I crawled into bed, bone-weary, convinced I would never sleep. Yet somehow I dozed off. My dreams were confused and fragmentary: awful, jagged snippets of Jimmy; the shelter; the wink of that hatchet in yellow light.

I had a terrible nightmare, too. In the dream, I was immobile, and that was because I was dead. It was one of those nightmares where you’re in and out of yourself at the same time. There was me, floating above my body—and there was me, facedown: a cadaver on a cold steel dissection tray.

My parents were there, too, hunched over my body like green vultures in surgical caps and gowns. “Don’t worry,” my dad said. The keen blade of a heavy-duty scalpel glinted, wicked and sharp. “He’ll feel every second.”

All at once, I collapsed into myself. No more safe detachment for me. I was in my body, my nose mashed against icy metal. I felt the instant the blade plunged into my flesh. I gargled out a scream—my mouth worked—but my dad kept going, slicing through skin and meat along my spine. There was this wet ripping sound, like the kind I’d heard whenever my mom tore up old underwear for dust rags. But this time, she was tearing me apart, flaying skin from bones, and I was screaming, screaming...

“Ah!” Flailing, I jolted awake in a sweaty tangle of damp sheets. My heart was trying to blast out my chest. Gasping, I fell back, gulped, waited for my pulse to slow down.
BOOK REVIEW: The Sin Eater’s Confession by Isla J. Bick

I tried very hard not to think, but of course I did.

It occurred to me that Jimmy might not be there, not because he was alive or had stumbled off or was in some hospital—but because there were animals all over that park: coyotes, foxes, raccoons, martens. Birds always squabbled over roadkill. I knew that animals went after all the soft stuff first then dragged off whatever they could.

Jesus. A moan dribbled out of my mouth. What if Jimmy’s in pieces?

Right away, and the heart is a powerful pump.

From a distance, Jimmy looked ... strange. The air hummed. Someone had draped a black shirt—a hoodie?—over his torso to cover his face and chest. Jimmy was on his back, legs splayed, his left foot missing a shoe. For some stupid reason, I zeroed in on that naked foot, his toes, the shoe that wasn’t.

I forced myself to move, one foot in front of the other. That hum was so odd ... and then Jimmy’s chest ... lifted.

Stunned, I let out a shout. I couldn’t help it. Oh my God, he was alive? I watched, eyes bugging, as Jimmy drew another shuddering, squirming breath ... that hoodie bunching and roiling as the air brrrred ... .

Flies. My own breath came out in a sudden whoosh. Not a hoodie at all, but a thick mat of noisy, hungry blowflies swarming over moist meat and jellied blood.

“Get away,” I choked. Somehow I’d waded into that awful red-black lake and begun swinging my arms, trying to drive them off. “Get away, leave him alone, go!”

The flies churned and lifted in a droning inky fog, and then I saw Jimmy’s face. Or, rather, what was left.
BOOK REVIEW: The Sin Eater’s Confession by Isla J. Bick

Jimmy’s skull wasn’t squashed. Despite those rocks and the pounding must’ve taken, Jimmy’s skull wasn’t mashed to pulp either. Given the dire thought they’d put that hatchet to good use, though, because Jimmy was barely alive, his skull fractured into a jigsaw of jagged slabs in the ruptured bag of skin and flesh that had been his face and scalp. Dusky bluish and purple goo spumed out onto the concrete because fresh brains are as soft as warm butter.

Yet, as bad as that was—and it was terrible—this was worse: there were grains of rice speckling Jimmy’s eye sockets. More dribbled from the lumpy mess of broken nostrils, dripped from his ears. Jimmy’s teeth were broken, but rice clogged open mouth and was sprinkled over the blood bib on his chest. Looking at it couldn’t make sense of it.
Jimmy's skull wasn't squashed. Despite those rocks and the pounding he must've taken, Jimmy's skull wasn't mashed to pulp either. Given the divots, I thought they'd put that hatchet to good use, though, because Jimmy was broken: his skull fractured into a jigsaw of jagged slabs in the ruptured bag of skin and hair that had been his face and scalp. Dusky bluish and purple goo spumed over the concrete because fresh brains are as soft as warm butter.

Yet, as bad as that was—and it was terrible—this was worse: there were grains of rice speckling Jimmy's eye sockets. More dribbled from the lumpy mess of both nostrils, dripped from his ears. Jimmy's teeth were broken, but rice clogged his open mouth and was sprinkled over the blood bib on his chest. Looking at that, I couldn't make sense of it.

And then I realized: flies.

This wasn't rice. These were eggs. The flies were laying eggs in all that good moist pulp that was Jimmy's face.

Vomit roared into the back of my throat. Gagging, I spun away, clapped a hand over my mouth. Don't lose it, don't lose it. I couldn't puke; I couldn't leave anything of myself behind. Come on, you can do this. I swallowed back a mess of stomach acid, bad coffee and undigested egg. You have to do this.

Then I looked at my hands. They were shaking. I hadn't brought gloves. What an idiot. I stared down at my smeary sneakers. In my horror, I'd blundered through muck and gore. The concrete was stenciled with coppery prints, and I would leave
more on the way to the truck. The deputies—my dad—would know someone had come back, and they’d wonder why?

One foot in front of the other. No help for what I’d already done, but I could be more careful from here on out. After thinking about it a few seconds, I untied my shoes, eased them from my feet, stripped off my running socks and then stuck a hand into each. Socks I could get rid of pretty easily. Bare feet could be washed.

Do what you came to do.

