

## Checking Out

I received Sally Binford's good-bye letter the day after her body was found.

To those I love--

Most of you know that for some time I've been planning to check out—not out of despair or depression, but a desire to end things well. I've been lucky enough to have had a remarkable life, immeasurably enriched by the love and support of a large (if improbable) group of friends and lovers. I don't want to let it fizzle out in years of debility and dependency. I've gambled enough to know that quitting while you're ahead (or at least even) is wise.

And those of you familiar with my birthday will recognize that the timing of my exit allows me to claim as my epitaph:

Toujours soixante-neuf!

Love and good-bye,

Sally

Sally had planned for many years to "check out" before her 70th birthday, but I always thought it was a vague promise, along the lines of "gonna die before I get old." Sally was more youthful than me, half her age, so I figured I'd never see that day.

But I did see the day, in fact I heard it first, when I got a phone call from my ex, Honey, telling me that Sally had really gone and done it. She had cleaned her house, put all her affairs in order, and given herself and her beloved poodle, Jake, a perfect good-bye cocktail of narcotics. She died peacefully, and exactly as she had designed.

I cried like a baby on the phone, "I just saw her a couple days ago, and she said *nothing* to me, nothing." Honey told me that Sally had sent out letters. The next day, there mine was, lying on the floor under the mail slot. No return address. It looked from the envelope like a party invitation, or some subversive plot she was hatching. It

was, indeed, the most subversive scheme she'd ever designed.

I opened the envelope and found a typewritten note Sally had photocopied for her long-time friends, lovers and those family members with whom she was still on speaking terms. In the letter, she sounded just as confident, determined and funny as ever. "Toujours Soixante-Neuf!" she proclaimed at the end. That was her motto: "Forever 69!"

Sally Binford, as anyone who knew her will tell you, was an astonishing person. A pioneering anthropologist and archeologist, her writings on prehistory are required reading for most college courses in those disciplines. A passionate antiwar activist who dropped out of academia at the height of her career in the 1960s, she was one of the founding mothers of the modern feminist movement, a charter member of N.O.W. But beyond that, she was the first woman ever (if you don't count Emma Goldman) who I'd call the very model of a sex-positive feminist.

Sally was the living embodiment of radical sexual liberation— free from the bonds of jealousy, monogamy and any and all love arrangements based on the idea of private property. She was one of the members of Sandstone, the infamous Malibu center for communal free love and rigorous chess playing. She was the female "star" of the only movie ever made about the sex lives of old people, "A Ripple in Time," which she made with her dear friend Ed Brecher when she was in her late 50s. Sally was a one-of-a-kind sex educator and a trail blazer to the very end, the only bisexual member of the very first Old Lesbian Conference steering committee. Sometimes she'd end a phone call with me, saying she had to go to a Gray Panthers meeting, and I'd wonder how the rest of them could possibly keep up with her.

Ms. Binford could convert anyone to the cause of erotic camaraderie and social insurrection. She was so smart, so witty, an intellectual's delight, a revolutionary's inspiration and above all, a hell of a lot of fun. She made her homes in Maui, San Francisco and southern France, near the caves at Lascaux. Her poker parties, which brought some of the finest minds in town to the table, were notorious. Her

Thanksgiving and Christmas suppers were legendary. She loved me to pieces, and I guess that's the thing that gets to me the most. Forget famous Sally, or notorious Sally, and you'd still find someone who would do anything for the people she loved—except live past her prime.

A year after Sally's death—and months after everyone who'd ever loved her had met at the enormous wake she requested—her longtime lover and companion Jeremy Slate wrote to each of us, asking what we made of Sally's choice to die. He wrote:

I believe in her dying, Sally had something to say, a point to make. Not unlike her, hey?

To clarify that point, to continue to reap the rewards of having known Sally, we should examine our feelings and let them be known to each of us.

If you agree, please answer a couple of questions and add some of your own:

Were you aware that Sally was planning to die when she was still 69? How'd you find out?

What was your emotional response/reaction upon learning of her death?

Where did your reasoning take you? What, ultimately, did you think of Sally's choice?

What are your feelings now, nearly two months later?

Love,

Jeremy

I wrote Jeremy a long reply, filled with all my mixed-up feelings. Yes, Sally had told me about her plan to "check out" according to her own design, and I hadn't liked it, although I wouldn't dream of trying to talk her out of it. She was the first person to ever prompt me to consider what I'm am going to do when my life is at its end.

*Was I aware that Sally was planning to die when she was still 69?*

Sally first told me about her plans to check out more than a year ago on a car trip we took to M. and R.'s ranch. We were on the winding forest road that leads to their place when she brought it up. She was 68 at the time. She told me she had no intention of living past 69, blah blah, her usual rap about how she'd planned this for a long time. By way of explanation, she added that her whole family tended to fall apart after 70 years of age.

