

When Sally Met Harry

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When Sally, a 35 year old trans woman, found herself in a sudden and unplanned relationship with a man she met by accident, she was reminded of the problems which others have with her mere existence – problems of theirs which influenced her own approach to relationships and sex. Sally and Harry are fictional people, but their stories are real – composed from a mosaic of real people's lives and experiences. UK Trans Rights Campaigner Christine Burns explores the trials of dating and loving when your sex, and the consequent interpretation of your sexuality, is regarded as a matter of opinion, rather than matter of fact.

Sally wasn't thinking about sex that day in the supermarket car park. In fact, compared with the daily banter of the other women in her office at work, it would be fair to say that Sally didn't think much about sex at all.

The whole world but her seemed to be obsessed with sex though – not getting it, getting it, liking it, hating it, having too much, talking about other people having it – and paying the price of letting it be the motivation for bigger decisions about life. As a not very sexual person she noticed this a lot. People married out of sexual desire. They deserted others for it. They lied. They stabbed friends in the back. Sometimes they even committed crimes.

Looked at from her rather more detached perspective Sally could see that sex was a pretty poor motivation for doing anything. Joking aside, it was usually over in minutes. Even the desire which kept couples coming back for more seemed a pretty ephemeral thing. Some said this was nature's programming in fact – a device to keep human couples together for long enough to nest, and to see their offspring old enough to fend for themselves, but then designed to send one or other off in the pursuit of fresh novelty.

Who would plan major life decisions of any kind on something so ephemeral?

And when your thinking is not confused by lust Sally reckoned that it was rather easier to understand what "love" meant.

Love was not on Sally's mind as she wheeled her bachelor girl trolley back to her car from the weekly shopping expedition though. Her mind at that moment was focussed on nothing more important than getting home, lighting a scented candle and flopping onto the settee to read her book.

That was an advantage of single life of course – it could be as simple and self indulgent as you liked, whilst having no less space for other people when it mattered. And having had more than her fair share of problems in 35 crowded years, Sally was well aware of the importance of having one's own personal space and knowing when to shut the door on the world. You see, the problems weren't her's but other people's. And when she shut the door they miraculously disappeared.

Sally had had a rather different life experience to the average woman though. She had been born with a penis and, so far as she knew, all the other paraphernalia which are associated with the expectation that you'll grow up to be a man. For all that apparent evidence though, Sally wasn't a man. She wasn't back then. And she most certainly wasn't any more.

This isn't to say that Sally could find it all that easy to "prove" incontrovertibly that she was a woman. But now she knew. Just as everyone she met "knew" as well.

She hadn't always "known" of course. Maybe that happens for some trans women. More "ordinary" people she met and had talked-to about this curious question said that, when pressed, "they just knew" what they were too. All Sally had known however was that she wasn't the things other people expected her to be.

It was a really peculiar question to dissect. After all, it's something most people take so much for granted that they never questioned – either about themselves or others.

She had worked out that it was not simply a case of what you've been brought up to believe by others. After all, that hadn't happened to her and, in talking to friends who had had children, it was quite apparent that there was perhaps something essential about a child's self knowledge and behaviour that came before the real onslaught of cultural indoctrination began. She'd read too of children who had been brought up in the wrong gender and "just knew".

For Sally it had been easy to simply know what she wasn't, but harder to decide what she was. If you can only imagine two axiomatic states of being then the question is both obvious and overwhelming in its implications. It is one-dimensional. "If you're not a man then you must be a woman". But if you already know that it's not that simple then it becomes possible to see into another dimension of possibilities – a two dimensional world in which you could be somewhere defined by a combination of *both* genders, or a three dimensional one where you might be something else entirely.

Exploring these possibilities is far less terrifying than the prospect of telling the world that you're a girl. Call it avoidance. Call it philosophy. But intelligent trans women can find lots of ways of putting off the unpalatable. So Sally knew all about exploring the possibilities of who or what she really was.

Harry's life had meanwhile been rather simpler.

Harry was three years older than the attractive woman he was appreciatively following past the line of cars. He had never ever thought for a moment about the question of being a man. He was one of those people who "just knew" – helped, of course, by parents, relatives and friends who knew this as well.

Some had the “proof” of course. His parents and grandparents had cooed over the baby Harry’s cute little willy when changing his nappies and bathing him. And Harry delighted them in being everything they expected of a boy child in the family.

