



Transgender

‘I thought my boyfriend of 10 years was going to propose – then he told me he was trans’

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It was 3am and I'd had a lot to drink; two reasons why I was pressing my boyfriend of 10 years on why he hadn't yet proposed. We were strong and happy, and loved each other madly, so his reticence seemed ludicrous to me when sober, let alone drunk. I suspect it was my ceaseless questioning that ultimately blew a fuse in his brain, because that's when he told me his secret.

When I woke up, he was gone. I watched his WhatsApp status like it was the heart monitor of an ailing relative. The second I saw "*online*", I called and asked him to come home. To talk. To answer the questions that I'd scribbled illegibly on a half-folded piece of A4 paper.

He walked through the door and sat down, his face masked with fear. "What were you trying to tell me?" I asked hopefully, all too aware of how different things can look when alcohol is no longer shaping your every thought.

"I have gender identity issues," he blurted, eyes fixed on the floor. "I just ... don't identify with being male," he said. My throat thickened. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I knew this person better than anyone in the world, but could in no way reconcile him with the words coming out of his mouth.

"Well, what *do* you identify with?" I pleaded, panicking.

"I don't know – like, non-binary, or ..." Oh my God, what was he about to say? "... trans." The word flooded my body with a surreal disbelief.

I was already sure, cold and emphatic: this was done. We were done. "But why?" he implored.

"Because I can't be ... I *don't want* to be with a woman." It was surprising to me how obvious this fact was, because everything else was suddenly underwater.

"But I don't know how far it will go yet," he said. "I don't know anything yet. Except that our relationship is more important than my gender."

My questions were redundant. Their purpose was to establish where we go from here, but in the private theatre of my mind, the curtains closed at every turn. Soon, my sister was outside. I tried to articulate why I'd asked her to collect me and why I had a suitcase. She knew something was wrong, of course, but she had no idea of the magnitude.

"He ... He ... thinks he might be ... ans." I couldn't get it out of my mouth.

"What? What are you saying, Feebs?"

"He thinks he might be trans." We stood on the dark street. cobbles glossed with rain.

and wept. Her tears soaked my shoulder, and mine hers. We drove back to hers. I sat in silence, numb, watching the rain blur the brake lights in front of me while she continued to sob – for me, for him, and I guess for the future brother-in-law she'd just lost.

For a week in January, she held my hand every night while I stared at the ceiling, watching her alarm clock announce the time in a glaring sequence of oblongs: 12.10am. 2.36am. 3.30am. 5.05am. 6.16am. The second 7am hit, I got in the shower just so I could cry in peace.

My new therapist was a large woman with a kind face whose accent I couldn't decipher. She worked from a light-flooded conservatory, which seemed sensible given the dark and endless trauma she mined from people's lives. I spilled the story chaotically. "He was so sympathetic when I was on my period," I yelped. "He would practically sprint to the shop to buy me ibuprofen or tampons. Is that because he wished *he* was having periods?" Her response was reassuringly rational. "If he was jealous of you, it would have manifested in anger, not kindness. He was kind to you because he loved you, and didn't like seeing you in pain." I realise now that I was focusing on the trivial in order to avoid the stark truth: that the person around whom my world revolved was disappearing, and I was just stuck here, waiting for them to go.

At once gender was all around me, screaming in my face. Forms asking me if I am male, female or whether I'd prefer not to say. How many times had he dared himself to tick something other than "male"? Every time I used a public loo I wondered if he wanted to use the women's. [Munroe Bergdorf](#) was making history as the first transgender woman on the cover of Cosmopolitan magazine. Had he bought a copy? The trans flag emoji appeared every time I wrote the word "trans" on WhatsApp (142 times a day). It was at once the most shocking and casual thing in my life. I surveyed women everywhere, as if every fifth person might be trans. Then there were the subtle, bordering-on-comical triggers at every turn. The Trans by JanSport-branded backpack on the train, and an article titled "Time to transition", about city folk fleeing London for somewhere leafy. It was inescapable. On the political stage, the UK government was being rightly condemned for failing to ban [conversion practices](#) for trans people. In Ukraine, many of them were [denied safe passage](#) at the border, while in the US protesters were rallying against conservative anti-trans bills. It was a time of global reckoning, and a long overdue one at that, but selfishly I yearned for some respite.

