

DIPOLELO TSA RONA

VOL. 1



DIPOLELO TSA RONA, First Edition.

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The names* depicted in these stories are not those of the real story teller and any similar instance is purely coincidental.



FOREWORD

By Rev. Dumi Mmualefe

A story is told that during the colonial days, in a village not far from the present day capital city Gaborone, a young girl came running excitedly to her grandmother from a Dutch missionary's house. This girl had a mirror, which she was seeing for the first time. She breathlessly shouted; "granny, granny, I am beautiful!" The old lady dismissively retorted, "Hey bring that thing and let me see!" The girl passed the mirror to the old woman, who looked into this shining strange object and scornfully responded; "yone tshwene e!" (you mean this baboon!)

Reading these stories is like looking in the mirror, expecting to see "them", but instead, we see ourselves. The old woman saw a baboon because it was "her", the girl she saw, little did she know that baboon was her, the old woman. The LGBTIQ stories are our stories, stories about us!

In any good play or film there are protagonists and antagonists. It is the former that are loved and the latter, because of their roles as enemies, work against the good. But in the stories of hegemony, be they racial, sexual, gender, ethnic, because they are ideological, it is the antagonists who are glorified. When the antagonists are handed the mirror, they see ugly, they see evil, they see that which should be removed from the face of the earth; that which angers God and bring damnation to humanity.

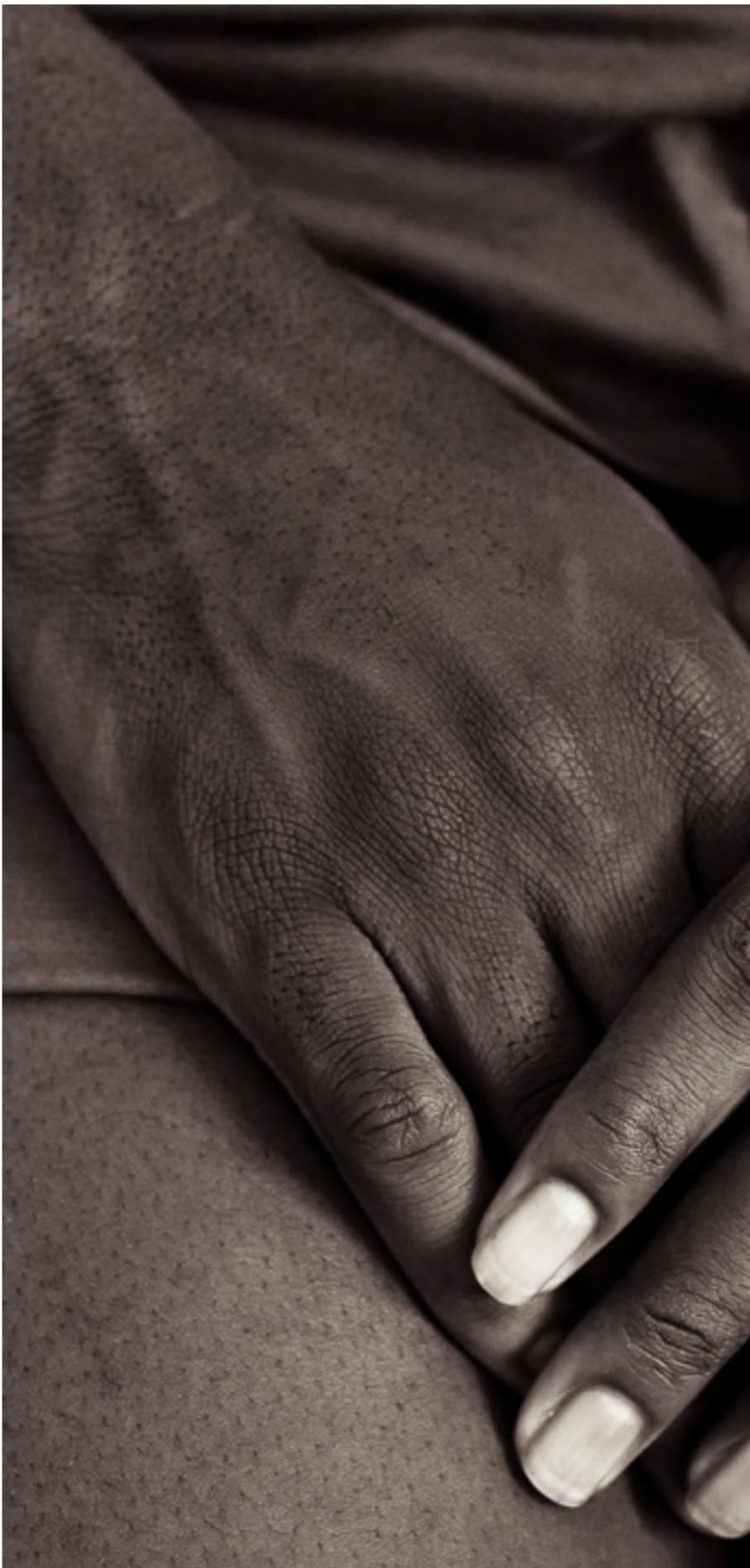
But wait, in there, that picture in this mirror is that of hegemonic demagogues and enemies of the normally loved protagonists. But this is not even half the story. These stories presents the mild side of the reality! The reality is that of the religious pelting unpalatables and pastors backing massages of doom

and damnation from the pulpits; it is a reality of both young and old committing suicide due to abuse and rejection by their loved one and their community. It is a reality of persecution due to the generally embraced procreative sexual ideology that condemns anybody who is not heterosexual for contradicting God's law "to be fruitful and multiply" while there are many among the heterosexuals who cannot have children not because they determine not to!

But we find solace in the Imago Dei, that we were all created in the image of God. We know and understand that "hate" is a choice, but some hate out of ignorance, but ignorance even in law is not an excuse! More often we choose not to be knowledgeable for fear of light. But hate is a debilitating burden. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was spot on when he declared: "I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear."

