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Speaking Personally

Marika's Experiences with Internet Dating

by Marika Jackson

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When I was asked recently if I'd like to contribute an occasional article to *Polare* my first reaction was one of surprise, followed by an inclination to decline politely.

After all, having seen in earlier issues the many erudite contributions from psychologists, counsellors, readers, editors etc., I could not imagine what I could possibly add to such a range of qualified contributors.

After some agonising and reflection, however, it struck me that maybe this was exactly the point. Maybe what has been missing is something more personal. Sure, there have been many personal accounts of transgender experience, including my own, but these have, by and large, either been histories or accounts of problems with the bureaucracy.

What I will try is something more down-to-earth, a from the heart sharing of the day-to-day highs and lows of my life as a lesbian woman with a transgender background, and the lessons I've learned along the way.

Internet dating ... can be fraught with devastating pitfalls for those of us with baggage we're unlikely ever to be able to shed.

Although I do appreciate the positive progress towards societal acceptance that has been achieved thanks to the tireless efforts of those willing to carry on the fight, I will not deal with gender politics. If, occasionally, I use a phrase or term that doesn't measure up to your sensibilities of political correctness, I smilingly apologise in advance for my ignorance.

So ... to get to it, and because this is to be the first of a series in both *Polare* and *Out On the Coast* (a magazine for L.G.B.T.I. on the Central Coast of N.S.W.), I thought I'd start with something about the trials and tribulations I've experienced, and continue to encounter, in my quest for a meaningful, loving and ultimately sexual relationship with another human being.

I realise, of course, that this is a quest so universal that you could well be excused an immediate reaction of "big deal!" or, more likely, "big yawn!". Especially if you're a 'straight' hetero person unblemished by the ravages of age.

In my case, however, we're talking about an openly lesbian woman "d'un certain age" toting considerable baggage. I suspect this is something many of you may also be struggling with, to a greater or lesser degree.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not a lonely person. I have many friends, gay, straight and transgendered and I don't think that I'm wrong in my conviction that, by and large, they love me as much as I love them. This comes about mainly from my determination not to find myself socially isolated when I relocated to the Central Coast in early 2011 about six months after surgery. It didn't take me long to realise that my openness about my gender and sexuality is a two-edged sword that has, more than once, "bitten me on the bum."

My first and most painful experience of rejection happened as the result of careless language on my part. I met a lovely lady not long after my arrival on the coast.

We had much in common at all levels and it wasn't long before we were breaking away from our circle of friends to spend more time alone together.

The shit hit the fan, however, when I carelessly used the word 'relationship'. I was told, in no uncertain terms that this was out of order and that she could never ever contemplate a lesbian relationship. "We're just girlfriends!" she angrily sobbed as she walked away. I was numbed by a combination of embarrassment and anger at my own naivety.

First lesson: An intimate friendship, in other words, "friends with benefits", has boundaries that need to be understood by both parties.

It was at this point that I should have accepted, once and for all, the reality of my prospects of ever achieving a meaningful intimate bond with another woman. But then ... rationality is not something that comes easily when you're high on hormones and going through a faux puberty.

After a suitable period of mourning (a day or so) I picked myself up, dusted myself down, and threw myself once more into a headlong pursuit of that someone special who's out there somewhere, waiting for me to appear.

Friends had suggested Internet dating and I was, by this stage, willing to try anything. The first of the sites I registered with is one that is mainly aimed at those seeking hetero relationships but does provide options for alternatives such as "men seeking men", "couples seeking couples" etc.

Membership is cheap. My profile presented me as "female seeking other females" accompanied by a head-shot of me at my most feminine and enigmatic. I did agonise over whether I should allude to my gender issue and decided not to. I completed the required list of my interests, habits, likes and dislikes and waited for the avalanche of approaches that I felt would soon follow. Meanwhile I trawled the site in search of prospects.