He never stopped to think about it but others relied on different cues when he started going out into the world. So did he. In fact, if any of us were to stop to think about it, we’ve probably never seen most of the people we know unclothed.

It would be difficult to say with certainty whether the man next door had a penis or whether the woman at the checkout definitely didn’t have one. Genitals are the things which midwives look at to tell you what to put on the birth certificate. They’re what you expect to find when you pursue another person with sex in mind. Society doesn’t actually pay much attention to them the rest of the time though. Like everyone else Harry was used to “sexing people” on a whole variety of other alternative clues. And when it came to women Harry had plenty of experience.

Harry had definitely always been a red-blooded male. He liked women. He liked looking at them. He liked the way they moved. He liked talking to them. And he certainly liked sex with them.

Harry knew where he stood with men too. He wasn’t hung up about homosexuality. A couple of his mates were Gay in fact – and he was confident enough about his own sexuality not to let other people’s worry him.

Harry simply enjoyed being heterosexual, in the way that he also enjoyed being a man. He didn’t think about either question because he “just was” – and nothing had ever come along to challenge the simple fact of either proposition. Besides – Harry’s attention was focussed on Sally’s long, smooth, elegant legs.

Looking back now he claims that it was an accident. Sally, with a cynical grin, still thinks it may have been less innocent. She had reached her car and stopped to unlock it. He – with

his mind nearer the road – carried on going. And Sally's first impression of Harry was formed face down on the tarmac.

It's a well-worn love story cliché of course. Two strangers bump into each other by chance. Their eyes meet, a celestial choir sings, and the camera unaccountably cuts to waves rushing up the shoreline. It's that sex thing again. Speeding things up.

For Harry and Sally it wasn't quite so clichéd. Their eyes certainly met. Hers glowering in hurt anger – his genuinely worried. Then he laughed at the absurdity. And so did she. Not because it was funny. No. But because his laugh was infectious. She recognised in that instant a likeable and kindred spirit. Her instincts said that this was a person with a similar sense of humour. More than that there was his smile – his gorgeous boyish smile and the twinkle of something in his eye. And she was genuinely surprised by the effect which that brief glimpse of the strange man's personality had on her.

As Sally's face cracked from a scowl into a big open smile Harry also realised that there was more to this woman besides her legs or any other physical assets. For one of those rare occasions in his life he saw more than just the young woman's body – though sure enough there was plenty to like about that too. That smile of hers tended to blot out everything else and connected directly with his inner thoughts though. Her eyes were bright and laughing too. In fact her entire face participated in the laugh. Young as she was she already had those characteristic lines around her eyes and mouth – the tell-tale signs of someone who laughs a lot and does so without a trace of inhibition. A woman whose personality shone through her body.

Sally did not realise it till later but, in that instant, Harry was hooked. He was already in the early stages of love.

He helped her to her feet, helped put her groceries in the back of the car, and then offered to escort her back to the supermarket and to buy her a coffee whilst she washed her hands.

Afterwards they talked. They laughed. They discovered they had similar interests in films and politics. They began to find that they finished each other's sentences. Time flew. The café staff went home. The supermarket began to close. Harry asked for Sally's phone number. And Sally, for only the second time in her entire life, gave this strange yet familiar and likeable man the key to enable them to continue this exciting new experience another day.

Over the weeks and months that followed Sally and Harry saw more and more of each other.

Harry thought Sally more beautiful the more he saw of her. She was his height. Slim built. Dark blonde. Clear skinned. She wore very little makeup and he liked that in a woman. She dressed well too – simple but elegant in tailored trousers and pastel-coloured tops.

Sally meanwhile had never dressed for others. She simply dressed to please herself. For sure it had taken her a while to find her style as a woman. For one thing she had missed the opportunity, which teenage girls take for granted, to experiment in clothes and makeup with her friends. Puberty is the one time in life when women are allowed to get it wrong and to learn from their mistakes. Nevertheless, she also learned that with the right friends and advice it doesn't take long to catch up – and she also noticed that all that teenage training wasn't a sure fire guarantee that other women of her age would go on to be perfect masters of their own style. Now – fifteen years after she had taken the huge life altering step to be a woman - she had learned how to be comfortable in her dress, and to use clothes as a way of helping to express her overall personality. Nothing more, nothing less – and definitely nothing kinky.

