

# Party Line

Matthew Vollmer

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**T**HE YEAR: 1989. THE PLACE: MY GRANDPARENTS' house on Glenwood Road in Greenville, South Carolina. If you looked out their living room window, which was blinded by thick drapes each evening, or if you walked out the front door and past the glossy-leafed magnolias and past the barn and through the field to visit the big sycamore where my great-grandmother buried, in a matchbox, three of my three-year-old grandfather's fingers after my six-year-old great aunt brought down an axe on his hand, which he refused to remove from a chopping block, you might think you were in the middle of nowhere. You would have no reason to suspect that a vast suburbia teemed just beyond the distant evergreens: neighborhoods and restaurants and strip malls. Here, on these bucolic ten acres, there was a creek, a swimming pool, a pine forest, a wide field at whose edges magnolias and sycamores, and—inside an island of backyard foliage—a white sculpture of a Grecian boy holding a tiny penis, from whose tip a tiny piece of black rubber protruded, indicating that its function, other than to depict a boy taking a whiz, was to be the head of a fountain. This peeing boy's name, according to my aunt Mary Jane, was Phillip. I'd never asked what he was doing there. No other sculptures or yard art existed any-

where else on the property. It didn't necessarily seem like a joke or that Phillip was there to be laughed at. Never had I seen him hooked up to a hose. And so, the boy was eternally frozen in an about-to-pee pose, with only a weird piece of rubber tubing extending from his tiny pecker's head.

On this particular day, at this particular hour, I was the only one in my grandparents' house. My grandmother had likely gone to the store or to the beauty parlor where, each Friday, she got her hair done. My mother was down by the swimming pool with my sister and cousins, making sure they didn't run or crack their heads open doing flips off the diving board. My grandfather was at his dental office, or the doughnut shop, or wherever he was when he disappeared unexpectedly for hours at a time. The A/C was on. The hallway leading from the kitchen to the bedrooms thundered with the noise of powerful machinery churning out frigid air. It was a comforting sound. A whitewash for the ears. A song for the drowning out of a conscience.

I was wearing a Michael Jordan tank top, plaid shorts, and a pair of white high tops my best friend liked to refer to as "moonboots." My hair had recently been cut into a flat top style, which I'd forced upwards on all sides by using a brand of spray-on mousse.

I was fifteen years old.

I had the flat top because it was—or I imagined it was—the only kind of haircut a white basketball player should have; if your hair was long enough to flop around, you looked dorky. I saw myself primarily as a basketball player despite the fact that I didn't play on an actual team. My school—a Seventh-day Adventist boarding academy—didn't allow students to play competitive sports outside of intramurals, in part because the prophetess of our denomination had forbidden it, had cited competition as contributing to un-Christ-like tendencies in the church's youth, whose energies could be better employed in manners that would hasten the Second Coming.

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I was not—at least not in this particular moment—considering the Second Coming. I was barefoot and relishing, with my toes, the hallway's plush carpet. You couldn't get carpet like this anymore, or so my aunts and uncles often said, carpet this quality, carpet that—after decades—would look this great: the color of a glass of half white, half chocolate milk, and just as velvety. I passed the night-light—ever-burning, because my grandmother kept the doors to the bedrooms shut and doing so darkened the hall. I entered my grandparents' bedroom. There was athlete's foot ointment on my grandfather's dresser, a plastic tub of some kind or other of orthopedic gunk. Curtains printed with tropical flowers framed the windows. A large mirror atop a bureau on the other side of the room. I avoided it. I didn't want to know what I looked like.

It was one thing to snoop, another to copy the numbers from my grandfather's credit card onto a square of paper I'd torn from a cube-shaped pad beside the kitchen telephone. My grandfather would've given me money had I asked; he almost always folded a twenty into my hand at some point during my visit. But I didn't need money, *per se*. I needed a card. Or, more specifically, I needed a code to gain access to a party line I'd seen in a magazine at the local Waldenbooks, and whose 900 number I'd committed to memory. It wasn't right, the few things I had in mind to do, but I had set my mind to doing them, and now it was as if there was no other way, and so the certainty of what was to come felt preordained. It was, I told myself, as

if I had no other choice. I merely had to pass through the doing and get to the other side. There were things I needed to do, things I needed to hear. They were available but only if I was brave enough to unlock the right door. But first I needed access. I needed the keys.

