

# The Kidnapping of Charlie Cotton

By Michael Groetsch

It is the fall of 1972. The skid row district of New Orleans, an area where homeless alcoholics congregate, is a tightly compressed hodgepodge of honky-tonks, dilapidated flop-houses, and corner swap shops. Wine bottles and young, but rapidly aging men lie strewn across its narrow sidewalks like wind-blown litter. Hoping to profit from his vulnerable prey, a tall thin man in a white lab coat places a sign in front of a blood bank that reads, "EARN TOP DOLLAR. BE A BLOOD DONOR. NO IDENTIFICATION REQUIRED." He discreetly retreats into the blood bank as quickly as he appears.

As a young social worker whose idealism was fostered by the social revolution of the late 1960s, I walk the streets of skid row in search of those in need of medical attention. My eyes scan a group of men sharing a pint bottle of Morgan David wine, better known as *Mad Dog*. An elderly man with thick gray eyebrows, accentuated by deeply set, dark blue eyes, gulps his share of wine as if filling an empty gas tank. Passing the bottle to his left, he places snuff between his gum and cheek with the speed of a fast ball. The old man appears as a hobo out of a Mark Twain novel. He is wearing a white baseball cap, with bold letters, that proclaim he has *GONE FISHING*. His baggy trousers are supported by fire engine red suspenders. A cone-like nose protrudes from his slender face. Following a series of curious stares, he speaks to me with the southern dialect of Rhett Butler.

"Hey boy," he yells, "can you spare me a quarter for a cup of coffee?"

Seizing the opportunity to break the ice, I nervously introduce myself as I pull a crumpled dollar bill from the pocket of my bell bottom jeans.

“Hi. The name’s Mike. What’s yours?”

“Cotton. Charlie Cotton’s the name and freedom’s my game. What’s a young kid like you doing hanging around a place like this? Hey, how about a drink? You can’t hang out here until you share a drink with us. Hey guys, pass the bottle to Mike.”

I decline Charlie’s offer and he immediately takes the defensive.

“You young studs are all the same. Don’t think twice about smoking dope, but are always afraid to have a drink with us older guys. Hell, I’ve been living and drinking on the streets for the last 55 years and it ain’t killed me yet.”

“Hey Charlie,” a member of his group yells, “leave the young guy alone. Sorry son, sometimes Charlie forgets his manners. Otherwise he’s perfectly harmless. Don’t let him scare you off. Please sit and join us.”

Without speaking another word, I accept the offer and find myself sitting between Charlie and a weathered looking man with thick jet- black hair.

“How ya doin?” the tongue tied, middle-aged man asks, with a dialect unique to an area of New Orleans known as the *ninth ward*. “My name’s Jack. Jack Snow. Glad to meecha.”

The *ninth ward* is best known for its *shotgun houses*. The name for such homes is derived from their rectangular style design that suggests if you fired a shotgun through their open front door the pellets would pass through each room and out an open back door without hitting a wall. The residents of the *ninth ward* also speak with dialects that seem devoid of grammatical logic. A reasonably educated resident of the neighborhood would

take a sentence like, “I am going with Anthony to see my mother’s new bathroom,” and turn it into, “I’m gonna go wit Antney to see my mudder’s new batroom.”

Although Jack appears to be about 45, his sun-dried skin and toothless mouth camouflage his real age.

“Jack,” Charlie yells, “How about going to the Camp Street Inn to get another pint? Here’s two dollars. Make sure that you come back this time.”

Jack takes the money from Charlie and without hesitation, scurries across the street to retrieve the prize. Speaking with a lisp and walking with a hobble, he reassures Charlie of his return. A dark complexioned man in the group leans over and as if warning me about the threat of impending death, he whispers, “Don’t eat the green pea soup at the Camp Street Inn.”

The almost empty bottle continues to make its way within the group as stories of what was and what might have been are echoed with legendary themes. The youngest of the six, a prematurely balding man with a large scar on his right forehead, tells how he was held as a POW in Vietnam. Charlie challenges him by describing his own exploits during World War I. As Charlie begins to tell how he evaded the approaching German soldiers by hiding in an old bunker, Jack limps back with the newly acquired bottle stuffed in a small brown paper bag. His prompt return is reinforced with praises reserved for home run hitters. He rejoins the group as tales get taller and voices begin to slur. I listen to the grandiosity of their stories while noses appear to grow.

