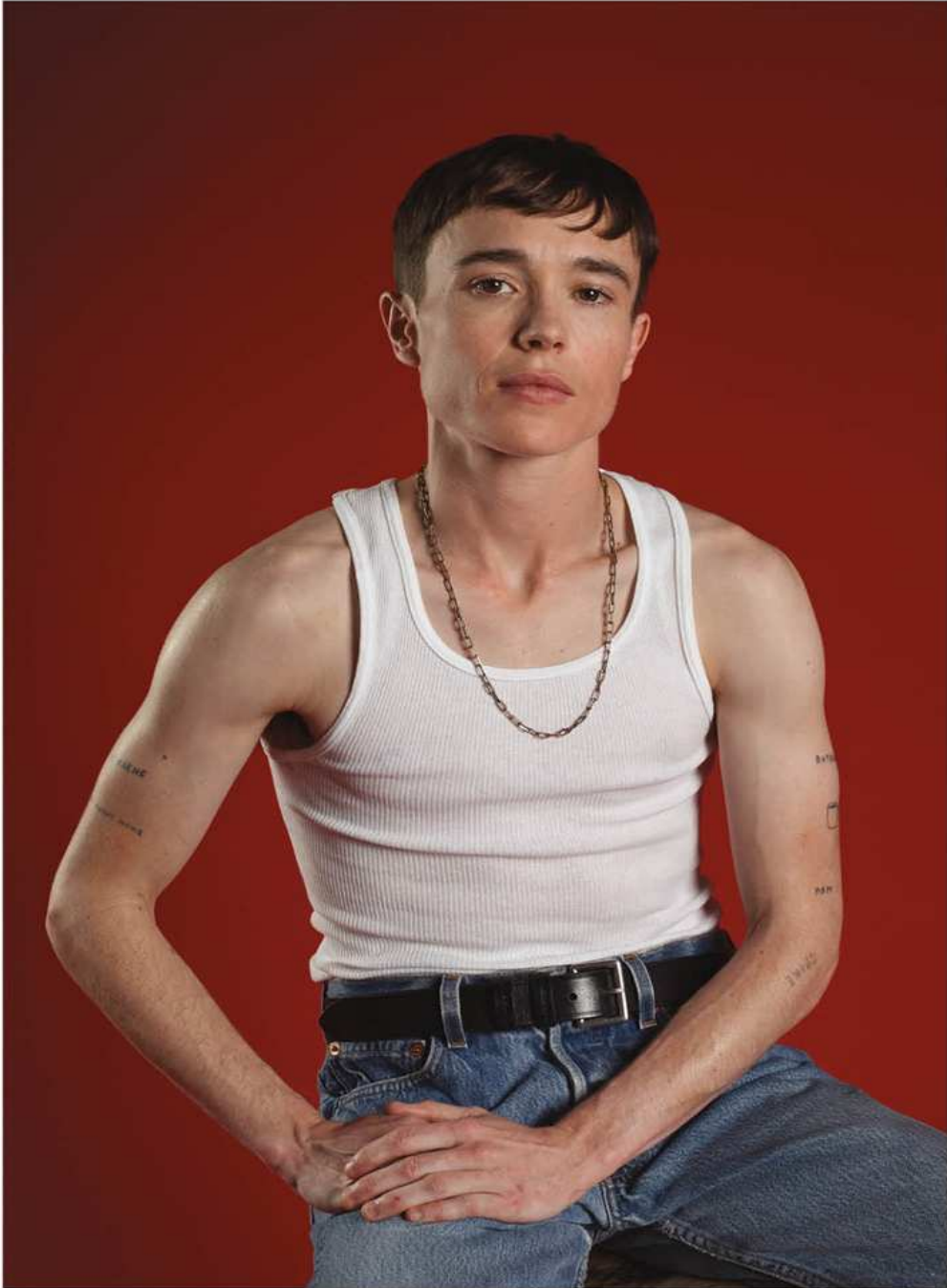


# PAGEBOY

A MEMOIR



A MEMOIR

# ELLIOT PAGE

# PAGEBOY

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*A Memoir*

**ELLIOT PAGE**



**FLATIRON  
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*To all those who came before*

## Author's Note

Writing a book has come up a few times over the years, but it never felt right and, quite frankly, it didn't feel possible. I could barely sit down, let alone be still long enough to complete such a task. My brain's energy was being wasted, a ceaseless drip attempting to conceal and control my discomfort. But now is different. New. At last, I can sit with myself, in this body, present—typing for hours, my dog, Mo, lounging in the sun, my back straighter, my mind quieter. This previously unimaginable contentment wouldn't have arrived without the health care I've received, and as attacks against gender-affirming care increase, along with efforts to silence us, it feels like the right time to put words on a page.

So here I am, grateful and terrified, writing directly to you. Trans people face increasing physical violence, and our humanity is regularly “debated” in the media. And, when we are given the opportunity to tell our stories ourselves, queer narratives are all too often picked apart or, worse, universalized—one person becomes a stand-in for all. There are an infinite number of ways to be queer and trans, and my story speaks to only one. As I say later in these pages, we are all but a speck in this universe, and I hope that in speaking my truth I have added yet another speck to dispel the constant misinformation around queer and trans lives. If you haven't already, I urge you to seek out many other vast and varying narratives from LGBTQ+ writers, activists, and individuals. The movement for trans liberation affects us all. We all experience gender joyfully and oppressively in different ways. As Leslie Feinberg writes in *Trans Liberation*, “This movement will give you more room to breathe—to be yourself. To discover on a deeper level what it means to be yourself.”

In writing this story, I have remembered each moment to the best of my ability. When I could not remember details, I reached out to others who shared those experiences to gain more clarity. A few names have been changed and some other specifics have been altered when necessary to protect the identity of certain people. At certain points I've referred to myself using my previous name and pronouns. This is a choice that felt

