

CHARITY

by Lisa Kron

Merlene Odums, her 7 year old son, Claude, and her 9 year old daughter, Antoinette, wearing tee-shirts, shorts and flip-flops and carrying plastic supermarket bags containing all that's left of their belongings, and holding glossy folders with the Bellagio logo on the front are listening, wide-eyed and a bit shell-shocked, to Clay Erickson, a hospitality specialist at the Bellagio.

Clay

Okay, so in your packets you will find your room key, a map of the strip, your vouchers for the world famous Bellagio buffet and, complements of Mr. Wynn, tickets to a very special show called "O."

(leaning down to talk to Antoinette)

Do you know what "O" is about honey? Oh, it's a show all about water!

Claude and Antoinette look at their mother, their eyes fill with confusion and tears -- and a touch of incredulity.

MERLENE

They're a little frightened of water right now Mr. Erickson. We was floating on a mattress for 5 days.

CLAY

Believe me, I know. I can't even imagine what that was like for you, Mrs. Odums. But that's why we thought this might be good. Therapeutic. Right? To get back on the horse? To see that water can be fun. We're going to have grief counsellors sitting in the row behind you. Okay?

MERLENE

Okay. Thank you.

CLAY

(handing Merlene an envelope)

Mr. Wynn thought you probably needed a little fun. So this is \$50 in cash, mad money as it were, and

(he pours a big pile of chips into each of the children's hands.)

\$200 in chips to which you can use in any of the Wynn hotel/casinos. Normally kids aren't allowed in the casinos but we're making an exception.

MERLENE

Can I just cash them in for the money?

CLAY

Um. Well, when Mr. Wynn gives out chips, which he very seldom does, by the way, he expects that you'll use them to play in his casinos.

MERLENE

No disrespect but we're not much in the mood for gambling right now, Mr. Erickson.

CLAY

(receiving a cell phone call)

Yep? Thanks.

(snaps his cell phone closed.)

Okay, Mr. Wynn and Ms. Dion are going to be here shortly. Ms. Odums, listen, can I speak frankly with you?

MERLENE

Okay.

CLAY

It would be really nice if you could thank Mr. Wynn and Ms. Dion when they get here. It's fine that you haven't thanked me because I'm just the conduit for their generosity but I really think it would be nice if you acknowledged what a terrific thing they're doing here.

MERLENE

Can we stay here permanently?

CLAY

What do you mean? Of course not.

MERLENE

This is the third city we've been to in five weeks Mr. Erickson. We don't need to gamble or see shows. We need an apartment and I need a job. My kids need to go to a school and not get pulled out after 10 days.

CLAY

We're holding out a helping hand, Mrs. Odums but you're also going to have to show some initiative. Okay? Celine Dion and Steve Wynn cannot magically change your life for you, can they?

MERLENE

I actually think that they could. I think they richer than God and they could get me an apartment and a job here at the Bellagio in billing or shipping and receiving -- a nice desk job. And that's all I would need.

Clay's cell phone rings.

CLAY

(into cell phone.)

Yep. Super.

(snaps the phone shut. Addresses  
Merlene)

Mr. Wynn and Ms. Dion are in the building so we need to put our happy faces on, okay?

MERLENE

I put on a happy face when you get me an apartment.

CLAY

(with urgency, almost pleading -- he  
needs to get the situation under control  
before Steve Wynn and Celine Dion  
show up.)

That's not our responsibility. Okay? We're doing all we can for you.

MERLENE

You know what I'm doing right now?

CLAY

What?

MERLENE

I'm showing some initiative. There's lots of jobs here. Get me one.

CLAY

Okay, Listen. There is a process. You have vouchers, right? From the government, for an apartment.

MERLENE

I been to seventeen apartments! Three already here in Vegas and I only been here half a day! Eight in Houston and six in Oklahoma. They tell me we can give you this apartment if you show us a birth certificate and certify that you never committed a felony.

CLAY

Calm down, Ms. Odums.

MERLENE

You calm down! You a felon, Mr. Erickson?

CLAY

No.

MERLENE

No?

CLAY

No!

MERLENE

Me either! I ain't got no birth certificate. I ain't got nothin'! My whole life was washed away! All I wanna do it take care of my babies!

The children begin to cry. Merlene glares at Clay.  
His cell phone rings

CLAY

Oh shit.

(into cell phone.)

Yeah.

(alarmed)

What? A riot? Where?

(covering the phone and talking to  
Merlene)

There's some kind of riot.

(listens -- then to Merlene)

Are Mr. Wynn and Ms. Dion okay? Thank God. Guests are being threatened?  
That's terrible.

(listens -- then to Merlene)

It's on CNN.

(into phone)

What are they reporting? Rumors... right...

(listens -- then to Merlene)

People heard yelling.

(into phone)

Uh huh.

(listens -- then to Merlene)

Refugees from New Orleans are taking over the Bellagio! I thought you people  
were the only ones here. There must have been another big bus load brought in  
by the MGM or something.

(listening)

Oh my God...

(to Merlene)

They're showing footage from the security cameras.

(listens -- then to Merlene)

A woman... crazy...

(listens -- then to Merlene)

Yelling...

(listens -- then to Merlene)

Taking everything they can carry.

(listens -- then to Merlene)

They're showing these kids with their hands full of chips...

Clay looks at Merlene and her kids, holding the  
chips he's given them.

CLAY

Oh... Oh no.

(into phone.)

There's been a mistake. Everything's fine.

(to Merlene, horrified)

It's a big misunderstanding... I guess. I'm so sorry. I don't know how that  
happened.

Merlene puts her arms on the shoulders of her children. She looks at Clay, shaking her head.