

When Faith Loves

African stories on when sexuality meets religion

Edited by

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and
Jide Macaulay



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About House of Rainbow

House of Rainbow (HOR) fosters relationships among Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer (LGBTIQ+) individuals, people of faith and allies in order to create a safer and a more inclusive community. As a support organisation, we are dedicated to reconciling marginalised identities with the pressures of society.

With locations in many countries, HOR is able to assist with issues and challenges such as asylum seekers' support, sexual health, counselling and pastoral care.

Our services are not exclusively for self-identifying members within our community as we are also passionate towards supporting allies who may be facing similar challenges regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, nationality or background.

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Foreword by Reverend Jide Macaulay

The stories of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgender, Intersex and Queer Africans, alongside those of our many allies, make for an incredible documentation, a key aspect of which involves the journey of reconciling faith with being LGBTIQ. The stories you are about to encounter are candid expressions of the lives of people who participated in sessions, seminars and workshops with House Of Rainbow, mostly in Eastern and Southern Africa. We are delighted that our work as an organisation has such an impact and has allowed so many people to connect with the interventions we provide. We are now making this material available to all those who encounter this book.

We met with people, in Zambia, Botswana, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda and Lesotho, for whom this programme has been a life changing experience. I trust that as you encounter their stories, you will be mindful of your own journey towards reconciling faith and sexuality.

Reconciling faith and sexuality is not easy. There are layers of trauma to negotiate for self identifying LGBTIQ persons of faith in Africa, and a great conflict between being black African and the backdrop of religious homophobia, hatred and ignorance. From many included in this book we saw a determination that we have never witnessed before. And I am inspired and further motivated by the authenticity and vulnerability of all the contributors who shared their stories.

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‘Golden Rays’

By Sarah Chirwa

It was on a beautiful day just at the brink of dusk I had met her. We talked until dawn; I had never felt more familiar to a stranger who still wanted to explore more of me than what she already knew. Her warm heart, her intelligence, her voice, her perfectly shaped body drove me insane immediately! I had never met a being so beautiful until that moment. She was beautiful inside out for it was all too good to be true. And from the 27th day of July, the year of 2014, I had found more than a lover, but in her, I found all the elements that would complete my quest in finding the one, Pesh.

June 3rd was our first date ever. I was in college then, and had gone to the club with friends where Pesh picked me up. We took a drive to her house for a more private first date, and like I expected she was the funniest and charming person I had ever met. She has these gorgeous hazel eyes that just see right into your soul. We talked for hours and had our very first kiss; it was perfect.

I discovered I was a lesbian when I was 16 years old, which of course was very confusing, and I was yet to come to understand my feelings. In my mind I thought it was part of the puberty process. I found myself getting crushes on other girls and dreaming about them. At 17 I had my first kiss with a girl I went to school with. I had mixed feelings about this. Growing up in a very Christian home this was not ‘normal’, it was unheard of, a taboo. This confusion led to internalised homophobia: I hated myself every day, I did not want to be me, I wanted to be like everyone else, ‘normal’. I created a little box in my heart where I locked all of the feelings I felt. As I became older, I

couldn't hide what I felt anymore, so I accepted who I was, and that was when I decided to start dating.

Pesh and I's relationship came under even closer scrutiny because of her activism within the LGBTI movement here in Zambia. We found our relationship being put through the paces by both family and society's expectations. Our love and faith were put to the test by my own family, who asked me to choose between them and Pesh. If I chose them, I would have to be prayed for, counselled, deny my sexuality and live a whole life based on a lie. I was not ready for that; it was too high a price to pay. I picked Pesh. My heart was torn because my family was all I knew. Though it made me feel alone, I was not going to be someone that I wasn't. Despite not living with my family anymore after I had chosen my relationship with Pesh, there were many times I questioned the existence of God. People had said He is Love, He is Almighty and that He has a plan for all of His children, so where was He at this time? Why had I been forced to make a choice? I searched and called out to Him, but He was silent. I had a plan laid out for my future, I was focussed, and yet my entire life was crumbling right before my eyes.

I dropped out of university due to the changes that made a shift in my life; I couldn't go back to the family to ask for any form of support because I felt like I had failed them. And going back would have meant that I had to leave Pesh and ignore my sexuality and become 'straight and holy'. I faced even more challenges when I lost my job, and I became fearful of going my local church because of what they may have thought or been told about me. It's funny, I didn't blame Christianity, but its Christians.

It has been a nightmare, but Pesh and I never for a day thought of giving into society expectations. Many are the times Pesh has taken me to local clinics where the staff have asked us very personal questions. This takes such a toll on our relationship. The intrusion shows how much work we have to do here in

Golden Rays

Zambia, as we still have a long, long way to go regarding changing people's perceptions. It breaks my heart to realise how ignorant our fellow countrymen are when it comes to sexuality and gender identity. The stares in the streets that Pesh and I get are so horrifying, even when all we do is go to the movies together or have a meal in public together.

On the brighter side, Pesh's family have been more supportive of her journey. She made the decision to come out at the age of 16. This also had its challenges, but her strong will to persevere and her faith in walking with God helped her to speak out not only for herself but also for the voiceless. She involved herself in a lot of advocacy with the group Friends of Rainka and Arasa¹ and because of that, she has been my pillar of strength. She would share links on encouraging information regarding the LGBTI communities in various parts of the globe. She introduced me to an organisation she currently serves as a board member on. They champion rights for sexual minorities, and from here I too found my passion for activism, and I loved the environment, the people, the knowledge I gained, and felt an urge to learn more. I was in the happiest place, among those of God's children who came from backgrounds of torment and hate, but still they shine like golden rays straight out of heaven. My faith in God grows stronger day by day; I have the world's greatest partner, she assures me of God's greatness, His love and plans for me, daily! She gives me hope for a new day.

And through the organisation I am currently affiliated with I had the privilege of working with House of Rainbow on the Spirituality, Sexuality and Faith project in Zambia. I had the privilege of having a discussion with the Rev. Jide Macaulay, who brought a deeper understanding of the reconciliation of sexuality and spirituality. It was through this rigorous training, which was represented by faith leaders, Christian and Muslim,

¹ ARASA – AIDS and Right Alliance of Southern Africa.

LGBTI delegates and Human Rights defenders, that my faith in God was restored. Thanks to the evidence-based scriptural readings regarding my sexuality shared by Rev. Macaulay, I was reminded of God's love and His plans for me. I am nowhere I want to be yet in life, my family is still to accept me, and I still face daily struggles, but I am so grateful to God for what He is doing in my life. God has blessed me with good health, a loving and supportive life partner, amazing friends and above all life itself. Today I believe I am where I am for a reason, for a purpose, and in God's own right time I will understand why.

From the day I met Pesh, I knew I would spend the rest of my life with her. We think alike, we read each other's minds, she inspires me and is a positive influence on me, and for this reasons, we want to legally bind our union in a ceremony, in front of God and man. We are a black lesbian couple in a developing country that has declared itself a Christian nation. But we still hold onto our dream. Pesh and I are a very determined couple, we will not let anything or anyone stand in the way of our happiness, and our plans are to have the ceremony blessed in South Africa in the near future, which I have no doubt will happen.

Meanwhile, Pesh and I have made a commitment to each other, we continue with our work, and follow our respective ambitions. We both have matching tattoos as a sign of this commitment.

We live every single day as our last, hoping for better things in the future.

My name is Sarah, and this is our story.

‘A Mother’s Love’

By Erica Zelda Joja

On 28 September 1988, I gave birth to a beautiful baby son, and I called him Shannon Jody Hugh Joja. He is my first and only child, and I consider him to be a gift from God.

I am a Christian and believe in the Trinity, and that God is the Creator of heaven and earth. I believe that everything I owe belongs to God as He is my provider and gives me the strength to go out there to work as if I work for Him.

Like all Christians, I baptised my son and raised him in the fear of the Lord. When Shannon was a toddler, he started wearing my high heel shoes. He loved playing with his cousin’s dolls and would love to dress up like a girl. His lipstick and make-up were always the highlight of his life. He showed little interest in the boys’ toys that I bought for him.

As a mother, I realised that my son was totally different from other boys and not because he wanted to be different, but because he was born that way. As his mother I accepted him for who he was as my gift from God and there is nothing that I as a human being could do to change that but should accept God’s will. I loved my son even more and I know that the years ahead might not be easy for him because of the homophobic attitudes harboured by some members of our society.

I’ve taught Shannon that all human beings are God’s creation and that He loves us unconditionally. I’ve told him that though I am his earthly parent, God has entrusted him to my care. Shannon is assured that I will always be here for him and that he will always be my pride and joy. I’ve told him that he should be

proud of who he is, where he comes from, and no one has the right to break his spirit, as he is God's creation.

Shannon has grown up to be a strong and positive young man and he has never grappled with being gay. He can openly discuss things with me, and he can identify gay people who are in the closet and he helps them get out of the closet, for he recognises that he too grew up differently.

I want to urge mothers out there not to reject your gifts from God because of their sexual orientation. Mothers should recognise that these gays and lesbians have normal hormones and God created them the way they are. I encourage you to love your sons and daughters, just the way they are.

What I notice, when I am in the circles of many gay people, is that God has given them so much talent. They excel in everything they do! They are God's special children.

My message to Africa, and the other countries around the world, is to open your hearts and souls to these special creations of God, for once we do that our world will be a better place. They are normal, ordinary human beings, not outcasts. They are my best friends because they are unique.

Thanks to the Destabilising Heteronormativity project, I am encouraging communities, faith and secular groups, giving special focus to the parents within these various groups. I call on them using religious teachings, human tenets and basic love, urging them not to reject their LGBTI children. The single message of Christ to all people is love.

My dear Shannon Jody Hugh Joja and all your fellow sisters and brothers in the gay community, you are a blessing from God, and I love you all unconditionally.

‘My, Myself & I’

By Brian Byamukama

I was born to a Catholic father and Muslim mother in 1986, in the rural district of Mbale district in Eastern Uganda; a place that is next to Mt. Elgon. I went on to lose both my parents to HIV/AIDS, with my father dying when I was six years old. I was raised single-handedly by my mother until her demise in 2001.

I was raised Catholic, having been baptised and confirmed, but around the age of 13, things began getting tough for me. I dropped out of school because of the lack of school fees. I, therefore, enrolled in an Islamic religious course for six months. I converted to Islam and was a Muslim from 2000 to late 2010. I was a strong Muslim, and I had a lot of passion for Arabic and loved the language as a medium of exchange with Allah. I had always admired the lifestyle of Muslims, namely, the way they worshipped, wrote and practised their faith. My Muslim friends did have some influence on my decision to convert to Islam. I remember when I told my mum that I wanted to be a Muslim, the only advice she gave me was to get circumcised, which I did. Having initially lived as a Catholic, it was difficult to survive in an extended family as a Christian when all my maternal family members were Muslims. I was very devoted to my new faith, to the point that I became sheikh² in 2001. I was put in charge of children and lead daily prayers at the mosque as the imam was only available on Fridays.

I faced a lot of difficulties with my siblings, especially af-

² Sheikh is an Arabic word meaning the elder of a tribe, a revered old man, or an Islamic scholar.

ter our mum passed away, because they believed in witchcraft. It was common practice for some individuals to practise Islam and believe in sorcery. Even some Muslim leaders in my community then lived like this.

I started questioning Islam in mid-2010 when my brother almost died. Witchcraft was the key suspect for his illness. When I went to seek help from my Imam, I was so surprised when he referred me to a witch doctor, which advice I followed. But despite all the rituals my brother's condition continued to deteriorate. We finally took him to a government hospital where he slowly recovered to full health. It was then that I started doubting the credibility of Allah and these witch doctors. I wondered how an imam could be part of the people promoting the work of witch doctors while I expected him to adhere to the teachings of the Qur'an. My teaching led me to believe that the Qur'an could heal, but I remember reading the whole Qur'an for my brother to get healed, and nothing happened.

2010 was a year that I will never forget because two months before my brother had fallen six, I had been kicked out of the family home because I had been caught having sex with my boyfriend. That year I finally came to accept that I was bisexual. I had had this feeling of being attracted to other guys for a while. I lived in doubt and hated myself each time these feelings came on me. I was given a lot more clarity about my feelings when I met an older family friend who would have been the same age as my father. He opened up to me and said that he was bisexual. He became my first partner. He was and is still a pastor, and he offered me a lot of encouragement during the time that we were together.

I was soft spoken and effeminate growing up and enjoyed the company of girls. People often referred to me as a girl, and at that time, I did not know anything about bisexuality, and to be honest, I liked being referred to as a girl. As I grew older, I began dating girls as was expected, and this went on until 2010 when I

first dated a guy. Things got bad later that year, when my relatives expelled me from the family home because they caught my boyfriend and me in bed. I lived with a friend for nine months but eventually moved out. I have lived alone since then.

