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QUEER ETHIOPIA



LOVE

SACRIFICE

FREEDOM

Between Borders & Identity

Stories of Courage from
Queer Ethiopian Refugee Community

Special edition: World Refugee Day

June 20, 2026

Introduction: The Flight for Freedom

This special archival report documents the deeply moving personal testimonies of queer Ethiopian refugees who fled systemic persecution, societal hostility, and psychological trauma in search of basic human dignity. Through intimate interviews with Jamzee, Helen, and Grace, this issue explores the complex intersections of faith, self-acceptance, displacement, and the profound definition of finding "home" in exile.

For many LGBTQ+ individuals in Africa, identity is a battleground between the core essence of self and the crushing weight of institutionalized or societal heteronormativity. The following accounts are raw, verbatim transcriptions from survivors who journeyed from provincial Ethiopian towns and the capital of Addis Ababa to Kenya. Their stories remind us that love, resistance, and faith can endure even amidst absolute isolation.

All the visual stories in this issue are documented by the participants over the course of two months to highlight their day to day lives in their own voices.



PART I

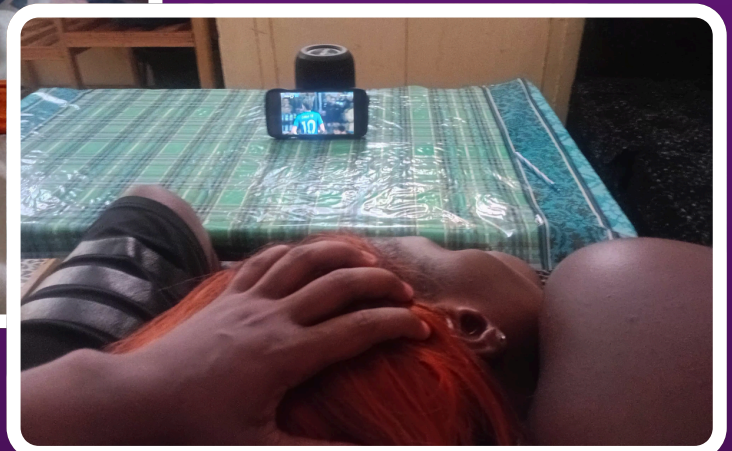
FINDING IDENTITY AMIDST SHADOWS

JAMZEE'S STORY



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For me, though, it was a feeling that vibrated from the tips of my toes to the hair on my head; it was my nature, right from childhood.



I believe
accepting
myself is my
biggest
achievement.

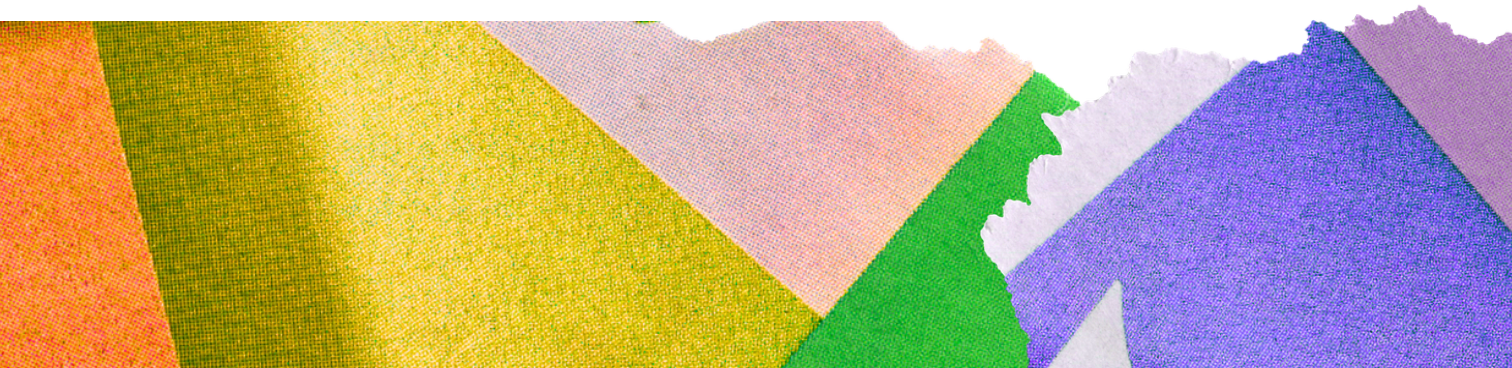
When I hold the hand of the person I love on the street, when I speak loudly about same-sex relationships... and when I see that there is no one insulting me, chasing me, or looking at me like a freak, I realize even more that I have found a place where I can live my identity freely.

EARLY AWAKENING

I realized that I was attracted to women when I was an elementary school student. To be honest, since women are beautiful and admirable creatures, it wouldn't be surprising for anyone to be drawn to them. For a long time, because I spent most of my time with boys, I thought it was just their influence. As time went on, however, I noticed a difference when talking to a few of my female friends; the way they admired women and the way I did were completely different. When I asked them, "Is it just me, or do you guys feel the same way too?" they would just brush it off lightly. For me, though, it was a feeling that vibrated from the tips of my toes to the hair on my head; it was my nature, right from childhood.

I grew up in a large family of eleven members. I had a wonderful family and upbringing. My tomboyish look existed even before I accepted myself, and that is how people knew me. Perhaps because I grew up in a regional province, people didn't have much awareness about same-sex attraction, so my masculinity never raised questions. Since I grew up playing soccer with boys, people assumed it was just their influence, and no one ever suspected that I actually loved women. Even when I cut my hair short and dressed like a man, people just passed it off saying, "She is an athlete," so I never faced suspicion regarding my sexual orientation.

Right now, I suspect that my younger sister knows I am a lesbian. The rest of my family members only know me as a tomboy. My father is the kind of dad who says, "Why don't you cut it?" whenever my hair grows out. When my brothers buy clothes for themselves, they bring back the same style for me. However, that doesn't mean they would accept me if they knew. Even if they were to accept me, I think they would be deeply unsettled by societal pressure.





“ Where there was darkness, I found light.



“ Football wasn't my whole story. It was just my camouflage. It hid me from the world, protected me from their hate, and healed what their judgment broke. Today I step off the field as my full self.

THE ANTI-GAY CAMPAIGN OF 2023

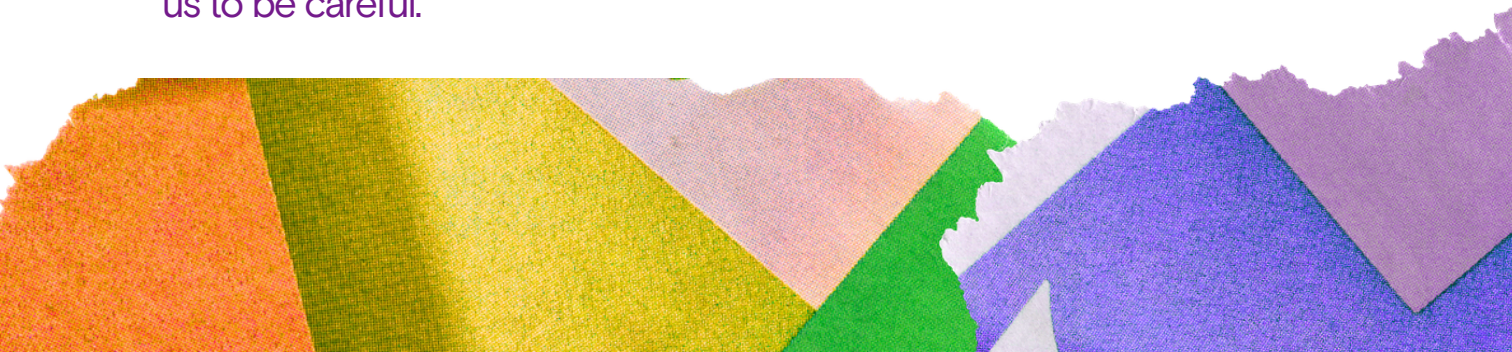
It was only after I came to Addis Ababa that I realized there were other people fighting the same struggle as me. When I started using social media and meeting people, I understood that this wasn't just my unique curse. Finding someone to talk to brought me great comfort and helped me calm down. Before that, I had no one to talk to about this. The people I met on social media stayed by my side until I left the country, even during the "We Oppose Homosexuality!" campaign. That period was so difficult for our community, especially for those of us women with a masculine expression. Nevertheless, compared to the isolation I felt back in the province, Addis Ababa was much better for finding friends and people to talk to. By the same token, because there were many closed-minded people with distorted perceptions and hatred toward our identity, we were easily targeted.

During the "Anti-Gay" campaign that arose in 2023, we spent the months of July and August living in terror. Because of my clothing and masculine demeanor, as I described earlier, I couldn't even work. There were people who would stop me on the street and ask, "Are you a lesbian?" It reached a point where I couldn't even sit in a café with my female friends. There were people who would say, "She is like this, she will do this to you... stay away from her so she doesn't ruin you." There were even those who hurled ugly insults and tried to pick fights. Although I didn't suffer physical harm, I endured severe mental and psychological abuse.

"I lost my freedom. I became paranoid, thinking people were calling me when they weren't, and hearing footsteps behind me. My mind was completely shattered."

-JAMZEE

Once, we met up after work to celebrate a friend's birthday. While we were hanging out and talking in a lounge, five or six large-built men were sitting next to us. After a while, the waitress waited for me to go to the restroom and told my friend that she heard the men planning to beat me up, warning us to be careful.



