



# **MORE THAN FICTION**

**INVESTING IN SOUTH ASIAN POZ COMMUNITIES**

**VOL. 2**

# **MORE THAN FICTION**

**INVESTING IN SOUTH ASIAN POZ COMMUNITIES**

**VOL. 2**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank all the contributors and those who generously helped and supported this project. We hereby acknowledge the following people and organizations for their contributions to this book.

**Authors:**

Abeer, Amour, Anuja, Ariel, Chahana, Edward, Farrel, Himalaya, Manav, Ms. Pretty, Numar, Pahal, Raza, Sam, Simi, Sinbad, Shamala, Skylar, Steve

**Project Team:**

Vijaya Chikermane, Haran Vijayanathan, Dr. Allan Peterkin, Chhiring D. Sherpa, Christian Hui, Lori Chambers, Shazia Islam, Sudin Sherchan

**Peer Facilitators (Vol. 1 project authors):**

Anjalee Aman and Aditi

**Workshop Space:**

Fife House and The 519

**Design and Layout:** Printed by:  
Sumon Shahariar

**underpant**  
COMMUNICATIONS

**C&D**  
Graphic Services

**Volunteer Proofreaders:**

Meenakshi Karunakaran, Atia Haq

**Cover photo:**

Shazia Islam

**MAC**  
**AIDS FUND**

 **Ontario**  
Ministry of  
HEALTH AND  
LONG-TERM CARE

 **ASAAP**  
ALLIANCE FOR SOUTH ASIAN AIDS PREVENTION

Photo by: Shazia Islam

# PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE

©2016 More Than Fiction: Vol. 2 by ASAAP. All Rights Reserved.

ASAAP recognizes and acknowledges the work of the authors of these stories and thanks them for their contributions to raise awareness around the challenges and successes of those living with HIV in the South Asian Community. To honor their contributions, this resource is intended for educational purposes only. The document and or each story will be used as a whole and not in parts. Any references made must be cited using proper citations and editing content is strictly prohibited.

Parts or the whole of the publication may be distributed for non-commercial use only (via print and or online) with acknowledgement given to ASAAP.

ASAAP appreciates notification of any use of this publication. This publication is also made available in online and pdf formats.



Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention (ASAAP)

E : [info@asaap.ca](mailto:info@asaap.ca)  
T : 416-599-2727  
W : [www.asaap.ca](http://www.asaap.ca)

Photo by: Shazia Islam



Photo by: Shazfa Islam

# FOREWORD

**“More than Fiction: Investing in South Asian Poz Communities”** is the second volume in the narrative-writing anthology series from ASAAP. Due to the overwhelming success of “More Than Fiction: POZ Women Share their Stories”, we adapted our unique community arts-based project to further engage members of ASAAP’s Connecting to Care program. The breadth and depth of experiences shared in these stories represent the program’s mandate to ensure the voices of South Asians living with HIV are heard regardless of their gender identity and sexual orientation.


This next anthology addresses challenges around income insecurity, employment, immigration, treatment access, HIV disclosure, aging, loss, and other determinants of HIV health. The individual stories speak to the triumph of the human spirit as nineteen writers in total acknowledged their unique struggles in poignant detail through narrative writing, poetry, and photography. Though these stories are not an easy read, they succeed in illuminating some of the specific health, socioeconomic and spiritual needs and concerns of people living with HIV. It is a bold and courageous endeavor to present one’s past and present struggles with such raw intensity for the public and for the good of the community.

The writers had a lot to say about their lives, and the eight workshops led by two peer facilitators helped create a safe and inclusive space where meaningful story-sharing and creativity could thrive. The peer facilitators were recruited from the group of writers from the first anthology, and received a capacity-building orientation on the new project. This was an important component to have peers plan and run the workshops in support of the Greater Involvement and Meaningful Engagement of People Living with HIV/AIDS (GIPA/MEPA).

The workshops bolstered the writers’ confidence to complete their writing assignments and narratives during their free time and as part of the project’s aim to encourage self-directed study and introspection. The writers provided pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity in the face of ongoing societal stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS.

It is our belief that the stories shared here will open your hearts and minds to the experiences of South Asian communities living with HIV/AIDS.

Sudin Sherchan, Shazia Islam, Haran Vijayanathan



“ *The city’s cost of living is so high that most marginalized people are stuck in a cycle of poverty.* ”

# I AM ONE OF SEVEN BILLION SOULS

by **Ariel**

I had been working for a large company for a number of years and was trying to build my Canadian dream. During this time, my mother, the strongest woman I had ever known, the love of my life, was on a path of self-destruction. Her life had begun to unravel years earlier from the mental and physical abuse at the hands of her husband, my stepfather. My father had died before we had moved to Canada and well after he and my mother had separated. My mother was a strong, loving, kind and compassionate woman, and she raised her children to be just that. But my mother was dying and I started to die along with her. My world became very dark, prolonged sadness was constant. I would never be happy again it seemed.

I decided to move to the States. I needed to get as far away from Canada as possible. I had friends there and they encouraged me to come. I was not getting through to my mother no matter how hard I tried and living in the same city while witnessing the destruction of her life was too much. I was mentally and emotionally exhausted and needed to get away. Most of our family lived in Canada, so even though it pained me to leave, I felt that my mother had enough support here. It was a tough decision to make but I did it.

I started my new life, trying to find and experience some sanity and peace in my surroundings. I did not keep in touch with anyone in Canada. I did not want to know what was happening. I could not handle the news whatever it might be. It was a whole new world for me in my new place. Everything was bittersweet, as I experienced firsthand how wonderful the kindness of strangers felt; everywhere I went in this foreign place, people welcomed me, yet deep within my heart lingered this infinite sadness and grieving like I was forever mourning a loss. The feelings of despair and guilt would forever stay with me as I continued to foster a new life. I tried my best to succeed and I did. I got a great job, my own place and car - all with the help of some awesome people.

A couple years after my move, while on a routine checkup at the doctors, I tested positive for HIV. I remember receiving the news. The room seemed to be spinning for a while and my head felt numb. Within my network of friends there, a few of them were also positive and they all seemed to be living normal lives at the time. Having been living in Canada as a gay man, HIV was always part of life. The fear and stigma were always there. As much as my life was going smoothly in the States, I was not fooling anyone, especially not myself as I had mastered the art of suppressing my pain, anxiety and depression.

Receiving the news of being HIV positive was devastating and I went home and cried alone for days all the while needing to stay strong as I needed to keep my work routine constant. My employment was very important. I shared the news with a few friends and they were supportive and comforting. I carried on with life, I looked healthy, nothing seemed different in my appearance and I never felt sick and I felt no change in my immune system. Life continued with routine three month checkups. I had no healthcare coverage so I paid a good sum every time I visited the HIV doctor but I was determined to keep up with my care so I never missed an appointment.

Just over two years later, I started to feel sick. It was quite unusual but not surprising I guess. Early that year, everything started to unravel. I became very sick and missed a few days of work. My viral load was high and CD4 were borderline and I could not get rid of a constant fever. I started to panic as I had no health coverage and the true reality of HIV started to scare me. My beautiful life was crumbling. My doctor prescribed painkillers and that kept me going but it was only masking the problem. My immediate thought was to get back to Canada.



☞ *Prayer, meditation and a deep sense of spirituality continue to give me strength.*

I abruptly quit my job much to the disappointment of my bosses and coworkers, and flew home and stayed with a friend.

I found out my mother was still alive, but I was ill and harboring this deep secret of being HIV positive with an impending visit to reconnect with family I have not said anything to in five years. Despite my anxiety, I made the trip to see my family to reconnect. My mother was all but eighty pounds, frail and skeletal; her tummy looked quite unusual like she had a basketball under her dress. Everyone was there, my aunts, cousins and grandmother. There was lots of crying and soon I learned that my mother had been sick for a while and they were going to take her to the ER to check her in.

I accompanied my mother to the ER, I checked her in and they admitted her because we all sensed that something was not right. I stayed with her for about six hours since we had to wait for a room to be available. During those six hours in that cold waiting room, we bonded and she updated me on what I missed and how she missed me. My mother was always scared of hospitals and doctors, so I comforted her, calmed her spirit and made her relax. She paced that room a thousand times while I stretched out on a chair watching her as I tried to conceal my pain and sadness.


I wished I had stayed with my mom when she finally got a bed. I returned to the hospital the next day to find my mother in the ICU hooked up to about twenty different machines and tubes. My mother was on her way out. The hospital staff wanted to have an important discussion with immediate family members. They recommended pulling the plug and as one of the family members who had been tasked with that decision, I would never wish for any person in the world to have to experience this. After tremendous, gut-wrenching soul searching,

we gave the okay and ten days later we said goodbye to the love of my life. I am eternally grateful to the powers that be for giving me the opportunity to be here when my mother passed. My being sick brought me back just in time to be with her.

After mother died, I needed to focus on myself and my health. I did not tell anyone about my HIV status. In my state of grieving, I was trying to find a doctor to see me. My health card had expired and the government would not renew my card until three months of residency had passed. I was in panic mode again. How am I going to get the care I needed without my health card? In my state of being ill, exhausted and depressed, I never thought of walking into any local ER which I could have done.

The moment I got the new health card, I went back to the doctor at the HIV clinic, he took one look at me and said I needed to go to ER. I went to the ER and was admitted right away. They rushed me to ICU and hooked me up to what seemed like a million machines. I had tubes down my throat and I was heavily sedated. I had PCP pneumonia and my CD4 was 80. I felt I was on my way out. The word of my hospitalization quickly spread and soon family members came to the hospital. My secret was out, for some only had to look at me, ask a few questions to the nurses and doctors, and then did the math to discover I had full blown AIDS.

I was referred to an AIDS hospice and thankfully they had room for me. I moved in there by ambulance and that welcoming place was my home for three months. They were heaven-sent, every person there was awesome. They treated me with love and compassion and restored my spirit. They gave me back my dignity and wiped away a lot of my pain and shame. I was mourning the loss of so much that meant to me, the loss of my mother, the loss of my cherished bond with family. It all hurt tremendously but I always reached for a higher power for strength and grace.



“ *I am older and wiser now  
and find tremendous joy  
and peace in passing on my  
knowledge to help others.* ”

Today I am healthy and life continues but poverty is one of my biggest obstacles. The city's cost of living is so high that most marginalized people are stuck in a cycle of poverty. For some of us who do not have a post-secondary education, options to earning a sustainable wage are scarce. HIV stigma remains a huge barrier to good health and well-being. Many of us live in isolation by choice because it is easier and safer. The important thing to know is that there are support organizations out there to reach out to when the need arises.

I have lost interest and any desire to pursue any romantic relationship possibilities these days. The rejection was palpable every time I disclosed my HIV status back then and these days my priorities have shifted to more important issues in my life like finding better, secure housing and decent employment, upgrading my academics, taking care of my health and helping others. My local ASO has been my constant force of support and care. I am indebted to this wonderful and much needed organization for enhancing my quality of life and giving me unconditional love and hope for a better tomorrow. Some of my relationships and faith in family have been restored, though HIV is never talked about or discussed and I have accepted this as a means to foster whatever relationships we can. Prayer, meditation and a deep sense of spirituality continue to give me strength.

There are lots of regrets, the biggest one of all is not doing more to save my mother. I miss her every day. They say that everything happens for a reason and I believe this to be true. I don't worry and agonize as much these days. I am older and wiser now and find tremendous joy and peace in passing on my knowledge to help others. My mother was a beautiful, loving, kind and amazing person. I am thankful for all that she instilled in me.

Photo by: Ariel

“ After getting diagnosed HIV positive in Canada, I was terrified. I didn't know how to cope with it. I knew very few people, and I hadn't been able to make many friends. Because of culture shock, it was taking time for me to adjust to life here.

# IN MY OWN WORLD

by **Sam**

---

It was not easy for me to come to Canada. I had a dream that I would get a decent job in my field, make a living and live happily. What I got here was HIV. The initial work at the time was hard for me to make ends meet. I also had to send money back home as repayment.

It's been years since I spoke to my mom and brother. My brother only wants money from me. They might have thought I'm earning a lot and living a luxurious life. My mother's dream for me is to get married so she could have some grandchildren, but this is also what keeps me running away from her and my brother. I do not have courage to tell her the truth that I am HIV positive. But it's not only my mother. I feel very uncomfortable identifying myself as HIV positive or talking about my HIV status. I'm not able to tell her that I can't fulfill her dream.

After getting diagnosed HIV positive in Canada, I was terrified. I didn't know how to cope with it. I knew very few people, and I hadn't been able to make many friends. Because of culture shock, it was taking time for me to adjust to life here. I still have difficulties living here. I usually have to forego activities that would bring me enjoyment or compromise on meals and clothing. I don't normally enjoy partying though. I would love to buy new clothes but can't afford them and feel uncomfortable about going to second-hand shops.

I hate mirrors. Whenever I look at myself, a lot of the past comes up. The person in the mirror shames me. I start to talk with the person in that mirror, and end up yelling and screaming at that person. After getting tired from that, I lie in bed. I have spent countless days and nights in my lovely bed. I sometimes wish I never had to see anyone, and that I didn't have all those required appointments to go to. When I am in bed, my hunger goes away, and I can spend whole day and night crying until I fall asleep.

