

**An excerpt from *The Screwed-Up Life of Charlie the Second*
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Okay, so maybe getting my scrawny ass pushed into the back of a Crystal Lake cop car wasn't the smartest thing I've done, but Dana's party last night—it sucked. She should thank me. The only thing anyone'll remember about the party is me getting busted.

My folks, on the other hand, won't let it go. They say I'm this big embarrassment to them. What else is new? After spending seventeen years listening to them say that I don't "apply myself," I'm giving up. Not in the goodbye-cruel-world sort of way. I'm not in this huge rush to swipe a Ginsu knife from the kitchen and make Swiss cheese of my intestines. It's just that when you're in a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't situation, it's best if you don't. It's easier.

Only, my parents don't see it that way. According to them, I need to grow up and try to make something of myself, which means writing this stupid personal essay for my college applications. So I said I'd start my personal essay.

My name is Charles James Stewart, II. Charles the Second. My friends call me Charlie. First (AKA Charles James Stewart, AKA Dad, AKA McHenry County's next state's attorney) calls me Chip at press conferences, but around the house, I'm usually Smartass. Everyone else calls me Ass Bandit or Fudge Packer. I'm 17 years old, scarecrow gangly at all of 6'4, and a buck-fifty dripping wet. My nose and ears are way too big, my voice cracks all the time, and I've never passed my driver's test. (Six failures, but who's counting?) As you can probably tell, I'm one of the cool kids. While some guys in my class already have hair on their chests, I *just* started getting pubes. And to make me a bigger freak, all three of them are growing in straight. I also don't have their "cool" half-a-pint-of-gel-and-two-hours-in-front-of-the-mirror-to-look-like-I-just-rolled-out-of-bed hair, pukka shell necklaces, designer hoodies, or K-Swiss shoes, either. I

do have their dirty jocks, though, 'cuz they shove 'em in my face all the time.

I'll be a senior at South. I'd've graduated already, but in grade school I was held back 'cuz I was, as First half-jokes, "socially retarded."

My extracurricular activities include soccer, being a total music and comics freak, and jacking off like a retarded monkey. C'mon, I'm 17, and it's not like I've gotten any action, short of the one time Bob Collins beat off in front of me after a soccer game (and then freaked and totally stopped talking to me).

After high school, I want to...

Who cares?

So naturally, Dana Flannigan's not the only person who thinks I'm a jerk. Everyone does. That's why Dana didn't even want me at her end-of-summer-we're-gonna-be-seniors party. It didn't matter to me. The only reason I even went to the thing was because Dana is dating Bink, my best friend since second grade (second grade round two, that is). Bink made me go.

I guess the fact that Bink's always making me do things is how the two of us ended up friends in the first place. He jokes that we wound up being friends 'cuz "all the really cool superheroes have sidekicks." He says it 'cuz he knows it'll get a rise out of me. I tell people we ended up friends, 'cuz we wanted each other's meat. It pisses him off, but it's true—sort of anyway.

During the first week of second grade, I made sure I always sat by him in the school cafeteria during lunch. Even back then, I thought he was cute—cute like I wanted him near me, not cute like I wanted him in me. Anyhow, this one day toward the end of the week, Bink opened his lunch bag, pulled out a plastic-wrapped corned beef sandwich on white bread, and stuck a finger in his mouth, pretending like he was going to puke.

"I hate corned beef," he said, pouting. "What do you have?"

I opened my plastic lunchbox and looked inside. "A ham sandwich."

“I’m not supposed to eat those.”

“Why?” I asked, wondering if he was like this one girl in class the year before who ate something that touched a peanut at some point and almost died.

“Because I’m Jewish,” Bink said. He looked like a little kid who’d just been told to hug a great aunt who always wear costume jewelry sharp enough to puncture a lung, tells you how big you’re getting, and then drags her chin whiskers across your face as she gives you one of those slobbering kisses that border on intergenerational incest.

“What’s Jewish?” I asked.

“It’s like being grounded for life for not believing in Jesus. You can’t eat ham. You have to wear stupid hats. Every Friday night they force you go to a place where everyone talks funny. Once a year, you have to wait at the table until some guy named Elijah shows up for dinner. He never does, ‘cause he’s dead, but they don’t tell you that at first. The worst part is you don’t get Christmas. I don’t want to be Jewish.”

