VALENTINA

THE EXILE CHILD

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY RACHEL VALENTINA NGHIWETE
On the dawn of Namibia's independence from South African rule in 1990, around 43,000 exiles were repatriated to the country formerly known as South West Africa. Of these, many had left their country of birth to flee the brutality of South Africa's apartheid regime, and/or to join the struggle (political and armed) for Namibia's liberation, waged primarily by the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO). But included in the 43,000, were about 20,000 children who had never set foot in or fully experienced the country to which they were being repatriated, having been born to and/or raised by exiled soldiers and refugees of the struggle. In Namibia, these children are often referred to simply as 'exile kids', though the country's Government officially recognizes them as “The Children of the Liberation Struggle”.

Rachel Valentina Nghiwete, is one such 'exile kid', born in the SWAPO camps of Kwanza-Sul, Angola, in 1979, to Namibian soldiers fighting under SWAPO's banner. Set against the background of Namibia's liberation struggle, Valentina: The Exile Child details the author's experience growing up in exile, her 'repatriation' to Namibia in 1989 on the eve of the country's independence, and her life outside the country in London and Washington DC, as the daughter of an Ambassador, as a businesswoman, and as an individual in pursuit of financial freedom.

The Exile Child also explores the challenges of establishing a Namibian identity after an early life in exile, and looks at how children of the liberation struggle – at home in Namibia and abroad – have struggled to adjust.

Read this book for a historical account of Namibia’s road to freedom from the perspective of an exile kid, and for an inspiring tale of a Namibian exile child’s painful and joyful journey to finding and living a life of meaning and purpose.

Valentina
The Exile Child

Autobiography By Rachel Valentina Nghiwete

Rachel Valentina Nghiwete

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“Honor thy father and thy mother, as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee; that thy days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with thee, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.”

- (Deuteronomy 5: 16)

I dedicate this book to my parents: my Heavenly Father Jehovah in whom I have my being. My mother, my role model, Martha Hatutale-Andjaba, and my father, my hero, Ambassador Veicoh Nghiwete. I hope that I have made you proud thus far. I have made every conscious effort to please you and bring honor to your names.

I also dedicate this book to all the fallen and living heroes of Namibia’s liberation struggle, and to my fellow Namibian “exile kids.” You are survivors.
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Exile Child

Exile Child, you are a byproduct of bondage and freedom. Born and raised in the struggle. Formed by unusual circumstances, you have learned to adapt to unfamiliar situations, and foreign lands. Survival has taught you to do without. Through resilience you have persevered and endured through it all. Heir of the revolution, born to carry on the torch of freedom.

Child, you understand peace and liberty. For your birth has paid the price. Today you celebrate no more tears and strife. Your cry for freedom has been heard.

Landless child. Your home is where your heart is. You are like a bird that lays its nest wherever it finds space. Your parents, banished into exile by circumstances beyond their control, left everything they loved behind, without land or possessions to call their own. They have suffered, crippled while far from home, and saved only by the mercy of their hosts and peace lovers around the world. Together you have faced a fate worse than death. Your identity concealed for your protection, left to roam in foreign nations. Seeking refuge with those that welcome you and support your cause.

Child of the Diaspora, don’t worry you are not alone. Everyone is in an exile of some sort. In search of that which brings meaning to their lives. Exile is nothing but a journey, from the old to the new, from bondage to freedom. You have been freed, reunited and reconciled with your people and homeland. But the journey never ends. Leave your Egypt and enter your Canaan. Embrace peace and harmony. Defend your freedom and liberty, and let history not repeat itself. Face the future with confidence knowing you have reached your dream, your destination, The promised land.

By Esther-Toini Amadhila
Introduction

On April 12, 2009, I turned the big 30!

For many, 30 can be a taunting age…a dreaded age and a simple search on the internet shows just how scary the prospect of 30 can be. But I choose to look at the flipside of the coin, and consider the specialness and significance of 30 for me.

My 20s had been a decade of trial and error…a time when I was truly getting to know myself, asserting my independence, and taking on challenges that have made me a stronger person. It was a time of seeking my purpose in this life, through both good and bad experiences, and growing despite the setbacks that presented themselves along the way. But I looked forward to turning 30 because I wanted to cross over into a new phase of my life. In fact, Jesus Christ embarked on His life mission to impact the world – the very reason for His existence – at the age of 30. So I saw my pre-30 years as a time of pruning, molding, shaping, and equipping me into the person that I believe God has called me to be.

This book is a celebration of those 30 years of life that were marked by trials and tribulations, but also by several triumphs in growing towards my calling. Before this, I’d never imagined that I would publish a book about my life. But people familiar with my life story often told me about how my life had inspired them and they encouraged me to write a book about it.

My story began as a child born in external exile in Angola, during the struggle for Namibia’s liberation. The experience of my early years growing up in the refugee camps of the liberation movement played a huge role in shaping me into the person I am today. Esther Amadhila’s poem, *The Exile Child*, speaks eloquently to that experience, not only for me, but for the thousands of ‘exile kids’ of Namibia’s liberation struggle, and perhaps for the millions more that have been displaced by other wars and struggles throughout the world, despite the uniqueness of each of our experiences.

I decided to write this memoir to tell my story as an exile child, and beyond my exile experience, as well as to inspire at least one person. I hope you’ll be inspired and motivated by this book to find and pursue your life purpose and mission, regardless of your background, the circumstances you were born into, and your current situation. Everything we go through in life is to develop,
strengthen and prepare us for our life’s mission on earth, and I pray that you find your full purpose in life.

In this book, I have detailed many of my life experiences, from my childhood to 2009. As much as possible, I have attempted to provide – particularly in my accounts of exile and Namibia – a factual historic overview of the political environment in which I grew up. However, having been brought up under the wing of the SWAPO party – the movement at the forefront of Namibia’s struggle for liberation, my account of the struggle therefore focuses primarily on what SWAPO was doing at the time. I am cognizant of the various efforts that took place within Namibia’s borders and abroad towards realizing Namibia’s independence, and where possible, I have tried to pay homage and recognition to these efforts.

The story of the exile child is similar in many respects, but it is also differs from one individual to the next. Exile children lived in Angola, Zambia, Germany, Cuba, and in many other countries, under ranging conditions, environments and experiences. This book details my own unique experience, but it also touches on many of the general feelings and experiences of all exile children – particularly in the way they were raised under SWAPO, and in the challenges they faced on their ‘repatriation’ to Namibia. I trust that this story will therefore go a long way in providing a holistic, albeit personal, experience of Namibia’s ‘Children of the Liberation Struggle’.

Perhaps it is also important to note that in writing my autobiography, I sought to respect the privacy of members of my family. As such, some accounts may seem somewhat inconclusive, but they provide as in-depth an account as possible, without stepping on the toes of my loved ones. I thank you for your understanding in this respect.

We all have a story to tell, and within that story, I believe we are constantly being prepared to meet our higher purpose. When I get to the end of my life and take my last breath, like my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I too want to proudly say with a sense of accomplishment that “It is finished.”
CHAPTER ONE

Setting the Stage: Exodus into Exile

“The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in His way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with His hand.”

-(Psalm 37: 23-24)

Growing up, I loved listening to my parents and their friends recount their stories of Namibia’s liberation struggle. I would sit there in awe and listen intently as they recalled the battles that they heroically fought and the guerilla tactics they used to eventually defeat the enemy. Their bravery was so inspiring to me, and as I sat there savoring every word that was essentially a narration of my own history, I wished they wouldn’t stop telling the liberation stories.

Both my parents became involved in the struggle for Namibia’s liberation at an early age. My father, Veiccoh Nghiwete, joined the movement at the age of 17 and fled into exile at the age of 22 to become a PLAN freedom fighter. My mother, Martha Hatutale-Andjaba, took her steps into exile at the tender age of 15, leaving behind her family and the life she knew to take on the cause for Namibia’s freedom.

My parents have often recounted the 23 years of the liberation struggle starting in 1966, against the illegal occupation of South Africa’s apartheid regime in Namibia. The war resulted in the deaths of 20,000 to 25,000 Namibians, and is estimated to have cost more than $1 billion a year.

Namibia is a beautiful country in Southern African with a heavy history. Its current population stands at about two million people, and it boasts the oldest desert in the world, the beautiful Namib Desert that is located on the west coast along the Atlantic Ocean, and after which the country is named. Namibia is bordered by Angola in the north, Zambia and Zimbabwe in the northeast, Botswana in the east and South Africa down south. Namibia is rich in mineral resources such as diamonds, uranium, vanadium, lithium and tungsten...but her wealth has also been her curse, in that it influenced and encouraged South Africa’s brutal apartheid regime to cling onto the mineral-rich Namibia for many years.

Namibia was annexed by Germany in 1884, and became known as Deutsche Sudwest Africa under German rule. After losing the First World War, however, the 1919 Versailles Treaty
dispossessed Germany of all its colonies, including Namibia – which then became known simply as South West Africa. In 1920, the League of Nations placed Namibia under the trusteeship of Great Britain, who in turn mandated the territory to the Union of South Africa to administer Namibia on its behalf and to “prepare her towards self-determination.”

But South Africa only increased and intensified its oppression of Namibia and her people through its execution of the apartheid regime when the National Party came to power in South Africa in 1948. In 1946, the League of Nations was dissolved and the United Nations (UN) began negotiations with South Africa to place Namibia under the trusteeship of the UN. Other former German colonies had already become trust territories of the United Nations. Namibia, however, remained under the rule of South Africa. Before the NP, discrimination between the races was already rife, and Namibians had been subject to brutal colonial history under both Germany and South Africa, but apartheid effectively institutionalized this discrimination. Apartheid, directly translated as ‘separateness’, was a political system in South Africa and Namibia of legal racial segregation, enforced by the National Party of South Africa from 1948 until Namibia’s independence in 1990 (1994 for South Africa). The impact of South Africa’s apartheid regime on the Namibian people, their land and their living conditions, was enormous. Blacks were forced off their land and relegated to Bantustans (black homelands), separated by ethnic grouping. When South Africa first took over Namibia, about 12 million hectares of good fertile land was placed in the hands of white farmers for free, with very generous government farming subsidies, including free fencing and boreholes. This, of course, was not extended to black farmers. Within four years, this figure had doubled to about 24 million hectares of land. And blacks - the majority - were forced to occupy a small 2 million hectares of arid land in the drought-ridden parts of Namibia, in which the whites were not interested. As a result, blacks were impoverished and forced to work as cheap labor in white owned companies, houses and farms. The socio-economic repercussions of this system remain starkly evident even today.

The South African regime in Namibia also placed great emphasis on protecting wild life. In fact, one could argue that they cared more for the wild life than for black Namibians, and spent billions of dollars to protect Namibia’s flora, fauna and game parks. Local black communities who lived traditionally and hunted some of the animals in those areas for food or collected firewood for cooking, were harassed and forcefully moved from their land to make room for game reserves, as they were “interfering” with white people’s sightseeing luxury. Black people, such as the San people (formerly known as Bushmen) were forbidden from engaging in their traditional activities of collecting firewood, and fishing and hunting for game. These activities
were declared illegal and constituted a criminal offense under apartheid law. In fact, blacks were summarily excluded from enjoying the natural beauty of their beloved motherland, with many of the game reserves bearing the sign “Whites Only.” The derogatory name used for blacks in Namibia and South Africa during the apartheid system was “kaffir” - an equivalent to the American slavery term of “nigger.”

The apartheid regime in Namibia and South Africa separated the different races and ethnic groups. It discriminated against black people, while giving white people an endless array of privileges. Black people of lighter complexion, such as the Coloreds and Basters of Namibia were given slightly better treatment than their darker countrymen, because they were regarded as being closer in skin color to the white people. The township of Katutura – to which many urban black people in Windhoek were moved – was completely neglected by the white regime. There was no running water, proper sanitation, or tarred roads. The education system was also unequal. For whites, it was compulsory, free, and of a superior standard, while black people had to pay for their optional, lower level ‘Bantu education’. Schools for black children were not as clean as those for white children; they were overcrowded and understaffed, and teachers were not well qualified. All these factors compromised the education of black children, who had to suffer the added burden of walking long distances to school due to the lack of private and public transportation.

Under the apartheid regime, blacks who were even slightly suspected of working against the system, were tortured, interrogated, and sometimes killed. On occasion, the executors of the regime even burned blacks to death. In northern Namibia, where the implementation of the apartheid system was carried out with a heavy hand, Namibians also suffered harshly, especially during the armed struggle, because much of the guerilla warfare took place in the far north. The Boers burned down their houses and farms, beat them and burned them to death. Some people were simply buried alive. To invoke fear in the black population, on occasion, dead black Namibians were paraded around the region while tied to Casspirs – the large, mine-protected, armored military vehicles introduced in the late 1970s and used widely by the South African apartheid police force and military for crowd and riot control. Many people were traumatized by the aggressive and dehumanizing tactics used by the South African forces to enforce their apartheid laws. But despite the psychological effects of this inhumane system, the prospect of real freedom only encouraged them to fight apartheid with greater vigor.

Along with its long list of other prejudiced laws, the South African apartheid government also introduced the oppressive Contract Labor System, which further exploited black Namibians. The
black male population, especially, had little choice in being subjects of this system, and had to leave their families to go to work in far away cities and mines – this being their only source of income. The system also required them to carry passes to legally travel from one area to the next – a way of restricting their movement in their country of birth and origin. Contract workers worked in mines (some going as far as South Africa), on white-owned farms, in basic labor positions, and in other areas where cheap black labor under semi-slave conditions, was needed. This system also disrupted marriages and family life as husbands and fathers were forced to leave their homes for work, often leaving the women in the villages to carry out work that was traditionally done by men.

Given the low wages earned through the contract labor system, the income of laborers was usually insufficient to support their families. And while the black majority grew poorer, the white population, profiting on the backs of their cheap black labor and forcefully acquired land, grew richer and richer. This historical scenario has resulted in today’s income disparity in Namibia, which although ranked as a middle-income country, currently has the highest level of income and wealth inequality in the world. The apartheid system, which legitimizied racism, made sure that whites were treated as superior to blacks, not only in the education and labor systems and the discriminatory laws it imposed, but in everyday life too. For example, for fear of reprisal, blacks often felt forced into assuming an inferior stance: making sure that they got out of the way when a white person was walking by without so much as an “excuse me,” remained silent when a white person cut in front of them in a line, or ceded to the white man’s demands, often before their own. This inferiority complex remains pervasive in many ways, even today.

The repressive nature of the contract work system and the general laws of the apartheid system are what spurred the liberation struggle for Namibia’s independence. South Africa used several dirty tricks to avoid handing Namibia over to the UN and to convince the international community that they had the support of the majority of Namibians. The South African government wanted to make Namibia its 5th province in 1948 when the Boer’s National Party took over power in South Africa. This move would have proved bad for Namibia and Namibians as their basic human right to self-rule would have been violated. A referendum to incorporate Namibia as a fifth province of South Africa would have become a reality had it not been for Chief Tshekedie Khama of British Bechuanaland and paramount Chief Frederick Maharero of the Herero people. The two leaders sent the Reverend Michael Scott to Namibia to see Chief Hosea Kutako in 1947 and warn him about the danger posed by making Namibia a fifth province of South Africa.
The Windhoek Uprising of December 10, 1959, proved just how fed up Namibians were with the way they were being treated by the South African apartheid government. During that year, black Namibians who were living in Windhoek’s Old Location were forcefully removed from their homes to be relocated. The reason: the apartheid law and structure reckoned they were living too close to white people, for whom they wanted to reserve the best land around the city center.

According to the principles of apartheid, these residents had to be moved out of Windhoek city, which then became reserved for whites only. The lighter skinned black people, known as “colored” Namibians were also to be divided from the darker black Namibians, and although this sometimes proved difficult as navigating the color spectrum could often be confusing. Nevertheless, most ‘colored’ Namibians were moved to the ‘Khomasdal’ area of Windhoek, which was about five kilometers outside the city. The darker black population was separated from the lighter blacks (coloreds) in Khomasdal by a five hundred meter boundary, and relegated to the area of Katutura, where they were further separated by ethnic grouping. The name of the area itself describes how the people felt about this move. In the Otjiherero language, Katutura means “the place where we don’t want to stay.” Today, much like Soweto in South Africa, Katutura remains the face of poverty in Windhoek, with squatter areas comprising shanty towns increasing in size by the day.

Black Namibians, of course, objected to their forced removal, but the Windhoek Municipality ignored their pleas. The non-violent protest of December 10 turned deadly when South African officers opened fire on a crowd that was objecting to the removal. The unarmed Namibians could only fight back by throwing stones at the apartheid police officers. Twelve people were killed and over 50 were wounded. Among those killed, was the courageous Mama Kakurukaze Mungundu, who during the protest took five liters of petrol, poured it over the car of the Superintendent of the Windhoek Old Location, and set the car alight. Her revolutionary act made her a household name as a Namibian hero.

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My father, Veiccoh Nghiwete, was born in 1952 in Okongo to Andreas Nghiwete and Rachel Kaxuadi. My father and his parents lived through the apartheid regime and its various massacres on innocent Namibians. As a boy, fascinated by the humanitarian efforts of the white Finnish missionaries and disgusted by the brutality inflicted through the apartheid regime, my father yearned to become a priest. The love and kindness shown by the Finnish missionaries towards Namibians often drew the iron fist of white South Africans.
On February 18, 1960, soon after the December 10 Windhoek Uprising and just two months before the formation of Namibia’s liberation movement, South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO), my mother Martha Hatutale-Andjaba was born in a northern Namibian village called Okahenge. Her father was Aaron Jesaya Hatutale, and her mother, who passed away while my mother was still an infant, was Natalia Mokaxua.

The 1960’s marked a historical period in Africa because many African nations – starting with Ghana in 1957 - gained their independence from western colonial rule. This ignited the spirit of the liberation movement in Namibia, and on April 19, 1960, Namibians formed a liberation movement called the Ovambo People’s Organization, which later came to be known as the South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO). The formation of the party by Andimba Toivo ya Toivo – and later placed under the leadership of President Sam Nujoma – marked the evolution of the predominant anti-apartheid movement of the time, and quickly became a national movement. It consisted mainly of black Namibians vehemently opposed to the apartheid regime, and with an aim to put an end to South Africa’s occupation of Namibia. As SWAPO began to actively carry out its work against the apartheid regime, it came to realize that its members could not operate safely and effectively within Namibia. For this reason, some of the SWAPO leaders fled into exile where they could receive assistance from caring nations around the world, and carry out their mission of liberation without fear. Other black Namibians also fled into exile to escape the inhumane treatment exercised through the apartheid regime. To augment its mission to liberate Namibia and to engage the enemy on all fronts, SWAPO came up with three strategies: the Political Front, the Diplomatic Front, and the Armed Liberation Struggle.

The Political Front involved mobilizing Namibians to rally behind SWAPO, and also worked with the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the Non-Aligned Movement, and the United Nations. The Diplomatic Front focused on mobilizing the world to support SWAPO’s mission to liberate Namibia, and included working with different political organizations such as the UN, the OAU, and various countries and international supporters of SWAPO’s cause. The third strategy - the Armed Liberation Struggle - directly engaged the enemy in guerilla warfare under SWAPO’s military wing, the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN).

In July 1962, with all strategic fronts working in tandem, SWAPO initiated its military exploits by sending seven men to Egypt for military training. They were Tobias Hainyeko, John Otto Nankudhu, Vilho Haimbela, Titus Muailepeni, Patrick Israel Iyambo (Lungada), Petrus Hambija and Lazarus Sakaria. The seven were trained in guerrilla war tactics and as commanders who would train SWAPO’s new recruits.
On December 22, 1962, SWAPO and its supporters received a horrid shock and major setback when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) failed to pass judgment on South Africa’s illegal occupation in Namibia. As such, Namibia’s independence was not guaranteed. As far as the South African leader, Verwoerd, was concerned, the Court’s decision validated South Africa’s presence in Namibia and gave him the green light to incorporate South West Africa into apartheid South Africa as a fifth province.

For more than 15 years thereafter, the United Nations failed to peacefully get South Africa to leave Namibia. Most African nations and other third world countries, and the Nordic countries supported the termination of South Africa’s mandate over Namibia. Some Americans and British citizens, who at first believed that South Africa’s occupation of Namibia was not illegal but just “unlawful,” also supported SWAPO.

But while the Court’s ruling came as a surprise to SWAPO, its leadership did not allow the “World Court fiasco” to discourage them from pursuing the liberation of Namibia. SWAPO issued a long statement that announced the launch of the armed liberation struggle, ending Verwoerd’s fantasy of a South Africa with Namibia as a fifth province. In March 1965, SWAPO prepared to launch the war by sending the first of four military groups comprised of ten guerrilla fighters each, into Namibia. SWAPO guerilla fighters are referred to as combatants as opposed to being called soldiers, because they were volunteer fighters who were not paid for their sacrificial services to free Namibia from the apartheid rule. As such, I will refer to them as combatants, freedom fighters or guerrillas in this book. The first guerilla groups were referred to as G1, G2, G3 and G4, who maneuvered their way into Namibia to fight the enemy using guerrilla tactics. John Otto Nankudhu led the first group, “G1”. Tobias Hainyeko, Peter Nanyemba, Patrick Israel Iyambo and others accompanied the group. They were armed with only two Russian produced PPSH (Pistolet-Pulemyot Shpagina) sub-machine guns and two Russian TT-pistols (Tula Tokareva pistols), which President Sam Nujoma obtained from the Algerian Government in 1963, along with hunting knives.

In 1966, SWAPO formally established its military wing, the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) and in February 1966, almost a year after G1 was deployed into Namibia, G2 followed suit. Like G1, they drove a land rover towards the Tanzanian-Zambian border where they received their weapons and entered Namibia via the Caprivi Strip, which came to be known as Northeastern Front. Unfortunately the mission for G2 wasn’t as successful as the first group, because it clashed with the enemy on their way into Namibia. This resulted in the capture of the
group members, including Leonard Philemon Shuuya – popularly known as ‘Castro’. The entire group was detained in Pretoria, South Africa.

While in detention, the South African army bribed Castro to work for them and sent him back into exile to spy on SWAPO. It is unclear what the terms of his bribe were, but Castro took his new job with the enemy very seriously, and betrayed the groups that were to follow G1 and G2, causing serious destruction to the unsuspecting SWAPO. Castro brought about the deaths of many SWAPO combatants, including Army Commander, Tobias Hainyeko on May 18, 1967. It is said that Commander Hainyeko died heroically...fighting to his very last breath. Before laying his life down for the independence of Namibia, Hainyeko shot and killed two South African police officers.

It is believed that Castro was also responsible for the capture of Toivo ya Toivo and many others who were arrested in the northern part of Namibia, tried in Pretoria, South Africa, and imprisoned for 20 years on Robben Island.

At about 5am on August 26, 1966, the South African Security Police, led by Captain Swanepoel and guided by Castro, sprung a surprise attack on a SWAPO military base at Omugulu-gOmbashe. Today, August 26 is celebrated as a public holiday - Heroes Day - in commemoration of those who fought fearlessly and lost their lives on that day.

Even before the official launch of the armed liberation struggle, many Namibians were recruited, trained in guerilla warfare, and scattered all over northern Namibia in the Ovamboland area. SWAPO guerilla groups went in and out of the country on military missions and reported back to the SWAPO leadership on their work inside Namibia.

On October 27, 1966, soon after the first battle and the launch of the liberation struggle, the UN General Assembly voted 114 to 2 to terminate the South African mandate over Namibia, and to place Namibia under the direct responsibility of the UN.

The UN General Assembly Resolution 2145 (1966) established the United Nations’ supervisory powers over Namibia as follows:

“Reaffirmed that the people of South West Africa had the inalienable right to self-determination, freedom and independence; declared that South Africa had failed to ensure the moral and material well-being and security of the indigenous inhabitants and had in fact disavowed the Mandate; Called on South Africa to refrain from any action tending to alter the Territory’s international status; Resolved that the United Nations must discharge responsibilities with
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respect to South West Africa; and Established a 14-member Ad Hoc Committee for Namibia to recommend practical means by which the Territory should be administered, so as to enable the people to achieve independence.”

But despite Namibia being declared an “international territory,” South Africa illegally continued its hold on the country.

Prior to the UN’s 1966 resolution, Namibia was officially referred to as South West Africa. On October 29, two days after the resolution was made, SWAPO President Sam Nujoma formally used the name Namibia for the first time. The new name was derived from the Namib Desert, the oldest desert in the world, and a natural wonder in its own right. This desert had shielded Namibians for many years against colonial exploits and slave traders who were causing havoc in other countries further north of Namibia’s coastline.

By November 1966, SWAPO had deployed five military groups in three regions of northern Namibia: Eastern Caprivi, Okavango and Ovamboland. The SWAPO bases established there were used as military training grounds to train local Namibians who were recruited by SWAPO combatants to join the armed struggle.

In 1967, UN Resolution 2248 established the UN Council for Namibia, as the ‘de jure’ government of Namibia, with the intent to administer the country until it achieved its independence. However, South Africa refused to co-operate with Resolution 2248, making it impossible for the Council to enter Namibia on numerous occasions.

In August 1967, the 81 Namibians who were captured at Omugulu-gOmbashe after being betrayed by Castro were tried in Pretoria, South Africa, where they were subjected to solitary confinement and torture. The international community was made aware of the illegal trial of Namibians in a foreign land, through awareness campaigns carried out by SWAPO and other Namibian proponents for independence, and supported by OAU member states, country members of the Non-Aligned movement, and anti-apartheid efforts of other countries who helped to intensify the campaign in defense of those on trial in Pretoria.

Toivo ya Toivo made a historic statement at the trial in Pretoria on behalf of all the SWAPO defendants. Excerpts from this statement read as follows:

“…..We find ourselves here in a foreign country, convicted under laws made by people who we have always considered as foreigners. We find ourselves tried by a judge who is not our countryman and who has not shared our background.”
“We are Namibians and not South Africans. We do not know, and will not in the future, recognize your right to govern us; to make laws for us, in which we had no say; to treat our country as if it were your property and us as if you were our masters. We have always regarded South Africa as an intruder in our country. This is how we have always felt and this is how we feel now and it is on this basis that we have faced this trial.”

“.....We believe that South Africa has a choice - either to live at peace with us or to subdue us by force. If you chose to crush us and impose your will on us, then you not only betray your trust but you will live in security for only so long as your power is greater than ours.”

“...I am proud that my countrymen have taken up arms for their people and I believe that anyone who calls himself a man would not despise them.”

The Pretoria trial of these SWAPO members and Ya Toivo’s powerful statement brought SWAPO into the limelight, and clearly, established the existence of Namibia as more than just an extension of South Africa. Ya Toivo, however, recognized as the founder of SWAPO, was sentenced to a 20-year term in prison in 1968, on South Africa’s infamous Robben Island.

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In 1969, inspired by SWAPO’s mobilization campaign, my father joined the liberation movement. He was 17 years old at the time, and living in Walvis Bay – a harbor town along the western coastline of Namibia.

By that time, SWAPO’s political, diplomatic and military strategies were in effect and there was no stopping the growing movement. This was reiterated by Nujoma in 1971, when he noted that “....as South Africa remains in Namibia, SWAPO will continue to wage the armed liberation struggle - indeed to intensify it until Namibia is free and independent.”

The growing PLAN at this point had an improved supply of sophisticated weaponry such as bazookas, rocket launchers and land mines, and groups of SWAPO’s guerilla combatants often entered the country to deal the enemy numerous blows with their surprise attacks.

Finally, on June 21, 1971, the International Court of Justice upheld UN authority over Namibia, declaring that South Africa’s presence in Namibia was illegal, and calling on South Africa to immediately withdraw from Namibia. The Court also advised UN member states against conducting business with South Africa, and cautioned them not to give legal recognition to South Africa’s presence in Namibia. This was a victory for SWAPO on the diplomatic front. However,
supported by Britain and France, South Africa refused to recognize the UN Council for Namibia. In addition to this affront against the UN, many Western countries also continued to trade with South Africa and occupied Namibia in violation of the UN resolutions.

