

The Secret Circle

The Secret Circle

Elizabeth Kawadza



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Very special thanks to all the adolescents who were brave enough to open up and share their stories with a total stranger – these are your stories. I salute you and believe your willingness to speak out will impact positively in the lives of your peers in ways you will never know or imagine.

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*

Dedication

To My Late Parents
Jonah Benjamin Kawadza & Tabitha Kawadza née Chitukudza

*'You both showed me the power of faith -
It can take anyone far and beyond unimaginable boundaries'*

Foreword

HIV and AIDS continue to have a devastating impact on Society. Sadly many children and their parents still do not know their HIV Status. Without that knowledge, they will not receive the necessary HIV prevention, treatment care and support services needed to stay healthy and will continue to spread the virus if not aware of their status.

This book challenges adolescents to know their status and adhere to the prescribed treatment. The content has been presented in a convincing way and the characters are well-rounded. The reader gains knowledge on HIV and AIDs procedures and the consequences of non-adherence. Such terms as Viral Load; CD4 Count; Opportunistic Infections; ARV and ART are explained in a simple manner empowering the reader to make informed decisions.

The goals of the book have been achieved as it encourages testing and medication adherence. It also deals with the emotional side of living with the virus, as it highlights the negative effects of stigmatisation yet offers hope and shows how mutual support can be realised.

Dr. P D Parirenyatwa (Senator)
Minister of Health and Child Care



Preface

In partnership with the Ministry of Health and Child Care, Medecins Sans Frontieres has been working in the implementation of HIV/AIDS medical care programmes in Zimbabwe since 2000. These cover the provision of Opportunistic Infections (OI) and Antiretroviral Treatment (ART) care in various districts. This includes the introduction of first line single dose therapy, decentralisation of services to the remote clinics, task shifting and task sharing where nurses are capacitated to start HIV treatment. Recently, through the co-operation of our partner, the Ministry of Health and Child Care, we have implemented the roll out of Viral Load Testing in our project. Beyond the medical care we deem psycho-social support a vital cornerstone of the holistic treatment of our patients by providing counselling, social forums such as Community ART Groups (CAGs), relevant Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials.

Hence, Medecins Sans Frontieres – OCB Zimbabwe Mission – is pleased to be associated with the editing and printing of *The Secret Circle* by Elizabeth Kawadza. We consider this book to be appropriate IEC material for adolescents. Our aim is to positively impact their lives through sensitising them of the "need to know" regarding their HIV status, whether they have been sexually active or not. If they are HIV positive, the storyline outlines the steps they should take and it prepares them for what they might encounter. *The Secret Circle* contains an underlining message of hope to encourage those who are positive. It gives them an assurance that they are not alone and that there is life after testing positive.

For us to break up "The Secret Circle" we need to vigorously contin-

ue with HIV and AIDS educational campaigns that empower adolescents and even younger children with the relevant information. Without the systematic and continual dissemination of accurate and comprehensive knowledge about HIV and AIDS, the link of the virus to future generations will continue. Yet, together, we can and are slowing the epidemic down. Let us not relent in this struggle.

If we are not vigilant and do not support the youth, HIV will remain as Nicky Woolfe pointed out, "the most recent truly devastating pandemic," worse than Ebola that has recently killed thousands in West Africa.[*The Guardian*, 3/10/14]

Daliah Mehdi, chief clinical officer for Aids Foundation Chicago recently said those who don't want Ebola compared to HIV are actually stigmatizing people with HIV.

Our experience with HIV in many ways reflects and echoes similar experiences with Ebola, and according to Mehdi, we could potentially go down the same road. Thus, as MSF, we believe sharing information with adolescents will help to stem the spread of HIV/AIDS and dispense with another "disease" called stigma which is still attached to the illness.

Fasil Tezera
Head of Mission
Medecins Sans Frontieres – Operation Center Brussels,
Zimbabwe Mission



CHAPTER 1

The Circle

Saturday afternoon arrived quickly. Suzie walked slowly towards the science block. She was both anxious and curious. Anxious about having to share her secret with a room full of... full of what? Why had she agreed to meet with them? Maybe she shouldn't go? But the curiosity to see who else would be there was overwhelming.

The girl stood in front of the Lab door and took a deep breath. She could feel her heart pounding. Her hand reached out to grip the door handle. Wait. From inside, she could hear the sound of laughter. Laughter? It was not a laughing matter it must be the wrong room. She looked up at the sign on the door to check if she had the right room. Yes, Lab 3.

Suzie took another deep breath, and then forced herself to turn the handle and push the door ajar. The hinges creaked as the door opened announcing her arrival. The slower she entered, the more pronounced the sound became. She cringed and the expression on her face was one of acute embarrassment. The laughter that had come from within the room ended abruptly.

As she became visible to the occupants of the room a voice broke the silence.

"Suzie, welcome!" The counsellor immediately stood up and walked towards her. She had one of those long double-barrel surnames so for convenience sake, she often introduced herself as Mrs T.

"Hi," Suzie whispered. Her voice expressed her nervousness but her curiosity overcame it as she looked beyond the woman towards three girls sitting in a circle. Mrs T took her hand which was sticky with fear, and led her to the circle of chairs, where she sat the newcomer down next to her. Suzie now had a front row seat. She gazed stunned at the three individuals who shared her same secret.

"Suzie, I honestly didn't think you'd come," said Mrs T smiling, "I'm so pleased you did. Ladies, this is Suzie. Remember, I explained to you that there was a new girl who'd tested positive whom I thought would benefit from this meeting. So, after receiving your consent, I gave Suzie the details and told her that if she wanted to meet others like herself she could join us. You should have seen the disbelief on her face when I told her she was not the only one in the school."

Suzie barely heard a word of what Mrs T was saying. She was preoccupied wondering what on earth Mona was doing here? Mona was not only the most popular girl in the school but beautiful and intelligent, she seemed to have it all. Mona sat cross-legged gently swinging her foot with – was it amusement or indifference? Her hands were perfectly manicured with a glint of nail polish. She wore her uniform as though it was tailor-made and the hemline was as short as school regulations permitted. Mona exuded a confidence that made her look superior, a guise bolstered by her height and good looks. For someone like Suzie, it was as though she came from another world, a world where her secret did not and could not exist. Yet here was Mona in flesh and blood.

"Why are you looking at me like I'm some psycho." Mona raised a carelessly plucked eyebrow.

"S-sorry, I just did not expect to see you here."

"Why?"

Suzie had no idea how to answer that question, and after a long pause, she mumbled, "You're... so... so popular and normal."

"What does popular have to do with this? Aren't you normal?" Mona sounded exasperated.

"Yes," Suzie replied quietly. It had not been her intention to offend.

"So?" Mona retorted.

Mrs T listened to the exchange with interest. She decided to ignore Mona's irritation. Maybe a dose of the girl's candidness was exactly what Suzie needed to shake her into reality and toughen her up a bit. So, Mrs T clapped her hands and said, "All right everyone. Let's get on with what we came here to do today. Can you three ladies please tell Suzie your names?"

The girl on the other side of Mrs T spoke up, "Hi, my name's Gillian." She was wearing the school tracksuit. Suzie had seen her play volleyball at which in Suzie's eyes she was exceptionally good. She had an athletic, tomboyish build and a mischievous look. She glowed with life and vitality.

It was then Mona's turn to introduce herself. "You seem to know me so I'm not going to tell you my name." The other two girls and Mrs T smiled as though they would not expect anything else.

Everyone's attention now turned to the third girl who said, "Hi. My name's Maggie. You only started this term?"

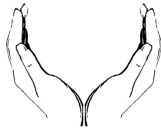
"Yes," Suzie replied. After Mona's rudeness she was grateful for any kind word. Maggie seemed rather untidily dressed and had, at Suzie's sensitive first glance, seemed rather sullen and distant. It did not appear as though she'd been laughing with the others. Indeed, Maggie did not look well but after she'd introduced herself her face lit up with a warm smile. It was as if she had two different personalities.

"Thank you for the introductions. Now, Suzie, these three girls are also positive. It's not an easy thing to face alone so we're here to help and encourage each other. Just like you, they want to keep their condition a

secret. So nothing goes out of this meeting. Now, I'd really appreciate it if you three could tell Suzie about yourselves and share your experiences of being positive. Gillian, please go first."

