**The Hum Podcast**

**Episode 9: “It was either seek asylum or seek asylum”**

**{Theme music begins}**

**{Cleo’s voice begins to come in over top of music}**

**Cleo**: After the passing of the anti-gay bill in Uganda, one of of the two options that were put on the table for me was you either seek asylum, or -- or seek asylum. Like there was no other option for me.

**{Music increases in volume}**

**Male voice:** You’re listening to The Hum.

**{Music fades off}**

**Gilad:** So we’re joined today by Cleopatra Kambugu, one of the few openly trans women in Uganda - or Africa - and her main squeeze, the one and only, the lovely Nelson Kasaga. How are you guys today?

**Cleo**: We’re good {laughs quietly}.

**Nelson**: We're fine. Very good.

**Gilad**: Thank you so much for joining us. How are you guys finding the weather here in Toronto?

**Cleo**: It's lovely from the last time I was here.

**Gilad**: You were back here in February?

**Cleo**: I was here in February earlier on, before you guys had some good weather that aren't horrible.

**Amar**: {laughs} So, you guys are visiting us because you're the subjects of a wonderful film that's playing the city right now as part of the Hot Docs festival.

**Cleo**: Mhmm.

**Amar**: And I wanted to start by asking you about Uganda, your homeland. You know, we hear a lot of the stories sort of as westerners about a lot of the discrimination and the things that are happening in Uganda. But, we wanted to hear it from yourselves as well. What is Uganda like as a place for people from Canada who might not have heard about it?

**Nelson**: Uganda is -- well it's called the "Pearl of Africa," ironically, and it's a place for, it's friendly people, they're good and, I guess, what is portrayed in the media - like today earlier I

was speaking to another Canadian and she was telling me that the only thing they hear about Uganda or Africa is the negative stuff from their, from their tv's and their radio news. And they don't portray what actually happens in Africa and it takes someone to really be there. So, not everything about Uganda is bad, but, I guess when Uganda and the current government passed the anti-gay and the homosexual bill and that took a lot of media attention and it was portrayed in a very bad way -- I guess that's what most people know about Uganda. But, in a nutshell, is a very good country. I mean we have good weather {everyone laughs}.

**Gilad**: That's a bonus.

**Amar**: We don't know about that in Canada {others laughing in the background}.

**Nelson**: Yeah, it shines all the time {laughing}.

**Gilad**: Hey, it's seven degrees today, I'm happy {everyone laughs}. This is good for us! {more laughter}.

**Amar**: I was curious about growing up there, what was that like for you Cleopatra? Can you tell us about your childhood and, and when you started to come into your own and understand your own gender identity and, and what was it like growing up as someone struggling with your own identity issue?

**Cleo**: I grew up in a family of fifteen - that's twelve kids and a couple of mothers and my dad. As an infant and up until the age when I was ten, I was kind of queer presenting, bordering

androgynous, but it wasn't an issue because normally kids expression isn't sexualized. Like, everyone says it's just kids being kids, kids just playing, and my parents thought I would grow out of it. But I remember from the time I was young I used to love playing with dolls, I wore flamboyant clothes - everything about me spilled out girl. I know that hobbies are gendered, but I was bordering the opposite. And I didn't think about it a lot, I didn't even worry about it. I guess me noticing that I was different was when I was about 12 or 13, entering puberty, entering my teenage years, when the roles for boys and girls suddenly split. And suddenly boys and girls didn't play the same games, didn't hang out together because it wasn't cool, had different lodging. And then that's when it struck me that I was different that, I was on the opposite side of the gender that was assigned on my birth certificate, and that's when it struck my parents that I needed to change. I remember when I was in my teenage years being thrown into a boys dormitory for school and it was so much hell cause I got sexually abused. But it wasn't something that I could tell anyone back then because I thought to myself that I would be blamed for being {indiscernible}, which was the reason I was abused. And if I told anyone - I didn't tell my brother, I didn't tell my sister, I didn't tell my mom or dad - up until the point that I came out at 25. And they felt bad that I didn't tell them. I would basically describe my teenage years as loneliness in a crowd, cause I had so many friends around me, I knew everything about all their relationship dynamics and all their drama, but they knew nothing about me. They knew nothing about the deep {indiscernible} I dealt with at night when I went to bed. And that was the ultimate loneliness for me.

