‘The starting point to change is acknowledging there’s a lot more to do.’

Tom Rasmussen is an author, journalist and drag performer. Their first book, Diary of a Drag Queen, traces a year in the life of them and their drag persona, Crystal. Their second book, First Comes Love, offers a queer take on the institution of weddings and marriage.

Crystal’s Make-Up | TOM RASMUSSEN

Crystal hasn’t felt the sun on her face for five years. So when the sun was shining last week I decided to take her outside – with a friend in tow, for protection of course – to bask in the mid-April rays. Just how she likes it: not too hot, not too cold.
Some context: Crystal is my drag alter ego. She exists entirely behind closed doors. Sure, these doors might lead to basement clubs, sweaty nightlife venues or Edinburgh Fringe theatres, if not my wig-bestrewn bedroom, but since I was attacked in drag five years ago on the street outside my house, Crystal has existed only in places where she’s safe. Even the more femme parts of my everyday self, the ones I used to so eagerly celebrate by wearing a cheap sateen ballgown on the tube or a waist-length wig to get coffee, were carefully tucked away for safekeeping. Seen only by those who understand why they must exist. Hidden, as much as possible, from everyone else, because harassment makes you disappear.

But not today, Satan. Out of the house we stepped, onto a busy London road, my lime-green sequinned one-shoulder gown (looks way nicer than it sounds) casting tiny glimmers of light across the tarmac. My friend surveyed the pavement – peering left and right – for loud men and their louder fragility, until the coast was clear. We strode out, and onto a quiet slip road. I rolled a cigarette, leaned against a brick wall, and felt the sun on my made-up face for the first time in half a decade.
It was a very specific feeling: heat and wax-based make-up all melting into one, like my gender does when I get into drag. And then, after three tokes on this nicotine-y goodness, from nowhere a van pulled up. The passengers looked me up and down – that’s okay, she’s quite the sight, even though my heart started to pump through my lime-green creation.

‘Are they looking at us?’ I asked my butch, protective friend, while also trying to appear as though I hadn’t noticed them. Before my friend could answer, the back door of the van slid open to reveal four men packed tightly in, all of them screaming homophobic, transphobic slurs at me. I would write them here, but they were both offensive and offensively unimaginative, so there’s no need to recreate them on the page.

Now, the old me would have done what I had tried to do in my early twenties and retaliated. Told them to fuck off, or found a way to make myself feel superior by putting down their intelligence or their appearance. But I realised, after a few years of utilising the art of reading so deftly, letting my library of insults wash over my attackers never made it better. I just felt guilt instead of relief.

And so I ignored them. I turned around, ran back across the road, and into an alleyway where no cars can go. My friend followed quickly, and asked if I was okay. To which I replied: ‘Fine, honestly, happens every single time.’
Then I remembered: this, or some form of this, actually does happen every single time I’m in drag. Every single time. Without fail. Even the times I’m behind closed doors of my own making there’ll be something: a shout from a passing car as you enter the club, a look of sheer disgust when you pop out for a smoke, a fist to the glittering face as I walked from a cab to my front door, followed by that night spent in hospital, in 2016.

It’s so normal we hardly feel it anymore. And yet we’re constantly faced with a choice: the choice of whether to go out into the world as ourselves and stay special, or stay safe.

For me, this choice was first confronted years ago. It’s fair to say that in Lancaster, the suburban city in north-west England where I grew up in the nineties and noughties, there weren’t many people who would accompany me across the street to ensure my safety the way my friend did. There was nobody online, nobody at home, and nobody on television either (unless you count the gays full of shame on EastEnders, or the two boys kissing in Christina Aguilera’s ‘Beautiful’ video). There

was just me. My most formative memories flit between twirling in a beautiful black chiffon dress in my bedroom, while refuting the fact I was gay in the schoolyard. My nights were spent weeping with a faux emotional depth a twelve-year-old couldn't possibly have to Celine Dion's masterwork Let's Talk About Love, and my days were spent pretending I was into women, even though my GHD-straightened hair and my deep hatred of PE screamed otherwise. This would be my existence for the first two years of high school – not the hair, thankfully I stopped that in Year 10 – but living between two worlds, two versions of myself, until I told the wrong friend and I was outed.

I went to a rough school. That's street speak for a northern state comprehensive where you were exalted if you left with two Cs at GCSE. I sound classist, but I'm not: that was my school, no frills, lots of hilarious moments, and a daily serving of homophobic violence in the form of a rock pelted at my back or a ball of phlegm hocked up and spat in my face. Faggot. Poof. Bumboy. Fudge-packer. Backs to the wall, lads. All turns of phrase I grew up laughing off, because I was too weak to ever really defend myself, and because the education system was too underfunded and overcrowded to offer help. It was all supposedly in the name of banter, anyway: everyone bullied everyone – it was the survival technique we used in order to get through high school.

Naturally, after this homophobic hellscape ended, I felt like my only option was to move somewhere that I would be understood. It didn't matter that I was leaving my family behind for the bright lights of the capital because there the Celine Dion fan (synonym for homosexual) inside me wouldn't just be accepted, they would be celebrated.

And in truth, when I arrived in London I felt like I'd come home, despite that sounding like the opening to a terribly clichéd mid-noughties romcom about a runaway girl who hates the town she grew up in. Here, in the big city, I made queer friends who would walk me across the street; I joined whole groups of queers who gather weekly in search of queer euphoria – usually on the dancefloor – and who find it. I found real, tangible joy in queer love – both platonic, romantic and somewhere messily in between. I do drag shows where people applaud me for talking about all the things that got rocks thrown at me at high school, I

tell anal jokes and far too frequently at dinner parties recount the time I wanked off a turkey (I was training to be a vet, which went tits up). I adore my community, and my family too, after a decade of complications. I'm nonbinary, a drag queen, fat, northern – and I, like many of my peers here in the cultural centre that is London, have in so many ways been given a space to be myself; to make choices my parents, or other queers in the regions or in other parts of the world, aren't afforded; to explore and celebrate my divergent identity more freely than perhaps anyone like us ever has before.

