

So I called Aunt Charlie.

“This is Cedar seven, five zero two four,” said a woman with precise enunciation.

The operator asked if she would accept charges on a collect call from Meridian, Mississippi.

“Not until 6,” she said, and hung up.

What the hell was that? She didn't want to talk until 6? Then I realized it was that game we all played on collect calls. If all you wanted was to let someone know that you were still alive, like maybe you'd arrived at the end of your trip, you'd call collect and they wouldn't accept the charge. Phone tricks. In this case, I guessed that I was being told Aunt Charlie wouldn't be home until 6.

So I tried again as directed and this time Lauren Bacall answered. When asked if she accepted the charges she said, “You bet!”

“Aunt Charlie?”

“AJ! Zuri said that you called. I'm so happy to finally talk with you.”

She was tickled to hear I was coming but, as she was going to be out of town a good bit of April, we decided I'd come up at the beginning of May. When she asked how I was going to get there I said I hadn't thought about that yet.

“Do you have a car?”

“I do, but it's a junker.”

“I suppose you could fly into Harrisburg,” she said.

“I'm not that keen on flying after four years of jumping out of planes. It's made me appreciate keeping my feet on the ground.”

She had a deep, throaty laugh.

“Trains are no good anymore,” she said. “So I guess it’s a bus.”

“I hate buses.”

“Well, you have a few weeks. Maybe you can get your car worked on?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

So I took my hearse to a mechanic.

“You want to do what?” he said. “Drive this heap to Pennsylvania?”

I tried to justify my plan, as much to myself as to this Gasoline Alley Skeezix. The hearse was the devil I knew. Sure, I could ditch it and buy another car, but I only had a few hundred bucks. Entirely likely I’d end up with an even worse lemon. Besides, the hearse didn’t have to make it *all* the way. Any distance it went was that much less time on a bus.

He didn’t *say* anything, but his face and body said, hey, pal, it’s your funeral. He was nearly right too. He gave it his all, though. I think he saw it as a challenge. After three weeks it no longer stalled every time it stopped, the new muffler was secure, and there were no more terrifying noises. I thought, damn, it just might make it to Gettysburg.

Then came D-Day. May 2, 1963.

I started the day with breakfast at a restaurant that was on the way. The Magnolia Tree. It was early and I parked in the shade of the enormous tree the restaurant got its name from, lousy now with cheeky blossoms pink and white. Across the street the clock in Union Station said 6:25.

A couple old geezers sat in a booth playing checkers. The only other customer was at the register paying. He'd eaten at the counter and his plate showed the remnants of grits, biscuits, and gravy. I slid into a booth by the window and saw him leave and step outside. There he paused, checked his watch against the station clock, and ambled off looking mighty satisfied. I've never understood why, in a world with ham, bacon, or sausage and eggs, anyone would eat biscuits and gravy? As for grits, don't get me started. I guess it takes all kinds. My ham and eggs came, I dug in, it was delish, and then it was time to hit the trail. The waitress scribbled out the check, I left her a buck, a lavish tip in those days, scrambled from my booth up to the counter and paid. Then I was out the door, bound for the great white north.

Let me say right now I've never believed in ghosts. Didn't then, still don't, even now. I think I'm what's called a strict materialist: if it ain't made of matter it doesn't exist. But that still leaves a lot of room for weirdness. I might mention quantum mechanics or Schrodinger's cat or parallel universes or there maybe being no such things as the past or future. You get my point. There are more things than are dreamt of in your philosophy and so forth. Mainly so forth.

The only people I've told the following to before now were Aunt Charlie and Zuri. They each had good reason, as you'll see, to believe me. You don't, and if you got any sense, you won't. But, as I said before, I've never lied to you, and I'm not starting now. So here goes.

As I was saying, I stepped out the door, but it wasn't 1963 anymore. I was in a large crowd of Confederate soldiers and they were real. They stunk. They were noisy.

They talked and laughed. They jostled me. There was that clicking, almost chuckling sound that military gear makes when canteens, bayonets, and muskets joggle about.

I said that I was in that mob but that's not exactly true. It was me but it also was not me. My mind was there, but in some other body over which I had no control. The soldiers and I-not-I were shuffling toward a train, which I had no inclination to do. It was one of those old-time trains with the funnel-like smokestack. It sat steaming and hissing next to a dilapidated shack with the word "Meridian" painted on it. Gone was Union Station.

I want to be clear about this. I felt that jostling, I heard that laughing, I smelled those bodies, and I saw that train. But more than that, I was *there*.



