

The adventure had just begun. I had traveled out of state before: I had joined my grandparents on road trips to South Carolina and Texas, and I visited Kentucky regularly. On those trips, I rarely spoke to anyone except family, and I never noticed anything all that different. Napa was like a different country. In California, every day included a new adventure with my teenage cousins and their friends. During one trip we went to the Castro District of San Francisco so that, in the words of my older cousin Rachael, I could learn that gay people weren't out to molest me. Another day, we visited a winery. On yet another day, we helped at my cousin Nate's high school football practice. It was all very exciting. Everyone I met thought I sounded like I was from Kentucky. Of course, I kind of was from Kentucky. And I loved that people thought I had a funny accent. That said, it became clear to me that California really was something else. I'd visited Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Columbus, and Lexington. I'd spent a considerable amount of time in South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and even Arkansas. So why was California so different?

The answer, I'd learn, was the same hillbilly highway that brought Mamaw and Papaw from eastern Kentucky to southwest Ohio. Despite the topographical differences and the different regional economies of the South and the industrial Midwest, my travels had been confined largely to places where the people looked and acted like my family. We ate the same foods, watched the same sports, and practiced the same religion. That's why I felt so much kinship with those people at the courthouse: They were hillbilly transplants in one way or another, just like me.

Chapter 6

One of the questions I loathed, and that adults always asked, was whether I had any brothers or sisters. When you're a kid, you can't wave your hand, say, "It's complicated," and move on. And unless you're a particularly capable sociopath, dishonesty can only take you so far. So, for a time, I dutifully answered, walking people through the tangled web of familial relationships that I'd grown accustomed to. I had a biological half brother and half sister whom I never saw because my biological father had given me up for adoption. I had many stepbrothers and sisters by one measure, but only two if you limited the tally to the offspring of Mom's husband of the moment. Then there was my biological dad's wife, and she had at least one kid, so maybe I should count him, too. Sometimes I'd wax philosophical about the meaning of the word "sibling": Are the children of your mom's previous husbands still related to you? If so, what about the future children of your mom's previous husbands? By some metrics, I probably had about a dozen stepsiblings.

There was one person for whom the term "sibling" definitely applied: my sister, Lindsay. If any adjective ever preceded her in-

roduction, it was always one of pride: “my *full* sister, Lindsay; “my *whole* sister, Lindsay; “my *big* sister, Lindsay.” Lindsay was (and remains) the person I was proudest to know. The moment I learned that “half sister” had nothing to do with my affections and everything to do with the genetic nature of our relationship—that Lindsay, by virtue of having a different father, was just as much my half sister as people I’d never seen—remains one of the most devastating moments of my life. Mamaw told me this nonchalantly as I exited the shower one night before bedtime, and I screamed and wailed as if I’d just learned that my dog had died. I calmed down only after Mamaw relented and agreed that henceforth no one would ever refer to Lindsay as my “half sister” again.

Lindsay Leigh was five years older than I was, born just two months after Mom graduated from high school. I was obsessed with her, both in the way that all children adore their older siblings and in a way that was unique to our circumstances. Her heroism on my behalf was the stuff of legend. One time after she and I argued over a soft pretzel, leading Mom to drop me off in an empty parking lot to show Lindsay what life without me would look like, it was my sister’s fit of sorrow and rage that brought Mom back immediately. During explosive fights between Mom and whatever man she let into our home, it was Lindsay who withdrew to her bedroom to place a rescue call to Mamaw and Papaw. She fed me when I was hungry, changed my diaper when no one else did, and dragged me everywhere with her—even though, Mamaw and Aunt Wee told me, I weighed nearly as much as she did.

