

BLACK SHINES

The wise men said, "Always keep your shoes shined." Attempting to maintain a grooming perspective without question, I made my way towards *Sam the Shoe Doctor*, a shoeshine shop. It would be one of many firsts: first job out of college, first pinstripe suit, and first pair of dimpled business shoes, the wingtip variety. Upon entering the shop with sheepish caution, I was greeted with a smile, a Sun Times, and a seat. "How's boss today? Have a sit down, chief." I obeyed. Having not fully grasped the nuances of this shoeshine culture, I wondered why a guy my age would speak to me in a manner of such deference... I then began to reflect on Grandpa's good old days of the Depression when "movies were movies," when shoes were shined, and when bellowing boys wearing "knickers," sold daily newspapers to men in *Casablanca* trench coats... Scanning my surroundings, using a survival technique I learned in a Chicago ghetto, I noticed an Asian man perched in the corner like Edgar Allen Poe's raven. He must surely be the proprietor of this shop. And although there were two empty seats available for service, five men sat waiting for a shine: three White and two African-American. I sat on my iron throne (Cold at first. Royalty warms rather quickly) like an urban prince, forced to look down upon my shoe shining subject. As he worked my shoes, I hoped he did not find my position condescending. However, it appears my concern for him was soon replaced by his patronizing me for a tip. "That's a mighty fine suit you got on!" This would be my last time in his chair, for I then became acutely aware of what the others knew: Never sit in the unoccupied chair of a fully occupied shop. The door then opened and the fresh air blew in the head of a Hispanic gentleman who leaned forward and asked, "Hey Black, how many you got?" I glanced about the room silently wondering to whom he was referring. Suddenly, an adjacent voice awakened and replied, "With you, I got six." Indeed, this was a multicultural affair; a group of men with multiplied experiences having one common denominator, a man named *Black*.

Oh how refreshing the certainty of his name amidst a time blurred by the

uncertainty of gray. A time as undefined as a workplace cubicle. Incomplete, lacking all four walls and the right to one's own ceiling. Where uniqueness lay in the hands of pin-cushioned panels, designer paperweights, and multicolor post-its. An age somewhere between the Black me and the African-American me. Patronage and the Shakman Decree. Magic's Aids and Michael's comeback. *Happy hour* and expensive coffee. Trashcans and recycle bins. *Go along to get along* and *can we all just get along?*. A world obsessed with power: vice-grip handshakes and power lunches. *I know someone who knows someone who knows someone. Yeah, he's a good friend of mine. Tell him I sent you.* A time that seemed to have no origin and no end.

Black's radiant greeting as he rolled up each pant leg: "Are you ready for the galactic gleam with the mean moonbeam and solar sheen?" His rhyme wrapped itself around us and took hold like the paisley nooses disguised as power ties. He was twenty-nine years of age, six feet tall, and very dark. His skin like worn, unvarnished leather chairs found in dimly lit law offices. Dark was his pigmentation, not his persona; for he had a natural grin that invited you in from the "rat race." He was no circus act in "black face." When he popped his rag to a ragtime beat, we tapped our feet and showed our teeth. Man, he was flying on the wings of our wingtips; taking us under his wing. Black was bright. Whatever the subject, be it the stock market, politics, or basketball, we wanted to know his opinion. Hey Black what did you think about...He shined shoes for interviews and bad news. Like when Manny's wife left him.

"You ok, Manny?" Black inquired, commissioning a Barry White baritone voice emanating from an old warped vinyl record. It was the only sound that could elicit a true and heartfelt response.

"Nah, she left me." Manny replied as Black patted the side of his leg, suggesting that Manny sit up erect.

"Do you still love her?"

"Yeah, I do."

“It hurts don’t it?”

Manny quietly agreed.

“Do you want her back?”

“Don’t know what I’ll do without her.”

“When’s the last you spoke to her?”

“It’s been two and a half weeks. She won’t return any of my calls.”

“Manny, listen to me. If you want her back, you can’t call her. She needs to miss you.

Right about now, your voice sounds like shit to her.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying everyone in here been through what you going through. I’m saying it’s gonna be the hardest thing you do, but don’t call her. If you do, you gonna lose her. Do something with your time. Go shopping. Or better yet, go to the gym. From where I’m standing, you look like you could lose a couple pounds.”

Manny laughed. He would get through another day.

Black buffed our backbone, strengthened our Achilles heel, and repaired our sole. The two men he worked with, of course, were not as busy as Black, thus received a fraction of the tips. They attempted to acquire his sense of humor, rhythm, and humanity, but fell short. As time went on, they simply accepted their roles as witnesses to something great. For if you are blessed, you recognize the phenomenon, you shut up, and you enjoy it before you miss it. As phenomena go, they do not last: the birth of a child, the eclipse of the sun.