**Gilad**: Can you speak more about what it's like to grow up identifying maybe in that LGBT community within Uganda - how does Uganda look at people from that community, how is it received?

**Cleo**: The time I grew up, the time when I was navigating my teenage years, there wasn't any media attention about queer love or homosexuality or transgender people. It is something that maybe teenagers of now might know about, but when I was growing up nobody talked about that like ever. I didn't even know about kissing until I was 13, so that is how much we don't talk about sexuality and gender back home. So it was hard because I didn't have a blueprint to reference, to like, being a transgender teen 101, I didn't have that. And I definitely couldn't ask anyone because there's a {indiscernible} about being a boy who identifies as a girl, especially in Africa which is very patriarchal and cisnormative, with all the misogyny. Cause being a woman in Africa is synonymous to being less of a person cause everyone would ask themselves why are you degrading yourself to womanhood? I guess that's how I'd compare it and all the backlash that comes with that.

**Amar**: Where do you think the shift came in Uganda where the politicians and the political class decided that this was something they wanted to tackle and they, they need to write laws? When did it become a political sort of anti-gay, anti-LGBT movement in Uganda?

**Cleo**: Up until the age when I was going to my university, there wasn't so much narrative out there about queer people or the queer movement. The queer movement started, it started being vibrant from around 2005, and all the changes that have been made have been in this very short period of time. But before that, before 2005 there wasn't so much happening in the media, no one really knew about the queer movement, queer people being in Uganda. Yeah, I guess we knew there were countries that had queer people, but we didn't know that that would be someone that would be your friend or your brother or your sister. Here, I know we used to see

queer people on Jerry Springer, on Oprah, but that was, it seemed like watching life on Mars {Amar laughs} and knowing that you'll never get there.

**Gilad**: Jerry Springer's never a great gateway into any form of life {laughing}.

**Cleo**: Yeah {laughing}, but that's basically who we - I think that's the first place where I saw a transgender person. And Oprah Winfrey, a couple of times when she was featuring a person who had a sex change surgery. But we used to look at these things like fantastical tales that could never - it's like talking about a unicorn - it will never happen to you. Of course when we would watch those shows, my siblings would liken those people to me, like if any person would ever have a sex change it would be me, but it was never something we talked about that was ever in the realm of ever happening. But after 2005 what really changed is that the LGBT community came up with a lot of figure and challenged so many things. Challenged Africa to - challenged Africa to start speaking about sexuality and gender. We do not talk about sexuality and gender as a people because it's that huge elephant in the room that no one wants to acknowledge exists. And we were challenged to start talking about it, and that was huge. And with that came the backlash from the religious leaders through Scott Lively who came to our country and, and did a huge massive campaign against LGBT people, highlighting family values and recruitment of children and the decay of the moral fabric as well as other things.

**Nelson**: I guess what really changed Uganda was the advent of the internet. With the increase in internet penetration in Uganda - and this began around 2004 when Facebook launched - and people were able to now actually open up the world. Before it was very hard to us to access the internet - you had to go to a cafe and we wouldn't have smart phones and all of that. But from

2004-2005 and onwards, the internet penetration increased in Uganda, and with that it opened up all sorts of doors, and one of them was that people actually knew about that there's actually LGBT people in the world. And that is when the ball started rolling and that is when even the movement I think in Uganda also picked up much more than before. Because before we didn't have any literature about it - we didn't know - and those who knew were the select few that could actually afford to have internet before then. So that also helped to spur up the penetration.

**Amar**: So when you were seeing things like this, like the Jerry SPringer thing you were talking about and you know Oprah and all that stuff, did you have moments where you felt like you started to understand yourself better because of access to all these things, or when, when did it start to dawn on you who you really were?

