



By: Pamela Weiss

Skewness
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Charlie kept meaning to change the picture in the silver-plated frame planted atop his mahogany desk and skewed purposefully to the doorway. To update it. In fact, he imagined Chuck would never have approved of the ornate swirls in the chunky pewter surrounding it, dust caking in the corners...let alone the image itself. Tacky, he would say. And this from a man who collects Hello! Kitty trinkets.

But staring at it now, Charlie knew he had grown accustomed to the nearly decade-old photograph. It was a flattering one of a petite blonde woman dwarfed further by an enormous St. Bernard puppy, both loyal, dutiful and amusing. Indeed, the more Charlie aged, the younger Deborah appeared in the frame, raising him slightly up a notch in the bloodshot eyes of legal interns who spent more time figuring out who powered the office than on their research. It was comforting, effective and necessary.

“Excuse me Mr. Williams, the limo is about to leave — is she here yet? You still need to arrive an hour early for boarding even if it’s not a commercial flight.” Kat, the receptionist had poked her head in just as Charlie’s head found its way out of his daydream. Hired last year, Katrina had introduced herself as “Kat spelled K-A-T” to anyone who paused in the reception area long enough to listen, as if spelling it might somehow make it more memorable than her inappropriately long hair and short skirt. She had replaced a forgettable Betty Booper, whose
claw-like acrylic fingernails extended with such defiant arc that she was constantly
misconnecting incoming calls to unsuspecting office dwellers.

“She’ll be right out. She’s in the ladies’...” was all Charlie could get out to an already empty doorway. Kat didn’t linger away from the switchboard for long. “I’m on my way there,” she called back over her shoulder. “I’ll hurry her along.”

Kat liked Deborah. Everyone liked Deborah — attractive, earthy, Southern, sophisticated, boyish and delicate all at once. Most importantly, at least to Charlie, she was believable. Granted, Atlanta in the ‘80s was no San Francisco and Charlie mostly fell below the radar of suspicion. Nonetheless, it was essential for their liaison to be convincing. Deborah was Charlie’s Cover Girl, had been since his move to Atlanta. He was her first blind date. She was his last. Charlie, above all, was grateful to her. Chuck, on the other hand, covertly called her “Her Highness of Alibi” which had more to do with her function than her friendship and added a layer of complexity to the sticky and fragile web that was life with Charlie.

Deborah was a willing co-conspirator. Her latest assignment? To accompany Charlie to a weekend partners’ retreat in Colorado for McKinley. The firm’s top five contributors were invited to attend. No. 5 took a deep breath of anticipation and let it out slowly. Though there were four other lawyers producing slightly more for the firm than he did this year, seniority meant he was up for partnership — to become one of the 6 managing partners in the mid-sized law firm. As an environmental lawyer, his was not the flashy career of high-profile cases and frequent mentions in the Journal-Constitution. Instead, Charlie had made a name for himself — and a shitload of money for his firm — creating intricate strategies to keep major corporate enemies of Mother Nature from being fully realized as such. Oil, gas, chemical, paper. Charlie

knew how to deftly navigate through government regulations in more than a dozen remote foreign bureaucracies as well as to dance the subtle two-step of small-town politics to evade blame or minimize damage. All legal, if not ethical.

This last year was particularly challenging as his largest client desperately sought to turn around an ailing image by PR'ing itself out of an abyss of careless abuse of international law regarding the desecration of coastal wildlife. This was good news for Charlie. As the visibility of the company's plight was raised on the media, so was Charlie in the eyes of his colleagues. It's not just anyone who can attack these mind-numbingly boring companies' issues with such vigor and creativity under the hot lights of media scrutiny, Charlie thought in a rare moment of self-confidence. He hoped Walker Ellery, the rest of McKinley's big boys agreed with this unspoken self-affirmation. Then again, this was the stuff of sleepy PBS documentaries he himself never bothered to watch.