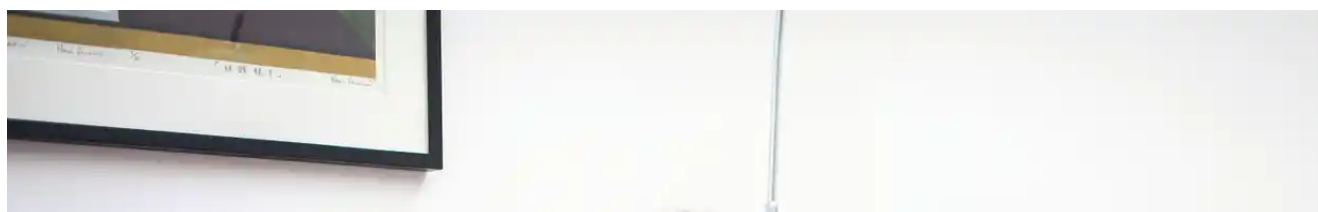
Forsaking our bond seemed like madness. This is 2022! If Harry Styles says it's OK then it's OK!

Packing up my stuff, we vacillated between sorrow that our relationship was over, and hope that we'd never let each other go. Not platonically, anyway. When I stayed over, we clambered into bed early, head to head, our legs entangled, his skin warming mine. I could usually read him as easily as the top line of an optician's chart, but now I wasn't so sure. His angular face seemed soft, the ridge of his brow less pronounced, his skin free from stubble. In the morning, there came a point where we both knew that we were going to kiss. And then we had sex.

"I thought you'd still love me, but I didn't think you'd be able to see me like that again," he messaged. I felt helpless, sensing the abject hope between the lines. And so, for us, I tried. In a way that I suspect any self-respecting liberal would do. I sought out an article that listed everything gender progressive that Harry Styles had ever said. "It's like anything – any time you're putting barriers up in your own life, you're just limiting yourself. There's so much joy to be had in playing with clothes," he told *Vogue*. By the time I'd mentally reduced the situation to an ideal of androgynous dressing, forsaking our bond suddenly seemed like madness. This is 2022! Love is love, and if Harry Styles says it's OK then it's O-fucking-K! I didn't fall in love with a trans woman, I fell in love with a person who happens to feel like their body is a burden, who just wants to be a little more femme.

But reality soon careered into view. "If I was going to be a beautiful woman I'd have had to have transitioned when I was a teenager. Now I'm scared I'm going to be ugly," he confided, contemplating the ravages of puberty and testosterone. He mentioned hormones with earth-shattering nonchalance, saying he'd wait a year to see how he felt about the superficial stuff – clothes, piercings, hair – then make a decision. I read that oestrogen can make a man infertile in as little as six months. Six months! I had desperately wanted his child, though the impulse was quickly supplanted by a surge of uninspired rage. If *I* can't have his baby, then no one should be able to. And so I silently willed him to start taking the hormones as soon as medical signoff would allow, a biting form of closure.

Man, this was confusing. The devastatingly handsome boy I met on the first night of university, whom I'd grown up with, and built a home and a life with, who was by my side when my dad was sick, who ran me baths and made me ramen, with whom I shared an ocean of hopes and dreams, could or would no longer be mine.





Phoebe McDowell: 'I was mad at those who profess to get it because they, too, had been through a breakup.' Photograph: Alicia Canter/The Guardian

And now what? I felt vastly exposed. I was doing everything differently, sheepishly, whether ordering coffee at the place I always had, or re-registering with the same estate agents who'd shown us around family homes. Meanwhile it felt like he was on a rocket ship to the moon. Try sitting at home with only antidepressants for company, while your ex is at a dinner party with your best friends extolling the virtues of full coverage foundation. Then try hearing that the male contingent put makeup on, too. And not only that, but that they skipped down to the nail salon with him the next day. (Blue. He got blue nails. Plus a set of new they/them pronouns.)

I hadn't quite anticipated the fanfare. Of course, these vignettes weren't the whole picture – there was their inevitable suffering behind the scenes, and truly I wanted nothing more than for them to feel safe and supported, but watching those closest to me celebrate the erosion of the person I loved was crushing. I knew my ex's pain had roots far deeper and more gnarly than mine, but anger began to bubble. It transpired they'd had a near identical conversation to the one we'd had that fateful night with a mutual friend *months* previously. And that they'd been engaging with trans social media accounts for almost a year. Seeing a fire emoji – merely a sign of solidarity – left on a trans woman's Instagram from June 2021 scorched a hole in my heart.

