

A Pedal Away

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FRANK SMITH AWOKE ONE MORNING with a solemn determination. “Today, I will discard anything that requires a thought longer than ten seconds.”

The resolute man gathered all unused things: half-hung clothes, shoes, undergarments that overflowed inside out from mahogany dressers and food—enough to survive a disaster. But as the bin overflowed, the unwavering man climbed on a ladder and onto the bin. He attempted to compress the waste with both feet by jumping up and down using the weight of his own body—but to no avail, for the trash bin had reached its full capacity and his light weight no longer made a significant difference—the way it did in years past.

It was through the rapid transit of life that he’d failed to notice the steady passage of time, for which he had forgotten to live. He’d spent a lifetime worrying about mundane things: what suit to wear...which bottled water to drink and as a result, ignored the simple details of life: the benefits of a walk, the blessings of a smile and the healing of a hug. He had gone for twenty-five years without true love and worse yet—without knowing how to love, heaving over the weight of an unused life.

“Visit *La Chureca!*” his doctor suggested after the tormented man had visited his office three days in a row.

“¿*La Chureca?*”

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“It is a life-changing panorama.”

By sunrise, he boarded a plane and fell asleep. In his dream he hopped over colorful frogs in the lush Nicaraguan rain forest. Howler monkeys swung from vines as the melody in his headphones rebounded off their cries—scattering leaves.

“Fasten your seat belt,” a voice instructed.

His hazed eyes turned to the window as if expecting to see what he’d dreamt. Instead he saw volcanoes, remnants of the 1972 earthquake and a land which appeared as viewed from a map: triangular, verdant, cooled by the Pacific Ocean and cradled by the waters of the Caribbean Sea.

Upon existing directly to the outdoors of the airport, his shirt became one with his skin and he began to gasp for air. His imaginary paradise had turned into a humid inferno.

And he traveled away in his air-conditioned shuttle, he saw beautiful landscapes, murals painted with faces of heroes and graffiti that read “*Patria Libre.*” The streets were different from his homeland; they lacked signs and names. But somehow, the third world country inspired tranquility as smiling vendors pushed wooden carts and children played soccer in the streets with a deflated ball.

“*¡La Chureca!*”

“¿Señor?” his driver asked.

“*La Chu-re-ca.*”

“*Bueno,*” the driver diverted.

But just as he imagined the life changing panorama his doctor had recommended, the paved road suddenly turned into a decrepit sight of dirt and scattered trash.

“Where are you taking me?”

“*La Chureca, señor.*”

Meanwhile not far from where he stood, in a world inconceivable to many, there lived a boy whose sole possession was a dream and unlike the new tourist, the boy had

not forgotten to live but rather had not been granted such right. He prayed daily to his Guardian Angel—believing one had been assigned to him, and would diligently ask for a bicycle. But lately, his luck had worsened for he had gone hungry several days, roaming alone through filth infested roads in a place known by many as the forty year-old landfill of eternal despair. By nightfall, after acquiring bruises from the competitors' rusted pitch forks, he carried his diminishing body home: a shack built with rusted metal, vinyl scraps, barbwire and weathered cardboard.

“You must be eleven,” a volunteer nurse estimated.

“I'm as old as you want me to be,” the brown-eyed boy flirted.

The nurse laughed as she had discovered beginning signs of growth. Strange roots were sprouting out of his skin and his voice—well—his voice, was beginning to change from that of a canary to a crow.

But just a year ago, he had been renamed “*El Desafortunado*.” A person without fortune, destined to roam ashy roads barefooted, without luck or a single córdoba in his pocket. Every time meager change came his way, he would hide it under the withered covers of his bed and fall into deep sleep. Only to awake the next morning by the rumbling noises his stomach made—his money gone without a trace.

“Maybe it is better,” he consoled himself as he sifted for edible food through endless piles of garbage—so high, they seemed to cover the sun and instead found parasite filled and decomposed fodder.

“Go home!” Cristóbal bleated. He was an orphan who had renamed himself after learning the history of explorers at his charity school.

“Have you eaten emaciated dog?” Cristóbal asked.

“I left a monkey boiling!” his friend replied.

“Monkeys! Ay, ay, AY,” Cristóbal said, waving his hand behind his head.

But the boy knew it was just a matter of time his luck would change. And to prove it, he decided that on that overcast day, he would make his dream come true. Somehow the approaching storm excited him, as if believing it would clean up all the asphyxiating stench of putrefaction and people doomed to dehumanizing fates.

“I will soon pedal my way out of here!” he said as the tourist began to click his camera in a demented way—every three seconds.