Charlie was glad for the monotony in at least this part of his life. How did the rest of it get so complicated in this simple Georgia city? He had spent so much time away from Miami at law school, had become another person really, how could he have returned to the heat of both the city and his father's scrutiny? Atlanta seemed like neutral ground. Oh, and there was the big fat recruiting bonus that dangled in his mind because he paid his own way through school. "Better you paid for it yourself, Chuck," his father had said. "You'll be a better man for earning it." If by a better man, Charlie thought, he meant a man absurdly in debt, then how true. The father had congratulated his son by phone since he couldn't make it to the ceremony. He was in the middle of his 4th divorce and didn't want to leave the house until all the locks had been changed.

Charlie had been called ~~Chuck~~ his whole life. But he hadn't been called ~~Chuck~~ here in this new city since the day he was introduced by Brian-in-HR to a boardroom of round-bellied colleagues as "Charlie" during his office orientation. How could he let someone he just met initiate something so permanent, so profoundly personal as a name change? But that was Charlie; he never corrected Brian-in HR or anyone else. He accepted his new name and soon found out that fate would teach him to embrace it. His onion skin exterior appreciated this added blanket of camouflage. New city. Check. New name. Check.

Charlie now rubbed the back of his thick neck with calloused palms, recalling further his first few months at McKinley. How he had to explain to every handshake that the hardened skin scarring the fleshy parts of his hands was from grasping and plunging a kayak paddle all summer long, and not rubbing his dick under his desk each time the receptionist walked past his office" to the ladies' room as Pete had joked at the company picnic. Self-proclaimed office comedian and assigned to show Charlie around, Pete had a wife who had a cousin who knew a great girl, a lifelong resident of Atlanta. Pete insisted on setting the two of them up. "Just meet her for drinks or dinner," he pushed. "She knows Atlanta inside and out. She's fun...athletic, like you."

Staring at his hands in his lap, the casual compliment clouded Charlie's attention. He didn't think of himself as athletic. Sure, he was an expert kayaker, but he could do that sitting down. His father had often pointed out that fishing, kayaking and cycling were "pansy-ass pastimes — you can't call it a sport if you're sitting on your ass, son." Charlie's younger self was never bold enough to ask if that extended to his father's hobby of racing cars.

"Charlie, are you listening to me?" Pete snapped, hand still over the telephone's Pete had called the unsuspecting woman directly from Charlie's phone, now sitting with his hip

propped on top of the organized desk. “I-is she free tonight?” Charlie sputtered, more in apology for spacing out than in eagerness to meet this woman. “Don’t be such a fag,” said a grinning Pete nonchalantly as he stood, tossing him the receiver. “Ask her yourself. Her name is Deborah.”

Back then Charlie wasn’t yet familiar with the patterns of traffic around the downtown area known as Five Points. He was, however, painfully aware that nearly every other street encircling the heart of Atlanta seemed to be named Peachtree something-or-other; he woefully misjudged the time he would arrive to meet her at his Buckhead home. “Let yourself in,” he spoke into his Mercedes’ car phone. “If I’m not there, you’ll find...”

“Lemme guess, a key under the mat?” Deborah interrupted. *That’s disappointingly predictable she didn’t say.*

“Well, it’s the cleaning lady’s day and that’s where she leaves it when she’s done,” he said. *Because despite two advanced degrees, I don’t speak enough Spanish to tell her to just leave it on the dining table and lock the door behind her, he didn’t say either.*

Deborah left the mall’s leasing office where she worked and with an extra 20 minutes to spare, she took up temporary residence at the Lord & Taylor’s make-up counter during happy hour. The free champagne convinced her to buy and wear more mascara, foundation and lip gloss tonight than she would all year. She still arrived at Charlie’s before he did. Damn! She had tried to play it traditional and let him pick the restaurant and he chose one within walking

distance from his house. She made a mental note to remember that one next time, she chided herself for being so out of practice. Her first blind date in six months since coming to terms with her past the incident. This wasn't going to be easy. Never been on a blind date. Breathe, but also pee before he gets here, she told herself

