

Gregory Boyle

If you locate one job for one homie¹ from one neighborhood, be assured that eight other homies from that same barrio² will call you asking for a job. It was in late May that Chico called. “Kick me down with a jale,” he blurts out with what I think is a fair amount of nerve. This roughly can be translated as ‘Do you think you’d be able to locate gainful employment for me?’ “Well, I don’t even know you, dog. How bout we meet first?”

I schedule to go to his house, which is not far from my office and situated on a steep, hilly street behind Roosevelt High. Chico is 16 and from a neighborhood whose roots reach back to the forties and the Pachuco³ (Zoot Suit)⁴ era. I meet Chico’s mom, a sweet, diminutive woman, who clearly delights in her children and maintains, at the same time, an evident dread at the path her bald-headed, cholo⁵ son has chosen. Her appreciation at my arrival this day is palpable.

Chico and I sit on the front porch. He is a lanky, funny-looking kid, really. As with most homies, his “pelon”⁶ cut has pointed large arrows at his overly-large ears. They are more pronounced than most. His smile is ready and willing, always hanging out at the surface and quick to appear at the slightest urging. Chico is shy and jittery, and yet will leap into areas of conversation that would normally take more time with other homies. We talk of his lady and family and the current status of his barrio with neighboring enemies. A most likeable kid, made all the more willing to me by his nervy request for a job, sight unseen.

“If I got you a job, mijo, is there some skill you always wanted to learn or pick up?” Chico is quick, needing no time to really consider my question. “Oh, yeah, computers. I really want to learn and know computers.” I assure him that I will work on this, promising only that I’ll do my best.

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Some days later, I call Chico. My investigation of a computer job led me to Chrysalis Center, a non-profit homeless resource center. I knew that they had recently received a bank of computers, so I made them an offer. I told them that I knew this kid, Chico, who wanted to learn everything there was to know about computers. He goes to school in the morning, I tell them, and could work at the Center from 1:00 to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. I will (gasp) pay his salary each week, somehow finding the money somewhere (bank heist?) and you folks would supervise him, teaching him everything you know. We will call it a job. They agree.

“Now, Mijo, you start at 1:00,” I tell Chico over the phone, laying down our ground rules. If you don’t go to school that morning, please don’t bother to go to work either. And I’ll know if you ditch school. A job is a privilege. Going to school every day makes you worthy. You will have two bosses. One of them, you’ll meet on Monday and the other, you’re talking to right now. So, if I find you’re hanging, banging or slanging (and I’ll know), then I’ll fire your ass. Got it dog?” “I understand, G. Thanks a lot. I promise I won’t let you down.” I finish our conversation. “You know, dog, that I know thousands of homies. But I chose you for this job. I’m proud to know you and I’m sure you’ll do just great. Good luck.”

Monday turned into Tuesday, turned into Wednesday, and I still hadn’t heard from Chico. I had resisted calling him, hoping that he would check in with me. Nothing.

I start to think that maybe he flaked out on me. Maybe my directions were bad and he never found the place. Perhaps something happened and he couldn’t make it and he’s too embarrassed to call me. I’m scratching my head and pondering Chico’s failure to communicate, when a message starts to spit out from the fax machine next to my desk. I can spot at the top of the paper, the tiny typed “Chrysalis Center”. The fax is a missive from our man, Chico, written in large, clumsy, handwritten script:

G –

I am learning to use a fax machine

I am learning a gang of sbit here..

Love,

Chico

P.S. I love this job

thanks for getting it to me.

About two months later, the first call I receive at 7:30 in the morning is from Chico's mom, Rosa. She tells me that the night before, Chico is standing with some friends, not far from his front porch. A car slowly creeps up. Windows are rolled down, words are exchanged and finally, bullets begin to fly from within the car. One lodges very high up on the back of Chico's neck and he is now in the intensive care unit at General Hospital.

I leave immediately. I walk into the unit and I see Chico lying there, skinny and tattooed, wearing only an oversized jumper, heavily tubed, with all the requisite IVs. He is staring, wide-eyed and unblinking at the ceiling, riveted to the acoustical tiles. There is a doctor at the foot of his bed, scribbling notes onto a clipboard. I go to him first to assess Chico's condition. "You know, Father," the resident begins, "I've never seen a paralysis this high." The doctor points to the back of his own neck. "It is so high on the stem, that we suspect brain damage, though we're not certain." The doctor leaves and I walk closer to Chico. His eyes don't even register that I'm approaching. They remain transfixed on the ceiling and unblinking, stretched, it would seem beyond their capacity. I lean in. "Chico". No movement, no acknowledgement at all. I anoint him in the Church's "uncion de enfermos". I rub a generous swath of oil, hoping against hope that the balm will penetrate his frozen state, hoping it will lead us both to some divine compensation for this mad, mindless waste of life. No such penetration happens. I am left thinking only, "Menos mal."⁷ At least he doesn't know what's going on.

