



*"We are humans,
not programmed
machines"* BY NDINAELAO
MOSES



Namibia



Warning this story includes references to suicide.

Act

I sat on a wooden bench at the bus stop staring at the sunrise on a Saturday morning, waiting for the bus to take my sister and I home from a campaign held at Gobabis. Maria had a misunderstanding with Mom this morning so she accompanied me. I had a lot on my plate for an 18-year-old. In addition to having to concentrate on my studies. I was on a mission to create a suicide- and depression-free Namibia. I had to make sure that every corner of Namibia was well-informed about the importance of mental health.

My sister had just left for the bathroom while I was conversing with a man seated next to me; he was probably in his mid-80s. He carried a vintage-like suitcase resembling those seen in old movies. After he greeted me, we started a conversation like buddies, though his age quadrupled mine. At some point, my attention turned away from our conversation and toward my phone. A few minutes later, I got distracted by a commotion across the street. I was curious, so I quickly ran to the crowd.

I found a young girl lying on the pavement. There was blood. When I realised it was my sister, my heart sank. I immediately notified the ambulance by pressing 'Accident' on my *Emergency 911* app. I then sent a message: *Car accident at Independence Avenue, next to Onandova service station.* Immediately, the emergency service responded: *Thank you, User. While you wait (for less than 10 minutes), the following message contains instructions on how to deliver first aid to the victim.*

Within 10 minutes, the ambulance arrived at the scene. "Thank you, you have saved a life," said a paramedic, as he picked up Maria and lifted the gurney into the ambulance. "That's my younger sister! I'll join you," I screamed just as the paramedic was about to close the ambulance.

"Why did she jump onto the road?"

I murmured.

"Reporters are not allowed in the hospital sir." A security guard stopped me at the emergency entrance of the hospital when he noticed my large camera bag.

"I am not a reporter. That is my sister."

After nearly half an hour, the nurse came looking for me.

"Are you Maria's brother?"

"Yes, sir," I responded loudly.

"Your sister wants to talk to you."

"Oh, is she discharged?" He ignored my question and told me to follow him. It was the most anxious short trip of my life, but I nerved myself to enter the room. As soon as I saw Maria, I hugged her and whispered "I'm glad you are fine, sis."

"I was surprised when the doctor said my brother saved my life; I thought was just a stranger. Thank you, bro." She asked the nurse for privacy before she begged me to keep the accident a secret from our parents.

"Why did you do it? And why do you want to put me in such a tough position?" I asked. "Our parents will make things worse. I'd rather keep it to myself." She held her forehead as tears fell down her cheeks. She was sobbing uncontrollably.

"I thought you were trying to commit suicide."

"Well, a lot has been going on lately."

"Oh, wait... are you okay?" I asked, knowing well my sister wasn't fine because tears kept rolling down her face.

"No, I am not okay, David. I didn't know how to bring it to your attention. I don't think I am good enough. Sometimes I just want to end my life." Her voice was shivering.

"Do you... I... you can trust me." I assured her. How could I have been so blind to her pain?

"Well, I trusted a friend who promised not to expose my secret. Next thing I knew, I saw screenshots of our conversation trending on social media. I know we are siblings, but I can't even trust my shadow."

"I am sorry you went through that sis. Betrayal hurts more than death."

"It's okay, I am used to it now." My heart broke into pieces. I felt so helpless.

"No, that's not right, Maria. You can't get used to pain, that's emotional torture. You have to treat it like a physical wound. Do you get used to a physical wound?"

"No, it's painful. How can one get used to that?"

"Exactly, emotional pain is even worse. You have to protect yourself from the world. You need peace."

"How? People are always right anyway. I am fat, not pretty like the girls I see on Instagram. My peers are going to university in the next two years, but I am a disappointment."

"No, Maria, you are beautiful. We are all uniquely different. Always remember that comparing yourself to others is the thief of joy." I had a lot to say, but the nurse ordered me to leave because they had to discharge my sister. Luckily, she had only stayed for four hours. I wondered if my parents would understand the pain they had contributed to this family. I just realized that my sister was emotionally neglected by our parents. I had to face them before we lost another teenager to depression.

When we arrived home, Mom was in class, Dad was playing *Fifa 46*, and Ndapewa was on YouTube doing research for a social science project that she had to present the following day.

"Hi Dad, hi Sis." I didn't expect any response from them because they were married to their electronic gadgets. I went straight to my room to check my emails. Maria also went to her room. She didn't want to talk to our parents, even though I had tried to convince her countless times to open up and this is why I had requested for a mind-reader robot, to help people like her, but I still didn't find an email from the designer. It had been months.

"Another disappointment!" I snapped. "How many times should I beg for what is right?" I was disappointed because this robot was



specially designed to help with the research, it was not a common robot.

I had so much going on that I didn't hear a knock on the door. "Oh, sorry. I am dozing" I lied.