On December 13, 1971, over 20,000 workers engaged in the contract labor system at mines, factories, in the fishing industry, railways and docks, municipal services and farms throughout Namibia, began a major two-month strike against the repressive labor system. Fed up with the exploitative terms of contract labor, which was administered by the South West Africa Native Labor Association (SWANLA), the workers downed their tools and demanded that they be sent back to their homes. Under this labor system, black workers would be contracted to white employers for terms of 12 to 24 months at wages averaging US$28/month, plus food and housing. Breaking the contract was illegal.

The 1971 strike was a non-violent show of the dissatisfaction Namibians held with the apartheid conditions to which they were subjected, and represented their call for the end of SWANLA’s repressive Contract System. The workers demands were not met, but the apartheid government did agree to make some improvements to the pay and working conditions of Namibians. Disappointed, black Namibians only became more convinced that physically fighting the enemy would be necessary to show that they were serious about achieving their independence, at all costs.

The strike, like the International Court of Justice ruling of 1962 and the Pretoria trial of detained SWAPO members increased the amount of international attention on the plight of the Namibian people and their struggle for independence.

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In May, 1974, the first group of Namibian civilians crossed the border into exile to join the liberation struggle. The group, led by Commander John Ya Otto and guided by PLAN Fighter Patrick Iyambo Lungada, comprised about 15 people.

In July 1974, a few months after the first group had gone into exile, my father, who was 22 years old at the time, left Walvis Bay and followed suit with another group. With the assistance of the Angolans, the group travelled through Angola into Zambia, where the SWAPO headquarters were located. While at the border between Namibia and Zambia, my father wrote a letter to his mother telling her that he was leaving the country to join SWAPO and the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia. He could only write the letter while at the border because it was not safe to
pen this kind of intent while in Namibia, as the enemy could intercept the letters and possibly capture or kill those attempting to flee into exile to join SWAPO. The entire journey was done on foot and took about a month to complete.

Zambia had four SWAPO camps, which became the first of many homes to children who were born in exile. They were *Nyango*, led by Moses Garoeb, *Old Farm*, led by Nahas Angula, and *Shalibana* and *Ontutula*.

Along with other freedom fighters, my father participated in frequent military operations into Namibia, where local support for the liberation movement was enormous, despite the associated risk. Many Namibians sympathetic to the cause, fed and sheltered the combatants although this was a dangerous act of kindness that could result in harassment and persecution by the South African authorities. But there were also those who bought into South Africa’s apartheid propaganda, and labeled the SWAPO combatants who were sacrificing their lives for the freedom of their own country as “terrorists.”

During 1974, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) gave SWAPO the title of “sole authentic representative of the people of Namibia.” This was a powerful recognition of SWAPO’s drive to free Namibia of South Africa’s occupation, and showed that the movement was gaining increased momentum and recognition.

But although SWAPO was making impressive headway in implementing its three liberation strategies, it was limited in its armed struggle efforts. SWAPO combatants couldn’t enter Namibia with ease from Zambia due to the geographical isolation of Namibia with South Africa to the south, the Namib Desert and the Atlantic Ocean on the west, and the Kalahari Desert and Botswana on the east. To make matters worse, the Botswana government was afraid of South Africa and didn’t dare to provoke it by supporting SWAPO, while Angola was still under the colonial rule of the Portuguese. Zambia, under the leadership of President Kenneth Kaunda and his famous white handkerchief, was the only neighboring country to Namibia that was willing to host SWAPO. This often resulted in trouble from South Africa, which routinely attacked Zambia as a result of its support of SWAPO.

As if God had heard the cries of SWAPO and the Namibian people, on April 25, 1974, a group of Portuguese army officers seized power in Lisbon, Portugal, overthrowing the Estado Novo Regime under the then leadership of Prime Minister Marcello Caetano. The new administration announced that all Portuguese colonies in Africa, including Angola, would be given their independence. This independence came to be realized for Angola on November 11, 1975, under
the leadership of Angola’s largest political party, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), led by President Antonio Agostinho Neto.

With Angola’s independence achieved, Namibia now had an open frontier, 800 kilometers long, along its northern border. This new access into the country brought the struggle for Namibia’s independence into a revised phase. The new Angolan government, led by President Agostinho Neto, allowed SWAPO to relocate its Provisional Headquarters from Lusaka in Zambia, to Angola’s capital city, Luanda. It also allowed SWAPO to establish its PLAN military headquarters in Lubango, a southern Angolan town closer to the Namibian border.

With its new strategic location, SWAPO was now able to engage in more serious guerrilla warfare against the enemy and to make direct attacks across the northern frontier. Larger forces of freedom fighters and bigger consignments of weapons could be sent into Namibia, and this Northern Front soon became the central hive of guerilla activity. There was also a Northwestern Front, as well as a Northeastern Front in the Caprivi area, allowing SWAPO to strike at the South Africans right from the Atlantic Ocean all the way to the Caprivi Strip along the Zambian frontier. Each of the three Northern Front regions had its own headquarters and commanders, logistics, food, medical points and clinics.

During its relocation to Angola, SWAPO moved swiftly to set up camps such as Nghulumbashe Wambu, a Namibian and Angolan civilian community. The support for Namibia’s liberation movement by the Angolan government enabled SWAPO to benefit from its host’s allies: the Soviet Union, Cuba, and socialist countries such as the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and Czechoslovakia. But although things looked promising for SWAPO, it was not completely impervious to raids by the apartheid forces. In fact, in 1976, South Africa attacked SWAPO in an incident that came to be popularly known as the Shatotwa Massacre, which took place at a western province of Zambia called Oshatotwa.

Needless to say, the fight for Namibia’s liberation went on, and more and more people joined the struggle, fleeing Namibia into Angola and Zambia. Those who joined the struggle mostly came in through Ovamboland (Northern Namibia), which was a lot easier to escape from into exile. It was a great challenge to flee from the central and southern regions of Namibia because it was difficult to get past the South African security at Tsumeb and Oshivelo, the gateway to Ovamboland. For all intents and purposes, Oshivelo was created to prevent people from traveling to the northern border areas from the rest of the country and particularly to stop the
exodus into exile to join SWAPO. However, those determined to flee the country found a way to escape despite these obstacles.

The inability and/or non-intent to flee into exile, however, did not stop the seeds of the liberation movement from being planted in regions south of Oshivelo; and the struggle for Namibia’s freedom was also waged within the country by many of the nation’s heroes and heroines. Other political parties formed in support of the liberation struggle, the Council of Churches in Namibia formed in 1978, various media platforms, and in particular The Namibian newspaper formed in 1985, foreign advocates for Namibia’s liberation, and numerous supporters of the struggle – black and white alike – played major roles in working towards Namibia’s independence. My own experience of the liberation struggle was formed primarily under the leadership of SWAPO, but I gratefully acknowledge the contributions made by these and many other elements towards the independence of Namibia.

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In January 1976, at the age of 15, my mother fled the country into exile in Angola. Before her escape, she was living at Oshingenge in northern Namibia. There, a SWAPO combatant who went by the guerilla name of Kiikombo ya Ndongoli recruited her and her friend Ndilimeke Angula to support the liberation struggle of Namibia by joining SWAPO. Without saying goodbye to her family, my mother and her friend fled into exile. When their families didn’t see them again after that day, they simply assumed that they had left to join the liberation struggle, as this had become a successful trend among many young people in the northern part of Namibia.

My mother and the group of people with whom she fled journeyed on foot all the way into Angola, sleeping and hiding in bushes at night to avoid being caught by the enemy. They were vigilant throughout their journey and evaded being captured and possibly killed by the South African apartheid forces. Right before crossing the border into Angola, their recruiter asked my mother and the others, to pick their new guerilla names that would disguise their true identity from the enemy while in exile, because using their real names was considered dangerous. They were given a list of combatant names such as Shimbilinga, Bazooka (Bazooka gun), Antitanka Mine (anti-tank), Shixualakateni (scatter), Ambushu (ambush), Naditope (let them explode), Mbwangela (hit them up), Danger, Shikololo (cave), Shafoondilo (like fire), Shoonyeeka (which was my father’s combatant name), Shixualala, Aantegelegeneta (grenade/hand grenade), Mahomet (packing/well armed soldier), Shitalena, Jumpingi (Jumping Mines) and so forth.
Valentina: The Exile Child

My mother picked “Jumping Mines” or the Oshiwambo shortened version “Jumpingi” because she was very energetic and explosive, inspired by the explosive effects of landmines on destroying the enemy. She saw herself having that same effect, and was ready to serve the enemy a platter of total destruction. Growing up, I thought Mee Jumpingi (Ms. Jumping Mine) was my mother’s real name. I only came to learn of her real name at the age of 9 and was quite surprised to learn that the names that I had grown up hearing were all ‘fake’. All that time, I had assumed that the guerilla names used in the camps and at war were the names that would’ve appeared on their birth certificates.

A week after fleeing Namibia, my mother and her group arrived safely in Oshikuti, Angola, at a SWAPO camp called Koolamba at the Northern Front. The Northern Front region was under the leadership of Commander Diimana, and comprised mostly Oshiwambo-Kwanyama speaking Namibians who had fled into exile from the Uukwanyama areas of northern Namibia. Much of the mobilization of young people to join the struggle started in these areas, explaining why Kwanyama was the predominant dialect (of seven Oshiwambo dialects) used in exile. Most Caprivians went into exile via the Northeastern Front in the Caprivi region.

When the Boers caught wind of the large exodus of Namibians into exile, they burned down a lot of houses in the north and tortured several people, including women, young people and the elderly, in their attempt to capture the ‘troublemaking’ combatants. Some of the elderly people were even burned to death in their houses as the Boers went frantically in search for combatants who were roaming the area recruiting young people to join the struggle.

My mother stayed at Koolamba for a few months, before moving to another Northern Front camp called Eheke, and led by Commander Elia Haulyondjaba, in May 1976. While in the camp, she was trained to use a gun and taught other guerilla military tactics. As a trained combatant, she had her own gun to fend for herself and fight back when the enemy struck. Like other combatants, she slept in trenches and was taught to be a fearless freedom fighter, on the same level as her male counterparts.

Eheke also holds significant meaning in my history, because it is the camp where my parents met for the first time in 1977.

As SWAPO forces gained in number, the South African regime became more and more agitated with the movement. As such, the regime went to great lengths to sabotage the mission of SWAPO by sending more spies into exile to crack the movement’s momentum. South Africa also tried to break SWAPO by drawing on the support of West Germany, which was not fond of the
liberation movement because it feared that Germans in Namibia would lose their property if SWAPO’s wish to liberate the country was granted.

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In December 1976, the UN General Assembly joined the OAU by officially recognizing SWAPO as the “sole authentic representative” of the Namibian people. This seal of approval boosted the morale of SWAPO freedom fighters and their supporters in Namibia. This also helped to raise the status of SWAPO and Namibia at almost every international conference, and made it easier for SWAPO to campaign for humanitarian assistance from caring and supportive countries and organizations around the world.

As more people joined SWAPO in exile, they were sent abroad either to study or to receive military training. Much of the military training was already taking place in Angola, but some platoons and companies were sent abroad for specialized training. My father was among those sent for specialized training – in his case, to a military academy in the Soviet Union in 1977. When he returned from this training, he was sent back to the battlefield, and gradually rose through the ranks of PLAN to become one of the regional field commanders and political commissars in SWAPO’s armed wing.

At the beginning of the war, the South African apartheid regime used South Africans to fight the war against SWAPO, but later began recruiting local black Namibians. These soldiers came to be known as the notorious Koevoet, and were called the Omakakunya by the Oshiwambo speakers in Northern Namibia. The South African government used them as informants because they spoke local languages and could easily gather information about SWAPO activities in the area. Koevoet at times pretended to be SWAPO freedom fighters, but their nasty attitude towards the people usually gave them away. Koevoet soldiers had a deep loyalty to their white masters and were trained to kill. In fact, South African General Magnus Malan encouraged Koevoet to kill blacks and present their heads as proof of their brutal work. This order turned into more of a killing frenzy, and Koevoet murdered several civilians in northern villages, cut off their heads, and falsely presented them to the South Africans as the heads of SWAPO freedom fighters. Their reward for these acts of brutality: ‘kop geld’, which means ‘head money’.

One of the greatest war stories I grew up hearing was about how PLAN captured its first white South African war prisoner, Johan van der Mescht. He was captured by PLAN combatants Danger Ashipala and Kamati ka Elio on Sunday February 19, 1978 at a water hole that he was guarding just outside the South African Defense Force’s Elundu base. Another SADF soldier had
also been captured that day, but he refused to walk when taken prisoner. The PLAN combatants therefore killed him. SWAPO was happy to have achieved the objective of capturing a South Africa Boer alive inside Namibia, and his capture sent shock waves throughout Namibia and South Africa. South African Air force and infantry battalions unsuccessfully pursued SWAPO guerillas in an attempt to free their captured man. But the PLAN combatants strategically broke up into two groups to confuse the enemy. One group moved the prisoner towards the Namibia-Angola border while the other group fought the enemy in a fierce battle. After his capture, he was first taken to the PLAN regional headquarters at Haipeto in Angola, and then detained for four and a half years as a SWAPO prisoner of war in the Sao Paulo prison in Luanda, Angola.

A month after van der Mescht’s capture, SADF was still fuming about the incident, and expressed some of its anger on March 28, 1978. On that day, at around 1pm, my mother - 18 years old at the time - and 17 other girls, four of whom were Angolans, were getting traditionally married in Ohaipeto, Angola, near the border with Namibia. Some of the Namibian girls getting married that day were Nanghiningwe, Rauha Shalonga, Cecilia Kangumu, Lavinia Ndekuwonja, and Mwandji. The three to five day ceremony took place at the home of Mr. Shipopyeni, and included the various rites that made up a traditional Oshiwambo wedding, called Efundula. Efundula, named after the act of kicking up the sand when dancing, included an initiation practice that celebrated and prepared young girls for fertility and other important roles in the world. It also served to protect them from unwanted sex, and provided validation of a traditional marriage, even if there was no husband yet. It was considered a formal wedding that initiated the girls into womanhood, and made it acceptable for them to get pregnant without reproach.

During the first stage of Efundula, the girls entered a room made of huts called Ondjua where an initiation leader called Namunganga came to feed them. The initiation leader was usually a male, but sometimes a woman could conduct the initiation on the condition that she was the daughter of a circumcised man. From the hut, the girls crawled through the legs of the Namunganga and stepped over a cleft stick, a performance test to see if any of the girls were pregnant. Stumbling while stepping over the cleft stick was considered to be a sign of pregnancy, and if any girl was found to be pregnant, she would be expelled from the initiation ceremony, rejected by the community, and treated as an outcast. In pre-colonial Owambo communities, a young girl who fell pregnant before going through the “marriage initiation” of Efundula was burnt to death. Another test during the initiation involved giving the girls a traditional herbal beer. If a girl vomited after drinking the brew, this was perceived to be a sign that she was pregnant. In addition to the performance tests, the girls also had to undergo “endurance tests,” which were
more physical. These included long sessions of dancing to the beats of the Efundula drums (*eengoma*) and hours of pounding millet, to weed out the ones who were pregnant.

The next stage of Efundula was called “Oihangolo” where the “brides” being initiated, known as “Ovafuko,” would adopt male roles and become like boys (ovamati) by covering themselves in white ash. They would then have to go around asking for food at different homesteads, which had to comply given that it was Efundula. If necessary, the girls would also beat up men who crossed their paths, insult them and even make them prepare food for them. This pretend boyhood even went to such extremities as beating up men if they were caught having sex with a woman... even if it was their own wife.

During the last day of my mother’s initiation, the South African Defense Force disrupted the just-ending Efundula wedding celebration when they launched an attack, shooting at the unsuspecting celebratory crowd. Everyone ran for cover, while the PLAN combatants who were armed, including PLAN Commander Elia Haulyondjaba, who was responsible for the combatant women who were getting married at the Efundula that day, fired back at the intruding enemy. My mother and other PLAN combatants were able to make it to their disguised military bases alive. A successfully “married” woman, my mother could now acceptably become pregnant.

In spite of the various battles waged between the SADF and SWAPO, South Africa continued to deny SWAPO’s effectiveness in a full-blown apartheid war. South Africa went to great lengths to fight what it wanted the world to believe was just a small ineffective bush army comprised of a few unskilled guerillas. Quite on the contrary, PLAN combatants were effective, and the magnitude of South Africa’s military presence in Namibia at the time is proof enough that SWAPO was indeed perceived a threat to South Africa’s occupation of Namibia. South Africa built a huge, well-equipped army to fight SWAPO, and had sizeable air bases at Grootfontein and Ondangwa in Namibia.

Still irate about the capture of van der Mescht, and intent on sending a strong message to SWAPO, on May 4, 1978, South Africa decided to attack a civilian SWAPO camp, Cassinga, which was located approximately 260 km into Southern Angola. “Operation Reindeer,” as the Cassinga Massacre was called by South Africa, was a well thought out plan for the destruction of the Namibian people in exile. The South African Defense Force chose the date, May 4th, to follow a UN Security Council Debate on South Africa’s illegal occupation of Namibia. The attack began with a wave of four Buccaneer bombers, which were followed by faster Canberra bombers that dropped 300 bombs on the camp, causing massive casualties amongst refugees. The Buccaneer
bombers dropped 32 one thousand pound bombs that were followed by Mirage jets, which sprayed the camp with 30 mm high explosive cannon rounds. Paratroopers were then dropped off.

SWAPO President Sam Nujoma had visited and left Cassinga just days before it was attacked and it has been speculated that he may have been the target. However, research also suggests that the presence of two of SWAPO’s top military wing commanders, Jerobeum "Dimo" Hamaambo and Greenwell Matongo, and other military components of the Cassinga refugee camp attracted the attention of South Africa’s Defense Force and led them to bomb the camp. Either way, evidence shows that Cassinga truly was a refugee camp with a kindergarten, primary school, a clinic, a vehicle repair shop and other civilian activities. Cassinga was home to refugees under the protection of SWAPO, which guarded all camps in exile in case of attacks from the enemy. SWAPO had a mandate to protect all Namibians under its care in exile, and it is unfortunate that SWAPO did not expect SADF to fly from Ondangwa to commit such an atrocity on the lives of innocent Namibian women and children.

According to the Angolan government, 12 SWAPO combatants were killed in the attack, though South Africa trumpeted the massacre as a victory by claiming that 95 PLAN combatants had been killed. In addition to the loss of a number of combatants, it is estimated that between 600 and 800 Namibian women and children were slaughtered in the attack. Refugees ran for cover in the trench systems created by SWAPO for military attacks, while the PLAN combatants who were guarding the camp tried to resist the attack by using personal arms and anti-aircraft guns.

The Cubans who were present in Angola at the time came to the aid of the SWAPO combatants, assisting them in fighting back until the South African forces left. It is reported that about 40 Cubans died trying to defend the otherwise defenseless Namibian women and children. About 300 Namibians were also captured and returned to Namibia as prisoners at a concentration camp in Kaiganachab in Mariental in southern Namibia. This massacre was South Africa’s greatest war crime against the Namibian people.

Pregnant mothers and children who survived Cassinga were taken to the nearest SWAPO camps in Lubango for a few months before being relocated to Kwanza-Sul, a new SWAPO civilian area located far from the war zone. The international community widely condemned South Africa’s massacre of Namibians at Cassinga. A delegation from the United Nations visited Cassinga soon after the massacre and reported that: “What the South Africans did was criminal in legal terms and savage in moral terms. It reminds us of the darkest moments in modern history.” On May 6, 1978, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 428 condemned South Africa’s attack on Cassinga.
SWAPO military commanders Dimo Hamaambo and Greenwell Matongo survived the Cassinga attack, but as the mystery around the Cassinga attack unfolded, news surfaced of their arrest and imprisonment by their own SWAPO leadership. The two were imprisoned for about eight months for mistakes made at Cassinga. Apparently, SADF had issued an attack notification to the SWAPO military leadership, informing them about ‘Operation Reindeer’. SADF rarely carried out surprise attacks on major operations such as Cassinga because it was not considered a “terrorist or guerilla” army. So they would issue notifications saying that they were on their way to attack on a certain day, although they didn’t always come on the days they said they would attack. Cassinga was South Africa’s first major operation against SWAPO. Although they notified the SWAPO military leadership in advance, their notification may not have been properly communicated to the rest of the SWAPO leadership to take appropriate action and prevent South Africa from massacring innocent Namibian women and children.

I personally believe that if SWAPO was properly notified about the attack well in advance, it would have done everything in its power to put up a stronger resistance against the South Africans, and to move the refugees out of harm’s way. Lessons were obviously learned from the Cassinga massacre, making it the first and last successful attack on any SWAPO camps filled with women and children.

Unfortunately, although Commander Greenwell Matongo survived Cassinga, he died the following year in July 1979 after the military car he was traveling in ran over a South Africa planted landmine. Commander Dimo Hamaambo lived to see Namibia become independent in 1990. He was the first hero to be buried at Heroes Acres outside Namibia’s capital city of Windhoek Namibia, in 2002.

Some of the South African soldiers who attacked Cassinga reported being haunted by the brutality of their actions, while others considered the raid a war victory. On May 4, 1988, a decade after the Cassinga Massacre, SADF celebrated the tenth anniversary of the massacre with a military parade in the northern Namibian town of Oshakati. This derisory celebration of May 4 by the former South African soldiers continued even after Namibia gained her independence from South Africa, until President Nelson Mandela eventually put an end to this profane celebration of Cassinga soon after he came to power in 1994.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission examined crimes and atrocities committed during the time of the South African apartheid Regime and in 1998 noted the following about Cassinga:

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"It is clear that from the SADF’s perspective, Cassinga was a military facility rather than essentially a refugee camp or refugee transit facility, as SWAPO has always claimed. The photographic evidence shown to the Commission at the SADF archives suggests a military dimension to the camp. This cannot, however, be taken as conclusive evidence that Cassinga was a military base. In the context of the ongoing war in Angola, some defensive fortification of any SWAPO facility, whether civilian or military, would have been standard practice."

Namibia has commemorated Cassinga day as a national public holiday to honor those who died on May 4, 1978.

After the Cassinga Massacre, SWAPO was even more motivated to defeat the enemy and bring about Namibia’s much-needed independence. PLAN combatants became more active on all the Fronts in the war zone, and some of the SWAPO combatants were sent for further military training. My father was one of those sent for more intensified military training in the Soviet Union in June 1978. This was his second specialized course of military training in the Soviet Union.

Soon after the Cassinga Massacre, my mother and other combatants left Eheke camp, which was very close to Cassinga, and moved to another camp - still in the Northern Front - called Ndjulu (Region). The group was led by Aatenya Nandanga. Later that year, she was again relocated – this time to Oshivale camp (also in Northern Front area). From Oshivale, my mother was relocated to another camp in the Northern Front called Oneshati. In August 1978, my father returned from his two-month military training in the Soviet Union to Oneshati camp where my mother was now staying. That month, my mother fell pregnant with me.

In September 1978, with still no sign of South Africa letting go of its hold on Namibia, the Western Contact Group (WCG) was formed. The WCG was made up of Canada, France, West Germany and The United Kingdom, and the United States, with the aim to diplomatically force South Africa out of Namibia and speed up the peace process. Their efforts led to the creation of Security Council Resolution 435. Resolution 435 was adopted on 29 September 1978, and endorsed the Secretary General’s decolonization plan for Namibia. It also authorized the creation and deployment of the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) in Namibia. This “settlement proposal,” as the plan was referred to, also called for elections to be held in Namibia under the UN’s supervision and control.

Although South Africa agreed to cooperate with Resolution 435, they continued to seek ways to delay the process. They strongly opposed the UN deciding the future of Namibia and insisted
that the Western Contact Group instead deal with the Turnhalle Alliance about the future of Namibia. The Turnhalle Constitutional Conference, which was held from 1975-1977 in Windhoek, Namibia, sought to create an "internal settlement" for the independence of Namibia and laid the framework for the government of Namibia from 1977 to 1989.

In October, 1978, Foreign Affairs Ministers from the five Western Contact Group countries went to South Africa to stop Pretoria from proceeding with its plan to hold the Turnhalle Alliance elections in December 1978 in Namibia, as part of its internal settlement plan. However, the five Ministers were unsuccessful at stopping South Africa from going ahead with the illegal elections. In light of this failure, SWAPO, the African States and several other countries intensified their demands for South Africa’s immediate withdrawal from Namibia. They also called for mandatory sanctions against South Africa for its defiance and delaying tactics of Namibia’s independence.

In December 1978, in disregard of the UN proposal, South Africa preceded with its Turnhalle Alliance elections. SWAPO and a few other Namibian political parties boycotted these elections. The DTA political party was declared the “winner” in the elections. SWAPO and the international community refused to recognize the results of the election, and the liberation movement called on the rest of the world to isolate South Africa. But South Africa simply ignored these demands, and continued to rule Namibia without a care in the world. But South Africa’s games with the rest of the world did not amuse SWAPO. In fact, they only convinced the movement that international diplomacy alone would not immediately secure Namibia’s independence. This forced SWAPO to intensify the armed liberation struggle in the country.

At the end of 1978 and in the early months of 1979, heavy PLAN operations against the enemy took place. These operations convinced Namibians inside Namibia, and the world at large, that SWAPO and its military wing PLAN were stronger, more motivated and more effective than ever before. They would not retreat until South Africa gave in to the pressure for Namibia’s independence.

Namibians continued to flee the apartheid regime en masse, leaving Namibia to join SWAPO in exile between 1977 and 1979. SWAPO reacted to the exodus by erecting more camps to accommodate the growing Namibian community in exile. One of the camps, called “Oonjaba,” was where many SWAPO exile kids were born between 1977 and 1978. They mainly lived in the Oshivemba section of Oonjaba. This is also where SWAPO’s “Education and Health Centers”
started. However, as a safety precaution, this refugee camp vanished soon after the Cassinga Massacre as the two camps were not far apart.

Another camp in Angola was Dalatandu, which was formed in 1979, located on the northeastern part of Dondo and headed by Dr. Libertina Amadhila. Dalantandu was also known as the Natalia Maulu Center. This camp housed the biggest kindergarten-hostel for exile kids whose parents had gone away to fight or study abroad. The children were raised by “madas” (mothers) such as the popular Mee Maha and Mee Lambwida (real name Ernestina). Each "mada" was given six to seven exile children to care for. Unfortunately Dalatandu only lasted until 1985/86, when it had to be closed down as UNITA forces, a former rebel political party in Angola and an enemy of SWAPO, was closing in on the area Their military presence, of course, was considered unsafe for the women and children who lived there. These women and children were relocated to Kwanza-Sul in 1985/86, when Dalatandu was closed down.

Each SWAPO camp had an Education Center, an eekulo, which was a free community cafeteria-kitchen for exiled Namibians and their children, and an “omangadjina” - a clothing warehouse where exiles got clothes for free. Every camp area also had a makeshift prison, where people would be imprisoned for acts such as stealing, spying for the enemy and dating foreigners. Namibian women were forbidden from dating non-Namibians because it was feared that they would run off with their love interest, and lose sight of the vision to liberate Namibia. There were no lawyers for these prison systems; the individuals in charge of the prisons carried out investigations on the accused and a person was found guilty based on that investigation. Women who were imprisoned usually got their hair cut off as a sign of punishment. Sweeping dirt was also part of the punishment of prisoners.

There were two SWAPO camps located in the province of Kwanza (Cuanza): Kwanza-Norte (Kwanza-North), also known as Kwanza-Yuupyu in Oshiwambo, was set up at the end of 1978, and Kwanza-Sul (Kwanza-South) established in 1979. The first group of twelve exile kids was taken to Kwanza-Norte in 1978, but the camp was soon found to be unsafe, as the mosquito-infested area proved a breeding ground for malaria. When the camp was closed down, everyone was relocated to Kwanza-Sul. Kwanza-Sul is located in west central Angola, with an area of 55,660 km². Sumbe is the capital of Kwanza-Sul. Kwanza-Sul had a major area called Adimi (Administration) which formed SWAPO’s headquarters in the area. Adimi was the biggest camp in Kwanza-Sul, and was led by community leaders such as Tate (Mr.) Mbolondodo (Darius Shikongo) and Director Nghandi. Mee Kwanime, Mee Kwahepo and Ma George led the kindergartens in Kwanza-Sul.
At the omangadjina, the term for getting free clothes was “okuyavala.” The process of okuyavala was not a simple one though, especially in Kwanza-Sul, as people bum-rushed each other to grab the best clothes from the bundles of items that had just arrived from donor countries. The person in charge prepared the crowd by counting “1, 2, 3, FIRE,” and everyone rushed to grab what he or she could. Some ended up with different pairs and sizes for shoes and socks, and if successful, they would convince the other person to let them have the other shoe or sock. From my experience, the omangadjina in Lubango was a whole lot more orderly than the one in Kwanza-Sul.

