**The Master of Windows**Walker Butterfield

If there’s one word to describe Charles, it’s American. Every day, he dresses up in red, white and blue from head to toe. From his star-spangled socks to his striped bandana, his whole image justshouts “patriot”. Even his bike is styled after the American flag, a custom built Specialized Hardrock in red, white and blue. It’s always a pleasure to fix his bike up for him when he comes into the shop where I work, Big Wheel Bikes.

He’s a strong-looking guy. This isn’t just true of his build, but his character as well. He’s a dark-skinned man about six feet tall, with a weathered complexion and old eyes. He moves with absolute confidence, like a man who knows exactly what his place is in the world. He looks like he could be in his fifties, but he’s in great shape and very well groomed. He has a firm handshake, and always looks me straight in the eye when he talks to me. When I talk back, he gives me his full attention rather than thinking about the last movie he watched or checking his phone. In some ways, he almost represents yesteryear’s man of integrity: down to earth, respectful and ever humble.

So when Charles showed up at Big Wheel for some menial maintenance on his bike last September, I was more than happy to help. All he needed was a routine tube change, and it only took a few minutes. But afterward, he patted me on the back and said, “Good job as always, man”, and tipped me ten dollars. At first I tried the obligatory refusal, but I knew he’d make me keep it. He tips me ten dollars every time he comes in, no matter how small the fee is for the repair. He always tells me that I earned it because I’m good at my job. He says the world needs more people who are good at and work hard at their jobs.

Charles is extremely good at his job. Dubbed the Master of Windows, he washes windows in and around the Bethesda area. He’s a one-man team, without a boss and without subordinates. In fact, he’s so good at his job that hundreds of businesses in the area hire him to wash windows instead of competing professional companies. And just as importantly, he loves his job. I see him in Bethesda all the time, listening to music and dancing as he washes windows. They say the man who loves his job never works a day in his life. Sure enough, The Master of Windows has none of the telltale traits of many working class men. He’s always full of energy and he’s easily one of the most optimistic people I know.

Which is why I was shocked to see him shivering violently as he tried to fall asleep on a park bench later that September.

It was a particularly cold night that month, especially because the weather had been strangely warm the previous week. I was walking home from a friend’s house when I saw the dark figure of a man in a hoodie huddled up on a bench. At first I didn’t think anything of it, but something caught my eye. Upon second glance, I noticed the unmistakable shape of a Specialized Hardrock leaned against the bench. A few steps closer, and I knew it was Charles. The Master of Windows, sleeping in the cold on a park bench. I was struck by disbelief and confusion. To see such a role model in such a dark place is disenchanting. At first, it seemed contradictory. How could this man be so satisfied with life, despite being homeless? How could a man whose country has failed him so terribly wear American flags every single day?

I didn’t know the answers to these questions, but I knew I had to do something. I checked what I had in my wallet, which was exactly seven dollars. I tucked it in the pocket of the jacket I was wearing, and walked over to him. I didn’t expect him to hear me, but without turning his head he casually extended a protective arm to hold onto his bike when I got close. “Hey man,” I started, ”It’s just Walker from the bike shop”. He seemed a little confused, so I continued. “You look a little cold, so I was just gonna give you my jacket for the night”. He loosened up a little, “Ah hey thanks man,” he said, “that’s really cool of you, brother.”

I didn’t see him in the shop for a few weeks after that, but I thought about him every day. It didn’t seem fair that someone could be so happy with so little while the rest of us were whining about not having enough. It didn’t seem fair that in the twenty-first century a working man was out in the cold. It just wasn’t fair that the Master of Windows, who is so good at his job and so proud of it, was struggling for to achieve comfort that I take for granted.

So I was mad. I was mad at all of the people who saw him there and didn’t do a thing. I imagined dozens of people walking by and not helping him because he was “just another homeless guy” despite how easy it would have been. I was mad at myself for not doing more. But most of all, I was mad at Bethesda for not making me want to do more. Why was it so abnormally kind to lend a cold man a jacket? I didn’t think much of it; I have more than enough cold-weather clothing. When I told them, my friends praised me for being nice. But at the time it just seemed like a very basic, humanly thing to do. I then realized that I easily could have gone home, gotten a hundred dollars and a warmer jacket, and given it to him without really feeling any negative repercussions. I smiled at the thought, thinking about how happy that would make him. So I decided to do it.