I balanced on my toes over Jimmy’s body because footprints are like fingerprints. I didn’t know about toe prints, but I wasn’t like I had tons of choices. My toes squelched. The flies were settling down to feed again, their drone a low, unending thrum like the purr of an engine. Jimmy didn’t smell yet, and he wasn’t bloated. He hadn’t been dead long enough. I saw, too, that the flies weren’t the only things to feast on fresh meat either.

Jimmy’s lips and tongue were gone. So were his eyes. His fingers had been chewed to the knuckles, and something had started in on his neck, ripping away flesh down to the sloppy pink, ribbed worm of his windpipe.

Jimmy’s jeans were saturated and stiff with gore, yet the fly was open, the waistband pulled away. His underwear had been pushed down into a rust-colored accordion fold as if he’d been caught trying to take a leak. A wash of coagulated blood, studded here and there with clumps of Jimmy’s hair, spewed over his thighs and down to his knees. Staring down, I just didn’t understand ... and then I remembered how sharp that hand axe looked and understood that after they’d taken it to his skull, they hacked off something else.
but failed because, light as he’d been in life, Jimmy was only so much dead weight now. I would have to turn him onto his side. Moving a body was bad, I knew that, because it told the police that there was something someone didn’t want left on the body. No help for it, though. I stepped around to Jimmy’s left side, making sure to keep clear of the muck. I didn’t want to reach over and pull him toward me; I worried about getting smeared with gore. So I had to jam the heels of my hands into Jimmy’s side, right at his ribs, and push.

His body, stiff with rigor, came away from the concrete with a sucking sound, like Jell-O turned from a mold. His right hip pocket bulged. Steading the body with my left hand, I squirmed my fingers into the pocket, felt them skim a hard edge, and realized that I’d found Jimmy’s cell phone. But there was nothing else.

I repeated the procedure, the drone of the flies fragmenting as I rolled Jimmy onto his right side. I remember that I hesitated, too, hand poised over his left hip pocket. If this was empty, I was out of luck. Or I still might be okay. Maybe Jimmy had changed his mind. But no, he’d been in back, waiting for me, right? Unless he’d only come out to dump the trash then gotten waylaid by that ... guy? Girl? I didn’t know.

As incredible as this may sound to you, that was the first time I’d actually slowed down long enough to wonder why Jimmy was murdered. For the money? Because they thought he was gay? Because he’d crossed them somehow? Who were these people? Why had he gone with that guy I’d seen in the back lot in the first place? And was it a guy? The more I thought about it, it could’ve been a girl. Way more likely than a guy, right? Right? Shit. I just didn’t know.
“Phone.” I wasn’t aware I’d spoken aloud until I heard my own whisper. Of course, if I turned on his phone, they’d find him faster and before too many more things got at him, which I really did want. It also meant that I had to separate my gluey socks, ease my naked toes into bloody jelly, and roll Jimmy again, but I did it.

Jimmy’s cell was a clamshell. I flipped the phone open—and then hesitated when I remembered something else: cameras. Cell phones had cameras, and Jimmy loved cameras. So, had he taken shots of me with this? Possibly—he’d managed with a digital camera, after all. Even so, that wasn’t necessarily incriminating. Everyone knew about the magazine pictures.
I turned my attention to the paper. Dried blood had glued the folds together, and I wasn't able to tease the paper apart without rips. The paper was blotchy with copper splatters, but I was able to make out enough: instructions to print JPEGs 2, 14, 26, 30, and 42, as well as a completed application that Jimmy had loaded onto the card, with an address to which I was to send the entire packet.

Below that, Jimmy had penned this:

I'm so sorry for everything. You've been my only friend. I never wanted you to get hurt. There may be something wrong with me, but I can't believe it's wrong to feel about you the way I do.

Jimmy

“...But Jimmy wasn’t gay,” I said. “That is, he never came out or anything. That’s just a rumor.”

“Well, his photography was certainly suggestive,” she said, sipping her coffee. “Wasn’t that why his parents withdrew him from the school?”

“I don’t know why his parents yanked him,” I said, then amended: “Well, that’s not true. They were mad because of those pictures. But that doesn’t mean he was gay. All it means is they were pissed.”
BOOK REVIEW: The Sin Eater's Confession by Isla J. Bick

I went through it all: asking about Jimmy at the counter, Jimmy showing up at my table, the lady calling Pastor John. “Then Pastor John pretty much told me he didn’t want my kind”—I mimed air quotes—“in his coffeehouse. So I left.”

“Your kind.” Agent Angela ran a finger around the rim of her empty cup. “You mean ... gay.”

“I’m not gay,” I said. “I don’t know if Jimmy was gay. Everyone’s just assumed that he was, that he and I might have, you know... done something. It’s nobody’s business even if he was or we had. You want to look at somebody with a serious axe to grind, you ought to look at Pastor John.”

“You don’t like Pastor John,” Agent Angela said. I noticed for the first time that her eyes were this deep, mossy green with flecks of hazel. I don’t think I’d ever met anyone with eyes like that.

“He’s a bigoted jerk,” I said and meant that, too. So far I hadn’t lied, and that was good. Okay, I had omitted stuff, but so what. “Why don’t you ask him where he was the night Jimmy died?” As soon as I said that, I thought, Oh shit, had she said Jimmy was killed at night? But, wait, wouldn’t that be what would a normal person

I had to think about that. Because it was a funny question. “No,” I said, finally. She did the eyebrow thing again. “Why not?”

