

How to get your hands on a Transman

By Raven Kaldera

All right, so you saw that cute guy across the room, and you ask your friends who he is, and they all whisper excitedly -- or contemptuously, or worriedly, or with sort of confused expressions on their faces -- that said cute guy was once a woman. Perhaps they are even less diplomatic. However, the more you look at him, the more interested you are, except for one thing. How do you approach someone like that? How do you get him interested, without offending him? And what if you actually do get him interested? What do you do with him then?

Or maybe you've just expressed your interest to a hot butch-looking woman, and she informs you that there's something you should know. She considers herself transgendered, and she feels as if she's really a man, and she's considering getting her body changed soon to reflect those feelings. And if you want her, you'd better start thinking of her as him. Now. Before you go any further.

One more note, before we go any further. The following tips are for dating people who are already clear about their transgendered status, including those who have already transitioned and got some body mods, and those who haven't but intend to. If your girlfriend of many years suddenly starts talking about getting a sex change, that's a whole different ball game, and one that is best covered by talking to SO's of transmen who went through that very situation. Try the SOFFA list at <http://www.egroups.com/group/FTMSOs>. They can also help you with a new flame who is struggling with question of whether to change or not. Get their advice. You are not alone.

But back to that hottie transman who is looking you right in the eye. First of all, unless they're the really shy type, transmen tend to make eye contact with you more often than bioguys do, because they've been raised women, and frequent eye contact is part of female training. He may know things that other men don't, which may take some getting used to, such as when you complain about your menstrual cramps and he looks at you with a sympathetic expression and says, "Yeah, I remember those. They were awful. Have you tried calcium supplements?" Some transmen, to their shock, have found that many women actually like having "feminine mysteries" that they can explain (or not) to men, and they are unnerved when a man already knows all about it. On the other hand, it can be a really nice thing to be able to say that you have to leave because your tampon is leaking, and have your date not give you the look of alien disgust.

Or, if you're male, when you make an off hand comment about not knowing what women want when they say such-and-so, and having the transman across the table shift in his seat and say, "Well, when I was living as a girl and I said such-and-so, I meant this." There's a certain dissonance in dating a man with a female history, if you're not used to it. However, it can give you great insights into the way things really happen around gender expectations.

Your transman may also not know things about being a man that most men just pick up by the time they're in their teens, such as how men use teasing and insults as both affection and dominance play, and he may have a hard time adapting to that without offence. If he didn't have time as a traditional butch who dated femmes, he may not be well versed in much of standard heterosexual courtship and may miss cues. Don't give him hell for it, or even tell him that it's "the expected thing to do." Tell him it's something you like, that makes you feel good. That's positive reinforcement.

You may have to defend your choice of love interest to your friends and family if you're dating a person of nonstandard gender. If you're a gay man or lesbian, you may be

accused by peers of going straight. Lesbians dating transmen may be plagued with friends who refuse to see him as anything but female, and who may deliberately screw up on pronouns. If you're a straight woman, you may be accused of lesbianism, and if you're a straight man, well, you're going to have to admit that you're not as straight as you thought you were. If you really want this guy, however, you're just going to have to deal with the harassment and be firm about it. Real friends are happy for you, and don't get weird about your lover's genitals or preferred gender. Anyone else can just shove it. Repeat this to yourself often.

On a similar tack, if your transman is out of the closet and open about who and what he is, he made that decision for strong personal reasons that he believes in. Don't ever ask him to go back in just for your personal comfort or embarrassment. Conversely, if he's in the closet, don't out him without permission.

One of the most important things about dating (and boffing) a transgendered person is that we really need to you express to us that you see us as the gender we are. If your particular transman hasn't made any body mods and still looks, for all intents and purposes, like a woman, this is often a difficult request. That's where that imagination thing gets used, all right? Concentrate on the things that seem male about him, both physically and mentally. Even if you can't quite handle the mental editing needed to do it, use your imagination and treat it as a role-play. If that seems too much for you to deal with on a regular basis, then he isn't right for you.

Things to do to show him that you do consider him male: Get his pronouns right. If he's a top, call him "sir"; if a bottom, "boy" is usually OK. If that dynamic doesn't enter your relationship, "my boyfriend", or "my gentleman friend", or "that cute guy" will help. If he wants certain parts of his anatomy called certain things, go with it. (For example, one pre- mastectomy FTM was all right with having his breasts touched, but only if his lover referred to them as "pecs".) But don't try so hard that you overdo it and look like you're humoring him, as in: "Fuck me, you big macho hunk!"

"So what was your real name?" Next time I'll tell 'em it was Richard, OK? Don't follow this up with a list of transpeople that you know and all their former names, either.

