

Beneath These Bones

By Austen Tucker · 2026

Today is the Pulse anniversary. This essay is for everyone who survived, everyone who didn't, and everyone still standing in the rubble of their own survival.

I didn't come out halfway. The whole messy business of finding myself, exploring gender, and figuring out what the hell I was happened in private. On purpose. I had a whole protocol — who I'd talk to, what white lies needed telling, what information had to be compartmentalized so my exploration didn't leak. (Growing up in the closet gives you a lot of practice in subterfuge. Makes you a damn good poker player to boot.)

But from the second I said "go" — the moment hiding hurt more than the humiliation of being found out — there was no half-measure. I came out like a monster truck: loud, imposing, destructive. I overwhelmed every doubt with obsessive forward motion. The people who knew me had two choices: jump on board, or get crushed under the weight of my determination.

Anyone who questioned my transition got a mountain of research, which I was more than happy to cite at length. People waffled and got both barrels of my discontent. People disappeared and I drove on past them.

My budget became dedicated to beard removal and surgery. I lived as cheap as I could. Instead of the post-college globetrotting I'd dreamed about, I did weekends at cons and trips to see friends in Chicago. Cheap stuff, so I could put \$700 a month into the fund.

I met other trans folks. Opened my home to them. Some moved cross-country to help. Some became close friends. I built new social circles where almost nobody knew about past me. I struggled — at one point had a full mental breakdown — and lashed out at anyone who tried to put even the smallest burden on my back.

I took night shifts at a call center so I could hit job fairs during the day. For two years, every hour of my commute went to practicing my new voice. On customer calls I tried to pass. When I broke into IT I threw everything I had at getting good — IT money meant surgery sooner. I edited resumes for the in-house recruiter, did QA on financial systems, proofread proposals, until I landed as a business analyst.

I studied fashion like comprehensives, hunting for the dress shape that would hide my too-square hips, my too-broad shoulders. I dressed like a super-femme, prissy girl because it let me pass. Passing

meant I could hide my trans-ness day to day. Passing meant customer-facing roles. More money. More momentum.

I felt like I was running ahead of a tidal wave. Of what, exactly? Future badness brought on by not passing. The guilt and loss I didn't have time to process while just trying to survive that first year. Some part of me felt compelled to make this work without help from family — being one of the queers already made them uncomfortable, and I wanted to prove I could be queer and successful. Asking for help would have signaled a failure to launch. Proof that this whole "trans" thing was a huge mistake. At least to my mind.

And then, one day, it all just stopped.

After all the struggle, the arguments, the detonated relationships from the early days — I was just me. After years in crisis mode, the silence left me in shock. After years of being driven by a singular impulse, it was just done. Imagine someone reached into the core of your being, grabbed your deepest and strongest desires, and yanked them clean out. No more "transition." No more goal. Just me: a professional woman in her late twenties, adrift, standing in a pile of rubble I hadn't cleaned up since I was 23.

The gravity of what I'd done finally sank in while I was listening to "Beneath These Bones" by Namoli Brennett. She's a trans folk singer — not usually my cup of tea, but singing along with her had helped me find my voice. I was at my desk, word processor open, staring at a blank page. Six months post-surgery. I was taking testosterone, ironically, to fight the worst depression I'd had since starting transition. My life was: hype myself up for work, survive the day, come home, and just sit. I didn't even have the gumption to play games anymore.

I'd opened the word processor hoping to find my writing groove. At least there I could get lost in another world, one where life had meaning and mine wasn't a cruel joke played on a woman who stopped running to beat the tide. Nothing came. I poured a glass of whiskey. Still nothing.

Frustrated, I started writing the first thing on my mind:

"What do you do when you've spent the last four years stampeding toward a goal and suddenly you're just there? Where does that leave me?

"Who am I if I'm not in transition?

"I haven't been on a date in years. I wouldn't know where to start. I don't even know what I like anymore.

"Do I even like the idea of being with someone? The last relationship didn't go so well. What if I end up in another emotionally abusive one? Is it worth the risk?

"My blood family probably hates me. Every time we talk I'm too busy, too off in my own world, too — too something."

(The narrative goes in dark directions for a few paragraphs.)

"I miss mom.

"Every time I meet a new group of people I end up breaking the relationship somehow. I'm too focused on myself, or too distant, or just — the word escapes me.

"I'm an asshole. I'm not sure if that's good or bad. Good: I survived this ordeal because I was willing to be a selfish asshole. Bad: I am an asshole.

"I flew halfway around the world alone for a surgery. Who in the hell thought that was a good idea? What if something had gone wrong?

"What now?"

I've lost count of the people who've commended me for being brave enough to transition. That's not true. The choice was move forward with transition or take my own life. In that context, "survival" fits better than "bravery."

I'm not impressed with the act of transition. Picking up all the broken glass and debris after transition is done, though? That's the quiet, hard shit no one talks about.