I'm aware of my privilege – that, had even one thing been different for me (say, I'd stayed in Lancaster), my life would have been much, much harder. Let alone had I been born in one of the many countries where it's illegal – punishable by prison or death – to be gay. In one of the countries where you get hunted on Grindr, or where your rights are revoked if you're trans, or never afforded to you in the first place. I can't begin to understand the complexity of identity in a context where it isn't even allowed to exist. Yet while I live in a city that is – like New York, or Stockholm, or Berlin – supposed to be one of the most accepting for LGBTQ+ people in the world, still so much of my time, and of my friends' time, is spent being forced to compute something as basic as safety.

It is not my choice to do this: please don't think I love spending hours contemplating my gender, my sexuality and how it puts me at risk in the world – it's dull, I've done it for three decades, I've read the books on L, G, B, T, Q, I and A. I've answered the questions hurled at me in the street, online, in society. But possibly 50% of my waking time is spent thinking about how to make myself, my friends and our community safer.

Sure, this focus on safety – and the action it brings about – has led to so much progress for the LGBTQ+ community both past and present. Same-sex marriage, the revocation of Section 28 (which previously banned local authorities from promoting homosexuality in England, Scotland and Wales), queer uprisings like Stonewall, legalisations and decriminalisations all around the world. In places like the UK we have the big stuff, the 'social and legal equality' cis heterosexuals have always had, and we have a great deal of visibility: online, in the media, on panels and in the Pride campaigns of countless brands who just love us for the month of June. We now live in a country where I have access

to things so few before me did: sure I can have a fab gay wedding, with a fab gay cake. I can cuddle up on the couch with my pink pound (I wish!) and watch RuPaul spill the tea, the Queer Eye queers help you live your most gorj life, and Timothée Chalamet fuck a peach in a movie about coming of age as a gay person. But a hypercapitalist drag contest, getting a do-over on your bungalow, or a peach-job isn't enough to help the most vulnerable in our community. We need more. Because while progress has been made, we still get attacked, we still have a disproportionate amount of homelessness, mental health issues, suicide and abuse within and towards our community. We are still spoken about in Parliament, on the street, in the classroom as if we are a problem and not the gift we are. Try to register your gender-neutral pronouns on a passport, or access healthcare as a poor trans person and you'll be clogged in a system that doesn't want you, for an agonisingly long time.

On a personal level, yes: I am glad I can get married, but it doesn't mean all that much if I can't even walk down the street holding my partner's hand (which we've never done in our five years together). I am glad I can be in drag on the cover of a magazine, but what's the point of that if I can't even stand on the street looking the way I feel?

The starting point to change is acknowledging there's a lot more to do. Rights on paper and increased visibility might make it look like we have all we need, but appearances can be deceiving. So often I speak to people online and after my shows who love drag, love Pride, love everything about us, but have no idea what must be done on the ground to ensure our safety. We need people to recognise that they haven't done their part and to properly engage with how they might bring about change – whether that's for the LGBTQ+ community more broadly, or if you're within that community, a letter in the acronym that you haven't been paying attention to.
What I'm talking about is active, proud, vocal, brilliant allyship whereby people stand up in public, private, online and in real life, and align themselves with our global fight for freedom. On a local scale – to call out the group of men on the train who threatened to piss on me on Christmas Eve Eve 2019, for example – but also on a broader scale. Support queer and trans housing and healthcare services by writing to MPs and opening your purses. Think about how your company is structured to ensure that queer people feel safe and respected, and

have access to opportunity. Think about what considering both sides of the trans ‘debate’ (a ‘debate’ which is explained later on in Juliet Jacques’s essay) really means for trans people (hint: our existence shouldn’t be up for ‘debate’ at all). Give away money, time and thought to causes and situations which you might never find yourself in. And as a community, we must consider people who suffer at the hands of imported colonial homophobic laws around the world, and then follow them, listen to them, fight for them. We must lobby governments for these laws to be removed. We need sanctions, and we need celebrations: of us, of our culture. We need to be heard and supported, and we need to be given a moment off from protecting ourselves so we can help protect others who need it even more.

I am so pleased that much of LGBTQ+ culture and history has been, and is, about fighting. Being different has made us a community; being oppressed, in some twisted way, has made us stronger, brighter, more powerful. Yet sometimes I want to spend more time fighting for those who have it far worse than I do. Sometimes I want to know what safety actually feels like when I step outside my door, and not just imagine it. Sometimes I really want to feel the sun on Crystal’s face. Not every day, not always, but sometimes.

‘If I have one wish for the LGBTQ+ community in Bangladesh, and globally, it is the decriminalisation of homosexuality.’

Mazharul Islam (Maz), is an LGBTQ+ activist from Bangladesh who fled his country on 29 April 2016, four days after the murder of his two friends, the activists Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy. In Bangladesh, Maz was one of the longest-standing members of the LGBTQ+ group Boys of Bangladesh. Each year Maz protests in front of the Bangladesh High Commission in London asking for the decriminalisation of homosexuality in his home country.

Leaving Bangladesh | MAZHARUL ISLAM

The first time I saw an ocean it was with Xulhaz. I remember that we took a trip together to the Sundarbans Reserve Forest, to see the world’s largest mangrove forest. I used to live near his office and often, at lunchtimes, we would hang out and have delicious tehari and khichuri from the famous restaurant Shad Tehari Ghar. Xulhaz was like my family. He was a special soul. If I or anyone else ever needed anything, he would be there for us. I remember, on my birthday, he bought me flowers. Somehow, Xulhaz knew that I love chrysanthemums. I made a painting of those flowers and I gifted it to him on his birthday. He hung that painting on the wall in his apartment. I don’t know what happened to it after he was killed.

