

PART I

Charmed

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Charmed⁶

“Come forth!” I commanded,
my head bent forward
towards the snowbank
of our January lawn.
I shook my finger
to repeat the charm:
“Come forth!”
Still the daffodil resisted,
even though my neighbors
tout me as their real, live fairy.

Growing Up Gay in Dixie⁷

I am a male, 40 (in 1977), openly and happily married to another male. We make our home in rural central Georgia, where he is a hairdresser and I am an associate professor at a state college. I am white, he is black. We are active in the community and have valuable friends on the campus and in town, where we have lived for almost four years.

Growing into my present open, reasonably stable, maximally fulfilling gay consciousness has been a circuitous, tedious process, with many false starts. My background was similar to that of many native Southerners. Great-great-great-granddaddy was a private in the South Carolina troops in the Revolutionary War. Great-granddaddy fought as a private in the Coosa County, Alabama, troops of the War of the Rebellion. I was born and reared in Anniston, Alabama, went to prep school at McCallie in Chattanooga, went off to Baylor University in Texas with a view to becoming a Baptist preacher, and wound up a schoolteacher, first at Auburn University, then at Darlington prep school in Rome, Georgia, and later at the University of Alabama, where I earned my doctorate in English.

My world of Anniston, Chattanooga, Tuscaloosa, Atlanta, and Auburn did not give me much help in growing up as a gay person. The thousands of gays in the South who had come before me were never allowed any positive visibility, and my entire education was directed by people who were not gay and who were unable to understand me.

The only gays I heard about in my youth were victims of cruel gossip, most typically people unlucky enough to have been caught in their own efforts to conceal themselves. They were always roundly vilified. Almost every small Southern town I know about has its tale of some talented person who was forced to leave following the “scandal” of such discovery. Most often the “crime” at worst was having been involved in an act of nonviolent affection of mutual consent, or often merely having made the inquiry to someone to discover whether he or she would be interested in such a relationship.

Growing Up Alone

My boyhood in the South was Puritanical, heavily influenced by the church. At puberty I struggled to be faithful to my church’s condemnation of homosexual behavior by denying my sexuality altogether, except for frantic autoeroticism and its attendant same-sex fantasies, which kept my secret ever before me. Had I been straight, the dynamics would have been the same but the institutions of courtships, dating, the family, and so on, would have counterbalanced the internalized guilt.

I buried myself in work and won the award for “unselfish service.” And I often spent long hours staring off Chattanooga’s Missionary Ridge, wondering about a previous winner of the award who had committed suicide, so the student rumors went, because he feared exposure for homosexuality. I minimized all personal contact except the most institutionalized, and had my touch only by serving as the campus athletic trainer, torturing myself with the unreciprocal physical rubbings of all my heroes. Growing up gay in a military school was a formidable challenge.

Fortunately, I did not retreat altogether from close contact with people during the years after boarding school. Instead I worked hard at developing five very close and long-term friendships with other males, most of them college classmates or colleagues. We shared comprehensive intellectual interests as well as a common professed disinterest in sexual behavior of any sort. To each of these select few I “confessed” my homosexual inclinations, but always in such a way as to seek the individual’s support of me in my resistance to such “temptations.” I studiously avoided any person I suspected was homosexual, naively assuming that I was an expert at such recognition. I could not accept the truth that just as I do not fit homosexual stereotypes, so most other homosexuals are equally unrecognizable. I made it expressly clear to my friends that I did not want reciprocal sexual confidences from them, and most complied. Year after year we traveled thousands of miles to visit and wrote scores of letters. It was not until I was twenty-eight and beginning at last to face squarely my own needs for human genital contact that I began to see that most of my bachelor “intellectual” friends were also homosexual and most were also committed to a fierce celibacy.

Except for the limited sharing of these early “confessions,” being gay for me meant being terribly alone, always having to wear a mask, constantly justifying even to myself my lack of sexuality by saying that I thereby won some spiritual compensations. Freud’s word *sublimation* came along as a big help: at least I knew better than to repress, and as much as I hated myself for doing so, I spent myself tirelessly in autoeroticism and prayer.

