

DIGITAL PUBLICATION OF REAL LIFE STORIES

# FOR HEALING

## THE HISTORY OF YOU

PERSONAL ESSAYS OF HOW FAMILY SHAPES WHO  
WE ARE AND WHERE WE NEED TO HEAL.





# EDITOR'S NOTE

Welcome to the first edition of *For Healing themed The History of YOU*. Join me on a whirl of emotions that will be summoned by the stories shared by the amazing contributors. Souls having a human experience shaped by those whom despite our freewill they could have never been in a position to choose.

Over the past few years, mental illnesses and emotional distress have received their due recognition, with less stigma, as areas of our lives that are just as important to heal as needing to heal physically. From healing, as I've come to believe, comes tremendous growth. But it's not without triggers or setbacks and there's never really a clean slate.

Along this process is people who've walked their path alone yet given the opportunity, are selflessly willing to share. For many reasons of course but my favourite being to connect us to the grand scheme of lived experiences. To reach out and touch another soul in hope of making pockets of this world better than their yesterdays.

This edition was not an easy offering! Delving into the contributions of family to our dysfunction, yet beautifully revealing resilience and wholesome choices to make life a tad bearable. A very cathartic encounter with vulnerability.

Brace yourself, pace yourself, find yourself, experience beyond yourself.

## KENALEONE GAPE

EDITOR





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# CLEO

# MASOMBUKA

## IS BLOOD THICKER THAN WATER?

The concept of family can be so weird when you really sit and think about it. It's a group of people you share commonalities with and are bound to forever.

Although the entire world is in some way related when the term "Family" gets thrown in the mix the relation has to be narrowed down to specifics. These specifics are what determine whether or not you should put this person before someone who is described as merely a friend. After all, we've always been fed the idea of family first right? But does having a family link with someone mean you should endure more hurt from them than anyone else?

Growing up I used to see the different cliques with the grown-ups in my family it never occurred to me to wonder why these cliques form, and if I'd ever be subjected to one. But like everything else, when you age you start to see people for who they really are.

We were never a family with money, we really struggled for a long time. My mother, however, was the saving grace. She was the only person in her family who had a career and a steady income.

She then took it upon herself to buy a house that not only she, but her family (including me and her) could live in. As time went by, everyone grew up, moved out and the elders aged and passed away leaving the house empty.

My mother was among the elders who had passed away and as her only child, by law I inherited all her assets when she passed. That sentiment however was not shared by my cousins. In their eyes, the house belonged to everyone, and the title deed should have their names on it too, despite none of them or their parents ever contributing to its purchase. They then, without my knowledge, sold their own home to live in the empty house. When they first moved in I was quite surprised, but I thought maybe something happened to them and they needed to sell their own property, and seeing as they're family and I wasn't using the house I didn't mind them living there.

I assumed that at some point they would reach out to me and we would agree on how we would manage them living there, so I kept quiet and waited. My biggest mistake!





# “WHERE SHOULD WE GO?”

Years of complete silence went by until I got a call from the municipality saying they had racked up a water bill which was now higher than the value of the house. I then found myself in a situation where on paper I'm an owner, and according to the municipality I owe large amounts of money.


My thing is, as a family I understand the need to want to have a central place that we all go to that's "home". But at some point, people grow up and create their own homes, which they have all already done. When that happens the house should go to the rightful owner who should then decide what happens to it. If there is a need for a central home, or if something happens to someone then next steps should be discussed as a family, not that people sell their own homes to go create problems for another person.

We're now sitting in a weird limbo where we're trying to fix things, but it's really difficult for me to move past how inconsiderate this entire situation is. I'm now at risk of being financially blacklisted, for a bill I had no hand in creating. Not only that but the expectation is on me to spearhead fixing this because my name is on the deed. None of them have stood up to go sort things out with the municipality, they've sat back and kept it pushing leaving me with a mess. When I say they need to leave, the rebuttal is always "where should we go?" as if I was even included in the conversation when they moved in. Now I'm being guilt-tripped into being considerate to a group of people who haven't shown me an ounce of consideration.

It's at times like this where you think about what family really means to you and how to navigate setting boundaries for them. I always feel when you have a falling out or a disagreement with someone you either end things, mend things or work towards a space where you're cordial but have set boundaries. I always find it so easy to decide which of those moves to make with friends but with family, it's so tricky. The fairytale that is "family first" and the idea that these are the people who always have your back and your best interest at heart, makes it so difficult to know what to do when they show you they only care for themselves. You start questioning if you're being too harsh, after all, families go through worse things and they move on together, so shouldn't you?

They say blood is thicker than water, if Covid-19 has taught us anything so is hand sanitiser. So thick in fact that it makes you feel sticky and dirty and you end up washing it off with what else, water. The point I'm trying to make is, should the proximity of relation be the thing that determines how you proceed with people once they've done you wrong? Is a blood tie as important as what they make it seem?



A woman is floating underwater, her head tilted back and eyes closed. A large plume of bubbles rises from her mouth, creating a dynamic visual effect against the dark water. She is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved top. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the bubbles and the contours of her body.

TAKE A MOMENT TO BREATHE IN  
THROUGH YOUR NOSE AND OUT  
THROUGH YOUR MOUTH 5  
TIMES.



# GAOLEBALE

## KHAISI

### How to love?

"I'm sorry, we can't continue to date, you are too clingy" or "We need to stop dating, you're too distant and detached". These were the words that left me down in the dumps, making me lose interest in dating. I even struggle to recall the last time I was in a romantic relationship. Amongst others, friendships and work relationships were a failure too. This is proof that I did not know how to love. At times it would feel like I am overdoing it and at times it would feel like I show little or no affection.

My Mother, who died in 2003, was either absent from her motherly duties or unduly drunk. Leaving me and my older brothers to fend for ourselves. Regardless of her excessive drinking, she was a remarkable woman. Whenever she was home, there was a sense of love and warmth. Her presence made everything perfect. However, on days when she wasn't, I became enraged at her for abandoning us continuously. She left a void that nobody could fill. As a result, in her absence, my older brother took the role of a parent to my brother and me.

Whenever she was home, I would try to distance and detach myself from her. Little did I know that the resentment for her lack of affection would affect my present life. Understand, my mother was a loving woman. At times she would offer her homeless or jobless friends a roof over their heads until they found their feet. I never doubted her love for us. I just could not understand why she would leave whenever push came to shove. Perhaps she too did not know how to love, and I wish I knew why. I guess we all have demons and battles that nobody knows about. Everyone deserves the opportunity to heal from their unresolved traumas. Heal properly before letting people, especially children, in their lives.







