

Crossing Paths With Charlie Nielson

A true story from [The Rocklore Files](#)

Of [Jamie Thompson](#)

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One day in the spring of 1968, when I was nine years old and in the fourth grade, I was hanging around in our garage working on my bicycle when Charlie Nielson appeared from around the corner of our house. At fourteen years old Charlie was a huge kid – probably in the neighborhood of three hundred pounds with a stature of about five foot ten. He had ear length reddish blond hair and very fair skin that was covered with freckles. He had a big round face that always seemed to have a bead of perspiration somewhere on it. I remember he had icy blue eyes – cold and distant like the eyes of a shark. It was apparent that he didn't bathe very often because when he was nearby he exuded a syrupy perfume - a mixture of fermenting sweat and urine caught inside folds of flab.

Charlie was my brother Jake's friend and, for what it was worth, my parents didn't approve of him at all. He had a reputation around the neighborhood for being a profoundly wicked kid. If there was some incident of mischief or vandalism, everybody's first thought was, 'Charlie did it' and they were usually right! Naively, I had no fear of Charlie because he was Jake's friend. I was, however, reluctant to get too friendly with him for fear of what my parents might say or do if they found out about it.

"Hi Jamie," he said as his eyes scanned the garage.

"Hi Charlie," I said, glancing up at his perspiring, pink face while I adjusted the cone bearings on my bicycle's front hub.

"Where's Jake?"

"I dunno," I said absently.

"Whachya doin'?"

"Workin' on my bike," I said evenly while jiggling my front rim from side to side and then spinning it around to check for play and the proper tension in the cone bearings.

Charlie glanced around the front of the house and then his big blue eyes sparkled as he said in a hushed voice, "Jamie, did you ever take acid?"

The wheel stopped suddenly as I pushed the brake lever on the inverted handlebar.

"Acid?" The only acid I had ever heard of was on TV in a boiling vat with Batman and Robin hanging upside down over it by a rope.

"LSD. Did you ever take it?" He looked serious.

"No," I said, wondering if I should admit it. Charlie became very animated.

"Aw, Jamie. Acid is amazing!" he said, waving his hands. "Just the other day Jake and I took some acid and rode our bikes down to the shore tripping our brains out and the whole time we played 'Melt the Tree!'"

"Melt the Tree? What the heck is that?"

"It's a contest to see who can melt the tree first."

"How d'ya melt a tree?" I asked incredulously as I started working on my bike again.

"With your mind, man! You see, when you're trippin' you see and hear all kinds of amazing things. You see colors and fantastic patterns and stuff melts."

"Really? Man, that's weird!"

"Yeah! You should try it. You'd really like it." I wasn't sure how to respond to that suggestion so I just stared blankly at him. He continued.

"Your brother and me were flyin' down the road staring at trees until one of us saw it melt and that's the game. It was so cool, man! You'd really like it. [silence] Sensing that I was more mystified than curious he switched gears. "Let me tell you what happened to me yesterday." I wasn't sure I wanted to know but there was no stopping him now.

"I took some acid in the morning, and then I went out thumbin' it. I'm standin' there on the side of Oxford Valley Road when a bright red convertible with the top down pulls over to pick me up. I go to get in the car when suddenly I realize that the driver's a naked girl! I mean she was totally naked!" That got my full attention.

"I'm standin' there with my mouth hangin' open when she says, 'Get in.'" Charlie said the 'get in' part in a softer, higher-pitched, alluring feminine voice. My eyes grew wide as I drew a quick, deep breath.

"Whadya do?"

"Are you nuts? I got in!" Charlie then described the girl in full detail... I'll leave that out of the story.

I was transfixed by the mental image. A goddess! In my circle of nine-year-old friends, as I recall, to have any kind of contact with even a partially naked girl was a feat worthy of instant fame and glory. But to have been in the presence of a totally naked girl was to have attained the unattainable!