Sublimation was grim, but it did have some rewards. I certainly grew as a student. Often I also was able to be a good friend. Ironically, I was able to respond better to the needs of others than to my own. As a corridor master at Darlington, I was trusted to keep a secret and frequently was asked by a distraught student: “Sir, what am I to do?” Here I was, never having known a gay adult whom I trusted and never having had the courage to act out my own attractions, yet called upon to counsel others.

“Did you enjoy it?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s what scares me,” always was the reply.

“Did he enjoy it?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, aren’t you talking to the wrong person?”

I am still amazed at my good sense as I recall those sessions in which I had to play it by ear, instinctively leading persons away from the very guilt that was suffocating me. Somehow I always knew that the crucial question was the personal one: “Have you looked for a way for this experience to bring you closer to another human being?” It seemed terribly important to tell them what I knew then mainly from books, but know now in the flesh: they were not isolated freaks for having had such sexual experience, and their enjoyment of the experience did not commit them irrevocably to repeat such behavior.

Not the First

I was in my thirties before I learned that a major religious figure in my childhood daily cruised the local bus station for homosexual trade. When once at college I went for counsel about my incessant homosexual dreams, the preacher opened the door and asked his secretary to stay within earshot, so fearful was he of being closeted with someone even to discuss gay dreams. Four years later, this same preacher was fired for having an affair with his male choir director. When as a teenager I once shared with a fellow convert at a Billy Graham rally what I had written as my confession in the booklets that were handed out for this purpose, the gorgeous young man confessed in tears that he too was “guilty,” and then in fear we both avoided each other thereafter. At Baylor I once slipped an anonymous note under the office door of my religion professor begging him to discuss homosexuality in our Christian ethics class; instead he gave a grim lecture on the Freudian terms *id*, *ego*, and *superego*, and suggested that his “anonymous caller” (I turned crimson!) ought to see a psychiatrist, and a Christian psychiatrist at that.

In short, I was facing in the South what gays face everywhere: I could not become visible without becoming an outcast; older gays were unwilling to risk counseling the young; non-gays did not understand the experience at all and were often openly hostile.

Later, at the University of Alabama, I learned that gay sex was big business, particularly in certain key departments. At least one dean and three department heads were well-known to our gay underground. Yet this underground offered very little community or support, and only on the rarest of occasions the dubious privilege of a nude swimming party or a one-sex dance. And even on those occasions, people were fairly

uncommunicative, and most did not even participate, so great were the risks of any potential visibility.

Amazingly, many gays survive these conditions and manage to avoid being crippled by society's fears, and our own as well. Many of us manage to preserve our integrity and to make meaningful contributions at all levels of society. Strangely, only in 1973 did the American Psychiatric Association "discover" what many gays have known all along: our gayness is not the sickness; the sickness is the homophobia plaguing the land.⁸

Our society finds it especially difficult to grasp the fact that we gays can repress or "control" our instincts without ever changing, much less "curing" our gayness. I myself was once pressured by a psychologist to accept heterosexuality. I found myself capable of heterosexual responses, responded to the overtures of a young woman with whom I could be completely open about my predominantly gay orientation, married her, and had a successful sexual relationship, as measured by the actual pleasure given and received. Yet throughout our five years together I sacrificed my primary orientation, my sense of self, my wholeness, my integrity. Now I am amazed that our society would license people to practice such counsel, that our society would encourage in young women a missionary zeal to "convert" men, that parents would rejoice at such suspicious "salvation," and that a priest would rejoice in such a marriage, knowing all the facts, but would not rejoice to see two men who love each other undertake the same union. If we have a messed-up, confused, alienated, crumbling society, as I suspect we do, I believe that we have ourselves to blame. For starters at reform we might try an honest avowal of our own nature and desires, instead of merely conforming to a code of institutionalized behavior thrust upon us.

Coming Out

Our culture teaches that homosexuality is the perversion of heterosexuality, and for years I believed it. Only slowly did I realize that the real perversion is the deceit and duplicity with which too many persons, gay and not gay, continue to live.