right to me, occasionally, when talking about my past self, but it's not an invitation for anyone to do the same. It's also important to note that while, in my life, gender and sexuality have been in constant conversation, these are two separate things. Coming out as queer was a wholly different experience from coming out as trans, and who I am evolved as I freed myself from the expectations of others. These memories shape a nonlinear narrative, because queerness is intrinsically nonlinear, journeys that bend and wind. Two steps forward, one step back. I've spent much of my life chipping away toward the truth, while terrified to cause a collapse. This is reflected on the page intentionally. In many ways, this book is the story of my unangling.

The act of writing, reading, and sharing the multitude of our experiences is an important step in standing up to those who wish to silence us. I've nothing new or profound to say, nothing that hasn't been said before, but I know books have helped me, saved me even, so perhaps this can help someone feel less alone, seen, no matter who they are or what journey they are on. Thank you for wanting to read about mine.

This world has many ends and beginnings  
A cycle ends, will something remain?  
Maybe a spark, once so bright will bloom again.

—BEVERLY GLENN-COPELAND,  
“A SONG AND MANY MOONS”



## PAULA

I met Paula when I was twenty. Sitting on our friend's couch, eating raw almonds with her knees to her chest, she introduced herself, "I'm Paula." The sound of her voice radiated warmth, a kindness. It wasn't so much that her eyes lit up but that they found you. I could feel her looking.

We went to Reflections. It was the first time I had been to a gay bar and would be my last for a long time. I was a miserable flirter. Flirting when I didn't mean to and not when I wanted to. We stood close, but not too close. The air so thick, I was swimming in it.

That summer we took a friend's boat to an empty island to camp. We did mushrooms around fires and cooked salmon wrapped in tinfoil. Stars pulsating, reaching, as if forming sentences. Mushrooms always made me cry, but she loved them, eventually my anxious tears turned to joy. I envied the self-assurance in her body. We danced on the beach. A guitar was being strummed, we took turns playing shitty covers.