Boys of Bangladesh started as a closed Yahoo group with the name Boys Only Bangladesh. I joined in 2003, but it had been going since November 2002. You had to know someone who would invite you in, someone who could vouch that you were gay. I met the person who added me in another chat room, and we began talking in private messages, introducing ourselves to one another as gay men. We swapped ‘ASL’ – age, sex, location. Asked the usual questions: Where do you live? What are you looking for? Are you a top or a bottom?

At that time in Bangladesh, internet access wasn’t very good, so we used to go to cyber cafes. I’d hire a computer for 30p per hour, trying to find other gays for a date or for sex. It was scary to talk openly with another gay man, even online, but we took the relevant precautions by hiding details about ourselves.

Early on, Boys of Bangladesh was a place to express our feelings, look

out for each other, become a small community. We were twelve or fifteen members when we started, and it wasn't created for the sake of activism, it was just a place to talk. We were united by the feeling that our country people, our families and our colleagues were against us, because – even today – homosexuality is criminalised in Bangladesh. The law that bans it, Section 377, was first implemented by the British Government in 1860 during Britain's colonial rule of the Indian subcontinent, and it has survived ever since. It calls homosexual acts 'unnatural offences' punishable with up to life imprisonment. For this reason, most of us in Boys of Bangladesh had never spoken about our sexualities to other people.

Meeting up with the other members of the group in person for the first time was surreal and it's still clear in my mind. Ten to twelve of us gathered in a park, chosen because it was a public place, busy, open – maybe we could blend in. We pretended to be a group of straight guys hanging out among all the other straight guys there that day. But all of us were nervous, and we used fake names and carried fake IDs, just in case the police came or anyone questioned us. It would have been nice to meet in private I suppose, but we were young students – no one had a house big enough.

Until that afternoon, I had no idea that there were so many other gay men in Bangladesh. I was brought up in a tiny village, within Dhaka's city limits but very rural. There was no internet access and no electricity. The houses were made of clay and our old duplex was surrounded by fruit trees, paddy fields, guava, pineapple, banana and bamboo gardens, plus cattle and goats. We were farmers by income, and our neighbours bought produce from us. During the rainy season, the entire village would be surrounded by water and the only transport that we had was boats.

Communication and roads have since been improved, but back then we would walk to school every day for miles and sometimes, during the floods, our school closed for weeks.

My brother is four years older than me and as a kid, I didn't like to play the typical 'male' games that he did, like football or cricket. I was much more comfortable spending time with girls, and I used to play with my

aunt and grandmother's high heels (a cliché, I know). Maybe my family knew about my sexuality, but we never talked about those things. Whether or not anyone else knew, there came a time when I could not deny it myself; from the age of ten, it was clear to me that I was attracted to boys. I started to suffer a lot mentally because I couldn't tell anyone. Society – from my community to the mosque – taught me that homosexuality is a sin, so I was terrified of the people around me – my family members, my neighbours – finding out. When I look back at that time, I think about how much I used to hate myself. I felt so guilty that I would cry in the mosque and beg Allah: 'Please, remove this feeling for me. Please, do something, anything.' But nothing changed.
I knew that homosexuality was against Islam, but I didn't know that it was against the law in Bangladesh until I was eighteen, when I passed my exams, went to college and started using the internet for the first time. Before that, I just thought I was 'different' – in Bangladesh we have a word for this, shomokami. When I discovered the word 'gay' online I came to understand from reading the news that it didn't just make you a sinner but a criminal, too. After I joined Boys of Bangladesh, my understanding expanded even further: I learned that, in the world outside of Bangladesh, people like me could live openly, have relationships, and be happy. It was only through Boys of Bangladesh that I learned that LGBTQ+ could be a movement.

After the first meet-up, Boys of Bangladesh started to grow. I became a moderator for the group and would help to organise the monthly get-togethers – we would tell people where to go only a few hours beforehand, and change the location each time for safety: restaurants, cafes, different parts of the park. Soon, they were happening more than once a month. More members joined, and at some point, in 2005 or 2006, we opened up membership so that no referrals or interviews were required. We were becoming a bigger community and starting to feel strong – like we had enough members to protect ourselves. We were in our twenties and were excited by feeling like we were part of something.

We started to organise 'HOP social' ('hanging out place') at a special spot where we would go on Friday evenings, Xulhaz and I included. We'd share love stories and sex stories, make fun of one another or bitch about the other members. We would plan the next activities too, like parties, movie screenings and picnics. But affection had to be

minimal – it was a public place. If you liked someone, you'd exchange numbers, and pick up the conversation later.

The more people that joined Boys of Bangladesh, the more we moved towards becoming an activist organisation. In May 2005, we decided to send a letter to the editor of the Daily Star newspaper asking them to publish an article about us and they did; it was about celebrating International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. Over the next few years, we organised private film screenings and talks. We made connections with international LGBTQ+ organisations and became part of ILGA Asia – a pan-Asian LGBTQ+ rights network – with our members attending their international conferences. In 2011, Xulhaz started planning Roopbaan, Bangladesh's first LGBTQ+ magazine. He launched it in 2014 with a party, which journalists and government employees attended. He told me that he did it because someone had to come forward, be the face of the LGBTQ+ community in Bangladesh and tell people what was happening within it.

I was happy that Boys of Bangladesh and Xulhaz were creating visibility and speaking up more and more for LGBTQ+ rights. It really did feel like we could keep growing as an organisation for ever. But now I would say it was not a good decision for us to go so public, given what happened later. We needed more time. Society was not ready to accept us.

In October 2015, I started to receive threatening messages. I had, by this point, left Boys of Bangladesh as I was focusing on my career and studying again. Still, I had remained close to the organisation and a lot of the people I met there.

