

Letters and the Sun on My Face

By Austen Tucker · 2026

A double feature. Letters to my younger selves, then the night I came up for air and learned how hard it was to stay there.

If I could turn back time

In one way, the answer is no. Doing this the hard way turned me into a strong, confident woman. But if you handed me a way to loop back into my body — say —

When I was 11

You feel like a girl because you are a girl. That's completely normal. Keep reading the coding books. I hear computers are going to be big someday.

When your singing voice dropped out of soprano and you cried for a week straight — you weren't being dramatic. You were grieving. That voice was yours and it was beautiful. It'll take a few decades, but you'll sing alto again. Promise.

When I was 15

It's not a fetish. It's not a fetish. It's not a fetish.

For the love of god, don't buy the "shameful secret" crap they're selling on sites hocking butt pads and overpriced falsies. Staying in the closet is the right call tactically — keep doing that. But quit wrestling now: your back is fucked up, the glory is short-lived, and you hate the way you look in the mirror anyway. Start practicing a woman's voice. You'll need it.

Keep coding, too. I hear the web is going to be big sometime soon.

When I was 19

It's not a fetish. It's not ever going away.

Girl, you spent your first week at college imagining yourself as a woman and felt damn comfortable doing it. That's not a strange outlier. That's a goddamn sign. When you friended your old boyfriend and felt that

tinge of jealousy rise up — that's not just about his fantastic life. That's some gen-u-ine wanting to be trans. Talk to him.

Get into therapy. Lean on your trans friends. Transition. If Wabash won't have you, go to Purdue.

And for the love of god, you hate teacher ed. English works out, though. Change your minor. I hear the web is going to be big sometime soon.

When I was 22

It's not a fetish. It's not ever going away.

Don't take the job at Ritter. You'll self-medicate with rum every night and feel like the universe is shitting on your head. You're not stuck in education. Find something better. I hear the web is going to be big in a few years.

I'd tell you to pull the trigger on transition already — but spoilers — you do it in a few months anyway.

Sweet Transvestite

The shame trans women feel about their gender identity is brutal. A healthy dose of toxic masculinity in our culture makes being feminine weak. I went through college as a profoundly depressed person, often suicidal, a perfectionist to the point of self-harm. Other than a few stand-out moments, my college memories are a long blur of friendly people I felt like I didn't deserve to know.

Purdue — the social center for Wabash College — ran an RHPS midnight showing every Halloween, and like clockwork my group showed up. Crazy costumes. Dresses and beards. Angel wings and pasties. I remember folks wanting me to join in. I can't remember who — maybe Jonathan, maybe Denis — made the suggestion:

"We could put some wings on you."

"No thank you. I just want to look like the girl next door."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It'd be fun to pass as just another girl."

I played around with gender all through college. Most years I had a separate wardrobe I'd pull out when I visited Purdue's campus, where I could explore without worrying about fallout at the small all-male college I attended. (Of course, I purged that wardrobe whenever I started to feel more comfortable in it than in my male clothes. Another story for another day.) I got pretty good at passing. I knew trans people.

They all seemed happy. But I never put two and two together: people like me, who don't feel right in their skin, are happier when they transition.

That moment when I quasi-admitted to my friends I liked dressing up as a girl? I think it was the first time I'd said it out loud to anyone at Wabash. The rush of excitement. The nerves that put the taste of metal in my mouth. The immediate wash of shame. Passing? What was I, some sort of tranny? I should tell them it's only a joke. I'm just doing it because I like learning new tricks. Crossdressing is a new talent I can pick up. Yeah. That's it.

I went. I felt pretty. Accepted. I had finally gotten my head above dark, murky waters — gasping for air, feeling the sun kiss my cheeks for the first time.

Three hours later I took a deep breath and dove back under.

I wish I'd listened to my trans friends. Really listened, instead of ignoring the correlation between their transition and their happiness. If I had, I might have saved myself a whole stack of headaches: taking a job at a Catholic school, nearly killing myself, transitioning while trying to change careers.

This is why I'm out, open, and (at times) annoyingly queer. It's not for you. It's not for the detractors. It's for the friend of a friend who's still struggling to tread water. If I can help one person shed that shame and find themselves — if I have even the slightest chance of helping someone not feel the way I did — I'm going to be out and proud.