Then as if enchanted, the filthy boy with his half-filled nylon sack found himself subdued to the fragile stranger, his droopy brown eyes drawn to the man’s pearly white teeth, sparkling blue eyes—the color of a clear sky, and an unusually shiny bold head. It was odd for the boy to behave in that manner as he held a reputation known to many as unaccommodating. Often, his hardened facial expressions did not attract the *Chureca* wanderers, who after a few moments of sorrow at first sight, promised to tell his story to the world in exchange for photographs—later to be displayed at extravagant galleries.

“Boy, show me your hands,” the nervous tourist demanded as he too became drawn to the boy’s penetrating stare. The young man, although clean, appeared pitifully bruised, as if he would bleed easily by touch. Therefore, without resistance, the boy held the palms of his sun-burned and blistered hands up into the air, while extending one towards the young tourist in hope for a *córdoba*.

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Manuelito, *Manuel*, plus *ito* as referred to an endeared person.”

“Manuelito...?”

“Manuelito.”

“Last name?”

“MANUELITO. *No más!*”

“How about you?” the boy asked.

“Frank Smith,” the tourist replied handing him a piece of chocolate, which the boy placed directly into his blistered mouth and as it melted, his eyes widened with celestial glow.

“*Gracias*, do you have more?” The boy asked, exhibiting severely rotten teeth; which appeared white in contrast with the days old soot that had stained his face.

“No,” the man nodded ashamed to remember the overflowed trash bin back home.

“I’m leaving soon,” the boy said in a secretive tone.

“Where?”

“To trade my scraps for a bicycle.”

Realizing that the boy was clearly dreaming, Frank listened and understood that the panorama of La Chureca was indeed life changing, although he didn’t know yet how it would change his.

“Why a bicycle?”

“Wheels change things. I could pedal myself out of here,” the boy sighed, releasing an alarming cough that made his ribs appear as if protruding out of his skin.

For a few moments, the two conversed like old friends, as Frank managed to ignore the piles of burning trash, ill-omened vultures hovering below the dark sky and even the palpable, revolting odor of putrefaction. But as he began to feel weak and his nose began to bleed, he noticed that he too was sitting on trash and raised himself quickly like a person who had caught fire. He threw *dos córdobas* into the air for the boy to catch and got on his yellow taxi.

“Where to, Señor?”

“The hotel. I’ve had enough and still can’t understand why trash follows me.”

“Every road has its turns, sometimes you choose the road and other times the road chooses you,” the driver added.

Frank nodded in agreement, soon noticing the stark differences in settings as they drove further away from La Chureca. As he traveled further, the gravel road gradually turned into stone and back into gravel, and from a distance he saw children and elders filling up pot holes with shovels in exchange for change thrown at them.

Once he arrived at the hotel he went to hide beneath the white linens of his bed, but unable to reconcile any sleep, he ended up instead in the hotel’s courtyard. He wanted to see the beautiful rain drops that fell synchronically onto the ground—only to disappear at once while laying on a hammock for the best sleep of his life.

“Despierte, Señor.”

On that morning Frank awoke by break of dawn while Manuelito worked as hard as or harder than everyone else.

“Oye, *Manuelito*, the trash is not going away!,” his friend Estrellita laughed.

“No, Estrellita.”

“You better find shelter soon, Manuelito. Look at the clouds.”

“You’ll see, Estrellita,” the somnolent boy said as the wind blew his nylon sack, nearly carrying him too away.

Unlike the dreamy night Frank had enjoyed, Manuelito’s night could hardly be differentiated from the noise of a day at La Chureca. But the boy had learned to ignore the noise and was able to drift into dreams, for in his short life, he’d learned that dreams were essential to survival. And in his case, his dreams would speak and would show him the way to happiness—the way to escape. The boy had convinced himself that it was not just a dream—because dreams at La Chureca rarely become true.

Later that night, Cristóbal visited Manuelito but he’d already gone to sleep.

“Ay, Manuelito, when are you going to realize that you are no different?”

On typical nights when the humidity levels were high, unforgiving blood suckers would feast on Manuelito’s scarce blood, creating an occasional splash and smack. Not on that night. The night was long but in Manuelito’s dream it didn’t matter. He needed all the time the night would offer—for him to travel far.

“Cock a doodle-doo!” crowed a distant rooster.

“*Gallo miserable*,” someone shouted.

“Don’t forget to count the scraps,” a gentle voice reminded Manuelito. And so, he grabbed his sack and counted all of the bicycle scraps he had accumulated: 3 down tubes, 1 pedal crank arm, 2 black and torn handlebar grips, 1 spoke and 1 valve.

