Imagine the terror and exhilaration of a first sexual experience in a church where you could be caught at any moment. In Cigarettes & Wine, this is where we meet an unnamed teenage narrator in a small southern town trying to make sense of their own bisexuality, gender variance, and emerging adulthood. When our narrator leaves the church, we watch their teen years unfold alongside one first love wrestling with his own sexuality and his desire for a relationship with God, and another first love seeking to find herself as she moves away from town. Through the narrator’s eyes, we also encounter a newly arrived neighbor who appears to be an all American boy, but has secrets and pain hidden behind his charming smile and athletic ability, and their oldest friend who is on the verge of romantic, artistic, and sexual transformations of her own. Along the way, these friends confront questions about gender and sexuality, violence and substance abuse, and the intricacies of love and selfhood in the shadow of churches, families, and a small southern town in the 1990's. Alongside academic and media portrayals that generally only acknowledge binary sexual and gender options, Cigarettes & Wine offers an illustration of non-binary sexual and gender experience, and provides a first person view of the ways the people, places, and narratives we encounter shape who we become. While fictional, Cigarettes & Wine is loosely grounded in hundreds of formal and informal interviews with LGBTQ people in the south as well as years of research into intersections of sexualities, gender, religion, and health. Cigarettes & Wine can be read purely for pleasure or used as supplemental reading in a variety of courses in sexualities, gender, relationships, families, religion, the life course, narratives, the American south, identities, culture, intersectionality, and arts-based research.

"I suspect that many people who have even unrecognized ambivalences about sexual and gender binaries might find in it an illuminating reflection of their own paths. This fast-paced, introspective romp through high school and beyond keeps the pages turning with love, sex, and an understanding grandma." Dawne Moon, Ph.D., Marquette University, and author of God, Sex and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies

"Cigarettes and Wine is entertaining, thrilling, heartbreaking, while also a bit educational about the often invisible members of the LGBTQ community – bi and pan sexual, trans and gender non-conforming, and polyamorous folks. You won't want to put it down!" Eric Anthony Grollman, Ph.D., University of Richmond and editor of Conditionally Accepted at Inside Higher Ed

J. E. Sumerau is an assistant professor and director of applied sociology at the University of Tampa. Zir writing and research focuses on the Intersections of sexualities, gender, religion, and health in the interpersonal and historical experiences of sexual, gender, and religious minorities.
Cigarettes & Wine
The Social Fictions series emerges out of the arts-based research movement. The series includes full-length fiction books that are informed by social research but written in a literary/artistic form (novels, plays, and short story collections). Believing there is much to learn through fiction, the series only includes works written entirely in the literary medium adapted. Each book includes an academic introduction that explains the research and teaching that informs the book as well as how the book can be used in college courses. The books are underscored with social science or other scholarly perspectives and intended to be relevant to the lives of college students—to tap into important issues in the unique ways that artistic or literary forms can.

Please email queries to pleavy7@aol.com

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Cigarettes & Wine

J. E. Sumerau
ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
CIGARETTES & WINE

“With same-sex marriage rights having been ruled constitutional, people who differ from the binary gender norm are finding new ways to communicate the countless ways in which reality challenges simplistic gender stereotypes. To some observers, this seems a nightmare of terrifying disorder. To others, it is a moment for true, even sacred, liberation. Still others won’t know what to make of it at all. This small-town coming-of-age novel might help people anywhere along this spectrum to understand what it is like to live where navigating others’ conceptions of masculinity and femininity is at once a necessary survival skill and an obstacle to self-understanding. In fact, I suspect that many people who have even unrecognized ambivalences about sexual and gender binaries might find in it an illuminating reflection of their own paths. This fast-paced, introspective romp through high school and beyond keeps the pages turning with love, sex, and an understanding grandma.”

– Dawne Moon, Ph.D., Marquette University and author of God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies

“Weeks after reading Cigarettes & Wine, I’m still having a hard time believing it is a work of fiction. The characters feel so real in their emotions, interactions, complexities, and flaws that I assumed the author had simply done a good job of recounting experiences from zir own life. The characters are people I would want to know in real life, their experiences are the kind I would become engrossed in as a friend. When I finished the book, I was disappointed that my time as an observer in their lives had come to an end. Cigarettes & Wine is entertaining, thrilling, heartbreaking, while also a bit educational about the often invisible members of the LGBTQ community – bi and pan sexual, trans and gender non-conforming, and polyamorous folks. You won’t want to put it down!”