My grandfather worked downtown in a fancy building with an elevator. I'd been there. I'd seen his waiting room, his dental chairs. In his spare time he blasted leaves from the driveway with a gas-powered blower, piloted a riding mower, and collected Zane Grey first editions sheathed in plastic. My grandfather was an amateur filmmaker, the kind of guy who'd set a camera in the middle of the road and then drive a 1949 Chrysler over the top of it to experiment with perspective. In 1975, he'd spliced together a film to make it look as if I, not yet then two, had walked myself to the old barn on the other side of the field—a ramshackle thing with a patchwork of rusted sheet metal for a roof and where a 1962 Chrysler had been parked, along with a riding mower, which in the film I appeared to turn on, back out of the barn, and drive around the field, at one point even cutting grass. "Look at him," my grandfather would always say, "he's cutting grass," as if I'm some kind of tractor-piloting prodigy—before returning the tractor to the barn, parking it, and running back to the camera.

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I didn't take the card. Didn't want to be caught with it. Didn't want to touch it. I was pretty sure nobody would ever dust it for prints, but I figured it was better to be safe than sorry. The card was gold. A MasterCard. I'd always liked the logo, the two orbs blending into one another, but couldn't have said why. It was one of an anthology of symbols—like the red 7UP dot and the McDonald's M—that seemed ubiquitous. It didn't occur to me that maybe the logo was nice because round things were nice, circles were nice, breasts were nice. Of this latter fact, however, I was acutely aware. For the last few years, I had been on the lookout for breasts. Breasts, I had discovered, could be anywhere. A Victoria's Secret catalog. A Sears Wish Book. A *National Geographic*. Even those catalogs they sent to seniors, the ones that sold canes and pillows and foot baths might—just might—and frequently did—offer at least one photo of an old biddy in a negligee. That silver-



haired cougar smiling serenely in her heavy-duty bra might be old—older, even, than my own mother—but who was I kidding? I'd have jumped those old bones in a heartbeat.

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There was a game I was tempted to play in my head during church, partly because I was often bored and partly because it was exactly the kind of game one shouldn't play during church. It was called, "What If So and So Tried to Seduce You, Would You Be Able to Say No?" What about Esther, the personalityless blob who resembled Barbara Bush? No thanks. What about Naomi, the wife of the retired pastor? She was old, but had gigantic boobs that squished against anybody she hugged. Rachel? She was my mom's age or slightly younger, but also pretty and endowed in a sort of poor man's Dolly Parton way. No question. But what, for the love of Pete, was I thinking? And how horrified would these extremely nice ladies be if they knew I was imagining them in various stages of undress, begging me to climb into their beds? And what would their husbands say? I assumed these ladies would no more betray their husbands than willingly chop off one of their fingers. And in church of all places! A place where people came to worship, to express their faith in God and to thank him for the plan of salvation and more importantly to confess silently their sins, not to *actually commit them*. But I couldn't help it. Or, that is, I liked to think I couldn't help it. Because if I was serious about being a better person, I probably *could* help it. If I prayed hard enough or achieved the proper focus, if I trained myself to combat the lust for flesh, to abstain from the thoughts of nakedness and sex and mouths and bras and titties, I'd be fine. My mother had once told me that she and her classmates in boarding school had not been allowed to wear sandals or any sort of shoe that revealed their bare feet, because toes made people think of babies and babies made people think of sex. It had seemed ridiculous, beyond absurd, but I understood it on some level because there wasn't much in the world that *didn't* make me think of sex. All it took was a woman. A woman with a mouth and eyes and arms and legs. A woman with breasts. A woman with legs she could open and close and wrap around

my waist. That was all I needed to know or see or recognize. My brain took care of the rest.

It wasn't, I knew, just because I was a sex-crazed teenager pumped full of hormones that were preparing me to procreate. I thought about church members in compromising sexual positions because church was a place where human beings went to elevate their minds, which was why, at least in part, I couldn't help but tempt myself to do otherwise. Acknowledging my tendency to think wrong thoughts would often make me remember the story of the first vision granted by God to the co-founder of our church, a 19<sup>th</sup> century prophetess (whose first book, incidentally, had catalogued the dangers of "self-abuse"). In this vision, the prophetess observed human beings as they traveled a narrow path of light toward heaven; if they looked down at their feet, they'd stumble and fall into an abyss, but if they kept their eyes on the serene face of Christ, who stood waiting at the end of the path, they could proceed safely forward. Whenever I heard that story I was convinced—in fact, I knew, without a doubt—that I would look down at my feet, that the temptation would be too great, and like Lot's wife, who disregarded an angel's warning not to look back at the flaming cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, only to be turned instantly into a pillar of salt, my demise would be swift and irreversible. It wasn't unlike the compulsion I sometimes felt during sermons to rip off my clothes and run up and down the main aisle of the church screaming obscenities, not because I *wanted* to do it but because it was the opposite of what I'd been taught to do and how to behave. And how weird was it, when you really thought hard about it, that everybody who went to church was so ridiculously agreeable, everybody dressed in their Sabbath best, which, assuming they were good Adventists, had been ironed the afternoon before and hung nicely in the closet, so as to minimize and reduce and avoid work on the seventh day, then entering the church and singing and praying and listening to sermons quietly and without ever speaking or interrupting, just sitting there on their pews, at the mercy of their pastor and whatever he felt inspired to say? Sometimes, the thought of it was enough to make me want to burst.