Jesus Christ also taught that the greatest commandment is to love God; the second greatest is to love our neighbors. He knew very well that we do not choose neighbors. We are called, not to tolerate but to love, and love unconditionally! When we love, we know God, when we do any other thing that is not love, we do not know God because God is Love (1 John 4:7&8). Furthermore "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him/her" (16).

Botho demands of us to treat each other with love, respect and dignity. Botho reminds us that what we do to the other defines not the recipient of the action but the doer. When we hate we project the feeling we have towards ourselves. We need to love ourselves better by loving the selves around us, the same selves who define us, for we are defined by our relationality! Finally, as the Apostle Paul said, we need to accept that there is still more to learn from the tapestry that is God's creation for "Now we see but a poor reflection in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.





HE TOOK MY CHILD FROM ME

My name is Laone*, and I identify as a lesbian. I was born and raised in Francistown by a single mother and stayed there all my life until I went to university in Gaborone. I majored in Sociology and English at the University of Botswana. My years at university were great. That's when I really discovered myself. I had freedom for the first time, and the LGBTI friends me I made there gave a platform to grow. I learnt a lot from associating with other LGBTI all of those years.

In 2010, I got pregnant and gave birth to a son. He stays with his father, because I haven't been financially stable. At the moment, I am just volunteering and haven't found a job yet. I only see my son when given appointed and arranged meet-ups, because all the custody has been given to the baby daddy. He dictates the terms of how and when I can see my son. He has not come to terms with my sexuality, with the fact of me being lesbian, and the involvement of my LGBTI friends and lovers that I have.

One time, I was in a relationship with a lesbian friend, and my baby daddy came out very harshly against our involvement, which led to many struggles and even blackmail to try to deny me chances of seeing my son. He believed that letting my son stay around lesbians would have a bad effect and spoil the boy's development, that my baby wouldn't be able to cope with "awkward" relationships between his mother and other women.

That struggle between me and my baby daddy went to some strange heights. I was cynically bullied into pretending to the community that I was different from the way I really was. Even at social events where I had a chance to see my son, I was made to find a male friend to accompany me. Whenever I was permitted to

see my son, I had to pretend to be straight and to date boys. This was the only way to calm the situation and avoid getting into a fight.

My baby daddy obtained full custody on the day of delivery of my baby. He convinced the health officers at hospital to deny me the chance of becoming my son's caregiver just because he told them I was a lesbian and unfit to be a mother. What seemed really unfair was the lack of support i got when such a right was taken from me.

Years have passed, and things have remained the same. If anything, they have got worse on my side All because of the unfair prejudice people have toward us lesbians.

What pains me most is the false relationship I have with my son. I have become a total stranger to him. He doesn't know me at all, but considers me like a distant female relative and not a mother. All because of the tension I have with the baby daddy. This estrangement from my own son breaks my heart. I know I am worthy to be the boy's mother and that I am capable of looking after him and raising him properly regardless of my sexuality. What does being lesbian have to do with it? I am his mother, and I want my son.

I AM A WORK IN PROGRESS

I grew up with my mother, but later on I decided to stay with my father. I felt he had not been present enough in my early childhood, and I wanted to connect more with him before it was too late. My parents lived in two different cities, so there was very little connection between my dad and me when I was staying with my mother. I was half way through my teenage years when I decided I needed his influence in my life.

At the time, I didn't know I was gay, but I was beginning to realise that I was different from the conventional straight boys. Growing up, I wasn't interested in doing what typical guys would do, like acting rough and tough. I never picked fights like most boys would do. I was more of a "softie."

It was only when I moved to Gaborone to live with my father that I started getting treated differently by my peers. That's when I started getting discriminated by other guys. They picked up on the differences in me, the things that were unusual, so that's when the realisation came to me that I was different from other boys in some basic kind of way.

I had never had a girlfriend, which seemed weird – to me as well as my friends. I didn't even have feelings for them. That was the hardest thing. I even tried to fake an interest in girls, and it was so stressful, because I didn't have that rough kind of look and voice that guys are "supposed" to have. Even the way I walked! It was hard trying to imitate the way other boys walked. It just wasn't me.

This was around that age when a whole lot of things happen to most teenagers, like experimenting with drugs, experimenting with sex, a whole lot of rebellious things, and what was odd was that I didn't

find any of that interesting. I preferred to go to the library or any place that would help my education. The other boys would always pick on me and pull stunts aimed at humiliating me and call me names that were supposed to mean I was some kind of gay “queen.” It was hard, but I managed to keep my head up. I may have been a “softie,” but I realised I had a strength that came from the attitude my mother had taught me. She had always told me not to pay any attention to what other people thought of me and not to be demoralized by their petty issues. That’s why the jokes and name-calling didn’t get me down. I knew, if I took the discrimination to heart or “bent” myself to what my peers expected, it would just make me weak. I was not going to be a “victim” or get pushed down by their treatment of me.

One thing that gave me hope at this time was becoming a church-goer. Church allowed me to “suspend” the pain and hardship I was going through. It reassured me that there would be joy at the end of my struggle, although there wasn’t much joy at the time. The discrimination and abuse persisted; the church couldn’t stop that. But I am still a believer, and I will never discredit the church. It did help me to cope with what was going on in my life and the struggle I faced.

Eventually, I accepted that the key to my difference from others was my sexuality, although it took me a while to be comfortable with this and to really accept who I was. I had to go through a process of “self-acquisition,” at least that’s how I thought of it. I had to “self-proclaim” who I was, that is, acknowledge to myself that I was gay, through a conscious pattern of positive thinking.

This is when I finally relieved all the stress I had been feeling about being different. It enabled me to become more “receptive” to myself. I understood that I was a work in progress and that accepting myself was a process that I had to take hold of

and control. I learnt continually to practice “self-confessing” to myself that I was gay. At times, this was still really hard, because I knew that, in my society, homosexuality was perceived as something bad, something shameful.

