



A Mother's Love: 'I'm So Happy My Son Came Out As Gay'

By Kevin Mwachiro



Stigma has never been far from Rosemary Kasiva. In her case, you could call it quadruple stigma. She was brought up by a single mother in the sixties, brought up her own children as a single parent, watched her sister die of an AIDS-related illness, and today is the mother to an openly gay son, Leonard aka Mutisya.

Our meeting takes place in her son's flat in a Nairobi suburb. The rainbow flag hangs limply in a corner. This was not the first time we had met. She had insisted that we meet at least once so that she could get to know me, and what I was after. She had good reason to mistrust the media in our society. Back to Rosemary. I was struck by how youthful she looks. Her spectacles sat squarely on her cappuccino coloured face. She wore a strong and somewhat serious face. She asked to make myself at home, and prepare whatever beverage I fancy. She's been wanting to share her journey of being a parent of being an openly gay son. Especially following the recent ruling on the petition to decriminalize homosexual sex. She figured it was time to talk about her son, her first-born, the one she had when she was only 19.

Kasiva could possibly have been the only parent present at the High Court during the Repeal 162 case. I remember seeing her during the submissions and she was also among the throes of individuals who were present during the May 24th ruling. She wasn't there for Leonard alone, she

wasn't there for the queer community alone either; she too had a stake in the judgement.

"I'm glad Leonard and I can talk openly about gay relationships, marriages and having children within the gay setting," says Kasiva. "We share posts on everything and I sometimes question why I was so mad when he came out. This has been the best thing that has happened to both of us. There are no secrets we now relate honestly and openly."

I know many other queer individuals who would love to hear their own parents utter those words. I know I would. There is acceptance, respect, and love in this home. Kasiva does not hide the deep love she has for Leonard and his siblings. But she is very protective of her children. Trust does not come easy to her. She has been hurt once to many times.

First, her sister. She tells me she wishes that when she had the same resolve to fight for her sister who died of an HIV-related illness the same way she now defends Leonard and his brothers.

"We faced stigma at the hospitals that I took my sister to. We were afraid then. When she died, who stood with us? No one," she says. "I [wish I] would have made sure she would have gotten the best treatment and maybe she would have still been here. There was a lot of stigma and fear surrounding us. Now I am not willing to sacrifice any member of my family at the expense of the world."

See where she is coming from?

We have the flat to ourselves, as both mother and son didn't want to impede each other during the interview. Kasiva has her cup of chai, I've got my *kahawa* and for then, she gives me the precious gift of time. Time to re-open memories and remember her journey and subsequently, transformation.

Kasiva describes herself as a Nairobi hustler through and through. This city is her home. She was born in Pumwani Hospital, raised at the BAT Village in Bahati, in the Eastlands area and spent most of her adult life in Dagoretti, until recently when she migrated to Athi River. But she still commutes daily into the city for business and for church on Sunday. She had also made the trek into the city for this interview.

Kasiva beams with pride as she remembers how Leonard was a very smart child. He excelled academically both in primary and secondary school and earned himself a scholarship to study in Singapore and then the United States. She describes him as a gentle and obedient child. The ideal first born, though he suffered from a number of health challenges during his early childhood. She remembers he preferred playing with dolls more than cars or more 'boys toys'. It was shocking at first but she opted to continue buying the toys that he preferred. She didn't think much of it. It seemed like just a preference to her back then, something that didn't warrant much fuss.

As she recalls Leonard's formative years, there were little incidents here and there that hinted he was different, but she was dismissive of them. Like the time he had a close friend in primary school and during their Standard 8 exams, she came across success cards from this particular boy to Leonard. They had love hearts and affectionate messages. Leonard told her they were just friends.

However, it was not until many years later when Leonard was studying abroad did the matters of his orientation resurface. He had come back home for holiday from Singapore with a male friend and they went to the Maasai Mara together. While they were away, Leonard's church friends came home to inquire on his whereabouts. When she told them that his away with a male friend, their reaction surprised her. She suspects that they knew Leonard was gay but she herself thought nothing of their interest in her son and his travel companion. To her, Leonard had just brought a friend who wanted to experience his friend's home country.

It was not until 2010 when Leonard came home unexpectedly from the US, where he was studying at the time, that things did begin to unravel proper. His university had been in touch with her a few times before asking her to intervene as Leonard seemed to be struggling academically. Leonard was halfway through his studies at this time, but he didn't seem committal about his return to America. There was always an excuse for the delay, until after he came out clean. She remembers him saying he was considering celibacy and informing his mother that he didn't like girls, not in 'that' way.

