

MUATJE UO NDUNO



MEMOIRS OF THE GAMBINO

I was raised in the bush. For the first couple of years I lived with my parents and drank gemsbok milk. My dad's people called me "muatje uo nduno" when it was just the two of us because he was my breast. My parents separated when I was young. My dad took me and Mom went back to her people in South Africa. Dad was a hunter. Not the official type. The type where police officers keep him out of jail for a share of his, shall we say, finds. During my time with dad I also lived with Ma's brother in Okahandja and with my great-grandmother. Dad had 12 other kids and a wife, so that obviously made things a little complicated.

In Grade 3 Ma came back to Namibia. Perhaps out of a need to hurt my dad she took me from him and made me walk with her from Karibib to

Otjimbingwe. Oh, I was used to walking for I'd sometimes go hunting with Dad, but that walk was too much for me. Eventually she stole me from Dad and took me to South Africa where I lived with her for two years. I did not go to school during this time. Ma would hit me for no reason, I was often hungry and cold, we sometimes did not have a place to stay so we'd be on the street, and when she did have an income or when we stayed with

her people she would have sex with men right next to me. Dad came to get me after two years. I blamed my mother for everything that was wrong in my life. Finally back with dad I lived with his wife and their children. I started doing well and loved the recognition I got. One day, I was in Grade 4 by now, I took a taxi and was taken to a place in R5, in Okahandja. It was a small room with a toilet and basin. I was fed, but had no change of clothes. This was strange, but not exactly alarming.

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I mean; at least I had a place to stay and food. There was a day or two I screamed through the small window. Eventually I was found and returned home. I was taken to hospital and checked out by a doctor. The people did not hit me or anything so I did not understand what the big fuss was about. I was then told in how much danger I was, but it is only now that I understand I might have become a victim of human trafficking. Can you imagine? Things returned back to normal.

Still living between family members, cousins would bring friends over and they'd do what they do, which was often drink. And then one of these drinking buddy's came over on a random day and... you know. When that happened I did not think it was a big deal. How different was this pain and violation to aching with

hunger, to my mother's fists that bruised me more emotionally than otherwise, to being cold to the bone? Besides I have seen my mother do this with men right next to me – so I thought it was just another of life's discomforts. My life experiences had probably numbed my ability to experience trauma in an acute way. This is probably why I could survive that man's animal act and the brutal arrogance that assumed I am a nobody he could relieve himself on – as if he simply blew his snotty nose and left a crumpled tissue, torn.

Of course I told nobody. Did he threaten me? I don't quite recall. Life was generally a difficult place. All around me was alcohol and drugs. But I liked the clean attention I got because of my good grades. And then something else happened. Twice. This time I was not numb to the pain – not in my body, not in my emotions, not in my heart.

My whole being screamed out like a glass-shattering silent-pitched note into the universe.

When this unfathomable thing happened I turned to drugs, alcohol and sex. I even cut myself. Mostly with a blade. But sometimes with a needle. I seemed to have died inside. The pinch of my burning flesh and the raw smell of blood were like a defibrillator on my deadened heart. At least it made me feel.

After this my father found a place for me to stay with a teacher. My schoolwork picked up again. Towards the end of Grade 7



I however decided to move to Windhoek. I wanted to get away from what happened. My father found me accommodation with a brother of his. He warned me the guy wasn't easy to get along with. But could anything – ever – be worse than what I now knew? I had survived hell and could now face anything. This uncle was well-off, but difficult indeed. Things soon became bad. He had his own son beaten up by police officers for having gone to watch soccer in a bar. The boy was 18; he did not drink; there was no DSTV at home and he was a soccer fanatic. What was so wrong with having gone to watch a game in a bar? On weekends we, the children at home, would have to go with him to his workshop over weekends to assist. After school I had so much house work that the evenings were the only time I had to do school work. When I was woken out of my sleep one night to wash the overhauls of the men from the workshop, I questioned him and he exploded, "You are a child. This isn't even your house. So just accept it and do it!" I became quiet. My marks went down.

At school I had been introduced to the Girl Child Club. A friend asked her mother if I cannot come stay with them. When her mother said yes, I simply packed my bags and left the house without saying goodbye. Two weeks later I saw my uncle through the window walking to the principal's office. I was Grade 9. I could have been dead. He only came to look for me then. My friend's mom had spoken to my father about me living with them so I did not feel bad for having disappeared from my uncle's house. I have stayed

with them since then till now. I'm in Grade 12. It was not an easy stay as the father would get difficult when under the influence, but the mother fought for me like

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I was her own lion cub. When the father put me out she demanded to know where I should go, and if anyone was going to go, it should be him.

My mother was missing and my father passed away in the middle of my Grade 11 final exams. I postponed the emotions that go with such a loss till after the exams when I attempted to commit suicide. It did not matter that I had been a Junior Town Council member. When I came to Windhoek, I stopped with the drinking and drugs. In Grade 10 fear of the future paralysed me so that I did not want to pass because then it meant I would have to go on until Grade 12. And then what? But there I was, at the end of Grade 11, on the brink of entering Grade 12 when life beyond that final exam filled me with such fear – and no father. Even if this father had no money to spend on me. At least he had given me good advice. He inspired me with the idea that an education is the key to success – both in a school yard and beyond it. He told me he won't tell me

what not to do and so he only showed me the consequences and left the choices up to me.

It is ironic, that I tried to commit suicide twice after my father died, though perhaps in a half-hearted manner. Ironic, because I felt like dying too when it was he who caused my broken scream to penetrate the universe. But he did teach me to think. And though a sense of loneliness and old demons darken my life from time to time, the world can't tell because of my ever ready smile. I think it is this smile of mine that brings people and opportunities my way that beckon me to take another sip from the cup of life.

My father was right; my life is the sum total of my choices – especially my responses to things that happen to me. Even if I can blame my fears, anger or problems on others it won't change a thing. I still have to live this one life of mine. Both times I did not die I was grateful because though sometimes weak, I find I am resilient and the flicker of hope sometimes feels like a flame coursing through my veins. Heck man, I've been able to survive my life thus far. I've come to believe life presents both the challenge and the solution at the same time as if it was one coin. I now know it and believe despite any tooth cracking or bone splintering pain I can survive and WILL overcome. I fled my father and "what is done in our tradition" with that coin in my pocket.

AS TOLD BY VIDA DE VOSS