I always saw her as more adult than child. She never expressed her displeasure at her teenage boyfriends by storming off and slamming doors. When Mom worked late nights or otherwise

didn’t make it home, Lindsay ensured that we had something for dinner. I annoyed her, like all little brothers annoy their sisters, but she never yelled at me, screamed at me, or made me afraid of her. In one of my most shameful moments, I wrestled Lindsay to the ground for reasons I don’t remember. I was ten or eleven, which would have made her about fifteen, and though I realized then that I’d outgrown her in terms of strength, I continued to think there was nothing childlike about her. She was above it all, the “one true adult in the house,” as Papaw would say, and my first line of defense, even before Mamaw. She made dinner when she had to, did the laundry when no one else did, and rescued me from the backseat of that police cruiser. I depended on her so completely that I didn’t see Lindsay for what she was: a young girl, not yet old enough to drive a car, learning to fend for herself and her little brother at the same time.

That began to change the day our family decided to give Lindsay a shot at her dreams. Lindsay had always been a beautiful girl. When my friends and I ranked the world’s prettiest girls, I listed Lindsay first, just ahead of Demi Moore and Pam Anderson. Lindsay had learned of a modeling recruitment event at a Dayton hotel, so Mom, Mamaw, Lindsay, and I piled into Mamaw’s Buick and headed north. Lindsay was bursting with excitement, and I was, too. This was going to be her big break and, by extension, our whole family’s.

When we arrived at the hotel, a lady instructed us to follow signs to a giant ballroom and wait in line. The ballroom was perfectly tacky in that 1970s sort of way: ugly carpet, big chandeliers, and lighting just bright enough to prevent you from stumbling over your own feet. I wondered how any talent agent could ever appreciate my sister’s beauty. It was too damned dark.

Eventually we reached the front of the line, and the talent agent seemed optimistic about my sister. She said something about how cute she was and told her to go wait in another room. Surprisingly, she said that I was model material, too, and asked if I'd like to follow my sister and hear about our next step. I agreed enthusiastically.

After a little while in the holding room, Lindsay and I and the other selectees learned that we had made it to the next round, but another trial awaited us in New York City. The agency employees gave us brochures with more information and told us that we needed to RSVP within the next few weeks. On the way home, Lindsay and I were ecstatic. We were going to New York City to become famous models.

The fee for traveling to New York was hefty, and if someone had really wanted us as models, they likely would have paid for our audition. In hindsight, the cursory treatment they gave each individual—each “audition” was no longer than a few-sentence conversation—suggests that the whole event was more scam than talent search. But I don't know: Model audition protocol has never been my area of expertise.

What I do know is that our exuberance didn't survive the car ride. Mom began to worry aloud about the cost of the trip, causing Lindsay and me to bicker about which one of us should go (no doubt I was being a brat). Mom became progressively angrier and then snapped. What happened next was no surprise: There was a lot of screaming, some punching and driving, and then a stopped car on the side of the road, full of two sobbing kids. Mamaw intervened before things got out of hand, but it's a miracle we didn't crash and die: Mom driving and slapping the kids in the backseat; Mamaw on the passenger side, slapping

and screaming at Mom. That was why the car stopped—though Mom was a multitasker, this was too much. We drove home in silence after Mamaw explained that if Mom lost her temper again, Mamaw would shoot her in the face. That night we stayed at Mamaw's house.

I'll never forget Lindsay's face as she marched upstairs to bed. It wore the pain of a defeat known by only a person who experiences the highest high and the lowest low in a matter of minutes. She had been on the cusp of achieving a childhood dream; now she was just another teenage girl with a broken heart. Mamaw turned to retire to her couch, where she would watch *Law & Order*, read the Bible, and fall asleep. I stood in the narrow walkway that separated the living room from the dining room and asked Mamaw a question that had been on my mind since she ordered Mom to drive us home safely. I knew what she'd say, but I guess I just wanted reassurance. “Mamaw, does God love us?” She hung her head, gave me a hug, and began to cry.

The question wounded Mamaw because the Christian faith stood at the center of our lives, especially hers. We never went to church, except on rare occasions in Kentucky or when Mom decided that what we needed in our lives was religion. Nevertheless, Mamaw's was a deeply personal (albeit quirky) faith. She couldn't say “organized religion” without contempt. She saw churches as breeding grounds for perverts and money changers. And she hated what she called “the loud and proud”—people who wore their faith on their sleeve, always ready to let you know how pious they were. Still, she sent much of her spare income to churches in Jackson, Kentucky, especially those controlled by Reverend Donald Ison, an older man who bore a striking resemblance to the priest from *The Exorcist*.