“Because you asked two different things,” I said. “If Jimmy was going out with someone, we would all know it and none of this would be a rumor. It would be a fact. If I only thought he was going out with someone, that would be a guess and it’s really none of my business. I’d be spreading rumors. Believe me, I know what it feels like to be on the other end of that.”

“That’s an interesting distinction. But Jimmy's dead. The rumors can’t hurt him, and many are built on half-truths. What if rumors helped us catch his killer? Would you tell me then?”
BOOK REVIEW: The Sin Eater’s Confession by Isla J. Bick

Reason I’ve started this now is because this lance corporal ate his gun about two hours ago. His buddy started bawling for a medic. (Actually, he screamed, “Doc, Doc,” because that’s what all marines call their medics. See? Not even they really know my name. It’s all about the mask.) Anyway, there wasn’t anything I could do except cover the mess with a blanket. The buddy was pretty freaked out. Not screaming-hysterical. These are marines, after all. But he was shook. Crying, moaning. Had a bad case of the shoulda-coulda-wouldas: how he shoulda seen this coming, and then maybe he coulda done something for his buddy, and then the dead dude woulda gotten help. Guilt—like God—is real big over here because life is so frigging random.

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Things went downhill when the senior NCO arrived on scene about thirty minutes later. He’s like a cartoon, a bullnecked jarhead, the kind of guy who probably picks his teeth with his KA-BAR. Not five seconds after he got there, but he started in on the oorah-marine-speak: how they were tough and had to stick to the mission and blah, blah, blah. Went on about how the dead guy didn’t deserve a real marine send-off, seeing as how he’s burning in hellfire for deserting his unit because he ended his life in a way that wasn’t God’s will. Whatever that is. Guy’s a real maniac.

Only he kind of has a point. I’m saying sort of, okay? With all the crap you go
can’t stand the secrets anymore. There’s blood on my hands, which is ironic con-
sidering I spend my days breathing in the stink of overcooked gore and flash-fried
guts. Considering that, some days, I don’t have time to wash the blood from my
boots before the next dust-off.
looked, like they were almost too large for his face.

“You idiot!” Mr. Lange bawled at Jimmy. Screaming, veins bulging, spit flying:
“You stupid... aren’t things bad enough without you trying to burn down the god-
damned house ... what the hell—”

“I know. Like Annie Leibovitz. She did this awesome photo of Daniel Radcliffe.
You know, Harry Potter? Only he’s completely naked and crouched on this black
horse—and together, they make something beautiful.” Maybe it was the heat, but
his face was flushed, a line of sweat standing on his upper lip. “There’s also this
old guy in the photograph, except he’s got all his clothes on and so Radcliffe looks
even more naked. But you also feel that there’s no connection between Radcliffe

“So your folks don’t want you to take pictures of naked movie stars?” I said it
lightly enough, but all this talk was making me a little uncomfortable. I mean, it
wasn’t like I’d never been in a locker room before. Guys are always commenting,
and some like to strut. But I don’t think too many would admit if they stared.

“They just ... don’t approve. Of the photographers, I guess. Some of their reputa-
tions.” Jimmy rinsed pails, so I really couldn’t see his face. “They think those kind
of people are a bad influence.”

Those kind of people? “What do you take pictures of now?”

“Handsome people.” He didn’t even bothered to look up. “A couple models.
BOOK REVIEW: The Sin Eater’s Confession by Isla J. Bick

Without a word, Mr. Lange clubbed Jimmy across the face. The sound the magazine made when it connected was like a jam jar exploding on concrete. Jimmy’s head snapped around, and he staggered.

“Liar.” The word struggled up from some animal deep in Mr. Lange’s chest. Mr. Lange hit Jimmy again, and this time Jimmy went down on his hands and knees. Mr. Lange clubbed him again and then again and kept going: “You liar, you think I wouldn’t find out, you think I’m stupid, you think I’ll let this go?”

My mouth dropped open, and my chest went tight like someone had cinched down a rubber band. The milk cow I held stamped her hooves and snorted and jerked her head. My mind was screaming: Do something, somebody do something, somebody stop him! I’m just a kid, but you guys are adults! How can you let him do this?

But they let Mr. Lange keep on. The adults did nothing. Mrs. Lange stood on the stoop. The pastor’s face was unreadable. In the silence, there was only the grumble of the truck’s engine and the scattered bleats of goats and the sickening slap of that magazine on Jimmy’s back and head, across his face.

Hunched on hands and knees, Jimmy finally looked up. Blood snaked from one nostril. His chin was smeary, and his teeth were orange. He made a feeble gesture with one hand, reaching for his father’s leg. Mr. Lange moved back with a little kick and left Jimmy grabbing air.

“Dad,” Jimmy said.

I will remember that moment—in that kitchen, by her chair—for as long as I live. It was then that I saw, for the very first time, what had so infuriated Mr. Lange that he would beat his son bloody and banish me. And yet this very same thing pleased my mother no end and so tickled my sister that she was fit to bust a gut.

It was the moment—the instant—that everything changed.
Jimmy Lange’s entries were on the third and fourth pages. That was because he hadn’t won first place. But he had come in second, and that should’ve been cool and was...

Until I got a good, long look at the pictures Jimmy had seen fit to put right out there, in the open.

You know how you read about all the blood draining out of people’s faces? I felt that happen, all the feeling and warmth flowing from my head and pooling in my toes. The room wavered.

Mal, sudden concern in her voice: “Wow, you don’t look so good.”

“Honey, are you all right? Come here.” Mom pulled out a chair. “Sit down.”