“Me neither,” I said, wondering, at the time, if it was something you could catch from a girl or sitting on a public toilet seat.

I felt bad that Bink didn’t get to have Christmas, so I gave him my sandwich. He practically shoved the whole thing in his mouth, telling me between chews that I was his best friend in the whole wide world. Looking back on it now, it wasn’t the smartest thing to do, but what did I know? I was, like, eight. And, I didn’t know that Mrs. B would fly off the handle when she found out.

I like to imagine the second-grade version of Bink, walking home from school all pissed-like and letting Mrs. B have it. He marches into the house, metal screen door slamming behind him, throws his book bag on the floor, puts his fists on his hips, stares at Mrs. B, who’s sitting on the couch watching some TV judge tell a hillbilly he’s gotta pay for the cellphone he stole from his truck-stop girlfriend. Mrs. B looks at him and asks, “What’s a matter, honey?”

Then Bink gets all high and mighty, and lays into her about how Moses, Methuselah, Maccabaeus, Meir, and Menachem had it wrong.

Bink says to his mom, “You lied to me. There’s nothing wrong with ham. In fact, it tastes really good—especially on rye bread with Swiss cheese.”

I can see Mrs. B going into this state of total apoplexy—bulging eyes, trembling lips, jaw practically to the carpet—but none of that seems to bother Bink. He just wants to know what else she lied about—bacon, shrimp, cheeseburgers, shellfish, bacon cheeseburgers, and probably even his foreskin. Okay, so not his foreskin. I’m the only freak who’d bring it up.

I don’t know how it really happened, but Mrs. B found out about Bink eating ham, and she actually did blow a gasket. She called the school and, I imagine, demanded that the principal tell her what Nazi sympathizer was feeding her son pork products, why the school was letting some kid single-handedly ruin the Jewish diorama (or whatever she called it), and if West Elementary would teach kids to remember the Holocaust by selling Anne Frank-furters at lunch.

The principal ended up calling my mom, and we had to go into his office for a meeting with Bink and Mrs. B. I got grilled on why I gave Bink the sandwich even after he told me he was Jewish and wasn’t supposed to have it.

“Because he doesn’t get Christmas.”

As a defense, it didn’t fly. It just led to some boring let’s-find-exciting-new-ways-to-celebrate-our-differences discussion that made both Mom and Mrs. B happy, especially when the principal made the two of us promise to be friends and swear that we would only eat the lunches that were packed for us. The part about us being friends held. The second part didn’t. Bink still takes my ham sandwiches whenever he gets the chance.

When Bink pulled into my driveway about two hours late, I wasn't in any hurry to leave. I had actually hoped he'd forgotten me.

Fat chance. Bink nailed the horn of his rusted-out, bumper-attached-with-baling-wire Volvo and I peeled my skinny butt off of the couch, slammed through the screen door, and slumped shotgun next to him.

"How was your summer?" Bink asked. He reeked of his dad's knockoff cologne—"If you like Polo, you'll love Lacrosse." Most people don't expect Neil Binkmeyer to be much of a talker. Hell, at first glance Bink looks like a jockstrap with a pulse. He's one of those guys who's like a puppy that hasn't grown into its body yet.

We hadn't talked much lately. He'd been too busy with football practice, carpooling his kid sisters, and, of course, Dana. It's weird, 'cuz there was a time when we were really close. My mom and Mrs. B were always saying if you wanted to find one of us, look for the other one. Sure, we'd argue about whether the Star Trek *Enterprise* could take out the *Death Star*. (Ummm, no...Prime Directive, anyone?) But at least we were talking. But this last year, it's been different. Mom says it's my fault. She says I'm jealous that Bink's spending more time with Dana than he is with me. So, she's right. What if I am jealous? Bink gets to go off and spend all his time with his girlfriend and my dating life's about as active as a comatose eighty year old on a respirator. Might as well pull the plug.

"My summer was pretty lame," I said. "I spent most of it beating off and playing *Grand Theft Auto*." I pretended like I was lying, but I really wasn't. I adjusted my seat so my knees wouldn't knock out my Adam's apple. Bink slipped the car into reverse and backed out.

