

For years, they lied to me about who I really am.

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Abstract:

As a child, Maya (28) was always approached as a girl. When she entered the male bathroom, she got remarks about it, or people stared at her. While Maya was, according to her ID, a boy called Thijs in those days. Maya always felt different and went on to examine why. In 2007 - Maya was 24 then - she discovered she has a hidden vagina.

Maya is a hermaphrodite, at least according to the German hospitals. The Dutch hospitals keep denying this, apart from one urologist who referred Maya to a German hospital, because it's less of a taboo there. For seven years, the medical doctors lied and tried to convince Maya that she was imagining that she appeared female. Up till the point where Maya was almost sent to a mental hospital. The search for her identity was a long period of suffering for Maya with very little support. On her own initiative, she went to Germany where the truth was discovered. On MRI-scans, it was clear there was a blind vagina.

Hermaphrodites, such as Maya, are rare. But intersex - a no-man's-land between male and female, where both sex characteristics show important differences - is quite common. In Flanders, each year there are approximately 14 children born with different genitals, babies of who it is not immediately clear whether they are male or female.

Because of the trepidation in Flanders, it was difficult to find a Flemish witness who wanted to do his or her story. But just across the border, in the Netherlands, Maya wanted to give us her story. She wants to get rid of the intersex taboo. For that, she has put up her own website, with a blog where she talks about the subject.

``When I was born, everything seemed normal. I had a little willy, I might have been a bit slimmer than my brothers, but there was nothing else'', tells Maya. ``At first sight, there was no problem. But after some time, the friends of my mother joked sometimes about my parents who got a daughter instead of a son. I had an extremely female face and I was slim. During puberty, I suddenly got mild breastgrowth and wider hips."''



Figure 1: Maya in bikini, the difference with a transsexual is big. Maya has the body of a woman.

So you got female gender characteristics?

Yes, But I also got a bit more hair, and slight beard growth. The beard never came completely through, but it was something more than fluff. But on the other hand, I don't have an Adam's apple.

You must have had a lot of doubts.

(silence) I just didn't understand what was happening. So I just pushed it away, and didn't do anything about it for a long time. Luckily, I didn't have a B-cup, because that would have been a lot more difficult to hide. I just wore loose clothing, and because my shoulders were pointing a bit forwards, as for most women, they didn't notice my breasts. Even not when we had to change clothes for the PE lessons.

Weren't you very uncomfortable when you had to undress between the others?

It was especially confusing. I realized I felt more female than male, while my ID said I was male. So you quickly get labeled as "transsexual", but I didn't belong there. So I tried to figure out what it was, until I arrived at the term "intersex". All the female sides of me, the remarks of my mother's friends, my feeling... Everything suddenly started to make sense. So I did hope when I first went to a hospital in Amsterdam that I would be understood and they would be able to help me. But that wasn't the case.

How so?

It's still a taboo, also in the medical world. At a certain moment I got the choice. Either I would continue to be a boy, and shut up, or I would follow the transsexual procedure. But that wasn't what I wanted. I just wanted to know who I was, how I am put together.

What did you do to get clarity?

I went to Germany, because there's a much more open way of handling inter-sexuality. It's also in Germany where they officially said I was hermaphrodite. It was the first time I got confirmation that I was different, that my feeling was right. Before that, people always waved my problems away and tried to convince me that I was crazy.



Figure 2: A scan in the German hospital showed what Maya felt: she's not only male, she's also female.

What did they see in Germany?

On the MRI, they could see I had both male and female genitals. My male genitals were better developed, and visible from the outside. But they weren't completely developed either. I've never been fertile. On the scan they did see a small atrophied prostate. It stopped growing in a very early stage. Next to that, the doctors also saw a blind vagina, it wasn't completely mature, and they discovered my testicles weren't completely mature either.

So you have a vagina that's only partially developed, and only in the interior of your body?

Yes, that's right. On the scan, you can see an oblong hole at the place where the vagina should be for women, but it didn't completely develop, so you can't notice it from the outside. It's now up to specialists to research if the female genital can be developed further with the aid of certain hormonal therapies.

Were you relieved, or rather disappointed when those things became clear?

I had mixed feelings. I hoped they would find a completely developed vagina, so it would just be a case of creating the labia via an surgery. Sadly, it wasn't this easy, and it'll take more time. The discovery of the German doctors made clear that I had in fact no genitals, and that feels strange. I neither have completely developed male genitals, nor female genitals. But on the other hand, the scan did reveal I'm not completely male, as my ID says. So my feeling was right during all those years.

For years you were known as ``Thijs'', but now you look completely female, and you changed your name to ``Maya''. How did that go?

When they told me I had a blind vagina in Germany, I decided to live my life as a woman. My surroundings have seen me as a woman for years anyway. And that's also how I felt. I changed my name to Maya, but the gender on my ID remained listed as ``male". Very confusing. So last year I decided to change my official gender too. This wasn't easy, as in The Netherlands, you have to let your testicles remove. And to do that, you have to follow the procedure for transsexuals. So I've had that surgery performed in Germany instead.