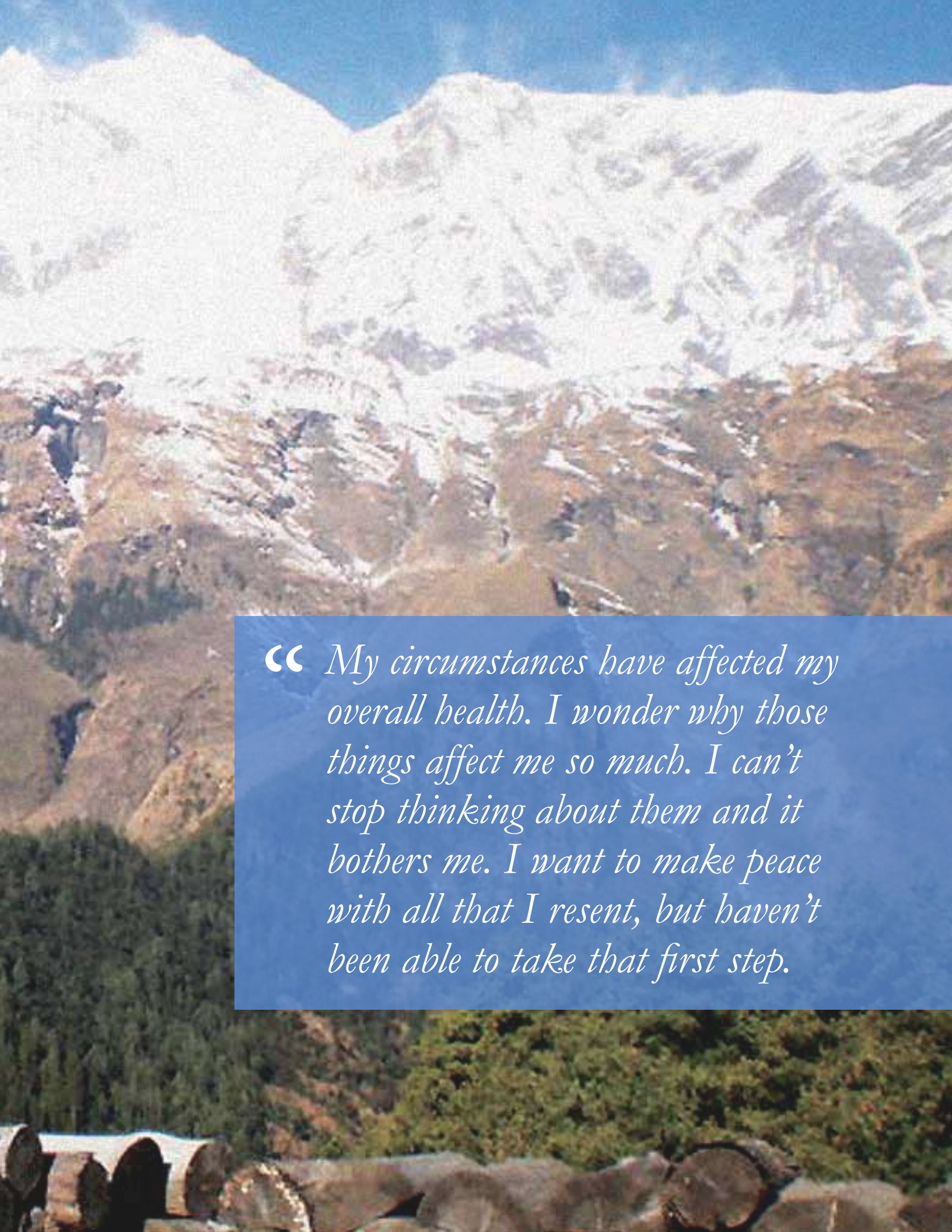
Recently, I had an incident where my confidentiality was breached. My name was called in front of a crowd without my consent. I couldn't face the crowd so I turned my back to them when everybody was expecting to see me. From that time onwards, I've avoided that place and even the surrounding road that intersects with that place. Who knows I might bump into someone from there, and they'd recognize me. I feel better keeping my distance. I wish I had not gone to that event so that I would not have been triggered by people knowing my HIV status.

“*I hate mirrors. Whenever I look at myself, a lot of the past comes up.*”

I have tried to get help to overcome this fear and confusion. I've been recommended to get support but I predict there'll be more pills along with such recommendations. I already have a long list of pills to take and don't want to add more to that list. My circumstances have affected my overall health. I wonder why those things affect me so much. I can't stop thinking about them and it bothers me. I want to make peace with all that I resent, but I haven't been able to take that first step. I'm waiting for wisdom to guide me and put me in a position to work on it all.



Photo by: Sudin S.



“ *My circumstances have affected my overall health. I wonder why those things affect me so much. I can't stop thinking about them and it bothers me. I want to make peace with all that I resent, but haven't been able to take that first step.* ”

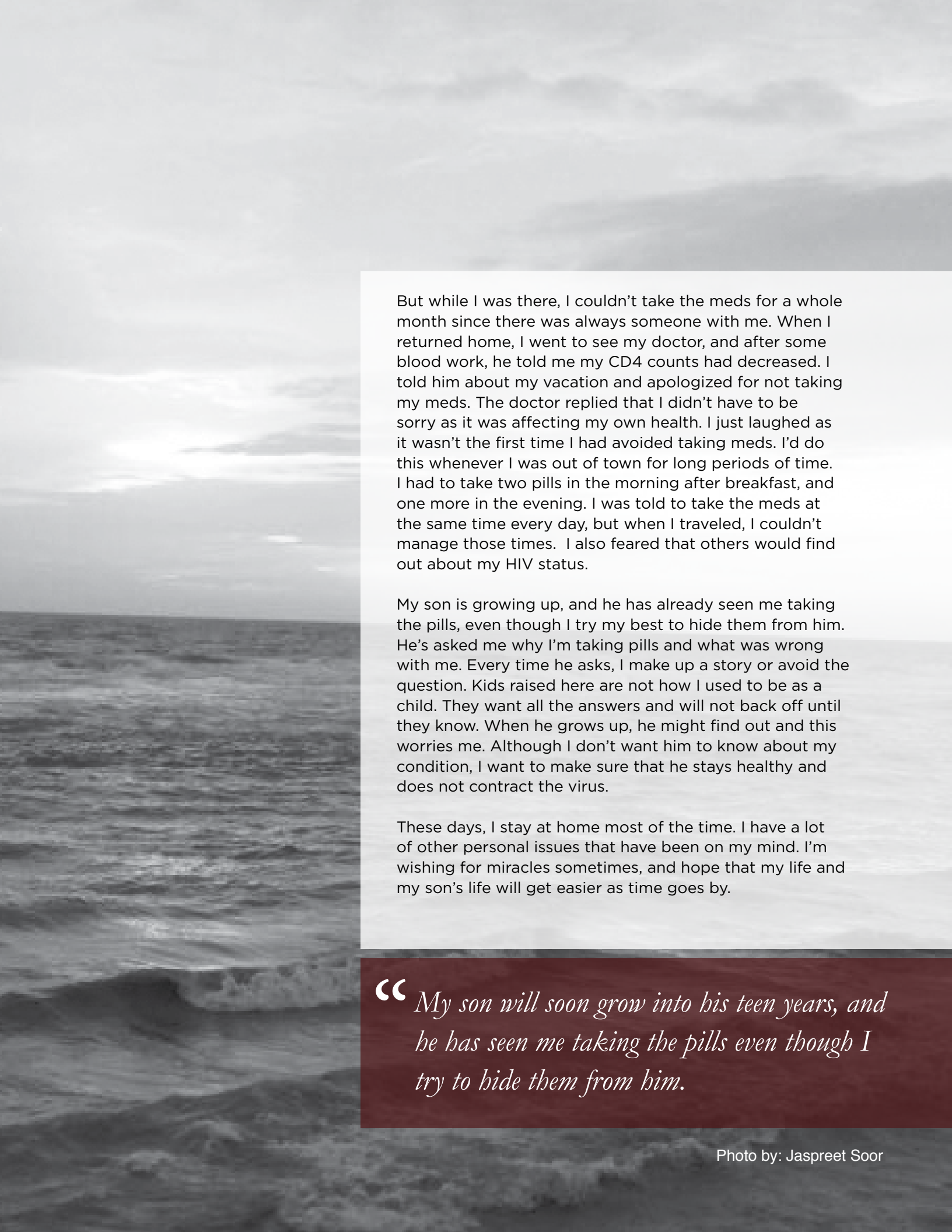
# A LIFE IN HIDING

by **Chahana**

I've been keeping my HIV meds in a bottle with the label covered with a sticker. Thank God people in my house cannot read. I always check to make sure the label is completely hidden; otherwise I put those meds in a plastic bag and throw away the bottle burying it underneath all the other garbage, so nobody would find out. This has been my method of concealing my pills ever since I was diagnosed 11 years ago. I feel safer knowing that I've erased all proof of my condition.

I started HIV meds when I was pregnant and was in the hospital. One time, the meds got stuck in my throat and a couple of times after that. This made taking the meds quite painful. I knew the moment would come twice every day and there was nothing I could do to avoid it. I recently went to USA. My brother sent me the tickets and covered all my expenses. I had the best vacation ever and wished my partner was with me.

“ *This has been my method of concealing my pills ever since I was diagnosed 11 years ago. I feel safer knowing that I've erased all proof of my condition.* ”



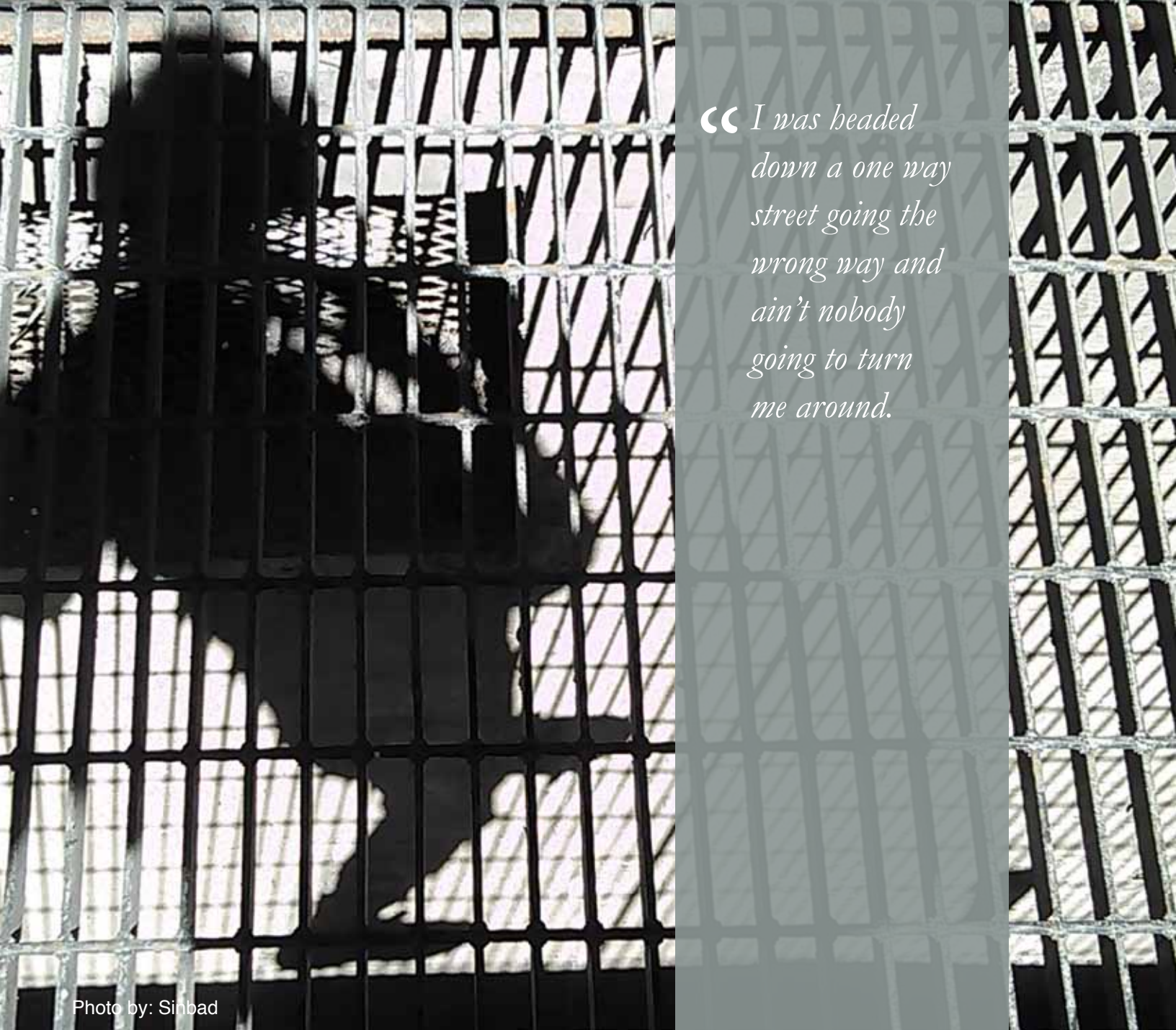
But while I was there, I couldn't take the meds for a whole month since there was always someone with me. When I returned home, I went to see my doctor, and after some blood work, he told me my CD4 counts had decreased. I told him about my vacation and apologized for not taking my meds. The doctor replied that I didn't have to be sorry as it was affecting my own health. I just laughed as it wasn't the first time I had avoided taking meds. I'd do this whenever I was out of town for long periods of time. I had to take two pills in the morning after breakfast, and one more in the evening. I was told to take the meds at the same time every day, but when I traveled, I couldn't manage those times. I also feared that others would find out about my HIV status.