"Actually, things suck," I continued. "There's this new rich kid on the soccer team. His dad got him on the team without a tryout. No one knows if he's any good. Then there's First. He spent the summer telling me how I was wasting my life, how I should get a job, try to make something of

myself... you know, his whole, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps, no-son-of-mine-is-going-to-sit-around-all-summer-eating-Ho-Hos-drinking-grape-Nehi-and-watching-reruns-of-bad-sixties-TV-shows routine. What are bootstraps anyhow?"

"Your dad's an ass." Bink rolled his eyes. We both grinned. His tongue was stained little-girl pink from the gum he always chews. I turned the radio down—the tuner was permanently stuck on WAIT, Crystal Lake's Home of Easy Listening—and watched Bink as he drove to Dana's house in Turnberry, the rich side of town.

He looked different—more college junior than high school senior. He'd bulked up a lot and he had a farmer's tan that almost hid the freckles on his arms and face. A few strands of glowing copper chest hair poked from the Velvet Underground T-shirt he wore under a loud-ass Hawaiian shirt. Christ, I should've known Dana's party was gonna be some kind of Don-Ho-Goes-Freaky-Tiki-Last-Days-of-Pompeii theme. I didn't care. I was with Bink. It was hard to think of him as the same guy I'd grown up with...kiddie birthday parties, fishing for minnows in the creek near his house, and catching lightning bugs until it was dark enough for games of kick-the-can. You aren't supposed to want to do it with someone who's practically your brother, right?

Part Two of the College Essay I Won't Be Writing 'Cuz It's Way Too Embarrassing:

I've been a walking hard-on for four years now. I can't help it. Sex is the only thing I think about even though I'm this total virgin dork and don't know jack about it. The guys at school talk about getting head and stuff. But I don't get how it's done. What do you do with your teeth?

I'm worried that I'm a total perv. The alarm clock'll go off in the morning and my dick'll be poking through the Y-front of my BVDs, frantic-like. I'll pull out last year's yearbook, flip to the two-page wrestling spread, and hump a load into the pillow between my legs. I even suck the spooge out of the pillowcase so Mom doesn't get any ideas. It's not like I'm the only guy who's ever tasted his own spunk, right?

It's even worse at school. I constantly wanna rub one off there. It doesn't have to be the locker-room-jocks-in-the-shower stuff. Odds are the guy sitting next to me in second period can get me burrowing out of my button fly. Or a guy with a fresh haircut—all those just-shaved hairs at the base of his neck. I'll see something like that and boom, I've gotta major case of wood poisoning.

Which sucks 'cuz there aren't many places at South you can actually make knuckle babies. The bathrooms are too busy, and besides, the stall doors don't lock. So that leaves the library stacks and daydreaming about the hockey team's "soggy biscuit" initiation, where all the guys jack off onto a slice of Wonder Bread and the last guy to shoot eats it.

Sorry, Toni Morrison; I promise I'll eventually read *The Bluest Eye* instead of tearing it apart page by page for come rags.

Honestly, I probably jerk off way more than other guys my age. It's so bad I don't even moan anymore. I could do it at a funeral and no one'd know.

"How was your summer?" I asked Bink.

"Crazy. Mom had me drag my sisters to swimming lessons, ballet classes, and to a bunch of other crap. My dad hounded me to retake the SATs for a better score. Football practice has been hell. The only cool thing was Dana went on the pill. Damn, Charlie, if she'd made me wait any longer, I swear I would've died."

"So?" I said, reaching into my pocket and pretending like my jeans'd been riding up. I adjusted my dick.

"It's weird. Doing it, I mean." Bink's voice cracked. He mopped a few beads of sweat from above his lip onto his forearm. "She says she likes it, but I don't know. I think I'm too fast. She hasn't said anything to me, but I think she told her friends. I'll walk past them and they'll huddle together and giggle, you know?"

He was being stupid so I laughed.

"Screw you, homo. What do you know about pussy?"

"Just that you're acting like one."