"Wow!!" I said with a tickle in my belly and my eyes bugging out.

"We drove all over the place, all day long. We went to the mall, we went to the store... we just drove around!"

"Didn't anybody try and stop you, like, the police or something?" I was trying to visualize standing in a checkout line with a totally naked girl like nothing was going on... it was hard to imagine... then again, it was the 1960's and the so called Sexual Revolution was in full swing.

"Naw, but wait till I tell you what happened." He looked around the garage and the front of the house again. Then in an even lower tone he told me the rest of the story of his encounter with his Lady Godiva on 250 horses... I'll leave that out of the story too.

When he finished the warm, humid air between Charlie and I was quiet and pulsing with energy. All I could hear was the hum of a distant lawn mower and a light breeze sighing through the willow tree just outside the garage door. Charlie stood up with a look of ultimate triumph and then turned to leave. As he passed through the garage doorway, though, he stopped. Then he turned and whispered, "If you ever want some acid, Jamie, just lemme know."

I didn't know whether or not to believe him. When I really thought about it, the whole story seemed patently absurd! But, then, who could make up such a story and expect anyone to believe it? I wanted to ask somebody about it, but

I was too embarrassed to relate such a story. So, I just kept it to myself. That night I fell asleep wondering about Charlie, the story, and... about acid.

The next day I was hanging around the garage with Jake and his friend Dave Winters. They were working on one of their "chop-shop" bikes that they assembled from parts from several bikes they had stolen from the LPRA pool bike rack. It was a little joint business venture they ran out of our garage. I was pretty nervous because Jake didn't always let me hang around when his friends were there. At any moment he might have ordered me to leave or played some cruel trick on me in order to get rid of me. So, I was sitting in the corner being quiet and inconspicuous. Charlie showed up at the garage door and was met with a round of greetings. He gave me a flash of eyes and a sly grin. When they finished working on the bike, they took it out to the driveway to give it a test run... and I found myself alone with Charlie. Once they were out of earshot he turned to me and said in a hoarse whisper, "Jamie, I got some acid for ya. Do you want it?"

At first I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to hurt his feelings. Then I thought about that weird naked girl story and the melting trees. It all seemed so strange, yet sort of interesting. It also sounded dangerous but, then again, here was Charlie alive and well and seeming none the worse for wear. I didn't know if I wanted it or not. I sank into confusion as he riveted me with those cold blue eyes and that chubby face when out of nowhere I heard myself say, "No." I remember thinking to myself that I really didn't make a decision, I just said it because I was on the spot and I needed to say something. Charlie was clearly disappointed and was about to pour on the persuasion when suddenly Jake and Dave Winters rolled the hot bike back into the garage. Charlie immediately broke off our conversation and acted as if nothing was going on. I took the opportunity to slink out of the garage and into the house. I was relieved to be out of there. Charlie was giving me the creeps!

A couple of days later I was in the garage working on my bike again (Jake and I were always tweaking out the maximum performance from our bikes) when lo' and behold Charlie appeared again.

"Hi Jamie!"

"Hi Charlie." I was sure that I knew what was coming next.

"Could you help me with something?"

"Whadya need?" I asked hesitantly, eyeing the cloth sack he was carrying.

"Follow me," he said as he climbed the ladder that led up to the attic above our garage.

I followed him up into the darkness like a duckling following its mother. Once we both made the short hop from the top of the ladder to the attic floor I groped around in the darkness for the string that turned on the light. The dim yellow bulb illuminated Charlie's face and threw jumbled shadows behind the stolen bicycle junkyard that had accumulated as a result of Jake and Dave Winters' criminal activity. Charlie was perspiring and his pupils were wide open as he scanned the attic for a suitable spot. His hands trembled slightly as he opened the sack. After pouring the contents onto the rough plywood floor he arranged his inventory: a dirty spoon, a small plastic bag filled with white powder, some matches, a syringe, and a small glass jar of water. My mouth went dry and I swallowed heavily.