By Mamaw's reckoning, God never left our side. He celebrated with us when times were good and comforted us when they weren't. During one of our many trips to Kentucky, Mamaw was trying to merge onto the highway after a brief stop for gas. She didn't pay attention to the signs, so we found ourselves headed the wrong way on a one-way exit ramp with angry motorists swerving out of our way. I was screaming in terror, but after a U-turn on a three-lane interstate, the only thing Mamaw said about the incident was "We're fine, goddammit. Don't you know Jesus rides in the car with me?"

The theology she taught was unsophisticated, but it provided a message I needed to hear. To coast through life was to squander my God-given talent, so I had to work hard. I had to take care of my family because Christian duty demanded it. I needed to forgive, not just for my mother's sake but for my own. I should never despair, for God had a plan.

Mamaw often told a parable: A young man was sitting at home when a terrible rainstorm began. Within hours, the man's house began to flood, and someone came to his door offering a ride to higher ground. The man declined, saying, "God will take care of me." A few hours later, as the waters engulfed the first floor of the man's home, a boat passed by, and the captain offered to take the man to safety. The man declined, saying, "God will take care of me." A few hours after that, as the man waited on his roof—his entire home flooded—a helicopter flew by, and the pilot offered transportation to dry land. Again the man declined, telling the pilot that God would care for him. Soon thereafter, the waters overcame the man, and as he stood before God in heaven, he protested his fate: "You promised that you'd help me so long as I was faithful." God replied, "I sent you a car, a boat, and a

helicopter. Your death is your own fault." God helps those who help themselves. This was the wisdom of the Book of Mamaw.

The fallen world described by the Christian religion matched the world I saw around me: one where a happy car ride could quickly turn to misery, one where individual misconduct rippled across a family's and a community's life. When I asked Mamaw if God loved us, I asked her to reassure me that this religion of ours could still make sense of the world we lived in. I needed reassurance of some deeper justice, some cadence or rhythm that lurked beneath the heartache and chaos.

Not long after Lindsay's childhood modeling dream went up in flames, I was in Jackson with Mamaw and my cousin Gail on August 2, my eleventh birthday. Late in the afternoon, Mamaw advised me to call Bob—still my legal father—because I hadn't heard from him yet. After we moved back to Middletown, he and Mom divorced, so it wasn't surprising that he rarely got in touch. But my birthday was obviously special, and I found it odd that he hadn't called. So I phoned and got the answering machine. A few hours later, I phoned once more with the same result, and I knew instinctively that I would never see Bob again.

Either because she felt bad for me or because she knew I loved dogs, Gail took me to the local pet store, where a brand-new litter of German shepherd puppies was on display. I desperately wanted one and had just enough birthday money to make the purchase. Gail reminded me that dogs were a lot of work and that my family (read: my mother) had a terrible history of getting dogs and then giving them away. When wisdom fell on deaf ears—"You're probably right, Gail, but they're sooooo cute!"—

authority kicked in: "Honey, I'm sorry, but I'm not letting you buy this dog." By the time we returned to Mamaw Blanton's house, I was more upset about the dog than about losing father number two.

I cared less about the fact that Bob was gone than about the disruption his departure would inevitably cause. He was just the latest casualty in a long line of failed paternal candidates. There was Steve, a soft-spoken man with a temperament to match. I used to pray that Mom would marry Steve because he was nice and had a good job. But they broke up, and she moved on to Chip, a local police officer. Chip was kind of a hillbilly himself: He loved cheap beer, country music, and catfish fishing, and we got along well until he, too, was gone.