Islam is fervent in its condemnation of homosexuality, and none of my Muslim friends tolerated homosexuality. I, therefore, started feeling uncomfortable and fearful for my life, scared that maybe one day I would be singled out. I remember my imam summoned me one day to his home and, although I do not think he was directly targeting me, he warned me against associating with homosexuals. I was afraid that he might have known about me.

In the ten years that I was a Muslim and living in the closet as a bisexual man, life was very cumbersome, and it hasn't become easier since coming out. My Islamic faith dictated that what I was doing is wrong and condemned by Allah in a few ayas (verses). I had all sorts of murmurings in my mind condemning me to the point that I felt I wasn't worthy to stand in front of the mosque to lead the congregation in prayers. I hadn't come across any LGBTI/ MSM³ Muslim person to share my experiences, and this worried me very much. However, this didn't prove that there weren't any LGBTI Muslims around. It was much later on, when I changed faith again, that I met many friends who are LGBTI Muslims. I must admit, found it a hard time to preach against the LGBTI people, yet it was a requirement expected of me while within the mosque.

As I was fluent in both written and spoken Arabic, I got the opportunity to have self-study sessions of the Qu'ran and expound much on what the Qu'ran says about LGBTI people and Jesus Christ. I, therefore, started thinking that maybe Christianity doesn't condemn homosexual acts as much as Islam. I already had doubts in my head about Islam following my broth-

³ MSM – Men who have Sex with Men

er's health incident. So in October that year I surrendered my life to Jesus. It was a personal and the most difficult decision I have ever made in my life

The following year I attended my first ever LGBTI meeting in Kampala, and thanks to the meeting I was able to connect with other members of the community, and I felt comfortable enough to accept myself.

Another new beginning

As a new Christian, I undertook an intense discipleship course for about nine months, and I enrolled for a church leadership course. I became active in church leadership until I started a church in 2012. The church has a small membership of 64 people.

Despite their accepting my sexuality, I came under a lot of pressure from my church elders to settle down because I am leading a church. I am therefore married to a woman, and we have two daughters, one biological and the other adopted.

In October 2013, a month after I had gotten married, we woke up to a notice that was pinned to our door which read, 'Pastor Brian, you pretend to be a man of God yet you are a homosexual. Stop teaching our youth your homosexuality and you should repent because you are going to hell. We are tired of your support which has homosexual attachments.'

Unfortunately, my wife saw the messages before I did. She angrily stormed into the bedroom and tearfully demanded an explanation.

I was confused at first because, honestly, I didn't know what she was talking about until I read it. The following months were hard for us, and it took us four months to resolve this matter. Though before we got married my wife had heard rumours about my sexuality, I had always denied these allegations.

Me, Myself & I

Only when I was outed did my sexuality come to light to the entire community. However, I am glad to say that my wife has tried to understand me, and supports my work with Rural Movement Initiative (RUMI), which I started in 2013, and church and the community organisations.

Ever since I planted my church, I never imagined that I would enjoy such freedom as an LGBTI Christian. My church welcomes all LGBTI people in our rural area to fellowship, though some parents have reprimanded me for associating with those of their children who come looking for me. I have realised that it was a lot harder being a homosexual Muslim. However, it has not all been plain sailing with my new faith. Security threats on my person and my property are something I constantly have to live with. Though, this does not deter me in my work.

Thanks to Facebook, I made contact with Rev. Jide Macaulay, and I was fortunate enough to meet him at last year's Uganda Pride festivities. Two weeks after this meeting, House Of Rainbow Fellowship (HORF) confirmed me as a local leader in Mbale here in Eastern Uganda. I formed a HORF group, initially with four members, in October 2016, and we are currently six in total. I believe the number of people who wish to join this group will gradually grow in the coming months. Many commercial sex workers have also expressed interest in joining our HORF group.

I will continue to defend rural LGBT and MSM people who are struggling to balance their sexuality and faith. My conviction remains strong, and I will endeavour to use my church, RUMI and House of Rainbow to bring about inclusiveness in this part of Uganda.

Shalom. Aluta Continua

'Proud To Be One'

By Lipheto Maoeng, aka 'Changes'

For a long time, I was afraid to be who I am
Because I was taught by society that there is something wrong
Something wrong with someone like me
Something offensive
Something you would avoid.

They call it is a sin
They say it is immoral, it is unnatural
I wondered; does hating someone make you any better?
Does it make you religious and accepted by God?
Are we not created free and equal?
Please do not insult humanity and say we are not.
And therefore we are entitled to life, liberty, education and
pursuit of happiness.
Why in the name of reason and justice should we not have the
same rights as heterosexuals?
Like them, we came into existence involuntarily
Like them, we are punished for disobeying life's rules
Like them, we are made of flesh and blood.

No one was born sexist, racist or judgemental
They learn to become sexist, racist or judgemental
They learn to become such labels, and stereotype others they
learned to hate.

Lipheto Maoeng, aka 'Changes'

I am proud to be gay because in my world I take it as victory to
survive labels imposed on us
I take it as victory to stand out from the rest and be individual
And try my best regardless of such labels
Labels full of hate, discrimination, ostracism, bigotry and others
I still stand and say I am proud to be gay
And if I had a Choice – I would have it no other way.

‘All in the Family’

By Chantel and Bradley Fortuin

Chantel’s story

I was born in Namibia, and raised by my grandmother because my mother had to work outside our town. My grandmother, ‘ouma’, not only taught us but lived the words of Christ. To me she was the embodiment of Christ for she shared everything with everybody, whether they were a drunkard, a prostitute or the mofies aka’ ladylike men’ in the community. Ouma would never turn a soul away.

When I was eight years old my life changed drastically, because my mother died of AIDS. This was the time when stigma and discrimination against the disease was rife. Shortly after my mother died, my ouma sent my brothers and I to live with her niece, who was living in Botswana at the time. My aunt treated us like her own, but my siblings and I got separated. My elder brother Bradley went on to live with one of her older children, and my younger brother and I remained behind with my aunt and her husband.

My aunt became my best friend, my teacher, and the embodiment of Christ in my life. She selflessly took us in and cared for us, but a couple of years down the line she too died, from kidney failure. With my mother gone, my grandmother and our immediate family living in another country, miles away, I felt alone. After my aunt died I went to live with her other children. My way of coping with the loss was by isolating myself and becoming very self-dependent. I was about 13 years old, and to them my self-dependency and isolating character was interpreted as ungrateful and stubborn, which stirred up conflict in the family. I just felt misunderstood.

A year later my ouma passed away, and I withdrew myself even more. I almost become a bitter and anger adolescent, but am thankful for my aunt and grandma, who introduced me to Jesus, and I believed in Jesus.

When I was a child someone joked that Bradley and I had swapped bodies, because I was a tomboy and he was a little more feminine than I. I would hang out with the boys and he mostly hung out with girls. I used to see him getting teased and sometimes I would be part of the kids taunting him. I grew up looking up to my brother because even when faced with so much hostility he stayed true to himself. He stood his ground no matter what happened! As a teenager, I discovered that I was attracted to both girls and boys, but because my brother was gay I kept my feelings towards girls a secret. I feared people would blame Bradley.

I began dating girls when I was in boarding school. This went through to my first year of university. Because of my brother's bravery and the way my ouma loved everybody I don't feel like I struggled much in accepting who I am. I don't let situations make me bitter, because my belief in God and my journey with God has always shown me there is a silver lining in every situation.

I have been able to marry my sexuality with my spirituality, loving and accepting myself, because I realise that God was and is always in my corner and on my side.

Because of this, it breaks my heart that many folks within the LGBTI community are struggling with their faith owing to what is preached in churches. I believe that both the good and bad experiences I have encountered are a training ground for me: that was why I dropped out of a business degree to join the seminary. When you have been in the margins, you understand why Jesus made it his life work to liberate the weak. Salvation is community and no person should be left behind. I joined the seminary, to train as a theologian in readiness for pastoral care

and support.

I am 24 years old now, and am still figuring things out though. Sometimes I get tired, frustrated, doubt myself, feel lonely, misunderstood or even mistreated, but my soul refuses to die. Though I grow weary, God always intervenes in my life at the right time.

God sent people into my life to help me, and they made me realise that my service was to minister to marginalised people. Maya Angelou quotes the Roman playwright: 'I am a human being, nothing human can be alien to me, that's one thing I am learning.' Similarly, Mother Teresa, my grandmother and aunt showed me that love does conquer all, and it nurses the weak to strength. These women have inspired me to understand the true meaning of ubuntu – I am because you are – more clearly.

When House of Rainbow came to Botswana, I was so happy. Their interventions, which focus on destabilising heteronormativity, reinforced my attitude and energised my intellect. I've resolved to push for change that includes queering sacred texts, in the understanding that we are all children of God.

I would really love to develop a pastoral care programme specific to the LGBTI community. I don't think I will have peace until the phrase 'all God's children' is inclusive of all! However, we in the church have the hurdle of getting LGBTI people to know that they don't need permission to praise God.

I believe the work of House Of Rainbow is a great example of what can be achieved and I look forward to being part of the work they are doing.

Bradley's Story

I am alright, I am Bradley Fortuin. I never really know what to write when I am asked about my story. There are just so many experiences that have added to the chapters in my life. I grew up

in a very Christian home. My grandmother was a respected and admired church elder. My mother was a churchgoer and as time went on she became an active member of the church. I am not ashamed to say that my mother was my superhero.

I loved church and I would never miss a Sunday. As a young boy I would watch the church choir and dream of wearing their choir gowns and singing with them.

From a very early age, I knew there something was different about me. I was not interested in soccer or re-enacting horrific, violent scenes from Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan movies. I appreciated the gentler side of life; I loved jumping rope with the girls, making dolls out of old cloth and wool, and playing house. I remember I always insisted on playing the mother. I must admit I lived a pretty happy childhood.

I remember my grandmother would sit in front of the television every morning and watch the televangelists who would then ask the viewers to stretch out their hands towards the TV set to receive their blessing. Then, I really did not understand what was happening, but I would imitate her.

When I moved to Grade 4, we started having physical education sessions, and boys and girls were separated. The boys played soccer, which I detested, while the girls played netball, which was not so bad. It was then that some of the children started making fun of me and calling names such as 'sissy boy' and 'girl-boy'. It hurt. One day during my grandmother's morning televangelist prayers, I joined her as I often did, and on this occasion I remember asking God to please not make me gay anymore. By then I already knew what being gay meant. I prayed this prayer every morning for some time.

The year that I was about to complete my primary school, my mother fell sick. I remember the day so vividly, my grandmother woke me up and gave me taxi money (bus fare) to dash to church and bring the reverend home immediately. I remember going back of the house and crying and begging God not to

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take my mother from me. My tears were flowing like a waterfall. When the reverend got home, and as soon as we walked into the yard, I looked at my sister Chantel, who immediately burst out crying. At that moment I knew that our mother had passed on. I could not believe it. My superhero was gone.

I blamed myself for my mother's death. I convinced myself that my homosexuality had caused my mother to die. Her death was a punishment from God. I buried my emotions and chose to put on a brave 'I'm okay' face. From then on that was how I masked my sadness. This façade went on for a great length of my life, and I still occasionally wear this 'happy' face.

I began reading books and watching documentaries and movies on homosexuality and faith, and slowly began to realise there was nothing wrong with me. I am okay. I remember reading a slogan on a T-shirt – 'God don't make no junk' – and that really struck me hard. I am not junk, I told myself, I am perfectly made in the image of God. This acclamation and these self-affirming words keep me grounded. I am a work in progress and I believe that I will manifest the wonders of the Lord. Plus, I am proudly gay. I believe every day is an opportunity to learn new things, and especially that God loves me the way he made me. When House of Rainbow visited my country with the Destabilising Heteronormativity project, I was elated and happy that the bible which I struggled with became alive!

I am still struggling with my sexuality and faith, because of years of denial, but with more learning and thanks to interactions with local faith leaders, I have been helped immensely on this journey of reconciliation. For this I will always be grateful to the work of House of Rainbow.

‘My Journey of Faith’

By ‘Anonymous’

My mother, who is also a pastor, has failed to come to terms with the fact that her upright Christian daughter is a lesbian. I do not know who I am anymore, because I have lost myself in the sea of hate of so many Christians, who use religion to stab me and others like me because we are ‘homosexuals’.

I can hardly recall a time when I got the privilege of being in church and feeling that God loves me regardless of my sexuality. I call it a privilege because a lot of hate has been shoveled in my direction. I almost became convinced that God hated Lesbians. I now am no longer able to attend family functions because I am the ‘dirty’ one.