I continued to live life without acknowledging her or making time for her because she was never present. I had hoped that her constant parental retreats would bring her peace and healing from her conceivable traumas. There is a thing called 'the last visit'. It is when someone leaves and never returns. My mother was called by God, and that is how she left for good.

Her passing meant I would never get the opportunity to make things right or tell her I love her. Her passing meant I will never find closure and forgive her for leaving us. My mother's passing affected all my relationships. I still fail to love thoroughly. How does one love thoroughly?

What is it that mama needed healing from or yearned for?

Perhaps, mama was yearning for peace! It is important for parents to teach their children how to love through their actions so they may know how to differentiate actual love from notional love. Through an adult whose done their mental and emotional healing, a child can learn a lot. Black parents need to normalize telling their children that they love them and show them affection. This will help them know when to leave the table when love is no longer served.

I am on a journey of forgiving myself for being too hard on my mother and myself for always believing that I am the reason for people who decide to leave me. The lack of affection... At times I cannot show my emotions, and when I do... I fail to love them thoroughly.



Wiggle your toes and wind your  
wrists. You're alive.





# A PRESENT MARRIED TO THE PAST

TAMAR DAVIDS

I am married to an amazing husband with two beautiful kids. We are picture perfect! I never imagined this in my wildest dreams and I'm grateful to God for my world.

My world, however, is sometimes marred by past traumatic experiences that I have not known how to deal with. A relative and two neighbours molested me as a little girl and thinking about it over the years has debilitated me. I feel anger, shame and tormented in my soul.

I lived with my grandmother during my formative years as my mother had me when she was a teenager. My cousin who was the same age as me also lived with us. My late grandfather was from the Tswana tribe and my grandmother is from the Sotho tribe. We grew up in an area where Afrikaans is predominant though there are mixed tribes. My grandmother wanted us to either learn Setswana or Sesotho. We learnt Setswana as a first language in primary school but did not do well so she sent us to Postmasburg for a short while to learn Setswana. We attended school there but didn't complete the year and were shipped back. I still don't know why.

Our stay in Postmasburg was not pleasant. I remember the poverty and not being able to eat as much as we would want. However, that's not what was disturbing; something horrific transpired that left me scarred for the rest of my life. An older male cousin who lived there molested me and I never told anyone. I don't explicitly remember the details of where and how he'd lure me to molest me but I remember the moments he would inappropriately touch my private parts with his long dirty nails.

I often get vivid images of his hands and long dirty nails touching and hurting me and I immediately shut the thoughts out. As I write this, I feel shame and I don't want to feel anything but it pains me deeply that my innocence and purity was tainted. We eventually moved back home and I never thought of asking my cousin how her experience was years later. I suppose it would've been difficult to ask her because I was not ready to face that trauma.

Being home was good and I literally forgot about what happened. When I was in primary school I faced another molestation by a neighbour but it was weirdly different. I can't remember what age I was, however, I remember the incidents vividly. He would pretend he wants to help me with schoolwork but he would make me lie next to him in an inappropriate way and then rub himself against me. He would always get aroused but would not take it further than that. As I reflect now, I am grateful to God for protecting me because the worst could have happened. This abuse eventually stopped but again, I never told anyone because I didn't understand that I was being molested.

At my grandmother's house, we had a thoroughfare her and our neighbour shared a gate and people would randomly pass to get to another street. There was an older male whom we knew and he would use the double up because he lived on the next street. I was at an age where I was aware of my surroundings so I used to hear stories about him being accused of rape.





One afternoon I was playing in the yard and my grandmother was with the neighbours when he came by and asked me to accompany him to our toilet, nothing clicked and I did as he asked me. He told me to pull my panties down and lie on the toilet seat, I did exactly that and then he took out his penis and stroked it on my little vagina. My heart aches deeply and I feel angry, I wish the memories were not etched in my mind.

I don't remember how long it took but I remember a look on his face as if something awoke his conscience and he stopped. I went to my grandmother and didn't say anything. I was too fearful to tell my mother because she was strict and I was afraid I'd be scolded at. Within that same week, this man doubled-up again and I just blurted out to my grandmother "Mama this man tried to rape me the other day". My grandmother did not think twice and she shouted at him. I did not go into details but I was satisfied that it was out and my grandmother believed me and faced this abuser. I did not understand I was molested.

Once again, life carried on and I believed I'm fine, but this last incident haunted me so much that I could not face the third perpetrator whenever I would see him. I would then have snippets in my mind of the other two incidents.

When dating or in relationships I could never enjoy myself, connect sexually or engage in conversations about sex with friends when they would share. It never occurred to me that it might be because of what I experienced.

Eventually, I got married and that's when all the memories haunted me with a force that made me lose interest in intimacy. It affected my marriage so much, those thoughts would come when getting intimate with my husband and I would tense up. My poor husband would feel extremely bad thinking that he is hurting me. He would go overboard with being gentle or give me space and weeks would pass with no intimacy. I was fine with that. Praying about our intimacy has been helpful and I have improved, but I still need professional help. I am also extremely overprotective and don't want my daughter to be babysat if there is a male, whether with relatives or friends.

I am currently seeing a psychologist over a loss and I plan to bring this trauma up for me to get help.







A little stretch could do you some  
good.





# MSONGELWA DLADLA

## PROJECT LERATO. PROJECT ME!

“I’m just here for the letter ” I refrained from blurting. My student counsellor was too nice a person so I just stuck out her questions. I was there for a piece of paper to substantiate my appeal for Financial Aid after flunking the academic year. I got what I wanted! But as I made my way out, it dawned on me that the therapy sessions may have been bigger than a means to an end.

It hadn’t been a year since “Lerato” had rejected my proposal for our matric dance that our paths would cross again. Only this time her path would take her halfway across the country. Leaving in her trail a defeated boyfriend who in exasperation suggested she go back to her high school sweetheart because it was all she liked on Facebook. With that affirmation, go back she did. What I may have missed was that our teenage love affair was underlined by years of close friendship, my resilient interest and her enduring patience. So in the unceremonious split, almost 2 years after my unintended blessing, we both lost a best friend in love.

