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LGBTQ

A trans immigrant fleeing persecution tries to get asylum—and just get by—in SF. It's not easy

Millions face pervasive discrimination and unjustifiable violence at home. Some come here seeking asylum in the true sense of the word. This is one story

By STARDUST DOHERTY JULY 31, 2023



Imagine you're an un-nameable teenager growing up in an unspecified West African country. Your journalism career is starting really well. But although you were assigned female at birth, you're feeling more man than woman. You're attracted to women as well. You're meeting like-minded folks and organizing as an LGBTQ community activist.

Unfortunately, this leads to persecution everywhere, starting with taunts and violent threats from homophobic gangs in your neighborhood for dressing "like a man." The situation escalates when the police arbitrarily arrest you for "promoting homosexuality" (not yet against any law) as you're leaving a workshop on transgender issues. They throw you roughly into a pickup truck, your phone and wallet lost (or stolen by the police) as they slap you around on the way to the police station. They detain you clandestinely for a week until a friend comes to

pay a ransom (no, not bail) with no formal charges filed at any point in the process (plausible deniability).



The Trans March is an exciting moment—but there's a long path ahead

The situation escalates further when extended family members notice a homophobic Facebook group has posted your photo. Your father died when you were young and your mother's views carry little weight in your patriarchal society, so your uncle—a very homophobic and transphobic guy—heads up the family. He orders your cousins and a brother to grab you and beat you with rubber straps. Adding insult to injury, they throw you and your belongings out onto the street in front of the neighbors. You seek help from a friend who puts you up at their place but, by this time, you are suicidal and only through the timely intervention of the building supervisor do you remain alive.

A month later, you're feeling a bit better, so you find a new apartment. Within a year, while you're in another city facilitating a workshop for transgender folks, homophobic bandits break down your door and ransack your apartment. The bandits steal your stuff and leave bladed weapons on your bed to reinforce their message. An investigation by a local support organization finds that the same

homophobic gangs are responsible. The organization helps replace some of your stuff and advises you to move to a “safer” neighborhood.

You decide it's time to leave.

Border line

Fortunately, you hear about a conference in the United States through a friend who knows a West African already living in the US—your new host. Through the auspices of your host, you receive an invitation to the conference which, along with a travel order from the support organization where you work and your host's loan for round-trip airfare, enables you to obtain a B1/B2 tourist visa.

Why pay the extra for round-trip? Without proof of intent to return to your home country, the Department of Homeland Security, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, or US Customs and Border Protection border control agent might not let you enter the country, even after detaining you for an hour or more in an interrogation room as is the custom when arriving at the airport. The investment in the airfare is well worth it if you can enter the country, then claim asylum, rather than trying to claim asylum at a land or sea border before entering the country. The US has basically closed land and sea borders to many asylum seekers. New rules require asylum seekers to use the CBP One™ app for appointment scheduling. At any time, you face potential removal to any country where you could have claimed asylum on the route you traveled to the U.S.

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After many flight segments, that fearsome border crossing, a couple of days in Portland at your host's apartment, and a long drive south, you arrive at the conference at a beautiful resort called **Saratoga Springs** in Northern California. The conference is a wonderful experience, despite the challenges of

communicating with folks who speak in English rather than your mother tongue. You have found a time and place to be free with your gender identity and sexual orientation. You are excited to go somewhere where you can live the dream of a life without harassment, violence, and shame. Then, the next challenges arrive.

Open your Golden Gate

You've arrived in San Francisco just in time for the Trans March. Wow! It's amazing. Thousands of transgender folks and allies from the San Francisco Bay Area and all over the world!

After the thrill of so much freedom comes the practicality of getting by in one of the most expensive cities in the world: Where to live? How to get around? How to eat? How to find a lawyer to apply for asylum? How to earn money? How to learn English? And a hundred other as-yet-unanswered questions.

Some friends from the conference donate a bit of cash to help.

"Where to live" turns out to be couch-surfing with friends from the conference, eventually in the basement of a cooperative house, with some of those funds going to a share of utility costs while you are sleeping on a mattress purchased by another friend from the conference.

"How to get around" turns out to involve a trip to an "Access Point", in this case, Dolores Street Community Services, ironically located on Mission Street. (To find an Access Point, you can [surf the web here](#).) Another friend from the conference who has agreed to interpret for you figured out that you might be able to get a free mass transit pass if you go there. The office is spare and understaffed, but somewhat friendly. The reception desk case worker is handling reception, phones, texts, and overflow from the only other case worker who is busy with another client. You spend an hour filling out forms and the case worker enters you into the "One Database" that helps coordinate your access to a variety of city services. The case worker refers you to [Lyon-Martin Community Health Services](#) for medical care, to the [LGBT Center](#) for not-yet-sure-what, and to the [SFMTA](#) for a free Muni pass.

Your next stop is the SFMTA Customer Service Center at 11 South Van Ness. You pull a slip of paper from a ticket dispenser and wait until your ticket number

appears on a screen. You hand over the now-sweaty ticket to a helpful employee behind a glass window, which makes spoken communication with you and your interpreter friend awkward and a bit impersonal. The employee fills out another form with you, checks your passport and national identification card, then verifies you are listed as a person without a fixed residence (aka unhoused) in the “One Database” and prints you a brand-spanking-new Access Pass transit card. The card is valid for one year of free travel on Muni. Yay! Not BART though.

Another day, based on the Access Point referral, you and your interpreter friend visit Lyon-Martin Community Health Services. Although this waiting room has no numbered tickets, a glass window still muffles communications between you and your interpreter friend and the case worker. The good news is that you potentially qualify for excellent medical services. The bad news is that there is a one-month wait before you could see a primary care provider and a seven-month waiting list for a mental health provider.