The texts came from an anonymous group. They tried to blackmail me, stating that if I didn't give them money, they would come to my office and tell my colleagues that I was gay, as well as handing my information to Islamic terrorists. I don't know how, but the blackmailers seemed to know a lot about me; they knew where my office was, where my house was. They usedto follow me and send texts that they could see me arriving at work. I started to panic but I couldn't talk to my family or relatives without coming out to them. I felt trapped and increasingly paranoid.

Luckily, because my company was international, I was able to tell my bosses about what was going on and they told me to make a complaint at the police station. I was apprehensive. I knew I couldn't tell the police why I was getting the texts – if they had reason to believe I was homosexual then suddenly I would become the suspect. Yet I had to do something. My employers asked a colleague to come with me to the station, and there I gave the police the number that was messaging me. I told them that someone was asking for money and saying that if I didn't give it to them they might kill me, but I didn't show them the texts where they mentioned that I was gay. I submitted the report and went home. The police said they'd look into it, but they never got back to me. In the meantime, my company sent a car to bring me to and from work every day.

Over the next six months, the threats continued. Eventually, I told my brother, who by then knew about my sexuality. 'I don't know what to do,' I said over the phone. 'I constantly feel like I might die tomorrow.' He lived in London and didn't know how to help. I was exhausted, and running out of places to turn; as homosexuality was an offence, the law effectively made it illegal for me to report a crime that was being committed against me. I was constantly jumpy, and I cried all the time.

On 25 April 2016, I left my office at 5 p.m. and went to the grocery store on my way home. I got a call from a friend.
'Where are you?' he said. 'Immediately go home and lock yourself in.' He told me that a group of Islamic extremists had attacked Xulhaz. 'We don't know what is happening,' he said.

I hurried back and my flatmate was watching the TV. On it, news broadcasters were reporting the murders: there had been two, Xulhaz, and another friend of mine from Boys of Bangladesh called Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy. They had been killed in the same apartment in a machete attack, said the presenter; one other guy who was there had survived by hiding from the attackers. We were silent, staring at the TV, then we looked at one another and cried for a while, until it occurred to us that we could be in immediate danger. The people who had committed the murders could have been on their way to us. The police could, too, given

that we'd recently had brushes with the law due to our links to the LGBTQ+ community.

That night, we left for another friend's house. I packed just a few things. When we got there, it was a sleepless night. In the morning I went to work and all of the newspaper headlines read that two LGBTQ+ people had been killed. Everyone at the office was talking about it, they did not realise that it was people I knew well. My boss told me that I didn't need to come to work again until it was safe to do so. I went back to the same friend's house until the morning of 27 April – two days after the murder – when the US Embassy sent a bulletproof car to bring me to them. There I had a phone call with someone higher up at my company who explained that they could relocate me, so I asked to go to London to be near my brother. Soon I had a plane ticket and a visa for Sri Lanka – it was the best they could do in the shortest amount of time and they would work on London later.

On 29 April, I was taken to the airport along with two others from the LGBTQ+ community. The night before, I had called my parents and asked them to come to a hotel near the airport. They were surprised and confused. I told them I had to go away for a long time for work and that it was urgent. I'm still not sure if they know the truth. We said goodbye, then I went to catch my plane.
I was lucky to get out, but I was leaving my family, my friends, my apartment, my country, everything.

For the first two months in Sri Lanka, I stayed in a hotel and only left to go to work. I closed all of my social media. I had no contact with friends, no idea what was going on back home. Then my office got me a work permit to go to London. When I arrived, the only person I knew there was my brother. I felt isolated and devastated; the working environment was new, the culture was new and the weather was horrible – I had to learn everything from scratch, even how to read traffic lights. I felt lost, but at least I was safe.

A year passed, and as justice had still not been served for Xulhaz and Tonoy, a friend and I decided to stage a protest in Trafalgar Square on the anniversary of their deaths. There were just the two of us – we wrote

their names on paper, big and bold, and held it up, as well as printing their story on a one-pager to hand out, and explaining what had happened to passers-by. A year later, in 2017, I met an activist called Dan Glass who introduced me to the Peter Tatchell Foundation, and they helped me to stage the protest again, bigger, and in front of the Bangladesh High Commission. We did it again in 2019, and in 2020 we held it virtually and circulated a letter to the Bangladesh government calling for decriminalisation. Now, alongside my job, I am a patron for human rights organisation ReportOUT, an active member of ACT UP London, and a volunteer for Gay Liberation Front UK. I also work with a grassroots LGBTQ+ organisation back in Bangladesh, helping them to set objectives and develop initiatives such as a website and a phone helpline for LGBTQ+ people in need.

In 2019, the Bangladeshi police arrested the suspected terrorists who are believed to have carried out the attack on Xulhaz and Tonoy. It's a consolation and might send out a message to other people in Bangladesh who are thinking of targeting the LGBTQ+ community. But in reality, nothing in the five years since 2016 has improved in terms of LGBTQ+ rights in my country. If anything, things have moved backwards; in May 2017, for example, the year after Xulhaz and Tonoy were murdered, twenty-seven men at a private party were arrested by the police for suspected homosexuality.

If I have one wish for the LGBTQ+ community in Bangladesh, and globally, it is the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Knowing that I am not accepted by my country by law – I simply can't explain how that feels. You try to get used to it, you try to lead your life and forget about it, but at the end of the day, it is in your subconscious all the time. Until the day I left Bangladesh, I pretended; I was never myself, and never expressed my real feelings – except for those rare and short-lived moments with my friends.