I did what she said. My hand shook as I dragged off my glasses, closed my eyes. My head had gone airy and my stomach fistled. In another moment, I thought I just might be sick all over those beautiful pictures in that stupid magazine.

I like candids. That’s what Jimmy had said. Because it’s when they don’t think you’re looking that you catch people being themselves.

Well.

Jimmy had caught me.

The second portrait, on the facing page, was of a young man. A boy, really: asleep on a mound of hay, his shirt off, his right arm flung over his head and his face half-obliterated in shadow as a bolt of sun, bright and luminous, broke over his lean, taut body. Beads of sweat on his chest and face gleamed like pearls. If you looked closely, you could see a pair of glasses cupped in one relaxed hand.

If that first picture of Jimmy’s dad was of tender despair, this one spoke of ... desire. A fierce kind of need and want ... and love. Don’t ask me how I knew that. It was all just there.

And it was me.

That shimmery young man—that boy—was me.
“Mallory.” Mom’s voice was firm. “That’s not helpful. No one’s going to sue anyone.” To me: “I can understand you being a little upset. But you do have to admit: the pictures are beautiful.”

Beautiful, my ass. I couldn’t think with my mom and Mal around, so I grabbed that magazine and got the hell out of there before I … before I … well, I don’t know. Before I did something. Don’t ask me what. But something.

In my room, I scanned the rest of the article, which mainly consisted of gushing art critics. Of course, it just goes without saying, doesn’t it, that they grooved on that one of me. Reminiscent of a young Robert Mapplethorpe, one said. Filled with lush imagery, a sensuous and undeniably erotic lyricism, another wrote.

So that was just really freaking great.

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So that was just really freaking great.

Mom knocked as I was googling Robert Mapplethorpe. “Do you want to talk about it?” she asked.

“Mapplethorpe was gay. He was gay. He died of AIDS, for God’s sake,” I said, blanking the screen, too embarrassed to let her see some of the pictures I’d pulled up. I mean, his pictures of nude women were just pictures: posed, but without much emotion and nothing truly beautiful. But his men—especially his portraits of
black men—were a different story. I could imagine Mapplethorpe spending time trying to get the lights just right to emphasize their muscles, the angularity of their bodies—and other things that I didn’t think you were supposed to stare at, much less dwell on, but which Mapplethorpe made sure were right there, front and center. Right in your face. Out in the open, daring you to look away.

Now, to be fair, Mapplethorpe had done a lot of celebrities, too. I really liked a black-and-white of Donald Sutherland in a trench coat and fedora; the curve of his eyebrow was just amazing. But the male nudes kind of freaked me out, to tell the truth.

Because the thing was ... I could see the echoes of Jimmy's photograph of me in them.

“I'm not gay,” I said. Downstairs, the phone started ringing, and I waited while my mom shouted down at Mallory to answer it and then continued, “But now everyone's going to look at that picture and that's what they're going to think.”

“Now why would anyone believe that?” Mom said. “Granted, it's a very beautiful, sensual composition—”

“See, see?” I threw up my hands. “You just said it yourself.”

Mom tipped me a look. “Sensual and sexual are not the same thing. Honestly, Ben, you're getting worked up over nothing.”

“Only for local consumption.” She threw me a withering look, like she was just disgusted I was being so thick. “Your college application is intended for a different audience altogether. As for this other issue, all you have to say is that you're not ... not one of those people. That is...” Her eyes bounced from me to the wall and then the floor. “Unless ... well, unless there's something you need to ... ah ... tell us?”
BOOK REVIEW: *The Sin Eater’s Confession* by Isla J. Bick

My cheeks heated. “Mom.”

“Well, honey.” She was using her reasonable-mom voice, the one she pulled out whenever she’d thought of one more new project guaranteed to get me into the dream school of her choice. But you should’ve seen that glitter of dread in her eyes. She couldn’t have begged me more emphatically to tell her she was wrong if she’d screamed it. “You’ve never had a girlfriend, you don’t go out…”

This was unbelievable. “Because I’m busy! Everything you’ve asked, I’ve done!”

“Lower your voice …”

“Jesus, Mom, I’m in clubs; I run track; I’m student council president; I drive a frigging extra hour every day to take classes at the university extension …”

“Of course.” Mom was patting the air with both hands, like I was this balloon of dough that she had to knead back into shape before I overflowed all over the counter. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. Of course, you’re not…” She pulled in a deep breath. “I know you’re very busy. It’s just that we just have to ... spin this to our advantage, that’s all. We need to be on the same page about this.”

“Spin.”

“Yes,” she said, firmly. “Those pictures are art. They’re prizewinners, and you should be proud. Who cares what everyone else thinks?”

*I care.* Man, if I ever had a kid, I would never, ever forget what it felt like to be one. “So what am I supposed to do?”

Weirdly, what I did instead was go back to those Mapplethorpes and then, from there, to other photographs by people like Annie Liebovitz, who was, I found out, a lesbian. Which was just so perfect.

Except their art was beautiful, and so much of it was ... sensual. Like this nude of Lance Armstrong, muscles taut, hunched over his bike, and that photograph of Leonardo DiCaprio with a swan’s neck twined around his. I truly felt those cords of
muscle bulging on Armstrong’s arms and hips and thighs: they were real; they had substance. The drape of that swan over DiCaprio’s shoulders was an embrace.

But the picture I returned to that Sunday and for days afterward was the one of Daniel Radcliffe and the smooth, defenseless bow of his back as he huddled on that jet-black horse—and I couldn’t help but remember Jimmy, hunched on the dirt, and the meaty sound of that magazine connecting with his face. How the adults—Jimmy’s own mom, the first person you’d think would protect her kid, and that pastor—stood there and let it happen.