At first, Bink wasn't totally cool with me being into guys. Even now, when we both go to the john to piss, he'll use a stall. If I space out for too long, he'll sometimes think I'm checking him out and he'll jab me in the arm and tell me to knock it off. Bink's parents were cool from the start, though. They were the ones who insisted I stay with them when First kicked me out last summer after he found my jack-off stash under my mattress. That's not exactly fair. I was the one who left. I couldn't take it. And it wasn't 'cuz First went into some kind of you're-dead-to-me, no-son-of-mine rages that ended where, warmed only by my own bitter tears, I stood on our front porch, shaking my fist at First and vowed that I would never go straight or hungry again. No, I left 'cuz First went silent—the cold, vacuum of space kind—and that's what freaked the hell out of me.

See, when it comes to me, it's not like First's ever been able to keep his mouth shut. He's never said it—he hasn't had to—but he's never been exactly thrilled with the way I've turned out. In a way, I actually understand it a little. It's the name thing—Charles James Stewart the Second, not Charles James Stewart, Junior. It's like he sees me as the new version of himself—First 2.0—and each and every one of my failures and setbacks are a reflection on him. Seriously, how screwed up is it to give your son your own god damn name? It's like pinning your dreams to a ghost.

I think that's why things went radio silence between us after he found my visual aids, or as I like to think of them, my collection of photos of future ex-boyfriends: an Abercrombie and Fitch catalog, one of the Binkmeyer girls' teenybopper mags filled with pictures of shirtless guys with names like Jeremy and Zach, and a photo spread from one of First's old copies of *Hustler* featuring two blond guys at a barbecue with some chick they didn't seem interested in.

Last year, when this all happened, my grades in trigonometry had been pretty crappy, and when after-school tutoring didn't help matters, First decided I had to be on drugs. It was the only thing that made sense.

So one Friday night after getting a D on a trigonometry pop quiz (I'd messed up, again, on sines and cosines)—First went on a hunt for the source of my reefer madness.

When I got home from practice, the parental units weren't around. I walked to the fridge to grab a can of Coke or something, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw my whack-off material splayed out across a countertop. Out in the open like that, the magazines felt dirty. Obscene. The crime scene photos of a murder victim shoved at the suspect in custody. My heart stopped. For a second, I actually hoped—believed—that destroying the evidence would erase the crime. And then I heard First and Mom upstairs. I sneaked up the stairs and stood just outside their bedroom.

"I don't understand it," First said. He sounded tired, like his voice had given up on expressing emotion.

"There's nothing to understand," Mom said. "It is what it is."

"And what, I'm supposed to just accept it?" First's voice jumped into sharpness. "Am I supposed to pretend that this isn't going to make his life harder?"

"You don't have to pretend anything. You just have to be there for him. I'm not saying it's going to be easy. I've always wanted a daughter-in-law... grandchildren. This... it breaks my heart."

"You'll talk to him?"

"We both should."

"I can't. Not yet."

I felt like I was going to throw up, so I sat on the second stair from the top of the landing. Part of me wanted run into the room and say I was the same person I'd always been, that nothing had to change, that we could all go back to acting like that they didn't know the truth. But another part of me was pissed. Me being into guys, it wasn't about them. It was mine—a private part of

me—and their stupid asses had to go rooting around for it. It was their own fucking fault if they discovered shit they couldn't handle.

I was so pissed and scared and hurt, that I was crying into my hands and didn't know it.

"Charlie?" Mom said. She and First had left their bedroom, and she was leaning down to me, her arm shepherding my shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll figure this out. We'll figure everything out in time."

I looked to First for confirmation. His eyes were empty as sinkholes. That hurt. It really fucking hurt. Even today, I don't know if there's anything worse than a guy looking at his father and seeing nothing behind his eyes-- no glimmer, no spark, just muted disappointment.

The three of us went downstairs to the kitchen, where First started cleaning the mess of masturbatory aids from the counter. The *Hustler*, he dumped in the trash, the rest he left in a stack to the corner. I know now that she was trying to be patient and understanding and all, but Mom was giving me the third degree.