The LGBT Center can help with referrals

That same day, also based on the Access Point referral, you visit the LGBT Center. An initial meeting with an Intake and Referral intern in training results in a

meeting the following week with an Intake and Referral employee. The intake process involves a lot of discussion, but also generates referrals to other medical care organizations like the [SF Community Health Center](#), support groups for BIPOC Trans folks at [Trans Thrive](#) and elsewhere, and a couple of grocery bags full of food.

Which partially addresses “how to eat.” Partially.

“How to eat” involves weighing the importance of the possible uses of donations by friends with other financial requirements. “How to eat” may mean waiting in line with others in need for a shared meal at a facility run by those who may not share your religion. “How to eat” may mean waiting in line with others in need for some surplus groceries at a food pantry. Or, if it doesn’t negatively impact your asylum case, you could try to get a [California state ID](#), perhaps using a General Delivery address at the U.S. Post Office, so that you can get [CalFresh](#) monthly benefits on an EBT card that some grocery stores accept for food purchases.

Inquiries for support in the community result in another new friend offering you a laptop computer that doesn’t require a half-hour wait to start an online conference call, as well as a hefty language dictionary to help you with weekly English classes offered by yet another new friend from the conference.

The asylum process

Since there’s no way in hell you could navigate the system on your own, your interpreter friend helps you contact various nonprofit organizations hoping to find an attorney to assist with your asylum case. Because of the date an immigration official stamped on your passport upon arrival, your B1/B2 visa permits you to remain in the US for six months, even though the visa itself is valid for almost five years.

Normally, you have a maximum of one year after entering the US to apply for asylum according to current immigration regulations. However, after you apply for asylum, you can’t obtain permission to work in the US for at least six months. This presents a bit of an enigma ... how are you supposed to survive in the meantime? Perhaps hope for some thoughts and prayers? How about federal legislation or new regulations to give asylum seekers and refugees a temporary work permit while processing their claims?

Most of the immigration organizations are over capacity and either put you on a waitlist or tell you to check back some weeks or months later. However, a paralegal from the **LGBT Asylum Project** sets up an initial phone consultation to see if they can take on your case “pro bono” (free of charge). You nervously email your asylum dossier to the paralegal. The phone consultation with the paralegal and your interpreter friend is not too painful and, due to some affidavits you’ve collected regarding the arbitrary arrest by the police, the family expulsion, and the ransacking of your apartment, the paralegal is excited to take on your case because they feel there is a strong chance of success. A follow-up call with the attorney on the case also goes well. This is very encouraging!

A bank, any bank

Another annoying obstacle is where to bank your funds, including any donations you receive from friends. You need a Social Security number to create an account at a credit union, a number you’re not legally able to request until you have permission to work.

Your host in Portland has managed to get a bank account, though. It figures that you have to resort to the bank that has paid hundreds of millions in fines for illegally shunting Black folks into inferior high-interest loans, as well as foreclosing on mortgage loans and evicting more families from their homes than perhaps any other bank in the United States. Yes, it’s Wells Banksters Fargo. Wells Fargo offers immigrants who don’t have Social Security numbers accounts through a process that involves signing a “Substitute Form W-8BEN.” Nonetheless, the process doesn’t go smoothly. After waiting two weeks for your bank card, you go to the bank branch. They seem baffled and agree to send a new bank card, which arrives almost two weeks later.

Once the bank account is functional, you have to figure out how to activate it without a Social Security number, which seems to be required for activation online. When you have online access, you can set up money apps like Venmo, Cash App, Paypal, and Zelle so that you don’t have to provide your bank account number or your telephone number to every person who wants to send you funds. However, the Venmo app has some undisclosed security measure that triggers, and, despite numerous attempts over several weeks, Venmo still won’t permit you to deposit any funds you’ve received into your bank account.

A well-meaning donor tries to send you funds to your name using Zelle, despite receiving clear instructions to use your email address, and a \$500 donation goes awry, arriving in the bank account of someone else who has the same name. Zelle doesn't offer a mechanism to request a reversal of the transaction. The only hope is that the mistaken recipient won't take the step necessary to receive the donation and the funds will then hopefully revert to the donor's bank account. Lesson learned: for larger donations, ask your friends to first "friend" you on the money app and/or give just a \$1 donation and confirm receipt before sending the rest of the funds.

You and millions others like you face pervasive discrimination and unjustifiable violence at home. Some of you come to San Francisco seeking asylum in the true sense of the word. Here you face many obstacles, often with only newfound friends and total strangers to help.

A friend who notices you are a bit homesick takes you out to dinner at Bissap Baobab, a restaurant serving yummy Senegalese food.

Not long after, you make a tough decision.

It's time to return to Portland.

You don't tell your friend the reason for your return. Perhaps you want to hang out with the immigrant community you know there, speaking your mother tongue? Perhaps you no longer want to stay in a basement, even though you have no idea where you'll end up staying in Portland? On the way to the airport, you let your friend know you may return since San Francisco is such a great place to live. You leave your friend—this author—wishing you well, yet feeling wistful.

Stardust Doherty is a local writer, composer, and activist currently working on "Where We Love" a (screen)play based on interviews with LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum seekers.

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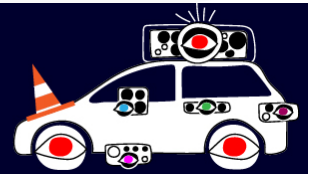


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