Wiggling the bent key and mustering the firmness of hand to turn it inside the lock, she felt the stubbornness of the sticky door, the resistance of even inanimate objects reluctant to see the evening progress. She entered the Colonial and began to search for the nearest bathroom. Losing her way through several long hallways sparingly interrupted with an antique table draped in crocheted lace or a small bookcase of undistinguished titles, she eventually skulked through Charlie's bedroom and into the Jack 'n' Jill bathroom which she noticed connected to another, smaller bedroom. As she washed her hands, Deborah took in the bachelor's bathroom. running, Deborah dabbed at the stains as she took in the bachelor's bathroom. She paused to notice the preciseness of the laundered terry cloth towel serving as a vanity tray laid out on the tile surface. It wasn't snooping. Snooping involved touching, she assured herself, and it was only her eyes she laid upon the room's contents. Combs, mouthwash, toothbrush with bent bristles begging for retirement, dental floss, vitamins and Rogaine. (Charlie had long since switched to Propecia and added Viagra, but that was years later.)

When Charlie finally did arrive to find Deborah in the bathroom, he took a moment in the exchange of greetings to look about, carefully trying to see what she saw around her. He hadn't had advanced notice to do a walk-through first. He thought of her eyes coming to rest on the jumbo-sized orange-and-white Metamucil container anchoring the whole toiletries arrangement.

It made him grimace. The fact that he was not just a gay guy, but a *regular* gay guy still got to him, as if who he was wasn't punishment enough. This is the line of thinking that his therapist would warn him about, constantly.

By the time Chuck moved in five years later, the process of house sterilization was down to a science. Chuck was the one who first gave it official acknowledgment. He dubbed it "Operation Gay Gone" during a lazy, sweltering Southern night spent smoking pot on the back deck of Charlie's house with Deborah. Charlie was allergic to smoke and wouldn't let them indulge in the comfort of his central A/C. But even before Chuck's presence, there were always risks. The risk of the courier from the office dropping off last-minute papers. An unannounced schoolmate in town. As for tonight, Deborah was glad for the walk back to Charlie's after a steak dinner and too much Silver Oak. The cool midnight air allowed her head to clear which in turn allowed her to drive away at a decent hour. She didn't know why, but she was not inclined to stay with him. Nor did he ask. Maybe this was a good way to start dating again, she counseled herself, windows down, hair flapping on the drive home.

Yes, there were risks even if Chuck, raised in a circle of acceptance and content in his thick skin couldn't feel it. And because of these risks, Charlie knew he had to take a proactive approach to keep his life with Chuck balanced, hidden and protected. There was too much at stake for him at McKinley. He'd absorbed the large, hand-painted family portraits, lining the hall in building's entryway. He'd heard about the countless affairs ignored by or engaged in by those stiffly posed on the canvas. And he witnessed the countless remarks made in his presence,

Though not as offensive to a dignified, Queen Victoria. The off-color stories, told by clients at dinner, slights and jabs made behind the backs of

local artists at community fundraisers, sponsored by the firm. Worst were the ones made by the partners—sometimes one-on-one—in the elevator ride to the top. Charlie's professional burden had replaced his childhood one. A new, heavier umbrella to hold against the unkind elements, something he naïvely had hoped to ditch once out of law school. Alas, Atlanta wasn't far enough away from anywhere for that. So, Charlie continued his attempt to contain the splatter, wipe up any residue visible to the outside world that he loved another man. Dearly. Best as he could.

Deborah proved pivotal in this theater of mild deceit. First, unwittingly, then, cleverly, craftily. Charlie invited her to a few functions, usually daytime, always with lots of somebodies-who-are-somebodies around. By the month's end, Deborah got it. She just knew. There was no Aha! moment. No direct quote. It was more in what wasn't happening than what was. So right there, somewhere between the cocktail shrimp and the sweating Chardonnay stems wrapped in "Happy Retirement, Stanley" napkins, bearing McKinley's logo, Charlie and Deborah had an unspoken meeting of the open minds. Over the din of the string quartet and accompanying mosquito buzz and anonymous conversations about them, they huddled close together, arm in arm, speaking in honest, hushed, even voices.