But despite the occasional frenzy created at the omangadjinas, the good thing about the SWAPO camps in exile was that there was unity and a real sense of community. This is much unlike present-day independent Namibia, where money talks and every man is for himself. But that’s a whole other discussion.

Daily routines in SWAPO civilian camps included regular morning assemblies, also known as parades. At these parades, entertainment, news and other updates were shared with the community. Young people and children went to school and kindergarten in the morning hours. There was also a school for the women in the camps, who were not as greatly involved in combat as the men, and therefore had the time to study. But most of the women didn’t like going to school, and many didn’t take advantage of the educational opportunities available to them.

School was over at around 12:30pm each day, and everyone then went to have lunch. Children ate at the children’s eekulo (cafeteria) while adults lunched at their own. The cafeterias were separate to keep order and also as a show of respect towards the grownups. Traditionally, children rarely ate with adults.

We always looked forward to going to the children’s eekulo and to show our excitement, we would sing a popular song about eekulo, called “eeshi daa kangwa, no makoloni...” (fried fish and macaroni), repeating the same line over and over. We rarely ate macaroni though! That was a luxury. Nevertheless, it was our favorite dish at eekulo, and we made a song to honor this rare delicacy. After eekulo, the children went out to play and those who were in the Pioneers club went for their special rehearsals. The adults took part in various military and household activities in the camp for the rest of the day.

There were very few men in the camps. Most were away fighting the war on the frontlines. Those who were not needed for combat in Lubango – the SWAPO camp area near the frontline – were sent to other civilian camps to work as guards, carry out administrative duties, and to look after
the general welfare of women and children in those camps. The adults in the camps were divided into platoons or companies, each with certain duties to perform. These included cooking, guarding the camps from enemy intrusion, fetching water from the river, cleaning and so forth. When a specific platoon was on duty, its members would have to drop all outside commitments – including going to school – to fulfill their duties in the camps.

Kwanza-Sul is infamous for a story called “Meendudu,” a rumor about a group of SWAPO exile kids known as kawalala (naughty kids) led by an older exile child called Laaliki, who fled the camps and disappeared to become tsotsis (thieves or gangsters). I’m not sure where these kawalala ended up, but it was speculated that they had joined UNITA. Another rumor states that they had, in fact, returned to Namibia. Either way, it turns out that this popular story – which spread across the camps like wildfire and was told time and time again - was untrue. The truth, I discovered while writing this book, was that around 1985/1986, a group of twelve-to thirteen-year-old-boys used to go hunting for pig meat in the bushes of Kwanza-Sul because meat was very scarce in SWAPO camps. Selfish as they were, whenever the boys caught a pig, they slaughtered it right there in the bushes and had a feast for themselves. They never returned to the camps to share the meat with everyone else, as they feared they would not get their stomach’s fill. So out of greediness, they failed to return to the camps. This group of scoundrels was led by twelve/thirteen-year-old Aralick (Laaliki) Bonzaigier, who was one of the few colored (historically mixed-race Namibians) exiles in the SWAPO camps. It was just assumed that Aralick had led the other exile kids to rebel against SWAPO and run away. This assumption was based on the common belief that non-Oshiwambo speaking Namibians were more likely to be considered puppets of the enemy than anybody else, when they got involved in activities that proved suspicious. The truth of the “meendudu” story eventually came out though, and those in charge confirmed the innocence of the group of boys. Absolved of the wrongly misconduct, along with other children of the struggle, Aralick was eventually sent to Zambia and then Cuba when it was realized that the story implicating him had been completely distorted.

Another area in Kwanza-Sul was Kwanza-Yookafe. This was primarily a children’s center, where Camp A was located. The camp had a maternity ward on its premises, with Mee Hilya Shambunga and Tresia Mweshihange as midwives and nurses. This part of Kwanza-Sul also had an area called Okambuta, where the big hospital was located. Dr. Indongo was the leader of Okambuta. There were other areas too. Oshingungu was a camp for the elderly. Camp Education – led by Nangolo Mbumba, functioned on the basis of its name. Helena Sheetekele was one of the teachers there. And Lambitu was a camp for the maimed from the war.
Had South Africa complied with Resolution 435 of 1978 and not delayed the Namibian independence process, many Namibian born exile kids, myself included, would have been born in a free Namibia in 1979. After the Cassinga attack, the SWAPO leadership appealed to the international community to take in children who had survived this massacre, and to educate them. Some of these children were injured. Many were orphaned. The first group of exile children to go abroad were those seventeen years and older. They were taken to Cuba at the end of 1978 to start secondary school at the Hedrik Witbooi Secondary School in the Isla De La Juventud (Island of Youth) area of Cuba, where many Africans lived. The school had been opened exclusively for Namibians. More groups of Namibian exile children from eight years old and up were sent to Cuba, and also to Laudima School which was located in Congo Brazzaville, Africa. The first group left in 1978, followed by more groups in 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985 and 1986. The last group went in 1988. The school ran from 1978 to 1993 when it was closed down - Namibia having gained her independence in 1990. SWAPO sent 80 of its Cassinga surviving and orphaned children between the ages of three to five to East Germany (formerly known as GDR in English and DDR in German) before the fall of the Berlin Wall. By 1989, a total of 428 Namibian exile children had been sent to GDR for a better life. Although Namibian adults cared for the children, most of them ended up losing their native language and culture, and adopted the German way of life. Many children were also taken to Cuba, and like those in the GDR, they adopted many elements of the Cuban way of life, learning to speak Spanish and living the Latin culture, although they were raised with a strong Namibian foundation and sense of being.

My own experience of exile during the liberation struggle would be limited to the African continent, and to Angola, in particular. There, I would be born, nurtured and raised in the SWAPO camps that thousands of Namibians called ‘home’, as they fought for the independence of their own country.
A map illustrating SWAPO military operations from Angola into Namibia during SWAPO’s armed liberation struggle against South Africa’s apartheid regime. Courtesy: www.statemaster.com
Former Commander-in-Chief of the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) and President of SWAPO Dr. Sam Nujoma. Courtesy: SWAPO Party Archives @ www.sparc.na

Top: SWAPO combatants ready for war at the Northern Front. Courtesy: SWAPO Party Archives @ www.sparc.na
Top and bottom: SWAPO combatants ready for war at the Northern Front and SWAPO guerilla fighters crossing a river from Angola into Namibia to engage in the fight for the independence of Namibia. *Courtesy: SWAPO Party Archives @ www.sparc.na*
A SWAPO combatant carries a gun with a SWAPO sticker on it. In the picture you can see other armed PLAN combatants. Courtesy: SWAPO Party Archives @ www.sparc.na

Top: Life at the frontline was not easy. SWAPO combatants sleeping in the cold, with only an open fire to keep them slightly warm. Courtesy: SWAPO Party Archives @ www.sparc.na

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SWAPO army commanders and top leaders among them are President Sam Nujoma, Comrade Hedrik Witbooi and Comrade Peter Nanyemba. Courtesy: SWAPO Party Archives @ www.sparc.na

Newcomers who fled Namibia into exile are addressed at a SWAPO parade. Courtesy: Office of the Founding Father of Namibia.
Bodies of mostly women and children are seen buried in one of the two mass graves following the Cassinga Massacre of May 4th, 1978. Courtesy: www.swapoparty.org
CHAPTER TWO

Angola: My Country of Origin

“Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.”

- Jeremiah 1:5

In exile Angola, when women combatants were a few months pregnant at Northern Front, they were sent to civilian areas to give birth. At the end of 1978, when my mother was four months pregnant, she left her camp at Onghulumbashe in Lubango with a number of other pregnant women to go to Kwanza-Sul. Here, she would reach the full term of her pregnancy, and give birth to me. Her group of pregnant women was one of the first to occupy the newly erected Kwanza-Sul camp in January 1979.

A large number of the children born in exile were born that year - most of them at Kwanza-Sul. I’m not sure why so many children were born that year, but my guess is that 1978, the year in which many of them were conceived, was a year in which the struggle intensified, taking on a new psychological dimensions. This baby making may have been a way to relieve some of the increased war stress. Another reason, I believe, could be that following the massive loss of life of women and children in Cassinga, SWAPO may have called for more babies to be born. After all, the movement probably needed to multiply and produce future combatants who would carry the torch of the liberation struggle forward. Or it may have been a combination of these reasons or maybe even none of them at all. The fact remains though, a lot of exile children were born in 1979 in Kwanza-Sul, and I was one of them.

On April 11, 1979, my mother - 19 years old at the time - was outside playing with other young pregnant teenage mothers and eating omakwaava (guavas) when she went into labor. At midnight on April 12 she gave birth to me.

My father was absent at the time of my birth, engaging the enemy on the battle lines in the Northern Front. I can’t begrudge him of this though. After all, this wasn’t uncommon for most of the children born in exile, some of whom never got the opportunity to see their fathers at all. In fact, I should acknowledge that I was fortunate to even know who my father was, as the nature of war made this important piece of information an anomaly for many children in exile.
Due to the constant mobility of male combatants, who would often stop at the camps for only a few days at a time, and the disuse of real names, paternal parentage was often suspect. To foster unity in the camps, people rarely asked each other what their full names were, and what region in Namibia they were from. Asking for such information could be seen as promoting division in the camps. But it was no secret that people were engaging in sexual activity in the camps, and when male combatants made short trips into the camps, they would often meet women who sparked their interest, have sex with her, and impregnate her.

But since people introduced each other only by their combatant names, by the time a woman realized she was pregnant, identifying the child’s father became a difficult task. She might only have known the man she’d laid with as ‘Bazooka’, for example. To try to identify the man, she would perhaps refer to the dates of his mission trip to their camp. But that hardly helped much, and with the prospect of the woman never seeing the man again, many exile children grew up never knowing who their fathers were. The unaware and unsuspecting father would continue about his business of war, possibly impregnating many other women on subsequent mission trips to other camps. As a result, irrespective of the degree of familiarity in their sexual encounters, many male combatants ended up fathering several children by different women. Men and women, or rather mothers and fathers, were separated by military mission trips, and thus, long-term relationships were scarce amongst combatants and women in the camps.

This state of affairs was slightly different for women who were impregnated by army commanders and commissars, as identifying the man proved an easier task. Moreover, women who were impregnated by top ranking officials in PLAN also tended to have special privileges, especially if they were considered to be solely “the commander’s woman.” Perhaps a pitfall of this for some women was that no other man would want to be with you once you’d been with a commander, for fear of reproach and falling out of favor with those in the top rank. In fact, the silent rule of not touching the commander’s woman was the principle in exile; seen as a way of maintaining peace, order, and respect. Most of the time, once a woman had given birth to a commander’s child, she automatically became untouchable, even if she wasn’t married to him.

Touching a commander’s woman could result in punishments such as a combatant being sent to the frontline to fight the war for extended periods of time, without any relief. This was cruel punishment, because although most combatants were committed to fighting for their country, they looked forward to returning to the camps to rest, and to try to lead a normal life with the rest of the Namibian community in exile, before being deployed again.
After my birth, my mother and I moved to an area in Kwanza-Sul called Mbolondondo in Admin, where she erected our new home: a UNICEF tent. In exile, most people lived in abject poverty, in shacks made of tents and/or tent material. But because this was an everyday reality into which we were born and raised, poverty was a normal state of affairs for us, and most exile children thought nothing of it. We were happy, comfortable and content with our exile life. But living in these conditions wasn’t as easy for our parents, who had been accustomed to better living conditions in the villages of northern Namibia. Senior SWAPO leaders in the camps were a little better off though. They had houses of brick, with proper zinc roofs that were more effective at keeping out the rain than our tent ceilings. But the housing situation ranged from camp to camp. At Lubango, for example, housing was far more favorable and certainly more orderly than in Kwanza-Sul, as people didn’t have to live in the tents or shacks that were common in Kwanza-Sul.

By the time I reached three months in age, I still hadn’t met my father, who continued to carry out his work for the struggle at the Northern Front. He was thinking of me though, and when my baptism came, he sent his relative - my much older cousin Mee Martha Imene - to represent him at the ceremony, and to give me the names he had chosen for me: Rachel Valentina Nghiwete. In the Oshiwambo culture of Namibia - the culture of both my parents - fathers name their children after someone special in their lives, or based on the times in which they are living. Names are never just picked at random. Every name is highly significant, carefully chosen, and sometimes even prophetic. My father named me after his mother, Rachel, who was a devout Christian. Rachel is also a biblical name with a Hebrew origin, and means “ewe” - a female sheep, one with purity. Rachel in the Bible was a prophet - the favorite wife of the great Jacob (Israel) and the mother of Joseph. She was described as “beautiful in form and countenance.” My middle name, Valentina, is a Latin name and the feminine form of Valentine, which is a saint’s name and means “brave, vigorous, mighty, healthy, full of love, powerful and strong.” My mother says I was a peaceful and quiet baby who hardly cried. Perhaps these were characteristics that came with the countenance of someone named ‘Rachel Valentina’. My baptism was conducted by Pastor Nathaniel Nghatanga – the only SWAPO pastor at Kwanza-Sul at that time.

A short time after my baptism, I finally got to meet my father for the first time, when he came to visit us in Kwanza-Sul. A month later, in September 1979, we received news that he had been seriously injured in the war zone at the Northern Front. His combat vehicle had driven over a land mine planted by the South Africans. Like any combat soldier who’d been shot at or who’d had mortars dropped on him, my father had been wounded before. But this time it was serious.

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This was his biggest war injury. It was a horrific accident that killed his colleagues who were in the same vehicle, and left him the lone survivor. He was rushed to Nanyemba hospital in Lubango for extensive medical treatment, and stayed there for three months before being flown to Russia for further medical treatment. And although he was badly hurt, he survived the land mine accident without being left handicapped in any way. In fact, if you saw him today, you’d never think that he’d been involved in such an explosion. Years later, I listened with enormous gratitude and thanksgiving to God as a former PLAN combatant recounted my father’s state soon after the explosion. He said he found my father covered in blood and on the brink of death, completely messed up by the explosion that had just killed his friends. The former combatant also told me that he was still amazed at how my father survived that fatal accident, because the chances of surviving such a huge blast were very slim. It was a miracle. Had the enemy had his way with my father back then, I would have been orphaned as an infant and counted amongst the thousands of war orphans of the struggle.

After my father recuperated from the land mine accident in 1980, he joined SWAPO’s diplomatic front of the liberation struggle and became active in the Foreign Affairs Department. In this capacity, he served as a SWAPO representative in various countries, mobilizing the world community to support Namibia’s liberation struggle.

In 1981, at the age of two, I went to visit my dad in Luanda. Luanda, the capital of Angola and the country’s largest city, is located at the coast and serves as Angola’s chief seaport and administrative center. I don’t remember much about that visit, aside from the area being a hive of activity. Luanda was home to SWAPO’s headquarters and Transit camp. The camp was formed in 1975 when Angola gained its independence and allowed SWAPO to erect camps in designated areas in the country. Transit was the receiving center for food, clothes, and weapons from donor countries, and from here, these items would be disseminated to the numerous other SWAPO camps in Angola. It also served as the main SWAPO transportation center for convoys from Lubango to Kwanza-Sul and other SWAPO camps, and essentially carried the purpose of its name - as a transit point. The camp was also home to Ndilimani, SWAPO’s cultural entertainment troupe, and was famous for its Omangaadhu fruit trees.

On the war front, the struggle continued to intensify, with the South African and Namibian economies both taking hits from the heavy funding going to the war. SADF was determined to stop SWAPO, and unfazed, SWAPO remained determined to see the independence of Namibia. In what seemed like a case of David vs. Goliath, SWAPO (the David of this war) fought back with the arms and ammunition supplied to it by the Soviet Union. These included military
Valentina: The Exile Child

weapons such as bazookas, katushas and pepeshas. Without the support of the Soviets, the Cubans and other countries sympathetic to the liberation movement, SWAPO would not have been able to apply the militarily pressure needed to defeat the South African apartheid army, which was militarily supported by the USA Reagan administration and its NATO allies.

SWAPO combatants effectively used guerilla tactics, which enabled them to maintain vigilance and mobility as they moved in sections and platoons. They carried out surprise attacks against SADF and rapidly covered long distances on foot, sometimes using the aid of bicycles. Their reputation as effective guerilla fighters left South Africa worried about its position in the war, and as the struggle intensified, the apartheid administration continued to recruit more local blacks to help them fight SWAPO. PLAN fighters would often find SADF units manned entirely by black soldiers, and speckled with only one or two white South Africans.

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One of my clearest memories of growing up in Kwanza-Sul was being attacked by a monkey – a traumatic event for me, but one that my mother recounts with much hilarity. When I was about three years old, I was walking home from kindergarten in Admin along a gravel road flanked and covered by a bunch of thick trees, when a monkey jumped on me from one of the trees, and wrestled me to the ground. Crying and screaming for help, I still remember how awful the monkey’s fur felt against my skin. I can only describe the feeling as that of worms crawling all over my body. It was horrendous, and the monkey – having overpowered me - kept at its attack until it finally got bored of my yelps for help. I thought that I was going to die that day. It was the most traumatic experience of my life at that time.

When the monkey finally left me, I got up and noticed that my knees and elbows were bleeding. Someone walking past happened to see me - whimpering as I tried to stumble home - and took me to the clinic. My mother was later called to collect me, and while she was quite sympathetic, she found the incident to be quite comical and just wouldn’t stop laughing. Despite the traumatizing attack, however, attending kindergarten in exile was a lot of fun, and that monkey didn’t succeed in keeping me off the path to school. There, we played a lot, sang SWAPO freedom songs and danced traditional dances that were uniquely our own.

Growing up as children in exile, although we were well aware of the political situation at hand and accordingly lived in a structured environment with rules and drills to ensure our safety, our lives were largely carefree and spared of constant adult reprimand. I remember, for example, how we would make fun of a lady called “Mee Naemi,” who was mentally challenged and loved
to sing. We would follow her around and throw stones at her, teasing her mercilessly about her condition. There were other mentally challenged women that we made fun of and looked at strangely, such as Kaatwe (meaning “small head” in Oshiwambo), Telesia and Eendelina Shoongola. We didn’t understand their conditions at the time, and laughed at their mental handicaps, as we had never been educated about the circumstances of mentally handicapped people. Moreover, we were never reprimanded by an adult for our actions, leaving us insensitive to their condition. When I look back on those days now, I feel embarrassed that I took part in such thoughtless mockery, but even more so, about the fact that the adults around us remained silent about our inconsiderateness. To me, it seems that in Africa, seldom are sensitivity and compassion shown towards people with mental disorders, who are usually shunned by the community. I would posit, too, that this treatment towards mentally challenged people hasn’t changed much in a lot of African and other Afro-cultures around the world.

Speaking of health matters, another commonality amongst us exile children that I remember was that we often suffered from insect wounds called “iiitakaya.” Other health conditions were also quite common. As a child in Kwanza-Sul, I suffered from a nasty ear infection from a young age. There would be a constant flow of mucus flowing from my right ear, and I always had to wear cotton balls in my ear to contain the flow. According to my mother, water had entered my ear as an infant while I was being bathed, causing the infection. My ear infection continued for several years after this, and although it was treated in the camps, it was never completely healed until I had an ear surgery some years later while living in London.

While in Kwanza-Sul, we also feared Kapyapya, a scary Angolan witch doctor whom we never saw, but had heard a lot about from the adults around us, who instilled enormous fear into us about the man. They pointed out Kapyapya’s house to us, and we didn’t dare to go or play near it, for fear of being “eaten” alive. While writing this book, I found out that adults would go to his house, located in the middle of Admin, to seek counseling and traditional healing.

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My mother was a strict woman, and she never spared the rod on me. When I asked her in later years about her strict nature, she said that it was all she knew. The lady who had raised her after her mother’s death treated her just as strictly, if not more, and my mother modeled this behavior. My mother scolded me over every little thing and beat me so often that I didn’t talk much around her unless I was spoken to. I remember one day at the age of 3 years when I had wet the bed after a long time of not doing so. My mother threw a fit! She punished me by making me spend hours

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“sucking out” the urine so that I could dry the bed. She told me that if I didn’t dry the bed, I would get another whipping. I did exactly as I was told but the urine wouldn't dry up. I sucked and sucked, hoping it would dry up so I would get out of yet another hiding. Obviously, the bed never dried, and luckily, my mother spared me of a whipping. After that day, I never wet the bed again.

In 1983, when I was four years old, I went to Luanda for a second time to visit my father, who was on a short diplomatic visit from England, where he was studying. When I arrived at Transit, my father picked me up and took me to the city center where he was staying. When we got to his apartment, I found my two sisters, Ndinelao and Nelao there. That was the first time I remember ever seeing them, although I had heard about them before. It was most fun for the three of us to be together, and we bonded well during that vacation – spending time with our father and telling each other stories about our respective camps. Naughtily, as we were, we would also lean out over the balcony of our father’s apartment, and spit at the people walking along the street below us. We would then duck and hide, breaking out in laughter as if spitting on people was the most amusing activity in the world. Another fond memory of that vacation was when my sisters and I would dance for our father, demonstrating the moves that we had learned with our peers at the camps. Ndinelao and I would dance to our little hearts’ delight, while Nelao, too shy to dance, preferred to watch.

I also recall a time when my father took me to hospital to receive a vaccination. I hated getting shots, as were injected so many times in Kwanza-Sul. So naturally, I cried! But my father made that day one of the most memorable in my time in Angola, by buying me some sweets later on. I’ll never forget that, as I rarely ate sweets while in the SWAPO camps. A sweet was always the best treat...a luxury. We visited many different places with our dad during that visit, and I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with him and my sisters.

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In 1984, my dad went to Britain to study Economics and Diplomacy. After completing his five-year course, he continued to work in the foreign affairs department of SWAPO, which was responsible for engaging the international community to support SWAPO in its aim to bring about the liberation of Namibia. As a result of the work done in such departments, Namibians in exile were able to receive help from many caring nations and organizations from all around the world. They received donated clothes, food, military weapons and vehicles. Many exiled Namibians also got sponsored to study in other countries. After their studies, they would return
to exile to teach or to be doctors and nurses in SWAPO camps. The work of SWAPO’s foreign
department also enabled caring people and organizations to put pressure on the apartheid
regime of South Africa to withdraw from Namibia.

The year my father left for his studies, my mother went off to receive further military training at
SWAPO’s main military academy in Lubango: the Hainyeko Military Academy. My father
instructed my mother to take me to live with his relative, Mee Peshukeni Shoombe, who also
lived in Admin. Mee Shoombe was one of the SWAPO officials in Kwanza-Sul and had a big
house at the camp. She had about four other children at her home, three of whom were her own
and were a few years older than me, and another who was under her care, and was around my
age. Mee Shoombe was very nice to me. I was well taken care of, and I lived happily with her.
Unfortunately, after living with her for a short while, I had to move again because she was
leaving Kwanza-Sul.

I then went to live with my mother’s cousin, Mee Tuliky Kavungo, a nice lady who was always
full of life and loved to dance. I credit her for introducing me to the world of music and dancing,
by exposing me to these wonderful arts, which I continue to carry with me today. The songs that
stuck with me first were Boney M’s 1981 version of the popular African song “Malaika,
nakupenda Malaika…” and “I love you Africa, I love you Africa, I love you yee…” Those songs
were popular in exile, and were among the few commercial songs I remember hearing while
growing up in the camps. I would get goose bumps just listening to their melodic beauty. I
believe that is when I realized my deep passion for music and dance.

One day while I was living with Mee Tuliky, my mother’s shack house, made with tents and
corrugated iron, burned down. Kwanza-Sul had a problem with tiny black ants called oshiyenene.
They were all over the place, and would get into people’s beds and bite them. They were
extremely irritating, and one day, in an effort to get rid of them by pouring paraffin (oil) on them
and setting them on fire, Mee Tuliky accidentally set our home alight. All our belongings were
lost in the fire.

After the fire, Mee Tuliky took me to live with one of her lady friends. She was a pleasant
woman, whose name evades me. While I was living with her, I became sick with okakwenyenye
(measles) and to cure my illness, I was given chloroquin, which made me so itchy that I couldn’t
sleep for days. The people living in the household with us tried to help to relieve the itching by
using corn cobs to scratch my body throughout the night. It was a depressing moment in my life
and the worst thing I’d experienced by that time. It was even worse than the monkey incident.
Sometime later, I was then taken to live with another friend of my mother, Mee Aanaly, who was also my kindergarten principal. I didn’t stay with her for long before I had to move again to live with a different lady, Mee Ndapandula, who was taking care of a lot of other kids. I remember her as a warm and caring person. When I started living with Mee Ndapandula, I was almost six years old, and about ready to start the first grade at school. I wanted to start school desperately because among all the children who lived with Mee Ndapandula, I was the youngest one and the only one who wasn’t going to school, often being left at home alone with no one to play with. When I finally turned six on April 12, 1985, I was ecstatic because this meant that I was a big girl now and I could attend school with the other big kids. Good riddance to the boredom and the loneliness I had felt until then.

The first day of school was fun. Our classroom was under a big tree; as all the classes in exile were, and it didn’t take me long to become friends with all the kids in my first grade class. Even at that age, I was a very social being, and had a natural tact of attracting people to my company. I was the only new student in my class, and my classmates were all older than I was. Some of them had even been in the first grade for quite some time because they hadn’t passed their exams to go on to the next grade level. In the first few weeks, we learned basic math: addition and subtraction. I was the only one who didn’t know the class material. Lucky for me though, the students in my class who were repeating the grade and were learning the same material again were kind enough to do my schoolwork for me during class without the teacher noticing. But it didn’t take me too long to understand the concept of adding and subtracting, and soon I was able to do my own work. The day I figured it out, I was so excited and felt super smart. But then I eventually became bored with school as I wasn’t being challenged anymore with basic math.

A few months after I started school, Mee Tuliky came to get me from Mee Ndapandula and took me to live with another lady. I was never given reasons for leaving my new homes, so I simply adapted to the lifestyle of having a new home every few months, believing that this was a normal trend for children whose parents were away. I merely went with the flow and never asked questions. Over the course of the one year since my mother had left, this was the fifth lady with whom I was being placed. I’ve never really had a place to call home since then. ‘Home’ basically had to be wherever my heart, mind and body were at any given moment in time.

My new guardian’s house was located far away from my school, so I stopped going to classes while living with her. This didn’t bother me much because I wasn’t so fond of school anymore. There were a number of other children staying with her. But this lady was very mean and extremely strict. She believed in hard working children, and made sure she put us to work.
I was only six years old by then, but she made me suffer from hard work. One day, she gave me a big bucket to go and fetch water at a river far away with the older girls who lived with us. As soon as it was filled with water, the girls placed the heavy bucket on my head. It almost fell off because I wasn’t used to fetching water in big heavy buckets and balancing them on my head. This was a first for me, and although it was obvious that I was struggling with the heavy bucket of water on my head, the older girls didn’t feel or show any pity for me. They placed the neck-breaking bucket on my head, swiftly lifted their own onto their heads, and began walking with ease, leaving me behind to follow them.

I struggled with my heavy bucket and followed behind them with water spilling all over me. I came close to falling a few times - walking fast to keep up with the big girls - and almost dropped the bucket numerous times. But I wanted to complete my task, and so I fought on. I managed to carry the heavy bucket all the way home, but by the time we reached the house, my bucket was near empty. My guardian was not at all impressed, and she gave me a whipping for wasting water. The only positive factor that came of that experience was that she never sent me again to fetch water.

But that wasn’t the end of her cruelty. Aside from the various whippings we received for ‘wasting water’ and getting on her wrong side, she also took control of any belongings we had. While my mother was away, she would occasionally send me clothes and other little goodies from Lubango. But I never got to experience these small pleasures in my otherwise dreary life, because my guardian would immediately give my clothes away to the other children who were living with us. My mother would later express her anger about this abomination.