My mother was always proud of me because of my good grades and how hard I worked while in school. I was the typical example of the young woman who earned everything she got, worked hard to appease her family, and lived up to what society expected of her as a true African woman.

Everything was perfect for me until the time I graduated from university. My graduation party was the typical Christian party with no liquor and only gospel music playing. As is the norm for many Ugandan families, the family first gets to know about the man who will marry their daughter on her graduation date. I, however, did not have a ‘future husband’ to introduce to my family. I used my ‘future husband introduction slot’ to introduce my girlfriend to my family. I didn’t know what to expect of them when I did this. They were none the wiser about the level of intimacy that existed between us. During my speech I introduced her as the one friend who has always been there for me, and to whom I owe my graduation and happiness. My family

seemingly took this for what it was, but suggestions of young men in my neighbourhood who would be potential suitors for me started being thrown in my direction almost immediately.

One evening about six months after my graduation, I got a call from my mother, saying I was required to go home over the weekend for a very urgent family intervention.

When I got home, I found all my relatives seated in the family compound and in the centre of them was a traditionally dressed young man. He seemed to be the focus of this visit. Unbeknown to me, my family had gone ahead and found a husband for me to marry! I had never seen him before nor knew him. I stood my ground and rebuffed the man and any suggestion of marriage to him. My family immediately banished from our home.

My family relationship has never been the same since. My mother spends most of her days with a bible, praying loudly and seeking my deliverance from the ‘spirit of lesbianism’. She uses her religion and the Bible (which I consider my best friend) to preach hate. She says the day I ‘turned’ lesbian I turned into an agent of the devil who is being used by Satan to destroy the lives of innocent girls and turn them into sinners.

My partner and I are both very spiritual people who love praying and sharing the word of God. We have severally experienced the impact of the grace of God on our lives. It, however, breaks my heart that we cannot go to church together because of the disapproving glances we get from the congregation.

‘A Pilgrim’s Story’

By Tampose Mathopeng

My name is Tampose Mothopeng, I was born and raised in Lesotho. I am a transgender man, Christian and Roman Catholic. My gender identity and sexuality have been my burden and I have had a very challenging life journey because of how my sexuality and gender expressions were perceived in my community.

My childhood was empty, lonely and confused as I could feel and see how different I was from other kids. I was called so many names by my peers and had negative messages from community members. As a Mosotho and Christian ‘girl’ I was expected to behave like a girl and do what girls were expected to do.

My journey in the church has been very challenging because of its heteronormative structure: all girls were forced to wear dresses regardless of their preferences of identities. Like any other Roman Catholic church kid I would wait to receive my first communion, but my first time was the worst experience ever. Being forced to do my hair and wear the white dress was to me the most terrible thing that could have ever happened. I decided to cut my hair the day before the ceremony but I received a lot of negative criticism from family. This was what I wanted.

I was also forced to join the young girls’ group, ‘Soldiers of Christ’. This was not a terrible space to be in, and very good for the little ones. The main challenge with this group was when we had to leave our families for retreats. The most challenging part for me was to bath in front of everybody else, for I was struggling with the ‘politics of my body’.

After completing my high school, I was at a stage where I thought I had the freedom to express myself the way I wanted, but this seemed as an invitation for discrimination. Instead of being respected and accepted, I was judged and stigmatised. Most of the negative messages I received from Christians, who freely used the Bible against me. I then went further to deepen my relationship with God as I thought He is the one with the ultimate power.

I went to my church and asked for blessings. I secretly told the priest that there was something bothering me though I never told him what exactly it was. He gave me the Holy Novena to pray on a daily basis and asked God to help me. Indeed I prayed, and have never ever felt closer to God before. I am still maintaining my relationship with the Omnipotent God and I consider myself a child of God.

I have heard of many holy sites across the world and felt drawn to join other Christians in prayer but I thought I was not good enough to be a pilgrim. It was only in March 2017 that I first joined the trip to Ngome Marian Shrine in South Africa.

The Ngome Marian Shrine is a shrine dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary in Ngome, KwaZulu-Natal, where Sister Reinolda May, member of the Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing, experienced ten visions between 22 August 1955 and 2 May 1971. It is one of the most popular pilgrims' sites in southern Africa. I wanted to partake of the blessing of Ngome, and as a Christian I was entitled to this just like anyone else. Before I left the country, though, I didn't believe I was good enough to visit Ngome. I was so anxious that I prayed furiously all the way there. There's a dress code that is encouraged for pilgrims, and there were constant reminders of this, but I never considered it because I knew the important thing was not how I was dressed but what was in my heart.

This trip was very success and it had a profound effect on me and my relationship with God. It also gave me the confidence

A Pilgrim's Story

to stand openly and talk about the love of God for his children regardless of their diversity. For God is love.

(Tampose Mathopeng is the Director of The People's Matrix Association, an LGBT support group based in the Kingdom of Lesotho.)

'Rainbow Children'

By Rev. Patrick Leuben

We are the rainbow
we are the rainbow,
we are a bridge of light,
an indestructible bridge
from one bank to another
of all rivers
of all countries of the world.

We are the bridge
that bears the weight
of all those who cross
the river of life.

We are the rainbow
made of common stones
and precious stones:
many colours are our pride
and our name is Freedom.

'It Rained On Our Parade'

By Rev. Jide Macaulay

Ms Keem Bad Black commanded our attention and the stage in a short black dress, gold stilettos and a sharp, straightened, blonde Nicki Minaj wig. She cracked jokes and supercharged the already electric atmosphere among the 300-strong crowd, who were on the edges of their seats to see the show. The Venom Club, Kampala was in full swing. Faces of friends old and new around me smiling, I leaned back in my front row seat to take in the atmosphere. What an honour to be here as Grand Marshall, in prime position for the showdown. Tonight we would see which of the eleven finalists from Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, Congo, or Kenya would win the crown. Which of these beauties would emerge triumphant from the beauty boot camp to be Mister or Miss Pride Uganda 2016?

Sam, my designated driver, had met me at my hotel about an hour earlier. He'd arrived with Peter, who had volunteered to offer security on the night. We'd taken the elevator to the fourth floor venue and, after passing through the security gates that are an everyday part of life for Ugandans, I grabbed a drink and was shown to my seat. I laughed out loud; Ms Keem Bad Black has got jokes!

Then the laughing stopped.

Police in uniform with firearms raised in the air marched through the venue and made their way into the backstage area.

Terror.

Pandemonium.

Confusion.

Fear.

Terror.

'Stay close to Peter,' Isaac whispered in my ear. While my

heart beat like it was seeking to run away whether the rest of my body wanted to follow or not, I heeded the advice, and in the rush of clarity that abject fear creates, thought about how I got here.

I had first met Isaac Mugisha, Program Director of Spectrum Uganda and member of the Pride Uganda organising team in February 2014 at the PAI (Pan Africa International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Association) conference in Nairobi, and again at the Johannesburg PAI conference earlier this year. We discussed whether a similar House Of Rainbow intervention to the one currently running in Southern Africa could be established in Uganda. I didn't hesitate to say yes. I knew Uganda to be a very tough place for LGBTQI people.

In the ten years since House Of Rainbow has been established, the majority of our UK members, especially in London and Manchester, are LGBTQI citizens of Uganda, fleeing the depths of legal discrimination and religious oppression. Oppression that was given even greater impetus by the passing in 2009 of the Anti-Homosexual Bill, popularly known as the Bahati Bill, after its sponsor, David Bahati MP.

I left the Johannesburg conference in May determined to support Isaac and other Ugandan colleagues in their struggle. House Of Rainbow has some funds allocated to other country work in Central and Southern Africa but nothing yet for East Africa. I spoke to a few organisations, colleagues and individuals about supporting an intervention in Uganda. The response was not overwhelmingly positive. One organisation described Uganda as the most difficult place to intervene in. For me, this only served to make Uganda the most attractive place to support. Human lives and in particular LGBTQI lives depended on it. In regular contact with Pride Uganda, I continued to seek support and develop plans.

In mid-June, Pride Uganda contacted me in light of the work of House of Rainbow, to invite me to be the Grand Mar-

shall for Pride Uganda 2016. I was shocked beyond words as I was not anticipating that such a responsibility and honour would be extended to me.

I needed time to think about what this meant for both them and me. I also needed to take serious advice before accepting. I reflected, prayed and argued with myself. I listed all the reasons why accepting would be a bad idea. I weighed these up with the knowledge that it would be House Of Rainbow's opportunity to take the Destabilising Heteronormativity Project to the East of Africa. I compared in my mind what my response would have been if I was invited to be Grand Marshall in New York or London. A few weeks later, I decided to accept, notwithstanding the challenges I faced to fund my visit and time in Uganda. The opportunity to meet with activists and many other LGBTIQI people of faith had got me excited but I was filled with trepidation.

Before I set out, we spoke at length about security and safety. I even called the Jamaican activist Maurice Tomlinson, a previous Grand Marshall, for advice. I also contacted many LGBTIQ Ugandan activists in Uganda and abroad to ask for their opinion, support and let them know that I was planning to accept the invitation to be Grand Marshall. I was particularly keen on connecting with the few faith leaders who have been openly supportive of the LGBTIQ community. I was in contact with Father Anthony Musaala, but he informed me that due to his own reasons he no longer publicly supported LGBTIQ people; I was unable to make contact with Bishop Christopher Senyonjo. Again, I saw this as an additional reason to go.

I spoke to the Board of House of Rainbow. My colleagues were brave and also encouraging. Once I had their support I informed my spiritual directors and mentors. We spoke extensively about what this might mean, with the LGBTIQ people of Uganda at the very core of every decision. I met with the leaders of Out and Proud LGBTIQ group in London for their support. I

communicated with other faith leaders prior to arriving in Uganda, including Bishop Joseph Tolton and Reverend Denis Iraguha, and garnered the firm support of several covenanted ministers including Reverend Cathy Bird, Reverend Canon Steven Saxby, Reverend Paul Bailey, Reverend Phil Purkiss and Bishop Otis V. Wilks.

I discussed the plans for Uganda with Lucinda Van Den Heever, the program manager at Accountability International, House Of Rainbow's Southern Africa partner. We reallocated some funds to the East Africa project and secured additional funding in cash and kind to pay for flights. Other sponsorship came in kind from Team Angelica based in the United Kingdom and the Global Justice Institute and Labsul in the USA. I and my team in London set to work. It was a busy time for me as I was expected in Durban from 11th to 24th July, working with Global Interfaith Network and attending the AIDS Conference; following that, I was running a training course in Soweto from 24th to 31st July. I booked a flight from Johannesburg to Entebbe, Uganda, arriving just three days earlier on the 1st August.

Earlier that day I had facilitated a Faith, Sexuality and Human Rights workshop. I, like many of the participants, was still buzzing from the experience. We shared that God created and loves LGBTQI people, we concluded that 'GAY' stands for 'God Adores You, God Affirms You, God Accepts You', not 'God attack or abandon you' as many have been made to feel or believe in Uganda. It was an opportunity to share an authentic perspective on what the Bible says in favour of same sex relationships and behaviours. Over thirty delegates attended and were fully involved in all the sessions. Learning different biblical perspectives of LGBTQI human rights was new for many people. There was sense of liberation, freedom and reconciliation, it was a day well spent.

Bang.

Then a scream.

It Rained On Our Parade

Two young men, scared for their lives, had jumped in panic from the fourth floor window of the venue that had become our prison. One fell onto a building below, only to be trapped once more. The other fell to the ground floor, clearly sustaining serious injuries. I prayed that he would not die.

Nearly 300 people were corralled into a small area on the fourth floor near the entrance of the venue, with police guarding an iron gate, not allowing anyone out of the building. Detained. Held at gunpoint. All the while, police officers shouted abuse and made homophobic comments, threatening their captives. They singled out men who cross-dressed, forcibly pulling hair-pieces, wigs and attachments from transwomen. They grabbed at transmen's chests. They clutched at people's genitals to assess to their satisfaction whether they were male or female. They went out of their way to humiliate us.

The police forcibly took photographs of us all. Many became hysterical. The police pushed, screamed and shouted. They used their guns as a threat and canes to beat those who tried to resist. They arrested anyone who protested or objected. I was terrified, worried that this could end up badly. An Orlando style horror came to my mind.

I was reminded by Peter to stay calm and follow his lead.

The lead officer (who I now know to be Isaac Mugerwa, DPC for Kabalagala police station) made a series of abusive homophobic and transphobic statements, described the gathering of LGBTQI people as ungodly, and informed us he would not allow such 'filth' in his district. He asked for the event organisers to be identified; no one responded. The police looked in my direction and asked me to raise my head so they could photograph me. Those around me whispered that I should keep my head down. Terrified, we were forced to sit on the wet, filthy floor.

