



Clyde and Charlie in Dallas Arboretum, 2007.

The Bird a Nest

When I look at the world, I'm pessimistic, but when I look at people, I am optimistic.

—*Carl Rogers, American psychologist (1902–1987)*

April 15, 2011, was an ordinary morning in my long journey as a well spouse. Charlie had just arrived for the day. As I came downstairs, I could hear his sweet voice singing: “Bill on the still hill drinks a bucket or two. . . .” Charlie told me it was an old Texas Hill Country tune, but I have not been able to verify its origin.¹

I loved to hear Charlie sing. His voice had a broad range. He sometimes used falsetto for high notes, which sounded sweet. He sang so beautifully that he was often invited to sing at weddings and funerals for family and friends. Somehow, hearing his singing in the house reassured me that things were OK, and if they were not, I had his strong shoulder to lean on.

“You have good days, and you have bad days,” Charlie said to me when I felt especially blue. “Just think that tomorrow will be a good day.”

It worked for me. Hope has the magic power to make the unbearable bearable.

I went into the family room next to the kitchen and approached Clyde, who was lying on his hospital bed against one wall. He was awake. His eyes, so hollow that I couldn't see the bottom of them, followed the movements of my face but were unfocused and showed no sign of recognition. He no longer smiled. I rubbed his face and smoothed his hair gently, believing that somehow, in a remote part of his consciousness, he would get my message telling him that he was safe and loved.

“Clyde, did you sleep well?” Charlie still talked to Clyde, although Clyde had stopped responding a long time ago. He pulled off Clyde’s blanket, and I reached underneath to feel the diaper pad.

Wet, big time!

Charlie unfastened the diaper and folded it around Clyde’s waist, turned his body toward the wall, and held him there while I bent down, tightly rolled up the pad, heavy with still-warm liquid, and dragged it out from underneath Clyde. My face was right by Clyde’s behind.

“That was a big one!” I said to Charlie. “At least he didn’t blow out a lot of gas right into my face.”

We had worked out this routine and performed it seamlessly every day. Afterward Charlie wiped Clyde down and changed him, and I fed Clyde his breakfast.

It had been almost nine years since Clyde’s diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease in late 2002, and almost six years since Charlie and Ronnie came to us on that hot June afternoon in 2005.

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It must have been only a few weeks after Charlie and Ronnie entered our lives that I asked them to call us by our first names. Being called “Mr. Wingfield” and “Mrs. Wingfield” seemed far too formal.

“Mrs. Wingfield, what say you?” an imaginary judge with a wig that looked very artificial asked in a guttural voice, as in a British television courtroom drama.

“Your Honor, I’d like to plead the Fifth,” a Mrs. Wingfield responded. Or maybe she would say, *“No comment,”* as “plead the Fifth” is used only in the US?

Clyde chimed in, “Yes, it’s about time you guys stopped calling me Mr. Wingfield. Call me Clyde. I insist.” Charlie referred to all his previous employers, and to others for whom he had been a caregiver, by their last names with the proper prefixes. To me, this form of address seemed old-fashioned and unnecessary now that Charlie and Ronnie were in my family handling the most intimate details of our daily life, such as taking Clyde to the latrine and laundering our undergarments. After some initial hesitation, they accepted our request, and soon we were all on a first-name basis.

I asked Charlie if I could call him “Charlie” instead of Charles, since he was not the Prince of England. “Yes, it ain’t matter to me.” So Charles was Charlie to Clyde and me, Chuck to Ronnie, and Charles to everyone else.

And Ronnie? He was just Ronnie, except when we were annoyed with him, and then he was Ronald.

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Charlie and Ronnie looked so different that even a fool wouldn’t believe they were brothers. Charlie later told me that he hadn’t wanted to shock me by telling me on the first day we met that he was gay. Well, he had underestimated this Chinese woman. My life had included so many shocks that I was more or less shockproof. At five feet eleven inches, Charlie was tall and lean with well-proportioned limbs. Ronnie told me that Charlie had once been a dancer in a nightclub, a part of his history that Charlie didn’t want to reveal to anyone. Underneath his blond hair was a sculpted face with high cheekbones, a strong chin, a “foreign devil’s” big nose, and a set of blue eyes under heavy blond brows.² He looked German to me, but he was actually the son of a man of Scottish ancestry and a Cherokee woman. He must have inherited those high cheekbones from his mother. Ronnie was just five feet six inches tall, short and round, evidently an overachiever

nutritionally. His dark brown eyes flickered under long dark eyelashes. His dark hair was tightly curled, his face smooth and tanned. The only feature they had in common was that both wore mustaches that matched their respective hair color.

