I was a creepy kid. Or at least that’s what I’m told. Physically, the odds were already stacked a bit against me. I was (and still am) cross-eyed, and apparently, my head was alarmingly large — so large that the ophthalmologist my parents took me to about my crossed eyes suggested that I be taken immediately to a physician to be examined for a brain tumor. I did not (and don’t believe I have) a brain tumor. But, in my child version, something was still… amiss.

Other parents wouldn’t let their children play with me. I’m not entirely sure why. The large head and odd eyes may have been concerning. But also, my mother was reading works by Dr. Spock and other child psychologists, works that, in the late ’60s and early ’70s, advised against corporally punishing children and suggested other modes of less intrusive and more nurturing forms of correction and discipline. Other children staying away might have been their parents’ way of showing disapproval for how my mother was raising me, as well as my first sister, born four years after me.

But beyond the physical oddities and potential parental skepticism, I suspect I was (as I am still) just strange. I remember lots of solitary games. When mother would take me to the store on a weekly shopping trip, I’d apparently beg and beg, howling in sore need, for spools of thread. Mother had a sewing machine and I recall sitting at it for hours, stitching lines of thread into
material over and over. Those spools of thread were also often used as power lines for electrical poles made of Tinker Toys that would span Fischer Price and wooden block cities. To this day, I don’t know why I’m not an architect, as some of my fondest memories of childhood are of these immense cities that I would build — built landscapes with Little Golden Books as roofs and Hot Wheels rubber tracks as elevated freeways — that would cover the living room floor. Legos and then an Erector Set steadily helped sophisticate my feats of miniature civil engineering. I am, instead, a teacher.

Perhaps like many others, I also remember a lot of late childhood tie-up games. I must’ve been influenced by the Adam West Batman because the neighbor kid and I would use bed sheets as capes and slide our tighty-whities over our pants and tie each other up, cackling with delight as we taunted each other to escape our bonds before the bomb went off and destroyed everything. The neighborhood kids and I spent a lot of time tying up the preacher’s kid — he seemed to like it; I know I did. And my sister and I, me upon the cusp of puberty, would don those tighty-whities and play superheroes. I’d be captured and tortured, the hero struggling in jump rope bonds while instructing my sister to belt me harder to make me reveal the secrets required to reign destruction down on us all. BAM! KerPOW!

From what I’ve heard, though, the ropes and thread had more nefarious uses as well. I’m told I made trip wires, catching my parents unawares. My parents would hear gleeful laughs coming from around the corner. And then, in a more intensely apocryphal story, as my sister lay in her crib, I supposedly tied a noose around her neck, the other end of the thread attached to a doorknob that I would open and close, listening to her choke. I have no memories of these events. I remember the cities, building and, of course, launching block bombs when my mother told me I had to clean up the mess. But the trip wires and choking are stories told to me, even about me. Apparently, I was a creepy kid.
And, of course, I remember the tie-up games. The first time I ever achieved orgasm I had tied myself up. I must’ve been 11 or 12, in middle school, alone in my room in the afternoon, still in my khaki schoolboy uniform, watching cartoons (early anime, I think, *Battle of the Planets*), my cheap leather belts becoming my bonds as I lay face down, struggling, wriggling, rubbing, and oh shit what was that? I recall a pleasant and unsettling shiver, some emanating heat, a throb. I don’t remember any fluid. But I do remember thinking that maybe I shouldn’t do this again. At least until tomorrow. And for a decade I masturbated primarily through frottage, both with and without self-bondage.

Yes, I’m something of a sadomasochist, though now, approaching 50 and the steady leaching of testosterone from my body, I’m less propelled to play or fantasize such games. Still, in my day, I’ve been a pretty twisted fucker, if largely in my own mind. The Adam West *Batman* certainly made an impression on my childhood polymorphous perversity. The satiny capes and shiny trunks have become fetish objects for me. And the regularity with which the duo—a seemingly savvy older man and his youthful and admiring sidekick—found themselves in precarious bondage has influenced many a sexual narrative I’ve scripted and run in the porno theater of my mind, and occasionally acted out. As a kid, board games became opportunities for perverse little bets. Risk was a perpetual favorite, and it seemed only appropriate that the loser would somehow be subject to the whims of the world-conquering victor. Light bondage and even spankings augmented many afternoon gaming sessions. Such mildly erotic play, never resulting in actual full-on sexual contact, persisted into early adulthood. I would stay up late into the night, playing games with friends, subjecting each other to various humiliations in the name of motivating better game play. I can make no comment about my friends’ enjoyment, but I’ve often been surprised by what a straight guy will consent to do, as long as you don’t make him feel too self-conscious about it.
And like many kids, I had my own imaginary friends, Mont and Dant. I don’t remember them well, but their names have stuck with me for over four decades. I don’t recall what we would do, though I think they liked thread too. I was well into my 20s when someone pointed out, perhaps my ex-wife who is a therapist, that Mont and Dant are clearly stand-ins for Mom and Dad. Well duh. But why did I need parental stand-ins? My mother was raising us as a stay-at-home mom; Dad worked for the local power company, but he was generally home in the evenings. I remember them being around, surely. What do I remember?

My parents bought me all sorts of sport gear, and I have vague recollections of suiting up in pads, jersey, and helmet, carrying a football outside while kids ran away in horror. I likely exaggerate here. I mean, the uniform I remember, and a scattering of bodies. But were they fleeing? I’m not sure. That part of the narrative gets mixed up between what I remember and what I’ve been told.

Indeed, I think my mother sometimes enjoys embellishing my past. She has told me that I once bit a young girl. I think I was in kindergarten. She had apparently spit on me. When mother told me this story a couple of years ago, a story of which I have absolutely no memory, my body convulsed a laugh of triumph out of me. The little bitch, she deserved to be bit. What I remember, though, is a faint memory of a smiling girl with pigtails, flower spotted cotton dress. Was she the one hurling her spit at me?

My mother is also the one who told me about how men and women have vaginally penetrative sex, after I’d seen something on television that sparked my curiosity — some pristine sexual health cartoon typical of the ’70s. I was 12, I think. I remember some slight discomfort at the thought, more a distaste, a souring in the mouth. The way she told it, however, I was puking into the garbage can. I overheard her tell such a tale to one of the parents who’d come to pick up her child from the nursery my mother operated on the first floor of our home (more on this nursery
later). Why would she say such a thing? I didn’t puke. If anything, my outward demeanor was — I’m sure — somewhat nonchalant as I trudged back up the stairs to tie myself up and rub out an orgasm. But I was perplexed by her lie. Was she trying to normalize me? Was I supposed to feel that sex was somehow disgusting? I thought it — sex — certainly strange. But I wouldn’t go so far as to say that what she described grossed me out. Could she have read my apparent sanguinity as a kind of creepiness? Perhaps I came across as too worldly, too knowing, and needed, at least for outward appearances, some kind of normalizing gesture. But is disgust at sex normal? Weirdly, in my mind such a story gets caught up with another incident, sitting across from some newly met gay male friends; we’re in our 30s and talking, inevitably, about sexual practices, and I mention that I’d been married and had actually enjoyed vaginally penetrative sex with my wife, and some of the guys’ lips twisted in shock and horror. Ewww. How could you stand that? Disgusting! I guess that, even among some gays, I’m capable of creeping people out.

To this day, my mother will pick on me, or on the strange kid I once was. (I think she’s a bit more cautious around the strange adult I’ve become.) I will still hear stories of how I was a mean kid. I used to be sweet. But the uniform of normal boyhood never quite fit. As she put it once, in a moment of kindness, I was trying to figure myself out. And she’s probably right.

Oh, there were many signs that I was… unique, in need of figuring out. People were reading those signs all around me. In a mall in Biloxi, I bought a book and plopped down a five-dollar bill, apparently with some flourish and aplomb. This was the first time I was buying a book on my own as a kid. My mother, watching in horror from the sidelines, later informed me that I’d totally embarrassed the young female clerk. I shouldn’t be so “dramatic.” Such early lessons in the embarrassing spectacle of my gender nonconformity were re-enforced throughout my youth, not just in the torture chambers of my high school gym, my lack of coordination constantly calling me out as less
than manly, but also in well-meaning older folk, such as a father whose kids I babysat who noticed I was reading a book by Truman Capote and wondered if I was “trying to tell us something.”