Someone startles me when a hand lands on my right shoulder. It is the guy from the blood bank in the white lab coat. He verbally solicits us for our blood. Like a modern day vampire in need of a fix, he speaks with a monotone voice. “You fellows want to

earn extra money? We're running into a shortage of blood. Anyone who comes in today before 5:00 p.m. will receive a five- dollar bonus." He gives us coupon books that look like green stamps.

"Awe eat shit," Charlie yelps as he throws the unsolicited pamphlet to the sidewalk. Without debate, the blood bank pimp disappears into the urban backdrop reminiscent of Dracula in a late- night movie.

"Hey you guys, It's getting late and I have to get back to my job at the detox unit," I announce. While giving out a business card that reflects my connection to an indigent hospital for alcoholics, I invite the group to call me if they need my services. Unlike the literature given to him by the blood bank hustler, Charlie places my card in his top shirt pocket. My eyes meet Charlie's as I bid the men farewell.

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"Hey Mike, its Charlie. Charlie Cotton. Remember me? We met on the streets in October. Look, I've been on a drinking binge for about three weeks now. I had the *DT's* last night and almost swallowed my false teeth. Been seeing snakes and hearing voices. I've kept your card, Mike. Do you think that you could help me? I need to dry out. I need to dry out real bad."

"Charlie, where are you right now?" I ask.

"I'm near the corners of Camp and Julia streets. It's right where we first met. Please Mike. I think that I'm going to have the *DT's* again."

"Stay where you are Charlie. I'll be there in about twenty minutes."

At about 1:30 in the afternoon, I drive through skid row and notice that there are three blood banks in a two-block area. All three have competitive signs on their windows announcing bonus plans for frequent donors. Within a block of the intersection where I am to meet Charlie, I stop at a red light. A shabbily dressed man in the need of a shave stumbles out one of the blood banks and walks directly into an adjacent honky-tonk. The song, *Mr. Bo Jangles*, blares from the belly of its jukebox.

A man in a gray business suit, carrying a leather briefcase, seems oblivious to two of the barroom's fallen soldiers lying outside of the doorway. A panhandler pleads with the man for a handout, as his slow walk becomes a hurried stride. "Get a job like the rest of us, you worthless bum. I'm sick and tired of being hustled every time I walk down the street. Leave me alone or I'll call the police." As if apologizing for the businessman's rudeness, a petite woman in a bright green dress gives the beggar some pocket change. A blood bank technician also approaches and offers to buy the only thing that the homeless man has left to sell.

I arrive on Julia Street and see Charlie leaning against the wall of the Camp Street Inn. Two men are assisting him. I recognize one of them to be Jack Snow.

Charlie's hands are violently shaking as if he is operating a jackhammer. He has lost some weight on his already diminished frame. His blue eyes are sunken deep into their sockets.

Acknowledging my arrival, Jack welcomes me with a friendly, "Whereyaat Mike! Tanks for helpin us out." Like an adult son aiding an aged parent, Jack slowly ushers Charlie to my car. "Everytings gonna be alrite," he reassures Charlie. "Everytings gonna be alrite. Mike's gonna take ya to da detox hospital."

As Jack helps Charlie squeeze into the front seat of my '66 Mustang, he pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes Charlie's sweating brow. He softly kisses his forehead and whispers "I love you." The tenderness of the moment touches my heart. As I drive away, Jack waves affectionately from the curbside while the blood bank technician works his way through a group of men gathered in front of another honky-tonk.

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"Ay Mike. It's Jack. How ya doin? How's my friend Charlie? He's ben in da detox tree days now. Can I come visit? Ya know, I ben given Charlie's situation some taught. He's ben living on da streets a long time and can't hold his boos like he yout to. He's a lot older den he yout to be. When he had da *DT's* da otta day, I taught dat he wasn't gonna make it. Taught I'd come to da detox and try talking him into goin into an old folks' home or someting. What ya tink, Mike?"