All of this was purely because of how I dressed; it wasn't because I had done anything else or because they definitively knew I was a lesbian. My friend was also a lesbian, but we had nothing more than a platonic friendship. By chance, there were other men sitting near us, who saved my life, but those guys were waiting for me to leave so they could hurt me.

Eventually, one of them came over, sat at our table without permission, and started advising my friend that I was a lesbian and that she should stay away from me, otherwise I would "corrupt" her. Even though my friend was a lesbian too, her dressing style was conventionally feminine, so he didn't suspect her at all; instead, he began speaking against me in front of everyone. My friend warned him not to talk about things he knew nothing about and tried to get him to leave, but he just became more stubborn and aggressive.

I was terrified at that moment, so to calm him down and leave peacefully, I asked him gently what he had seen me doing to accuse me like this. At that moment, men from another table came over and confronted him, telling him it was wrong to accuse someone based on false information. They demanded, "Did you see them kissing or doing something inappropriate? We haven't seen anything unusual, what are you trying to do to them?" When they challenged him, he returned to his seat in anger. Nonetheless, we didn't want to leave before they did, so we stayed there until 3:00 AM. Only after the waitress confirmed they had left did we call a private taxi and head to our respective homes.



“ No matter how heavy the sky looks or how close the rain feels, I remind myself that freedom begins the moment you stop being afraid of the storm. Birds don't wait for perfect weather to spread their wings, and neither will I.

Another time, wearing shorts and a hoodie like anyone else, I left a bank and was nearing my house when some men stopped me on the street and asked, "Why do you dress like this?" I told them that because I am an athlete, other clothes are uncomfortable for me. Since the "Anti-Gay" protests were happening during that time, everyone was watching their surroundings like a hawk. So, instead of arguing and defending myself, I was ready to just nod and say, "Yes, you are right." When one asked if I had a boyfriend, I blindly but confidently replied, "Should I call him so you can talk to him?" At that point, he calmed down, "advised" me saying, "Just don't dress like this, be like a woman," and let me go.

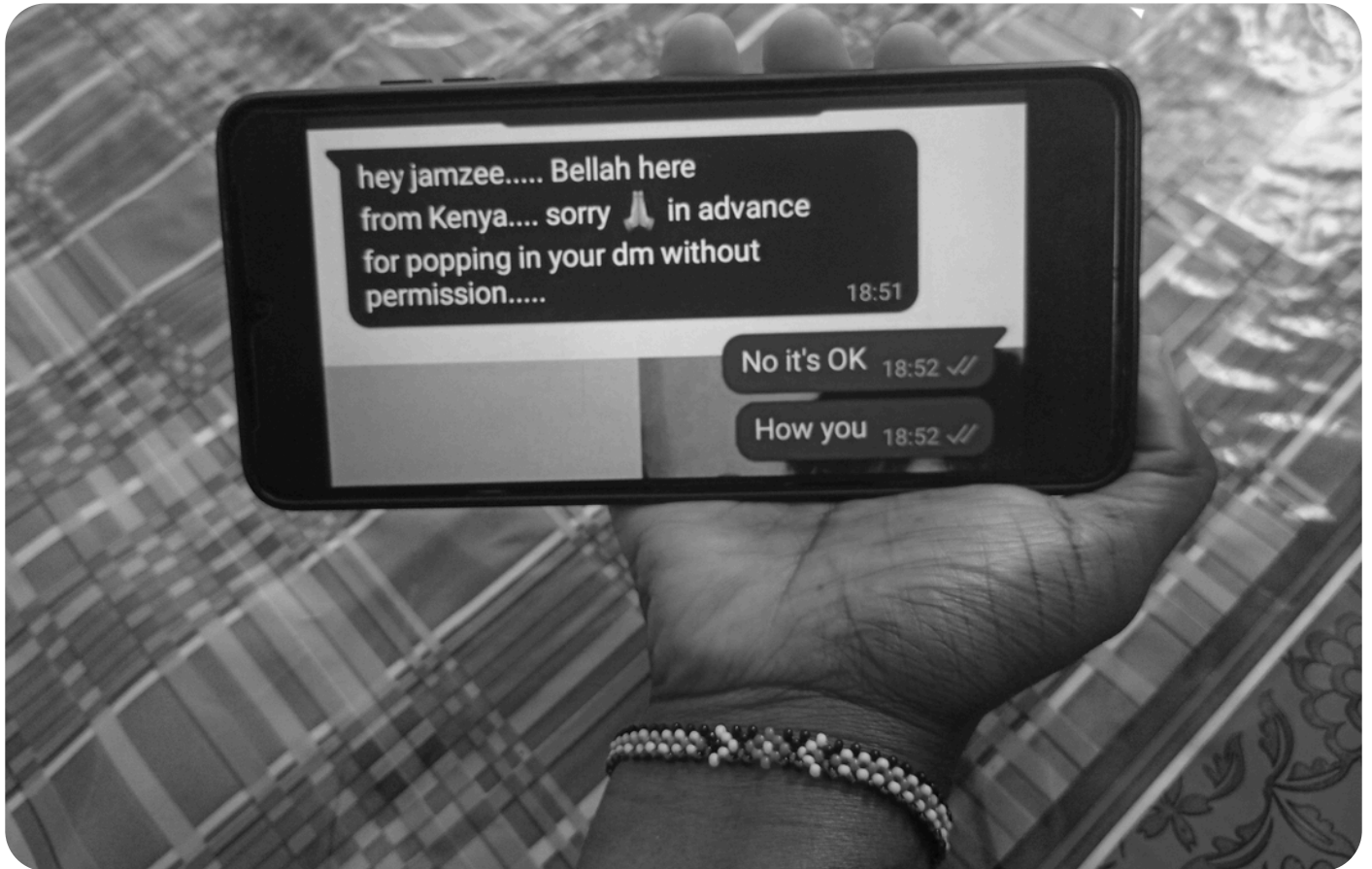
I don't even know how I made it home that day; it felt like my soul was about to leave my body out of fear. After that, whenever I walked on the street, I would look left and right like a thief. I lost my freedom. I became paranoid, thinking people were calling me when they weren't, and hearing footsteps behind me. My mind was completely shattered. It was after this that I told my current girlfriend, whom I had been talking to on Whatsapp, about what happened. She told me, "If you can somehow make it to Kenya, leave the rest to me." Spurred by those words alone, I left the country during that wave of hatred.

Leaving my country behind due to these hardships and coming here to Kenya gave me my freedom. When I hold the hand of the person I love on the street, when I speak loudly about same-sex relationships, when I play music that represents me on a speaker, and when I see that there is no one insulting me, chasing me, or looking at me like a freak, I realize even more that I have found a place where I can live my identity freely. I am very free now. It has been almost four years since I arrived.

"If you can somehow make it to Kenya, leave the rest to me. Spurred by those words alone, I left the country during that wave of hatred."

- JAMZEE





“ I met her through a queer Whatsapp group. And this is the Dm that changed **everything**.



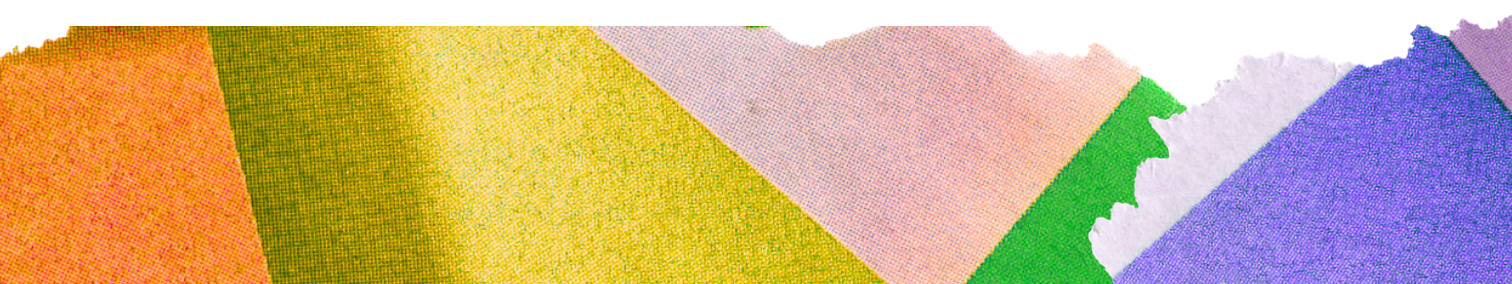
“ I may not have everything figured out, but under these trees... I find myself again. I talk to nature because it understands what people refuse to.

ACCEPTING SELF, FREEDOM, AND FINDING LOVE

For me, my identity is my strength. When I was in Ethiopia, besides being lonely, I used to ask myself if I was sick or what was wrong with me. Because in the provincial town where I grew up, there was no one like me or if there was, I didn't know them. Since I had no one to talk to, I felt isolated. And because this feeling had been with me since childhood, I considered it a problem. The thought of "Why only me?" used to torment me. But when I went to Addis Ababa and saw that there were many people like me living relaxed and accepting themselves, I came to believe that love has no gender. However, Addis Ababa was just a place to realize what freedom looks like, not a place to actually be free.

In our society, finding a romantic partner is another headache, and accepting yourself is a struggle of its own. You live thinking about many things, conflicting with yourself: Am I not normal? Why do only I feel this way? After passing through all that anxiety and finally meeting your peers, finding the right person, building trust, and staying together in love requires another huge struggle and a stroke of luck. When looking for a partner, first of all, who can you trust? Even on social media, we hide ourselves; most people talk to you using fake accounts and identities. Many are wolves in sheep's clothing, pretending to be like us just to attack us. For these reasons, finding a good, compatible person was difficult. You start your romantic desires on Facebook, but you can't end them there; you have to take a step forward, and that carries its own responsibility. In fact, you might even think that the internal struggle to accept yourself is better than looking for a partner, not because self-acceptance is easy, but if we have to compare, the struggle for self-acceptance is far more pleasant!