Besides my architectural fantasies, various light bondage, and some unfortunate concoctions mixed together from a chemistry set, my most common form of childhood entertainment revolved around playing school. I can’t remember the first time that I played school, but I think I did so until I was at least 14, drafting the kids in the neighborhood and my mother’s nursery into my schoolrooms. I was always the teacher. I would concoct multi-day curricula, detailed lesson plans, quizzes and examinations for which I used carbon paper to reproduce. The delicious sticky stink of purple ink is still something of a turn on. You used to be able to buy remaindered textbooks at what we called “drug stores,” the forebears of Walgreen’s and CVS. I quivered with anticipation on trips to such stores, hunting for the cache of $1 books. Subject and grade level were irrelevant. I collected scores of these textbooks and would use them to compose curricula in math, reading, geography. Then back at the house, my sister and her friends would be subject to my tutelage. I took the play teaching quite seriously, but I also loved the paraphernalia of instruction. Out of old boxes and Tinker Toys, I made large flip charts to reveal the mysteries of sentence diagramming. I used my old Erector Set to try to make a chalk holder, one of those delightful contraptions that a teacher could fill with a stick of chalk while keeping her hands clean from the dusty substance. I fucking loved chalkboards. We had a large one in the nursery, and I spent many days just drawing on it. The swipe of an eraser across the black surface seemed miraculous, especially if it was soundless. Everything clear. Nothing more to see here.

Once, an early memory, I was playing school in a set of large refrigerator boxes, my makeshift schoolrooms. I’d dragooned a neighbor boy, a kid with a delightful British accent, into playing my pupil. I was probably 9 or so, he 7, and we’d already had our superhero fantasy play, me stuffing my football jersey into my
briefs pulled over my pajama bottoms to protect the household from the Joker. The kid seemed eager for anything. But for some reason, my mother came to pull him out of the box, yelling at me that she had already warned me not to play school with this boy. I still feel her stinging slap, less on my upper arm and more on my mind. I wasn’t sure what was wrong. We were just playing. I don’t recall anything strange. Unless playing school itself constituted something untoward.

Surely in time the untoward would emerge. One of the rituals of schooling I enjoyed most was meting out punishment. I was always sending one of my students to the corner. And eventually a ruler was randomly and regularly applied to the buttocks of a variety of neighborhood kids. I wouldn’t hit my sister, though. If she misbehaved, I made her read passages from the Bible in detention. But her male friend would get a stern spanking. Again, no one seemed to mind, although we all knew to keep such play to ourselves, behind the closed doors of our rooms.

I’m surprised that so much of my childhood play focused on school, though maybe not surprised that I always insisted on playing the teacher. I would let other kids spank me, but not as nearly as often as I wielded the rod of correction. And to be fair, this was hardly just all pre-pube kink play. Real scholastic activity occurred. I somehow loved teaching, with the accompanying design of lessons, pedagogical activities, and assessments, which suggests I somehow loved learning. But my experiences with *actual* school weren’t as playful. Indeed, *real* school was something of a traumatic space for me.

I barely remember kindergarten, and nothing particularly tragic. Loud and noisy rooms, naptime, making various craft objects. But first grade was a shitshow. We’d moved to a new house in Metairie, a large suburban community outside New Orleans, and the school, a public school, Alice Burney, was just a block from my parents’ home, which I could see from the playground. I spent many recess periods crying at the chain-linked fence,
wailing to go home. It seems that one teacher would be set to supervise hundreds of kids as they roamed the playground in their feral ways, so I barely recall catching that teacher’s notice, though I remember my mother coming up to the fence and trying to figure out why I was so distressed.

Part of it was her fault, though not maliciously so. My mother had apparently enrolled me a bit late and so I couldn’t be placed into one room with one teacher who could guide her class throughout the day. Instead, I had to roam from class to class, learning reading in one room, math in another, etc., etc. In retrospect, none of this makes sense to me, and I can’t imagine that anyone thought this was a good accommodation. It meant, in effect, that I never got to know any set of kids particularly well, shuttled as I was from space to space. Beyond my large-headedness, I was spatially marked as the odd one out, the freak, an outsider.

So, I started acting out. In one room, I don’t remember the subject but it was clearly some art-oriented activity, I started eating paper. We were making bones to arrange into skeletons for a Halloween project, and, instead of making my ghoul, I took to ingesting my art supplies. I’m sure I freaked the teacher out. This behavior did not help to alleviate the other kids’ — or the teachers’ — sense that I was a budding creep.

But the largest part of my distress I lay at the feet of Ms. W. (I actually remember her name to this day, even if I won’t use it here.) She taught reading, and I clearly vexed her. I’m not entirely sure why. One event — I must have been all of six years old — is emblazoned on my mind. On the first day of class, all of our school supplies, which our parents had to buy and send us to school with on the first day, were taken from us and put into communal piles, to be used socialistically throughout the school year. So, one day, when we were assigned a coloring activity, a fellow student was given the coffee can of crayons and instructed to provide us each with a set of colors. This little girl didn’t care for
me, for what reason I do not know. I suspect my large head and tendency to eat paper didn’t help, so, when she came to my desk she only gave me black and orange crayons. I started to protest, she pulled away, and I stood up to assert my right to additional colors beyond black and orange. Ms. W. was furious and sent me to the corner. Again, I tried to protest, but she was having none of it. I was clearly in the wrong.

I don’t remember all the ways in which I communicated my displeasure and creeping sense of injustice at the world. I was only a child after all; my resources for revenge were limited, and I’d already tried biting, but one sticks out. During lunch, as Ms. W. sat at the head of a freakishly long table while all of her charges wolfed down their food, I calmly left my place, walked up to her, and, as she sat there wondering what the hell I wanted, quietly pissed my pants. She just shook her head in disgust. I had won. Even today, as I write this, I chuckle with the memory of victory.

This was my one and only year at Alice Burney. My parents then moved us from the suburbs to the country, a river town called St. Rose about an hour outside the city, where they bought a condominium and I was enrolled in a Catholic school, St. Charles Borromeo, and my parents sent me to a child psychologist, who promptly told them that the problem was that I was too intelligent, under-stimulated, and that they would have to adapt to my needs. I don’t think they were impressed by this. But neither had a college education, and while both were quite intelligent, they didn’t have many options, strategies, and resources for dealing with a strange child. Sending me to Catholic schools — smaller classes, better teachers — was a way to help provide better education than they had had. It was also mildly racist. Throughout my entire Catholic education — attending from second grade through high school — I knew perhaps three black kids. Three. In an area with a very large African-American population. My parents just didn’t want us hanging around the blacks. So, addressing my creepiness by sending me to Catholic schools could also scratch a racist itch.
Am I being harsh? Perhaps. But my memories of schooling, even in — and perhaps especially in — the Catholic schools would come to make the one-year at Alice Burney actually seem educational. For sure, I learned a lot from the Catholics, who apparently did have a more rigorous curriculum of book learning. But their schools were also the site of intense abuse and bullying for me — and not just at the hands of other students. So, in retrospect, the acting out I experimented with at Alice Burney — an acting out that seems now like justifiable protest — was slowly beaten out of me, if not always physically then most definitely psychically.

Part of my initial difficulty in these schools might have arisen out of the fact that I wasn’t Catholic. As a Cajun growing up in southwest Louisiana, my mother was raised Catholic, but upon getting married to my religiously unaffiliated father by the justice of the peace, her priest began refusing her the sacraments. (Because that’s how their god rolls.) So, while we were surrounded by Catholics and were growing up in a very Catholic-influenced culture — Mardi Gras being an uber-Catholic kind of event, a hedonic blowout before forty days of self-depriving Lent in anticipation of the celebration of the execution and resurrection of Christ — we as a family had opted out of that particular religion. (In time, we would become Southern Baptists, initiating its own particular trajectory of terror. More on this later.) So, all of my friends and pretty much all of my classmates were learning and participating in rituals that explicitly excluded me. Actually, I learned the rituals; I just couldn’t take part in their official practice. We learned about the terrors of the confessional and the mysteries of the Eucharist, and kids would line up at the large wooden boxes to give confessing a go and then practice taking unconsecrated Eucharist, either delicately extending the tongue or piously holding up clean hands. I’d sit and watch, having been quizzed on my knowledge of the rituals but denied their experience. To be fair, I was allowed to go talk to the priests in a kind of confession, but it was clear to me — and to all others — that I
was separate, different, perhaps even damned. Good job, educators!

