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Why It Is So Hard

When I came first to Portland I was lost in a confusion of crisscrossing highways and bridges that would one day be as familiar as housemates, but at the time were an enigma. I took a wrong exit and happened upon Holladay Park, where someone would one day attempt to mug me and I would come to know—through the familiar friction of daily habit—the specific identities of the trees which inhabit the park. I would spend the next six years working in the Sears at Lloyd Center. My favorite part of those work days was strolling through that little island of green. There's a middle-aged cedar with one low branch describing a gentle parabola and whose vertex invites lounging. Its top has been worn smooth by the passage of countless posteriors; my own among them. I relaxed in that spot many times with an after work pipe while waiting for a homeward MAX.

On the other side of the park, at the northeast corner, just before you cross Multnomah to get into Lloyd there's an old bent apple tree. It has the most beautiful blossoms each spring, but I've never seen a single apple adorn its twiggy mantle. In spring the park is flowering, exciting, and muddy. In summer it's full of people, napping in the grass, playing in the fountain, or just passing through. Ants to the hill. That was me. Then comes autumn, whose winds are so much sharper than the soft, sweet susurrations of sister spring. Where warm May breezes once strengthened shoots—young and eager to eat the sun—October's chilly gusts shake loose the old teeth. The wind moving through the park in October was like an embrace from a childless aunt—cold and quick.

Winter's nice, when there's a little snow on the ground. This is an opinion which is prone to sudden change whilst standing in an unheated MAX car whose doors are stuck open and which cannot get underway until the workers thaw the track ahead. But I never know this at the time. I never know the reason for the delay until it's resolved. All I know is being trapped between stations in a meat locker filled with swinging sides of oddballs and grumps who quietly mutter hot breath at their shoes. In the moment all I know is that something is up and they've stopped bothering with the lie of five more minutes. It's those moments when the snow shrouded spectacle of Lloyd Center kind of loses its charm.

I came first in summer. I was in a rush and noted the park only as a landmark to identify the location of my vehicle. Lost in worry I mistakenly entered Lloyd Center by way of the Nordstrom's entrance. This was about as far away from Sears as one could get. As I salmioned my way through the press of flesh, fabric, and fragrance I became amazed at the sheer size of it. The mall we had back home couldn't compare to this leviathan. There was even an ice rink situated at the center of the mall, where Tonya Harding first skated. My coworkers were fond of incorporating this fact into a trite, but amusing joke about being able to take the Olympian out of Lloyd Center, but you know the rest. Lloyd Center is the aging, impoverished, high-crime mall, where shootings result in knowing shrugs; not national news.

There is a smell specific and peculiar to the Lloyd entrance on Multnomah avenue. There, on the second floor between T-Mobile and the escalators is a region of space which perpetually smells of sweaty undergarments and nail polish. I have often wondered if this awful smell is in any way connected to a similar, spicier aroma near the second level Ross. I have also dithered over the wisdom of replacing the nearby T-Mobile with a Bath and Body Works. Would the

olfactory blitzkrieg of a Bath and Body Works be enough to overpower the resident stench, or would they simply combine forces—becoming unstoppable?

When they enclosed the mall in the 90s they kicked out all the pigeons who had long loitered near the big splash fountain. I'd sometimes see one of these old birds who had managed to penetrate the airlock style doors and returned to check up on old haunts. They would never stick around, though. Pigeons want the sky. We did have a few sparrows who lived in Lloyd year-round. They fared on leftovers and found sufficient exercise swooping on their short wings down Lloyd's long. I would sit and watch their maneuvers while eating my lunch. I would eat my peanut butter and marmalade sandwiches and think of Bukowski's bluebird. I would occasionally feel as if there was beauty and worth yet to be coaxed from this aged and decrepit instrument of commerce, humming quietly to myself and would sometimes leave a convenient crust.

I met so many characters at Lloyd Center. There was that drunk mall Santa Claus who at first annoyed me with the banality of his shtick, but who set himself apart as a master craftsman of drunk-Santa-Clausing when he popped his fake eyeball out mid-conversation and put it in his mouth. Lloyd Center taught me to be on the lookout for characters, because they always have the best stories. That's how I came to hear a bit of Charles Bradley's story.

I registered his presence the moment he stepped into my department. He was wearing a tunic of crushed green velvet, open to his chest, over these funky purple pants. I could smell a good conversation, so I called dibs to my coworkers and walked over to greet him.

"Hello sir, I just have to say that I love your style." I indicated his shirt, "Vintage?"

“Well thank you, but no. Well sort of. You see what I mean is I made this shirt myself, but the fabrics—you know the materials—those are vintage.”