What were the responses like?

It seemed as I had more problems with it than my surroundings. They already knew I was different. I have always been treated and seen as a woman. Only my little brother had some problems, but that's all fine now too.

Are you completely female now, or do you still have male genitals?

After pondering on it for a long time, I decided I wanted to keep my penis for now. (*silence*) That wasn't an easy decision. The doctors also proposed to create an artificial vagina via surgery, but I didn't like that idea. I first want to know if I can develop my vagina any further without surgery.

And if that would be possible?

Then I want a vagina (*brief pause*) but I would still like to keep my penis as well. It seems hard to remove it, it belongs to me. I'm afraid that I won't be the same person without a penis. I don't have a problem with my penis, I look at the bright side. I can't get cystitis this way and it's handy when I have to urinate, so why would I want to get rid of it?

Maybe because of the reactions of others?

I don't mind that as much now. I used to be scared that one could see everything when I was wearing a bikini. So I always had the ones with a short skirt, to hide everything. Until I tried a bathing-suit one day, and I realized you can't see a lot. Now I just put my penis a bit to the back, and I wear what I want.

But this won't be simple when you have a relation?

No, indeed. In the first place because ... (*silence*) You know, my first sexual experience was in 2006. I got raped by a man. This makes it hard to start a relation with a man. At a lot of gestures, attitudes or words I'm thrown back to that moment. For now relations with women work better for me, both from a sexual as emotional point of view.



Figure 3: Maya as a child, when her name was still ``Thijs''.

Have you had a relation?

Not a real relation, no. I did have a few dates with a girl, but that turned out to be nothing. Not because of my gender, but just because it didn't work out between us. Partially also because I still have identity problems. The past years I have been lied to so much and got assigned all kinds of disorders. Dissociative identity disorder, multiple personality disorder, post-traumatic disorder, those are all labels I received. Not that weird in fact. My entire life, people have had their doubts about my gender. When I went to the male bathroom, they shouted: ``Hey, these are male toilets'', when I stood at the back of a group photo, they asked ``whether that girl could come to the front''.

Would you have preferred they did surgery on you right after your birth?

No, absolutely not. I notice that a lot of fellow victims, or fellow intersex people think the same way about it. When the sex isn't clear right after birth, it's best not to perform surgery but to wait until the child has reached the age of eight or thereabout when the child can decide for him/herself. Before puberty gender isn't important anyway.

But parents want to have it clear which sex it is? If only because boys are raised differently from girls.

No, that's yet another preconception. I don't believe in it at all. My brothers and I and have received both dolls and cars as toys. My parents never reasoned whether something was something for boys or not, but just looked at what we considered to be pleasant toys. It are only toys, what does it matter? When you give a child the choice around the 8th birthday you still have enough time to perform surgery before puberty, because then gender becomes important. Youngsters start to ask questions and girls might start experimenting with make-up.

Did you ever experiment with make-up during puberty?

No, I wasn't interested in it. That's also why I know I wasn't transsexual, because I didn't have the urge to wear women clothing, or to use make-up. Only in 2008 did I buy my first make-up.

You said that, during the puberty, you got more hair. But there isn't much left of it. How did you do that?

I go to a beauty specialist on a weekly base for electrical epilation. It's quite expensive. It costs 45 Euro per week and you have to go for at least a year to get a good result. For transsexuals and women with a hormonal disorder, it's fully covered, but not for intersex people, although we have exactly the same problem. Pretty tough.

Do you want to leave the country?

Yes, I'm preparing for that. First I wanted to go to Canada, but that doesn't seem to be simple. For the moment, I'm applying in Germany and Norway. I hope to find a job there.

THE OPINION OF THE ENDOCRINOLOGIST: IMMEDIATELY OPERATE OR NOT?



Maya is proponent of waiting with surgery until the child is older. We asked the Gent doctor Martine Cools, pediatric endocrinologist. She told us how things are done in our country.

“Children with an unclear sex used to be called intersexual, children with both sex characteristics hermaphrodite. These are however dated terms which are sometimes even used as derogatory terms. These days we speak of 'disorders of the sex development', according to Martine Cools.

“For about 1 in every 5,000 births is such a condition diagnosed. We then try to take enough time to carry out examinations on the sex of the child. For the parents this period of uncertainty is very difficult.”

WAITING

“Usually the sex becomes quickly clear after a few examinations”, says Cools. “We do a chromosome test, an ultrasound and sometimes a minor exploratory surgery is required. But even when we know the sex the actual surgery gets postponed by years sometimes. That way we can await the evolution of the child and avoid that mistakes are made. This may sound weird, but it turns out to be the best approach. We give the parents advice about the sex of their child, in function of raising them. Sometimes there are people who say that the child should be raised in a kind of third gender, but from reality we know that this is impossible for the parents. The uncertainty about a gender is for them much more important than the possibility that at a later age one has to switch genders.