

Garden Party

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I've only been actively dating for a few years, but I've noticed patterns. Early in the mutual flirtation process, there's a discovery slash confession phase during which we determine whether the other person will be a brief fling, a months-long love affair, or someone I'll eventually drag to Fresno to meet my mom. The other girl will drop subtle and not-so-subtle caveats such as: "I had a hard time finding a babysitter tonight for my two year-old and five year-old." Or: "To counteract my ADHD my doctor has put me on amphetamines, and when they wear off I get a little dodgy." Or: "I'm batshit crazy, so dating me would be a really bad idea." I've heard variations on all three, and for better or worse, I've never been scared off.

My own big reveal is not that I'm a male-to-female transsexual. Unless we're in a bar with especially low light, or the girl is especially lit, I figure she can tell I was born male by looking and listening. It's not something I try to hide, so it usually comes up in casual conversation.

Instead, my version of the "I have kids" or "I'm a psycho hosebeast" disclosure goes like this: "I'm a writer, mostly of essays and autobiographical stuff. If we end up dating, I *am* going to write about it, certainly in my online diary now and possibly in a book someday. I won't use your real name or any identifying characteristics, and in spite of my reputation I don't slander or reveal private stuff which doesn't involve me. I don't go into detail about sex, either. I'm a lot of things, but an erotica writer isn't one of them. Anyway, I thought you should know. I hope you're okay with it."

That's the trickiest part, the moment where I'm most likely to queer the deal: coming out as a memoirist.

It can be easy to forget that even within the queer-positive bubble of San Francisco, male-to-female transsexuals are often considered destructively selfish, pursuing our abstract inner desires regardless of how it affects people around us—whether we're attempting to desecrate sacred bathhouses with our male energy, or getting persnickety when we get referred to as boys. (Who do we think we're kidding? We were born with penises and most of us are tall, so case closed, am I right?) Memoirists also have a horrible reputation in the news these days, frequently being revealed as frauds or getting sued for libel or both.

I'm aware of these things, and I'm proud to be a tranny memoirist all the same. To me, that's at the core of coming out: doing something or existing a certain way because it's how I'm wired, facing the consequences no matter how dire--and most importantly, owning it, regardless of how screwed up it makes me look to the rest of the world.

Fun fact: *everyone* is screwed up. Me and you and your mom and every single Nazarene carpenter who's ever lived. This is why the phrase "only human" is used to explain away mistakes and failures, not herald triumphs and accomplishments. All of us are carrying baggage and nursing wounds and are damaged in one way or another; we've all done questionable things in the past, and we will inevitably do questionable things in the future.

Being a memoirist, much of it is in the public record. So, in addition to the danger of being part of future work, people entering my life have to deal with the ever-present past, both things which have been written and things which haven't.

When I start dating someone new, I usually find an excuse to point them to an essay I wrote for the Eros Zine about the 2007 Masturbate-a-thon. In addition to graphic descriptions of the event itself, the essay goes into detail about spending the evening on my hands and knees roleplaying as a cat alongside my then-girlfriend Vash, who was in pony mode.

Not only do I think it's one of my better pieces of writing, it's a good litmus test of the girl's tolerance for both weird behavior and unapologetic depictions of weird behavior. The subtext is: *not only am i okay with the world knowing these things, i'm gonna do the telling so it gets done right*. I also hope it helps her feel comfortable to open up about her own peculiarities without fear of being judged or rejected.

Obviously, this sort of highly personal storytelling is not without risks, whether in the form of general controversy, legal threats, or a potential girlfriend deciding she'd rather not get involved with a memoirist, let alone a tranny who has no shame about putting on kitty ears and crawling around meowing in a room full of people masturbating for charity. Turns out some people find it irredeemably weird. (Who knew?) I was also recently threatened with my first lawsuit, by someone who doesn't want to be mentioned in the book I'm currently writing. I consider it a milestone.