Still, I didn’t get all gooey. Let’s face it: Jimmy was also one messed-up kid. He’d effectively stolen my face. He’d exploited our friendship. What he had done to me might just wreak everything if I didn’t do some serious damage control.

And you want to know what also ticked me off? The moment my mother worried that maybe, just maybe, I was gay. I wasn’t. I knew that. No, no, scratch that: I know it.

I know it.
BOOK REVIEW: The Sin Eater’s Confession by Isla J. Bick

“I thought you didn’t want to talk about it.” She must’ve seen the murder on my face, because she said, real fast, “Look, it’s not, like, official? Like, he hasn’t come out or anything. But he used to go steady with Sherry Strauss. This was last year, a couple months before Del died?”

“Okay.” Jimmy had never mentioned Sherry Strauss. Why did I care about this anyway? “So what happened?”

“Nothing. We always thought it was stupid; I mean, we wondered what they did together? Sherry never talked about it, though; her parents are really strict, and she’s taken this vow of chastity. She’s even got one of those purity rings?” Mal had this bad habit of ending a lot of her sentences with a question. “Like, she said she’s not going to do it until she’s married?”

“Jeez. You guys talk about these things?”

“Of course. Don’t guys talk about girls?”

Well, yeah. Mainly about which girl was hot or who you could date where you’d stand a chance of getting laid. There were a couple guys who were completely focused on that. I didn’t join in, and honestly, I did my best not to hang around once they got talking about who might put out. Just never appealed to me. The whole thing kind of creeped me out. Not that I was gay or anything. It’s just that they talked about girls like they were pieces of meat. Know what I’m saying? I mean, sure, I knew how to look interested and laugh at the right places and say things like how cool it must be to get laid, or wow, you really got your hands under her bra?
BOOK REVIEW:  The Sin Eater’s Confession by Isla J. Bick

But I really wasn’t all that interested, and until that second, the fact that I wasn’t hadn’t bothered me either.

Except now it did.

Because I started thinking, Shit, what if that means I really am gay? My palms got clammy. Maybe this made a horrible kind of sense. I was the only person I knew who was sweating so much over college applications. I didn’t go out. I’d never had a girlfriend. I’d never kissed a girl. And I worked all the time. I wasn’t like the others, the ones I used to hang with, my friends. They went to parties. They went hunting together every November and snagged beers from their parents’ refrigerators and got drunk and did stupid stuff like jump over open fire pits and puke into kiddie pools.

But the truth also was ... I did have work, some of which I actually enjoyed. Getting drunk was stupid. There was nothing remotely cool about vomiting your guts into your little brother’s baby pool. Besides, my dad was chief deputy. With my luck, the one time I get drunk and drive, he’d be the guy to pull me over.

“... so, really, Jimmy was a perfect choice,” Mallory was still chattering on. “Because Sherry wouldn’t sleep with him anyway? Jimmy probably doesn’t know what goes where with a girl.”

“Jeez. Mal.” This was coming out of the mouth of my thirteen-year-old sister? “Give it a rest. You guys shouldn’t be spreading rumors. You don’t know Jimmy’s gay. Even if he is, it’s nobody’s business. It’s discrimination.”

“Oh puh-leez,” Mallory said. I could just hear the eye-roll. “Do you see anyone in this school coming out and saying, yippee, look at me, I’m proud to be a homosexual? Hellooo ... this is Merit.”
“No.” Parker was offended. “I’m just saying. You can make a lot of money modeling.”
“No way. You’re crazy,” I said.
“No, man, I’m serious.”
“So am I.”
“Whatever.” Parker did an all-purpose shrug. “Your parents upset?”
“Don’t know about my dad. I kind of doubt it. Not much upsets him. Believe it or not, my mom thinks colleges might like it.”
Mark brayed. “My mom would be shitting bricks.” “Thanks,” I said.

No one glanced at me, but I felt them doing it just the same. Ignoring stuff didn’t sound like my dad. Was he chief deputy back then? Come to think of it, why hadn’t Mom said anything about this on Saturday night? How come I hadn’t heard any of this?
“What happened?” asked Parker.
“The gay guys had a couple cats, and one of them was black, I guess,” said Robert. “On Halloween, the kids got drunk and went over and strung up the cat.”
“Jesus,” Parker said.
“Yeah. Left it hanging on the front porch. The bartender was out, and I guess the other guy found it when he came back after second shift. Dad said the guy freaked out, jumped in his car, went over to one of the kids’ houses where I guess they
were having this Halloween party in the backyard."

"Then what?"

"Gay guy torched the house."

"Holy shit," said Mark.

"Wait a sec," Parker said. "You mean the old Fletcher place on Grove?"

"Oh my God," I said. I remembered that fire. Every kid knew the Fletcher place. Grove was only two streets down from the school, and the Fletcher house had stood on the corner. The house had been nothing special: white clapboard with black shutters, a tar roof. But I remembered the stink of scorched wood and molten plastic that hung like smog for a couple days after the fire. The four of us went after school to gawk. I was about ten, and fires were still cool, right up there with haunted houses and sandlot baseball. The roof of the Fletcher place was gone, caved in, and the second story completely gutted. But all I’d heard was there was a fire. Period. No other explanation. Another house, this one made of sturdy red brick, had been built, and the family there now wasn’t Fletcher, but everyone in town still called it by the old name. “If the kids were there, why didn’t they stop him? Or call the police?”