"So you're still like a girl in bed, right?" No. It's amazing how little anatomy determines one's sexual behavior.

"Why do you have to change your body so radically in order to have people treat you like you want?" If you're asking this question, your world view is obviously not ready for a transman to play a major role in your life. Suffice it to say that until you understand, at least vaguely, the concept of body dysphoria that has little or nothing to do with culture, it's better not to bother. Your politics will not change him, and it'll only be frustrating for both of you.

"How can you say anything about feminism? You gave up being a woman." Yes, but you can't erase 30 years of your personal history and experience. Some transmen consider themselves feminists, and some don't. I've been known to wear a "Feminist On Testosterone" button myself.

However, I've found that even rabid feminism gets modified slightly by actually living as a man for a time (something I sometimes wish all women could do for a little while, with the reverse true as well, of course) and he may not toe the party line on all things. Even if you discuss these things, even if you argue about them, don't be tempted to call him a traitor, or tell him that since he gave up being female, he has nothing to say about it. Don't disqualify the third-gender perspective; a little objectivity is sometimes a good thing. Besides, as I pointed out to one such accuser, I may have decreased the number of strong women by one, but I increased the number of men sensitive to women's issues (and willing to be role models) by one, and that's an even smaller category. Nobody's come up with an answer to that one yet.

"If you're not going to get a dick, why do you want to be a man?" 9 out of 10 transmen do not get phalloplasties. This is partly because the surgery is way, way less than ideal, and they may not want to sacrifice nerve endings that work for a possible disaster. Frankly, were I a genetic factory-equipped male, I would be downright offended by the idea that my dick was the only defining, or important, item with regards to my manhood. We are much more than our genitals. If you can't deal with a man with a vagina, go elsewhere.

"But you're such an attractive woman!" OR "I'll bet you were a really attractive woman!" Yes, and I bet I'll be a really cute guy, too -- wanna stick around and watch? ...alternatively... Actually, I was an ugly, mean bitch. Amazing what a little testosterone will do for ya.

"Can I see your pussy?" Can I see your asshole? Here, bend over this chair for me and spread'em! Seriously, there is something about a transsexual that makes ordinary people think that they can ask all sorts of stupid questions about one's genitals that they'd never, never dream of asking a non-trans person. Don't do this. You will be more likely to get a chance to see it if you are polite and friendly and interesting and we think you're cute.

Infantilizing names such as "Babe," "Sugar," "Kitten." Oh, come on, what are you trying to prove?

"I knew you were one of those. I could just sense it." This is most offensive when it comes right after you come out to someone, and they give you *The Look Of Absolute Shock*, and then have the balls to tell you that they "somehow knew." Even if by some miracle talent of trannyvision they did know, this is not likely to put the transman of your choice at ease about his passing ability. It will likely raise the tension level rather than lower it.

"You're the best of both worlds." Be careful with this one. Some transmen do consider themselves something in between male and female, and would be complimented by that. Others consider themselves men, work very hard to be accepted as men, and would take great offense. Best not to say it until you're certain which variety you've got.

"Do you like being fucked up the cunt?" This is especially offensive when said to a fully transitioned FTM in a public restaurant, particularly while the waitress is standing right there. A better way to ask would be, "How do you like to fuck?" or "What sex acts get you hot and what turns you off?" But really, don't even start to ask until it's been made very clear that, yes, he does want to do the mattress dance with you.

"Are you stone?" Not every FTM came out of the lesbian community and has read his Leslie Feinberg primer. Don't assume that he used to be a dyke unless you know that to be the case. This term may well make an FTM who hasn't heard it think that you're asking him if he is a piece of granite, or he may wonder if you are asking him for marijuana. Even if he does understand it, he may not want to answer it, if an answer would make you think of him in butch lesbian rather than male terms. "Did you hate being a dyke?" or "Do you hate dykes?" are in the same category.

"I know this sex change must have been hard for you." Really? How do you know that? For some people, transition is the best thing that ever happened to them. If we want to bring up our emotions about our TG-ness, we will do so in time. Don't assume you know how any of it feels. Often, when people say this, one senses that it is them who are having a hard time with our sex change.

"You're so exotic," "You're so fascinating," "I'm simply fascinated by you." These can come across as patronizing. I personally think I'm exotic, but many FTMs see

themselves as regular guys with a difficult history. The last one also has a bug-under-a-microscope feel to it.

"But you're so short!" Oh, please. Sit down and you'll see how much that matters. Calling your transman "Little Guy" or such terms is also unlikely to win points.