"Charlie, I, uh..."

"Jamie you gotta help me with this. Don't worry it's not for you, it's for me."

Unable to say no I fell silent and watched apprehensively as he went about his business. First he picked up the spoon and poured some of the powder into the bowl. Then he added a little water. He swished the solution around to help the powder dissolve then he gave me the handle of the spoon and struck a match. He retrieved the spoon and cooked the concoction by holding the match underneath the bowl of the spoon. When the milky white brew was ready he

picked up the syringe. As he sucked the juice into it I didn't know whether to cry or panic and I started wondering what the heck he needed me up there for anyway. Then with a rough voice he pointed to his upper arm and said, "Squeeze my arm!"

"What?" I asked, terrified.

"Put your hands around my arm right here and squeeze." So I did.

"Harder!" He barked.

I squeezed as hard as I could. Charlie had big fat arms and the fingers of both my hands could barely reach the whole way around them.

"HARDER!!!"

"I'm squeezing as hard as I can!" I whined through gritting teeth, tears streaming down my face. I closed my eyes and turned my head as Charlie positioned the needle over a bulging vein at the inner crux of his elbow. The next moment he let out a sigh. Then he slowly reclined against a box as his eyes glazed over and closed about two-thirds of the way. I sat and watched him for a minute or so. He was breathing regularly and he was sweating. He seemed totally oblivious to his surroundings... like he was sleeping or something. I felt awkward being there with him like that. I took stock of his paraphernalia.

"Yech," I said to myself as I hopped onto the ladder and let myself back down into the garage. I went into the house and hid in my room for a while, trying to sort out what I had just experienced and wondering if Charlie would die up there... and what I would do then.

A couple of weeks later I was in school when our class was taken to the cafeteria for a special program. A local policeman had come to talk to us about drugs. He was very impressive looking with his crisp blue uniform and shiny gun holstered to his side. He talked about all the different kinds of drugs that were proliferating our neighborhood and then showed us some real paraphernalia that had been confiscated from drug addicts. There were pipes, bongs, joints, pills of every variety, zip guns, a baggie full of marijuana and an assortment of powders, various feculent looking contraptions, and a set of

“works” – a junkie kit. I recognized the inventory right away, except for the tourniquet. The officer gave us a description of how each item was used by the drug addict. When he finished describing the use of the kit, I casually turned to the kid next to me and said, "I helped a kid do that one time." His reaction was totally unexpected. He gasped and gazed at me in wild astonishment. He didn't respond. He just stared at me like I had just stepped off of a space ship. I felt a sense of doom pour over me as I realized that my little rendezvous with Charlie must not have been a typical experience for a nine-year-old in Levittown, Pennsylvania. From that moment on I resolved not to divulge that information to people that I didn't know.

Charlie's evildoings were innumerable. I think that if I've ever known anyone who was truly possessed by the devil, it was Charlie Nielson. His life was like an enigma wrapped up in a riddle. He was a black hole of warped, twisted malevolence... a truly evil person who was always lying to everyone about everything and who always had a one-eyed jack up one sleeve and a killer king up the other.

Among his exploits in our neighborhood that I can remember were the times that he supposedly burned a cross on the front lawn of the only black family that lived in our section of town. On another occasion he allegedly lit one of our neighbor's cars on fire, completely destroying it in the middle of the night. But the worst atrocity of Charlie's that I can remember was when he got my brother Jake addicted to heroine and then sold him a bag of baking soda. Charlie told a friend of his who lived down the street from us what he had done and she managed to call Jake on the phone and warn him just minutes before he injected himself with that stuff... she saved Jake's life!

I remember the night Jake went through withdrawal... it was ugly. He thrashed, grunted and groaned in his room for hours. At one point he got violent and rammed a hard shell guitar case through the wall while trashing his room! The next day his room looked like a tornado had gone through it! I

couldn't help thinking how blessed I was to have been the one who said "no" to Charlie's solicitations to try drugs.