The hardest thing in the queer community, in my opinion, is finding the person you love and can call yours. Other problems are not as exaggerated; even if they exist, they are the typical issues found between heterosexual couples. There is no unique problem created just because we are of the same sex.



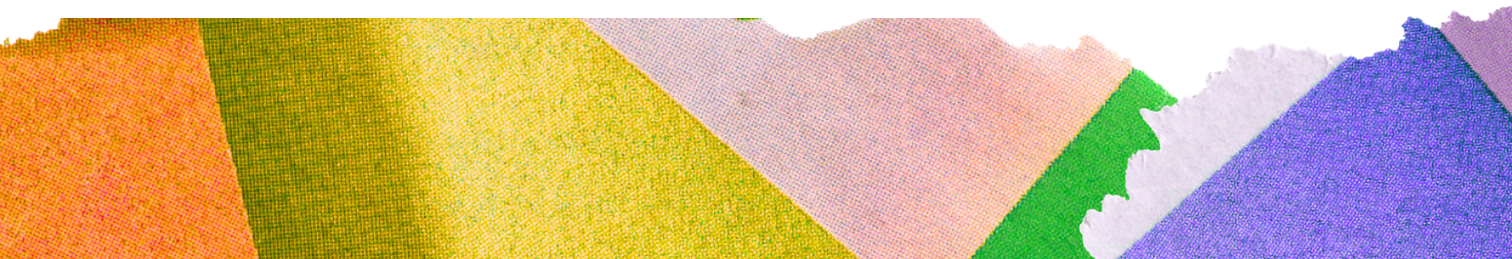
LIFE IN EXILE

Since leaving Ethiopia, my life has seen both bad and good changes. In terms of freedom, back in Ethiopia, I could only talk about this matter inside my house with the music turned up high. Here, I can speak freely and be myself. No one tracks you or ostracizes you as long as you don't interfere in their personal business.

My only problem here is financial. Because we don't have IDs or work permits, and we aren't citizens, it is difficult to find a good job and income. We survive from month to month scraping by from here and there. Back home, I could at least work and support myself, but I didn't have freedom. In Kenya, it was only this year that some work tailored for the queer community started, allowing us to earn a small income.

I suffered a lot during my first two years; I was homeless on the streets. I didn't know anyone, and there was a language barrier. If you don't know Swahili, it's hard to communicate because most people do not speak English. There were no jobs either. Over time, by searching here and there, I got used to the country and started doing whatever work was available.

When I was on the streets, I used to do trash disposal and various manual labor alongside men. While nothing happened to me based on my sexual identity, as a woman, I faced attempted rapes, which left me with long-lasting anxiety and fear. In order to survive and work, the responsibility fell on me to cleverly outsmart my potential attackers. I had to pass it off by joking around, pretending to be like a brother to them. Thank God nothing worse happened, but the threats and attempts of violence were real. Sleeping peacefully was difficult. And when I didn't sleep, my body and mind would be exhausted during the day. So, while it wasn't directly linked to my identity, indirectly, the lack of employment and financial independence made me vulnerable to sexual violence. If I hadn't been driven out of my country because of who I am, I wouldn't have become poor in search of freedom, nor would I have put my womanhood at risk. In my country, I was a government employee working in Human Resources. Here, I am a manual laborer. Since it is a sacrifice I paid for my identity, I am not bitter, but it breaks my heart that I couldn't live with freedom and acceptance within my own society.





“ Not trash but survival. Not easy but it was necessary. Kenya tested me but I didn't break. I carried more than bags. I carried my survival.



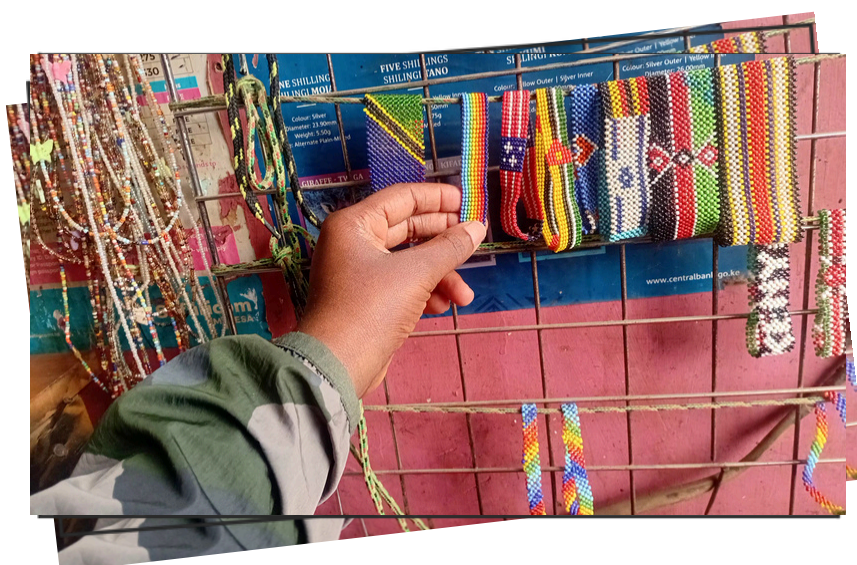
“ I didn't have much, but I had discipline. Every coin I saved was a promise to my future. This wasn't just a box it was my hope, my struggle, my silent plan for a better tomorrow.

MEANING OF HOME

To me, home means freedom, a place where I can be whoever I want without hiding my identity. In this regard, Kenya has become my home. Kenyans are hospitable just like Ethiopians; the way we care for foreigners back home is how they treat us here. I have found a sense of community. They don't ask where you came from; wherever you are from, they welcome you. Especially when you tell them you are Ethiopian, they get very happy. I have a good relationship with the community; they love us and we love them. They respect me and I respect them.

I still love my country and my people; I don't blame everyone. I know my people for their kindness. When I moved from the province to Addis Ababa and rented a place, I never went to bed on an empty stomach. Those who are homophobic act out of a lack of awareness about the issue, not out of malice. I don't blame them all. There are many who mind their own business, living without violating human rights. Of course, the rest think, "She is going to touch our women." Just because I love women doesn't mean I love all women; I have choices. I don't just go around touching people's wives, sisters, or mothers. I have morals and I have religion. How many fathers are there who are heterosexual but rape their own children? There is no behavioral defect that comes with loving the same sex. There are only fundamental human flaws that can occur in anyone, regardless of their sexual orientation.

People just exaggerated our situation. It's not like they don't sin in other ways; they just refuse to accept a sin that is different from theirs. To begin with, love is not a sin, promiscuity is. I have the right to give my own body to the person I love. There are many other things in Ethiopia that truly deserve to be forbidden and stopped. But despite all that, I love my country, my family, and my people. Even though I don't hate it, it is not the place I long for or call my home right now. For now, my home is Kenya, where I found my freedom.