"Did it hurt?" (in reference to surgery) Duh, of course it hurt. Major surgery does, even when they give you lots of morphine. Don't be dumb. Better things to concentrate on might be, "You're very brave to go through such hard experiences to be yourself; most people wouldn't," or something like that.

"Hey, guys don't do that!" or **"That's not very masculine behavior."** I am amazed how so many people feel that they're being "helpful" in pointing out how a transman's behavior varies from the stereotypical male norm. Believe me, your transman has probably spent more time watching and mirroring male behavior than you, even if you're male yourself. If he chooses not to do a particular masculine behavior, it may be because he considers it personally oppressive, so why should he? Some of us, after being shoved into one tiny little box for the first part of our lives, have no wish to climb into a different tiny little box and close the lid. In fact, after years as a woman, some forms of male behavior seem awfully silly. (I'll never forget watching a self-professed feminist woman lecturing an FTM on how his gestures weren't masculine enough.) And if your transman is trying hard to act in a traditionally masculine manner and he slipped for a moment, you'll just embarrass him.

Trying to show him how male you think he is by playfully punching him in the shoulder or trying to give him knuckle noogies is not helpful. Any behaviors you might pull on an obnoxious younger brother should be avoided.

"When people use jargon, I think they're not being sincere" as a response to him using words common in the trans community, such as transman, FTM, tranny, transgender, packie, diclit, etc. Let's face it, the words needed to describe FTM sexuality do not exist in most people's vocabulary. If you're going to date him, you need to learn the language. Don't be afraid to ask, "And what does that mean to you?" but don't put him down for using terms you don't know yet.

"Hand her the...oops, I'm sorry! No, really, I think of you as a guy, it's just that it's hard to remember..." Pronoun mishaps are the single biggest problem in dealing with transfolk. It makes us wince, and we generally consider all slips to be Freudian. Do try your damndest to get it right, even if that means chanting a little mantra under your breath of "Jonathan-he, Jonathan-he, Jonathan-he likes to rollerblade, Jonathan-he likes garlic," etc. If you do slip, don't go into a string of profuse apologies. Something simple like, "Damn, I screwed up. I'll do better next time," will do, especially in public where there's no need to call more attention to the slip. If you're dealing with a pre-transitioned FTM and it's really hard for you to remember it, avoid pronouns altogether and just go with names, as in, "Hand it to Chris."

If you're dating a fully-transitioned transman, who looks like a normal guy -- and nearly all of us pass really well after testosterone and mastectomies -- and you get to the taking-off-your-clothes part with him, it's real important not to choke up when finally faced with his genitalia. Some people, unfortunately, do the deer-in-headlights thing when the dissonance of this male body without the "expected" dangling male genitals hits them. The minds of some biomen, especially, may instinctively think "castration!" and they may even flinch. If you're even slightly afraid that you may react this way, I suggest that you buy Loren Cameron's book "Body Alchemy" and study the photos until you're more familiar with the anatomical dissonance of a transman's body.

Believe me, he does not need your negative reaction to genitals he may already feel ambivalent about. He is less thrilled than you, or anyone else on the planet, that he was not born with a factory-equipped penis. The last thing he needs is to have to worry

about you freaking out. Of course, to be fair, some transmen are so dysphoric about their crotches that they will not have sex the first time - or the first few times - or ever - without a strap-on dildo, or their underwear on, or some such. Some will not allow you to touch them there. It's certainly fair to ask whether there may come a time when they will trust you enough to let you handle their genitals, and what you can do to facilitate that trust.

However, if the answer is, "Not until after I've had surgery," or "Never, and it's my problem, and there's nothing you can do," then you'll just have to make your own decision as to whether this is a situation you can handle emotionally. Pushing your transman to a level of physical intimacy he's not ready for will trigger his dysphoria and make things worse.

There's a whole continuum of genital dysphoria among transguys. Some are "stone," and will be until they get surgical penises. Some are perfectly happy to use every inch of erogenous tissue they have, up to and including penetration there, as long as you can prove to them that you think of them as men even while your fist is buried in their cunts. Some will fall somewhere in between, perhaps wanting to start out the sex with a strap-on, or concentrating first on your genitals, and perhaps letting you deal with theirs when they know you better and trust you. Some are fine with what's between their legs, but if they still have breasts, they may prefer that you ignore them.

The best thing to do is let your transman take the lead in talking about his body and sexuality. If he's shy, tell him you're unshockable (and be that way), but he has to let you know how you can make him feel good. If you really want him, let him know it. Feeling desired is important to us; many of us have secret fears that in getting the bodies we wanted, we've alienated the rest of the world. The gift of your desire for us just as we are, not as you or anyone else thinks we should be or hopes we will become, is a good thing for anyone's self-esteem.

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