**Cleo**: I think I had always known. My - identifying myself as a trans person to me doesn't mean that I became transgender. I was actually born as transgender person. I'm not cisgendered male,

I'm not cisgendered female, but I'm a transgendered person and I've always been that. There's never a time I felt that I was cis male or any maleness in me. I was assigned male at birth, but there was never a time even from my childhood when I felt male. But there was also never a time when I - I can't really define my lived realities as being those of a cisgendered woman either, cause I've experienced male privilege by virtue of what I was assigned at birth. I've experienced that pressure of being a cisgendered male person who was effeminate, because very feminine presenting so I know that pressure that society puts on men and people who identify as male to live up to manhood. And with my transitioning I've been able to experience - like all my privilege of being a male person, that crown was removed from my head. And I was

forced to wear a crown of vulnerability and oppression that is subjected to women, and of all of the things I read out there, no one prepared me for that. No one prepared me for how it would feel to walk down the street and feel scared that someone might attack you because you're a woman and you're the weaker sex. Not because you're transgender, but because you're a female person. No one prepared me to the fact that my voice would be less heard, that I would work twice as hard and shout twice as hard to be heard as a woman. And in some spaces I would never access them as I used to before as a male person. I'm the first born son of my mom; I should be the one inheriting my dad's property, like land and stuff like that. But in my culture women are not allowed to inherit land or property, so me being transgender and saying I'm a transwoman, I can't own land, I can't even inherit my dad's property because women can't inherit that, and that's a reality I have to live with. And that [indiscernible] about what women go through, so when you ask me what it means like to be transgender back in Uganda, it's all those things really. It's not just the being a trans person whose gender expression is not coherent with what they look like physically, like before I had my hormones, but it's also all those other things that I never got prepared for.

**Gilad**: When you are speaking…

**Cleo**: Mhmm?

**Gilad**: {Pauses} Nelson has these love eyes on you {laughter in the background}. And I noticed before that when he was speaking earlier you were just sitting here, one hand on the cheek, just staring at him in love {Cleo laughing}. I saw the film at hot docs, you guys are madly in love! I want to talk about that. How did you two meet?

**Nelson**: Oh, well, uh -

**Gilad**: Love eyes are back on by the way! {the others laugh}

**Nelson**: Yeah, I took them off {laughs}. We met in high school and, uh, I happened to be transferred from another school to the school Cleo was in. I remember meeting this person was uh, who was presenting male, and uh, I was coming from a background where I was… I was a straight guy. And I mean, by being a straight guy you can tell that no, this is a girl, I mean this definitely is not a guy. I mean, this definitely is not a guy! And there's something about her, I don't know. And this is before we had - well before we heard, I never heard anything about transgender, I never had shared the time.

**Gilad**: You hadn't seen the Jerry Springer episode?

**Nelson**: Yeah, which is what I was I was saying earlier that uh she had the privilege of watching it. Me, I didn't have the privilege of watching Jerry Springer so I didn't know anything about that, or Oprah, for that matter. But, still with my naive eyes I could still see that this is someone different. And we became friends because she was very friendly, she was very talkative, so she helped welcome me to the school and helped me acclimatize {Cleo and Nelson both laugh}. And I guess I fell in love like that, friendship, friends become lovers and that story. And that is how we were and through all the journey of navigating and her discovering herself and learning who she is and even telling me, you know Nelson, I'm actually transgender cause I didn't who I was. Cause at the time I met her I didn't know that she was transgender - I don't think she had

even heard of the word transgender before. But, through all that, and through us struggling to learn, her struggling to learn, looking for literature, well I was there and that is how we have been ever since.

**Cleo**: {mmm}

**Amar**: This journey of learning kind of happened together for both of you?

**Cleo**: Mmm.

**Nelson**: Yeah.

**Amar**: And did you think that kind of strengthened your bond - learning about these issues and learning about what Cleo was going through? Do you think that being so young together and learning these things together is why you're so close today?

