

AMERICAN MEN

JORDAN
RITTER
CONN



“A masterclass in
empathetic storytelling
that brings us into the lives
of real men grappling
with the silent pressures
of masculinity.”

— GILBERT KING,
PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING
AUTHOR OF *DEVIL IN THE GROVE*

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INTRODUCTION

Every Saturday night when I was in high school, I sat in a room with a half dozen other teenage boys, and I announced whether I'd made it through the week without masturbating. Usually, the answer was no. I was seventeen and impossibly horny. But whenever I could say yes, I felt like I was the strongest man who'd ever lived.

I understand that this ritual may seem odd, at least if you've never spent much time in conservative Christian circles. But my parents raised me to love Jesus. And what I learned, from the Christian schools I attended as a child in Atlanta and a teen in Philadelphia, the youth groups and the church camps where I spent weeks every summer, was that the best way for a teenage boy to love Jesus was to never ever lay a finger on his own penis.

There were exceptions, of course. Peeing. Showering, though you should make sure to scrub quickly and move on. But other forms of touching led inevitably to erections, and erections left you vulnerable to the siren's call of masturbation, and that, along with accepting hand jobs or blow jobs or, god forbid, sexual intercourse outside of marriage, was among the gravest of imaginable sins.

This small group of guys from my small Christian school gathered each Saturday night for "Bible Study." Rather than *studying* the *Bible*, though, we asked each other a list of questions, confessing how we'd sinned and advising each other about how to be better. I only remember a few of the questions. Did we lie? Did we gossip? Did we disrespect our parents or struggle with pride? Did we objectify or demean any girls or women? But all of those came after the first question: *So, uh, any of you guys jack off?*

I barely remember anything specific that was said. But I remember my desperate striving. I remember the torture of being left home alone with high-speed internet; the pain of beating my parents to the mailbox to grab the *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issue but then heroically throwing it straight in the trash; the shivering while standing in yet another cold shower, where

I waited for sinful urges to subside. And I remember how I learned to fear my own body.

That particular lesson wasn't restricted to the Bible Study. Everywhere I turned, then and for years to come, the same message: Your body is designed for destruction. I knew boys like me who were abusers. I knew boys like me who had been abused by men. In locker rooms and on bus rides to basketball games, I heard jokes about rape that sounded like they might not really be jokes. Sometimes I laughed and felt guilty. Sometimes I laughed and felt nothing at all. Puritanical theology taught me that my flesh was dangerous, and everywhere I looked, the world confirmed it. I became terrified of what I might do if I indulged the faintest desire. So I took the cold showers. I did everything I could to show up to that Bible Study each week and announce that I hadn't given in to temptation.

You'll be shocked to learn that as an adult I have spent thousands of dollars on therapy. Apparently it's difficult to spend years learning to hate and fear your teenage body, and then try to love that same body as a grown man. And yet, no matter how much I now disagree with the framework of those conversations at Bible Study, I still recall those Saturday nights as some of the best of my life. The strange thing about forcing yourself to confess your sins to your peers is that it forces you into the kinds of intimate conversations that young men so rarely have. Once we finished talking about our masturbation habits, we moved on to all the other ways we'd struggled during that week. We talked about our anger and our insecurities, our futures and our fathers. We pushed each other to treat our mothers and sisters and girlfriends with greater respect and care. Something was unlocked by the directness of these weekly conversations. We grew into a group of young men who actually cared about each other's inner lives. Perhaps more importantly, we gave each other permission to care about our own.

When I decided to become a journalist a few years later, I attended school in a place that promised the exact *opposite* cultural experience of my evangelical upbringing: Berkeley, California. On the first day of class, my tiny, terrifying professor told us to take the train into San Francisco's Mission District, interview ten people about their lives, and write a paragraph about each one by the end of the day. This presented a problem: I was afraid to talk to strangers. My entire life, I had been debilitatingly shy. I