My son is growing up, and he has already seen me taking the pills, even though I try my best to hide them from him. He's asked me why I'm taking pills and what was wrong with me. Every time he asks, I make up a story or avoid the question. Kids raised here are not how I used to be as a child. They want all the answers and will not back off until they know. When he grows up, he might find out and this worries me. Although I don't want him to know about my condition, I want to make sure that he stays healthy and does not contract the virus.

These days, I stay at home most of the time. I have a lot of other personal issues that have been on my mind. I'm wishing for miracles sometimes, and hope that my life and my son's life will get easier as time goes by.

“*My son will soon grow into his teen years, and he has seen me taking the pills even though I try to hide them from him.*”





“ I was headed  
down a one way  
street going the  
wrong way and  
ain't nobody  
going to turn  
me around.

Photo by: Sinbad

“ The boy kept running away his whole life growing up alone; he  
eventually grew afraid of his own shadow.

# CAPTAIN RUN AWAY

by **Sinbad**

Once upon a time, long ago in Toronto back around 1981 a very young and pretty fourteen-year-old West Indian Canadian boy thinking he had nothing to lose decided to run away from home after failing at his first attempt at coming out in front of the family.

You see! The Boy, foolish as he was, didn't plan where to go or what to do and ended up running away to a Disco, dancing to "Celebration" all night long. The Bathhouse would provide a place to sleep and the streets of downtown would soon become his home. The Boy was cursed to be forever foolishly gay.

Disco Dancing to "Super Freak" and "Bad Girls" he was the "Dancing Queen" looking for love in all the wrong places and too many faces in Toronto's gay "Village Ghetto Land". The boy kept running away his whole life growing up alone; he eventually grew afraid of his own shadow.

People come to look for him, he run away. People come to bother him, he run away. People come to help him, he run away. People come to give him food, he run away. Lord Jesus, the Boy even run away from the Lord God Almighty.

Picture it as a silent film it would read "Young Gifted and Black". I remember when that was a good thing. Now "Young Gifted and Black"... You took the words right out of my mouth HIV/AIDS is what this is all about.

Life had become a three ringed circus with my pocket full of pills. I stand before you with my instrument in hand and a monkey perched on my back, Disclosure, I am the man in the mirror sharing with you these reflections of the way life used to be and what happened to me.

I was headed down a One-Way Street going the wrong way and ain't nobody going to turn

me around. The sign said no exit bareback only and I missed my axis. I thought I had a date with destiny on this dead-end boulevard with HIV/AIDS.

Back in the day...Hola! "Livin' La Vida Loca" with stories of "The Way We Were" and "La Vie en Rose". Oh baby! It's too hot to handle real life lived experience. You will find it more than fantasy or fiction. It's what I done did with my life. Following that Gay Compass of yours, Remember, Just because it points doesn't mean it works.

These days with technology it is as easy as Speech to text add GPS to Google search next horny man. Please! It's Trending the new way to Find a Fuck (sex).

Forecast, "It's raining man" all over again.


Dazed and Confused he kept going doing the best he could each and every day facing life challenges; laughing with the good and crying with the bad; doing the right and avoiding the wrong with nowhere to go when you are stuck; and don't know what to do; when you have tried your very best to be all that you can....stronger and wiser in this crazy world of ours.

Ohhhh!!!! If I could turn back time... I would take back that sad word, Good Bye!!!!!! Undo the hurt that I caused when I walked out of your life Oh!!! So many years ago.

"Can we talk" friend to friend, You can't demand respect without change and times have changed. I now live with HIV/AIDS learning and growing over the years to change...

My Role Play to Rules and Responsibility... Bondage to Boundaries...Party and Play PNP to me is I am HIV Positive and Proud...

I am Glad to be an Old West Indian Man Living with HIV/AIDS.



“ At this point in my life, I realized that some people didn't care about my wellbeing, so I told myself it was going to be me and myself on this journey. I would do things that would help bring some peace into my life. I'd do all the things that I enjoyed that would take me out of the darkness and back into the light.

# C'EST LA VIE

by **Amour**

I have been through many struggles in my life. Growing up was very difficult, and I had to make due with whatever I had. As time went by, my life became increasingly more difficult, as I had grown up in a dysfunctional home. But somehow the word determination guided me as well as having faith each and every day. Some days I felt low and everything seemed dark. It felt like there was a cloud hanging over my head. I had no idea what my future would be like. Living with no emotional support, I felt isolated and alone. Navigating through these turbulent years, everything seemed up and down. Never stable and never knowing what the next day would bring. I just kept telling myself I had to "LIVE ON."

In my twenties, my life was not getting any better. I felt displaced. Couldn't understand myself or figure out the path where I belonged. I woke up each morning telling myself I would make it through each day.

At this point in my life, I realized that some people didn't care about my wellbeing, so I told myself it was going to be me and myself on this journey. I would do things that would help bring some peace into my life. I'd do all the things that I enjoyed that would take me out of the darkness and back into the light. I had to survive all that was happening, and search deep down inside my mind to find my strength, to overcome the road blocks and the bumpy roads. To pick myself up whenever I fell and put the broken pieces back together. Let sunshine into my life to give me energy throughout the day. The moonlight, to light up my night and the stars, to glitter in my eyes as I fall asleep. I'd silently whisper a prayer and take glimpses of my surroundings as my eyes slowly close and as my body indulges in restful sleep.

So through my challenges, I came to understand what was most important in my life, and what values I cherished most. For me, my life goals were no longer impossible. "You can do anything" - the will to live and to learn, but to not push yourself over the limits and just enjoy the baby

steps you make to get closer to your dreams.

Nurturing self-confidence gave me the ability to explore the possibilities without fear and to stay focused on the things I was passionate about. My strong inner voice guided my every step. During the past few years I've regained my confidence step by step by attaining new and different skills.

I found my courage, and am ready now to take on anything that life throws my way whether negative or positive.

Through my journey, I reconnected with music and realized it was good for my soul, so I drowned myself in it because it helps me forget my problems and worries. When I hear my favourite songs, it takes me away wherever I want to be and reminds me of the good times in my past and present. I often enjoy dancing to the rhythms and melodies as they come.

I learned through my struggles how important self-care was. I love to listen to my body and provide the necessities that it needs. I love myself. I'm always ready to nurture my spirit with a relaxing bath, a lighted scented candle, and to enjoy the serene moments. I make it a practise to eat healthy and prepare nutritious meals that my body requires from day to day.

My home is a reflection of my artistic and creative drive - a place that helps me stay grounded and brings out my real self. My home expresses my cultural background, and I dive into the culinary arts to cook up delicious meals, and create a peaceful sanctuary that surrounds me with love and happiness.

I also realized that self-respect is one of the keys to success. Self-respect, self-esteem, self-worth, and being a self-starter, and using myself as an instrument to help me accomplish my goals. My learning experiences and my knowledge have given me a strong sense of belonging today.

I have endured and overcome all the storms to create a living masterpiece.

# CHOOSE LIFE

by **Edward**

I didn't know your name  
And you didn't ask my permission  
You came into my life and made yourself at home  
You didn't exist in my world  
Before you came  
The initials in your name had no meaning to me  
I was too young to even pronounce them  
When I found out what you could do to me  
I was devastated but too young to care.

On top of the world, you came into my life  
And made me fall in love with you  
Now you've broken my heart into a million pieces  
Just like shattered glass  
Broken wings, on my knees...I can't get my balance.  
What have you done?


Run, run, run away  
It's the only way  
Will you ever learn to stay?

Fuzzy-headed, things are blurry  
I can't see my in-bound flight path  
Should I go around again?

My head hurts, my ears sensitive  
To the sound of the ticking clock  
Into the garbage you go  
What was I thinking?  
Oh! I forgot.  
It's a new day today,  
What happened yesterday?  
Oh! I forgot.

Standing, staring out of my window  
Face pressed against the glass  
It's cold, there is no sunshine in the morning sky

Photo by: Shutterstock.com



As I got older, things started to change  
And I was beginning to understand a little bit more  
You sit silently in the background  
Just letting me be  
As my world spun out of control

What should I do now?


Do I fall victim to you?  
Or do I find reasons to fight?

Little birdie, little birdie,  
Sitting on a tree branch  
Where have all the green leaves gone?  
The morning is cold and the sky is grey  
The breeze blows and the treetops sway

I sit and stare out my window again  
My eyes to the sky  
An airplane flies by  
Oh I wish I owned those wings  
Lord oh Lord, make my headache go away  
Millions of thoughts run through my head  
My dreams still fresh

I think I'll have a cup of tea  
And under my blankets I will stay  
Thank you Lordie Lord for another day

Some days you make me feel sick to my stomach  
My bed my best friend  
A bag of meds lay full  
As a reminder of my only way to control  
What you do to me  
Other times I celebrate with friends  
For whom you've touched,  
With a picnic and a rainbow-draped parade  
God, how I love to hate you at times



Over time, I've grown to understand you better  
I now know your weaknesses  
Teams of dedicated and devoted men and women  
From all walks of life,  
Hold hands and unite  
As they have found a place to put you  
You are now powerless and manageable  
You are no longer feared

People have their lives back

Although you've left your mark  
You can no longer do me any harm  
For 30 years, you've tried to steal my dreams away  
And stripped me of my ambitions  
I found reasons to fight

Family love  
Newborn babies  
My little sister grows up  
Warm bright summer day  
Birds sing  
I lay on my back in the grass  
Through the tree branches, I look up, up and away  
I can still have my dreams

You make me tell stories  
You make me tell lies  
Because the truth causes people  
To feel the need to run and hide  
I hold my head in my hands  
With my eyes closed  
I ask myself why  
Why did you think it was necessary  
To come and steal all my dreams away?

Wait!

I get it now!  
You don't own me, I still have my life!  
You are not my life,  
Oh no...you are just a part of it

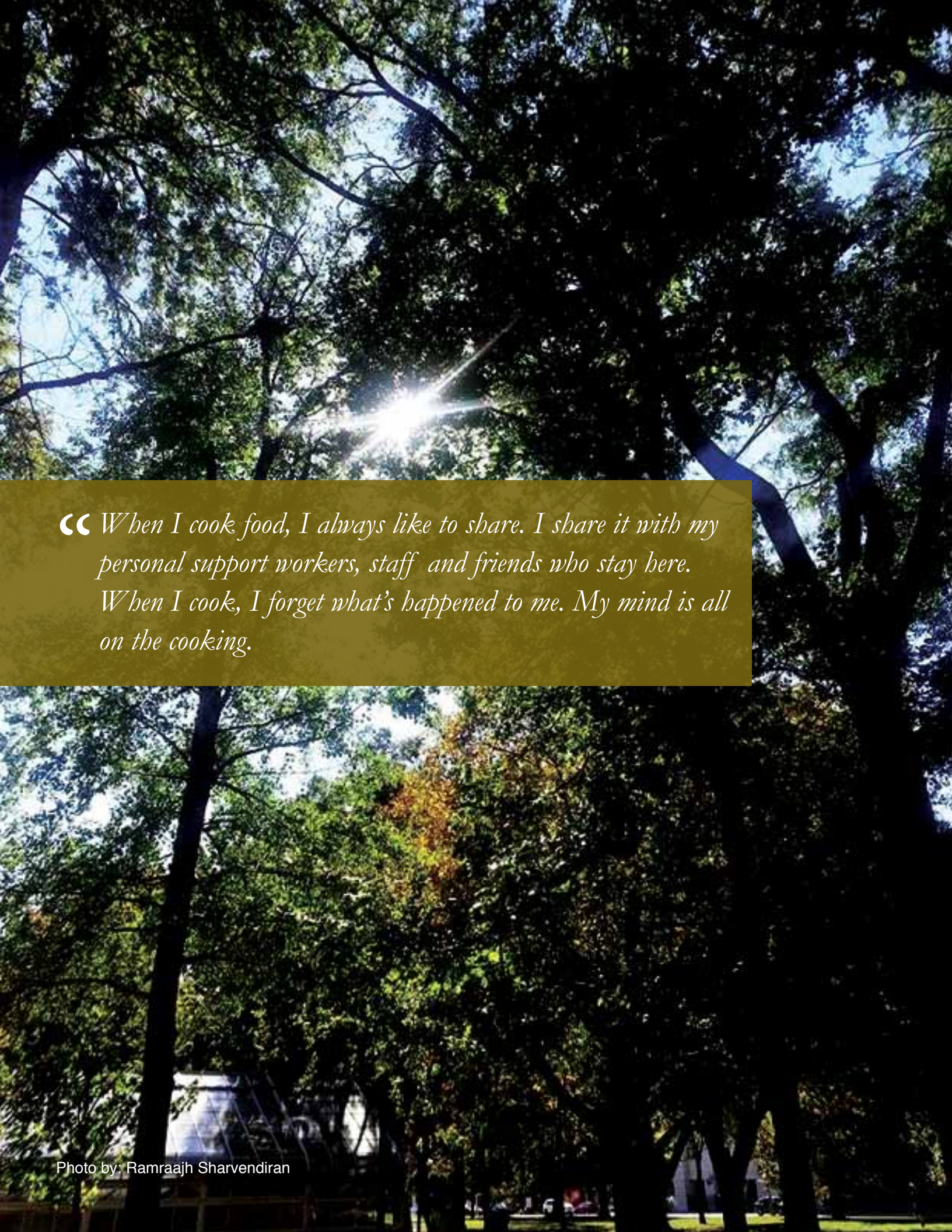
So take a backseat and enjoy my ride  
I have to take you with me, I have no choice  
But, I get to decide when I have to deal with you  
You are no longer the one who gets to say 'go'

Once or twice a day, you remind me that you're there  
A handful of pills and a sandwich  
And poof! You're gone until it's time to deal with you again

So, step aside and let me live my life  
Healthy choices and smart decisions  
Have played a big part in making,  
My life joyous and prosperous  
I can be anything I want to be  
Speak any language I like  
There are so many ways  
To make your life  
What you want it to be.