"What do you want me to tell her Mrs T?" Gillian looked dismayed.

"Anything you feel comfortable with. About when and why you were tested; how you felt and reacted then, and what has happened since, for example."





CHAPTER 2

Gillian

Okay," Gillian sighed, "about two years ago at the inter-district soccer tournament, there were some people doing HIV-testing. On a dare I decided to go for testing and I tested positive.

"When the lady told me my results I was very shocked, in fact, I felt ill. I'd never slept with any guy and never been sick. How could such a thing

happen to me? I can barely remember what the nurse said afterwards except that she told me to go out for a while and come back later so that we could talk some more. She was very thoughtful: she knew I wouldn't want my friends to become suspicious because I was taking so long.

"My mates were waiting for me and, of course, they asked me straight away what my result was. I told them, 'What do you expect? It was negative!' And since that day I've become a professional liar. I didn't go back to talk with that woman. Instead, I made a decision to ignore everything.

"But as much as I tried to blot it all out, I couldn't. My status was constantly on my mind. To make it worse, the following week I read a book by a West African author – I forget her name – and in it there was a line, 'You're not running away from the snake for the snake is in you.' The words haunted me. I felt so alone. My mind was a horror movie where a snake was consuming my body. It was awful."

Gillian began to cry. Suzie looked at Mrs T who remained sitting quietly and let the girl cry. Suzie wondered why she wasn't comforting Gillian? Mrs T sensed her agitation, and turning to her, said, "Suzie, here we let each other cry as much as we need too. We acknowledge and express our grief, fear, anger and other emotions as this is all part of the acceptance process. Then, bit by bit, we try to overcome our anxieties and resentments."

Gillian reached for the box of tissues in the centre of the circle. She blew her nose and mopped her tears. There was silence for a while. Without a word being spoken, Suzie could feel the sympathy emanating from the others. Gillian's tears affected Suzie. It was comforting to know that she was not the only one who'd been crying.



After a while Gillian continued, "I know this sounds crazy but that saying, the one about snakes, was my wake-up call. I knew I had to do something or speak to someone about my status or else I'd go crazy. So I decided to speak to my mother when I went home for the holidays, but every time I wanted to tell her, something stopped me. I'd look at her and at my old-

er brother and wonder if they were positive too. I thought of my father who'd passed away when I was about three years old in a car accident. Was he HIV positive?

"So I came up with a plan. I faked a bad stomach-ache. I thought if I'm taken to the doctor, she will have to do a blood test and knowing our family doctor, she will definitely tell my mum the results.

"So my mother took me to the doctor. You know adults, if a teenage girl mentions anything about a stomach problem, the first thing they think is: might she be pregnant? So the doctor did some blood tests. When we went back for the results she said she wanted to do another test. She said there'd been some error at the Lab and they needed to re-test. That night, for the first time, I felt some hope: maybe the first results, the ones I was given at the soccer tournament might've been wrong.

"We went back the following afternoon for the results and the doctor asked to see my mother alone. My heart sank. I knew this was not good. When my mum came back her eyes were red from crying. She looked at me and we both started to cry together.

"The doctor also advised my mother and brother to get tested. My mother tested positive but my brother refused to go for testing. He now accuses my mother of being a whore for passing this disease on to me. I was so close to my brother, but now he says that I'm not his sister because mum must have had me from an extra-marital relationship. He says that's how she must have got the disease. But I have no doubt that I am my father's daughter as I am the spitting image of him."

"How old is your brother?" Mrs T asked.

"Twenty-three."

"Why do you think he's saying all these things?"

"Denial and fear that he might have it." Gillian answered quickly as though she'd already given the matter a lot of thought. Then, after a pause, she added, "And I guess, he can't handle the idea that his father – our father – was HIV positive."

Everyone sat quietly absorbing all the many emotional trials that can result from someone discovering that they're infected with the dreaded virus.

Mrs T broke the silence when she explained: "The first HIV case was diagnosed in the USA in 1981. The treatments now available for combating HIV did not exist then. This meant that all children born from mothers infected with HIV were very likely to become infected themselves. We can't blame your parents because most probably they didn't know that they had the virus. You and your brother were most probably healthy children. This is why there's a campaign for adolescents to be tested. Was your mother ever unwell?"

Gillian replied, "No, not really. She was not well when she started taking her ARVs but I guess that's normal because I struggled to adjust as well. She's also stressed by my brother's cruelty to her and I know she worries about me."

"Give it time." Mrs T said reassuringly, "Your mum will manage. I only hope your brother will be able to face reality soon and stop creating fantasies as a coping mechanism. A lot of people go through a denial phase, it's normal."

"But, Mrs T, it's been almost two years now and he's still acting like a jerk. He can be so cruel. I love my brother and now he denies that I'm his sister," Gillian's voice broke and her eyes filled.

Mrs T smiled at Gillian and replied, "All you can do is give him time. We're all different and respond to situations differently. Look how maturely you're coping with the situation."

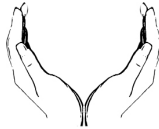
"Gillian, tell me, did you ever get an explanation for the error in the lab? What happened?" Mona asked.

"The doctor confessed that there wasn't an error. She just couldn't believe the results, as she's been our family doctor since I was a toddler. When I was growing up there was never a hint that I might be positive. I was always a healthy child, so she felt she had to double-check in case there had been a mistake."

Gillian stopped talking. It was as if she was worn out by all the memories.

Suzie could see that she just didn't want to talk about herself or her family any more. Mrs T looked at the girl and said gently, "Thanks Gillian. You did well.

"Now, Mona, can you please share your experience."





CHAPTER 3

MONA

How do I know I can trust her?" Mona questioned, glaring at Suzie. "Like you, I know she doesn't want anyone to know. If she tells your secret, I'm sure you'll tell hers." Mrs T said firmly. Her direct response was good enough for Mona who'd been keeping her secret since she was in Grade 7.

"Well, my baby brother was often sick and when he died our parents told us that he'd had leukemia. Shortly afterwards, my parents took blood from my big sister and me but we were never told why. About a week afterwards, they called me in and told me that they wanted to make sure that I didn't fall sick like my brother, so I needed to take some medication daily. For the first two months I reacted badly to the medicine which I took at night."

Mona stopped and smiled at the memory of her parent's concern. "During that time, every night one of them would sleep on the spare bed in my room just to make sure I was okay."

The smile on her face vanished as quickly as it had appeared as she continued, "At the time, I was in Grade 5 and I took that medication for two years. My parents are both doctors so I never went to see a doctor and the medicine always was in a bottle with no labels. I didn't even know what it was.

"Then, one day, the truth came out. My parents were having an argument when I walked in unexpectedly. They weren't expecting me and were so angry with each other that they didn't notice that I'd come back early from school. My mum was shouting at my dad, that it was his 'messing about' which had killed my brother and was now killing me, herself and him.

"I was only eleven. I hadn't seen my parents fighting before, and I hadn't ever understood why I had to take medicine; but I understood that something was horribly wrong. Were we all dying? When they saw me, I just ran out of the house. My parents both came running after me and caught me as I was trying to open the gate.

"I started screaming and my best friend Cynthia came rushing over from next door. My parents gave her some lame excuse and dragged me back inside. My dad squeezed my arms painfully and said, 'You must never tell anyone what you heard today.'

"Before I could say anything my mother repeated. 'Mona, your dad is right. Never tell anyone.'

And it has been like that ever since. I get all the medical attention and medication I need. I think if I told them about this group they would disown me."

"What about your big sister does she know?" Gillian asked, thinking about her own brother.

"Yeah," Mona replied.

"And," asked Mrs T, "how did she respond to the news?"

Mona shrugged her shoulders then said, "She's now away at university. After she was born my parents split up for a while and when they got back together, I was their reconciliation baby." She shrugged again. "And I now carry the consequences of their adventures." Mona glared at the others, her face a mask hiding her pain.

"Mona," Mrs T said softly reaching out her hand...

"Don't pity me," Mona said angrily.

"She's in fighting mode. It wouldn't be her first fight this week," Gillian interjected with a wicked smile.

"Gillian, you've got a big mouth," Mona retorted.

"Mona? In a fight? Why?" Mrs T asked with concern.

