

Men I Love: Charlie Murphy
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The Best Of The Best: We began with a shared hatred.

“What do you think of Mr. Nixon?” the squat, bald old man with the wide face and the grin that suggested a canary somewhere had disappeared, asked me.

“I hate him. He disgraced the office of the Presidency. He should have stayed gone when he said the press wouldn’t have him to kick around any more.”

That was when, he told me much later, he knew we’d do well together.

It was a job interview in 1978 during which the word “job” was never mentioned. Neither was money. Or hours. Or duties. We talked about all sorts of other things that day in his office at 1776 K Street, NW, but, when we finished, and he stood up and shook my hand, all he asked me was when I’d be able to start.

Thus began my adventure in a world I’d never even considered, even though I knew it existed.

Hell, everyone knows American history. I just didn’t realize I was about to go to work for someone who had been there – right THERE – for so much of it

Charlie Murphy was general counsel for an airline headquartered in Denver when I met him, but by that time, he was almost seventy years old, and had done some other things in his life.

A few.

Like, he had worked on Capitol Hill, where he met a Senator named Harry S Truman. Later, he succeeded Clark Clifford as President Truman’s White House counsel. He worked for Lyndon Johnson and served as an Undersecretary of Agriculture during Johnson’s tenure. Then, Charlie went on to become chairman of the Civil Aeronautics Board, which had been formed with Senator Truman’s help back in 1938.

None of this, of course, mattered much to me, newly single, back in Washington after time spent on various legal adventures that brought me multitudes of experience in the wild worlds of litigation, COINTELPRO, Black Panthers, and how fast I could run when being chased by the authorities. I needed some normal experience, and working for Charlie Murphy would end up changing my life, but not at all in the way I had planned.

Thinking about Charlie, I see him behind his desk, writing whatever it was he had to write with a #2 pencil. Part of my job was making sure those pencils were kept sharpened. He said he liked the way I did it. Another part of my job was sitting on the couch in his office, late in the afternoon, listening to him tell stories while he cleaned out his desk.

He was forever cleaning out his desk. He’d almost always find something he wanted to show me.

Once, he pulled out the letter Adlai Stevenson had had delivered to him when he decided not to seek the Democratic nomination in 1960.

Another time, he found a Kennedy-Johnson campaign button, which he gave me, and which I still cherish.

He gave me one of the things President Truman liked to give to visitors to his office: a slender strip of paper labeled “A bookmark for narrow-minded people.” I guess that was Midwestern humor.

Charlie was from North Carolina, and he had the most beautiful accent I’ve ever heard. Didn’t matter what he was saying because those words flowed from him in the sweetest syrup I ever knew. He had a funny way of saying my name, with the

emphasis on the first syllable. He had another funny habit of calling out my name sometimes, when I was in my office next to his corner office, both of us with our doors open.

“Annette,” I’d hear the word soothing itself around the corners.

“Yes?”

Then he wouldn’t answer, so I’d get up and go into his office.

“Mr. Murphy?” It was always “Mr. Murphy” in the office. It was always “Charlie” outside, but, even though I wore jeans and polo shirts and cowboy boots to work, we were formal with each other, something I just loved so much.

He’d never look up from whatever he was writing.

“I just wanted to know you were there,” he’d say.

He was an old man who didn’t much fancy being alone. I understood that.

Sometimes, caught up as I was with the madness of my personal life, I’d spend a whole lot of time on the phone. Sometimes Charlie would walk past while I was having a conversation with the Man du jour. He never interrupted, but once, just once, he asked me a question about them.

“Annette,” he said, “sometimes I hear you telling people that you love them. When you’re on the phone. Not eavesdropping, understand. But, I hear you.”

“Of course,” I said. “Yes, you do.”

“I would like to ask you something about that.”

“Ask away, Mr. Murphy.”

“When you say ‘I love you’ to these people, do you mean it every time?”

“Well, yes, at the time I say it, I do, yeah.”