“I am not black,” Ronnie was quick to clarify, referring to his dark hair with tiny curls.

I thought both of them were good-looking, and I let them know. Charlie said nothing, but Ronnie was visibly pleased. They smiled at each other as if they were hiding a few secrets. I later learned that they had enhanced their appearance: hair dyed, skin moisturized and spray-tanned, nails polished. I had heard that, as a general rule, gay men were more particular about their appearance. I wished all men were like that.

I quickly realized that Ronnie was not the quiet one, as I had mistakenly assumed after our first encounter. In fact, no one could stop Ronald Duck from quacking. Within a matter of days, I learned every detail of his entire life, which spanned almost five decades. He was a graduate of Southern Methodist University, the “rich kids’ school,” and had grown up a rich kid indeed. His daddy owned three “car lots,” aka car dealerships, in Big D. Ronnie was the youngest boy in the family and was spoiled rotten. His mother adored her baby boy. She took him along to the best restaurants and shops and lavished on him all kinds of things, beyond his heart’s desire. Her wealthy women friends doted on him. His parents gave him fancy cars and pushed him into marrying a very young woman, believing that doing so would “cure” his “deviant” sexuality. They paid his wife a generous stipend to stay married to him, but the marriage didn’t last.

After Ronnie’s father died, his mother eventually became ill with Alzheimer’s disease and went to live with one of his sisters. His siblings would not allow him to see his mother anymore, and they all rejected him utterly. Was it because of his homosexuality, his in-your-face

attitude, past jealousy over his being their mom and dad's favorite, or all of these? I didn't know. But Ronnie didn't care. He had his Chuck.

Charlie, on the other hand, was a country boy who had grown up on a farm in a rural Texas town. He was the middle child among eleven siblings, three boys and eight girls, all from the same heroic mother. From early boyhood, while his father was away in the army, he helped his mother, a domineering Cherokee woman who was the commander in chief of the household. Charlie plowed fields, planted and harvested crops, helped with household chores, and took care of his younger siblings. Every pair of hands had to work so they could feed all those mouths with their scarce resources.

Rural communities in the 1960s and 1970s were even more conservative than they are today, especially in the Texas countryside. Homosexuals were generally not accepted, and their families often felt ashamed. So Charlie hid his sexual orientation from his conservative, devoutly religious family long after he had left home, until one day, when he was in his late thirties, he brought Ronnie to a family reunion with no warning and no explanation. Charlie's mother and siblings couldn't believe that their handsome, God-fearing Charles was gay. They blamed Ronnie for leading Charlie astray. Although Charlie's family never rejected Charlie himself, they never accepted Ronnie, who, in his typical flamboyant manner, openly let everyone know that their Charlie was just as gay as he was and that both were superior to their redneck and unenlightened relatives.

Ronnie was clearly smart. Like most smart people, he did not suffer fools gladly. Once, when he was waiting tables at a restaurant, he served an elderly lady a sandwich. The lady looked at the sandwich on her plate and said, "But I told you that I wanted the mustard to be on

top of the meat.” Ronnie picked up the sandwich on the plate and flipped it over. “Here you have it.” He had the pleasure of watching the lady gaping at the plate, speechless.

During their courtship, Ronnie was a funeral director, a job he loved. He would drive a stately black Cadillac hearse to pick Charlie up after work. The two lovers would spend their evenings in the funeral home, making up the dead. Older women were their favorite. They groomed each woman’s hair; applied lipstick, blush, nail polish, and fake eyelashes; then dressed her up for her big event the next day, the wake or funeral. Charlie would say to her softly, “Sweetheart, I am going to make you so *perty*.” And he always did.

And he would sing a *bluegrassy* gospel song:

Down here my burden’s heavy
And the road is rough and long
Sometimes my feet get weary and so sore
But a brighter day is coming
Soon I’ll step on Heaven’s shore
And I won’t have to worry anymore³

It was such a sweet song, made sweeter by Charlie’s mellow and somewhat feminine voice and softened by his drawn-out vowels. Every time Charlie sang it in the house, its melancholy tune moved me. Later, at Clyde’s funeral service in 2011, I asked Charlie to sing this song with a twist, changing all the first-person pronouns to second person.