– Eric Anthony Grollman, Ph.D., University of Richmond and Editor of ConditionallyAccepted.com
“J Sumerau’s novel is a funny, painful, powerful exploration of identity in the rural American South. Grounded both in Sumerau’s personal experience and zir extensive research in gender, religion, and sexualities, the novel depicts the complex processes involved in existing and connecting with others in social settings that are at once hidden and highly visible, and in which the risk of exposure of multiple kinds creates an ever-present structural force that shapes the narrator’s developing identity. Written from a first-person perspective that allows the reader to envision zirself in the narrator’s shoes, *Cigarettes & Wine* provides a fantastic teaching tool, addressing myriad issues related to inequalities and identities.”
– Brandy Simula, Ph.D., Emory University

“*Cigarettes & Wine* offers a humanizing look into an adolescent’s journey through desire, love, and discovering their place in the world. A bold and brave contribution to the discipline, *Cigarettes & Wine* is an exemplary model for coupling storytelling and Sociology. A captivating read for all those studying gender and sexuality and for anyone interested in a coming of age narrative of a gender and sexually nonconforming individual navigating a heteronormative world. Much praise to J Sumerau for what can best be described as a one-of-a-kind narrative of pain and passion.”
– Katie Acosta, Ph.D., Georgia State University

“This wonderful novel uplifts as it challenges us to consider the invisible lives of queer and bisexual working class teens living and loving in the Evangelical South of the 1990s. Nostalgic, joyous, painful, and raw, *Cigarettes & Wine* strips away the shiny veneer of the coming-of-age novel and delivers powerful lessons about sexuality, gender, class, and youth. Sumerau’s characters inspire, reminding us of the best that can exist in people even in the worst of circumstances. *Cigarettes & Wine* is a valuable contribution to social science fiction, which may prove invaluable in classes focused on gender, sexualities, class, and the ways our social experiences influence the people we become.”
– Katherine McCabe, MA, Doctoral Candidate and Instructor, University of Illinois Chicago
“In my classes, I seek to emotionally engage students with the powerful ways of knowing sociology offers for everyday life, reflexivity, and social change. Unfortunately, standard textbooks typically fall entirely short in this regard, and often leave many marginalized communities and experiences unrepresented. On the other hand, *Cigarettes & Wine* is an exceptional example of how evocative, captivating, accessible, and inclusive storytelling can and should be used to promote sociological lessons for students far beyond classrooms. It is quite difficult to think of a course where I would not incorporate this work as it speaks to so many topics of great importance to sociologists – gender, sexualities, religion, relationships, families, and emotion to name just a few. What I find most appealing is its raw and unapologetic honesty, as well as its unique privileging of complexity. Sumerau makes no use of ‘sunshine’ or ‘smoke,’ but instead constructs a ‘show-don’t-tell’ exhibition of the type of confusion and sense-making, love and loss, pain and endurance, life and death, support and abdication that may accompany ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ Queer youth in our society.”

– Maggie Cobb, Ph.D., University of Tampa

“*Cigarettes & Wine* is not just a marvelously written coming of age story, it is the bisexual, transgender coming of age story we so desperately need today. I cried my eyes out, laughed until my abdomen was sore, and felt connected to these characters in a way that transcends time and space. Be ready to feel the wind through your hair on the ride to the lake, the cool Carolina grass between your toes while walking through the park, and the very real pain of loss mixed with the joy of teenage discovery. As a bisexual, genderqueer scholar, *Cigarettes & Wine* feels like a fictional ethnography because I know these people, I’ve adventured with them, and had to say tearful goodbyes to a few of them along the way. An emotional rollercoaster, *Cigarettes & Wine* is a journey I recommend to any reader interested in Queer coming of age stories.”

– Lain A.B. Mathers, M.A., Doctoral Candidate and Instructor, University of Illinois Chicago
“Narrative is pedagogically timeless. A tool that allows strangers to relate by getting to know characters and context, stories help make abstract, academic concepts concrete. In Cigarettes & Wine, Sumerau enables anyone to step into the character’s shoes to better understand life, context, and coming of age in a society that labels non-mainstream beliefs, behaviors, and identities shameful or wrong. With humor and emotional candor, this story allows the reader to follow along with the challenges of growing up while trying to become the most authentic version of oneself, while also helping readers unfamiliar with scholarly approaches to gender and sexuality ascertain ideas on a human scale that they may have only read about in a detached way on the internet. Readers can’t help but empathize with the common struggles and desires for recognition and acceptance which are universal to us all. I believe this book is a useful addition for teachers or seekers alike who wish to expand their horizons beyond the constrained categorizations embedded in society to the larger multifaceted and nonconforming liminal hues of humanity.”