Choose Life.

*“I get it now!  
You don't own me,  
I still have my life!  
You are not my life,  
Oh no...you are just a part of it.”*



☞ *When I cook food, I always like to share. I share it with my personal support workers, staff and friends who stay here. When I cook, I forget what's happened to me. My mind is all on the cooking.*

# COOKING FOR LIFE

by **Anuja**

I forget what's happened to me when I cook.

I like to have guests over to my place so that I can cook for them. I like to see and serve guests and ask how they liked my cooking. I want to see them eating happily. This makes me feel happy. I usually cook three dishes.

When I cook food, I always like to share. I share it with my personal support workers, staff and friends who stay here. When I cook, I forget what's happened to me. My mind is all on the cooking.

My mom taught me how to cook. I helped my mom with the cooking. I must have been around 8 years old when I cooked for the whole family. There were 12 members in my family at that time. I used to help my mom and sometimes I used to prepare the meals on my own later.

Before going to school, I would help my mom prepare the meals. My mom would tell me to go and play with my other siblings but I was more interested in cooking and being with my mom.

I'm taking HIV medications but can't remember their names right now. Before I used to be very sick and there were a lot of medications at that time. I used to have to take a full cup of pills but now it is less. I am happy.

My personal support worker brings the pills for me three times a day, so I don't have to worry about missing my dosage. It is hard to swallow medications sometimes because of my health condition. The PSW speaks my language and I feel very comfortable.

Sometimes I have too many appointments and they make me tired. I have no energy but after I take my pills, I can be active again.

I would like to have my own place, a house where I have some friends to stay with me. I used to have a permanent job and my own house. My life was smooth. I loved the job. But then I was hospitalized for around 2 years.


My husband and children come to see me sometimes and often ask me to come and live with them. I'm happy when my husband comes to see me.

I wear all kinds of dresses and when I see something pretty, I like to buy it.

I like to wear sari but for the past few years, I haven't been able to wear any because there are no parties or functions to wear them at.

My life continues and I don't worry too much.





“ I’m taking HIV medications but can’t remember their names right now. Before I used to be very sick and there were a lot of medications at that time. I used to have to take a full cup of pills but now it is less. I am happy.



# FAMILY IS GOLD

by **Simi**

I am a happily married woman. I migrated to Canada more than ten years ago with my husband and children. The country was new to me with a different way of life than where I came from. The life in this new place fascinated me, and I knew it would take some time for me and my family to adjust.

We were in the process of getting settled when my husband became very sick and started losing weight. I was very worried and wondered what was wrong with him. We went to see the doctor and had some tests done. Shortly after that, we got a call from our doctor asking us to come see him. When we reached the clinic, the doctor asked to speak in private with my husband. This made me more worried because I couldn't be with him.

But I didn't have to wait too long. I was asked to join my husband in the room and the doctor told me that my husband was HIV positive. The doctor saw that I had no clue what that meant, so he explained what it was, what could happen, and what needed to be done. He asked me how many kids we had, and said that we all had to get tested. We didn't wait long to get the tests done, and the good news was that our kids were not positive. But I was.

My husband and I both broke down and thought our world had come to an end. We didn't know what to do, and wondered what would happen to our kids if we didn't survive. Depression took its toll since we didn't know anyone else with HIV, and we didn't want to disclose to anyone that we were positive out of fear that they wouldn't want to have anything to do with us.

But we had each other, and that was the positive thing in our lives. I then realized it wasn't the end of the world, and that we had to face whatever hardships there were in life and keep on going for our children's sake. The doctor told us that we were not alone. There were organizations that we could go to for support where we could meet others living with HIV. The workers there could give us more information and help us find ways to cope with our depression, and we could learn from other people's experiences. All of this pulled us out of fear and isolation by connecting us to a strong community of peers.

Today I am a grandmother. My grandchild is the best thing that happened to me, and I am grateful to still be here and see her grow. She inspires my husband and me to do our best to stay healthy and strong so we can be part of all her happy moments. We take our meds, eat healthy, and take care of our mental and emotional health. Our grown children remain very supportive.

Through all this, the most important thing is that my husband is always by my side. We take each day as it comes, still here and still going strong until our time comes. Nothing can stop me from making a choice to look for happiness every day of my life.



“ The doctor told us that we were not alone. There were organizations that we could go to for support and to meet others living with HIV. The workers there could give us more information and help us find ways to cope with our depression, and we could learn from other people’s experiences. All of this pulled us out of fear and isolation by connecting us to a strong community of peers.



Photo by: Farrel

# FROZEN LIFE, FOREVER LOVER

by **Farrel**

---

I grew up in a family of devout Muslims. My parents used to pray five times a day and follow all of the religious rules, fasting and prohibitions associated with Islam. Our family used to attend mosque every Friday to pray with our community. As far back as my memory can recall, I always knew there was something different about me. I remember when I was eight years old, I started feeling attracted to people of the same gender. I had to suppress these feelings because I was Muslim. I had already been raised to understand that homosexuality was wrong. It was forbidden to be gay.

I came to Canada as a temporary worker on a two-year contract. I worked at a farm. A year later, I was hospitalized because of symptoms like coughing, shivering and migraines. I felt nauseous and was losing weight. I weighed only 45 kg, which was a huge difference from my normal weight of 70 kg. I was eventually diagnosed with HIV and tuberculosis. I didn't know much about HIV at the time, so I was scared, disappointed and lost all hope that I'd make it through. I was a sensitive person and would get upset easily. I was worried that people could tell that I had this problem. If I saw people whispering, I would think that they were talking about me and talking about how I got HIV. I felt that no one would want to speak to me, that I would lose my job, and that I would be rejected by society. I was alone and had no support. I was just a temporary worker. The physical and emotional pain was tremendous at the time. I had come to believe at one point that I was going to die soon. I had no motivation to take the ARV meds that were

prescribed to me. There was no one around while I was hospitalized and after I got out to give me support. I felt like I had lost everything.

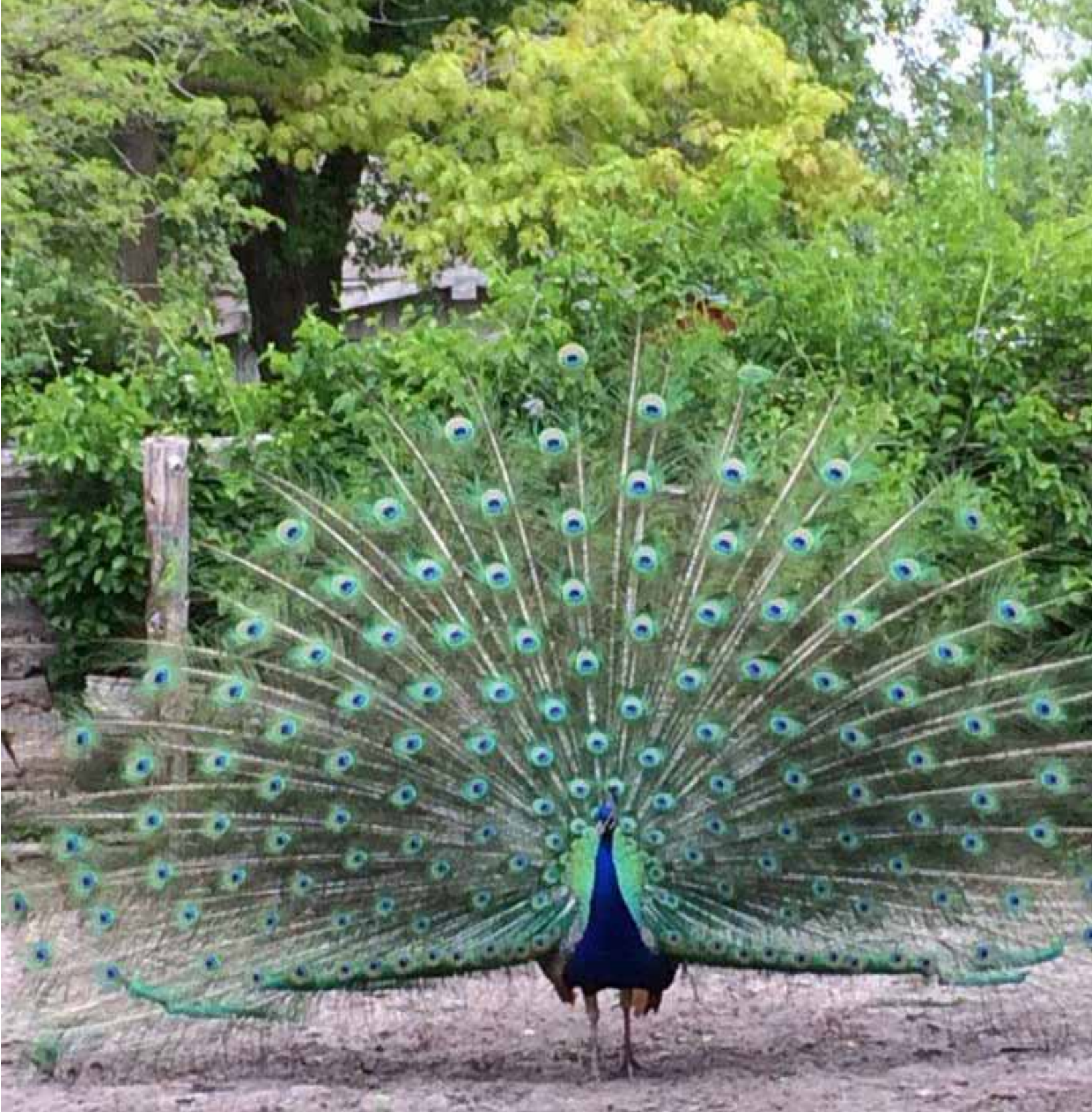
Treating HIV and tuberculosis at the same time was a frightening experience. My hair started to fall out and I lost my appetite. The six months I spent in the hospital was the toughest period of my life. I was worried about being discharged, as I had to go back to my farm, a five-hour ride from the city. I had made some friends there but they did not know about my situation, although they knew I had been hospitalized. I was not ready to disclose my HIV status. I had to hide the meds and taking them on time was always a challenge. I couldn't find friends to talk to; I didn't even try in the first place.

I made a quick decision to move to the city without having a place to live. I contacted organizations which supported people living with HIV. With help from these organizations, I started the process and stayed in a shelter for a while. There were a lot of people in the shelter, and I felt connected to them in our common struggle. The environment was different than what I had been used to; I was meeting different kinds of people with their own stories. Some had substance addiction problems, some had hygiene issues, some would always be angry, some did not want to go back to their families because they felt unaccepted, some just wanted to live by themselves. In the beginning, I was scared to be at the shelter and felt unsafe but nothing unusual happened. They were all there just like me, having nowhere else to turn to. In the meantime, I applied for a temporary housing program through an AIDS Service Organization and eventually applied for rent-geared-to-income housing in the city.

Living in Canada, I have the freedom to express my sexuality. I dress up how I like. I can talk with friends about my desires. I can share stories about the relationships I've had. I can welcome new relationships if there's a mutual attraction. I have so many opportunities to learn and know about life. I have been living my life to the fullest. I have permanent shelter now. I sometimes think if I were back home, what would it be like?

I had a fear that I would never have the life I wanted. Then, I met a man whom I liked; we both liked each other. I told him about my HIV status, and he was ok with it. We practiced safer sex and always used a condom. This was my first relationship after a long period of illness and searching for love. Although the relationship lasted for a short time, it was a great experience to fall in LOVE with someone who was HIV-negative and who accepted me as I am. Even though we broke up in a healthy way, my heart was broken and I felt lonely. I started using to overcome that situation but it did not help me at all and made me paranoid. My friends who supported me were able to figure out what I was up to. With their support, I went to detox. I accepted my relationship and the break-up as a life lesson and was sure there was nothing that would stop me from finding someone in the future. I am eager to have a lot of relationships with men, and I'm not afraid to be open about my HIV status.

I remember being alone in this country and sick in hospital, people from organizations were the ones who helped me, talked to me, came to see me, did not judge or even ask how I was infected. I received a lot of support. I have been actively participating wherever there is an opportunity for engagement as a participant or volunteer. I also publicly speak about my HIV life and the support I receive provides me energy to do more. I get to meet a lot of handsome men who I am attracted to and who are attracted to me. The best parts of my presentations are the hugs I receive from those handsome men after I speak. But I know my boundaries too.



“ I have the freedom to express my sexuality. I dress up how I like. I can talk with friends about my desires. I can share stories about the relationships I’ve had.