I saw Jay Mulucha, my friend, a transman, being dragged and forced out of the crowd. He was immediately arrested. The

police officer took him away, pushing him violently towards the exit. Several other police officers pulled at his hair and slapped him a few times across the face. I noted that they kept pressing against his chest. I was not sure what was said as they spoke in a mixture of English and local languages. He was now in police custody. I feared for his life.

At about 1 a.m., about two hours since this nightmare started, DPC Isaac Mugerwa ordered us all back into the main area, took the microphone and offered his explanation for the police raid. Repeating several homophobic and transphobic slurs, he warned LGBTQI people to never step in or organise an event in his district. After nearly thirty minutes of his incoherent bullshit, he ordered people out of the building. The beautiful decorations and rainbow coloured curtains were torn off the wall and destroyed; people's hair littered the floor. We walked quickly away from the premises to a taxi park, where we got transport to the safety of my hotel.

In the early hours of the morning, I managed to contact some of those I knew who had been arrested. Thankfully I also got through to Jay, who informed me tearfully that whilst being held in the car by the police, they forcibly interfered with him touching his genitals and grabbing his chest, slapping him several times with their bare hands. He was afraid that he would be raped or, worse, be killed.

I was very angry. We both started to cry.

The next day, we heard news that the police were looking for all the organisers and now wanted to re-arrest all the people detained the previous night. This was an uncomfortable place to be. We were aware that those arrested were being looked for at their homes and that many would now have to flee.

I saw Jay and a few of the others two days later and we spoke about the events of that night. They showed me the physical bruises they had received during arrest, but I became more and more concerned about the longer-term emotional abuse that

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had taken place. Jay and many others will need long term pastoral counselling and therapy. I strongly believe that with the threats, ongoing from State government, Jay and others may need to be relocated to safe houses or better still leave the area or even the country.

The news of the raid quickly made it into the foreign media. The news of the lockdown and arrest spread via social media. Following further threats made by the police and government officials, and after taking advice from local activists, a decision was made to reluctantly cancel the 2016 Uganda Pride March and Parade.

On the 8th August, four days after the raid on the beauty pageant, and eight days after my arrival in Uganda, I was ready, with support from the British High Commission, to leave the country. I left with a serious check to my privilege. While I stand alongside seriously oppressed communities including LGBTQI people and those seeking sanctuary from societies that fail to recognise their humanity, I have the ability to leave and return to my liberty in the UK. My citizenship means that I have never had the serious anxieties around freedom of movement that so many have to live with. I hear people around me discuss migration in terms of the first world problems of crowded tube trains, lack of school places, or access to low-skilled employment. That night in Club Venom has seared into my mind the truth of the life or death situations, the terror that so many are forced to live in simply for being themselves.

I finally arrived home in the United Kingdom exhausted but feeling safe and happy to be back home. Disheartened by those who chose to rain on the Pride Uganda Parade, but even more determined to support the Ugandan struggle for freedom.

(Editor's note: a version of this article was originally published in October 18, 2016: <https://blkoutuk.com/2016/10/18/it-rained-on-our-parade/>)

‘This Thing Called Love’

By Rev. Sarah Kurusa

My name is Rev. Sarah Kurusa. I was born a Christian and have always been guided by Christian ethics. Therefore, the notion of the rejection of homosexuality is something I’ve heard all my life.

It is common knowledge that Christendom tends to be selective when it comes to the rejection of sin, and time and context always determines the rejection. Unfortunately, homosexuality has been regarded as an abomination through the ages, regardless of scientific and social advancements.

Growing up in rural Botswana came with partial darkness regarding human sexuality. By ‘partial’ I mean that we knew that some people were attracted to people of the same sex, though these were especially westerners. However, we were always surrounded by people with features that contradicted their gender. Of course, we never associated that with sexual orientation; rather it was easier making them objects of scorn.

The transition came when I moved to Gaborone, our capital city, for my tertiary education. I came face to face with the reality of human sexuality and the diversity that came along with it. Allied to that was the intensity of the Christian proclamation rejecting any sexuality that contradicted the heteronormal. God was portrayed as one supportive of the rejection of sexual minorities. Therefore, it was/is permissible to openly express and promote hatred towards LGBTI individuals because we take after our heavenly father. The prevailing perception is that the LGBTI people have given themselves up to immorality and refuse to be delivered from it.

The more I grew as a Christian, the more the rejection of sexual minorities grew. Ten years in the charismatic churches

pushed me deep into hatred. When I returned to my Methodist church, The Book of Discipline⁴ cemented the hatred. There was a clause that discouraged association with the LGBTI.

Out of nowhere, I began experiencing psychological issues. Every time I came into contact with an obviously gay person or even discussed the topic, I felt nauseated. What I felt convinced me that indeed it was a sin against the spirit. I would even imagine seeing them having sex.

I knew something was wrong when I accidentally met an old friend in Rustenburg, South Africa. He was and still is a good man, who at one time in his life disclosed to me that he had been delivered from being gay by the Nigerian preacher, TB Joshua. I was shocked to see him now openly displaying gay tendencies. The moment he held my hand I felt a wave of nausea and suddenly there was a terrible smell of poop everywhere. I excused myself and went to vomit in the washrooms. Afterwards, I asked my friends about the smell, and they were shocked. They hadn't smelt anything. The conclusion drawn by a fellow pastor was that God had blessed me with a gift to discern and 'catch' the LGBTI so that I could deliver them. When I returned to Botswana, I posted a statement on Facebook saying that, the anuses of gay people lose its elasticity and eventually droops or leaks. This statement was insensitive and wrong, and I apologise for it. Throughout this period 'love' never rebuked me. I believe that if I had been filled with real love in its purest form, it would have been impossible for me to harbour such sentiments and believe in the rejection of individuals different from myself.

While in college, one of my role models happened to be lecturing a course on human sexuality. I struggled to maintain my composure during the classes. Interestingly, female college friends whom I liked and respected I found out were either

⁴ The Book of Discipline constitutes the law and doctrine of the United Methodist Church

This Thing Called Love

lesbians or bisexual. ‘Love’ let me research on human sexuality. Would you believe, I went through a different kind of conversion? ‘Love’, which is a powerful emotion, began to uproot wrong teaching and started sowing seeds of compassion.

I felt guilty and regretted every single moment I sowed seeds of rejection. I then decided to discuss and share truths on human sexuality with whoever cared to listen. I talk about it in public transport, at home, in shopping malls and definitely in my church. The more people face the truth, the more they are to being receptive to learn about that truth.

It’s not surprising that after completing four years of studying theology, I chose to work with LEGABIBO⁵, Botswana’s first LGBTI organisation. Thanks to my association with them, I was introduced to Rev. Macaulay and the work of House of Rainbow.

⁵ LEGABIBO - Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals of Botswana

‘Peace of Heart’

By Ishmael Bahati

My name is Ishmael Bahati from Mombasa, Kenya. I was brought up by a father who was Christian and a mother who was Muslim. Growing up in a conservative family, I was taught over and over the dos and don'ts of ‘good’ boys and about sinful and righteous acts and the punishment and rewards that come along with the ‘right’ path.

I happen to have discovered my sexuality uniqueness at a very young age, and I felt ‘abnormal’ when comparing myself with other boys. I withdrew into myself because I didn't want my peers to notice the ‘abnormality’ that was in me. I missed out on childhood playtime because I felt that I was not like ‘regular’ boys. I wondered how God could give us feelings that we have no control over and then give us limitations to act upon the same feeling. In my quest for answers, I buried myself in reading anything that I could find on homosexuality. This included religious literature, both Islamic and Christian. I read the Bible over and over just to see whether there was any story that I can relate to. Unfortunately, most of the scriptures condemned homosexuality and this drove me crazy! Maybe at this point it is important to state that I was brought up in a village where the word homosexuality didn't exist. I had these feelings, but I had no word to describe them. I didn't go to a boarding school nor live in a town. I was that raw village boy.

The struggle with my sexuality was a personal journey, and no one knew about it. As much as I had never actualized my sexuality, I felt filthy and sinful. I started praying to God to heal me or take away the feelings that I had.

When I was around 14 years, I was made aware of a man who used to bathe at the stream near my home. He was known

to be mad. Children were called by his name if they cried. I came to learn that this 'mad' man liked boys, and that he would go to the stream to watch boys bathe and masturbate as he watched them. I was afraid that I would be heading in the same direction as this man. A fact that made me hate myself even more. How was I going to live as a madman? How was I going to live in this village? This man's feelings were like mine. I didn't want to live to see myself being ridiculed by the whole village. No! I wasn't ready for such a life. I wanted to die before anyone discovered what I was. Suicide became a solution for me.

One evening it rained heavily. My village was known for the swollen streams that surrounded it when it rained heavily. I saw this as an opportunity to die. I went to the riverbank and jumped into the swollen and fast-flowing stream. The water swept me away for about one kilometer before my head got stuck between stumps that were by the stream. Death had refused to accept me, but I was not ready to let it win.

My village is situated next to a steep road which cut through a wooded area. On this, my second suicide attempt, I went and hid in the bushes and waited for fast-approaching bus so that I could throw myself in front of it and be run over. A bus soon came driving by, but this wasn't going to be my 'lucky' day. The bus driver had seen the bushes move and slowed down. Even though I threw myself onto the road, it brushed by me, leaving me with only minor injuries. Yet again, death had refused me! I was baffled why even death would be so unkind to me when I needed it most. Maybe God did not want me to die just yet.

I began praying and making deals with God that He should either let me die or take away these feelings away. As time went by I started accepting the fact that it was not time to die. After high school I left my village and went to the town of Kisumu. I was not only going to start a new life for myself but also run away from the boys to whom I was secretly attracted. It

was while in Kisumu that for the very first time I met people who I could talk to about homosexuality. Even though it was not necessarily in a positive way, at least there were like me and not 'mad'. I began making some acquaintances and I heard and saw people who I perceived were gay. They were normal. I wanted to talk to them and get know about their respective journeys. To my astonishment these gay individuals were both Muslims and Christians, but they were discreet about their sexuality. Kisumu unveiled the gay world to me. By now I had gotten used to being around gay people and it felt good. It was in Kisumu that I had my first gay sex experience, though deep inside me were unanswered questions. I started going to madrassa⁶ classes. I had once again started feeling guilty and sinful about my sexuality. I began despising the very gays that I had become a part off. I must mention that being in the madrassa didn't seed these feeling, but my own self-loathing. I needed to get away from gay people and opted to go across the country to the port city of Mombasa. Being in a largely Islamic city, would accord me the opportunity to concentrate on my faith rather than sexuality.

While in Mombasa, I learnt that words like 'shoga' and 'msenge'⁷ are words that are thrown everywhere and at anybody. On the other hand, the words were used derogatively to refer to homosexuals. This freaked me out. Every mention of either word had me scared. But as time went by, I started getting used to it. I realised that in Mombasa the words were not used necessarily about homosexual people.

I had thought that by being in Mombasa I was running away from the gay world but I began meeting all sort of gay men, discovered gay hangout places, met gay sex workers and encountered Muslims who were in the closet. I was intrigued by these

⁶ A madrassa is an Islamic religious school.

⁷ Shoga and msenge are Kiswahili words used to describe gay individuals.

Muslims and wanted to know how they managed to reconcile their faith and sexuality. I learnt that there were many individuals who were torn between religion and their sexuality. Deep inside me, I wanted to be the person who could help them out of this situation. I wanted to provide them with answers to the many questions they had. Not because I had the answers, but because I knew how exactly it feels to be in that position.

February 2010 was a turning point in my life. For the first time, the Muslims and Christians teamed together to flush members of the gay community from Mombasa. Many people were injured, some escaping death narrowly. Houses were raided, businesses vandalised and property was destroyed. It was a mess. Was God that wicked, I asked? Was He too weak to stand up for Himself? What was the crime these gay people committed to deserve this torment? It was unfair.

Luckily, in 2008, we (the gay community) had begun organising ourselves. I was one of the founders of PEMA Kenya⁸. We as PEMA Kenya knew of a few human rights groups that we could reach out to for help. Organisations like the International Gays and Lesbians Human Right Commission (IGLRC), Gay and Lesbians Coalition of Kenya (GALCK) and Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI)–Wellcome Trust stepped in and offered support to the community during this difficult time. Once things had cooled down these same organisations assisted in fostering conversations with religious leaders in the area. It was a successful dialogue.

Soon after this, I was introduced to Imam Muhsin Hendricks from South Africa, who is the founder and Executive

⁸ Persons Marginalized and Aggrieved (PEMA-Kenya) – formerly known as the Mombasa Brotherhood, was established to ‘create, raise and promote public awareness, tolerance and acceptance of PEMA in the society’.