She wanted to know if this was a phase—*no*—if I was confused or experimenting—*no*—had someone, a friend, a relative, a teacher touched me—*hell no, don't be sick*—if I was having sex—*it's none of your business*—which apparently it was as long as I was living under her house—*I'm not having sex with anyone but myself, is that what you want to hear? Just leave it alone, okay?*—did I have a special friend—*like a retread?*—no, was I seeing anyone special to me—*no* (with a huge disgusted sigh)—was Bink gay—*no Mom, he's not gay, he's just Jewish*—did I want to see anyone for help—*I'm gay, not crazy, but if you ask me any more questions and I'll be both.*

The whole time she was drilling me—and yeah, I was kind of shitty to her—I kept looking at First. I was waiting for him to jump in and say something. I actually wanted him to yell at me. I really did. I wanted him to say what a disappointment I was and how this was yet another one of my illustrious screw-ups. He didn't, and that's what killed me. No lecture, no study guide, no after-

school tutoring, no new game plan, no extra practice, no him breathing down my neck and refusing to let up for even a god damn second—nothing was going to help. By saying nothing, it felt as if he was telling me that he was done with me. That's why I had to leave. I couldn't be around him when he made me feel dead at 16.

I spent the next few days, until Mom said that First had come around a little, with the Binkmeyers. Things were freaky, partly because Bink's parents are so much older than everyone else's and partly 'cuz it was three days of Binkmeyer family powwows about my dick and how I hoped to use it. Mrs. B is big on "dialogues," which are her solution for anything that can't be fixed by a "strongly worded" letter-to-the-editor, protest march, or boycott. She's this flower child gone to seed who's always lecturing Bink and me about how she'd been to Woodstock and marched for civil rights in Selma or Alabama or some place, I forget. Anyhow, Mrs. B droned on and on about all the homos in history who lived wonderful, normal lives. (*Oscar Wilde—no, they were awful to him. Prison, then dying broke in France. Well, Charlie, he's not a good example. But what a tomb! If you're ever in Paris, you really should see it*). And Mr. B, being a high school biology teacher—excuse me, "man of science"—kept saying that in the animal kingdom there are muff-diving sheep and circle-jerking chimpanzees.

Bink's parents tried acting cool, but every night Mrs. B'd sneak into the basement where I was sleeping and shine a flashlight on me. She wanted to make sure I hadn't gone all Sylvia Plath and stuffed my head in their gas clothes dryer. C'mon, give me some credit. I took World Lit with Ms. Puckelwartz and Shop with Mr. Sturng. I know it was an oven and I know I'd have to at least disconnect the gas line. *Yep, Mrs. B, still alive...go back to bed.*

One night, when I was jonesing to escape, I climbed out a basement storm window so I didn't have to hear any more history lessons (*Alan Turing—a brilliant mathematician who broke the Nazi's code... No, Charlie. Forget about him. They put him on hormones and he killed himself.*

Sad, really.) or about animal orgies (Male walrus sometimes bond and have sexual intercourse with each other. It's also been observed in bison, antelope, sage grouse, and...).

I walked out into the backyard. Bink was sitting Indian-style in the grass and staring up at a sky that was charcoal purple and littered with stars like debris from a riot. He brushed a hand along his hairy legs, shooing mosquitoes or gnats, and patted a spot of ground beside him. I sat—a good two feet from him—my legs stretched out, leaning back on my palms.

Bink said something, maybe “sorry,” but I wasn’t sure.

“Me, too.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” I said.

Bink fumbled in his pocket for the hard pack of Marlboro Reds and Zippo he’d lifted from his dad. I caught a whiff of kerosene and watched Bink study the end of his square before taking a long, slow drag.

“I had to get out of there.” His head bobbed back toward the house. “They’re making me nuts.”

“They already think I am,” I said. “Your mom’s convinced I’m going to off myself. Last night, I caught her taking the Clorox out of the laundry room. She claimed she spilled red wine on something. Tonight, she came downstairs and took the laces out of my shoes so I won’t hang myself. She didn’t even bother making up an excuse.”

“You wouldn’t, would you?”

“Nah. If I did, First’d probably just dig me out of my grave to lecture me on how a noose should have thirteen knots and mine only had eight or something.”

“You’re such a dork, Charlie.” We laughed. Bink leaned a hand against my shoulder, stood, took one last puff, and then flicked the butt into a neighbor’s yard. “I should go to bed. If my parents check on me, they might think I ran away ‘cause I got wigged that you’re a homo.”

Bink offered me his hand and pulled me to my feet. Things were as normal as they could get between us.

That is, until last night.