At 21 years old, 24 months into novel freedom and provinces away from rebuke, I couldn’t exactly obsess about marriage. I was prizing away the best years of my first serious relationship while maintaining a simplistic outlook on life. But as I’d come to learn, relationships say a lot about a person’s experience, or lack thereof, in and of love.



Following Lerato's exit, I entered a period of depression. With contributing factors such as alcohol, weed and bad company leading to disciplinary hearings, poor academic performance and an official exclusion warning. In the midst of all of that, you'd think a well-meaning young adult would keep his love on lockdown and open up his books more than his heart. But, "Ntando" I felt had what it took to fill the void left by Lerato. At least, in theory, she did. She was beautiful, smart, had similar academic interests and was superb company. She was fun, but not fun enough to go beyond the 9 months we lasted.

Then there was "Anne", who said I had "the emotional intelligence of a 4-year-old". I, on the other hand, was more interested in her being the first woman I'd dated outside my race. "Zama" came along shortly after, she was a "situationship" turned girlfriend who never ceased bemoaning my insensitive offhand comments. I wasn't always wrong. But it was the apathy and the shameless detachment and the insensitivity with which I compared her to my ex. How Zama couldn't rely on me to mean anything I said. The brazen indifference in approaching one of my closest friend's girlfriend's, over a misread situation. These were student life episodes of little significance until therapy made me look objectively within, at the source of my toxicity.

Beyond troubles that come with instability and moving around, my parents' separation at a critical juncture in my development dealt my confidence in relationships a huge blow. Hence the subconscious resentment and apathy towards intimacy and romance. The emboldening company of like-minded boys and varsity hookup culture didn't help either. My gripe wasn't with making sense of love or feigning maturity only to deepen my confusion, far from it. What needed to make sense was how pessimism became my default setting.

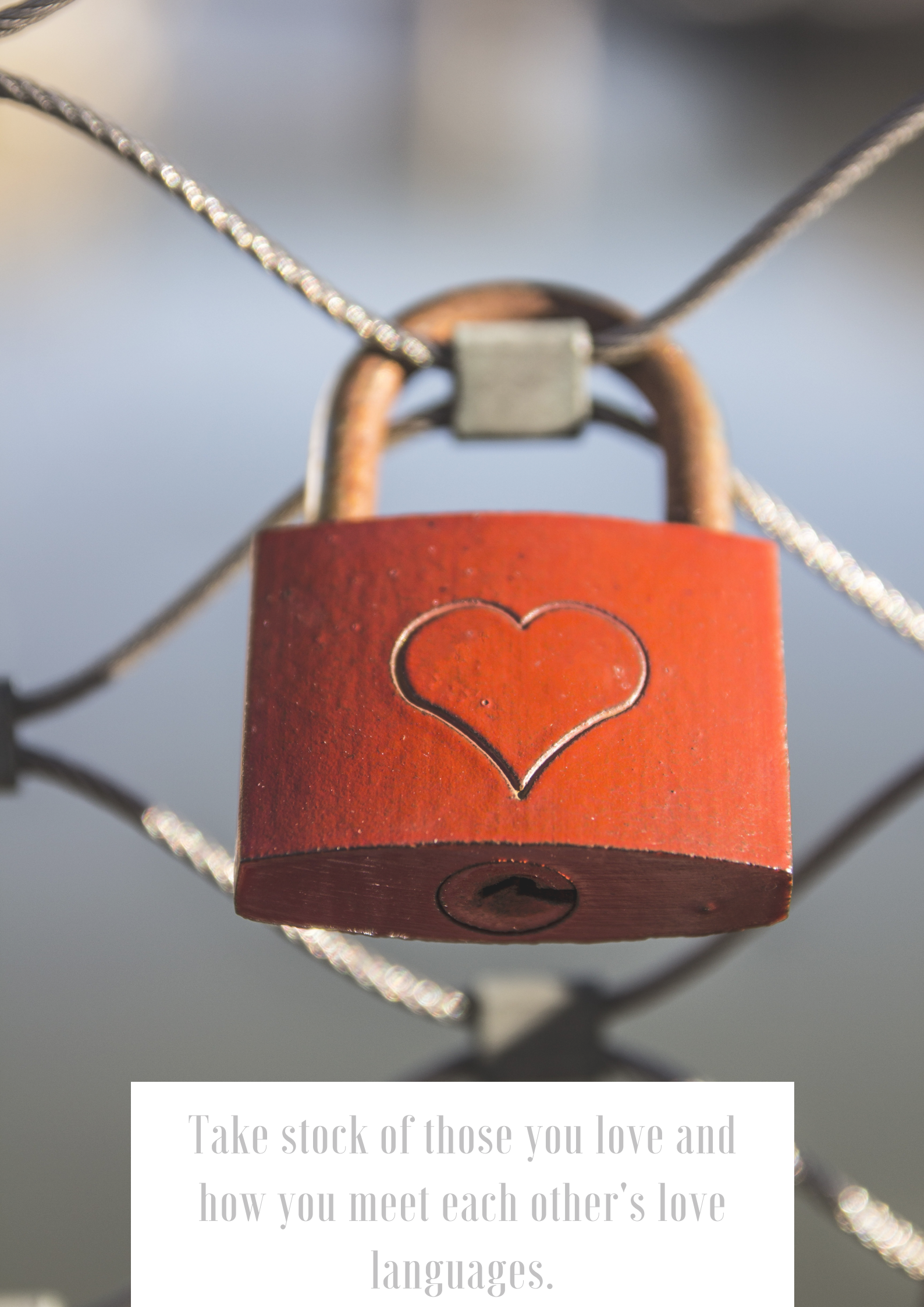
Psychology suggests that we're predisposed to repeat dysfunctional childhood patterns in adulthood. For reasons not more prominent than risk-aversion and survival. The first reference for a boy child on life orientation in manhood is the father.

Genetically, at least. In the fortune of some, socially too. But this may be to the misfortune of others in areas such as intimacy and love. The inconsistency defining my early relationships was the manifestation of my miseducation. To be miseducated in intimacy is to be illiterate in the language of love. I couldn't reciprocate Lerato's language of quality time and acts of service because it said more about my prowess that she'd leave her boyfriend for a long-distance relationship than it did about her commitment. Gross misinterpretation. Anne's words of affirmation, which sometimes came as a rebuke, were misconstrued pettily because listening -an act of service ultimately- was passed on.