– Sarrah Conn, Ph.D., Hillsborough Community College

“Cigarettes & Wine is an unflinching account of coming into one’s gender and sexuality at the intersection of curiosity, pleasure and religion. It is an honest take on the ways we relate to others, sexually and emotionally, that would benefit students across disciplines like Women’s Studies, Sexuality Studies and Sociology. By reading Cigarettes & Wine, marginalized students would get an important opportunity to see themselves in text and others a chance to learn about bisexual and non-binary people that mainstream LGBTQ efforts refuse to prioritize in media and scholarship.”

– Simone Kolysh, M.A., M.P.H., Doctoral Candidate and Instructor, City University of New York
To those who embody sexual and gender fluidity in a world that seeks to erase us, and especially to Xan for continuously inspiring me to do the same even when it hurts
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Imagine the terror and exhilaration of a first sexual experience in a church where you could be caught at any moment.

In Cigarettes & Wine, this is where we meet an unnamed teenage narrator in a small southern town trying to make sense of their own bisexuality, gender variance, and emerging adulthood. When our narrator leaves the church, we watch their teenage years unfold alongside one first love wrestling with his own sexuality and his desire for a relationship with God, and another first love seeking to find her self as she moves away from town. Through the narrator’s eyes, we also encounter a newly arrived neighbor who appears to be an all American boy, but has secrets and pain hidden behind his charming smile and athletic ability, and their oldest friend who is on the verge of romantic, artistic, and sexual transformations of her own. Along the way, these friends and others they encounter confront questions about gender and sexuality, violence and substance abuse, and the intricacies of love and selfhood in the shadow of churches, families, and a small southern town in the 1990s. Together with the narrator, we walk with them through celebrations and heartaches on the way to adulthood.

Although written as a first-person narrative that allows readers to imagine themselves in the shoes of the narrator, Cigarettes & Wine is a novel about relationships and intersections; how the people, places, and stories we encounter in our lives shape the people we become, and the complex ways gender, sexuality, age, religion, region, violence, and broader social norms shape identities, relationships, and experiences. As in life, the themes of relationships and intersections permeate the events captured in the following pages. Cigarettes & Wine offers a view into the ways varied intersections and relationships shape and shift the life course over time. It also provides a first person view of the ways churches, families, friends, lovers, and broader social norms influence the efforts of young people seeking to find their place in the world.
Cigarettes & Wine also presents realistic explorations of bisexual and transgender experience all too rarely available in contemporary media or academic materials. Alongside academic and media portrayals of the world that generally only notice binary sexual and gender options, Cigarettes & Wine delivers a reminder that non-binary sexual and gender options exist, and introduces readers to some of the conflicts unique to non-binary sexual and gender minorities as well as those shared with other sexual (i.e., gay and lesbian) and gender (i.e., women) minorities in contemporary American society. Especially at a time when even college professors sometimes struggle with topics related to gender and sexual fluidity, Cigarettes & Wine supplies readers with a chance to view the world, society, the American south, teenage experience, relationships, and love through the eyes of a non-binary narrator. Readers seeking more information on these subjects may also want to check out, for example, https://bisexual.org/home/ for information on the bisexuality spectrum and http://nonbinary.org/wiki/Main_Page for information on non-binary gender identities.