"I'm in total agreement with you, Jack, but he's not going to take my advice. You seem to be his best friend. Maybe he'll listen to you. It's worth trying. How about coming in at 10:00 o'clock tomorrow morning and we'll both speak to him about the idea."

"Okay Mike. Tanks a lot. See ya den."

On Thursday morning, Jack comes in 15 minutes early and together we approach Charlie's bed.

Almost as if he has rehearsed his proposal, Jack begins to speak. "Ay Charlie. Da guys on da street sure do mist ya. Look, Charlie, ya almost like a farder to me. But ya not getin any younger and da streets are getin tougher. Hell, in da last mont, ya had your

shoes stolen while ya were down and out and da *DT's* done nearly kilt ya twice. Mike and I ben talkin. Taught it mite be a good idea for ya to consider goin into a nursing home. What do ya tink, Charlie?"

"What do I think? What do I think? Instead of planning my future behind my back, I think that you and Mike ought to go back into his office and eat shit! Ain't no way that anyone is putting me out to pasture. Hell! At least I know who stole my shoes, but can you remember who stole your teeth. You lost them three months ago and still can't figure out where they went. Tell you what Jack, I'll go into an old folks' home the day after you do. In the meantime, you and Mike can both eat shit."

Feeling like the blood bank guy who was cursed out by Charlie weeks before, I retreat back into my office without saying a word.

Undaunted by Charlie's affectionately belligerent response to the nursing home idea, Jack continues to visit Charlie over the next few days. As I make my daily rounds on the hospital floor, I can hear Charlie's continued resistance to Jack's persistence.

"When hell freezes over," he proclaims. "When cows fly out of my ass," he yelps. "You can eat shit," he screams. While relying on many different clichés to make his point, they all basically convey the same message. Nobody is going to put Charlie in old folks' home.

Several days after Charlie was admitted to the detox unit, there is a soft knock on my office door. "Come in," I announce. The door opens slowly. It is Charlie. His eye sockets look fuller and the color has returned to his face. It also appears that he has regained some of his weight. "Mike, the nurse is getting ready to discharge me. Just thought I'd apologize for the way that I spoke to you and Jack the other day. I guess I'm

like a chameleon that changes colors to avoid an uncomfortable situation. I don't mean to hurt anyone, just trying to protect myself. I know that both of you are trying to help me. It's just that I'm not ready to give up the only lifestyle I know." As he explains his presence among his homeless friends, he speaks with the insight of Plato.

"You see Mike, I've been living on the streets since I was a teenager. Don't know any other type of lifestyle. I don't have a family. Never met my father. My mother died when I was five. Never married and never had any kids. By the time I was 12, I lived in six foster homes and several children's homes. When I turned 13, I hitched a ride on a boxcar in Austin Texas and have been on the streets ever since. Ain't ever had a real job and never paid income taxes. Jack is like my son and the other guys are like my family. Unlike the foster homes I grew up in as a young boy, my friends on the street care for me and I care for them. They give me a sense of belonging. They give me a sense of who I am. The business people that walk through our neighborhood to get to theirs look down on us with pity and shame. Don't think we are not aware that their eyes never meet ours. When they get home in middle-class suburbia, most of them don't even know the next door neighbor's first name. When I go into my neighborhood, I know everyone. Who is it that needs to be pitied? Mike, I could never make it in your world anymore than you could make it in mine. I would feel like a trout in a school of sharks. Piranhas would gobble me up. I have to return to my street family, Mike, just like you have to return to yours. But I'd like to thank you for caring."

As Charlie walks over to the discharge desk to pick up his belongings, a blue comb and red suspenders, I notice tears in his eyes. The nurse presses the buzzer to the back door and Charlie exits into the chilly evening air.

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“Hey Mike, its Charlie! Look, I was having a beer at Harry Fritch’s Bar and fell off the goddamn barstool. Think that I may have broken my hip. I’m sitting at the table in the back of the bar but can’t stand up. I don’t know what to do. I know that it seems like I only call you when I have a problem. I would have kept in touch since I left detox but I hopped on a boxcar with a couple of friends and spent the last few months on the Bowery. When you’re vacationing on skid row in New York, you don’t exactly send postcards.”