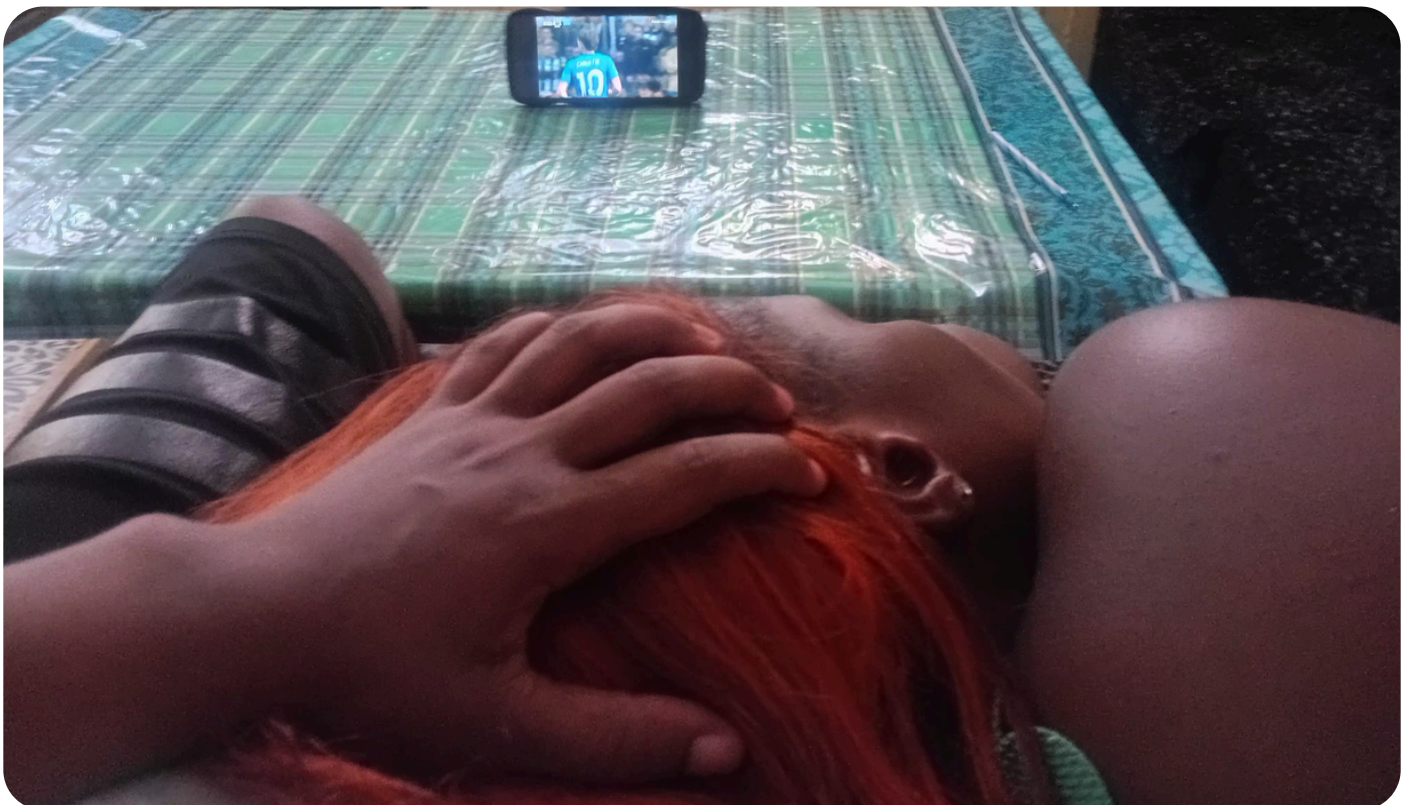
OUR QUEER LOVE LIFE

My partner and I started talking as close friends while I was still in Ethiopia. We started living together when she left her parents' house in Nairobi for my sake, moved to a smaller town, got a job, and rented a house. We used to be just friends; I never thought we would end up together. But God willed it, and we became a couple. We had conflicts along the way, but we overcame them to get where we are today. We faced many trials; we spent days without food due to financial problems. At one point, she left her job and I didn't have one, which caused friction between us. On top of that, she didn't want me to go out and work; she would get jealous when I did. But I came to this country not just for freedom, but to change my life. I didn't want to sit around depending on someone else. So, we cried, split up, and I returned to Nairobi looking for better opportunities. After I came here, she didn't know where I was, and I didn't tell her. After seven months, she searched and found me. Because love existed between us, we got back together. Since I had worked a bit and rented a house, we started living together again.

Now, even though we have resolved our past issues, whether we have money or not, we are together. We are both working, her mother has accepted us, and we are living our lives. We spend most of our time together. We have a child; she was a single mother. When we got together, our son was only one year old, and now he is four. When she goes to work, I take care of him, and when I go, she does. Since he has known me since infancy, he sees me as his mother and loves me. He calls me "Mom." If God permits, we would love to add one more child.



“ Helping my son with his homework. I often teach him about the power of self love.



“ In a world that rejects us, we create our own safe space. Home isn't a place... it's her, it's us, it's this watching my favourite football 🏈 with my favourite person ❤️

We spend our Sundays going to church together. After lunch, we go to parks or brew coffee at home, cooking and eating either Ethiopian and Kenyan food. We love each other very much; occasional conflicts are inevitable, but that's normal. To be honest, I draw my strength from our love, our child, my wife, my mother, and my faith. I still talk to my mother, and I strictly hold on to my Orthodox Christian faith.

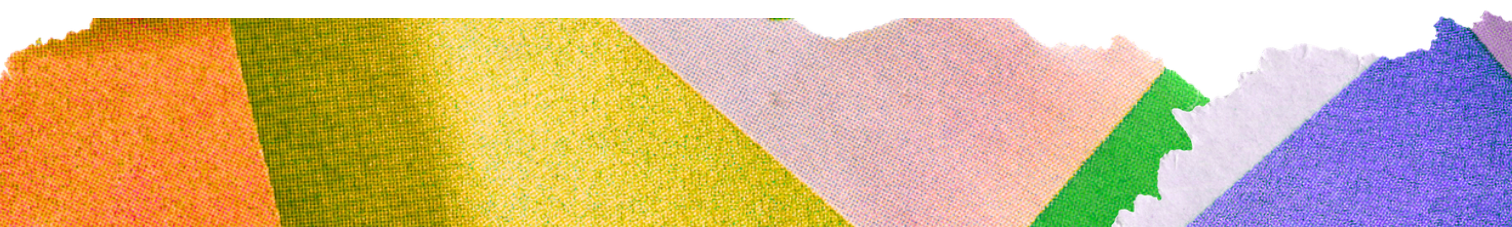
FUTURE GOALS

In the future, I plan to start a business; I have already started the process to get an ID. When this succeeds, I will be able to say I am standing on my own two feet. To me, success means when I stop asking people for help, and go beyond just looking at others' hands to a level where I can support my family and others. But beyond that, I believe I have already achieved the greatest success. I believe accepting myself is my biggest achievement, and it makes me prouder than anything. Because someone who hasn't accepted themselves cannot be of use to anyone else, let alone themselves.

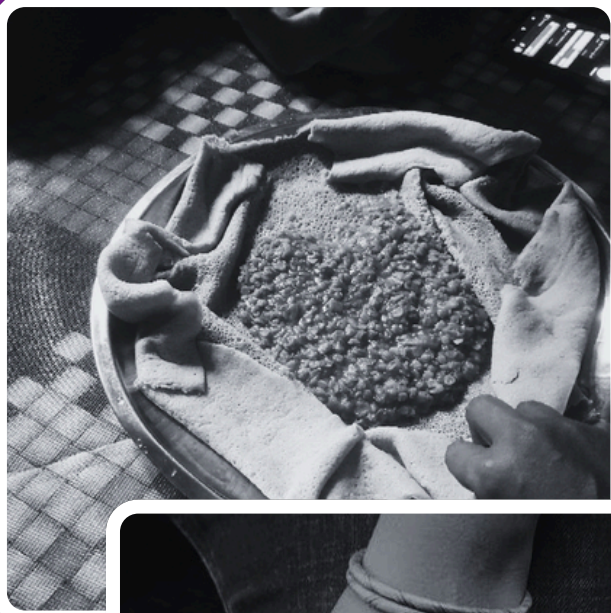
MESSAGE TO MY PEOPLE

The message I want to convey to my fellow Ethiopians is that there is no society as compassionate, kind, and caring as ours. Because we know what it feels like to be rejected, we do not reject others. I want the Ethiopian people to know this. Moreover, I wish they could learn cooperation and unity from us, small as we are. We are an example of good, not bad as we are labeled. Even if they don't accept us, I would be happy if they just respected our identity.

To my compatriots who are in the same situation, I say: Be strong. You are not sick. This is our nature. You are not sinners either. God loves us, so let us love ourselves, accept ourselves, and have self-confidence. Stand firm; the time when we will stand and testify in front of people is not far away. Until that good time arrives, let us pass through the hard times together in unity. Let us pray according to our faith. Everything has its time. Patience with oneself is necessary. Even in the darkest hours, knowing that this is our nature and accepting ourselves with grace is key. It is good to know that love has no gender, religion, or age.



HELEN AND GRACE



“

Where I stand is not a point of confusion, a middle ground, or a phase.



But our gain is that you and I will be together.

The most important thing is making a decision, accepting oneself, and living with trust and faith in the person you love. When I found Helu, she became my world because she had made her choice; she had nothing to look back on.

EXPRESSIONS OF IDENTITY

Helen: What I describe as my identity, or my defining characteristic, is my same-sex attraction, it is what I have accepted and what I am proud of.

Grace: I define my identity by saying that I am a cautious, special individual who knows exactly what her inner self desires. For me, being queer is a pure identity. Just as any heterosexual person did not search for or intentionally bring about their orientation, my being queer is not something I practiced and acquired; it is what nature gave me.

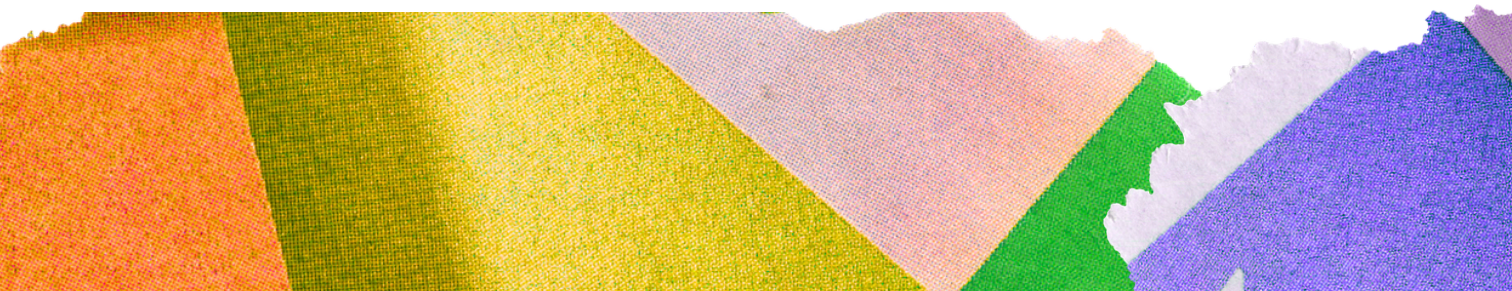
Helen: I won't lie, I used to struggle with my identity. There was even a time when I thought about drinking bleach. Accepting your identity was not easy; it makes you collide with so many things. Because I lacked a proper understanding of the matter, I went through a lot of anxiety and self-hatred. As I grew older and gained knowledge about my feelings, accepting myself and my nature brought a massive change. Above all, accepting myself brought me mental rest, peace, and self-love.