Across the party, Ellery's wife of 20 years whispered to her celebrated, and now inebriated husband, who had been distracted this evening by his sudden bump to senior partner thanks to Stanley's failing health.

“Now there's a couple in love," she slurred, spilling her martini as her shaky hand gestured toward them. A silent Ellery nodded his full head of dark curls while he steadied her drink with an equally clumsy motion with his hairy knuckles.

In a way, Charlie and Deborah were starting a new relationship as a couple. Building a future: Charlie's. Burying a past: Deborah's. They found this friendship served them well. She was afraid of being alone with herself; but more distressed that there were others not as lucky as she to have escaped her situation and ashamed she had once trusted people so easily. Charlie was afraid of being himself, lonely and in need of discreet company. The “alibi” and the “safety net” spent time together, making lists of where they could go as a "couple," but still beckon the opportunity to find someone special for Charlie. The ambience of the few loud, techno-beat gay bars that Atlanta had to offer posed too big a threat for Charlie. He'd have no good excuse for being there, even with Deborah. One night he slipped out of the back of Backstreets night club after recognizing the son of a client in the bathroom.

After about a year, that meant hanging out, mostly during the weeknights as Deborah had begun to date in earnest once again on the weekends. But they found a haven in Hoedowns, an unpretentious place of pool tables, pinballs, plastic chairs and both kinds of music – country and Western. Gays and straights alike came for a longnecks and line dancing. Here, Deborah and Charlie could be playful and affectionate with one another, while leaving elbow room for Charlie to keep his options open. Six weeks into becoming regulars at the place, Chuck – in Jordache, jeans, a pink Polo shirt and cowboy boots – closed those options for Charlie for good.

Born and raised in Atlanta, Chuck had never been outside The Perimeter, as the traffic reporters like to call Highway 285 and other main roads that guarded the greater Atlanta area from the real south surrounding it. Despite this shortcoming, Chuck possessed enough sophistication to be engaging, charming and intellectual beyond his community college education. He grew up reading his sister's Cosmo magazines late at night and his mother's Harlequin romances while she was at church with his deacon dad. Chuck was nice looking, but not sexy. Certainly not manly, but not effeminate either. All of this, and his unique sense of humor rendered him more quirky than queer, and earned him the nickname "Chuckles" in junior high. Later in high school, he remained outwardly ambiguous enough to bed a cheerleader on one awful, sophomore night. The same night he discovered alcohol, marijuana, mushroom tea, and the fact that he could escape an unpleasant situation by closing his eyes tight enough while picturing an entirely different anatomy.

The mental part was easy enough to control. But what he couldn't avoid – what he struggled with his whole life before and since – was how his body physically reacted. It's like it had its own sense of what was revolting to him, despite what his head, and his upbringing had pounded into him. He couldn't escape the nausea that immediately followed. Neither could the perky cheerleader. He vomited most of what he consumed that night on her before extracting himself from the whole close encounter. He and the unfortunate cheerleader never talked about that night, but his friends at work – some of the same friends who took 9th grade geometry, and senior English with him during the ambiguous years – still joke about it at the office. Unlike Charlie, he wasn't invisible to his coworkers. Chuck never made a point of disguising or toning

down who he was...Hello! Kitty screensaver and all. One of the benefits of not going beyond the Perimeter, is that people got to know him. Chuck never left home to find where he belonged, finding instead, he belonged here.

On the contrary, everything about Charlie seemed subtle. Charlie knew since he was five. The door had been slammed by his exiting father about 36 hours before. It was 7 p.m. when the doorbell rang and an anxious and pajama'd Charlie came bounding down the hall, figuring his dad had just forgotten his key and the weeks of terrible shouting right along with it. His mom, wearing a tight, white T-shirt, no bra, and purple satin dolphin shorts with white piping up the sides, strode right behind him, an unopened bottle of ice-cold white Zinfandel in one hand. His mom stopped right behind him, but it took her enormous, swishing breasts a second or two more to finally halt, resting atop his buzz cut head. With her other icy hand resting upon his tiny sweaty one, both mother and son turned the doorknob at once. He remembered thinking that the little hairs left extending just a quarter inch tall from the barber's electric razor must be poking through and tickling her...didn't she notice? She didn't. The stranger at the door was producing much more of a sensation within her, as the two made eye contact. Charlie felt it too – a slow tickling, burning sensation in his lower stomach. He wasn't sure then if it was disappointment over his dad's leaving that was creating this sensation or what. But he thought he had just seen the most beautiful human being ever. Muscles, shiny tan skin, perfect teeth, jet black hair and a huge bulge, right at eye level to Charlie. And though he never saw him again after that night, and unsure about what to think as he heard the noises through the thin, Miami Beach apartment walls, he was left with the sense that he and his mom were more alike than he and his dad ever would be.