Soon *you*’ll step on Heaven’s shore
And *you* won’t have to worry anymore

Once I knew that there was a genuine bond of affection among us, it was safe for me to ask Charlie and Ronnie a potentially offensive question:

“From what I have observed, it seems that homosexual couples always have one person who is more masculine and one who is more feminine, like a man and a woman in a heterosexual couple. So which one of you is the man and which one is the w—”

Before I could finish the question, Ronnie responded.

“I am a man and he is a man. That’s what makes us a gay couple.”

It was an unexpected answer, but it sure made sense. Ronnie said that was the question most often asked of them and also the most ridiculous question. That made sense too.

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At the time Charlie started working for us, Ronnie was on the night shift in a hospital, filing medical insurance forms. After work, he went home to take a nap, then came to our house early in the afternoon and stayed until Charlie had finished, usually by around five in the evening.

While Charlie was working in the house, Ronnie kept Clyde company. One day I came home from the university and found Ronnie talking to Clyde. He was pouring out a stream of frustrations about his job: how the managers wouldn’t listen to him, wouldn’t believe him, didn’t understand, didn’t care, and wouldn’t talk to one of his colleagues as Ronnie had asked them to do, and how the colleague wouldn’t admit that some problem had arisen because of a mistake she’d made, and how she wouldn’t correct the mistake herself but expected Ronnie to fix it, and how she thought she was above him, and how unfair it all was, and how he knew that he was definitely right.

Clyde, who at the time could still understand some conversations, listened attentively and even asked a few questions for clarification. Finally, Ronnie was finished. With the same

seriousness that he would have used if he were counseling a member of his senior executive team, the former university president said, “Ronnie, I have some advice for you.”

Ronnie had been venting, and Clyde was his only willing ear. He wondered what meaningful advice Clyde could offer in his diminished mental condition.

“OK,” he said, politely and expectantly.

Clyde licked his lips as he always did when trying to squeeze out the words, and finally said solemnly, “Don’t be crucified on small crosses.”

Ronnie laughed. It made wonderful sense. He saw right away that it was his own pettiness that was bothering him, and his frustration evaporated. “Don’t be crucified on small crosses” became our favorite motto from that day on.

Unfortunately, we would eventually witness the exhaustion of Clyde’s pearls of wisdom. Several years later, Ronnie was again telling one of those long, convoluted stories about this person and that person, and who did what to whom, what happened after that, who said what to whom, who was happy and who was not, who was right and who was wrong. . . . He talked for over half an hour without pausing for breath. Charlie and I were listening, or pretending to listen, and Clyde was sitting with us. When Ronnie was done at last, Charlie and I looked at each other and breathed a sigh of relief.

Sensing that the conversation was over, Clyde stood up, walked over to Ronnie’s side, and put his arm around Ronnie’s shoulders. We all looked at Clyde, wondering what he was about to do. Clyde paused, leaned slightly toward Ronnie licking his lips, and stuttered:

“Could you, could you, could you . . .” He was searching for the words, and we all held our breath, waiting.

“Take it from the top!”

The three of us looked at each other for a moment in disbelief, then simultaneously burst into laughter. For once, Ronald Duck was tired of quacking, and we were spared his repeating the entire story again.

Charlie and Ronnie had been a couple for seventeen years by the time they came to us. Even though their personalities were like night and day, they were still inseparable. Charlie was quiet, and Ronnie was talkative; Charlie was somewhat shy, while Ronnie was flamboyant; Charlie was thrifty, but Ronnie never hesitated before walking into the most expensive stores, whether or not he had any money; Charlie was sweet, and Ronnie was always in your face in a way that was annoying and amusing at the same time. Charlie worked nonstop to keep Clyde safe, the house clean, and me happy. And Ronnie? Always quacking, being annoying, entertaining us, not lifting a finger.

“You are not my boss,” Ronnie would say to me as he sat on the couch with Clyde, talking cheerfully about anything and everything, munching on snacks, and drinking the eleventh of the fifteen cans of diet soda he poured down his throat every day.

Well, Ronnie, you are doing my job, just not getting paid.

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For a long period of time, Clyde’s restlessness was the most frustrating challenge. Although his body was still strong and healthy, he was no longer able to



Celebrating Ronnie’s Birthday in the big-and-beautiful house.

read, a lifelong passion of his, nor could he comprehend much of the TV news or talk shows. What could a person do with all that physical energy trapped inside his body? He paced around the house constantly like a caged animal, trying to figure out where he was and what he was supposed to do. On several occasions, he walked out of the house and got lost.