Of the various places I was taken to live after my mother left, I stayed with this lady for the longest. I didn’t enjoy living with her at all, but I did enjoy playing with the other children in the nearby fields, where fruit trees and other crops were abundant. There, we would eat a lot of fresh corn, mangoes, sugarcane and guavas that we got straight from the SWAPO garden in Kwanza-Sul called Eepako. It was a fantastic and wonderful break from the meanness that we endured at home.

Nevertheless, even though I wasn’t my guardian’s biggest fan, I did start liking her a bit when she one day defended me against a group of boys in our neighborhood who were trying to bully me.

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In January 1986, I was outside playing with my friends when Mee Tuliky called me inside to greet a guest. I didn’t know who the guest was at first, but when I got closer to the house, I saw a lady who looked like my mother. It was my mother! And it was almost too good to be true. I hadn’t seen or spoken to her since she’d left almost two years before in 1984, and my heart jumped for joy at the sight of her. As she hugged and greeted me, she observed the way I looked and what I was wearing, and this brought a frown to her face. Apparently I looked dirty, thin and malnourished. She was saddened by my appearance as this was not how she had left me. My hair was uncombed, and it was as short as a boy’s because no one had the time or the care to do my hair like my mother did. My head was also full of hair lice and dandruff, which made me itch a lot. Hair lice were common. Almost every exile kid I knew in Kwanza-Sul had hair lice. Grownups would sit us down between their legs and inspect our heads for lice, and then remove and kill the lice by pressing them between their two thumbnails and squeezing them to death.

Later that day, I was told that my mother had come to fetch me to go and live with her in Lubango. Mee Tuliky and the lady I was staying with helped me pack the little I had left of my clothes into a bag, as my mother watched quietly. I didn’t realize how upset she was until I heard her ask Mee Tuliky what had happened to all the nice things that she had sent me from Lubango. It was an awkward moment. My mother cried when she learnt about the way I had been treated over those two years, being dropped off from one house to another for different people to look after me. I had lived with five different families since my mother had left me in the care of Mee Tuliky. Along with my last guardian distributing my belongings around the children in the household, the constant moving may also have resulted in most of my things getting lost or being stolen. Or maybe I just never got all of the things that my mother had sent.

But this moving up and down wasn’t unique to me. Moving from one “mada” (mother) to another “mada” was a normal practice for children in exile as their biological parents were engaged in fighting at the Northern Front, were in other towns and countries studying or in military training, or had been killed in the war. This resulted in exile kids being raised by “madas,” each of whom was assigned six exile kids at a time to take care of. Some of these children only came to know who their biological parents were upon independence, when they were introduced to their real parents. This was a painful and heartbreaking experience for many of those children who had simply become accustomed to thinking that the “mada” who raised them in exile was their real mother. They had no recollection of their real parents, most of whom never went back to get them or visit them while they’d been left in the care of a “mada” in the camps. But the parents can’t necessarily be faulted for this, as it was not that easy for them to get
their children to go and live with them unless they were stable and were no longer moving up and down in exile fulfilling their military duties.

In exile, children basically belonged to SWAPO. We were known as SWAPO kids, and we were the responsibility of SWAPO. It took the whole SWAPO community to raise us. There wasn’t okatongo (favoritism) with raising exile kids. All the adults treated us as if we were their own children and gave us the best care they could under the circumstances. Sometimes this was a wonderful prospect, because we always knew that someone was looking out for us. But at other times, those who were extra strict made being everyone’s child a drag. Overall, though, there was a true sense of community in SWAPO camps.

It was a psychologically trying experience for some exile kids to discover that “mada so and so” was not their real mother. Some “madas” had to tell the confused children that “No, I’m not your mother, she’s your mother. I was just taking care of you.” It was difficult for some to re-learn and try to connect with a new mother and family, and many are still dealing with this transition today. Furthermore, most exile kids were raised without father figures because their fathers were mostly at war. Usually, the only men that the children in the camps were exposed to, were those who were guarding the camps and protecting women and children against the enemy. I was one of the few lucky ones who was mostly raised by at least one of my parents and got the chance to see my father a few times.

When all my clothes were packed and I was ready to take off with my mother, we went to stay with Mee Aanaly for two days at her home near the convoy station, where we waited for the next convoy to Lubango. The route to Lubango from Kwanza-Sul was somewhat complicated. For safety reasons, instead of taking a short cut from Kwanza-Sul straight down to Lubango, which was in the southern part of Angola, the convoy first had to go north to Luanda, and then back south to Lubango on a different route. The reason for this long detour was because of the situation at Eendede, which was a dangerous place controlled by the UNITA rebels, who were enemies of SWAPO, Angola’s ruling party, MPLA, and the government. Eendede is the name SWAPO gave to the UNITA-controlled area between Luanda and Lobito because the place was full of eendede (a type of nut) trees. UNITA, which was quite powerful at the time, used to block the main road at Eendede, making it difficult and dangerous for travelers to pass by. It was also located on a hill, making it easy for the rebels to block the passage.
To ensure the safety of the SWAPO convoy, it would first travel to Luanda to meet up with a SWAPO escort team of armed combatants, who would then safeguard the journey to Lubango. The escort took a slight lead and was then followed by the rest of the convoy.

After spending two days in Admin with my mother at Mee Aanaly’s house, we boarded the free convoy to Lubango via Luanda. This was in January 1986. Luanda is about 414km from Kwanza-Sul, and when we reached the Angolan capital, we stayed at the transit area for about two days, as we waited for the convoy to load before continuing on to Lubango. We camped under a big omangaadju fruit tree located in the middle of the Transit area, eating crackers, canned beef and the omangaadju fruit. One had to be careful when eating omangaadju, because if the juice got on your clothes, it would leave an indelible stain. When we eventually boarded the convoy to Lubango, my mother and I were seated in the VIP section, which was simply the passenger seat of one of the trucks. My mother has always been a people’s person and very friendly. She was popular and well liked by all who came to know her, and this was one of the reasons we got to sit up front, instead of being squeezed into the back with many other people, luggage and materials that the convoy was transporting to Lubango.

On our way to Lubango, I noticed several Angolan civilian cars and trucks standing by the road, waiting to join the SWAPO convoy. When we reached the dreaded Eendede, I found why they too needed the escort and convoy as a shield. At Eendede, I came face to face with the reality of the war that my parents were fighting. Prior to this, I had been shielded and protected from the war, living my six years of life in the safety of the camps of Kwanza-Sul, which were located far away from the war zone. Lubango, where I was moving to, was closer to the Northern Front, from where PLAN launched military attacks against the enemy.

UNITA, which we derogatorily referred to as “kaxuxua” (chicken) in SWAPO camps, was a political party in Angola led by the late Jonas Savimbi, a notorious enemy of SWAPO and Angola’s ruling party, MPLA, and a friend of South Africa’s apartheid regime. As we made our journey through Eendede, we found the road covered in blood, with the dead bodies of Angolan civilians plastered all over the road - their cars and trucks burning. I also remember seeing the bodies of dead Angolans burning. One of them had his leg raised in the air - burning as if he was still alive. I was only six years old at the time, and the scene sent me into a state of shock. I couldn’t quite comprehend what lay before me. I knew kaxuxua was responsible because everyone in the convoy was murmuring: “Look at what kaxuxua has done.” I had grown up fearing kaxuxua in the SWAPO camps because grownups made constant reference to it when they tried to discourage us against wandering off into the woods. They would tell us that if we went
Rachel Valentina Nghiwete

off, kaxuxua would catch us. Also when they wanted us to behave, they would threaten us saying that if we didn’t behave, kaxuxua would come to get us. With the sight that lay in front of me, my fear of kaxuxua only multiplied, the reality of war having being drummed in my little head with a force much stronger than the tales the adults in the camps would tell us.

Our convoy drove off the tarred road that was covered with dead bodies and burning cars, and slowly and cautiously continued on the gravel road, beside it. The image of such extreme violence caught me off guard. I have never seen such destruction in my life. The blaze of the flames and the freshness of the blood that covered the roads made it seem that the fighting had just taken place. Had we arrived there a few minutes earlier, I’m sure we would have gotten caught in the crossfire and a serious exchange of gunfire would have taken place between SWAPO and UNITA forces. Who knows what may have happened to us then?

When we had passed all the dead bodies and burning cars, our convoy returned to the tarred road, and stopped. Our male combatants and drivers with guns then jumped out of the trucks and ran off to search for UNITA soldiers in a big ditch on the right side of the road. My mother and I were the only ones left in the front seat of our truck as our driver had gone off with the other combatants. My heart skipped a beat as I tried to make sense of what was going on…I had never seen SWAPO combatants on such high alert, and the prospect that we might become engaged in combat right there and then was a scary one. Moreover, our combatants had only gone to search the ditch on the right, and as I sat there in suspense, alone with my mother, I feared that we might get ambushed from the left side of the road where there was a big open area from which the kaxuxuas could attack us.

To my relief, our combatants returned before we could get attacked from the other side. I didn’t see any sign of fear or panic in the SWAPO combatants that day, and they displayed so much confidence, that I immediately felt I was in good hands. I suppose this type of display of confidence against the highly feared UNITA rebels, is the reason why Angolans often waited on the roadside to join the SWAPO convoy through Eendede. It seems Angolan civilians considered the convoy a safe haven because it was well protected by SWAPO combatants. SWAPO’s military wing had the capacity to safe-guard not only its members, but also other foreign missions in Angola. The convoy continued on to Lubango, and as we drove along, our truck’s driver informed us that they had managed to kill a few UNITA soldiers.

The rest of our journey went smoothly, with short eating breaks in which we indulged in corned beef and crackers. When night came, our convoy stopped, and the drivers and other people went
to sleep while armed combatants guarded the convoy. It took us about three days to reach Lubango which was about 676km from Luanda.

Lubango is the second largest city in Angola, surrounded by mountains and located in the highland province of Huila with an agreeable climate. The fertile lands around Lubango provide the city with a lot of fruits and vegetables such as sugar cane, mangoes, omalalanje (oranges), omakwawa (guavas), omafiweena (a type of fruit with thorns), and okanakamdesha (carrots). There are also a wide variety of other wild fruits, of which we ate a lot, such as omakwa, eendede and a yummy sticky clear golden type of unsweetened “candy“ that we plucked from the trunk of a live tree. I can’t remember what that tree-trunk candy was called though. While living in Lubango, we also ate eenangu (type of edible seeds), omahola (a bean variety) and okapenda (tiny fish), which made me itch. With Angola having once been colonized by the Portuguese, Lubango’s buildings reflect the Portuguese style of architecture, and the city is one of the three cities in the world overlooked by a statue of Jesus Christ on a mountain. The other two cities are Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon. During that time, Lubango served as a major base of the Cuban, MPLA and SWAPO military forces during the war.

When we reached the SWAPO convoy station in Lubango, my mother and I got a ride to Okaposte where she lived. Lubango had several SWAPO camps. Kombaye was the logistics center for food and clothes that were donated by caring nations around the world; Okashitanyela housed the SWAPO maternity ward; and Lenin was the administrative area, which housed SWAPO’s Lubango headquarters and the PLAN commanders. Oomatale, also known as the Dungeons, was where Namibians who were accused of being spies of the South African regime or who were presumed to have carried out offences against SWAPO were detained. Konjabo is where combat-ready combatants stayed before they were deployed to the Northern Front to fight in the war. Lubango Transit area was the receiving center for combatants returning from Northern Front; and the Education Center was the center of learning, led by Principal Aatumbangela.

Okaposte was a camp where Tate Solomon Jesus Auala was based; Nanyemba was where the main SWAPO hospital was located; Omalulu was the VIP center where SWAPO leaders such as President Sam Nujoma stayed when he visited Lubango, and where PLAN top commanders Dimo Hamaambo, Peter Mweshihange and Hidipo Hamutenya lived. Agriculture Center was the food area for SWAPO led by Mee Teckla Shikola (now Mrs. Teckla Lameck). Ohaiduwa was a receiving area for civilians joining the liberation struggle from Namibia. Ohainyeko Military Training Centre was the main SWAPO military academy in exile (and the place where my
She had received her extensive military training when she left me in Kwanza-Sul in 1984. Some of the other camps in Lubango were Witbooi, Onghulumbashe and Kamati Base.

Tate Fanuel Shiimi, (“Tate” means Mister or father), one of the drivers at Okaposte where my mother stayed, picked us up from the SWAPO convoy station in Lubango in a small military car called a “pacha” that was used widely in Lubango. Another common car that was also driven in Lubango was “okawaza,” a car with six wheels in the front and two in the back. Big military trucks were also used for heavy duty work.

Okaposte was under tight security because Commander Solomon “Jesus” Auala lived there. Tate Auala was SWAPO’s chief intelligence officer and the man in charge of prisons and security – including the infamous dungeons. I later read that because of the atrocities and the torture that took place in the dungeons, Tate Auala was referred to by victims of the dungeons, as the “Butcher of Lubango.”

We had to pass through various security points before entering the camp, which was a small close-knit community of a few selected people. There weren’t many children living at Okaposte, but I became friends with the few who were there, such as my age mate, Helena Wendama. One day, a few months after living at Okaposte, my mother took me to visit Tate Auala at his private compound. He was the first top SWAPO leader I was meeting in person, and as an impressionable seven year old, I felt honored to meet him.

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With my relocation to Lubango, 1986 was a defining year for my exile experience because it further opened my eyes to the reality of the war that my parents were fighting. During that year, the UN Security Council called on South Africa to end the illegal trial of 37 SWAPO guerrillas and leaders in Pretoria and condemned South Africa’s defiance of UN authority over Namibia. That year, the General Assembly also proclaimed that “in accordance with the desires of its people, South West Africa will henceforth be known as Namibia.”

I stayed at Okaposte for about a month before going to school. There was only one SWAPO school in the whole of Lubango called Education Center, and it was miles away from where we lived. So to be closer to school, my mother took me to stay with one of her relatives, Mee Maria Weyulu who lived in the Greenwell Matongo section of Education Center. I would go back to Okaposte for weekends and holidays. While living with Mee Maria, I sometimes stayed with my
favorite teacher in Education, Mee Justina, who was a heavy-set, dark-skinned lady, who lived close by to us in Greenwell Matongo.

Sometime during that school year, our school Principal, Tate Aatumbangela announced that some of the students would be selected to go and study abroad. I’m not sure what criteria were used to select who went to study abroad, but I was happy to be among those chosen to go, and was excited at the opportunity to go and study in Europe like some of the other exile kids that I had heard about. This was an opportunity of a lifetime and even at that young age of six/seven years old, I was determined to seize the moment. We were told that we would leave the next morning. Without wasting time, I rushed home to tell Mee Maria the good news. She helped me pack my things and took me to Admin where we boarded the minibuses which took us to the station to catch the main convoy leaving Lubango for Luanda, where we would get on a flight to another country.

My mother, who was far away at the camp in Okaposte, was not notified about my going abroad to study, nor was she consulted to give permission for me to leave. This was quite normal in exile as parents or guardians were rarely consulted, and I’m almost certain that permission was not sought for any of the other selected students who were not living with their parents. SWAPO usually decided what was best for us – with or without the consent of our parents – and this was a case in point. And needless to say, biological parents hardly worried about their kids, knowing they were in the care of the movement that had brought them there. So it was against this background that Mee Maria didn’t see the need to notify my mother about my going abroad.

The journey from Lubango to Luanda was going smoothly, and I was enjoying every moment of it. This was my second long distance convoy, and by now it was clear to me that I had a real passion for traveling and going to faraway places. This time the journey was also a whole lot more fun than when I had traveled south to Lubango with my mother, because of the many other children around my age who were on board. After we passed Lobito, which was about 286km from Lubango, the convoy came to an abrupt halt. I wondered what was going on as uniformed SWAPO combatants on their walkie-talkies went from truck to truck searching the convoy for a six-year-old whose mother wanted her to return to Lubango. In my mind, I found the idea to be absurd. Why would any parent try to deny their child a chance of a better life abroad where they would receive a quality education, I wondered. That was, of course, until I was eventually pointed out as the six-year-old girl the uniformed men were looking for: Rachel Valentina Nghiwete. Disappointed and on the brink of tears, I stepped off the truck and got into a small
military car, which took me to central Lobito – a city in the province of Benguela, which also housed another logistics and receiving area for SWAPO supplies from donor countries.

On the way to Lobito, the men in the car revealed to me that as soon as my 26-year-old mother heard that I had boarded the convoy and left Lubango, she panicked and begged Commander Aualu in Okaposte to do something to bring me back to Lubango. Phone calls were made from Lubango to other towns in Angola to stop the traveling SWAPO convoy and search for me. But it was still not clear to me why she wanted me to go back to Lubango.

After a short ride, we arrived in central Lobito where I was going to stay and wait for the next convoy going to Lubango. I spent an enjoyable month at the beautiful coastal town in the care of some Angolans who worked with SWAPO. There, we stayed in a big apartment building overlooking the beach, where I experienced luxuries that I never even knew existed. Every day, I was fed delicious cuisine such as macaroni or spaghetti with a wide variety of well-seasoned meats and vegetables. At the eekulo in the camps, we would simply eat plain rice or porridge, and if we were lucky, this would come along with some un-seasoned meat or fish.

While in Lobito, I also befriended an Angolan child who lived there, so I never became bored. I was ecstatic to have a new playmate, and we would go down to the beach every day to indulge in the sun, the sand, and the beautiful Atlantic Ocean. I thoroughly enjoyed playing with my new Angolan friend and other children at the beach, and although we spoke different languages, (I spoke Oshiwambo and they spoke Portuguese), we somehow managed to communicate with and understand each other clearly. One of my favorite activities with them was fishing, using bottles with food attached as bait.

Along with my new temporary family, I would also go to a nearby open market where they would buy me chocolate and sweets. That was my first time eating chocolate, and since I hardly ate sweets in the SWAPO camps, this was heaven to me. The last time I had eaten a sweet was years before in Kwanza-Sul, when white uniformed Cuban soldiers visited us at our camp, and one of them gave me a sweet. Back then, because of the scarcity of sweets in the camps, we would invent our own chewing gum from the sticky unsweetened black gunk that was used to tar the roads. It was so easily accessible in Lubango, and we would chew on it as if it was real chewing gum. Sometimes we would even add sugar to it to make it taste more like “oosingamu” (chewing gum) as we called it. I’m surprised we all still had our teeth and our health after chewing our gum concoction, considering it couldn’t have been very wise.
The only part of my stay that I didn’t enjoy in Lobito was at night when mosquitoes came out to feast on us as we slept. The mosquito nets that we used to cover our beds didn’t help much, and the constant buzz and bite of the mosquito was an extreme annoyance. But other than that, my stay in Lobito was a wonderful, eye-opening experience. This had been my first time away from the SWAPO camps over such a long period of time, and in the company of non-Namibians. The only other time I had slept outside the camps was when I visited my father in Luanda.

After a month in Lobito, I returned to Lubango, where my mother shed tears of joy at the sight of me. Due to the limited communication technology at our disposal, I hadn’t spoken to my mother since the time I’d left her to attend school in Education Center, and our reunion was a happy one.

When I questioned her for denying me the opportunity to study abroad, she told me that those other children were not going ‘abroad’. They were, in fact, going to Kwanza-Sul where I had just come from a few months before. She told me that she simply couldn’t let me go as I had just moved to live with her in Lubango. It was at that point, that I realized that I had found a more permanent home: with my mother in Lubango. Surprisingly, my mother did not scold me for leaving without her consent. I guess she understood that I was just a child who had simply grown accustomed to being moved from one place to another without explanation. It was great living a stable life again.

Years later in Namibia, I met Nangolo Malima who was one of the exile kids on that convoy with me. He confirmed that they never went abroad but instead ended up in Kwanza-Sul. They were never returned to Lubango either. I suppose there had been a change of plan or miscommunication somewhere because so many children of the struggle had been successfully sponsored to go and study abroad in other countries. In fact, earlier that year (1986), a group of exile children were taken to Laudima in Congo Brazzaville, and our group may have been heading there. In any case, my fellow exile kids found new “madas” to care for them in Kwanza-Sul, and settled in to their new homes outside Lubango, without difficulty, I’m sure. The set up and culture was similar in all SWAPO camps, so if you were at home in one SWAPO camp, you would be at home in all of them. Adjusting – at least for me – was never really a big issue. The kids may have been disappointed at first, but I doubt the disappointment lasted for more than a few hours.

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On April 10, 1986, two days before my 7th birthday, my mother and her friends went to Lubango city center to purchase food and drinks for my first ever birthday party. On the night of my
birthday, my mother dressed me up in a pretty pink dress. She too, was dressed to impress that day. She was well known for being a very neat and well-dressed lady and always looked her best. She then took me to the Okaposte Hall – an open area in the middle of the camp near the community kitchen – where my birthday party was being held. It was very well decorated, almost as if for a wedding celebration, and there were so many people. As soon as I entered the hall, people started singing an Oshiwambo birthday song, “Oshike sheetweeta? Oludalo! Oshike sheetweetaa? Oludalo! Oludalo leetweeta paka oludalo!” (Translated: what brought us here? It’s a birth? What brought us here? It’s a birth? It’s a birth that brought here, it’s a birth.)”

I couldn’t stop smiling at my party...I was just so thrilled and thankful to my mother. And the party was awesome! There was an MC who directed the proceedings; the food was delicious; and the main dish was a whole pig grilled on an open fire. It was well done, golden, crispy, and delicious, and I especially liked the pigskin. At one point during my birthday party, the MC announced the “money collection,” and a basket was placed on the high table where my mother and I were seated. Everyone came around and placed money in the basket...it was the most money I’d ever seen by that time. I enjoyed every moment of my birthday party.

The large turnout at the party was no surprise. My mother was a big socialite in Lubango, and as she had friends all over the place, she didn’t stay home much. She often took me along to visit her friends at the different camps, and since there wasn’t a public transportation system between the camps, we would walk for miles. I thought I was too young to be covering such long distances on foot, but my mother would just urge me to keep up as I lagged behind her. Most of the time, I tired of all that walking and wished she would just leave me home.

One day, my mother took me to Nanyemba Hospital to visit one of her friends who had gotten injured while fighting the enemy. Nanyemba hospital was the main SWAPO hospital in Lubango, where injured SWAPO combatants were treated. It was a frightening sight, especially since it was my first time seeing injured SWAPO combatants. There were so many of them in one huge room, and it was just scary seeing all these people badly injured, bandaged up and lying on their beds.

My mother’s friend was bandaged up all over, and I was surprised that he could even talk. He extended his hand to shake mine, and to hug me, but I was too afraid to return the gesture. I was also angry at my mother for exposing me to such a horrific sight at my tender age of seven years old, without mentally preparing me for what I would see. We brought my mother’s friend some food, but I was too nauseated to eat with them so I watched them eat as I tried to block the scene
around me from my mind. I was not amused when my mother joked to her friend about me being scared, and laughed.

But the visit was good for something. On that day, I saw that in spite of their injuries and near death experiences, the combatants still had a high level of morale. They believed in the cause they were fighting for: the freedom and independence of their beloved country, Namibia. As guerilla fighters, they fought courageously, covering long distances on foot in pursuit of the enemy. Over the years, they had remained disciplined and never lost sight of the vision for an independent Namibia. And as they lay there on their beds, they sang freedom songs to celebrate their victories and to urge them on.

Despite the numerous casualties and the hospital scenes like the one I had just been exposed to, PLAN combatants also saw many successes on the battlefield. They shot down South African air force planes and destroyed enemy combat vehicles, such as the heavily armored Casspirs and anti-mine combat vehicles. In fact, while living in Lubango, I witnessed a display of SWAPO's effectiveness on the battlefield against the enemy for the first time. PLAN had captured South African weapons in large quantities, including huge combat vehicles called Casspirs, which were made in West Germany. West Germany didn’t expect SWAPO to capture anything from South Africa as it had been led into believing that SWAPO was nothing but a bush army, incapable of capturing military warfare from one of the most powerful armies in the world, SADF. This show of power by SWAPO and its revelation of West Germany’s support for the South African military was a huge embarrassment to the German power.

When the combatants entered the camps with the armaments they had captured, the whole community came out jubilantly to applaud and celebrate their achievement on the battlefield. There was a lot of ululating, and everyone broke into a chorus of freedom songs. These songs were like a boost of energy, and were sung all over SWAPO camps at regular morning assemblies, parades and other social gatherings and events. The parades were serious but entertaining at the same time, with varied cultural performances, speeches, military drills and pioneer songs and dances. This was also where news and other updates were shared.

We were allowed to go inside the captured Casspirs to have a look at what our combatants had seized from the enemy. The Casspirs had not been cleaned, and everything was almost exactly as it had been when captured. There were drops of fresh blood on the inside of the military vehicles, and the only thing missing was the dead bodies of the enemy. While observing the inside of one of the Casspirs, my eyes rested on a wrapped chewing gum packet that looked oh-so-appealing. I
had a bad sweet tooth, so I discreetly reached for it hoping that none of the grownups would see me. Unfortunately, one did see me reaching for the chewing gum and slapped my hand away before I could even touch it. She scolded me for wanting to eat ‘Boer (white South African) things’, cautioning that the enemy could intentionally have poisoned it. I doubted her poisoning argument because I didn’t believe the enemy had planned on being captured that day, to the point where they would poison their chewing gum just in case a SWAPO kid with a sweet tooth came along and ate it. But then again the enemy was unpredictable, and I suppose it was better to be safe than sorry.

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Life in Lubango was interesting and exciting compared to life in Kwanza-Sul. I enjoyed my life there because there was always so much going on and so much to do, and as my mother’s only child, I was hardly ever short of what I needed. It was only later in 1986, when my mother took another child into our household. One of the high-ranking SWAPO army officials, Commander Martin Shali, had given my mother the honor of caring for his son, Isaac Martin Shali, while Isaac’s mother was abroad studying. Isaac was younger than me by about four years and instantly became my little “brother.” Although he was very naughty and rebellious, my mother adored him as if he were her own son.

When I was 7 years old, I was made a flower girl for the first time in my life for Mee Maria Ndafohama and Tate Ngula ya Netanga’s wedding. In exile, weddings were celebrated for three consecutive days. The first day - Friday – was when the oxungi was celebrated. The oxungi was a pre-celebration of the wedding day, and presented an opportunity for the two families to come together, and for people unite to eat, drink, dance and have a great time. The second day – Saturday – was the wedding day. On that day, we went to a SWAPO “church” where the couples signed a SWAPO wedding certificate, put on rings, were announced as husband and wife, and kissed. Wedding days were the only time we attended “church” in exile, although the service was not very spiritual. In fact, it was more like a civil court where people got married. But it wasn’t called that. It was called “ongeleka” in Oshiwambo, which is “church” in English. And the third day of the wedding celebration was the “cake day,” where people celebrated the married couple, and ate and danced some more. Only the bride and groom ate the wedding cake on the ‘cake day’.

As a flower girl, I was responsible for picking up the money that was dropped on the ground for the married couple during the grand march to the reception area. As we made the grand march,
people danced in front of the couple blowing whistles, ululating and joyfully hitting the couple with scarves and horsetails. That is the Oshiwambo way of celebrating weddings. During the long grand march, a wedding flag bearing the couple’s names and pictures was carried with pride as people sang the popular wedding song “Epandela, letu. La nyolwa nawa, la nyolwa (couple’s names mentioned here)... Mavaya taleiko nyemulesheko, opo mu djepo taaki kongela veni.” This translates as: “Our (wedding) flag is written well, written (couples names). Cowards take a look, so you can go and find yours...” (admonishing unmarried men, who were considered cowards for not being married, to go and find a woman to marry).

After what seemed like a very long walk, due to all the dancing and stopping that forced us to progress extremely slowly, we finally reached the reception area. There, “protocol” was observed with the MC, who we called “the Protocol,” opening the reception and allowing the celebration to continue. I enjoyed watching the adults dance that day. I didn’t know if I was allowed to dance, so I just sat back and watched. It was my first wedding experience, and I loved being part of it. As a little girl, being a flower girl was like a dream come true.