Circumstances had given Charlie an early start on how to obscure this unfamiliar new reality. He was good at hiding. He hid his feelings, his discovery since age 5, he hid pot from his mom as a teenager, questions from himself, and his real self from his father his entire life. Practice like that made him a tragic expert. This sounded harder to do in theory than in execution since Charlie rarely performed to a suspicious audience. His dad has only visited him once in all his time in Atlanta, about two years into his life as "Charlie." But it was just about the time he had reluctantly allowed Chuck to start sleeping over and the phone call had startled with him.

“Hello?” Chuck answered Charlie’s phone after a hard-earned nap in Charlie’s bed.

“Chuck?”

“Yeah.”

“Jesus! You sound like a fuckin’ redneck already!”

“Gimme that,” Charlie hissed at Chuck while grabbing the phone. He’d heard the rasping voice so loudly over the phone and he knew at once it was him.

“It’s me, Dad, that was just a hoops buddy goffin’ ~~off~~ *oops? He'd never said that word in his life until last week when he tried to play basketball with some of Chuck's high school friends. Nerves.*

Dad and Belinda, the housekeeper turned housewife number No. 5, were on their way to Louisiana. Belinda's mother died and the funeral was tomorrow. They were driving straight through but had just enough time to stop by and see Charlie.

"You mean you are here? Atlanta?" Charlie panicked, eyes darting wildly from his and Chuck's clothes strewn about the room to the porn on pause on the TV screen to about a half dozen framed photos of the two of them in Jamaica, camping in the Smoky Mountains, and at a friend's commitment ceremony.

"Yeah, we are at a steakhouse near you, I think...what's it called again, Bee? Oh, right – Bones. You know it? Just put our name in for a table. Come meet us for a bite to eat. You can meet Belinda, finally. We gotta be back on the road in a coupla hours. Hey, I got you a belated graduation present." Charlie ran to take a piss and splash cold water on his sweaty face. Calmer, he put on deodorant, a clean shirt, and a fixed, pleasant expression. He left without a word to Chuck.

The reunion lasted a little more than an hour. By the time Charlie arrived and found parking, Belinda and Bernie were nearly done with their dinner. Small talk followed. Condolences for her mother; diabetes. A few details about some of the legal matters Charlie was working on and that was that. They were pretty much caught up. Bernie said he had to park several blocks away and wondered if Charlie would walk with him out to the car. Leaving Belinda inside, Bernie told her he'd pick her up out front. As they walked out, Bernie continued to mumble something about his health, and how it's not good for Charlie to live alone. Once at the car, Bernie opened the door, quickly putting one end of a leather strap in Charlie's hand. It had been Belinda's. A gift from her mother, but now she doesn't want the painful memory around her every day, Bernie droned on, not to mention how that dog had ruined two of his Syd Solomon paintings. Charlie got the creepy feeling that his dad was bestowing this gift on him

unbeknownst to Belinda. But he said nothing. Bernie sped off leaving Charlie in the parking lot with one end of the leash in his hand, and the other end attached to a St. Bernard puppy named George.