One of the worst parts, honestly, was that Bob's departure would further complicate the tangled web of last names in our family. Lindsay was a Lewis (her dad's last name), Mom took the last name of whichever husband she was married to, Mamaw and Papaw were Vances, and all of Mamaw's brothers were Blantons. I shared a name with no one I really cared about (which bothered me already), and with Bob gone, explaining why my name was J.D. Hamel would require a few additional awkward moments. "Yeah, my legal father's last name is Hamel. You haven't met him because I don't see him. No, I don't know why I don't see him."

Of all the things that I hated about my childhood, nothing compared to the revolving door of father figures. To her credit, Mom had avoided abusive or neglectful partners, and I never felt mistreated by any of the men she brought into our home. But I hated the disruption. And I hated how often these boyfriends would walk out of my life just as I'd begun to like them. Lindsay,

with the benefit of age and wisdom, viewed all of the men skeptically. She knew that at some point they'd be gone. With Bob's departure, I had learned the same lesson.

Mom brought these men into our lives for the right reasons. She often wondered aloud whether Chip or Bob or Steve made good "father figures." She would say: "He takes you fishing, which is really good" or "It's important to learn something about masculinity from someone closer to your age." When I heard her screaming at one of them, or weeping on the floor after an especially intense argument, or when I saw her mired in despair after a breakup, I felt guilty that she was going through this for my sake. After all, I thought, Papaw was plenty good as a father figure. I promised her after each breakup that we would be okay or that we'd get over this together or (echoing Mamaw) that we didn't need any damned men. I know Mom's motives were not entirely selfless: She (like all of us) was motivated by the desire for love and companionship. But she was looking out for us, too.

The road to hell, however, is paved with good intentions. Caught between various dad candidates, Lindsay and I never learned how a man should treat a woman. Chip may have taught me how to tie a fishing hook, but I learned little else about what masculinity required of me other than drinking beer and screaming at a woman when she screamed at you. In the end, the only lesson that took was that you can't depend on people. "I learned that men will disappear at the drop of a hat," Lindsay once said. "They don't care about their kids; they don't provide; they just disappear, and it's not that hard to make them go."

Mom perhaps sensed that Bob was regretting his decision to take on an additional child, because one day she called me into the living room to speak on the phone with Don Bowman, my

biological father. It was a short but memorable conversation. He asked if I remembered wanting to have a farm with horses and cows and chickens, and I answered that I did. He asked if I remembered my siblings—Cory and Chelsea—and I did a little bit, so I said, “Kind of.” He asked if I’d like to see him again.

I knew little about my biological father and barely recalled my life before Bob adopted me. I knew that Don had abandoned me because he didn’t want to pay child support (or so Mom said). I knew that he was married to a woman named Cheryl, that he was tall, and that people thought I looked like him. And I knew that he was, in Mamaw’s words, a “Holy Roller.” That was the word she used for charismatic Christians who, she claimed, “handled snakes and screamed and wailed in church.” This was enough to pique my curiosity: With little religious training, I was desperate for some exposure to a real church. I asked Mom if I could see him, and she agreed, so in the same summer that my legal father walked out of my life, my biological one walked back in. Mom had come full circle: Having cycled through a number of men in an effort to find me a father, she had settled on the original candidate.

Don Bowman had much more in common with Mom’s side of the family than I expected. His father (and my grandfather), Don C. Bowman, also migrated from eastern Kentucky to southwest Ohio for work. After marrying and starting a family, my grandfather Bowman died suddenly, leaving behind two small children and a young wife. My grandmother remarried, and Dad spent much of his childhood in eastern Kentucky with his grandparents.

More than any other person, Dad understood what Kentucky meant to me, because it meant the same thing to him. His mom

remarried early, and though her second husband was a good man, he was also very firm and an outsider—even the best stepparents take some getting used to. In Kentucky, among his people and with plenty of space, Dad could be himself. I felt the same way. There were two kinds of people: those whom I’d behave around because I wanted to impress them and those whom I’d behave around to avoid embarrassing myself. The latter people were outsiders, and Kentucky had none of them.