“ Family members and close friends started avoiding me because they feared they would contract HIV.”

# HANDS TO HOLD

by **Shamala**

I had a happy family. We had bought a house and my partner and I were working hard to make that place our permanent home. I was physically active and had strong connections to my family and friends. My marriage was stable since tying the knot 15 years ago. Life was going smooth with our two kids who were in their teens at the time.

That happiness I knew didn't last. All of a sudden my husband passed away and I found out I had HIV. My world, my thoughts - everything seemed different. Like so many other people, I always thought that HIV was a bad thing, like even holding hands and doing everyday things could transmit it. My husband's family thought it was my fault that their son died. The saddest part was that one of my children believed this too. I found out my mother-in-law went to a traditional psychic reader and was told that it was me who was cursed. This news was circulated and my relationships and support started falling apart. I felt I lost everything including my will to live. Anger, bitterness, and sadness were the common emotions I experienced.

Both of my children knew about my status, and my son ended up moving out to live with his grandmother. Family members and close friends started avoiding me because they feared they would contract HIV. Since I stopped working, I couldn't pay the mortgage. We had to move to a rental apartment. Life was no longer functional, and all my dreams were lost to me. I couldn't believe this was happening.

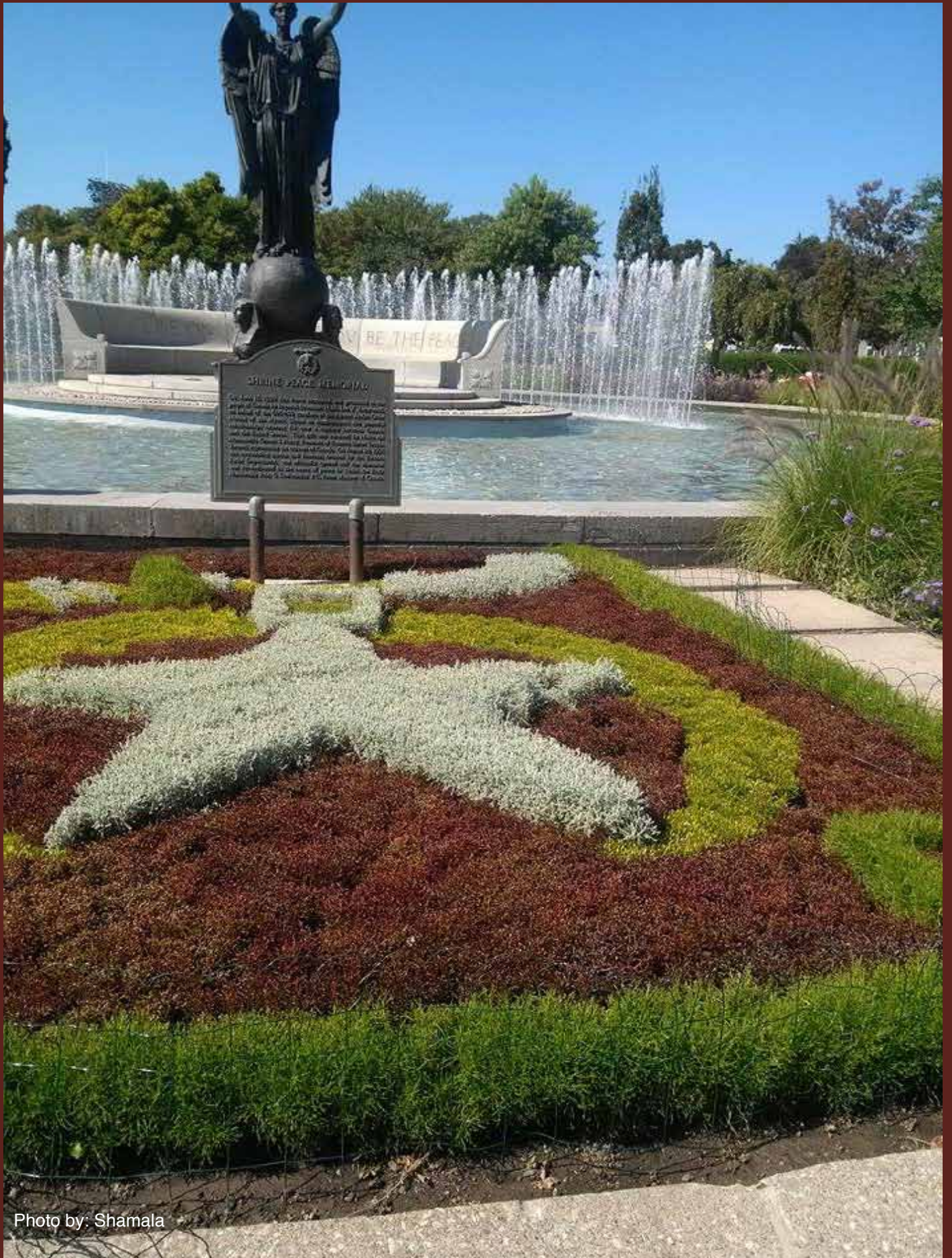


Photo by: Shamala

Although it took me some time to recover from the past, I feel much stronger today. It's been six years since being diagnosed with HIV. I've met people like me, who've been living with HIV for a long time, and being with them has brought some light into my life. I've been seeing a therapist regularly for my mental and emotional well-being. I can share all the things that have happened and are happening in my life without fear of being shamed.

I discovered the importance of having a positive attitude and having my peers for support. They've made my life easier. I sometimes wonder why I deserve to receive such support and not others, but everyone's life is different.

I want to continue to make my life meaningful, so I've let go of those people who think living with HIV is a sin. Love has entered my life. I've been seeing a guy who treats me right. He knows about my HIV status and he supports me all the same. It was not an easy relationship; it took some time for us to be comfortable with each other, but it's been going strong for a number of years now.

I am a mom who still has responsibilities like everyone else in this world. I have rebuilt my relationships with my children, and even though my son isn't living under the same roof, we have kept in touch and the hurts of the past have been worked out. My daughter lives with me and helps out in so many ways. She is always beside me when I need her support.

My goal now is to help others living with HIV and support them as a peer and friend as they too rebuild their lives.



“ I discovered the importance of having a positive attitude, and also having my peers for support. They've made my life easier.



“ I was scared but I couldn't show I was scared. Men are supposed to be tough. Real men don't show their insecurities and I am a man now.

# I AM A MAN

by **Manav**

**This story is dedicated to all the refugees around the world for their bravery and resiliency in relentlessly pursuing a better life for themselves and their loved ones.**

I am an immigrant. I came to Canada on a student visa to pursue my education. When I arrived here, I left everyone behind; family, friends, home, comfort and security. But I was ready, ready to live my life, ready to be a man.

I started university as soon as I arrived in the country. Suddenly, there was so much to do, classes to register for and attend, books and furniture to buy, learn how to get around, understand the transit system, understand people's accents, and look for a job. I was scared but I couldn't show I was scared. Men are supposed to be tough. Real men don't show their insecurities and I am a man now. I am no longer a boy. So I smiled, and I laughed and acted like I had everything under control but the reality was, I was overwhelmed! Not only that, I was also lonely. I missed home, missed my family and friends and I was freezing all the time. Don't forget, it was winter after all.


Time went by and I fell into a routine but I still felt very alone. Summer came and I met a guy. He was a bad biker boy - long blond hair, leather jacket, tight jeans and boots. He liked me and wanted to get to know me. We started hanging out all the time. I was happy. I had met someone who liked and cared about me, and who was interested to know about my family and where I came from. It felt nice. I didn't feel so alone now. I had a friend and more importantly, I had a companion.

Summer ended and I got busy with school and work. He went back to his own regular routine. I hardly ever saw him anymore. We had drifted apart.

Soon it got cold again. One Friday night, I saw my summer love in a crowded bar. He was drunk. He saw me and came over to hug me. In front of everyone, he told me he was HIV positive. He had known for some time but was afraid to tell me because he really liked me. I was shocked. I really didn't know much about HIV. I figured I didn't get it as I had not been sick at all. So I blocked it out of my thoughts and went about my routine.

A year went by and I suddenly became very sick. After numerous tests, I was diagnosed as HIV positive. My head was spinning. How was I supposed to stay in Canada? I was going to graduate soon. I couldn't go back home anymore. What was I supposed to do now? The fear, the shame, and the guilt I was feeling was tremendous but I couldn't show it. I was a man after all and real men were fearless.

Under all that emotional chaos, I graduated and all hell broke loose! I was no longer a student so my student work permit couldn't be renewed. I couldn't work anymore! I started to research about staying in Canada but I seemed to be getting nowhere. I decided to engage a lawyer. Thus began my journey with immigration but I was tired and sick. I needed help but how could I ask anyone? I was a man after all and men were supposed to be tough. How did real men survive difficult times alone? I just didn't understand. I was a broken man.



“What was I supposed to do now? The fear, the shame, and the guilt I was feeling was tremendous but I couldn't show it. I was a man after all and real men were fearless.

But with my lawyer's support, I got connected to AIDS Service Organizations. There, I met others who were like me. Some of them shared their story with immigration with me and taught me about the immigration process. I also learned about HIV from their lived experiences. All of them stood by me and supported me physically, emotionally and mentally throughout this ordeal. With them on my side, I began to feel strong again. I now had support, I could fight and I didn't have to do it alone.

Eleven years later, I was sworn in as a Canadian citizen. It has been a long tough road but I made it. Today, I have friends, a support system, a job, a home and a community. I have everything I need. I am stronger, wiser and happier. Today, I am not afraid to show my emotions and I am not ashamed to ask for help. I have finally become a real man.

#### About the Author

The author chose to share this story so as to allow people a glimpse into his journey with HIV and immigration. The author wants his readers to understand that immigration isn't just about filing papers but rather it is about people and their life and the entire emotional and mental trauma that they go through. This real life story is one man's personal journey on the human side of immigration while dealing with HIV.

The author chose the pseudonym 'Manav' for this story which in Sanskrit means 'Human' and in Hindi means 'Man'. The author feels that this pseudonym appropriately reflects his journey as a man as well as honours all the people who have stood by him, for their humanity.

# I AM A SUPER HERO

by **Manav**

I am a superhero,  
I fight for justice

I am just a regular guy,  
And a little bit shy

Shyness does not mean weak,  
I will fight in a heartbeat!

Be real bad,  
And you'll make me mad

Fearless like a lion,  
I'll roar real loud

Scared you'll be,  
You'll have self-doubt

Treat me nice and  
See me smile

Be my friend,  
Join the fight

Come on everybody,  
Let's do what's right!





Photo by: Chhiring D. Sherpa

# IN THIS COUNTRY FOR LOVE

by **Numar**

This would be my first time abroad so I had a lot of expectations that my life would be easier and better than before. I would be able to spend some quality time with my family, visit different places and find work. I used to think, what would it be like working in Canada and living there? I had heard of the winters and was anxious about moving to Canada to be with my loved ones who were already there, and to start a new life.


I flew more than twenty hours and reached Pearson International Airport. I was excited to see my partner, who had been waiting for a while. Before we were reunited, I had to go through securities and immigration. I was confused about which way to proceed so I just followed the crowd. I was advised to approach certain places to submit my documents. I felt a bit lost. Then a person in uniform approached me and asked if I needed help. English was not my first language and conversation with him was difficult. That guy did give me the directions to immigration; otherwise, I would not have known where to go. I saw a queue, and after inquiring, I got in line. After passing immigration, we had to again line up for certain documentation. While in line, I had the opportunity to have a conversation with people who shared similar stories and were eager to see their families.

My three years waiting to come to Canada seemed to have passed by fast but now when I think back to those days, I can hardly believe how much patience I had. It was not easy to wait until I was finally allowed to be with my loved one. I had heard that it would take a long time to get a spousal visa. Every time I checked my application, it was “in process.” Those were frustrating times.

It's been five months since being here in Canada. At the beginning, I felt like going back to my country. I usually had the same kind of routine. The days and nights just passed and I did not notice. There were no forms of entertainment I was interested in and everything was new to me. I did not understand the system. I was hoping to get around and get to know the place.

It took around four months for me to get enrolled into the healthcare system and get my health card. I was lucky that I had brought seven months' worth of ARV medication with me.

“*I sometimes feel that one day HIV will be cured and I do not have to take medication anymore.*”



“ My three years waiting to come to Canada seemed to have passed by fast but now when I think back to those days, I can hardly believe how much patience I had. It was not easy to wait until I was finally allowed to be with my loved one.

