The background of the image is an abstract painting featuring bold, expressive brushstrokes in shades of red, orange, yellow, and blue. The composition is dynamic, with thick, impasto layers creating a textured surface. The colors are vibrant and layered, suggesting movement and emotion.

Living on the Margins

LGBT+ STORIES FROM IRAQ

LIVING ON THE MARGINS; *LGBT+ STORIES FROM IRAQ*

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Disclaimer: This book contains violent and intimate details.

INTRODUCTION

"We do not have LGBT+ people in Iraq." That is what most politicians, media personnel, and other influential people say.

This book contains a collection of stories of LGBT+ citizens. We share our love stories, talk about the times when we were brave, and highlight all the violations, discrimination, and life-threatening circumstances we face.

We are telling our stories to tell everyone that we exist. We have always been here, and will always be here. We also want to tell our LGBT+ brothers, sisters, and everyone in between that they are not alone. We all face similar things. Let us be brave together. Let us raise our voices and hold them accountable for not recognizing us, marginalizing us, and killing us. It is time that we get our rights. These stories focus on different aspects of our lives, but at the end, they are all about the resilience LGBT+ Iraqis have who continue to exist and live despite all the violence.



Stories of Love

1

Sara, 28

I met my girlfriend two years ago on a dating app. Being a woman and a lesbian in a city like Basra is very difficult. We do not have the opportunity to express either one of our identities. Because of that, I never thought I would ever meet someone who will know about both of my identities, accept them, and even love me because of them. I never thought that I would ever be able to express my feelings as a women, as a lesbian without fearing for my life and without facing any consequences.

Being in a relationship with my girlfriend is the best thing that has happened to me. She makes me feel safe and loved. Two things even my mother did not provide me with. My relationship with my girlfriend pulls me away from the negativity and fear. When we are together, I am lost in our time together. Even though we sometimes go on long walks together, most of our times are either spent in my bedroom or hers. It is not acceptable for girls my age to go out a lot in Basrah. My family like many others are traditional and more strict with girls. Our families think we are best friends, so they are



okay with us spending a lot of time visiting each other.

Despite all the love I have for my girlfriend, and the love I feel from her, we are always afraid of being caught. Every time I kiss her in my bedroom, half of my attention is on my bedroom door. Fearing that one day one of my siblings or parents would walk in on us! Sometimes I get carried away by these thoughts and think about what might happen if that ever happens. Will they hit me? Will they insult me? Will they kill me? Sometimes these questions make me cry as I do not understand why something beautiful like the feelings my girlfriend and I have for each other are considered as a great sin in my society. But at the end, I focus more on what I have. I do not care where I am when I am with her. As long as I am with her. As long as we have a place where we can be ourselves, hold hands, watch a movie, and talk about poetry, love, and music. Even though I know my life is very difficult and I could face all sorts of punishments at any given moment, I am thankful for what I have. I know I am one of the lucky ones who found love and has someone who will always be there for her. Because if I did not have her in my life, I do not know what I would have done...

2

Omar, 23

When I was ten years old, I became friends with one of my classmates. He was the only boy in school that I could be friends with. I was shy and uncomfortable around people. It was not easy for me to make friends. But things were different with him. Looking back now, I realize that maybe I was mixing the feelings of friendship with love. Those feelings pushed me to becoming friends with him. I was very comfortable spending my day with him,

and I felt like he felt the same way.

I did not know what being gay meant! But I did have feelings for him that were not the same as other boys had towards their friends. One day while being together, we kissed. I regretted it immediately. I told myself that what I did was wrong. I ignored any feelings that I might have had for him. We continued being friends and did not discuss the kiss.



At the age of 12, my feelings for him grew stronger. I started realizing that I can not control my feelings for him. Since then, we started getting closer and more intimate. We kissed more,

and spend more time together. The more time we spent together, the closer we got and the more intimate we became.

Even though I have enjoyed my time with him, I also started feeling more guilt and shame. I was told that these kinds of relationships are sinful. My family, the society, and even some friends in middle school always talked about how religious teachings and rules can never be broken. My feelings of guilt and shame grew so much that I started physically hurting myself. I was taught that struggling in life can reduce struggling in the afterlife. So I thought, maybe if I hurt myself now, I will not face a severe punishment in the afterlife. I knew I did not want and could not stop being intimate with my friend. But I also knew that I could not get rid of the shame and guilt I have felt. Despite not fully understanding why, I kept trying to keep the balance between these two hugely different feelings.

If you are reading this story, and you are a young LGBT+ person who is in a closet, or does not understand the feelings you are feeling, please do not make the same mistakes as I did. Do not hurt yourself. Do not deny your sexuality. Just like me, you probably feel afraid and alone. You feel lost between what you feel inside of you and what you are told by others. I think the feelings you feel are beautiful. Loving someone else and discovering who you are should never be wrong. Maybe you can not tell your family, but maybe you can make friends who could understand you, maybe you can read and watch online sources that can help you understand, and maybe you read my story and feel like you are not alone. You are like many other people who feel the exact same way as you do.

3

Ahmed, 31

I was born and raised in Kirkuk. My father is an engineer. My mother is a teacher. And I was the only boy and youngest child in the family. My parents and five sisters have always showed me love and support. Coming from a family that had so much love has naturally made love one of the most important things in my life.

I did not go through the phase of rejecting my identity. Despite knowing that I was different than other boys, I always felt like this is me and I will never change. This feeling helped me start discovering who I am. I met several guys and got into a three year long relationship. For me, finding love was always the burning desire inside of me.



A few years ago, I met someone on a dating app. He was a foreigner who lived in Slemani city. An hour away from Kirkuk where I lived. On our first date, he put all sorts of vegetables in his blender and made me a green smoothy. Despite his attempts of making it sound very good, it was too green for me. He only managed to make me take a sip, and I mainly did that because of how excited he was about his smoothy.

Since then, we started spending more time together. He introduced me to photography. Through his photos of different places in Iraq, he made fall back in love with my country. A place that was so familiar to me that I no longer noticed its beauty. He then got me a camera for Christmas to encourage me to go place and take more photos. I would be the one driving since he did not know how to, and had no interest to learn. At the end of each day, we would have an hour long call to give each other our daily updates. We call it "Nightly Conversation". These conversations got us closer and closer to each other. Until one day, we were on top of Azmar Mountain in Slemani City when we opened up to each other about our feelings and love for each other. That moment for me was the definition of freedom. Six months after, we got engaged. I know that it is not acceptable or legal to be in same sex relationships in Iraq, but this is my story and my life. I live it discreetly, but authentically. We are still living apart, but planning to one day move in together.

4

Sami, 25

I was four years old when my cousin chose me to be the ring bearer in her wedding. Since then, the white ring pillow with the fresh white rose attached to it became a sacred object to me. I too wanted to be married someday. Four

year old me thought that I would probably marry one of the girls I already knew. Not knowing that in a few years, I will be making a life-altering

discovery as I realize that I am gay. From the beginning, being gay for me was more than discovering sex. It was about the way a handsome man stirs a mix of passion, jealousy, and fantasy. I interpret conventional opposite sex norms into my own same sex world. That is why gay marriage is so important to me.

The first time I spoke to my fiancé was in 2016. We texted for a while on a dating app, but we did not meet as he was living in Turkey at the time. We continued talking for a while until he moved back to Iraq. Not too far from Erbil where I was living.

Something about him has stuck with me even in times when we did not talk. But the moment we started chatting again, those memories of our first conversations were vivid and began to mix with some optimism. There were many attractive things about him. His gorgeously dark eyes, his sweetness. With every small detail of his life that he shared with me online, I got more intrigued and wanted to step into his life. I wondered how beautiful it would be to be together.

When we met in person for the first time two years ago, I could not believe how handsome, funny, and intelligent he was. I was immediately worried about the possibility of him not feeling the same. But our first date was a success. He ended up staying at my place for the night as he lived outside of the city. After our first kiss, I have never been with someone else besides him. I feel so grateful that this man chose me as the one who gets to ask him every night, "How was your day?"

We are approaching two years together, and we are navigating new stages in our relationship. We got engaged a few months ago. We want to live together and spend our lives together. I do not know if it will be in Iraq. I do not know if things will go the way we want them to. But I know that I am with the person I want to spend my life with.



5

Khawla, 40

36 years, I was following all the rules that were put for me by my family, extended family, religious teachings, and the society. I was the only one who did not have any power over my own life. Ignoring my feelings, my thoughts, and my own identity. It was not until I got divorced that I got to really think about who I am and what I want in life.

I got divorced four years ago, after six years of marriage. I was married off to my cousin. Arranged marriages are very common in Karbala where I am from. A 30 year old girl who is not married is not acceptable. In families like mine, girls are supposed to get married at a certain age, perform their marital duties, give birth to babies, raise her children, stay at home, and be a good wife. For

After my divorce, I spent a lot of time in my room. I always wanted to be alone, away from my family and everyone else. That's when I really started listening to myself and think for myself. I started realizing that all the "strange" feelings I had towards women, was not strange. It was how I really felt. I was attracted to women. But I did not realize that because.. well, how would I know that when I was told my entire life that I should find a great man! Never ever have I thought being with a woman is an option.



Three years ago was when I met the love of my life. I was going to buy some things from the grocery store when I met my neighbor. She was wearing blue top which brought out her blue eyes. She is the most beautiful person I have ever seen. We started texting. We talked about everything. I could tell her the important and person things in my life. Our connection grew stronger and stronger. Being neighbors, it was not strange that we would spend time together in person. Our mothers were friendly with each other, and that allowed us to visit each other at home.

One day, we were laying on her bed, listening to Shireen's song "Enkatabli Omr", our hands started touching. We were talking about love, then we had our first kiss. It was the first time in my life that I feel afraid and safe at the same time. Since then, we have been together. We meet and talk all the time. Our families still do not know. They think that being a divorcee makes me sad, but in reality, I have never been happier.

6

Kamaran, 34

Growing up in a city like Erbil, I never thought it would be possible for a guy like me to find love. Not because I do not think highly enough of myself, but because it is shameful for a gay to fall in love with another guy in a city like Erbil, or even the rest of Iraq. I had my fair share of sexual encounters with different people. Being financially independent allowed me to easily move around and meet people. Being the oldest boy in the family meant that I could stay out late, and not really be restricted by the family rules the same way my sisters were.



A few years after working, I decided to get my masters. I went to study abroad to expand my horizons. I went to study in one of Iraq's neighboring countries. I never thought that I would find love so close to Iraq. Even though this new country was more progressive than Iraq, gay people still faced a lot of discrimination and it was not possible for us to be out.

A few months after I

moved there, I met a guy whom I am married to know. He was originally from that country. Our cultural background could not have been more different. Our taste in music, fashion, movies, and interests could not have been more different. But somehow, the connection between us was very strong. Our love story like most other love stories went through a lot of ups and downs. It takes a lot of work to be in a relationship. But the reason why I chose to talk about this is because this love story was the reason why I am now fully accepting of who I am. It took me one person who loved me for who I am, without fear, without worry, without stress, without anxiety, without shame. Someone who loved me and saw the good in me. That was what was missing from my life. Today, we are married. We live together outside of Iraq. I often go back to Iraq and talk about him as "my friend". I still hide this part of my identity and life from my family and loved one, and put on my "straight macho dude" face when I visit them. For some, this might sound fake. And they might be right. But for me, I am happy. I do not need my family to know. They have their lives, I have mine. And when we are together, I focus on what I have in common with them.

