

# Driving Mother Knickers

## Recalling My Special Friendship with Charles Alexander



BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Every night the call would come. “Any gossip?” he would ask. Sadly, there wasn’t usually much worth mentioning since we’d spoken just the day before and neither of our lives were terribly exciting. But we checked in with each other, and Charles Alexander was the only person I was guaranteed to hear from on a daily basis. Tonight, I won’t hear from him. And today, I’ll get through the day without anyone telling me they love me, or that they’re “holding the good thought” for me, as Charles always did.

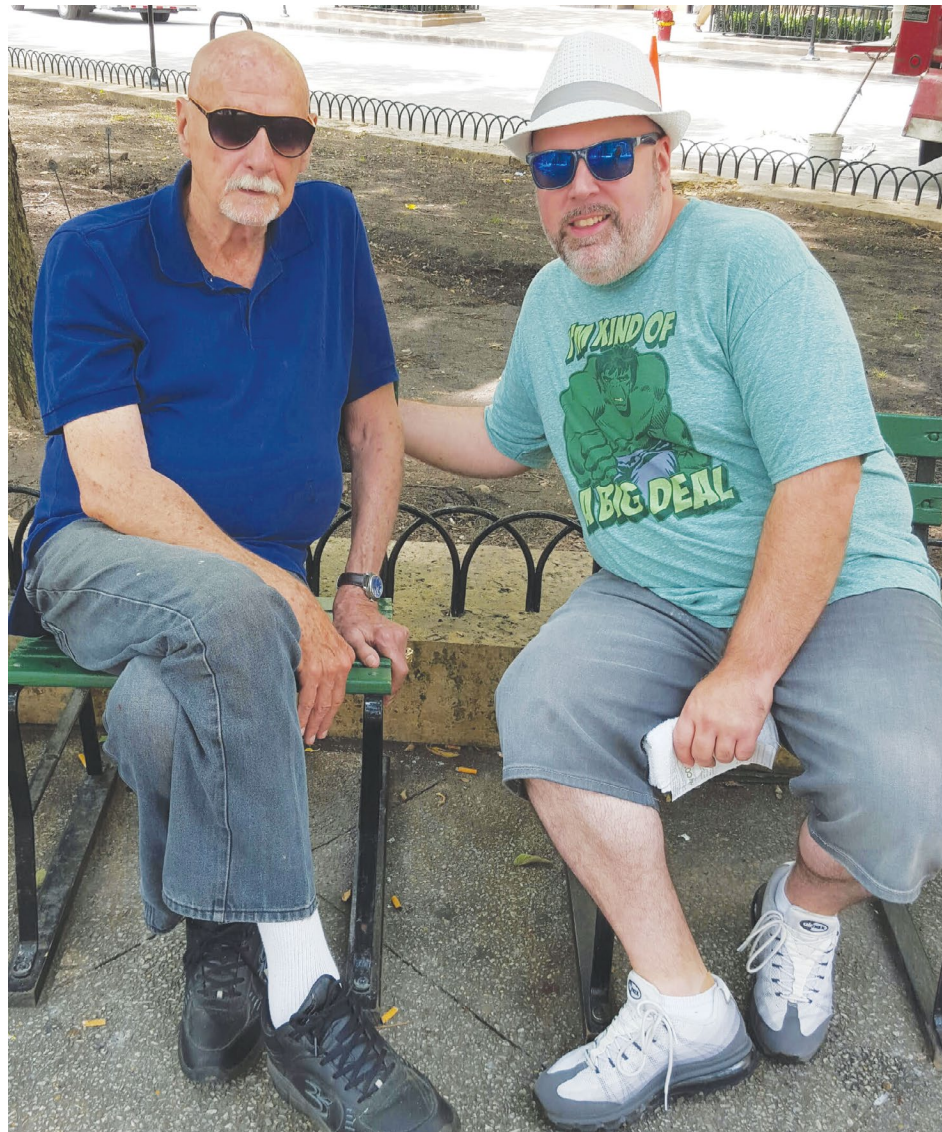
I’d be lying if I pretended that Charles didn’t have a special knack for calling at inopportune times. I’d be lying again if I said I wasn’t sometimes slightly annoyed. But I knew, had known for years, that if nature took its course, I would one day miss these calls. Now, that day has come. And I miss the calls already.

Looking back, my friendship with Charles was a bit unlikely. It began in 1999 when I was hired as the new staff writer for *Between The Lines*. Charles was 63, and I was 27 at the time. A popular columnist for the paper, Charles traditionally came in once a week to work from the office and, more importantly, catch lunch with the bosses, his dear friends Jan and Susan.