I had just returned from a monthlong trip in Eastern Europe, backpacking with my childhood best friend, Mark. We began in Prague and took the train to Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, and Bucharest. We stayed in hostels, except for one day in Bucharest when Mark was so ill that we got a hotel room with air-conditioning. I bought individually wrapped cheese slices from the store and put them in the small freezer of the small hotel room's small fridge. We waited as they became cold, and I pressed damp cloths on the back of his neck and along his spine. When the cheese slices were frozen I placed them all over Mark's body, and that seemed to help a bit. The room had a Jacuzzi, and we sat in it without filling it up and flipped through the television channels, landing on a porno that incidentally also took place in a Jacuzzi. Mark ate the cheese.

This was before smartphones. Navigating trains, hostels, men, all with one guidebook. We would go to internet cafés to send a message home. "Hey, we are alive." I would email Paula, yearning for her. I thought about

her incessantly—while we railed through Austria, looking at a sea of sunflowers; while I drank blueberry beer in a basement in Belgrade, lips purple, head spinning, like the last time we kissed, which was the first time; on a twelve-hour train ride from Belgrade to Bucharest during one of the worst heat waves in decades. Mark and I lay next to each other on the same bunk, window down with our heads as close to the opening as we could manage. There was no air-conditioning, and we had no water. We listened to Cat Power through shared earphones and sipped absinthe. *Are you listening to it at the same time? The CD I made you?* I wondered, almost saying the words out loud. I watched the night pass by, the Serbian landscape, rural, motionless with its sparse, fleeting lights. I thought of Paula.

That time at Reflections was new for me, being in a queer space and being present, enjoying it. Shame had been drilled into my bones since I was my tiniest self, and I struggled to rid my body of that old toxic and erosive marrow. But there was a joy in the room, it lifted me, forced a reaction in the jaw, an uncontrolled, steady smile. Dancing, sweat dripping down my back, down my chest. I watched Paula's hair twist and bounce as she moved effortlessly, chaotic but controlled, sensual and strong. I would catch her looking at me, or was it the other way around? We wanted to be caught. Deer in the headlights. Startled, but not breaking.

“Can I kiss you?” I asked, jolted by my boldness, as if it came from somewhere else, powered by the electronic music perhaps, a circuit of release, of demanding you leave your repression at the door.

And then I did. In a queer bar. In front of everyone around us. I was coming to understand what all those poems were about, what all the fuss was. Everything was cold before, motionless, emotionless. Any woman I had loved hadn't loved me back, and the one who maybe had, loved me the wrong way.

But here I was, on a dance floor with a woman who wanted to kiss me and the antagonizing, cruel voice that flooded my head whenever I felt desire was silent. Maybe for a second, I could allow myself pleasure. We leaned in so our lips brushed, the tips of our tongues barely touching, testing, sending shocks through my limbs. We stared at each other, a quiet knowing.

Here I was on the precipice. Getting closer to my desires, my dreams, me, without the unbearable weight of the self-disgust I'd carried for so long. But a lot can change in a few months. And in a few months, *Juno*

would premiere.

## SEXUALITY SWEEPSTAKES

THE ELLEN PAGE SEXUALITY SWEEPSTAKES—I read the headline, color draining from my face. It was an article by Michael Musto in *The Village Voice* during the peak of *Juno*'s success. I scanned the rest of the piece. Among his speculation about a twenty-year-old's sexuality, Michael included, "I mean, come on already, is she??? You know, Lebanese! She certainly dresses like a, you know, tomboy ... Let's put the dykey pieces together. Is Juno a you know?"

I had been thrust into the spotlight overnight, but I'd already been called a dyke many times while growing up in Canada. The bullying had taken on a new tone in high school, from little quips by the popular girls to the relatively dramatic display of being physically forced into the boys' bathroom. Pushed in, nostrils distorted by that foreign, urinal smell, I waited a moment, listening for their glee to dissipate, to soften with distance—only to exit and have the stern, narrow face of my English teacher glaring directly at me: "To the office!" I apologized. I didn't say I was pushed in.