7

Dalia, 38

It is funny how people think that bisexual people can freely choose who they fall into! They can choose to fall in love with the opposite sex. Straight people think we choose to be gay, gay people think we do not face the same discrimination because we can choose to fall in love with someone from the opposite sex. But in reality, we have no control over who we fall in love with.

Just like everyone else. I know this because even though I have found many men attractive, my heart only sees one person. The girl that I met during my college year more than ten years ago.

I met her during the third semester. We had two classes together. We started talking because of our assignments, and gradually became friends. We spent more time together every day. My attraction for her grew stronger, but I could never do anything about it. We lived in Samara, a very conservative city. The idea of anything outside of the norm is not acceptable. So something like being bisexual will actually become life threatening. We stayed friends, and lost touch shortly after graduating and I have not talked to her for 11 years.



Four years ago, my family moved to another neighborhood. Two weeks after we settled, I ran into her in the grocery store. My heart dropped. I could not believe that I ran into her! I discovered that they are our neighbors now. We started hanging out again. We became even closer friends than we were before. We started going out together, do shopping, and have girls night.

One day, we went to Al Malwiya together. We were walking around, talking about our lives and aspiration, and in a quiet moment we held hands. We walked for hours and told each other that we are attracted to each other. I told her how I have thought about her a lot.

Since then, we have been dating. Every day that I am not with her, I am thinking about the time when I will see her next. She is the love of my life.

8

Wasim, 31

they are in other public places. I did not believe it in the beginning. That was during 2007, one of the most violent phases in Baghdad. But I had to go to check it and see for myself. If there was even a small chance that he was right, I had to know and meet other people.

The place was not a big gay coffeeshop. I do not think that exists anywhere in Iraq. But it definitely felt more open minded and I did see others who looked like me. I started going there more. It was a relaxed environment where people could simply express their artistic sides. It was a good place to meet other likeminded people. Not everyone was gay. Many were artists, creative people, and others who are considered misfits in the society. But we

I met my boyfriend at a coffeeshop in Baghdad six years ago. The coffeeshop's name was Jar Al-Qamar. That coffeeshop no longer exists! It was bombed by Mahdy Army because they knew it was an LGBT+ friendly place.

I used to go there a lot. The first time I found out about it was when I was talking to another gay guy I knew through the gay website, manjam.com. He told me that there is a place where LGBT+ people are not as scrutinized as



all tried to show each other that we have acceptance in this place.

A year after, I met my boyfriend. In a way, you can say that for a few months, we had normal dating life. Two guys getting to know each other. But it all changed after that. My dad whom I thought was traveling, came home early and caught me and my boyfriend in my bedroom. The horror we had to face since then is unimaginable. My dad started beating us both. He kicked me out of the house and asked me to never come back.

My boyfriend and I found a small place outside of Baghdad to avoid danger especially when we heard that my cousins and boyfriend's family started looking for us. We have been living in this place for several years now. My boyfriend works in a small restaurant, and I do design for different small companies. Despite all that we have faced, I am thankful every day that I am not going through this by myself. I am can not imagine how it is for others who are in my situation but have to face it alone. Love has saved my life. I can easily focus on all the problems that I faced and continue to face. But he is the reason why I don't.

9

Manar, 18

When I started Highschool two years ago, I was really depressed. For a few years before, I have been confused about my identity and trying to figure out what the feelings I am feeling mean. I knew I was attracted to guys, and that I liked to date them, but I do not want to have sex with them. For a long time, I thought this was because I come from an Iraqi family, and most if not all Iraqi families find sex outside of marriage a mistake that no one should ever do. I

thought being raised by my family made me hate sex. I thought that I just inherited my family and society's beliefs and simply did not want to be intimate with other people.

My feelings started changing some months ago when I met my friend Rana. The closer we got, the more we shared about our lives and private thoughts that we do not share with anyone else. Like most girls our age, we started talking about love and what it means to us. I was afraid to tell her that I do not like sex. I did not want her to think I am a freak. A loner. Someone who does not want to be like other people and live a normal life. But on the other hand, I did not want to continue living in isolation and only have these thoughts in my head. I did not want to continue feeling depressed because of all the thoughts and aspects of my identity that I keep to myself.

One day, I decided to tell her. She then told me that what I am describing sounds like an Asexual. It was the first time I have heard of this word. She said she has seen a show that had an Asexual character, and that made her research the word more. She did not identify as one, but it stuck in her head because it was a unique thing that she has never encountered before.

Together, we started googling Asexuality. Every word I read made me feel more free. With every word, I felt like weight was being lifted off of my shoulders. It was like I was meeting myself for the first time realizing that I am not a weirdo. Maybe the world does not have millions of people like me, but there are still a lot of people who identify as Asexual, and I no longer felt alone the same way I did before.

I do not know what this discovery means for my life in general, and my love life specifically. I have never met guys who want to be in a relationship with a girl and build a life with her knowing that sex is not something she really wants. Or maybe there are guys like that but I have never met them. And I do not know if I will ever meet them! But I do feel a lot of love today. Love to myself and my identity. I love discovering myself and continuing to read more about what it means to be Asexual. Like most people, I do want to find someone who loves me and I love him. I want to have moments when I hold his hands, hug him, and talk about our dreams. And I do hope this happens to me one day. But until then, I have enough love for myself, my friends, and my family that will drive me to continue in life.



Stories of **Fear**

1

Shireen, 29

It has been a few months since my girlfriend and I fled Iraq. We both come from a traditional, tribalist, and religious city in Iraq. We met there a year ago and continued dating. As a bisexual girl, I often found myself being attracted to women, but always manifested my “straight” side to stay safe. Until I found my girlfriend whom I could be myself with.

Our problems started when my older sister walked in on us kissing in my room. My sister and mother threatened to tell my father. They also called my girlfriend to threaten her and told her that they would tell her family if she did not stay away from me. Living through that stress impacted me greatly. I felt depressed and attempted suicide. I was taken to the hospital and I was kept away from my girlfriend despite her trying to visit.



My mother then told my brother. He got my discharged from the hospital against the doctor's recommendations. My mother then told me that I have to marry this guy who has proposed to me. An arranged marriage to keep me away from my girlfriend. I realized that I needed to calm

the waters to make sure I stay alive and be able to communicate with my girlfriend. So I told them that I would do it.

Shortly after, I reached out to my girlfriend, and we decided that we have to leave the country. She did not have a passport, so we had to wait until she gets one. Two days after she did, we left the country and went to Turkey. We left in such a hurry that we did not take most of our documents with us.

Although our lives are not in immediate danger now, we are still afraid and uncertain about what will happen to us. The more we have is running out, we are unable to find jobs, and the United Nations and other international organizations are not doing much to help us. We are feeling very vulnerable. Going back to Iraq is not an option as both of our families know. Leaving Turkey is not possible as we are not getting the help we need to make that happen. So we are very cautious about what we do in Turkey and avoid attracting any attention to avoid being deported. This means we put up with guards aggressively interrogating us when we go to the UN offices, answer any question a Turkish security officer might ask us no matter how personal they are. We do not want to risk anything. Risking anything might lead to us being sent back to Iraq. If that happened, what do you think will happen to us?

2

Karim, 23

I am currently hiding from my family and tribe as I am afraid for my safety. Being a transgender man is not acceptable in Iraq. Especially in families like mine which has strong traditional and religious beliefs. My family has always forced me to act and look more feminine. My parents often gave my brother the authority to control me. He would sometimes beat me if I did not do what they wanted me to do.

I have struggled for many years to learn about and discover my trans identity. Being abused by family members and other people, being bullied and receiving threats made me confused and unsure about my identity. I had no way or place to express my identity. It is not possible for me to get hormone treatments as they are too risky and illegal. I was never able to even dress the way I wanted at home or elsewhere. I could not even get a haircut that would reflect the image I wanted to show the world. Home, the place where I should have felt the safest was the place I felt imprisoned at.

I was lucky that after



escaping, I found people who provided me with a place to live and hid from my family. But the fear is still there. I can not go out freely. I can not even go by the bakery to get some bread without fearing that someone might see me.

I am writing my story hoping that someone or some organization would read it and decides that they can and will help me. Help me change my life. I want to live my truth. Be myself. Is that too much to ask?

3

Lina, 29

The first time I was raped, I was nine years old. My uncle walked into my room laid next to me in bed, and started touching me. He put his hand in my pants and started touching my penis. I did not understand what was happening. He then started making noises, and asked me to never tell anyone about this or I will be punished. He raped me a few times after that over the course of two years. Since then, I started feeling confused about my identity and what I felt

inside. I thought him raping me made me feel like I want to be a girl. For a long time, I felt guilt and shame for feeling like I want to be a girl because I was feeling guilt and shame about what happened with my uncle. These feelings were magnified every time we had a family dinner with the extended family and seeing my uncle.

Years have passed before I started really learning about my identity. I started reading about boys who want to be girls on the internet. The first time I discovered the word transsexual was when I was 19 years old. Reading about trans people made me realize that I have always been trans. I have always felt like a girl. I started viewing some childhood memories differently. Like when I was five and I wanted to buy the same dress as my sister, and my mother telling me that is for girls, not for boys. Or always wanting to play with dolls, dressing them, and imagining myself being one of them.

When I got older, I started meeting other people like me. Sometimes, we would organize gatherings to be together and be ourselves. Someone at these gatherings told me that they can help me get hormone treatment to start changing my body and be more like a woman. I was very scared of taking that step because of my family and the fact that it is not legal. But I also could not continue living in a body that I started hating. I wanted to be who I am. So I decided to do it.

Months later, I started noticing changes in my body. My chest was growing, my face was becoming more feminine, and I was seeing myself differently. I started feeling more comfortable about what I was seeing. At the same time, my life became very difficult. People started noticing the physical changes. I was stopped at different check points around Baghdad several times. Sometimes, they would only look at my strangely and let me pass, other times they

would ask me to get out of the car so that they search it, then they would start touching me claiming that they are just searching for things. And a few times, I was raped by officers at these check points. Sometimes more than one officer at the same time. I feel disgusting. I do not feel like a human. I often think of committing suicide but do not actually do it. I do not feel alive. The only thing I feel every single day is fear...



4

Mustafa, 36

From an early age, everyone around me said that I am a very smart guy and I will do great things in the future. My family and everyone around me had high hopes for me. They all told me that when I grew up, I will have my pick when it comes to finding a girl to marry, and that any girl would be lucky to marry someone like me.

Years later, I graduated from college and get a great job. I was making a lot of money. I bought my own car, started paying for an apartment, and even helped my family when they needed me. From an outsider's prospective, I was fulfilling all my parents' dreams. The only thing that was missing was to get married. But from my own prospective, I was struggling. I knew I was gay and that it would be very difficult for me to marry a girl.

For a few years, my life was okay. I was succeeding in my job, I was secretly meeting other guys, and my family was not pressuring me to get married. But when I was getting older, they started getting suspicious of why I never had a girlfriend. A good guy with a great job and a stable life should at least have one girlfriend! They started dropping hints and suggestions for girls that would make a good wife. For many years, I convinced them that I am too busy and too focused on my work to be meeting girls.