We moved at a snail's pace but it was still too fast for me. Part of me was trying to explain, part was noticing all the details, details that just fed more data into the part trying to explain so that it could never quite form a conclusion. I wanted to scream. I tried to scream. I think I tried to shout "NO!" but all I-not-I said was "magnolia" and then yawned.

And then it was over.

I had stumbled into something that wasn't there – my car. No more soldiers, no more train, no more ramshackle station. Red brick Union Station was back, its clock

now showing a couple minutes after 7. It couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds. It was 1963 again and there was no one around except a middle-aged woman who walked around me giving me wide berth and the side eye.

What had she seen? Had I made a fool of myself? Had I been shuffling as though in a crowd? Had I yelled, "No", or had I said "magnolia"? I quickly looked away but in the process saw the waitress and the old checkers players watching. I felt the need to do something, but what? Walk casually down the street? Cross over to Union Station? Go back into the restaurant and sing "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer"?

And then, damned if I didn't turn to head back into the restaurant. Why did I do that? To see if it would happen again? Why would I want it to happen again? I only made it to the door, however, where I made a show of thinking I'd forgotten my keys but then discovering them in my pocket, though I'd had them in my hand the whole time. Of course, having "fished out" my keys I then had to get into my car.

I discovered my hands were shaking. I thought, "I've been shaken to the core", then called myself a drama queen. Cars these days don't use ignition keys but back then they did. You'd put the key in the slot on the dashboard or the steering column to start the car, and it always struck me that I, well anyone really, could stick that key straight into that slot even in the dark without even giving it a thought. Your muscle memory got so attuned to the motion it just happened and most folks never even noticed how weird that was.

But not this time. I poked and poked and finally had to look at the slot and even then it wouldn't go in, I was shaking so much. I finally managed and turned the key and the car lurched forward and stalled. I had forgotten to push in the clutch, another thing

today's cars lack. Before I could try again I became aware of the waitress next to me bending down to look into the car asking if I was alright. Oh yeah, I said, sure, maybe just a bit too much coffee. She said, great, and stood back up but continued to watch me.

I finally managed push in the clutch, turn the key, and drive off, but I didn't get far. In my rearview mirror I could see the waitress still watching me. I took the first turn just to be out of her sight and pulled over. I sat for some moments with my hands gripping the wheel, trying to still the shaking. I felt dizzy, my pulse pounded, my head was stuck in a vise. Weirdly, I wanted to take a shower. It took several minutes to calm down enough to manage the least pretense of thinking the matter through.

What the hell had just happened? Was that a hallucination? Why would I hallucinate? I didn't do drugs, I barely drank, hadn't even had a beer since Oxford when I was pretending to be a student. Was I losing my marbles?

It had been so real. I didn't just see those men, I heard them, smelled them, felt them bumping into me. And the details! The variety of hats, of beards, mustaches, and hairless faces, the ragtag uniforms, ripped shirts pinned shut, pants that were too long and rolled up or too short, pants tied at the waist with rope, the shoes and boots in manifold stages of wear. The cacophony, the rank odor of unwashed bodies, of filthy clothing. Could I have imagined all that detail? Had it all been created by my subconscious? Can you hallucinate something you can't imagine? But if not hallucination, then what? A waking dream? But there too can you dream things you can't imagine? But if all that detail didn't come from my own mind, where did it come from? A memory from a past life, perhaps? That didn't seem right either. I'd never paid much attention to that sort of thing but it seemed to me that no matter how clearly you

might remember some past life event it's still only in your mind's eye. The entire present world down to every jot and tittle doesn't get replaced.

I was on a residential street and had been sitting long enough to attract attention. One guy came out of his house in a bathrobe to get his paper, looked at me for several seconds. The blinds of the house across the street were pulled down and a face stared at me. The real world, it impinges. It kicks down the door, forces its way in. I had to get going.

Okay then, but where? There were really only two options. Back to Bobby Lee's or off to Aunt Charlie's, and going back to Bobby Lee was not on the menu.

So, off to Gettysburg as planned, hallucination be damned. But to do that I had to concentrate. Push in the clutch, turn the key, pull out onto Front Street, cross the tracks at 11th, take C Street to Bonita, and Bonita to US 11. I had it all in my head. That's how it was back then. You studied a map, memorized your route, and off you went. There was no nice lady with a British accent telling you to turn this way or that in so many feet.