While entirely fictional, Cigarettes & Wine is grounded in my own personal experience as a bisexual (on the pansexual end of the spectrum), genderqueer (formerly identified as a cross-dresser then as trans) person raised in a small South Carolina town. It is also built upon years of ethnographic, auto-ethnographic, historical and statistical research I have done concerning intersections of sexualities, gender, religion, and health in the United States, and hundreds of formal and informal interviews I have conducted – professionally and for personal interest – with bisexual (across the spectrum), transgender and non-binary (across the spectrum), lesbian, gay, asexual, heterosexual, intersex, poly, kink, cisgender and Queer identified people who span the religious-nonreligious spectrum and were raised all over the world. Since stories – both fictional and non-fictional – are often powerful pedagogical tools for stimulating reflection and discussion about even the most challenging topics, I crafted this novel as a way for readers to step into the shoes of a non-binary person, and in so doing, hopefully acquire a starting point for discussion and understanding of sexual and gender complexity in contemporary society.
For me, *Cigarettes & Wine* is a pedagogical text blending my artistic and research endeavors in a manner that has, throughout my career thus far, been incredibly effective in classrooms. In fact, the novel itself developed out of conversations in my own classrooms wherein students – in response to stories I use from my own life and the lives of others I study to illustrate concepts – often suggested I should write a novel so more people would have access to such perspectives within and beyond classrooms. Further, it developed from my own recognition of the ways such stories could have been useful to people like me growing up in a world where explaining bisexual and transgender existence – even to fellow Ph.D. holders – is an exhausting necessity. As such, *Cigarettes & Wine* may be used as an educational tool for people seeking to better understand growing numbers of openly bisexual and transgender people; as a supplemental reading for courses across disciplines dealing with gender, sexualities, relationships, families, religions, the life course, narratives, the American south, identities, culture, and/or intersectionality; or it can, of course, be read entirely for pleasure.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I was a kid, I dreamed that one day I would write and publish a novel. To accomplish such a dream, however, requires the help and influence of many people willing to take a chance on a work like this one. I am eternally grateful to each of these people, and especially a subset of them who played important roles in bringing *Cigarettes & Wine* to fruition.

Thank you to Patricia Leavy, Peter de Liefde, Jolanda Karada, Paul Chambers, Robert van Gameren, Edwin Bakker, and everyone else at Sense Publishers and the *Social Fictions* series for your faith in me, your willingness to support creativity, and your invaluable guidance throughout this process. I would also like to thank Shalen Lowell for the considerable assistance and support throughout the submission process. I cannot overstate how much the efforts and support of all of you means to me.

Thank you especially to my life partner Xan Nowakowski for giving me the courage to write this novel in the first place, and walking by my side as I completed it and sent it out for consideration. This book would not exist without your inspiration, guidance, and faith, and I will never be able to thank you enough for what your support and encouragement means to me.

I would also like to thank Lain Mathers, Kate McCabe, Shay Phillips, and Eric Anthony Grollman for providing constructive comments and insights throughout this process, and for being willing to listen to me talk about this project unceasingly while I was writing, editing, and revising it. There is no way for me to adequately express how important your efforts have been to me.

I would also like to thank two people I have never met. This novel emerged as I began listening to the music of Amanda Shires and Jason Isbell, and their records played on a loop throughout the writing, editing, and revising of the novel. As I have written elsewhere, music often fuels my creative and scholarly work, and in this case, their musical stories about life in the south provided part of the fuel for my
own construction of southern life through the eyes of a bisexual and gender fluid teenager in South Carolina.

Finally, this novel would not be possible without the years of research I have done on sexualities, gender, religion, and health. I have had the privilege of interviewing and observing so many wonderful bisexual, transgender, non-binary, lesbian, gay, intersex, poly, kink, asexual, and otherwise Queer people formally and informally over the years, and many of their experiences find voice throughout this novel. I would thus like to thank all of them both for sharing their stories with researchers like me, and for being role models to many of us navigating sexual and gender fluidity and difference in contemporary society.
CHAPTER 1

We were supposed to be in our weekly Bible Study. We were supposed to be learning about Jesus. We were supposed to be surrounded by other thirteen-year-olds dressed like adults holding Bibles and waiting patiently for the weekly lesson to end. We were supposed to be finishing off the snacks that were always in the larger room before we went into the smaller rooms for the lesson of the week. We were supposed to be taking turns going to the bathroom – otherwise known as finding excuses to leave the room – while the lesson of the week unfolded between the periods of social engagement at the beginning and end of Sunday school.

We were not, however, supposed to be in the little store room on the first floor where they stored the communion wine we did not yet realize was not actually wine. We were not supposed to even know about this particular room I don’t think, but we found it one night roaming around the buildings when our usual private spot – the left side of the church library where all the old books no one ever noticed went to die – was occupied for some reason. Or maybe the library was closed that evening. Or maybe we just got bored with the library. I cannot seem to recall for certain what led us to roam around the buildings one evening three weeks before that fateful Sunday, but in any case we found the storeroom with the not really wine that evening and added it to the list of places young people could be alone when we were sent to church for one or another of a collection of social engagements.

In fact, our list had grown rather long over the years. There was the aforementioned left side of the library that was never occupied on Sunday nights when families ate dinner before evening church. There was the suite of rooms where the adults had Sunday school every week that appeared to be completely unmonitored the rest of the week, and actually contained comfortable chairs and sofas perfect for teen imaginations. We sought to see if our own little suite of Sunday school rooms would make a viable setting, but unfortunately it was locked when Sunday school was not in session. It was almost like
they didn’t trust us to use the space unless we were being spoon fed religious dogma. There were also many other nooks, crannies, and empty rooms located throughout the buildings at any time that was not Sunday morning between seven and noon, but the best by far was the baptismal area.