“Estrellita, you look so pale.” He said failing to notice she’d been long gone.

But resuming his task, he scampered out of that place so fast; his feet began to peel like onions. He must have about ten kilometers when he was forced by his incessant cough to sit on a park bench.

“The sky looks beautiful today, doesn’t it boy?” An elder asked while feeding bread crumbs to pompous white pigeons directly from his wrinkled hands.

“*Sí*,” the boy replied while staring at the crumbs, wishing he could be a pigeon.

“Have some my friend,” the old man offered.

Therefore, extending his hand towards the old man, Manuelito forgot to even say yes and scared the pigeons away. He knew those were signs of a better life.

“*Desafortunado*, no more!” he cried.

“*Desafortunado?*”

“That’s what they call me back home. No, that’s what they used to call me at La Chureca,” the boy said resuming his travel.

“Boy!”

“¿*Sí*, *Señor?*”

“¿*Desafortunado*, *no más!*”

“Never again, unfortunate!” Manuelito repeated, his heart beating faster than the air that filtered through his lungs.

Hopping over puddles left by the storm, Manuelito arrived at the bus station, but had missed the last bus. Disappointed but unburdening, he sought shelter in a place only a Chureca resident would consider—behind an oversized trash bin pushed up against a painted wall with a man labeled “The General of Men.” He admired paintings which retold the history of his land, its martyrs and poets and dreamt of a new life—only this time he felt unfortunate no more.

“¿*Ay*, *caramba!*” he’d overslept.

“*La Rotonda!*” the driver called—a can of sardines appeared more humane than that old, swaddling bus. But the boy didn’t care. He gripped the back of the rail, unnoticed with all of his remaining might, one hand on the rail, the other tightly on his sack.

“I am definitely not DESAFORTUNADO!”

“*¿LA ROTONDA!*” the driver called again.

Filled with excitement and anticipation, the boy jumped off the bus and nearly dropped his sack. He resumed his run and failed to notice his bleeding feet, for he'd ran out of skin a long time ago.

“There you are as beautiful as I knew you would be,” Manuelito said as the shop appeared as he'd dreamed it.

“Go on with your business,” the owner demanded who didn't know that the boy work harder than anyone, possibly more than what the owner and his workers averaged altogether.

“I am bringing these scraps in exchange for a bicycle,” replied the boy.

“Ha, nice trick.” The owner murmured.

“Could you at least purchase them?”

“Let's see what you have in there, useless boy,” the man said while hiding his surprise at the quality of Manuelito's recycled goods.

“*Dos córdobas. No más,*” the bitter man offered.

“*¿Dos córdobas?*” the boy agreed with disappointment as he picked up his empty nylon sack.

The boy headed back to the bus station but this time he could feel his aching feet and the growing hunger in his stomach. He walked slow, his head down and returned to the same bench where he'd met his old friend.

“Too bad the old man is not here to at least feed me old bread crumbs.” Manuelito sighed, wondering how he would return to La Chureca.

“You're back my young friend!” echoed gently the voice of the old man, who still held a bag of bread crumbs on his hand.

“Where's your bicycle?” he asked.

“Not this time. I would have to make about a hundred more trips to that shop.” The boy said with tears pouring as if the previous storm had settled into his eyes.

“Not even an old bicycle in need of repair?” the old man asked infuriated.

“*Nada*,” the boy wept.

“And how much did he pay for your scraps?”

“*Dos córdobas*.”

“Miserable Sinner,” the old man mumbled as he grabbed Manuelito’s arms and ordered his to stand.

“I can’t walk anymore.”

“Here, put this on your feet.” The old man instructed handing him two plastic bags.

Obedying the old man as there was nothing left to do, Manuelito placed each foot inside the plastic bags and as if by miracle, the pain vanished and he was able to walk again.

“Where are we going?”

“We are going to revisit that sinner.”

“It’s of no use,” Manuelito said, stumbling upon a rock.

“You leave this to me. I know that old fox like the palm of my hand.

“Whatever you say, *Señor*.”

Soon, the sun disappeared into the horizon and the ominous sky became covered by clouds again. The old man and the boy walked side by side, exchanged stories, pausing occasionally to refill their lungs. But upon arrival, the shop displayed a “Cerrado” sign.

“You have something that belongs to this young man,” the old man shouted.

“I don’t understand,” the surprised owner responded.

“This boy has worked very hard in a world not many can hold their chins up.”