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Years before, my family had visited the home of a recently divorced man whose son was a good friend of mine. My sister and I had been playing hide and seek with this friend when I found them in a closet, joyfully browsing a knee-high stack of *Playboy* magazines. As the older child, I felt it was my duty to take charge of the situation. I offered a judgmental, "You guys shouldn't be looking at that," and shepherded them out of the room. Once I was sure that they'd hidden somewhere else in the house, I breathlessly returned to the stack, which seemed improbable not only because of its sheer volume but also its rather brazen placement at the foot of that guest room closet, within reach of anyone who happened to open the door. I had time only to flip through the top issue, eyes falling upon an image of a naked woman reclining upon a bearskin rug, but the stack of nudie mags had already worked its magic, imprinting upon me the possibility that magazines such as these could be hiding just beyond plain sight in the homes of other people I knew, people who went to church every week and passed the offering plate and performed the offertory and were otherwise upstanding citizens of the community, when actuality they were the secret owners of dirty magazines. And so, when I had occasion to be alone in a person's house that was not my own, I learned to race first thing to the master bedroom, where I lifted the mattress and peered underneath. I don't know if I'd yet seen *Raising Arizona*, and thus the scene where Nicolas Cage and Holly Hunter bring the stolen baby back to their trailer, and Cage is frantically cleaning up a room for the benefit of the baby, and finds a girly magazine that he pauses to flip through, then stuffs in between a mattress and box spring, but I understood that this was the conventional storage location for such periodicals. And, on one occasion, this method of searching had borne fruit.

It was the summer of 1987. I had a job babysitting two brothers, who were the sons of a dental technician and his wife, all of whom attended our church. The boys were wild. They ate raw onions like apples and ran their big wheels off the towering dirt embankments behind their house and giggled when inspecting their skinned arms, bloody gashes aglitter with dirt. Somehow, after initially locating the magazine, I returned to it—I'd had to create a diversion, or instigate a game

of hide-and-seek, or lead the boys downstairs to a series of unfinished rooms where a poorly tended Jacuzzi bubbled green froth, then I sprinted back to the drab and dusty master bedroom where I lifted the mattress, absconded with the magazine, and locked myself in a bathroom, flipping pages hurriedly, shocked and overwhelmed and pleased that the images within should meet and exceed my approval. My heart beat wildly. The boys bounded up the stairs, yelled my name, pounded on the door, jiggled the handle. I flipped on the fan to drown out the ripping of several pages from a pictorial—the word "pictorial" flooded me with a gleeful licentiousness—which was much easier than attempting to steal the entire magazine. Supposing the rip was clean, supposing I could snap the page from its tri-stapled spine without leaving any shark-fin-shaped flaps behind, who knew? The missing page might go forever unnoticed. And even if the dental technician *did* find out it was missing, what course of action could he take? I mean, I assumed the magazine was his, and that his wife must therefore surely know about it, unless he was the bed maker in the house, which seemed unlikely, as the bespectacled and hunched and low-drawling man who sneered at his own jokes did not seem like the kind of guy who would clean up after himself, which meant that when his wife made up the bed, her hand might brush against the magazine's glossy finish, and who could know then what might be going through her mind? It seemed impossible to think of his wife, who drove our carpool to Murphy Adventist School on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, six kids piling absurdly into a two door Subaru XT, as if auditioning for some kind of pathetic circus act, and whose rapid-fire, machine-gun-like giggle she released on what appeared to be every possible occasion, as someone who would endorse the viewing of *Penthouse* magazine. Unless of course she really didn't know, unless the dental tech always bought one *Penthouse* at a time and stowed it under the mattress, just far enough so that when she tucked the fitted bed sheets in she would not, in fact, brush her fingers against it, and because it was such an obvious hiding place for this kind of material and she'd had no reason to suspect that he owned such stuff, she'd never once checked.