It may have been a sunny day and perhaps all was well in the world; but Black was nowhere to be found. What we figured to be a “sick day” turned into a week, a month, and a year. We, his clients, looked like wide-eyed deer whose watering hole had dried, scrambling around the downtown area to quench our thirst. We scoured other shops in search of him, but they were only

a mirage. Then just like forgotten money in an old pair of jeans, he appeared. He lost some weight, sunken, and drained of energy; but he was Black as ever. Elated, I took him to lunch at my favorite restaurant before anyone else could fill his “dance card.” Subsequently, he read my thoughts then began to satisfy my curiosity. Once again, I huddled before him like a child on a camping trip, listening to his ghost story by the campfire.

He began, “About a year ago, I went to a house party. There were so many women; I was ‘the rooster in a hen stack.’ The moon must have shined a bit different. I say that because I’m used to people laughing at my jokes, but that night, I needed laughter like an alcoholic needs one last drink. *Pretty Ken*, the guy that threw the party, told me not to “bring sand to the beach,” so I went alone. And anyone who knew *Pretty*, knew that this was the kind of sand you don’t mind being buried in up to your neck. We danced, drank, ate, drank, and danced again. I didn’t know too many people there; but I went with the flow. A couple hours went by and this chick, who laughed at everything I said, pulls me into a room. She got to kissing and stroking. Man she was fine! I mean finer than red wine. And I don’t even drink wine, but it sure looks good in glass hips. When she went into her purse, I thought she was going to pull out a rubber; but instead she pulled out a credit card, a straw, and some ‘caine. I told her I didn’t get down like that. Then she started stroking again and said, ‘Come on baby, just a little bit.’ I don’t have to tell you what happened next. That credit card must have turned into a Link Card ‘cause I swear I was linked to ‘em both, like an ankle brace to house arrest.” As for me, I was on the edge of my seat and decided that my afternoon would be spent in that position. “Hey Black, hold that point. I gotta make a phone call.

“Hello Sandy, can you put me down for ½ sick day?”

“You’re out of sick days.”

“How about ½ personal day?”

“No can do, you haven’t earned them yet and besides, they have to be approved for at least two days prior to the date requested.”

“Well, what do you suggest I do?”

“I suggest you come to work like the rest of us.”

(I wanted to tell her she could kiss my ass, but word has it, she’s screwing the Chief of Staff.)

“Thanks, but I can’t come in right now; it’s an emergency.”

I hung up. And returned to the scene my *power lunch*.

Black asked with one cheek puffed with food, “Hey man, you alright?”

I replied, “Yeah I’m OK.”

“Maybe we can do this another time.”

“Not a chance.”

He proceeded, “Cocaine turned to *crack* and I was addicted. I couldn’t get enough. My brother threw me out and I was living on the streets. I remember one night. It was cold as hell and I didn’t eat for about a week. Remember the Thriller video?” I nodded, yes (while thinking how can it get cold as hell, but I got the point.) “Well, I was one of those zombies crawling out the grave. I was a jonesing for a hit, but none of my crack-head buddies had a damn thing. I walked down my skid row, Division Street from Clark to Halsted, knowing I had to get something to eat; but I didn’t want to spend my last money. You see, that was the thing. Everything was a big ass decision in one long ass sentence: If I bought a sandwich for \$3.00, I would need \$14.00 ‘cause I only got \$9.00, and I need \$20.00, so I can put it together with the \$10.00 that Derrick owes me, but maybe I could get the rest at Jewels helping somebody with his bags, but that’s gonna take some time, and I only got fifteen minutes ‘cause the dope man comes around at nine, and it ain’t like I can get on the bus, ‘cause that’s \$1.50 and if I sneak on the bus, I might get caught and go

to jail, but at least I'd be out the cold and get a sandwich, nah that shit ain't gon work, I got to get this hit!"

"Now that's funny!" as I laughed almost choking on the one bite of my *patty melt*. This was not a laughing matter; but only Black could put it like that. I was no longer hungry. Just filled. The moment brought me back to one of my favorite movies, Cool Hand Luke. Paul Newman played Luke, a prisoner among prisoners in a Georgia prison. Throughout his time there, he "swam upstream," constantly "testing the waters" and at times amusingly challenging himself. To the other prisoners, he was a lifeboat transporting them through a mundane existence. "What's Luke gonna to do next?" For each of his pranks, there was a trip to the hole. For his peers, there was sheer entertainment. "Stop feeding off me!" Luke screamed after being whipped. And now here I sit, feeding on each word Black had spoken. Perhaps I too was guilty of this parasitic behavior; or maybe, I genuinely cared.