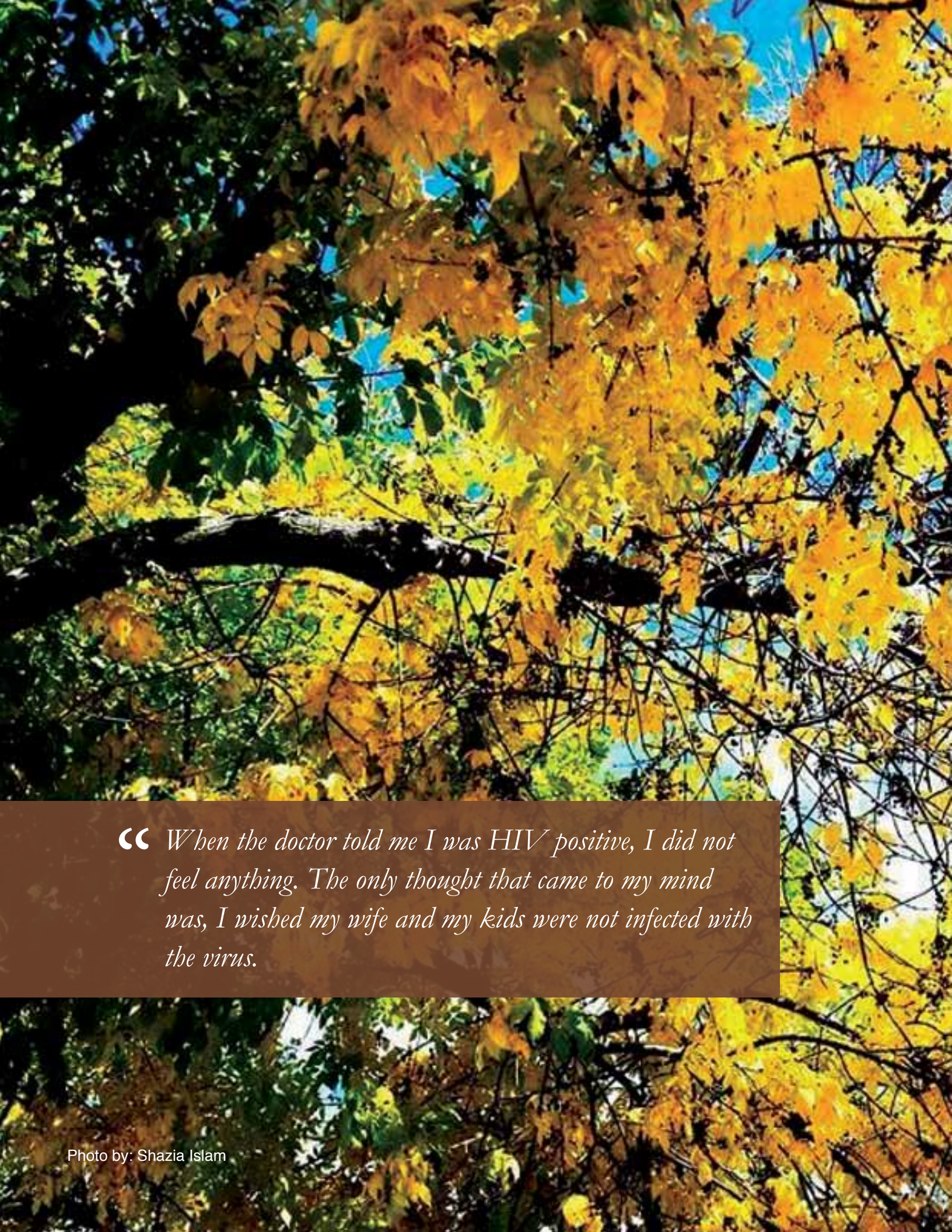
After meeting my new doctor in Canada, I had to change my meds so I prayed the new pill would suit my body like the medication that I had been taking for 10 years. But I'd only have to take one pill this time. I sometimes feel that one day HIV will be cured and I do not have to take medication anymore. I had to go through the medical examination from the beginning. I felt that my health was going to be improved with the results and tests done. I had some health concerns but now that I'm on treatment, I can manage them well enough.

Back in my home country, I did not want anyone to know about my HIV status. I stayed isolated for years and used drugs. If it was HIV only, I would be relieved, but HIV accompanied with Hep B and C was hard. Since treatment was not available even for HIV eighteen years ago, it was an anxious time. Years passed, those fears have decreased. As a way to help others and myself, I contributed some of my time to social work, which changed how I looked at my own life living with HIV. I felt comfortable talking about my HIV and being open about my status to a small group of people. I still had a feeling that people outside of this group would not understand my feelings.

Now that I'm here, there's a lot on my mind. Being in a new place is hard, but at least the recent tests here show that both Hep B and C are no longer in my blood. I remember a year ago when I had to do the medical examination for immigration, they still showed up in my reports.

I am looking for work now and if I have a routine then my life should be fine. I used to drive quite a bit before. The process here of getting a driver's license is long, but I want to get it so I can buy a car. I am thinking of working as a driver. Since it might take years to get a license, I am working with an organization that is helping me reach my goal. When this story is published, I hope I will have already started working.





“ *When the doctor told me I was HIV positive, I did not feel anything. The only thought that came to my mind was, I wished my wife and my kids were not infected with the virus.*

# WHAT MATTERS MOST?

by **Raza**

I migrated to Canada from a South Asian country thirteen odd years ago. I am very happy that I came to know about my status here in Canada and not my country of birth, or else I would be dead. I feel I am lucky to be here for a lot of reasons. Firstly, I am able to disclose my status, get medical support and of course medication. Most important are the support groups I'm a member of. In these groups, I can freely talk and share my story and no one judges me. I am also glad my family has accepted my status and treats me the same way as before, and most importantly my wife, who is also positive, is by my side.

When the doctor told me I was HIV positive, I did not feel anything. The only thought that came to my mind was that I wished my wife and my kids were not infected with the virus. At the time, I wasn't sure how HIV was spread, and thought I could give it to anyone just by touching or sharing the same glass. The doctor asked them to be tested too. The reports came and it said my wife was positive but my kids were not. It hit me hard and broke my heart. I could not stop crying and my wife and I cried together. At the same time, it was bittersweet because thankfully our kids were not positive.

I did not know much about HIV nor ever dreamed of having it. I found out how my wife and I had contracted it, which made us all the more determined to support each other.

I remember a story where a boy who was nine years old had lost his mother. His father used to comfort him every day and tell him there was tomorrow and all would be fine. When the boy started high school, an incident happened which made him

depressed. He started going home late after school. His father waited for him every day and then they had dinner together. They used to part for bed without saying a word. Days passed and it was the day before examination, his father came and sat beside him on the bed. Why are you not studying? was the question the boy expected his father to ask but instead, his father just sat beside him. He could not tolerate it and hugged his father. When they made eye contact, both had tears in their eyes. His father said there was always tomorrow and all would be fine. I recall this story because it helped me come out of my depression and I told myself, as in the story, there would be tomorrow and not to worry. What is bound to happen will happen so why waste today?

I don't wish to talk much about my past but want to say how we are coping with this condition and I want to make the message clear to those who are living with it: it is not the end of the world. We are happy and do not think about it much. One of the main reasons might be is because we have each other for support. We also have the countless support of family members and community. It is very important to have a supportive environment to cope with a condition that is so stigmatized.

Thanks to the new HIV medications, my whole life has changed. I am a strict follower of healthy eating, positive thinking, and regularly taking my HIV medication. I wish all poz people could follow these simple steps. I know it's not easy living with HIV, but making an effort is worth it.

Death is natural and unavoidable, but constantly thinking about it and my HIV status is a waste of time for me. God has given me this beautiful life and has already decided how long I will be here. I will never be able to change that. Since this is the truth, I am going to live my life to the fullest.



“ After a couple of years, when there was more information about HIV transmission and better options for treatment, we decided to have another child.

# THE RUNNING FORCE

by **Abeer**

---

I contracted HIV from my partner who did not know his HIV status. At the time, we had been planning to buy life insurance, and when they rejected us, we had no idea why. They didn't want to release any information to us. They just sent us a form to fill out and requested our family doctor's contact information so that he could release the information to them directly. My husband refused to sign the forms. I was three and a half months pregnant, and I decided that I would sign the forms because I was curious to know why they wanted my doctor's information. I didn't find out that I was positive until I went to the doctor. At that time, I didn't know anything about the virus; my only thought was that I was dying now.

I called my parents back home to tell them the news, and asked them if they would take care of my only child. My parents tried to educate themselves on HIV with as much information as they could get a hold of, just to know that their grandchild was safe. They told me that it was fine for her to continue being under her mother's care. But I insisted because at the time I wrongly believed that if she stayed with me and was near me, she would get infected too.

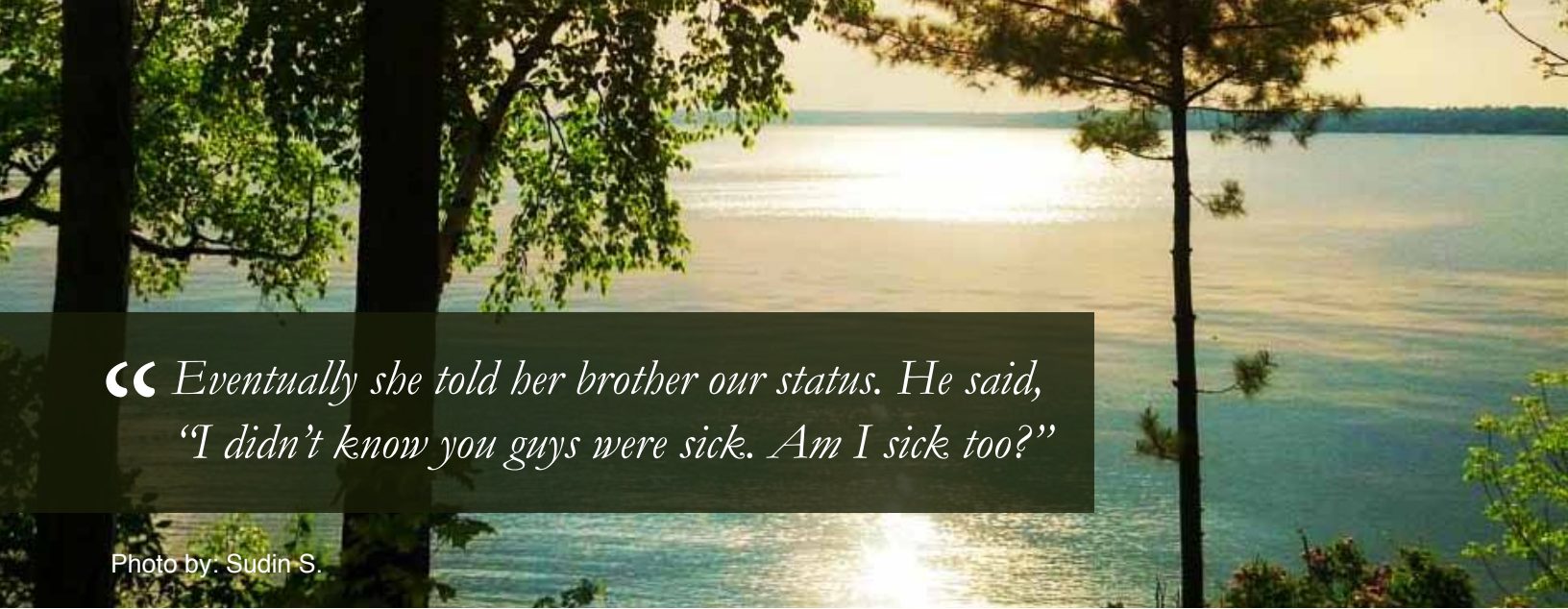
We were close friends with an Italian family, and we told them our situation.

They were very supportive of us. There was more information available for them here in Canada than what my parents could find back home. Still, concerned about our child's wellbeing, we told our friends to take our daughter. They said the same thing my parents had told me, which was to keep our daughter, but they reassured me that they would take care of her if anything happened to my partner and I. We felt that they were not supporting our decision, which we thought was in the best interest of our child.

Luckily, at the infectious disease clinic, there was a counsellor who was very supportive to me. She referred me to an AIDS Service Organization (ASO) for support. But I was scared - I didn't want to go because I didn't know who I might see there. A woman from the ASO spoke our language and was willing to come see me at my home. She came to visit and was very supportive. She made sure that once a week, a group of people would come to my home and talk to me. Shortly after that, I started accessing services from as many ASOs as I could.

I was very comfortable at one ASO in particular - the person in charge was very kind. I was almost four months pregnant and I had to decide if I should have an abortion. The ASO worker tried to persuade me not to go ahead with it because of the availability of medications that could prevent vertical transmission. He walked with me from the ASO to a hospital to meet a specialist there, who was treating HIV positive children. Despite meeting the specialist and learning about their support services, I decided to go ahead with the abortion since my partner didn't want any sick children. I was alone in the hospital. The procedure was very painful and I was treated very badly by the hospital staff. The nurses wouldn't come near me because I had HIV. It was a very bad experience overall, especially after all the kindness and support I had received at various organizations.





“Eventually she told her brother our status. He said,  
“I didn’t know you guys were sick. Am I sick too?”

Photo by: Sudin S.

After a couple of years, when there was more information about HIV transmission and better options for treatment, we decided to have another child. We thought, if anything happens to us, our daughter would have a sibling to be close to. We took the necessary precautions, and God blessed us with an HIV-negative son. Around that time, I started getting involved with various ASOs, where I did volunteer work. I managed to get a paid position at one of them, and have been involved in HIV work ever since.

We were not yet ready to tell my daughter about our status, but she regularly saw her father taking his medication. One day while I was at work, she noticed an HIV medication chart on the wall, and compared the pills that she saw my husband taking to the pictures on the chart. She came right up to me and asked me, “Does daddy have AIDS?” I said nothing - I was in shock. I took a deep breath and I told her to ask her father that question. But she was insistent, and she repeated the question. “I’m asking YOU, does daddy have AIDS?” I gave her the same response - to go see her father. She left angrily and waited for my husband to come home. I called him at work to warn him, and told him not to lie to her when she asked; she needed to know the truth. When he came home, my daughter asked him. He said yes. Then she asked, “Does mommy have AIDS too?” He said yes. Her third question to him was “Did you give it to her?” When he replied yes, she broke into tears and locked herself in her bedroom. We had to talk to a couple of her

close friends to give her some support. After a week I spoke with her and asked her how she felt about the news of our status. She said “I’m not surprised to know that he had it, but what makes me angry is that he gave it to you.”