My second through sixth grades passed in this state of semi-spiritual exile. Many times, at recess, I would circumnavigate a large oak tree, circling it again and again for the entire hour, stepping carefully over its complex and exposed root system, imagining them as highways around a large city, the Tinker Toys and wooden blocks of my earlier childhood projected onto this living entity. No teacher came up to me to inquire, and most students just left me alone. I wasn’t engaging others much, and I mostly sat quietly in class, outcast but not troubling anyone, while other kids would coyly bop up to the priest prowling the play yard, asking “Father, may I have some candy?” which he’d then dole out of his trouser pockets. Perhaps I was already learning the value of trying to keep out of sight, lest my protests of black and orange crayons send me once again to the corner. Perhaps I was already just putting myself in the corner automatically, before enduring the humiliation of being told to go there. After all, some of the nuns had little paddles and while I didn’t mind spanking other kids I most certainly didn’t want to be on the receiving end of a sex-deprived menopausal woman’s wrath. (I’m obviously glossing with my middle-aged sense of things, but still…)

For middle school (seventh and eighth grades) we moved and I had to switch schools again, and then again go to a separate parochial high school. Entering middle school coincided with the onset of puberty, and the predatory nature of childhood assumed a whole new set of chemically induced imperatives. All of a sudden, my non-Catholic, vaguely Aspergery, non-engaging, solitude-seeking, keeping-under-the-radar nerdiness had a name. Faggot. It actually had several names, including gay, homo, and queer, but fag and faggot quickly became my new names. The sexualizing of childhood predation isn’t surprising. We were all feeling the flux and fumbling throbs of flesh, although I don’t know how many of my fellow classmates were ty-
ing themselves up as a prelude to rubbing one off. But I suspect a few were. I distinctly remember one kid, a gangly dark-skinned boy with a shock of kinky hair who grabbed the teacher’s ruler once and started whaling on his own ass before the befuddled matron could grab it away from him. I had neither the nerve nor the wherewithal to invite him over to play after school, though I wish I had.

Instead I was too busy dodging the verbal attacks of my classmates, coming from both boys and girls, and trying to make myself small and unnoticeable. Fortunately, though, I was a tall kid, and I think my height served as a kind of frontline deterrent for physical assault. I was rarely physically attacked, but that may be because my fellow students just weren’t paying enough attention. I was clearly inept at PE, and I was always chosen last when captains were brutally instructed to divvy us up into teams, so anyone could’ve seen that I wasn’t capable of defending a corporeal assault. I couldn’t do pushups. I couldn’t do pull-ups. I was always last in a race.

But I was also, at the time, a tattle-tale. Once I was shoved roughly and tripped down part of a flight of stairs. I told my parents who exhorted me to fight back, to defend myself. I responded by saying that Christ instructs us to turn the other cheek. Their mouths hung open.

Certainly, I had some friends, and I suppose in some ways my childhood was marked by scrapes not too uncharacteristic of others’. I didn’t play with fire, but I did steal the neighbors’ mail once. He was so fucking pissed. I also abused a cat once, and feel bad about it to this day. Nothing terrible really. I just picked it up and flung it around. It wasn’t hurt though probably scared to death, maybe traumatized by the sight of children from then on. I did befriend some fellow sufferers, like a Russian kid whose parents had defected from the USSR, another outsider, someone everyone else picked on too. We huddled together, pretending we had things in common. I suppose we did. But years lat-
er — and I mean like three decades — I found him online, living just up the road about an hour away, suggested we have dinner, and it was a total disaster. He’d become a Republican, fairly conservative, and his wife scowled at me throughout the dinner; I kept wondering if she was wondering what this faggot wanted with her husband, and oh my god why didn’t you tell me you had a gay friend when you were younger. He barely remembered me, though. Well, he did, but he’d moved on to other friends after going to a different high school, his adolescence filled with the usual and the normal, leaving a safe and secure taste in his mouth as he lifted another bit of expensive steak to his pristine teeth. I asked after his younger sister, and the wife erupted: Am I going to contact her out of the blue too? What, really, do you want? She didn’t ask that last part, but she was clearly thinking it. I could feel it. I felt the force of the question too. What do I want? Why did I reach out? A gap opens up, a chasm of unknowable intention. It’s dark in there, even to me. Why should it not be dark to others, and a little bit scary because of that lack of light, that unfathomable need that calls out to others, come in, come in?

My father… you might be wondering where he’s been. If I have delayed in introducing my parents more fully that might have to do with my retrospective sense of them as largely absent from my childhood. Of course, that’s just patently bullshit. Nothing could be further from the truth. They were around, all the time. But I have had to contend with the fact that, walking in circles around and around a tree alone in a playground full of kids, I experienced my childhood largely by myself. And then increasingly, picked on and bullied, teased and tormented, made even further outcast, I don’t wonder that I spent some afternoons tying myself up.

My father did show up one day at my school when I was in seventh grade to talk to the principal about the bullying I was ex-
I was called into her office and there he sat. I don’t know if the surprise I felt was felt at the moment I saw him, or if I remember surprise through the years of all the times he didn’t show up, or both. I do remember going through the door and pulling up short when I saw him turn around to face me, the strange, large headed outcast child he’d come to somehow protect. I wonder what he was thinking. He was in his work clothes, taking a half hour out of his day to stand up for the son who had elected to turn the other cheek. Did he resent being there? Or is that resentment all mine, a backwards feeling into this encounter that stands out for me because it is so anomalous, so not how I would experience my father throughout my life?

I learned from my mother years later, in my late 30s, after he had died, that, when I was born, my father wondered if I was actually his. I must have been a monstrous looking baby. But that little revelation, whatever he really thought, just learning of his suspicion, allowed me to see my childhood in a glaringly new light. His distance, his lack of engagement, his coldness — they all made sense. I don’t ever recall playing with my father. I remember him drying my and my sister’s hair after a bath. We must have been 8 and 4. He took the towel, roughly drying my hair and then, taking both ends, rubbed it furiously across the back of my neck, giving me a brush burn. I yelped up out of his reach. To this day, my body stores tension in my neck.

Years later, just days before I got married to a lovely young woman — a soul similar in her feelings of being an outcast, an outsider in her own right — he asked if I was homosexual.

To be sure, he showed up for the typical things: graduations, and the wedding. Mother told me, perhaps right around the same time that he asked if I was queer, that he was sad he didn’t have a part to play in the wedding. But by that point, I didn’t know what role to give him. Years later, after I was already divorced and starting to date the man I would eventually marry, he called me up on the phone — the only time he ever did — to ask if I
believed in god. He was dying of Parkinson’s disease, slowly, devastatingly, losing one bodily function, including his mind, after another, all the while taking my mother down into despair with him. By that point, I didn’t believe in god—not in any conventional way. But I was taken up in the strangeness of the call, its truly exceptional character, a one-of-a-kind and probably never-to-be-repeated (it wasn’t) event. I stammered a reply: if there is a god, I can’t imagine he wouldn’t be full of forgiveness, even if only for having made us and allowing us to suffer so much. Indeed, if he had any moral sense and wasn’t cosmically psychotic, god should be asking our forgiveness. My father seemed satisfied with this response. The tremor in his voice, the dual shaking of body and heart, a soul sensing its own imminent demise, stilled a bit before hanging up.

I must have been a profound disappointment. Why else would he have turned away from me for so long, calling only when his own pain drove him to ask for succor from someone he had largely ignored? Am I misreading that phone call? To this day, nearly twenty years later, I don’t know. Maybe that call was the respect and love he’d always felt but couldn’t show because of his own damage, his own emotional stuntedness. I don’t know.

But that’s telling, because I know next to nothing about him. He married late, in his early 30s, and yes, that was late for that time period. (My mother was 24 when she had me.) I know he came from a large family, eight brothers and sisters, and tried to dodge the draft during the Korean War, not out of any sense of peacenik protest, but because, shit, who wants to go to war? He worked most of his life for the power company. He drove a truck and, if you didn’t pay your electric bill, he was the one charged with turning off your power. He hated his job. He was often yelled out, cussed out, sometimes attacked by dogs at their owners’ command. He tried to cheat his work, coming home in the early afternoons for long naps while still on the clock. He was eventually caught and told he’d be fired if he were caught doing this again. He took his resentments out in other ways,
such as going to discount clothing stores on the weekends, buying name-brand shirts, and then taking them to higher-end stores and returning them as unwanted gifts for cash. (Something you can’t do anymore without gift receipts.) I actually admire the ingenuity he had, even as I’m left wondering what drove him to feel he deserved to cheat others.