In the early 1970's Charlie bought a bright yellow 1969 Plymouth GTX with a 440 cubic inch engine, a six-barrel carburetor, and big fat slick tires on the back. That thing was a monster muscle car and a very dangerous weapon in the hands of a psycho sociopath like Charlie. At any given time you could tell if he was driving anywhere within a five mile radius of where you were because you could hear that car revving, roaring, skidding, and peeling out. Charlie and that car were a menace to the community!

One sunny summer afternoon I was sitting on the curb of Red Rose Drive along "the green belt" in front of the woods down the road from my house. It was a lovely day and I was enjoying the serenity of my neighborhood. Red Rose Drive is a windy, hilly residential street with a speed limit of 25 miles per hour. It was very common for kids to play stickball or street hockey on the road. People walked their pets, washed their cars... or just hung out like I was doing.

Suddenly I heard a roar, squealing tires, another roar, a skid, and then a flash of yellow from around the bend to my right. Charlie was cruising the drive in his GTX going about 90 miles per hour! I gaped in astonishment at the oncoming vehicle as it took the bends in the road. At the speed he was going Charlie could barely negotiate the curves. In order to stay on the road he repeatedly cut across the opposite lane and scraped the curb with the sides of his big wheels. In that crucial moment of time I realized that I was sitting on the protruding edge of a curve and that there was no way Charlie could slow down. I can still see his crazed face behind the wheel of that car. Animal grin and wild shining eyes, he looked like one of those mutant-monster-driving-a-dragster models come to life! At the last instant I did a reverse somersault off of the curb and back onto the relative safety of the greenbelt just as Charlie's tires scraped through the very spot where I was just sitting! He didn't even try to slow down!! As I regained my senses I saw the yellow flash of the GTX as it

rounded another curve about 200 yards down the road and vanished. I fell on my face and cried, hyperventilating. Charlie had almost run me down! Furthermore, he had no more regard for my current status than if I was a dog or a raccoon or something. I was just another worthless road kill left to rot on the side of the road! As I regained my composure I could still hear the roaring and skidding of that car in the distance. I was lucky to be alive!

In the early 1970's Charlie's family, the Nielsons, moved to South Florida but that wasn't the last we heard of them. I often wondered what kind of family could produce such a monstrous kid. Of course, it was the late 60's/early 70's so, times being what they were, it wasn't unusual for otherwise normal families to have wild, sociopathic kids. I remember seeing Mr. Nielson from time to time and thinking to myself what a normal looking guy he seemed to be in spite of the fact that he was Charlie's father. He looked sort of like the "Roger Kaputnik" character from Mad Magazine's "The Lighter Side Of..." series. Anyway, not long after they all moved away word came to our neighborhood that down there in South Florida the entire Nielson family got involved in selling and using drugs. We also heard that they got busted and that, mom, dad, the kids... EVERYBODY got carted away in a police paddy wagon! I never knew if it was really true or not but it wouldn't have surprised me one bit.

Charlie's life ended in a suicide in the late 80's when, as the story goes, he was being pursued by both the FBI and the Mafia at the same time. He had allegedly stolen a quantity of cocaine from the Mafia and was wanted by the FBI for drug trafficking. At a certain point in the chase, he became certain that one or the other would apprehend him. Being caught by the Mafia meant immediate execution and being caught by the FBI meant certain death at the hands of the Mafia in jail. So, he opted to do the job himself. He shot himself in the chest with a rifle. Being a huge person, though, he didn't die right away. So, he reloaded the rifle and shot himself in the chest again! He died.

How does one wrap up the story of the life of Charlie Nielson? God have mercy on his soul and thank God so many people survived - crossing paths with Charlie Nielson!!

The End



Jamie Thompson is a writer, musician, songwriter, photographer, videographer, husband, and a stay-at-home-dad with two small children.

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