Try as I might, though, I couldn't stop stewing over what had happened, and, paying almost no attention to the driving, I found myself, almost before I knew it, quite a way into Alabama, in a town called Eutaw. I've since learned that Eutaw is known mostly for several Klan murders and a massacre in which the Klan attacked a rally of about 2,000 black citizens. There is no historical marker. There is, of course, a large Confederate monument. It was the first place since I left Meridian where my route got a little tricky, and I had missed a turn in the center of town. When I found myself in a residential neighborhood I had to backtrack and try again. Turned out 11 had also become US 43 and, in my agitated state, that had been more than I could handle.

It was there in Eutaw, at the turn that I'd missed, that I was nearly T-boned by a pickup truck. I had absent-mindedly meandered into the intersection when it wasn't my turn. Brakes squealed, horns honked, men shouted. I tried to signal with various arm wavings that I realized I was at fault and was sufficiently contrite. Once the brouhaha had passed I pulled into a strip mall. I parked near the edge, next to some scruffy vegetation. I had to get myself under control. If I didn't stop thinking about the Magnolia Tree and pay attention to my driving I might get myself killed.

What I wanted, what I needed, was to know something about hallucinations, or waking dreams, or past-life memories. Nowadays, I could look that up on my phone, but back then I needed a library. I saw on the map the next town was Tuscaloosa, the University of Alabama. There'd be a library there. I noticed on the map a University Boulevard a few blocks from US 11, and I figured I could probably find my way from there. I was only about an hour away, and, wonder of wonders, I managed to get there in one piece, make all the correct turns and park near the Quad, near Denny Chimes and, there, had Gargas Library pointed out to me.

Not surprisingly, there was way too much for me to fathom in a mere hour's reading. Seems there are many types of hallucination: hypnagogic, hypnopompic, pseudo, etc. As for causes, I could rule out drugs, sleep deprivation, and the DTs. Which left only very disturbing suspects like psychosis and various neurological disorders. To make myself feel better I decided, for the time being at least, that I had somehow, when walking out the door of the restaurant, fallen asleep and had a dream. A dream at least explained how the entire external world could be replaced by a figment of my imagination.

My plan had been to reach the north side of Knoxville on the first day and then Gettysburg on the second. But this time spent at the library now meant I'd have to drive later than I had planned in order to reach that goal, or stop before then and try to make it up the next day. Once more, I had to get going.

Just minutes after getting back into my car, which had a parking ticket that I crumpled up and tossed in the back, I passed, without realizing it at the time, Foster Auditorium, where, a month later, George Wallace would pull his PR stunt of standing in the door to prevent two black students from registering for classes.

Here's a guy, when running for governor in 1958 told the voters, if he "didn't have what it took to treat a man fair, regardless of his color, then I don't have what it takes to be the governor." When he lost that bid he said, "I was out-niggered, and I will never be out-niggered again." That's all it took to deep six that ideal, one lost election. Now in 1963 he's looking to be President, has this moment fall into his lap, this chance to show the world what he was really made of, to show integrity and leadership, to show his constituents what it means to be American, to tell them, hey, not only is it the law, it's the right thing to do, it's the Christian thing to do, it's the American thing to do. It's been a hundred years, it's time. And what does he do with this opportunity? He panders to the basest elements in his state. He did indeed show us what he was made of.



He and the Kennedys tried to make it look like some sort of legalistic, principled conflict between federal and states' rights instead of what it actually was, pure and simple racism. At least this time they managed to avoid a replay of Ole Miss. Wallace warned away the Klan and RFK told my old friend Nicholas Katzenbach to "let Wallace have his little show".

Then, driving down University Boulevard toward US 11 I passed one of those houses you see in the middle of nowhere and in the front yard was a small magnolia tree. It was only a fourth the size of the one back at the restaurant, but it too was laden with all the same pink-white flowers. It made no impression on me at first, but once back on 11 it suddenly struck me that there had been a magnolia tree in my hallucination. In fact, now that I thought about it, it was very nearly in the same place as the real one, the one in front of the restaurant. The tree in my hallucination, though, was

a stripling, even smaller than the one I'd just passed. I found myself wondering if my mind had retro-aged the restaurant tree about a hundred years. If so, that seemed quite impressive. I mean, I could easily imagine having that same hallucination without a magnolia tree, so it didn't really add anything. The attention to detail of my subconscious astonished me.

I found myself wondering how long magnolia trees live. Suppose for the sake of argument, I thought, I had somehow witnessed a real historical event. After all, Confederate troops may well have boarded a train in Meridian at some point in the war. If the restaurant tree could have been a sapling in that very spot back then, well, that seemed to me a bridge too far, seemed to me to at least raise the possibility I had witnessed an actual event.

To learn how long magnolia trees lived I decided I needed another library and the next one was in Birmingham.