“Charlie, ask the bartender to call EMS for you and I’ll be there within the hour,” I respond. “Don’t try getting up. If you broke your hip, you’ll only make it worse.”

Driving up to Harry Fritch’s, I notice that EMS has already arrived. As I enter the bar, the odor of whiskey and beer permeates the air and gives it a sour smell. Beneath the dim lights and smoked filled air, I see two paramedics, a middle aged man and a young woman with bleached blonde hair, speaking to Charlie as he lies extended on the naked coldness of the gray concrete floor.

“Mr. Cotton,” the young woman says in a kind voice, “we think that you may have a fractured hip. We’re going to lift you onto the stretcher and bring you to Charity Hospital. You’re going to feel a little pain but we’ll try not to hurt you.” As they carefully lift and maneuver the stretcher through the narrow aisle that leads to the front door, I introduce myself and agree to follow the ambulance to the hospital. It occurs to me at the moment that Charlie's days on the streets are numbered.

The crowded emergency room at Charity Hospital appears as a military Mash Unit. People sit and stand everywhere with various degrees of injuries and illnesses. A young bearded man with a gaping stab wound lies impatiently on a wooden gurney screaming with pain. An older woman with brown matted hair seems to speak in spiritual tongues in an apparent attempt to chase away the demons. The institutional sounds of the hospital bounce off the walls like whispers of the grim reaper. An overworked nurse with cold piercing eyes and a monotone voice calls names of patients in waiting. Staring blankly at the high ceiling, Charlie awaits his turn with a sense of indifference.

The paramedics provide the desk clerk with a written assessment of Charlie's injuries. They apologetically explain their departure as a dispatcher summons them to the scene of another emergency. Assuring them that I will stay with Charlie until his name is called they hastily retreat through the emergency room door.

It is now about 5:00 o'clock on Friday afternoon. We have been waiting for about three hours when I hear Charlie's name being called through the long narrow hallway. A male nurse, short and stocky in stature, introduces himself and asks if I am related. After determining that I am not a family member, he politely explains I am not allowed in the examining room. I begin to object as Charlie insists that he can do the rest without me. He promises to call later to let me know how things work out. While he is being carted off to x-ray, I touch Charlie's hand as he silently thanks me with his blue eyes and deeply lined face.

It's Monday morning. A summer rainstorm hitting against my office window intensifies my lethargic mood. I sit at my small desk reviewing charts of patients admitted to the detox since Friday.

My unfocused concentration is easily broken by the muffled sound of my name over the intercom. "Mike, Charlie Cotton is on line one," the receptionist announces. I pick up the phone and immediately encounter Charlie's dry humored wit.

"Well, I guess hell froze over right after cows flew out of my ass," he proclaims. "They're going to put me in a nursing home, Mike. The doctors tell me that I have multiple fractures to my right hip and that at my age, it will never heal completely. They tell me that I won't be able to get around without the use of a walker. A social worker here at the hospital is trying to find me a place to live once I am released. Should have listened to you and Jack before and I probably wouldn't be in this situation. Mike, I just don't want to die in a cold bed without friends."

As Charlie's voice sinks into skeptical resignation, I stammer for words of encouragement. "Charlie, going into an old folks' home is not the end of the world. With your personality, I am sure that you will never die lonely and friendless. Jack is right, Charlie. It is time for you to settle down and retire from the streets."

"It's not that I have a choice, Mike. But like I said, I just don't want to die an old lonely man in a cold, nameless bed. Look, Mike, the social worker is coming in to tell me where they're going to send me. I'll call you back as soon as I get settled in." Grappling for words, something that Charlie is not known for, he suddenly says, "I love you Mike," but hangs up before I can respond.