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Director of The Inner Circle (TIC), a Muslim human rights organisation for queer Muslims. I was lucky to attend TIC's annual retreat in Cape Town, South Africa. There I met people who were practising Muslims and identified as queer. I knew this was where I belonged. This grouping not only advocated for the rights of gay people but also for women's rights. I was taken out of my usual custom of segregated prayer, and experienced collective prayer that involved women and men being in the same room at the same time. Inclusivity was everywhere! Women were doing khutbas (sermons) and leading prayers. I wanted to be part of this.

In 2014, I attend a three-month training course organized by The Inner Circle on reconciling Islam and sexuality. It was not only a learning process but also a personal journey. It was intense, but empowering. I was not only able to reconcile my own faith and my sexuality, after the course I came back home determined to help other queer Muslims to reconcile their Islam and sexuality too. I brought together a group of gay Muslims and helped them understand that it was possible to be queer and Muslim. The two are important identities, and one need not compromise the one for the other. I also started participating in and facilitating sessions for religious leaders, educating them on homosexuality and Islam.

Reverend Jide Macaulay and I first met in 2016, though we had connected virtually before then through Facebook. We met in South Africa at the Inner Circle annual international retreat, where I had been recognized for my work in Mombasa. As we spoke about our respective work, Jide expressed his interest in working with me, as there was a crossover in the work I was doing in Mombasa and the work he was doing with House of Rainbow. He asked if I could work with the HOR in reaching out to Muslims in countries that they were already working in.

Our first engagement was in Zambia. House of Rainbow

in partnership with Friends of Rainka (FOR) had organised a three-day workshop to talk about religion and sexuality.

While in Zambia, we met for the first time the ZENERELA, an organisation working with religious leaders affected by and/or infected with HIV-AIDS. We invited them to the workshop. It was amazing to realise that the religious leaders at ZENERELA were open-minded and willing to partner with the LGBTI community in their country.

During the workshop, we explored and referred to scripture that touched on homosexuality. Rev Macaulay spoke on the Bible and I on the Koran. The interaction between the religious leaders and members of the community exceeded our wildest expectations! After the workshop, we booked an appointment with the Grand Mufti of Zambia. A mufti is a religious scholar who specialises in matters of Islamic law. During one of the Fridays while I was Zambia, Jide, members of Friends of Rainka and I joined Muslims in the Jummah (the Friday prayers). After the prayers, the Grand Mufti introduced us and announced that we were going to have a meeting/dialogue with the mosque's leadership, and that anyone else who was interested in attending was welcome. The meeting was attended by approximately 35 people from the mosque and the Grand Mufti introduced us to lead the discussion. We discovered that the Muslim community was willing to work with the LGBTI organisation in Lusaka, and that they felt lack of information had brought a chasm between the religious leadership and the LGBTI community. We agreed to have future engagements and to explore ways to partner.

As I left Zambia, I felt that there was so much work to be done in building meaningful relationships between religious leaders and the LGBTI community. I am proud that I am part of this work.

'One Homospirituality'

By Reuben Silungwe

This is the body, mind and soul
I was born in
A gift from the Creator's love
I am love

This the body, mind and soul
That captures the essence of what humanity is
To be complete and content
To struggle and still be peaceful
Because love is within me

This is the body. mind and soul
It speaks of one love, one heart and one humanity
It survives on the very same breath God released
Into our body, mind and soul
We are homospiritual creatures
We are the same love.

'I exist, I believe, & I'm unique'

By Reuben Silungwe

When we are born, our parents rejoice at the bundle of joy right there in their warm arms. Here, I also want to assume, our parents have an uncorrupted, self-confessed and deeper understanding of the Creator's unconditional love. At that point, all they see is a child. Gender identity and sexual orientation never cross their minds. What they see is a gift – God's. The parents or guardians make choices and decisions for their newborn child – from religion to culture and even the future. Mine is such a story. I still cherish the happy moments and a belief in God Jehovah that my parents chose to share with my other siblings and I. Minority people have always been part of humanity, be they left-handed, people living with albinism, differently abled individuals, or sexual and gender minorities.

Mine is a story of a minority member that is gender-sexual in nature.

We grow and develop in already existing cultures and these cultures have gender roles, responsibilities, community activities and belief systems that define their existence. I was born into a Christian family and then baptised and dedicated to God when I was one year old. Sunday school followed naturally.

Being at church was a joy – because at that point sin and evil were clear cut. Obeying God was the opposite of sinning. No child wanted to sin. It was quite easy to fear and yet still love God, because He stood for what is good and humane. The name Jesus brought with it so much joy – Jesus loved and loves children. Jesus stood for what is good. A good and better world, we were taught, would be ours in the future if we continued to obey God.

As I grew into adolescence, developmental changes both physical and emotional became a reality. It was then that my father decided to accept the Lord Jesus as his Saviour, and within a few months he was chosen to become a church elder. Everybody loved and respected my father at church. I adored him. I believed he was God's gift to our family and the church. A caring and loving man, who with the support of my mother encouraged all his children to obey God and be disciplined in life. Meanwhile, my gender identity and expression swung between male and female. As a child I was still normal in my understanding of what made me happy.

At times my father would scold me for wanting to play with girls more than boys, but he was always a loving father. My mother was quick to come to my defense and explain that I resembled her young brother in being aware of my feminine side. She never cared about what people said or thought: she loved me more. Besides the occasional teasing and mocking for daring to be in touch with my feminine side, my peers were usually non-discriminatory. I played soccer, made wire cars and engaged in routine boys' errands. Equally present in my adolescent lifestyle, was the enjoyable time spent undertaking girls' chores and games now and then. I guess with such indistinct gender identity and expression, my family was convinced it was a passing phase, but by the age of 16 began slowly accepting my non-gender-conforming reality.

Growing up as a non-gender-conforming child was not easy. Eventually, I was forced to choose a gender identity. I chose to be a man. It was the easier and societally more comforting option. Plus, it came with certain privileges. Meanwhile, I continued attending and excelling in catechumen⁹ at church, to the pleasure of my parents. Somehow it felt challenging and

⁹ Instruction in the basic doctrines of Christianity before admission to active membership in a church.

confusing to think I would one day marry the opposite sex and have children. This was not mere coincidence – it made me realise I was ever going remain different.

At this point, I wondered if God knew I was not a ‘normal boy’ and not even a girl. I questioned my same-sex attraction and fought these feelings hard. My teenage years were the most challenging. I wanted to talk to someone who I could relate to, but I was scared. This period marked the beginning of internalised phobias towards sexual and gender minorities. Furthermore, I almost withdrew from society, and this had its own repercussions on my mental health. Despite all this, God remained my fortress – I sought answers only from Him, and I learned to understand my sexual and gender identity through God’s love. As early as 1997 I started searching for answers to my questions on human sexuality. At some point in 2002, I shared with a close friend of mine that I could not identify as heterosexual. Amazingly, he had no problem and accepted me just as I am. This was affirming and encouraging. Many questions bogged my mind down. Where was God in all this?

In 2008, I read an article in the local newspaper about a Friends of Rainka¹⁰ representative who was discussing issues surrounding sexual orientation. Thoughtfully enough, a phone number was shared as well. I contacted the interviewee, and was introduced to someone from the organisation. Nonetheless, I never felt pressured by family members or society to disengage my Christian faith from my views on sexuality. In this same year, I had joined the University of Zambia and was staying at the manse (clergy house), and this period marked the beginning of my journey to try and comprehend and reconcile my Christian

¹⁰ Friends of Rainka (FOR) - is a non-governmental, not-for-profit organization that champions the rights of sexual minorities in Zambia through advocacy, information dissemination, legal reform, research and direct service provision.

faith and sexuality. There has always been a much stronger conviction that God will never deny me for my sexuality or gender identity. Somehow, it felt disturbing and frustrating that ‘people’ thought of me as an outcast and preached against my very existence as a child of God.

Being surrounded by a loving family is what a child needs to develop healthily and confidently. I am grateful for this aspect of my upbringing and have on so many occasions shared this with the youth who identify as sexual and gender minorities. We are loved just as we love and struggle to seek answers from God on a personal level.

Consequently I joined and became affiliated to several LGBTIQ organizations, and yet through all involvement I still wanted to hear from persons of faith. The first online community that changed my lone stance was the Changing Attitude. It was a welcoming community of Church of England congregants whose mission was to share conversations regarding human sexuality, gender identity and their Christian faith. Still, something felt amiss. Where were my fellow LGBTI congregants within my local church?

When I began my postgraduate studies in Applied Ethics, I was drawn to the notion of good or bad and right or wrong. I easily connected this to my sexuality and identity journey. Subsequently, aspects of human rights and social justice also began finding resonance with me. I knew God was a just God – a God who would support the existence of sexual and gender minorities and discourage any form of harm or discrimination.

My journey took another important turn when I was listening to the BBC World Service in 2013, and heard Rev. Jide Macaulay being introduced as a gay pastor from Nigeria. At last! I remember sending him a friend request and chatting about the interview. He quickly introduced me to the House of Rainbow (HOR) Facebook group and the Lusaka chapter. I eventually met Rev. Macaulay in 2015, during the Destabilising Heteronorm-

ativity project, in a workshop, when he visited Zambia. This was a dream come true. I have found the conversations that we've had about the HOR fraternity surreal, comforting and inspiring. Although I still think I am a bit agnostic, I continue to identify as Christian and a sexual minority.

Being part of the workshop organised by the Dette Resource Foundation and Inclusive and Affirming Ministries in 2014 was my first encounter where my two worlds of Christianity and homosexuality converged. During the workshop there was a pastor who stated that it was possible to change and conform to societal and Biblical teachings on sex and sexuality. I found this view quite challenging. I realised then that we have a lot of dialogue and engagement to undertake in seeking a shared understanding of human sexuality and religious scriptures.

In the last few years my interests have begun to include humanism, human rights and the religious fundamentals of human coexistence. Furthermore, my journey to the full reconciliation of my sexuality and faith continues. Our natural processes of growing up are met with social conditioning which may affect our individuality and health for good or bad. It is in our uniqueness and diversity that we can rightly appreciate God's love. This is the message that is currently missing in most congregations and faiths all over the world.

‘You Can Call Me Derrick’

I was raised in a staunch Anglican family. I am the last born of eight children. All of us are boys. My parents were both active members of the church we attended which was situated in one of the many suburbs of Kampala, the capital city. They served within that church until they died. I am Derrick¹¹; I’m from Uganda and a Muganda by tribe. I identify as a gay man though when I was young, I wasn’t aware of my same-sex feelings. But there was something in my life that made me challenge who I was and what I felt.

If I was a girl....

From the age of six I started feeling that I was a girl, but I kept this to myself. I began playing with dolls, and I wasn’t interested in football. Here in Uganda, children play a lot of family games where we act out traditional family roles, and I also found myself playing the part of ‘the mother’, and I happily took on the responsibility of caring for ‘the father’.

Unbeknown to me, my mother was observing my behaviour, though she never said anything or cautioned me against playing female roles. It was the other family members who kept on teasing me about wanting to be a girl. Whenever they said this, I felt good and special, and I would continue my ‘girly actions’. We were a very religious family, and prayer was part and parcel of everything that occurred in our home. I harboured a short and simple prayer in my heart: ‘Lord, I wish you could dissolve my penis and make me become a girl like my friends who don’t have a penis’. When I’d go to urinate, I would squat

¹¹ Real name withheld for security reasons.

just like a girl. Furthermore, I would wear tight clothes because I thought they would make me look exactly like a girl and I enjoyed putting on make-up. I loved being in my mum's bedroom, sitting in front of her dressing mirror and applying her make-up. She had almost every kind of cosmetic. Though, every time my elder brother came across me with make-up he would verbally abuse me. He would tell me that I was ugly and that I was stupid to be wearing make-up like a girl. But Mum would watch me, and all she would say was, 'I see you love girls' things. I wish, my son, that you were a girl.'

During the December holidays it was routine for us as a family to go the village home to visit my grandma. While there, we learnt many cultural practices, myths and beliefs. These were used to reinforce tradition and instill a sense of morality in us children. One of the myths I learnt while at the village stated that if a boy or girl wants to change their gender, they should sit on a mortar. We call it an ekinu. These mortars are usually very large and it seemed that people thought this myth held true, though the process was said to be very painful and at times could lead to death. I believed in the myth wholeheartedly, because my wish at that time was to become a girl no matter what! I was ten years old at this time.