In many ways, Dad’s life project was rebuilding for himself what he once had in Kentucky. When I first visited him, Dad had a modest house on a beautiful plot of land, fourteen acres in total. There was a medium-sized pond stocked with fish, a couple of fields for cows and horses, a barn, and a chicken coop. Every morning the kids would run to the chicken coop and grab the morning’s haul of eggs—usually seven or eight, a perfect number for a family of five. During the day, we capered around the property with a dog in tow, caught frogs, and chased rabbits. It was exactly what Dad had done as a child, and exactly what I did with Mamaw in Kentucky.

I remember running through a field with Dad’s collie, Dannie, a beautiful, bedraggled creature so gentle that he once caught a baby rabbit and carried it in his mouth, unharmed, to a human for inspection. I have no idea why I was running, but we both collapsed from exhaustion and lay in the grass, Dannie’s head on my chest and my eyes staring at the blue sky. I don’t know that I had ever felt so content, so completely unworried about life and its stresses.

Dad had built a home with an almost jarring serenity. He and his wife argued, but they rarely raised their voices at each other and never resorted to the brutal insults that were commonplace

in Mom's house. None of their friends drank, not even socially. Even though they believed in corporal punishment, it was never doled out excessively or combined with verbal abuse—spanking was methodical and anger-free. My younger brother and sister clearly enjoyed their lives, even though they lacked pop music or R-rated movies.

What little I knew of Dad's character during his marriage to Mom came mostly secondhand. Mamaw, Aunt Wee, Lindsay, and Mom all told varying degrees of the same story: that Dad was mean. He yelled a lot and sometimes hit Mom. Lindsay told me that, as a child, I had a peculiarly large and misshapen head, and she attributed that to a time when she saw Dad push Mom aggressively.

Dad denies ever physically abusing anyone, including Mom. I suspect that they were physically abusive to each other in the way that Mom and most of her men were: a bit of pushing, some plate throwing, but nothing more. What I do know is that between the end of his marriage with Mom and the beginning of his marriage with Cheryl—which occurred when I was four—Dad had changed for the better. He credits a more serious involvement with his faith. In this, Dad embodied a phenomenon social scientists have observed for decades: Religious folks are much happier. Regular church attendees commit fewer crimes, are in better health, live longer, make more money, drop out of high school less frequently, and finish college more frequently than those who don't attend church at all.¹⁶ MIT economist Jonathan Gruber even found that the relationship was *causal*: It's not just that people who happen to live successful lives also go to church, it's that church seems to promote good habits.

In his religious habits, Dad lived the stereotype of a culturally conservative Protestant with Southern roots, even though the stereotype is mostly inaccurate. Despite their reputation for clinging to their religion, the folks back home resembled Mamaw more than Dad: deeply religious but without any attachment to a real church community. Indeed, the only conservative Protestants I knew who attended church regularly were my dad and his family.¹⁷ In the middle of the Bible Belt, active church attendance is actually quite low.¹⁸

Despite its reputation, Appalachia—especially northern Alabama and Georgia to southern Ohio—has far lower church attendance than the Midwest, parts of the Mountain West, and much of the space between Michigan and Montana. Oddly enough, we think we attend church more than we actually do. In a recent Gallup poll, Southerners and Midwesterners reported the highest rates of church attendance in the country. Yet *actual* church attendance is much lower in the South.

This pattern of deception has to do with cultural pressure. In southwestern Ohio, where I was born, both the Cincinnati and Dayton metropolitan regions have very low rates of church attendance, about the same as ultra-liberal San Francisco. No one I know in San Francisco would feel ashamed to admit that they don't go to church. (In fact, some of them might feel ashamed to admit that they do.) Ohio is the polar opposite. Even as a kid, I'd lie when people asked if I attended church regularly. According to Gallup, I wasn't alone in feeling that pressure.

