My heart pounded, I could feel my palms sticking to the plastic wrapping gripped in my hands. I always did take my father’s advice too literally when he told me to bite my tongue. Even in his absence, I could feel the small sore forming as I gnawed on its sides. I tried to steady the trembling of my sweating hands before it was my turn in line. I could hear Adam’s words were in my head as I walked up to the cash register, just be cool. I shuffled up to the counter and placed the magazine face down. The clerk kept his eyes on me as he flipped it over to find the barcode. His eyes drifted down towards the cover and then back to me before he started to ring me up. I thought I saw a small smile creep over his face, but I couldn’t be sure. To be honest, all I could concentrate on were the pointed molars digging into my tongue.

“Nine seventeen,” the clerk stated starkly. I couldn’t believe he didn’t ask me how old I was. I also couldn’t believe it was that expensive.

I resented my paranoia of my mother snooping on my internet history. She had snooped on Adam once and just about shit a brick. It took him six months to get his computer privileges back, and even then she checked his history every chance she got. She hadn’t gone psycho on me yet, she still thought I was too young to be distrusted, that I had several more good years left before I went down that path. I wasn’t taking any chances.

I handed the clerk a week’s worth of allowance, scanning the store as he counted my change. I knew dad was supposed to be at work, but sometimes when he got off early he would stop in for a Diet Pepsi.

“Eighty-three cents for your change. Have fun, kid,” said the clerk. As I turned to leave I glanced up to see the clerk give me a wink. It made me feel dirty. I quickly stuffed the magazine down the front of my jacket and pushed open the door into the cold. I checked the clock on my phone, 3:45. That should give me just enough time. It took me fifteen minutes to walk home and mom didn’t get home from work until five. That gave me a good solid hour.

I desperately wished I had a lock on my door. I sat on the edge of my bed, still not ready to unzip my jacket. I pulled out the collar and
peeked down at the magazine. It was wrapped up in plastic, almost like a present to me. I checked my phone again, 4:23. The longer I waited the more chance there was of getting caught, and I never got caught. I was always too careful, probably because I learned from all of Adam’s stupid mistakes.

Adam had the bad habit of carelessness. Maybe it was something more than that, maybe he just didn’t care what our parents thought. He always had a “So what?” attitude. The used condoms he didn’t bury in the bottom of the trash can, the bag of weed he didn’t stash away in his backpack, the front door he didn’t close delicately at three in the morning. Not me. I hid everything compulsively. Every move I made in my home was carefully calculated. Hiding was the one thing that I was good at.

I kicked my boots off and slowly unzipped my jacket. Out fell the magazine onto my lap. There it was, right there on the cover, beckoning to me. I tore into the plastic and a cascade of paper advertisements fell to the carpet. This was the moment that I had been waiting for. I brought the magazine up to my face and inhaled. I’m not sure what exactly I expected, but to this day, the smell of a new magazine churns my stomach. The glossy pages felt slippery in my hands as I thumbed through the myriad of images bombarding my young eyes.

Suddenly I felt too open, exposed. In a desperate search for safety I climbed into bed and pulled the magazine underneath the covers with me. My jeans struggled against the sheets. I quickly kicked them off and pushed them towards the end of the bed. Once again I peeled the pages open, my eyes growing wide. I explored every detail, every inch of those photos. My eyes met theirs and I felt safe. Lying there under the covers I was seduced. I closed my eyes and imagined the hands of a stranger touching me, a finger running down my belly and deep into the crevice of my thighs. I swallowed hard and held myself, exploring the way a stranger might explore. My heart thumped within my chest and I began to feel hot underneath the heavy covers. My cheeks burned but I wasn’t ready to stop. A dull aching pain began to grow in my arm as it moved faster, keeping time with my labored breathing. My eyes opened and focused on the photo propped up on my chest. It was mechanical now, I was a machine. I was a thousand moving pieces, working together rhythmically to produce the final product, and we were almost there.