So this particular December I told mum that I wanted to go to the village to be with grandma, but I knew that I had my ulterior mission to accomplish. My plan was to sit on my grandma's mortar and become a girl. We didn't have the right size of mortar in our home, plus I also felt that there was a sense of comfort in being within the village. The mortar was about 50 centimetres high and roughly 20 centimetres wide.

When we got to my grandma's home I spent the first two days surveying and acquainting myself with the environment, in addition to catching up with my relatives. D-day arrived, and I was determined to turn into a girl come what may. That evening I went into the kitchen and secretly smuggled the mortar and

hid it in our bedroom. I was more than ready to spend the night seated on the mortar. I'd understood that one had to be naked for the transformation to take place. After supper everyone went to their respective rooms to sleep. I was sharing a room with four of my relatives. We said our prayers, and everyone fell asleep, while I pretended to be asleep. After an hour's time, and after ensuring that everyone was asleep, I got up and prayed one more time, calling on the heavens to make me a girl. I got undressed and then went to the corner where I had hidden the mortar. I was prepared for a long night: if mounting this mortar was going to get me closer to being a girl, so be it. Around midnight I fell asleep and woke up at around 5 a.m., but my legs felt like they were paralysed and I could hardly stand up. I couldn't even call for help, so I gathered myself and slowly crawled to my bed. At that point I didn't care about the pain. I was heavily disappointed because I couldn't see any physical change to my body. There was nothing! I was nowhere closer to being a girl. I was still a boy! I was still a boy!

When my grandma came to our room for morning prayers, she noticed the ekinu and asked us how it got there. None of us said a thing. To my relief grandma didn't pursue the matter and didn't press for an answer. Since my mission had failed, I opted to cut short my visit to the village and returned to Kampala. I wanted to get back to my mother, for I knew she was the only one who would love me the way I was.

The following year, when the new school term started, I told my mum that I wanted to change schools. She accepted my request, and I enrolled in a different school. I orchestrated this move because I wanted to join a new school as a girl. Since I had failed in changing my physical form, I might as well 'pretend' to be a girl. When we went to school to register I broke down when the head teacher brought me a boy's uniform. I told her that I wanted the girls' uniform. Everyone present looked at me and burst out laughing! I couldn't see anything wrong with

my request. I cried furiously, and I remember mum wiping the tears from my cheeks. I was heartbroken and was devastated when I went to class for my first day.

From boy to man

As I puberty kicked in, I started hating my body, because I now knew there was no way I was going to develop breasts, and my body was not going to be the girl's I wanted it to be. I had so badly wanted a miracle, but things had failed.

In spite of this I was making new friends, though I never made male friends because deep inside me I still felt like a girl and was more comfortable around girls. I began to walk and act like a girl, and it wasn't long before people took notice and chided me for 'going astray and beyond' as they described it. The insults started flooding in, but nothing was going to discourage me from expressing myself and how I felt, though there were times I would lock myself in the room and cry, and ask God to now make me as masculine as my brothers so that the taunts would stop. Mum used to call me for prayers, and she too was also praying for me to be less effeminate. This hurt, because I saw that my effeminate habits were distressing her. As days went on, I was slowly beginning to get attracted to boys, and I loved looking at men's trousers. At school, while in the showers, I used to spy on my fellow student's penises and bums. This would make my day! I made it a habit of showering in the evening so that I could see the other boys bathe themselves.

Meanwhile, the church I attended started regularly preaching against homosexuality, and this led to lots of discussions on homosexuality in the neighbourhood. Hardly a fortnight would pass without this topic making its way to the pulpit. Describing it as a devilish act, as 'immoral Western culture', and the greatest sin that two men could commit. Within me, I was that person they were referring to unknowingly and I was psy-

chologically tortured and tormented. By referring to homosexuality as an irregularity, I often started wondering whether I was abnormal. I, therefore, started isolating myself from friends, becoming very private and independent. Our strongly religious stance as a family didn't make things easier for me. In my family, we prayed for everything and against every evil, with the spirit of homosexuality often being rebuked from our home. This constant condemnation would dishearten me. I was battling all alone, for no one knew what I felt or battled. I believed I was the only gay person on the planet. I chose to become more prayerful, and began fasting so that I could stop my 'abnormal life'. This wasn't fruitful because every day my feelings for men would increase.

Higher Learning

During this period most of my brothers and male friends were getting girlfriends, and whenever they spoke of them I remained quiet and refused to participate in their conversations. I had never felt any attraction to anyone of the opposite sex. No one knew I had crushes on several boys.

Surprisingly, my connection with God became stronger, and I believed that I could break this 'spirit of homosexuality' that was within me. But whenever I went to church the priests were constantly preaching against homosexuality, citing that it was an automatic pass to hell. I began to question whether there was any point to my fasting and praying.

Unfortunately, it was around this time that I received a blow that marked this period as the worst point in my life. My mum, who loved me unconditionally, and who was my protector, passed away from malaria. This was in 2007, and I was 14 years old. I knew that from then on I was alone, a goat in the midst of lions. Life became a battle both at home and at school. My one source of peace and comfort, which was free of the homophobic

talk, was gone. I was now alone.

Right through secondary school and into university, I continued to battle with my same-sex feelings. Up till now, as a young adult I had never researched about what I felt because I believed that I would be adding another sin to my life. They say ignorance is bliss; I chose bliss. Though my feelings were a mess! For the more I pretended, the more intense they became. I was falling for guys all over the university campus. As I still had no answers as to why I felt the way I did, I decided to find out about homosexuality. I wanted to know who these people were; where they lived, and how they looked. Armed with all those questions, I went on the internet to search for answers. My discovery of whole new truths that countered the lies I'd been brought up to believe left me surprised.

I was over the moon because now I could go online and see brothers and sisters who shared similar feelings to me. I developed a virtual gay life, and for the first time I felt good about myself. I realised that I was not alone in the world. I got addicted to the internet. It was around this time in Uganda that the public storm erupted around the 'kill the gays bill'. I still had never made contact with an actual gay Ugandan, and was frightened about coming out to anyone outside of the virtual world. This offered me a sense of security from the homophobic rhetoric that was sweeping across the country. By the end of my first year of university I had done a lot of research on the LGBTI community. While on the spiritual side, it was around this time that I gave my life to God, allowing Him to do all that He wants to do in me.

It was while at university that I opened an account on one of the gay social networking sites. I hooked up with an American guy called 'David'¹². David was the first person who told me that I was handsome! I was excited and loved him even more because

¹² Real name withheld.

he loved me for who I am. We had an online relationship for two years, during which he helped me understand more about gay life. This relationship ended when David, just ‘disappeared’. Then I met another guy who also loved me! He was a Dutch man called ‘William’¹³, and we spent a lot of time online getting to know one another. He eventually came to Uganda to pay me a visit! Oh my, you have no idea how it felt, and for the three weeks that we were together and I got to live a semblance of a normal life, without fear or repercussion. It was beautiful being loved by someone. It was difficult parting ways when our holiday came to an end for William had to return to his country. Unfortunately, three months after his departure, William told me he was seeing someone else, and so we parted ways. I picked up the broken pieces of my heart and moved on with life.

My faith was still important to me, and I lived a very prayerful life. Even after the two relationships I still wanted to meet someone who could understand me and love me. I went online again and this time round I got to meet a Ugandan, and we started dating. He mentored me and helped me get rid of the prejudices I had against my fellow Ugandans. He encouraged me to meet my brothers and sisters within the LGBTI community. It was around this time that I got introduced to an organisation called Frank and Candy Uganda¹⁴. It was thanks to this organisation that I learnt about for sexual reproductive health matters and advocacy. In addition to the formal aspect of the work, the group used to share the scripture together. I entrenched myself with the group, receiving encouragement, comfort and I was also able to learn about what the Bible says about homosexuality, and about faith and love.

¹³ Real name withheld.

¹⁴ Frank & Candy is a non-profit LGBTI organisation started in 2011 to facilitate access to health services, information & legal first aid to the LGBTI community in Uganda.

I became an active volunteer in 2015; I began with Frank and Candy after losing my full-time job for downloading gay movies and other 'queer' information onto the only company laptop I was in charge of. My former boss said that he couldn't work with someone who was gay, though I remember asking him not to disclose my sexuality to anyone else.

While I was unemployed, I prayed to God to open a way, and miraculously I managed to get some money that enabled me to start my own agricultural project. My faith in God kept on growing, and I received nourishment from the fellowship of my friends.

During a workshop on faith and sexuality at the Pride Week festivities in 2016 I met Rev. Jide Macaulay. This encounter was like an answered prayer, because I had always wanted to meet other individuals who were able to live out their sexuality and their faith. The workshop was very beneficial as it elaborated what theology had to say about sexuality. Rev. Macaulay affirmed me and others by saying that by being homosexual we aren't a sin, we are not living a life of a sin, and that we are all created as human beings in the image of God.

After the workshop I felt the strong desire to do more with what I had learnt and therefore applied for a post as a local leader in the House of Rainbow Fellowship in Uganda. I am currently a voluntary local leader here in Kampala, and I am very happy to be part of the organisation.

‘Still Growing’

By Mark Mvula

I was very young when I noticed how different I was from all of my other friends. I had a very visible feminine side, and they called me Mary instead of Mark, but at that tender age, I did not know what being gay meant. I thought being gay was just a phase that everyone underwent. When I was 14 years old I tried to date a girl, so that I could avert the focus from me and stop the trash talk that I was constantly receiving from my friends and family. Nevertheless, the relationship never worked because I knew that I was not into girls, no matter how much I tried to force myself to commit to the relationship. It was impossible because I always felt this was not the right thing to do, nor did I feel ready to commit to anyone. I was undergoing a lot of pressure from my family to be more masculine and live according to my conventional gender role. I found acceptance amongst my friends, who loved me the way I am. When I turned 16 I met the guy who would be my first boyfriend. However, because I never had anyone to talk about matters of sexuality and gender identity, I turned to the internet for explanations. I found out about personal hygiene, how to have sex, and how to practice safe sex. I still had that naïve belief that if you are gay you are not at risk of catching HIV/AIDS or other STIs.

As a gay couple we faced many challenges, both within and outside the relationship. My first boyfriend was always ashamed to be seen with me in public and always preferred to meet after dark. He also had major internalised homophobia, despite being gay himself. When I was 18, I met a guy called Derick, and we became fast friends. We got to know one another before finally deciding to get into a relationship. Things seemed to be going well with Derick, but I discovered that, because he

knew a number of community members, he had a number of sexual partners. I was scared that if I continued being with him, I, in turn, would be putting myself at risk. This was after a series of community gathering workshops, and exposure to organisations like Friends of Rainka (FOR) and Transbantu Zambia (TBZ).

Only after I joined the social media bandwagon, namely, Facebook, did I meet my current partner, and we have been together for two years. Like any other couple we've had our fair share of challenges, such as communication issues, managing finances and dealing with societal views. Being gay in a country like Zambia, we've had to work extra hard in order to make ends meet. Jobs are hard to come by when potential employers openly discriminate against you. I mean, even getting a place to live has been difficult!

Fortunately, by affiliating myself to the various LGBTI organisations that disseminate information on health, safety and security issues, and also on empowerment, I have grown as an individual and realised that there are lots of opportunities out in the world for me. It is because of this exposure I have developed strong networks both locally and internationally.

In July 2015 I got to know about House of Rainbow while attending a religious workshop with Christians and Muslims. The meeting looked at our common and divergent beliefs on sexuality and explored what the Bible says on the matter. Being told that I was demon-possessed by church leaders was the common rhetoric I'd grown up listening to. Thanks to the workshop I learnt that I have every right to stand strong in my faith in spite of my sexual orientation.

Thanks to the Destabilising Heteronormativity Project organised by HOR, I don't believe being heterosexual is the only 'normal', nor do I believe the theory that says being gay means you have a mental disability. I learnt that we are ALL wonderfully and beautifully made in the image of God and that He loves us

Still Growing

just the way we are. I also learnt that no one has the right to stop me from going to church, or impose any limitations based on one's sexual orientation or gender identity. I never really had a close relationship with members of my family because I had also felt excluded by them. They would constantly look down on me. Whenever I would say the grace at the dinner table they would ask someone else to pray after me, because they believed that God would not listen to my prayers because of my sexual orientation. It is for this reason that I felt that matters of faith and spirituality stopped having any meaning to me. I slowly began feeling like an outcast and believed that God did not consider me His child. Therefore my visits to church got fewer and fewer, because I felt there was no need to for me to pray if my prayers were being disregarded. It was not until I was baptised in the Catholic Church that I discovered that all those were mere thoughts in my head.

I hope and dream that churches in Zambia will become more open and welcoming to more people despite their sexual orientation and gender identity. I look forward to the day when individuals will feel accepted, because Jesus died on the cross for all.