"Over a boy," Gillian replied laughing.

Mona glared at Gillian in an effort to silence her with an intimidating look.

"Boy? This sounds interesting do you want to talk about it?" Mrs T queried.

"It was some dumb girl who said I was stealing her boyfriend. It's not my fault if he likes me," Mona said defensively.

"Do you like the boy?" Mrs T continued.

"No!"

"Is there any boy you do like?"

"No! What can I do with them and what can they do with me? Nothing."

"Nothing?" interjected Maggie slyly.

Mrs T ignored Maggie's comment and continued. "What do you mean by nothing?"

"Well, my mother warned me that I should avoid relationship with boys until I'm ready to get married."

"Why?"

"You know why Mrs T! Don't ask such stupid questions! Do you want me to spell it out? We might have S E X!"

"Ohh?" Mrs T was unmoved by Mona's outburst.

"If that were the case, couldn't you use condoms?"

"No, they don't work."

"Why don't they work?"

Gillian and Mona looked at each other and Mona nodded at Gillian as if to say go ahead, tell her. "Some of the boys in our form told us never to use condoms. They contain little worms. It's a trick to make the virus spread. We asked them to show us, so they put Coke in the condoms and the little worms came out."

"Little worms?"

"Yes," Gillian and Mona said together.

Mrs T smiled. "Ladies, I'm sure those little worms were a result of the lubricant gel in condoms reacting to the acid in the Coke. I'm surprised you were taken in, you're such smart girls."

Gillian and Mona looked abashed. "Why would the guys make up such a story?" Mona asked.

"Maybe they're trying to trick some girl to have sex without a condom." Mrs T replied.

Maggie asked, "Is there a difference whether you use condoms or not?"

"For your information condoms have a 95 per cent protection rate. This protection is not against little worms but from pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, STIs, and the HIV virus. Remember, you can also be the one who transmits the virus to someone else if you're not using condoms. That's the difference you should remember."

"So my mum lied to me yet again!" Mona's cynical voice sounded tired.

"I wouldn't be so hard on your mother, Mona. She obviously loves you

a great deal and cares about you. Most mothers don't want their young daughters to experiment early with sex. Some girls imagine themselves in love with a boy who is simply using her as an experiment in order to boast about his prowess. Don't forget there's often huge peer pressure on teenage boys to prove that they are *men!*"

"But I'm almost fifteen, Mrs T. I'm not a child."

"Yes, Mona, you're fifteen and you've already been through a good deal, which can make you mature for your years. But let me tell you that having sex with a boy is not proof of maturity, and, like your mother, as an older woman, I don't want you to be badly hurt in a relationship which is not based on mutual trust, respect and affection."

"But," Mona was undaunted, "are you saying we can have sex if we use condoms?"

Mrs T laughed. "Mona that sounds like a trick question. I see I have to word my advice very carefully so that no one," Mrs T looked straight at Mona, "imagines I've given them license to have sex if they use a condom. Let me make myself very clear. It's normal to have boyfriends. But real relationships take time and they're not based on when or how often you have sex.

"Let the boy become your friend. Build the friendship. Do not rush into the physical part of the relationship. Yes you can hold hands – no virus transmitted there. Yes, you can hug – no virus transmitted. Yes, you can even kiss – no virus transmitted. It is in the sexual act where the virus transmission takes place."

"But should I tell my boyfriend that I'm positive?" asked Gillian.

"Why would you rush to do that?"

"Just being honest and upfront," said Gillian. "There's so much secrecy around AIDS and HIV."

"You're right," Mrs T said, "and you've all experienced such secrecy first hand. But still, most of us only share intimate personal details with people we really trust. That's why I think it's probably best to wait, build the re-

lationship and see where it's taking you both. You might break up before you become serious, and then what? The boy would know your status and if he was hurt or angry, he could spread it.

"I can't say often enough that seriousness in a relationship does not mean sex. Seriousness means trust, dependability and accountability. You will sense it when the time is right when you reach that stage.

"Whether positive or negative, love holds no guarantees, and certainly not in its early stages. You can be negative and dumped because you find you don't like the same sort of movies. If somebody loves and cares for you, they'll be there for you. If he or she does not genuinely care for you, trust me, even before you get to the serious stage, they'll have done something that will make you want to dump them."

Suzie asked, "How about if he wants to have children?"

Before Mrs T could respond Mona said, "No sweat. My parents are both positive and they had a negative baby."

"I thought it was just you and your sister?" Maggie sounded puzzled.

"Well, I hadn't finished my story when Gillian decided to tell you all about my fight, which you all found more interesting than my story! Anyway, when my parents stopped fighting, they decided to have another baby. So I have a baby brother called Mark who is negative."

"How did they manage that?" Suzie was amazed.

"PMTCT meaning Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission. In simple terms, if a pregnant woman tests HIV positive, they're given special attention at the clinic with drugs aimed at preventing HIV from crossing from the mother's bloodstream to the baby's. Ideally, if you already know your status before pregnancy, you should inform the clinic or your medical doctor of your intention to fall pregnant. This way they can work with you and assess when it is best for you to do so. There are tests they can conduct," Mrs T informed her.

Even though Suzie nodded her head in understanding, a look of amazement still lingered on her face.

"That said," continued Mrs T, "and while I want everyone in this room to know the facts and have the right information, I must add that considering having children when you are still so young, is *not* a good idea. You have your lives before you. Focus on finishing school first, let marriage and childbirth come later."

Mona pulled a face, as if she was tired of being lectured to, and quickly changed the subject. "I think I've figured out why I was so upset earlier. My parents in their own crazy way have each other. My other siblings don't have to deal with this, they're in the clear. That's what upsets me."

"Deal with what, Mona?"

"All this! This secret!" Mona burst out.

"But why does it have to be a secret?"

"Because my parents told me not to tell anyone. I'm the child who is protecting my parents from exposing their secret. No one should know that I take ARVs. Do you know that I tell my roommates that it's a special vitamin tablet that my parents prescribed for me because I have this hormonal imbalance, blah blah blah? The tablets are even in this really nice vitamin tablet container. I have to make sure that no one ever gets to see the tablets, just the beautiful container they're in. And guess who came up with this cover story? My mother!

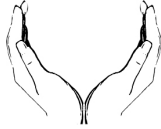
"Neither of my parents has ever apologized to me for passing the virus on to me. I'm sure if I had cancer or some other terminal disease they'd have preferred that!"

Tears of frustration began to flow down Mona's face. She reached for the tissue box and blew her nose.

Mona's tears disturbed Suzie. This was the girl whom she'd idolized and wished to be like. Such a girl was never meant to have problems like these or cry in this way.

Mrs T said, "Mona despite their shortcomings, I do believe your parents love you. We all idolize our parents for a while, put them on a pedestal,

expect them as adults to do no wrong, but as we grow up and become adults ourselves, we realize that we all make mistakes, and our parents did as well."





CHAPTER 4

MAGGIE

"Maggie are you ready to share your experience?" asked Mrs T. Maggie said nothing and looked at Mrs T as though to say, "You expect me to tell my story?"

Mrs T understood her look and said, "Maggie, if you don't want to share your story with us, it's okay. But what you have to tell us is important as we

all learn from each other."

Maggie looked out of the window, and said simply, "I received my results and immediately started to take ARVs."

"That was a good decision, Maggie. Can you explain why you didn't hesitate to do so?" Mrs T was gently trying to draw more out of her.

"I have to take responsibility for my life," was the firm response.

"Have you told any of your family?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Maggie turned to look at Mrs T and in a voice that shrilled with stress said, "What do I tell them?..."

"Hi Mummy! I've been having a series of one-night-stands. Oh, and by the way, I'm positive!" The sarcasm with which she mimicked herself unveiled the curtain on her unhappiness.

Suzie gasped and then quickly covered her mouth hoping that no one had heard her. Gillian bowed her head to hide the expression on her face. But Mona appeared fascinated by the outburst and looked at Maggie with a new interest.

Maggie glared back and said nastily, "Why are you looking at me. While you're dreaming about having sex, some of us haven't waited. Despite your looks, I can have any boy I want."

In her role as counsellor, Mrs T always kept a close eye on developments; she knew that if she let Mona respond, it would be the beginning of a third world war and the end of the meeting. So, before Mona could respond, Mrs T prompted, "Mona, quiet, please."