Charlie watched a long time while Bernie drove off, shook his head and pet his newest pal. Despite attempts at kindness, all in all, Bernie Williams was not a nice man. Despite tender pictures of Charlie, roughly the size of a Butterball turkey in blue gingham and a tiny beret and propped up on the hood of a 1962 Cadillac Sedan DeVille, Charlie couldn't remember a single outing alone with his dad. He could still recall the flashing "Bernie's Cadillacs" sign clearly. It was a short-lived Miami Beach dealership, funded in part by two military buddies. Along with Bernie, they were discharged after a night of heavy drinking, which turned into a night of heavy beating of a Marine rumored to be from San Francisco and therefore, most assuredly, gay by their estimation.

It was the first marriage for the dad awkwardly balancing the infant in the snapshot, and an unwelcome detour to getting on with the rest of his life. It had been four months since Bernie and his girlfriend, Jill, of 11 months had broken up. Bernie, self-imagined Casanova that he was, had moved on. On to Andrea. On to Ellen. And on to Jaime. He was on Jaime when, not out of character, he took the call that came from Jill on the speakerphone beside the waterbed. Baby. There was a baby on the way.

"A baby!" Bernie nearly shouted.

"Y-esss, Baby, yes!" a breathless, nearly climaxing Jaime replied.

Bernie hadn't meant to repeat Jill's stinging announcement out loud. He crash-landed to the left of Jaime, too soon for either's satisfaction, instead entangling her in the telephone cord as he struggled to grasp the edge of the queen-size bed, and this single guy's worst nightmare.

Bernie called it chivalry. Jill called it Jewish Grandmother Guilt and the Last Decent Thing Bernie Williams did. But Charlie had just called them his family. Until age five.

Chuck waited impatiently for Charlie to get home after his family dinner. He had already been to the neighbors to borrow kibble and a chew toy to welcome the new adoptee. He had seen the whole thing unfold from a barstool in the restaurant and also from a cooperative darkened area of the parking lot later on to see the abandoned pet in Charlie's grasp. It's the closest he had come so far to meeting Charlie's father. He sat in the dark bar by the bartending station, obscured by swinging doors and kitchen activity. But he had a good enough line of sight to see the shared features of Charlie and Bernie's solid physics, expanding foreheads and infrequent smiles. Following that night, Chuck avoided Bones all together; not due to any emotional trauma he suffered, but because he had unintentionally left his bar tab unpaid as he darted for the exit. Dinner for the Williams men and Belinda had halted abruptly and father and son would've passed directly by his hideout had he not drank—and— dashed.

Though he was a male, Chuck renamed the puppy "Girlfriend," finding small pleasure in watching Charlie not react to the name. That is to say, Charlie had this habit of maintaining complete composure, except for his eyes. Whenever he felt threatened or alarmed, the pupils in

his dark eyes involuntarily would flash and his eyelids widened to accommodate his eyes darting side to side. But no raised eyebrows or facial tick, so Charlie thought, like many things, his panicked expressions for the most part went unnoticed. Having a boy dog named Girlfriend might cause a ripple in the bubble, Charlie worried. But he saw how much fun Chuck had in answering a random phone call with “Charlie’s not here right now. He’s out taking a walk with his Girlfriend” and let it go at that.

Now, back in the office, awaiting Deborah Charlie reminisced; all these years later, Girlfriend’s graying, but still got her wag, he mused, glancing once again at the dog and sidekick Deborah in the photo. He had just put the day’s final notations into his journal, checking his watch, and hearing Deborah's warm and husky laugh echoing as the bathroom door swings open and she heads toward his office ready for Colorado.

He has kept a journal for years now. Enters only in it the last interaction between Deborah and him as a couple with any unsuspecting audience of their charade. It was in this way he felt he can maneuver effortlessly through his other life, the one on the curling pages of the 7-year-old journal – just about when he started seeing Chuck. The journal is one of the few things he hasn't worried about being unearthed. Once his assistant accidentally picked it up when he asked her to retrieve his leather-bound case notes and began flipping through it. When Charlie stuck his head in the door to inquire what was taking so long, she didn't flinch of being caught red-handed. "I think it's beautiful the way you chronicle your dates with your sweetheart, detail..." she breezed. She could use a word like "sweetheart" because she was nearly 70 and in such

because of the romantic "code" Charlie used when writing about time with Deborah. He was comforted knowing he was making sure he didn't misspeak. The rehearsed excuse of *Deborah and I went kayaking on the Nanahala river over the July 4th weekend* didn't somehow get used more than once when he was covering his tracks while at Sandals in Jamaica with Chuck.

