

# Early Days

By Austen Tucker · 2026

Eight essays for June. Song-titled. One a day, originally — lightly revised, anchored to the dates that matter. The woman who wrote these drafts knew what she was talking about, and I've learned not to argue with her.

Pride isn't a brand activation. It's a fucking riot. See you in June.

## Seasons of Love

It's 2009 and I'm going to my first Pride. My Aunt Ada and I are having cocktails at Olly's in Indianapolis. The server — a nice guy I see here most every week — is wearing bandages on his wrists. I never see him again. Outside: rainbows, the sound of drums and brass, a house party booming from a flat down the street. I feel out of place in a world I didn't know until very recently. I have a mix of straight and gay friends in my life.

It's 2011 and Pride is a reunion. My Aunt Ada, my sister, and I watch the parade go by. When Indiana Youth Group passes I'm dragged into the parade alongside them. Someone I know stops me every few steps for a hug and a how-are-you. Outside: blue skies, a folk singer on a main stage, booths full of friends from activist groups. Later that night I tell a friend I have plenty of straight friends. He says: "Really. Name four." I cannot.

It's 2013 and it's my first Pride in the city. I'm at D's house, still learning the names of the people who will eventually be my chosen family. Outside: a dozen house parties with open windows, the din of Boystown a street over, police sirens. A friend of a friend shows up, props himself in a handstand against a wall, and twerks. He ends up being an amazing guy. I have maybe two straight people in my social circle. At least one of them has come over to the queer side.

It's 2015 and it's my first Pride post-Obergefell. D and I wear wedding dresses and rainbow cat ears. We take a shot for each justice that secured our right to marry. Outside: a parade that lasts three full hours. A houseguest with a YouTube channel starts streaming our party on Periscope. I assume everyone I meet is queer until proven straight.

It's 2017 and I just finished a low-key Pride with my favorite people in the world. Outside: an even bigger parade than before. The family has grown up. Found love. Had kids. Landed bigger jobs. But in that

moment we're just there, together, clad in our rainbow fineries. We may not have the most exciting Prides in the world anymore, but there's nowhere else I'd rather be in June.

## Let's have a kiki

A month before I started HRT my therapist sent me home with some homework. "Try dressing up and going out. Pay attention to how you feel. We'll talk soon."

I already knew the answer. Between the days I dressed up in college, the makeovers with friends in Tennessee, the long weekend in Chicago where I went full girl mode — the answer was clear to anyone with half a brain. But I'm stubborn. Stupid, too. I'd get over that eventually.

So I came out to my sister. I told her about the therapy. About how I'd dressed in college. I asked for a makeover.

She obliged. (I don't know if I'd have made it through this without her. Shoutouts to Whit.)

We made plans to go dancing at Talbot Street, a drag bar in Indianapolis. She came to my apartment with an armful of makeup. I tried my best not to freak out. I failed. Picture it: after years of this being my deepest, darkest secret, my sister was about to make me look good. Not exactly easy. I was probably clammy and a little jumpy, but she took care of me.

I spent so much effort trying not to freak out that I didn't even notice when she finished. "Go look in the mirror," she said. "I think you look pretty good."

When I saw my reflection my heart caught in my throat. Someone had thrown a rock into a still pond. Splash.

I look like a girl.

I feel like a girl.

I'm not sure I ever felt like a boy, really.

I saw myself for the first time in that mirror. From that moment on, boy Austen didn't have a chance in hell of surviving.