

Anonymous (60 years)

“I always thought I’m a nothing”

Part of my childhood I spend with my grandmother because my mother was a domestic. When I was twelve my mother got a little place. At this stage I had younger brothers and sisters as well. My teenage years I don’t remember. I only remember small bits and pieces. I can’t even remember how I went through my high school years. I dropped out of standard seven. At some stage I went to work in a factory. I was very rebellious and moody also. When I went to this high school, it was at that stage that I met my boyfriend. I was getting pregnant, dropping out. I think I was nineteen.

The next stage is my married life. Before I was twenty-one I had my second child. Because I never knew who my right father was, I always thought I’m a nothing. I always felt like I had a double life, with one man in Cape Town pretending to be my father, and another guy who I once met, who told me he is my real father... When I married I felt like I finally was somebody. We were young. He wanted to go out. At a stage he was more outside than inside the house and I was sitting with little kids. I had all my kids but still I went back to the factory and brought my part. All my money went into his hands. I was never thinking you must have your own bank account. I was submissive. He was not abusive in a violent way, but verbally. And of course he also would have girlfriends. That just went on and on. But I would forgive him. At some stage I felt like I wanted to move out. He was making me feel like a liar and he was always right. Most women stay because you feel you are dependent on the man, on the money.

When I had my fourth child, I felt I wanted to move out. I went as far as Oudtshoorn. When I finally found out who my father was I got connections there and I stayed there for three months. But my husband found out where I was and he came begging. At that stage the council wouldn’t let a man stay in the house on his own, they wanted to throw him out. So I came back. At a certain stage we moved to a new area and things started to go smoothly. I think he felt he must make his family right, because I came back to him. But he was still the superior one. I must always be submissive. Then I started empowering myself. My daughter at one stage asked me how could I keep it out for so many years? I was always trying to keep the family together, because I didn’t grow up in a family environment. I thought I was doing the right thing. And I did not believe divorce was the only option.

“Maybe the story must be told”

At the beginning of this year, I got ill. The doctor referred me to a specialist at the hospital. The

doctor said to me, we must take blood. I went back in a week's time. When the results came, I couldn't talk about it, because it is too sensitive. He told me I've got a sexually transmitted disease. Do you want to know the name, he asked. I can't hardly say the name now. I was so devastated. It was syphilis. I said but I'm sixty years old. I've been with my husband for more than forty years. The doctor said I must come in because I need a ten-day treatment. I felt as if I could just run out and be somewhere on my own. Nobody at sixty years old will want something like that. The doctor said, if your husband gave it to you, he must also come. I got home and when my husband sees me, he could see I wasn't right. I couldn't talk. I wouldn't talk. I just said to myself, I'm going to tell my children what happened to me. So they know to be faithful to their spouses. Maybe the story must be told. It's a strong story and it can... where to next? That night I never slept. That was the thing on my mind. Where to next?

I asked the doctor, can this have happened to me eight years ago? He said it could even have happened thirty years ago. The germ might have been sitting in my system dormant, but now that I'm weak and down it attacked me. I spoke to my husband. He also couldn't believe it and denied it. He went for a test and it was negative. The doctor explained that if my husband took antibiotics through the year it could have gone away. But I knew he was in the primary stages because at certain stages he had to buy medicines and stuff. I thought, I forgave my husband eight years ago for that affair, what is the sense of disrupting our lives now? I don't know where to go, what to do. I decided I'm willing to go the next miles with him. I would want to be with my family. It was a sensitive time.

*"I'm paying this price now"*

It was a sad time, but it was also a time for me to say, is this what I really want? It made me feel that I know what I want. I can't stand rejection and I don't want to be on my own. That's why I don't know if I want the story published. How will the community relate to me? I really can't say. Because people has this stigma towards Aids. I was thinking, how will people judge me? I know there is other people who have the same, because at some stage in the hospital, someone said to me they get these kind of cases a lot. When I was in hospital you can imagine how humiliated I was. I was in this bed. Now the night staff gives over to the day staff. I was wondering what was going through their mind. Do they now think I'm a slut? Or that I had a rough life when I was young? I felt so humiliated the first two, three days. I just kept a straight face and did not burst out crying.

Why would I now want to disrupt a whole nation, I would almost want to say. The family relationship. Because I didn't grow up like that, I felt like I'm paying this price now for wanting a close family relationship. At this stage I'm content, but not with my health, because I must get back to the hospital for my health. I just want to be a normal sixty year old with ailments that a sixty year old sits with. Yet because of A, B and C, I've got these ailments...

I was lucky to have a very good friend. When I was having trouble with my husband she could console me, because her daughter was also going through something similar. That is what I like

about women. We counsel and console and strengthen one another. We help one another through hardships.

I sometimes wonder how my life would have been if my real father would have accepted me. I now know that for my mother, she did what she thought was best for us. She felt rejected by him when he denied I was his daughter so she did not want him to be part of my life. I am so happy now when we have a birthday and the whole family gathers. That is the only thing that I want, to see my children happy. I never believed divorce was the only option. I did not want to be another statistic of divorce. I felt my children deserve to have a family. I stayed together for the sake of my children. And I did not want that cycle of disrupted families to go on. Now my husband is also old. I always tell him, when I pass away, these family gatherings must continue.

Because of a lot of hardships, I could work my way through dealing with a husband that I am dependent on. Because he knew the church people was also in favour of me going to Germany he didn't make a fuss. At some stage he couldn't handle it, he must have been thinking what is going to happen to this woman now? Because he thinks it's a women thing to do this and that. My children would wash up, he never would. But now we take turns, he irons his own pants. He didn't know how to relate with me when I became more assertive. In the past I had to ask if I could go for a weekend away. Now I just say the women's group is going on a weekend. I can twist him around my pink now. But he never wants to join me on a trip. Sometimes I find it annoying because I feel like a single person now. With a man being so verbally abusive, you, with your passive nature, you can make a partnership. Because there is a soft side in that person also, and over the years I could find out where that soft side is.