In any case, they would probably not, upon noticing that a page was missing, embark upon a search to hunt down the perpetrator—such a scenario seemed like the most absurd notion of all: The couple would first have to admit that they owned this sort of magazine and that it was important enough for them to track the person who'd dared tear a page from its contents. It just couldn't happen. Unless it did. Unless the dental tech was overly protective of his secret stashes, and would go to great lengths to figure out who had wronged him. What if, upon realizing that page 52, in which one nude woman dipped a supple breast into the awaiting and sensuously lip-glossed mouth of another, had vanished, he might yank a belt from his walk-in closet and go berserk on his boys, whipping them in a frenzy of paternal vengeance? "I told ya'll to stay out of my porn," he might yell, or "Tell me where it is, where's the rest of my *Penthouse*?" I could imagine it, sure, but it was a risk I was willing to take, so I folded the page into quarters and slid it into the pocket of my jeans, hoping but certainly not praying, because God would not approve of naked women or taking something that didn't belong to me, even if it was considered smut and therefore shouldn't be in the possession of the person who owned it in the first place—that the page would not accidentally slide out before I could stow it safely, or semi-safely between the pages of a random *Sports Illustrated* in my bedroom, because of all the things that my mother might open up and look at, not that she ever took the time to browse the books in my bedroom bookcase, but still, the last would be any of the *Sports Illustrated* magazines I stored on a shelf in my closet, where the 1986 swimsuit issue my father had tried to hide had ended up and remained unmolested for over a year, though I certainly wouldn't keep this page for that long. In fact, I was already planning my repentance, even though I knew that a sin that had been planned and that one assumed would be forgiven was the trickiest one to atone for, since how in the world could a sin you planned to atone for later be truly aggrieved? How could a person truly feel sorry for something he had in fact longed to do? One's heart, I knew, had to feel the conviction of the Holy Spirit. And I did feel remorseful. Or, at some point, I would. But before remorse: anticipation. And then: pleasure. And then:

regret and shame and disgust. I would even wrap up the stolen page in a wad of paper towels or some other forgettable packaging so as to make a kind of counterfeit garbage to covertly place at the bottom of my trash basket—a yellow woven receptacle that it was my job to empty, with the rest of the family's refuse—into a large bag which I'd take to the bins outside once a week. But then a day would go by and the storms of regret and shame—which reminded me that, in fact, I was not totally lost, had in all likelihood not committed the unpardonable sin, which was a sin that finally separated one forever from God, a sin that had been indulged in so frequently and unrepentantly that the indulger could no longer hear the pleading voice of the Holy Spirit—would dissolve, and the clear and burning flames of desire would spring up, and I would think to myself, one last time, one last viewing of the forbidden picture, and so I'd retrieve it from the trash, unfold it, and smooth it out, where, despite its fissured surface the image still retained enough of its lurid glory that I returned with haste to the bathroom, and thus the cycle would begin again.

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I walked through the kitchen and down the stairs to the guest bedroom where I now preferred to stay, even if it was discomfiting to sleep there due to the vast open spaces of darkness outside the bedroom, which could be made slightly more hospitable if I kept the light burning in the bathroom just around the corner. Part of why I'd always loved my grandparents' house was how predictable it was, how it presented the illusion of perpetual sameness. There were always Ritz Crackers and Raisin Bran and Nilla Wafers in the cupboard. There was always a loaf of Pepperidge Farm Sourdough in the bread drawer. One drank milk out of the same heavy glass tumblers or green beveled goblets. There were Cokes in the basement fridge and parlor-sized tubs of Baskin Robbins French Vanilla in the freezer. In the basement shower, the same plastic bottle of Suave shampoo, with a red price tag from Rite Aid, and a bar of soap blotted orange thanks to the rusty cradle in which it sat. In the guest bedroom, bookcases were filled with novels about cowboys and ladies who required rescue. In a shelf of the guest bedroom, a Coke bottle emblazoned with the year 1973



and the Clemson Tiger paw-print; a Confederate flag in a drawer, which I figured must have belonged to my uncle Johnny, a stockbroker and armchair Civil War historian who had once claimed this room as his own. There were old movie posters on the walls depicting scenes of gun-pointing cowboys clutching distressed young women in tight plaid blouses. A Zenith TV that didn't get as many channels as the one upstairs but which I watched late at night, as it was the only opportunity I'd ever had to sleep in a room with a TV.