Then she turned to Maggie and said, "Maggie, please calm down. No one here is your enemy. Every time we meet you seem to be angrier than the time before. What's wrong?"

Maggie rubbed her eyes, fighting back tears that she did not want anyone to see. Finally she blurted out, "I'm tired of people talking about me."

"How do you know they're talking about you?" Mrs T asked gently.

"I'm not stupid. I don't look like Gillian and Mona. No one imagines they're positive. Look at me! I look and feel sick!" This was the heart of her bitterness and Maggie had managed to express what she really felt. Her voice was full of pain. Her tough brave exterior had cracked; the vulnerable girl who was fighting to be heard had suddenly spoken out.

There was silence while they all absorbed this new persona, and reflected each in their own way how hard it was to keep trying to pretend that all was well, when each of them knew it wasn't.

After a while, Maggie continued, "Last time I went to the clinic they told me my viral load was high and my CD4 had gone down."

"Why?" asked Mrs T. "What's triggered this?"

Maggie looked down at her feet. Suzie sat up and listened intently to the conversation. Mrs T had mentioned something to her about a CD4 count but she had not paid attention. What was this via... via... something? Suzie sensed that this was a very real, very serious exchange and not the moment to ask any questions.

In a voice so quiet, they could barely hear, Maggie muttered, "I stopped taking my ARVs for about two months."

"Maggie! Why?" For the first time the girls heard real distress in Mrs T's voice.

"I'm fed up of everything."

Very casually, Mona said, "And you wonder why you look sick? As much as I hate taking the tablets, I hate being sick more."

Gillian jumped in with a question, "What do they call it, Mrs T?"

"Who call what?" Mrs T responded.

"Taking those suckers at the same time every day. Ad...Ad.." Gillian tried to explain.

"It is called adherence." Mrs T replied.

The older woman was grateful that the girls had felt free to comment. Mona and Gillian had given her enough time to compose herself after her show of emotion. That was not supposed to happen but she was human

and genuinely cared for each of them. She reflected again that the ones with a solid support system always seemed happier and more able to cope than the ones without. And since they were given support, it made them able to support others more easily.

Maggie felt horribly conflicted. Despite her curt responses, her apparent bravado, deep down, she knew she wanted to talk as freely as the other girls and to accept their friendship.

She considered them lucky because they could blame someone else for their positive status; sometimes she blamed the guys that she'd fooled around with, sometimes she blamed herself. She was the one who'd consented to having unprotected sex. If only she could turn back the clock and had insisted that they use condoms, maybe she wouldn't be sitting here today.

It had all started with Jack who was three years older than she was. Maggie had gone out to a party with her friends. Jack had been there, and he'd been charming and made her feel like she was the best thing that ever happened to him. She knew he was a flirt, and she'd been flattered. She'd been stupid but that's how she'd felt. She never felt for a moment that he was taking advantage of her youth and her naivety. Instead, she'd thought for once, I'm being treated as if I'm woman.

She told her friends that Jack was taking her home and they'd tried hard to persuade her not to go with him. Everyone knew that Jack had the reputation for being a casanova but Maggie didn't care. Thrilled by the attention, she told herself that probably her friends were jealous of her, and she ignored their warnings.

When they left the party Jack turned up his charm to full blast and Maggie in the end agreed to have sex with him in the back seat of his car. Maggie had not really wanted to go that far but she liked him and wanted to please him. She thought that if she didn't agree to sleep with him he would dump her and look for another girl. It had not been fun; in fact it had been both painful and uncomfortable. She'd comforted herself by

telling herself that now she was a woman, all the time wondering what on earth all the fuss was about.

However, the next day, Jack did not call her, and eventually Maggie tried to call him. Jack did not return her calls. Instead, a few days later, he sent her a text message with one expressive Shona word in capitals, 'NDISIYE', leave me alone!

Maggie felt very hurt, very let down, but as her friends had warned her, she had no one to confide in. So, she figured that the best revenge was to go out with one of his friends to show Jack that other boys liked her. Somehow, it ended up being more than one of Jack's friends and some who were not even his friends. And now she had a reputation for being easy game, she knew it, and her gut twisted with anger, shame, hurt and humiliation.

"Yeah!" Gillian suddenly exclaimed loudly, jerking Maggie back into the present. "Yeah! That's the word adherence."

And turning to Mona, she continued, "You see this bottle? You know I carry it everywhere. Sometimes I get tired of taking these suckers so I squash them and put them in this bottle with water, which I can drink when I want to."

"Why do that?" asked Mona.

"To break the monotony. I feel like I'm cheating the system by taking the pills differently. " Gillian replied.

Mrs T repressed a sigh, "I hope this is not something you do every day, Gillian. It's best you take your medication in the normal way."

"Maybe I should get you one of mother's fancy bottles," Mona joked.

Mrs T said, "Maggie are you listening? I think Gillian and Mona are actually explaining that it's not easy for them either but you have to accept your situation and deal with it. Both girls have been taking their medication for a much longer period than you. I guess you've both found it difficult at times too. Maybe you could tell us what makes you take those pills every day?"

Mona responded first, "I want to live. I can't wait till I start working and travel the world."

"For me it's my mother because we're both on ARVs and we encourage each other," Gillian smiled.

Mrs T said, "It does make it easier when there is someone who can support you. This is why we encourage you to disclose your status to a close friend or relative. Keeping everything to yourself is stressful and can also make one feel very lonely. Maggie, do you think you can find at least one person to disclose your status to?"

Maggie shook her head ferociously. "No. My parents would kill me."

"But she has told us," Suzie volunteered.

"Yes she did. But I was hoping she also could tell someone in her family who might support her," Mrs T responded.

"No. I can't." The statement was final.

"How do you hide the tablets from them?" Mona asked. "My mother is always in my room searching through everything."

"They don't care," Maggie said flatly.

Gillian, who always liked practical solutions, said, "Fine, so you can't tell your folks but take your ARVs. After a time, if you look after yourself, you should look healthier. Do you play a sport? I find that energy breeds energy for me. Why don't you come and play volleyball with me."

Maggie couldn't resist saying, "I do exercise. I just don't do your kind of exercise."

"Well, excuse me!" Look at where your exercise has got you!" Gillian retorted, hurt.

"Maggie, there was no need for that. Gillian is only trying to help. I would like you to try to learn to accept help and kindness instead of rudely brushing it off. Is it so hard to believe that people can care about you?"

"Yes. When everyone uses you," Maggie mumbled bitterly.

Mona overheard her and asked, "But why do you let people use you? Can't you say no? Is it not you going out and doing whatever with whom-

ever? Yes, you can get whichever guy you want, but is it worth it? Unless you enjoy it, but you don't seem happy?" Mona sounded genuinely interested. She was just one human being trying to understand another and to her Maggie's behaviour seemed so self-destructive.

The room waited for an explosive response from Maggie but it did not come.

Mrs T took advantage of the pause and added, "I think Mona is trying to tell you that if you once made a mistake, you don't have to keep on making the same mistake. And Gillian was trying to suggest that you try something new, something that works for her. If you blindly keep on doing what you've done before – perhaps because you feel so trapped – nothing will ever change. You seem so terribly unhappy and I think this is blinding you from accepting help. But remember, we are here to help each other. Sometimes it is hard to accept help, especially if you feel it is born of pity rather than respect, but you're only making life harder for yourself. But, first, the most important thing is for you to help yourself: do take your medication, every day and without fail. Please Maggie. Okay?"

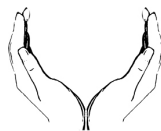
Maggie nodded.

"Fine!" Her reply was curt.



"Now ladies, I've brought us some snacks; let's have a fifteen-minute break. Suzie, do you think you are ready to share your experience with everyone after the break?"

Suzie nodded.





CHAPTER 5

SUZIE

Suzie took a deep breath. She had rehearsed events so often to herself that her story seemed to flow despite her own nervousness. "My parents, two brothers and three sisters were all HIV positive and have all died." She stopped, halted by the weight of loss. Then, taking another deep breath, she continued, "My grandmother takes care of me."

