

As I stand here in my indigo Pendleton wool blazer and Boyish jeans that I bought secondhand, I think about how far I've come from my fast fashion days. But upon hearing the news that Forever 21 is closing its doors for good, I feel compelled to pay this iconic retailer its dues. In my teen years, there was no other store with which I trusted my looks more, for selfie photo shoots that were for no one but me.

In the mid-2000s, before brick-and-mortar began a slow and painful suffering toward e-tail, before Shein and Cider and Temu ruled the app stores, there was Forever 21. Their shabby chic, affordable and accessible clothing spoke to me, a good girl wanting desperately to rebel against the wardrobe that her mom picked out for her. I knew exactly where it was in my local mall; my body would reflexively turn into the store like a rat toward a hunk of cheese. Even if their clothes were made from sweatshop fabric, I adored every piece I owned. Each one was part of my journey to define my style, one I'm still embarking on as an adult.

And so, to thank this store for all it did for me, I present the Top 5 Forever 21 Lewks that Defined My Adolescence:

5. My white jeans with neon pink, peach and lavender splatters that never actually fit me
These are ranked last because I never did get to wear them in public, or really wear them at all. But the promise of wearing these insane pants and having friends gawk and ooh and ahh kept my dream alive, until I came to my senses and tossed them aside.

4. My gray and black raglan tee with roses and some emo quote written in black script that I can't remember but fell on the thin line between tame and edgy

When my mom refused to let me wear bondage pants and the like, you were my goth-adjacent article of clothing. You appeared slightly refined and dark while your fabric was as thin and flimsy as rice paper. I could wear you with a healthy dose of lip gloss and mascara while watching my favorite local band, trying and failing to catch the eye of the brooding, depressed lead singer.

3. My orange and burgundy-striped halter

You were my first classy top. I rang in the year 2007 with you and my best friend Schyler, sipping Martinelli's Sparkling Cider in plastic wine glasses like the good little dorks we were. I recall a photo from that night, both of us wearing big silly grins and my hair frizzy from the straightener, our innocence still intact.

2. My white and black party dress.

You were an 80s-esque outfit straight out of the 1988 film "Working Girl" updated for 2011. Your cream short-sleeved top with black speckles sewn on top of a tight, stretchy black skirt gave me the feeling of floating on the dance floor, twirling in my brushed gold flats. My 21st birthday wouldn't have been the same without you.

1. The MVP, my girl, my ultimate confidence booster: My beige-pink and black striped body-con mini dress

You were by far the hottest garment I laid eyes on in 2010. You had short sleeves, a slightly open back held together by a bow, and just enough coverage to leave a little mystery without showing it all off. You held all my club memories when my alcohol-soaked brain couldn't. You got me laid more often than not, and you made me pee about the same amount of times.

About three years ago, I walked into Forever 21 with some friends so we could find some last-minute earrings for a wedding. Before my eyes appeared skimpy, shimmery belly shirts and rainbow tie-dyed shirts that were giving Limited Too in 1999. The gold-plated hoops and butterfly studs looked chintzy, and I knew from experience they'd turn my earholes green. A mix of moroseness and embarrassment washed over me, and I came to the grim realization that I was too old to shop here.

Perhaps the death of this chain store came at the end of a stage in my own life: one in which I buy clothes that will last and not pill after one wash. But if any part of my future wardrobe can give me the confidence to venture out into the world the way Forever 21 did, I'll know my money was well spent.