**Nelson**: Yeah, I think so. I think that experience had a very big effect. Because I imagine that if I had met her right now and she had already transitioned, since we were both straight out of high school and young and growing together, I think that was a very big impact. It impacted a lot and shaped our bond, our love, especially the learning process. Because even as much as I liked her and I wanted to be with her, I couldn't be with her in Uganda. I mean, you couldn't go out with your friends and say hey, this is my girlfriend. No. So, the secrecy, the hiding, and the bearing, the explaining, cause you know - like no one wants to date someone in hiding - that

helped us strengthen our love and say, you know, one day, one day something will change. One day this will change.

**Gilad**: Where are you both living right now?

**Nelson**: We're both living in Nairobi.

**Gilad**: You're both living in Nairobi. And what brought you, what brought you there?

**Nelson**: Cause one morning we're happily in Kampala and the next she was outed in the papers, and after that it was a roller coaster. We had to basically flee, flee Kampala because it wasn't safe for her anymore. And with that it wasn't safe for me - I had to leave my job because they had seen her, and well they knew she was - they knew she was a cisgendered woman, and now they're outing her as this. So I couldn't go back, she couldn't go back. We stayed in the house for close to two months, just feeding off our parents. They brought us food. It was so hard, you know, being there. Even me, well I had to sometimes brave myself and sneak out and you know get us some small grocery and come back, and it had to be after dark. We really had no choice. We had to leave and she had to go first. I remember when she left, it was raining. We didn't have enough money to leave and she had to get a, you know, in Kampala we have these motorcycle  taxis, so with a suitcase on and goodbye - like a tuk-tuk, you know a tuk-tuk?

**Gilad**: Yeah.

**Nelson**: Yeah, so imagine sitting on a tuk-tuk with no cover and a suitcase straight to the airport. And I tell her, you know, just get out of here. I mean, I will come and join you, but, I will try to weather whatever will come, but for you it will not be the same.

**Amar**: So you felt the danger was that imminent once Cleo was outed that you just had to make that decision and, and go?

**Nelson**: Yeah, because it was not only about the law coming out, because it's not like before there was no hostility - the hostility was there. But when the law came out, it gave people a reason to actually attack people from the LGBT and now they had a reason to hunt. There were actually man hunts. Even if you know someone you are an accomplice - you are a neighbour and you know someone is from the LGBT community or who is gay or transgender or lesbian and you shelter, you too also go to prison. And so that addition was there put specifically I think to out other people out. And that's what made people so scared. So even if I had a friend who knew that Cleo was transgender, for his safety he would rather give me there, so that's what made it so much even unsafe. Not only were they even targeting them, they were targeting the family around them and I think they will tell you how our own brother would call and say please delete my number, and if they ask me to say do I know you, I'll say I don't know you. And I heard her talking on the phone and, uh, I know she was crying. And I was like I can't believe this is happening. Like yeah, but, that it what it has come down to.

**Amar**: Cleo, are you able to stay in touch with family back home and friends back home? And are both of you aware of the people who weren't able to leave, and the people that weren't able to get out in time, can you tell us about some of the struggles there now?

**Cleo**: I'm still able to get in touch with family back home. It's pretty hard to go back home, though, cause I have - whenever I'm flying back home it needs to be discreet in secret. I always stop at border points and asked to change my documents, and asked about, like what's up with your passport, why does it read male, why does this person look different, are you a terrorist? And stuff like that. Some people know and they just ask to humiliate you in a long queue and they'll be shouting over, like over the whole queue, are you a man or a woman? That happened twice just to make you feel humiliated. I think like once or twice I've had to be subjected to an involuntary medical check-up just to prove - physical check just to prove I'm a transgender person who has had a sex change surgery. I did it. I did it to set precedent for other trans people, so they don't go through the same. {Theme music begins low under Cleo's voice} So I told this particular border control person if you ever see another person that has a passport that reads different, but looks different, they have the same condition as I do. So please don't undignify them to the extent of having to strip them, cause how would you feel if you had to strip at every airport you go to just to be able to cross countries?