“They were in back,” Robert said. “The gay guy broke down the front door, went inside, sprayed gas everywhere, and touched it all off before they knew what was happening. When the fire department got there, the gay guy was standing across the street with the gas can in one hand, laughing his head off."

“What happened to the gay guys?” Mark said.

“The one who started the fire’s still in jail. The other one moved away, I guess. All my dad knew was he wasn’t in town anymore, and I guess the kids’ family moved away, too.”
BOOK REVIEW: The Sin Eater’s Confession by Isla J. Bick

said. A young boy... “What are you talking about?” My voice came out high and tight. Horrified, I looked to Jimmy, but he wouldn’t meet my eyes. “Jimmy, what did you tell them? What did you say?”

“You leave him out of this,” Mr. Lange said.

“B-but, sir,” I stammered. “I d-don’t ... whatever Jimmy’s told you . . .”

“Don’t,” said Mr. Lange, and his upper lip actually curled into a sneer. “Don’t pretend you don’t know. You may be able to lie to your parents and everyone else, but Jimmy’s a good boy and you are scum.” He made an abortive grab at my coat, but I stumbled back. He settled for shaking a fist in my face. “I will not give you the satisfaction of losing my temper. You will not goad me. You sicken me, you’re filth. Don’t think that just because your father’s chief deputy, you’re above the law.” He put his hand around the back of Jimmy’s neck the way parents do when they steer little kids through malls. “Let’s go.”

What the hell? Stunned, I just stood there like an idiot, an idiot... I might’ve gawked after the Langes for the rest of that day if the school bell hadn’t shrilled

What was going on? What had Jimmy said? Mr. Lange was acting like Jimmy and I had ... done things. This was a nightmare. I hadn’t done anything! Even if I had—no, no, what was I thinking; that was so sick—wasn’t that supposed to be private? Other kids had sex. I might not have been into dating, but I wasn’t a moron. People were always hooking up, and just because I hadn’t didn’t mean that I was some kind of closet pervert or gay or...

Yeah, yeah, I know what you’re thinking, especially if you’re a grown-up or maybe from San Francisco. You don’t believe people still react like this. You’re still shaking your head over that story about the gay guys and their cat. You all probably live someplace where there are gay and lesbian and bi- and transgender teenager support groups.

Or you think you live in that place.

Because this is the truth.
“You know,” I said, carefully folding the paper and slipping it into my wallet, “if I were a different kind of person, I’d think you were trying to cash in on my notoriety. Or maybe this is a mercy invite. You know, show everybody how cool you are, being friends with the gay guy.”

“What?” Her lips parted as her smile evaporated. She put a hand to one cheek as if I’d slapped her. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” I was shaking now, all the rage and pent-up frustration threatening to erupt, even as I knew that Brooke hadn’t done anything wrong. But part of me wanted to be cruel and mean and small. “I’m gay—or everyone thinks I

“Hi,” he said, colorlessly, with absolutely no surprise. Someone must’ve told him that the gay pervert child molester was here. He began gathering soiled plates. “Sorry about the mess. We’ve been kind of busy.”
BOOK REVIEW: *The Sin Eater’s Confession* by Isla J. Bick

Jimmy said, “They’re still talking about sending me away, to some Christian school out-of-state, or maybe one of those fundamentalist ex-gay camps? They’re all over the place. There’s this one in Tennessee where they keep you, like, in jail or boot camp or something, until you change from being ... from feeling...” His eyes clicked to mine and then away. “You know.”

“I told them how I felt about ...” His throat worked again. His gaze crawled to mine. “I told them about, you know, what I ... what you ... what we did.”

“About ...” The rest dried up in my mouth. I closed my eyes. The darkness spun. “Oh my God. Oh fuck, Jimmy. How could you ...” My stomach curled. I was sick; I was going to be sick. “Jesus. Shit. Shit.”

“They got me all confused.” Jimmy’s voice was dim, as if he was broadcasting over an old radio channel from another planet. “I never meant for it to go this far.”

“This far?” My eyes snapped open. I still had Jimmy’s wrist, and for an instant I thought how easy it would be to snap the bones, to crush them. I gave his wrist a sudden, vicious twist and, yeah, all right, I confess: I liked his gasp of surprise and pain. I wanted him to hurt. “Like you didn’t mean for the picture to go that far? Like you didn’t mean for your lies to go that far? Jimmy, don’t you get it? We didn’t do anything. I don’t feel that way about you!”

“For what? For you to tell more lies?” A sudden heat flooded through my face. Hate, bitter and vile, bolted up my throat. I do believe that, in another time and place, I would gladly have killed Jimmy there and then, and to hell with the consequences. Because—my God—he’d worked me into some twisted little fantasy; told everyone I’d been a willing participant; that I was like him when I wasn’t, I hadn’t! I jerked his arm so hard the table tottered and my latte sloshed in a muddy brown swirl. “What you need to do is tell the truth! You want to confess to something? Confess to this: I’m not part of whatever’s going on in your sick—"
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“Hey, hey, someone—a guy—said. Take it easy.

”Seething, I jerked my head round, ready for blood. “Mind your own fucking—” The words died in my mouth.

Pastor John was there. “Looks like this is my business,” he said.

Shit. I’d been so furious I hadn’t noticed him at all. How much had he heard? It was then that I also realized how quiet the coffeehouse was. Except for a tinny twang of a steel guitar seeping from the loudspeakers, it was completely silent. No hum of conversation. No clink of cutlery or dishes.
“No,” I heard him say again, but whoever it was—and I couldn’t tell if it was a girl or guy because the light was so bad—said something else. A thin razor of light cut the shadows around their faces, just enough for me to catch the barest details of a profile: the angle of a jaw, a hank of hair. Then the light was blotted out as the figure in black pressed close, and then closer.