The sound of my heart pounding filled my ears, completely
distracting me from all the noises I never would have missed if I wasn’t so close. I would have heard the car pulling up in the driveway, the squeal of the timing belt my dad kept putting off fixing, the jingle of keys rattling in the front door, and the soft thumps of her heels climbing the carpet staircase. These were the things I prided myself in being so in tune to, now all white noise amidst my adolescent self-exploration. I did, however, hear the knock on my bedroom door.

“Jimmy? Are you home sweetie?” My mother always did that thing, I’m sure many mothers do, up until they make the mistake mine was about to make. In years to come she refused to open the door to my bedroom before she heard several confirmed yes, you can come in’s. Even then she would creep in slowly like a victim in a horror movie, terrified of what lay within.

I watched the door handle turn in slow motion, like a car crash, and scrambled to shove my magazine in the crack between the wall and the edge of my bed.

“I didn’t even know you were home,” she said, stepping into my room that was now heavy with the smell of my wanton sweat. I gripped the top of my covers tightly around my torso, desperate to hide my naked lower half.

“Jimmy, what are you doing in bed?”

“I was tired,” I said it too quickly. I knew that she would catch me in my flimsy lie. My heart was still pounding, only it continued out of fear, all traces of lust disappeared. Her eyebrow raised, skeptical, she was going to catch me, I knew she would.

“It’s nearly 5, how could you be tired?”

I shrugged in reply. It was all I could to do keep the panic out of my eyes. She must have gotten off early. I wanted to slap myself for being so careless. My mother glanced around the room and then back to me.

“Alright, well, don’t sleep too long. You won’t be able to fall asleep tonight.”

“I won’t,” I said. She was turning to leave. I couldn’t believe how lucky I had been. She hadn’t questioned a thing! My muscles relaxed and I smiled in utter relief. Unbelievably, I had once again been successful in hiding from my mother. She had no idea. That’s how I had always wanted it, and if she knew, that would be how she would want it. We were both safe as long as I was able to keep hiding.

She was just about to close the door when something made her
turn back around. I often wonder if maybe she knew all along, and was debating whether or not she should confront me.

“Let me just close your blinds so it’s nice and dark in here for you to rest.”

“Oh, no, Mom, it’s fine.”

“But it’s so bright in here with this window.” She stepped into the room and pulled down the blinds, the room was now comfortably dark.

“There you go! Now you can take your nap.” She crossed to the edge of my bed and leaned down to kiss me on the forehead. I heard the sound of paper crinkling under the weight of her heel.

“Jimmy, you know I don’t like you leaving garbage on the floor.” She bent down to pick up the culprit.

“What is this?” As the words slipped from her mouth, my stomach churned, and I felt it rise up into my throat. Years of success were tumbling down around me. She would know. She would know that I wasn’t the little boy she thought I was, the little boy I made sure she believed I was. My entire body began to sweat and tremble, only this time it wasn’t in satisfaction. I briefly wondered why it was that my nose always stung when I tried not to cry.

I sputtered a distressed objection as she stepped towards the light switch. The small paper had been illegible in the dark. The bright light made my eyes sting, although it could have been from the tears fighting to escape. I swallowed hard, knowing it wouldn’t have done anything to rid me of the painful lump in my throat. I watched her eyes dart back and forth on the paper, trying to decipher exactly what the advertisement was. Her brow furrowed, her tight ponytail whipped around and her eyes met mine. She had to have seen the fear, embarrassment, humiliation in my tear streaked face. Clear snot was beginning its slow descent down my upper lip; I could taste the saltiness as my body shuddered with silent sobs.

“Jimmy, why the hell is this in your room?” She waited briefly for my reply.

“Jimmy, why the HELL do you have this in your room?”

I considered a number of escape routes, none of which were plausible. I felt dizzy and my stomach continued its violent churning. I wiped my dampened face with the back of my hand, spreading a mixture of snot and tears around on my reddening cheeks. I thought of how Adam would react in this situation, So what? I steadied my
breath, bit down on the fresh sore on my tongue, and looked into my mother’s confused eyes.

“I’m gay.”