

Maya's story

For most people their body isn't a big mystery, but for some it is. What if you were born with a body which only raised questions? How would you and your environment deal with it? This is one such story.

I was born on the 4th of September 1983 in the Netherlands. I was welcomed into the world by both my parents and my brother as their second son and older brother, respectively. During the first four years of my life, quite a few things happened. Our house burned down and we had to live in a trailer for a year while a new house was being built. My younger brother was also born during this time.

Starting school, I initially I had no problems. Yet when a teacher had me redo the second year of primary school due to me being 'too playful', I lost contact with my classmates and became quite isolated. During the rest of primary and then high school I found myself often the subject of bullying by my classmates, who thought I was 'weird'.

Near the end of high school I took a giftedness test due to a suspicion that I was under-performing at school, where it was found that I am in fact highly gifted. I thought that this might explain why I always felt so weird and different from others, yet this turned out to be not the case. After finishing high school I had little motivation to keep studying, so I stayed at home.

During this time my parents divorced and I moved with my mother and younger brother across the Netherlands. At that point in my life, feeling lost in life and being forced to look at myself to figure out what I wanted to do, I found myself cycling one day with my mother to a local DIY store to buy some supplies.

Once at the DIY store, I suddenly realised something odd about my behaviour. Even though I was supposed to be a guy, I was attempting to walk in a feminine fashion, trying to appear attractive to men around me. After this I realised that I had been trying to do similar things for much longer than just that day. Later that day I would think about this a lot more to figure out what was going on, until it suddenly hit me, right as I was preparing to head to bed: I had never chosen whether I wanted to be a boy or a girl. Despite being already twenty-one years old, I had simply never picked a gender role, but had stayed a child.

Looking back at my life so far and what role I would feel most comfortable in, it was obvious to me that I would prefer to live my life in a female gender role. Since I was a male, this had to mean that I had to be transsexual. That's when I started to do some research on the internet on what my next step should be. I found out that there are two gender teams in the Netherlands who handle transsexual cases, with the largest one located in Amsterdam, at the VUmc hospital.

I first told my mother about what I had found out. She was simply happy for me because she had seen how unhappy I had become during those past years and hoped that maybe now I would become happy again. I told both of my brothers about it and they didn't really have problems with it

either. I just needed to clear things with my family doctor at this point.

During my research on the internet I stumbled over a term I hadn't heard of before, but which seemed like it might be relevant to me: intersex. Basically, individuals who have the physical characteristics of both men and women. For some reason this seemed familiar to me. Looking at my own body in the mirror and taking measurements, I quickly found that even though I had always been told that I was male, I had in fact a very feminine figure.

This suddenly explained why men's clothing always fit me so poorly, with me always requiring to wear a belt with jeans so that they wouldn't sag down onto my hips. I also learned that I had abused my voice for a very long time, trying to sound masculine. When I stopped trying to force my voice, I stopped having a sore throat and people no longer complained about my voice sounding 'rasping'. I also learned that the lower back pain I would often suffer was due to me trying to walk like a guy – even though I have a female pelvis – with the knees moving outwards, instead of inwards, which would put a lot of strain on my back.

While it was great to learn all those facts about my own body and finally learn to understand it, my experiences with this Dutch gender team was sadly completely negative. While initially it seemed that they were open to the idea that I might be intersex, the tests and examinations they organised showed that I supposedly had a completely normal male body.

It wasn't that I had to prove that I was intersex, but more that by this time I had realised that I wasn't transsexual. I had never even once felt anything in common with transsexuals, or felt like I was 'in the wrong body'.

This ultimately resulted in a confrontation where a psychologist from the VUmc's gender team withdrew all the promises she had made during the previous appointment, including me not having to undergo more talk sessions before treatment, and being able to start on hormone therapy really soon. At this I left the room, cancelled all my further appointments and left the VUmc hospital, hopefully forever.

Once back home, I ordered the first batch of hormones via the internet. I had asked my family doctor and she would provide me with blood tests so that I could determine the right medication dosages myself. The reason why I felt I had to start on hormone therapy was that I had recognised that my body looked basically like that of a female, and I still preferred a female role. To become female hormonally then seemed like the proper choice. I just had to adjust my hormone levels to match those of a regular female.

To this end I took oestradiol (the base form of oestrogen) as well as a blocker for testosterone. While using the blood tests to change my hormone levels to proper female levels I found out that I only needed very little testosterone blocker to get down to a female level: only a quarter of what a male to female transsexual would take. This meant that my body produced only a quarter of the testosterone a male's body would produce. This was my first concrete evidence that I did not have a regular male body, as the gender team's doctors had claimed.

This wasn't the last of the discoveries I would make that year, either. By December of 2007 – shortly before I would leave the Netherlands forever for Canada – I found out that I could have an MRI scan performed. This was something that was illegal in the Netherlands unless a physician referred you. Yet if you wanted, you could go to a German private clinic and pay for an MRI scan there.