The baptismal area was located atop the sanctuary within the wall behind where the preacher stood for every sermon. Likely due to its use as a space for dunking people into magical water for a few seconds, it had both a little recessed pool and a perimeter surrounded by padded seating – or kneeling I guess – areas that were quite cozy and rather quiet. We would get together up there to discuss the latest Madonna or Guns N’ Roses record or the latest gossip at school. One of the more fascinating aspects of the place was that it was technically closed when not in use. As a result, there was a wood panel that slid across the opening, and created a kind of box that felt extra private. Crafted wooden walls, a tiny little pool, and a set of cushioned seats – I often thought my first sexual experience would and should take place at the holy site of baptism in my childhood church, but that was not the case.

Instead, there I was in a storeroom with the not really wine and sounds from a conversation in the hallway terrifying me to no end. Out in the hallway, one speaker who sounded a whole lot like the music minister at the church was explaining a passage in the Bible where Jesus turns water into wine. Instinctively, my companion and I looked at the boxes of wine wondering if we were about to be visited at any moment. What we could not know at the time – we would find out 45 minutes later in the late worship service – was that the story about the wine had been the centerpiece of the week’s morning service. Rather than impending doom, my partner in crime and I were simply listening to the same rehashing of the sermon topic that seemed to follow every service. Someone who was either actually curious or seeking to look good in the church had cornered the music minister in search of further discussion on the topic, and neither had any clue – to the best of my knowledge then and now – they were rudely interrupting an initial foray into oral sex.

Over the years, I have realized that very few things can induce the level of quiet in young people as the possibility that an older
person is about to catch them doing something fun. As we waited in
the storeroom for the conversation outside to end or for the minister
to catch us, I remember trying to count just how many rules we were
currently breaking. First, there was the sin of skipping Sunday school,
which in and of itself was worthy of scorn in that church. Second, there
was the act of breaking into a storeroom that we were neither supposed
to know about or use for any reason. Third, there was the fact that
we were basically taught that sexual activity was dirty, wrong, and
against God unless it happened in marriage and only for the purposes
of creating screaming little humans, which only made us all the more
curious about it as we grew up under the roof of that place. Fourth,
fifth, sixth…I could go on, but needless to say I started thinking I
might need a calculator if we were caught.

I also realized much later just how many major moments in
my life involved a mixture of excitement and fear contained within an
enclosed space that I was not supposed to be in at the time. How many
times had I walked into this room or that one for one purpose or another,
and come out transformed by a new or just unexpected turn of events?
I don’t know if I can count that high. So much of my early life took
place in private spaces carved out by a constant tension between what
the people in that little town expected and what was really happening
behind the scenes. I didn’t think of any of these things at the moment,
but rather, I just sat there in the storeroom wondering whether or not
we would get caught.

We were not caught. After a few minutes of conversation that
can only be described as utterly boring, the people said goodbye, and
slowly the voices dissipated. As soon as they did, my partner in crime
finally started breathing again, and said, “Well, that was not fun.” I
distinctly remember I could not help myself, it was not my fault, I had
no control over myself at the moment. I started laughing like a lunatic.
My companion did not share my enjoyment, and kept telling me to be
quiet until finally I got all the laughter out. All I could think to say was,
“Well, this was your idea,” and I started laughing again.

It had been his idea. We were sitting in Sunday school a few
months back when he noticed me staring at the picture of Jesus that
hung in the room. While everyone was socializing after the lesson, he
came over to me, and asked, “Why do you stare at the Jesus picture in class?” The truth of the matter was that I simply loved Jesus’ hair and body, and thought he was just so cute, but this was a conservative Christian church in a small town in the south so I said, “I don’t know. I guess I just like it.” I had, however, also seen him looking at the picture and at me before so I asked, “What do you think?”

This simple exchange began a series of small conversations between the two of us about Jesus and life that continued until the day after we shared our special moment in the storeroom. We would team up when we met on Monday nights for youth volleyball, walk together back and forth to get milkshakes from the diner nearby, sit together in Sunday school and church, and pass each other notes each week when we got to Sunday school. Like many childhood crushes, I question my taste in hindsight, but at the time he seemed very sweet and funny. More importantly, he seemed curious and that was an important quality for me at the time.