When I turned 31, my parents started pressuring to get married even more. I ran out of excuses. So I started convincing myself that it will not be that bad. So I did get married.

Marriage in Iraq usually restricts women more than men, but in this instance, I was the one who felt like he is imprisoned. My wife is a great woman, a nice woman, but a woman. The longer we were married, the more problems we had. People started asking us about having babies and wanting us to start a family.

It was very difficult for me to have sex with my wife. She is beautiful, but I am not attracted to her. I try to avoid her and sex. I always pretend to be tired and use my work as an excuse for going home late and not having sex often enough. But it is impossible to never have sex. Every time we had to have sex, I would go to the bathroom, watch

gay porn on my phone to get aroused, then go back to the bedroom and have sex. I would often close my eyes and think about a guy while having sex with my wife. I am still married to my wife. I am still living this life. I do not know what will happen next. I just hope one day the life I have imagined for myself will be the life I will live one day.



5

Marwa, 27

I have never felt safe in my life. No one knew who my father was, and my mother abandoned me at birth. I was then registered to different parents who later give me up. Since then, I have been raised by two women.

At the age of eight, I started discovering my gender identity. I noticed that I had more feminine behavior than other boys my age. For a few years, I was not sure what that meant. But when I turned 14, I discovered that I am

a woman in a man's body. I started making myself look more feminine. Which made things difficult as I was living in a very traditional area that was controlled by religious parties and militias. It did not take too long before they started threatening me. These threats forced me to move to a different area and started living with a relative of one of the women that raised me.

I thought moving would give me the opportunity to a new beginning. But the threats never stopped. Despite having a place to live, I never had anyone who would stand for me. I did not have real parents or friends who could support me.

Shortly after, I was abducted by three armed men. I was tied up, beaten, and insulted. Other people were around but no one did anything to stop them. In fact, even the police member who was there tried to sexually assault me. I realized then that no one will stand for me. Even my government that was supposed to protect me was actually threatening my life. Everyone I knew was against gay and trans people which is why I almost never left the house.

After a while, the situation in the city got a little bit better. I started working at a hair salon. I met someone whom I was romantically involved with. These were the best times of my life. But these times did not last long. The threats pretty quickly started happening again. Armed militias started targeting LGBT people again. This did not only put my life in danger, but also the lives of my lover and the women who were raising me. One day, our house was raided, and they started beating me, and shaving my head in front of a religious Imam. The humiliation and pain I felt then is something that still lives inside of me.

Today, I am still moving around. I still face uncertainty and instability. But most of all, I feel afraid. Afraid cos the militias constantly keep targeting us and killing LGBT people including people that I know. I am afraid because I do not know what will happen to me. I do not know if I will wake up tomorrow, if I will have a normal day, or if I will face another threat that could potentially end my life.



6

Zheer, 29

I have thought about writing my story many times. But looking back at what I have been facing in life is extremely difficult. I think one has to make peace with the past before being able to write about it. I am hoping I am wrong, and that writing the story will help me make peace with my past and focus on the present.

I was on my way home one day when one of my friends and three of his friends attacked me on a hill near my hours in Slemani city. They beat me, hit my head with a brick, sexually abused me, and took all my money. The shock and fear I felt that day is engraved in my mind.

I went to the police to report what happened. The police officer did not take me seriously from the beginning, and then pointed out that I am an "odd boy" with "feminine behavior". He said "We can not do anything because it looks like you like being fucked." Another officer then asked his colleague "What do you think about holding him captive for the night?" The two officers left the room to discuss. I was left in the interrogation room for at least two hours not knowing what will happen to me. I came to the police to report a crime committed against me, and I end up being the one who faces danger.

Shortly after, they came back and started sexually harassing me. One of the officers started fucking me while the other one was holding my hands. Since that incident, the fear I have from police officers is haunting me. Anytime I drive and see traffic police, or even go to work and see the building security. Others might know what I feel. But I am afraid every day.



7

Saeed, 29

I was texting my boyfriend when one of my friends called me to tell me about my name being in an LGBT+ hit list in Baghdad. I was shocked and terrified. I did not know what that means and what I can do about it.

A few days passed and we started hearing more about the list. We discovered that at least two of our friends are killed. Their names were also on the list, and their bodies were found in a dumpster near the area they lived in.

Hearing that did not only make me feel devastated but also panicked! One day I was going to work and living a normal life being a closeted bisexual guy in Baghdad, trying to deflect any suspicion, the next I am on a hit list thinking that I could day any time I leave the house.

I took a sickness leave from work and decided to stay home for 11 days. I went back to work after that as it was becoming difficult to stay on leave. A week after, I was taken by five guys, blind folded, and put in the trunk. I think they drove for 25 minutes before we stopped around Sadr City. They started asking me if I like boys. I kept denying it, but they did not believe me, and started hitting me. One of them smashed a bottle on my head and I started bleeding. Another was spitting on my face while threatening my family. I was terrified and started crying.

One them began to take off his pants and said, I will prove that you are gay. He undressed me and started fucking me. Shortly after, I became unconscious. I do not remember what happened immediately after. The first thing I remember after that is me being on the floor. They took me back to the car, drove for some time, and then throw me on the side of the road. I spent an hour crying before I took a taxi and went home.

Today, I am full of hate, shame, guilt, and fear.



8

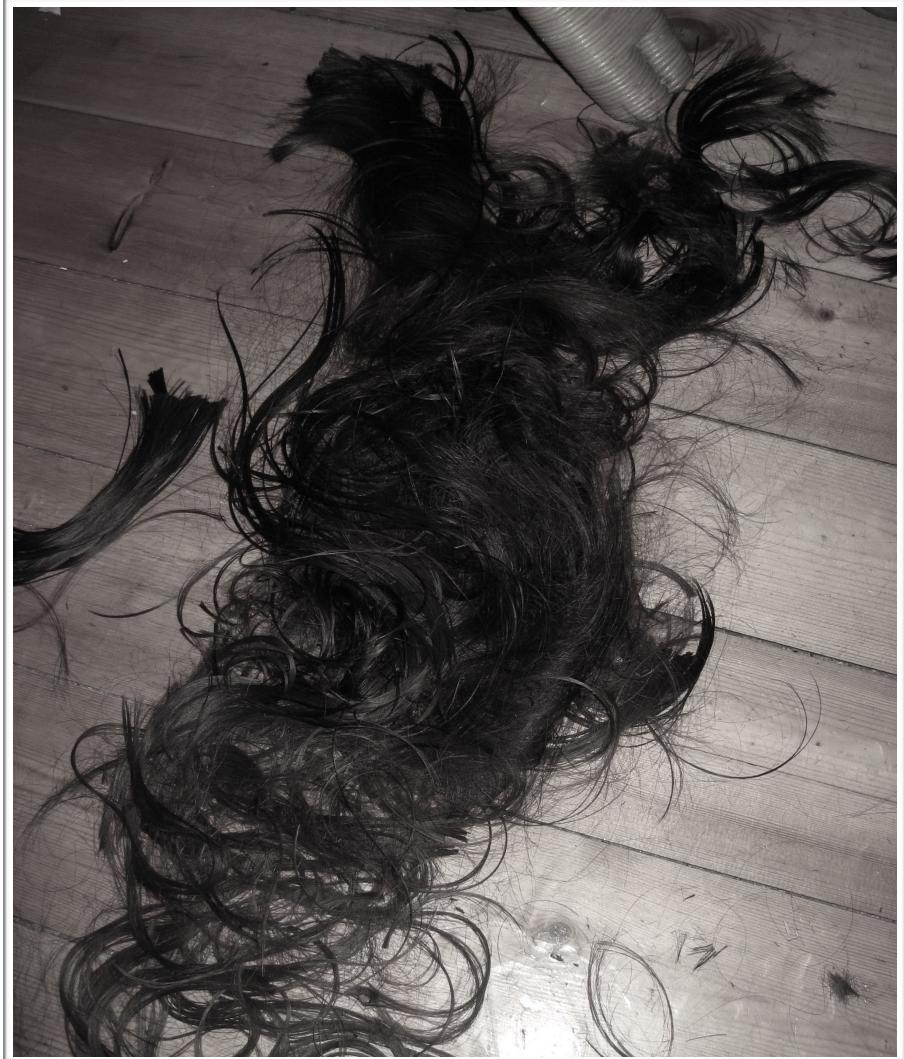
Maya, 28

"hermaphrodite" was living here. One of them pulled my hair and took me to the bedroom. They ordered me to take off my clothes. They saw that I was wearing a bra and that my body looked more feminine while my identification card said that I was a male.

The lead officer started asking me questions like "Why do you want to be a woman?", "Are you selling your body?", "Are you a slut?", "Look at yourself, is this what you want to be?" I was standing in front of six officers in a bra and underpants, while four of the officers were taking a video of me and making jokes about me. One officer was pushing me around, the other was slapping me. I felt so humiliated that I wanted to just die right there.

Even though I tried to deny that I was trans, it was very difficult for them to believe as I was wearing women's underwear, had very long hair, and already had hormonal treatment that changed my body. I

A year ago, I was in my room when the apartment door was knocked. I opened the door, and a swarm of people pushed me and came inside. They were six police officers in uniform with weapons. They said that they had a report that a



tried to tell them that I wear these clothes just for fun, it's not who I am. But they were not satisfied by my answers.

The lead officer ordered one of the younger ones to take me to the bathroom and shave my head. One of them was hold me from the neck while the other was shaving my head. At the same time, another officer was cutting all the women's clothes that I owned in front of me. The lead officer said "Since you do not know how to be a real man, we will teach you and make you the man that you should be." They sat me down on a chair, and said "This is your warning, next time we will not be this forgiving. If we ever hear you are doing anything feminine, we will be back and will solve the problem permanently."

Since then, I have been living in a safe house. I rarely leave the house, and when I do, I wear hoodies and hide my identity. It has been a year since I lived that nightmare, and I am still living it. I do not know if it will ever be over. If I will ever stop feeling afraid.

9

Zainab, 20

I was seven when I was kicked out of my house. My mother's husband did not want a "sissy" boy around his other sons. I knew I was trans very early in my life. I have always felt like a girl and knew that I am born in the wrong body.

For the past 13 years since being kicked out, I have had a very difficult life.

Being alone means that I did not have money to even buy food. I was homeless for a two years. I used to sleep on a carton near Al Kadhiya mosque. People who passed by would sometimes give me some money. But I never made more than 3000 Iraqi dinar in a day. That was enough for two sandwiches. Sometimes, I would only eat one of them and save the second for the next day in case I do not make any money.

Shortly after I turned nine, a man came and offered to take me to a home, feed me, and give me a bed. In return to his offer, he would have sex with me. He rented a room for me and would visit me once a week as he was married.

A few months after, he started bringing his friends and let them have sex with me. They started taking me to other cities to entertain men.



Three years after, I was sold to another man who lived in Erbil. That was the start of a number of men who bought and sold me, and took me to different cities around Iraq. I do not remember how many men have raped me in my life. I do not remember how many private parties were organized where I was one of those who was auctioned like a piece of furniture.

I am 20 years old, and sometimes I see others who are my age, and wonder what I did to deserve a life so different than theirs. Was my crime that I was born? That I felt different than what the society wants me to feel? My life has been destroyed! I live in a country where rebuilding a life for someone like me is impossible. I have no one, I did not develop any skills, so I do not know what to do with my life. All I know is that I am afraid. Afraid of the unknown, afraid of men, afraid of anyone knowing my story.