We barely knew his brothers and sisters. There was a crazy one, subjected to electric shock treatments in the state mental hospital, having gone around the bend after much of her body suffered third-degree burns in a mysterious house fire. A largely toothless one. A fairly malignant one. A younger brother who disappeared. Another aunt I only recall meeting once because she got the fuck out of southern Mississippi, married, had children, made a life elsewhere. Right after 9/11, she started mailing my father and one of his other brothers threatening letters, demanding payment for therapy services to deal with the trauma of having been sexually abused by them. Everything was denied, a lawyer consulted, the letters ignored, the correspondence slowly stopping. It was all, in a word, creepy, or at least suggested dark secrets from the past slowly creeping into the present. To this day, we don’t know what the truth is.

I had little time as a child, though, to meditate on my parents’ varied and potentially sordid pasts. High school was generally a horror for me. There’s little other way to say it. I went to an all-boys Catholic school, where I believe I got a solid education, was introduced to a slew of good books and literature, and found a couple of teachers who encouraged my writing habit. But I faced nearly daily traumas of harassment, bullying, and abuse. I was immediately marked as the class fag, and I was verbally taunted all four years. Even some teachers, apparently, understood me as queer, sharing that information with students. I, of course, had made no such declaration. I think I barely said a word out loud. You have to keep in mind that this was in the early ’80s, in the
Deep South; people just weren’t very openly gay. Some of us suspected that a few of the brothers who helped run the school, and actually lived in separate housing on campus, might be queer, and I even heard from some students that one of the brothers in particular would diddle students on various academic tournament trips out of town. But this was all well before the priest abuse scandals, and also before the relatively widespread depiction of gays and lesbians on television and in movies. Being in Louisiana, and in a Catholic school, homosexuality just wasn’t discussed. Even talking about it seemed dirty — unless you were identifying someone as a fag or faggot to ostracize him socially.

And that was me.

PE was a particular torture. I never showered on high school premises. To be fair, not many boys did. But I’m not going to lie here: for all of my deep shame at the time, and my sense of horror that I might in fact be a faggot, I was still a kid going through puberty. As I was surrounded by other boys going through puberty, I’d inevitably try to sneak a look at some of the boys changing in and out of their PE uniforms. We all wore white briefs (in fact, the coaches insisted on it, or a jockstrap), and to this day a lean muscled man in tighty-whities seems wonderfully erotic to me. (The Marky Mark Calvin Klein underwear ads posed a particular challenge to resist public gawking in the early ’90s, outing myself on city streets as a real creep.)

But wait: more briefs, I remember, intimately interwoven into the narrative of my adolescent sexuality. At 16, 17, I snuck into the movies to see *Risky Business*, my first rated R film and I knew immediately that I wanted Tom Cruise. Not from the scene of him dancing around in his tighty-whities but the later one in which he’s calling the prostitute while lying in those same briefs in his bed, pulling his goalie mask down over his head while he touches himself. Fuck that’s hot, even now. I instantly had a crush on Cruise, and *Top Gun*, coming out just a few years later, seemed like pure porn to me. I hunted out other movies he
starred in, or even just appeared in, including the pretty wretched Cocktail. When he was cast in The Color of Money with Paul Newman, Life magazine put their pictures on the front cover, lying head to head, and I bought a copy, poring over it secretly, relishing the article for glimpses into the actor’s life. I still have that copy of Life. At school, studying alone in a classroom for a psychology test, I’d go to the chalkboard, writing out notes, then erasing them and writing “I love…” and then holding back from writing a name, but quickly scribbling “TC” before wiping the board clean. And while my interest in Cruise has since faded, and I haven’t kept up with his filmography (that whole Scientology thing is just weird), I remember seeing him in the opening scenes of Vanilla Sky, standing bare chested in front of a mirror, searching for a gray hair before yanking it out. I yelped along with him, recognizing, in the late ’90s, that I too was getting older. He’s a few years older than I am, but close enough that tracking his aging has been instructive for my own. How does one get older, gracefully? And is that really the goal — grace?

Besides Tom Cruise, I had my first real crush on another human being in high school during sophomore year: Domingo. (We are Facebook friends to this day.) He was so fucking hot, though I’m not sure I could’ve brought myself to that exact articulation at the time. I was too busy trying to deflect attention from my sexuality, denying that I was, indeed, the faggot everyone seemed to think I was. So, my sensations seemed vaguer, less definable, but still surging. He wore a hot pink undershirt, with a button down over, barely tucked into his sand-colored khakis, and frequently sported a pea coat in winter. He was Latino, but very fair skinned, with a shock of black hair swooping over his forehead. He swaggered and was snide, quick-witted, and his friends were amongst the smartest kids in school. It was assumed that I was very smart too (bookish, bespectacled, literally egg-headed, quiet), but I didn’t make friends with this smart set — who were all a little bit slick, sharp-tongued, well-dressed, and generally good-looking. Ah, the categories of adolescent education. I look back and think, if only I’d found a way to attract the attention
of these boys, I might have found a somewhat safer harbor to weather the weirdness of high school. But it wasn’t happening. I made some fumbling attempts to get to know Domingo, invited him over to listen to music. (I had not thought of a sexual encounter; I just wanted to be near him, perhaps wanted to be him.) He came over but thought I was just showing off my musical knowledge. (I’d hide in my room most afternoons and evenings, licking my wounds by listening to music.) Our friendship went nowhere, and I pined silently, eventually consoling myself by imagining tying him up and whipping his ass as I rubbed out an orgasm late at night. Who was I kidding? Of course I was a little faggot. But I was also deeply ashamed of being so and desperate still to hide, deflect, throw off the scent of others, however unsuccessfully. I eventually ran into Domingo again in college, where he and his friends had turned to evangelical Christianity; he remains a right-thinking Christian to this day, though he heard gracefully my admission to him, thirty years after the fact, that he was my first crush.

Teachers, except for a very few, were useless. Don’t get me wrong: I think I got a decent humanistic education, perhaps with too much religion, but I still read good books, including some surprises like Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and Herman Hesse’s Demian, as well as the usual classics, such as Lord of the Flies. But most teachers seemed to turn a blind eye to the tortures I faced. I wasn’t protected, and my parents, I think, just thought I needed to learn to man up and fight back. I did once. A kid took a small razor to me, wanting to carve “fag” into my arm, but I slapped his hand away and may have snarled. I remember the look of shock on his face. Perhaps that was enough to deter my fellow students from more probing physical assaults, and I was still tall, so perhaps unknown in terms of strength.

But no adult intervention was forthcoming. In fact, in a strange way, the school vectored such assaults— not only through its religious condemnation of anything sexually perverse (the only sex education we got was being shown pictures of aborted fetus-
es), but also by publishing our phone numbers in a widely dis-
tributed booklet. Perhaps they thought this would build com-

munity. It did, but mostly amongst those little budding sadists
and future wife and child abusers who would get together and
prank phone call my house. Prank phone call seems such a mild
way of putting it. One kid called my house and told my mother
that I was going to be beaten so badly that she wouldn't be able
to buy groceries for a while because my hospital bills were going
to be so high. I walked to and from school in fear. I think my
parents alerted the school officials, but hey, what could they do?
Boys will be boys. And people thought I was creepy.

In retrospect, I think I was abused. Sexually abused. While next
to no one laid a hand on me, my sense of self was warped by
a combination of social ostracism, religious intolerance, adult
indifference, and ceaseless bullying. If I were a middle-class
kid today, my parents would be trying to sue the school — and
would likely be successful in securing a settlement. I've thought
of doing such now. And for several years, in my late 20s, coming
into consciousness of how what I'd faced had not been just boys
being boys, I would write letters and then emails to my old high
school's administrators. In part, my missives were in response to
the periodic pleas for donations sent out by the school. Reply-
ing to one, I wrote the principal (a new guy, a lay person, not
anyone I knew), saying that I'd consider donating money if the
school set up a Gay — Straight Student Alliance. The possibility,
though, was unthinkable for them, given Catholic doctrine. Is it
any wonder that, for many years, I thought that anyone identify-
ing themselves with Catholicism or Christianity were suspects?
After all, they were aligned with a system of thought that, no
matter their particular views on homosexuality, had contributed
to the immiseration of countless millions for nearly two millen-
nia. Fuck those fuckers, I'd think.
Anyway, I graduated, finally, disappointing my parents by deciding to study English in college. I wanted, oddly, to be a teacher. To be fair to my high school experience, I had a couple of teachers, one in particular, Ms. Morgavi, who encouraged my interest in reading and writing. I’d bring her my poetic attempts, and she said I should keep going. I clung to these bits of attention and stayed in touch with her for years afterwards, decades, well into my career and her eventual retirement from teaching.