Xulhaz and Tonoy's murders snatched everything from us because they created a climate of fear, and when everyone is afraid, who is able to fight for change? This is why we need the support of other countries. We need international networks, and we need to know who to ask for help. With stronger links between the Bangladeshi LGBTQ+ community and

the community across the world, if something were to happen again, we could all collectively raise our voices. By campaigning and petitioning to decriminalise homosexuality everywhere, we could reach a place where violence towards LGBTQ+ people would no longer seem to be legitimised. People like me, who love their families, their jobs and their countries, wouldn't need to flee and abandon everything. Millions of young people are suffering in countries where their existence is illegal, just as I did, and it's clear how we can take that suffering away.

Every time I talk about what happened it makes me lighter and stronger. If I hide the things I went through I'm not going to overcome them – they are painful memories, but they shaped who I am today. After Xulhaz's murder, there weren't many people who could publicly ask for justice for him. That's why I ask for justice. I want to make him proud. I'm trying.

‘Is “Pride” walking down the street holding my partner’s hand, even if I don’t feel safe to do so?’

Shura (aka Alexandra Lilah Denton) is a half-Russian singer, songwriter and producer from the UK, who now lives in New York. Her 2016 debut album Nothing’s Real marked her out as an ambassador for anyone who feels like an outsider, while her second album forevher tells the story of a long-distance lesbian love story between London and New York. Shura is an outspoken LGBTQ+ voice in pop music, and she also spends quite a lot of time gaming on Twitch.

Kissing in Public | SHURA

The first time that it happened I was sixteen. I had started to go to the gay village in Manchester, under age, with my twin brother, who is also gay. It was an amazing place to have access to as a gay teenager, because it wasn’t just one bar or one club, it was an entire street that felt like our safe space and where we met kind, older gay people who took us under their wing. Strangely enough, though, my first memory of unwanted attention around a PDA (public display of affection) was in this safe space. I was holding hands with my girlfriend from school when a man drove past and shouted ‘Lesbians!’ at us. At the time, I laughed. Partly because my first instinct when something like that happens (something that isn’t a physical attack) is to try to make a joke out of it. To try to make it less painful by laughing it off. But I also laughed because I thought it was hilarious that this man, who was in the gay village, had seen two lesbians, and had just decided to say what he saw. I remember turning to my girlfriend and saying: ‘Well, I’m glad that he said that because I was really struggling with figuring out my sexuality until he just yelled the word “lesbian” at me!’

The second instance I remember was nastier. I was living in London and around twenty years old. My girlfriend and I had just been out somewhere, were a bit tipsy, and were waiting for the bus home. We kissed. It wasn’t a big movie snog or anything (not that it should be necessary to qualify the kind of snog it was), just a small kiss. And I remember hearing a man’s voice say: ‘Kiss again.’ I glanced over; he was an enormous guy. He looked at me and repeated: ‘Kiss again.’ I said no, turned away and tried to ignore him. But he grabbed my shoulder, pulled me back towards him and said it again, in my face. I didn’t know what he was going to do next. At that moment, by some

miracle, our bus arrived and my girlfriend and I both ran onto it. What stuck with me is how the whole incident was a horrible mixture of homophobia and fetishisation. The message I received was: ‘I think gay people are disgusting’ but also ‘Women should kiss for my entertainment.’

The third instance was a few years later. I was on an escalator in a Shepherd’s Bush shopping centre with my then girlfriend and we had a little kiss. Again, it’s not like it was a big movie kiss (why do I feel like I keep having to say that? It shouldn’t matter). A man coming down the escalator the other way suddenly commented: ‘Don’t kiss like that.’ What he obviously meant was ‘Don’t kiss another girl romantically’ but the way he phrased it was funny to me. I laughed and replied: ‘Okay, how do you want us to kiss?’

Although it’s these memories that stand out for me, they’re not isolated incidents. Often when I’m with my current partner, people stare, or roll their car window down to get a better look. Their eyes hover over us just that little bit too long. Almost every time I hold hands with her in public, at some point on our journey, we get that look, the ‘oh, they’re lesbians’ look. It has this funny effect on me. I know that being a lesbian is a big part of how I present to the world, especially through my music, but I don’t constantly think about the fact that I’m gay. I suppose because so many people in my life are gay, sometimes I just forget. But when these things happen, it’s like I’m suddenly reminded … I am reminded that, to some people, something about me is ‘different’.

In the summer of 2019 there was an attack on two women on a London bus: Chris, who identified as bisexual, and Melania, who identified as gay. They were on their way home from a date when a group of men accosted them, asked them to kiss, and when the women refused, they were beaten up. Photos of the couple covered in blood made global front-page news. People were shocked: that this could happen in Britain, that it was so violent, and that it could happen to two young, pretty, white, femme women – which might have been part of the reason that these pictures travelled so far in the media, even though similar attacks happen around the world every day, a point that Chris made in an article she wrote for the Guardian after the attack.

When I saw the pictures, it was the first time that I'd seen an image of a homophobic hate crime that violent against a woman. It felt like I was looking at a photo of myself and my girlfriend, or what could have happened that night at the bus stop when I was twenty. I have a WhatsApp group with my gay female friends where we discussed the attack in the days that followed. No one in the group had experienced anything quite as severe as Chris and Melania, but every single woman had been in a situation that could have escalated to violence if they hadn't been able to escape. There was a scary moment of realisation that it could have happened to any of us. It makes you think: if this could happen in London, a supposedly progressive place, what the fuck is happening elsewhere? And to gay men, people of colour and trans and nonbinary people? And how often?