With every instance that my father's philandering met my mother's endurance and stillness, my frame of reference crumbled. Frequent breakups normalized inconsistency. Vilifying my father didn't help my respect for my mother, ironically. Maybe sympathy. But pity isn't exactly the wisest template for love. The tangible value of my father's role predisposed him to my favour. From this dynamic, I developed some sense of entitlement.

It's been over 5 years since some of these episodes. Self-awareness is not only the standard by which I measure my fitness for any commitment but that of the next person's. Lest we play Russian Roulette with each other. My father and I continue to have a close friendship which was solidified by the watershed moment when we began talking about these things frankly. We've had these since I was 12 with my mother. From these relationships, I've been able to learn how I'm not bad for not needing anyone. It should come from a genuine and secure place of self-awareness and sufficiency.





Take stock of those you love and  
how you meet each other's love  
languages.





# NTOMBI

TRIGGER WARNING EXTRA SENSITIVE READ



# MANAGED TO ESCAPE

I will always remember being at school as a young child, quiet, teary and scared to go home after school.

Dad had just beat mom up that morning. She was bruised and/or bleeding. He would cut the phone line (as he always did) so that we could not call for help. Then, he would lock her out of the house, and make her sleep outside like a dog. He would tell us he didn't love us, and that we were not his children.

I wet myself until I was at least 14. At school, I would be too scared to tell the teacher I had to go to the bathroom. I only knew to be silent. At home, I would wet the bed every single night, and get a beating from my mom or insults from my dad in the morning. Nobody understood that it was something I could not control. Now I know that it was a response to trauma.

My whole schooling life, I watched dad beat up mom when he wasn't verbally assaulting her. I remember when I was 16, something triggered dad and he started again. I ran away from home in the middle of the night that day and was sexually assaulted on my way to my grandmother's house. I will never forget that day. And feeling like it would never have happened had I had a 'normal' family.

When I finished matric, I vowed to get as far away from my family as I could. And I did. I got to breathe for most of my university career, and live a life far away from my unstable family. Going home during holidays was the worst, and I would always find excuses not to. I spent many days wishing death upon my dad, and waiting for a phone call to tell me he was no more, just so that I could finally have peace. I don't know if my sisters felt the same.

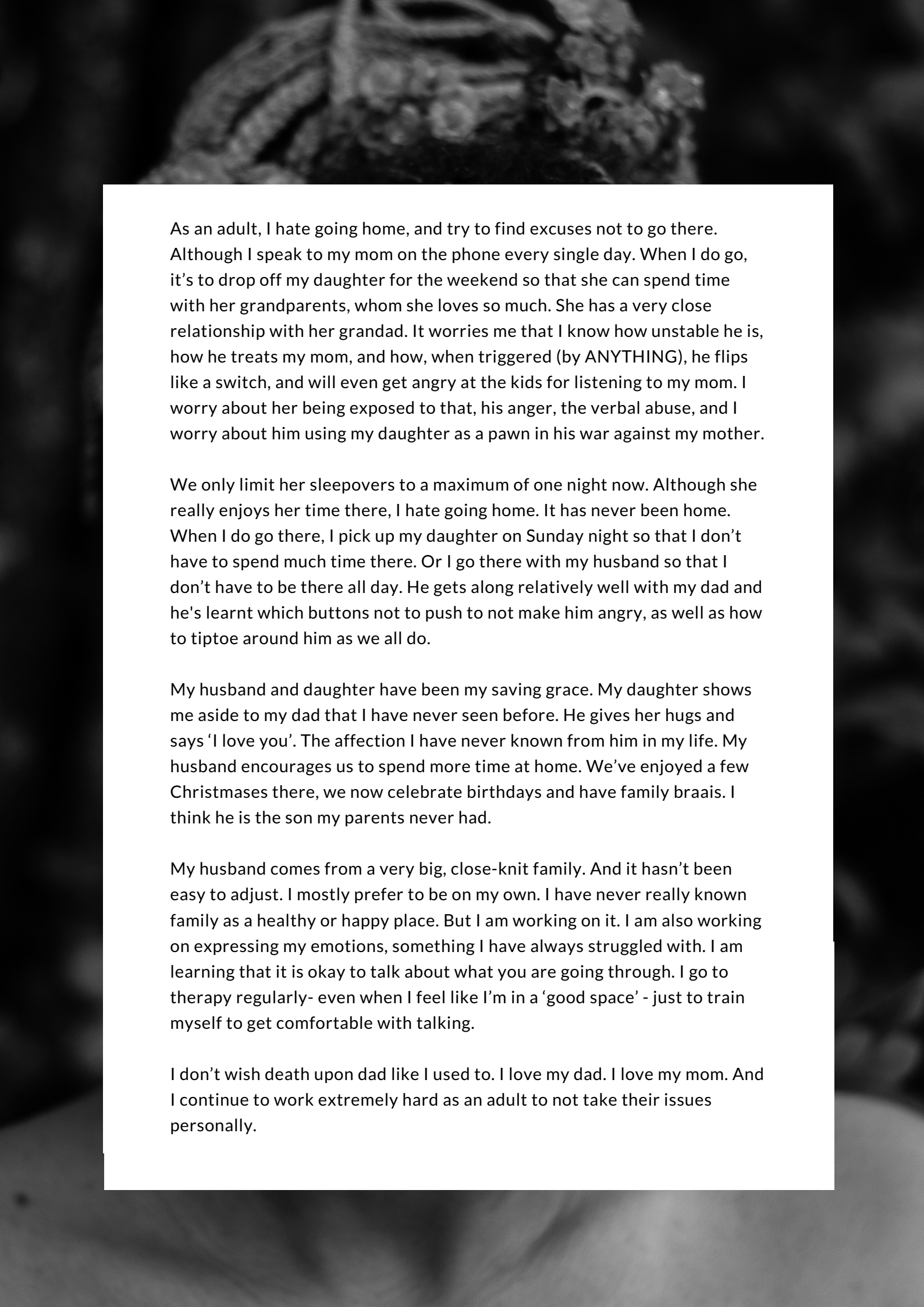
He doesn't beat mom up anymore. I don't quite remember when that ended. But the verbal abuse continued.

One day I will never forget is my first *Lobola* negotiations after I had met the man of my dreams. It was supposed to be the happiest day of my life but dad ruined everything. Like he always did. Least bit interested in the proceedings of the day, or making decisions as the head of the household about how things would go - he went MIA. Upon his return, he caused drama because of alcohol and the money brought by my inlaws that he said my mom kept from him. I couldn't believe that he had never shown up for me at any point in my life, and still could not show up for me and be a decent dad on that day. I was extremely relieved when he decided to go MIA again (after we gave him money and alcohol) and actually not return until the event was over when my in-laws came back a few years later to make the last 'payment'.

