

by Leandro • photographs Contributed

TO KNOW THESE THINGS

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A FATHER AND SON CAN BE COMPLICATED, BUT WHEN IT IS CHARACTERISED BY VIOLENCE THE LARGER FAMILY MAY WANT TO RECONSIDER REMAINING UNINVOLVED AS THE CHILD MAY NOT HAVE THE MEANS TO ASK FOR HELP, EVEN IF HELP IS DESPERATELY NEEDED.

Leandro recalls it was some time in October when he noticed the Christmas decorations. He was looking at a sleigh thinking how out of place it was in hot Namibia when he thought of his own life and its place in his extended family. Two of his father's sisters who lived in South Africa were coming to Windhoek for the holidays. They each had a son nearly his age. Staring at the particularly red-faced Father Christmas, he wondered if things would have been different had the shoe been on the other foot.

Reflecting on his youth Leandro cannot stop thinking about the "what ifs". If Aunt Naomi was his mother, she would have been able to treat his wounds after an incident since she was a nurse. Aunt Pam was a psychologist who could have counselled

him afterwards. But neither of them were his mother. Yet, given their professions and the semblance between him and their own sons, should they not have paid more attention to his plight? Besides, they were the sisters of the man who thought nothing of beating up his own son. If their husbands inflicted their boys with the irrational cruelty that marred his life, would they not have hoped their brothers would step in and give their husband some of his own medicine? But nobody stood up for him. His uncles spoke of him as a "stout mannetjie". But they didn't know – or didn't want to know – that his "stout mannetjie" ways were informed by their wonderful brother.

When Leandro was about 12 he fled to his grandmother. But his Uncle Justin gave him a talk that sent him back home.

Because that's what sons do: they live with their parents. Like men sometimes do, he and Justin beat around the bush. They spoke about his father's drinking problem but avoided unpacking the toll of his violence. Justin did not say it in so many words, but he hinted at his awareness of Leandro's own drinking and wayward ways. Hence? Because he wasn't an angel himself he needed to go back to living with the devil? Yes, he smoke and drank and beat guys up at the clubs. Did such a reputation mean he did not need rescuing? Probably. But what about the time when he was younger and his father beat him over the head in front of another brother of his, all the while laughing in disbelief and cussing in disgust, "This, effing* brat can't read! This, effing* brat can't read!" His uncle smiled





uncomfortably, but did nothing to stop the humiliation. Did they think he chose not to read? Did they think he wanted the shame and trepidation that came with this inability? To compensate for such insecurities he “went the wrong way” as his grandmother would have said.

Excited about the upcoming visit of his cousins, he hoped that Christmas would be one without incident as the family would be spending most of their time at his grandmother’s house. His birthday on the 24th should also be peaceful as he can always say he wants to stay with his cousins, should he notice that familiar agitation in his father’s shoulders. He would be able to delay the itch in his father’s fists until the New Year.

Leandro recalled the previous Christmas when Kathy, his mother, had to take her children and flee into the streets for safety. He remembered many winter evenings under his mother’s large green coat, when she covered her chicks under her green wings because the cock of the house was drunk and violent out of his mind.

His father’s wrath shifted from his mother to him, when, at the age of five Leandro stepped between them to protect

his mother. He could do nothing to stop the bullets yelled at her, half of which he was too young to understand. Whether seven or eleven, the only way of protecting his mother from the physical blows, was to allow for the raining fists to be sated on his scrawny body. In no time the father had no interest in directing his violence to anybody other than him – as the time when he broke down the door in order to attack him with a panga. He wondered why his father didn’t pick on men his own size.

Given his home life, fighting at school became the norm. The pent-up hurt and misery gave him the strength to take on much bigger guys and dominate in the fight. He also used aggression or being disruptive to divert attention from a private struggle: reading. He did not know how to ask for help in this area. His mother, older siblings or teacher would surely have taken the time to help him learn to combine the sounds and the letters that wouldn’t stick in his head. But they must have presumed he was fine. Because guess what? The system allowed him to move from grade to grade without raising the necessary alarm about the lack of this fundamental skill. Leandro even sat for his Grade 12 exams, yet failed it

with two points.

He would eventually learn to read. There was no gift for him on his 21st birthday. The following day, as could be expected, there was also no Christmas gift either. Although he was in another country – far from his family and in prison – Leandro realised he had attained a great gift during his stay there: he had learned to read.

The journey that led him to prison began with these words, “Do you know these things?” Of course he knew them. When violence and terror drive you out of the house, they drive you into the streets. Leandro started drinking at the age of six; began using drugs at 13; at 14 he used guns to rob houses; he began stealing cars at 16; and later he was involved in cheque fraud. So when his father asked him at the age of 13, “Do you know these things?” he certainly knew them. So yes, he was a “stout mannetjie.”

The day Andrew asked Leandro if he was familiar with drugs, was the day the father set his son on a path of self-destruction. Unwilling (or afraid?) to do it himself, he sent his son into that dangerous world. It was a world in which Leandro would go to Johannesburg or Walvis Bay over weekends to do pickups and sit in class on Monday. It was a world in which he saw beautiful girls sell themselves or be sold by their boy-friends for a fix. He saw people killed in front of him. The things he witnessed were like something from the movies, but the movies didn’t show you everything.

His faith in humanity was shaken to the core by the cruel things he observed. He was aggressive and feared by others. But because he has a mother and sisters he never abused women. Moreover, his argument has always been that those who had to protect him instead exposed him to the meanness of life. Today he has a daughter whom he doesn’t always know how to love but knows how not to hurt. He often wonders how his life would have turned out if somebody did something to protect him against his father. And while he has walked away from selling drugs, he still sometimes resorts to using it when the pressures of life become too much. But because he has a daughter he is determined that the darkness of alcohol, drugs and abuse will stop with him and NOT carry on into the life of his daughter. ♀