10

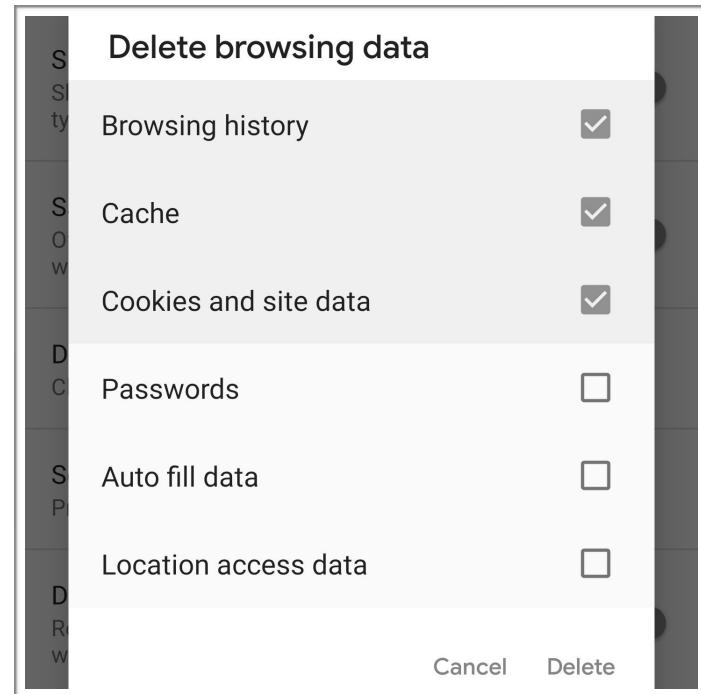
Ali, 36

I was born with autism. So for people, I have always been the weird kid. I have always been treated differently. My family knew I was different, but living with autism, they did not notice the other things that made me different. Anything strange that I ever did was attributed to autism. Hearing everyone saying that made me believe it too. For a long time I thought the feelings I had towards other men were because I had autism. I thought that

I was just wired differently than other people. But all that was okay. Because I had a mother who protected me against everything. Any comment about me, anyone wanting to insult me, or hurt me in any way had to face my mother. She was my protector. Everything changed when she passed away 14 years ago. People started making fun of me more. Treated me differently, and I no longer had a support system.

One day I was watching gay porn, and forgot to delete the browser history. My brother saw it, and he told my dad. They both started hitting me and insulting me. They then locked me in the room for days without any food.

Since then, I have been neglected more and more, but also not given any space to live any kind of personal life. I am constantly being watched as they want to make sure I feel afraid of doing anything that they might not approve of. I am a 36 year old man who has no power over his life. I do not know how much longer I can live like this. Hide my identity, ignore my own feelings, and live by everyone else's rules. I have thought about escaping many many times, but I am afraid that I might not be able to survive alone. I am gay, I am autistic, I have no job, no supporters. What is someone like me supposed to do?



11

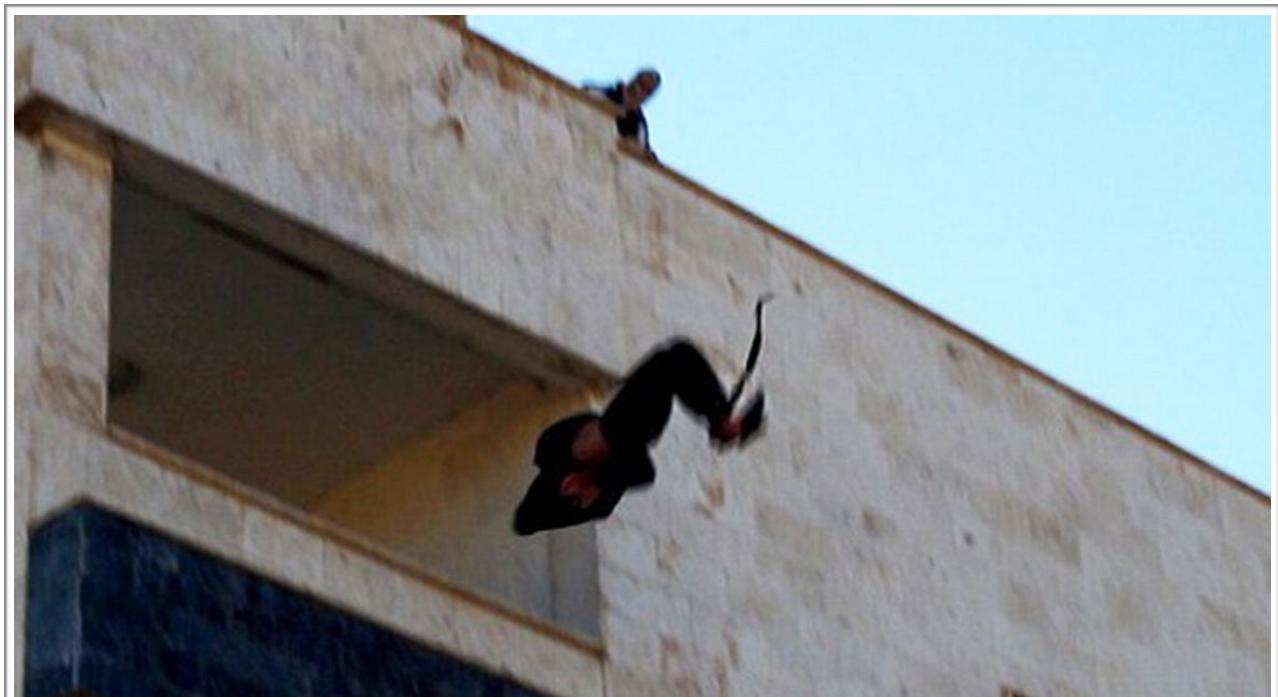
Rami, 28

When the Iraqi government announced the defeat of ISIS, everyone was happy. We all celebrated that the terrorist group is not longer controlling our lives. But for me, the fear continues. Because when it comes to my identity and nature, even my government acts the same way as the terrorist group. I have been living in fear since 2011 when a militias organized another attack on gay people. When they put my name with

many other names on a list of people they will kill because they were gay. That terrifying moment in my life turned into a terrifying seven years.

When that list was published, I did not know what to do! I could not tell my family as I did not know how they will react. I could not tell my friends because even if they accepted me, they will not be able to help me. And I certainly could not tell the police because they themselves have been torturing gay people for many years. The only option I had left was to escape!

I went to Mosul because a friend of mine said I can work there. Eight months later, ISIS entered Mosul



and quickly controlled it. They started torturing and killing anyone whom they did not like. Gays were on the top of their list. They started throwing them from buildings, killing them with stones, and shooting them. I had to be even more invisible than I already was. I could not go anywhere as leaving Mosul was not possible. So I spent most of my time inside my room. Leaving for a total of one or two hours every week to go buy groceries and food. I could not even go to work because I was too afraid to go out.

This nightmare did not end for me when ISIS was defeated. Killings of gay people continue. I do not know where to go! I am currently living above a restaurant that I am working at. I almost never leave that building. What if I leave and someone recognizes me? What if they knew I was gay? What if someone wanted to hurt me? What if they wanted to kill me? All these are questions I ask myself every time I want to go and buy my basic needs.

12

Aram 37

I was born deaf which means that I have always known what it meant to be different. But being deaf did not stop my family from loving me. In fact, they have loved me harder because of it. They made me feel special. They have always tried to be there for me and show me that I will never face the world without them.

When I turned 15, I realized that I am attracted to other men. I knew that my love for women and wanting to spend time with my friends who were mostly girls was not because I was attracted to them. It was because I identified with them. I liked talking about fashion, design, and more creative things that are mainly talked about by girls in my society. I realized that I was gay.

I decided to tell my family. I thought, my family have never showed me anything but love. They will be okay with this. I did not realize that I was so sheltered that I did not know the risk I was deciding to take! I told my mother about my feelings. She started crying and hitting herself, wondering what she did wrong! She told me that it might be because they gave me so much love that it made me soft and girly. I could not



believe what I was hearing. My mother whom has never said anything to me except I love you, is now questioning her love to me. She told me not to tell my father or anyone else for that matter. She said that my dad will not react like her and might even kill me. Hearing these words from my mother was shocking.

It has been more than two decades since that conversation. I am still living with my family, still hiding my identity, and still pretend to be the clueless deaf son. I have accepted that I will die without expressing my identity or telling anyone. This secret will die with me and my mother.

Stories of Courage

1

Mohammad, 23

When I was 14 years old, I was searching yahoo answers to find answers for the question "How to stop being gay?" Since then, I have faced a lot of difficulties in life. Starting with the fact that I came from an unstable and sometimes abusive home, to being betrayed by friends and boys that I thought I had a connection with, and ending with the depression that I was diagnosed with a few years ago. I went through several years of not accepting my identity and even tried to suppress it. Depression became a major part of my life that I am just beginning to come to terms with.

After years of exploring all these feelings, I started accepting myself slowly. I watched a lot of videos online like the "It Gets Better" videos and learned that people like me could live happily. I became a child of the internet. The language classes my family sent me to have opened several doors and introduced me to different worlds that enabled me to learn more. I started seeing things more positively. I



When I was 14 years old, I was searching yahoo answers to find answers for the question "How to stop being gay?" Since then, I have faced a lot of difficulties in life. Starting with the fact that I came from an unstable and sometimes abusive home, to being betrayed by friends and boys that I thought I had a connection with, and ending with the depression that I was diagnosed with a few years ago. I went through several years of not accepting my identity and even tried to suppress it. Depression became a major part of my life that I am just beginning to come to terms with.

started making friendships with more open minded people whom I started coming out to, I started traveling more, studied abroad, and volunteered for human rights organizations. None of these things were things that were handed to me. I worked very hard for them.

A few years ago, I started working with IraQueer. This work is one of the things that I am tremendously proud of. The fact that my bedroom became my workplace and my laptop became the tool that has helped many makes me feel proud. The fact that a lot of times I find myself in a situation where I brainstorm with my colleagues to invent words in local languages because the ones that exist are either offensive or inaccurate is something I am very proud of. This work has also contributed to the way I view myself. I know I have faced a lot of difficulties in my life, but instead of being defined by them, I took advantage of them and developed myself.

Today, I fully accept myself. If I go back in time, and they give me the choice, I would choose to be gay. Not because it was easy, but because it made me a better person. Until today, there are many people who do not know about my identity, including my parents. But I will continue using my laptop to help others accept themselves. To encourage them to not give in to the bad voices inside of their heads or in their surroundings. And hope that one day, our story will have a happy ending.