I will always resent my mom for staying. She did us no favour. And I feel we would have been better off if she had left. My oldest sister hates our dad, and could not care whether he's dead or alive. I think she witnessed most / the worst of the abuse as the eldest child. She lives in another country now and keeps her distance (literally). My other sister caught the bad end of the stick, lacks self-confidence and is full of self-pity just like my dad. She has chosen a life partner who shares similar traits too. I think my mom sees it. I think my dad sees it.

But they won't say it. I have managed to 'escape' from my family and create a new life for myself.





As an adult, I hate going home, and try to find excuses not to go there. Although I speak to my mom on the phone every single day. When I do go, it's to drop off my daughter for the weekend so that she can spend time with her grandparents, whom she loves so much. She has a very close relationship with her grandad. It worries me that I know how unstable he is, how he treats my mom, and how, when triggered (by ANYTHING), he flips like a switch, and will even get angry at the kids for listening to my mom. I worry about her being exposed to that, his anger, the verbal abuse, and I worry about him using my daughter as a pawn in his war against my mother.

We only limit her sleepovers to a maximum of one night now. Although she really enjoys her time there, I hate going home. It has never been home. When I do go there, I pick up my daughter on Sunday night so that I don't have to spend much time there. Or I go there with my husband so that I don't have to be there all day. He gets along relatively well with my dad and he's learnt which buttons not to push to not make him angry, as well as how to tiptoe around him as we all do.

My husband and daughter have been my saving grace. My daughter shows me aside to my dad that I have never seen before. He gives her hugs and says 'I love you'. The affection I have never known from him in my life. My husband encourages us to spend more time at home. We've enjoyed a few Christmases there, we now celebrate birthdays and have family braais. I think he is the son my parents never had.

My husband comes from a very big, close-knit family. And it hasn't been easy to adjust. I mostly prefer to be on my own. I have never really known family as a healthy or happy place. But I am working on it. I am also working on expressing my emotions, something I have always struggled with. I am learning that it is okay to talk about what you are going through. I go to therapy regularly- even when I feel like I'm in a 'good space' - just to train myself to get comfortable with talking.

I don't wish death upon dad like I used to. I love my dad. I love my mom. And I continue to work extremely hard as an adult to not take their issues personally.





Perhaps it's time for a quick run  
to the fridge for some water?



# PAUL

## FEELINGS WERE TABOO

I grew up in a poor family. What I do remember of my dad, who died when I was around 8 or 9 years old, was when he was sober, he was nice enough, but weekends and payday, when he hit the bottle, I would end up hiding and sometimes sleeping in the garden. If he got his hands on me during these binges, let's just say I would end up crying. In hindsight, my mom took a few beatings on my behalf.

So the physical side of things from my dad, I have been fortunate enough that they have never affected me. If anything, they have made me a better father to my kids. My youngest was about 13, the one and only time they had seen me drunk. I never felt the need for regular physical discipline. Just goes to show that physical never affects you as much as mental or emotional.

My mom, who lived until I was in my forties, was a beautiful soul. She had the best intentions, was deeply religious, was a hard worker, and had a profound sense of responsibility. During my formative years, I was spoiled, I think as a compensation for my dad and the fact that by this stage, she had also outlived 5 sons.

Her upbringing clearly had an impact on how she raised me. She came from a very poor conservative Afrikaans family. Emotions were never discussed, feelings were taboo, and you were just expected to get on with things, don't question, always be grateful, and believe in what people in authority tell you. And this is exactly how she raised me. I would be lying if I said that despite being poor, there was never anything I wanted. I never went without, but as a child, you are never aware that this is anything but normal.



It was only as I got older, and had to start dealing with my emotions, relationships and stresses of everyday life, that I realized I was completely unprepared for life and how to deal with it. I love my mom, but the realization has hit home, that as a parent, we have so much more responsibility to our children, than just keeping them fed and schooled and out of trouble.

My opinions and outlook on so much of my life were shaped by the way I was raised. My responses and actions were all based on what I was taught growing up. I have had to grow myself as a person, I have had to learn to be able to face and deal with things in ways I didn't even know existed. Many years later, I am thankfully a very different person, I still have a lot of my journey and self-discovery left, but I am so different from the person I was 20, 10 and even 5 years ago.

My go-to response with relationships and conflict was to simply clam up. My mom would go for days not even saying a single word to me because I had upset or disappointed her. That was what I thought was right. In my marriage, as a result, communication was not my strong point. I could never equate differences of opinion as not being personal attacks on my character.

My way to fix everything was to spoil those people in my life. Just like I was, and now I realise it was my mother's guilt because she didn't have the ability to say sorry. As a result, sorry was not a word I used often. I would always try and be the nice guy, even if it impacted my happiness and my needs. I would never say if I was unhappy, or if something was not working for me. I would just keep on slogging away because I was taught that we should always be grateful, that we must never complain, and we should always be happy with our lot in life.

My relationship with God has had many obstacles. Mostly from my side. I could never reconcile what I was taught growing up with what I felt in my heart and what I know now, my God wants from me.

Turns out that I have suffered from depression most of my teenage years and adult life, but I was never equipped to question or deal with it. Feelings were to be kept in, bottled up and under control. As I mentioned, I am in a much better place now, still trying to get by, still trying to find peace, but so much more self-aware, with a deeper understanding of what this life is all about. I am no longer with my one true love. The damage I caused was too deep. It affected her feelings too much. But I can accept that and live with it. Every day I am trying to be a better version of me. My journey with my kids is a lot better now that I understand myself better.

I still struggle with putting myself first, I still struggle with guilt for various things. For not being grateful enough or for how I view the world. But I am getting better as I slowly undo a lifetime of examples, that I also know were the best my mother could do. She just didn't know any different.

I am just grateful, that I didn't go through my entire life not realising that things could be so different. As well as being in the position with my own experience to be a better person and share some of my journey with whomever I can. If it makes a difference to a single person, then it was all worth it.

I guess, most of us try our best as we muddle through this journey we call life. But it's only the further you get on your journey, that you realise just how many wrong turns, bad choices and sheer luck happened.





