

My plan after the Army was to “go to college.” Now, back home in Meridian, I realized I had not given my plan sufficient thought—or any thought at all. Messy details like room and board, for example. I was living with my stepfather Bobby Lee rent free, which would have been perfect if Bobby Lee wasn’t there and if there was a college within walking distance. But he was and there wasn’t. The nearest four-year college was 90 miles away. Was I going to drive there and back several times a week?

I had acquired a car, a ’53 Packard hearse that I wouldn’t trust to get me out of the driveway. Whether it would start each day was anyone’s guess, and when it did it would make you wish it hadn’t. Would it stall at every light, as usual, or would the muffler fall off again? Would the brakes fail, or would the radiator spew molten lava? Maybe a tie rod, whatever that is, would shoot through the hood, or maybe the whole interior would suddenly crash through the rusted floorboard and your feet would be skidding along the road like in the Flinstones. The suspense would kill you if the car didn’t. Commuting was clearly not an option. There was a junior college in Meridian, but it was way the hell over on the other side of town. Way too many lights to stall at.



The Grim Beeper

To negate the transportation problem I would need to live near or on campus, and that meant rent and food. Clearly, I needed a job, but Meridian was no boomtown. One day found me digging ditches, another selling encyclopedias. I had my greatest success selling toilet bowl cleaner door to door. Made three bucks on that. Finally, I found the perfect job. All night gas station attendant. Back then you'd pull into a station, a guy would come out, pump your gas, clean your windshield, and check your oil. You sat in your car guzzling the ice-cold Coke you got from the chest that squatted by the door. Gas ran you nineteen cents a gallon. All transactions were in cash and the attendant would make change from the wad of bills he'd pull out of his pocket. I became that guy. In the middle of the Mississippi night, in the middle of the Mississippi nowhere. That I wasn't robbed could be cited as one of the three miracles required for my canonization except that, in the end, I did get robbed—by the owner. Claiming all manner of bogus deductions, he paid me 19 bucks for two weeks work. So there I was, without a paddle.

Then came my day of deliverance.

It hadn't started well. I was getting teeth pulled. I had developed cavities in a couple molars and for a few months I'd been "treating" them with tiny cotton balls I would soak in paregoric and then cram into the cavities. When I finally consulted a dentist, he said I had wisdom teeth coming in on top of the molars. He wanted to go in from the side of my damn face and remove the wisdom teeth, an operation that would cost, roughly speaking, the GNP of a medium-sized Latin American nation. Instead, I found a black dentist who would yank the molars for five bucks each. My idea was, with the molars gone, the wisdom teeth could emerge. I had to park a block away and then

sneak in the back door because, well, Mississippi. Turned out to be a fine solution to the problem, though, for about 50 years. Then the wisdom teeth finally cracked, literally, from the strain of being molars and had to go. So now I have nothing there but empty space. There's an upside though. Fewer teeth take less time to brush, and they say time is money.

When I got home that day Bobby Lee was fit to be tied. Seems the sheriff had tried to arrest him for kiting checks. Well, one check. Our local Barney Fife had parked across the end of the driveway so Bobby Lee couldn't make a run for it. That's the part that Bobby Lee wouldn't shut up about. He was like that. He'd latch onto some particular detail and make the whole story subordinate to it. So it wasn't easy to find out what happened. Turned out the sheriff was not blocking Bobby Lee's escape at all. He was blocking mine. I was the desperado whose flight had to be prevented. Bobby Lee proved to the sheriff that he wasn't me and gave him the pitiful amount of the check.

It's not like I wanted to be a deadbeat. Without cash your options are limited. I'm sure you've never noticed that you swallow saliva from 500 to 700 times a day. One time you do notice is when you have swollen tonsils. Then every swallow hurts. Amazing what you don't know about your body until something goes wrong. Never had any idea until I had hemorrhoids, for example, that you clench your sphincter going down stairs. Anyway, I had recurrent tonsil problems back then and I'd gargle some over the counter stuff and wait it out, but this one time it wasn't going away and was getting so I could barely open my mouth. I finally consulted a "physician", as the diploma on the wall alleged. I'm sitting in a chair in the exam room when he waltzes in with a cigarette dangling out the side of his mouth.