SELF-DISCOVERY: TRANSFORMING YESTERDAY INTO TODAY

Grace: After I realized that I had distinct feelings toward women, it used to conflict with my spiritual life. I would analyze my feelings by comparing what I felt with attractions toward women versus men. I labored over reading the Bible to prove to myself that I wasn't a sinner. By researching our community, reading literature about us, and studying myself, I improved my essence in many ways. So, looking back at where I started, I have come a long way; there is a lot of change.

Helen: Accepting myself is something I paid a heavy price for, and it involved reconciling with myself after being at odds until I believed and accepted it as my nature. I will not look back. Now, I have fully accepted myself. Where I stand is not a point of confusion, a middle ground, or a phase. It is real! I am in this place and in this identity because I have accepted it and believe in it.

Grace: As I said, it is something I thought through and decided on. It has even led me to leave my mother behind. There is no turning back.



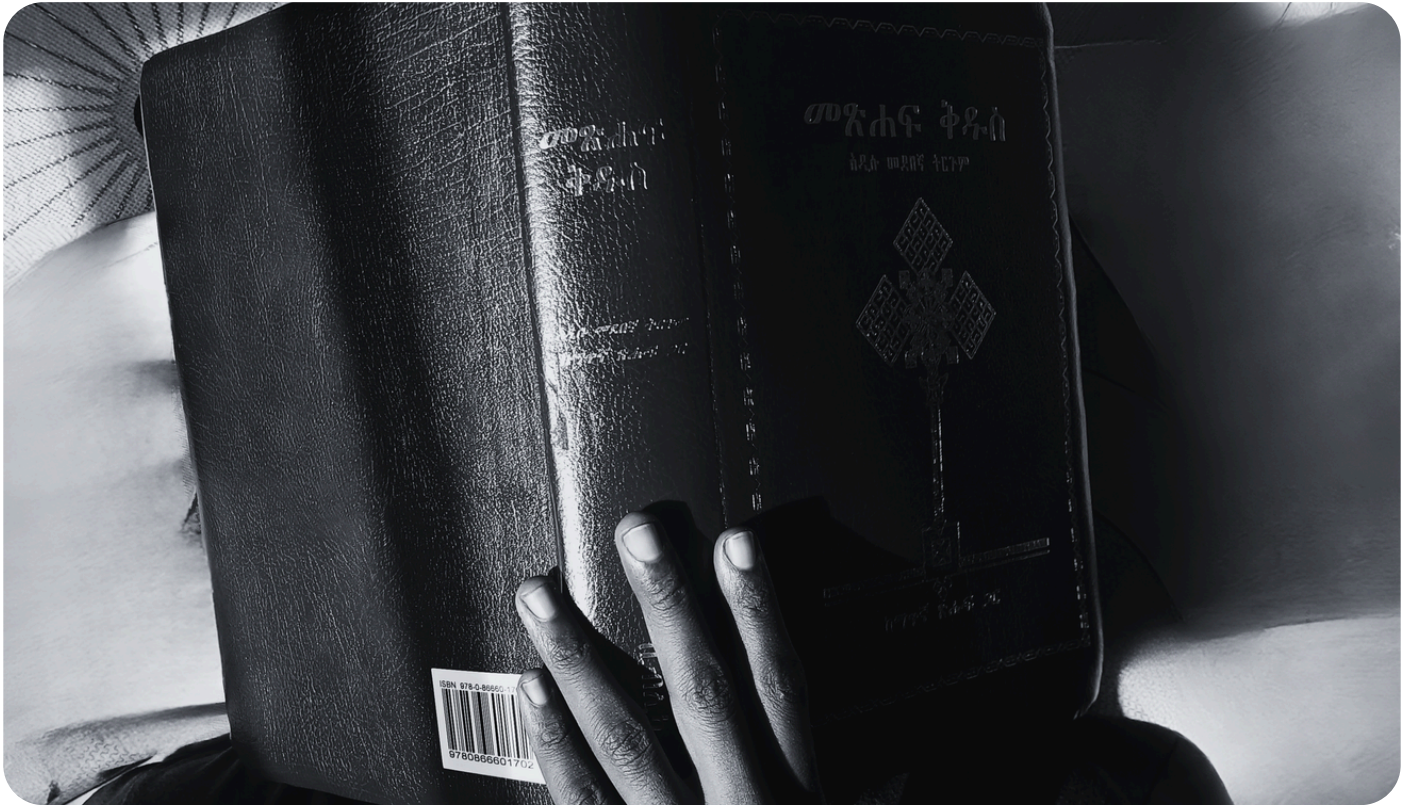
Helen: I first realized I loved women when I was in the seventh grade. I loved hands; seeing a woman with beautiful hands made me happy. There was a girl I loved back then who had very beautiful hands. We grew close as friends and grew up together. Because we used to walk home together, everyone knew her. When I finished high school, because of my desires, it became something I could no longer suppress or ignore. That was when I became completely sure about myself. But then, while knowing nothing about her feelings, I moved a bit too fast with her; she got scared and distanced herself. Sometime after that, I went to the Middle East for work. So, I can say I discovered it when I was young, but I truly accepted myself in my twenties.

Grace: After I started working, I was texting in the office one day with a former teacher of mine whom I always consulted whenever I felt anxious about various matters. She is the woman I turn to when I need answers for many things; she is not only open-minded but also spiritual and mature. I value her judgment because I believe she weighs things well and tells me what is right. That day, when I asked her, "How is entering into a same-sex relationship viewed from the perspective of religious salvation?" she laughed out loud and surprised me, making me laugh too, by saying, "A person reborn in Jesus would just become a 'saved lesbian!'" That gave me immense relief. She reassured me that it is not a sin, that just like any other love, our love is love.

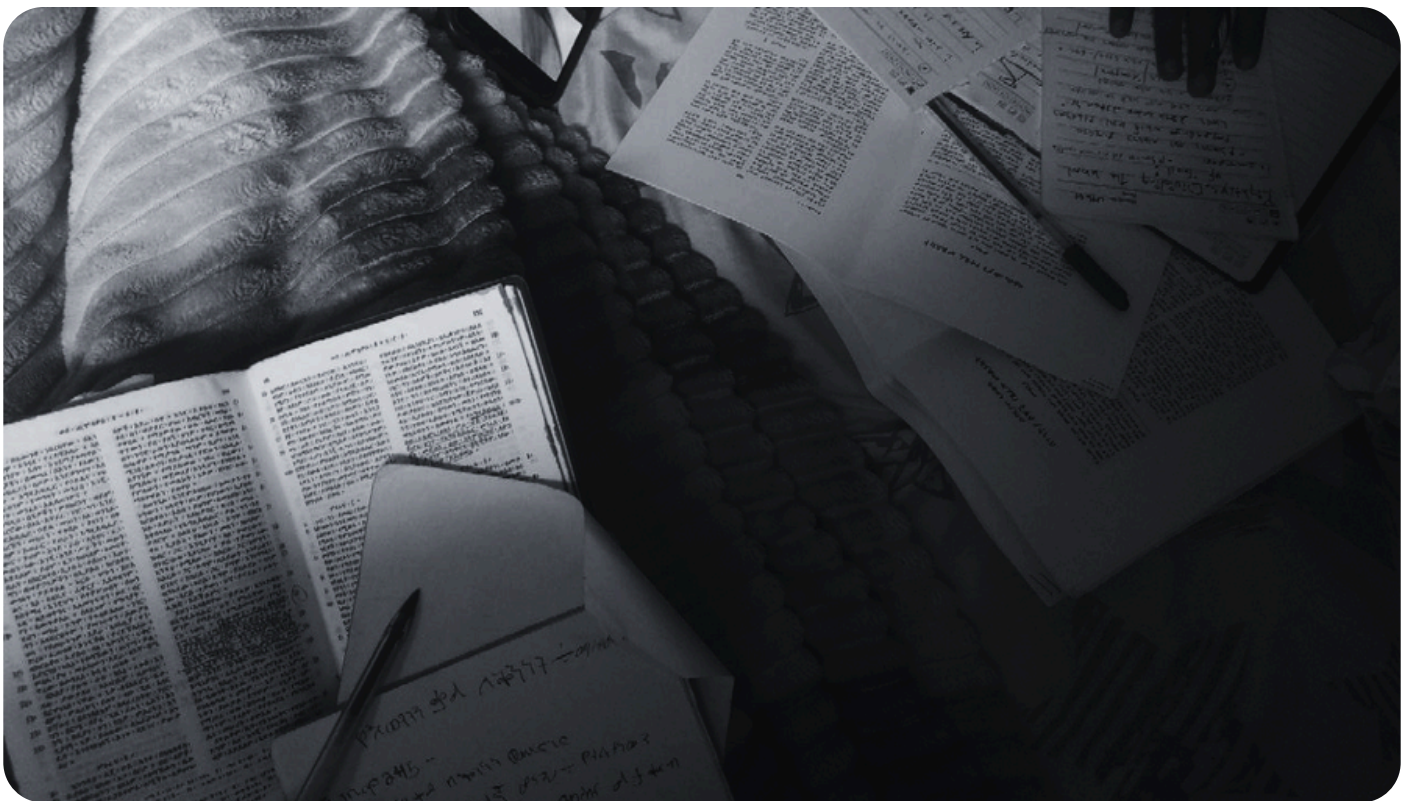
Terrified, I told her, "You know, I am like that." Without getting shocked, she pulled up Helen's photo, which I had set as my profile picture on Telegram, and asked, "Is it her?" I said, "Yes." Even though I used to kiss her on the lips every time we said goodbye, she had assumed I was like that with everyone and never suspected a thing. Knowing the men I had been with before, she asked, "What about the guys?" I told her that I had tried but couldn't do it, and that it wasn't who I was. We still talk to this day; she is my good friend and mentor.

