

# CHOOSING A DIFFERENT LIFE

Eleven is an age of innocence for many. It is a carefree time when you have not yet learned the capital cities of the world, God equals Sunday school and prayer is no different than reciting kindergarten rhymes. At this age we are still pretty much only concerned with our games, toys and our wants. And so it was to an extent for Simone who liked to shepherd the goats and search for mopani worms. But her carefree days ended with the passing away of her grandparents when she was 11. She and her younger brother now went to live with their mother.

Life at home was tumultuous. Her mother, Dina,\* and her boyfriend, Kallie,\* enjoyed the fruit of the vine too often and too much. When Kallie was sober he was a relatively nice guy but he became toxic when intoxicated. Under the influence Dina liked to scold and swear referencing Kallie's mother. Thankfully for the children they spent school holidays at home. After the holidays Simone would receive half a soap, a matchbox filled with vaseline and two school dresses when she returned to the hostel. No freshly baked favourite cookies and pocket money. When her mom asked her in later years how this used to make her feel, she simply said she understood her mom did not have anything to give her, so it was not a big deal. Simone recounts, "I knew my mother loved us but could not take care of us because of the drinking and the abuse. Besides, uncle Kallie easily got jealous and would beat my mother in front of us when she just gave us too much attention. And he would get angry if she did not want to go drink with him. That's just how things were".

Coming home for the holidays Simone and her brother would often not find the adults at home. They would then go look for them and find them in the location already well under the influence. She did not understand why Kallie and Dina could not be sober at least on the days they came home.

This would at least have given the impression the grown-ups were happy to have them back. When the adults fought Simone would take her brother into the veld where they would look for glue to eat.

On the 7th of December her aunt, whose house was next to theirs, passed away and her three young daughters came under Dina's supervision. On the 10th of December Simone returned home with the children near sunset and heard a terrible commotion in her mother's bedroom. Unlike a child who had just finished Grade 7, Simone told the younger children to have some sweets and make food to divert their attention from the war zone she was about to enter. Before Simone saw the knife in Kallie's hands she saw her bloodied mother. She wrestled the knife from a very unstable Kallie who asked her in a stupor, "Why did you take my knife?" Looking into his glazed eyes she saw the futility of explaining to him he would have to kill her first before he did her mother. The mother and daughter then attacked Kallie. Simone recalls her mother's powerless punches and herself slapping Kallie to wake him from his drunkenness. He seemed to come to and she suggested they leave her mother on the bed and the two of them go rake the yard outside. She closed the bedroom door, told the children to stay in the kitchen and closed the front door leading Kallie into the rear darkness. They must have been raking for longer than half an hour when a surprised Kallie wanted to know if it was Christmas the next day for them to be raking the yard that time of the night. Since his sanity had returned they went to get the wounded Dina medical help. Things needed to change. Simone knew her continued begging for her mother leave Kallie would remain as fruitless as it had over the past years. That evening's fight was caused by Dina having told Kallie she wanted to leave him. Simone understood, though she was a child, she needed to make a grown-up

decision. She knew she needed to take control of her life since the adults who were meant to take care of her could not. Dina seemed trapped in her life. Simone decided to put her hope in a place called Moria Grace.

Simone had met children before who lived at this Moria Grace and from what she heard it could become her refuge. She had made up her mind. From Dordabis she hiked to Windhoek without a cent to her name. Initially she kept her whereabouts from her mother. After she settled in she requested that her brother join her. Soon after her three cousins would also join them. At Moria Grace they had peace, ate and went to school in clean clothes.

To date, Simone has lived at Moria Grace for four years. When they go home for Christmas, because the house parents believe it is important for family ties to stay strong, they go live with their mother's brother. This uncle of theirs is known as a strict man and a non-drinker in a community where this is a rarity. Simone feels protected by this "shadow" of her uncle. She has noticed that young people don't ask her about her school when she goes home, but talk about alcohol and sleeping around. Beyond these two topics there seems to be little else to talk to a city girl about. When young men tell the blooming 16 year old, "Hey Windhoek girl, come with me then we go talk," her response is, "Why don't you go talk to your sister if you want to talk?"

In fact, young people act like finishing Grade 7 equals finishing Grade 12. It is sad for Simone to see girls her age already the mother of two and struggling the way they are. Looking at her community and her mother, Simone is encouraged to make different choices if she wants a different life.

By Vida de Voss

\*Dina and Kallie are pseudonyms