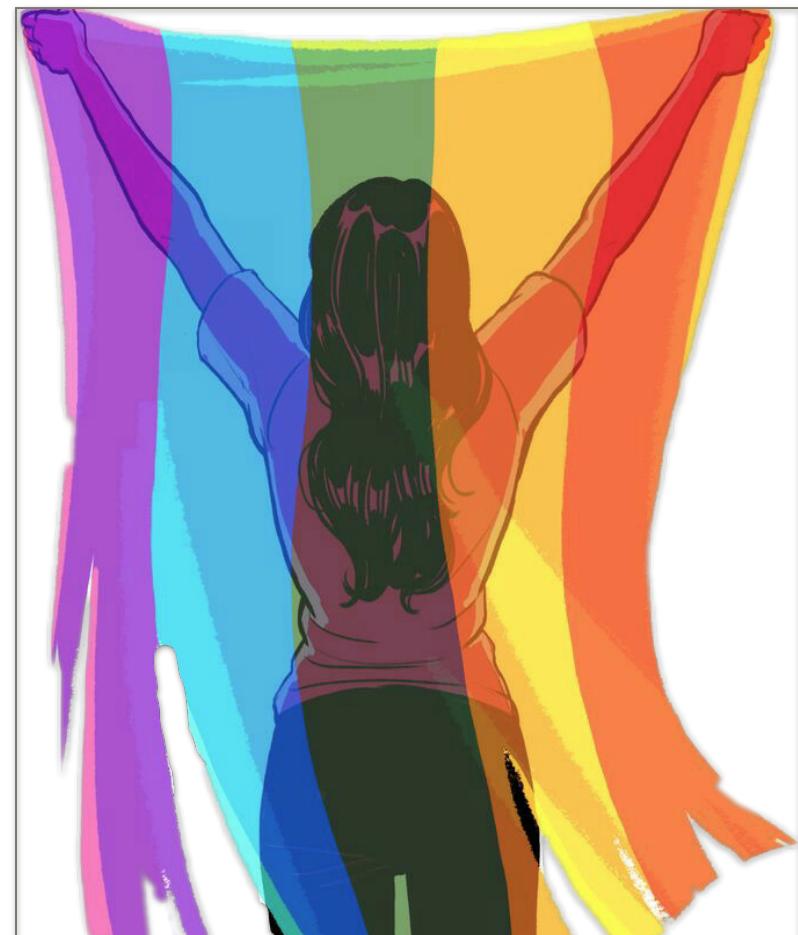
2

Lamyaa, 31

My story can easily be a sad story. For many years, I faced discrimination and threats. My family has kicked me out of the house. Extended family members have been looking for me to kill me and “clear” the family name and protect its honor. For more than two years, I was living in a one bedroom shelter where other people would also join. On one hand, it was great that other people can also be protected and feel a bit safer than they do. On the other hand, I have never had privacy, and was constantly surrounded by people who like me have faced a lot of difficulties, which at times, could be too heavy and hard to deal with.

A year after I went to the shelter, I started volunteering for the organization that was providing it. I started helping them with the different projects that they were leading. Despite the limited things that I could do to avoid endangering their work, I felt like I am a part of something.

Shortly after, I was offered a job to help them more regularly. I received a lot of training and started learning about how to be a good human rights advocate. I started using my situation of both being an activist and a victim to reach out to other people and help them in whatever way we could. I slowly became one of the few LGBT activists that I knew about. Even though I am still not public, I am very passionate about the work we have been doing for many years. My past is still very much a part of my present. But I am determined not to take it with me to my future.



3

Nazdar, 51

When I was born in Duhok city in 1968, we did not have access to a lot of information. Despite going to college and graduating with a bachelor degree in literature, I never really had access to information beyond my studies. There was no internet, no cell phones, and no connections to the outside world. So the word lesbian was never something I ever heard of used.

Even though I never heard the word, I still had the feelings. Like when I had a crush on my best friend in middle school. Or the teaching assistant in college. I knew that I found them attractive and I had feelings for them that went beyond just admiring them as people, friends, or mentors. But seeing everyone around me expressing intimate feelings only towards the opposite sex made me feel like what I felt did not have a place in the society. I started neglecting these feelings more until I stopped feeling anything.

Like most girls, I got married when I was 28 years old. My husband whom I am still married to is a great person who gave me a lot in life, including our three beautiful children. He



has worked hard his entire life, and never let me or our children need anything. I love him so very much. He is my partner, the father of my children, my friend. But he has never really been my romantic partner.

Despite trying to burry my feelings for so many years, they have always manifested themselves one way or another. But it was not until I learned about IraQueer and Amir Ashour's work that I started feeling them again. Seeing a fearless young guy expressing his identity that way and refusing to live a lie made me start thinking about my life and pushed me to reevaluate my life choices. I know today that for a woman like me in a country like Iraq, starting over is extremely difficult. It might have been possible if it was only me. But if I do anything based on my lesbian identity, the consequences will not only be faced by me. They will also impact my two daughters and son, my husband, my 88 year old mother, and all those who care about me. I do not want to be responsible for my family's reputation to be destroyed. I do not want to be the reason for my children's life being difficult.

But I decided to write my story. At this point, this is the biggest thing I can do. It is brining out some emotions that I have not processed in my life. While thinking about some parts, I cried, laughed, got angry, and had all kinds of other emotions. I am disappointed that I can not live my life, but I hope my story will encourage others to live theirs. I want others to know that if they can, they should take the risk and be who they are. Whether they are old or young, being a lesbian is not something that became a reality because of the internet. I have always felt this way. Way before any kind of communication with the outer world was possible. Do not let the norms put you in a prison like the one I am in now.

4

Ahlam, 55

My name is Ahlam. I am a poet, a creative, a mother, a grandmother, a widow, an activist, a lover, a woman who wears hijab, an Iraqi, and a woman. These are some of the many identities that I have always identified with. Some of which were accepted by the society, some were not. But all were things that I knew existed. The one thing that I never thought I would identify as was "Queer". This word was never a part of my world. My

mother was a simple woman who dedicated her life to raise seven children. She did not go to school and did not really know much about the world. My dad was a hardworking man who never really had time to spend with us. So I never really had people in my family who would teach me about the world, my identity, and beyond.

I spent my entire life defending different human rights. I believe that we should all be equal, free, protected, and have the opportunity to be who we want to be.

It was not until I was 51 years old that I knew that I was queer. I was at a training, and this 24 years old gay activist was giving us a training about sexuality and gender. He talked about what it



means to be queer. He said that one way to define queer would be as a sexual orientation. When defining it, he said "Someone can fall in love with people regardless of their sex and gender identity. The more important thing for them is the attraction and the feelings." His words stuck with me that day. I had so many questions but I did not dare to ask them because I did not want others to wonder if I am queer. I stayed silent and waited until the end of the day to ask go to the trainer and ask him.

We were walking towards a restaurant to get dinner when I asked him again about what it meant to be queer. He explained again and shared some resources. We continued walking for some minutes while I was thinking more. "Am I queer?", "Can I even be queer?" These were just two of the questions that were running around my mind. I then told him "I can not be queer." He said "Why not?" I said "I am a 51 year old widow. I am a grandmother. I am a well respected member of the community. What would people say?" He said "I think your grandchildren will be inspired by you when they know. I think people do will no longer respect you do not understand what it means to be queer. But most importantly, do you want people's respect on the expense of your personal truth?"

His words made me think! How can I really advocate for human rights and freedom when I myself am not free? I know I can not go public with my identity because I can be killed, and there are too many people in my life that rely on me. But I can decide that I will not lie. I will share my truth with the girls and boys who come to us asking for help showing them they are not alone. I will raise my grandchildren in a way that allows them to grow and become the people they want to be, instead of who we think we want them to be. I will show them that all my identities that might even be full of contradictions have made me the person I am today. I am 55 years old now, and some think it is too old for people my age to be anything but someone who conforms to norms. But in reality, my heart is full with a lot of love and beliefs that I want to share with the world around me. It is never too late or too early to discover our identities. I am just happy that I have, and that I can say that I know myself better than I did a few years ago.

5

Saman, 25

Sometimes, I would hear my family talk about how disgusting gay people were and I believed them. Every time I heard them talk negatively about gay people, I would hate myself and internalize what they were saying. It was a very dark time, and I am now very sorry for that kid. At the same time, I had two close friends who I felt like they were like me. We never spoke about it, but deep down we all knew and we could relate. It was the unspoken secret

that all of us knew but we did not speak about. They also came from religious families and the conversation we have involved religion.

I kept myself locked in the struggle for a few years until I could not take it any longer. It was exhausting. I eventually came out to my close friends. And, like I expected, they told that they were like me and that they are also LGBT. Opening up to them made things a bit easier for me. There were now other people with whom I could talk about my struggles. We all took the decision to change. We talked about religion together and we prayed together. As we grew older, we realized that our attempts to change were not successful and we started reading online that it was not possible to change ones sexuality. It was a grim fact for us at the time but it made us question many things. In my early teenage years, I started struggling with my mental health and I was diagnosed with a mental illness. I am now sure the appearance of the mental illness had many things to do with my sexuality and also the trauma that I was subjected to in my childhood.

But through the years, my friends and I started becoming more and more okay with our sexualities and we grew less religious. I am not saying that gay people cant be religious, but thats just how it was for me (and my friends). I starting working with an international NGOs and through there I met many people and foreigners who became my family. They accepted me for who I was. It did not even matter to them that I was gay and that helped me accept who I am. I also travelled and met people from other countries. My perspective in regards to my sexuality began to shift. I met other gay people who I admired and saw that they were normal. And when I started college, I got new

friends who were open-minded. Even though the society was against me, there were a few people who supported me. My family would react terribly if they knew that I am gay. But I now have friends who are in place of my family. I do not think my story was interesting. And I know that even though I struggled with my family and other things, my situation was better than other peoples because I came from a rich family and because of that I went to private schools and colleges



where people were more open minded. But I just want you to know that the future might be better than what you imagine. I never expected to accept myself or find people who accept me. But things are now better than what I thought. Safety and security are bad for all of us and we are always in danger. But having hope and loving yourself you can have in your own private mind. And no matter how bad things can get, try to stay positive.

6

Rivan, 22

From a very young age, I had an almost instinctive set of norms and guidelines installed into my system without questioning that I was expected to adhere to in the years to come. At the age of 4, I had to give up my denim shorts and sneakers for a ride to the kindergarten in my pink Sunday dress with a pair of white Mary Janes to match with. I hated pink and white. Not

long after, I had to beg my mom for a revamp of my toy collection; I traded all of my toy cars and stuffed animals for Barbies and dollhouses. I gave up my blue bunny, a stuffed bunny that I grew up with. My mom used to make up stories for me about the blue bunny—which by the way, was called The Blue Bunny—and I going on adventures, nothing else mattered in the world. Those were some of the best days of my life.

At six, I got into school. The boys and the girls no longer sat together during lunch breaks, which I later came to realize as a way to not only draw boundaries between us but to also emphasize our differences. Differences that were later on expected to become attractions; after all, opposites attract, don't they? At the time, Seven year old me couldn't think or do much except to follow suit.

Before the start of my third year in school, my father took me school shopping. I went into the store and carefully picked out a beautiful red bag with the picture of Spiderman doing a somersault in the air sewn on to it. I was very proud and pleased with my purchase that I carried it around the house for days before school had even started. When school did start though, I didn't get such positive feedbacks from neither of my female nor male colleagues. I was so angry and frustrated; I didn't know which or whom I wanted to throw out: my friends or my precious bag? It was agonizing to hear my female friends laugh at my choice of bag when all of theirs were pink Disney bags. I kept the bag.

But this had me thinking, like really thinking, why do I like things I am not supposed to like? Why do I want to be a superhero when I should want to be a princess? That's when the questions started flowing into my head like a never-ending river.