“Give me a chore,” he would tell me, insistently and repetitively, clinging to me like a burr hanging in a dog’s fur. There was nothing I could do to help him settle down, and none of the previous caregivers had had any luck either.

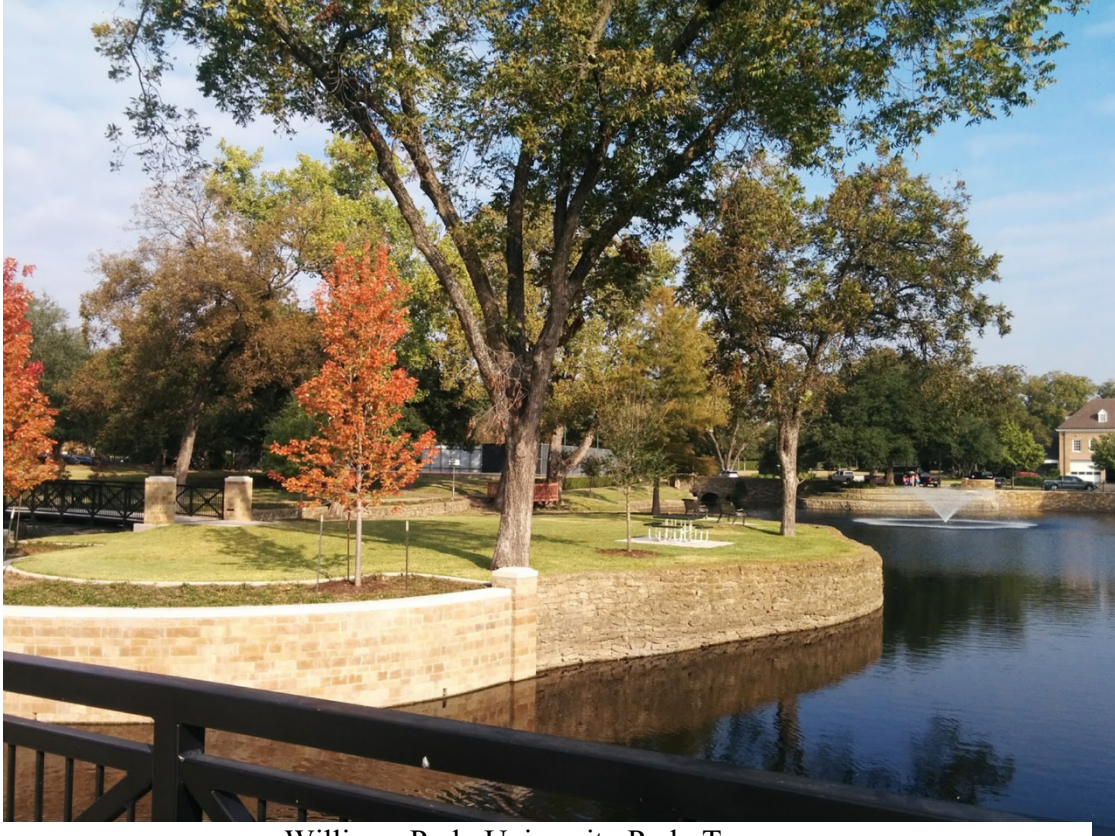
It was Charlie who came up with a solution to Clyde’s restlessness by giving him some harmless tasks to pacify him, however temporarily. He handed Clyde a feather duster to “help” with dusting. He placed a basket full of old towels and worn T-shirts in front of him by the couch and asked Clyde to “help fold the laundry.” He gave Clyde a broom to sweep the floor. Then Clyde got to fold the same old towels and T-shirts all over again. Charlie praised Clyde lavishly for “helping,” and although I was sure that Clyde didn’t deserve any praise for the result, he did deserve it for the effort. The former university president did the most minuscule chores with the same complete and earnest concentration he would have applied to a multimillion-dollar project for the university.