Given my isolation, combined with a toxic brew of varied abuse and neglect, it’s no exaggeration to say that reading probably saved my life. I’d actually done poorly in what was called language arts when in grade school, getting Bs and Cs, even merit-ing a deficiency one time — there was a warning that I was likely not to pass Reading. To earn extra credit, my fifth-grade teacher suggested I memorize and recite poems in front of the class. I did, performing several. They were amongst the only times I probably spoke aloud in school. But they probably also instilled in me, or helped develop, an interest in language. Then, one term, the same teacher read to us daily from C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. I was hooked. By the end of the book, she was quizzing us, asking us if the story of Aslan’s self-sacrifice for his friends reminded us of any other story. Clueless, we listened raptly while she explained that Lewis had essentially re-written the story of Christ’s crucifixion as a fantasy. I was mesmerized. I couldn’t have articulated the precise nature of my fascination, but I suspect the little boy I was, proto-queer, intuited that the doubleness of the story — saying one thing but meaning another, telling a tale with hidden depths — was a strategy with which I would become intimately familiar.

The fantasy of the story, as well as the power of reading to transport, were immediately useful, and I started reading as an escape. I haunted bookstores. The first book I read on my own was the sequel to *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, called *Prince Caspian*, and I still have that battered little book. I think
it was the first book I actually bought too. I took it with me on our poor man’s summer family vacation to Biloxi, where, when not burning my skin to a blistered crisp while building sand castles and swimming in polluted Gulf waters, I’d sit in our favorite beach-front McDonald’s and read Prince Caspian. My father turned to me at one point: “You’re not supposed to read on vacation. Vacation is for fun.” I looked back down into my book and kept going, reading on the hour drive all the way back home.

After completing The Chronicles of Narnia, I scouted out the books next to it—other fantasies, then science fiction, delighting in long series, reading all of L. Frank Baum’s Oz books, then Terry Brooks’s Sword of Shanara, etc., etc. The books assigned in class I barely touched. Mark Twain’s Prince and the Pauper? I failed that quiz, lying about having read it but just not understanding it. But by the time I hit junior high and then high school, I was introduced to better and better books, and my reading palette expanded, mixing genre and literary fiction. I read constantly, often late into the night. I always had a book with me. It was pure escapism, but also taught me a great deal, even if I wasn’t conscious of it, about how language worked. And reading inspired me to try my own hand at writing. I sketched out fantasies, drawing the maps through which my characters would have their adventures, then writing out my stories long-hand (no one had a computer or even a typewriter, though I wanted one, badly), double-spaced, on lined paper with red margin lines.

So, English as a major and teaching as a career combined a love of reading and writing with an attempt to control the situations—the classroom, the campus—that were often the site of my own torment. Just as I had played school, yielding the rod of correction over other kids, I planned to move into adulthood to enact those play fantasies for real. At the time, I couldn’t have articulated these choices in this way. But I see now the deep, connected uncanniness of it all. Not that I regret any of it, much. I’ve managed to make something of a life out of escape and control,
trying in adulthood to reverse the damages done by managing some of the scenes of torture. I can now inflict pain (if I want to, though I generally don’t) in the spaces in which it was once inflicted on me. I can hold forth as a teacher and everyone will finally have to listen to me.

College offered something of a reprieve from bullying, with my fellow students probably both too overwhelmed by the size, complexity, and diversity of the campus and more focused on performing versions of potential adulthood. I welcomed the relief, though I remained quiet and reserved, rarely talking in class. One of my professors, in a letter of recommendation, even referred to me as “reticent,” a word I had to look up, and one friend thought it might not be the very best modifier a teacher could use to describe someone in whom he had confidence.

I was only about ninety miles away at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, though I could’ve been on another planet. A huge, stately old campus, with large live oaks whose exposed root systems we were urged not to cut across for fear of damaging as we sought more expedient paths to class. After fleeing a crazy freshman roommate (he attacked me in my sleep because he thought I’d purposefully hidden his retainer), I moved into a room in a hundred-year-old former army barracks. No air-conditioning, though we could get a good breeze going with all the windows open. In the winter, which could see several days in a row in the 30s, we kept the windows open to balance out the radiator heating, which had only two settings: off and hell.

It was 1985 when I arrived at LSU, and I was free from both PE and religion classes. I was also around girls for the first real time. (I’d gone to my senior prom with a friend, who had somehow wrangled us both blind dates — so that didn’t really count.) I almost immediately got some girlfriends, a couple who became more than just pals, and I thought in my heart that I had possibly found some salvation. They were often smart, deeply feeling, and interested in me. They were also girls, not boys, and I
could all too easily read my interest in them — very likely more
the shock of the new, a discovery of a whole new kind of hu-
manity — as emerging proof that I wasn’t going to be lost to the
hells of homosexuality. Some of them were even a bit kinky. For
my 19th birthday, I coaxed one of them into tying me to the
bed and whipping my ass. I still remember that night fondly,
perhaps thrilling now more to the trace memories of my sleek
twink body than to the charms of Penny, who nonetheless often
captivated me with her deep love of words and commitment to
an aesthetic life. She also loved drinking and fooling around,
and I caught on quickly to these two past times.

Indeed, one of the minor humiliations of aging is that I recall
all too well the bodily sensations of being 19 and knowing now
that my body will never feel that way again. I’d walk across the
swelteringly humid Louisiana campus in a t-shirt and khaki
shorts, and I think I could’ve pretty much fucked anything that
would’ve let me. I’d orgasm multiple times a day, each time striv-
ing to feel a spasming in my middle toes, the ones between the
big toe and the pinky. That quivering, an involuntary electric
throbbing lasting seconds, signaled pure pleasure, a giving over
of the body to carnal delight. I haven’t felt that throbbing in
nearly three decades.

For all of the orgasms, though, I wouldn’t penetrate a young
woman. Some begged, and I’m not bragging, really. Remember,
it was 1985 when I arrived at LSU, and we were all watching Rock
Hudson die on television; he actually passed away on October
2, the day I turned 18. In the deep south at the time, AIDS was
so clearly understood as god’s punishment for homosexuality
(drug use, too) that I was practically scared straight. I’d fool
around with the ladies, but no sex, even though sex with them
would’ve seemed “safer” at the time. Indeed, the fear of AIDS,
coupled with rampant homophobia, kept me fearful for both my
soul and body.
And not all of the homophobia was vectored through organized religion. I remember going for my first AIDS test in the early ’90s. I was starting a new relationship and was regretting—actually fearing for my life—my college-age fumblings with a young man. (More on this in a bit.) I sat in the clinic while the nurse drew blood. Another nurse inquired what test I was getting, shaking her head with disgust as my blood-letter told her: “That AIDS test.” I had to call two weeks later to find out my test results, and when the nurse on the line looked at my chart, she said, “I’ll have to let you talk to a doctor.” She curtly put me on hold and I immediately stopped breathing. Even now, writing out this story, my breath shortens; I thought I was receiving a death sentence. The doctor came on the phone and told me that I was negative, everything was fine, and that only a doctor at the time could report such test results in Louisiana. I nearly sobbed with relief, and only later got angry: why couldn’t the nurse have told me that a doctor would have to report the results? Her abrupt and dismissive comment—“I’ll have to let you talk to a doctor”—seemed designed to punish me for even just seeking out the test. At the time, I was still indoctrinated enough into homophobic Christianity to believe I just might deserve such punishment, being the creep I was. In retrospect, the nurse’s righteous dismissiveness seems its own brand of creepiness.

But what about those fumbling with another young man? Nice how I just slipped that in, thinking you might forget. But no, I have to confess: the true propulsions of my incipient creepiness came full throttle forward during my senior year. Let me set this up for you, for full effect.

As I said, besides my experiments with women, I’d kept pretty much under the radar sexually. Most weekends I’d go home to New Orleans, do some homework, go to church, and then take the bus back to campus. My explorations of homosexuality remained relatively theoretical. During my first-year honors biology course for humanities majors, for instance, I wrote a term paper about the origins of homosexuality, ultimately focusing
more on the history of its denigration and steady rise to a kind of acceptance in the late twentieth century. I’d discovered John Boswell’s *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, which had just come out five years earlier in 1980, and which passionately argued against homophobia, tracing tolerance for homosexuality to the early middle ages. As part of my “research,” I convinced a group of friends to check out a local gay bar, and we even boldly went to a meeting of the gay student group on campus. The former experience was marked mostly by my horror at being cruised by a rather large older gay man (poor thing, he was probably only 30 and I bet he would have treated me well and gently). The latter proved more cautionary than enlightening as the group’s discussion revolved mostly on in-fighting and bickering, with one graduate student, I believe, belittling his conversational opponent by suggesting he was anally receptive. Not the best put-down to combat internalized homophobia, I now realize. I walked away from both experiences more distressed than enthralled. So, my college years were fairly non-sexual, except for excessive masturbation and some limited kink with a couple of young women, although in time I would become a bit bolder as I moved toward 20, 21, feeling my adulthood emerging. But not before a brief non-affair with an older woman that likely propelled me forward into a tentative public probing of my queerness.