Within a couple of weeks of being released from Charity Hospital, Charlie calls me from a nursing home located near Chef Menteur Highway in an area known as New Orleans East. Chef Menteur was once a bustling thoroughfare used as an escape route by Louisiana residents seeking the white sandy beaches and peaceful tranquillity of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. As Interstate 10 spread its calculating tentacles across the Gulf Coast States, Chef Menteur became a by-product of progress consisting of low-rent motels and truck stops. It is now nothing more than an economically depressed area where streetwalkers, truckers, and newly arrived immigrants compete for residency.

“Mike, its Charlie. I know that it always seems like I’m whining about things, but please get me out of here. They may call this a nursing home, but for some reason I feel that I’m being prepped for an autopsy. It’s a very cold place and I’m not speaking about the temperature. They think we don’t notice, but they don’t even have pictures on the walls. Jack came to see me yesterday but he was told that visiting hours were over. My roommate died in his sleep last night and two guys in white uniforms removed his body without speaking a word. Please, Mike, I don’t mind living at an old folks’ home, but this is no home, it’s a human warehouse. If you help me get out of here, I promise that I’ll never ask another favor.”

“Charlie, I’m sorry that you’re disappointed, but where will you go if you leave? You can’t go back to the streets. You can’t even walk. Look, I have a friend named Gary who owns a nursing home in Northern Louisiana. I’ll try getting in touch with him to see if he can help out, but please don’t get your hopes up. I seriously doubt if there are any

immediate openings. Why don't you call me back this afternoon and I'll see what he says."

"Thanks a lot Mike," Charlie responds. "I just hope they don't try to embalm me tonight when I'm sleeping."

Within an hour, I have Gary on the phone. Although he appears receptive to the idea of taking Charlie in, he cautions me that there is only one opening.

"The greatest problem I see, Mike, is the red tape involving Charlie's discharge. Getting him released from the home he is currently in will take some time. Maybe you can help speed up the process. I plan on being in New Orleans on Friday. If you could assist me in expediting the transfer, I could hold the spot for Charlie until then. Beyond that, I just don't know."

"It's a deal Gary. I already have a plan of how to get Charlie released without a lot of hassle. One way or another, I'll have Charlie ready for you. I'll call you back tomorrow to give you directions and details of where to pick him up."

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Several days after agreeing to rescue Charlie, I turn onto the grounds of the nursing home where he is living. My senses are numbed by the absence of flowering plants and shrubs as I make my way down a narrow gravel road that leads to the home's entrance. Cypress stumps protrude from the surface of a small circular pond like the heads of crocodiles. An elderly woman sitting alone on a park bench gives me a half wave. Parking in a black topped area marked for visitors, I notice only two cars in the lot designed for 50. Standing up slowly, the woman on the bench waves a second time as if

anticipating that I may have come to see her. I return her wave with a warm smile to acknowledge her presence and walk towards the front door. She returns to the bench and sits in silence.

As I enter the box- like foyer of the nursing home, I immediately encounter the welcome sound of a familiar voice.

“Whereyaat Mike,” Jack states in his ninth ward tenor like dialect. “Da guys on da street told me dat ya were trying to reach me. Sorry I mist ya. Da people in your office told me dat ya were coming out here dis afternoon. Heard dat ya gonna spring Charlie from dis goddamn place. Taught I’d catch da bus and see if I can help ya. I don’t like dis place anymore than Charlie. Won’t let anybody visit. What da plan Mike? How can I help?”

“Look, Jack, I don’t have the time to give you the details. Do me a favor and follow my lead and don’t ask any questions. Just play along without saying a word.”

“Okay, Mike, ya know dat ya can count on me. You da best Mike. You da best.”

Jack and I enter the hallway like Green Berets on a rescue mission. The deafening silence of the nursing home’s interior is reinforced by the blandness of its décor. The empty, eggshell white walls scream for color and seem to deny the presence of life inside.

“What da plan, Mike?” Jack asks again as he hobbles behind me.

“Please, Jack! As I told you, just follow my lead and keep quiet. I’ll explain later.”

“Okay, Mike, Anyting ya say. Anyting ya say.”

At the far end of the corridor, the silence is broken by the voice of a stone- faced nurse sitting alone at her desk as Jack and I make our approach.

“Can I help you gentlemen? If you’re here to visit anyone, visiting hours are over for now. You will have to come back later.”