Hope you're still okay! If not, a  
step back to do something  
relaxing might help.





# MBALENTLE

I had to acknowledge that while everyone seems to have a loving, closely acquainted and treasurable relationship with their mother, the opposite was true for me. I love her and in her own way, she loves me too.





# I ALWAYS FELT SHORT

I always assumed that that's how all mother-daughter relationships are, but she made everything my fault. According to her, I was too quiet, I behaved like I'd been abused before, I was not outgoing enough, not social enough, nor could I ever do anything that would appease her enough for her to finally allow me to be her child or to be me.

She always seemed too busy to mother me, so if I was not living with my grandmother, it was my aunt or my step father's family. Her visits were random, rare & quite brief. So much so that my brain can never recall a mother-daughter moment between her and me. I don't know the warmth of a mother's embrace that everyone seems so certain of.

When one of my step father's family members tried sneaking into my bedroom at night on more than one occasion, I had to fight that battle on my own. Stay up late at night and be ready to protect myself should he try anything sinister. I couldn't tell her because she wasn't around. I also couldn't tell her because I didn't want to be labelled delirious and trying to break the family. I had to learn to protect myself.

When I finally moved in with her, I was in grade 4. I didn't know what to expect because after all, I didn't quite know her. The first few months were pretty cool, she packed our lunch in the morning, stood in front of the gate and watched my sister and I walk to school. After school, we'd come home to lunch already made. But that slowly faded.

By the end of the year, it was my responsibility to ensure that my siblings and I were well looked after. had to see that they had enough clean shirts, their socks were washed, meals were ready and that they did their

homework. She would ask me what's for dinner and if my sister's homework is done.

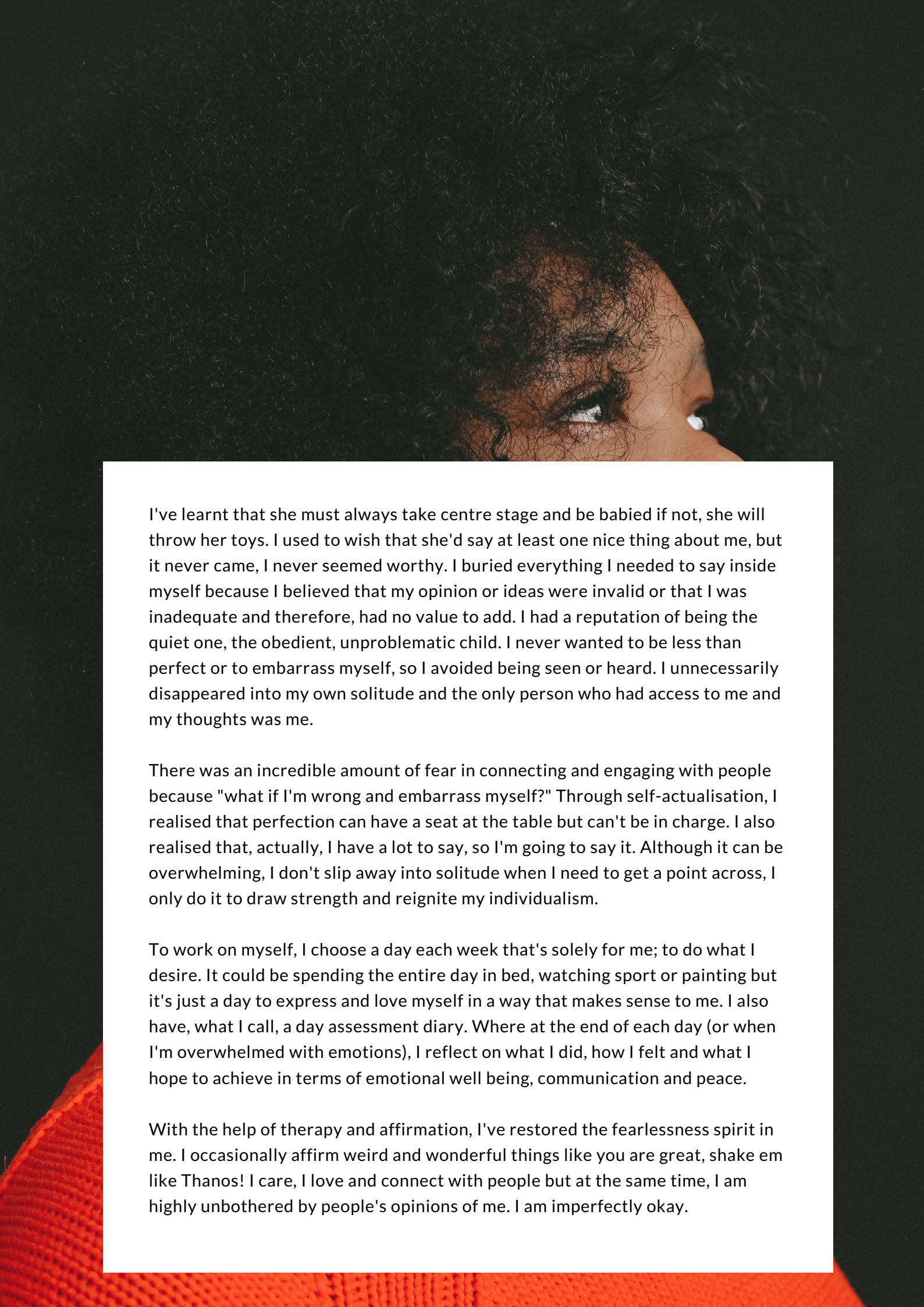
I took care of the house and my siblings as if we had no parent. I became aware of her well being, I made sure that her laundry was done, bed made, meals prepared, her house cleaned, but she never approved. I always felt short! There was always one thing I didn't do or couldn't get right.

Either the stew was too watery, the fridge wasn't cleaned properly or I didn't remind her to buy bread. This meant I deserved the screaming, cursing and shouting that would follow. It would go on for hours. But each day presented an opportunity for me to impress her so she would stop shouting and complaining about having children who are less than and don't put her first.

I remember one time she asked me to make beef stew. I was 13 and really thought I did a good job considering that I'm allergic to red meat and the smell of beef is not a pleasant one for me. It turned out the meat wasn't cooked to perfection and it was under seasoned. She called me an embarrassment and said that she wished that she gave birth to a boy because he would be doing way better than me.

The worst, however, was when after graduation, I was faced with one unsuccessful interview after another and in my moment of despair she said, "inkinga yakho uyigwala, uyisahluleki, uhlulwa impilo."