Eventually she told her brother our status. He said, “I didn’t know you guys were sick. Am I sick too?” I said no, and that I was very careful when we decided to have him. I told him that we had taken him to all the necessary appointments after he was born until he was at the age where we were sure that he was negative. “You don’t have to worry,” I said, “you are fine and we are okay too.”

These days, I’m in good health and am looking towards the future for my children. I want them to be independent and not worry the way I had to from the time we had arrived in this country. Whatever I earn I try to save it for them. I always tell them that, if anything happens to me, to use whatever I have set aside for them in a way that would make their mother happy. My hopes and prayers are that I’ll continue to get through my challenges for the love of my kids. They are strong - I’ve taught them well.

# HOW TO LET GO

by **Steve**



Photo by: Suruthi Ragulan

I last visited my birth country 14 years after I fled due to civil war. It was a great moment to return to my homeland, meet childhood friends who were hard to recognize, go to familiar places, and eat all together with my mom and loved ones. Those were good days spending quality time, and I now miss those precious moments. I often call my mom and friends and feel good whenever I hear their voices.

I got married while I was in the UK and shortly after, my partner and I moved to Canada. We were looking forward to our future and were gifted with a son. But we had a misunderstanding and had to separate. I had no idea how I was going to move forward. I couldn't take time off work to mend my relationship with my partner. I thought that at least I was allowed to spend time with my son once a week for a few hours, but after a year, I was denied visitation.

In order to overcome the depression and loneliness I felt, I made new friends. I was looking for a new relationship. A friend introduced me to a local bathhouse to find a sex partner and I indulged in using. On top of all this I got diagnosed with HIV. This brought so much shame in me. I isolated myself, and needless to say, my depression got worse.

My life took a different turn afterwards.

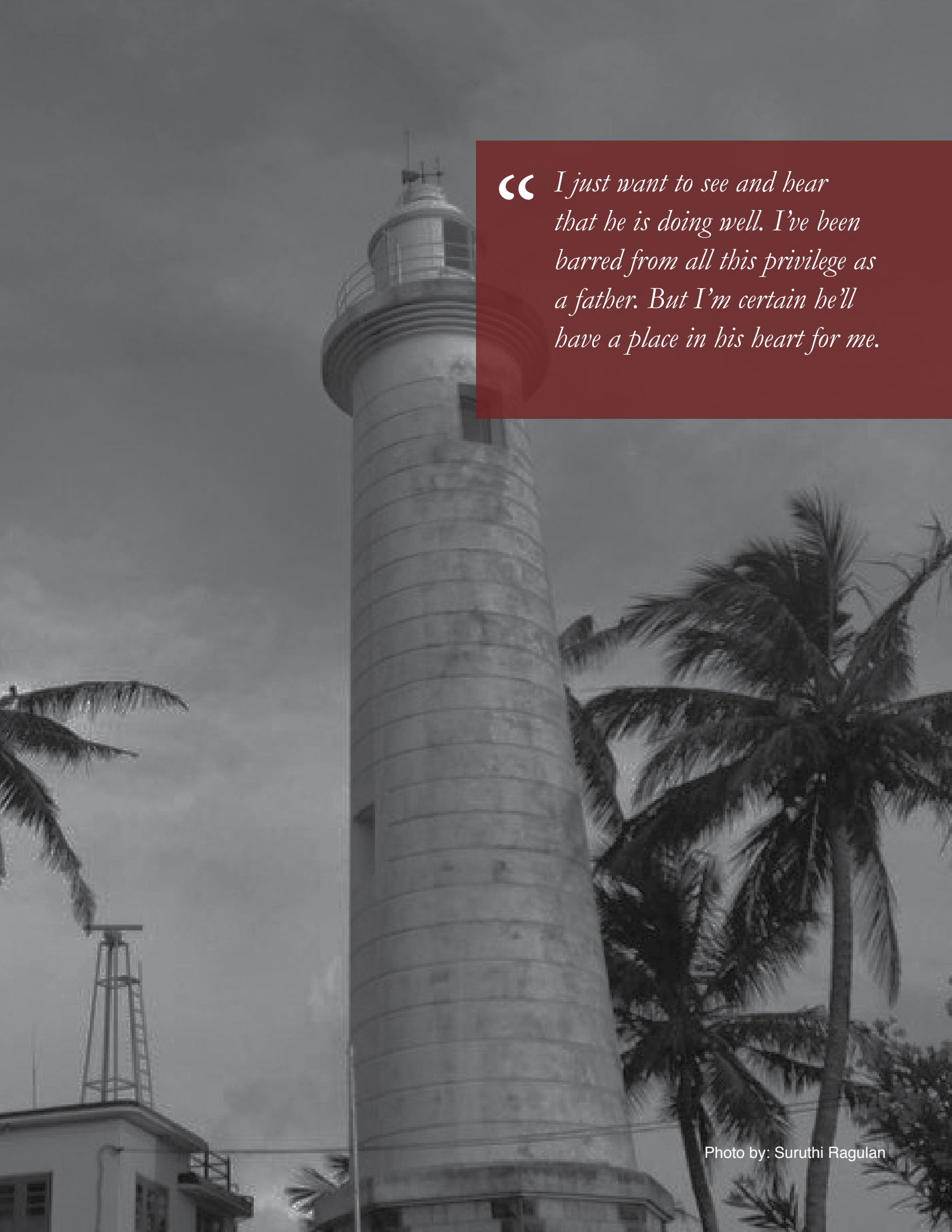
Since I was diagnosed HIV positive, my partner and son were also recommended to go through the HIV test. My HIV status was disclosed without my consent during the time when my wife and son had to get tested. My family and friends all found out. I soon became an outcast and eventually my partner filed for divorce. I could not afford to file a case to allow me to see my son. I approached various organizations on my own so that I could fight to get custody of my son, but all were in vain.

My son was only three years old when I last saw him. It has been fourteen years since. I am worried about his well-being and wonder if he's been well taken care of. I have no idea what he might be like now as an adolescent. What is he studying and what is his future going to be like? I wonder if there is any way I can support him. I've learned that when parents are divorced, it affects their child's mental health. I wonder what he's heard about me during this whole time and if he would ever accept me. This makes me more worried than my health. I just want to see and hear that he is doing well. I've been barred from all this privilege as a father. But I'm certain he'll have a place in his heart for me.

In order to cope with the shame and isolation, and not being able to see my son, I started using. I even started skipping my meds more frequently. As time went on my health got worse. I could not walk, could not see properly, could not eat, and felt upset most of the time and lonely. Eventually

I had to be hospitalized. There's always a reason for everything. While in hospital, I learned about different AIDS service organizations from the nurses and doctors. After becoming a member of these ASOs, I finally started to get the support I needed. I met people who were also living with HIV and that encouraged me. I started making different choices for my life that helped me feel better.

I found people working in these organizations so different from the reality I live in. The community groups I mingle with are so supportive. I wish the real world was also as caring and supportive, but unfortunately a lot still needs to be done. Through my involvement in the ASOs, I met someone who cared for me like a sister. I never had this kind of relationship since leaving my birth country. She and her family treated me with the utmost love. But just as life was turning around for me, tragedy struck - I lost my brother to suicide. To cope with the loss, I again started using, sometimes seeing my brother in my mind. I use on and off, especially when I get triggered from missing my son and my late brother.



“ *I just want to see and hear that he is doing well. I’ve been barred from all this privilege as a father. But I’m certain he’ll have a place in his heart for me.* ”

Photo by: Suruthi Ragulan



Photo by: Suruthi Ragulan

“ *Death is natural and unavoidable, but constantly thinking about it and my HIV status is a waste of time for me.* ”



# LIFE IS WHAT WE MAKE OF IT

by **Ms. Pretty**

“*When I met others who had been living with the condition for a long time and were still leading normal lives, I started planning for my future once again.*”

It has been 15 years since I was diagnosed HIV positive. From 2001 onwards, my life has been a rollercoaster. When I first found out I was positive, I thought I wouldn't make it to 45. I was only 30 years young at the time. I've had so many challenges in my life such as being treated poorly because people assumed I was sleeping around and was to blame for contracting the virus. I've been insulted by the people who I thought were my friends. I lost a few when they heard about my HIV status, but I gained new ones too.

I left my country and went to the U.S. where I planned to go to school, but my aunt who lives there advised me to go to Canada instead. The money I brought from home was not enough for me to go to college. My aunt did some research and found out that Canada was accepting refugees from my country, and since I was politically involved back home I qualified for the claim.

I claimed refugee status at the border and was allowed to settle in Canada while I waited for my case hearing. As part of the immigration process, all refugees had to go for a medical checkup and that was when I found out that I was HIV positive. It was very hard to accept that reality. All my dreams were shattered and I anxiously awaited my death. But as luck would have it, I met someone who introduced me to community support services for people living with HIV. When I met others who had been living with the condition for a long time and were still leading normal lives, I started planning for my future once again.

I got married and had a beautiful healthy boy who was born HIV-negative thanks to advances made to reduce the risk of mother-to-child transmission. But my husband left me soon after because he couldn't deal with the fact that I had HIV. I went back to college and earned another diploma so that I could get a decent job in Canada. Even though I had a business diploma from back home, it was hard for me to get a job without work experience in Canada. Luckily I got a job as an admin assistant at an AIDS service organization (ASO). Today I work at a bank.

## HIV as a Lesson

Being HIV positive does not have to be a nasty thing. I believe it has brought me tremendous chances in my life. Yes, you might think I'm crazy to be thankful, but I'm absolutely sane.

In the beginning, I was always unhappy because of my HIV status; however, I've learned so much about myself through it all.

I had challenges throughout my life so why should I blame only HIV for all my suffering? I've gone through a divorce and had my heart broken. I was ill-treated by people after they found out about my HIV status. However, all of those struggles gave me a new life and brought out the best in me.

Being human, I sometimes get tempted to try different things like having sex with another woman, or maybe trying a threesome and many other things. But since I have a disease, it makes me stop and think. I believe I would be a naughty woman if I didn't have this governor to control me. I turned to religion and stayed away from all those temptations.

I've had so many opportunities to travel before coming to Canada. But, being HIV positive and an active member of various ASOs, I've had even more chances to travel. As a public speaker, I was able to educate and share my story to others. I spoke at one of the International Aids Conferences where people were so moved by my story that I got invited to speak at another faith-based AIDS conference in South Africa. Then, my new husband and I went to Mexico to the International AIDS Conference where there was so much to learn and where we had so much fun as well.

I'm so happy to have all of these opportunities, and I'm so glad to have my family, especially my parents and my siblings who understand and accept me the way I am. They never judge me and love me unconditionally.

So now, do you still think I'm crazy to be thankful for having HIV?



“ *Being human, I sometimes get tempted to try different things like having sex with another woman, or maybe trying a threesome and many other things. But since I have a disease, it makes me stop and think.* ”



“ I had to find a place to live and moved in with a group of people as soon as I landed in Canada. I had no choice at that time. Four of us lived in the same room. My medication was running out and I was terrified. Living with four other people who did not know my HIV status was an uncomfortable experience.

Photo by: Shazia Islam

# LIFE CHANGING LIFE

by **Himalaya**

I had a lot of dreams when I was younger. One of them was to get recruited in the army. My father had already served 20 years and he still looked young. The job appealed to me. I tried getting recruited but I failed twice. The competition was tough. Each time, I'd fail in the later stages of the training. Life had a different destination for me, it seemed. I thought of running my own business, so I went abroad, but couldn't get established. I started feeling like a failure, and turned back to substance use.

My life started to become more unpleasant with my HIV diagnosis. I had only shared this news with my father, who tried his best to keep me optimistic and motivated; it helped me survive. But somewhere inside me, I was still afraid. What should I do now? How do I move forward? What if others find out about my HIV status? These questions did not stop haunting me. The strength came from within when my mother used to appear in my dreams and give me advice. To remove those fears and negative thoughts, she advised me to change my lifestyle. I started using more after my diagnosis. I decided to go for treatment at a centre and later started volunteering there. Being at the centre gave me the courage to share my HIV status with the counsellor. I was relieved to lift this heavy load off my back.

I was linked to other poz people who provided me with some hope. Our poz group started to meet privately, and then through that treatment center, I got an opportunity to visit another country. The visit changed my life. An HIV-positive woman I met there said, "Thanks to HIV, I have come to know the value of my life. I do not fear and worry about my HIV status." After returning, I wanted to do something. I didn't know what. I finally decided that I'd work in the field of HIV wellbeing. We started to get organized and our poz members started to grow. But I remained worried that other people would find out about my HIV status.



Societal stigma was one of the major barriers against poz people, and it had to be broken. I decided to be free of my worry and disclosed my status through media. Now everyone in my community knew I was HIV positive. There was satisfaction deep inside me, and I was relieved. I started to dedicate my life working for the HIV/AIDS cause. But I did not know that there was another dark side to living openly with HIV and fighting for our rights. It was time for me to leave my country.

Although many of my relatives were already living abroad, I applied for refugee status in Canada. My application got accepted and I was able to sponsor some family from my home country. It took around four years. The waiting was the hardest part.