I had grown up with this perception all around me, and it was sometimes hard for me to overcome the feeling that I was “self-confessing” to something bad in myself, some negative attraction or spoiled identity deep inside me. So, though I made progress, I often felt conflicted.

Around this time, I began to really have a love of photography. My grandfather was a photographer, and I had grown up looking at the wonderful memories captured in the photographs he used to shoot at our family events. Now this started to inspire me to become a photographer myself.

When I was younger, I had sometimes tried taking pictures with my grandfather’s camera, even though he never allowed me to handle his camera. But, out of curiosity, I would sometimes “steal” it, I mean, take it without his consent, and try shooting my own pictures. This made me gradually develop an interest in one day getting my own camera and even starting my own photography business.

Once I came to the city, that’s when I began to get more exposure to photography and develop a serious love for taking pictures as an art. I got more and more involved in photography as I went through high school and starting doing it as a business even before I completed Form Five. It’s now been five or six years living and doing business in the photography world. And it’s something that I have had to learn and grow in, much like accepting my sexuality as a work in progress.

And like my sexuality, the style of photography I like, which is my very individual take on alternative street fashion, is one that most people in my society seem

to think is weird or sick. But in pursuit of doing more in photography, I dream big. I always want to do something no one has ever tried before, something on the cutting edge, so I can't worry about what society or other people think. I want to do something unique that blends my sexuality with my idea of photography as an art, and that captures the trends of the fashion blogging lifestyle from that perspective. As a work in progress – in both my sexuality and my art – this is what will help me grow as a photographer and entrepreneur.

FOLLOW YOUR OWN DREAM

I grew up pretty much as my mother's best friend. We did everything together, and her friends would often say, "ke sephache saga mama," because we were so inseparable. One of the clearest memories I have is of her waking me up in the morning and asking me to do her hair and help her choose an outfit to wear. It was a lovely, routine thing to do. So, from a young age, I had a very close relationship with my mother, and this is a big part of who I am now.

From primary, I used to be dropped off and picked up from school by my mother's driver. Every time he would drop me home, before my mother arrived back from work, I used to run and quickly have my lunch, and then go straight to my mother's closet to try on her clothes. Then I loved to go out into the street and prance around wearing her expensive dresses and gowns. I was known in the neighbourhood as that guy. But oddly enough, this attracted a lot of my male neighbours, which was a surprising twist to me at the time. Now that I'm older, I know better and don't consider it very odd ...

My childhood was very open. That's how I like to think of it. The people surrounding me were very open-minded and just let me be. In my neighbourhood, there wasn't much boy vs girl. We all played together, and that's just how it was. I was treated like a girl, although it was something that was never spoken about. It was just sort of second nature, so to speak. I considered myself one of the girls, and it didn't bother me or anyone else. The girls were my closest companions, my "go-to" people, so I considered myself one of them. The guys were open-minded and just accepted me that way.

So, as I grew up, I never had a problem accepting myself. I was just different. The trouble came later,

when I had to come to terms with my sexuality at university. That was a roller coaster of difficulty, and I was thrown deep into it all at once. From my childhood, I had never been involved with anyone sexually, so it was very hard for me, transitioning through that gap. It was both scary and fascinating at the same time.

It wasn't until I went to university that I had my first encounter with someone gay like me, but open about it. It was my first time to even see someone like that. We met through Facebook, through chatting and small talk to begin with, then ended up meeting and becoming friends. A while later, he introduced me to his other gay friends, and, for the first time, I was able to find relief and associate with friends who were similar to me.

But now, breaking out of the closet was the next step, and this was the most difficult thing for my family. I remember I was out with my friends one night, and suddenly I received a call from my mother. She spoke harshly, in a way she had never done before, and said, "Come back home now, I don't like the people you are hanging out with!"

Well, I felt I should be able to go back home in my own time, so I put my phone on silent and continued hanging with my friends. Half an hour later, I found 46 missed calls from her!

That's when I rushed home, but by the time I got there, I found my mother asleep, so all I could do was go to bed and sleep too. In the morning, the atmosphere felt awkward and intense. My mother was acting strangely, and I didn't know how to respond to her, because she didn't even want to talk to me.

In the afternoon, I left the house to go swimming with a friend, only to suddenly receive a call from my mother asking me where I was, demanding that I come back home as soon as possible, and saying she hated

the people I was hanging around with these days. When I got back home, I sat on the edge of my bed, and my mother came and said there were “rumours” circulating about me. I kept quiet, and then she just came straight to the point and asked me directly, “Are you gay?” I hadn’t seen this coming, and all I could say was, “Yes, I am.” She then asked me, did I think being gay was a good thing, or did I think what I was “doing” was good, but, before I could say anything, she lost her temper and left the room.

Half an hour later I heard a knock, and there was my aunt by the door, saying, “Your mother wanted me to come to you and talk about the issue that you are gay. I am here to pray for you.” Then all at once, as soon as she walked through the door to enter my bedroom, something like 15 or 20 other women followed her in, locked the door, and announced they were here to “cast the demons out of me” and pray for me as well. It was like they were on a mission to “exorcise” me.

Well, this went on about for an hour, with everyone laying hands on me and praying and crying.

When they were gone, I told my mother I was disappointed with her for not at least talking to me and trying to understand me being gay. I told her we should have been able to talk in a modest and decent way without bringing strangers to humiliate me in the way they did. Unfortunately, she never apologised or asked me to explain anything. A parent should want to know their child’s feelings, but she did not.

And so that was the beginning of the rift between my mother and me. That same evening, I left home to stay at a friend’s house. Keeping away seemed like the only thing I could do to avoid more ill treatment from my mother.

A few days later, she called to say she had made an appointment for me with a psychologist who would try to “solve my issue.” I agreed to go to the sessions. I hoped the psychologist would explain to my mother that I wasn’t possessed by demons or mentally ill and that she would should accept me the way I was.

But it was no use. The psychologist seemed to have been already “fed” by my mother and her friends to influence me into agreeing to be “cured.”