"I hope you don't like boys?" she remembers asking. His response to her was, "Unfortunately I do." As she recalls this conversation, she falls back into the sofa. She remembers that the revelation was painful. She tells me that she fired her son with a barrage of questions and even threatened to beat him. She verbally abused him, berated him and expressed her disappointment. Some of the answers to her inquisition were greeted with silence, and some revealed the bitter truth. One such truth was that some of the individuals with whom Leonard had gay encounters were also within the church. Her church. Their church. The church where Leonard and his brothers served in ministry. The family church. The sense of betrayal from within and outside her home was immense. Did everyone but her know of her son's sexuality, she asked herself. Had people within the church managed to 'recruit' her son, she wondered.

They say hindsight is 20/20, and as Rosemary reflects on that moment, she tells me she regrets her reaction and wishes she'd have acted better. She describes the family as close-knit and expresses disappointment that she had not created an environment for Leonard to come clean about his sexuality earlier.

It was also around this time, she says, that Leonard got involved in activism. This added fuel to her fire. She hated the gay community for having 'recruited' her son and also from detracting him from his studies in the US. She recalls how Leonard's coming out may have affected his brothers, as she hints their grades slipped around this time due to the tension that had come out in the home. Pun intended.

An ultimatum was issued. She categorically told Leonard that he could only live in her house if she renounced his homosexuality. Then one day, he stepped out and never came back home. It was a harrowing six months that followed. There was no contact, nor knowledge of his whereabouts. Phone calls and text messages went unanswered. Some of these texts demanded that he came back home or else she was going to set the police on him. Leonard remained *mteja* all through this period.

"I lost so much weight during this time. Eventually, through my own networks and the rumour mill, I found out that Leonard was in Kisumu. I was on a matatu almost immediately once I got this news." I'm astounded at the clarity at which she remembers things. She remembers it was a Prestige Shuttle that she travelled on. The two samosas and tea that she had for breakfast and the five hours she spent walking around Kisumu. She believed that Leonard was living as a street person and she was somehow convinced was going to meet someone, anyone, who would know him. Maybe he now went by the name of Mutisya. I must mention she had never been to Kisumu before and had presumed that it was the size of Machakos (it is much bigger). Her words, not mine.

She admits there was a mixture of naivety, bravery, and desperation during this expedition. The fact that Leonard was AWOL was a secret that was known only to her and her other two sons. Not even her mother - Leonard's grandmother - knew. She wanted him back and still hoped he would resume his studies.

Kasiva was relentless in trying to contact Leonard. She kept on sending him messages. She endured numerous sleepless nights. She'd rack her brain, wondering what her son was doing in Kisumu, whether he was homeless, and what he is eating. There is nothing like a mother's love.

“Mutisya’s grandmother used to ask about him and when he was going back to the US. The bishop of my church would ask the same. I couldn’t tell them that I didn’t know where he was. I had to lie to them. I kept on telling them he is taking a break so that he could work on a project.”

“There was a rumour already doing the rounds in the church that Leonard had been chased away from America because he was gay. I also started being blamed for making him gay. People were saying that it was my male friends who had abused Leonard, which is why he had turned out gay. There was so much hate!”

The wagging tongues and lack of support from her church led Kasiva to walk away from a place that she believed was a sanctuary. It didn’t end there. On the home front, Leonard’s siblings started questioning their mother on their elder brother’s whereabouts. “They started telling me, if I had not been angry with Leonard, he would not have run away.” Her voice now sounding pained.

The period of Leonard’s absence accorded her time to reflect and ask herself some hard questions. Questions that made her think about his sexuality, her love for him, and whether she was going to live a life worrying about other people’s opinions. Despite not being in communication with her first born, she religiously kept on sending him money. She was trying to reach out.

Kasiva looks at me squarely, tilts her head and with a seriousness in her eyes and tells me she prayed constantly for her son. Prayed for him to come back. She got her miracle when Leonard called her one day and informed her he was working in Kisumu. A reunion and homecoming were delicately agreed on. By this time, she had to come to terms with two things – Leonard’s sexuality and his decision to drop out of university. Both were bitter pills to swallow for her because she had dreams for him once he graduated. Kasiva also realised that Leonard’s coming out would also put her in the line of a lot of criticism and being ostracised. However, she knew full well that she was not going to go through another six months or more of mental and emotional torture.