"With your eyes fixed to your MacBook?"

"Yes, Mom. I am probably just tired, it was a long day."

"Are you fine?" She asked as she walked close to my 'miracle table', where all research was done.

"No, you are lying, you are not fine David, you are stressed." I moved an inch back in fear, nearly breaking my pulse rate machine. I thought my mom's voice had changed.

"What is it, David?" I was now hearing her normal voice. I got nervous. I wanted to run to Dad, but Mom blocked my way.

"What is going on Mom? You are changing voices."

"Hi, it's me. I am Pombili. Nice to finally meet you."
It was a beautiful, shiny robot.

"Wait, Pombili, you are finally here! I have been expecting you!" I screamed in excitement, I couldn't believe that I finally got my perfect companion. Thank you, Mom, for welcoming Pombili into the house." Mom went back to the study room.

"Hey buddy, come here," said Mom. "You were right, I was lying. I was stressed because you took a long time to come home." Pombili moved closer to me.

Pombili was capable of reading human minds and exposing their feelings. She was very helpful in my everyday life because I helped people suffering from emotional trauma and depression. Pombili is an *Oshiwambo* name, which means *peace*. Despite how much I rely on her after spending a few hours with her, I switched off Pombili's brain in order to sleep because she had endless questions about my day, some of which I had no answers to.

The following morning, I packed my camera and Pombili, and headed to school. After class, I went to people I had interviewed months and years ago. I wanted to confirm the honesty in their previous responses on their emotional well-being, which included their coping and healing mechanism. This is because most

people were scared to open up, they were scared to be judged and to be called names.

Once home, I sensed something was off. Ndapewa was nowhere in the house, her usual sitting spot was empty. I turned back to the living room to ask dad.

"Hi Dad, where is Ndapewa?" Dad was watching soccer on TV and didn't respond, so I went back to my room. She might be at the neighbors or at Aunt Katrina's. An hour later, my little sister was still not around. I didn't want to assume anything, so I returned to dad. It seemed I was the only one panicking. Mom was dozing in the study room and Dad was on the phone. He didn't realize that Ndapewa wasn't around.

"Dad, I assume Ndapewa is not yet back from school."

"What did you say?" he asked.



"She is not here!"

I raised my voice when he told me to calm down.

"Give me a second. I got you." He was busy on the phone while I was stressing out. His facial expression didn't change a bit. I wanted to yell at him, but, with Dad, I had to practice patience.



"Her phone is here, if you are trying to call her, Dad." I reached out to a cupboard to show her phone to Dad.

"Okay, I am aware of that. I am trying to track her current location. She is in the surrounding area, I don't know why she isn't here."

"What do you mean, Dad?"

"I have installed a tracking device in her school bag."

"Is that why you didn't pick her up?"

"I forgot, David, I forgot! Can we just look for Ndapewa?"

"Dad, are you aware that a device only tracks her current location, but it doesn't protect her from kidnappers?" I was fuming.

"David, let's go. She's nearby."

We got in the car and drove to where the tracking device led us. We spent about five

minutes searching until, from the corner of my eyes, I noticed the bright blue stripe of her backpack on the stairs of the church."

"Dad!!!" I yelled.

"What is it, David?"

"Tha.... that is... Nda..."

"Speak up!" He yelled.

"Ndapewa's bag, Dad!!" I returned the same energy.

I could tell my Dad was shocked. He didn't say anything and, instead, ran around the building. I followed him. The place was quiet. The only sound was our footsteps. We didn't inform Mom because we thought we would find Ndapewa, but we couldn't find her anywhere. I didn't know how to break the news to Mom..

When we got in the house, we found my nerdy little sister watching a series on Netflix.

"Where were you, Ndapewa?" I asked, my body shaking.

"I was at school and now I am home." She rolled her eyes.

"Your bag was in church," my dad said.

"Yes, because a thief put a tracking device in my bag so I had to trick them."

"Wait, how do you know that it's a tracking device?" We were all surprised.

"Maria taught me safety tips. She warned me about the tracking device."

"I'm sorry, my princess, I didn't know it would get to this. I wanted to keep you safe."

"So, it was you, Dad? I was scared for my life. You have threatened my privacy. Please talk

to me instead and spending time with me will keep me safe, not a device." She spoke in an angry tone.

"What is going on?" Mom asked.

"Ndapewa came late from school, we thought she got lost," Dad explained.

"I am glad she is home. My five minute break is over, I will talk to you guys later."

Weeks later, Maria, Ndapewa and I sat for the final exam. It was a busy week for everyone. Pombili was annoying but helpful, really. She could tell when I needed to rest my mind, though I felt like I was sleeping on my grades. The exam wasn't hard, but I had trouble catching up. One day, while I was busy on my phone, our parents called us for a family meeting.

"I need your candidate numbers to login to your student portals." Ndapewa and Maria gave theirs first. Ndapewa passed outstandingly.