That made sense to him, and that was the end of it.

Journalists and historians came to see him all the time. Very often, I’d go out to the reception area to meet these people, and escort them back to Charlie’s office. Sometimes I’d sit in on the interviews, although I almost always had other things to do.

But, once, I heard something, and, after the researcher left, I asked Charlie how he remembered so much detail from so long ago. (I was so much younger back then; time looked very different.)

His answer still makes me smile. He said, “Well, I will tell you, but only you. I am not sure that I remember the events, but I do remember the last time I told the story.”

One afternoon, while I was lying on his couch, thinking things over and smoking a cigarette, I idly asked Charlie if he’d ever smoked. He was, after all, from North Carolina.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “I did smoke for a long time. In fact, I once had a cigarette with the Emperor of Japan.”

That was the kind of thing that happened when you asked Charlie an idle question.

He told me that, when he had been with Agriculture, he went over to Japan to find out about how they were doing so well growing chickens.

“Chickens,” I said. “You and the Emperor and chickens.”

“Well, yes. He raised chickens, and knew a lot about them.”

“The Emperor of Japan raised chickens,” I noted.

“They were more like pets,” Charlie added. “I believe.”

“So, what did you and the Emperor talk about while you were smoking together?”

“Well, he couldn’t speak English, so we just smoked.”

“I see.” I didn’t, but what else was there to say? “So, when did you quit smoking?”

“When I got tuberculosis,” he said, and then I found out that Charlie had been diagnosed when he went to volunteer for the Army after Pearl Harbor. He had spent a year in a sanitarium.

“You OK now?” I asked him in 1979, almost forty years later.

“I’m doing all right,” he said.

But, he wasn’t. He had ailments for which he took medication, and sometimes he slept in his chair in the afternoon, when I’d silently close his door and make sure no calls were put through.

Then there were the photos on his walls.

Pictures of Charlie with people I’d read about in history books and newspapers. Charlie with JFK. Charlie with LBJ. Charlie with Truman. Charlie with Bess Truman. Charlie with Clark Clifford. Charlie with Edward R. Murrow. Charlie with Douglas MacArthur. Charlie with Averell Harriman.

The Harriman story was maybe the funniest one.

Charlie always liked to slip me into situations that would test my patience and/or my ingenuity. So, one day, in his capacity as president of the Truman Library in Independence, or maybe it was for the Truman Internship Program, or any one of the historical groups to which he gave so much of his time, he called me into his office and said, “I need to have this signed by Governor Harriman. Will you please take this over to his house and have him sign it?”

Moron that I was, historically oblivious and not at all impressed by living history, all I said was, “Is he home? Does he know I’m coming?”

Charlie assured me that the Governor was waiting for me. So was the firm’s limousine, downstairs.

I’d been introduced to Governor Harriman a couple of times before, when lunching with Charlie at the International Club, that bastion of White Guy Sameness And Really Mediocre Food. Both times, the Governor, who couldn’t hear and who was almost blind, had seized my hand and pronounced me “a fine young man.”

I had short hair and wore jeans and polo shirts and, yes, I guess I had that coming.

Anyway, over to Georgetown we went, and the driver delivered me to one of those old wooden houses that line the back streets – I think we were on N Street, but it might have been P. I’m not sure any more.

I hopped out of the car and knocked on the door, which was street-level. A butler, the real goods, wearing white gloves, opened the door, and when I announced myself, informed me that I should use the main entrance. He pointed to another, bigger door at the other end of the house.

Then he closed the door.

So, I walked over to the other door and stood, because I figured he'd open it, knowing I was there.

I stood and I stood, and then I knocked.

The door opened, and there he was. "The Governor is waiting for you."

As I walked through the house, I was struck by the low ceilings and how the wooden furniture seemed to throb through its subtle shine. There were paintings on the walls, and I stopped at a credenza over which a remarkable painting of white roses. I had never seen anything like it in my life.