Helen: To accept yourself, you must first reconcile with your Creator. If you reconcile with Him, reconciling with yourself won't be difficult. And if you are at peace with yourself, the pressure that comes from family or society will not shake your stance, because your foundation is your God.





“ Every morning, I open this book not because life is easy, but because my soul needs hope and strength. - Grace



“ In our home, we learn from, listen to, and feed on the living and everlasting Word of God. To those who may think we lack faith: God was with us when we were created, and He remains with us today. - Helen

"Didn't He create me? I don't think He is ashamed of His own work."

-HELEN

To be honest, I was completely alone in this. I had no one to talk to. The people around me would occasionally ask questions out of suspicion, but no one knew about me openly, and I didn't dare talk to anyone. I only started talking freely after I met Grace. My background is Muslim; I am someone who studied the Quran. In the past, I used to pray to talk to my God, but then I would argue with Him, saying, "Then again, You won't accept me either." But after that, I would comfort and calm myself by thinking, "Didn't He create me? I don't think He is ashamed of His own work."

Since I grew up around many Protestant friends, I used to listen to a lot of gospel songs from childhood. Having gone through that, the Lord sent me Grace, and I started asking her to take me to church. Of course, when Ramadan came, because I couldn't bring myself to completely abandon Islam, I used to fast. But after we came here to Kenya, we went to visit a friend of ours who was sick. As it happened, everyone there was Protestant, so they felt comfortable. They cornered me right there (laughs)! They prayed for me, and I accepted the Lord. I hadn't made up my mind before, but my heart was already leaning toward it. Since Grace is strong in her faith, she guided me toward it. Now, I have started taking salvation classes.

THINKING OF LEAVING THE COUNTRY

Helen: Do you think there was ever a time I wasn't thinking about leaving the country? But there is one incident I will never forget. Before I knew Grace, there was a girl I knew who came from South Africa, and I was with her. One night, as we were getting a hotel room to stay overnight, some local guys followed us, calling out my name. They said things like, "What are you doing with her? She is like this." I will never forget how they disturbed us even after we went inside and locked the door on them.





“To be honest, we spend most of our days at home. We watch movies on our phones. It helps us kill time. We sometimes forget the movie and make love. - Helen



“ If there's one thing I never want my house to run out of, it's snacks and chocolate. Whenever I have money, they're the first groceries I buy. - Grace

I never knew anyone was tracking me to that extent. It was the hotel manager who kicked them out, asking, "Why are you disrupting my hotel?" They stood outside until late into the night, shouting, "Come out!" Eventually, the manager threatened them, and they left. At the time, the girl was completely confused and wanted to call the police. But knowing that our situation is not legally permitted in our country, I advised her against it, telling her police intervention was not necessary. That is a time I can never forget, and that was when I decided I couldn't stay in my country.

Grace: I made my decision while she was away working in the Middle East. When she returned, we didn't have a place to be together. My family was extremely strict; we lived in a house where we all gathered for dinner, and if someone was late, they were expected to account for it, with the phone ringing ten times. Staying out late or going out was unthinkable. Because of that, the only option was for her to stay with us, so she came to our house. When I went to work during the day, since staying home was boring for her, we would leave together; I would go to work, and she would spend the day wandering outside. Being at work and thinking about her outside killed me with anxiety. Our destiny became a chaotic mess. We didn't want to be apart for a single second; we sought each other out in every way—our bodies, our spirits, even our hair wanted to be together.



The environment, however, was hostile to us being together. It began to raise questions within my family. As the oldest child, the topic of marriage kept coming up. My family noticed that there was no man around me, only her, and because they knew my every move, they knew there wasn't a single man around, so our situation began to spark suspicion. I couldn't build a life under their control. Even when I came here to Kenya, I lied and told them I was going to Canada; if my mother had known it was an African country, it would have killed her. She told me, "You will walk over my dead body to leave," but I convinced her that going to Canada via Kenya would be easier, and that's how I came.

We paid a price to be together. We sat down, talked, and made a decision. On the final day, I told her: "Helu, we have decided now. We have gathered information. The process might take one year or ten years. We might face hardships, we might go hungry, we might get sick, and we might die. But our gain is that you and I will be together."

BEING QUEER IN KENYA

Grace: I think the first time we faced trouble due to our identity was at the airport. Our luggage was held back, and a female employee confronted us with intense questioning. She harassed us, saying, "Either you are trying to flee the country, or the two of you have some sort of relationship." I had already passed through, but when she got held back, I returned. They asked, "How did you get in?" locked us inside a room, and locked our luggage too. She insisted on seeing the papers we had inside. Since we had some queer materials with us, we were terrified, thinking, We are done for today. It was God who intervened, covering for us and transferring us to another officer. He passed us through without making a big deal out of it like the first woman did. I can say we were a little lucky.

When we arrived in Nairobi, we spoke to a driver and went downtown. Whether he thought we had money or just realized we were new, he charged us an exaggerated price, something we only realized later. On top of that, he checked us into a room that cost 5,000 Shillings. We didn't know anyone, and we didn't even have anyone to ask whether the price was expensive or cheap.



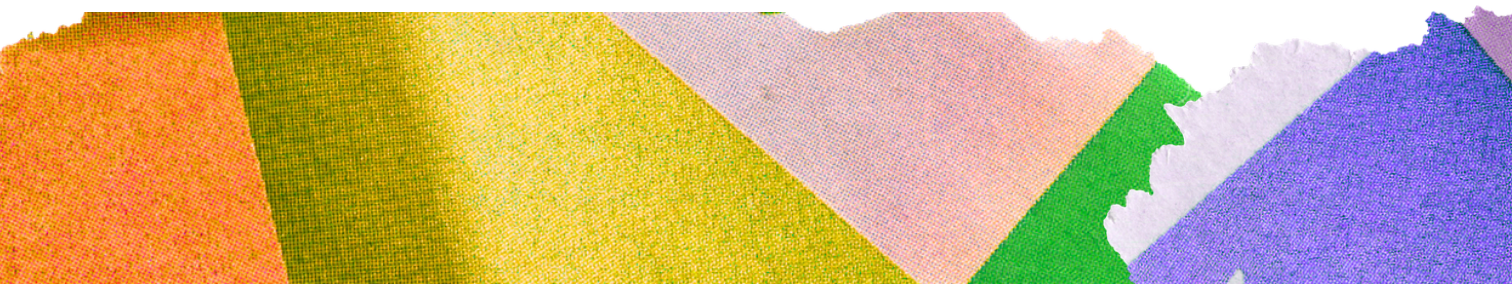
All we knew was that after paying that 5,000 Shillings, we didn't have a single cent left. The last time we had eaten was breakfast before we set out; we spent the whole day on an empty stomach. When we got off, we asked the taxi drivers to take us to a neighborhood where Ethiopians lived, and they quoted us 1,500 Shillings, a distance that shouldn't even cost 30 Shillings. They saw we were new and tried to rip us off. Since we didn't have that kind of money at the time, we left them and just started searching the streets, hoping to find an Ethiopian. We even had a single bedsheet with us, thinking that if we had to sleep on the street, we would wrap ourselves in it. Until then, we agreed to walk around and look for Ethiopians.

By chance, we spotted two Ethiopian men. Overjoyed, we stopped them and asked for directions. They broke the bad news to us, asking, "Why did you come at this time? There is no registration happening right now." But since we had already arrived, we asked if they could direct us to where the Ethiopians lived. They paid 300 Shillings for our fare and sent us off, telling us to go to Jamhuri or the Medhane Alem Church in the Ethiopian neighborhood, where they would give us water and a place to stay.

When we reached Jamhuri and started seeing people wearing traditional Ethiopian Netela scarves, we felt as happy as if we were back home. We found a hotel with its name written in Amharic, went in, and sat down. Since Helu is a bit more outgoing than me, she struck up a conversation. After telling them our story, she asked where Kakuma refugee camp was located. Before leaving our country, we had agreed that if we found work, great; if not, we would go to Kakuma.

Helen: One of the women listening to us there said, "Why on earth would girls like you go to Kakuma?" At that time, we still looked healthy and fresh since we had just left home; we hadn't withered yet (laughs). When she told us, "You will start working here with me," we couldn't believe it. She added, "I am about to open a bar, so one of you will work as a waitress, and we will find something else for the other." We said God had helped us.

Grace: That night, for accommodation, they introduced us to a man who acted aggressive, and indecent person the moment we saw him. When they told us we would stay with him, we agreed, thinking he was a fellow countryman from Addis Ababa. But he was restless.





“ Wearing matching shoes or clothes is something I really love because it reflects love. It shows care and togetherness, and it makes me feel trust, freedom, and a sense of closeness and familiarity with the person I love. - Helen



“ As the Scripture says, ‘A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife.’ My spouse and I are united just like that, in body, spirit, and mind. There is no limit to how much I love her. 😊” - Grace

"If anything happens, let's make sure we hear each other. Let's not lose consciousness completely; let's watch out for one another."

