

Aunt Charlotte was my grandmother's younger sister. And she had led a hard life. Her husband, Uncle Travis, had been killed in The Battle of The Bulge and was buried in the Ardennes American Cemetery in Belgium. She had been left on her own to raise their three-year-old son, Henry. Matter of fact, we have a set of black and white photos in a box dated "September 5,1950" of the time that Aunt Charlotte took Henry to Europe to visit the grave of his father. Henry would have only been seven years old at the time.

Charlotte never remarried. She raised Henry with an iron fist and a heart of gold. Henry grew up with the image of his own heroic father guiding in always in the right direction. He graduated at the top of his class at Roosevelt High School in 1961. He even gained a congressional recommendation to WestPoint and graduated from there in the 1966 class of cadets. But sooner had he graduated, than Uncle Sam shipped him off to Vietnam to make him the squad leader of aa dozen as equally young and green young men. And just like his father, Henry didn't make it home from his war either. And to make matters worse, the Army simply listed him as "Missing in Action". There was not a body or remains to return to Texas.

That was too much for Charlotte to take. She lapsed into some sort of silence catatonic state. She was neither alert nor asleep. She was unresponsive to anything external. She wouldn't respond to conversation or questions. She would sit silently and solemnly eat, if served food. But if not served, she would not seek out sustenance own her own. It was obvious that she could no longer take care of herself.

Nobody in our family knew what to do with her in the "in-between" consciousness she was living in. At first, she was sent to the State Mental Hospital, but after a short stay there, my grandparents brought her home to Dallas to live and care for her in their house. But in 1975, both my grandmother and grandfather died in quick succession after brief illnesses.

So, instead of having her sent back to the State Hospital, my parents decided that Aunt Charlotte would come live with us. I can remember riding with them to pick her up and driving to our house in Houston while I sat next to her in the back seat. I was eight years old at the time. Aunt Charlotte would have been eighty.

My dad and his brothers built an attached private apartment on the back our house for her to live in. It had a small bedroom, bathroom and living area. That's where Aunt Charlotte moved into. We just referred to her place as "the back room".

Mom and Dad prepared meals for her. I would take the plates out our side door and walk around to her room and give her each meal. At the encouragement of my parents, I would take my own meal to the back room and eat with Aunt Charlotte. I spent many evening with her, sitting and eating at her small dining table in the back room. I would ask her questions, but she never responded. I'd talk to her about random aspects of my life like Star Wars, what I was learning in school and other meaningless trivia.

We even had a T.V. in the back room for her to watch. Sometimes, I would tune it in to "The Price Is Right" or old reruns of "Gunsmoke" but she never seemed to notice it was on. She spent her waking hours sitting in a rocking chair, looking out the window. In her lap, she kept a small tattered Bible. Inside the Bible, was a silver star military medal that had been given to her Henry posthumously. She often held the medal tightly in her hands, running and caressing it like a set of prayer beads.

She looked out her window all day, each day, every day. She peered deeply into the sky silently. Sometimes, way above, she'd spot a faraway airplane, quickly thumb through her Bible, put her finger on a verse, look back out the window and quietly mumble some few syllables in a language known only to her.

The days turned into weeks. The weeks turned into months. The months turned into years. Aunt Charlotte remained locked in her world, except for those few mumblings directed towards distant aircraft.

And then one day, seven years into her stay with us, while I was sitting across from her in the back room eating meatloaf and mashed potatoes that the silence was interrupted.

"You Man!" I hear a voice say.

I stood up quickly and turned around.

"You Man!" said the voice again. "I'm talking to you."

I did another one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn. I looked at Aunt Charlotte in her eyes on the other side of the table. She was standing straight up, smiling at me.

"You Man." She said a third time. "What is your name, child?"

"R...R..Robert." I stuttered back at her.

“And just who are you, Robert?” she asked.

I thought about the question just for a few moments and said, “Well, I’m your great-nephew, I suppose.”

“You’re Jerry’s son, then?” she snapped back at me referring to my father.

“Yes, mam.” I said nodding.

“Well. Robert, great nephew, son of Jerry...I’m ready to talk now.”

My heart began to race. My jaw nearly popped out of its skull sockets.

“I said I’m ready to talk now.” She repeated then she leaned over the table, smiled at me from ear-to-ear and added, “Are you ready to listen?”

I took in a deep breath, cleared my throat and said, “Yes, mam. I’m ready to listen.”

“Very well then.” She proclaimed sitting back down in her chair. She smiled, patted her palms on the table and said, “Let us begin!”