I'd been attending boarding academy for exactly one year. I loved it. I had tons of friends. I was as popular as a rising sophomore could be—not that I was universally admired or liked. Plenty of seniors, including my hall monitor—a deep-voiced and redheaded gymnast with the body of a well-built twenty-five-year-old, who I sometimes provoked for fun during study hall and ended up getting sat on or wrestled to the ground and then asked to perform fifty sit-ups and fifty push-ups—liked to put me in my place or remind me that there were penalties and consequences for mouthing off, like sometimes you got wedged so hard that you ended up with the waistband of your underwear ripped out and strung around your neck. Still, I had friends and remained optimistic that, maybe, someday, I might even score a girlfriend. So what if the crush on Kim H. hadn't borne fruit. So what if Cathy W.—a girl that'd showed up second semester and basically selected me as her boyfriend—had dumped me before we'd even gotten to first base, preferring to hook up with a skinny black dude named Byars who sported a Pee-Wee haircut and a glass eye and, according to Cathy, the prettiest penis she'd ever seen, and which she had ostensibly taken into her mouth in the gymnasium ball room when nobody else was there. So what if Eileen hadn't left her college-aged boyfriend for me; I'd still taken her to the Christmas banquet, where I'd made her laugh hysterically on the bus ride home. I had a wallet full of Olan Mills pictures upon which my friends who were girls—pretty girls—had written personalized messages. I hadn't yet kissed any of them, but I was, so I imagined—so I hoped—on the verge.

I hadn't exactly bloomed spiritually. I knew that. It wasn't for lack of wanting. Or maybe it was. All the super spiritual guys—the ones who refused to change

out of their church clothes on Sabbath afternoons and ran for class pastor and volunteered to lead song service and prayer—struck me as humorless dorks. Nice guys, I guessed, who hung out with bland-looking girls. I preferred the kids who, because they were rambunctious, had gained the kind of popularity that made sense to me. Popularity wasn't superficial, at least not in my head. It was about who was funny, about who didn't take themselves seriously, or who dressed well, or interestingly, or had bangs that fell into their eyes, or who listened to cool music, or skated, or free-styled, or knew how to improvise effectively during pickup basketball games: who could rise up, stay strong, improvise, and take the ball to the hole.

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The phone was the shape of a rotary—a squat fat square that angled upwards toward its cradle—but instead of a dial it had a keypad, thus making it easier to enter the numbers.

I entered the numbers.

I waited.

A ring sounded.

Then a click.

A voice welcomed me.

It asked me to enter a credit card number. I entered the number. I did not need to say my grandfather's name. For that, I was thankful.

I knew about credit card bills. That is, I knew that anything charged to the card would appear on a piece of paper in the mail. I didn't know what the charge would be listed as or if my grandfather would see 1-900 and know immediately what those first four digits would lead to. I didn't know if he would note the date, remember that I'd visited, and blame me. It wasn't likely but it was possible—and I wouldn't have been surprised to learn—that my grandfather called such numbers on occasion. Then again, even though my grandfather liked pretty women, he wouldn't have the patience to sit and chat about what he might do—or want to have done—on the phone. He'd cut to the chase.

Unlike the heroes of the radio dramas that my parents played during long car trips, I had not heard the sly voice of a tempting fallen angel, nor had I heard the reprimanding baritone of my guardian good one, like the boy from the story "Phillip's Great Adventure,"



where a boy is sweeping in a bank after hours and notices that the bank vault is open. His bad angel, who sounds like a small-time crook phoning into his brain from a pay phone, says, "Go ahead, take a look inside," and the boy does; and inside, there's a door there—and I imagined as I always did the Wachovia Bank where my family had accounts and the posts and desks where female tellers, with jewelry and makeup and long painted or pressed-on nails handed out disc-shaped suckers sealed in squares of easy-tear plastic—and the kid goes inside and is tempted by the evil angel who says, "Look at all that dough." But then the admonishing good angel says, "Don't do it, Phillip, that money doesn't belong to you," and Phillip doesn't do it and at the end it turns out that Phillip was being watched by a security camera the whole time, just like human beings are watched by their Recording Angels in heaven, and the bank's owner had left the door to the vault open on purpose as a test, which Phillip had aced.

I wasn't passing any tests.

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The voice on the other end of the phone was a bit nasally. High-pitched. A woman. "Anybody there?"