"When I came to this boarding school, I fell sick during the first week. I was sent to the clinic and I tested HIV positive. My late mother and my grandmother have always told me that nothing is impossible with prayer. I have faith that God can heal me. Perhaps this is why I've lived longer than the rest of my family. God will heal me and show his power through my healing and I will not take those tablets. "

An uneasy silence fell. Mrs T quietly observed the girls, wondering who would be the first to respond. She did not have to wait for long as Gillian was quick to say, "So you think that since we take the ARVs, we do not believe in God."

Suzie seemed to have a practiced answer, "Believing in God and faith in God are two different things. We can all believe that there is a God but not have faith that he can heal us. I have faith that he can heal me and God can heal all of us."

Mona asked, "Are you trying to convince us or you are trying to convince yourself?"

Suzie was not perturbed by their remarks. It was as though she'd already been questioned many times about her faith. "In such matters you can't use intelligence, for the wisdom of man is foolishness to God."

"Don't you know the Bible says God will help those who help themselves." began Mona. "And..."

Mrs T interrupted, "Excuse me, Mona, but can I say something please." Mona nodded.

Still looking at Mona and smiling Mrs T said, "Suzie for someone so young, you have suffered so much loss. I think it is only human to try to find meaning for so much pain, and faith in God, can ease the hurt."

Suzie blinked back tears. Mrs T was right, it was a belief in God that had helped she and her grandmother to survive the many deaths, the many funerals.

Mrs T noticed her struggling to contain her emotion, but she decided to continue, as there was still tension in the atmosphere.

Turning to the girl, she said "Do you understand why there was uneasiness in the room when you said that you have faith that God can heal you? I know you didn't mean to, but you made everyone else feel as if you're the only one here who has faith and believes in God. But to take ARVs daily requires belief and faith and a lot of inner strength. It's so easy to give up and feel overwhelmed and defeated."

Suzie did not respond. In fact, she felt somewhat hurt. Had she not felt overwhelmed and defeated when her mother died?

Gillian cleared her throat, "Suzie, my mother once told me a story. There was once a man who was trapped by a flood on an island. The water kept on rising. A man came by in a boat and asked him whether he needed help. He said no. And the water continued to rise. A fisherman paddling home very fast in his canoe stopped and offered him help and again he refused it. The flood waters rose to roof level and the man had to climb on the roof of his little house. Then, a helicopter hovered overhead and the pilot shouted out that he was going to drop a ladder down to him. But the man refused his help. He said, 'God is coming. He will save me.' He did not see that God had sent the people to save him because God did not come in the form that he had expected to see him send help. My mum told me that this story means God does not always answer our prayers in the way we expect or want him to. Maybe ARVs will be his simple way of giving you more life."

Mrs T added gently, "We're not here to force you to change your belief or faith in God. We're just concerned and are challenging you that if it is necessary you should also start ARVs."

Suzie didn't respond.

"My dear, did your mother or grandmother not take you to the clinic for your measles shots and so forth?" asked Mrs T.

"Yes," Suzie replied.

"Why do you think they did that?"

"Because they did not want me to fall sick with measles."

"Okay it is not exactly the same since there is no preventive vaccine yet for the HIV virus, but if you're initiated on ARVs, they stop the virus from spreading in your body. I'll use a Coke bottle as an example. If you take a bottle of Coke and shake it, the cap stops the fizz splashing everywhere. ARVs, like caps, contains the virus. If you stop taking the ARVs or don't take them at all, the virus has a better chance of spreading in your body or making you ill," Mrs T said persuasively.

"You and your grandmother have lost so much family, please spare your Gogo the pain of having to bury another grandchild," Mona said quietly.

When Suzie heard these words, her composure, which she had tried so hard to maintain, broke and she started to cry as if her heart would break. Maggie reached for some tissues and handed them to her.

She cried as if she had never cried before as all the pain, grief and worry cumulated over years was released through her tears.

Eventually, when her tears ceased, Mrs T asked very gently, "Can you tell me what made you cry so much?"

"I don't know. I miss my mother so much." Suzie shook her head, "I'm confused."

"Confused about what?"

"What to do."

"What exactly is confusing you?"

"Listening to all these experiences has made me begin to ask myself if I should take the medication."

Mrs T continued, "Okay. And if you don't take the ARVs, what do you think will happen?"

"That I will be showing my faith in God – at least, that's what the priest told us."

"Your faith means a lot to you doesn't it?"

Suzie nodded.

"And if you decide to take the ARVs what do you think will happen."

The room was so quiet, they could hear the birds singing outside. "I

will get better."

"Do you think that God wants you to live?" Mrs T asked.

Suzie nodded.

"So do I." Mrs T stated, "I believe God wants you to live and enjoy life."

After what seemed a long time, Suzie said, "Okay, when can I start on the medicine."

It seemed as if everyone had been holding their breath waiting for those words. Once Suzie had spoken, there were sighs of relief from all the girls, even Maggie, and the atmosphere lightened. Mona stood up and hugged Suzie and they all smiled at each other. They were together and they all understood that this was the beginning of a lifetime's journey for Suzie.

Mrs T also gave Suzie a hug. "Suzie, I'm so pleased," she said, and then sitting down she added a little practical advice. "You will need to go to the clinic on Monday for further counselling and other necessary laboratory testing."

"What counselling Mrs T? I thought this was counselling?"

"Well, you need to know why you're having another test and what to expect if you are initiated on ART."

"I'm confused what is ART and what are ARVs?" Suzie asked.

"This is the importance of counselling," Mrs T said. "We are here to answer such questions. ART stands for anti-retroviral treatment or therapy, which means the total package of HIV treatment, including medication and counselling. ARVs are the medication one is given."

"Can we not have the counselling now Ms T? My Monday schedule is so tight. I can then just come over for the test in the afternoon?"

"Okay, Suzie. Just this once. Would you other girls like to leave now?"

"I did not really get the full ART package. I only was initiated on ARVs without counselling and I am beginning to realize that my 'doctors' do not always tell me the truth. Can I stay?" asked Mona.

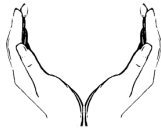
Maggie said, " Me too. Can I also stay?"

"And me," added Gillian."

Mrs T put her hands in the air to silence everyone and said, "I need to ask Suzie first. Do you mind if the girls stay?"

Suzie smiled, "No, of course not."

"Okay! Let's have another break before we start the counselling session!" Mrs T said.





CHAPTER 6

BRIDGES

After the short break, Mrs T began. "Suzie, when I informed you that your test result was positive this was another way of saying that you are infected with HIV which means human immune-deficiency virus. The test that we did was to discover whether HIV antibodies are in your blood or not. HIV antibodies are only produced in the body when HIV is present.

'You guys have done biology you know what antibodies are. They fight germs in your body and are produced in response to a specific attack. For example, if you have measles your body will actually produce antibodies to fight measles. Do you remember anything I told you about the CD4 count?' Mrs T asked Suzie.

"No, I was not paying attention."

Mrs T continued, " Okay. HIV undermines your body's immune system. It destroys the CD4 cells which help in the production of antibodies. So when one gets infected with flu or any common illness, your immune system cannot put up much of a defence because your white blood cell count is low. This explains the term your CD4 count is low.

"Currently our country's health guidelines are that when your CD4 is less than 500 cells per a microlitre, it means your immunity has been affected and you need anti-retroviral drugs, otherwise known as ARVs. However, if a child under the age of five, or a pregnant or breastfeeding mother tests positive, it is recommended that they immediately be put onto ARVs regardless of their CD4 results.

"These guidelines can differ from country to country and may periodically change when internationally based guidelines, such as those issued by the World Health Organization, change. They can also change if, for example, more people have access to ARVs because drugs become cheaper in their country.

"Sorry! I think I'm becoming sidetracked. Let's get back to what we can change right now. Suzie, since you're now in agreement, when you come to the clinic on Monday afternoon, you will be given a CD4 count test. You're fortunate that our clinic has a machine which produces the results in about 20 minutes. Some clinics can't do this, and the patient or client has a long anxious wait over a few days."

"Mrs T, if Suzie's CD4 count is above 500 what happens?" asked Mona.

"This would be excellent. It means she will not need to start on ARVs now. However, what's important is that we check her CD4 count every six

months. It is also essential that she – or any of you – visit the clinic every time you're not feeling well. And if, like Suzie, you are not on ARVs and your CD4 count falls below 500, we will initiate the ARVs treatment.