Not long before the bullying amped up, I had been rooming with a girl named Fiona in the St. Francis Xavier University dorm for a soccer tournament. Saint FX is located in Antigonish, a town on the tip of northwest Nova Scotia, just a skip and a jump from Cape Breton. It hosts the oldest ongoing Highland games outside Scotland. *Nova Scotia* is Latin for "New Scotland," but the land it's on was originally named Mi'kma'ki. The Mi'kmaq have lived here for over ten thousand years.

I can still remember the sound of Fiona's laugh. I could hear it above any other noise, through all the static, penetrating my ears, swelling inside my body. I wanted to be near her, I wanted her to want me. I was a right-wing midfielder; speedy, small but scrappy. She was a sweeper, the last line of our team's defense and cocaptain with our center midfielder. She was a natural leader, commanding but kind. She had our backs. I loved

watching her kick the ball—strong, fluid, and with a confidence I envied. I was crushing.

We lay in hard beds on either side of the room, the walls lined with dark, cheap wood. I looked at the ceiling and inhaled deeply, would I keep it in or let it out? The sensation was preternatural, as if I was spying on a potential future.

“I think I may be bisexual.” I said this seemingly out of nowhere, having never conveyed anything like this to anyone.

“No you are not,” she responded immediately, a sharp reflex, giggling after she said it.

This time, the sound of her laughter was harsh and cutting. Still, I wanted to laugh with her, *I mean being queer is funny and bad right?* The word “homosexuality” simply uttered in health class would give way to a cacophony of snickering. All the sitcoms I watched when I went home from school reinforced this. Whenever a joke was made, or I made one, it stuck; shit in the treads of my shoes. A spotlight moving stage right to stage left. I would tap-dance around it. Like a wet dog, I’d scramble to shake it off, to shake it out.

I can’t remember what was said after, just the echoing laughter and the hard surface of the stiff bed.

Unable to sleep, I snuck out into the fluorescent hallway around 5:00 A.M. I sat on the floor to read. Kurt Vonnegut was the first writer I ever really liked, *thumbing the nose at You Know Who*. I was reading *Mother Night*, a novel of moral ambiguity. “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be,” Vonnegut wrote. Sitting in the hall alone, I chewed on these words. Shame, with its steady swing, oscillated through my body. Something had slipped through my fingers. There was no catching it. I waited for the sun to rise.

We all ate breakfast together in the common area. There were Tim Hortons bagels and a large bag of oranges brought by a parent. The adults looked on, drinking their coffees. I ate silently. I didn’t know how to look at Fiona and figured it was best to avoid the situation. I grabbed my shin pads, intending to get to the field early and warm up for the game.

“Dyke.” The word smacked me across the face, said through that fiendish smirk I would come to know so well. As if gloating: *Ha, I’m nothing like you*. It came from a popular friend of Fiona’s. And it stung. An isolated pain, a blink of language, but really, it’s permanent.

Things changed after that. Something had been severed. I could sense

the whispers, a shift in energy, the speculation. Perhaps it was good? That dangling tooth needed to be ripped out.



A few months later, my father and I were visiting my grandmother in Lockeport, Nova Scotia, a small fishing village with a population of just over five hundred located on the south shore of the province. Fishing boats line the harbor, strung along the long pier, colors like Christmas lights. Worn yellow, a faded red, various shades of blue. A Nova Scotia postcard.

When I was a kid, my father would take me to Lockeport on July 1, a holiday in my homeland called Canada Day. Think July Fourth, but with less independence from the Crown, more “Canada’s birthday.” As a white kid growing up in Nova Scotia, I’d no clue about our history or our present. I was not taught it, the degree of our genocidal roots, the systemic racism, the segregation.