“I realised I loved him. I always loved him. And I told him that I didn’t look at him for who he slept with, but I looked at him as my son,” she recollects. She wanted her son(s) to be able to approach her with anything. In true Kasiva form, she laid down the questions again. She even asked Leonard whether he was dating. At the time he wasn’t, but she remembers him telling her that he’d let her know if there was anyone on the cards.

As I sat there listening to Kasiva, I remembered another friend who came out to both her parents and both were in full support of their daughter’s queer identity. There are many queer Kenyans who crave that kind of support from their parents or even friends. Unfortunately, the Kasiva’s of this world are still few and far between. I marvelled at Kasiva’s 180-degree turn. Their relationship is warm, Leonard is now her right-hand-man, her go-to-guy and more importantly her friend.

In accepting Leonard, Kasiva wonders what she was really scared of. Was it because he chose to drop out of school or was it about his sexuality? Was it because of what people would have thought or had her worst fear been realised? Did she blame herself for the many ‘red flags’ that she ignored?

Kasiva and Leonard’s journey is a blend of the biblical prodigal son without the demand an inheritance (and with a mother instead of a father obviously), but a request for acceptance. It was like the runaway Jacob getting back to his father Isaac or Joseph reuniting with his father Jacob. In ‘finding’ her son, Kasiva opened herself to a whole new world of activism and a whole new community of friends.

However, this has not been an easy process for her. This has exposed her to the politics of the queer community, which at times left Leonard holding the short end of the stick because of his work in the

activists' space. In those initial days, she admits that her feelings towards the gay community swung like a pendulum.

I learnt at a conference a few years ago that when an African comes out as gay/queer, they come out with their whole family. With Leonard's sexuality being an open book now, and with him being back home, the rejection squarely kicked in. Kasiva was ostracized by relatives, friends, neighbours, church members, fellow business people, the whole lot! She had not realised what she had signed up for by openly standing in support of her son. She also feared for her family's security at the home in the Dagoretti area.

"Nobody wanted to identify with me. I would go to the market to buy vegetables or to the butchery to buy meat and the moment I would turn my back, people would start laughing." The pain stigma returned anew, this time, worse than those years ago with her sister.

In the years gone by, her relationship with Leonard has grown from strength to strength. "I am so happy that he came out as gay and decided to live as a gay man in Kenya. I'd be more worried if he came out as gay and he was away from me. I can see him happy, I can check on him and I have been able to see him transform.

"I'd like to encourage parents to embrace their children. Talk to them about what they feel about their orientation; let's be open to our children. Let us not put barriers to communication."

Kasiva has severed relationships with individuals who seem spiteful towards her and her children. The accusations have been levelled at the whole family, insinuating that they are in the business of recruiting young people into homosexuality.

"I wish we could have honest discussions within our churches. My bishop has been supportive of me, even calling me during the absence to find out why I had kept away from the church," she says. "The problem, I think, is with the congregants more, the ones who are trying to prove they are 'holy'."

The church still plays a pivotal role in Kasiva's life. Her faith has become more personal. "We need to practise what we preach, we need to practise love, preach love and loving everyone and not judging anybody. We do not know until such a time when God comes who is living right and who is living wrong."

Kasiva doesn't trust easily. She has now kept a handful of friends and I understand why. She has been betrayed too many times. When things were really rough, the only people who stood by her were Leonard's siblings. She would break down before them often. Those were days she didn't have the energy to face her fellow hustlers. It was too much. I sense that she is still grappling to understand how individuals whom she called friends or relatives could burn her at the stake because she had a gay son.

"Let's be honest. We are not all the same and let us not hate people who are different from us," she says. "All families are not perfect, even those with a father and mother. There are families that can have also gay parents. Let us be willing to judge and accommodate the other person. Let's try and understand that we are not all equal."

Kasiva knows that she is not the only gay parent in the village. She and another fellow mother occasionally check on one another. However, she knows that there is more than she can offer. She would love to start a support group to help parents understand and come to terms with their children's sexuality or identity.

She urges parents to be more open-minded and to recognise that there are many forms of love that

exist out there. Unconditional support and love are the bedrock of the family, according to Kasiva. Love, love, love is what she is calling for now.

As we concluded the interview, she tells me that she is surprised that she didn't cry. She expected to be very emotional. It had been an intense one and a half hour interview. I left feeling envy for Leonard and his siblings, respect and admiration for Kasiva. I didn't know how to respond to her statement on the crying then. It was only later that I found the words, where I wanted to tell her she had done her tears, and now it was time to enjoy the rainbows.

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