It's similar to coming out as a tranny: the more strife and static you encounter at first, the better. Oh, it can hurt—I still cringe every time somebody refers to me with the male pronoun, and I always will—but, as a syphilitic Teutonic philosopher suggested, if it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger.

I was fortunate to experience memoir backlash fairly early on. In August 1999, I transcribed some old journals onto my recently launched online diary. The journals were from my dark period in 1994, right after I moved from Fresno to San Francisco. I was suffering from severe culture shock, I was still deep in the closet, and I was obsessed with the first tranny I'd ever met.

Amongst the angst was a seven-word description of my brief and thoroughly disastrous fling with the her: "She gave me head until I came." I didn't mention

that I also sucked *her* off, or anything else which happened on that drunken, bleary and altogether unsatisfying night.

So, I posted these writings five years later while I was in a long-distance relationship with Maddy, a girl I hadn't met in person and who was about to visit San Francisco for the first time. We were introduced to each other by a mutual friend who knew Maddy was interested in male-to-female transsexuals, so that was never an issue. I came out to her early on about being a memoirist, though I didn't know the word back then and I didn't have anything to show for it beyond the relatively new diary.

When she read the entries, Maddy got upset that 1) on the eve of meeting me in person I posted what she described as "information that had to be slowly absorbed and was not to be taken lightly"; 2) that she read them at the same time as anyone else who read my diary--which was about a dozen people; and 3) that I revealed even semi-explicit details of my sex life without warning her ahead of time.

Though she made the conscious decision to read my diary, and even had to scroll a few screens down to get to the offending sentence, Maddy later described it as me "forcing" the details on her without thinking how they might make her feel. That last part is true: I posted them because of how they would make *me* feel, not her. Besides, she was a published erotica writer and proud of her self-described "gutter mind," so it hadn't occurred to me that a PG-13 description of lousy sex from half a decade earlier would bother her.

When Maddy moved in with me a few months later—which is a whole long story on its own--she grew increasingly disapproving of my writing. Everything I wrote was at risk of immediate and inescapable repercussions, and autobiographical stuff was the worst. She often got angry and accused me of "living in the past."

Coincidentally, around this time she discovered and fell in love with Michelle Tea's memoir *Valencia*.

An entry in my online diary about doing acid when I was sixteen upset Maddy because she was staunchly anti-drug, and she was afraid it meant I wanted to do acid again. I *did* want to do acid again, but that wasn't why I wrote the entry. Later I wrote about a time in college when I was totally crushed out on my partner in acting class, so I interpreted a scene from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in a way which allowed us to kiss. This story especially bothered her because it involved me being unfaithful to my previous girlfriend, Kim. Maddy had no love for Kim—when Maddy moved in, she forbade from me from having any contact with Kim or even mentioning her name—but she viewed the story as proof that I couldn't be trusted. Which was probably true. I'm only human.

Maddy eventually became less threatened by my past and my writing—she met Kim and liked her, plus she tried acid and loved it--and the domestic stress was a dry run for a more public fall from grace. The catalyst was a diary entry about some emotional trauma I experienced during a photo shoot for the graphic novel *Rent Girl*, Michelle Tea's memoir of being a prostitute in Boston. Some people who already had issues with my writing--though Maddy was not one of them--misinterpreted it as a slam on photographer Laurenn McCubbin, and regarded it as further proof that it was unsafe to say anything remotely personal to me, lest it end up on my "goddamned blog."

Though I was never aware of Michelle or Laurenn having problems with the entry, four and a half years later there are those who still refuse to speak to me because of my wannabe-Spalding Gray anecdote of my ancillary involvement with *Rent Girl*—a book which, like Michelle's canonical *Valencia*, goes into far more detail about other people than my own solipsistic writing does. I know some people will choose to interpret *this* as an attack on Michelle. It isn't, but I also know there's not much I can do about it beyond what I've always done: put

my words out there from a place of honesty and love, because it's who I am and what I do.

The threat of misinterpretation and backlash has never stopped me, and I will no more stop writing about my life than I'll stop living as a girl. Coming out is the best thing I've ever done, every time.



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