My mother was very popular, and she was always being asked to be the maid of honor at people’s weddings. As such, I soon became a popular flower girl and was invited to be in wedding parties almost as often as my mother was. I accepted all but one of the requests for my services as a flower girl, and the only reason I turned down that one request, was because it clashed with another flower girl engagement. Even though my mother and I would often end up as members of the same wedding party, I didn’t enjoy being in the same wedding party as her because she would scrutinize and watch my every move. If I did any little thing that she thought was “childish,” she would give me one of her signature warning looks, where she blew her cheeks to signal me to behave and not embarrass her, or else I’d get in trouble when we got home. I wasn’t free to be a kid and enjoy the weddings when my mother was around.

Although I was living with my mother, my father was in constant communication with us. We didn’t have personal phones, so he wrote letters and sent photos. In the mid 80s, he was assigned as the SWAPO chief representative to Zambia and Central African countries.

In 1987 after a year of living in Lubango, my mother decided to leave Okaposte and move closer to Education Center, so that she could look after me while I attended school. Education Center was the central meeting area for exile kids, and it was where all exile kids’ activities such as Pioneers rehearsals took place. "Pioneers" was a reference term for SWAPO exile kids and it was also the name of the youth club that exile kids belonged to.
First, we moved to Lenin, where we shared a military dugout house with two small rooms as bedrooms with a lady called Mee Sarah Monasa Fanuel, who had a little son called Jesus. In front of the house were trenches where we would have to run to take cover if the enemy attacked the camps. Lenin was a short walk to Education Center, so I attended school from there. My mother didn’t take me back to live with Mee Maria in Education Center after the going ‘abroad’ incident. She kept me under her own watchful eye ever since that day.

My favorite teacher, Tate Henock, was one day arrested for leaving the camp to go to Lubango city center without a travel permit from the SWAPO authorities in Lubango. This was an unlawful act in the camps, where, for safety reasons, our movement outside the camps was greatly restricted. Those who left the camps unceremoniously were often considered as having “run away” from their liberation struggle commitments, and were punished for this, even if they were just going to mingle with the local people. In the SWAPO run camps, we were hardly exposed to the Angolan locals, and strictly maintained most of our Namibian cultures, including only speaking Oshiwambo. This is why most exiled Namibians in Angola never picked up Portuguese – Angola’s official language, although some learned a few basic words here and there. As a child, the only time I had mingled with Angolans was during my Lobito experience, or when I went outside the camps to perform in Angolan sponsored cultural events as part of the Pioneers group. I also got a few chances to go into Lubango city with Okaposte designated drivers who went into town to fill up large containers with petrol.

The arrest and detention of our teacher affected our learning at school tremendously. We went to classes for a whole week without being taught anything as there was no substitute teacher to replace Tate Henock. At the time of his arrest, he was teaching us how to read and write our native language, Oshiwambo. English was the official language in SWAPO and the medium of instruction in exile schools, but we hardly communicated in English outside the classroom, making it hard to master the language. That was the first and only time I received formal Oshiwambo education, and I enjoyed the class immensely. I wasn’t happy when it was interrupted by the arrest of our teacher.

Tate Henock was a very good and kind-hearted teacher whom I was very fond of and missed a lot when he was in police custody. His arrest pained me because it made him appear to be a criminal, which he wasn’t to me. So to free my teacher, I lobbied some of my fellow classmates, and together, we went to the police station to convince the officers to release him. When we reached the station, we found our teacher chained like a common thief, and sitting under a tree. We greeted him, and all felt sorry for him…angry at the way in which he was being treated. As
the spokesperson for our group of seven-year-olds, I pleaded our case to the policemen in charge, including Officer John Aamalwa, whom I knew personally because he was a good friend of my mother. I told them that we were no longer receiving an education because our teacher was not there to teach us, and that his detention was keeping us from learning. We also confirmed what a great and caring teacher he was towards his students. It was obvious that we had made our point at the police station and our voices were heard, because the very next day our teacher was released. We were all happy to have him back in the classroom, and I believe that the experience exposed my innate leadership skills and ability to influence others. This boosted my confidence in being a leader and not a follower at that early age, and since that day, I’ve never shied away from fighting for what I believe is right.

As children growing up in exile, we lived relatively carefree lives, and were allowed to roam and play freely around the SWAPO camps. We were able to be children, despite the war situation, and we would play all day after school and on the weekends, without our parents having to worry about our whereabouts. We usually left the house in the morning after a breakfast of okatete (porridge). Sometimes, breakfast would also include tea with condensed milk and homemade bread. Canned condensed milk and Cerelac baby food were staple foods to exile children in Lubango, and we never tired of it because it tasted so sweet. We even ate condensed milk with rice sometimes and it tasted so good. But with my sweet tooth, I preferred to suck the thick condensed milk straight out of the can.

After breakfast, we children would all meet at a field to play. The girls would build houses with sand as we didn’t have playhouses, dolls and toys to play with; while the boys made cars out of wire. Or we would make balls out of sox, plastic bags and other basic materials to play various ball games. Even with our makeshift amusements, we had fun and were content with our lives as we had little to worry about. At lunchtime we all made our way to the children’s eekulo to eat, after which we would play some more. Later in the afternoons, we would report to Pioneers rehearsals at the Education Center community hall, which was just a big open field where most of the community activities took place. The rehearsals included singing SWAPO liberation songs, dancing, learning basic military drills and also gymnastic movements. After playing and rehearsing, we always made sure that we were home by sunset as we instructed by our guardians and parents. Since learning was restricted to the classroom and we were never given homework, we sure had a lot of time left to play and enjoy our childhood in the camps. That was basically a normal day in the life of an exile child in the SWAPO camps.
Another aspect off my childhood that I always enjoyed, was watching “okiino” (films) in the open community field at Education Center. The films were a real treat, as they were only shown once every couple of months at night, on a big projector that had been set up in the middle of the field. The whole community, except for those on guarding duty, would come out with blankets and sit on the ground to enjoy the movie. The films were usually based on war stories, and were very captivating and entertaining. We didn’t have personal televisions in our homes, so as you can imagine, we were all awestruck by the moving images and the happenings on the screen. It was one of the few times – aside from the usual parades – for which the whole community came together for entertainment.

While living in Lenin, little Isaac and I made frequent trips to Agriculture area to visit Mee Teckla Shikola. During one of our mid-morning visits on a day in 1987, as we were playing outside with Nangi Amupolo, Katazo, and Exile, we heard loud gunshots. We started to panic. I was eight years old at the time, and it was my first time hearing shooting so close by. Having been raised under military conditions, we were taught basic military drills at Pioneer rehearsals, and we applied what we had been taught to do when the enemy attacks. We took cover by lying prostrate on the ground and belly-crawled to the nearest hideout spot. Since the trenches were far away from where we had been playing, we crawled into the house and hid under the beds instead. Some people took cover in the trenches, while some of the combatants with weapons at their disposal reached for their guns and started shooting back. The gunshots were deafening, and my friends and I were terrified. We knew it was the Boers shooting at us. I held my breath for a long time as we lay huddled under that bed, with no idea of what exactly was going on outside. The loudness of the gunshots made it seem as if the enemy was very close on foot, and about to butcher us as they had done in Cassinga. It was my first time hearing an exchange of gunfire between SWAPO and the enemy, and while the shooting only lasted about half an hour, it seemed it had gone on for ages.

A good while after the shooting had finally ceased, we slowly came out of our hiding places to observe the scene around us. Everything looked normal as far as we could see, and we spotted no signs of destruction or chaos amidst the chatter that was going on to make out what had just happened. A combatant soon came over to tell us that South African planes had attempted, unsuccessfully, to bomb down the Hainyeko Military Academy, not too far from where we were. Luckily, because they were unsure of the exact location of the target, they were unable to cause any damage to the training center that equipped our combatants with the knowledge and tools they needed for war. But it was because they didn’t know the exact location, that they had simply
started firing randomly at what they thought may have been the target. I’m not sure what the South Africans were able to hit though; probably nothing, I would like to believe. The combatant showed us some of the bullets the enemy had fired, that he picked up on his way back to the camp.

It was a frightening experience. Scenes like this were non-existent in far away SWAPO camps such as those in Kwanza-Sul, because they were very far from the war zone. Luckily nothing worse happened to us during that shooting. But about a week later, the enemy returned. This time they came early in the morning at around 5am, while we were still fast asleep. My mother woke me up as soon as she heard the first round of gunshots. I don’t know how she heard them so quickly, but I guess that being a trained combatant, she was accustomed to sleeping lightly, with “one eye open” all the time. She was always aware of her surroundings and could hear everything. As soon as I woke up, I heard the loud community emergency bell ring frantically, alerting everyone about the imminent danger. Once the bell rang, all the combatants knew that they needed to assume a fighting position. The non-combatant women and children had to run for cover in the nearby trenches. My mother quickly threw me some clothes to put on. She also handed me thick plastic boots to wear since it was wintertime and the trenches were muddy, with all sorts of insects wandering about.

After getting dressed, we stood at the front of our dugout house waiting for the right time to run to the nearby trenches. We looked up at the sky, which appeared bright red with machine gun lights going off as shots were fired from the fighter planes. This attack – much closer to home than the previous one – was so much louder...so much more frightening too. And it felt very live too – I guess because I wasn’t hiding under a bed inside a house, and could now see all the action taking place around me. Shaking in our little boots, Isaac and I ran with my mother to the trenches, taking cover with others to avoid being hit by bullets. The trenches were covered with grass and looked like plain ground, camouflaged to conceal it from the enemy. The gunshots went on non-stop for a long time, unlike in the first attack where there were small breaks between different rounds of gunfire. From the trenches, the shooting sounded fierce, as our combatants fired back. All I could hear was the non-stop “djuu-djuu-djuu-djuu” sound of gunfire.

After what seemed like hours, the shooting finally came to an end, and we were able to emerge from our hideout. I was glad that was over. Nothing frightened me more than the sound of loud gunfire with the aim to kill. I didn’t hear of any casualties during that incident; nor was SWAPO’s Hainyeko military training Center destroyed. It seems SWAPO had successfully
defended its territory, forcing the enemy to retreat in failure. Despite the traumatizing effect of the gunfire, I felt safe, and the thought of returning to Kwanza-Sul where I had never experienced the war, never crossed my mind. I loved living in Lubango regardless of the fact that much of the struggle’s military action took place there. For days after that incident, we went to bed fully dressed every night, ready for any more surprise attacks. Security was on high alert in Lubango during that year. Towards the end of that year, one of the fiercest battles in the history of PLAN was waged against the enemy at Limbundu (Trida) in Southern Angola. During this battle, PLAN combatants under the command of Comrade Nghilifavali Hamunjela, who was popularly known as “Oundjuu ua-Ngundumana Nopoundjuu” dealt the enemy a major blow.

Soon after those attacks, on October 31, 1987, PLAN detected the movement of the enemy inside the Angolan borders. This time they were trying to attack PLAN headquarters at the Northern Front, stationed in the Cuando Cubango province of Angola. That morning SWAPO combatants engaged the intruding enemy in a fierce fight that lasted for almost two days until the enemy retreated back to where it had come.

Several other fierce battles took place between SADF and SWAPO during the course of that year, and the emergency security alerts were set very high in all the SWAPO camps in Lubango. A curfew was enforced every night; movement was heavily restricted; and new military codes were constantly being introduced. Everyone in the camps, including us children, had to be familiar with each of the codes, and with how to identify and catch the enemy if we suspected that anything was amiss. And every day, there was a different special code, usually named after a tool such as “eekatana (machete), eetemo (hoe) and ookonda (a big knife).” If you came across a stranger, especially at night, you’d ask him what the code was in short secret terms, so as to not make it obvious that you were trying to screen him. If he couldn't correctly answer the code of that particular day, you would take the necessary action or notify the authorities because he could be the enemy. I don’t recall ever hearing of someone getting the code wrong.

After living in Lenin for a while, my mother, Isaac and I moved to Education Center, where my school was located. Education Center was in a lovely area alongside a river. There were also Ovamwila (native Angolans) who lived there, but we avoided them at all costs. The Ovamwila seemed scary to us children, as we had been taught to fear them. We were told never to talk to them because they kidnapped and ate children. I suppose this was just a trick used by the adults, to keep us from wandering off with strangers. Anyone who was not a citizen of the SWAPO camps was considered a potential danger – and in this case, a child-eater – unless he was authorized to visit the camps and mingle with SWAPO women, children and combatants.
When we would go down to the river to wash our clothes, we sometimes encountered the Ovamwila there. I was impressed with their style of washing clothes, because it was so different from ours. One time, I tried to imitate them by hitting my clothes against a large stone, which I thought was pretty cool. But my mother thought otherwise, and she scolded me for this indiscretion, telling me that I would ruin my clothes quickly if I washed them like that. Ovamwila also lived behind our camp in Greenwell Matongo at Education Center, with only a long ditch separating them from us. After months of observing them from afar, I realized that they were just normal people and not ghosts or animals that kidnapped and ate children. I started being friendly with them from a distance, smiling and waving “hi” to them. I simply couldn’t resist it, and I’m sure those who waved back felt the same.

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When we first moved to Education, we stayed with my mom’s friend, Mee Shimbilinga, while our two-bedroom house in the Greenwell Matongo section was being completed. It was around this time, that I learned that my mother’s real name was Martha and not Mee Jumpingi as I had grown up calling her. ‘Jumpingi’ (Jumping-Mine) was just the combatant name that she used in exile, I learned.

My mother got a few of her male friends in Lubango to help her build her own house from scratch. I remember she used to join them every day, directing the whole process, cooking for the builders and making them oshikundu (a traditional Oshiwambo drink). And when our house was completed, Isaac, my mother and I moved into our simple but beautiful house with two small bedrooms and a sitting room. Isaac and I shared a room. The bathroom was a simple room behind the house, made with sticks and covered with plastic. The bathroom didn’t have a toilet. In exile, we all did our business in the bushes far from the houses and used sticks and leaves as toilet paper to clean our behinds since we didn’t have toilet paper or newspapers to clean ourselves with. The un-cemented bathroom floor had wide wooden planks on which we stood while bathing from a single bucket of water, to avoid stepping on the sandy ground. We didn’t have running tap water in the house, so we fetched water for bathing from the nearby river. We also didn’t have electricity in the camps, so we used oil lamps to illuminate our surroundings, and a thermos cooker to make our food. Sometimes we cooked food on an open fire outside the house, using firewood we’d collected from the bush. We didn’t cook very often though, as all our meals were served at the eekulo, where everyone ate, but my mom preferred to cook her own food and eat at home. Isaac and I preferred eating at the children’s eekulo because we got to hang out and socialize with our friends.
We had many wonderful neighbors. Mee Anakie Aakoshi lived on the front right of our house, Mee Nekwaya Lavinia Lilieni lived behind our house, Mee Petelina Aindjabi lived on the left, and Tate Uudju Utoni and Mee Ndapewa, the parents of my friend Ndina, lived on the right past Mee Anakie’s house. There was another lady who lived on the front left of our house, but I can’t recall her name. She had two or three light-skinned daughters, one of whom was around my age. Her little sister used to act real funny whenever she was impressed or excited by something. We used to tease her saying “oota shituka,” which means transforming from a human being into a creature. We were great friends though. My very close friend, Helena Wendama, Mee Paulina Haidula’s daughter, stayed with my family a lot when we lived in Education.

Mee Anakie’s house had previously belonged to Mee Justina - the teacher whom I often visited before leaving on the convoy going ‘abroad’. When I inquired about where she had gone, I was told that she had been taken to "Omatale," the dungeons where criminals and suspected spies of SWAPO were detained. My teacher was a nice lady who welcomed me into her home without even knowing who my parents were. I was surprised to hear that she was a (suspected) spy, but I didn’t question her detention. This news was too much for my little seven-year-old ears, so I just accepted what I’d just been told, and didn’t think too much about the issue. Omatale was almost a taboo term that was hardly discussed in the camps. It was like a top kept secret that everyone knew about, but hardly talked about, and people always shied away from broaching this topic of discussion. One day, on one of our many Pioneer performance trips into Lubango town, as we were driving across the bridge over Lubango’s largest river, Omatale was pointed out to us. As soon as I heard the words, “That’s where Omatale is,” I felt chills run down my spine. Omatale was synonymous with being the worst place in exile. We were told this was where “bad people” who worked for the enemy were taken.

SWAPO detained Namibians who were detected or even slightly suspected by the SWAPO intelligence unit as being agents of South Africa’s apartheid regime. This was to protect other Namibians in exile against the likes of people such as Castro, who had aided South Africa in infiltrating SWAPO’s bases and strategies. But the Omatale system was not 100 per cent perfect, and I have heard of innocent people being imprisoned and tortured. Some have even argued that this was done intentionally to settle vendettas between people within SWAPO, while others say that any wrongful imprisonment was done by mistake. Very little has been published about the SWAPO dungeons, and there hasn’t been much discourse and discussion around this topic either. Furthermore, unlike South Africa, Namibia never conducted a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that would explore and reveal the atrocities of the struggle. As such, much has
remained unsaid about the dungeons, and I doubt we’ll ever fully know the extent of what took place there, and who the guilty parties were in this regard.

It was hard for me to hear that my favorite female teacher had been imprisoned in this place that some described as ‘SWAPO hellholes’. If she was indeed wrongfully detained as a spy and subjected to the torture and humiliation of omatale, I am personally sorry that she went through such a sordid ordeal and got caught up in the “crossfire.” I often wonder about how she, and others in a similar situation, considered their plight. Did they understand that their fate was part of the nature and circumstances of war? Did their detention in the dungeons change their view of the struggle for which they’d been fighting? And have they found it in their hearts to forgive SWAPO for mistakes that were made in line with protecting the majority? I have no idea of what the dungeons may have been like...I never witnessed their horror. Perhaps these questions are too much to ask.

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At Education Center, I became close friends with my neighbor Ndina Hidipo Hamutenya. We did everything together. One day we went to the children’s eekulo early because we were so hungry. The food was cooked in a big pot and ready to be served, but the chefs were not there to serve us. With our bellies growling, we quickly got tired of waiting and decided to serve ourselves. But just as we began serving ourselves discreetly, so as not to alert anyone to the fact that we were actually stealing food from eekulo, the man in charge appeared. We quickly ran off before he could recognize us, rolling over in laughter as soon as we were out of sight.

Although we were quite naughty, Ndina and I were also top students in our class and always got good grades. Ndina and Nakushe Kapofi were always first in our class and I was always the second. I thought they were very smart, and no matter how hard I tried, I could never get in the first position with them. I admired their academic gifts, but I was also happy to hold the second position in a class of so many students.

Like my mother, I was very much of a socialite, and thoroughly enjoyed organizing children’s events at Education Center. I had fond memories of my first birthday party, which my mother had thrown for me the previous year, and when she didn’t display any hint that I’d be having a party for my 8th birthday, I decided to take matters into my own hands. To raise money to buy food for the party, I took some of my clothes to sell to the ovamwila (local Angolans). Three of my friends accompanied me to the forbidden villages. We walked for what seemed like several miles, stopping and talking to ovamwila, and trying to convince them to buy my clothes. After
numerous unsuccessful sales pitches, we eventually managed to get two live chickens, in exchange for my clothes. Excited that I now had what I needed to throw a birthday bash, I went home to my mother to tell her the good news.

To my surprise, she was furious. She scolded me for going off to the Ovamwila villages, especially without an adult escort. She reminded me that we were forbidden from mingling with local Angolans on any level without the presence of an adult. According to her, our irresponsibility could have gotten us raped, kidnapped and killed in the villages across the ditch. And to cut a long story short, we didn’t celebrate my 8th birthday party, and I came to terms with the fact that I wasn’t going to be thrown a birthday party every year.

However, that failed attempt at organizing my first big event didn’t dissuade me from pursuing my passion to plan events. After being in so many weddings in Lubango, I had fallen in love with the idea of weddings and wedding planning. So I decided to imitate adults’ weddings and organize our own exile children weddings. I became the children’s community wedding planner in Education Center. Our kid weddings were innocent; they had most of the elements of adult weddings, minus the kissing, and we only married one couple per weekend, unlike adults who had multiple weddings in one weekend.

I recruited my friend Ndina to assist me, and we did everything from picking the bride and groom, to dressing them up, creating the reception, cooking “play food,” and making a cake out of Cerelac baby food powder. I had a toy dining set that someone had given me, and I used this for our wedding catering. We made our wedding marches around the community – ululating, dancing for the newlyweds and making joyful wedding noises just like the grownups did. Adults would often stop dead in their tracks to marvel at our kid weddings. And to my personal delight, they always commented on how well organized our weddings were.

I managed to marry off most of the younger kids in Greenwell Matongo. I decided not to get myself married as I didn't trust anyone else to put on a good show for my wedding. So I preferred to be the wedding planner. Ndina didn't get married off either.

Unfortunately, my mother put an end to our weddings one day when she came home in a sour mood, and found us in the middle of our wedding reception that I was hosting in the small space behind our house. She hadn’t had a problem with my kid weddings before, but this time, clearly bothered by something else; she angrily stormed into our reception and started throwing away our toy utensils and play food, yelling at the kids to go to their homes immediately before she beat them. As she threw our things away, she shouted about how she was tired of all these "kid"
weddings. That was my last wedding planning event. I wasn’t too upset about the wedding cancellations I would have to make though…I was just glad she didn’t whip me that day. In any case, almost everyone was married off, so it didn’t bother me much.

At the age of eight, I had my first boyfriend, Mweshi (Gabriel Mweshihange). Mweshi was the son of the late PLAN Commander Peter Mweshihange, a respected and high-ranking SWAPO military commander in exile at the time. Mweshi and I went to the same school in Education Center. I thought he was very cute, and we liked each other a lot. We were not ashamed to admit that we were an item. When friends asked me if I was Mweshi’s girlfriend, I would confirm "yes" and when they asked him the same question, he would say the same. We didn’t deny our “puppy love” for each other. Other kids at school used to enjoy asking me and Mweshi the same question over and over to see if we really liked each other. They laughed at us like we were crazy to admit such feelings for one another at that age. We were so into our lovey-dovey world that their opinion and childish behavior didn’t bother us or stop us from admitting our “love” for each other. Mweshi and I kept declaring our “love” for each other openly until we left exile.

But even though Mweshi and I were a “couple,” we never spoke or made direct eye contact with each other because we were too shy. We communicated our feelings for each other through our friends, and when our eyes met while checking each other out, we’d quickly look away. It sounds cheesy, but it was so cute. That was the first time I had strong feelings towards the opposite sex.

Mweshi and his “brothers,” Brown James Auala and Kaulushu Peter Mweshihange, lived in Omalulu, the SWAPO VIP camp in Lubango, where PLAN Commander Dimo Hamaambo and Tate Hidipo Hamutenya also lived. I visited this area a couple of times with my friends to catch a glimpse of my handsome little boyfriend, Mweshi.

I stopped making the long walk to Omalulu with my friends when Mweshi and his brothers relocated to our camp at Greenwell Matongo in Education Center, to live with their aunt, Mee Piskila Lombe. They were always so well behaved and his brothers always looked as if they were guarding Mweshi, who due to his father’s leadership position, appeared to be a VIP himself. I always thought that maybe Brown and Kaulushu were both adopted. Kaulushu was the eldest of the three, and there was a rumor about him that kids at school believed to be true, as it was never refuted. According to the rumors, he was said to be a UNITA kid that Commander Peter Mweshihange had adopted, out of love. I later found out from Mweshi, right before publishing this book, that Kaulushu was indeed adopted, but he wasn’t a UNITA kid. He was the lone survivor of an attack by UNITA in which both of his Namibian parents had been killed.
One day we were at eekulo when Mweshi and his brothers came to eat. It was the first time I had ever seen them eating at eekulo, and it was my most memorable eekulo experience too. Eekulo was just a simple open area cafeteria under a tree, with wooden seats and tables that we sat at when eating. Our food was prepared in a big pot, and we stood in line to be served. That day, an older naughty boy called Nakada, who was aware of my relationship with Mweshi, decided to spark some drama by claiming that I was his new girlfriend and trying to flirt with me. Mweshi got very jealous and angry with Nakada for attempting to steal his girlfriend. Fuming, he got out of his seat and started fighting big boy Nakada for his girl, crying that “she’s not your girlfriend, she’s my girlfriend…”

I didn’t know how to react to being the center of attention at eekulo that day, but I felt so sorry for Mweshi. He liked me so much that he was ready to put up a fight with Nakada. To try and help the situation, I took sides with Mweshi, flatly denying that I was Nakada’s girlfriend and saying that I didn’t like him. I told Nakada that I liked Mweshi and that he needed to back off and leave us alone. Mweshi, who must have been about nine years old at the time, threw punches at the older Nakada, who was about four years our senior. But Mweshi didn’t hit him hard enough, as the stronger Nakada, easily blocked his jabs. There was a big scene at eekulo that day and all the kids were watching the drama unfold.

Mweshi’s brothers tried to stop Mweshi from fighting Nakada, but were unsuccessful; and there were no grownups in sight to put an end to Nakada’s bullying as they usually left us to eat after serving us. Eventually Mweshi’s brothers managed to convince him to leave eekulo, and they went home. That’s when the drama stopped. I can’t say I didn’t enjoy being the center of attention at eekulo that day. In fact, I have to admit that it was a great feeling having boys fight for me, especially Mweshi. It meant a lot to me that he was willing to fight an older guy just for me. That was special.

After that incident, my friends and I started hanging out with Mweshi and his brothers a lot. We would go to their house, but Mweshi and I still never talked unless we were part of a group discussion. We were too shy of each other. The first time we spoke was when we had a Pioneers Club field trip to Lubango city. The Pioneers club was a performance group for exile kids where we did traditional dances called “okudana,” sang songs about SWAPO and the struggle, and learned to march and salute like SWAPO combatants. We also learned some acrobatic and gymnastic moves that were part of our performance routines. Our Pioneer group participated in many special events for SWAPO, wearing our formal Pioneers uniform, which consisted of blue shorts, white shirts and red scarves for girls or blue scarves for boys. The Lubango Pioneers club
was better than the Kwanza-Sul one in terms of accommodating everyone. The Kwanza-Sul club had a lot of selective politics because it was the main Pioneers club for SWAPO and the older exile children above the age of 12 years old would choose only themselves to be part of the performing groups. The Kwanza-Sul Pioneers performed for top SWAPO and international leaders, and traveled on special missions abroad to perform at special events and to represent the youth of SWAPO. During these mission trips, they got a chance to eat very well...better than they were accustomed to in the camps. As a result, getting into this elite pioneer group was tough. Our group, the Lubango Pioneers club, only went on local mission trips, as we were not the main performing SWAPO pioneer club in exile, so the politics of selection didn’t affect us much.

The Pioneer slogan that we opened all our performances with as we saluted the audience went as follows:

(Pioneer Leader): “Pioneers, attention!”

(All the Pioneers): “Today we are the Pioneers. And tomorrow we are the youth, and then men and women and elders. Discipline, courage and loyalty shall be our principle.”

This slogan was always our introductory salute, and every Pioneer knew it so well, that they could recite it in their sleep. After pledging our loyalty to SWAPO and Namibia, we would then stand at attention, saluting like young soldiers. Following the salute, we would form a semi-circle to start our performances, which entertained the crowd. We usually opened with a popular song and dance. First the drummer would drum out the tune to the song we’d dance to, and then we’d respond by clapping along to indicate that we were ready to begin. After the first round of clapping, the first set of two dancers entered the circle, jumping and gyrating to the beat of the drum and our clapping with such high energy that we would all be excited for our respective turns. The dancers in the middle usually closed their act with a fancy move that would drive the crowd wild.