What he couldn't see was that the more he filled in the journal, the more he drained Chuck. Deborah treasured in writing; Chuck, disappearing, becoming erased. The Alibi, flying off for the weekend, while the Invisible Man was left behind to tidy up the house that lies built. Chuck had his hopes, his reasons for believing that he would one day be an equal partner with Charlie. They had the long conversations of how the industry was changing. Partners in other law firms in the South had become open with who they were, associates hesitantly following with their own revelations. There were even rumors that right now here in Atlanta, there were several legal groups who had known gays among their partners, who were just waiting for the right time in the press to heed their hearts and make their statements.

Charlie would not be one of those. Twelve years after graduating from law school, he was up for a partner. His lifestyle had helped him in some ways. No demanding girlfriend or very public social obligations meant more time for his clients, though he had long ago admitted to himself that keeping Chuck under wraps demanded more of him than his legal career. Chuck was unstable; content one moment, horribly upset the next. Like a water hose with several cracks, as soon as one gash is taped up, the other cracks squirt with even more force. Chuck found other outlets to make up for the bound areas of his existence with Charlie: frequent online

shopping, a home course addressing his irrational fear of flying, an assertiveness support group, and to Charlie's chagrin – increasing flamboyancy.

Charlie has begun to feel that just bumping into Pete in the hardware store the other day while with Chuck was a big screw-up. He had introduced Chuck as his "hoops buddy" (since "hoops buddy" had passed the Bernie test) and later became thoroughly annoyed, because Chuck said "hey there" instead of "how's it going, man." That was the same day he forbade Chuck to answer the phone at home anymore, leaving the machine to screen all callers first. Just managing the risks, he'd said.

Things needed to stay manageable. Like this trip. Perfectly timed, despite that fact that his father would be there at his house when he returned. He arranged for Chuck to do the usual sterilization and be out of the house, staying with his parents until Charlie called him home. The invitation had read Charlie Williams and Significant Other as it did for the other single associate in the top five who was still unmarried, though recently engaged. Chuck felt flushed and hot and constantly humiliated when things like this arrived in the mail. Though Charlie has not officially been announced as a new partner, he's invited to a partners only retreat. He, and Deborah, his significant other.

Now at the mountain retreat, Deborah would've traded places with Chuck in a heartbeat. Never having really suffered from altitude sickness before, she was having a tough time in the difficult climate. Friday was OK, but she spent most of Saturday between bouts of nausea and resting, rallying for cocktails and dinner that night. She'd played her part in tight quarters before,

but never for so many consecutive hours, causing her to be careless with medication and alcohol she presumed. She had put out of her mind for now that she was more than three days late, choosing to chalk it up to stress. But it was finally Sunday morning, and after a continental breakfast, they were all together in the giant media room, bigger than some public theaters she'd been in back home, for a special presentation.

Charlie had an ill feeling himself. No one had discussed partnership with him all weekend, though there had been plenty of celebration about the firm's revenues and future profitability. He checked his watch again, and wondered if he would indeed arrive back in Atlanta on time. There was no set schedule, he learned. It was whenever Ellery said the plane was leaving. Well, at least he'd get there within an hour or so of his dad, who'd have to wait on him outside because he no longer left keys to his house outside as Operation Gay Gone rules now dictated.

Charlie's dad had driven with more urgency than usual, following the MapQuest directions Charlie's assistant printed out and mailed to him days earlier. He would arrive a little early, he decided. After a lifetime of giving his son little, he is asking for everything. He wanted to get it over with, to know his options sooner. Time was wasting away and so was he. Looking over at Belinda, dozing open-mouthed with head bobbing and jerking, he hoped there still might be time to move on to No. 6, should he live that long.

Chuck's been busy all morning, stashing things in corners, tucking objects of expression out of sight. Once that was done, all that was left was for him to disappear as well. If his assertiveness support group could see him now.

