

Wicked Little Town

By Austen Tucker · 2026

I spent a lot of time as a teen hanging out with furies on the internet and writing terrible transformation stories under a pen name. But don't leave yet. I can explain.

It started, as few stories do nowadays, on an obscure IRC channel. Purposefully hard to get to — you had to know the server address, the configuration, the right rooms — but once you found your way there it felt like a cozy bar, familiar faces at the stools. I only went to chat with a writer I idolized, who insists to this day it was the only real communications channel he used with any regularity. Anything less than an idol and I wouldn't have bothered.

But I stayed for two reasons. One, the folks there were fun to talk to. Two — and this one mattered more to a kid in the sticks — the people on the channel were different. Different sensibilities. Different histories. It was the first place I ever role-played. The first place I met a gay person. The first place I ever heard the word "trans" used in a sentence.

Not "I'm a freak." Not "I'm abnormal." Just a woman casually mentioning she was transgender.

Let me set the scene outside my bedroom door. I'm living in a barn my family renovated from bare walls. Outside: blacktop, a basketball hoop, yard. Fifteen minutes north is a cornfield. Ten minutes east, a tractor repair shop. My teachers know my parents because they either taught them or sat next to them in class. There's a church on every corner and every sports team prays before games.

The internet is in its infancy. If you want to connect, you need a desktop computer you probably built yourself. Which means every piece of information available to me pre-internet came from books, encyclopedias, and television available in a conservative Indiana town.

It's not the kind of environment where folks talk about gender theory.

My dad came home one day with a pile of broken machines from an office fire and handed it to me with an ultimatum: "If you can build your own from parts, it's yours." A few months and countless late-night AskJeeves searches later I had a first-gen Celeron with a 12-inch display that wouldn't fully degauss and a Model M keyboard. My gateway to the boundless possibilities of cyberspace. I locked it down tighter than Fort Knox.

Back to the channel. Originally built as the social network for a niche (now defunct) website and a (still kicking) fiction critique group. Picture a wood-paneled bar, warm lighting, and at the stools a number of

anthropomorphic animals. (Yep. Go ahead. Get it out of your system.) Boys, girls, and people who hadn't made up their minds yet, sharing stories and playing games and talking about nothing. On here, I'm a squirrel. Usually squirrel-sized. Usually a boy. Sometimes — in moments when I trust the people in the room — a girl.

That night I was sitting beside a lovely rabbit named Kristi. She owned the bar. Depending on the day she could be anything from a straightforward anthropomorphic rabbit to a self-governing colony of nanobots roughly shaped like a rabbit. As long as you had some sort of rabbit-like being in your head you were in the clear.

The trans joke came along when a few channel long-timers started reminiscing about pre-Kristi Kristi. It took me a minute to figure out what she meant by "being a bear before" — furry chatroom kind of masks the obvious — but I couldn't let my curiosity slide.

I whispered a private message. "Did you say you used to be a boy?"

She giggled. "Yes. Figured everyone knew."

"I didn't know that was even possible."

She was kind. Patient. I can't remember exactly what we talked about beyond that. She sent me a before-and-after picture that was simultaneously not-a-rabbit and mind-blowing. This wasn't a fantasy in my head. It was real. I was looking at pictures of a real, live human being who used to look like a guy and now looked like that guy's sister. There were doctors. Legal name changes. Procedures she described to me the way someone might explain how to change a flat tire.

And then it hit me: I could be like her.

I wish I had told her that night. I wish I had spilled my guts onto that bar, sloppy tears mixing with stale liquor and condensation. The fact that at four I had wanted to go with the girls in preschool and got shepherded over to the boys. The nights I cried as puberty turned my pretty soprano into a tenor. The sensation of being an alien in my own skin and not being able to do anything about it because the words I needed didn't fucking exist.

It would have been so easy to tell her everything. But I can say this now:

Thanks, Kristi. For giving me the words. For giving me the hope. For giving me the dream. You may not remember talking to me about it, but I'll never stop passing that kindness forward.