The images forced us to confront the reality that things haven't come as far as we think. While I might not have been totally surprised by the images, it was overwhelmingly sad to me that, nearly a decade after I was confronted at a bus stop, these sort of fetishising and terrifying attacks were still happening. We want to believe that, over the last ten years, progress has been made. In some ways it has; we have queer people on TV, gay and bi- and pansexual musicians releasing records, and people can be out in a way that they never could be before. But there can be something dangerous about perceived progress. It can create a sense of complacency. It's very easy for some people to look at the world and say: 'Things are so much better for LGBTQ+ people now.' But the fact is – and as those images proved – just because something is better in certain arenas, it can still be bad, worse even, in others. They were a wake-up call to the fact that, for every person who says 'I'm cool with gay marriage' there is still someone who isn't. A lot of people might support our rights in theory, but they still aren't comfortable seeing us holding hands, kissing or being affectionate in public.

Personally, the attack was also a reminder of why my subconscious – not even conscious – brain is trained to think about how I act in public. I know I'm not alone in doing so. It was a reminder of why we look up and down the tube, train or subway car before doing something as banal as putting our head on our partner's shoulder. Why I feel the need to explain in this article how each time I kissed my girlfriend in public it

wasn’t a big movie kiss. Why, before we go on holiday somewhere, we have to google ‘Is it safe to hold hands in public’ about wherever we are going. Why, before kissing somewhere outside of our homes, we have to ask ourselves basic questions like: Is anyone else here? Anyone that I don’t know?

LGBTQ+ people make these calculations all the time. We are constantly doing the math. If there is one thing I would change for LGBTQ+ people, it’s that we didn’t have to think: Is there anyone here who might get stressed out by me just being me? Because that is what we are really talking about. We’re not just saying, ‘Is it safe to kiss?’ or ‘Is it safe to hold his or her or their hand?’ What we are really wondering is: ‘Is it safe to be me?’

Every LGBTQ+ person will face different obstacles related to their sexuality. A gay man’s experience will be different to a gay woman’s, to a bi person’s, to a trans man or woman’s, to a queer person of colour’s. I feel this acutely having grown up alongside my twin brother who is gay; we had very different experiences as part of coming out and discovering our sexuality. These will depend on who you are and where you are.

While I can’t speak for other people, what my experiences as a cis white queer woman have taught me is that gay and bisexual women are dealing with misogyny on top of homophobia. What we experience is not necessarily worse than what anyone else under ‘LGBTQ+’ experiences, but it is specific in that it is often sexist and objectifying. I don’t think you’d ever hear of a homophobic woman coming up to two lesbians and saying, ‘Kiss for me’, which makes it clear to me that there is a certain dynamic between men and gay women that we need to challenge. It’s to do with this ingrained idea that the only reason women exist on this planet is for their bodies to be at the service of men, and that lesbians are therefore threatening to men because we don’t adhere to this or ‘need them’. I don’t believe that all lesbians feel that they don’t need men; my life is full of men that I love.

I’m not sure how I can tell people not to fetishise lesbians when I sit around hoping that two women on Westworld will snog – and yes, a big movie kiss – but I think that part of it starts with this, with not reducing

women to their bodies. Sometimes I think about pornography (and if I ended the sentence here that would be quite the statement) but I don't believe that porn is the problem. Yes, to some degree porn furthers the idea of lesbianism as spectacle, as something that exists for another person's pleasure. But porn is just made to satisfy desires or fetishes that already exist; women showing attraction to one another has been viewed as fascinating, taboo or entertaining – something to roll your car window down and stare at – since long before Pornhub was around.

The problem of fetishisation persists because we still need more representation – more representation of lesbianism or same-sex affection between women that isn't sexualised or entirely for someone else's pleasure, and representation not just of lesbians who are young, femme and straight-passing, but lesbians who are older, butch, trans and gender-nonconforming. Representation of both overt queerness and incidental queerness; gay kisses in music videos, but also lead characters who just happen to be gay. Representation of the depth and nuance and frankly sometimes boringness or banality of lesbian same-sex love. Stories where the lesbians don't just have sex then die. Stories with happy endings (I'm looking at you Blue Is the Warmest Colour).

In other words, I don't think we have to abolish lesbian porn to send out a message that we are diverse, that we're not an attraction or a performance. Queer cinema, TV and music are important because they offer a safe space where we can improve the visibility of same-sex love when we might not feel comfortable doing so on the streets. Where we can expose people to our lives and experiences without putting ourselves at risk. But it also takes the onus off us as individuals.

Often, when I talk to my queer friends about PDAs, they tell me they not only have to calculate where is safe to be affectionate with their partners, but that part of doing the math is wondering to what extent it is their responsibility to shift the narrative. They ask themselves questions like: If I hide my PDAs, am I giving in to prejudice? Should I be exposing people to my way of loving? Is 'Pride' walking down the street holding my partner's hand, even if I don't feel safe to do so?

While these questions are valid, ultimately I don't think it should be the

responsibility of gay people to fix straight people to not be homophobic, in the same way that it's not the responsibility of Black people to educate white people in how not to be racist. That doesn't mean we won't do it, because if you love someone and they express an opinion you think is wrong it can be worthwhile to tell them, or because sometimes it's important to stand up to discrimination. But it shouldn't be the responsibility of the LGBTQ+ community to improve acceptance, it should be everyone's responsibility.

Along with better media representation then, what we need is elected leaders to speak out and make it clear that hate crime and discrimination is unacceptable – and they need to do this all the time, not just as a reaction to a specific event. What we need is straight and cis people to stand up for LGBTQ+ folks if they see something bad happening and it is safe for them to do so. What we need is sex education in schools that is more than a biology lesson in reproduction. That covers consent, safe sex, good sex and how to have it if maybe you don't have a penis, don't want to use it or if there are two involved. That not all sex has to include genitals. That people have sex to have babies but, if we're being honest, most of us most of the time are having it because it's fun.

These things will help, but this isn't an issue that we can solve overnight, and the fear of kissing in public may never fully disappear – even in places where we are materially safe, the worry lingers in our minds. 'How do we solve the problem of homophobia?' might sound like a question, but that doesn't mean it necessarily has an answer – or an answer that works for everyone everywhere. There might always be people who believe, on an extreme level, that we LGBTQ+ people shouldn't exist. There might always be people who don't want to see us kiss in public. Just as people are divided politically, they're divided on LGBTQ+ rights.