Charlie hasn't seen his dad since George became Girlfriend. Bernie's condition, like most of his marriages, deteriorated quickly. Dialysis, previously presented to Charlie as the solution, was really just a tourniquet. Bernie's age, health, and impatience precluded him a spot on the organ donor list. His doctors had said most patients turn to a family member at this point.

"After all, Mr. Williams, he'd be honored to help his father out in a time of crisis. You raised him, supported him through law school, therapy...that's got to mean a lot to him." Had the doctors asked Charlie, currently sucking down a bloody Mary on the balcony of Walker Ellery's 10,000 square-foot mansion in Beaver Creek, it would've been worth exactly \$463,712. Nothing more. Certainly not a kidney.

Chuck's taken care of all the details; sterilized the house, right down to stocking the fridge with longneck Buds. Scrapbooks boxed in the back bedroom. Frames tucked in drawers. Chuck glanced at Hello! Kitty's paws on his wrist and plucked a pink bow off Girlfriend's head with a sigh. That's when he heard the familiar crunch of the gravel... It was only 2 p.m., but Bernie was already here.

For Charlie, it was all too much to endure. Twenty minutes into the meeting, he felt his face get uncontrollably hot. The real reason he had been called to the retreat was not what Charlie had hoped. He's not be getting a partnership offer this go 'round. Instead, he had been included on the trip because his client had sponsored an environmental documentary on restored wetlands that will premiere at Sundance in January and Charlie's work for the client figured in significantly. In appreciation, the client had sent an unauthorized copy. A special viewing just for McKinley was about to start in the now claustrophobic 40-seat theater. Deborah felt she was getting woozy again as the lights went down and excused herself to the ladies' room. Charlie, both angry and intrigued, focused intently on the screen. His face he felt betrayed nothing of his bitterness, though his eyes were flashing wildly with only pitch-black theater to witness it.

He felt the weight shift again in the connected pair of cushioned chairs as Deborah's seat was occupied once again. The gritty film began. Cinematography – bad. Film – grainy. Charlie wondered why all documentaries seem to end up looking this way at all the film festivals he'd ever been to. He was beginning to process the small twists and turns and missteps that have brought him to this point when a reassuring hand is laid upon his thigh; Deborah no doubt is sensing his unraveling. It's moments like this, he thought to himself, how lucky he is to have his Cover Girl. Not breaking his mindless stare at the screen, Charlie's fingers lift with just enough height to lightly rub the back of the fingers now resting with more weight, nearly a grasp, on his leg.

At first, he can only move his eyes, for the rest of him was paralyzed. With the poker face of McKinley's best litigator, Charlie allowed his eyes to drift ever so slightly downward to

further process what his fingertips have already told him. Hair. Dark. Thickly curled on the knuckles.

As the car eased toward the house, Chuck's eyes fixed on the driveway. This was not part of the plan. Charlie was supposed to be home before his dad arrived. He let the lace curtain fall back into its place, becoming aware that he was leaning almost all of his weight on the delicate antique table that had occupied its assigned place beside the front door for as long as Chuck could remember. It was just sturdy enough to support a dish for keys, a small lap and their favorite photograph, now shut in the dark inside its one tiny drawer. The car had come to a stop.

Chuck was certain that if he bolted for the back door now, he would still have time to disappear out the side gate and to his car parked on the usual side street down the garden path. Out of sight. Unnoticed. Unaccounted for. Invisible. A distantly familiar bile began to bubble up in his throat. He should go. But his legs wouldn't move. His eyes could not break their gaze straight out past the porch, past the late model Cadillac with Miami plates, past the curb and coming to rest on the small black form at the end of the driveway which he knew to be the mailbox. The one which only accepted mail addressed to Charlie Williams or Occupant.

His right hand found feeling and then strength as it reached for the latch which once turned, would no longer hold the door tightly to its frame; his left hand gently opened the rickety drawer, slowly pulled out a smiling Chuck and Charlie—somewhere on a Jamaica beach—and then placed them on the tabletop, skewed purposefully to the door.

THE END