-GRACE

He spun us around all day. Night eventually fell, and he took us to his house. I was told, "Take a shower; you start work tomorrow." We left Helu's situation to God. Then, he opened some alcohol, insisting we must drink to celebrate that night. Since we were in someone else's house and had found a job on our very first day, we agreed and started drinking moderately. But I talked a little and then fell fast asleep right where I was; I was exhausted and couldn't fight it. Helu, out of courtesy, stayed up a bit to converse with him, thinking it would be rude to just sleep. However, right when we started drinking, we had agreed: "If anything happens, let's make sure we hear each other. Let's not lose consciousness completely; let's watch out for one another."

Helen: Then the guy's demeanor began to change. He tried to grab me. We were strangers to the country and the house, and I tried to soothe him so as not to ruin the opportunity we had just found. I told him to stop, but he completely ignored me and started pulling at my pajamas. Suddenly, Grace jumped up! She leaped and locked his neck in her elbow. Because he had been drinking, he had no strength, thank God. Seeing her, my courage surged, and we confronted him. We told him, "We will kill you and rot in jail, nothing else will happen to us!" All his drunkenness vanished out of sheer shock. He kept saying, "Okay, okay, okay!"

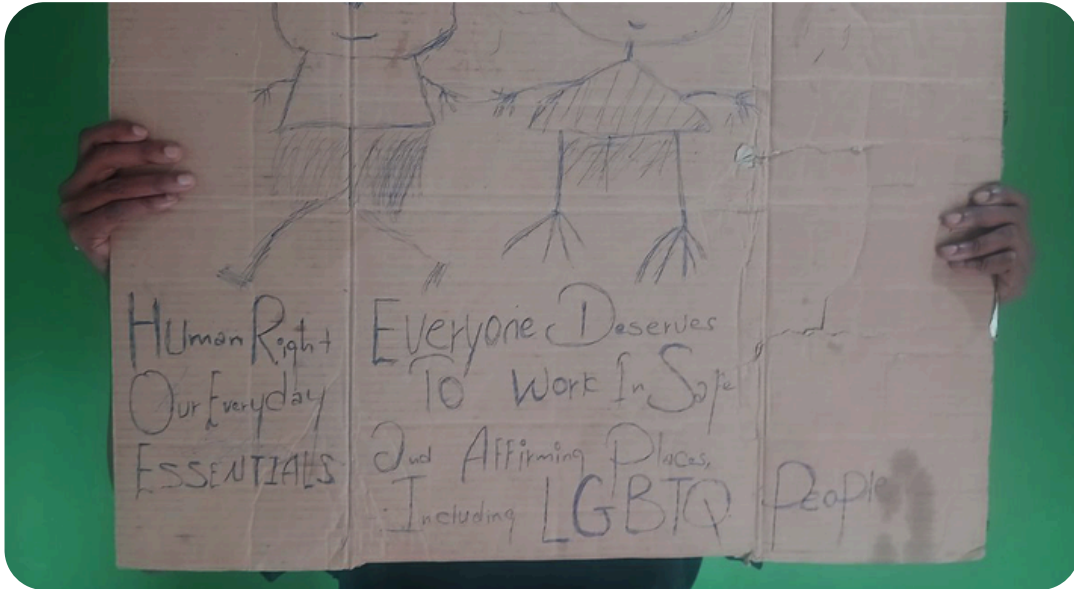
Grace: After that, I wrapped my arms around my wife and went to sleep, and morning eventually came. That evening, as I was about to start work, I told the manager that I wouldn't leave Helu alone with that man. I said, "If she can't come, I will quit the job." She told me not to worry and let Helu stay at her female friend's house. That was the first time we slept in separate places. On my second day of work, Helu started making coffee during the day at that same place. God loved us and brought us together, but the struggle never ends, does it?



Because my work was at night, the men kept harassing me and making it impossible to work. They would challenge me, asking, "Who do you think you are? What makes you different from the others?" Because I am hot-headed, I couldn't just smile and pass over things that others brushed off. The owner would defend me, but it became too difficult. To make matters worse, a male coworker made things even harder. One night, he flat out demanded, "Kiss me." I replied, "I would rather lose everything than kiss you." He arrogantly said, "If that's the case, I will ruin your job." I told him, "Do whatever you want." Just as he threatened, on my third month of work, the owner called me, handed me my salary, and said, "You are dismissed." Because he was the husband's right-hand man, his word actually mattered. In the first month, they had already cut my salary because they thought my tips exceeded my income, and then they dismissed me over this.

Helen: After that, we had to survive on a single income. Our rent was exactly the amount of my salary, even though we were living in a house with a shared living room. Getting income for other necessities became very difficult. Following that, Grace found two similar jobs, but men wouldn't let her work due to harassment, so she would leave. Just by being a woman, let alone a beautiful one, harassment is inevitable, isn't it? On top of that, they didn't allow us to be together; they ruined our unity and care for each other. They monitored us to the point where we couldn't even feed each other or eat together. We are a couple who had never eaten without sharing food, and they made us miserable. They became like a mini-Ethiopia to us, robbing us of our freedom, love, and peace. From our landlord onwards, people started tracking us, asking, "How can you be this attached to each other? What are you to be this close?" On the flip side, there were those who praised us, saying we were well-mannered girls from Addis Ababa who didn't mix with men. But the negative attention from the others grew worse; tracking us became their entire occupation. Our landlady was incredibly jealous of our devotion to each other; she would even cry. Eventually, she ordered us to leave the house because of suspicion. Moreover, people don't just leave you alone; they want to study you. If they hear you are from Addis Ababa, they try to investigate: "Which neighborhood? Which school did you go to? Who do you know?"





“ What I meant by this is that, like any other Ethiopian, we also deserve to have security, to speak and express ourselves freely, to have our dignity protected, to be treated equally, and to live without fear. - Helen



“ I am Ethiopian. I am queer. I am a born-again Christian. I say all three of these with pride. ❤️🏳️‍🌈🇪🇹 The passport in my hand shows my citizenship; the identity in my heart tells the world who I am. Even if there is no community that supports or accepts my identity, I am still Ethiopian. No one can take away my Ethiopian identity, my ability to love myself, or my right to accept who I am and live authentically. One day, I hope to see an Ethiopia where every person can live the truth of who they are without fear. - Grace



LIFE IN THE SHELTER

Grace: You are supposed to give a one-month notice before leaving a rented house, right? When we began the shelter process, we told our landlady that we would move out the following month. On our final day, we were sleeping in late when suddenly our door was violently pounded on. Startled, we woke up wondering what was happening. Our landlady was standing there, shouting, "Come out! It's been known all along that you are lesbians! We were terrified. We packed whatever we had and went into the shelter.

Once there, it didn't take us long to realize it was a place thoroughly organized for corruption. There were greedy people who lazagna in our name but wouldn't give us so much as a crust of bread. We told ourselves that as long as we had a roof over our heads, we could find food from anywhere. Fortunately, we had also started a process with an org to get business training. Luckily, in the first round, they gave us money without requiring an ID, and we used that money to start a coffee business. Even though we didn't have a formal permit, by God's will, we began working and earning a living.



Helen: When we first entered the shelter, we were told, "Food, Wi-Fi, everything is fully provided." But far from having food, we had to take 80 Shillings out of our own pockets just to buy flour to bake chapati. If that money hadn't arrived, we would have starved to death. We took over an empty house, completely empty! But it was far better than being stranded on the street. After staying in that condition for four months, the shelter owner's cousin, who was living as our roommate, told us that the sponsor money was insufficient for the owner. She said, "Since funding has stopped, contribute 600 Shillings each per month and give her 1,200 Shillings." We were afraid to say no or risk being evicted. We couldn't even ask, "Where are we supposed to bring it from?" because she knew about our business. So, we were forced to pay them 1,200 Shillings every month. If it had ended there, it would have been fine. But during the next two months, while we were struggling with food and rent, the electricity was cut off. The gates were locked against us, and with no one to open them, we had to start jumping over the perimeter wall to get home. To prevent the inside door of our house from being locked from the outside with another padlock, we jammed pieces of wood into it. We survived in the dark without the internet, charging our phones at our workplace. To make matters worse, the compound was overgrown with long grass and there were snakes; there was even a day one almost bit us. Everything was neglected, the compound was unkept and turned into a jungle, completely deserted and without electricity and water. We survived by buying water at 50 Shillings per jerrycan.

After all this, we left the shelter and moved to another place. We spent a month in that house, which was a mix of rest and anxiety. The rest came from having a good, secure home, but the anxiety came from having no income since we had closed our business to move. A coffee business is unthinkable in a place with no foot traffic; most of the residents were locals, so there was no work. Ironically, it was a very comfortable and safe place for our community. We found our freedom, but we lost our livelihood. The Ethiopians there didn't even number ten. Therefore, we had to change direction.





“ Pigeons and I... When I see pigeons here, they remind me of the ones I used to raise when I was in Ethiopia. Their colours, watching them fly, hearing their sound, it makes me happy. - Helen



“ One of our friends went to ethiopia to visit his family and I was sad that I can't do that. I would have loved to visit my friends and family. - Grace

EXILE AND LOVE

Helen: We first started talking on Instagram on September 26, 2021. Because her profile featured our flag, I sent her a direct message saying "Hi." She was online and replied immediately. We started chatting. When I sent her a photo on Snapchat, she said, "I want to see your real face," so I sent it. But when she sent her photo, I couldn't believe my eyes. She was incredibly beautiful.

Grace: I remember I was at a hair salon that day. I thought, That's it, I've found my wife. When she told me she was abroad, I felt a bit disappointed, but we kept talking. We spoke morning and night for about seven months. When she finally came back, I expected an older woman, and just as she told you, she couldn't believe it was me either and kept staring (laughs). We made our vows to each other and before God that very same day.