By thirteen, my hormones started fluctuating and puberty hit close and hard. I started getting the tingles and the stomach butterflies every time a cute guy or girl would smile in my direction. The guy part was not so much an issue, but when I would share with my friends how I feel towards girls, I got more looks of disapproval than approval. One girl, who was a few years older than me, seemed to understand me. It turned out she was better at empathizing than judging, and for this I was thankful. She took me by the hand and showed me a world I had not seen before. With her, I discovered more about my sexuality and my gender than I had ever known. We were unstoppable. I will always love her. But that is too much to say about two girls in a society that is very indignant about any relationship that is not heterosexual. I got a bad reputation for it. I was known as the dyke. In the hallways and cafeteria, I got stares that made me want to cave in and hide in a corner. My first home was good home; I was born into a family filled with love. My parents always did their best at loving me and protecting me. But there comes a time and place, where your parent's assurance doesn't reach anymore. How do you shield your child from a place you've only known as cheerful and holy? You can't, and you don't. School is supposed to be our second home, a place we feel secure at; a place to call our safe haven. When your safe haven turns into a landmark of fear and torment, what does that look like exactly? I hid my real shades and masked them with layers that were more appealing to everyone but me.

Years has past since the first time I ever questioned my identity and where I stand in my community, and I can tell you that I have discovered far more than I had anticipated at the time. Grateful for my parents, my books, my circle of friends, my mentors, and the Internet, I have gotten far in discovering who am I. Through the years, here is what I have learned: My sexuality is not something I chose or something that is relevant to everyone else; you choose your lunch on the menu, your handbag, your haircut, but you don't choose something that you know will result in difficult outcomes, not if you had the power to change it. Even if I had chosen to be different at first, I would have back out to reverse those differences a long time ago. For they have brought over me more bad than good. I was, at some point choosing against the unique sides of me. I chose to neglect the parts of me that were real and genuine because I feared rejection and exclusion.

But not anymore, even though I live in a country like Iraq in which differences as such are not very acceptable, my fear of not being accepted and approved by everyone is long gone. Partially because I have found people who accept me for who am I and make me feel like it is absolutely okay to live in my true colors. It shouldn't really matter to everyone what my sexual orientation is, and I don't owe any explanation to anyone on that matter. My relationship to a guy was not anymore significant than my relationship to a girl and that is why I have chosen to not specify whom I am attracted to. I have learned to not put a label on myself in times and places that are not relevant. My different shades will only appear when they need to, but never all together. These are things I was born with, and I refuse to apologize for the way I was born. But mostly, I have grown to learn that what we are into doesn't define who we are. It is the choices we make that define us, and as far as I am concerned, my sexuality wasn't and isn't a choice. Everyday, I am discovering more things about myself; everyday I get to know myself a little better. This alone, has been the greatest blessing of all. I am not finished in life, I have a long way to go, and I have so much more to live for, but I know I am in a good place.



7

Masoud, 26

During my middle school and high school days, my attraction towards boys intensified and I started to question myself as to why I was different from the rest of the guys; since all of my friends, especially during high school stage, were attracted to girls. I decided to start exploring what my feelings meant. I headed towards a public library to discover and read about the causes of my sexuality. I decided to borrow one of the books about sex and I started going

to the library on a daily bases to wander through more psychological books. Eventually, after several months' worth of research and reading, I discovered that my sexual orientation was "alien" and that it would stay like that for the rest of my life.

In the beginning, I did not accept myself very much. This impelled me to seclude myself from people and I told no one about my sexual orientation. I spent much time being sad and lonely. I was troubled by an internal conflict with myself. College went by without me having a relationship with any girl. And here started the big dilemma; being pressured by my family into marriage. All of those who were my age had gotten married and had kids. My only response to my family was that it was not the right time for me to get married.

Things progressed and having finished my university education, my family's pressure on me was more than ever. Consequently, I decided to leave everything behind: my family, my work, my city and to go live in a different city far from family pressure. Things were decided and I left home leaving my family with no knowledge about me. I left them a short note of a quote I remembered from Jean-Jacques Rousseau: "one who can't perform the duty of parenthood doesn't have the right to get married and conceive children".

I cannot continue living a double life as it happens with some gay men who have no choice but to get married under the pressure of their families. They live in an unresolved internal conflict especially that some of them have children. Some of those men have told me that they forcefully got married to throw away their "alien"

sexual orientation. They had thought that by getting married their sexual orientation would change but their marriages ended up in vain. I resided in the new city I moved to and it has been a year far from my family, my friends and my city. I know nothing about my family and I have no contact with them. I thought moving to a new city would make me happy especially being away from family



pressure. I am still not a happy person. But at the same time, I am not a prisoner in my parents' house. I have the ability to choose what's best for me even if that is very limited for someone like me in a country like Iraq. I want to use whatever privileges and chances I have to help myself and others like me to have a voice and maybe one day things will change for all of us. One thing for sure, if we do not do anything, nothing will change.

8

Rawand, 32

find their passion. I encouraged them to pursue their goals, explore options, and discover their identities.

Graduating from University with a degree in English literature opened up a lot of doors for me. Shortly after I graduated, I was offered a job at the American University. I started really succeeding in my job! I quickly became one of the staff members who contributed to different activities at the university in addition to my job. I mentored several students and helped them

It was important for me to encourage them to be who they are because it was not possible for me. Even though I completely accept myself, coming out as gay would both put my life in danger. It would also stop me from being helping out these students. Being gay is actually the reason why I am determined to help others. Being gay enabled me to understand what it means to be underrepresented and unable to chase goals because of things that you have that others do not understand.

Despite not being out, I am very proud of myself. I have created a good life despite the fact that I am unable to express all of identities, and actually living in fear since one of my identities can actually lead to losing my job, my social life, and even my death. A lot of people have the misconception that gay people are bad people who only go after sex. But in reality, a lot of us actually try to be great because we want to prove that we have dreams like everyone else, and the only difference is our sexual orientation. Being gay has made me a better person.



Stories of Death

1

Esam, 29

not arrived. I started texting him and calling him to see where he is, but he did not respond. I started getting really worried. I looked for him in places that we both went to, but I could not find him anywhere. Even his family did not know where he was.

Six days went by without any trace of him. On the sixth day, we received the news that he was killed. His body was sent to his family with a note saying "Your son was practicing faggotism, and he was punished." That is when we knew that ISIS members have killed him. The family kept that part a secret. His sister told me because she knew we were both gay and best friends.

His death has changed my life. I have been feeling different things. I have been depressed because he is gone, lonely because I do not feel like I have anyone else, afraid because what happened to him could happen to me. But the biggest feeling I have is guilt. Guilt because if I have not asked him to come to my place, he might have been alive today.

On July 2015, I called my friend who is also gay to come and visit me. I have not seen him for a long time and was feeling a little bit sad and wanted to talk to him. As usual, he told me that he will come as soon as possible. He was always there for me. He texted me an hour later saying that he is on his way and that he should be there in 30 minutes. I waited for an hour and he still has



2

Malak, 41

Growing up, I spent a lot of time with my sisters. I used to play with their things while they were changing or getting ready to go out. I would play with their high heels and make up, and they would let me. My sister who became a doctor later in life, has always let me be the way I was. I think on some level, she knew that I was different. She knew that even though the family was happy to have a son, I was actually feeling like I am a girl on the inside. I never liked anything other boys liked.

When I was a teenager, my sister went to medical school. Around these years, she

I grew up in a house with two other sisters. My sisters were older than me, and they loved me a lot. One of them is an engineer, and the other was a doctor. Being the younger child meant that I was everyone's spoiled child. I was the only boy and they all loved and supported me.



always told me to accept who I am but hide it at the same time. She said that people around us will not understand and that my life can be in danger. I took her advise and always pretended to be a boy. It was easier for me because I had her. I had someone who told me that what I feel is okay and natural. There was nothing wrong with how I felt and that I should trust my feelings.

But a few years later, my sister died in a car accident. The whole family was in shock! None of us really recovered from that! My sister died at the age of 24! After her, I was left without anyone who knew who I really was. I no longer had a voice telling me that my feelings are valid. Instead, I had a lot of people around me saying that such things are unacceptable and that it is a disease that must be treated. Many think growing up with two girls and playing with them made me the way I am, but that is not true! I have always felt like I was a girl! That is why I wanted to play with them and their stuff in the first place!

It has been 25 years since I lost my sister. I am still living like a man. I am not married, and only focused on my work. I am still not living my truth! What I am left with now is the rare occasions when I dress like a woman when I am home alone. Pretend that I am Malak, and not Mohammad! That I am a woman who is accepted and can live freely, and not a man who is hiding his truth from the world.

3

Saif, 24

My name is Karrar, and this is not my story. This is the story of my boyfriend who killed himself two years ago. He left me a suicide note. It said:

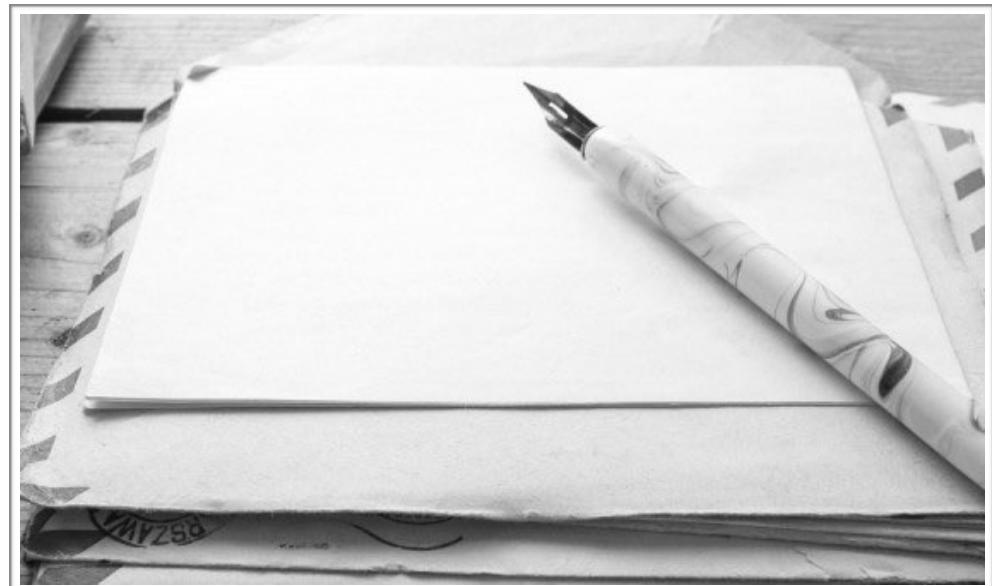
"My love, Karrar. I love you so much. I am writing this letter to you because I reached a point where I can not find a purpose to live. You are the only

reason why I have not killed myself before. But the pressure from my family, the shame that comes with being a feminine boy, and the threats I keep receiving put a lot of pressure on my mental health. You know that I have been depressed for a long time, but you do not know that my depression was a lot less when I was with you because you made me happy. You never saw how depressed I was when I was not with you. I know that if I stayed alive, I will continue to think about killing myself because I can not spend the rest of my life facing everything I have been facing, and I do not want to put your life in danger.

When I die, I will go to heaven. Because in my 24 years I have never hurt anyone. Even those who hurt me. My dad who always beat me, my mother who constantly insulted me, my brother and cousins who always ridiculed me, and many others who threatened me made my life unlivable. But I never did anything against them.