At first they stuck to neutral venues – the theatre, cinemas, meals in restaurants and day trips in Harry's car. This all suited Sally very well because it allowed her to keep the relationship at a level where she felt comfortable, whilst she wondered where it would go next. She wasn't thinking about sex in a speculative way; nevertheless she was a big girl and understood in today's world what men expect after a few preliminary encounters.

As she got to know more of Harry she found herself liking him more and more too. So when she pondered the very likely thoughts running through Harry's head it was from the perspective of wanting it to go right. Not the just sex which he was bound to start to press for before too long, but the whole relationship.

She began to realise something new about herself that she'd not appreciated before. She had always known that she wasn't all that interested in sex at all. It certainly wasn't a driving force in her life. Her girlfriends salivated over pictures in the glossy magazines, but that kind of animal desire was a complete mystery to her from either angle. She had always liked looking at beautiful people – men or women. But she didn't lust for either. Now she was planning how to go about having sex with this man she had met. Again it wasn't for lust. She simply wanted to please him, and to be closer to him too. And, as she touched that thought she could smell his smell and picture herself curled up against his chest and with his arm around her.

Sally knew that sex for her wasn't problematic, but then she knew that in another way it was.

On a purely technical level she knew that she was capable of having sexual intercourse with a man if she wanted. To put it bluntly "it all worked down there", although she knew from experience that she needed to have a very high level of trust in the man concerned before going through any of the stages of intimacy beyond outer clothing.

It wasn't any fear of being "found out" as some people assumed. It had certainly taken a long time to develop confidence in her body image. After all, if you'd started out with a male body you'd probably have trouble accepting it was now unambiguously female-looking as well.

Lots of trans women have body image concerns of that kind in fact – a point to be noted by any fool who might think that people change their bodies in order to be aroused by their image as women. Sally had never thought or felt that way. Lust for herself was a laughable idea. Indeed until she'd experienced enough men telling her how great she looked, she was convinced she looked awful.

And, though it might sound awful to express it this way, the only way that Sally could convince herself to trust what her admirers were saying was to be sure they knew nothing of her past. She had to be sure they weren't just saying things to be kind or that they were seeing her in any way other than as a woman.

All of which raises that unique ethical problem which trans people have to negotiate with their intimate partners. When to tell them.

Having spent many years pondering what others thought about people like herself Sally was pretty sure that her life was generally problem-free. At least, it was problem free from her own perspective and once she had solved the issue of how to feel comfortable in her own skin.

The problems all tended to be other people's. This was especially true of so-called "professionals", who all seemed to see her life as a problem through the lens of their own preoccupations.

Lawyers saw Sally's life in terms of legal problems. Her existence regularly made the law into an ass. Medical professionals saw her identity as an illness. Politicians saw her as a set of political problems. Sociologists saw a brainteaser in gender constructivism. Religious leaders saw theological and ethical problems. Sex researchers thought of her in the only way they could – as a sexually motivated problem child. She thanked her stars that transsexual people were, at least till now, off the radar of anti-terrorist agents.

All these people tended to see the lives of people like Sally from the perspective of their own interests and advancement. They all had a stake in seeing a problem to write about – to be famous for describing – or to charge people to solve.

Only her close friends and family saw her as something other than a problem – a complex and complete human being you could simply love.

Nevertheless, Sally had to acknowledge that deciding if, when and how to tell someone about your transsexual past is a problem which the individual needs to take ownership of themselves. And there are no easy answers.

Should you tell someone the moment you met them? Should you ever tell them at all?

Neither of these ever seemed realistic or reasonable to Sally. Friends who did share her secret pointed out that everyone has things which they keep back before they know someone well-enough. When do you mention the divorce for instance? Or the children of that marriage? When do you own up about the second cousin who is in prison? And when do you mention the genetic defect which you have a 50/50 chance of passing to your new partner's progeny?

Sally had theoretical trigger points which she had faithfully promised herself she would adhere to. At first she had decided that she would always tell a man before they had intercourse. Experience soon taught her that that wasn't as practical as it sounded; so then she raised the bar. She was absolutely certain of the ethical necessity of telling someone before things got serious-enough for people to be thinking of marriage. But what were the milestones in-between?