She'll never ask you about your life or well being. But she does want to know how much you earn and when do you get paid, not where you work, she won't even bother.




I've learnt that she must always take centre stage and be babied if not, she will throw her toys. I used to wish that she'd say at least one nice thing about me, but it never came, I never seemed worthy. I buried everything I needed to say inside myself because I believed that my opinion or ideas were invalid or that I was inadequate and therefore, had no value to add. I had a reputation of being the quiet one, the obedient, unproblematic child. I never wanted to be less than perfect or to embarrass myself, so I avoided being seen or heard. I unnecessarily disappeared into my own solitude and the only person who had access to me and my thoughts was me.

There was an incredible amount of fear in connecting and engaging with people because "what if I'm wrong and embarrass myself?" Through self-actualisation, I realised that perfection can have a seat at the table but can't be in charge. I also realised that, actually, I have a lot to say, so I'm going to say it. Although it can be overwhelming, I don't slip away into solitude when I need to get a point across, I only do it to draw strength and reignite my individualism.

To work on myself, I choose a day each week that's solely for me; to do what I desire. It could be spending the entire day in bed, watching sport or painting but it's just a day to express and love myself in a way that makes sense to me. I also have, what I call, a day assessment diary. Where at the end of each day (or when I'm overwhelmed with emotions), I reflect on what I did, how I felt and what I hope to achieve in terms of emotional well being, communication and peace.

With the help of therapy and affirmation, I've restored the fearlessness spirit in me. I occasionally affirm weird and wonderful things like you are great, shake em like Thanos! I care, I love and connect with people but at the same time, I am highly unbothered by people's opinions of me. I am imperfectly okay.





Sometimes you just gotta push  
through the pain!





# ZOEY

It all began about 37 years ago, in the way most of these things begin – guy meets girl, girl likes guy, guy makes a move, and boom – magic.



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# WHAT DID WE EVER DO TO YOU?

Or, as it was in this case - societal pressures, religious convictions, socio-economic status and the facade of a better future pushed two people together forever. Although they barely knew themselves, let alone each other. As per the bible's stipulations, the wedding ring was followed by attempts at being fruitful and multiplying. A few miscarriages later, I made my grand entrance. I wasn't bright-eyed, bushy-tailed and ready to do life, nope. I was on life support with a premature body and a heart with a hole in it. Mom held onto hope, prayed, begged and pleaded for me to stay alive, while dad concluded that this "I'm pregnant" story will end the same way that all the others did - in tears.

I had a very sickly early 2 years but was fit as a fiddle from that point. Until my teen years when my parents abandoned their parental duties in lieu of chasing each other and making their sham of a marriage work. Which depressed me greatly, and completely broke my body down. I even repeated a grade because I spent so much of that year in and out of the hospital. To put it into perspective, I recently bumped into an old acquaintance (not age-wise) and he said, "I'm really impressed that you've made it in life and you're doing so well. Wow!" Surprised, I asked him to elaborate, and he reminded me of how for weeks and sometimes even months at a time, my parents would leave me home alone to get myself to school, church and everywhere else while they're out of town busy "working on things". At some point, my dad worked in Mpumalanga, but unlike most families who would then relocate together, we'd see him on weekends.

Before I get too far, let me make it clear that my dad is NOT a family man. I don't know who allowed him to get married and have kids, but it's honestly NOT his vibe. He's too self-centred to be that guy.

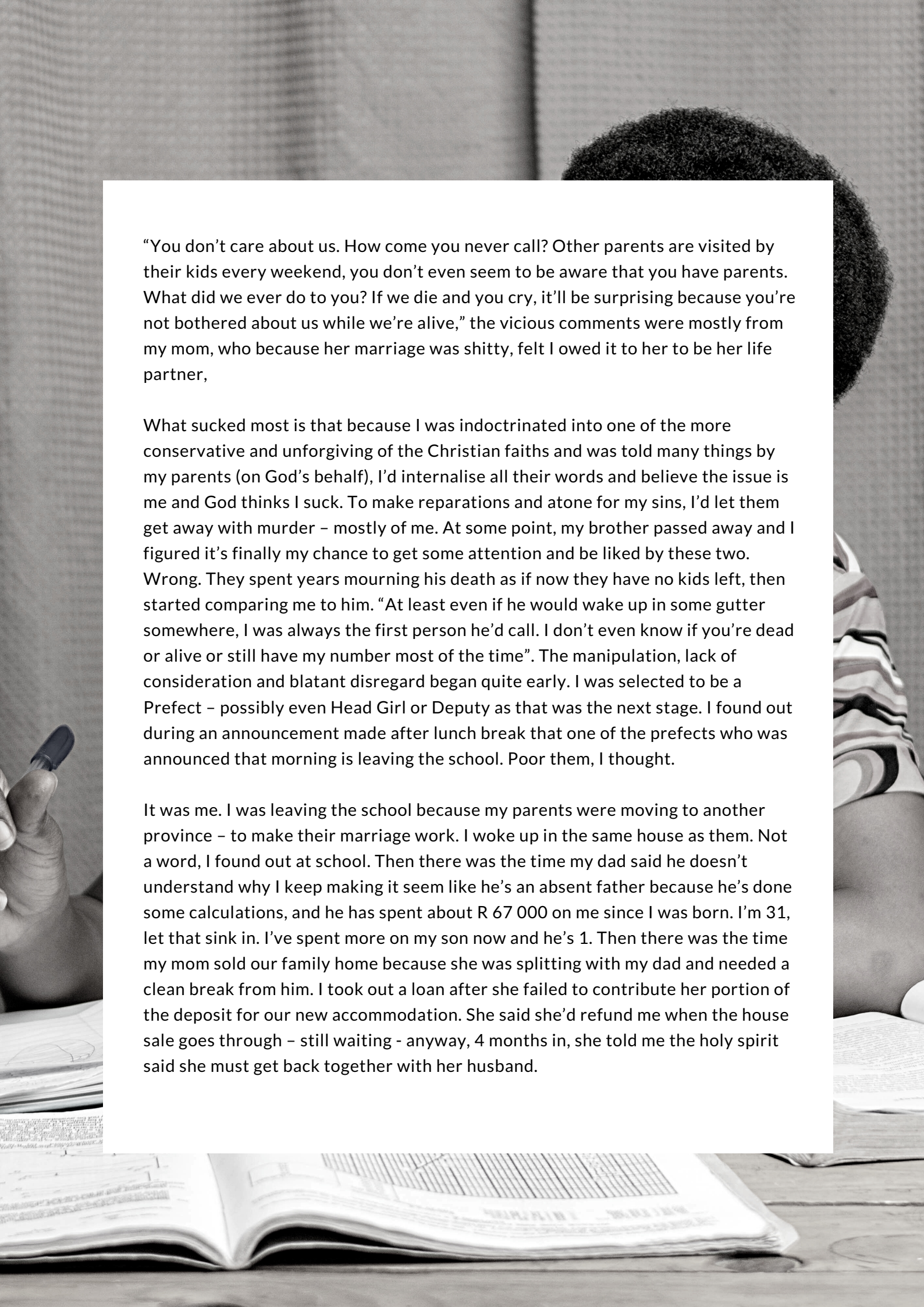
He doesn't get sacrificed. He doesn't understand responsibility or duty and he certainly doesn't get that it's a forever commitment. Before I came along, the folks adopted agent who was initially adopted by my paternal grandmother. She ran a daycare centre and kids playing near an open veld just outside the daycare facility heard a plastic moving in the bushes.