"ARVs are basically made up of a combination of three drugs to maximize the attack on the HIV."

"You mean I'll have to take three tablets a day?" Suzie asked.

"No, not really. Some people take just one tablet a day, a tablet that is a combination of all three drugs. Others have to take tablets twice a day. It depends on such factors as your age, blood composition, condition of your liver and how well, or not, your kidney functions.

"What's very important to remember is that the medication should be taken at the same time every day."

"Thank God I was warned about the side-effects!" Gillian interjected half laughing.

"For about the first two months, I had the most horrendous nightmares. My poor roommates – if they only knew the truth – I think they'd sue me for abuse. Every time it happened they would all wake up and start praying for me. They were convinced that it was some evil spirit coming to hound me."

"With me it was dizziness. I ended up taking the pills just before I went to sleep." Maggie said making an effort to contribute.

"Don't worry, Suzie. Depending on the combination of drugs they decide to give you, they will tell you about any side-effects you might experience as your body adjusts to the treatment. These should subside after two months and, if not, some of the drugs can be changed." Mrs T explained.

"So what if I run out of tablets?"

"Well, Suzie, when you first start you should get a month's supply from the clinic and they will need you to come back for a check-up after a month both to see how you are and to check if you are having any serious side-effects. They should also tell you when your first viral load count will be scheduled. After the first few months, the clinic will give you supplies

for a longer period."

"What is a viral load?" Mona asked.

"Mona you've not had one?" Mrs T sounded surprised.

"I don't know. My parents just periodically take my blood, but don't ever explain why."

"Oh? Okay. A viral load count basically counts the number of HIV particles in your blood. If your medication is working the viral load should be low."

"Can it decrease to nothing?" Gillian raised an eyebrow.

"So far the medication that has been developed helps to reduce the HIV to very low levels. It does not disappear, but hides itself inside your body tissue and is not able to reproduce itself. When it is suppressed it cannot destroy your CD4 cells.

"But if you stop taking your medication, the HIV virus will be back, and with a vengeance. If you stop the medication suddenly or miss a few doses, the HIV can develop resistance against it, and, over time, the medication won't be able to fight against the virus. Then, the chances are that after a while you will start feeling ill.

"Maggie, are you listening?"

"Yes!" Maggie replied sharply. "But why did the nurse who was treating me tell the other nurse that I was 'playing with fire'; and I was lucky that I didn't need to be put on a 'second line defense'. What did she mean?"

"Okay, I'm going to keep this very simple. The first ARV combination, the one which HIV positive patients are initiated on is, in a way, the first line of defense. However, Maggie had stopped taking her medication. If resistance had really kicked in, it would mean that the combination of drugs she was initially given would no longer work for her, and so a second, possibly stronger, drug combination would have to be prescribed. This would be the second line of defense.

"Ladies, adherence to your medication is really important. Don't mess with your health, your life, your future."

"How can I ever know that my health is better, scientifically speaking?" Mona asked.

"The viral load count results will tell you. For example, you might have a viral load test done today and let's say the count is 500; then, if you have another viral load test after six months and the count is lower than your first test, this is a good sign. However, if the viral load count, which is the scientific measure, is higher than your first test, it is not a good sign."

"Can I ask for a viral load count?" Gillian asked.

"Yes, of course. It's your privilege to ask for one at your next review, especially if you have never had one before. We do, however, like to try and do the viral load at specific junctures. For example, in our clinic, when a person is on ART we conduct a viral load test at six, twelve and 24-month intervals. The clinicians should be able to guide you."

"Mrs T, I've heard of cot... corti... something what's that? Some patients get this, whatever it is."

"I think you mean Cotrimoxazole. If so, it's an antibiotic protecting you against opportunistic infections, which may take advantage of your body's weakened immune system."

"What do you mean opportunistic infections?" Suzie asked.

"It's just a fancy, all-embracing term for all sorts of common illnesses such a flu, sore throats, rashes and TB."

"Do you mean that Cotrimoxazole," Gillian pronounced the word very slowly, "works like a prevention medication?" If so, why don't you give it to us all?"

"Cortimoxazole is prescribed in accordance with World Health Organization regulations and our country's guidelines. I don't want to get too technical, but don't worry, your clinicians will know and will explain to you what you should be taking. This is why regular visits to your clinic are very important.

"My two clinicians know, they just don't, or won't, tell me!" Mona exclaimed.

"Mona, your parents are both medical doctors. I think you might have to start asking them questions next time they take a blood sample. You're their child and not a patient. They love you and I'm sure they're trying to make it all as easy as possible for you and trying not to stress you."

"Well, it doesn't feel that way," said Mona crossly. "I'm not a child!"

"Mmhm," the older woman responded soothingly. "I don't want to get into a discussion about whether or not you're a child. But to me, maturity signifies how emotionally stable one is. I know some remarkably childish adults!" She laughed. "However, I know well that the instinct of every parent is to protect their children, and that this sometimes means they're over-protective. I am sure, if you explain to your parents, that you'd like to understand the science of it all, they will explain it to you."

"I also did not get the full ART package. I only was initiated on ARVs without counselling and all this information has been such an eye-opener." Gillian commented.

"Not to worry, Gillian. All you need to do from now is to make sure you continuously update yourselves on the latest developments and one way to do that is," she paused, and then said firmly, "don't just clam up when you get your medication or visit a clinic. Ask, ask and ask. It is your right to know. Also read, read and read. Don't stop attending your clinic as the WHO guidelines and other new medical techniques are always changing and developing."

"Suzie, do you think you are ready for the CD4 test on Monday? Does anyone have any more questions?" Mrs T asked.

"I'm ready but what do I tell the headmaster so that I can get a pass?"

"I fake illnesses," Maggie answered.

"My mother told the headmaster," Gillian said simply.

"The headmaster knows your condition?" Mona looked astonished.

"Yeah, my mum said she didn't want me having to explain myself should I need a pass to go home for medication or something."

"Do you think he's not told other teachers?"

"I don't know, Mona. All I know is that it makes my life easier when I have to collect my medication."

"Suzie, I can't tell you what to do but I think Gillian's mother's decision to tell the headmaster was a good one. You'll all have to make your own decisions about how to handle this now, and in the future. Ladies, it's getting late. It's been a long afternoon, but there's one more thing I need to ask you. May I bring a visitor to our next session?"

They all felt a sense of unease. How could they ensure their secret was maintained if the group grew bigger and bigger. The more people who knew their status, the greater the chance of someone spilling the beans.

"Let me tell you a little more about the visitor," Mrs T said. "First, it's a man!"

"Oh, no, please!" groaned Maggie.

While everyone shook their heads: they did not want to be joined by a man. Mrs T smiled, "This is exactly why I'm asking your permission.

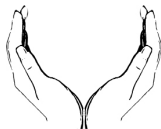
"As young ladies maturing into womanhood I think it's very important that you have a conversation with a man about his perspective. He's also positive so you will be sharing your status to him and he with you. He's definitely not a school-boy nor does he work anywhere near here.

"Am I wrong to say that some of you completely avoid men because your status has made you feel like they're taboo?"

Gillian giggled.

Mrs T continued, "How shall I put it ... our visitor is someone who will not sit in judgment. He has no ulterior motive except just to tell you his story and encourage you. He's someone you can comfortably ask questions in this safe circle."

Eventually one by one they consented to her request and agreed that a male visitor could join their circle the next time they met.





CHAPTER 7

Mystery Man

Suzie said, "They asked me if I was pregnant." Mona and Gillian laughed and hi-fived each other. Mrs T tried hard not to laugh out loud. Even Maggie was smiling. The only person who was serious was Suzie who was telling the story.

She had started her ARV treatment and was telling the other girls of the

side-effects, which had led to several comic episodes since she started to take the medication. She'd felt dizzy, skidded and fallen very ungraciously on the ground in front of a group of senior boys. On being taken to the deputy headmaster's office, she was bombarded with questions including if she was pregnant. She had not thought it was funny.

Still, now that she was telling her story, she began to see the funny side, and felt relieved and happy to be part of this group of girls who had accepted her and her secret. She was no longer anxious about sharing her stories. And, like them, she had a healthy curiosity about who the male visitor would be.