The juxtaposition is jarring: Religious institutions remain a positive force in people's lives, but in a part of the country slammed by the decline of manufacturing, joblessness, addiction, and broken homes, church attendance has fallen off. Dad's

church offered something desperately needed by people like me. For alcoholics, it gave them a community of support and a sense that they weren't fighting addiction alone. For expectant mothers, it offered a free home with job training and parenting classes. When someone needed a job, church friends could either provide one or make introductions. When Dad faced financial troubles, his church banded together and purchased a used car for the family. In the broken world I saw around me—and for the people struggling in that world—religion offered tangible assistance to keep the faithful on track.

Dad's faith attracted me even though I learned early on that it had played a significant role in the adoption that led to our long separation. While I really enjoyed the time we spent together, the pain of that adoption remained, and we spoke often of how and why it happened in the first place. For the first time, I heard his side of the story: that the adoption had nothing to do with a desire to avoid child support and that, far from simply "giving me away," as Mom and Mamaw had said, Dad had hired multiple lawyers and done everything within reason to keep me.

He worried that the custody war was destroying me. When I saw him during visitations before the adoption, I would hide under the bed for the first few hours, fearful that he would kidnap me and never let me see Mamaw again. Seeing his son in such a frightened state led him to reconsider his approach. Mamaw hated him, a fact I knew firsthand; but Dad said her hatred stemmed from the early days of his marriage to Mom, when he was far from a perfect husband. Sometimes when he came to pick me up, Mamaw would stand on the porch and stare at him, unblinking, clutching a hidden weapon. When he spoke to the court's child psychiatrist, he learned that I had begun acting out

at school and was showing signs of emotional problems. (This I know to be true. After a few weeks in kindergarten, I was held back for a year. Two decades later, I ran into the teacher who had endured my first foray into kindergarten. She told me that I'd behaved so badly that she had nearly quit the profession—three weeks into her first year of teaching. That she remembered me twenty years later says a lot about my misbehavior.)

Eventually, Dad told me, he asked God for three signs that an adoption was in my best interest. Those signs apparently appeared, and I became the legal son of Bob, a man I'd known for barely a year. I don't doubt the truth of this account, and though I empathize with the obvious difficulty of the decision, I have never felt comfortable with the idea of leaving your child's fate to signs from God.

Yet this was a minor blip, all things considered. Just knowing that he had cared about me erased a lot of childhood pain. On balance, I loved my dad and his church. I'm not sure if I liked the structure or if I just wanted to share in something that was important to him—both, I suppose—but I became a devoted convert. I devoured books about young-earth creationism, and joined online chat rooms to challenge scientists on the theory of evolution. I learned about millennialist prophecy and convinced myself that the world would end in 2007. I even threw away my Black Sabbath CDs. Dad's church encouraged all of this because it doubted the wisdom of secular science and the morality of secular music.

Despite the lack of a legal relationship, I began spending a lot of time with Dad. I visited him on most holidays and spent every other weekend at his house. Though I loved seeing aunts, uncles, and cousins who hadn't been part of my life in years,

the basic segregation of my two lives remained. Dad avoided Mom's side of the family, and vice versa. Lindsay and Mamaw appreciated Dad's new role in my life, but they continued to distrust him. To Mamaw, Dad was the "sperm donor" who had abandoned me at a critical juncture. Although I, too, resented Dad for the past, Mamaw's stubbornness didn't make things any easier.

Still, my relationship with Dad continued to develop, and so did my relationship with his church. The downside of his theology was that it promoted a certain segregation from the outside world. I couldn't listen to Eric Clapton at Dad's house—not because the lyrics were inappropriate but because Eric Clapton was influenced by demonic forces. I'd heard people joke that if you played Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" backward, you'd hear some evil incantation, but a member of Dad's church spoke about the Zeppelin myth as if it were actually true.

