

# The woman inside me

Story by Anelisa Tuswa

The gay community has been excluded and isolated for years in our environment. A few years back, the government gave this community rights, including the right to marry a same-sex partner. Many were critical of the decision and yet we call ourselves a democratic country!

For the gay community, it was a symbol of acceptance and freedom. Some compared it with the excitement that black people felt when Nelson Mandela was released from prison!

This is a story about a teenage boy named Thabo – or Thabisa because that’s what he calls himself. He was born in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth, and raised by his father who is a man of God. Last year, Thabo took us through his journey of a life of being trapped inside a body that does not feel like his own.

Thabo tells his story: “For years of my life I was hiding in shadows with a sense of not belonging. While boys my age were playing with wire cars, I was playing with dolls. While we were playing happy home, I would play the mother or the daughter.

I remember one Sunday, my dad wasn’t feeling well so he told me we weren’t going to church. I was so happy and relieved because going to church was torture – seeing all the young girls my age wearing their beautiful white dresses. Deep inside I was dying to wear those things.

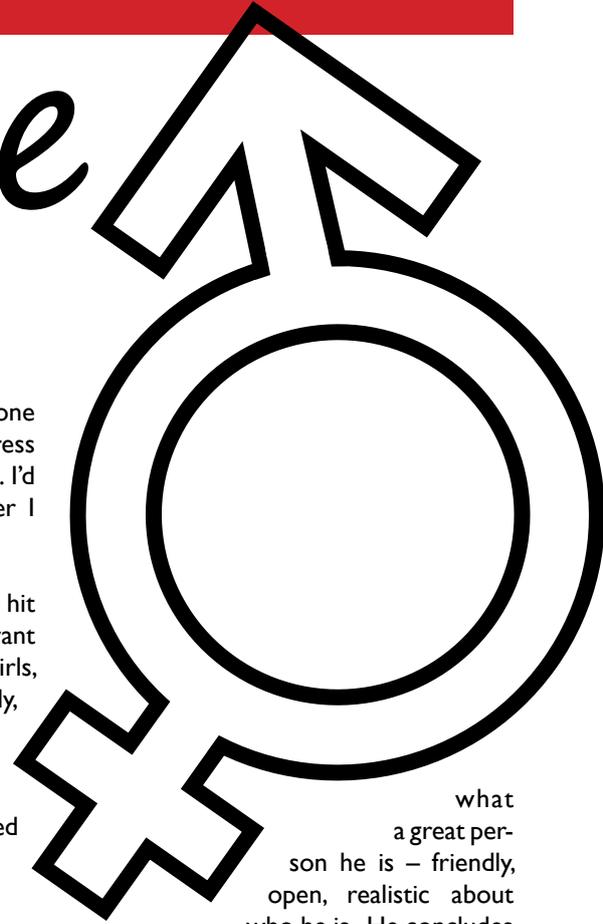
My cousin Andisiwe came to visit one summer and accidentally left her dress at our house. That was my first dress. I’d close my door and wear it whenever I was home alone!

Then I went to high school. Bang! It hit me. I wasn’t like other boys; I didn’t want to play soccer. I wasn’t interested in girls, except to hang out with them. Luckily, there were other guys like me, so I associated myself with them.

When I was in Grade 9, my dad asked me to invite my friends over for dinner. In the middle of the dinner, one of my friends said something to me and ended the sentence with ‘peto’ (the Xhosa equivalent of ‘darling’)! My dad was really angry; I could see the fury in his eyes. He had noticed the way we spoke, walked and behaved. Before the evening ended, we had become like demons to him. He knew who I was but found it hard to accept.

Three months ago, he got sick and called me into his room and told me to start thinking about initiation school (a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood where young Xhosa boys are taken into the bush and are taught to be men and are also circumcised). I was like “Hello! Have you seen a woman camping in the bushes for a month?”

As I am sitting in front of Thabo, I realise



what a great person he is – friendly, open, realistic about who he is. He concludes his story by saying that while he was growing up, he felt like he was enclosed in a small box; he couldn’t breathe. “I am a woman trapped inside a male structure. I feel I am one person inside and another one outside,” he says.

In a country like South Africa, which has been through so much, why do we still find it hard to accept those with alternative sexual orientation? We say Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu (You are a person while people are around you) but we still find it hard to give a small gift to those who seem just a little different from us.

Xenophobia came and went; same applies with the apartheid system. Those were really hard times but we were united. Can’t we do it now?