Despite the tension between my mother and me, I eventually moved back home, but things were never the same. My mother, whom I had always cherished as a friend, was now hostile towards me, which felt very strange and uncomfortable.

Then, through a school club I was in, I got an opportunity to go to Malaysia for a few months. I was very excited about this trip and hoped it was going to be my big break. When the time came, I packed everything and left home to stay overnight with a friend who was going to drive me to the airport. My mother said nothing, but at the airport the following morning, just as I was about to board my flight, she appeared out of nowhere, rushed up to me, and hugged me.

That was the last time I would see her for the three months I stayed in Malaysia, but every day she would send me an email promising that, as soon as I got back, she would try and understand me, and there would be peace between us. But I was determined to find an apartment of my own when I got back to Botswana and just stay away from home and really have a new perspective on life.

Back in the country, things didn't turn out the way either of us planned. I had got behind in my studies and ended up flunking out of school. My mother, instead of trying to understand me like she promised, blamed this on my being gay and hanging around with gay people who wasted my time. The result was that I developed a major depression that took me a long time to get over.

But after a while, I met a lady who helped me to start a business doing something I really enjoyed doing, and for the first time in ages, I felt I could accomplish something.

Now I'm happy as an entrepreneur in a field I like and have a talent for. I've learned that life is more than being brought down by the negative things that other people want to bring into your life just because they can't accept you the way you are.

Reflecting on my life, I feel I have so much advice for the old kid in me – or for anyone going through the same kind of experience I had.

My advice? Search your own soul until you find what you really want to do, and then work to make it a reality, regardless of what others say or think. Don't let anyone else push you into the trap of following their rules and conventions and being misdirected away from your own dream.

AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

I have always been told that every family has dark memories and that there is a skeleton in every family closet. But mine has many skeletons, and they live not only in the closet but inside my family members as well. When I sit and remember, a cold shiver runs down my spine. My name is Boitumelo*, and this is my story.

Born in a family of two children, I've always felt like the odd one out. I often thought I was being paranoid but always managed to tell myself that paranoia wouldn't feel that bad. My brother, Thabo* and I lived with our extended family, while our mother studied in South Africa. At first, everything was okay, until one day my grandmother started beating me for things I didn't even do. This was after she had seen me and my cousin Kefilwe* playing together. To this day, I wonder what offended her. She knew me as someone who played a lot with boys, but the look she gave when Kefilwe and I were playing has mortified both Kefilwe and me up to now. Maybe it was because I liked Kefilwe more than I should, but back then I didn't know anything about homosexuality or girls liking other girls.

Because of my friendship with Kefilwe, she was shunned from our love and connection, and my mother was told. Next time she came to visit, she beat me up so badly I thought I'd never recover. After that, things got even worse in my house. It was obvious I was different, and from the age of ten, everybody started calling me those names I've always hated: setabane, rrenayna, and all the rest. This mockery made me introverted. I ended up alienating all my friends and was left alone in a cruel world. When I was 11, my mother came back from South Africa and my brother and I went to stay with her in

a village in the north-eastern part of the country. I remember hoping I might be able to start afresh in the new place. I didn't know that my tunnel was about to get even darker.

My own mother started making me feel like I was a burden, and like she was not even my mother. Every time I asked for money or anything, she let me know that my father had passed away without leaving me anything. The emotional pain I endured because of the woman who bore me introduced me to self-hate. At 11 years of age, I started cutting myself.

No one understood my pain, because no one could believe me what I was going through. In public, my mother was a darling, but behind closed doors she became the mother that only I knew she was. Meanwhile, my feelings for other girls were growing. I tried to do some research, but all I found out was that families apparently fell apart due to people like me. So I fought who I was. At 12, I started dating a boy so as to get rid of these feelings I had for girls.

When my mother found out, she beat me using one of her belts. The buckle pierced my skull, and I fainted. My brother woke me up by pouring water on me, and when I came to, I found myself in a pool of blood. Tears stinging my eyes, I could only watch my mother as she spat on me and told me I disgusted her. When I went to the hospital later that night to get the wound checked, I lied and said I had banged my head on a window. That's how much I still wanted to protect the woman; I wanted her to see me like I was her own. After that incident, the boy and I parted ways, of course. He was afraid and thought I didn't like him. My mother and I didn't talk for months, though we stayed in the same house, but eventually – I don't remember how – we co-existed. I passed exceptionally well at school, but she didn't appreciate. She even told me she knew I would fall pregnant before I finished junior high school!

Well, this was motivation enough not to fall pregnant. I wanted to spite her, so I studied hard until my birthday in 2010, when my mother sent me a message telling me how much she hated my birthday because it reminded her that she gave birth to me instead of having an abortion. She actually told me how she had tried to abort me but had failed, and that's the only reason I had been born!

This is when I got introduced to the idea of suicide. It felt perfect; my own mother didn't want me, so why should I be alive at all? I overdosed on some pills but only landed in Nyangabwe Hospital. My mother said in public that she wished I had died.

As if this wasn't enough, on April 10, 2010 (I remember the date as well as I do my birthday), my mother's boyfriend raped me, beat me to a pulp, and left me for dead. He had heard rumours that I was a guy, so he said he was "straightening me out." My mother found me in a pool of blood but didn't even want to hear about it. Instead, she complained about me staining her rug, and when I told her what had happened, she only started shouting at me. In fact, she forced me to take a shower and even shaved me to wipe out any evidence of the rape, telling me at the same time that I was the one who had forced myself on her man. She accused me of trying to steal her boyfriend!

So instead of helping to get the bastard caught and punished, my own mother blamed me. When I later reported the rape to a friend's mother, who was a police officer, she told me there wasn't much that could be done, because my mother had made me get rid of the evidence. Nevertheless, she took me to hospital for tests, and some proof was found; the rape was so violent it had left scars in my vagina.

