

Chey Chey - The Wonderful Guy - Cheyenne - Walter Middleton

“Chey Chey --- The Wonderful Guy - so nice they named me twice.”

That is the name and greeting I received when I met Walter Middleton also known as Cheyenne.

He shows up in my dorm room as my roommate in 1970. Me, an 18 year old white guy at a midwestern Catholic University on a basketball scholarship, and Walter, a Black man coming mid-year on a scholarship to play as well. We sit on beds across from each other.

He is from Harlem - scabs for veins on his arms.

But he can play. On a lay-up he can cup the ball between his hand and forearm and bring it behind his back and look as if to pass it and bring it back for a lay-up in one smooth move. “Now you see it - now you don’t - I is a magician.”

He could play. Unique is an understatement. Always talking always smiling.

We became friends - trust - caring - likability - two dramatically different worlds touch - not embrace - but touch - embrace would come later.

Chey had access – pushers from NYC. He used the big H. Pushers however, had eyes on the bit older Black Superstar, who was already present at the University. Walter was merely the conduit to introduce the pushers to the Superstar.

The Superstar, through Walter, began and quickly became addicted, thereby escaping pressure, expectations and most of all surrounded and infused by deep racism by other players, coaches and in all of University life. I was witness to many sad scenes – some of use – many of unbearable indignities not even comprehended by the majority oppressor or admitted to themselves.

Season ended. Walter and I went to his home in Harlem together for Easter. On our way from the NYC airport Walter instructs the cabbie to pull over and stop outside a store. He runs up steps and picks up drugs and the newly released album “Puzzled People” by the Temptations (The Black Beatles).

We go to his home on the corner of 159th and Amsterdam. Candy cane stores on all 4 corners – drug fronts. Walter gets out of the cab and windows in the high rise projects fly up – many yelling “Chey Chey” – Walter salutes and bows to all corners saying “As-Salaam-Alaikum.”

We go upstairs. His wonderful, loving, devout Baptist Mom has prepared a beautiful dinner served at a table in a small kitchen not far from the police lock on the front door. The warm corn honey biscuits just out of the oven were full of love and welcoming delight. First, a prayer. Then a favorite meal.

After dinner, 6 or 7 friends file in. Walter and I join them in a side room. Walter next to me on the right pulls out cocaine and the end of a bic pen and begins to use and pass to his right. It proceeds slowly. Mumbling conversation ensues that the whole group seems to understand except me. The bag and the pen tip come to the man next to me on my left. He uses and pauses and pauses for what seems like a long time. He then asks me one clearly enunciated question for all to hear; "ARE YOU PREJUDICED?" I pause, think and respond; "YEAH I AM." He holds out the palm of his hand and I give him the soft 5 offered and he says; "GOOD MAN CAUSE SO AM I." Laughter fills the room. Later Walter tells me that the guy who asked me the question and most in the room had never sat with a white guy and had a conversation.

With Walter as my exceedingly informed guide and protector, we explored Harlem for the next 4 days including playing bball at the old Rucker.

Walter did not come back to school in the Spring. I next hear from him a few years later when word comes he is in a jail in downtown Omaha. Can I come see him? I go, but they will not let me in. Only his lawyer or clergy are permitted. So I go back to school and borrow a priest's collar from a man studying to be a brother - not a full priest. The collar fit - off I went back to the jail. They let me in, up an elevator, took a left and there were about 25 Black men and one long haired white hippie in a large tiered jail cell. They got Walter and brought him to a small room I was in with 2 chairs and a worn green steel table. He looked awful. His mouth was sewn shut from the inside with a thick wire and his gums were clearly infected. He had not seen a lawyer or a doctor or heard from anyone in about 30 days. His jaw was busted in a fight before coming to jail.

I went to the DA's office and announced myself as Father Manning. I waited patiently. A prosecutor came and as we talked he told me he had no file on Walter and did not know why he was in jail. I gave him the basics on Walter. He told me if I could return with a one-way ticket to NYC and

give my word that I would put him on the plane, he would release him to me. I did both. Justice was served Omaha style and Walter flew to NYC.

About 3 years later I was living and working in NYC. I called Walter's Mom. I got a hold of Walter and invited him to come to a Knick's game at The Garden to see his hero Earl – the Pearl – Monroe play. At the approximate appointed time and place outside the Garden, a cab pulls up and 5 Black guys run like blazes in all directions out of the cab. 5 minutes later all return to me. Walter explains they had to beat the cabbie out of the fare. We proceed to the gates. I explain I have only 2 tickets after I meet all the guys. They says no problem. Walter and I start to enter with 2 tickets and 4 guys jump the turn-styles and run. We see them 20 minutes later all smiles.

The Pearl did not disappoint. Walter and I experienced a marvelous reconnection of trust and acceptance. As we exited, I asked Walter why he was limping? He explained a bullet was lodged in his knee from a gun fight. He looked about 60 years old when he was about 30. Drugs had clearly taken hold and he was living a very dangerous lifestyle.

It was the last touch I ever had with my friend. We embraced. Both knowing it was the first and me, at least, if not him sensing it was the last.

His Spirit of enormous joy and exuberance still soars in my soul. A behind
the back pass - "Now you see it -now you don't."