One of the popular songs to which we danced was, “Tu selingeni omota, see endume ndomoofitu, eguerilla da Tate Sama ya Nujoma, o SWAPO otai komanda....Aaye ye, aaye ye ye o SWAPO otai komanda.” The song basically said: “Let’s get the mortar (weapon) ready, we are the men of the bush, guerillas of Sam Nujoma, SWAPO is commanding/in charge...” Another popular opening dance was sung to the song: “Nujoma okweya, eeya mo Namibia, etelela ushani, Aaye, Nujoma okweya...” meaning that SWAPO President Sam Nujoma has come to Namibia, bringing peace. There was also the song: “We are killingi, killing Botha” (Botha was the
South African prime minister from 1978-1984, and state president from 1984-1989); or the one that went: “cha la la, la la! Cha, la la! Cha la la ndina ku ku ti ti wee ma ma…”

Some of these songs were in English and other languages that we didn’t regularly speak, so we often sang the words incorrectly. For example, one really popular song that we all loved, we sang as: "ope nde do cha la la, ope nde do cha la la, ope nde do for me, iiiiii, itwaasimi eemaiso ooo, open de do for me"...I later found out in my adult years that the proper words to that particular song were "Open the door, open the door, open the door for me. If you want to hear my song, then open the door for me."

Our dances were just as spellbinding as the words to our songs. There was one that looked like a cat dance, where, kneeling on our hands and knees, we would tilt our pelvises up and down imitating a cat as we sang a “meow” song. We also had some other moves – especially when we would end a set with our fancy concluding finish – that appeared to be sexually inspired, and looked like a humping move. I’m not sure who taught us that popular kid’s dance with such a vulgar finishing touch, but fortunately, the song was usually danced by females, so the humping movement was seldom, if ever, done on a boy. There were so many pioneers dances and songs that we performed, that documenting them all would be a book unto itself. I do hope, though, that someone records and archives them as a testament to the rich history of the exile kids.

I distinctly remember a performance in December of 1988, when our club was invited to partake in the Pioneers Day event. The day was dedicated to commemorating and honoring the life of, Ernesto Ngangula - a 12-year-old boy who was beaten to death by Portuguese soldiers on December 1, 1968, because he wouldn’t disclose the location of his people-run school and an MPLA base. His revolutionary and heroic role, which continues to be celebrated in Angola, served as an inspiration to us as Namibian exile children in SWAPO camps. We were taught a song about Ngangula and sang it at the event. The song went something like this:

“Ove Ngangula, oopi wafila, aapa wafila, oko ndila yo skoola. Eepa, iiya welufu, siyevalasi, Ngangula aasa…” This is translated as: “Ngangula, where did you die, you died on the way to school…… Ngangula is dead.”

Aside from the inspiring purpose of the trip, I also clearly remember that day, because that was when Mweshi and I finally exchanged words directly to each other. While we were changing, I’d worked up the nerve to ask him to hold my jacket. He didn’t hesitate, and I fell even deeper in love with my childhood boyfriend. It was an innocent ‘relationship’ – as courtships between nine year old kids usually are; and we maintained our innocence as kids. We were non-intimate kid
couples who never kissed (not even on the cheek), never touched or engaged in any type of
sexual activity that little kids have no business engaging in.

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Early in 1989, my close friend Ndina and I were playing at her house when she started playing
with her parents’ gun, an AK-47. All homes in SWAPO camps in Lubango had loaded guns,
pistols and Ak-47s to fend off any surprise attacks by the enemy. Ndina scared the living
daylight out of me that day when she took her parents’ loaded AK-47 and aimed it at me,
chuckling and saying that she was going to shoot me. I didn’t think this was a funny game,
especially after a recent incident that shocked Education Center. Just a few weeks prior, my other
close friend, Helena Wendama and I were sleeping when I was awoken by gunshots. I woke
Helena up and asked her if she had heard them too. After a little while, I heard my mom and
Officer John Aamalwa, who was a SWAPO police officer in Lubango, talking outside about the
shooting.

Tate McKenzie, whom we knew quite well since we passed his house to and from school every
day, had shot and killed his girlfriend, Mee Justina Shapopi. Mee Shapopi was our math teacher,
and hailed from Okatope in the Kwanyama region of Northern Namibia. She was a friendly,
slim, beautiful, light-skinned woman whom we were all very fond of, and her murder came as a
terrible shock to us. From what we heard, Tate McKenzie apparently planned on running away
to Namibia after killing Mee Shapopi, but his plan failed when he accidentally shot himself in the
leg.

The next morning when we passed by the yellow one-bedroom house where they lived, the zinc
ceiling had been removed, and through the windows, we could see the blood-stained walls and
floor. It was a horrid sight and a depressing reminder of our teacher, and we would always run
past the house to block out the sight and reality that our teacher what had happened there on
subsequent trips. Tate McKenzie was arrested and taken to Nanyemba hospital for treatment on
his badly injured leg. SWAPO didn’t have courts where they tried people, so Tate McKenzie was
apparently never dealt with in exile for his crime. He stayed in the hospital recuperating and
shortly after, the cease-fire was announced and the war had come to an end. I heard that SWAPO
officials in Lubango had said that Mee Shapopi’s family would deal with Tate McKenzie when he
returned to Namibia, but who knows what came of that?

That horrific incident was still fresh on my mind when Ndina was playing with her parents’ gun,
and I pleaded with her to put the weapon down. I didn’t want to have my blood splattered all
over the house, as had happened to Mee Shapopi. She continued to giggle as she pointed the AK47 at me, and I feared that with her constant moving about, she might accidentally pull the trigger on which her finger was resting. Eventually, to my relief, she stopped playing with the gun and put it back. We had been told never to play with those guns in exile, and that’s why our parents hid them well. I didn’t even know where my mother kept her gun. Fortunately, that incident didn’t ruin our friendship, and we remained close pals even after that nerve-wrecking moment. We were, after all, inseparable. And as kids do, we continued playing together, dancing with the adult cultural dance troupe to which the two of us were the only child members, and running around the camps, having a good time with our friends.

Since I was my mother’s only child and daughter in exile, she often braided my hair. In fact, it felt like she did it almost every day and sometimes I think it was simply to irritate me. I was like her little Barbie doll, whose hair she played with all the time. She would call me saying: “Lakela, come, let me do your hair…” even when she had just braided my hair the previous day. She was also mean at doing hair… she always pulled and when I flinched in pain, she would hit my head with the comb and tell me to toughen up, saying, “Beauty doesn’t come easy.” If I didn’t toughen up hard enough, she would stop and ask me, “What’s your problem?” and then taunt me by saying “Let me hear you sniff one more time….” – a warning not to let out any more painful squeals.

One day she decided it was my turn to do her hair. I had never braided hair before but she just believed I could braid hair. She handed me the comb and hair extension to braid her hair in a “Rasta style” (single braids). I had watched people braid the Rasta style before, so I had a small idea of what they did but this would be my first attempt at actually braiding. To my surprise, the braids looked pretty good, and she was pleased with the result. I was 10 years old then and have been braiding hair ever since. This skill brought me a lot of income later on while I was a university student, and helped to supplement my income in those financially challenging college years. I’m thankful to my mother for helping me discover my hair braiding talent, as well as for teaching me survival skills at that early age. By 10, for example, she had also taught me how to cook for the family.

My mother was very protective of me. Anyone who knew her knew not to dare mess with me. One day I had told her that big boy Nakada - the same boy who had caused a scene between Mweshi and me at eekulo - was trying to bully me. It may have been that he was still agitated about the eekulo incident, which I had never told my mother about. But by this point, Nakada had become such a nuisance, that I decided to tell her the whole story.
The next day, I was shocked when my mother walked into our classroom under the big tree and interrupted the class. In front of everyone, she asked the class where Nakada was. Everybody was shocked. No parent ever stormed into a classroom angrily looking for a kid. The class didn’t hesitate to point Nakada out to my mother as the teacher just stood there, stunned. When Nakada was identified, she walked up to his seat and confronted him about picking on me. She scolded him in front of the whole class and warned him against doing it again or else she would deal with him. Nakada looked completely dumbstruck, terrified of this no-nonsense woman whose daughter he’d been bullying. I don’t believe he knew who my mother was prior to that day. Her approach may not have been the best, considering that compared to her, her was just a little boy; but I was happy that she put him in his place. Nakada never dared to mess with me again after that.

Sometime in 1988, a group of young people came from Namibia to join the struggle. Because they had decided to only join the war as news of its coming to an end was making the rounds, they were mischievously referred to as “uutalasha” (mattresses). Within the group, I remember there was a young woman - probably in her early 20s - who was insulting Sam Nujoma and other members of our SWAPO leadership, in our presence. Stunned by her audacity to join a movement for whose leaders she had no respect, Ndina and I did our best to defend SWAPO and our leaders against her insults. We eventually concluded that she must be a traitor and a puppet for the enemy, and promptly reported her to Principal Aatumbangela. I believe she was questioned about her comments, but am not sure what happened to her after that.

A short time before my ninth birthday, I got an opportunity to go and visit my mother’s friend at the popular Ohainyeko Training Academy that I had heard so much about. As I mentioned before, this was the main military training center for PLAN combatants that the enemy tried to bomb on previous occasions. I was excited about visiting the center, and was impressed by its size and the level of security surrounding it as soon as I arrived. There were combatants all over the place, armed and dressed in military uniforms. The area was a hive of activity, with guerilla fighters in training. I heard gunshots, which made me jump, but was assured that they were not shooting with real bullets. They were using rubber bullets.

The family I stayed with for that weekend had a young girl of my age, with whom I toured the academy. I was curious to see what this place was all about. It had a lot of trees, and according to my new friend, cutting the trees down was not allowed, as they shielded the combatants and the academy from potential enemies.
Daily activities for combatants at the academy included waking up early in the morning for parade, where they were briefed on the war situation and where other news and updates were shared with the community. After the usual morning parade, everyone reported to their respective duty stations - on the field practicing military drills, working at the communication department, etc. That day I saw PLAN combatants in action, practicing their shooting skills in different positions as if they were in real combat. The moment we heard the gunshots from close range, we got scared. We felt as if we were on a battle field, where we were the only target. It was quite uncomfortable for me, so we hurried back home. I wondered how people lived in this place constantly hearing loud gunshots, and was grateful that this did not have to be my daily experience. I enjoyed my time there though, and was glad at the opportunity afforded to me to experience the combatant preparation process.

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On March 23, 1988, the famous battle of Cuito Cuanavale came to an end. The battle had started when SADF’s 101st Battalion, pretending to pursue PLAN combatants, crossed over the border into Angola. This pursuit of SWAPO’s freedom fighters started a full-blown battle, fought on Angolan soil in the area of Cuito Cuanavale. South Africa’s army, backed by UNITA, attacked the main Angolan government base at Cuito Cuanavale. South Africa sent additional artillery to help in the siege, and the battle developed into an artillery duel, that has been described as “Africa’s largest land battle since World War II”. MPLA, SWAPO and Cuban forces made up one side, while UNITA and South Africa fought on the other side. All sides claimed victory in the battle, but as far as Namibia is concerned, this was a victory for the liberation struggle, because it eventually led to the departure of South African, Cuban, and other foreign troops from Namibian and Angola, and was therefore linked to Namibia’s ultimate independence. So the attack on Cuito Cuanavale not only failed for South Africa, but also brought South Africa an ultimate defeat both in the long war against SWAPO, and in the heavy fighting against FAPLA.

After the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, added political pressure mounted against South Africa, its apartheid government was becoming more isolated internationally, and the cost of military intervention was increasing sharply. A cease-fire was agreed on and announced in Geneva on August 8, 1988. In May 1988, negotiators from Angola, Cuba, and South Africa, and observers from the Soviet Union met to work out an agreement that would bring peace to the region and implement the 1978 UN Security Council Resolution 435, which had already been delayed for a decade by South Africa. At the Ronald Reagan/Mikhail Gorbachev summit in Moscow on May 29
June 1, 1988, it was decided that Cuban troops would be withdrawn from Angola and Soviet military aid would cease if South Africa withdrew from Namibia.

The agreement, known as the Brazzaville Protocol, was signed in New York, in December 1988. The Tripartite Accord, a bilateral agreement between Angola, Cuba and South Africa was signed, and South Africa agreed to hand control of Namibia over to the United Nations. The agreement was finalized at the UN headquarters in New York City on December 22, 1988. April 1, 1989 was established as the date for the cease-fire between SWAPO and South Africa, and as the start of the implementation of UN Resolution 435. No other political issue ever engaged the International Court of Justice more than that of Namibia. Evidently, pressure from SWAPO, its allies and its military wing, as well as all the apartheid resistance movements and calls for the liberation of Namibia by various elements working within the country, had all been instrumental in eventually forcing the South African apartheid regime to agree to peace initiatives, which paved the way for Namibia's independence. On March 29-30, 1989, SWAPO President Sam Nujoma held a huge and emotional PLAN parade of about 9,000 SWAPO combatants at the Hainyeko Military Academy in Lubango. There, he read out the terms of the cease-fire, which would take effect at midnight on April 1, 1989.

Soon after the parade, the news about the end of the war had reached everyone in the camps. My mother excitedly informed me that we would soon be going home to Namibia for good. I wasn’t really sure how to react. Growing up, I had heard so much about Namibia, and through SWAPO, it was all we lived for. But I was indifferent about going to Namibia for good, because the only home I really knew was Angola. I didn’t see big celebrations in the streets of Lubango when news of the cease-fire was made public. There were no celebration parties and no freedom songs being sung aloud. Maybe everyone was being cautious...trying not to get their hopes up too high just in case the plan backfired, after so many years of delays and setbacks. They were probably not sure if South Africa was going to pull another delaying tactic.

On April 1, 1989, the day of the cease fire, Eefuma radio, the only Namibian-Oshiwambo radio station we listened to in Lubango, reported that a fierce battle between South Africa and our combatants had broken out inside Namibia. It was not clear what had happened at the time, and everyone had his or her own speculations. I later found out, however, that our PLAN combatants, who were already in their secret bases inside Namibia, were waiting to report to UNTAG reception points, so that they could be confined to their bases as instructed, when the South African forces attacked them across the Eastern Caprivi to Kaokoveld. The PLAN combatants fought back, but experienced many casualties.

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As the details surrounding the attack surfaced, it became evident that either there had been a misunderstanding, or that this was yet another plot by South Africa to derail the peace process of Namibia’s independence. South African leaders, Pik W. Botha and Louis Pienaar told the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who had mysteriously arrived in Namibia on April 1, 1989 from her trip to Malawi, and the UN Special Representative Marti Ahtisaari who arrived in Namibia on March 31, 1989, that 600 PLAN fighters were in breach of the cease-fire agreement because they had crossed the border into Namibia and were not confined to their bases in Angola. But PLAN fighters were already at their bases inside Namibia prior to April 1. These ‘bases’ (not conventional army bases as SWAPO was engaged in guerrilla warfare) were located at Eenhana, Oshakati, Ruacana, Okatope, Okongo and Okalongo from where SWAPO guerillas launched surprise attacks on the enemy.

South Africa immediately blamed SWAPO for breaking the terms of the cease-fire agreement, and argued that it would cancel the implementation of Resolution 435 if SWAPO combatants were not sent back to their bases in Angola. Thatcher sided with the South African leaders and advised Martti Ahtisaari, who was in charge of the UNTAG peace keeping force, to authorize South African troops to help with “restoring order.”

Whether or not SWAPO’s combatants were already in Namibia is an issue that still has not been verified by independent investigators. However, it was common practice for PLAN combatants to frequently cross from Angola into Namibia and to stay in the bush for long periods of time, hiding out in secret locations or among the local people before returning to Angola. As such, I believe that laying the blame at the door of SWAPO for the broken agreement was unreasonable.

From my understanding, on that fateful day, all that the SWAPO PLAN combatants wanted to do was to report to the UN bases and hand in their weapons as instructed. In the process, however, I believe they were ambushed by the South African forces in concentrated areas of Ohangwena, Omafu, Onuno, Engela, Endola and Ondeshifiilwa. The United Nations took a long time to put an end to the fighting. SWAPO ordered its combatants inside Namibia to lay low while the situation was being sorted out, preventing more deaths. The fighting lasted nine days, and resulted in the deaths of more than 375 PLAN fighters and 26 South Africans.

Among the 375 combatants killed that day, was Tate Kavenhu Indongo, husband to Mee Nekwaya Lileni, who lived close to our house. We heard the news of his death on Eefuma, and many people went to Mee Nekwaya’s house to comfort her and the family. A few days later, a delegation of SWAPO army officials in Lubango came to deliver the news personally. It was a
sad sight, seeing Mee Nekwaya who was always happy, wearing black from head to toe as she mourned the death of her husband. Tate Indongo was a good man, although we didn’t see much of him, as he was always at Northern Front fighting the war.

After the cease-fire backfired on April 1, a series of meetings was held at Mount Etjo on April 9, and an agreement which came to be known as the Mount Etjo Peace Accord was signed between Angola, Cuba and South Africa. The agreement provided for an immediate cease-fire and stipulated that PLAN combatants in Namibia would be given “free passage” to Angola through designated crossing points controlled by the UN. This agreement is seen to have finally provided the passage for Namibia’s path to independence, but further miscommunications and violations on both sides resulted in a number of skirmishes, with SWAPO suffering the most casualties.

On the morning of April 18, 1989, a day before celebrating SWAPO’s 29th anniversary, a SWAPO delegation led by Nahas Angula met the South African delegation at the Ruacana border post. At the meeting, SWAPO reiterated its commitment to the cease-fire agreement. This was the first time that the two warring parties had come face-to-face, to peacefully negotiate the independence of Namibia. SWAPO had not been present at the Mount Etjo signing, for example. Both parties agreed to another meeting of the JMMC that had been scheduled for April 20, 1989, at the same venue. In the end, South Africa agreed to withdraw to its bases on April 26, 1989, for a period of 60 hours, to allow SWAPO combatants free and unhindered passage into Angola. After a few more weeks, along with the loss of lives of hundreds of SWAPO combatants and some loss of the UN’s credibility, the UN mission in Namibia was back on track and Resolution 435 on its way to full implementation. Everyone started packing and giving away some of their belongings to the Ovamwila. I had just turned 10 years old by that time.

Adults celebrated at the news that the war was over, overjoyed that this time it was really going to happen. They were happy to finally go back to their homes, after years of living in exile. Most of them had not seen or communicated with any of their loved ones in Namibia since they’d fled the apartheid regime.

But everything seemed to be happening a little too fast for me and other exile kids who couldn’t quite share in the “going back home” excitement as the news came that we would soon be leaving. Namibia was not our home; exile was our home, and the only home we had ever known. It seemed as if at one moment, I was happily playing with my friends, and in the blink of an eye, I felt complete loneliness, as I was separated from my friends. We had never said “goodbye” to each other. In fact, we didn’t really know what that word meant. Isaac’s family soon came to
fetch my ‘little brother’ to return to Namibia with him. I didn’t see him again until two years ago in 2008, when we were attending the funeral of a mutual relative.

The six-week repatriation process was organized and supervised by the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Its responsibilities included making the necessary repatriation arrangements for Namibians in exile, including their registration, administering vaccinations, providing medical treatment, and covering the travel arrangements from exile to Namibia. UNHCR also had to ensure that repatriated Namibians reached Namibia in time for the first national elections of an independent Namibia on November 11, 1989.

Resolution 435 stated that the repatriation of exiled Namibians would be entirely voluntary and required beneficiaries to sign a voluntary repatriation form. The SWAPO leadership granted the UNHCR staff freedom to have access to all its members in the various camps and guerilla bases.

To effectively carry out a smooth repatriation process, the UNHCR partnered with the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN). The Council, formed in 1978, had been actively involved in resisting the apartheid regime, and played a significant role in the liberation struggle for Namibia’s independence – mobilizing churches and communities at home and abroad to speak out against South Africa’s actions in Namibia. The UNHCR also chose CCN as a partner in this effort, because the Council had a huge network throughout the country, and the overwhelming support and confidence of the Namibian people.

Within CCN, the “Repatriation, Resettlement and Reconstruction Committee” (RRR Committee) was established to take on this partnership role. In a nutshell, the RRR was responsible for receiving and taking care of returnees and their children while in reception centers inside Namibia, as well as helping returnees to trace their relatives and reconcile with them. The RRR also provided counseling services to the returning exiles.

Originally, the repatriation date was set for mid-May 1989, but it did not commence until June 12, 1989, due to the tense negotiations taking place between the UNHCR and the South African administration governing Namibia. These negotiations mainly concerned efforts to secure amnesty for all returnees – particularly those who were members of PLAN.

Once the exercise finally commenced, an estimated 43,000 returnees were repatriated to Namibia over the course of three months, at a cost of about US$ 38.5 million. They arrived at three designated arrival points: the Windhoek Airport, and the military airbases at Grootfontein, and Ondangwa. Although most of the returning refugees came from Angola and Zambia, a
significant proportion also came from other countries such as Cuba, East Germany and several African countries, as well as other friendly nations to which SWAPO had sent Namibians to study.

My mother was hired to cook for UNHCR VIP; so we would be among the last scheduled to leave Lubango. To keep me from getting bored and lonely after all the other kids left with their parents, my mother convinced my best friend Helena’s mother, Mee Paulina, to let Helena stay behind and make the journey to Namibia with us instead. Mee Paulina was kind enough to let her daughter stay behind to keep me company.

On June 12, 1989, I woke up early in the morning to watch the first group of Namibians leave this exile that had become our home. All the adults seemed happy. They were dressed in their best clothes and made joyful noises as they sang SWAPO freedom songs, waving their blue red and green SWAPO flags in the air. The grown-ups resembled a bunch of excited children, giddy and unable to contain their excitement, as they made their way to the airport to catch a flight to Namibia. They had left Namibia on foot and in fear, but were returning jubilantly by airplanes...like true VIPs. For most of them, it was the first time being inside a plane. They had every right to celebrate their homecoming. The struggle had been long and bitter, and came with a huge loss of life, but victory was now theirs. A total of 7,792 PLAN combatants sacrificed their lives for the liberation of Namibia during the war period 1959-1989. On the South African side, 2,365 SADF soldiers lost their lives in the war.

But while the adults celebrated their return to the country they had left many years before, the children – most of whom had only known the camps as their home, looked somewhat puzzled. They simply had to go with the flow, having no say in what happened to them in light of recent developments. That first day of departure, I watched many of my friends follow their parents onto the trucks heading for the airport, unsure of what lay ahead for them in the country we’d been told was ours: Namibia.

On that day - June 12 - the first charter flights carried hundreds of returnees from Angola and Zambia to Windhoek and Ondangwa. Many of the returnees were from northern Namibia, but most of them arrived through Windhoek because they feared intimidation in the northern part of Namibia by the South African agents called omakakunya (Koevoet). Many members of the SWAPO leadership returned on June 18, 1989. SWAPO President Sam Nujoma’s homecoming was delayed until September 14, 1989 for security reasons.
The exodus out of exile to ‘the promised land’ happened quickly. In no time everyone was gone. I didn’t even know when some of my friends had left. I would wake up on different days, just to find that so and so had already left for Namibia. Helena and I were the only children left in the Greenwell Matongo Section at Education Center. We only had each other to play with and missed the others with whom we’d grown up on the streets of SWAPO’s Lubango camps, such as Kabulala (Cabral) and Justus Namoloh, Ndina Hidipo, Mweshi (Gabriel) Mweshihange, Brown Auala, Kaulushu Mweshihange, Nkushe Kapofi, Nelao Haulyondjaba, Nangolo Malima, Liina Nandago, Isaac Shali, Loide Daniel, Freddy ya Freddy (Freddy Amushendje), Nakaye Weyulu, Exile, Nangi and Katazo who lived together, Nangi who lived with Nelao Haulyondjaba, Nakada, Nakaye Weyulu, Toivo the light skinned boy, the big naughty boy, and another Nakada who was a cute, short boy with whom I was in a wedding party one time.

Lubango, the place that I had grown to love, soon became dead and boring. Exile was not the same anymore. I missed everyone, and for the first time, I looked forward to leaving exile to be with my “exile family” in Namibia. I hoped that we would live together again as we had done in exile, with not a care in the world, and with the day at our disposal to play as we pleased. I was eager to leave and was happy when my mother finished her work and received a check for R9,000, which was a lot of money for us at the time. This was my mother’s first paid job ever, a blessing from God because this is the only money she had to help us settle in Namibia. Most people went to Namibia empty-handed, with not a penny in their pockets to start their new independent lives.

Although I was born and raised in SWAPO refugee camps during a period of war, my early childhood was filled with fond memories. SWAPO protected and took very good care of me and my family. I don’t remember ever being without. Everything I needed – food, clothing and shelter - was provided by SWAPO, with the help of donor countries around the world. I had a rich and true childhood in exile, Angola. I was free to be a child, and if the war had not ended when it did, SWAPO would have shaped me into a leader, valiantly fighting to liberate the country of my heritage, Namibia, from apartheid’s stronghold.

On the morning of August 14, 1989, my mother, Helena and I boarded the trucks that were transporting our group of returnees to the airport. There, we boarded a military cargo plane to Ondangwa in northern Namibia, where for the first time; I would set foot in the land from which I’d been exiled before I was even formed in my mother’s womb.
Chapter Two in Pictures

This is the earliest photograph I have of myself, taken in my father’s apartment while visiting him in Luanda, Angola.
Me and my beautiful mother in Luanda in 1984.

My tall and handsome father, walking the streets of Luanda in the early 1980s.
Top: My sisters Ndinelao and Nelao, and me dancing in our father’s apartment in Luanda in 1983

I’m the girl on the left with my eyes closed, in protest to the girl on the right who was wearing my dress without my permission. Picture taken in Luanda.
At Okaposte (camp) in Lubango with some of the kids who lived there. In the front row on the far left is Jesus Fanuel, with my ‘little brother’, Isaac Martin Shali, standing behind him. I’m the tallest girl on the right in a white dress.

First time at a wedding and my first time as a flower girl. Tate Shemele’s wedding in Lubango in 1987.
Posing with the older bridesmaids at Tate Sheemele’s wedding, Mee Josephine and Mee Penny.

My second wedding in exile, Lubango, at Mee Maria and Tate Ngula Netanga’s wedding in 1987. The little boy on the left next to the groom is the younger Nakada (not the bully), and I’m the girl on the right sitting next to the bride.
I’m the girl in the middle wearing white and holding an umbrella, a flower girl at yet another wedding in Lubango. I’m not sure who’s wedding this was…. I lost track as I became a popular flower girl 😊.

At Lenin (camp) in Lubango. On the left lying down is my mother; in the middle is Mee Maria Kakole holding her son; I’m in the back admiring my mother’s pose; and I believe the girl on the right is Kauna.
Valentina: The Exile Child

At Lenin camp in Lubango striking a pose. I was seven years old here.

A female PLAN combatant in Angola with a child on her lap, holding a gun. This picture is a good depiction of the life of exile children during the liberation struggle of Namibia. Courtesy: SWAPO Party Archives www.sparc.na
Exile children playing in SWAPO camps in Kwanza-Sul, Angola. This picture paints a good picture of life and the living conditions in the SWAPO camps. *Courtesy: Office of the Founding Father of Namibia.*

Exile children playing in the shade of a tree at a SWAPO camp in Kwanza-Sul, Angola. *Courtesy: Office of the Founding Father of Namibia.*
The infamous eekulo (public kitchen/cafeteria) of SWAPO camps where food was cooked in big pots and served to camp residents who ate at eekulo. *Courtesy: Office of the Founding Father of Namibia.*

Former leader of Education in exile, and currently Namibia’s Prime Minister, Nahas Angula, teaching exile kids in one of the outdoor classrooms where we were all taught to read and write. *Courtesy: SWAPO Party Archives @ www.sparc.na*
Exile children at one of the regular SWAPO parades in exile. *Courtesy: SWAPO Party Archives @ www.sparc.na*

SWAPO Pioneers in action; marching at a parade in their signature uniforms and carrying the SWAPO flag. *Courtesy Office of the Founding Father of Namibia.*
At parades, Pioneers honored their leaders by tying red scarves around their necks, as seen in this photograph. The leader standing in the middle is former SWAPO President Sam Nujoma. Courtesy: Office of the Founding Father of Namibia.

Pioneers receive a hug and handshake after a job well done at honoring their leaders. Courtesy: Office of the Founding Father of Namibia.
Top and bottom: Exile children/Pioneers at a parade saluting like true soldiers. Courtesy: Office of the Founding Father of Namibia.
CHAPTER THREE

Namibia: My Country of Heritage

“I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me.”