Three weeks later the man was arrested and charged. My mother made sure I felt guilty about getting her boyfriend into trouble, but a week later – I don't know how or why – he was released and I never knew what, if anything, happened after that. Since the rape, I have

drifted away from reality. My doctor diagnosed me with depression and said I was probably schizophrenic, as if depression wasn't enough to handle already. Eventually, through counselling, I thought I had managed to put the rape behind me. I even thought I could finally see the light at the end of my tunnel. But in 2013, around April again, I suddenly started losing weight drastically. In May, a specialist found a malignant tumor. I needed to start treatment immediately, but my mother wouldn't hear of it. She accused me of wanting to bankrupt her!

I wasn't a smoker, but I started smoking after that. I wanted to speed up the tumor so that I'd die sooner. Unfortunately, it didn't work. I just landed in hospital for a month and came out still alive. The whole time I was in hospital, I was only made to feel like a burden. My aunt had to come all the way from Tsaabong to check on me because my mother refused. I felt so alone.

Towards the end of that year, however, I learned that my father – who had “died leaving me nothing,” as my mother constantly reminded me – was actually alive and well. I confronted my mother with the lie, but this turned out to be a bad mistake. My grandmother was present at the time, and both of them turned on me, saying I was calling my mother a whore. They twisted my words and made them foul and bitter. I had to quit trying to find out more about my father.

Since then, my brother has been doing his best to patch up my relationship with my mother. I've been willing to give this a shot, but I can't just forget what she has put me through. I've always told myself I'm strong, but I realise that my one big weakness is my mother. I love that woman, but I hate her too. We are still trying to fix things between us, but every time that she offends me, I remember!



LOVE IN A TIME OF STIGMA

Dumelang Batswana, I am a 23-year-old, blue-black-and-white Motswana, second born of six siblings. My mother is from Tswapong, and my dad is Mongwato, and both my parents have accepted that I am gay.

Have you ever told yourself that you want to settle down, find yourself a lifetime partner, and go through thick and thin with that person? I have, and still do.

But that means knowing your status and testing regularly, which I have always done since I started dating. I had my second HIV test when I was still at the tender age of 19 years. I still remember that the time was exactly 14:50 when I received the results. I was negative.

A couple of weeks later, I ran into a tall, humble tall gentleman in his mid twenties. I had met him before, just in passing, but this second meeting was very different from the first. It was the beginning of what seemed like a beautiful relationship.

He wanted to settle down too, and we soon respected, trusted, and loved each other deeply. I told myself my dream of finding a lifetime partner had become a reality. Until a few months later. That's when some people in my community (I mean my gay community) started knowing about our relationship. Suddenly I started receiving Facebook messages from various "sources" telling me my partner was disloyal to me, that he was cheating on me all over the place.

Soon the news got even worse. I was told that he was HIV positive!

To say I was agitated would be an understatement, but at first I did not want to believe it. Do you want to know why? Because I had already slept with him without protection. So

I refused to believe the story, but at the same time I couldn't help but feel angry with him – and with myself. I realised that trust could be a dangerous trap, and I wondered if it would turn out to be a trap I had set for myself.

Then soon after this, his HIV status was publicly exposed on a Facebook page. On that same day, I dropped everything and went to visit his home village to see what I could find out. I found his elder sister there, and she told me candidly that her brother was not “the right guy” for me. She openly admitted that her brother was always bringing a lot of different guys in and out their house and said I must do what is best for me, which she suggested was to run from him as fast as I could.

She then tried to bring the traditional Christian view of homosexuality into our relationship, but I told her this was not about religion and that I didn't consider the relationship, or my sexuality, to be any kind of sin.

When I got back to town, it was rough days for our relationship, but I did not end it. I stayed with him and tried to figure things out. That's when other gay guys started asking me how I did it. They saw that I was fighting that battle we gays cannot usually cope with – family disapproval, partners cheating, and all the complicated rumours that come with trying to sustain a relationship. So they all wanted my advice on how to have a successful, long-term relationship!

This is when I asked my partner to go for an HIV test with me. He didn't refuse outright, but he kept coming up with excuses every time we were supposed to go, and this made me more and more sure that the rumours must be true. The deal was sealed for me when a friend of his came and told me that my partner had been positive since 2011, two years before this!

After a full – and for me a faithful – year in one relationship, I finally realised that to love somebody didn't mean I should stop loving myself. It certainly didn't mean being inconsiderate to myself or, worse, sacrificing myself for someone who didn't deserve it.

The end result was that I decided I needed to be independent as soon as possible, so I dropped out of university and did a certificate in Accounting and Business Studies so I could support myself. I still cherish the dream of finding a lifetime partner, but now I'm more realistic, and I know exactly what I'm looking for.

The reason I'm telling my story is not to let everyone about my love life, but rather to raise awareness about a dangerous trend in the way a lot of gays behave towards HIV-positive gays. There is a lot of stigma. I am certain that's why my ex-partner was afraid to reveal his status. He was afraid of being stigmatized by other gays, and that is exactly what happened when he was exposed on Facebook.

Today I have been living the HIV-positive life since 13 November, 2013. I have never had a problem with being positive or with dating another positive guy. However, I must say the stigma that exists within the gay community is way beyond bearable. The humiliating acts that so many of us perpetrate towards our HIV-positive brothers make most HIV-positive members of the community scared to tell even their partners about their status.

So I am raising awareness about an issue that I have personally encountered, seen happen, and discussed frequently with other HIV-positive gays who opened up to me because I was open with them.

I was even threatened once by an ex of mine who works as a nurse. He had no shame about telling me in a public place that he had access to my medical records, so I shouldn't mess with him. I was also threatened by a total stranger when he found out I was wooing someone he liked; he told me my status was his "strongest weapon" against me. Moreover, I once had to tell a guy about my status because

he has been declaring his love for me for years and, guess what, he thanked me for protecting him and then I never heard from him again!

I know some young Batswana gays who bear their hearts, minds, and souls in their quest to find a sense of belonging in the gay community but fail because of living in fear, being humiliated through gossip, exposed on social media, and so forth. This viral stigma by gays towards positive gays puts everyone at risk, for we are silencing each other, and silence equals death.