Against Jimmy.

Jesus. My throat squeezed shut. Was Jimmy... Christ. My eyes jumped away. I didn’t need to see this. I felt dizzy and sick.

And—yes—angry. Because what the hell, what the hell?

But then I thought, Wait. It’s cold. Who’s gonna do anything like that when it’s minus ten? They might be just talking, the other guy leaning in so they’re not shouting.

I wasn’t sure, though. Because the way they looked, they might be... God, I didn’t want to even think about it.

All I knew for sure was that this second person’s hands were all over Jimmy. Maybe Jimmy was struggling, but I couldn’t be sure about that either. His apron was gone, and the second person was fumbling at Jimmy’s waist and then...

Oh, Jesus. Not struggling.

Kissing.

They were kissing, mouths working, jaws pumping, and—

No. The sight knocked the wind out of my lungs; I couldn’t breathe; my mind felt like it was melting. God, no. I didn’t want to see this. I might have taken a step back, but I don’t know. I do remember thinking how dirty I felt, and the next I knew, my glasses were in one shaking hand. I couldn’t be seeing this.
**BOOK REVIEW: The Sin Eater's Confession by Isla J. Bick**

Jimmy! Gasping, I looked, my eyes snapping back just in time.

Two figures rushed from the dark woods ringing the shelter. I couldn’t see them properly; I still held my glasses in one hand. So all I know for sure—the only thing I could be certain about—was they wore black, and as they moved under the shelter’s lights, I caught a flash of yellow hair. One, I thought, had a rock. A rock. I don’t know how big it was. Bigger than my fist, I think, but the rock was wavering and out-of-focus and I was far away and so stunned, my mind was still catching up to what I thought I saw when I realized something else.

The second person was clutching a stone in one hand and a hatchet in the other. And they went straight for Jimmy.

Jimmy’s head, all an amorphous blur, whipped around. He screamed, but then the others were there. The blond swung. There was a sodden thunk, like the sound of my mother’s cleaver chopping raw roast.

Like that, Jimmy’s shriek cut out. A thick gout of black blood spumed in an oily geyser, and Jimmy went down.

And then I was scuttling away like a crab, one hand clapped to stopper the scream pushing against my teeth, my eyes wide and staring, bulging from the skin of their sockets. My heel hooked a root, and I toppled back. My elbows jammed rock; a searing sensation of pins and needles raced down both arms. My glasses jumped from my hand, but I was too paralyzed to move, much less search for them. I just lay there, my breath whistling in and out of my nose.

And I heard it all, every second: the attackers’ grunts. The thud of stone against bone, a sound that went wet and mucky. The dull chop of metal on ... something: wood. Concrete. Meat. And, finally, a long, lowing moan that went on and on and on.
Oh God. I couldn’t be hearing this; I couldn’t be here! Frantic, I stirred the earth with my hands until I found my glasses only a foot away. Jamming them on, I staggered upright, clawing air.
And then I ran.
Christ.
I ran.

Yes, Officer. I could hear myself now. Yessir, I saw Jimmy with someone dressed all in black: black jeans, black sweatshirt ... no, no, not like mine. Well, all right, maybe a little...
The person I saw with Jimmy—kissing Jimmy, touching Jimmy, grinding against Jimmy—wore a black hoodie.
And Pastor John wore black.

“I didn’t say that. His parents pulled him out. But I don’t recall anybody coming forward and saying that he wasn’t gay. No one defended him.” No one defended me.
“What I remember is how the rumors started about me and Jimmy on the basis of a picture and what some asshole who had never spoken to me said in some magazine.” My voice was quaking by then. “People can only be responsible for so much, but one thing they can own up to is when they’ve spread rumors. Maybe if Jimmy’s
“You said that wasn’t a big deal.”
“Well, I’m not thinking like a dad right now. I’m thinking like a chief deputy.”
Bullshit. That’s what I wanted to say. Bullshit, you’ve been thinking like a chief deputy the whole goddamned time. “Okay.”
All right, all right: finding him sooner also meant the flies wouldn’t have had 
time to lay those eggs. Nothing could’ve made a meal of Jimmy’s fingers and toes, 
his throat. His tongue. His eyes.

But that was *all* it meant. No matter what, Jimmy would still be just as dead.

Parker and the other guys I knew were perched around a hot tub with their girl- 
friends. They were already pretty drunk, and Parker kept spilling beer into the hot 
tub and laughing and spraying more beer out of his nose. When he and his girl-
friend started stripping down, I went back into the house.

I knew then it had been a mistake to come. It’s hard to describe how I felt, but it 
was like this: I was in this little bubble of space, cut off by a force field. People and 
noise swirled around, but nothing touched me. I was isolated, self-contained, in a 
universe all by myself. Like hiding behind my fogged-up glasses. It was horrible.

“There’s a big difference between wondering something privately and saying it 
out loud.” I squeezed my head between the heels of my hands. “I can’t stop thinking 
about—” I almost said the whole thing, *Jimmy and those flies and the way pieces 
of his skull were all humped like slabs of broken ice and all that blood.* But I caught 
myself in time. “I can’t stop thinking about the whole thing.”

and then throw rocks until you’re dead. They even have rules about how big the 
rocks have to be: not so big that it kills you right away, but not so tiny there’s no 
damage. They want you to suffer, and for a long time.”