There was a quick firm knock on the door, it opened and Andrew walked into the room. To say Andrew was good looking would be an understatement. As Suzie looked at him, she had the same shock as when she saw Mona. How could someone who appeared so physically well be positive?

When Mona looked at him, she thought maybe there's hope. Perhaps there was a hulk of man out there somewhere with whom she could one day have a real relationship.

As Gillian stared at the visitor, she wondered what sport he played: he looked so fit and strong, even at 37, which to her seemed a very great age.

Maggie looked at him and felt sick. Andrew somehow reminded her of Jack. With hindsight, she knew that none of the boys she'd slept with had really cared about her: they'd just been using her to have sex with. And here, was a perfect example of just such a boy, now man, who most probably never gave a thought to the trail of damaged female lives and broken hearts that he'd left behind.

Since the last meeting she'd been asking herself some of the questions that Mona had asked her. If she was truthful, she didn't like some of the answers which also made her responsible for her actions. Looking at Andrew, it was easier to squarely place the blame on someone else for her status.

By now, Andrew was well into his story. "I found out that I was positive when I was 22. I belonged to a circle of seven friends and we were tight. We'd

all grown up in the same neighbourhood and been to the same schools. We knew each other's families, played the same sport and life was good.

"When the first HIV cases were being realized in Zimbabwe, I was about ten years old. At that time, in the community in which I grew up, the virus was considered to be a punishment from God for one's sins. As we grew older our mothers strategically used this belief as a weapon to deter us youth from having sex."

Mona and Mrs T looked at each other and smiled at the mention of strategizing mothers.

"But the sermons did not stop us, we were young and invincible. From a very early age, as much as I loved my friends, I was always a ladies man. As I got older, I experimented physically with the opposite sex and my friends joined me. I want you to remember that peer pressure can be constructive but it can also be destructive. You don't always have to do what your friends are doing.

"The criteria we used to decide was if the girl or woman looked healthy, and if we thought she did: game on. Deep down inside, we knew we were playing Russian roulette. I don't know whether, in a strange way, that added to the excitement. We heard of people outside our circle dying of HIV/AIDS; more often in the older age group, so death seemed far away.

"Four of us were at university when David became ill. He tested positive, deteriorated fast and died. The remaining six of us were pallbearers at his funeral. Not only did the thought of losing such a good friend at an early age weigh heavily on us, but so did the thought that maybe we could be next. We had all slept with the same women at one or another time."

At the end of his last sentence Andrew saw how shocked his young audience looked. "You're right to look shocked. We were strong, healthy, the future lay before us, and we thought we were invincible."

"I can't believe it," Maggie was horrified or was she thinking about herself. "Didn't you think about the girl at all? Did you all share jokes about her afterwards?"

"Good question," Andrew kneaded his hands, "the honest answer is we didn't. We didn't give her a thought. We were just interested in having a good time."

He coughed as if clearing a lump in his throat. "At the time of David's death, the fight against HIV had progressed and there were clinics where one could be tested and information was more accessible about what to do. Unfortunately, unlike now, ARVs were not easily obtainable. Medication, if it existed, was a remote possibility and then only for the super rich.

"After David's funeral, I made a decision to be tested and I tested positive.

"That night I got terribly drunk. I just wanted to forget my results. But when I got up the next day, they were the first thought on my mind. I couldn't rid myself of the knowledge that I was HIV positive. To make matters worse, I knew I couldn't blame anyone except myself. I knew my parents were negative because they'd been tested at some church function and came home happily telling us, their children, the virtues of living a clean life.

"All I know is that my having tested positive felt like a death sentence. To top it all, about two weeks after the great revelation, I started not feeling well. I did not want to go to the clinic, but I had to and ended up being treated for a sexually transmitted infection. I went to a different clinic from the one where I'd first been tested and the sister there asked if I'd been tested for HIV and she went on and on, until I felt I wanted to hit her.

"Eventually, she said something like "it would be good for your partner to be tested as well." It seemed strange to think that once I'd thought only of conquests, never as partners. My whole world, my attitude, was turned upside down in just minutes.

"Maybe it was the shock of this awareness, maybe it was the shame, maybe it was the anxiety, or the thought that I might die too, or maybe it was just easier to talk to her because she was a stranger. But I found myself

telling the sister – who not long before I thought I wanted to hit – about David. She listened and told me I'd have a better chance of not ending up dead if I followed her advice. I'd seen David suffer and I wanted to put off that suffering as long as I could, so I said yes to all her advice, instructions and medication.

"But life is never about you alone. It is about others around you, especially those you care about. I knew I had to encourage my five friends to get tested, which might give us all a chance of survival. No, don't ask? I didn't even think of the women we'd slept with.

"So I organized an outing for the six of us and eventually after a few beers for Dutch courage, I brought the subject up. After a long brutal discussion Sammy, Taps and AK agreed to go for testing but Henry and Josh said, No. *Aiwa*. Never! Sammy amazingly tested negative. How remains a mystery. Still, I guess his result made it easy for him to tell us."

Andrew pauses, "Remember I'd told them my results but Taps and AK never told me theirs. I only found out by chance one day when I went to the clinic for a check-up. So I see Taps there and he's holding a pink file. A few minutes later, AK walks in and he's also holding a pink file. Back then, the clinics we attended had a colour system that was really not very user friendly as one automatically knew one's status from the colour of the files. However, since we'd been friends for such a long time, we were able to laugh it off and there was no confrontation: no, 'why didn't you tell me?' I was just happy that they'd taken my advice.

"Then one day Sammy was bragging about his status, his invincibility and joking about our weak bodies. He bragged that this was why he could drink more than us. It was a joke but something snapped in AK. He went crazy and started to shout at Sammy; and, in doing so, he unwittingly disclosed our condition. The other patrons in the bar overheard him. AK, realizing what he'd done, stormed out of the bar but not without over-hearing such comments as – 'You deserve it. You've all done nothing but play around with other people's lives.'

"It's one thing to imagine people are talking about you, quite another to hear their criticisms to your face."

Andrew pauses again, heaving a deep sigh. The girls look puzzled. They'd no idea what to expect as Andrew's expression revealed some powerful emotion.

"When AK left, we all left, and turned on Sammy on the way home. He was distraught. He had not meant any harm, and we knew it, but he'd pushed AK too far. Living with HIV is no joke.

"Next morning, my phone rings at about 8:30 a.m. I answer. Taps is crying, 'AK is gone.'

"We buried our friend exactly six months to the day after we'd buried David. AK had committed suicide. The pain we all felt was overwhelming. It was only to support AK's mum that we agreed to be the pallbearers. Sammy was a mess and blamed himself. It made me realize that we all have different thresholds of pain and anxiety and will react differently to the test results.

"What I learned was: don't disclose your results until you're ready to do so; and don't betray someone's confidence if they've trusted you with their results. After the funeral, Sammy immediately distanced himself from us, so it felt as though we'd lost two friends on the same day. Our circle of seven had been reduced to four in six months by Mr HIV and AIDS.

"For the remaining four of us, these events changed the dimension of our friendship. We still communicate but something had changed. Josh turned to religion and became a pastor. I never asked him if he ever went for a test but recently I heard he was in hospital and I went to visit him. He has terminal cancer. Henry is thriving overseas in London working as the CEO of some big international conglomerate.

"Why am I sharing all this? Maybe looking back on my life I'm aware that I most probably passed on the virus to a lot of innocent unsuspecting young girls. I can't go back in time and make it right but this is my small way of doing some good by encourage you young ladies to continue with

your ARVs. I also encourage you to continue to share your feelings and worries with each other. It does help when you have someone that you trust and can confide in.

"All these years I've had Taps and it has made a difference. Our neighborhood got to know of our status through that episode. Since we already bore the label 'bad boys' we found out that most of our community were predicting our funerals; in other words, waiting for us to drop dead. It wasn't easy. Once we'd laughed and even bragged about being called the 'bad boys', now we had to deal with the loss of our friends and all the negative talk both behind our backs and sometimes to our face. The stigma then about being HIV positive was much worse than it is now. To fight this, we had to make a very conscious decision to continue planning for our lives and follow the medical advice and medication that we were given. I confess that sometimes giving up seemed much easier.