I HAVE HAD TO LEARN TO BE INDEPENDENT

My name is Pinky*. I am 23 years. I live in a small village called Kuke in Hukuntsi subregion, Kgalagadi District. I first realised that I had two sex organs when I was in Form 1. I had a teacher, Ms Nare, who was interested in knowing more about me, because she could see I behaved “differently.” I guess she picked up on this because she was from “Botswana,” so she knew about gays and lesbians. One day she took me aside and asked me the question she said she had wanted to ask me since I first came to register for school.

After that, Ms Nare and I became a bit close, and I eventually joined a couple of school clubs she was patron of. I was doing well at school, but Ms Nare became concerned when I started experiencing something like menstruation. I would bleed for about three days but just thought it was some sort of illness that would pass. Ms Nare decided to take me to the local clinic, where I was examined. It turned out I had a female hormonal profile and that the bleeding this was indeed a menstrual bleed.

I was then moved out of the boy’s hostel at school, and I moved in with the school matron until my “situation” could be assessed and a decision made about my school living arrangements. After two weeks, I was moved into the girls’ hostel. Until I finished my junior school, many of my teachers were very supportive. They understood the circumstance I was in, and they taught me to be accepting of my physical makeup, because

accepting myself would make it easier for other people to accept me.

Discovering I was different and being accepted has made me appreciate myself and the woman I have become. I grew up selling sweets as a way of making pocket money, but now my business has grown to include airtime and eggs. Next, I want to start doing some catering.

My mother still has issues with the fact that I choose to live my life as a woman. But even though my visible sex organ is that of a male, I have a female reproductive system internally. I have had to choose how to live, but it's my life, and I have had to learn to be independent.

I WAS NEVER AN EVERYDAY, AVERAGE KID

My name is Kabo*. I am 23 years old. I was born and raised in a small town called Selibe Phikwe and came to Gaborone in 2011 for my tertiary. I am done with that now and am graduating soon.

I lost both parents as a child. I was raised by my grandmother, who took good care of my siblings and me. My relationship with my grandmother was wonderful and humbling. She supported all of us as a single woman and sacrificed all she had to make life easy for us. With all the efforts she had to make with her job and to make ends meet, she did everything just to ensure a safe, loving environment for all of us at home.

Growing up, I was raised in church, but for me it was never the most exciting or fulfilling place to worship, not compared to my own preference for worshipping God on my own without any need to identify as a member of some church. Anyway, growing in a small town like Selibe Phikwe, I was “different” from other boys. Of course I didn’t know this at first – to me, I was just like everybody else, a child like any other -- but everybody else could tell I was different, just by the way I handled myself in public.

I was never an everyday, average kid.

On some days I’d find myself playing dress-up alone, because I didn’t really have friends. I’d wear my mum’s wig, tie a cloth around my waist, and let it flow behind my short body to imitate a dress with a train. I’d put on her heels and go sit with the rest of the family. Nobody complained about it, and my mum would just laugh. She loved it. My beautiful mother, she left this earth too

soon, while I was still a small child, but she always preached love to me and taught me good manners (and good English!).

My grandmother was kind, but she discouraged me from having friends. She was superstitious and believed no good could come from other people. She thought they just wanted to bewitch you and take away what was yours, but of course, as I grew up, I made friends. I was always fond of the boys and felt I had a special connection with them. Being only a kid, I didn't know anything about gays, lesbians, straight, queer, and all that, but I began to realise I was different.

So, yes, other people did make fun of me. They called me of all sorts of names and stuff, and this did hurt me. I was young, and having people attack me in this way made me feel bad about myself. Even some of my friends treated me like this. I remember when I got my first best friend, I loved him from the go. He was like a brother to me, and we got very close, because he seemed to fill the void in me left by my mother's passing. I felt I had someone I could count on. Funny, right? I had siblings I didn't rely on, but a friend that I did. My friend and I did everything together. We even bathed together, but here is the catch. I was always curious to see his penis. At the time, this meant nothing to me; I was too young and had no name for my curiosity.

Then puberty kicked in, and everything changed. I began to experiment with things, sexual things ... with both boys and girls! Deep inside, I knew I enjoyed it more with the guys, and that is when it began to hit me why I was different, and it all began to make sense. In my lone moments, I connected the dots, from the dress-ups to the make up and wigs, to getting excited seeing boys naked, gosh!

So I came to discover that I was “gay” and what this meant when I was in junior high school. That’s when I first had feelings for a guy. At first, this didn’t add up, and I couldn’t make sense of how I felt. People weren’t familiar with what being gay was. There was no information out there. So it took me a while to get the meaning of what being gay was. I felt trapped by my feelings and confused by them, but eventually I had to accept that “maybe” I was bisexual or gay. Still, I just didn’t know for sure, and I felt that I couldn’t tell anyone or ask anyone for advice. I kept my secret for as long as I could, but even though I didn’t tell anyone, people still assumed who I was.

I heard that it’s called “gay,” and that became my nickname in high school! It hurt but I just walked past it and kept a strong stance. Soon it didn’t mean shit to me anymore. Anybody could call me gay, and I would give no fucks.

Sure, the teachers explained it during guidance and counselling classes, that it’s “when men sleep with men.” I’d get stares from the whole class every time the subject came up. The “joke” never got old. I still couldn’t really accept myself though! If people asked, I’d say “no, I’m straight, I’m just soft!” I got so used to the slurs from other people that it didn’t hurt much, but I never expected my own blood to say such slurs against me, and when it happened, this hurt the most. Despite the looks and name-calling, the only person I felt was really against me being gay was my older brother.