There were lots of cut flowers everywhere, which made the place smell very good, over the slight whiff of lemon oil, but these white roses were so much more than any of those real flowers. Those white roses seemed to seize my heart.

The butler stood respectfully behind me while I stood there and stared. It would have felt very good to cry at that moment, although I wasn't sure why.

After a moment, he said, very nicely, "The Governor is in his study, up on the third floor. You go up there and take the next flight and you'll be right there."

Up the creaking wooden steps I went, and then up a really narrow set, and suddenly I was in something that reminded me of the attic in my parents' house back in Shenandoah, PA. Low, sloping ceilings that met in a point in the middle, and nowhere to move. Boxes of files everywhere, pictures, lots of black and white photographs in plain black frames on the walls. And, in the middle of all of this, the Governor.

He wore the biggest hearing aids I'd ever seen, and he greeted me with the customary bellow: "Hello, young man."

"Charles Murphy would like you to sign these," I shouted back, and sort of bent around him to put the documents I'd carried onto his desk.

"Where? Where do I sign?"

You know how old people, when they can't see or hear very well, get that scared sound in their voices? Anxiety, trepidation, uncertainty – you can hear it when they're not sure of what's going on around them.

There was none of that in his voice. The old guy barked. I liked that.

Governor Harriman used not one but two – that's TWO – magnifying glasses to read what I set before him. And when I pointed out where his signature would go, he thanked me and then promptly ignored me while he read them through the two magnifying glasses.

I studied the photographs, and saw the usual suspects.

There was Harriman with John and Jackie Kennedy. All three were laughing.

I looked at the old man with the thin, dyed black hair hunched over the documents he was to sign. He seemed not to know I was there.

The next photo I looked at was the one that's remained with me all these years. FDR, Stalin, Churchill, and the man who was right beside me. The Yalta Conference, 1945.

There were others, but they didn't matter. I was alone in a small room with one of those four men, the only living one. I had just shook his hand.

Then, he spoke, without looking up. “Are you a lawyer, too?” he honked.

“Yes, sir,” I honked back.

“Charlie Murphy’s the smartest lawyer you’ll ever meet. Listen to everything he says. You’ll learn all you need to know.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, Governor.”

He signed the documents while I held the magnifying glasses, and then we shook hands again, and I was dismissed by his turning away and going back to whatever he had been doing before I arrived. I couldn’t wait to get downstairs to see that painting of the white roses again.

The butler was waiting for me in the dining room

“I wish I could take that one with me,” I sighed as I took my last look at the roses.

“You can’t,” he said, not unkindly.

Back at the office, Charlie was waiting. I gave him the big envelope, and then he asked me how I had liked “visiting” with the Governor. (In Charlie’s world, a kind, genteel world, people “visited” each other.)

“He was at Yalta with Stalin. And Churchill,” I said, stupidly, still numb.

“Yes, he was,” Charlie agreed.

And that was all. Charlie had given me the opportunity of a lifetime to stand close to a living piece of American history, and I understood it. Any courier could have taken over those documents and waited outside until they were returned, signed. But, Charlie knew that he could give me something, and that warm summer day so many years ago, he did, and that’s just another reason why I love him.

Not long after that, he took me to visit at the White House one afternoon, but I’ve written enough about Charlie for now. There’s so much more, so much.

I saw that painting of the white roses again, maybe ten or twelve years later, as HWWNBO and I were wandering through the National Gallery in Washington, DC. It startled me just as much as it had that day in the Harriman dining room. Only this time it was far from me, with a guard beside it and a low velvet rope keeping me from stepping up to it as I had the first time I had seen it.

It had a name: “White Roses.”

Next time, I’ll tell you about Truman’s Secretary of the Treasury and why he kept trying to put his tongue down my throat, how Charlie explained to my Mom that he didn’t buy General MacArthur’s wife a five-pound box of candy at Garfinkle’s, and me fighting down the urge to steal Jimmy Carter’s pen from his Oval Office desk while the President was talking to me and Charlie was watching.