My opportunity came when I was walking home from work one afternoon and I saw him washing the windows of a store on my route home. I sped up my pace so I could make it before he left, bringing back a hundred dollars and a North Face coat that had been sitting untouched in the basement for years. He was still there when I got back, so I approached him saying, “Yo Master of Windows, I thought you could use a little help from a friend” and handed him the wad of cash and the coat. At first he froze, arms mid-arc upon the window, just looking in disbelief. I could tell he hadn’t been offered a hundred dollars and a North Face in a while. Then his arms dropped, and his eyes got misty. “Brother,” he said, “this is beautiful.”

I felt a huge pride like I’ve never felt before welling up from deep inside my chest. It wasn’t normal pride, which usually feeds the ego. It was the kind of pride that feeds the self-esteem. The ego is a balloon, and is very easy to inflate. Many people who look to feed their ego do so because it doesn’t take much. It’s a static object, filled with nothing but air and wrapped in a thin sheet of fragile plastic. The ego isn’t hard to enlarge, but it doesn’t mean much to enlarge it. Self-esteem, on the other hand, is a fire. It’s can only be fed with real fuel, and it needs to be fed often. The fire has to earn its own life by creating useful things like light and heat while a balloon has nothing comparable to a life at all. A balloon can stay inflated for days and do no good for anyone; a fire that can make it through the night can do a lot of good for the cold people around it. In this moment, I felt my fire being fed. I could see how much joy I was bringing the Master of Windows, and I couldn’t believe how much joy that was bringing me. He took the wad of cash, looked at it, weighed it in his hand and really felt it. Then he gave it back.

I was confused to say the least when he handed back he cash and the coat. “Thank you, brother. That’s a beautiful thing to do. I won’t forget this. But I can’t take it because I’m a working man. If I start taking handouts, I’ll be a begging man. And that’s a road that I will never go down, no matter how rocky this one gets.” I felt absolutely ridiculous as I walked home with rosy cheeks.

And for a while I just didn’t understand why he refused. I didn’t really know what he meant about the distinction between a working man and a begging man. I understood what he said, but I didn’t believe that such a small bonus would really be a big deal. But after seeing him around town a few more times, I started to get it. I started to understand the window washing, the bike, and the American flag outfit. It was all part of the same picture, which I was just beginning to see the whole of. He washes windows for a living, and he’s not just good at it. He’s the Master of Windows. His job is to cleanse the world’s view of itself.  
 The windows that people work and live behind are their lenses to the outside world. As people look through this lens, the light is warped and bent through imperfections in the glass. Dirt, scratches, bends and cracks all skew people’s perceptions of the world in which they live. To view the world through a dirty lens is to not really view the world at all, but to view a false interpretation of how the world is. As someone who has seen the worst of our own world, he wants the worst to be recognized. He wants people to see the world for how it is. And he dons the American flag every day because despite everything, he loves his country and he thinks that it’s something worth looking at.

And it is worth looking at. The Master of Windows is worth looking at. As he cleans the lenses of perception, he knows that people won’t understand. Kids will call him weird and adults will call him crazy, dressing up like that every day. But it’s not those people who matter to him; it’s the people who do understand that matter to him. People like me, who saw him for what he is and struggled with the stark image but tried to see it anyway, are the people he’s trying to captivate. He wants people to see things for how they are regardless of how hard they are to see, because the truth is always worth seeing. We have to realize the truth in order to improve society, and we absolutely must recognize what is wrong if we’re to improve it. Which is why the Master of Windows preaches truth through his actions.

One Sunday last April, I opened at the bike shop. By the front door was a folded up jacket. It was the jacket I gave to the Master of Windows on that cold September night. On the inside pocket was a note of beautiful cursive that read,

*Thank you for this, brother. This kept me warm through many cold nights, and I hope it does the same for you.*

*--C*

Inside the pocket, there was also a ten-dollar bill. I still have it.