**{Theme music gets louder then stops}**

**Cleo**: It would have been easy for me to seek asylum, but it was two things that I didn't want to do this: I didn't want to do this because I would never be able to se Nelson again, and I couldn't fathom not ever being able to see Nelson again for I don't know how long. Or not being able to see my mom, and being told after I don't know how many months that mom has had an accident or she has died or something and I can't come to visit or even bury her - that worried me, that's freaked me out completely. But also, it felt so defeatist, me having to leave home. I didn't do

anything after being outed in the papers, but I felt like by seeking asylum I was throwing in the flag. I really wanted a last throw at them. I wanted to do one last thing. I didn't do anything right away at that point because I felt like I had put my family in trouble and my friends in trouble. And Nelson had lost his job - I felt responsible, so I didn't want to do anything at that moment, and I did nothing. And it was so annoying not to be able to do anything and have all these people keep on writing all these things about you and have to be locked up in the house for two months knowing you can't go and speak about it on any radio station or - or do anything. And my facebook went quiet cause my parents had advised me please don't do anything - your anonymity has been broken, please don't do anything. Lucky for me I didn't have to seek asylum, I was able to come to Nairobi and work with an organization called Uhai-Eashri, which is an Indigenous activist fund that works to support LGBT activists organizing in Eastern Africa. But for many other people who identify as trans and queer, most weren't able to cross the border. Some have since crossed the border to come to Kenya to the UNHCR camp in Kakuma. The people who remain back home, a couple of them have been -- I've had had very horrible stories of some of them being - there's this thing called cleansing…

**Gilad**: Cleansing?

**Cleo**: Yeah, sort of like your family does an intervention, like you don't know that you're coming back home to this. So you just get back home and you have everyone seated in the room and they tell you about how they know about everything you've been doing, and they'll either tie you up or take you to a {indiscernible}. It really ranges from being taken to a {indiscernible} or being taken to a church to be cleansed of demons, to being whipped. So that's - the demons get out of you, cause we are a very spiritual people. What also has happened that I have heard during the

interim of the passing of the bill - there's a group of vigilante men who took it to themselves to capture gay people and take them to a safe house and beat them up. Beat them to thrashes. So they would let you go after a while, they would get your phone and they would call another person and tell you that ah, you know, Max has had an issue, he has been beaten up because of ABCD, please come and help him. He's in this place, he's at {indiscernible} street. So you would think you're going to come and save Max and they would get you and beat you up as well and take your phone and let you go without your phone and call the next number, because they figured I guess that if I get a gay person they will know another gay person, right? So they just beat up people like that for like three weeks until we reported this case to police officers. But when they realized why these boys were being beaten up, that it's because they were gay, they felt like that was justified.

**Gilad**: It's so frustrating to see these - I think you used the term superficial identifiers?

**Cleo**: Yeah.

**Gilad**: Pin people down from a government level all the way to a community level. I wanted to ask you both, you're both the subject of a film, 'The Pearl of Africa,' I know how annoying it is when my girlfriend turns the camera on even to take just a five second video of me just cooking breakfast, I get so awkward! I want to ask, what was the process like for the two of you to have this whole process documented, cause there was some very intimate moments. From you guys hanging out I remember on top of a hill -

**Cleo**: Mhmm.

**Gilad**: It was - Nelson's trying to act funny, I remember a particular gangster pose {Cleo laughing}. From, from playful things like that to serious moments in Thailand uh, as you're preparing for the surgery, but even as you're awakening from the surgery.

**Cleo**: Mhmm.

**Gilad**: What was that like opening up?

**Cleo**: For me, I had done a lot of media so it was not difficult, but I would say that, even for me, I became - cause we shot for three years, so you get more comfortable with the camera as time goes on. You know that you will have someone hearing you all the time, so you need to get on with your life, so -- just get on with your life. For Nelson I know that, Nelson is an introvert {laughs}, and he's not an activist. He's another person who's dating a person who happens to be an activist and is very passionate about human rights and, you know, it was an issue originally of I need to support my girlfriend. And I know we had a very huge conversation about convincing him to do this, but 'The Pearl of Africa' grew, and as it morphed, as it changes, it grows. It grew him, it grew him to be able to appreciating why we are doing this.