You are the only person I have ever loved. I will wait for you in heaven where we will be happy together. I want you to have an amazing life. I will watch over you.

Love,
Saif."



4

Ghada, 49

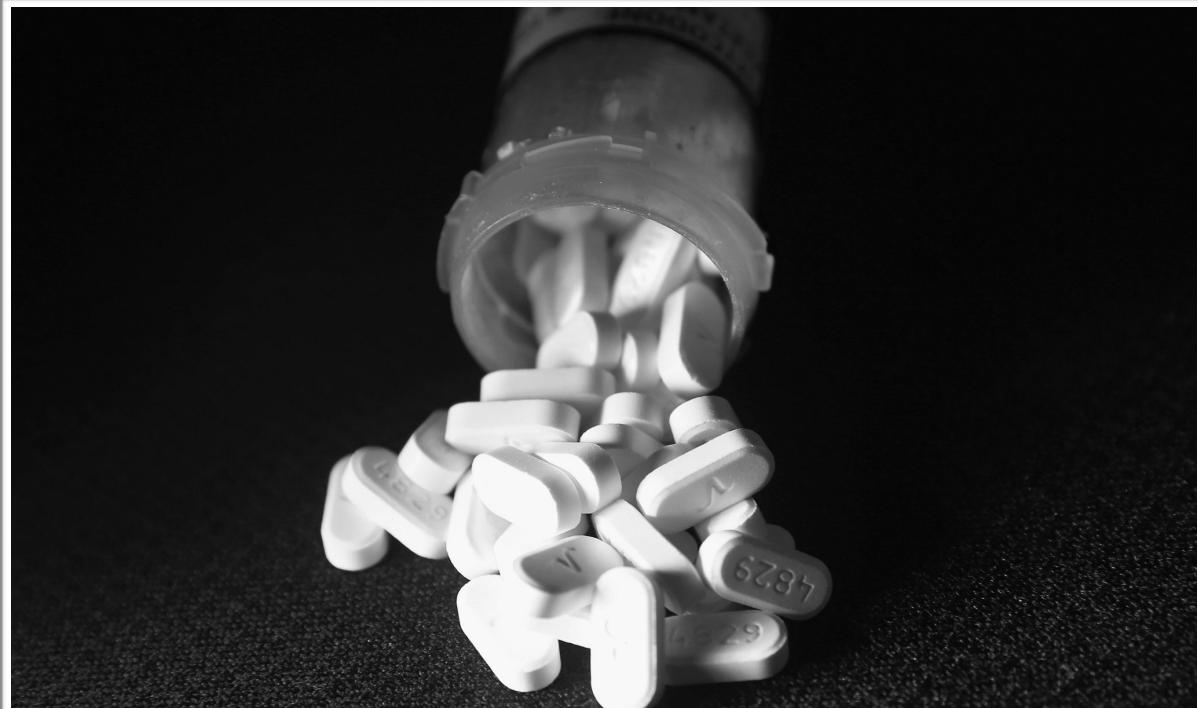
My hand is shaking while holding the pen to write this story. How do I start writing a story that makes me feel ashamed and guilty. How do I face the fact that I was a reason in my son's death? It is impossible to do face my feelings and my regrets. But I decided to write this story hoping that it will help save other people's lives. Other boys who like my son are different.

When my son told me that he was gay, I was shocked! I have never met a gay person, let alone have a family member who is one. I did not understand it, and in a way, I felt betrayed. I felt like I was robbed of the joy and pride of seeing my son getting married, have children, and be a successful father, husband, and person. I dreamt of the days when my grandchildren would run around me while I make them breakfast. So knowing that he is gay and that it will not be possible for him to do any of these things in Iraq made me angry and sad.

I stopped talking to my son for many months. I did not tell his father or any other person in the family because I knew that their reaction will be violent. But it was becoming obvious that there was tension between my son and I. I tried to hide it from the world, but I could not hide it from him. I have constantly expressed my disapproval of his choices and made it clear to him that he has no place in the house if he does not change. He kept telling me that it is not possible for him to change. Our fights escalated and it reached the point where I had to kick him out of the house. He slept at his friend's house for many weeks.

One day, we received a call from the hospital saying that my son is there and that he tried to commit suicide by taking pills. I rushed there immediately, but by the time I arrived, my son passed away. That day is engraved in my memory and will never leave me as long as I live. My baby, my flesh and blood, my son is dead. I then find out that he has left me a note saying "I forgive you mother, but I can not live in this world anymore."

I have been devastated since then. I did not tell anyone about the letter or the fact that he was gay. I did not want the rest of his family to be ashamed of him or hate him. I saw where that led me. I will never forgive myself. While writing this story, my tears are running like a river, and I am thinking of my son. I still do not understand what it means to be gay. But I know I could have been a better mother. I could have shown him love instead of the hurtful words that I have shared. I could have tried to support him and show him that he is not alone. There are many things that I wish I could have done differently, but that will never be possible until I reunite with him in the after life. But one thing I can do to honor his memory is to write this story and encourage other mothers to love their child. You never know what might happen.



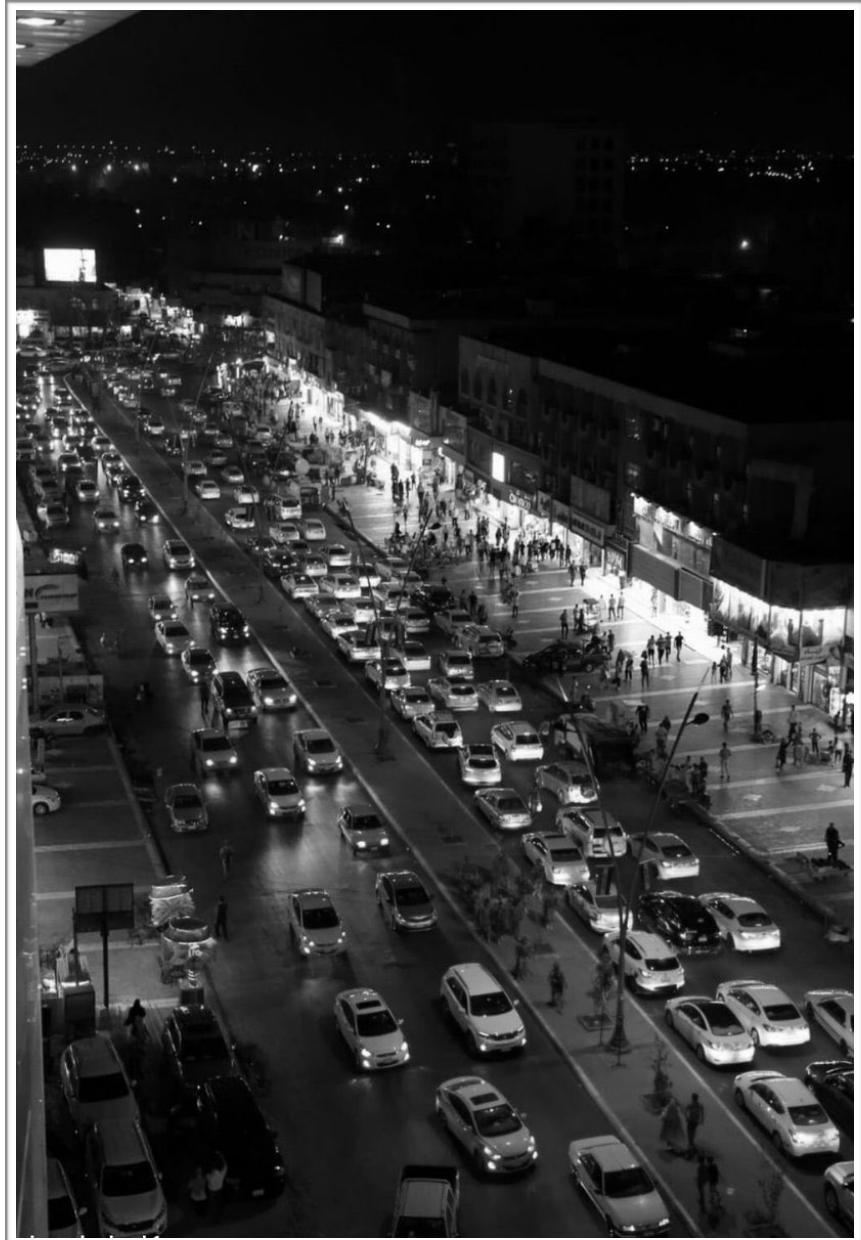
5

Yasir, 29

Before knowing my boyfriend, I always felt lonely and incomplete, empty of invaluable love. The days of my life

went by in a meaningless and empty way, I wished for a person who would at least semi understand the meaning of loyalty and love. Luckily I saw that he is an advocate of love and I can view him as an angel and prophet from that world and learn from him, when we started talking I felt a spiritual closeness with him. In a way; I wanted to constantly talk with him and whenever we'd talk I'd learn more from him, especially in romance and devotion. Day after day I saw more beauty in him and my love kept growing bigger.

All that made me forget the sorrow and the repetition of daily routine, because in this country there is not a square of land for two gay people loving each other to share their feeling peacefully or kiss without fear unless they fit into certain boxes, I did not know how and where to spend time with my partner, the only place that I'd have relied on was a room I shared with other students in a dormitory where I studied, I waited for my friends to go back to their homes during a school break



or a weekend, to invite my lover and spend a peaceful time with him there. He made me happier than anyone ever has.

Then came Asaeb Ahl Al Haq. The extreme and religious militias that hated gay men, tortured them, and killed them. We were walking together in Mansour one day when someone in a car opened the window, shouted my boyfriend's name, and shot him. He continued driving, and my boyfriend fell on the floor bleeding. I was in shock! I called for help and someone called an ambulance. While waiting for it, I saw my boyfriend slowly dying. I saw the best person I know, the person I love the most slowly die and I could not do anything to save him. He died a few minutes before the ambulance arrived.

6

Samah, 62

Everything seemed to lead to that. My son graduated from university, got a very good job, and was establishing himself. Until one day, his cousin discovered that he was gay. He told my husband about it. My husband went crazy! He immediately calls my son and tells him to come home right this second. I texted my son and told him not to come home and that he should go to a friend's house. I wanted to protect my son. I knew if he comes home, he will not leave the house safely.

My husband got angrier. Days have past and my son was still hiding. My husband called his brothers and asked them to come to our house, and told him that he will kill Tariq. While waiting for

When my son told me that he was gay, I was shocked and terrified at the same time. In tribal families like mine, having a gay son is like a death sentence to that son especially for someone like my boy Tariq. He was the oldest grandchild in the family. He was prepared by his dad to be another leader in the family and honorably sit in meetings and family gatherings.



them, I was talking to him trying to calm him down. I told him that we can send Tariq to study abroad and just cut contacts with him, or that things could be a lie. I tried to reason with him, but all my attempts failed. He said that he is the oldest son of the family and he will let him not bring shame to it.

After days of looking for Tariq, they found him and they shot him. They killed my son. The grief I have been living with for four years now has been unbearable. Since then, I have not spoken to my husband. We still live in the same house, but I only stayed because of my two daughters. Every time I see him, I see the monster that killed my son.