In my many years in the closet, Southern writers sometimes managed to break the silence and speak about people who shared my sexual orientation, but often the accounts were more devastating than the silence. Calder Willingham in *End as a Man*,⁹ writing of his experiences at the Citadel, speaks of a brutality that completely violates my gay sensibilities. Tennessee Williams peoples his works with self-destructive gay neurotics, thus earning for himself the title "Poet of the Damned." The gay male in Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*¹⁰ is an ominous, mysteri-

ous threat, and the novel's little boy is routinely teased by freaks and circus people. Southern gothic novels spread damnation-by-association like sorghum over the gay experience, a heavy sweetness unto death that is not likely to tempt any reasonable gay person to walk out of safe hiding. Even hints of camp, of gay celebration, when they occurred in Southern fiction were usually played for their jadedness. The impression I received was that all gay sexual encounters were grim and joyless, and that grand old families were routinely leveled by them. Neither impression has been confirmed by my own experience of healthy, open gay sexuality.

For years I took it as a blessing that I was not very effeminate, was not usually recognized as gay, even in the highly sensitive boarding schools where I taught, where sometimes even straights were fired for giving the misleading impressions of feminine softness. Of course, I studiously avoided any clues of gayness, real or imaginary. I would never wear green on Thursdays, always kept my fingernails closely trimmed, eschewed various "delicate" styles of smoking cigarettes and crossing legs about as assiduously as I avoided football and rough competition. I now have no particular regrets about the sexual blend that resulted in my personality. And I even enjoy my renaissance notion of mixing a certain toughness with a definite gentleness. What I do resent is that my culture made me pay the heavy price of sexual abstinence for twenty-eight years to maintain this view of myself.

In the closet I was unlikely to find a strong gay love relationship that could nourish my wholeness. In the closet I could not affirm my casual existence as a gay person on a par with my sexual existence. In the closet I maintained the rigid, stultifying separation of my mind and my body. In the closet I was even afraid to pray to my God "Just As I Am," and no church thought to tell me that the God who made me loves creation and designed my body chemistry; I had left the Baptist Church to become an Episcopalian at age twenty-five, and though the form of worship was more pleasing, the needs of my body and personality to be reconciled were still not met. In the closet I wasted holy energy of all sorts—intellectual, spiritual, artistic, sexual—trying to be something that I was not, namely a heterosexual.

My real growing up was accomplished in 1973 when I decided to leave the closet. I announced to my classes and to the community that I was gay. I accepted, affirmed, and celebrated being who I am. Two major factors influenced this dramatic reversal of my habits of thirty-seven years. For the first time I was involved in a gay relationship in which both of us desired a long-term, substantial commitment, and we were both much too happy in our own union to be willing to hide. In fact, we felt that many public dimensions of healthy unions (shared colleagues, friends,

economic relationships, etc.) required such openness if we were going to have a space for growth. Secondly, I had been given an opportunity to co-edit *College English* for a special issue on "The Homosexual Imagination."¹¹ In doing so I wanted to speak my pronouns honestly: not *they*, *them*, *their*, and *theirs*, but *we*, *us*, *our*, and *ours*.

When I announced my gay identity, the world did not fall apart as I had feared; in fact, for the first time it really began to make sense. By embracing myself, I discovered, even actualized, my strength, my energy, my capacity to love, my ability to be loved, my will to survive as myself rather than as a fabrication of my community. For the first time, many major ideas of our culture began to make sense in terms of my personal experience, not the least of which were grace, redemption, the Wandering Jew, the Good Samaritan, integrity

In the closet, a gay inevitably confirms the might of the oppressor, and the social and economic mobility allowed to those who pass as not gay is bought at the price of self-doubt that the oppressor is right. To think oneself a slave is the worst form of slavery; it is to be shackled with what William Blake called "mind-forged manacles."¹² Homosexuality is a serious felony in thirty-four states, but the real measure of the oppression is in terms of the quiet resignation of the thousands of gays who do not complain. My vulnerability is measured by the tight closet doors of many, many about me.

