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My favorite religious pamphlet was the one that described the Apocalypse—favorite, that is, until I got to the end where Judgment Day was drawn in minute detail. Up to that point, it was just titillating pictures of the Four Horsemen skewering fornicators on the ends of their pikes, and Jesus in glory floating down into the orgy that was still going on among the sinners who hadn't drowned in the river of blood. In the picture of Judgment Day, a huge crowd was seated in a celestial amphitheater. On the stage surrounded by angels were God, whose features were difficult to make out in the midst of his radiance, the Holy Ghost, who had no features at all, and Jesus, easily recognizable as he smiled and waved to the crowd. Behind them on the stage was a giant movie screen. Playing on the screen was a movie that God, Jesus and the Holy Ghost had spliced together. The movie showed every sin ever committed by every person who had ever lived. There was no popcorn, no getting up to go to the restroom. Instead,

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the crowd sat in queasy silence, waiting for the moment, eons away on this eternal day, when their own foibles would be projected in galactic scale for all creation to see.

As I studied the picture of Judgment Day, I began to cast about in my mind for ways that I could turn this scene to my advantage or at least emerge with my eternal reputation intact. I thought of my mother's little bird and how bored it must have been reporting the trivial misdemeanors of a Southern Baptist child. I thought of my straight-A report cards stretching back for years and of the J. S. Bach two-part invention I was learning to play. I thought about Ewing Park Junior High School and my exalted positions there on the honor roll and the student council and the Cougar Patrol. I played out in my head a movie of my own making. In it were all my adventures in Sunday school and training union. There were warm evenings of fellowship with the Royal Ambassadors of Christ gathered around the piano. There were heartwarming moments of "Please" and "Thank you" and "You're welcome" and "Beg your pardon?" There were moments of comic relief when my mother would glare at me until I yielded my seat to an old person or held a door open for a lady. There was romance as well, not a subplot exactly since there was no action and therefore no story, just the chaste love affair with Janet Davis, a pretty girl with a round face and pale hair who held a place on the honor roll close to my own. I had managed to keep my toes underwater during baptism, and that scene was played to great effect as well. All in all, I thought that if the movie shown by the Holy Trinity bore any resemblance to

the one I was cobbling together in my head, Judgment Day might not be so bad after all.

Then I turned the page and my heart froze. There, emblazoned across the top of the page in colossal letters, were the words “Even your thoughts will be revealed!” The movie projector in my head stopped turning, the house lights went up, and I panicked. A different and far more interesting movie was now threaded into the projector. My mental theater was darkened once again and the new movie began to play. My cheeks burned and icy hands of fear closed around my throat as I watched that movie and realized the inescapable truth: it was smut! Actually, not just smut. The movie had interludes of another genre that I did not recognize at the time but would later learn is called a snuff film. But mostly it was just smut, and though I tried to splice in some smut that was at least regulation heterosexual smut, the projector was spinning too fast, was spinning out of control in fact, lights projecting frame after frame, reel after reel of male single-sex porn. I would still get into heaven—I was a Baptist, after all—but I would never be able to hold my head up and join in the celestial chorus of praise gathered around the Almighty. It was unlikely that I would even be able to take my place in the modest but pleasant suburbs at the edge of town. No, I would be living in a pup tent in the woods surrounding heaven, permitted to come into town only on market days and then only long enough to be hooted at before I slunk away in shame.



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Thus began my prayer campaign to Jesus for the miracle that would change Pinocchio into a real boy. I had prayed for that miracle before, of course, but never so earnestly as I did now. I wanted to be like the other boys. Homosexuality at that time was still the sin that dared not speak its name and so was rarely mentioned, beyond the occasional “sissy” that I heard whispered as I walked down the halls at school in my Cougar Patrol sash. The bullies were circling but dared not say anything out loud or lay a finger on me. They knew perfectly well that the faculty and the administration were looking out for the reigning champion of the honor roll.

It also helped that the other members of the Cougar Patrol were not only the star athletes of the Ewing Park Cougars but held places on the student council and the honor roll themselves. My relationship with them was complicated, but it was generally understood that an elite needs artists and intellectuals among its number. In the social pecking order, I therefore was assigned a position on the fringes of the ruling class. I was easily the most visible future homosexual at school, but my fame protected me instead of making me a target. I was safe but isolated, respected but reviled. What child in that position would not pray nightly to Jesus for the miracle that would change him into a normal boy like everyone else? After all, the Bible promises us that all things are possible in Jesus. Sunday after Sunday, thundered from the pulpit were heartwarming stories of murderers and drunks who were snatched from the jaws of hell by the redeeming power of the Lamb of God. At times it seemed a wonder they could keep the prisons full and

THE THOUSAND-PETALED LOTUS

the taverns open what with all the sinners leaping into the Everlasting Arms. There were no stories of reformed harlots or drug addicts or homosexuals since such things belonged to a demimonde too perverse to be mentioned in a church. But the implication was clear. If Jesus can make an honest man out of a lying, thieving, murdering drunkard, he can make a straight boy out of you. All things are possible with Jesus. I knew that if I died tomorrow, the movie of my thoughts that would be shown on Judgment Day would scald my soul. But if Jesus would turn me into a heterosexual, the movie at least would have a happy ending. I redoubled my prayers. I prayed nightly, daily, hourly for Jesus to change me into a real boy.



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