Black swallowed his food, fueling up for the trip he continued to take me on, "When we stood on the corner, we thought we were doing something. The truth of the matter is, we waited for something to be done to us. We weren't actors. We were reactors. One day, I saw a 'hype' running through the streets like Paul Revere. The only difference was that Paul rode a horse; this hype was on *Crazy Horse*. We all ran behind him 'cause we knew the deal. And I swear I heard him shouting, 'The dope man is coming! The dope man is coming!' When we made it to the alley, we pushed to get to the 'pusher,' behind the Blazer. 'You all better stop pushing and line up before I get in my ride and ride my ass outta here!' We followed his drill-sergeant instructions and stood at attention like it was the first day of boot camp. Boot camp to us sick soldiers meant the dope man had his foot up our ass.

“ I knew I had to get my ass out of town. I didn’t exactly want to die. And somewhere deep inside me, I figured I could make myself quit. Either that or run out of ways to hustle up some money. This way I would have no choice but to quit. That never worked though, because I knew too many people. They always found ways to ‘fix’ me.” Offering a thought, I asked, “Rehab did it for you?” He smirked, “Yeah right! Relax, release, and rehab didn’t relate to me. We sat in a circle developing what they called ‘interpersonal relationships.’ I called it sharing high time stories: Man, I was so high, I ... We talked about it so much I left twice. When I came back, you better believe I had another story to tell.

“I started believing my own insanity. I mean, the insanity is not that I believed the insane. Nah, that’s not it. The insanity was my own good reason. You see, had I known I had no damn sense, I would have recovered a long time ago. Knowing I had good sense, made me convince myself that all this shit made sense. You feel me?”

“ I think so.”

“Well anyway, I went to Texas to stay with my other brother. He hardly recognized me when he opened the door. I think right at that moment, he almost changed his evangelical mind. When I hit the doorstep, he put his hand on my chest and said, ‘Before you take another step, no crack stories in my house. You got three months. And call mama once a week.’ It was like we were in opposite worlds, one door away. Here I was - on crack. There he was - never cracking a smile. I shook my head and he let me in.”

Chewing on more of his experience, I asked, “When did you hit bottom?” He replied with that half full or half empty smile, “You been watching too many documentaries on drugs.” (There! That drawl again. He dragged out the word “drugs” like a deep pull on a long awaited

cigarette. Like an office worker on a fifteen-minute break, shivering outside in the dead of winter with no coat). I guess I had been watching too much TV. Then he went into his own question and answer session, "No, I didn't steal from my mama. No, I didn't find God. And no, I didn't look in the mirror and realize that I didn't like what I saw." I chuckled. It seems he had watched those same documentaries. He continued, "None of that stuff happened; I just got tired of not being Black."

The tight-skirted waitress approached our table delivering the check, "Can I get you anything else?" I hardly touched my plate. I had a full cup of cream o' chicken soup, a half sandwich with fries, and all the trimmings. Black looked at me with a pointed finger, "You gonna eat that?" I said, "No, be my guest." He looked up at the waitress and said, "I'll take that to go." He had an appetite for nourishment and that was OK with me. I guess you get hungry when you share so much of yourself. He must have been famished.

As we walked towards our respective destinations, I noticed my shoes were not polished. So I got to thinking how life is a long walk. We take step up and down the stairs of tragedy and triumph. We step in different directions at different paces. We step in the right direction and the wrong direction. We take infant steps, migration steps, graduation steps, relationship steps, and alienation steps. We step *into the night*. Some take twelve steps. Black said he took steps in and out of himself. Some people like to say, "take a step back." That sounds good; but sometimes stepping back means we look back.

"Hey Black, how do you know you won't go back?" With no hint of preparation, he replied, "I looked back once before just like that lady in Sodom and Gomorrah. And I was 'salty' like she was." Beaming with pride for his victory, I declared, "I heard that Black; I heard that."

Through Black's experience, I learned that no matter the steps, we take this long walk; so why not take them in shiny shoes.

We arrived at the intersection of Randolph and Wells and I wished him well. We embraced with a soul handshake then parted. Then I took one step away and realized I had not perfected my inquiring exploration. I had to know.

“Wait, you didn’t answer my question.”

He turned and asked, “What question?”

“You know, your lowest point; when did you hit bottom?”

Standing like a man whom God had found, he plainly said, “The day I tried it.”

Walking backwards, he continued, “Hey my brotha , sorry I didn’t get a chance to hear what you been up to.” Then waving a clenched *black power* fist, he shouted, “Keep ‘em shining!” I never looked down to see if his shoes were shined. I was in no position to judge him.