"Don't disclose your status until you're ready for the consequences for you will always meet negative people. Also remember that such people will always be a part of life whether or not you are HIV positive, so don't let them destroy you. Such negative people are normally miserable themselves and just want to take it out on others.

"When ARVs became accessible, Taps and I immediately started to take them. Today, we're both married with kids and doing okay. There's life after being told that you are HIV positive."

He paused and said, "Well, that's my story in a nutshell."

Mrs T said, "Thank you, Andrew. Such stories mean a lot to us. You girls have been very quiet. Do any of you have anything you would like to say or ask?"

Mona broke the silence when she said, "Mr..."

"Please call me Andrew."

"Andrew, is your wife positive?"

"She's negative."

Mona continued, "Did she know your status when you got married?"

"Yes. When I knew that she was the woman I wanted to marry I had to tell her. Was it easy? No."

"Well, I guess it was easy for her to say 'yes' to you."

Andrew smiled, "Why do you say that, Mona?"

"Well, look at you. You're ... you're good-looking. I'm guessing you have a good job, which, even back then, makes you a certified good catch. I guess most girls, positive or negative, would jump into marriage with you!"

Gillian and Suzie were smiling. Mona was asking the questions they were too shy to ask.

But Maggie glared at Andrew.

"Thank you for the compliments, Mona. But don't you think all you girls are potentially good wives?"

"No!" Mona answered emphatically.

"Why not?"

"We're positive. No one is going to ask a positive girl to marry them."

"How can you be so certain of that? Maybe things have changed today but as far as I know boys don't normally ask girls to marry them on the first date. Stop worrying about 'getting married?' You're all too young to be thinking of marriage. There's more to life: friends, relatives, a fulfilling job, for example. If you find someone whom you like, someone who shares the same interests, and they like you, just enjoy the relationship. Enjoy getting to know each other and do not rush getting into a physical relationship."

"That's easy for you to say. You're a guy: you slept with all the girls you wanted to back then and now look at you, Mr Respectable! Your bad boy club was most probably the most popular thing around and you got away with everything!" Maggie said this with such vehemence that in the course of the sentence Andrew's face changed from ease to being puzzled to shock.

Mrs T was about to say something but Andrew raised his hand to stop her. He looked at Maggie and quietly said, "Yes, you're right, when I was

young I messed around with a lot of girls and their lives. I admit I never thought much about anyone except what I wanted then and there. Now, when I look at my daughter and think that some guy might one day treat her the same way, that is when I regret some of the things I did. But I cannot live in the past. I can't take back the things I did.

"However, every new day is an opportunity for all of us to change. My not changing and continuing with that bad boy lifestyle might have cost me my life. So I made the decision to change my behaviour."

By the end of his response Mrs T had moved her chair closer to Maggie and put her hand gently around her shoulder. At least Maggie was beginning to express her pent up anger in words, she thought, which was a good sign.

Mona was anxiously waiting for Andrew to finish. She needed him to answer a burning question and quickly said, "Okay! Okay! But I still need to ask this: would any negative guy want to marry a positive girl if they knew that she was positive before marriage?"

Andrew looked at Mrs T and they both smiled.

Mrs T said, "Okay I'll tell them. Ladies you know that I'm positive. My husband is Andrew's cousin and he's negative. This is how I got to know Andrew."

"You married a negative?" Maggie exclaimed astonished.

Mrs T laughed and said. "The way you said that Maggie suggests you think he's an alien!"

"You're positive?" Suzie exclaimed, stunned.

"Yes, the day I disclosed my status you'd not joined our circle."

"And, by the way, my friend Taps's wife is positive," added Andrew "Stop basing your future relationships on positive or negative but on love."

Mrs T picked up on Andrew's statement, "The fact that you girls are continuously skirting around these relationship questions shows that deep inside, intimacy is something that bothers you. You think I don't understand. but I do. I know relationships are very important to you. I think

your positive status has made you believe the lie that being HIV positive equates to no relationship; or that you can't take the relationship to the next level; or, that you now think of yourselves as second-class citizens who can only be in relationships where they're abused by males. So, let me stress: *this is not true.*" And Mrs T looked directly at Maggie.

Andrew continued, "Don't let your status rob you of the most natural thing in the world. When one day a boy likes you and you like him back, take your time to get to know each other. Then, when the time comes, find out what you need to do to protect yourself and your partner. Sex does not necessarily mean 'I love you' or 'I want to be in a long-term relationship with you', I hope you all realize that.

"Right now you should be focusing on getting good grades and discovering what you want to be when you grow up. You don't have as much time as you think you have to start making these decisions. It's about choosing the right subjects at school and that cannot happen after you've finished school. Let me tell you a little bit about Taps' wife. She was orphaned at nine years old; she is HIV positive; a mother of three and a forensic scientist."

Ahh! you mean like CSI?" an astonished Gillian asked.

"Yes. Like CSI." Andrew replied laughing. "I need you, little sisters of mine, to focus on discovering yourselves and what you want to be. Planning your future will also give you an incentive to be adherent in taking your ARVs. Start planning your futures not your funerals. You'll have bad days when you're not well, but even negative status people have bad days when they're feeling miserable or under the weather. Do what you need to do, pick yourself up and keep moving."

There was a moment's silence as they all tried to digest everything they'd been told.

"Any other questions?" Mrs T asked.

"Yes. Why do you think AK committed suicide?" Suzie asked Andrew.

"That's not an easy question to answer. Looking back with hindsight,

there were some signs such as from the time he tested positive he seemed angry and started to distance himself. We all thought it was a passing phase and never really asked him about it. Maybe if he'd had a support group like this one, it might have helped. I don't truly know except that the one lesson I took from it was not to mess around with the issue of disclosure.

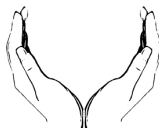
"Also be prepared that if it should ever come out you will have to deal with it. Your greatest revenge against bullies and those who say malicious things behind your back is to succeed in your life. Work hard at school, girls, and take your ARVs.

"It has been almost two decades since I found out that I was positive and so many developments have happened since then. You need to take responsibility for your lives and keep abreast of any new medications or techniques that continue to be developed. Be strong."

Gillian said, "I don't have a question but wanted to thank you for showing me that a full life is possible even if you're positive."

"Yes, Andrew, I personally don't know how to thank you. Even though there was some resistance to your coming I believe that the girls have enjoyed your talk and also learnt a lot from it." Mrs T concluded.

Andrew smiled and said, "Thank you for permitting me to come. It is up to us to have this stigma removed, and stop this condition being treated as some dirty secret. You can thank me by continuing to take your ARVs and working hard at school. Then one day I hope you will have the courage to break the silence and help someone else who is positive to overcome their fears or, better still, help someone who is negative to understand that despite our positive or negative status, we're all human beings."



Glossary

CD4 cells:

CD4 cells help in the production of antibodies. They are measurable and can be high or low. When they are low this is not a good sign.

ARVs:

If one is HIV positive depending on their CD4 count they will be put on a Anti Retroviral Drugs regimen to suit them otherwise known as ARVs. The medication that is given depends on such factors as your age, blood composition, liver conditions and your kidney function status.

Adherence:

Adherence is making sure one takes their ARVs at the same time daily without fail. The medication should be taken at the same time everyday.

First Line:

The first ARVs combination of drugs/regimen that one is initiated on is called the first line of ART.

Second Line:

If adherence of the first line of ARVs given is not kept resistance can kick in and a second combination of drugs will have to be prescribed for the patient. This second combination of drugs is referred to as the second line.

Viral load:

Viral load is a test done which basically counts the number of HIV particles in your blood. If one is on ARVs and their medication is working, the viral load count should decrease. The HIV does not disappear but hides itself inside the body tissue and is not able to reproduce itself. When it is suppressed it cannot destroy your CD4 cells.

Cotrimoxazole:

It is an antibiotic protecting against opportunistic infections that may take the opportunity of entering a weakened body's immune system. Cortrimoxazole is given in accordance to World Health Organization regulations and the country's own guidelines.

ART:

Anti Retroviral Treatment or Therapy which means the total package of HIV treatment. This is inclusive of counselling and ARVs.

PMTCT:

This means Prevention of Mother To Child Transmission. If a pregnant woman tests HIV positive, she receives drugs aimed at preventing HIV from crossing from her bloodstream to the baby's.