- (Isaiah 45: 5)

Our plane landed at Ondangwa Airport on the afternoon of August 14, 1989. Ondangwa, a town with a flat landscape, is about 80 km from the Angolan border and is named for one of the Ovamboland kingdoms and means "the end of the Ondonga area.” The Owambo people of Northern Namibia – as with other Bantu-speaking groups in the region – migrated from East Africa in the 15th Century, and settled in Ovamboland. The Owambo people are traditionally farmers who grow mainly vegetables, millet and maize while keeping cattle and goats. They make up close to 60 per cent of the Namibian population, with close to 50 per cent of Namibians living in the northern part of the country, which is predominantly Oshiwambo-speaking.

As we stepped off the plane, we started singing SWAPO songs and waving our SWAPO flags up high. And as soon as I set foot on Namibian soil for the very first time in my life, I made a big deal over every little Namibian thing that I saw. Amazed that I was actually inside Namibia, a country that I heard so much about growing up, I whispered to Helena, “Wow, look at that Namibian…” It was also while disembarking the plane that I caught my first glimpse of white people in Namibia. Not knowing who they were, I immediately thought they were Boers, who had terrorized black Namibians for years. The sight of them gave me uneasy, and I wondered why they were welcoming us to Namibia, dressed in their military uniform. I was relieved when I later realized they were UNTAG personnel.

We continued singing as we went down the corridor into a big hall, where we were served light refreshments. Namibians inside the country were surprised at how healthy we looked and how well we were dressed. Contrary to what they had heard and believed, while in exile, we had actually been very well fed and clothed. We were well taken care of during our time in exile, and were kept in good health. Granted, we weren’t living in luxury, but we certainly received everything that we needed to ensure that our basic needs were met. Our normal state of health probably caught the local Namibians off-guard, as they had, for the most part, only been exposed to South African propaganda that painted a negative picture of SWAPO as guerilla simpletons.
with no clout. After having refreshments at the airport welcome center, we boarded buses to one of the five tented returnee reception centers (camps) in the country, which were set up on church properties through the UN’s partnership with the Council of Churches in Namibia’s RRR Committee.

The five reception centers were located at Dobra, Okahandja and Mariabronn for Windhoek entries and at Ongwediva and Engela for those arriving through Ondangwa. When we arrived at the Ongwediva reception center, which was closer to Ohaukelo where my mother’s family lived, we were registered, provided with food ration cards, tents, clothing, and health care. The RRR Committee also provided returnees with a basic kit which included blankets, mattresses, kitchen utensils, and some pocket money, which was called a transition allowance, to help us adjust. The maximum stay at these centers was usually seven days to make room for other returnees and to avoid overcrowding. While in these centers, returnees were assisted to trace their long lost relatives, and to make other settlement arrangements, as needed.

The relatives of returnees usually had no idea that a family member was returning, as there hadn’t been any easy way to communicate with relatives from exile. Many hadn’t been in touch with their family members at all since they had fled the country many years before their repatriation. Some of those that had been left behind assumed that their relatives had perished in exile and were surprised to see them alive during the repatriation period. Some of the exiles came home, however, to find that some of their relatives had perished within Namibia. During that time, both tears of joy and of pain were shed.

When we arrived at the tented Ongwediva reception center the set-up appeared to be rather similar to what we were used to in exile. The only difference, though, was that while in exile, we didn’t all live in tents. In Lubango especially, we had lived in brick houses and dug-outs. I felt very much at home in the reception center. I saw some of my friends from Lubango, who had left a couple of weeks before us, and had overstayed their seven days in the center as it was taking longer to locate their families. We played freely again, running around the reception center camp all day, and excitedly exchanging our first airplane experiences. We ate free food at the reception center cafeteria, which reminded me of eekulo in exile. There were also public showers with running tap water at the center, something that was entirely new to me. In exile we had collected water from the river, and bathed out of a bucket or a big bowl, splashing the water on our bodies with our hands while we squatted. Sometimes we squeezed ourselves into a sitting position in the big bowl and soaked our little bodies in the water.
The reception center certainly felt like home, and it almost seemed as if I’d just made one of those normal transitions from one camp to another as I had become accustomed to doing. The RRR Committee may have been deliberate in providing a fairly familiar environment for the returnees. They had, after all, visited the SWAPO camps in exile prior to the repatriation, in order to gain an idea of the conditions we had been living in, as well as to brief the exiled communities about the process we would be undergoing as soon as we returned to Namibia. I didn’t want to leave the reception center to go to my relatives’ village, where my mother had told me we’d be living in huts made of grass and trees. I was not very comfortable with the idea of living in huts at all. While in exile, across the ditch from our home in Greenwell Matongo at education center, the Ovamwila lived in huts, and I was not at all keen on the prospect of doing so myself.

Outside the gated and guarded reception center, people were selling apples and other fruits, and I begged my mother to let me buy something. In exile, we had only eaten red apples, and in my fascination with all things new in my new home, I chose a green apple. It was delicious – sour, but tasty. I also asked for omalalanje, but received a rude awakening when I found that the Oshiwambo I had grown up speaking in exile, was not a perfect match to the way it was spoken in Namibia. When I asked the street vendor that I wanted to buy “omalalanje,” she had no clue what I was talking about. I repeated slowly “o-m-a-l-a-l-a-n-j-e,” but that didn’t help. Confused at her inability to understand this word in a language in which we had just exchanged a full greeting, I pointed to the oranges “Ohoo, oma lemona” she exclaimed, laughing at my exile Oshiwambo. I didn’t think this was so funny, because in exile, ‘oma lemona’ were lemons. It soon became increasingly apparent to local Namibians and me, that the Oshiwambo our parents taught us in exile, had somewhat become modified over the years, thus creating a slight language barrier between exile kids and local Namibians.

The way we sounded when speaking Oshiwambo was very different from the way non-exiled Namibians sounded. The Namibian Oshiwambo was considered proper and polished, compared to ours, which was considered broken and mixed with words borrowed from other languages in exile. More than twenty years down the line, my Oshiwambo is still a source of humor for my relatives who were not in exile. When I first arrived in Namibia, I thought the way local Namibians spoke their Oshiwambo was funny too, especially the non-Kwanyama Oshiwambo dialects, which sounded as if the people speaking it were singing their words. We spoke the straight, mono sound Oshiwambo with an oshikwanyama dialect. This was, after all, the first and only language that we could speak fluently. The local Oshiwambo-speaking Namibians started referring to us as “ovambwela” to mean that we were not authentic Owambos. And the fact that
we knew so little about the traditional Oshiwambo culture did not help much either. All we knew was exile; our culture was exile.

My mother, Helena and I stayed at the reception center for about three days, before we departed to my mother’s family village. Like other returnees, we were taken to Onuno by a chartered bus sponsored by UNHCR, after which we hitched a ride to Ondobe. That night, we slept in a local church building, and then spent the next day waiting for another ride that would take us closer to Ohaukelo, our final destination. The UNHCR chartered bus didn’t take people deep into the villages; it only took them to the secondary reception centers, of which there were about thirty-four.

Although we had left the UNHCR reception centers, all returnees continued to receive free food and material assistance for another year, in order to facilitate our (re)integration into Namibian society.

As we sat waiting for a ride to Ohaukelo under a big eembe fruit tree outside the church, a group of the notorious South African Koevoet (omakakunya) who terrorized SWAPO supporters passed by, waving big sticks and something that looked like a gun, and making a lot of noise. We were cautioned not to make it obvious that we were returnees until they’d left, and we felt very frightened and vulnerable outside the protection of SWAPO. During the repatriation process, Koevoet continued to operate illegally in the north, spreading fear, intimidating returnees, and trying to curb SWAPO support for the upcoming November 1989 elections. We often heard of cases of harassment, badgering, and provocation at the hands of Koevoet. In fact, the UN Secretary-General at the time, Javier Perez de Cuellar, issued a formal complaint in June 1989 against Koevoet, prompting the UNHCR to send security forces to different areas in the country to monitor the problem. In that month alone, UNTAG police monitors in the north had received over 200 complaints against Koevoet and the apartheid police, SWAPOL, for the harassment of returnees. This harassment and intimidation also caused delays in moving some of the early returnees out of reception centers to their homes in the north. In July 1989, Cuellar visited Namibia, following which the UN Security Council demanded the disbandment of Koevoet and the dismantlement of its command structures through Resolution 640 of August 1989.

After what seemed like a whole day of hitch-hiking to Ohaukelo, we were dropped off by a truckload of people on a gravel road near the homestead of my granduncle, Tatekulu (“grandfather/uncle”) Martin Hamweedi. In Owambo culture, family – no matter how distant a relative – holds great importance. I have a total of 26 aunts and uncles, hundreds of cousins, and
I’d guess several more hundreds nieces and nephews, most of whom I’ve never met (see my family tree on the back of the book). Even today, my parents still regularly introduce me to (extended) family members I’d never heard of before, and it’s extremely difficult to keep track of who is family. Luckily, I haven’t ended up in the unfortunate position of suddenly finding out that a person I’m dating is a relative, but with the enormous extended family size common among the Ovambo people, you wouldn’t be shortchanged to hear of this happening.

As we made our way to Tatekulu Hamweedi’s homestead, after scaling the wooden fence gating his large village compound, members of the family who had seen us coming came running out to welcome us. They were happy and jumping with joy, before they even learned who we were. My mother had left exile 14 years before, when she was 15 years old, and Ohaukelo was not the home she’d abandoned when she’d left. For this reason, I doubted whether these people really recognized her. But that didn’t matter to them. They just knew that it was one of their relatives returning from exile, and rejoiced at this fact.

My mother then introduced herself, Helena and me to our relatives. Although Helena and I were only eleven and ten years old respectively, we looked quite a bit older, and were taller than our peers in the village. The difference in age appearance may have been due to the way we were raised and nourished while growing up. Helena and I were fed better and had a far simpler and more luxurious life in exile, compared to the children who were born and raised in the northern villages of Namibia.

After the introductions, amidst a great deal of ululating, streaming tears of joy and emotionally-charged celebrating at our homecoming, we were escorted to the residential area. Some of the young children were promptly sent to fetch my mother’s sister – her closest relative in Ohaukelo – from her homestead nearby. Reuniting with long lost family and friends was a sacred and emotional moment all across the country that year. Many relatives were happy to see their loved ones alive, as many were rumored to have died in exile or in combat. But the year also marked a time of heavy grieving, as some relatives mourned the loss of their loved ones, who did not show up to their homes for several months after the last flight carrying the last of the returnees had landed in Namibia.

As we made our way to the homestead, I noted how it was positioned in the middle of the field, surrounded by a log tree fence. Behind the homestead there were two big kraals: one for cows and the other for goats. They had a lot of animals. The huts within the homestead were made of sticks and grass, and a few had brick walls. We walked through the log-fenced pathways, which
divided different sections of the homestead. This was my first time inside a village compound, so I had no idea what to expect. There were chickens wandering all over the place, and as we walked through the homestead, they scurried away, some of them fluttering into any openings they could find within the log walls. It was an amusing sight.

We eventually made our way to *olupale*, the open air living room where guests are received and greeted in Ouwambo homes. Our seats were big logs arranged in a rectangular shape, with a fireplace in the middle. Once we were seated, many people – including those that had just welcomed us, came to greet us formally. My mother’s older sister, Mee Nashitye Weyulu, who lived close by, came running and broke down crying as soon as she saw us. She hadn’t seen my mother since the day of her *efundula* at Ohaipeto in March 1978, when the celebrations were disrupted by a SADF attack. Mee Nashitye had no idea if her sister had survived that attack and as she never heard of or from her for the 11 years since then; my mother was as good as dead to her and the rest of the family.

Among the villagers admiring us, there were several barefooted, topless children wearing only torn and dirty shorts or skirts. They appeared amazed at how clean and well-dressed Helena and I looked, and probably likened us to those privileged few people who hardly ever set foot in the village. I’m sure our funny sounding Oshiwambo and foreign demeanor only made us all the more amusing to them. While food was being prepared, we were served oshikundu in a traditional calabash gourd called *oomindo*. The *oomindo* was passed around the *olupale* and all the distinguished people who were allowed to sit with us at *olupale*, had to drink out of it. I was uncomfortable and almost disgusted with this procedure, and knowing that I wouldn’t be very good at pretending that I had drunk from the gourd, I simply refused to share from it. Although this was considered rude, I think they understood my distaste for this tradition that was so new to me, and I was provided with my own cup to drink from.

A similar problem arose when it was time to eat. All the children were expected to eat from the same big *oshimbale* (traditional basket) and *eetiti* (traditional clay bowl). Helena and I had to share our food with four other village children who had just returned from playing and working in the field. We ate oshifima, a stiff porridge made from *omahangu* (pearl millet), that is often compared the ‘fufu’ of West Africa, or the ‘pap’ of Southern Africa. *Oshifima* is usually served with a side of meat, chicken or fish, and savory gravy into which it is dipped, and eaten using the hands. In exile in Angola, I had always eaten from my own plate, and was uncomfortable with this communal way of eating. Nevertheless, so as not to offend anyone, I forced myself to eat a little, though I only took a few handfuls from the parts nobody had touched in the *oshimbale* and *eetiti,*
and declared myself “full” as soon as things got too close for comfort. Fortunately, after that first meal, Helena and I were served in our own orange-red UNHCR/UNTAG plates and cups that we had received at the reception center.

Some people may have seen this attitude as being a little stuck up, but I’ve always been nauseated by the idea of over-sharing germs with people. To this day, I get very fussy about keeping things clean and hygienic, and while it may be a nuisance for some, I’m sure my anti-germ stance has helped keep me healthy.

Helena and I worked hard to adjust to village life, which was very different from our exile communities. The only similarity I saw between exile life and village life was the bathroom. As we had done in exile, we bathed by stepping on a wooden plank or a large flat stone/rock, and splashed water on our bodies from a bucket. In the village, they also didn’t have toilets and did their private business in the bushes, using sticks and leaves to wipe themselves like we did in exile.

After a few days of living in the village, we started volunteering to fetch water from the well and to pound ilima (maize) and omahangu, as women in the village did. Although this work was not expected of us, as we were still considered guests, we made an effort to learn a few things...mostly out of boredom. We had never pounded before, and were thoroughly impressed by the skill that went into making the flour for our staple foods and drinks. Pounding, called “okushimbaana” in Oshiwambo, usually involved two women, who would alternately drive tall, thick, wooden pounding sticks called omushi/omshi into a hole containing the seeds to be pounded (see picture gallery). The pounding action would then crush the seeds into flour. When we expressed our desire to shimbana, the other girls were hesitant to allow me and Helena to pound together because it could be dangerous, but we convinced them that we knew how it was done. We started out pretty well, but before we knew it, the head of Helena’s omushi had hit my pinky finger, and I started screaming in pain, convinced that my finger was going to fall off as blood streamed down it.

When my mother returned home from wherever she had been that day, and heard of the accident, she was furious, and gave Helena a beating for it. My mother’s annoyance with the accident stemmed from the fact that she had just been planning to send me off to school in the capital city, Windhoek. To her, my wounded pinky was a gross inconvenience, and would ruin my chances of a bright future by limiting my ability to write. Poor Helena ended up bearing the brunt of my mother’s anxiety, and though I wanted to defend her by pointing out to my mother
that it had merely been an accident, we had been raised not to talk back or openly disapprove of what an adult was doing.

The repatriation process officially ended in October, 1989. Over 43,000 Namibians were repatriated through UNCHR; others came back later on their own. Of the 43,000 UNHCR returnees, more than 35,000 returned to their families in the northern parts of the country. Returnees came from 46 countries in total, with Angola and Zambia accounting for 95% of the total. Many of the adult returnees had some professional skills. There were 370 medical doctors, dentists and nurses, and 196 architects, engineers and technicians. A total of 452 chartered flights were used to transport returnees. The largest number, over 12,500 returnees, came through Dobra reception center. 56% of the returnees were male and 44% were female. 68.5% of the returnees were above the age of 18, while the rest were children. The UN and the SWAPO leadership hailed the repatriation process as a resounding success, and it has been cited as being among the most orderly internationally assisted processes. As a prerequisite to the impending November elections and the subsequent transformation of Namibia into a democratic independent country, the importance of a successful repatriation could not be overstated.

Exile kids who had been sent to East Germany were repatriated to Namibia soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 11, 1989. They returned to Namibia and comprised the largest group of exile children to return after independence – 427 children and 27 adults. SWAPO tried hard to delay the homecoming of the GDR kids until they had finished their education. However, this was around the time of elections when anything and everything was being used to smear SWAPO’s campaign, and allegations that SWAPO had kidnapped the children and sent them to the GDR as a form of punishment, were rife. This was obviously far from the truth, but SWAPO rushed the kids to Namibia in an attempt to clear its name and to do some damage control during a sensitive time.

Although the repatriation process of Namibians from exile was successful, the next two years proved very difficult for returnees, especially financially. 75 per cent of returnees remained unemployed after a year of being back in Namibia. After two years only 32% had received full-time employment while a further 46% were only employed part-time and barely making ends meet.

The returnee unemployment problem was due primarily, in my opinion, to two reasons. First, the UNHCR, which had been responsible for the repatriation process, focused entirely on the technical aspects repatriating returnees, but neglected their longer term socio-economic and
psychological integration into Namibian society. While the UNHCR and other donor organizations did provide some means for returnees to adjust, to a large extent, it also simply assumed that returnees would be well cared for and accommodated by their families. It did a slightly better job for the children though, for whom free schooling was provided for a year after their return. Exile children who had been orphaned during the struggle continued to receive financial assistance for their schooling even after the free exile children schools closed at the end of 1990.

The second issue which I believe contributed to the high unemployment rate of returnees was SWAPO’s reluctance to show too much favoritism towards returnees and exile children in an independent Namibia. Once they had won the elections of 1989 and took office in March 1990, their focus became the overall economic development and welfare of all Namibians, not just those who had been in exile.

Another problem that the new government had to deal with, which had hardly posed a problem in exile, was the challenge of HIV and AIDS. In exile, despite all the baby-making that was going on, AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) did not make their presence known in SWAPO camps. According to exiles at the time, AIDS was brought into the camps in the late 1980s by those people who had gone abroad to study. AIDS – of which little was known at the time – was referred to as “ookiifi wo va longo,” translated as: the disease of the educated. Some became scared to sleep with those who were returning from their studies for fear of contracting the disease.

Within Namibia, the presence of HIV/AIDS fell onto the shoulders of UNTAG’s peace-keeping forces, although the disease had first been detected in the country in 1986 already. Some also blamed the returnees for the increasing presence of HIV. Prior to the UNTAG peace process, AIDS was almost unheard of in Namibia, and by 1989, only 189 cases of HIV/AIDS had been officially registered. The low incidence of HIV/AIDS at the time may have been due to the fact that Namibia had largely been a closed-off country under South Africa’s apartheid rule. According to some sources, UNTAG soldiers came to the country with money, and local girls were attracted to them and their lavish lifestyle. The promiscuity that resulted has been attributed to as a cause for the spread in HIV. But while various theories were made as to how the prevalence of HIV increased so rapidly since the late ‘80s, the fact remained that HIV/AIDS had made its debut as a huge problem to be dealt with in an independent Namibia. Today, the prevalence rate stands at close to 20 per cent – among the highest rates in the world.
Children born and/or raised in exile experienced major ‘culture shock’ upon their ‘repatriation’ to Namibia, and posed a barrage of problems for their families in Namibia – some of whom were taking them in as orphans. We had not been adequately prepared for what life in Namibia would be like, and the practices that we would need to observe. Having been brought up in very different cultures, some of the children appeared very unruly, rebellious and disrespectful towards the elders. The exile culture differed vastly from how things were done in Namibia, and as the cultures clashed, it became even harder for exile children – particularly those who had grown up in the GDR, Cuba, and other countries abroad – to adjust to their new lives. I heard shocking, but amusing tales of just how difficult the transition was for fellow exile kids. For example, some were said to have used the oshini (the hole for pounding) as toilet pots, because these resembled the ones used in exile. This, of course, was a huge insult to their families.

Village life was especially difficult for the children of exile. For us, life in the SWAPO camps was far more superior to life in the villages. And for the GDR kids, who had grown up in a comparatively more luxurious life in East Germany than those of us that had been raised in SWAPO camps in Angola and Zambia, village life was an even greater oddity. One can only imagine the extent of the culture shock and confusion they experienced as they were united to their Namibian families, most of who were living in villages or in urban poverty. It was almost a case of having lived a good life in the “city,” just to wake up one in the slums of the village, having fallen from grace and hitting rock bottom.

Along with the severe culture shock they experienced, the resentment of exile kids towards their new lives made them seem ill-disciplined and rebellious to local Namibians. Exile children were free spirited, much unlike the way their local peers had been raised. We were considered to be very honest – almost too honest - calling a spade, a spade, and ignorant to the apartheid-imposed pressures of having to be politically and culturally correct. As such, exile kids were often misunderstood. In no time, we came to be known in Namibia as the most vocal kids, infamous for being naughty. You would often hear people stereotypically say “uunona voko mbada iiya vauduko,” to mean “those exile kids have no manners.”

The language dilemma, which I pointed to earlier, didn’t make things easier either – particularly for those who returned to Oshiwambo speaking households where the dialect spoken was not the Oshikwanyama dialect that we had become accustomed to in exile. Oshiwambo has seven different dialects. Having been raised in Germany, some of the GDR kids hardly spoke
Oshiwambo at all, and those that did, did so with a German accent. German had become their only spoken and written language while in Germany, but their families in Namibia spoke only Oshiwambo and some English. Their social dislocation from Germany to Namibia, along with the added language barrier, was perhaps the most difficult of the adjustments that young people had to make upon their repatriation to Namibia.

Exile kids, as a whole, also had other adjustment issues to deal with. Many of them were being reunited with their mothers following a long separation. Some of them had forgotten what their real mothers looked like, and once reunited, were unable to feel part of a family. Many of the children had also become orphaned, and with no parents to claim them, were given to their extended families, which found the children strange and could not relate to them. Some children were given away to foster parents in Namibia, mostly Germans originally from East Germany, who lived in Namibia.

Failure to properly integrate exile kids to the Namibian way of life left some of these children emotionally and psychologically scarred and confused, and created a host of problems, many of which remain unresolved to date (see chapter 5). Exile children born prior to 1986, or those born in Namibia and raised in exile, were particularly affected by the cultural adjustment, as the memory and effect of exile were especially real for them. The few who were born after 1986 returned to Namibia as infants and toddlers below the age of three, too young to have been deeply rooted in the exile way of life and to have experienced the life changing culture shock felt by the older children.

In fact, these post-1986 born exile kids were fortunate to have been partially free of their ties to exile. Many of them can’t remember a thing about exile, and were able to shift gears into Namibian society with much greater ease. But although they had the benefit of living an entirely Namibian experience in which they could have excelled, many of these post-1986 exile kids failed to take advantage of the opportunities availed to them. Later on in life when the going got tough and the mistakes they had made during their teenage years caught up with them, they resorted to using their birth in exile as an excuse for their failures. The hype that they started making around this issue in late 2008, demanding that the government take care of them by availing them jobs, education and training, has given all exile kids a bad name and image.

When any exiled person, child or adult, returns to their country of origin, they bring with them the experiences, strengths, vulnerabilities, knowledge and skills acquired while in exile. They may also carry with them the psychological injuries connected with the loss, violence or
persecution experienced in exile. But the experience of exile is not only physical. It also pertains to the way in which the “culture clash” is mediated, to the never-ending process of identity formation, and to the response of the receiving society that either encourages or inhibits integration and participation in society.

The emotional and psychological effects of the culture shock experienced by Namibian exile children after their arrival in Namibia should not be underestimated. Experiences from repatriation in other countries reveal that children are a particularly vulnerable group as the repatriation process interferes with the development of identity. For many children though, this was not ‘repatriation’ in the true sense of the word. It was about moving to something completely new and unknown. They had to leave important parts of themselves in their country of exile, and the emotional upheaval caused by moving from one’s country of origin to his/her country of heritage could be completely overwhelming. Fortunate exile children who were raised by their biological parents or who depended on caring family members for their wellbeing were able to more easily integrate into the Namibian system. Others were not so fortunate, and had to deal with the still untreated emotional and psychological stress of being dislocated from what they knew. These issues made it difficult for some exile children to adapt socially. The culture shock was almost unbearable and some simply yearned to return to the homes they knew in the SWAPO camps.

But every child reacted differently to their new state. Most went through three stages of adjustment. In the first “Honeymoon Stage”, some exile children were swept up in the euphoria exhibited by their parents and guardians, and became somewhat excited about their new lives. Things were fine, and they were having a good time learning about their environment. But this honeymoon stage also overshadowed the need for counseling and adjustment services that would have been well placed at the point of the children’s arrival. After this, they went through a “Culture Shock Stage,” where the differences between the new and the exile way of life became more apparent. They started to feel overwhelmed as there was so much they couldn’t understand about their new home. Their frustration heightened as language and cultural barriers impeded their ability to effectively communicate their feelings towards this bombardment of new and unfamiliar things. As a result, without the social support systems they needed, symptoms of being easily irritated, disinterested or depressed started to show in the children, and some simply became rebellious to act out their frustrations. In the third stage, the “Integration Stage,” exile children started to slowly deal with the transition from exile to Namibia, and began the work needed to integrate their own belief systems with those of the independent Namibia to which
they had been brought. With time, some eventually replaced the old ways of exile life with the Namibian way of life, while others found ways to incorporate the two into their new environment. Sam Nujoma himself confirmed that “the war conditions under which exile children were born and raised were extremely difficult and dangerous…….Some were born in the war zone, right there where the enemy could attack anytime.” He has passionately referred to exile children as “Heirs of the Revolution,” who SWAPO would have groomed to continue the armed struggle for Namibia’s independence, had it not come in 1989.

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Spirituality in exile was not a serious affair, and was left to individuals to practice on their own. But in my own experience, people in exile were not religious at all and hardly ever talked about God. As such, I grew up as an Atheist, someone who didn’t believe in God or a higher power. As far as I was concerned, God didn’t exist. The most supreme, almost godlike figure was my childhood hero, SWAPO President Sam Nujoma, who led the struggle for Namibia’s Independence. We sang about him and held his name in high esteem. After him, there was no other more powerful being, I thought.

Namibia introduced me to God, though the first few attempts at this introduction didn’t go down so well. The first real religious church service I attended – very different from the ‘ongeleka’ in which people were married in exile – was at the village in Ohaukelo when we first arrived from exile. The Pastor was preaching about something that didn’t make sense to me at all. Completely uninterested at what he was saying, my eyes wondered around the room, amazed at how attentively everyone else was listening to the mind-numbing sermon. It was obvious that I was the only pagan in the room. Bored out of my mind in a packed church, I quickly found something else to do. I reached for the nail clipper in my mother’s purse, lifted my feet onto the back of the church pew in front of me, and began clipping my toenails in view of the whole church. As I concentrated on my toes, oblivious to my surroundings and the ‘clip, clip’ sound the nail cutter was making, I didn’t realize people were staring at me strangely, as if I had just committed an unpardonable sin. I was in my own world, which my mother didn’t seem to mind either. But when she noticed all the people were staring our way, she quickly told me to stop and whispered to me that people don’t do their nails in church.

With nothing else to do but pay attention to the church service, I became slightly interested when I recognized a song the congregation was singing, that we children had often sung in exile. The only difference, though, was that where the church mentioned “Omwene” (God), we had used
the name “Samma” (Sam Nujoma), singing: "Twa pandula Samma, twa pandula Samma, shashi oyalipo okudja pu nona wange” translated as “We thank Sam for being there since our childhood.” At the time, I thought the church had stolen our song and changed it by substituting our leader’s name, for Jesus/God. I thought that this was entirely disrespectful on the part of the congregation, but later learned that we had been the disrespectful ones in exile, removing God out of church songs and hymns, and replacing His name with the names of Sam Nujoma and other big SWAPO leaders. It turns out that in exile, church songs had often been remixed into political freedom songs for inspiration in the struggle. Nonetheless, even though the song caught my attention, that long and boring Lutheran sermon left me uninspired and unconverted to Christianity. I was still convinced that there was no God, and that Christians were just wasting their time worshipping and praying to something that didn’t exist.