One thing was absolutely certain. The longer you left it, the more there was at stake. And, as Sally and Harry grew closer, the inevitability of what she would need to do weighed heavier on her mind. What would he think?

She knew the full range of possibilities of course. They ranged from rapid assurances of continued and undying love to murder – quite literally. Trans women have been beaten and strangled for telling an insecure lover that he's been dating someone with a past like Sally's. The uncertainty of what the attraction makes of them can drive sexually insecure men into a frenzy of anger at the perception of being "tricked" or "deceived".

Yet where is the deception in being who you feel yourself to be?

Sally knew that the confusion for some men stemmed from being unable to recognise what they had been attracted to in a woman like herself, and what that meant about their sexuality. It also depended on how people rationalised her own existence. Was she still the same woman in people's eyes once they knew her past? Or were all their perceptions swamped by the irrelevancy of factors which were mostly long gone and forgotten? Did it also depend on why people thought she had "changed her sex" in the first place?

To Sally, of course, it had never seemed like a change to her. Once she knew that no part of her identified with being a man, and that she could better understand and explain her experiences as a woman, the rest had all been about helping other people to see that clearly.

Changing her body was as much about making it easier for people to see "the real Sally" as it was about feeling comfortable in her own skin too. It just felt right. And the more relaxed she became about the completeness of her physical transformation, the more she found herself at peace and able to fully express herself. That was when she started to smile in that whole-body way that Harry first noticed in the supermarket car park.

But did it matter that she didn't have a uterus or ovaries? Was the fact that parts of her body weren't completely female a problem? What was happening if she fancied a man? Was that attraction between them homosexual because her chromosomes were still those she was born with? Or was it heterosexual because she fancied the man as another woman would fancy him?

More to the point, what did it mean when seen from the other perspective?

Harry was heterosexual. Of that there could be no doubt. He was a man and he only fancied women. He had been attracted to Sally precisely because he saw and liked her as a woman. Did the fact that someone else might define her differently alter his own sexual orientation?

Was Harry and Sally's relationship homosexual on a technicality which it required a microscope to detect?

Was Sally a Gay Man because of her physical past and some people's mistaken ideas about what it said about her mind? Was she defined by what had once been between her legs or by what was between her ears, and which had led her to be so recognisable as an attractive woman? If so how on earth did one define the sexualities of the many people born with ambiguous genitalia?

More to the point, however, was Harry already a Gay Man without knowing it? Were all those other men who looked at Sally with admiring eyes? Would he have to dump her the moment he knew of her unusual past, just to redeem himself as a heterosexual man? Or was he heterosexual still, because he had only ever been able to see and think of Sally as the woman she appeared to be?

Last but not least – if one came to different conclusions about Harry and Sally would that be at all logical? Can there be a heterosexual or a homosexual relationship in which one half is Gay and the other half Straight.

Sally and Harry are fictional characters of course, assembled from the spoken experiences of all the real transsexual people and their partners whom the author has met over the course of years. The questions and dilemmas are real though.

You can speculate how and when Sally told Harry about her past, and what that would mean if you were Harry. Some Harry's run away. Some commit violence. Where there is love, however, there are lots of Harry's (and their woman equivalents) who realise that it was a human being who they were first attracted towards – and what sort of human being that was.

As a romantic I hope for my fictional characters' sake that Harry would fall into the latter category. I made him a sexually secure man for a reason – just as I emphasised the emotional as well as physical plane on which their hearts first met.

Sex happens between the legs, but love takes place between the ears and in the heart.

Harry would need to realise the enormous vulnerability opened up by Sally in telling him about her most personal and intimate of secrets. He would need to realise that she might always live in fear of him one day levelling the accusation that “she wasn’t a REAL woman”.

But what is a real woman? It seems such an obvious question because few are ever called to think about it. Take away the reassurance of other people’s agreement, however, and each of us is on far shakier ground – required to scratch around and ultimately agree that we “just know”

Does it depend on reproductive capacity? If so, how does one define the status of women after hysterectomy or menopause – or those whose bodies were simply never quite as unambiguous to begin with?

Does it depend on how you are brought up? If so, where would you place a Sally who was born female-bodied but whose parents socialised her as a boy for some reason?

Or does it depend on how you think – and how others find it easiest to think about you?

Do you – like Sally – “just know”?

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