I had a group of older friends that I’d met through church, three musicians, Larry, his wife Jeanie, and the church pianist Faith. By older I mean they were in their 30s. I was totally taken with their interest in me and their willingness to spend time with me. We would all go out to eat, get season tickets to the New Orleans opera, exchange books, and generally enjoy each other’s company. Larry, I remember with extraordinary fondness. He had a striking and powerful baritone, and I started composing music, little art songs based on the poetry I was reading, and he’d consent to sing them, even performing in church some of my arrangements of old hymns for solo voice. I spent many weekends overnight with them, and Faith and I eventually grew closer
through our shared interest in the piano and indie film. She and I started seeing each other as friends outside this little group.

Lots of church drama ultimately drove Larry, Jeanie, and Faith from the church (something unfortunate about some members of the church not feeling comfortable with having a female minister of music, Jeanie), and the psychic toll on our little group was intense at times. I don’t remember, and am not sure I ever fully knew, the nature of the tensions amongst my three older friends, but Faith and I saw more and more of each other separately. We’d head to uptown and watch foreign films at the Prytania, then browse the Maple Street Bookshop. I loved those Saturday afternoons. They seemed arty and smart. And they were. We’d even check out films that Jeanie frowned on us seeing, such as Merchant Ivory’s adaptation of E.M. Forrester’s posthumously published *Maurice*, about a young man coming to terms with his homosexuality in Edwardian England. Did Faith suspect I was queer? I’m not sure but one weekend she drove to Baton Rouge to visit, and we had a delightful evening at a George Winston recital followed by pancakes at the IHOP before driving back to the city, where I crashed at her apartment (she sleeping on the couch). We never had sex, and at most would just hold one another. But I think she liked me, and I know I liked her, though I didn’t think of her sexually. She eventually broke off our friendship and started dating in earnest people her own age. I was heartbroken. I didn’t understand why we couldn’t still be friends. Perhaps that was my limitation, perhaps hers, but it ended what had been a junior-year of relative happiness and stability, in which I felt wanted and admired by people I wanted to know and whom I admired.

I have to admit that I was a bit of a creep in the aftermath of the dissolution of my friendship with Faith. Not awfully so, but creepy nonetheless. I was so hurt that she wanted (really needed) to move on and that she wasn’t going to continue to make room for me in her life. I wasn’t in love with her, but, at 20 years of age, I was in love with her independence, her ability to lead her own
life, her pursuit of her own interests, and even her decision to be
decisive — the thing that hurt in terms of our relationship but
that nonetheless seemed admirable. She knew what she wanted,
and she went after it. And, of course, I was a bit in love with
her interest in me, however muted, however modest, however
much she knew I wasn’t a reliable long-term object of romantic
or sexual affection. In retrospect, I totally understand her deci-
sion, even if I think she could’ve been a little kinder about it.

And perhaps my inability to see in retrospect — again, I was
20 — prompted me one Sunday morning to show up at her
church, where she sang in the choir, and just stare at her from
my seat in the pews. I didn’t approach her after church, I didn’t
warn her I was coming. I just showed up. And stared. I was
creeping. I wanted her to know that she couldn’t just discard me
from her life, just kick me to the curb, just decide unilaterally
that our friendship was done. But, of course, she could. And my
showing up at her church to stare at her only spoke to my hurt
and sense of betrayal. I was smart enough to realize that, and I
didn’t show up again.

But I wasn’t mature enough yet to keep myself from other little
acts of creepiness. A few months after not hearing from her and
not reaching out myself, I called and we chatted for a bit. Our
conversation was a bit awkward, but soon become friendly, al-
most like old times. I suggested we see a movie and we made a
date, Faith actually seeming excited about getting together. But I
was already planning to betray her. The night of our movie date,
I was with Larry and Jeanie, her former friends. She called the
house, and my mother told her that I was with them, reporting
back to me later that Faith sounded hurt. My older self now is
ashamed to admit that I was glad she was hurt. But hell, even
my younger self at the time was a bit ashamed. This was just
revenge, pure and simple. And whatever small satisfaction I got
from inflicting pain was drowning in how small I felt. If I loved
her, even just a friend, would I really want to hurt her like this?
Still, such questions couldn’t quite prevent me from even little further bits of creepiness. I just couldn’t quite stay away, not just yet. I prank called her a few times, just calling and hanging up as soon as she said hello. This was well before the time when it became incredibly easy to know who has called you, but I’m pretty sure Faith knew it was me. I called her once from Larry and Jeanie’s house one evening, where I was staying the night, and within a minute of hanging up their phone rang a couple of times before stopping. I remember my face flushing and my friends wondering what was wrong. Of course, they had no idea, but I knew I’d been called out, my creepiness identified. I stopped calling and tried to forget about her. I mostly did and moved on, other dramas soon to take the place of this botched friendship.

And then, senior year. What the hell was I thinking? I was probably still psychically reeling from the dissolution of our little circle and my friendship with Faith. Or perhaps I was experiencing a late adolescent hormone surge. Or maybe the prospect of leaving college and really entering adulthood was scaring the shit out of me, as well as the other senior-level folks I was hanging out with. But I threw caution to the wind and unleashed a shitstorm in my life.

I joined the Student Union Film Committee, and that was the beginning of the problem. The Film Committee was run by the Student Government, which organized a variety of social and theme-driven groups and clubs. Our committee’s primary charge was choosing the films that the Student Union would show in its dinky little theater: mostly indie films, but some blockbusters. I saw a lot of good movies. To this day, I remember my first viewing of *A Clockwork Orange* and Spalding Gray’s *Swimming to Cambodia*. Walking out of the Kubrick film with a “girlfriend” in tow, I pompously began reciting in German Schiller’s “Ode to Joy,” which forms the text of Beethoven’s final symphony’s final movement’s paean to brotherhood and which is used to great rhetorical and aesthetic effect in the film to ironize scenes of
grotesque inhumanity. It’s a truly creepy use of the music. My date was increasingly turned on by my precocity. What a little fucker I was, such a tease.

Anyway, enjoying film as I did it seemed like a good move socially to join this club. I’d meet some new people, perhaps some who would help me lick my Faith-inflicted wounds. And I did meet a group of smart, bright young folks, all pretty literary, some of whom I’d had classes with but didn’t get to know in the midst of my relative anti-sociality. We met for the committee meetings and then would retire to the local college bars, the all-purpose Chimes or the smarty-pants Library or the skanky Bayou, and drink drink drink. Wow, I fucking loved to drink. At that time, we’d been grandfathered in, as Louisiana changed its legal drinking age to 21. So, I began the year at 20 fully intending to toxify my liver. And I’m sure I put a dent or two in it.

We were all frequently lubricated, having mastered the arts of happy hour, drinking cheaply at 4, hitting the dining halls before they closed at 7, and then passing out, sometimes in each other’s arms, relatively chastely, so we’d get a full night’s sleep and be prepared for class the next day at 9. A good formula.

We even branded ourselves at one point, me creating a little poster: The New Decadence. It all felt good, like I’d found a home, at least a group to hang out with, a set with whom I could start to explore my preferences, my interests, my (dare I say) desires. I confessed my homoerotic interests, and so did some others. Two young women in the group, both previously straight, one dating a really cute and sweet boy, started making out one evening, and their affair began. Not to be left out, I started making out with the comic strip writer for the student newspaper, her bra winding up strewn across my bedside lamp. That image later appeared in a cartoon she published, inserting a can of Crisco next to the bed. (There was no Crisco in real life.) I remember opening the paper before class and yelping out loud, recognizing the scene, knowing this dorm room depicted was mine, and feeling I had “arrived” in some sense, that I was part
of a scene, that I was a mover and a shaker, one whose exploits merited documentation, even dissemination, however coded and covert. And I hadn’t even really had sex yet.