Since part of my suspicion was that I had a female skeleton and female genitals, the only way to make sure of this outside of surgery was an MRI scan. With one scan I could hopefully resolve this medical situation I had ended up in once and for all.

It was thus that I ended up in a German private clinic on the 21st of December 2007 to undergo an MRI scan. It was the first MRI scan in my life, and immediately also the most important one. The scan itself took nearly half an hour, after which I had to wait about the same amount of time for the analysis. At least during that half hour of waiting I was able to eat the breakfast I had been unable to eat that morning; I was so nervous that I for the first time in my life literally could not get a single bite down my throat.

Of all the things in my life which frighten me the most, preparing to hear a doctor's or radiologist's analysis has to be among the most difficult of all. Walking to the radiologist's office was hard. Waiting there until the radiologist finally told me what she had seen on the images seemed to take an eternity, with me meanwhile feeling as though I would sink into the ground if she told me that she saw nothing special.

Instead this radiologist was completely enthusiastic, as she had never seen anything like it in her life. Asking me whether I had ever had surgery (which I hadn't), she then proceeded to point out on the MRI scan where she could see the vagina. She also thought that surgery to reconstruct and open this vagina might be possible.

To me this was the redemption I had been waiting for. I had been right all along. I was intersex. Even a hermaphrodite. I had the CD with the MRI scan as well as the MRI report saying all of that with me. It was true.

Unfortunately that is where cruel reality hit again. After spending a few weeks in Canada, I decided to return to the Netherlands, mostly because it was going to be really hard to get a permanent visa in Canada and without it I wasn't going to get any medical help. Saying farewell to my best friend there who I had finally been able to meet in real life, I went back to the Netherlands. This might have been one of the worst mistakes I have made in my life.

Back in the Netherlands the effect of the German MRI scan were astounding. Not in the sense that they changed any physician's mind, of course. All they did was 're-examine' those German scan images and conclude that they couldn't see anything unusual on them. Certainly no sign of intersex, as the German radiologist and physician had indicated.

The years after this didn't change this pattern much. I moved from place to place within the Netherlands, staying wherever I could as I had no job and little money. There was just this hope that

with the German medical evidence I would be able to somehow convince the Dutch doctors. I had a second opinion performed at another German private clinic, who concluded the same thing as the first one: you're a hermaphrodite, congratulations. This still didn't convince any Dutch 'specialists', though. At the second gender team in the Netherlands they did their best as well to convince me that I was a perfectly regular male.

The only useful thing I accomplished after returning to the Netherlands was to have my official first name changed from the old male name to my current, female, name. The lawyer handling my case was almost shocked how easy this went. Yet for me it wasn't enough. Year after year of just dealing with this eternal curse of my intersex condition and never getting any help had worn me down. When I faced eviction from where I was staying by the end of 2010, something just... broke inside of me.

I had often thought about suicide before then, of course, but never gotten to the point where it seemed so... logical and obvious. I went to bed that night, had a good night's rest, woke up the next day, got dressed, brushed my hair and then took all of the sleeping pills I had in one go. It was truly one of the only moments in my life when I have felt absolutely at peace with myself and everything else.

Waking up in the hospital's emergency room, many hours later, was akin to waking up again in a horrible nightmare you thought you had escaped. I wasn't supposed to be alive. I died. I must have. Coming to terms with the fact that I had not died, that I was alive, was something that is almost impossible.

After surviving that suicide attempt, my mother took me home with her, back to the small Dutch city of Rijssen. Ironically located in the middle of the Dutch Bible Belt. Here I had to begin to rebuild my life out of the shards of what felt like a past life. Yet despite my recent suicide attempt and psychological issues, I received no psychological help there.

A few years before this I had begun to visit a psychotherapist, who had diagnosed me with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), yet the psychologists of the 'psychological crisis team' there in the region of Rijssen merely ridiculed the idea that I could have PTSD. As one psychiatrist on their team put it to my mother and myself: "You can only get PTSD if you are a soldier on a battlefield."

With psychological help not going to happen, I decided to focus again on getting medical help. At this point I did also often get the question of why I put so much importance on getting medical help. Why didn't I just get a job and live my life? The answer to that was basically that I still didn't know anything about my body, with Dutch and German physicians disagreeing completely on what I am. It's hard to have a self-image or self-esteem when you cannot even tell what your own body is, because you do not know and everybody around you disagrees on what your body is.

What I wanted at that point was to just get the basic questions about my body answered. Questions such as which reproductive organs I have, whether any female reproductive organs would be useful for reconstruction, whether I have a menstrual cycle, and whether I am completely infertile or not. Yet also questions like who was telling the truth about my body between the Dutch and German sides.

Essentially I just wanted to know what and who I am. I first began to question the narrative that I was just a boy when I started to grow out my hair during high school. At first it was just the school photographer getting 'confused' and telling 'that girl in the back' to move forward, referring to me. After that incident I got told to leave the men's toilet at a department store by a cleaning lady, and asked by both children and adults whether I was a man or a woman. When I tried to get my first passport in 2007 I initially couldn't pick it up, because they kept looking for a woman's passport with my last name. In waiting rooms at hospitals and such they'd call for a 'Mr. Posch', then get all confused when I got up and I had to explain the whole situation to them. This was very embarrassing.