Soon enough, Charles, who did not drive, had wrangled me into picking him up and dropping him off at his apartment in the Park Shelton in Midtown. It was a little off my route, but worth the detour. We hadn’t traveled very many miles together that first day before I began to realize that Charles and I shared a similar sense of humor, an affinity for a certain combination of catty and completely irreverent remarks to be delivered deadpan.

Charles was just some four years younger than my grandmother. Still, the friendship seemed to work. Eventually, even after I left my full-time position with the paper, Charles and I would continue to get together for dinner once a week. Favorite spots included Pete’s Place in Ferndale and Baker’s Square in Birmingham, both long closed. Charles loved to go to Borders — and later Barnes & Noble — and trips to Ann Arbor for a meal at \aut\ BAR and a pass through Common Language Bookstore were always enjoyable.

But the most fun I’d ever have with Charles would be on our road trips to Chicago. Charles had been going to Chicago frequently since



Charles Alexander with writer/friend Jason A. Michael. Courtesy photo

the 1960s. All told, over the years, we made 11 wonderful trips to the Windy City. A 12th was planned, but then he had a stroke in 2019 and travel was no longer possible.

I’d agonize over the playlist for these trips. In the early years, I made a series of CDs and then, eventually, I got an iPod before moving onto a flash drive. Charles and I shared a varied taste in music. He liked classical, opera, pop, disco, chill out and oldies. He had a couple favorite songs I’d always be sure to include.

One was “Trade Winds” by Roberta Flack and the other, somewhat comically to me, was Donna Summer’s “Love to Love You Baby.” Both songs brought back pleasant memories for Charles of trips to Chicago in the ’70s. He often regaled me with stories and, when we were there, we’d often take long walks where he’d

point out gay landmarks that no longer were.

We’d also listen to old time radio serials. Programs featuring Rita Hayworth for his dear friend Gordon “Rita” Barnard, who was, as Kenny from Chosen Books used to call him, a legend in his own living room. We discovered a fantastically campy 1950s San Francisco-based radio show called “Candy Matson,” about a feisty female private detective.

In Chicago, we stayed in separate hotels. Our rendezvous spot would be the giant Borders on North Michigan Avenue next to Water Tower Park. After it closed, we’d just meet in the park, which was a prime spot for people watching, something Charles loved to do.

We’d go bargain shopping at the old Virgin megastore and make trips to Boystown. Charles’ favorite spot there was the still-open Lucky

Horseshoe, which was home, he liked to say, to the world’s homeliest boy go-go dancers. That didn’t stop him from tipping them now and then, though.

We were both always sad on the way home. Yet we managed to have our share of fun in Michigan, too. During one trip up Woodward Avenue, I don’t recall where we were headed but we were listening to some miscellaneous old-time radio show when we were introduced to a character called Matilda Knickerbocker. We burst out laughing, in sync, at the mention of the silly name.

And from that moment on, it was Charles’ new moniker. He’d shorten it in time to Mother Knickers, and that’s how I’d address his birthday cards and other correspondence. He called me Jasona. We played around with other drag names over the years. He created the fictional character Sister Scatterpin for a few farcical columns he wrote. And anyone whom he determined to be a little dinky would be deemed to be a Dora Dizz.

Charles remained healthy and vital into his 80s. He was active and well known in his Midtown neighborhood, often seen at Cass Café and Shangri La (and Twingo’s before that). He was a regular in the area and never failed to run into someone he knew at most places we went. He only ate out — he never cooked — and would often appear in paint-stained jeans having just finished a new piece of art.

After the stroke, though, problems with vision and mobility slowed him down. He moved into a very nice senior community, which was not a particularly good fit for someone so young at heart. As Covid kicked in and visitation was restricted, Charles fell victim to feelings of loneliness and isolation. He was never quite the same again.

He had no living relatives but, like many gay men, had built a family of caring friends who acted as surrogates. I was honored to be one of those friends. Our unlikely friendship ended up being one of the most meaningful relationships of my life. He wasn’t very active in his final years, but we still spoke every day.

Now, there is no one holding the good thought for me, not quite in the way Charles did. But though he is gone, I will think of him every time I pass by the many pieces of his artwork I have hanging in my home, every time I visit Chicago (which will be terribly difficult to do at first) and every day, I’m sure.

I’m still holding the good thought for him. And somewhere, high above the clouds perhaps, I hope he is still doing the same for me.