She spoke of three people who were influential in her wishes. First, there was Ed Brecher (a fellow sex researcher and educator), who had taken his life a year earlier, also according to plan. She felt comradeship with Ed in their mutual decision to check out when old age became intolerable. Then there was her friend Jeanette, who she thought was the most awful example of someone brilliant and vital who'd turned into a virtual idiot and invalid before Sally's very eyes.

Finally, she brought up Honey Lee, my ex-lover and the person who brought Sally and I together 10 years ago. She said that Honey Lee opposed her plans and was not supportive. She got so angry just thinking about it! She brought up Honey's opinions as if to ask, "Do you agree with her?" Sally always treated us like a couple, which considering the way I still relate to HL, was not that far from the truth.

I remember protesting, "Sally, it's not that Honey Lee doesn't support your decision, it's just that she doesn't want to do that damn plastic bag thing!"

That was true. The very first time I heard about Sally's suicide plan was when Honey Lee and I lived together, in the mid-'80s, and Honey Lee told me that Sally wanted to enlist her help. The critical question was whether Honey Lee would have the wherewithal to wrap a plastic bag over Sally's head and finish her off should the dose of sleeping pills fail. This, Honey Lee could not see herself doing. Honey Lee can't even put a live lobster in a pot of boiling water.

I could just imagine Sally's matter-of-fact discussion of plastic bag asphyxiation techniques while Honey looked on in horror. I was surprised that Sally couldn't see that

no matter how much someone loves you, they don't necessarily have the temperament to help you kill yourself!

I told Sally that it was easy for me to support her decision to die when she wanted to, that I had thought of doing the same thing myself when the time came. But it seemed so abstract to me then, like something I could only consider when I was a great deal older. Sally had made up her mind before she was 50.

I knew I didn't have any moral dilemmas about taking my life. It makes me angry when people get outraged or punitive about suicide. It's the people who are alive who suffer, really. The dearly departed are no longer feeling anything at all—happiness or pain. I'm not the type who relishes death or thinks about suicide in earnest, but I never thought it was wrong.

I did tell Sally—and this is where I cried a little—that I would miss her so much and that I couldn't stand to think about not having her near me. She was very loving to me when I said that; she kissed me and patted my knee as she was driving. She seemed relieved that I didn't oppose her plan and, honestly, our main argument seemed to be which one of us understood Honey Lee's feelings correctly!

Sally only made occasional, lighthearted references to checking-out after that afternoon. What's interesting to me now, in retrospect, is that I never mentioned it again, ever, as if by my not speaking of it, I could somehow postpone the event. When she passed her 69th birthday without incident, I was so relieved. I figured she had changed her mind and decided to live on until she was genuinely disabled. I never compared or shared my explanation with her, because I was afraid, I guess. I was avoiding the truth.

Sally didn't involve me in her death plans except to make very sure that she saw me a couple of days before she died. We had a wonderful time. She met my current lover, whom she obviously approved of and enjoyed, and I met her old friend Sarah and partner Don. We all got on really well. I remember feeling like a party pooper because when I announced it was time to go home and relieve my baby-sitter,

it was clear we could have all rolled off the dinner table and gone to bed together in a minute. She did kiss me on the mouth before I went out the door, but that seemed like just her usual affection for me—not any big, poignant good-bye.

During that last dinner, we had Sally's usual feast: French country cooking, a new Beaujolais and Armagnac after the plates were cleared, with Sally's hand-rolled Three Castles tobacco, Maui sinsemilla and pretty little lines of cocaine laid out on her pocket mirror. It was so luxurious, and she made it look so easy. I

thought for the hundredth time, "Sally is a total cokehead, this can't be good for her"—and once more I kicked myself: "You know perfectly well Sally is going to check out, so she might as well do whatever she pleases."

*What was my emotional response/reaction upon learning of her death?*

I was at my lover Jon's house fooling around in the garden with my three-year-old daughter Aretha. Jon, a painter, was gessoing a canvas. The phone rang, Jon answered it, then came over to me with his face all screwed up and said, "Honey Lee has to talk to you, Susie, it's terrible news. "

I assumed something had happened to Honey Lee. Interestingly, I thought she had been diagnosed with cancer, suspecting that her daily pack of Shermans had finally done her in. I got cold all over.

Honey was crying. She said, "Sally's dead." I folded over like I'd been hit on the head, and water gushed out of my body —hot sweat from my pores and tears like a flood. I was so overcome it made Honey stop weeping, and she told me she had just gotten the news from Jeremy.

What was unexpected was my daughter's reaction. She came to me while I was crying on the phone and hugged my leg. She looked so worried. Jon and I told her that Sally was my friend, and I loved her, but that she had died and it made me so sad.

Aretha remembers this moment, and brings up Sally's death to this day. One night, months after Sally's death, I gave her a notepad and a pen to doodle with in the car while we were driving home from school and she drew a picture.

"This is Sally dying," she said, holding up the notepad after she'd been drawing for a while—right out of the blue. I asked her a bit more about it.