‘Rehanna’ by Rehanna

By Rehanna

For security reasons call me Rehanna, though I was born Francis, for I am a transgender woman from Uganda.

I was 13 years old when I started being victimised for my sexuality. This was in 2005 and I was in form one, which is the first year of high school in my country. My first love interest was a boy called Dimitri. Unfortunately we were caught kissed by other students. I was beaten by those other students, who also poured hot porridge on me. They then took me to the headmaster for more punishment. He made us knee on concrete under the blazing sun for 12 hours non-stop. If that wasn't enough, we were locked in the headmaster's office for the whole weekend without any food. We were only let out on Monday when the headmaster came to school. We got 50 strokes of the cane and he vowed to humiliate us in front of the whole school during the morning assembly.

As we were being taken to the assembly my boyfriend managed to run away and I was left alone to face the school. In front of the whole school community, I was asked by headmaster to admit that I was gay and I was to ask the school for forgiveness, and if I refused to do that, then the police would be called in. I admitted to being gay and the whole school laughed at me. I was spat on and rubbish was hurled at me. From then on, life became very difficult for me. I was left isolated without anyone to talk to. I'd be in the showers when no one was around and eat alone. I spent most of the time by myself and you'd have thought that I had the bubonic plague. Not only did I have to deal with the loneliness, I was still bullied by the other students. It was relentless! When I was in Senior 4 (my 'O' level) year a group of boys armed with knives and broken glass confronted

me and ordered me to stop being gay. This left me terrified and I opted to change schools. This was in 2008. They left me traumatised and fearful for my life. I joined Ntungamao High School for the last two years of high school. It was like a fresh start and I was finally able to make friends.

Since I was at a boarding school, we were only allowed visitors on specific weekends. My boyfriend, who was working at a local bank, paid me a visit during one of our visiting days. He came with lots of presents for me, and when it was time for him to leave, my friend and I saw him to the gate. We call it 'giving him a push' and just before he left he gave me a kiss. A few weeks later, when I was on my way to church, I was accosted by four men who asked me whether I was gay. I felt so small and I kept silent. They then pulled me away from the church vicinity to a nearby forest where they started assaulting me and asking me to tell them who I was having sex with. They demanded that I give them 100 dollars or else they would kill me. One of the men had a knife and he poked me in the ribs with it, demanding that I tell them who my lover was. I got a wound from the jab and began bleeding. I kept on telling them that I had no money and denied knowing what they were talking about.

Because I feared for my life I eventually gave in to their demands and took them to my boyfriend's house. Somehow my boyfriend saw us approaching and fled before we got there, leaving the house unlocked. These thugs walked in and stole everything!

Somehow the following week word got around school that I was gay. I was treated like an animal. It got so bad that a section of the students staged a strike demanding that I be expelled. The school took it upon themselves to expel me.

I was left in a hopeless situation, disappointed, miserable and defeated. I only had my boyfriend to turn to. I told him what had happened to me and he took me in and I stayed with him for

two months. After some time the landlord started asking me why I was staying in the same house as my boyfriend. My boyfriend became fearful and didn't want to lose either his job or the house, so he introduced me to friends of his in another part of town, who helped get me a place to stay. My boyfriend supported me with money for rent and food.

One night his friends came over to my house. There were five of them and they told me they wanted to shoot a sex video with me in it. I refused, but they forced themselves on me and they all slept with me. When I woke up in the morning I found that I was bleeding from my anus. Because I had no one to turn to, I called out to the landlord for assistance. I was in a terrible state and this shocked him when he walked in. When he asked me what happened I told him that I was forced to have sex with boys. He asked me whether I was gay and was persistent to get an answer from me. Because I was desperate to get medical assistance, I told him the truth. Would you believe that instead of getting me medical assistance he went to call the police! The police came and took me to Ntungamano Health Centre, and after I received medical assistance I was thrown into a police cell. While I was in the cell, the other inmates started beating me. For my own safety I was put in solitary confinement. After three days I was asked to make statement of what happened and was told by the officer in charge of the police station to call my parents to come and stand for me or else I would face death.

Instead of calling my parents, I reached out to an uncle of mine. When he came to the station the police demanded a bribe of 300 dollars for my release. Unfortunately my uncle did not have that type of money. He opted to call my father and he informed him of my plight. My dad agreed to come to the station and the police told him what had happened to me, and he even called my old school, who informed him that I had been expelled because of my sexual orientation. My dad paid the 300 dollars and I was released. I discovered that all the relatives had been

summoned to our homestead. My father proceeded to renounce me as his son in front of family, relatives and friends. Not only did he renounce me, but he proclaimed that death was what I deserved. Everyone who had come supported the idea, and they added, 'That thing is not in our culture and norms so whoever does it deserves death'. They started beating me, then tied me up and proceeded to pour petrol on me. Miraculously, I managed to escaped and found my way to the streets of Kampala. I lived off the streets until I manage to get a job in a hotel as a cleaner.

The respite from the homophobia was short. My neighbours began harassing for my behaviour and it wasn't long before I was homeless once again. I escaped to Rakai District in 2015. It was while in Rakai that things started looking up for me. I managed to secure a job that gave me financial security and respect among the local community. I made good money and life seemed to be smooth. I was also able to report anyone who discriminated against me or threatened me to the police.

I started to help fellow LGBT individuals who were suffering in the district by providing them with food, shelter, HIV testing and counselling, lubricants, and paying off the police for their freedom when they were arrested. I became popular, and the youth in the area supported me in my attempt to stand for public office. Unfortunately my opponent was not willing to play fair, and started telling the community that I was gay. I instantly became a marked individual to the police and the community. I fled to the neighbouring Kabale District in the south west of the country. Things weren't any better for me there, due to the constant harassment I was facing from the police. In the full year I was in Kabale my various homes got raided. I had had enough by March 2017 and opted to flee to neighbouring Rwanda.

I went to the offices of the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugee (UNHCR) offices in Kigali, thinking that I would be granted asylum based on my sexual orientation. I was

referred to the local immigration office, where I presented my case. The officer assigned to me told me to become a born-again Christian and informed me that Rwanda does not welcome individuals like me. I felt humiliated and desperate. I had to resort to sex work to live in Kigali. My plan was to raise enough money and then move to a more welcoming country.

I managed to make it to Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo. There I was registered as a refugee by the UNHCR. I also met a fellow refugee who had fled to DR Congo for similar reasons. He is a constant companion. People in Congo are no different from people back home in Uganda: homophobia is still present here. We still get harassed by local authorities and live in fear of attacks.

In the end I was too frustrated, until I found out about the training programme offered by House Of Rainbow. I was motivated and inspired by the teaching, particularly on reconciliation, as it was easy for me to hate and despise myself – in fact I was on the brink of self destruction. But the communities in Uganda were the saving grace, and most especially the instant connection with services that was provided by House Of Rainbow. I learnt to forgive, and to begin that important journey of reconciliation and love for myself. I believe the future is brighter when we learn to love each other.

‘Land of Dreams’

By Rethabile Manong

At exactly 8:00 a.m. Khauhelo got off the cab in front of the towering, hi-tech, state-of-the-art Lehlakaneng office block. A new wave of hope tugged at the strings of his heart when he took in his surroundings, smelling the sweet morning aromas like a dog in a new territory. After adjusting his shirt, necktie and evening jacket, he fell into step with the already hurrying job-goers. It had taken him more than three years of hustling and despair to find a job. Many times his applications had been turned down for what he thought were no apparent reasons. However, time and age had taught him differently.

Realising the ever-escalating graduate and unemployment rates changed his mindset completely. All that mattered to him was keeping a positive outlook. ‘Today is a different day,’ he muttered to himself confidently. He felt in his blood and heart that he was going to get that job he had waited so long for. Time and time again he kept adjusting his tie and taking nervous side glances. He felt as though the hurrying people around him could sense his worst fear, which he knew was awaiting him a few floors from the lobby he was now in. After confirming with the receptionist that he was expected, he took a seat along the wall with the other four job-seekers like him. He did not feel intimidated by their presence at all, for he could sense that they were ‘freshmen’ in this dreadful department of unemployment; recent graduates indeed!

After securing a scholarship to study in one of the best universities in the U.S. seven years earlier, he had never thought he would struggle this much to get a job. In the real world things do not go according to how we envision them at times, he

thought. Just then an elegantly dressed lady of about 35 years approached them, her bright-red, self-shine high-heeled shoes making an irritating clicking sound on the ceramic-tiled floor. She requested their particulars and disappeared into the board-room with the first candidate. Khauhelo sat drumming his knuckles nervously on the briefcase resting on his lap. Minutes passed, and to him they felt like hours. Eventually the board-room door swung open and out came the ashen-faced first candidate. It was evident that he was fighting a tough war of suppressing already-visible tears.

Two hours later, the CEO's personal assistant called Khauhelo with the good news that he got the job. What a blessing to our hero! He was, therefore, requested to make yet another visit to the CEO's office the following day to finalise a few things. Khauhelo spent the rest of the afternoon daydreaming and smiling to himself. He found it hard to wait any longer: he would share the good news with his family that evening. Just then his sister's familiar voice announced dinner. For the first time in hours, he realised he had been building castles in the sky. He rose stiffly from the wooden bench he had sat on all afternoon, stretched his tired limbs in a leisurely way, looked about the already darkening evening and disappeared into the house.

Holding his head high and walking briskly with a determined look on his face, Khauhelo made his way into the CEO's office. The office had an aura of authority about it, and so did the gentleman owning it. His main table took centre stage, flanked by bookshelves on all three walls except the one housing the door. Files dating to as back as 1998 were neatly lined up on the many compartments. Khauhelo drank it all in with amazement, likening them to loyal subjects showering their king with adoration.

The CEO lifted his head. Seeing Khauhelo, he beamed

warmly, in the process revealing a white, even set of teeth. He shoved aside whatever he was doing and came to the table to shake hands 'businessman style' with Khauhelo. After being shown to his seat, the introductions began. Mr Ralekholo, as Khauhelo later learned, cleared his throat and adjusted his tie the same way Khauhelo usually did when nervous. Khauhelo's heart beat twice as fast, and his inner voice was crying out loud, 'Here comes my fate again.'

'The criteria this company uses to select a suitable candidate for this position is a very strict one,' he said, linking his fingers on the table in front of him, his voice a complete mask of seriousness. His forehead was now deeply furrowed, and eyes which seemed friendly and welcoming earlier now took on a menacing gleam.

Khauhelo's finely chiselled nose gleamed with beads of sweat; his close-shaven chin, peppered with stubble, felt like it did not belong to him anymore. His thick crop of well-groomed hair on his head and neck was standing on edge. As for his lips, they were so chapped due to the absence of saliva in his mouth. Boy, he was way beside himself with fright! He kept his shocked eyes low, afraid to look up at Mr Ralekholo. His boyish beauty must have flown out the window: for a while for he was no longer that charmingly and handsome young man.

'And considering your qualifications and your worth, your application was on the brink of being rejected, but I put my neck on the line for it.'

At that Khauhelo relaxed a bit.

'Sir, I can't thank you enough, for what you did has saved not only me but five other souls back home,' he said, offering his hand for a shake across the table.

'Don't thank me yet,' Mr Ralekholo said, smiling wryly. 'For that comes at a dear price. As they say that a good turn deserves another, I need just a small favour from you.'

'As long as it's something I can do, say it out loud, sir,'

Khauhelo said reassuringly. Mr Ralekholo struggled for words for a few minutes, snatched a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his profusely sweating brow. Standing, he came around the table, took both Khauhelo's hands in his and looked straight into Khauhelo's horrified eyes.

'The war I fought for you to be taken into this company was not because of brotherly love or the parental care I had for you. It is because I was drawn to you the very first time I laid my eyes on you,' he said, drawing a sharp breath. Khauhelo snatched his hands away from his grip, sprang to his feet and took to the door.

'Thousands could die for a chance like this. Think straight, my boy before it's too late. I did all that because I like you and wish you find it in your good heart to accept me and be my special friend.' Desperation then honesty was evident in his voice, and that was enough to root Khauhelo to the spot.

Pictures of distress back home flashed quickly through his head and struck the right chord in his heart. He could see his dear mother, who back in the day got crippled for life fending for him, his little brother and sister. His sister had had to drop out of school to help take care of their mother. At some point she too had got things mixed up and ended up with two kids out of wedlock. Since then they had given up all their precious investments to send him to school, sure that he will come back and take care of them all. His many failed attempts at suicide hit him across the face anew. It was obvious he did not want to slip back into that kind of life again. The sleepless nights he spent feeling hollow, empty and hopeless were long gone, and he wanted to grow and be a better person, and reawaken his family's feeble and fading hopes. It did not matter how long it took him to change his perspective for the better; he believed in himself and what was left was to follow his heart. True, he was scared beyond measure, but he decided to do it for his family's sake, who gave up everything for him.