One night we were sitting downstairs in the game room below the gym where weekly volleyball happened, and he asked me if I had ever kissed anybody. I told him I had, but I had not done any other stuff. You gotta keep in mind that for a small town kid “stuff” may as well have been the official linguistic marker for anything not shown on local television before bed time. He admitted that he had never been kissed, and so I gave him one and watched him react with a mixture of fascination, embarrassment, and fear of being caught by any of the people upstairs playing volleyball. We kissed a few more times on a few more occasions before he asked me what other stuff I wanted to do.

I don’t really know why, but at the time I was fascinated by what I called “boy parts.” I thought they were just the ideal of cute, and I wanted to snuggle them like one of my stuffed animals. I remember one time an older boy just whipped his out in the front yard, and started swinging his hips. I was transfixed. All I could do was stare, and when his mother made him put it away, I wanted him to pull it back out. I remember his girlfriend – who I was friends with – apologizing to me about it, but I thought it was one of the greatest days of my life. That little thing – and honestly the boy too – was just so damn cute.
I told my companion this story, and then I told him that one of the older boys had told me that it felt good when he got kissed down there. As I hoped, my companion became intrigued with this idea, and we talked about it regularly for the next couple weeks until one night we were roaming around the buildings of the church with other kids and stumbled across the storeroom with the wine we did not know was not really wine. As the other people slowly disappeared that night, one by one, having to go be picked up to leave, he and I remained sitting on the floor in the little room. As we got ready to leave for our own rides, he softly said, “We could come here and try the kissing thing one day if you want.” I didn’t respond, but deep inside me somewhere I was only starting to get to know, I really liked this idea.

And that was how we ended up in this little room starting to calm down after being scared by fellow churchgoers. After my laughter finally subsided, he smiled at me and asked me what I wanted to do. Very softly, a little nervous I admit, I said, “I want to kiss you…there.” He said, “Me too,” and I leaned over and undid his nice enough for church but too nice for anything else pants slowly. I remember being surprised that it was so soft and small. I had only seen a couple of them at this point in my life, and the others had been harder looking and bigger. I remember wondering just how many sizes and colors and shapes these things came in, and for some reason, I started thinking that maybe they were like baseball cards or stuffed animals or something else where people try to collect all the different editions. I wondered how long it would take to get a full set, and if there was a Becket guide for that type of thing. I almost started laughing again at the thought, but fought to maintain a straight face. At least as much for fun as to stifle potential laughter, I began my sexual life.

A little while later, he began to convulse and pulled back from me. He was shaking. I was confused. The room was silent. It was over. Without a word, he re-buckled his pants, and stood – almost knocking me over – to pull up his zipper. The only thing he said was, “I, uh, I think it’s time for church,” before leaving the room. I sat there for a few minutes trying to figure out what happened. One minute he seemed very happy, and the next minute he was rushing out of the room as if the devil showed up to visit us or maybe the music minister decided to
check out the wine that was not actually wine after all. I would spend the entire church service and the rest of the day trying to figure it out, and come up with nothing. At the same time, I spent the rest of the day thinking about how much fun it was, and what it might be like the next time we were alone together. Unfortunately, I never learned the answer to that particular question.

Instead, the next night at volleyball my companion acted like I was not there, and spent his time talking with other people. About halfway through the evening, I finally went over to him and said hello. Instead of the warm hellos I had begun to look forward to, he quietly said hi and then went back to talking to other people. I didn’t know what was happening, and we never had another conversation like the ones we had before that day in the storeroom. I still have no way of knowing exactly what happened to him in that moment, but I think I’ll always remember that day and the other times he showed up in my life even if I never can bring myself to say his name again.
“You kissed him like that,” Jordan says a little too loud after hearing what happened at church. “Really, you did that? Did you like it?”

Jordan does not go to my church. We met when I was eight, and became fast friends because we lived not too far from each other, both played soccer at the fields near our neighborhoods, and both loved music. Jordan is a few months older than I am. He will, in fact, never let me forget this little tidbit. I live in the neighborhood on the north side of the park where most of the sports in the area are played by children and adults with dreams of getting out of this little town. Jordan lives on the south side of the same park in the neighborhood that houses the football stadium used for peewee and middle school games. We meet at the park regularly throughout most of my childhood.