His voice was at once fluid and abrasive; an avalanche of sand or a pool of molasses spreading through a spray of broken glass. He wet his lips frequently.

“Oh, are you a designer?”

“No, no. I’m a counterfeiter,” he squealed laughter like rear tires eager for asphalt and he actually slapped his knee in delight at his quip.

“I can’t afford no designer clothes, but I still want to wear ‘em. So what I do is I find me a jacket or pants or whatever it is that I like. I look it all over and see just how all the pieces go then I go-and buy me some real good fabrics and zippers and things and I just put it all together. Yes sir, I have me a sewing machine and I make all my own outfits.”

“Ah, that’s cool. Kind of like Peter Parker. You know Spiderman?”

“Uh-course. Everybody knows Spiderman.”

“Yeah, well he made his own costumes.”

“Oh, he did? Well you won’t catch me spinning no web in a corner. I live for the spotlight! I’m a singer—a performer. I been performing most uh my life and I always make my own costume.”

“That’s awesome, what kind of show do you do?”

“Soul, man. Ha ha! I’ve been doing a James Brown show for a long time, but brother lemme tell you I just landed in your wonderful, your beautiful, irresplendent city of Portland,

Oregon, USA. I flew in just now from Japan—part of a world tour of my music. And it's all to support and promote the release of my first album. And do you know whose face is on the sleeve?"

"Yours," I hazarded a guess.

"Well brother I promise ya it aint James Brown's! Ha ha! And you can be sure it's my name up top, too. Charles Bradley." He was already extending his hand as he pronounced his name. Very smooth. As I shook his hand I noticed his fingernails were severely overdue for a clipping. And beneath his cologne there was a whiff of that particular breath-scent which seems common to people who've attained elderhood.

He said "My sister called me and said momma's TV's gone and died. You know that TV is all my momma has to fill her days. Can you help me replace it?" I guided him in selecting a new television which he liked the look of and which would be available for installation in Brooklyn. While weighing the relative pros and cons of liquid crystal versus plasma displays he told me bits and pieces of his story. He'd left home at fourteen, never learned to read or write. He'd been a cook by day and a James Brown impersonator by night.

There is a virginal sort of magic to him. As if, along all the hard miles he's trod, he's kept—at the bottom of his bindle--the Teflon-coated optimism of a child. It's in his face; so big, so emotive. A smiling valley crossed and marked by the gullies and washes of time and centered on a broad, basalt shelf of a nose.

His eyes strain from their sockets, but in a way that's more like an old friend leaning in close, the better to share a good story. I was not having a conversation with Charles Bradley. I

was having a conversation with Charles Bradley's eyes. Charles Bradley was relegated to mere transportation.

He'd been performing his whole life, but he was sixty-two years old when he finally released his debut album. Sixty-two: that's when most people are peering over the fence at retirement, not breaking out. Not playing their first world tour.

The dominant cultural frame generally characterizes age as a disadvantage. In this view the prestige of celebrity tends to be forged from unalloyed talent in the hot fires of youth. Like a bauble of pewter; all sparkle and no substance. It has become a cliché of meteoric rises culminating in spectacles of explosive failure. There is, however, a backchannel to success and Charles swam against the current long enough to finally get there. He has taken his personal hardships and loss and folded them deep into his character and—like carbon within steel—it has made him stronger. His is an alloy interfolded with time; he is cloaked in its patina.

Charles has lived a different truth. The truth is society expects less of the aged with each passing year. It reveres the promise of youth while ignoring the fulfillment of that promise in the aged. We come to expect shootings and foul smells at Lloyd Center. We tell ourselves that's just what happens at the poverty mall, so we buy our baubles at one of the modern plazas in the better parts of town. In so doing we perpetuate a flawed model which interferes with our ability to conduct ourselves in an optimal manner. While many continue to view age as a sort of disability, Charles Bradley, I suspect, knows better. Age only has authority over our success if we believe it does.

Why is it so hard to make it in America? This is the title of my favorite of Charles' songs. He has a curious way of changing the order of words, so this heartfelt line becomes not just a

question, but a statement—why *it is* so hard to make it, in America. When he screams this line, plaintive, bewildered, he becomes a graveside child. A tired dog tied to a tree slowly understanding the presence of a rifle in their companion's hands. Sometimes it takes struggling into your golden years before fortune turns. I was lucky enough to meet Charles Bradley just as he slipped time's fetters to dance a while through the tides of good fortune.

“I spent my whole life being someone else,” he said, “I’m Sixty-two years old and finally I can be myself. And maaaaan I love it!”