Aretha said that "Sally is sad," and "she has on a shirt and she has on pants and she's turning round and round until she dies."

I said, "Well, I was sad when Sally died, but I think Sally was happy—she had a really big life and she was ready to go."

For years after Sally's death, when Aretha saw me sad or crying, she always asked about Sally, and whenever we talked about something being dead, even a leaf on the ground, she would say, "like Sally."

I never experienced the death of anyone close to me when I was young. Sally is the first intimate friend of mine to die. I've had other friends and family who died after I had been apart from them for a long time, like my grandparents, and although it was tragic, I felt at a great distance from the loss.



This is Sally dying.

*What do I think of Sally's choice?*

The one thing I can't figure out, the one thing I wish I had asked her, is how she could resist living when she was in such excellent mental and physical shape? Sally was an athlete, she had a beautiful body, everything worked, she could party us all under the table and get up at six the next morning to walk with her dog. I certainly have had an interesting life, a full life, but even after my daughter is grown, or I've seen more of the world, it would be so hard for me to think, there, I've done it, I've done enough. What if there was something more?

The closest I came to being ma at her was thinking, "Oh, she just had to stick to her little plan, Little Miss Control can't stand to change her mind—once it's on the calendar, that's it."

I also realize now how very secretive Sally was about certain things. That's ironic because her politics and philosophy were all about honesty and openness. She had to pull off a great performance hiding the things she did.

I don't understand that part of her. Of course we all have secrets, we all put people on, but our styles of discretion and privacy were different. I don't know why she kept certain things from me and her other loved ones.

I also wonder, as a mother, how she felt about dying before Susan, her adult daughter—who's alive but ill with multiple sclerosis. It's always been difficult for me to understand why the two of them had such a hard time with each other—another secret. Of course I understand mothers and daughters feuding. But while I confided in Sally a lot about the distress between my own mother and myself, she never did the same with me.

She did talk a lot about Susan's illness, her grandchildren and son-in-law—who she always referred to as a "saint." Susan was obviously on her mind a lot and she often spoke of her daughter's animosity toward her; how it developed when Susan was a

teenager. But she treated it like an act of fate, something there was no rational explanation for. I know Sally could be annoyingly rational and stubborn, but she was so caring to me that I felt I received an unconditional mother's love from her.

I also wish I could have asked Sally about how her view of romantic love changed, because after all, she was married three times and wasn't always a bisexual polyamorist. That was another secret: she never told me why she married any of those men, or confessed to any sentimental or romantic feelings she might have had about old or current lovers. She respected her third husband and research partner in academia, Lou Binford, for his mind and ambition, but that was it.

When I was once terribly in love—in an affair with "Bad News" written all over it—Sally was very sympathetic about the self-destructive aspect of it, my desire to live on hot coals. She said she had done that in the past, too. But I couldn't possibly imagine her in my situation! I never saw her bent out of shape over love. I remember when she and G. were breaking up, she was really mad, but she was so typically cut-and-dried about it—"Thank God I've got my house back to myself again," she said. And then she seemed to be good friends with G. almost immediately, without ever expressing loss or grief—just a little pissed.

I guess I didn't ask Sally these questions because I would get caught up in her charismatic common sense. I didn't want to be girly and silly either, let alone pry into her past for some tender or painful revelations.

*What are my feelings now?*

I have had a lot of dreams about Sally visiting me, unexpectedly. I say she's "haunting" me. In one dream, I am involved in some chaotic situation, very stressful, when all of a sudden Sally comes around the corner like a Cheshire Cat.

"What are you doing here, you're supposed to be dead!" I say. She tells me

that it was all a big trick, that she's not really dead, but that now I'm the only one who can see her. I feel like Cosmo in the "Topper" movies. I get so mad at her, shouting, "How could you upset everyone like this, just as a ruse?" and I tell her that I can't shoulder the burden of being the only one who can see her.

The night before we held Sally's wake, I dreamed a slightly different scenario. Once again, she popped up in the middle of total chaos, but instead of being mad at her, I was relieved and I ran into her arms. I told her I was going to her wake, that nothing was going to stop me, and she was so happy to hear it. Then she kissed me on the mouth, and my God, it was so vivid. I could feel the dry wrinkles of her lips pressing against my own. It was like a sex dream that instantly wakes you up.

I also remember the sunset the evening after Sally died. I was alone in my room looking out the window at the ocean, and it was so pink and red and blue. I've never done this before, but I stuck my head out the window and talked to the sunset as if it were Sally.

We don't often have spectacular sunsets in San Francisco; it's so overcast at the beach. When I see one now, at Ocean Beach, Sally's sky comes back to my mind. I can see it exactly, every color.

I realize, inasmuch as Sally wrote me a letter I could not reply to, I have responded nevertheless, with a story that I can only release into the air, and into anyone's hands that it falls upon.

Dear Sally, the one I love: I miss you. The last time I wept this way for you, you visited me in my dreams. You're always with me, always Sally, *toujours*, in my heart.