So maybe the question isn't 'How do we solve the problem of homophobia?' but is, instead, two questions: 'What are those of us who are not homophobic doing to reduce it?' and 'How can we build a world where LGBTQ+ people can stop doing the math and don't have to ask themselves, "Is it safe to be me?"'

‘Queer people in parts of the world like mine should be entitled to basic experiences like safely chatting on apps and going on dates.’

Vincent Desmond is a writer and essayist living in Lagos, Nigeria. His writing has appeared in British Vogue, Dazed, i-D, Vice, Nylon, Reuters, Elle, Paper and more. In 2019, he was awarded the TIERs Young Activist Award for his work in media advocacy. In 2020, he was shortlisted for the Nigeria Prize for Difference and Diversity and nominated for the Future Award for Leading Conversation.

Kito Diaries | VINCENT DESMOND

In 2014, the then president of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, attempted to win public approval ahead of the coming elections by appealing to the conservative majority of Nigeria. As a conspiracy theory that the US was attempting to pressure African countries into legalising same-sex marriage gained traction, Goodluck Jonathan passed a bill that not only criminalised same-sex unions and cohabiting, but also introduced a wider change. It decreed that: ‘A person who registers, operates or participates in gay clubs, societies and organisation, or directly or indirectly makes public show of same sex amorous relationship in Nigeria commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a term of 10 years imprisonment.’ The president was praised by many for ‘preserving the African culture’.

This law, entitled the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, 2013, led to several attacks against queer people by mobs who claimed they were working for Jonathan.1 The constitutional rights of queer people living in Nigeria – the right to privacy and the right to form civil associations – were all considered to be null and void by the sweeping homophobic law. Queer people were apparently expected to stop existing, at least publicly. Bars and clubs that previously catered to mostly queer people became targets of almost daily harassments from law enforcement as well as homophobes, which forced these venues to shut down. People suspected to be queer or engaging in sexual intercourse with others of the same gender were tracked down, beaten up, forced to perform sexual activities in public, ostracised and even killed. In the months and years following this bill being passed into existence, the Nigerian

LGBTQ+ community was further rejected from mainstream society and forced to redefine how it existed.

In Nigeria, as in many places around the world, the internet provides a platform and a voice for the country's most oppressed groups. It was largely thanks to the internet that #SexForGrades – a documentary and campaign against lecturers victimising their female students in universities – came to challenge and reshape the Nigerian educational system. Movements like #ArewaMeToo, a version of #MeToo focusing on the oppression and sexual abuse of Arewa women in northern Nigeria, as well as #EndSars, a youth-powered movement fighting police brutality within the country, also have the internet to thank for the traction they gained.

The internet is vital for enabling LGBTQ+ people in Nigeria to continue to interact as a community, too. With the passage of the new law in 2014, queer people were forced to get creative. We created AGAs (anonymous gay accounts) on social media, which served as burner accounts where we could share and reshare LGBTQ+-focused content, as well as interacting with other queer people without our identities being known. Code words like 'TB'/'tibi', which translates to being gay, were created as a way to communicate about queerness. Existing almost solely on the internet was hardly compensation for having no actual human rights and it did not make up for offline queer spaces, but it gave us something close to a safe space. That is until even this relative safety came under threat. As the LGBTQ+ community went digital, so did its oppressors.

In February 2020, news broke that a gay man living in the eastern part of Nigeria had been murdered by someone he had made plans to hook up with via Facebook. The murder and the details surrounding it devastated the Nigerian LGBTQ+ community who expressed themselves on social media with the hashtag #EndHomophobiaInNigeria, which trended for days. The outcry was loud, but the crime was not new: a lot of queer people in Nigeria have dealt with being catfished – drawn into a relationship online by someone with a false identity – by people who intend to blackmail or extort. Even if we have never been targeted, the way that we approach online dating is heavily marred by the possibility

of being vulnerable to someone who plans to attack us or maybe even kill us.

I deleted Grindr from my phone in 2018 after I had arranged to meet someone from the app, and a friend told me it might not be safe. They explained that the side of town where this person had suggested to meet was the location of multiple attacks on queer people. I never confirmed if the person I was meant to see was actually a catfishing homophobe or a queer person who was unfortunate enough to share a zipcode with them.

The phenomenon is so prevalent that it has a name within the Nigerian LGBTQ+ community: kito. A kito is a person who masquerades as being queer on social media to create a false sense of security in queer people, predominantly men, and makes plans to meet. They will then either blackmail you to pay huge sums of money to avoid being outed or just out you to people you know, which may result in your being beaten up, or worse. These assaults are not as random as they appear at first glance. While many are by homophobic individuals who see an opportunity to use the internet to lure out victims, others involve an organised network of kitos across a relatively large area. The kitos share information on those they suspect or know to be queer and how best to target them.

In October 2019, I spoke to several people for a story on dating while queer in Nigeria. ‘No matter how many precautions I take, I’m always really scared,’ Ike* , a developer, told me. ‘There’s always this fear that the guy walking in that I think is super-cute has been catfishing me and has plans to turn the other people seated in the restaurant into a mob. It got to me at a point and now I only go out with friends of friends. It’s limiting but it is safer.’

While kito has been around for quite a few years, it became particularly prevalent after the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act was signed. The act not only essentially legitimised homophobia in Nigeria, it also meant that queer people cannot report hate crimes because, here, being queer is always the bigger crime. In February 2019, Dolapo Badmus, spokesperson for the Lagos Police, addressed the Nigerian LGBTQ+

community on her personal Instagram account, reminding us of our place in Nigerian society:

If you are homosexually inclined, Nigeria is not a place for you. There is a law (Same Sex Prohibition Act) here that criminalizes homosexual clubs, associations, and organizations with penalties of up to 14 years in jail. So if you are a homosexual in nature, leave the country or face prosecution.