**Nelson**: And at the beginning it really sucked. Like you said, I didn't like the camera {laughs}. In my personal space it was really not so easy to take in at first. I really asked a lot in order to know exactly what is 'The Pearl of Africa' going to help, who is it going to help? I don't feel like it's helping me at all - it was actually pissing me off having someone there all the time. But, like Cleo said, eventually I appreciated it and I got to know that you know this is something that's

going to be bigger than me and, uh, I might have my feelings towards having someone there, but this is even bigger than that. And through the story, I guess the next transgender person out there watching the movie, or the next guy dating a transgender person from my perspective, would appreciate and know exactly what to expect, what to go through. And maybe they would pick up something or like you said they won't have to go through what we went through.

**Cleo**: Mmm.

**Amar**: So if, it the filmmakers want to make a sequel, you're in, or no? {Cleo and Nelson start laughing}

**Nelson**: No definitely I'll be in. Definitely I'll be in. It was hard shooting CLeo in Thailand, but you know it was only me, Cleo, Jonny, the director, and even though Jonny was filming, he was the only person there. So, I also needed someone there or else I would have gone crazy. I mean, being scared, being nervous and anxious. So, after three years we became like a family. And we let him in and he - that's also helped.

**Gilad**: There's one part of the movie that I think you do best in, and it's when you don't know that the microphone is on. {Cleo and Nelson laughing}

**Gilad**: That was so memorable. And I want to ask, in a perfect world, in a perfect, perfect world - a dream world - how does all this end? What's next?

**Cleo**: In a perfect world for myself would be -- to be able to change my documents, to be able to show ‘The Pearl of Africa’ back home and have a new conversation, a new revolution around people appreciating transgender people and the need for transgender health care. In a perfect world I would see ‘The Pearl of Africa’ sweep through the whole world and create a thinking about how differently the trans narrative should be told as not being heavy on victimhood and sensationalizing of stories and sensationalizing of trans realities and policing of trans women, to one of agency and resilience and -- and love and humanity. One of hope. I don’t like it when the only stories that are told about minorities are sad stories. And I think Canada has one of those as well with the First Nations. The only time we hear about First Nations is when there is suicide or something bad has happened in their camps, and that’s sad because who talks about the positive narratives, the narratives of hope, the narratives of the good things that First Nations are doing? Same over here. To have a narrative where another cisgendered man is dating a transgendered person who’s struggling with having their masculinity questioned and their heterosexuality questioned because they are dating a transgender person, how do they deal with this? How do they deal with their family accepting this woman who is different from from the next woman - and all the expectations that won’t be fulfilled just because they’re dating a transgender person. How do they deal with that? I think Nelson gives them an insight into how you deal with that and insight into saying I’m a cisgendered, heterosexual man who’s dating a transgendered woman in Uganda, you should be able to do it. That kind of hope and resilience that he shows -- I remember a point where my mom asked me, so you’re dating Nelson, yeah? So what’s wrong with Nelson? What she was basically asking was why would a cisgendered heterosexual man date a transgender woman like you knowing what that comes with? When there are all other cisgender women out there whom he can date without, without whatever - {Nelson says something indiscernible, then laughs} without all the liabilities that comes with

{laughing}. Because she was wondering why he would have to go through that - and for me that's love. That's love, that's the truest form of love. To date someone unconditionally irrespective of if will be good or bad - you know it will be bad, but you still date this person. The future is clear, you it will be bad, but you still date this person. Yeah, just that.

**Nelson**: You know, let's add that to any person in Canada dating a transgender person, it's not what people are going to say, because people will always have an opinion about you regardless, but if you are with someone, you look at them and not what people say about them. Like when you had asked earlier what would be the perfect ending to the movie? For me, it would be just to take Cleo out with the guys and, you know, they don't have to look at her like transgender. That's what for me would be the perfect, perfect ending. I want to see that happen, not only for me, but for everyone. For us to reach a point where we're not putting labels to anyone. I guess it's just to be more resilient {theme music comes in softly under Nelson's voice}, you're always going to have hurdles, but just know that you are not alone. We are all here and if we work together, change will definitely come.

**{Theme music gets louder and fades out}**