One night, when grandmother was away on one of her annual visits to her home village, I was out late with my best friend. We were standing by the entrance to our yard, just talking and chilling. Little did I know my older brother was watching and getting all worked up. He locked me out of the house just for spite, and I literally had to beg and cry to get in again. Later on, he threatened me and beat me up for some kind of a rumour that I was trying to have an affair with one of his friends. Well, that is all behind me now. The first person who helped me accept myself and come out of the closet was a friend of mine who right now is abroad in Turkey. He came out to me first, which

scared me, because I had not yet accepted myself. I was still trying to live my life the way other people wanted me to be. I was telling people I was straight, and I even thought I was convincing them that way. So when a gay guy would approach me, I would be in denial and pretend as if I was straight. But when I got on my own again, I felt “self-convicted.” The lying was just too easy, and I couldn’t take it anymore.

When I completed my high school, I finally felt confident enough to come out to my friends, and luckily, I had good friends who accepted me very well. Then my transition from Selibe Phikwe to Gaborone helped me to grow more as an individual. After years of secret gay life, when I got to university, it wasn’t so hard anymore. It felt like a way of leaving behind all those years of struggling with myself. I started a social life with friends who were gay and straight but who accepted who I was. I got confident and experienced a lot of love. So far the most part, varsity was really good, and I loved it, because it taught me a lot about myself and about life. I dated here and there, but most of the people I had relationships with were still in the closet, so most of the time I kept my relationships very private. People do ask me, in terms of being gay, whether I want to be married or not, but I tell them, with respect, that I have nothing against marriage but regard myself as “distanced” from it, not because I’m gay, but just because I think I lack the commitment to devote myself to a long, tiring union with one person. The social structure of it is too formal for someone like me.

Homosexuality in Gaborone, at least as I would associate with it – detached from its “public” perception – seems not to be any strange thing. Most people around town are okay with it compared to my hometown, where people still see it as so alien and shocking.

NOT ALL THAT I AM

Nobody knows they're dyslexic until they go to school, but that doesn't mean they were any less dyslexic before this. Same thing with sexuality. Until you reach a certain stage of life, you can't fully understand your own sexuality, but it's still there. For some people, the journey of self-discovery only requires reaching puberty, for others it may take a while longer. For some, it can take a lifetime. For some, the journey is easy, but for many it's only ever going to be a whirlwind of emotions, a confusion they may never come to terms with or understand, especially in a heteronormative culture such as my Botswana.

All I knew about sexuality was what I had grown up around and what I had been taught in school, which was all about what was "normal." The religious teaching I got at church also promoted heterosexual practices only and condemned homosexuality, using Bible scriptures interpreted in the most literal way.

My parents always advised me to stay away from boys. They wanted to protect me and keep me safe, yet this was the only type of sexual relationship that was recognised, and it was indoctrinated into us as the only natural thing. So it was quite "normal" for me to want to have a boyfriend, especially since, growing up, I had always been one of the boys. Most of my friends had always been boys, and at 17 years old, after completing my Cambridge, it seemed only fitting that I too get myself a cute boy who would buy me chocolates on Valentine's Day!

Well, that did not go so well. Having never had any kind of sex, I was consumed with trying to please. Even unprotected sex seemed cool, when the alternative was to lose my street cred and be known as an old clueless virgin.

It took just that one encounter for me to fall pregnant. And as if that was not enough, I had to go through the whole thing without any help from him. I have never been so scared, nor so disappointed in myself. It was like a fierce slap in the face, so I withdrew into my "cocoon" and stayed away from boys, just like I'd been warned by my folks a gazillion times before.

By then I was in college. Having no use for boys again, mostly because I was once bitten, I was not about to go down that road again. But I had this other friend I hung out with. She was beautiful, but at the time I did not think there was anything special about the relationship, except that I loved her as my best friend. We did everything together. She was just as wild as I was, and we were both very curious and tried out everything. There was one time she kissed me, and it just felt normal. It didn't feel like we had done anything wrong. She called me her "baby" and was very possessive of me. It felt good, and to us that was our normal.

Then one day we had sex, and it wasn't even awkward between us. I thought to myself, wow that felt good! It was the first time I'd had an orgasm, and you know I had to do it again, just to revisit the feeling. This made me finally realise I was not attracted to boys but rather to girls.

Well, we parted ways after college, but I soon met the woman who was to be my very first "real" girlfriend. Still, I never thought much about sexuality or how I should define or label myself. To me, sex with a woman, or even just being attracted to one, was something I thought everyone went through.

But my girlfriend introduced me to a whole new world I never knew existed. I met a lot more girls who loved girls, but especially boys who loved boys. Gay boys had always been my fetish. I had always been very good friends with gays; we just got along - so that part I understood. They were very open to me about their sexuality, and I learned a lot from them about the diversity of sexuality. I had more than enough gay friends, and I guess we always got along because we had something in common - loving people of the same sex.

I guess what I am trying to drive at is that I did not always know I was gay. It was only when I had my first encounter with a woman that it dawned on me that I was what others called a lesbian. And I have many moments when I don't even "feel" gay – when I simply feel like a human being who just likes what she likes. So I don't comprehend what all the fuss is about sexuality. As a lesbian mom, I'm just glad I have had the life I've had. I understand my sexuality now. My experiences with women, my having so many gay friends, my reading, and my exposure to the media have all helped me learn a lot and understand more about my sexuality and that of others around me. I know that, if at all my daughter discovers she is a lesbian, that will not change how I feel about her as a person, not one bit. I will continue to love and cherish her wholeheartedly.

My sexuality has been a journey I would not trade for anything. It is a part of who I am, though it is not all that I am. The world would be such an amazing place if people could just get that.

NOT WALKING THAT DARK TUNNEL

The usual clichés apply, but at one time or another, we all have to share a story that goes beyond the gay subculture, so dark and hidden below what anyone would ever guess. Well, of course, it was hard to tell if i would make it and accept myself. I was brought up in a small, middle-class family in a new suburb, mommy working, daddy too, with one older brother. Everything was manageable and ordinary, and I had a stable background morally as well as economically. Family life was organised around the stiff principles of Christianity, even if my own behaviour often secretly contradicted them. But on the surface it was a calm, normal life. To idealise it, you could even say it was a steadfast, “perfect” upbringing.