I thought Canada Day was all about fireworks, a parade, strawberry shortcake in the church basement, and, my favorite event on July 1, the “grease pole.” A long, thin log was laid down on the pier, protruding out over the harbor, with a long drop to the water. Lard has been rubbed all over the hard wood, smothering it. On the far end, stretching out over the ocean, is a whack of cash held down by a chunk of lard that competitors attempt to retrieve. There are only two strategies really. One, on the stomach, slow, a small slither forward, slow again. This typically fails. Instead, the key seemed to be gliding out with as much speed as possible, swiping off as much money as you could while beginning your descent toward the frigid Atlantic. Emerging, you collect the fallen bills through the shock of the cold. Seagulls circle above, diving for the floating fat. No, I’ve never tried it.

My grandmother still lived in the house where my father grew up. A small two-story with three bedrooms and white siding. Behind it, forest, endless forest. Across the street was my grandfather’s general store, Page’s Store. It is still there, though I am not sure what it is called now. They added a gas pump.

The bedrooms upstairs were connected by a closet space that tunneled from one room to the other. As a kid, I’d escape into it, waltzing into an imagined dimension, the door so small, as if designed for me. I would pull the chain on the bare bulb, illuminating my assortment of treasures. It all felt very cinematic. I’d look through the boxes of bullets, inspecting them,

eyes close like a jeweler, fascinated that something so minuscule could kill the bucks I would see jetting through the woods. Their stoic bodies barreling, seemingly too magnificent to crumple over such a tiny little thing.

“Dennis, what are you gonna do if Ellen’s a dyke?” my grandmother asked my father as we all sat in her sunroom. Her voice that same sharp tone she used when saying racist things. In the Alanis Morissette version of irony, this was the same grandparent who had given me a bear with rainbows on its paws and ears when I was born. I was sixteen now and had recently shaved my head for a film. A Blue Jays game played, baseball was her favorite sport and Toronto her beloved team, or was it Boston? That was one of the last times I would see my grandmother before she passed. I wonder what she would think of her grandson now if she were still alive. I doubt she would choose rainbows anymore. Some people do change, though.



The success of *Juno* coincided with people in the industry telling me no one could know I was queer. That it wouldn’t be good for me, that I should have options, to trust that this was for the best. So I put on the dresses and the makeup. I did the photo shoots. I kept Paula hidden. I was struggling with depression and having panic attacks so bad I would collapse. I could barely function. Numb and quiet, nails in my stomach, I was incapable of articulating the depth of pain I was in, especially because “my dreams were coming true,” or at least that is what I was being told. I dismissed my feelings as dramatic, berated myself for being ungrateful. I felt too guilty to say I was hurting, incapacitated, that I didn’t see a future.

I called my manager after reading the piece by Michael Musto, only to be met with a follow-up blog post detailing their phone conversation: “‘It’s not mean to wonder if someone’s gay,’ I shrieked, outraged.” Sure, it is not mean to simply wonder if someone’s gay. What *was* thoughtless and dangerous was writing something without any concern for a young queer person’s journey.

*Juno* had premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival to a fervent response. I did not have a personal publicist at the time. I’d decided I could go it alone after a previous experience where an innocent teenage question—“Did you ever watch *Xena*?”—was met with “No, because I’m not a lesbian.” I was glad to not be working with that publicist

anymore—these comments emblematic of the Hollywood they warn you about. Plastic, empty, homophobic. Still, I wasn't prepared or experienced enough to navigate this new fame alone.

It is different growing up as an actor in Canada, especially when I did. Canada didn't have the glossy cover. We weren't so obsessed with being shiny. The insistence to mask up mostly came with *Juno*.

I was planning on wearing jeans and a western(ish) shirt to *Juno*'s world premiere. I thought it was a cool look, and it had a collar. *That's fancy, right?* I thought. When the Fox Searchlight publicity team learned about my outfit, they urgently took me to Holt Renfrew on Bloor Street, with a dramatic rushing that is characteristic of the Hollywood circulatory system. I suggested a suit. They said I should wear a dress and heels. After they discussed this with the director, he called me. He said he agreed with them, insisting that I play the part. Michael Cera rocked sneakers, slacks, and a collared shirt. He looked fancy to me. I wonder why they didn't take him to Holt Renfrew. I guess he had nothing to hide, he was approved. He fit the part.

