

# Pornographic

*Maren Christiansen*

I get up in the morning to go to church. I pull a dress out of my closet, deciding between this or my regular pants, shirt, and tie combination. It's short, six inches above the knees, riding up higher when I sit. It's sleeveless, shows the edges of my shoulders and doesn't cover my armpits. It's striped, black and white, makes me feel curvy and feminine. I wear bicycle shorts underneath it so I don't have to worry about flashing my underwear at anyone. A boy in Young Men's confessed to the bishop last week that he saw a girl's underpants and now our leaders have been trying to correct the way we sit.

I stand by the door, ready to leave. "Your denim jacket is on your bed," my mother says. She wears a skirt that reaches her calves and a shirt that appropriately covers her shoulders.

"I'm not going to wear it," I pull my hair up to show off my hoop earrings.

"You should," she says. Outside it's in the nineties. "It's just a little too much."

I don't argue today and pull on the jacket to cover my arms. Sweat drips down my forehead on the way to the car taking my makeup with it. The many zits that burst up through my meticulously scrubbed face shed their concealment and the red swollen skin now matches my lipstick.

I tug at my jacket.

*If you really didn't want to wear the denim, then you should have chosen a different outfit.*

The voice in my head is that of my Young Women's teacher, Sister Carlton, from last year. I push the thought away and keep my jacket on. All through Sunday School I sweat, skin itching underneath the fabric. In the hallway on my walk to the Young Women's room, I flap open the denim to cool off.

I sit down among the rows of teenage girls and teachers who wear white tank tops under blouses to hide any crease between breasts, t-shirts under sundresses, leggings under skirts. Layers upon layers, leaving me staring at the only exposed skin in the room: my legs, elongated by wedged heels.

The Young Women's leader teaches an object lesson, as usual, representing some of the most complicated theological questions using a cake plate and a ping-pong ball. "How hard is it to balance the ball on the platter?" she asks a Mia Maid as the girl is instructed to hop on one foot while rocking the plate. The ball bounces off and rolls across the stained carpeting.

"The platter represents the world. And the ping-pong ball is you," chimes our enthusiastic leader. "So what did the jumping symbolize?"

"Earthquakes?"

"No. Sins, earthly temptations." She hands us markers and strips of paper. "I want you to write down a temptation that can rock people from their firm foundations."

"Right," I hold the pen in my hand but don't feel like participating.

The girls all tape the temptations to the cake plate. Five times written in five different handwritings are three words:

NOT DRESSING MODESTLY

*Shit.*

Then four times written in four different handwritings are two words:

FOUL LANGUAGE

I sigh. My young women's leader jumps on the m-word with a familiar exuberance. Dressing immodestly sends a *bad* message to the Savior and sets a *bad* example for the women around you. And biggest of all, it distracts and tempts righteous young men.

"Hold it," I say. "We're not responsible for the thoughts of boys. Why should they dictate our feelings about our bodies?" The jacket clings to my arms.

"Because, you never know what they're struggling with."

"But that doesn't concern us!" My voice shakes like it always does when confronting someone about something I care about. I regret putting on mascara. Several other girls in the room voice their agreement.

“Yes it does,” says Sister Carlton from the back of the room, cutting through the sudden stir. I force myself to turn around and meet her eyes. “I don’t like telling stories about people but this is a very appropriate example and I want you to understand . . .” I hate that phrase. Oh, how I hate that phrase, because it has nothing to do with understanding. What it really means is “I want you to conform and stop making a scene.”

She goes on, “There was a boy in my old ward. Very sweet boy, but he developed a terrible pornography addiction. His parents established rules to keep him away from it, one of which involved locking up the computer in a glass cabinet when they left him home alone. One night, while his parents were gone, he broke into the glass cabinet because his addiction was so strong. He knew his parents would come home and see it, but he did it anyway.”

My face burns. How dare she tell this story! This boy’s personal struggle blatantly brandished in front of a group of girls hiding their faces and giggles.

“So you see, showing your body in an immodest way might lead to more inappropriate thoughts for people like that young man.” Sister Carlton leans back in her chair and the leader takes over the lesson.

I stare down at my body, the body I haven’t ever been able to love. Never skinny enough, never pretty enough, never strong enough. I see it in terms of how I’ve just been told others see it: calves, thighs, breasts, waist, shoulders, hips, neck, butt, crotch. Every inch dangerous and sinful.

I sit here in this room, sweating because I have to wear a jacket over a dress that doesn’t completely cover my shoulders but I can’t take it off because some day someone will use me as an example of what not to be, of what a fallen soul looks like, a contrast to the goodness that is those who are “in the world, not of the world.”

Why am I consumed by this overwhelming guilt for being born with a body that can never be shown? Why do I feel as if it were me who was individually responsible for that “very sweet boy” breaking the glass cabinet? Why is it my own skin doesn’t belong to me?

I hold the marker and instead of naming sins and pointing fingers, draw intricate flowers all over my exposed thighs. When church ends I pull off my jacket and walk outside, feel the cooling breeze on my arms. I begin to take back bits of my skin in these small acts of defiance against an idea that has been ingrained in my head every Sunday of my life. Yet, whenever someone glances at me, I cringe. The paranoia, thinking everyone who looks does so because of either shame or lust, makes me feel sick. At school whenever a boy speaks to me, I unconsciously check to see if it's because my shirt has slid. I'm told that some day I'll marry one such boy. Some day I'll lose my precious, most sacred virginity because it is a "beautifully wrapped present we give our husbands on our wedding night." And what do I become then when it's gone, when I stand exposed in every sense of the word? Less of a person, less loved by God?

Genesis tells that when Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge they saw their nakedness and felt ashamed. Something pure in the eyes of God appeared suddenly wicked to man. They covered themselves. We cover ourselves. And we look down on those who don't, make assumptions about how they live, judge their hearts by the skin that they expose, blame them for atrocities that happen to them in back alleys or at parties or college campuses. We fear the addictions caused by the sight of unwholesome flesh and blame our daughters for being born no physically different from the women on the internet who bare their breasts and spread their legs. So we make them hide their similarities. We instill in them the idea that when a patch of skin becomes visible it's vulgar, but when the same area is covered it's "sacred" and "holy." We teach them to have a deep sense of shame and holier-than-thou reasoning to protect them from ever discovering that we women are all still women underneath our clothes.

Today, when I look in the mirror, my body is torn apart into individual weapons of seduction, so much so that I can't see my own shoulders without feeling pornographic.