Truth be told, this was indeed a hard kid to visit the next day. Excruciating, really. A rush of memory kept at me in the hours after my hospital visit and it placed in bold relief the enormity of loss. I can still see Chico waiting for me on his front porch on every Friday afternoon. Unlike other homies waiting for their pay-checks, I never had to honk my horn, nor leave my car, in search of Chico. He was always there, seated on his porch, and I was almost always late. He would catch sight of my red car coming up the narrow, steep hill, and would hurriedly head for my car (homies don't run, unless in hot pursuit). He would hop in the passenger side of my car and there was no extricating him. There, he'd sit and talk and talk. Gone long ago was the reticence and shyness, he would just launch into it. He was, as we say, "bien pregunton."⁸ He'd ask a grip of questions. In fact, he'd invariably ask me questions about God (like I would know). "Is God pissed off if I have sex with my lady?" "What do you think heaven is like?" "Do you think God listens to us?" And, clearly, far more valuable than

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the measly paycheck I'd hand him every Friday afternoon, was the time I sometimes had to spend with him, in that car, wondering what's on God's mind. And to this day, I regret I didn't spend more time. I did go back the next day to visit. I walked in and found Chico just as I had caught him the day before, with eyes pulled wide open, epoxied to the same spot on the ceiling. I approached, fully expecting the same response as the day before. But I made the attempt anyway. "Chico", I say, not far from his ear. His frozen eyes thaw in an instant and they dart to my own and they lock onto me and will not let go. I'm stunned by this and speechless. Chico's eyes become intense puddles. Mine do as well. "Do you know who this is, mijito?" And to the extent that his can nod affirmatively, they do so. He can only move his eyes. "Do you know, mijo, and these words are hard to say, that we all love you very much?" This last statement sets him off and he cries and cries. And his face says to me, in a most unmistakable way, "Get me out of this body!"

I anoint him as I had the day before, and think to myself, "the good news is, he's alive, and the bad news now, is that he knows enough to wish that he weren't." Our eyes tenaciously cling to each other as I back out of the intensive care unit. His eyes want to leap out of their sockets, they long to be transported anywhere else. The door closes behind me, but its closing is unsuccessful in shutting out Chico's desperately haunted eyes.

One week later, Chico's heart stops, unable to sustain any longer this traumatic ordeal. And as I blessed the gold cross resting on his coffin, and handed it to Rosa, with a long embrace, a thought comes to me. I inform myself that I really must let this grief in. Too long, I had suspended my own profound sense of loss here, and dutifully placed it on my emotional back burner. I needed to be there for Chico's family, his girlfriend, his homies. I gave myself permission then, to allow this pain into some cherished, readied place in my heart. Every homie's death recalls all the previous ones and they all arrive at once in a rush. I'm caught off guard, as well, by the sudden realization that Chico's burial is the eighth in a three week period. Remarkably, this thought does not become conscious until this very moment.

I decide to walk away from the coffin and spot a lonely tree not too far from the crowd. I stand there by myself and allow myself to feel this great loss and I cry. Before too long, the mortician appears at my side. He is more acquaintance than friend. Now he has broken the spell of my grief and unknowingly invaded the space I had carved for myself. I am overwhelmingly annoyed that I'm annoyed. There is an obligation, clear

and immediate, to break the silence, to make the mortician welcome in my space, uninvited though he be. I remove my glasses and wipe away my tears. I point feebly, at Chico's coffin, and I know that I need to find some words to fill our blank air. "Now that," I whisper to the intruder, "was a terrific kid". And the mortician, in a voice so loud and obnoxious, it turns the heads of the gathered mourners, says, "*HE WAS?*" *My heart sinks. I KNOW EXACTLY WHAT HE MEANS. THERE IS SOME SEVERE DISCONNECT HERE FOR HIM. SOMETHING ISN'T MAKING A FIT FOR HIM. HOW COULD IT BE POSSIBLE THAT A 16 year-OLD CHOLO, GUNNED DOWN, NOT FAR FROM HIS HOME, BE A TERRIFIC KID,* and yet, nothing can alter this fact: Chico was a son any parent would be proud to claim as their own.

¹ a gang member, a homeboy

² gang, turf, territory, neighbourhood

³ Latino gang member from the 40s

⁴ the suit gang members would wear during this period

⁵ Latino gang member

⁶ a shaved head, sign that one is a gang member (among latinos currently)

⁷ just as well

⁸ one who asks a lot of questions