Fast forward, in the plastic was a newborn, whom my granny raised until about 8 when my gran passed away and my parents took over. At first, I didn't know he was adopted, in fact, how I was raised led me to believe that I was the adopted one, imagine my shock when the news broke that I'm the one who actually belongs based on DNA. It's not so much the private school education or the many second chances he was given by life and my parents (think crime, prison, drugs, HIV, etc), it's the fact that as a child, I was extremely low maintenance. Straight As, never in trouble, remarkable performance in sports and cultural activities alike, the list goes on. I was basically like those plants that need nothing from the owner, they just grow and flourish.

To my detriment, the fact that I didn't need much from my parents ensured that as time passed, they did less and less and less. There were years at a time where I'd be shipped off to live with relatives - to experience not belonging there too. I got my first period at my aunt's house where I had an impromptu sleepover because my folks forgot to fetch me from school.

At some point during high school, I shoved down the anger and resentment and replaced it with IDGAF about these people. I'm going to get what I can from them and keep it moving because clearly, I can make it on my own. As soon as I resolved this, they started being in my face in the worst way.






"You don't care about us. How come you never call? Other parents are visited by their kids every weekend, you don't even seem to be aware that you have parents. What did we ever do to you? If we die and you cry, it'll be surprising because you're not bothered about us while we're alive," the vicious comments were mostly from my mom, who because her marriage was shitty, felt I owed it to her to be her life partner,

What sucked most is that because I was indoctrinated into one of the more conservative and unforgiving of the Christian faiths and was told many things by my parents (on God's behalf), I'd internalise all their words and believe the issue is me and God thinks I suck. To make reparations and atone for my sins, I'd let them get away with murder – mostly of me. At some point, my brother passed away and I figured it's finally my chance to get some attention and be liked by these two. Wrong. They spent years mourning his death as if now they have no kids left, then started comparing me to him. "At least even if he would wake up in some gutter somewhere, I was always the first person he'd call. I don't even know if you're dead or alive or still have my number most of the time". The manipulation, lack of consideration and blatant disregard began quite early. I was selected to be a Prefect – possibly even Head Girl or Deputy as that was the next stage. I found out during an announcement made after lunch break that one of the prefects who was announced that morning is leaving the school. Poor them, I thought.

It was me. I was leaving the school because my parents were moving to another province – to make their marriage work. I woke up in the same house as them. Not a word, I found out at school. Then there was the time my dad said he doesn't understand why I keep making it seem like he's an absent father because he's done some calculations, and he has spent about R 67 000 on me since I was born. I'm 31, let that sink in. I've spent more on my son now and he's 1. Then there was the time my mom sold our family home because she was splitting with my dad and needed a clean break from him. I took out a loan after she failed to contribute her portion of the deposit for our new accommodation. She said she'd refund me when the house sale goes through – still waiting - anyway, 4 months in, she told me the holy spirit said she must get back together with her husband.





It's a convoluted story and an absolute mystery how I'm alive and somewhat sane now, but to give a summary of the damage; I don't trust people in general, especially those who say they love me. I also buy people. Most of my financial woes are from spending on others. Watches, spa days, birthday gifts followed by belated birthday gifts, because I need to earn my keep and convince everyone that I'm worth keeping around. I also have zero boundaries and cannot stand up for myself at all, especially when it comes to my parents. Conflict terrifies me and I've trained myself to resolve things on my own without ever facing anyone who has wronged me. I've stayed in relationships that had long expired, for fear of replicating my parents' on again off again marriage of 35 years, with 2 divorces and 5 separations in between. Then I've left relationships without giving them a chance, for fear that I'll overstay if I don't. The debt is much better now, but it's not gone, especially because I returned from varsity to discover 2 surprise student loans which my parents had applied for in my absence, for home renovations and other things, at most 30% actually went to my school stuff. (I had 3 jobs and could've funded my own life if I so much as had an inkling that they were struggling). This list is endless too.

It'd take a book to properly tell the tale. If it helps anyone at all and makes any kind of difference, I just want to say that you don't need to walk around as a billboard advertisement of where you've been or the shitty experiences you've lived through. Breakthrough man, you totally can!





You're more than the parts of you  
that set you back because you feel  
broken.



Whatever your sentiments by the time you get here, just know that I created this so that we can connect. There are so many stories that live in many of us that need to reach others! And so the birth of this platform.

The age of independence carried with it the downside of isolation and individualism which can sometimes border onto aloneness and even loneliness. This can lead many to think that the unfortunate events of existence are solely targeted at them. Which through growth and as I seek to connect with many other living beings I've learnt otherwise.

In fact many of the things that happen to each of us connect us to a greater whole. A universal duality of ups and downs. Things that happen as results of many other occurrences. Occurrences that bare truth to the notion that there's nothing new under the sun.

So here we are, you the reader, the storytellers and me the editor, connecting, learning and hopefully healing. Not only with ourselves in mind but with the generosity to deepen our empathy for others and the worldly journeys that shape them into the strangers we encounter. And if selfishness must erode, to feel less alone.

Lastly a major extension of gratitude to my team. My mother for giving this a second look and helping me edit as well as my younger sister for all her feedback.

Kenaleone Ontlametse Gape





THANK YOU