I was mad at those who professed to get it because they, too, had been through a breakup. I have dived into a swimming pool but that does not make me Tom Daley. I knew it came from a good place but please, no. It's absolutely not the same. I don't want

to deny anyone their own suffering, and I know that there's commonality in the heartbreak and the loss. But not the shame. Not the guilt, or the incredulity. And so I reached out to a support group called SPA (**[Straight Partners Anonymous](#)**). "You've come to the right place," they told me. "We have a growing number of 'trans widows' who will very much identify with your difficult situation and the issues it raises." I wasn't all that keen on my new label, I'll be honest, but I agreed to meet someone else in possession of it regardless. Then, the reversing beep of regret, because as it happened she and her partner had decided to stay together, and I felt ashamed all over again, because I couldn't do that.

I was not asleep at the wheel. My underwear never went awol. There were no signs

It didn't stop me from trying to understand. I owed it to myself and, of course, to them. I went on TikTok – and was duly transfixed, aware that it had been instrumental in helping them to arrange and affirm their feelings. I listened to podcasts and read interviews, blogs and books. I followed activists, influencers and education accounts, all of which vindicated me in my decision to split. Repression, the very thing I'd need to make things tenable, is no basis for any relationship, and it's certainly not the action to ask of someone who has been practising it for years already. They needed to be able to wear pink suits and platforms in peace. To go by the new name that was floated gingerly, and soon after voiced in abundance. To throw off the shackles of the former and flourish in the new, so that when their ex calls to say they might like to write about the situation, they feel comfortable and confident enough to give their blessing (it goes without saying that this piece wouldn't have happened without their consent).

Before learning their secret, I'd shared infographics on trans rights, and toasted the cause at Pride. But it was only the L, the G and the B that I'd been familiar with. The T and the Q, however, is where I become shamefully unstuck, not least because, prior to this experience, I knew precisely zero non-binary or trans people. We twenty- and thirtysomethings are sandwiched between two ideologically and societally opposed generations. My dad, liberal, lovely, but resolutely a Yorkshireman, knows as much about gender dysphoria and all its nuances as I do about the stock market. Then there's gen Z, who are seemingly born as blanks, encouraged to colour and contour themselves as they please, no labels, judgment or questions asked.

I, on the other hand, was bombarded with inquiries. After the "I'm so sorry" refrain, came "Were there any signs?". It dances in people's eyes and pirouettes off their tongue before they even know they're going to ask it, and when they do, they cock their head and make a pained expression to acknowledge that they perhaps shouldn't ask something so personal, given that we've only ever shared small talk. They're itching for

the full story; the movie cliché – that one day I came home early, unannounced, and found them in a dress, tottering around in my heels, cheeks awash with clownish blush. I get it. But I also get that they really do *not*. That this is not the reality – it's not ours and nor that of so many others. I was not asleep at the wheel. My underwear never went awol. And my concealer never met his under-eyes, despite my gentle suggestion sometimes that they might get on. There were no signs.

Talking was a tonic while writing, accompanied by an actual gin and tonic, made the unbearable bearable. I leaned on the philosophy of *amor fati*, which means to “love one's fate”. It liberated me in part from exhausting heartache and existential dread, providing hope that sooner rather than later I would look back and think that my life was never supposed to be any other way. That one day I'd be happy again (I am), that one day I'd fall in love again (I have), and that this gargantuan thing had no business manipulating my memories and messing with this most formative and joyous decade of my life. It helped a lot. As did a magic mushroom trip, since you ask.

Seven months on, I am proud of my ex – for having the courage to utter the words, and the conviction to follow them through, crop tops and all. There are many things they will never understand about my experience, but there are far more I will never understand about theirs. The image of them at the dinner party that night, high on the fumes of their authentic self, no longer sucks the breath from my lungs. And now I am confident that in the not too distant future we will sit at a table together and reminisce about our imperfect, profuse and untamed love. And raise a glass to the fact that they've never been happier.

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