I was confident I passed, but I wasn't sure about Maria, who was shivering.



We are humans, not programmed machines by Ndinaelao Moses

"Maria!!!" Mom yelled. I moved an inch back. I could tell Ndapewa was frightened too.

"Do you know how much we spent on you?" Maria was quiet. There was never a time my parents questioned our performance in school. They treated us like Pombili. I did well, but my sister's emotional well-being was important to me, especially after witnessing her suicide attempt.

"Your mother is talking to you, Maria!" When Dad joined in, I thought he wanted to make things better. My parents continued cursing my sister and threatening to not pay for her school.

"I'm sorry, I promise to change my grades!" Maria pleaded. It was painful to see my sister getting all emotional, all I could do was embrace her and let the stream of her tears soak through my shirt.

"Your sorry is useless," Mom yelled as she always did.

"It has always been useless, anyway, you never listen to us." I was fed up. I had to step in.

"Are you talking to us?"

"Yes, you don't listen to us, especially to Maria. All you do is blame her. She pleaded to get a private tutor, but you turned a blind eye. You are always on your phones. Maria told you about gardening tools she needed for her agricultural practical assessments, but you ignored it."

"Yes, what on earth do you expect me to do? You are always shaming me, but you don't do your duty as parents. Leave me alone!" Maria cried out.

"What did you two say? We give you everything," Dad said.

You are lying, you don't listen to them, and you don't apologize when you are wrong. When you realize it, you bribe them with money. They want love and appreciation from their parents. I thought Pombili was off. At first, I ignored her, but then I heard myself continue.

"Yes, Dad. It doesn't matter. Everything without love and appreciation is nothing, there's more to that. Do you know how much you've damaged Maria? I am sure you don't understand her tears."

"Yes, I don't like it here, I wish we had a grandparent. You love your phone more than you love us. I am a stranger in this house, sometimes I wish I could just die." My sister's words got to me. I couldn't hold it anymore, so



"What accidents have you kept from us?" I had to betray my sister because it was the right thing to do. As I explained every detail to our parents, I could see they were trying hard not to yell as they always did. Maria's emotions got the best of her, but Mom later calmed her down.

"I am so sorry, Maria. What can we do to make the situation better?" Dad asked.

"Hear me out. Don't assume, ask but, don't yell at me. I am also not an expense. I don't want to talk to my iPad anymore. I am tired of searching for help from strangers. I am tired of being parented by YouTube and Google. I have no interest in computer science, but you want to choose a career for me." After Maria stopped, I continued.

"Yes, a number of people I interviewed are living unhappy professional lives because they had no choice, but to take careers their parents chose for them. I also have seen parents whose children committed suicide after they have failed, because instead of them being supportive, they insult and make them feel like they will never achieve anything in life. All successful people have once failed in their lives, but they had people who believed in them and supported them. Support is more than just money. Mom and Dad, we have a lot of young adults and children who are unknowingly battling childhood emotional neglect. One thing I have also picked up is how parents allow digital technology to consume their lives, how they let technology parent their children and overtake all their duties. A good example is how Dad used a tracking device

I left the room, but Ndapewa ran to me and gave me a hug.

Mom followed after Sis. "David, what's going on? Why have you bottled up so many emotions?"

"I haven't bottled up my emotions. Maria did. And that's why we never told you about her accident. Please talk to her. I know how to take care of myself."

"Wait! What accident?" Mom covered her mouth with both hands.

"Don't worry about it! David helped me," Maria responded.

instead of spending time with Ndapewa and how you all don't have time for us. We don't even spend time together as a family." My parents were listening attentively.

"Okay, thank you. We will try our best. We thought giving you everything you needed meant love." Dad tapped Maria's shoulders.

"Yes, I am sorry, my children, for all the hurt I have caused you." Mom's voice wavered. "Anyways, what exactly is childhood emotional neglect? I never came across that."

"It's a failure of a parent caused by not meeting the emotional needs of a child. It's not child emotional abuse because it's not intentional. Parents with emotionally neglected children can still provide care and necessity like you do with these children. This mostly occurs when parents spend more time on their phones and let children parent themselves. How when a parent is wrong doesn't apologise, instead they brush it off with a video game or a new phone. Emotionally neglected children may suffer from depression,

anxiety, low self-esteem, distancing from friends and family. If these children are not helped, they deal with consequences as adults because their emotions were not valued as children, so they are usually emotionally absent, suffer from eating disorders, feel lonely and may fail to properly nurture their children's emotions." My family was listening to Pombili attentively.

"We are sorry." Dad's voice shivered while tears welled up in Mom's eyes.

After Pombili's talk, my parents started listening to us more often with less judgements. Not only have they been supportive of my project, but at times, we would even embark on a journey together as a family to help people fight against mental health issues all over Namibia. Maria was confident enough and never compared herself to her peers again. The thought of ending her life has never crossed her mind since.