“Good evening, Miss. I’m Bobby Cotton from New York City. I’m Charlie Cotton’s grandson,” I announce. “I’ve come a long way to visit my grandfather. Could you please tell me his room number?”

“Like I said sir, visiting hours are over until 7:00 o’clock tonight. There are no exceptions. I guess that you will just have to come back tonight,” she smugly asserts.

“What, 7:00 o’clock tonight?” I echo. Look lady, I haven’t seen my grandfather in over five years and I do not plan on leaving until you let me visit. I have rights, you know.”

“Tell it like it is, Mike, I mean, Bobby,” Jack utters as I kick him in the right shin.

“Sir, like I told you, visiting hours are over for now. You and your little friend here will have to come back later.”

“Dat’s all right, Bobby,” Jack yelps. “Let’s come back lader and bring our uncle, da attorney.”

“Who are you?” the nurse asks Jack.

“Who am I? Who am I? I’m Charlie’s oldest son, lady! Mike’s, uh, Bobby’s farder. Dat’s who I am! Like I said, ya can eder deal wit us or our uncle who’s a big time attorney.”

Unflustered by our demands, the stone-faced nurse responds with a tone of defiance. “I’m sorry, gentlemen. I don’t make the rules. I just follow them.”

Recognizing that the nurse is not easily intimidated, I up the ante. “I’d like to speak to the owner of the home,” I demand. “You are violating my grandfather’s constitutional rights and I’d like to speak to someone else in authority.”

“Sorry, sir, he’s not on the premises at this time. But I’ll be glad to tell him tomorrow when he comes in that you would like to speak to him.”

“Tomorrow! Lady, I’ll be back in New York tomorrow! I’ll tell you what, lady, if you don’t let me see my grandfather right now we will have our attorney file complaints with every nursing home regulatory agency in the state and will make your life miserable. By the way, Jack, it sure does smell in here and the floors don’t look like they have been mopped in a month.”

“Tell it like it is, Mike, uh, Bobby, tell it like it is,” Jack responds.

Appearing as if I struck the right cord, the nurse suddenly becomes defensively compromising. “Mr. Cotton, you can report us to whomever you want but we always pass inspections. See all the certificates behind my desk? Your grandfather is in room 434. You have 15 minutes. If you are not out by then, I will call security.”

Jack and I enter room 434 to the sound of Charlie snoring like a jumbo jet while his lips are open like a wide mouthed bass.

“Jack, wake Charlie up while I open this wheelchair.”

“Okay, Mike,” Jack replies, “but can ya please tell me now wat da plan is?”

“Jack, we’re kidnapping Charlie. I have a friend named Gary waiting for us in a van right out the front door of the home. We need to get Charlie in the wheelchair and roll him out into the parking lot. Hurry up! We have less than 15 minutes before Nurse Hospitality calls security.”

“Whoah, Mike! I wanted to help but didn’t know dat we were gonna kidnap Charlie. The mot time I ever done was tirdy days for panhandling. I’m almot 45 years old. I can’t afford to do tirdy years for no kidnapping.”

“Awe shut up, Jack! You can’t get arrested for kidnapping someone who volunteers to have it done.”

Charlie wakes from his coma like sleep to the sight of Jack and I hovering over his face.

“Jack! Mike! What are you guys doing here?” Charlie asks.

“I tink Mike and I are kidnapping you, Charlie,” Jack responds.

“What in the hell do you mean that you’re kidnapping me?”

“It’s part of da plan, Charlie,” Jack replies. “It’s part of da plan.”

Explaining to Charlie that my friend Gary is waiting for him outside to take him to his new home, he sighs with relief as Jack and I lift him from the bed and place him into a worn out wheelchair.

“Okay, Charlie,” I ask, “are you ready to roll? We have about 10 minutes left to get you into the parking lot.”

“I’m ready, Mike, but how are we going to get past the bitch at the nurses station?”

“Charlie, I don’t anticipate any more problems with Nurse Hospitality. I doubt if she’ll even say a word to us after our last conversation. But just in case she tries to stop us, Jack, why don’t you do the pushing and I’ll do the talking.”