All of that's why I wanted to get those questions answered, also so that I could finally get my official gender changed to female so that I wouldn't have to keep explaining things. For this I still needed a cooperative doctor, so I tried to find one at the local medical center.

The first family doctor I met with refused me as a patient, on basis of me being intersex. My mother was with me during that appointment and became quite angry at this refusal, asking the doctor how she could refuse her daughter as a patient especially since this doctor claimed to be a Christian. After leaving this doctor's office, we tried the other family doctor, also located in the same medical center. They did accept me as a patient.

I'm not sure whether they regretted accepted me as a patient, but at this family doctor's office they were everything but cooperative as well. At first it was fine. I was trying to get help at the John Hopkins hospital in the United States initially and I got medication to help me with the resulting anxiety. When I got rejected with a 'we do not do sex-reassignment surgeries' as excuse from the John Hopkins, my doctor then promised to refer me to a urologist at a nearby hospital who could hopefully help me further.

Getting this referral together took a very long time. First it would be 'next week', then it was the week after that one. As this dragged on I would check up on it every week, first by myself, then finally my mother came along with me as well, to try and persuade them to please just get that referral ready. During this time I wasn't feeling happy about the whole thing, and when my mother asked the assistant whether the referral was ready, the answer was a brisk and very unfriendly response, implying that we were the ones being unreasonable and unfriendly.

The next thing I know, I am lying practically naked in a police cell, hurting everywhere as fragmented memories flood back into my mind. I remembered seeing myself pushing things, pulling on things, looking at a hand covered in blood which dripped on a smooth floor. I remembered walking outside with rapid footsteps behind me, then just pain. My right knee, wrists from metal biting into them. Screaming and a heavy weight on top of me as someone bashed my head into what I think was a car door. Getting stripped naked by a large group of men and women. Being thrown down and dragged up again a few times.

I spent that night in that brightly lit cell, unable to sleep, just able to watch TV (Discovery Channel) on the screen built into the cell's wall, and keeping my hands occupied by tearing the roll of toilet paper I found next to the cell's toilet into really tiny pieces. My right hand hurt from the glass that had torn into it and my right knee was swollen and I had a very severe limp. Many times during that

night I'd cry and scream until my voice was nearly gone.

The next day there was a lot of confusion and waiting. The same people from that psychological crisis team came by and judged that putting me back into that cell posed no psychological problems for me. The lawyer they had found for me told me my charges. I was accused of threatening to harm, possibly murder the people at the doctor's office, as well as of vandalism and some other offences. Ultimately I was released from the police station since it was deemed that I posed no risk to my environment.

Now, four years later, the resulting civil case has recently finally concluded. All of the charges but the vandalism one were dropped. Officially I got no punishment, but I still have to pay a large sum of money: for the works of art a local artist had put there in the public space of the medical center without thinking about insuring said works.

Suffice it to say that after being released from the police station I began to realise even stronger that the Netherlands wasn't the right place for me. With the good experiences I had with Germany so far, I began to consider moving there, but without a job or a lot of money, I wasn't sure how I would do that. Ironically it was a few months later that I would meet with this urologist I had been trying to get a referral to for so long who would refer me to Germany again, this time for surgery.

After trying for so long to get medical help, I had to admit that it wasn't going to work. Not in the Netherlands at least. The next best thing and perhaps easier to achieve was getting my official gender changed. For this a number of laws exist in the Netherlands, basically one aimed at transsexuals and one at intersex people, although the latter is mostly intended for people whereby the wrong sex was assigned at birth, meaning that they chopped the wrong bits off the child.

To qualify for this second law, I would have to be able to prove that I both had male and female genitals at birth, and that I was infertile on the male side. When I met this urologist – who turned out to be very understanding and compassionate – he simply told me that what I wanted was impossible in the Netherlands. I would have to go to Germany, since an orchiectomy (castration) in the Netherlands is only legal for transsexual surgeries and in the case of cancer.

It was thus that a few months later I was walking through the outskirts of Hamburg, thanks to a friend who had referred me to her surgeon. The next day, this surgeon would perform surgery on me: removing the testicles and exploring reconstructive options for the vagina.

The surgery itself went fine, the testicles were removed and analysed in the laboratory. They were found to be only partially developed, which explained why I had such low natural testosterone levels and also showed that I had never been fertile as a male. Unfortunately while the surgeon did see the entrance of the vagina, he couldn't do anything with it at that point, so I would have to find another surgeon for that.

After this things changed quickly. I got my official gender changed to female. I first got a job in the Netherlands. Suffered physical and psychological abuse from the girl with whom I shared an apartment, left that place and never got my belongings back. Without belongings or money I stayed

at my mother's place until I got a great job in Germany and the offer to move to Karlsruhe in 2013.
Finally I had made it out of the Netherlands. Hopefully everything will be different now.