As the owner opened the shop, Manuelito could barely restrain his heart from escaping his chest. He rubbed his eyes and shouted “*Desafortunado*, no more!”

“*Desafortunado*, no more!” the old man agreed.

And so the old man and the young boy left the shop along with an old bicycle, but this time, Manuelito pedaled with a smile worth a lifetime of rejoice. The old man held the bicycle until the boy learned to maneuver, and eventually set him free.

“Go on my young friend. Fly like an eagle!” the old man confirmed, fading away into the horizon.

Later into his journey, Manuelito decided to head back to La Chureca once more. He needed to say goodbye to Cristóbal and Estrellita but upon his arrival, the landfill seemed unusually quiet. Cristóbal lay on his cardboard bed, while Estrellita moaned a strange sound, preventing Manuelito from going inside her shack.

“Perhaps is one of her friends.” Manuelito thought as he spotted what appeared to be a man, many years her senior, crawling out of her shack.

Fatigued from pedaling, Manuelito resumed his sleeping position while his bicycle remained hidden under the piles of accumulated cardboard. Manuelito slept while the heavy rain resumed its course as if it had never left. He twisted and turned, coughing in synchronization with the rain as his swollen feet continued to mimic a pedaling motion. He pedaled so fast and so hard that his body alternated between warm flashes and cool shivers.

“¿*Café*, señor?” a waiter asked.

“*Café y Gallo Pinto*,” Frank said.

Sooner than Frank had anticipated, the waiter brought in a scrumptious dish of refried black beans, white rice, onions, bell peppers and customary fried plantain. But as he readied to devour his food, he lost all appetite at the sudden memory of Manuelito at the infernal landfill.

“Make it to go please.”

Frank wanted to reunite with Manuelito as he felt an enormous urge to bring food to him. He left the hotel in such hurry that forgot his prescribed medicine.

Meanwhile the boy was home again; this time, sustained solely by a heavily soiled piece of carton, which began to dissolve slowly into fragments—his stomach sunken by hunger. But unrelenting, the boy continued to pedal through beautiful verdant rain forests, sighting a shy quetzal over the tall trees and hearing a distant jaguar roaring every now and then. The boy traveled vast distances. He passed through the polluted lagoon surrounding La Chureca; visited the National Museum of History and sobbed at the broken promises of his nation’s leaders who had failed to remember the people they claimed as their children: Cristóbal, Estrellita and him, leaving them to rot along with the decaying piles of garbage. Manuelito had learned in one night what many could not learn in a lifetime: the importance of a promise—particularly for those who await its resolution, every second of their lives.

“Cristóbal, have you seen Manuelito?”

“He’s probably at the landfill,” Cristóbal, following Frank to the shack.

But upon arrival to Manuelito’s shack, Frank held his head in disbelief as the boy appeared asleep, dreaming and pedaling with his soiled and skinny legs.

“I brought him breakfast!” said Frank to Cristóbal, whose wide opened and yellowish eyes stared deeply into a twenty-five year old man who seemed to know much less than the six year old boy standing before him.

“What is it, Cristóbal?” Frank asked, incredulous of the obvious surroundings: the puddle of water Manuelito lay on, and the white foam gushing out of his mouth.

“Manuelito. He hasn’t eaten for many days and...”

“What do you mean, Cristóbal?”

“He inhaled glue in order to dream,” Cristóbal wept.

“I gave Manuelito dos córdobas, I don’t understand!” Frank shouted while calling out for a doctor. To his amazement, the people surrounded the shack curious but lacking a spark of surprise in their aged and dreamless state. His heart pounded at the reality of an inferno, so palpable he could smell the sulfur. But he knew it was just the burning trash.

Soon enough, Frank realized that time was running out and knelt down on the muddy floor with tears pouring out of his blue eyes. The young man who appeared

nearly as fragile as the ill child, managed with a heap to lift the boy's already feathered weight while walking slowly in nearly absent steps, away from La Chureca as the others witnessed in awe at a spectacle unfamiliar to them. Not that the act of death was unfamiliar, but rather the act of a clean foreigner who held one of their own soot infested people on his arms, with a love and care capable of igniting a desire to take the child's place.

"Where to, *Señor*?"

"Carlitos' Bicycle Shop—and church."

It was then and for the first time that Frank realized that the distance from La Chureca to Manuelito's dream shop was not as great as Manuelito had assumed.

"It's closed," the driver said. "But if you knock, they might open; the owner resides inside his shop."

Frank set Manuelito down onto the torn seat of the cab while whispering into his ear that they had reached their destination. "*Ya llegamos amigo*," and for a moment, Manuelito's big brown eyes opened half way as if to return a weakened smile.