I said nothing.

"Hello?"

"Hi," said a male voice.

It was a party line. Like the one my dad listened to on the radio. Anybody could call in with things they wanted to sell, things they wanted. People could just call to call, to chat, to say hello—and some did. Or you could just listen.

The man and woman exchanged pleasantries. The man said he had a big cock. He said it was hard. She said she liked hard cocks because they made her wet. She wanted the man to talk more about this cock and what he would do with it. The man obliged.

For all the sex talk, I wasn't aroused. Not really. I hadn't known exactly what to expect, except that I might like to participate. But what I'd imagined as salacious and titillating sounded rehearsed, as if the participants were practicing parts of a script to which I had no access. Beyond that, the voices failed to suggest the kind of adults whose copulation I'd have been interested in bearing witness to. In my head, I pictured a

skinny blond grandma bent over, a slovenly dude with a beer gut and beard unbuckling his jeans.

A click sounded. Someone on another line had picked up. "Matthew? Is that you?"

I knew that voice.

The voice said my name.

I hung up.

It was my mother.

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A few minutes later she appeared in the doorway, her jaw clenched, fists on her hips. I was sure that she'd heard the other woman and man talking about the man's cock.

"Were you just on the phone?" she said.

"No."

"I heard somebody talking," she said. "Don't lie."

My face flushed. "Okay," I said. "It was me."

"Who was on the other line?"

"Nobody. A friend. From school."

"I told you that you were not to make any phone calls. Your grandparents have to pay for that. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

If my mother knew I was lying, she didn't say. And she never brought it up again. Maybe—probably—she didn't want to know for sure, didn't want to admit to herself what had actually happened. Of course, the last person who wanted to find out for sure was me.

This wasn't the first time I'd been caught doing something I shouldn't in this particular room. Once, on a Saturday, my father had found me watching TV—specifically a Tar Heel basketball game—with the volume down, and because television of any kind was verboten during the sacred hours between Friday sundown and Saturday sundown and because I was old enough to know better but had chosen the wrong thing, he'd expressed his disappointment and suggested that maybe I needed to make an appointment with our pastor to have a chat—a suggestion that I was grateful he never followed up with. On another occasion when my family was visiting and I thought everyone else was asleep, I'd begun to arrange on the carpet a series of photographs—all of which featured beautiful women in various stages of undress, and many of which I had torn out of books and magazines like

*Life: 50 Years in Pictures*, a volume which happened to live in this very house—when the door knob turned; I glanced up in horror to see my father standing above me. He took stock of what he saw, and then delivered an impromptu lecture about the dangers of indulging one's desire to see naked flesh: It was a hunger, he explained, that could never be satiated. The more you looked, the more you wanted to see.

On that particular night, he didn't mention anything about the "unpardonable" sin. He didn't need to. It was one thing to make a mistake—human beings were imperfect creatures and their righteousness as filthy rags. But it was something else altogether to intentionally do something wrong: This eroded one's conscience to the point where a person no longer felt the rebuke of the Holy Spirit. And without remorse, there was no pardon and no salvation. I imagined my mother at the End of Time, after Jesus had ridden to earth on a giant cloud of angels to wake the dead and gather the redeemed and ferry them all to heaven. Not everyone would make it. My father had said before that God would never let anyone into heaven who wouldn't be happy there. Every person on earth had their own heavenly Recording Angel who transcribed every thought, every action. Each human would have to answer for the lives they had led, everything that they had thought and done. Had I repented? Or would I be one of the lost, the unredeemed, who would perish in the final heavenly flames? It was my understanding that the redeemed would be able to view the lives of the lost, so as to understand why so-and-so didn't make it, and for some reason, perhaps because I'd seen a drawing in a *Revelation Seminar* pamphlet illustrating this very scene, I imagined a throng of robed beings with jeweled crowns on their heads watching a planet-sized screen suspended in space, where the unrepentant replayed their transgressions. So even if my mother believed my lie, perhaps someday she would discover what I had done on this fateful day and what I had done on other days. She would maybe cover her eyes to keep from others seeing her openly weep to see her own flesh and blood unrepentantly beating his meat. I would, I knew, need to say a good prayer in order to avoid this future scenario. I would promise to be better. I would surrender my heart and conscience.

I would keep my eyes on the face of Christ. On either side of the path I traveled, a great abyss awaited. And behind me a city on fire, whose flames I dared not see, lest I too be turned to a pillar of salt. 