Being made to feel that I was inadequate, erroneous, the little queer who needed to be tucked away while being celebrated for repudiating myself was a slippery slope I'd been sliding down since before I could remember. And like a film stuck to my skin, I couldn't wash it off. The compulsion to tear apart my flesh, a sort of scolding—I became as repulsed as them.

I was spending more and more time in Los Angeles. Press for *Juno*, meetings, "awards season," which is two actual seasons. Back in Nova Scotia, another publication investigated my sexuality, perhaps trying to win Michael Musto's "sexuality sweepstakes." *Frank*, a "magazine" that has been published out of Halifax since 1987, considered itself a satirical magazine but was actually more like a tabloid. I was in Santa Monica when my father called to tell me that I was on the cover, a photo of me from Sundance with a giant headline that read IS ELLEN PAGE GAY?

I spun out. In bed at a friend's guesthouse, I closed my wet eyes tight, tears soaking my cheeks—*please let this be a dream. Please.*

When I got back to Halifax, the magazine was everywhere. Always sitting in view at the grocery store, the gas station, the corner store ... and there they all were, asking the question—*Is Ellen Page Gay?* Paula would flip them around. Hide them behind other magazines. Once she stole a bunch from a gas station in the South End.



The freedom I felt during my summer with Paula was coming to an end.

There was a photograph inside that included Paula. A small group of us at a party. I remember that night, a gathering at an apartment in one of the drab condo buildings that continue to overtake Halifax. The article speculated whether we were in a relationship or not, examining the rumors. Paula was still not out to her family. Staring at that picture, a realization: *a friend must have sent this to them*. I never knew who.

## BOY

We matched online, my first time on a dating app, my first time dating as an out trans person. After eating dinner in the Meatpacking District, I hopped on the train to Midtown to meet up with Sara and her friends. I was nervous, but energized, these spontaneous adventures new to me.

The bar was tacky, but I liked it. Searching for her, my eyes landed on a group of women. They sat at a high table with stools, already a few drinks in. I hate tall stools, they don't work well with my short legs. The women greeted me kindly, welcoming me, pulling up another seat.

All of them were gorgeous, hovering around six feet. I was dubious about my match with Sara. Were they just tipsy, swiping through the app, bemused by my presence on it? The little trans guy. Did they flip through all the cis dudes, the hot record producers, pro athletes, doctors, and then pause on my photo—a moment of disgust or merriment or both?

I ordered a tequila soda on the rocks with lime. TVs played, remnants of food were scattered on the table. I downed my drink and ordered another.

“Nova Scotia,” I said, responding to the obligatory “Where are you from?” “It's in Canada,” I added.

“What? I thought it was in Scandinavia or something?” one of her pals responded.

I finished my second drink and popped out to smoke a joint. Sara followed.

“When did you know?” she asked as we stood outside, leaning against a wall. She loomed over me. For a brief moment, I wondered what she meant. This is something I'm asked frequently and not something I wish for during a casual night out. I'd experienced this inquiry as a queer woman, but as a trans guy it's perpetual. Code for—*I don't believe you.*

I knew when I was four years old. I went to the YMCA preschool in downtown Halifax, on South Park Street across from the Public Gardens.

The building had a dark brick facade and has since been demolished and replaced. Primarily, I understood that I wasn't a girl. Not in a conscious sense but in a pure sense, uncontaminated. That sensation is one of my earliest and clearest memories.

The bathroom was down the hall from my preschool class. I would try to pee standing up, assuming this to be the better fit for me. I would press on my vagina, holding it, pinching and squeezing it, hoping I could aim. I befouled the stall, but the bathroom often smelled of urine anyway.