These were quirks, and at first I understood them as little more than strict rules that I could either comply with or get around. Yet I was a curious kid, and the deeper I immersed myself in evangelical theology, the more I felt compelled to mistrust many sectors of society. Evolution and the Big Bang became ideologies to confront, not theories to understand. Many of the sermons I heard spent as much time criticizing other Christians as anything else. Theological battle lines were drawn, and those on the other side weren't just wrong about biblical interpretation, they were somehow unchristian. I admired my uncle Dan above all other men, but when he spoke of his Catholic acceptance of evolutionary theory, my admiration became tinged with suspicion. My new faith had put me on the lookout for heretics. Good friends who interpreted parts of the Bible differently were

bad influences. Even Mamaw fell from favor because her religious views didn't conflict with her affinity for Bill Clinton.

As a young teenager thinking seriously for the first time about what I believed and why I believed it, I had an acute sense that the walls were closing in on "real" Christians. There was talk about the "war on Christmas"—which, as far as I could tell, consisted mainly of ACLU activists suing small towns for nativity displays. I read a book called *Persecution* by David Limbaugh about the various ways that Christians were discriminated against. The Internet was abuzz with talk of New York art displays that featured images of Christ or the Virgin Mary covered in feces. For the first time in my life, I felt like a persecuted minority.

All of this talk about Christians who weren't Christian enough, secularists indoctrinating our youth, art exhibits insulting our faith, and persecution by the elites made the world a scary and foreign place. Take gay rights, a particularly hot topic among conservative Protestants. I'll never forget the time I convinced myself that I was gay. I was eight or nine, maybe younger, and I stumbled upon a broadcast by some fire-and-brimstone preacher. The man spoke about the evils of homosexuals, how they had infiltrated our society, and how they were all destined for hell absent some serious repenting. At the time, the only thing I knew about gay men was that they preferred men to women. This described me perfectly: I disliked girls, and my best friend in the world was my buddy Bill. *Oh no, I'm going to hell.*

I broached this issue with Mamaw, confessing that I was gay and I was worried that I would burn in hell. She said, "Don't be a fucking idiot, how would you know that you're gay?" I explained my thought process. Mamaw chuckled and seemed to consider how she might explain to a boy my age. Finally she asked, "J.D.,

do you want to suck dicks?" I was flabbergasted. Why would someone want to do that? She repeated herself, and I said, "Of course not!" "Then," she said, "you're not gay. And even if you did want to suck dicks, that would be okay. God would still love you." That settled the matter. Apparently I didn't have to worry about being gay anymore. Now that I'm older, I recognize the profundity of her sentiment: Gay people, though unfamiliar, threatened nothing about Mamaw's being. There were more important things for a Christian to worry about.

In my new church, on the other hand, I heard more about the gay lobby and the war on Christmas than about any particular character trait that a Christian should aspire to have. I recalled that moment with Mamaw as an instance of secularist thinking rather than an act of Christian love. Morality was defined by not participating in this or that particular social malady: the gay agenda, evolutionary theory, Clintonian liberalism, or extramarital sex. Dad's church required so little of me. It was easy to be a Christian. The only affirmative teachings I remember drawing from church were that I shouldn't cheat on my wife and that I shouldn't be afraid to preach the gospel to others. So I planned a life of monogamy and tried to convert other people, even my seventh-grade science teacher, who was Muslim.

The world lurched toward moral corruption—slouching toward Gomorrah. The Rapture was coming, we thought. Apocalyptic imagery filled the weekly sermons and the *Left Behind* books (one of the best-selling fiction series of all time, which I devoured). Folks would discuss whether the Antichrist was already alive and, if so, which world leader it might be. Someone told me that he expected I'd marry a very pretty girl if the Lord hadn't come by the time I reached marrying age. The *End Times*

were the natural finish for a culture sliding so quickly toward the abyss.

Other authors have noted the terrible retention rates of evangelical churches and blamed precisely that sort of theology for their decline.¹⁹ I didn't appreciate it as a kid. Nor did I realize that the religious views I developed during my early years with Dad were sowing the seeds for an outright rejection of the Christian faith. What I did know is that, despite its downsides, I loved both my new church and the man who introduced me to it. The timing, it turned out, was impeccable: The next months would bring a desperate need for both a heavenly father and an earthly one.