It soon became clear that many of the women were either from overseas seeking to get into Australia or they were local but really not what I'm looking for, to put it kindly. The avalanche of responses to my profile didn't happen except for a couple wanting a threesome and a guy pictured in a dirty blue singlet and a 'full sleeve' of tattoos. After only a couple of weeks I gave that site the flick in favour of one I'd seen advertised in *Lesbians On The Loose*, the free lesbian publication. The site, "Pink Sofa", is in a different league altogether, tightly controlled, administered and organised. I was immediately impressed by the large numbers of girls registered and the comfortable feel of an opportunity for online chat etc. I strongly suggest that if online lesbian dating is what you're considering, this is the place to be. A little more expensive but well worth it. Check it out.

Anyway, I subscribed, entered my profile and it wasn't long before I was exchanging 'smiles' and messages with a variety of new online friends, all of whom came across as genuine and civilised.

Little did I realise that I was setting myself up for another bite on the bum.

After several message exchanges with a person whose profile as a professional woman close to my age seemed to indicate we were ideally matched, we agreed that we should meet at a café on neutral ground.

When the time arrived she was running late and phoned to tell me she was on the way. Alarm bells rang at the sound of her voice. It didn't match the image I had of her as the refined feminine person portrayed in her profile picture and her personal description. When she entered the café I failed to recognise her. Because of her masculine clothes, cropped hair and manly gait I didn't rise to acknowledge her. She did, however, recognise me but it was immediately quite obvious that she, too, was not impressed.

We sat down, ordered coffee and then, following an awkward silence while we glared at each other the conversation went something like this:

"Are you pre-op or post-op?"

"post-op," I said.

"Well, you should have said so in your profile. You lied about who you are!"

"No, I didn't. Everything in my profile is accurate. I'm female in mind and body, as most can tell at a glance, which, I'm afraid, could not be said of you, and, furthermore, if honesty is the issue here you don't look at all like your picture. I don't think it's you."

"Well it is, but it was taken some time ago and ... anyway ... it doesn't alter the fact that you lied and I've a good mind to report you to the site administrators."

"I wish you luck but I think you'll find there is no rule that says members are obliged to include their medical histories with their profiles. There may well, however, be something about deliberately including profile photographs bearing absolutely no resemblance to the person they're supposed to represent!"

There was another awkward silence before she suddenly stood up, picked up her bag, muttered something about being uncomfortable, turned ... and left.

Second lesson: Internet dating presents great opportunities to find that person of your dreams, but it can be fraught with devastating pitfalls for those of us with baggage we're unlikely ever to be able to shed. To tell or not to tell is a difficult choice at times and we each have to face the dilemma according to our own convictions.

Postscript: My search will continue and I will stick to my principle of not exposing my gender history on my site profile. What I should do, I now believe, is to mention it during a message exchanged shortly before arranging a meeting, to give the other party the option of backing out. I'll keep you posted.

Finally, on an entirely different note, I feel compelled to share something rather special with you.

I recently experienced something quite moving, beautiful and especially encouraging. The occasion was the funeral of a dear friend's ninety-one-year-old mother. Although I was never privileged to meet the lady, I felt honoured to be allowed to attend in support of my friend Jessica, one of the lady's ten children.

Upon arrival at the chapel I was delighted to find that so many of our mutual transgender friends had also turned up in support and we were all graciously received and engaged by Jessica's family and friends. Jessica herself was resplendent in an all-white suit, as is the Chinese custom. She was clearly in control of proceedings, including the personal reception of each guest, the necessary introductions and the delivery of the eulogy which she delivered with confidence and style.

What particularly moved me however, was the obviously high degree of admiration and respect she was shown by everyone present. All of whom were clearly well aware of Jessica's gender background and had been for a long time. In conversation with several of her siblings and friends it became clear that this was an extraordinary family. I really would like to believe that this was a glimpse of a not too distant future where this level of acceptance will be the norm rather than the exception.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.