Helen: In the midst of missing each other terribly, I tried to bring her to where I was through the same agency I had used. When that failed, I couldn't bear it anymore. I hadn't even stayed a year; I cut my contract short and returned. My friends told me, "You've found a beautiful and faithful girl, why don't you get engaged?" With their help, we organized an event. Holding the Bible and the Quran, we exchanged rings upon my return. It actually caused trouble for her with her family. They asked her, "You've never worn a ring before, where did you bring this from?" To avoid arguments, she took it off and put it away. At the time, I was staying at her family's house. Because they were notoriously strict, the only time we could truly be together was at night when we went to sleep. We wouldn't even enter the bedroom before sleeping hours. During the day, when she went to work, I would leave with her and spend my day wandering outside until she finished. At night, we would head home together. We stayed in this condition for about a month, past my supposed return date. Her family thought I was just a friend visiting from abroad who would eventually leave. My own family told me, "If you don't return, we are done with you." Around that time, because I used to set her photo as my profile picture, my sister asked me, "Where did you bring this one from again?" When I told her, "She's someone I know from church," she let it pass, though she wasn't convinced. Because of this, I figured it was better to keep her in my heart than on my profile, so I removed her photo (laughs).

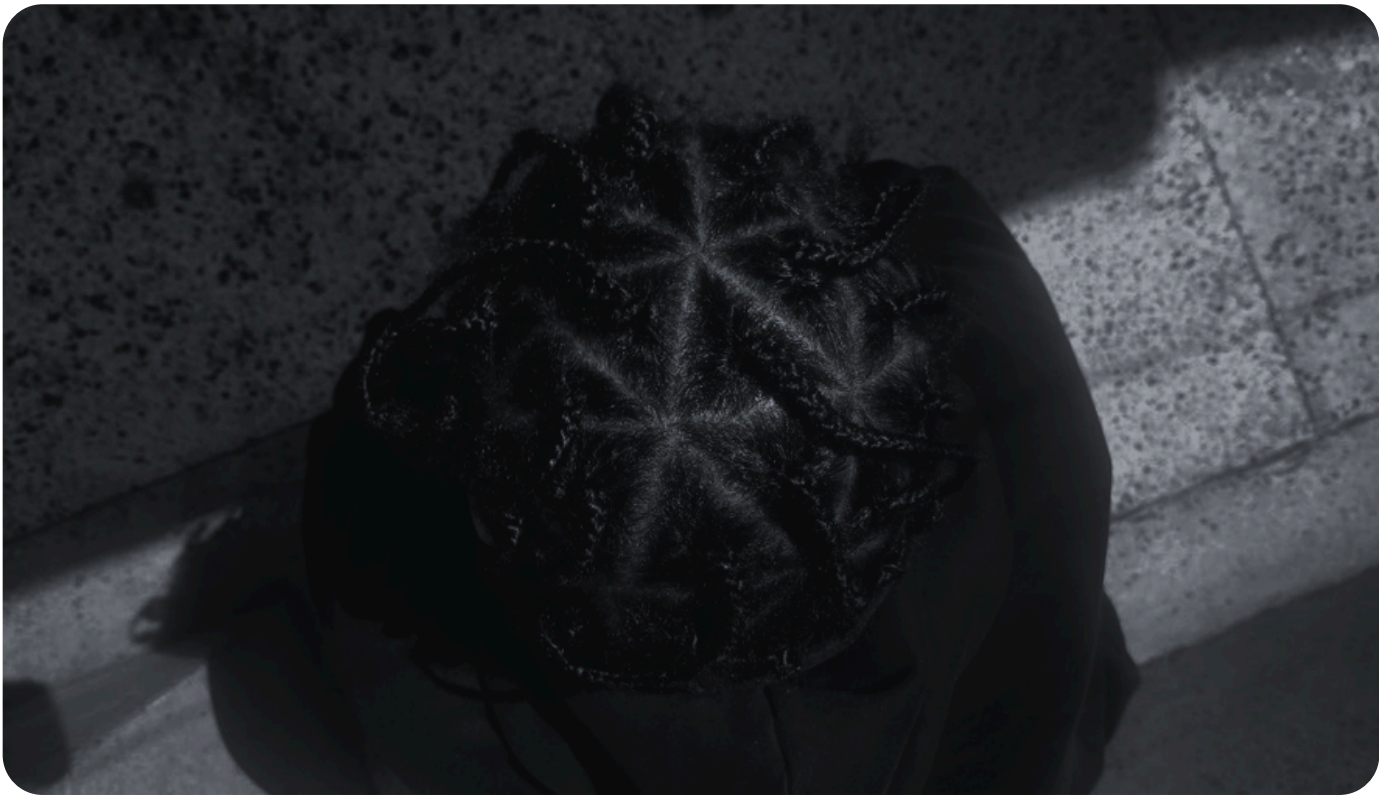


So, the deadline I gave for my return passed, and her sister began to suspect us. But separating was incredibly painful for us. One day, she told me, "Either leave or make a final decision and stay." I decided not to leave, packed up from my house, and moved into theirs. But then her family wouldn't let us be at peace either; my departure date became everyone's question. So, I started a new process to leave within ten days. She came to the airport to see me off. Once inside, I found myself unable to board the plane. I walked out twice; I just couldn't do it. We couldn't bear to separate. On the third time, she told me, "Make up your mind and don't drain us!" That time, I forced myself to leave. But I didn't even stay a month properly; she sent me a ticket and I returned. I told my family back home, "I fell sick and couldn't settle there." When we realized we couldn't live together in our country, and couldn't live apart abroad, we decided to flee to Kenya together.



Grace: I love Helu from the tips of my toes to the top of my head. Seeing all this hardship and passing through it together has only made me love her more and made us stronger. Right when we started our journey, I told her: "We will face many trials that could pull us apart, and very difficult times may come."





“ I love how she braids my hair for me that lasts a long time and. My one and only designer, everything looks beautiful in her hands. 🥰
- Helen



“ ‘Your hand caressing me, wrapped around my waist from behind’, Isn’t that what that singer said? Haha, she’s right! When my life (my partner) massages my waist, it’s not just my body that relaxes, my mood also resets, I come back to myself. My everything, my partner, may you live forever. -
Grace

But you must start this journey with me only if you love who I am." We spoke, trusted each other, and made the decision. We started this prepared for whatever struggle would come. Sometimes we laugh, sometimes we cry. The main thing is that we are together through it all.

Helen: For me, above all else, life brought her to me! I was ready to do anything. Even now, that feeling hasn't cooled down. May God preserve our love for us.

Grace: After so much hustle, we came to a new place, cost of living is cheap, there are people like us, water is free, and there is an Ethiopian community. We also found work. It has now been three years since we moved into our current house. It is God's work; He is the one who cleared our path. Granted, we don't have stable work at this moment; even when we do find work, we might only make up to 1,000 Shillings. Beyond that, we have a friend we met online who helps us. We live for today rather than planning for tomorrow; God goes ahead of us and straightens things out. Aside from supporting each other on our journey to get here, there are community members who have helped us mentally and in every other aspect. The online friend we mentioned earlier has stood by us at various times. He generously covers our rent and some expenses. Simon is someone we have never even met in person; we know each other through Facebook. But he is a very kind and open-minded person; for three whole years, he is the one who has paid our rent.

HOME, FREEDOM, AND QUEER SOCIAL LIFE

Grace: In terms of freedom, leaving the conservative home I grew up in and a country where I felt ashamed of my identity, to now sleep peacefully cradling my wife every night, is a massive achievement and change for me. But because we live in a place with an Ethiopian presence, it doesn't mean we are completely free. The Kenyans, however, are very peaceful. They don't meddle in other people's business; we got a sense of community partly from them. We talk and meet with other same-sex couples. Surprisingly, we recognize and know each other on sight. We have found a social life. As for the concept of "home," it is a feeling I have carried with me since leaving Ethiopia, because to me, home means existing for one another.



“My little home is my wife. I don’t take that for granted either, because the dating scene within the queer community can be difficult.”

-GRACE

In my opinion, it’s not just accepting oneself that is difficult, but finding someone who has truly made a definitive choice. I have often seen people enter relationships who have accepted their identity but not committed, and they end up leaving the other person in tears. Some even go as far as getting into marriages; by hesitating, they ruin both their own lives and someone else’s. You could date seven people in a week, and all seven might be undecided. Even if they accept their identity, they cannot choose that identity and you on a daily basis; they get confused along the way. So, the most important thing is making a decision, accepting oneself, and living with trust and faith in the person you love. When I found Helu, she became my world because she had made her choice; she had nothing to look back on. One must possess enough strength to accept their identity and stand by their decision. For instance, when I hardened my heart and left my mother, it wasn’t because I hated her. It was because I realized I had to choose, otherwise I would leave everyone’s life and faith in confusion, including my own. Furthermore, it’s not just about deciding once; you need to grow stronger in that decision every single day. Many people fail to make it through that.

STRENGTH AND PRIDE IN IDENTITY

Helen: God gives strength; He strengthens us. While pride can be a negative trait, our love is a gift from God, and we take pride in the love we share.

Grace: When morning comes and I find Helu next to me, I gain strength. If I go a day without seeing her, my whole day is ruined. Next to God, she is the one who keeps me going. Having her means I have everything; she is the reason I look forward to a better day. We take pride in being fighters, in reaching this point, in exerting effort for what we believe in and accept as our truth, and in having Jesus with us.







Special Uncut Edition

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*Preserving the lived experiences and verbatim testimonies of our
community.*