Our little town is like so many others that circle Augusta, Georgia. A couple of hours from Atlanta and about an hour from Columbia, Augusta is the biggest game we have as we grow up in our little enclaves. We live in one of the towns across the river in South Carolina nestled amid our neighbors with names like Clearwater, Edgefield, North Augusta, Jackson, Johnston, and Graniteville. Towns built on factory work and long abandoned mills populated with more churches than anything else it seems. The other side of the river, circling the city in its own way, holds similar little places like Hephzibah, Wrens, Waynesboro, Queens, Louisville, and Grovetown. The whole area becomes the center of national attention every year when the Master’s golf tournament begins, and crowds of media and tourists arrive, but the rest of the time it’s a sleepy little area not unlike many other places in the south. Like so many other kids in our little town and others we meet over the years, we dream of the day we live somewhere else while also maintaining an awareness that very few people actually ever leave.

Stuttering and not at all sounding as cool as I want to in the moment, I say, “Yeah…I mean, I don’t know…I mean, kind of yeah I think so.” Jordan just laughs.

Jordan was at camp when the events occurred, and has just returned. This summer will be the last one he spends at camp, but
neither of us know that yet. I could not wait to tell the story, and find out someone else’s thoughts, but decisions about how to tell someone about your first sexual experience have to be navigated with caution in small towns in the south and maybe in other places as well. Naturally, I went to Jordan because we talk about everything, always have, well, always since we were eight and eight-and-a-half respectively. Jordan continues to laugh, and reaches into his pockets for a box of cigarettes.

“You want a smoke,” he says.

“Where did you get cigarettes? When did you start smoking?”

“They had them at the camp, some of the older people did it so I tried one. They’re kind of nice – helps me turn off the ole brain, mate,” he says tapping me on the shoulder.

Jordan lights a smoke, and I watch his firm forearm curl and release for just a minute. I am in love with Jordan. Jordan knows this. I know Jordan knows this, and I think Jordan loves me too, but he has never really said so explicitly. I have been in love with Jordan since the first day he walked onto the field for our first match against each other. Jordan knows this too. Jordan knows a lot of things that other people do not know about me. I am pretty sure Jordan is the perfect creation, and the only possible reason I might ever believe in a god. Jordan knows this as well. He also knows that beside him I feel like a blithering idiot, but he assures me I am beautiful in my own way and somehow makes me believe him.

“What the hell is a mate,” I ask still watching him. The smoke softly escapes his lips, and he squeezes the cigarette in his fingers, those perfect fingers. He takes another puff, and blows it out like he’s been doing this for years.

“It’s like guy or man or whatever – it just means buddy or friend or what not. Damn, you are always asking questions.”

This is true. I am always asking questions. I’m, as my parents used to say, addicted to curiosity. Punching him in the arm, I say, “And what’s wrong with that MATE.”

Laughing, he smiles and says, “So you kind of think you might have liked giving a blowjob?” He chuckles and takes another drag off his cigarette.

“A blowjob?”
“It’s what they call it when you kiss a guy down there dumbass.” “Did you learn that at camp from your mates?” “Nah, I got that from one of mom’s “adult” magazines,” he says before taking another puff from his cigarette. “Kind of cool you did it at the church I gotta admit, but I guess I’m not your first anymore” he says before messing up my hair.

Jordan was my first kiss. I was eight. He was adamantly eight and a half. We had just finished our first soccer match against each other, and one of his teammates invited our team to walk over to the concession stand and hang out. I admit that I mainly went to hang out with Jordan, and that I basically thought all the other boys were losers. I was dribbling a ball off to the side of the stand, ignoring the crowd of loud and smelly soccer players I already felt like I spent too much time with, when Jordan came over and took the ball. Jerk – I chased him across the park for what felt like an hour to an eight year old, and tackled him with all the strength I had in the little field right before the park turns into the woods.

“What do you mean you’re not my first now?” This thought really bothers me for reasons I can’t quite put into words.

Throwing out his cigarette, he nods sagely – always the older expert – and says, “Well, sex counts more to guys than kissing so now that dude is your first.”

“That’s stupid as hell!”

“I don’t know, maybe now you belong to him and I should just leave you alone,” he says with that little smile he had the day he stole my ball.

After I tackled him, we wrestled in the grass for a minute, and I proudly informed him that he was a jerk. Instead of being offended, he kissed me. Right on the lips, right there at the park, right out of the blue, he kissed me! I could have killed him, but I wanted him to do it again. It was a new feeling, I mean, I felt like I was melting so I did the only thing I could think of – I punched him in the face and told him never to do that again. It made sense at the time, I promise. He just laughed and held his jaw for a few minutes in the grass. After a few minutes, he leaned in again, and this time I kissed him too, and I didn’t stop for years. Neither did he.
“Don’t be a jerk, mate,” I say and shove him against the fence on the side of the path after we have fully entered the woods and left the park behind for the moment.