We may have found a word for it, but Nigeria is far from the only place where the kito phenomenon exists. Although in Egypt homosexuality isn't criminalised, the el-Sisi regime has been using a 1950 anti-prostitution law and a 1961 law against debauchery in tandem to target the queer community. Research carried out by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) found that between October 2013 and March 2017, 232 people were arrested on suspicion of being LGBTQ+, compared with a total of 189 across the thirteen years beforehand. There have been reports of law enforcement using apps like Grindr, Hornet and Growler to identify and track down queer people, before showing printouts of conversations to bring charges.

While catfishing is one of the major ways technology is used to oppress us, it isn't the only way. In Paraguay, a Twitter account was set up to expose LGBTQ+ people living in the country by uploading images and conversations from apps. The account was reported yet it took over six weeks before Twitter finally took it down. This is similar to what happened in Ghana in early 2018, when an anonymous Twitter account posted the names, photos and locations of queer Ghanaians and directed homophobia and violence towards them.

In April 2020 Sofia Talouni, a Moroccan trans woman living in Turkey, went on Instagram Live to encourage attacks on queer men. She told cis heterosexual women – wives, mothers, sisters – to create profiles on gay dating apps, and to use the location feature to identify and out the gay men living in their communities. As same-sex relations in Morocco are punishable with up to three years in prison, and queer people are frequently marginalised and subjected to violence, Sofia's actions have left the Moroccan queer community living in fear. One man took his own

life after being outed and many others were rejected by their families. The story made global headlines after activists including Adam Eli (who appears later in this book) pushed for the press to cover the events, and Sofia's Instagram and Facebook accounts were eventually suspended. Digital spaces have often been paraded as safe for marginalised communities but it's clear now that this is not the case. Social media platforms have not always responded quickly to reports of targeted harassment, forced outing and violence organised through their sites or apps. Dating apps like Grindr, Scruff and Tinder do have certain in-app functions to protect LGBTQ+ users – they notify you when you use them in countries where homosexuality is criminalised and advise you to be careful in these places. In response to arrests in Egypt, Grindr disabled the feature that shows users' exact distance from one another, and the app was also involved in a project whereby users in countries where homosexuality is criminalised were surveyed about their safety. The app has since made improvements, such as requiring a pin for users in these places to open the app. But is this enough?

The creators of social media and dating platforms need to keep working with the LGBTQ+ community as well as groups that champion our rights and safety, and to rethink how this technology can guarantee the protection of users. In places where digital catfishing and crime is more prevalent, we can no longer wait for this change to come. We are killed and attacked way too often to afford the luxury of time.

In Nigeria, queer people are having to protect one another, in lieu of adequate protection with technology and from the police. Older queer people take younger queer people under their wings and have created mentor relationships, teaching their 'protégés' how to screen potential dates to work out whether they are kitos. When I speak to Alex* , a designer, he tells me about how he helps young people and tries to ensure their safety:

I was privileged enough to have been schooled in the US where homosexuality wasn't criminalised. When I came back to Nigeria, I was taken for a fool multiple times because I was an ajebo. [An ajebo is a person who grew up wealthy and hasn't experienced hardships.] I was kitoed, taken advantage of and forced to wise up. So I did and I started

helping young and sheltered people to not make the mistakes I did. Whenever any of them tell me about someone they like, we have to go through their Facebook and Instagram, and sometimes check to see the mutuals they have. If you don't have mutuals, that is a red flag. If the posts are fanatically religious, red flag. It's a long process but it is how I ensure they survive. I also tell them that if anything goes left, they have to call me first. I'll pay whatever money the kitos need and will come pick them up.

Throughout the country – especially in the big cities like Abuja, Lagos and Port Harcourt where the queer community is slowly but steadily trying to create a form of solidarity offline – community leaders like Alex are rising up to protect more vulnerable queer people. The LGBTQ+ community is also using kito tactics against homophobes by creating Kito Diaries. This is a platform which allows people to submit their kito experiences, details of where they happened and sometimes the kitos' names, social media accounts and profile images. It also contains information on the kitos' bases of operations and locations that have high kito activity. Over the past few years, Kito Diaries has become a relatively large database.

While this has likely saved lives, it has not eradicated kitos. The LGBTQ+ communities in countries like Nigeria, Egypt and Morocco need the global LGBTQ+ community, campaign groups and mainstream media to highlight what is going on. But action is also needed beyond this – catfishing and kito represent a whole new frontier of persecution, requiring a new approach from Silicon Valley. Technology companies must realise that tailored measures are needed to stop attacks by kitos: that could mean better reporting functions, stronger verification processes for accounts, and more education or warnings provided in areas where users are vulnerable. More research into the issue is important, too, and it may be that collaborations between app developers and, for example, Kito Diaries should be explored.

To bring an end to kito activity, or drastically reduce it, it is also important for international advocacy and human rights bodies to apply pressure on the Nigerian government. Nigeria's homophobic laws must change as they make it impossible for queer people who have fallen victim to kitos

to seek justice. I'd like to see international bodies partner with organisations like TIERs Nigeria (an NGO that fights for equality here) and Kito Diaries in order to raise awareness and to hopefully make a real difference.

I am twenty-one years old and I was born and bred in Nigeria. So far, I am yet to plan a date with someone from an app and actually meet up with them. This isn't from a lack of interesting or 'meetable' people, it is from a deep-seated fear for my safety. I'm not alone. Queer people in parts of the world like mine should be entitled to basic experiences like safely chatting on apps and going on dates – and it's clear to me that both better laws and digital solutions are urgently needed to make this happen.

* Names have been changed.