Just the basic troubles now and then at home and at school. Breaking some rules, messing around in the neighbourhood, some hard knocks here and there. Basically the same for all the guys who passed through the same line of upbringing.

But although I was bright and academically “convincing,” most people doubted me, because I played a “double major,” all sweetness and light one day and then bad as could be the next, one day an angel and the next a thug. Anyone that got caught up in my childhood years must have been very confused!

Adolescence was worse. A long story that would be futile to recollect, although no one in my household knew anything about it. The trouble years. Teenage life. Where all your priorities and wishes turn out to be different from

what you expected, but where it's even worse to discover that your deepest, amorous desires are unconventional and deemed "unnatural."

This was when the bully effect that I had in me was caught up with the kinds of mischief all boys at that age get involved in, trying to experiment with everything, but especially with the little romances that most boys would try to get going with the girls.

But mine were different, of course. My naughty deeds involved a liking for boys. At the time, it was hard for me to tell if I was a maniac or not, because what set me apart from all the rest was that I was both a little punk alpha boy and gay too, and this kept me doing my thing without anyone noticing. It was a frightening and dark exploration of myself as gay, breaking all the rules and doing my thing both with those I saw as "sissy boys" and with the same kind of boys as me, with all my boy traits.

I knew I was safe with the sissies, but it was hard to cope with the fear of being exposed by the "co-boys" I played with. I felt alien to my sexuality, both accepting my deeds and facing the fact that I was unlike these other guys who would also date cute girls.

All these years were like an interlude. Suppressed sexuality, struggle, and a blurred identity that I had to hold within, while still struggling to cope with all the other stresses of teenage life.

Until finally I made it to university and suddenly met a whole new culture, so punk and hip that it fascinated me totally. It was amazing to see the praise and pride the gay guys there surrounded themselves with. For them, being gay was an identity they championed without being shy about its social and sexual expression. Partying, clubbing, and exploring new sexual adventures was open and fun, and I raced to catch up.

Hanging out with guys like me, amazing hook-ups that my new-found friends would fix me up with, and great sex – it was all just amazing – to be able to explore such a world and feel like I belonged, after all those years of adolescent confusion and concealment.

Okay, so sometimes it was still hard to come to terms with coming out of the closet and admitting to the world who I really was. All the questions everyone, including family and friends, would ask, all the doubts and fear they had about my new associations and the company I now had around me all the time. It was hard, and I sometimes fought my sexual orientation. I suffered some severe bouts of depression. Sometimes it seemed like it was impossible to truly come out of the closet, even if my sexuality was obvious to the world!

So, yeah, there was still some lying. Not to mention some binges of substance abuse as self-medication to ease my pain away. It didn't help. There was plenty of pain, but luckily I seemed to have a natural resistance against blaming myself for being the way I was.

Even when I sometimes felt that my identity or my life was just worthless, as a fall back there was always a kind of "rough bliss," because I knew there was something in me that was good, even if it was only the kind that expelled my own devils at the risk of expelling my angels too!

So the struggle continues, but at least I'm not walking that dark tunnel anymore, the one I had been stuck in for all those teenage years. And this is all thanks to leaving my closet and championing my identity with the rest of my queer fellow men. I express my identity to the fullest, and that's what keeps me strong, just to grasp and accept who I truly am.

THE WORLD COULD DO WITH FEWER PEOPLE WHO JUDGE OTHER PEOPLE

It's been a while since I've dated. I am going a year without sex to see if I keel over and die. (Surely not!)

I'd like to meet the right person one day, but society has never allowed me to feel like I should accept everything that comes by or anything that makes me feel cute. A dog is cute. I'm AMAZING.

I'd like to fall in love – whatever that means. Deaf, blind, rich, poor, HIV positive, come what may, I'd like to fall in love. I'd be devastated if I contracted HIV/AIDS, but I hope I would come to terms with it and find it bearable. Hopefully, I'd have the support I need from friends and family, so that I would not see only doom and gloom. That's what society has led us to believe – that gay and AIDS are synonymous. Today I'm surrounded by love, but not the right kind of love. Love interests or suitors, you might call them, but the thing is they all have girlfriends and wives. How is it possible that, in one month, ten eligible guys can want me, but all of them are in the closet?

Shouldn't I demand that someone love me with all his heart – as cheesy as that sounds. I shouldn't have to conform to this sex-driven society where love equals sex. I don't want to out anyone, but I wouldn't mind someone telling their mother they love me.

It's stupid if the people you hang around with don't accept you being gay. Otherwise, get the fuck out. Its ridiculous what closeted gay people use as excuses not to come out, not to be free loving whoever. But I try not to judge. The

world could do with fewer people who judge other people. Let's just love.

Love is endless, but so is hate. I can't walk the streets without someone clocking that I'm a fag. I'm used to the catcalls, but I don't think I should be okay with them. I might end up having a minor case of Stockholm syndrome. The word fag is endearing to me, if said by the right people. It's like, if you're my friend and you call me a fag, that means you understand my struggle, and we turn it into humour. These days it's abundantly clear that a lot of people want to be faghags. I have people calling me "chwaa," and they don't even know what it means. When I tell them to call me fag instead, they gasp as if I just killed a baby. They don't get it, they don't know the struggle. These women have spent more than P5,000 on me! It's shameful. But they use me, so I use them, no?

I don't have a relationship with my mother. I was very aggressive when I came out. I told my whole extended family, and my mother said "do you think you are natural?" I never laughed so hard. It's my life, right?

My sister is my biggest supporter, even though she doesn't "agree" with me being homosexual. So we never talk about it, but, funny enough, I always tell her when I'm going to a LEGABIBO event. Homophobic minds can't be reasoned with, but they can be conditioned to love.





Dipolelo Tsa Rona - Our Stories - These are LGBTI stories of bravery, survival and victory told in our own words, documented and shared with community members so that, from your experiences, they can breathe, learn and just may be catching a break. Tell your story, help those surrounded by hate break the barriers - Our Stories - Our Victory!

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