Avoiding eye contact with Nurse Hospitality, as if it makes us invisible, Jack slowly pushes Charlie past the nurse’s station as I walk alongside.

“Hey, where do you think that you guys are going with him?” she asks.

“Lady,” I respond, “we’re just taking my grandfather for a stroll around the grounds. After all, it’s a free country. He’s not a prisoner, you know. We’re taking him to get some fresh air.”

“That’s what you think,” she says arrogantly. “You can’t do that until regular visiting hours.”

“Maybe we need to call our uncle, da big time attorney,” Jack yells.

“You can do what you want, gentlemen, but I’m calling security.”

Nurse Hospitality’s shrill command can be heard over the intercom. “SECURITY TO THE NURSE’S STATION. STAT. SECURITY TO THE NURSE’S STATION.”

Our fast walk down the corridor now becomes a running sprint out the door and into the parking lot.

Seeing Gary standing in the distance near a white high-topped van with an opened tailgate brings welcome relief to our hurried situation.

“SECURITY TO THE NURSE’S STATION, STAT,” can be heard over the intercom for a second time.

“Push faster, Jack, push faster,” Charlie screams as if riding a merry-go-round at a corner playground. Jack increases his already Olympic sprint pace as Charlie gives out a deep belly laugh, the kind that originates from the soul.

“How are you guys doing?” Gary asks in his warm friendly way.

“Fine, Gary,” I respond. “But as you can hear, we may have a security guy on our tails in a matter of minutes. Gary, how about starting the van while Jack and I lift Charlie

through the tailgate. Wish I had more time to talk, but we can do that by phone once Charlie gets settled in.”

I position Charlie comfortably on the sofa bed in the back of the van as his eyes well with tears and he and Jack begin to hug.

“Good-bye old friend,” Jack whispers. “I will miss ya like a farder.”

“Good-bye Jack,” Charlie responds. “I will miss you like a son.”

Gary backs up the van and pulls away. The elderly woman on the park bench stands up and waves.

“SECURITY TO THE NURSE’S STATION, STAT,” can be heard echoing through the parking lot as Jack and I drive my Mustang down the gravel road toward the exit. An overweight security guard can be seen in my rearview mirror as Jack sticks his hand out the window and gestures with his middle finger. “Didn’t know that you knew sign language,” I comment.

“Charlie tart it to me, Mike. Charlie tart it to me.”

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Charlie passed away during an Indian summer in 1976; four years after our adventures and friendship had begun. Until his death, he lived in the old folks’ home in Northern Louisiana where rabbit and deer roam like drifting vagabonds. An area where the gulf wind blows through tall scented pine trees like the soft voices of whispering angels. Charlie Cotton died happy, surrounded by many friends, curled up in a warm bed. He died with dignity. He also died my friend.

Jack and Charlie spoke frequently by phone after his transfer to the Mississippi home. On at least two occasions he tried to visit Charlie, but failed to reach his destination. The first trip ended when he fell asleep after hopping a boxcar with a pint of Mad Dog and woke up in East Miami. A second attempt failed when he got into a heated argument with a truck driver who picked him up hitchhiking. The angry driver put him out in the middle of Interstate 10, nearly 200 miles south of the nursing home, in a heavy rainstorm.

I lost contact with Jack shortly after Charlie's death. A mutual acquaintance told me that Jack passed away in his makeshift shanty nestled among the trees in the batture of the river. The shanty has long been washed away by the rising tide and strong currents of the muddy Mississippi.

It has been over 30 years since Charlie and Jack entered my life. The memory of their charm, charisma, and love for one another will forever be etched in my heart. Although urban renewal has forever altered the backdrop in which homeless people now congregate, *Charlie Cottons* and *Jack Snows* will always sit in groups telling stories of what was, and what might have been. As I patiently await the passing of a train this day, I see the shadows of Charlie and Jack through the open door of a boxcar drinking their pint.

“Where do ya tink dis train is takin us now, Charlie?” I can hear Jack ask.

“To wherever the next place is, Jack. To wherever the next place is.”

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*“You are not free until your spirit finds peace.” - Michael Groetsch*