Frank pounded on the heavy gate with urgency.

"Can I help you?" a surprised owner asked.

"I'm here to fulfill a boy's dream to own a bicycle."

"Dreams don't come free my friend and the shop is already closed."

"Here's twenty dollars, just to open the shop and allow my friend to sit on one of your bicycles."

The pleased man opened the rusted gates as Frank returned to the taxi. Meanwhile, the driver poured a few drops, of water into Manuelito's dried mouth, but the boy no longer felt thirsty, he was too busy dreaming for when dreams come to La Chureca, you just can't let them get away.

"*¡Despierta!*" Frank ordered, shaking the boy's softened body twice.

"Manuelito, here's your bicycle," Frank told the boy as he placed his weakened body onto the seat of the bicycle. Then barely opening his eyes, Manuelito appeared

temporarily conscious and with his weakened hand, glided his bony fingers through the polished bar of the bicycle.

“*Señor Frank?*”

“¿*Sí, Manuelito?*”

“I’m one pedal away!”

“*Sí*, I see you, Manuelito.”

“Catch up, *Señor...*”

Manuelito released a struggling sigh while producing one last pedal, until his arms dropped slowly to the ground and the boy with a dream became lifeless.

“I’ll catch up soon,” Frank wept.

Never had Frank seen someone perish, much less a person he had learned to love in one day. Manuelito’s body still kept the stench of putrefaction, but to Frank it no longer mattered for the boy had changed whatever remained of his life. Frank knew he had served his purpose on earth and that gave him the necessary strength to complete his journey. He knew the boy had fulfilled his only dream. But as Frank’s tears weakened him; his scarce blood flowed slowly through his veins while his heart beat slowed to nearly absent ones, reminding him of his incurable illness.

“I’ll take him,” The driver offered.

“Where to, *Señor?*”

“*La Casa de Dios*,” Frank said pointing to a church.

Ironically on that day, the fervent church goers followed a procession as they carried Jesus of Nazareth on a donkey decorated with sacred palm leaves into an old colonial church. Jesus wore a beautiful red velvet gown, his head decorated with a crown of thorns.

“Look at those people, they beg to Jesus for compassion.” The driver said, as he pointed to an old woman’s bleeding knees that followed while passing her finger through pearly rosary beads.

Inside the church, an old piano rested above steep stairs cushioned by a red carpet. The heavenly piano played the Latin version of the Ave María.

Ave María

Gratia plena

Dominus tecum...

Bleeding deeply from within his soul, Frank placed Manuelito's little body onto a single step before the altar. Therefore, reacting to the situation and without asking for an explanation, the humble priest seemed to know exactly what to do and proceeded to bless Manuelito with holy water and incense while reciting a prayer in whispering voices.

"Tri lesson, Christy lesion..."

The priest stood behind the altar where a tall, longhaired man, whose nearly naked body hung in agony over a heavy marble cross and knelt still on one knee. He remained inside a well-protected crystal box used as the altar for the priest. His bloody face, covered by thorns, broken skin and relentless stare reminded Frank that only pain and repentance could absolve people's sins. As mass progressed, due to the presence of Jesus Christ, the fervent crowd barely paid attention to the humble priest, who recited the mass, shouting sporadically and nearly in despair "NOW IS THE TIME TO REPENT, reflect on your sins, and REPENT at once!"

For the first time Frank noticed the differences in the appeal and overall effect between the traditional Roman Catholic churches and the modern ones back home. He felt a sense of sanctity inside that church. It was as if a piece of heaven was there to offer hope and relief to its followers. Perhaps it was the effect of the sun rays coming through the stained glass, the hypnotizing statues that seem to follow with their stare or the intoxicating scent of incense. Whatever it was—Frank did not care. Somehow he knew Manuelito had gone to a better place and that he too would soon follow.

"Where to, Señor?"

"The Red Cross."

As Frank surrendered Manuelito's body to one of the young paramedics, the driver explained the situation.

"Where to, Señor?" he asked once more.

“El aeropuerto.”

Frank returned home only with his U.S. passport and forgot his medicine in the hotel but cared no more as he had enough for one last adventure. Upon arrival to Los Angeles airport, Frank collapsed and was admitted into Urgent Care. As it turned out, Frank and Manuelito’s true happiness was just a pedal away. A few days later as it was recounted by his close family, Frank was seen moving his legs into what appeared to be pedaling motions, resting finally from his illness while whispering...

“I’m catching up, my Manuelito.”