“What’s the problem,” he says.

I point to my throat.

“Open up,” he says, looks in, takes the cig out of his mouth and whistles.

It ain’t good when the doctor whistles.

“Tonsillitis,” I mumble, not entirely convinced he knows what he’s looking at.

“Cryptitis,” he says. “When it gets that bad it’s called cryptitis”.

“Wait here,” he says and leaves.

I wait, god knows why.

Comes back a few minutes later with his nurse, and ain’t she a mind-boggling piece of work. As tall as Wilt Chamberlain, squeezed into a nurse’s outfit that would fit a woman half her size, got big teased up hair dyed black with a white streak in the middle like a skunk, way too much makeup on a face made of driftwood. She goes to a counter to my left, he goes to a counter to my right. With their backs to me, they fiddle with their various medieval doodads. Over his shoulder Doc says, Ready? Nurse says, Yeah. OK then, he says. Nurse Morticia turns around and grabs my head. Got a grip like a python. Yanks my mouth open. Doc’s there now too, telling me to hold still as he sticks a gleaming scalpel in my mouth. I thought he was going to do a tonsillectomy right there and then, but all he did was lance them. Sounds brutal, but it did the trick.



### Doctor Gumby the tonsil specialist

Doc hands me a prescription and says I can hang there till I think I can walk, and then he and Florence Nightmare leave. After a while I staggered out to the reception area. No one in sight. Certain unmistakable noises coming from behind his office door. Lancing tonsils can be quite the turn on, I guess. Still wobbly I managed to get to my car where I sat a while before heading for the nearest pharmacy. Being flat broke, I wrote the bad check.

So there I was, swollen mouth full of bloody cotton, listening to Bobby Lee's theme song about financial responsibility and how a fellow should just forget all this hifalutin college nonsense and get hisself a paying job, and so on. Mostly so on. I was afraid he was going to launch into one of his favorite themes—how I should have stayed in the Army, made a career of it, cashed in on the family history of Henry the Elephant and the Amos Jasper Starks. Shame to waste a heritage like mine, yada, yada, yada. He refrained, though, maybe exhausted from his run-in with the law. After a final tsk-tsk, he grabbed his newspaper and headed back to his Lazy Boy. Before he got himself completely settled in, though, he said, "Oh yeah, some lawyer called for you."

“Lawyer? What did he want?”

“Wouldn’t say. You’re probably getting sued for some other shit you did. Name and number’s by the phone.”

Okay, I figured. Might as well get it all over with today. I called the number.

Secretary put me through to the lawyer who said *his* client was a lawyer in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and that *that* lawyer’s client was a woman named Charlotte Tate who said she was my great aunt. Well, I’d never heard of a great aunt Charlotte, or any other great aunt for that matter, and said so. The lawyer asked if I was Amos Jasper Stark the Third, at such-and-such an address, recently out of the Army and winner of a chess tournament in Meridian.

I’d gotten hooked on chess in the Army. Played in some tournaments, did okay. Pickings in Meridian were much easier, not exactly a hotbed of intellectuals. The entrance exam for the local Mensa society was, can you spell Mississippi?

So yeah, that did sound like me. Here’s the deal, says the lawyer. I have this letter and your aunt wants you to come to my office to read it. I’m supposed to make sure you’re you, so bring identification. Seems like it might be important, going to this much trouble.

“Is this a trick to serve me a subpoena?” I asked. But he laughed and assured me it was legit.

I remained suspicious but, unable to think of anything shady I might have done, I figured what the hell, and next day went downtown. Mr. Henderson, the lawyer, sat me

across from his desk and handed me a sealed envelope and letter opener. Not only was the envelope sealed as usual, there was also an old-fashioned red wax seal. Henderson made a point of having me notice the seal, making sure no one had opened it. I slit the envelope open and the first thing I noticed was cash. A lot of cash. I'd never before seen a one hundred dollar bill and here were five of them. I still have that letter:

Dear AJ,

Surprise! As you see, I know to call you AJ. I'm that long lost relative you always hear about. And did I have the dickens of a time finding you! Where should I begin? I suppose with my son Davy. When he died, four years ago, I was left alone. Not that he lived with me or even in the same town or state. No, he lived on a farm in New York and I live in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. But he was all I had. All my husbands were gone, as well as my other son. I was feeling all alone in the world and started wondering about my original family from whom I'd been estranged. Surely some of them must still be around. I shan't bore you with all the details but I started looking for them and found, to my amazement, that I had a sister I never knew about. And that sister happens to be your grandmother, your mother's mother. I don't know what you called her, and sadly, I never called her anything, but her name was Susannah. As you know, she is no longer with us and, in fact, I couldn't find a single living member of that original family. Father, mother, sisters, brother – all gone. But I did find Susannah and your mother and, of course, you.

I saw in your newspaper down there that you won a chess tournament. How clever you must be! I do hope you'll come visit. You see, I live in quite a large house near

the center of town. It was here during the famous battle and even has a few bullet holes! That's a hot item in these parts. I wonder if you know we're about to have a big Centennial here, the 100th anniversary of the battle. There's so much going on. I'm sure you'd enjoy yourself. It's a small town but because of our tourists we have so many nice restaurants and taverns, a couple movie theaters, and even an amusement park!! We also have a college right here in town and I've learned just this week we even have a chess club!!! We have something for everyone, even a smartypants like you. I hope whatever you're doing in Meridian isn't so important you can't humor an old woman at the end of her days and come visit.

As you see, I've included money to cover the expense of your trip. But even if you can't come, please keep the money. Think of it as all the five dollar gifts I would have given you for Christmas and your birthdays if only I'd known about you.

Love,

Aunt Charlie

P.S. My phone number is CE7-5024. Call collect.

I didn't know what to make of it. After a moment, the lawyer piped up.

"Per instructions," he said. "I'm supposed to tell you I can read the letter if you want me to."

I saw no reason he shouldn't.

"Interesting," he said afterwards. "So you don't know this Aunt Charlie?"

"Never heard of her."

“Huh. What do you think?”

“I dunno. It’s all pretty strange.”

“If you were to visit, could you get time off your job?”

I laughed.

“Ain’t no job,” I said. “Not since the other day when I got my paycheck. Spent the last couple weeks working at an all night gas station and then the owner stiffed me on my pay.”

“Oh yeah,” he said. “That place down at 45 and Causeyville. That guy’s a crook.”

“You can say that again. I got 19 bucks for two weeks’ work.”

“He docked you for missing stuff, right?”

“I didn’t steal even a candy bar!”

“No, he steals it himself, then blames the night guy. Count your blessings. Sometimes he has someone pull a stickup. So, no job. How about this college thing, any interest in that?”

“Pretty much what I want most right about now.”

“Well,” he said. “Gettysburg College has a good reputation. I imagine if Aunt Charlie lives in the middle of town the college ain’t far off.”

“That’s a good thing. Wouldn’t want to trust my car to do much commuting.”

“Oh yeah? Whataya got?”

“’53 Packard hearse.”

“Wow. So you have no job, you live with your stepdad, you drive a ten year old hearse, and you were worried I might be serving you a subpoena. Leading the life of Riley, are you? You might want to go to Gettysburg just to get out of Meridian.”

“Good point.”

“Something else to consider,” he said. “You notice she says you’re her only relative? And she’s nearing the end of her days? Sounds like an inheritance to me. Wouldn’t surprise me she just wants to see who you are before writing you into her will. I doubt she’s a millionaire but a large house in Gettysburg? That’s got some value. Certainly more than you have now. In fact,” he said, tapping his teeth with a pen. “She also wants you to know the house was there during the battle, and she makes sure to tell you that ups the value. Bullet holes too. I’m seeing dollar signs. Yeah, she wants you to read between the lines. And that explains the instruction that I could read the letter if you wanted me to. So that I could help you see what’s going on. Of course, I could be wrong, but that’s my two cents.

So I was an heir? Over the next 3 days I chewed on it. Asked Bobby Lee what he thought. He jumped at it like a big mouth bass going after a fly. Then he got all sober like maybe I wouldn’t notice his glee and asked why not? Not like you got a good thing going here. Yeah, I thought. Why not? Not like I liked living with Bobby Lee any more than he liked living with me.