I was perplexed by my experience, severed from the other girls, twists in my stomach when I gazed at them. I remember one in particular, Jane. Her long brown hair, the way she could draw, her eyes focused and still with concentration. I was jealous of her artistic abilities. When I drew a person, limbs would protrude out of the head, arms like branches, thin lines for fingers. Little chicken legs with oversize sneakers. Jane, however, would draw a body, a stomach, a belly button. I was transfixed. My first crush, but I knew I was not like her.

“Can I be a boy?” I asked my mother at six years old.

We lived on Second Street at the time, having moved only a few minutes' walk from our previous attic apartment on Churchill Drive. A ground-level flat on a tree-lined street, it had two bedrooms, hardwood floors, and a lovely small living area with big windows. I'd sit in front of the TV for hours playing Sega Genesis—*Aladdin*, *NHL '94*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*—praying to God when my back was against the ropes, requiring the all-magnificent force to help me beat the game. There are no atheists in foxholes.

“No, hon, you can't, you're a girl,” my mother responded. She paused, not moving her eyes from the dish towels she was methodically folding, before saying, “But you can do anything a boy can do.” One by one, stacking them neatly in their place.

It reminded me of how she looked when ordering a Happy Meal for me at McDonald's. I insisted on the “boys' toy” every time—a delightful, congenial bribe. My mother's discomfort requesting the toy was palpable, releasing a sort of shy giggle, slivers of shame peering through. Often they gave the girls' one anyway.

At ten, people started addressing me as a boy. Having won a yearlong battle to cut my hair short, I started to get a “thanks, bud” when holding the door for someone at the Halifax Shopping Centre.

It was unfathomable to me that I wasn't a boy. I writhed in clothes that

were even in the slightest bit feminine: Everyone around me saw a different person than I saw, so for much of my childhood I preferred to be alone. I played by myself extensively. “Private play,” I called it.

“Mom, I’m going to have private play now,” I’d say as I marched up the stairs to my room, closing the door behind me.

I loved action figures—Batman and Robin, Hook and Peter Pan, Luke Skywalker, two Barbies from Happy Meals whose hair I cut off. The “girl toy” making it into the bag, despite the “boy toy” request. I was a walking stereotype, just not in the way my mom wanted.

Disappearing into private play for hours, I’d build forts on my bunk bed. It was metal, bars lined the bottom of the top bunk, and I would hang blankets and towels, making rooms. A little kitchen, a miniature bedroom. Vanishing into intricate and impassioned narratives, danger lurked, I’d hang off the top bunk, as if dangling from a cliff, facing death, using all my might to pull myself up to safety.

Imagined romances bloomed. I would write love letters to my fake girlfriend from across the lava floor, always signing, *Love, Jason*. I would tell her about my adventures abroad, how I longed for her, cared for her, that I needed her in my arms.

Those were some of the best times of my life, traveling to another dimension where I was ... me. And not just a boy but a man, a man who could fall in love and be loved back. Why do we lose that ability? To create a whole world? A bunk bed was a kingdom, I was a boy.

My imagination was a lifeline. It was where I felt the most unrestrained, unselfconscious, real. Not a visualization, far more natural. Not a wishing, but an understanding. When I was present with myself, I knew, without exception. I saw with startling clarity then. I miss that.

Private play was similar to acting, the sensation a sort of paradox. My reliance on my imagination has carried me through life. Perhaps I’ve been chasing that feeling ever since. “Acting, finding a character, it is like being possessed,” Samantha Morton once said. Later, when I was sixteen, her performance in Lynne Ramsay’s *Morvern Callar* would become one of my greatest inspirations. The quietness, the subtlety, the power of silence.

Before my taste in cinema led me to films like *Ratcatcher* and *Movern Callar*, I was stuck on disaster films. I rented *Anaconda* on my eleventh birthday, not a disaster film, but close. Anna, a girl in my class, had come over for a sleepover. We took a cold, short walk from home, cutting across the boulevard to Isleville Street, the grass hard and frozen, crunching