I will not pretend to be accepting and understanding of homosexuality. But I know that no matter who or what my son is, loving him is my first and main job. I tried to save his life, but there was nothing I could do in a male-dominant society especially when you are in a conservative family. They portrayed my son as a monster because he was gay, but in reality, the real monsters are them. Those who are so fine with killing a person who had all of his life ahead of him. Killing a person simply because they did not understand him. If God is real, if God is the champion of the discriminated against, then God will get justice for my son.

7

Esraa, 32

about myself because I was allowed to express different things in my identity, and my family were supportive.

When I turned 16, a new girl joined the program for a summer. We became friends very quickly. She was beautiful. Time went by, and we got closer. I started feeling attracted to her! I did not fully understand what those feelings meant, so I told my parents. Both of them asked me to keep this to myself as it could put me and them in danger. They did not reject it, and helped me understand what it meant. So I took their advice and did not tell the girl that I liked her.

We continued being friends even after she left the acting class. We started seeing each other outside in coffee shops and went shopping together. I felt like she was also developing feelings towards me but I did not

Ever since I was a kid, I dreamt of being an actress. Coming from an artistic family that loved the theater and music meant that my family were supportive of my dream to go to theater school. To me, it was one of the few ways that I could express myself freely. I enrolled at the age of eight. I grew up in the theater and had a great childhood! I learned early on



say anything because I was too scared. Until one day we were in her room when she kissed me. I was surprised, and she was nervous. She said "I have been wanting to do this for a long time. I am sorry, did I offend you?" I said no!! And I told her about my feelings towards her too. Since then, we got romantically involved without telling anyone. I did not even tell my parents.

One day, we went back to their house and we started watching a movie on the laptop in her bedroom when she started kissing me. While we were kissing, her brother came into the room. He pulled her by her hair, and started hitting her. They kicked me out of the house and asked me to never come back or they would call the police. A few days after, I heard the news that she was dead. They told people that she slipped and hit her head in the bathroom. Just like that! No one questioned them. A beautiful young woman was killed for loving someone, and she was killed and quickly forgotten by her family and the society. Like she never existed!

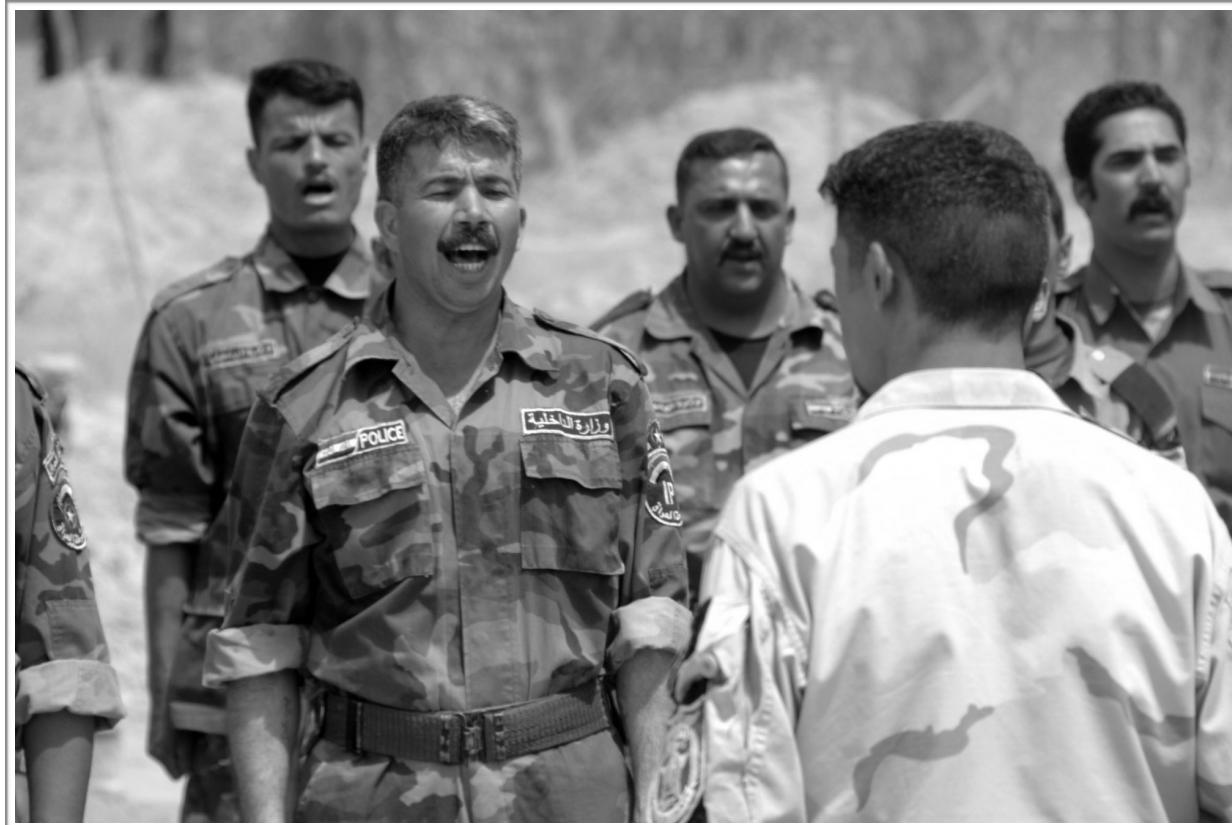
8

Walid, 28

When I heard the news about my boyfriend being dead, I knew that his family was responsible. He told me several times that his brothers and cousins suspect that he was gay, and that they would kill him if they confirm that. The last time I spoke to him, he told me that they found photos on his cell phone. Since then, he did not call and I never heard from him until I discovered that he was dead.

I did not want his death to go unnoticed. So I called the police anonymously and told them that he was killed by his

family and they should investigate them. In a city like Karbala, honor crimes are very common and they always go unpunished. Despite trying to get their attention several times, they told me that the police does not interfere in the family business and that they trust what the family tells them.



At that time, I knew that not only that the legal system here does not protect us, but it also allows killing us as they do not punish anyone for their crimes.

9

Pavel, 25

I spent most of my teenage and college years trying to ignore the fact that I am gay. I often tried to get girlfriends to show the world that I am straight. Deep down, I also wanted to tell myself that I am straight. But no matter how many girls I tried to date, there was always a feeling of confusion. An internal struggle.

Around two years ago, I made a friend who ended up being so much more than that. Haval was the first person that forced me to really face the fact that I was gay. Even though we started as friends, we quickly realized that we have something more than that. Neither one of us was willing to actually admit it though. We have always flirted with each other pretending we are just being really friendly with each other. It took us months before we admitted that we are attracted to one another. Haval was the first guy that I have ever loved, the first person who understood me. All I needed with him is to watch the sunset while putting my head on his shoulder.

About a year ago, rumors were spreading about him being gay. These rumors made his life a living hell. He was often bullied and ridiculed. It even impacted us as it was difficult for us to meet without raising more suspicion.

The rumors escalated and more people started talking making his dad grow more suspicious. This led to his dad limiting his freedom, controlling his life, and beating him. Until one day, he killed him.



10

Bassam, 54

night around Abu Nawas in Baghdad. Despite feeling shocked by what I saw, something inside me wanted to see that again. So I went back again hoping I would. Weeks went by before I saw something like that again. One night while I was sitting in my usual spot, a guy approached me and said that he noticed me coming here many times in the last week. I was nervous as I did not know whether he is another person like me or someone who is spying on others. He then quickly said "Do not worry! I am just like you." I said "What do you mean like me?" He said "I am gay." I got very nervous and angry. How dare he call me gay!!! He looked at me and said "You can act offended all you want. But when you finally realize that I am right, I hope we connect again."

There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein was a dictator. He limited a lot of political freedoms to Iraqis. But ironically, gays were doing better in the eighties than they are doing now after "liberating" Iraq and having more "freedom".

When I was 19 years old in 1984, I saw two gays kissing during the



Only a few days past until I went back again. His words stuck with me and forced me to really think about why I kept going back to the park and why I was eager to see two guys kissing.

I saw him again. We started getting closer and closer. He became one of the best friends and people in my life. He invited me to different gatherings and parties where everyone who attended was gay. Some parties had a few people, others had up to 60 people. For more than three decades, Tammam (my friend) was the best friend I have ever had.

Five years ago, Tammam was killed by members of Asaeb Ahl Al Haq. His name was on a list of people who are suspected of being "Faggots". His head was smashed, and his body was dumped in an abandoned building. Days past before he was discovered.

Since then, something in my has died too. I know we live in a country where death is so common, and all forms of injustices occur almost on daily basis. But I could not help but feel disgusted by my government and society. How could they be okay with the death of one of the kindest people? How are they okay with murderers walking amongst us without facing any consequences? I know there are people who believe in our rights and believe in equality, but until they speak up, there is not any value to their opinions. Until they speak up, we will continue to be killed. People like Tammam who are kind, successful, and loved will have no place in our country. Is that the type of country that we want to be?

11

Hussein, 30

a group of guys approached us and took us to a corner. They started hitting both of us and said that they knew that we were gays and that we bring shame to our country as we are not real men.

They spoke in a religious way quoting people like Muqtada Al Sadr. They then take out their gun, and shoot both me and my boyfriend. The next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital.

The police came shortly after, and started interrogating me. I kept telling them that I do not know who the attackers were, and that the only thing I knew was the fact

July 14th, 2015. A date that will forever be engraved in my memory. A day that started as an exciting day as me and my boyfriend decided to go shopping for clothes as we were invited to a best friend's wedding. A day that ended with events I never thought possible.

We were walking from one store to another look for suits and ties when



that they were affiliated with religious groups. I kept asking about my boyfriend but no one gave me answers about where and how he is. Until two of my friends arrived and told me that my boyfriend was killed. I start crying hysterically. I can not fathom the idea that my boyfriend is dead! I start screaming and shouting. I felt angry, sad, afraid, and helpless. I talked to the police again and told them that they have to do everything they can to get the killers.

As I am writing this story, three years have passed since those events. I call the police almost every month asking for updates and whether they are still following the case. They tell me that they are, but when I ask for specific updates, they keep telling me to wait. I have lost hope in getting justice, and lost faith in the legal system in Iraq. Since then, I did not date anyone. Not only because I am still missing my boyfriend, but also because the fear I felt pushed me deep into isolation. I am unable to tell my family or friends about this. I can not talk to a therapist as they will immediately report me to the police if they knew I was gay, and I certainly can not tell the police if something like that happened to me again. Iraq has a long way to go, but unless we get real equality for all, no progress will ever count.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book contains a selection of stories written by LGBT+ Iraqis. The details mentioned in each story were provided by the writers themselves. No details were added in the editing process.

IraQueer and another local partner organization have collected these stories over the course of seven months between March 2018 and October 2018. The goal of this book is to share Iraqi LGBT+ voices with the world and give them a platform to share the happy, sad, fearful, and courageous moments of their lives.

— This book is dedicated to Iraqi LGBT+ people everywhere —

ABOUT US



IraQueer is Iraq's first and only LGBT+ organization. It was founded in March 2015, and has since been leading the LGBT+ movement in Iraq. Iraq has gained international recognition through working on education and advocacy, by partnering with Iraqi and international organizations through engaging with different stakeholders.

This book was produced with the partnership of another Iraqi organization that chose to remain anonymous.

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