I had to find a place to live and moved in with a group of people as soon as I landed in Canada. I had no choice at that time. Four of us lived in the same room. My medication was running out and I was terrified. Living with four other people who did not know my HIV status was an uncomfortable experience. I could not tell anyone because of my past experience with stigma. I had to carry my medications and documents wherever I went. Even in the middle of the night, I would wake up to check that my bag was still beside my bed and that no one had opened it. I was terrified. If someone found out, the news would travel fast among my community. I would frequently change the topic of conversation and often lie when people asked me about my personal life.

With help from a friend, I found out about an AIDS service organization and got medication. I am grateful they were there to provide me with the support I needed and later I got linked to another agency where I made more new connections among peers from similar cultures. I started feeling like I was part of this society.

My work permit got rejected twice. I was pissed off that I had to live without a proper source of income. The Permanent Resident process also took a long time. It had already been two and a half years and there was no sign of my PR card. I was feeling miserable. I had been in contact with other people who had similar cases and they were with their families already. I reached out to wherever and whoever could help me figure out why the application was taking so long. To my surprise, I found out that my medical examination paper hadn't reached the case processing center. I had to follow-up with the documents.

But I still had some other mountains to climb. I did not have a stable source of income. I was told about ODSP which could help me through the hard times. I could afford better living conditions now. After four years, I was reunited with my family. I had already started to work and could afford to rent an apartment. I now had privacy and I didn't have to carry all the documents and my medication in a bag. I was relieved that others would have no way of finding about my HIV status.

Despite all the hardships settling in Canada, I feel satisfied with the services offered to newcomers here. The healthcare that is in place and the organizations providing support have given me back hope. I still have a long way to go, but at least I now have a stable home. It's never going to be easy. Life is a struggle.

# THE FIRE INSIDE

by **Pahal**

I was 30 years old when I had done my test. I actually got a call from a friend of mine who worked at an AIDS service organization. He said somebody had given him my name, and said we had unprotected sex, and the person was tested HIV positive. I did my test but didn't have the courage to go back for the results until 3 months after. When I showed up, they said I had a positive test result. The doctor told me, "Ok, you could live for maybe a year and a half." Because this was 23 years ago when I was diagnosed, back in the day, the medication was not as good as it is today, and people were still dying. A lot of people were still dying.

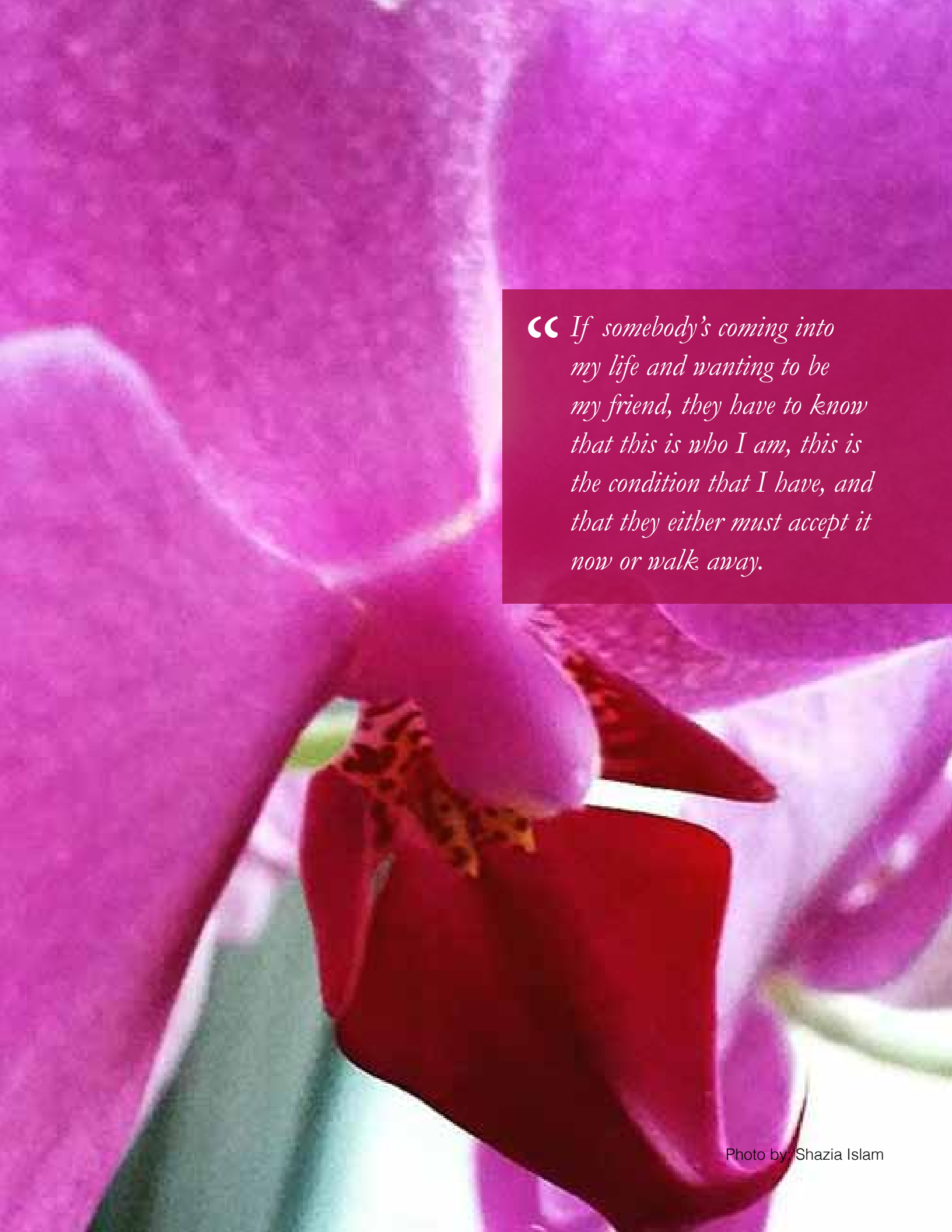
After I got my test results, that night I felt like I wanted to just end my life right there. I went home, and wanted to jump over the balcony in the house I lived in. However, when I got home and looked over, the drop was not steep enough. Yes, there were a lot of jagged rocks, but they probably would have just cut me up, and chances are, I would not have died. I decided, ok, I'm not going to do that.

After the diagnosis, I didn't share this with anyone because I was so afraid of the stigma and discrimination. I was in a country where if my status was made known, I could've gotten killed, or could've lost my job, or lost everything I had, and probably end up on the streets or dead. So I kept my mouth shut.

However, because the doctor told me I would live for a year and a half, I lived it up. My parties were legendary. I traveled. I made money. After 8 years, I was contracted to work on another island for a year, but at the end of that year, I got very ill and I knew what was happening. I was asked to come in and renew my work contract, but I said, no, I wanted to go home. When I got home, the doctors did some tests, and they confirmed my worst fear. I was diagnosed with full-blown AIDS.

Fortunately at the time, I had some money, and I had some support from my former boss. When I came back I contacted her, and told her about my diagnosis.





☞ *If somebody's coming into my life and wanting to be my friend, they have to know that this is who I am, this is the condition that I have, and that they either must accept it now or walk away.*

Photo by: Shazia Islam

She said she would help me and spent a lot of her time and resources to help me recover so I could get back to work.

I had shared my diagnosis with somebody else who was working with me. He went and told the rest of the staff. At this time, I had been working as a manager. The staff came into my office and told me that they didn't want to work with me because they didn't want to work with anybody who had AIDS, and who was gay. It was a very traumatic time. I cried many nights. Many times, I got up and I didn't want to go to work. And when I went to work, I felt afraid that somebody would attack me.

I decided to report what the staff had said to me to the owner of the business, and she intervened on my behalf. She made threats to them that if they ever said anything hurtful to me again, she would have them fired, and would use all her contacts to make sure they couldn't work in the industry anymore.

All of this happened eight years into my diagnosis. About 5 years in, I started my medication and moved to Canada. The medication was really bad for me. It was making me really sick. It changed my body completely. I wasn't able to sleep, so in the daytime, I was like a zombie. My head was not in its rightful place. My hormones were changing also. I started growing breasts, and I had to get special medication to bring it back to my normal size. To this day, after coming to Canada, I still have issues with the HIV medication. My body will accept the pills for maybe 2 years or so, and then after, it will start to reject them.

After going to many doctors to find out what was wrong, they couldn't give me a diagnosis. I had been taking one of the HIV meds called Ziagen for about a week when the symptoms started. One of the doctors I saw told me I didn't have to take it anymore because I was having a negative reaction to it. For a little while, I had to stop taking ARVs until everything was flushed out of my system, and then I could start a new cocktail of meds. I have a long and varied history with my cocktails – they usually made me sick; I've had kidney failures; I've had all kinds of drama happening with me.

Hopefully I will get a new medication in the near future that will work well with my body.

Even after 23 years, I'm still not 100% comfortable with my HIV status. Every day that I take my medication, it's a harsh and painful reminder that I'm still living with HIV. It's painful because I've seen so many of my friends who have now passed away or have become very ill. I fear that one day, I will take a new medication, and I will once again experience its side effects.

In terms of my relationships, I've had so many rejections from people when I shared my status with them. Yet, I'm very open that way in sharing my status when I engage somebody sexually or very personally. And I say very personally because if somebody's coming into my life and wanting to be my friend, they have to know that this is who I am, this is the condition that I have, and that they either must accept it now or walk away. I don't want them to stay in a relationship with me for a long time and eventually find out about my HIV status, and decide to leave. So I tell them to walk away now, and save me and themselves from that pain - the pain of having to deal with the loss of a friendship after a connection has been made. In every aspect of my life, I'm always treading on thin ice with my HIV status.

I'd like to say that one should really consider every move they make in their lives, relationally, physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. You have your life and destiny in your hands. Don't leave it to chance or don't leave it to anybody to determine that for you. I did that. I was silly. I did not think my partner would be somebody who would have HIV because he was such a good-looking man, had a high-profile job, was from a good family, and was educated. What that has taught me is that HIV does not discriminate. It affects all levels of society – gender, race, social- economic background, good-looking, not good-looking – it can affect anyone, everyone. It's not an easy road. Many people are walking that road, and many more people will be walking that road. Just don't be one of them. And I'm saying this because I am walking that road, and know the trials and tribulations I have faced, and the fears, the stigma, the discrimination, the hiding, and what it has done to my psyche.

I worked in the HIV sector for many years, but I had to quit my job. There's an expression that says, art imitates life, and in my case, it was life imitates work, work imitates life. I was trying to help everybody but not taking the time out to do the same for myself. I had to take time off from work to focus on me. I've learned now to be positively selfish in redirecting all the love, all the attention, and all the care, and empathy, and everything that I have inside of me - and when I say "all", I don't mean in totality, because being a generous person is part of my nature. I'm giving to myself a little more as opposed to giving all to everyone who comes knocking. I'm learning to not always answer.

As a long-term survivor now in my 50s, I think the HIV sector needs to talk about living longer with HIV because this is a new norm. With medication working as good as it is now, people are living normal lives, but there needs to be more talk, programs, services and support for people aging with HIV, especially gay men, trans men, trans women, and racialized people.

I would just love to accept myself as I am by fully and totally accepting my HIV status and knowing this is a condition that I have been living with for 23 years. Remember my doctor said I would live for a year and a half? I would love to affirm for myself a healthier lifestyle, a new job where I'm comfortable being me, and working with people who are comfortable with me. Giving love, but also giving to me. I'd love to see myself in a good relationship - well better than good, a great relationship and a happy relationship where two people can comfortably share their honesty with each other.

Although I have no blood relatives here, I have my chosen family. I would like to build on those relationships - relationships with the people I call family and who call me family, and who were there for me when I needed help the most.

“ I was trying to help everybody but not taking the time out to do the same for myself.

# A LEAP OF FAITH

by **Skylar**

A few years ago I was very sick one day so I got rushed to the hospital. I was feeling so much weakness at that time. After a few tests I was diagnosed HIV-positive. I was in shock. My doctor was explaining to me about the disease but I couldn't remember a single word he said. I was already married so I used to live with the in-laws. At first they hesitated when I told them the news, but slowly they understood about my disease and everything went on as normal.

It's very hard to accept people like me in my country because they don't know much about HIV. Although they're aware of prevention and transmission of the disease, in their eyes, they think if a person gets HIV they will die soon. After one year of taking medication, I became very sick again. I was rushed to the hospital and the doctor told me that the amount of blood in my body was abnormally low. It was because of how my body reacted to the medication. I was admitted to the hospital and stayed for a week.

I am in Canada with my husband now and am happier and healthier. I'm feeling positive nowadays because I'm meeting more people living with the same condition. Now I feel more confident talking about my disease and everything about it. Sometimes I miss my family and friends from home, but when I meet my friends over here they lift me up and make me feel part of their community.

Nowadays I believe thinking about negative thoughts is a waste of time. Think positive and move on. What is gone is gone and I cannot change the past but I can make my future bright and happy. So to everyone out there, life is too short. Live it to the fullest if you can.

“ I’m feeling positive nowadays because I’m meeting more people living with the same condition. Now I feel more confident talking about my disease and everything about it.









# **MORE THAN FICTION**

**INVESTING IN SOUTH ASIAN POZ COMMUNITIES**

**VOL. 2**