

It Is a Privilege to Show Kindness

by Mark Morelli, *Liguorian*

I had just begun my job as a reporter at a small newspaper located in the county seat. At lunch, the town's simple restaurants buzzed with clerks, attorneys, politicians, a few reporters, and townspeople. It was the kind of community in which a farmer called the judge by his first name because they had played ball together in high school.

At the Bar Ten diner, a frail old man sat on a stool at the counter. Jerry, the restaurant owner and bartender, leaned toward him. "You want the special, Charlie?" The old man mumbled something. Jerry understood. "Okay, Charlie, the ham plate it is." A few minutes later Jerry set a plate of Salisbury steak before Charlie. Charlie looked at his plate, puzzled.

"What's wrong, Charlie?"

"I...I...wanted ham."

Jerry sighed, wiping his hands on a towel, trying to decide what to do. The tables were filling quickly. "Charlie, why don't you just eat this anyway. It's a good special." Then he cut Charlie's meat into bite sizes. "There you go, buddy. You eat this and it'll save Nancy from cooking up another lunch." Charlie shrugged and said, "Okay. Nancy's busier 'n me."

A few days later in the office, I stepped out of my cubicle to find Charlie, clad in worn slippers and loose-fitting plaid pajamas, standing in the hallway. He spotted my notebook and grinned mischievously. "Do you want to interview me?"

What kind of office is this? A reporter walked by. "Hello, Charlie," he said. Another passed and said nothing. The sight of Charlie standing in the hallway dressed in his pajamas wasn't news.

I asked around. An old-timer at the paper leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Oh, you don't know about Charlie? He was a janitor here at the newspaper for a long time. Started right after the war, I

think. He retired, but he couldn't stay a stranger very long. He'd come by once a week, grab a cup of coffee, say hi. Stand over our shoulders and backseat drive while we wrote. Then he'd snatch the morning paper and head out. Always left the room singing 'My Wild Irish Rose.' His wife got sick and died, and he just got too old to drive. They never had any kids, so he moved next door. He hangs around town. A sad soul. Not his old self. Except when he comes here."

In the distance we could hear a raspy "the sweetest flower that grows..." going out the door.

Next door was a county-run boarding house, assisted living meets an old downtown hotel. Charlie often eluded those who helped him get dressed each morning and he ate lunch at the Bar Ten every day. My employer, the well-heeled publisher of his family-owned newspaper chain, often sat on the stool next to Charlie's. They frequently ordered the same lunch special and talked quietly together.

We are a nation of proud, hardworking people, but over the years we have become less certain. Industries collapse, businesses close, jobs vanish. We fear that we will be rendered useless in a society that worships vigor and productivity. We feel an empathetic pang like when, in *Death of a Salesman*, Willie Loman is fired after decades of service to his firm. He cries out, "A man is not a piece of fruit!" No one should be disposed of like rind. Too often, however, we discard the rind without seeing how much fruit is left to be tasted. And the taste may be in the satisfaction of continuing to care for those we mistakenly think is useless. Those like Charlie, who can no longer push a broom, remind us why we are here and why we have hearts. The Charlies in our midst give us the privilege, and it *is* a privilege, of living a benevolent life.