The chaos seemed to have receded now that Charlie and Ronnie were around. They both found ways to engage Clyde’s attention and keep him occupied. Often, when I got home from work, I found the three of them talking while Charlie was preparing dinner. They discussed everything: the fabled history of the Lone Star State, tall tales from their childhood, American Indian legends, politics, war and the military, racial issues in America. There were differences among them, although they found plenty of common ground and listened to each other with restraint and respect. Clyde was a moderate conservative, whereas Charlie and Ronnie were

moderate Democrats. Clyde was a Korean War veteran, and Charlie had grown up as an Army brat. Cherokee and Shawnee blood ran in Clyde's veins, Charlie's mother was a Cherokee, and both Charlie and Ronnie resented being considered "privileged white males." All three men had stories to tell about their respective mothers, the strong-minded women who had raised them and loved them unconditionally, earning their sons' endless affection and admiration in return.

I wasn't sure how many times the same stories got recycled. But who cares? After all, the memory-impaired lost his awareness of repetition, and the other two were content if repetition could preserve present harmony.

When conversation flagged and when domestic chores failed to pacify Clyde, it was time for a walk. Charlie took him to Williams Park, just steps away from home, where there were pleasant walking paths that meandered along manicured lawns and circled a small duck pond. They brought bread to feed the ducks.



Williams Park, University Park, Texas.

On one trip to the park, out of the blue, Clyde started to imitate the quacking of the ducks.

“Clyde, can you show JoAnn how the ducks quack?” Charlie asked Clyde when they got home.

“Gua gua gua gua . . . gua gua gua gua.” Clyde’s imitation was better than I ever could have done even if I had practiced, and he did it with a child’s zest. I laughed out loud. My laughter encouraged Clyde, and he started quacking some more.

“Gua gua gua gua . . . gua gua gua gua . . . gua gua gua gua.”

He was pleased that he could still make his “Hon” laugh.

One day I came home after work and Charlie’s report was: “We walked to the park seven times today.”

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We all ate well in those days—Charlie could cook! To my Chinese taste buds, his cooking sometimes reflected the American tendency to ruin food by overseasoning it, leaving little room for appreciating the subtlety and complexity of flavors. Sugar-saturated cakes, salt-heavy soups, dressing-smothered salads, and the same “fry-it-up” approach to so many different foods, even cabbage, were just a few examples. He made meatloaf, which Clyde wouldn’t eat because he didn’t eat anything if he couldn’t see what was in it. Then he proudly made salmon patties for us fish lovers. I politely tasted some, but Clyde declined. Neither of us cared for the taste of canned salmon. Once Charlie made a cake that had more icing than cake. The saying “the icing on the cake” implies that such a cake should be everyone’s desire. But unlike the delicate, sophisticated icings on Shanghai cakes, Charlie’s icing was just sugar and fat.⁴

On the other hand, we did like Charlie's spaghetti, chicken-fried steaks, and scalloped potatoes, although we wished they were less salty and greasy. We really liked his chili, with lots of meat and no beans. "Bean chili is for sissies, not for real Texans," Ronnie told me. And we loved Charlie's skillet cornbread made with bacon grease, his Southern-style overcooked green beans, and his turnip greens with ham hocks. There were black-eyed peas every New Year and peach cobbler when Texas peaches were in season.

We quickly learned to adapt to each other's food preferences and to compromise in our cooking styles. Charlie and Ronnie thought my Chinese cooking was delicious. Dumplings and fried rice were their favorites. I even got the two country boys to eat tofu with us and taught them how to season it so that it tasted like meat. When Charlie's nephew from a rural Texas town came to visit them in Dallas, they made a stir-fry dish with tofu and served it with rice.

"How did it go? What did your nephew and his wife think about the tofu dish?" I asked them, eager for a verdict.

"They loved it. They said the meat in the stir-fry was good, and both had seconds." They were delighted that their guests hadn't even realized they were eating tofu, not meat.

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While Charlie and Ronnie were with us, I was able to get out and about with Clyde far more often than I would have if I had been trying to manage on my own. Alone, I could not get Clyde in and out of the car safely, make sure he kept his balance while walking, maneuver him in his wheelchair through difficult spaces, help him with his frequent latrine trips and occasional toileting mishaps, handle his constant confusion, and still have energy left to enjoy myself. A well spouse caring for an ill spouse with Alzheimer's encounters challenges every single

moment. With Charlie and Ronnie sharing my burdens, I was able to enjoy many shining moments, those we consciously created with hope, humor, and heartfelt love for each other.

“The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship.”⁵ How wonderfully said by the English poet William Blake! The real home we build for ourselves is constructed of the people around us rather than brick and mortar.

