

Patricia

I love Tiwi just the way it is, I love my homeland, my island. I live on Melville Island and it's beautiful there; there is a very long sandy beach.

I go to Church every Sunday and when I don't go, I just say a prayer every night before sleep. I don't think it's a sin to be a Sista Girl. Jesus died for all of us; he said, love don't hate.

I think there are so many of us Sista Girls here because a long time ago we never had the right skin to marry.

First, I was very shame of myself. Growing up I just wanted to be a woman, I wanted to be like I am.

I used to love to play with my cousin's dolls and wear their skirts and make-up—when I was about 4; I remember everything. I used to go to school in pink tights and a skirt. I had fights with my cousins because they used to call me 'faggot' and you know that other word, 'poofter'. But my grandmother was very accepting, she knew who I was, and my aunts, they were accepting too.

I want to get a sex change, 'cause as I was growing I thought I was a girl, a female. I'd like to get it when I'm like 30. I wonder what it would feel like when I wake up.

I have met some inspirational women in my life but never before have I met women like the Sista Girls. I felt both grounded by their presence and swept away by their romanticism.

Tiwi is made up of Melville and Bathhurst islands, home to an Aboriginal community of around 2000 people, about 50 of which are transgender women, or Sista Girls. The land is both stark and luscious, waterholes are bordered by parched red earth and saltwater crocodiles claim the turquoise sea. It is a community governed by Indigenous knowledge, where master painters wrap entire buildings in rich colour and intricate line work and a child's first words are uttered in their traditional tongue.

While many of the Sista Girls dream of running away to far off lands where their sexuality will be embraced rather than judged, they all have an unwavering loyalty to their homelands. As Crystal says, 'We are lucky. We have all the necessities right here. We have the bush; we have our culture, and that's what shapes us, makes us who we are. That's what makes us so lucky.'

To me transgender identity always seemed so complex, but ask Buffy if she is gay, bisexual, a woman or a man and she will simply reply, 'Come to the island; see what it's like.' And she's right. Before embarking on this trip I was nervous about saying the wrong thing,

Jemima

I work at Tiwi Shire Council, doing CDEP Admin. I sign people up to programs, I sign them on and off jobs like arts and crafts, sport and rec., programs for the kids, walking the country picking up rubbish, cleaning our community. I enjoy it; I hope to do it for a long time.

The photo shoot was good; I haven't had my hair and make-up done before. I was nervous when I was ready to do it but happy in the end.

I might try wearing fancy dresses around the island now.

When I was about 10, I thought I was a girl. I started dressing up, playing with dolls. I dressed up in my sister's clothes but she didn't mind. I didn't hear any words from my family, so they must accept me.

I been to the Sista Girl's retreat three times. There's been some Sista Girls from Darwin, some from Arnhem Land. We talk about ourselves and our lives. It makes us strong and proud. We classify ourselves as Sista Girls, we're women you know.

I would love to see people in the community accept us. Just talk to us, give us encouragement, not talk behind us or look at us. I just don't get why a lot of people can't understand. We don't tell them what to do. It's their life, we're not judging them.

but as Jemima will tell you, it's pretty simple: 'We classify ourselves as Sista Girls, we're women you know.'

Patricia, with her long hair, delicate body language and serene gaze is a lady if I ever met one. 'If a man wants me I play hard to get,' says the 21 year old. 'I have to see if a man loves me for me, not just for the thing that he wants. I can tell by the way they look at me, the way they talk to me. I love my man and I expect him to treat me like a lady.'

Despite pain from violence endured and loved ones lost, the Sista Girls continue to hold dear notions of love that many of us have forgotten. Patricia dreams of her wedding: she is going to save up and wear a beautiful dress with flowers, 'All in white with a long veil.' 'Long time ago I had this one friend,' she remembers. 'One day he held my hand to the disco and he said I will remember you. I could feel his touch, and I thought, I think he likes me. When he left, after holding me, he broke my heart and I bet he's missing me too. I hope I find someone one day, just like him.'

Sitting in red dust, breathing in their country, listening to their dreams and memories, I couldn't help feeling pulled into a world of love songs and romance films.

17 year old Bimbo loves Noah's Ark, a serial depicting the romantic lives of eight successful Black men. Her favourite is Noah's boyfriend,



BINDI COLE - "SISTA GIRLS"
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