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‘Khauhelo, please don’t make me beg. You are smart, intelligent and the most handsome chap with the best heart ever, and I’m willing to do whatever it takes to ensure you stay like that forever,’ Mr Ralekholo said, his voice quavering a little.

Realising that Mr Ralekholo’s proposition might be his last, he made his mind up there and then to accept him into his heart. Without a second thought, instead of uttering a favourable response, Khauhelo threw himself around his neck and sobbed hysterically. Mr Ralekholo patted him softly in a soothing gesture.

Mr Ralekholo drove Khauhelo home on the pretext that he was going for an early lunch. Khauhelo did not let his mixed emotions cloud over his voice of reason; he laid his conditions out. First, he told Mr Ralekholo that he would wait until he got his first paycheck before he could take his ‘special friendship’ with him to another level. However, he could not brush aside a twinge of worry in the back of his mind – ‘What if this old he-goat is taking advantage of my innocence, desperation and naiveness?’ he thought, confusion written all over his face.

‘I will have to work myself out of this extraordinarily bizarre relationship, the sooner, the better. I just don’t want to get too involved lest it cost me my integrity, rob me of a chance to live in reality and to appreciate what life has to offer truly,’ he said to himself. ‘But what if he threatens to sack me?’

To avoid beating himself up for the decision he had just made, he decided to let sleeping dogs lie.

Amidst the excited talk over dinner that night, his mind was, however, miles away. He gobbled his food quickly, excused himself and made his way to the internet café a few blocks from his house. Besides having five failed marriages, Mr Ralekholo was once a prime suspect in the brutal murder of a seventeen-year-old boy, an event which was believed to be an act of a satanic worship ritual. Khauhelo could not thank Google enough

for all that it had revealed to him.

His biggest problem was how to wriggle his way out of Mr Ralekholo's grasp, and on what grounds would that be? What about his family's excitement about his new job? He was indeed in the centre of confusion. He spent the first two days at work avoiding Mr Ralekholo, a conduct Mr Ralekholo noticed instantly. He decided to put the chap's conscience at ease. Towards the end of his shift, he was informed that his presence was requested at a business dinner that night in one of the posh hotels downtown with Mr Ralekholo. He felt as if the earth could open up and swallow him whole. What he dreaded the most was the long, night drives with only Mr Ralekholo.

'Will I even be able to say my last prayers before he sacrificed me to his boss, Angel of Death?' Khauhelo muttered nervously as he made his way to the already waiting car. He only wished Mr Ralekholo would not realise his innermost fear. The 'business' dinner turned out to be just the two of them.

'Your attitude towards me has changed,' Mr Ralekholo said, looking across the table at Khauhelo. He pretended to be calm, but his heart was betraying him and trying hard to jump into his mouth.

'You've heard rumours about me, I know that for sure. I've been in this CEO's office too long, and I know people attempt to overthrow my authority.' He paused and their eyes locked for a few seconds. 'One of their machinations is by poisoning the hearts and minds of whoever I get close to.'

As the evening wore on, the two gentlemen chatted happily away like old acquaintances. Even Khauhelo finally relaxed and completely forgot about his fears, after knowing the sole reasons why Mr Ralekholo was backbitten. The fears aroused in him by that information he read on Google shrivelled to oblivion, for he realised that Mr Ralekholo had been a target of envious, jealous and unqualified colleagues whose thirst for power drove them to want to acquire his position corruptly.

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After that night, the two of them were as thick as thieves, working hard as ever. The company's quarterly profits doubled, at times going as far as tripling. In a short while Khauhelo won many 'Employee of the Season' titles and was quickly promoted. What a beautiful house he bought for his family! And what an expensive car he drove! All those daydreams he had a few months ago sitting on the verandah of his old, dilapidated house quickly became a reality.

Eighteen months went swiftly by with Khauhelo living a life of bliss. He couldn't regret the decision he made a long time ago, a decision to open his heart wide and usher Mr Ralekholo in. Had he not given ear to Mr Ralekholo's proposition, what would have befallen him and his family?

One morning Khauhelo was busy updating clients' files on his personal computer when his office phone rang incessantly. He did not make even a slightest attempt to reach for it but went on with what looked like a pianist's assault on the keys, clicking numerous icons and typing new and additional information. The ringing would stop for a few seconds and start again with renewed urgency. Bearing it no longer, Khauhelo reached for the receiver and spoke with total indifference. Stunned by an unexpected shock wave, he felt the blood and colour drain from his face, and he felt his heart drum deafeningly at his chest. His laboured breath added unbearable weight to his already feeble body, and tears flowed down his cheeks in great torrents. His body was shaking uncontrollably as the receiver slid from his limp hand and dropped onto the table.

Some months after Mr Ralekholo's death, Khauhelo got a phone call from Batlounge Conveyancers and Notaries inviting him to Mr Ralekholo's family's will reading. He could not understand why his presence was needed; after all, he wasn't even family.

Mr Ralekholo had suffered a terrible heart attack and died unexpectedly. Khauhelo had been by far the most heart-

broken after all that the two of them had been through. Theirs had been a sweet, loving relationship where both their hearts were snug and intertwined. He felt like he had lost an irreplaceable part of him. Khauhelo was, however, thankful that Mr Ralekholo had worked hard to ensure that he, Khauhelo, was standing on both his feet in the company before his untimely departure. The dark cloud of loneliness, though, hung hopelessly over him.

On the set date he made his appearance at Batlounge Conveyancers and Notaries, together with Mr Ralekholo's sons and daughters from his previous marriages. His presence startled them all, but they said nothing. What surprised them most was that they did not know who he was; some speculated that he might be their half-brother, fathered secretly out of wedlock by their late father. They didn't have to wait long to find out who the 'stranger in room' was.

'Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all so much for making it here on such short notice,' the lawyer said welcomingly.

'Today marks an important milestone in the history of our late father, colleague and friend. I was instructed to read this will to you today as it is Mr Ralekholo's birthday.'

A sudden hush had settled in the room as all waited impatiently. The lawyer shuffled a few papers in front of him, cleared his throat and started to read.

'I hereby nominate, constitute and appoint Advocate Motlounge as Executor. If this Executor is unable or unwilling to serve, then I appoint David Motlalepula from Maralleng Chambers of Law as alternate Executor. I declare that I am of legal age to declare this will and that I am of sound mind. This will, therefore, expresses my wishes without undue influence and duress.

'To my eldest son and heir, I bequeath Ralekholo Holdings (Pty) Ltd,' to which up went a congratulatory round of applause.

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‘To my second son, I leave my taxi fleet and its operations. To my twin daughters, I give ten percent of The Educator Policy to fund their higher education, with the remainder released upon their graduation. Otherwise, the remainder shall pass instead to any of my children who complete their university education. My mansion at 14 Mofolo Street, Hillsvue Estates, I give to my twin daughters too. Lastly to my youngest daughter, I leave all my investments and personal car to be released to her only at the age of 21,’ went on the lawyer.

Waiting for the excited voices to die down, he busied himself by adjusting his spectacles repeatedly. At last, everybody settled down, and the lawyer heaved a sigh of relief, mouthed a ‘thank you’ in their direction and continued to read.

‘I believe I have shared my property fairly and equally well among my children. So, one other person I would like to offer something is a colleague, friend, son but above all my beloved spouse Mr Khauhelo Leraka,’ the lawyer paused intentionally and eyed the confused faces before him.

‘Who is that Leraka chap, advocate?’ the eldest son asked. Before the lawyer could respond, Khauhelo shouted aloud, ‘I am.’

They were stupefied by this very young chap who appeared barely old enough to have been their father’s spouse.

‘Spouse? Hold on a second, I mean let me get this straight. I have never known my father to be gay,’ the other twin exclaimed with a clap of her hands, a Sotho expression of great surprise.

‘You... you... you bewitched our father and turned him to be gay and desert our mothers, I am going to kill you,’ the eldest son said approaching Khauhelo menacingly, pointing a shaky, threatening finger at him. His brother, the second son stepped in and held him back.

‘Everybody calm down,’ barked the lawyer. ‘The gentleman in front of you has done no wrong, but your father fell in

love with him, period. As a matter of fact, your father was gay, he told me he married all your mothers to fool the common eye, which you know as well as I do, is strongly against such a lifestyle especially in this country.'

He paused again, letting his words sink into the horrified children of Mr Ralekholo.

'To prove my point,' he continued, 'here is an envelope containing photos of Mr Leraka and your father's wedding, held privately in Mauritius nine months ago.'

They snatched it and browsed through the photos, the eldest son spitting at some with disgust. Only the daughters commented positively on them.

'Well, I guess I should continue,' said the lawyer.

'To my trusted, kind and always loving spouse, I leave the sum of 3,985,000 maloti, which is a combination of my company's severance pay and Public Servants Defined Contributions Pension Fund. I can't pay him enough for the joy he brought into my world. Even if I die now, at least I will die a truly happy man knowing that I have a special place in his heart. Lastly, I leave my entire livestock in all the three cattle posts to my dear uncle who took my father's place when he passed on. I direct that on my death my remains shall be laid to rest in our family burial plot where all my ancestors are sleeping. Signed by Ralekholo Ralekholo on 19th January 2013, in the presence of the following witnesses: Advocate Motlounq for Batlounq Conveyancers and Notaries, and Auntie Maputsoa Ralekholo for family representative.

'That is the end of your father's will, and thanks again for your patience and time, especially considering all your busy schedules,' concluded the lawyer with a sigh.

Amidst a torrent of the angry voices of Mr Ralekholo's sons, Khauhelo sat there dumbfounded and unable to believe his ears. Almost four million maloti for him! That's unbelievable. He managed to get the eldest son's string of angry words.

‘Dad must have been crazy to have acted that foolishly. I also don’t believe his extravagance on that dog of a boy he calls his spouse. I swear I will get that son of... Oh, excuse my language,’ he exclaimed angrily for what seemed like a millionth time. The lawyer seemed quite amused by the commotion the will had created. Amongst all he enjoyed looking at the eldest son.

‘Forget it everybody, the fact remains, we all have witnessed a loving and caring spirit in our late father,’ the youngest daughter chipped in, firmly clutching the straps of her handbag and preparing to go.

‘It’s for the best you are going, little sister, because you don’t have anything better to say,’ her eldest brother shouted at her.

‘Don’t be stupid, can’t you see Dad kidnapped this cub to spite our mothers and us. Huh?’ They all nodded unanimously except her.

‘And what a bizarre cub he kidnapped,’ interjected the second son with a sad headshake.

‘In fact, what Dad has done was to cook a perfect recipe of embarrassment for this family. Just think of what people will say when they hear this. He has soiled our family’s name beyond measure.’

Oblivious to her brothers’ interjections, she continued, ‘Look at us now, clawing at each other for one simple fact which you hate so much to penetrate your hard, thick skulls.’

She paused, looking from one face to another. ‘Do you think it was that easy for Dad to have just woken up and come out if he knew this was the kind of reaction he was going to get?’

Holding up her index finger to forestall any further interruptions, she continued boldly, ‘The truth is, Dad and people like him deserve so much more than to have their human rights trampled on mercilessly and their voices muted. They are people like us, entitled to every good thing as us. They need our support to

make peace with their unique, true nature. But what do we do? We call them names, avoid them and point accusing fingers at them. We hurl insults their way, and many have even undergone excruciating pain and abuse at our many “holier than thou” corrective rituals. We call them trash and embarrassment which have to be swept from people’s eyes and be swept under the carpet. Come on brothers and sisters! Our Dad at this point deserves nothing but our deepest respect, for he lived wisely and happily in a broiling firestorm of controversy. In her book, Helen Keller describes her brief romantic attachment as and I quote, “a little island of joy surrounded by dark waters”. Similarly Dad and Khauhelo formed their own “island of joy” away from prying eyes and accusing mouths.’

With that, she rose from her chair and left.

About the editors



Kevin Mwachiro is a broadcaster with 17 years' experience in the media sector and is now building a career for himself as a writer and poet. He has worked as a radio journalist and producer in Kenya, Uganda and the UK and as a correspondent for the BBC. He describes himself as a storyteller, a lover of words and the spoken word.

He was the editor of *The Invisible – Stories from Kenya's Queer Community* and was part of the editorial team for *Boldly Queer – African Perspectives on Same-sex sexuality and gender diversity*. His first play, *Trashed*, was published in *Six in the City – Six Short Plays on Nairobi* and his poems were published in the anthology *Walking The Tightrope*. Kevin Mwachiro lives in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi.

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