Smiling, he says, “I don’t know, I don’t want to be fighting with some other dude over you from here on out.” With that, he leans in slowly and softly kisses me on the lips and wraps his arms around me. Our lips combine in a form of music that shakes me inside even when I think about it all these years later. We sway back and forth, sharing the moment, and holding onto each other for dear life.

After a few minutes, my voice cracks as I say, “I missed you.”
“‘I missed you too.”

We stand there in silence holding each other for a few more minutes. The same way we have for years already at that point, we both know that something between us is powerful and important. At the same time, we go to different schools, different churches, and different neighborhoods when we leave the woods. We dance this way together for a decade — somewhat together, somewhat separate — but in the heat of these shared moments we both somehow know that nothing can really ever separate us. The world beyond the woods may never know it, but we know it with all we are.

“So,” he whispers as his head rests on my shoulder, “You kind of liked it?”

“Yeah, it was nice, it was fun, but it was also strange.”

“What was strange about it?”

“I don’t know really, but at some point he felt like he got really happy, but then he kind of ran away and he hasn’t really spoken to me since.”

“Asshole.”

“Yep, but he wasn’t before then so I don’t understand what happened.”

“I’d guess he got freaked out. Maybe he isn’t ready for this type of stuff. The first person I was with, you know, like that, was amazing, but I totally freaked out and could not get home fast enough. Remember, I faked being sick so my mom would come get me early?”

I did remember that. I remembered that at camp last summer Jordan met someone nice who he really liked, and they had sex like
I did in the storeroom. I remembered that it hurt. I remembered that Jordan came home early, and I thought he wouldn’t like me anymore. I remembered that he came home and said he missed me. I remembered that he said sex was scary, that he didn’t know if he would do it again, that he didn’t like it. I remembered wanting to make him feel better, but not knowing what to do. I remembered he didn’t talk about it much. I remembered that I tried not to remember all these things because they still hurt for some reason.

“Well, I was a mess. I got so freaked out, and it wasn’t anything that they did, you know? I just wasn’t ready, and so it was scary as hell. I was at camp, I was horny, I didn’t know what I was doing, and it just happened kind of out of the blue before I really thought about it. I just freaked out so maybe that’s what happened to your guy.”

“Maybe, still sucks.”

“I know. Do you like him?”

“I mean, I did like him, I mean, not like I like you, but I did like him. I don’t know, I was lonely and kind of sad and kind of curious, I don’t know.”

“Yep, that’s kind of how I was,” and with that he kissed me on my head, and we started walking again.

“How was camp this year?”

“Same old boring shit, but I guess my mom needs the vacation.”

Jordan had gone to camp of some sort every summer I had known him. His mom was all alone raising him, and he thought the camps were kind of like a summer babysitter service. His dad disappeared at some point before he could remember, and his mom wasn’t welcome in her family because she got pregnant out of wedlock with Jordan. It was just the two of them against the world, but as his mom often said, “The world usually won.” Jordan helped her as much as he could, but things were tight and she was always tired from work, from neighbors, from life, or just in general. I don’t think I ever saw her once without wondering how she even kept going when she never seemed to be happy for even a second.

After a few minutes walking down the path, Jordan stops and stares out at the woods. He lights a cigarette, and just stares out at nothing. Softly, I ask, “Are you okay?”
“I don’t like you messing around with other people.”

“I don’t like you messing around with other people either Jordan.”

“I know, neither do I.”

“Same here.”

We just stand there silently for a few minutes. Jordan’s cigarette breathes all around us, and he touches my cheek. His hand smells like cigarettes. It reminds me of my grandmother and my best friend Abs and happy times on back porches. It reminds me of the older kids in the neighborhood sitting on the hoods of cars at night, and letting me tag along because they all know Lena. It reminds me of how Lena hides her cigarettes from her parents in an old box on her back porch. It reminds me of things that we hide because other people would not approve. He takes another puff, lowers his hand, and sighs. I grab his hand, and he smiles just a little bit. “I don’t like it,” he says, “but I don’t know what else to do. I don’t know what else to do.”

“I don’t either,” I say and we smile at each other. Without another word, we start walking back to the park hands grasped tight, voices silent in the emerging night, and trying to figure out this thing called love.