Gay mind-forged manacles rattle across our land, growing rusty, ready to break. Thousands of gays wait to make their own discoveries of growth into personal freedom and responsibility. I have met gay people of every race, class, and background working in every area of the South. It is high time for the South to grow up to the needs of these gay persons. At this time gays remain the one minority group with no outspoken allies, in spite of the fact that all gays are born in heterosexual unions. Few if any sympathetic non-gays are self-confident enough in their own sexual orientation to risk being seen wearing one of our buttons. Politicians are terrified of open association with us, though they frequently knock at the back door and are regular if anonymous customers at gay baths. Schools which we support with our taxes maintain medieval notions about us and systematically deprive us of our history while flagrantly appropriating as non-gay most of the literature, music, and art that we have created. Medical servants and public health officials are not even trained to understand basic specialized requirements of gay patients, and typically give us inadequate physical examinations. Religious groups, for the most part, regularly condemn us as special sinners, and social groups ostracize all of us who refuse to be invisible.

The most immediate and specific need of gays is the extension to us of our civil rights. We should have the freedom of sexual association and public overtures of affection as do non-gays. We should not be discriminated against in employment, housing, and so on. Our marriages should be accorded legal status, and possibly even tax credits should be awarded us for our contribution to solving both the population explosion and the energy crisis. Television, movies, and textbooks should be required to give a full view of the gay experience from uncensored gay points of view. Every care should be made to recognize the diversity of ways of life in the gay experience, not just those styles which confirm non-gays' fears of us. Crimes against gays by blackmailers, entrapment specialists, toughs, and other hooligans should be punished with firmness. Children should be guaranteed an atmosphere of freedom and joy in which to discover more responsibly who they are and who they may become.

If this vision of equality is too terrifying to America and the South, perhaps we should rewrite the tenets of our church and state institutions more honestly, saying instead that "Whosoever is straight and believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life," that "All straights are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights." The declaration would be narrower, the Gospel less good news, but such revisions would do justice to those straights who are afraid they might be gay if given a fair chance to discover who they are.

Growing up gay in the South is a challenge, one that became exciting for me only when I assumed responsibility for my own growth. During my nearly thirty-seven years of acquiescing to the bleak invisibility prescribed for gays, I abetted the arrest of my own healthy maturation.

Now I routinely face a different set of problems, namely, the hostility which our society reserves for open gays; yet I face this hostility with maturity and with the energy I formerly wasted in hiding and self-hatred. It has been painful to be cut off from some members of my family, though fortunately my parents have remained supportive, though confused. Some of my neighbors' children spit on me when I jog, and shout obscenities as I routinely pass through town. HUD¹³ has proved that a local realtor discriminated against the two of us by denying housing when he learned that we are gay and racially integrated. Because I am gay, a dean in another university refused to hire me, though I was the unanimous choice of the entire search committee and of his faculty rank and tenure committee.

Several members of the vestry at my local parish sent a letter asking me to "Find some other place of worship that may be more in sympathy to your thinking and efforts toward gay people," and when I shared this letter with the press, my bishop blew up and told me through the papers

that he was summoning me for discipline, because I (!) had “disturbed the peace and good order of the Church.” Interestingly, at the “discipline” session he admitted privately to my lawyer and to me that he had “no authority to discipline a layperson” and had spoken only in anger, but he has refused to make this episcopal abuse clear to the public.

Another bishop (in the Anglican Orthodox Church¹⁴) wrote a letter printed on the front page of the regional Birchite¹⁵ paper accusing my lover and me of having caused the tornado that ripped through our town recently! Meanwhile, my priest sometimes shouts at me in public, has said that he wants to kill me, and sometimes spills the communion wine on me when I continue to accept Christ’s invitation for all persons to partake of His Body and Blood. Confronting such nonsense from the changing old order is much easier than was the task of trying to accept that order’s definitions of me.

In the mutual support and understanding of our union, my spouse and I daily confirm that all that our culture had taught us about gayness was indeed a denial of our full humanity. It is a real comment on the quality our society gives to gay life that the two of us met just outside the bathroom on the sixth floor of the Atlanta YMCA. Such a fact might be a source of shame in the straight culture, but is a source of pride and joy in the gay culture, evidence of the growing power of the gay experience no matter what kind of ground the straight culture allows us to plant in.

My growth is not the decadence of my family tree, but the flowering of the dreams of freedom that my great-granddaddies had in the American Revolution and the War of the Rebellion. My gay integrity, wholeness, honesty, and responsibility are part of an honorable human tradition, and the New South will simply have to make room for Ernest and me.