But despite however theoretical my homosexuality might have been, existing largely discursively, I tried to put theory and discourse to good use. I boldly proposed a film series, “Homosexuality in Film,” typing up the rationale, listing such “classics” as *Making Love* and *The Boys in the Band*, photocopying my mini-manifesto, and distributing it at the meeting. I felt fucking badass. And, not to toot my horn too much, it was a bit daring. This was the ’80s in the deep Deep South after all, and AIDS seemed to be announcing the wrath of god against queers everywhere. The chair, one of our little group, was supportive, although she didn’t want people to know about her experimental sapphic affair. The proposal was outvoted by another, and I can’t for the life of me remember what it was. Film Noir? No, nothing that smart. Maybe something chickenshit like Dance in Film. I was appalled by the small-mindedness of the world, my outrage resulting in several rounds of binge drinking as we all cried into our cocktails at The Chimes — the sapphic chair liked old fashioned, I think, while I preferred something called Jet Fuel, which looked like Windex.

By that point, I’d already met in passing Matt S. He was on the film committee and an editorialist for the student newspaper, *The Daily Reveille* (which we lambasted as *The Daily Revile*). He was fucking gorgeous. Cleary intelligent, but also rakishly aware of his good looks, with a full head of luscious hair and piercing eyes oddly complementing his ever just so slightly pudgy body, which he paraded around campus in ratty shorts and a dirty t-shirt to intoxicating effect. He was loose and nonchalant, snarky and smart. I was completely smitten. He didn’t know who the hell I was.

I began a complicated project of stalking. I found out that he lived in the same dorm complex as I did. I was in a ground floor
suite in one building, he in an upper-floor suite two buildings over. I skulked around the old red-brick buildings day and night, hanging out in my own recently acquired nonchalance, totally studied and probably coming across more like barely controlled psychosis. I was (still am) a walker and a pacer, lapping multiple miles a day, either going to and fro destinations or just moving back and forth like a caged animal, patrolling the perimeters of my room. I must have circled the pentagon a thousand times, hoping for a glimpse of this boy. Then, as though fated, I saw him walking back from soccer practice with… my roommate, Nick, whose name wasn’t really Nick but who called himself that because there’s no conceivable way that most Louisianians could pronounce his Taiwanese name. I’d paid next to no attention to Nick, who was nice enough and whom I’d essentially just met earlier that term, poor thing being assigned a room at random with me. But now I was all over my roommate, asking him questions about Matt. Tell me about soccer! Where do you play? Is this an official club? Oh, you know Matt? We’re on the Film Committee together! I had no idea, really! Wow! We should all get a drink sometime!

And we did, the three of us. And it was awful. Matt and I had clearly nothing in common, though we obviously did. We were both writers, of a sort, he a journalist and I a poet. Never did the genres of the language seem to erect such an insurmountable barrier, topped by glass shards and razor wire, electrified. We sipped our tepid beers while hunched around a sticky table stuck to the stickier floor of The Bayou, and I thought, “This is hell.” His fat little hand gripping his beer just inches from my own as he flicked his hair out of his eyes taught me the meaning of the word swoon. Indeed, I’m sure the rancid odor of the bar couldn’t overpower the scent of my attraction, and he consequently paid me little attention. Perhaps in those moments, even over and beyond my stalking around the dorm, my creepiness revealed itself. I couldn’t take my eyes off him, but I had no idea what to say.
“You’re a journalism major? I write poetry.”
“I’m taking Sasek for Milton. I hate Milton.”
“Milton is one of the best poets in the language.”
“So Nick, nice goal yesterday...”

And with such verbal dexterity he sidelined me right out of the conversation, thrown summarily out of any Eden I might have been imagining as we sat hunched over those sticky tables.

As with any desire thwarted, a dream deferred, acute interest soon turned to active antagonism. My group of decadent friends knew all about my interest and some tried to dissuade me, correctly advising me that he wasn’t right for me, not to mention that he couldn’t care less about me. But some of them enjoyed the drunken sessions of prank phone calling we started. Late into the night, we’d call his room, hanging up, call, hang up, call hang up, call, hang up. To avoid too much repetition, we’d sometimes shout obscenities, masking our voices. I’m sure he knew we were calling him. He even called back once, the phone ringing after we’d just hung up, my sapphic friend whispering not to pick up, me unsure why she was whispering. I did, pretending I’d been roused from sleep. I don’t think he was fooled, and he pretended he’d dialed the wrong number.

In a desperate move, I submitted an editorial to the student newspaper countering one of his. He’d written about how the Student Union should be willing, as an expression of free speech, to show not just indie films but also pornography. He was arguing particularly, I recall, for a showing of *Deep Throat*, calling it a groundbreaking film in the history of blue cinema. The part of me that still headed home some weekends and attended church was appalled. The id-driven strategist in me also saw an opportunity. Disgust and desire, often mirroring one another, resulted in my own editorial, which was published in response to his. That itself seemed like a victory. But what is truly strange is that I sincerely thought I could attract at least his attention by publicly attacking his interest in promoting free speech, however
misguided his promotion was. (Fuck, by criticizing him even now I’m still trying to engage him.)

Was it still a surprise to me that he voted against my progressively ahead-of-its time proposal, “Homosexuality in Film”? Was it really? It was. His no still stung. Heavy rounds of drinking, and then more drinking and some awkward sexual fumbling with the girls, and then more drinking ensued. Sapphic chair had a car and, realizing that she was too drunk to drive us to our next location, she gave me her keys. I didn’t have a driver’s license and I was surely as fucked up as she. But I took the keys and we drove away into the night, me focusing on the white dashed lines to stay on the road while cars zipped around me. This madness played itself out not just once but twice, and I count it a miracle or sheer luck (still haven’t decided) that I’m alive today, that she’s alive today (at least according to Facebook, through which we have accepted “friendship” but never converse), that I didn’t kill anyone else, and that I wasn’t arrested and thrown under the jail. Why no one bothered to call the cops on us is also something of a mystery. On one of these jaunts, having peeled out of a bar’s parking lot, we dizzyingly rolled into a K-Mart, stumbled to the fake jewelry counter, bought cheap gold-colored rings, declared ourselves married, and actually wore them for weeks, brandishing them at Film Committee meetings to show our alliance in defiance of the bigots and small-minded fuckers who opposed “Homosexuality in Film.”

In those heady weeks, when I was trying to write an honors English thesis on the poetry of World War One, focusing on gay British poet Wilfred Owen and the mad Austrian Georg Trakl, I actually caught the attention of another member of the Film Committee, a tall slender gay guy my age, whose major I forget. He chatted me up once and I walked away thinking he was cute. But what next? I was still smitten with Matt S. What could I offer Mike W.? I mean, just even practically, I had no idea how to even go about asking a guy out on a date. I also didn’t even know if he was into guys really. He seemed… gayish. But he wasn’t
particularly effeminate. And there are lots of guys who are into film and the arts. Hmmm. I had no models. I had only feelings and suspicions.

So, why not have him tag along, get him drunk, and see what happens? Drinking seemed to be the answer to everything, and given that I could apparently drive drunk with impunity, I felt fairly confident that through the bottle lay the path to pleasure, freedom from fear, and an approach to the kind of life I couldn’t even really imagine but that I thought for sure would save me from the desperation I felt in the presence of Matt S. And sure enough, with enough alcohol, I turned from making out with the female cartoonist to making out with Mike W. I remember pulling away after we started kissing and saying, “You’re scratchy.” I’d never thought that even a clean-shaven guy’s face would feel rough from stubble, not smooth like the girls I’d grown accustomed to kissing. But then I dived back in. We made out, fumbled around with each other, and then eventually fell asleep in each other’s arms, while my other drunken friends sat around drinking and making out on their own, one of them saying, kindly, “I’m so happy for Jonathan.”

To this day I remember that scene, that first kiss, that parting comment and my eyes brim with tears. I was 21.

It all fell apart within a few weeks, and rather dramatically. The drinking turned more desperate, even though I was now kissing a boy, perhaps because I was kissing a boy. The prank phone calls escalated. The second drunk driving escapade. It was ugly.

And then I got a phone call from the police. Someone had filed a complaint against me. I had to make an appointment to go talk to an officer, who gently read me my rights before asking me some questions. He asked if I was prank phone calling people. I denied it. He then asked about the Film Committee, and I explained about the film series I proposed and how, surely, the people who were accusing me of prank phone calling were just
afraid of the ideas I was forwarding, of the waters I was testing. I knew how to hide, how to lie, even with half-truths. He listened patiently, and then explained that duly elected representatives to the Student Council had suggested that I was a dangerous and manipulative force, luring the unsuspected and once pristine into drunken depravity. My exploits were known and I needed to take care lest I jeopardize my entire future and become a complete creep. He referred the case to the Dean of Students, who warned me that the technology for tracing phone calls was getting better and better (as it was), and that that was something I should know whether or not I’d done anything wrong, whether or not I was being persecuted for being ahead of my time (my words, not his).