For a couple of years, from summer 2005 to fall 2007, before Charlie had his first hospitalization and Clyde went to stay in an assisted-living facility, every Friday, Charlie and Ronnie took Clyde to our weekend home on Lake Ray Hubert, some twenty miles outside Dallas. They picked up lunch for all of them at Dickey’s Barbecue Pit en route and brought it to the lake house to eat. After lunch, Charlie cleaned the house and mowed the lawn while Ronnie watched Clyde until I got there in the evening after work. Charlie and Ronnie would come back to the lake house again on Saturday mornings to join Clyde and me for brunch on the patio by the lake. Charlie made scrambled eggs, bacon, and fresh biscuits.

Ah, those fluffy biscuits, hot out of the oven, moist inside with a golden crust!

One day while mowing the lawn of the lake house, Charlie found a turtle the size of a dinner plate casually strolling on the lawn. Charlie and Ronnie quickly picked it up and released it into the lake.

“You don’t come back now,” Charlie said to the turtle, “if you don’t want to end up on JoAnn’s dinner table. She is Chinese!”

For the mother goose who was hatching babies in the thick bed of reeds by the lake, we left bread that she devoured eagerly while keeping her distrustful eyes on us. Then one day, about three weeks later, Mama and babies were gone, leaving behind a pile of broken shells.

The Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden was a favorite place of ours during the warm seasons. In springtime, we sat under the fragrant cascading wisteria trellis outside DeGolyer House, overlooking the carpets of tulips, daffodils, and azaleas in a rainbow of brilliant colors. In summer, we spread a blanket on the lawn, laid out our picnic, and sang songs from the Flower Power era. Fall was the time to stroll among thousands of chrysanthemums and watch kids run around the pumpkin patch.

When the leaves were off the trees and the temperature had fallen, we took our walks inside NorthPark Center mall. As Christmas approached, we drove around the neighborhoods of University Park and Highland Park, admiring the spectacular holiday decorations. Together, we attended many concerts and holiday services in the Highland Park United Methodist Church at one corner of the SMU campus.



Ronnie, Charlie, Clyde, and the author at a Turtle Creek Chorale concert.

Sometime in early 2008, Clyde went out to eat with us for the last time. It was a Sunday. Charlie had recovered from the illness he had developed in the early fall of 2007 and was out of the hospital. We picked Clyde up at Monticello, an assisted-living facility where he had been staying since October 2007, after Charlie had been ill. Clyde's condition had progressed so far that we couldn't take him to regular restaurants anymore. He was in a wheelchair and had to be fed. If we didn't watch him every second, he would grab food off the plates, stab the table with the utensils, and spit nonstop everywhere. On that day, we decided to try the food court at NorthPark Center. We took a corner table away from the curious eyes of passersby. After lunch, I got us some ice cream, Clyde's all-time favorite treat. As Charlie pushed Clyde in the wheelchair, I held a giant ice-cream cone, doing my best to keep up so I could feed Clyde a few bites and eat some myself as we made our way through the mall. Ronnie, trailing behind, was holding an equally big ice-cream cone that he was supposed to share with Charlie, who had no spare hand to hold a cone himself. Of course, Ronnie conveniently forgot to make sure that Charlie got his share. In his other hand, Ronnie carried a bunch of napkins, busily wiping up the gobs of spit that Clyde was shooting out nonstop in all directions.

Quite an odd group in the eyes of observers, I was sure. But we just met people's probing eyes with smiles.

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Every December around Christmastime, the Turtle Creek Chorale, one of the most celebrated all-male choruses in the country, performs a holiday concert. The chorus has more than 170 members, mostly gay men.⁶ It is the premier opportunity in the Dallas gay community to see and be seen, an occasion for wearing the most elegant or innovative fashions. Knowing that this was a real treat for Charlie and Ronnie, I got tickets for us every year. It was the perfect way to

celebrate Ronnie's birthday, which fell in the middle of December. The performance was always festive, beautiful, hilarious, and superbly entertaining. It was an evening we all looked forward to: dressing up, getting out of the house, enjoying some holiday cheer, and afterward, for sure, listening to Ronnie mercilessly making fun of *his* people's aesthetic senses, or lack of them, in clothing.

"Chuck, did you see him?" Ronnie said during one of the holiday shows, referring to a man Charlie had dated long ago. The gay community was relatively small, and they frequently ran into acquaintances or past lovers. "He sure isn't aging well—he shouldn't wear that toupee if he doesn't know how to put it on right."