“That is sick,” I said, but I was thinking about that second guy and his rock when 
one would’ve done. Hell, they’d had a hand axe. What did they need rocks for in 
the first place? Is that what they thought they were doing, stoning Jimmy the way 
the Bible said? “So that’s what your pastor thinks? That some religious nut-jobs 
did this?”
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Jimmy had become a cause célèbre, everybody’s poster child. Mal said things started to spiral out of control when this gay rights group, bused in from Madison, started a shouting match outside the cemetery gates with a bunch of people from Jimmy’s church. To the gay-rights people, Jimmy was a martyr, a kid who hadn’t dared come out about his sexuality in the current oppressive climate of rural Wisconsin. (Told you there were no gay people here.) To the evangelicals, Jimmy was a symbol of the dangers of earthly temptations and a godless existence and blah, blah, blah.

But I did do another search: online confessions. I know. Completely dumb. You wouldn’t believe what came up. All these sites—GroupHug and FessUp and LightenYourLoad. I actually went to a few and read through a couple of the posts. One big rule I figured out right away was that you couldn’t comment on anyone else’s confession. I guess the point was for you to get it off your chest and then move on and not feel as if anyone was judging you. Someone might write I slept with my best friend’s boyfriend and I don’t feel bad about it, and then a bunch of people would send a hug or kiss or whatever.

Most of the confessions I read were pretty tame. Things like I want a cigarette so bad I’ll sleep with anyone and I’m only twelve. Or My girlfriend is a whore and not as good-looking as her Facebook picture. I ran across one guy who wrote about beating up his girlfriend’s ex-boyfriend and not telling anyone. More than a couple people confessed that they wanted to die or thought they were going crazy. (Hello? A cyber-hug was going to help with that? I mean, what could you say?) Not a single
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I even ran across this article about old-time sin-eaters: beggars, mostly, but also people you could pay to come and sit with a dying person or by a corpse and then eat bread either touched by that person while he was still alive or placed on his body once he was dead. Sounded to me a lot like transubstantiation, only in reverse: instead of the bread turning into the body of Jesus, the food turned into sins that got taken into someone else and cleansed the soul of the dead person. The downside was the sin-eater was considered unclean and had to live outside the village—which was crazy, because that poor guy had voluntarily given up himself to swallow all the villagers’ sins. Okay, sure, it was also one way of making a living, but it was in the village's best interests for their sins to be gobbled up—and now they wanted nothing to do with the guy? He should be an outcast, cut off, and hold all that filth inside and live like a bum? Wasn’t that a sin, too?

I mean, come to think of it, that kind of crap had been going on for ... well, forever. Since Jesus, right? Dying on the cross and all that? Look at it the right way, and you see that Jesus was this ultimate sin-eater—and people worshipped him. (And you have to wonder about the whole communion thing, too. I mean, think about it. Jesus ate all our sins, and we’re supposed to eat him. But if his body holds our sins, then ... See? You can drive yourself crazy thinking about stuff like this.)

But, by that logic, a sin-eater was as brave and selfless as Jesus. Hell, he was about as close to Jesus as a person could possibly be.

So to treat a sin-eater like that for your filth and guilt and sin ... that’s not a little screwed up?
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There were twenty portraits, all in black and white. About half were men. Most were nude, and many were black. I don’t know anything about art, but I could see Mapplethorpe’s influence in the attention Jimmy paid to the men’s bodies, delineating the line of muscle straining against skin. By contrast, though, Jimmy’s work was much softer and gentler; the men’s bodies weren’t as aggressive in their poses or their sexuality. This wasn’t about being in your face. There was this one picture entitled Sleep that was absolutely breathtaking: a black kid, maybe no older than me, lying on his back in bed. His body was relaxed, his head turned to one side, a drape of sheet crossing from his left hip to curl just under his right arm. His arms were thrown over his head, the hands dangling limply off the edge of the bed. The image was a little misty, no sharp edges at all, as if the photograph had been taken through mosquito netting or gauze: a picture at once both peaceful and wistful and erotic—and eerily similar to the picture Jimmy had taken of me.

This person in Jimmy’s picture, it could’ve been a guy, except the Adam’s apple was in shadow, nothing but the gleaming jut of a chin and then a splash of black over the throat. So it might have been a girl, too. I just couldn’t tell.

And here’s what was really creepy: the moment it occurred to me that he or she—or it—might be both.
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“I—” I couldn’t speak. My eyes were adjusting to the dim wash of orange light, and now that I saw her—now that the moment was finally upon me—I wasn’t sure, at all, if she was the girl in the picture or the one I’d seen that night with Jimmy, or if that person—in the picture or beneath that shelter—
—touching Jimmy, wanting Jimmy—

had been a girl at all. How could I be so sure? Maybe if I got her under a bright light? Yes, maybe then. It had been dark that night in the park, and hadn’t I thought it might have been
—Pastor John—

a very thin man? Boy? Or was that what I was primed to see because of all the rumors about Jimmy? About me?

PROFANITY APPROXIMATE COUNT (and other sensitive words)
D*amn 18
G*d d*amned 3
H*llfire 2
H*ll 51
Sensual 3
Sexuality 4
Gay 59
Sh*tting bricks 1
Bullsh*tting 1
Jesus 32 (in vain and not in vain)
P*ssed 8
Christ 7

RED FLAGS
Sexual Content
Extreme Violence, Gruesome description
Language

CONCLUSION
Not appropriate literary content for K-12 schools