Writing this, I realize that the officer at the LSU police station was the first adult—as in not someone my age, not in college, but older and established as an adult—to whom I suggested I was gay. A police officer.

Was there no one else I could’ve talked to? Someone at my church? Someone in my family? My adult friends? Faith? It’s hard at times not to think that, as creepy as I must have been and seemed, the surrounding situation was creepier still. There was no adult I felt I could safely talk to.

But my own creepiness—my potential to destroy, not only myself but those around me—was what was on trial at the moment. My friends deserted me. I nearly lost my little part-time job teaching English as a second language to spoiled foreigners. And Mike broke up with me. He was both turned off by my drunken escapades, but also dissatisfied that all of our alcohol-fueled fumblings in bed had never actually resulted in orgasm. I’d suck, he’d suck—but nothing. We were all just too fucked up. And he wanted anal, and I just wasn’t ready.

So, I ended my senior year, having nearly been arrested or thrown out of school, friendless and alone. I finished my the-
sis and graduated with honors. Then I moved back home for the summer, announcing that I was going to graduate school to study comparative literature. Despite having spent most of my last term in college inebriated, I’d gotten a teaching assistantship and full tuition remission at LSU, and I’d be amongst their first students in this new interdepartmental program. My parents were furious. They thought I’d move back home to teach English in the local high schools. To be fair, they just didn’t understand what I was doing. From their perspective, I’d gone to college, and now it was time to get a job. But I intuited that, despite the last year’s setbacks, there just had to be another world out there. And while everything else around me had let me down — or had punished me for stepping too far out of the norm — my books and writing hadn’t. I’d stick with them. I’d stay where it was safe. And besides, fuck my parents. They hadn’t paid for my college. I had to wait every single semester to see if a special scholarship would come through so I could afford to go. Some terms I wouldn’t know until just days before classes started. And I’d be paying my way going forward, thanks to the generosity of the tax-paying bigots of Louisiana. How I mustered such defiance, I don’t know. But there were a few days that summer that I spent in drunken stupor. And one incident with some tertiary friends in which, consuming screw drivers all the way up I-10 to a get-together in Baton Rouge (with someone else driving this time), I got to the party completely fucked up, passed out, and woke up the next morning to tales about how I’d tried to grab one of my guy friends. I didn’t see much of these guys again.

All of these incidents scarred me, even if they didn’t always scare me. I had tried to make a gay way in the world, without much guidance, with no mentor, lacking any positive role modeling, facing resistance and outright hostility, and stumbling my way through tortured feelings I didn’t know how to manage or even fully understand, if we ever can understand the courses of desire. But I had tried, and I had failed. In no conceivable way could I “come out” to my parents. I felt shame about botching the job of trying to be gay, which only compounded the shame
I felt about being queer to begin with. Surely, god was sending me a powerful sign. *Don't go there.* *Homosexuality can lead to nothing good.* You need to remember that, at the time, in the mid-'80s, we didn't have the relative plethora of relatively sane images of gays and lesbians on television and in the movies that we do now. Not only were queers, associated with drug users and prostitutes, part of the media spectacle of AIDS, but countervailing narratives of gay pride were hard to find in the Deep South of the Reagan years. I can't recall one positive representation of a gay man from television. I remember a brief, short-lived series, “Love, Sidney,” with Tony Randall, who played a lonely old gay man, his younger lover having left or died, I can’t remember which. The prospects didn’t seem good for sustainable queerness. But surely, you’re thinking, you were near New Orleans, you must have had some access to queerness? But no. I knew no gay adults (with one exception, which I’ll get to later). I suspected that some of my teachers, both in high school and in college, might be gay, but no one was out. How I ever thought that I could come out as a teacher, which I eventually did, still surprises me.

In graduate school, having returned to dating young women, and turning my attention in particular to a smart fellow New Orleanian I would eventually marry, I sought counseling to contend with my feelings of shame and despair. I wanted to try to cure the inner creep. By that point, I was telling myself a complicated narrative: all of the homophobic slurs that were used to bully me as a child had left me feeling that I, in fact, might actually be queer. Perhaps my sexuality had been detoured from its just, true, and straight path. Perhaps I couldn’t make a go of being gay because I wasn’t *really* gay. Indeed, to this day, I can’t tell if I like men because of some deep-seated predisposition or if, over several formative years of puberty by being labeled, constantly, insistently, irrevocably, I eventually just psychically gave in to the ceaseless interpellation. At this point in my life, I don’t know that I care. The etiology of my desires is less interesting than the complexity of strategizing for their fulfillment. But
the genealogy of my creepiness fascinates — now. At the time, though, it was just horrifying. I was a young man suffering from years of abuse. Is there any wonder then that I found myself a couple of times sitting alone late at night in a bathtub of tepid water considering how I might slit my wrists?

Fearing such thoughts and thinking that I should give god another chance, I found a Christian counselor who readily supported my interpretation that I’d been bullied into thinking myself queer, and he gently advised me to continue praying about the issues. God would understand. I’d been tested and tempted, but seeking help was the right thing to do. I want to be fair here: this wasn’t conversion therapy. I believe this man was genuinely concerned about me — as he damn well should have been, given the amount of bullying and abuse I’d suffered as a child. And his pre-ordained response — to encourage a healthy heterosexuality as opposed to a heinous homosexuality — is totally understandable given the time and the area. But it also vectored a powerful emotional solution: “God will give you a son.” That was his answer. He was convinced that god would provide me a boy of my own to raise and love, and that that would be healing in ways I couldn’t even imagine. To this day, I’m moved by this gesture to comfort, to prophecy in the name of healing, to provide a solace that recognized my need for some human warmth from a male. He believed, as I wanted terribly to believe myself, that having a son would allow me to experience myself as a caring father, and eventually a friend, that I never had in my own father, and that I rarely found in male friends.

No, god never gave me a son. I will admit that I never tried that hard to have one. Not that there wasn’t possibility; I was after all married to a woman for a while. But even then, something in me balked against having my own child. Some deep-down instinct said no, let’s stop the madness, let’s refuse to pass on this genetic material, let’s end the line with me. It’s as though, in cutting off the possibility of my having a child, I would prevent
further abuse. When my wife wanted to go on Norplant, I readily supported the decision.

Indeed, about my wife. I got married to a wonderful young woman; we were together for several years, finishing graduate school, leaving Louisiana and moving to Colorado to set up a life together away from all we had known and all that had made us suffer in our youth. Her story needs a book of its own, and I respect her enough to let her tell her own story. Suffice it to say that we were smart enough after three years of marriage to recognize that, while we needed each other to get out of the south, we didn’t need each other to craft sustainable and fulfilling adulthoods. We might even have started to hold each other back if we hadn’t parted as husband and wife.

So, we divorced right around the time I came out as queer, started developing a new friendship circle, turned my attention to writing actively about queerness, began teaching courses in queer theory and LGBT studies, started dating men (three at one time even!), found my current partner, refocused energy on my career, started publishing a range of work, moved up the academic ladder, got married to a man, etc., etc. I’m obviously skipping over a lot, but there’s a way in which the last twenty years of my life — as eventful as they have been, and as deserving of their own story as they are (if only I thought that anyone cared to read about it) — have been an attempt to deal with that first twenty years, to make a survivable, much less enjoyable, life out of the damages foregoing. I have not always been successful, even though external markers suggest otherwise. Indeed, it’s precisely that disconnect — visibly living a successful life while mostly feeling like shit, and periodically avoiding, just narrowly, my best efforts to sabotage my life — that remains the truest, most persistent legacy of my youth. And it’s the feeling like shit, and the sabotage, that comes straight out of my own deep down feeling of creepiness, the sheer weirdness I carry with me, the substantial strangeness that animates nearly everything I do, how I experience the world.
When younger, I would stage for myself triumphal returns, such as a couple of lectures at LSU that I talked former professors into offering me. I would strut on campus, walking amongst the stately old live oaks, looking on past sites of youthful self-degradation and feel myself not only a survivor but even victorious. *Look what I’ve done. Look at me now.* I remember walking into a former professor’s office, someone I really adored as a young man but whom I hadn’t seen in years, nearly two decades. “You’re so… big,” he said. And I was. Fatter, surely. But a college friend of mine remarked that, as tall as I was, I was often stooped, bent in on myself as a young person, afraid, meek. Now I stood tall. I’m not sure I felt tall, but I had learned to fake it well. I might be successful, even openly gay now, but deep down, I was still a creep.