Charlie ignored him, so Ronnie turned to me. "Chuck looks much better than him, doesn't he?"

Yes, I thought Charlie was a good-looking guy, but it was a mystery to me how Ronnie always knew just by looking that someone was wearing a hairpiece, a false mustache, fake lashes, or even fake boobs.

On the evening of the Turtle Creek Chorale show in December 2006, Charlie was busy getting Clyde ready, taking him to the latrine, putting him in a tuxedo, and exchanging his slip-on house loafers for a pair of patent leather shoes that he had polished earlier that day.

Ronnie, meanwhile, was grooming himself and immediately got distressed.

"Chuck, my face looks terrible." He came out of the powder room, visibly upset. "Look at me! I can't go anywhere."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

“You look just fine, Ronnie.” Charlie must have dealt with the problem a hundred times. He continued to work on Clyde and did not pay much attention to Ronnie.

“Here.” Facing the light, he pointed to a lighter spot on his face close to his left temple that was hardly noticeable. “My color is off. What am I going to do? There is no way I can go to the chorale looking like this.”

“What happened?” I asked. Charlie smiled, saying nothing, and continued to work Clyde’s right foot into his shoe.

I was illiterate on the subject of cosmetics and had no idea that Ronnie’s tanned skin was the result of painstakingly applied makeup. It was so out of the norm for me that I commented, “Ronnie, I think you are quite eccentric, queer, or is it peculiar?” Not sure of my word choice, I tried them all.

Ronnie forgot what was troubling him. He laughed so loud that he had to hold his belly, and so did Charlie.

“Chuck, did you hear what JoAnn just said? Am I a queer?” Ronnie said to Charlie, who was no longer squatting on his heels fiddling with Clyde’s shoes, but sitting on the floor, bending over and laughing uncontrollably.

“Yes, I am.” When Ronnie was able to catch his breath, he answered his own question, and then pointed to Charlie. “And so is he.”

That was how I learned that *queer* as a noun refers to a gay man, in addition to what I had been taught in my English education in China, as an adjective meaning “strange.”

At last we were all ready to go. Charlie and Ronnie were in black suits with freshly starched and pressed white shirts. Charlie had a yellow tie with blue stripes from Clyde’s collection, Ronnie had a red one with black dots, and both wore shiny black leather shoes.

Ronnie had recently lost a lot of weight and looked quite trim. Clyde was wearing a black necktie and his three-piece black tux, which Charlie had put on him with quite some effort. It still fit him perfectly after forty years. I was in a long royal purple velvet dress, white pearl earrings, a long white multistrand pearl necklace, a black satin handbag, and black leather heels that I had brought from China more than twenty years ago but that still looked brand new. We were confident that our group would turn heads, not only because people were often curious about how we were related, but also because each one of us looked mighty sharp that night.

We all got in my car, a pearl-white Cadillac SUV. Ronnie was driving, and Charlie sat by him in the front passenger seat. Clyde and I sat in the back. It was the very picture of a happy family.

Charlie turned his head, took a look at Ronnie, and said, “Good lord! Ronnie is drivin’ a Cadillac again.”

To which Ronnie responded, “Shut up, you queer!”

To which I recited Shakespeare, ““What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.””⁷



¹ This is based on my recollection. In researching the origin of this lyric while writing this book, I found no exact match but some variations, as seen in this Appalachian tune (North Carolina), assessed November 2, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Old_Mountain_Dew.

² “Foreign devil” was a common Chinese term referring to all foreigners. Historically, it carried a negative meaning because it was associated with foreign invasions, the Opium War, and unequal treaties China was forced to sign with foreign countries. It is still used today with or without the negative undertone. My use of the word here is facetious and endearing.

³ Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver, “I Won’t Have to Worry Anymore,” original release date March 18, 2008, Crossroads Entertainment & Marketing.

⁴ Shanghai cakes are inspired by baked goods introduced by Europeans who went there in the early modern era. They seem more European-style than American-style, more delicate with lighter frosting.

⁵ William Blake, “Proverbs of Hell,” *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the William Blake Archive, accessed November 15, 2019, <http://www.blakearchive.org/images/mhh.a.p8.100.jpg>.

⁶ Charlie and Ronnie said Turtle Creek Chorale was an all-gay group. I use “mostly” to be safe.

⁷ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, act 2, scene 2, lines 47–48, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. W. J. Craig (London: Oxford University Press, 1914), accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.bartleby.com/70/3822.html>.