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After weeks in the village, I eventually grew tired of being there. The way the people there worked so hard to produce their own food, build their own huts and homesteads, raise their herds, and perform other manual labor was commendable, but that lifestyle was not for me. I knew the day I arrived at the village that I could never fully fit into and adjust to village life and its environment. I yearned to move to the city, or even back to Angola. I preferred life in the SWAPO camps to life in the village.

At the end of August, after less than a month of living in the village, my mother answered my prayers for the city by taking me to Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, to start school. She didn’t want me to go to school in the village. When she delivered the good news, she told me that Windhoek City was going to be our new home and that we would only visit the village during the holidays. I was very excited. Taking me out of the village was one of the best things my mother ever did for me, and I likened the move to the one she had done some years before, when she had taken me out of Kwanza-Sul to go to Lubango. My mother has always sacrificed to make life easier and more comfortable for me, and to position me to reach for the best that life had to offer. I was so excited at the prospect of going to the city, that I couldn’t contain myself. I kept bragging about living in Windhoek City to Helena, who unfortunately couldn’t come with us as she had to go back to her mother, who was waiting for her in Ondangwa.

Before parting ways with Helena at her relatives’ home in Ondangwa, the two of us went into a store nearby. This was our first time ever going in a store. The closest we had come to something like this was as the omangadjina in the SWAPO camps where we would receive free supplies.
Helena and I assumed this was the same setup, and proceeded to take candy and other things from the store without paying for them. A security guard at the main entrance stopped us, surprised by our audacity to simply walk out of the store with our arms full of goodies without paying. When my mom realized what was going on, she quickly came to our rescue, and explained our ignorance about what a store actually was. She explained that we didn’t know we had to pay for the things as we were not accustomed to buying things and had been programmed to believe that everything in that exile-looking omangadjina store was for free. Her pleading with the security guard got us off the hook, and we were eventually allowed to go free without being accused of shoplifting.

After that incident, we said our goodbyes to Helena. I haven’t seen her in the 21 years since.

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Our journey to the city on an overloaded minibus lasted about eight hours. Arriving at night, it was the bright city lights that alerted me to our entry into Namibia’s capital city, Windhoek. Originally referred to as Otjomuise by Namibia’s Otjiherero-speaking population – the first inhabitants of the Windhoek area – and later as /Ae //Gams by the Nama people, Windhoek was formally established on October 18, 1890. Windhoek is marked by its blend of Western and African culture, evident in the diversity of its people and in the varied style of its architecture that dates back to the times of Germany’s colonization of Namibia. Windhoek is also recognized as one of the cleanest cities in the world and one of the leading cities in Africa in the areas of telecommunications, banking facilities and conferencing technology.

The city lights and urban vibe made me fall in love with Windhoek instantly – a confirmation that I was born to be a city girl. We were dropped off in Katutura – the township to which black Namibians were forced to move in 1959 – at the home of Tate Salomon Namakuti, in the suburb of Shandubala. We didn’t know Tate Salomon personally, but our relative Mee Paulina Hamweedi lived there and would be our host. It was a beautiful house on a small hill on Hans Dietrich Genscher Street, the main street running through Shandubala. The neighborhood was very lively, with many people always moving up and down and cars driving past.

We only stayed at Shandubala for one day, before moving to Soweto in another section of Katutura. There, we stayed at the home of my grandaunt, Mee Ndamona Mokaxua, at the invitation of my mother’s cousin, Mee Tuliky Kavungo. I loved this family home even more. It was a lovely three-bedroom home with the amazing bonus of a color television – something we didn’t have the luxury of watching daily in exile. There were about five other returnees staying at
the house too, but we all managed to live comfortably, laying out extra mattresses on the floor when we went to bed at night.

On September 12, 1989, news came out about the assassination of Anton Lubowski. A lawyer based in Namibia during the liberation struggle, Lubowski was the first white person I’d heard of who was a SWAPO activist...and a very popular one at that. He was also the only white person in SWAPO’s leadership structure at the time. Having immersed himself in what had largely been seen as a ‘black cause’, Anton Lubowski was an important symbol of how Namibians of all colors and backgrounds could unite towards a common cause, in spite of the elements that divide us. His assassination, which took place just days before SWAPO President Sam Nujoma was expected to arrive in Namibia and exactly two months before the elections were to take place, was a clear attempt to derail the entire independence process.

Two days after Lubowski’s assassination, on September 14, 1989, I was watching TV at home when news of Sam Nujoma’s return to Namibia was aired. His return followed an absence of almost 30 years from Namibia, and was clearly an emotional occasion. As soon as he stepped off the flight, he knelt down to kiss the tarmac at the Windhoek airport where he had arrived to a huge welcome. There was high security and tension at the airport that day, given the recent assassination of Lubowski, the multiple threats on Nujoma’s life, and the fact that at that moment in time, Nujoma was perhaps apartheid South Africa’s most hated man. Minutes before Nujoma disembarked from the Ethiopian Airlines flight that had flown him into Namibia from Lubango, Angola, SWAPO security officials detected a South African intelligence officer with a rifle who was waiting to assassinate Nujoma, and apprehended him right on time.

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Soon after moving to Soweto, my mother enrolled me at the free temporary school for exile kids, sponsored by the Council of Churches in Namibia. The school, which started in September 1989, met at English Primary School in the afternoon, using the classrooms after the regular morning school session had been completed. There were two other schools for exile kids in Namibia, one at Dobra and another one in the north of Namibia at Odibo and Mweshipandeka. The schools had a large number of exile children, and classes were taught primarily by teachers from exile. At school, I was able to re-unite with a few of my friends from Lubango, including Ndina Hidipo Hamutenya, Nakushe Kapofi, and Freddy ya Freddy (Amushendje), Katazo and Exile. I also befriended several other children whom I hadn’t known in exile, as we had been located at different camps. Some of these new school friends included Kalipi the bully, Angela ka Mbombo,
Ndeyapo Shilume, Nduuvu the female comedian of the school, Nadula (Nomvula) Ankama who was very active and full of energy, Eben, Nambuudunga the bully, Thoiny, Tabitha Mbome, Hafeni Kapofi, the twins Nanewo and Kandaha (Selma and Kandi Neumbo), Kadjene Homateni, and Tuvambala (Selma Homateni).

I thoroughly enjoyed my new school, and loved being around fellow exile kids, as we understood each other well. We played our exile games, danced our exile dances and sang our exile songs during our breaks, and on the CCN school bus that chartered us to and from school. At this point, our lives in Windhoek had become a vast improvement from our exile and village experiences. Classes were not conducted under a tree as we had been accustomed to in exile, and instead, we had proper classrooms in well paved modern school buildings. It was brilliant.

I formed many new memories and experiences at my new school. One of my favorite recollections is a weekend field trip we took to Swakopmund – a beautiful town on Namibia’s coast – that provided a stark reflection of Namibia’s colonial German and apartheid South African histories. We took a tour of Swakopmund and spent a lot of time at the beach – which brought back memories of my wonderful month in Lobito, Angola – and the public swimming pool which had a big fun slide that we indulged in countless times. While we were in Swakopmund, we also learned that in Walvis Bay, just 30km to the south, South Africa still had control, having refused to let go of the strategic harbor town with its deepwater port. Any one going into Walvis Bay at the time had to carry travel documents to allow them through the bordered area that remained subject to South Africa’s apartheid laws. It was only in February 1994 – almost four years after Namibia’s official independence – that South Africa, under the new leadership of President Nelson Mandela, fully relinquished control of Walvis Bay to Namibia.

A second memory I have of the Exile Kids School can hardly be defined as a fond one. In fact, it was simply painful – emotionally and physically. While at our new school, having lost touch with my first love, Mweshi, after we left exile, I developed a crush on one of the boys at my new school. His name was Exile, and I had known him in Lubango, where we had attended school together. We also played together often when Isaac Shali, Katazo, Nangi and I would visit Mee Teckla’s house at Agriculture camp.

But when Exile got wind of the fact that I liked him, he didn’t take it well at all! One day at break time, he and his boys approached me in front of everyone at school, looking very confrontational. Exile stepped in front of me and blatantly asked me, “Shiimenu ove, ngi shi ouholenge?” meaning “You useless person (with a very belittling tone), so you like me, huh?” I was caught off
guard. But before I could even respond, he started kicking and beating me in full view of all the other kids, while repeatedly making reference to my liking him. I was so stunned, that I felt paralyzed – unable to react to his strange reaction. I just kept quiet and toughed it out so as to not provoke him even more and draw more attention to the embarrassing incident. That was my way of keeping the situation under control. I handled it maturely and it seemed as if everyone forgot about it by the time break time was over. But I never forgot!

I wished that he had tried to beat me up in exile so that I could have reported him to my mother. My mother would have dealt with him and showed him whose child he was messing with, just as she had done to Nakada that one time in Lubango during class. But I knew that here in an independent Namibia where we didn’t have open classrooms under a tree, my mother wouldn’t be able to pull off one of those moves. So I let it be and avoided Exile for the duration of the CCN School. He and I are friends now and often laugh about that incident, though it’s always clear that he is thoroughly embarrassed by his childish childhood action. Needless to say, I didn’t like boys for a very long time after that incident. But I have to thank Exile for giving me a different kind of “love” story to tell in my book. One exile kid (Mweshi) “loved” me back, while another exile kid (Exile) loathed being the object of my childhood affection. Fair enough!

It was also while attending the CCN School for exile children that I became a street vendor, helping my aunt Ndamona, whom we lived with, with her kapana (street food) business. My cousin Rachel (Mee Ndamona’s daughter) and I would wake up early in the morning before school to make vetkoek (a tasty deep fried pastry popular in South Africa and Namibia), fry fish and cook meat and omatangara (tripe). Along with other treats like sweets, chocolates and chewing gum, we would then go over to the bus stops and other popular areas on the streets, where we would sell our products to people on their way to work. In the late afternoons after school, we would then get back to work, selling to those arriving at the bus stops on their way home from work. This informal market activity continues to be a vital source of income for many Namibians, and has become a recognized element of Africa’s urban culture.

I didn’t mind selling okapana, as long as my school mates didn’t see me. At school, engaging in this informal business implied that you (your family) were very “poor” and didn’t have real jobs, other than cleaning and cooking for white people. So as you might imagine, being caught selling kapana on the streets by your friends was a big deal, and could potentially be a most embarrassing discovery. Unfortunately, as much as I tried to duck and hide every time I saw someone I knew approaching, some of my exile schoolmates saw me selling kapana on the sly, and the news got around at school. I was teased mercilessly. But as painful as the experience was,
kapana helped to cover some of our household expenses and put food on the table, and I can’t be ashamed of that.

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In November 1989, the campaign process surrounding Namibia’s first ever democratic presidential and general assembly election campaigns was in full swing. SWAPO’s election campaign was, in my view, the most colorful, exciting and jubilant of all the participating political parties. Huge rallies of people dressed in the blue red and green that distinguished SWAPO, would take to the streets singing freedom songs, dancing and toyi-toying. SWAPO trucks painted in the party’s colors made their rounds in various communities, with excited party members shouting out the message for all to go out and vote, over loudspeakers that seemed to carry their voices for miles. SWAPO supporters all over the country hoisted SWAPO flags up high on the roofs of their houses and cars.

SWAPO and DTA flags were the most visible during that period, and even though the South African apartheid government put R 100 million into funding some of the political parties contesting SWAPO in that first election, SWAPO’s support from the masses remained undeterred. It was clearly the most exciting time in the history of Namibia, and the high-spirited SWAPO campaigns and rallies made me long for exile. I missed Angola dearly, and sometimes, in my 10-year-old mind, I secretly wished that SWAPO would lose the elections so that we could go back home to our camps in Lubango, and continue fighting the Boers. But that was the reasoning of a child, and I didn’t realize then, what it would mean for the greater Namibian population to be in control of the country’s own destiny without the ridiculous laws imposed by the apartheid regime.

The elections were held from November 7-11, 1989, and the results were announced a couple of days later. About 98 per cent of the registered voters turned out for the parliamentary elections that would decide the structure of the Constituent Assembly. The UN Special Representative certified the election as having been free and fair. SWAPO won by taking 57 per cent of the vote, and 41 seats in the constituent assembly. The official opposition party, DTA, received 29 per cent of the votes, and 21 seats in the assembly. Other parties that received seats in the national assembly included the United Democratic Front (4 seats), Action Christian National (3), National Patriotic Front (1) and the National Convention of Namibia (1). There was another party in the running by the name of SWAPO-Democrats, which had broken away from the SWAPO party in 1978, choosing to participate in the transitional government established at the time. In the 1989
elections, with only 3161 votes in its favor, SWAPO-D was unable to secure a seat in the new Constituent Assembly. The Christian Democratic Action for Social Justice (CDA) and the Namibia National Democratic Party (NNDP) also failed to garner any seats in the election.

I was happy that SWAPO had won, but at the same time, I was a bit disappointed because this meant that we would never go back "home" to exile. But I also realized that we were safely “home” now, and the sooner I refocused my mind to completely settling and adjusting to Namibia – the country that my parents sacrificed their lives for – the better. I was happy for my parents though. Their hard work and sacrifices to free their country had paid off, and with a renewed appreciation for what this all meant, I celebrated SWAPO’s victory chanting the slogan: “SWAPO United! SWAPO Victorious! Now hard work!”

On November 23, as I was listening to Eeyakulo – an Oshiwambo radio program into which members of the public could call in to make public and personal announcements, I heard a caller announce that my Uncle Paulus Nghiwete had been killed. Uncle Paulus, my father’s older brother, was a pilot. I didn’t believe the news at first, but it was later confirmed to my mother. He had died when his vehicle ran over a South African planted landmine in the northern part of Namibia, soon after he had arrived in the country from exile. Land mines planted by the South African forces had still not been deactivated in the north after the cease-fire, and several people were killed and maimed as a result. I’d never met my Uncle Paulus, although my mother told me all she knew about him while we were in exile. She attempted to arrange a meeting one time in 1988 when he was making a quick flying stop at a major airport in Lubango, but unfortunately we missed him by a few hours. My mother was very good at keeping me abreast of who my family was, even on my father’s side. She was the one who told me about and introduced me to my older first cousins Tate Shafoondilo Nghiwete, Mee Martha Imene, and Tate Stophu Imene, whom I saw many times while in exile. I was sad that my Uncle Paulus never got to experience the free and independent Namibia for which he had risked his life on so many occasions before.

By February 9, 1990, the Constituent Assembly had drafted and adopted the Namibian constitution, which was hailed the world over for its guarantees of fundamental rights and freedoms. The Assembly also drafted and unanimously adopted the flag of Namibia, picked from the 400 national flag competition entries. While the flags main colors – blue, red and green – are those of the SWAPO flag, the reason for their presence on the Namibia flag is not entirely attributed to the party. Blue is said to represent the clear Namibian sky and the Atlantic Ocean,
the country’s precious water resources and rain. The Sun represents life and energy. Red represents the heroism and the determination of the Namibian people who shed their blood for the independence of Namibia. White represents peace and unity, and green represents Namibia’s rich agricultural and natural resources.

The Constituent Assembly chose March 21 as Namibia’s Independence Day. The date also marked United Nations Day and was chosen as Namibia’s Independence Day in order to acknowledge the international support that the people of Namibia received during the liberation struggle.

At midnight on March 21, 1990, I witnessed the beginning of a new era for Namibia from my seat in the front of the color television in our Soweto home. The UN Secretary-General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, swore in Namibia’s first President, Sam Nujoma. The historical independence ceremony was held at the Windhoek Independence Stadium and attended by more than 50,000 people, including 20 heads of state and hundreds of dignitaries representing 147 countries. I listened attentively as Namibia’s first President Sam Nujoma delivered a moving inaugural speech. Excerpts from his speech, which continue to touch me to this day, included the following:

“...For the Namibian people and for myself, this day, March 21 1990, is the most memorable and indeed the most emotional moment in the annals of our history. This solemn hour is the moment, which our people have been waiting for, for more than a century. This the day for which tens of thousands of Namibian patriots laid down their lives, shed their precious blood, suffered imprisonment and difficult life in exile. Today, our hearts are filled with great joy and jubilation because our deepest and longest yearning has been realized.”

“...However, it pleases me to state that we are gathered here today, not to pass yet another resolution, but to celebrate the dawn of a new era in this land and to proclaim to the world that a new star has risen on the African continent. Africa’s last colony is, from this hour liberated.”

“...For the Namibian people, the realization of our most cherished goal, namely the independence of our country and the freedom of our people, is fitting tribute to the heroism and tenacity with which our people fought for this long-awaited day.”

“...The world’s demand for our country to be allowed to exercise its’ inalienable right to self-determination and independence has been achieved. WE express our most sincere gratitude to the international community for its’ steadfast support.”
“...I am indebted to the Namibian electorate for giving SWAPO (the South West Africa People’s Organization) an absolute majority, thereby enabling it to form the first government of the Republic of Namibia.”

“...In accepting the sacred responsibility which the Namibian people have placed on me, as the first President of the Republic of Namibia, I would like to bow and pay homage to our fallen heroes and heroines, whose names Namibia’s present and future generations will sing in songs of praise and whose martyrdom they will intone. In conclusion, I move, in the name of our people, to declare that Namibia is forever free, sovereign and independent.”

After the inaugural address, South Africa’s flag was lowered and replaced by the new Namibian flag as both President Sam Nujoma and South African President FW De Klerk looked on emotionally.

Namibia’s new national anthem was then played, as the crowds joined in singing:

Namibia, Land of the Brave
Freedom fight we have won
Glory to their bravery
Whose blood waters our freedom
We give our love and loyalty
Together in unity
Contrasting beautiful Namibia
Namibia our country
Beloved land of savannahs
Hold high the banner of liberty

CHORUS:
Namibia our country
Namibia motherland
We love thee.

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After attending my first nail-clipping church service in Ohaukelo village, I didn’t think much about God until the day my cousin Rachel and I got into a heated discussion about Christianity.
Like 90 per cent of the Namibian population, Cousin Rachel was a Christian. It was my first time ever engaging in a serious discussion about religion, but I was ready with a defensive response. I stubbornly told her she was foolish for believing in God when she was going to die anyway and this God wasn’t going to protect her and keep her from that dreadful fate. I also told her flatly that there was no God, and that all she had to do was observe the state of the world, with its pain, suffering and misery, to see that this so-called loving God couldn’t possibly exist. She was shocked by my attitude towards God and feared for my life, thinking that God would appear from the heavens and strike me dead right there and then for denying His existence.

She also told me that my spiteful attitude towards God would bring me bad luck in life, and expressed her belief that I would go to hell when I died if I didn’t change my ways. But this didn’t scare me because I didn’t believe in hell either, and simply argued that everything she was saying was a bunch of hogwash. It became obvious to me that my cousin had never heard anyone flatly deny the existence of God before, when she told her mother the seemingly devastating news as soon as we arrived home. Mee Ndamona was shocked and uttered “Uuhu!…” in a high pitched voice, alongside other expressions that made it clear that I had committed a reprehensible blunder. I didn’t understand what the big deal was as no one in exile had ever told me about God, even though I had been baptized as a baby. After all, what could one expect of a little girl whose idea of ongeleka was watching a bride and groom sign SWAPO papers at their weddings? They soon gave up trying to convince my non-God programmed 11-year-old brain to believe in God, and I was even more convinced that I was right.

But my life was never the same again after that divine debate. For some reason, I couldn’t stop thinking about this God. It was almost like He was trying to reveal Himself to me, to show me that He really did exist, even though I couldn’t “see” Him. I thought about my life in exile, my experience of the liberation struggle, and my parents surviving the war and coming to Namibia to reunite with loved ones. I began to question: “Wait...was that all an act of God, protecting me, my family and watching over us?” As I meditated on my life in exile and Namibia, and the favor that followed me almost everywhere I went, I realized that there had to be a special, loving and caring force guiding me and my loved ones, every time. That special force must be God, I thought, as it became clear to me that there had to be a higher power orchestrating my life’s events.

During this time, I also learnt that while we were in exile, supporters of the struggle based in Namibia were constantly praying for us, even though we hardly prayed for ourselves. It was their prayers that carried Namibia to her independence, and that delivered her people out of
exile. I realized that without God’s hand, we could have perished in exile. To me, this was a revelation of the depth of God’s love. My heart started being grateful towards this God, and I started to fall in love with Him without even fully knowing Him. I started to build a personal relationship with God, saying simple prayers and striving to be a better kid believing that God didn’t like bad kids, and I didn’t want to be on bad terms with Him.

I questioned several things as I started building my relationship with God. And even though my cousin and aunt were unable to answer my most pertinent question – that “If God is all-powerful and all-loving, then why does He permit war, sickness, pain, and death, and all sorts of evil and suffering in the world, especially amongst those who are considered to be innocent?” – they were able to plant the seed of faith in my heart, which God Himself, patiently watered and cultivated to spiritual maturity, with time.

In mid-1990, soon after I began welcoming God into my heart, my father, whom I hadn’t seen since I was four years old in 1983, came back into my life. In exile it was often very hard for fathers to be around and raise their kids. Like my father, other dads in exile were either at the forefront of armed struggle for Namibia’s liberation, or were traveling the world studying and representing Namibia’s interests abroad. As I was preparing to go to school one afternoon in the absence of my mother, I slipped on my favorite dress – a lovely pink frock with beautiful flowers – that I wasn’t allowed to wear to school. I looked very pretty that day – even if I do say so myself – and I’m glad I did, because when I walked into a crowded sitting room when I returned home later that afternoon, all eyes fell on me.

I took a quick glance around the room at all the guests until my eyes rested on a man who looked just like my father. My eyes opened wide in disbelief, as I whispered to myself whether it could really be him. I didn’t know he was in Namibia, and my mother’s several attempts to get word on his whereabouts had until then, seemingly proved futile. I think my mother noticed the surprised look on my face as I stared at my father, unsure of whether this was the man I had grown up loving, but hardly seeing. She broke the ice, and happily asked, “Rachel, do you know who these guests are?” I was sure one of the guests was my cousin Stophu Imene, whom I recognized from the photos my mother used to show me. Deep inside, I knew that the other man was my father because he was very tall and had the most beautiful smile with dimples, just as he looked in the many pictures that he sent me back in exile. But I was finding it hard to believe that it was him. So afraid of the disappointment I would feel if it turned out I was wrong, I shook my head and said, “No, I don’t know who they are…”
Slightly embarrassed at how unusually shy I was acting, my mother then proceeded to introduce me to the guests who were smiling at me. I was right! It was my father. I could hardly contain my excitement, but pretended to be calm, lest I embarrass my mother and myself. I simply stood there and smiled widely. At that moment, my father called me over to him and sat me on his lap. He smiled the whole time he talked to me, asking me all sorts of questions about my life, and trying to catch up on the seven years he had missed of my life. He couldn’t believe what a big girl I was and that I was already developing breasts. How embarrassing that he noticed that, I thought to myself. Nonetheless, I was happy to be reunited with my father. Like a little girl, I sat on his lap for the duration of his visit, memorizing his scent, his voice, and his look, in case another seven years would intervene in our relationship. But deep down inside, I was praying and wishing that I would never have to leave his side again.

When it was time for my father to go, he took my hand in his as we walked outside to where his car was parked. I was devastated that he was leaving, and came very close to tears, but he promised that he would be back to visit me. Before he left, he gave my mother and me some money for our upkeep, and as the lights of his car faded as he drove away, I felt sure that I would see him again soon. My mother had gone to great lengths to locate my father as soon as we arrived in Namibia. She asked everyone who might know him or who might come across him to let him know that we had made it out of exile into independent Namibia, and gave them our location in Windhoek. That’s how my father found us in the end.

A few days after seeing my father, my mother and I moved from Soweto to another area in Katutura called Okomboni in the Wanaheda area. I had enjoyed living at Aunt Ndamona’s house although I didn’t like the violence in our street where I witnessed a lot of botsotsos (thugs/thieves) fighting each other with stones, bottles and knives. For that reason, I was happy to move to a more peaceful area in a nice apartment complex, with the help of Uncle Cuba, who was a very tall, light-skinned, kind and gentle man. There, my mother and I had our own private space. And although my mother was still unemployed, we still had some money left from her UN paycheck to survive on. Our relatives also kept giving us money since we were still new to Namibia and they did their level best to support us while we got settled.

One day, when my father visited us, I told him that Ndinelao, my other sister, was also in Windhoek on a short visit from the north where she lived with her mother. I hadn’t seen her myself, but my mother had told me she was staying at her aunt’s house, and I knew my father would be eager to see her too. A few days later, my father came to fetch us, and we went over to visit Ndinelao. She wasn’t expecting us, and didn’t know that our father was around, but like me,
Rachel Valentina NghiweTE

as soon as she rested her eyes on him, she knew who he was, and told her aunt, “Otate wange” (‘that’s my father’). Although she didn’t recognize me (the last time we had seen each other was when we all visited our father in Lubango in 1983), as soon as we entered her house and I saw her familiar smile, I knew it was her.

My mother then introduced me to Ndinelao, and we started chatting away, although we had a little difficulty understanding each other because we spoke different Oshiwambo dialects. I couldn’t understand some of the things she was saying in the Oshindonga dialect, which she picked up fluently while living in the Ondonga area since coming to Namibia. After that encounter, our father took Ndinelao and me shopping, and let us pick out whatever we wanted from the stores. What a treat! It sure was nice having a father around. After shopping, we spent the rest of the day visiting different people, including Uncle Halute, and Mee Ndaiponofi Ndinelao Nehova, after whom my sister was named.

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I began to enter puberty just before I turned 11 years old, but tried to disguise my newly developing breasts because I believed that I was too young to be growing breasts. It didn’t help though, that my mother was proudly announcing to all her friends that her only daughter’s breasts had started growing. They all smiled and laughed. To hide my small breasts, I would wear a big sweater in Namibia’s burning summer heat that often reached upwards of 36 degrees Celsius. I thought I was doing a pretty good job at hiding my breasts, but was proved wrong one day when an older girl at school noted my pubertal development. She kindly advised me to start wearing a bra to support my breasts, so that they could grow healthily. I thought she was crazy, and retorted that I had no breasts, and therefore needed no such thing as a bra.

But my puberty nightmare didn’t end there. Later that year, I found stains of blood on my underwear. I panicked. I didn’t know what was going on. Something told me it was my period, but I thought “It couldn’t be, I’m too young.” My mother had never discussed these things with me - probably because she didn’t expect me to enter puberty so soon either. I managed to keep my period a secret from my mother for a few days. I thought that maybe I would get in trouble if she found out.

But one day, while I was getting changed for school, my mother noticed the blood stains on my underwear. I got nervous. Shocked, she looked at it closely, and asked me “What is this.....Lakela ootokosho..?” “Ootokosho?” literally translates to “are you washing?” but is an Oshiwambo reference to being on one’s period. I knew what that big word “ootokosho” meant, although it

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never came out of my mouth. I shook my head in denial. She knew the truth though, and confused, she sat down and started thinking, counting the years to verify my age. She concluded that I was too young for this, but didn’t make a big deal of it. Reality hit me when she pulled out one of her sanitary towels and gave it to me to wear. I didn’t want to wear it, but she made it clear that I didn’t have much of a choice. I felt as if I was not the same anymore; I was no longer a kid but a grown up...wearing grown up things like pads.

I started feeling depressed about the situation, with no one to talk to me about what was happening to my body or to answer as to why my period had come so early. I became quieter at school and didn’t play much with other kids. I kept to myself for a while so that other kids wouldn’t find out that I was all ‘grown-up’, with breasts and a period. I thought I was the only 11-year-old at school with such a predicament. We’d never learned about such things at school. I believed I was cursed and prayed to God to please take the curse away by stopping my period permanently. It stopped, and I thought the prayer had worked, but then it came back again the next month. I wondered what I had done to deserve this.

I later discovered that breast development is usually the first sign that a girl has entered puberty, and that Menarche (the first menstrual cycle) occurs approximately two to two-and-a-half years after the appearance of breast buds. I also learned that although the average age of menarche was 13 years, it could begin anywhere between the ages of 11 and 15 years. This finding certainly helped to make me feel better, but having budded early, I looked forward to being able to share the strangeness of the experience with my friends. It would also have helped quite a bit if my mother, who again shared the news of my entry into womanhood with all her friends, had prepared me more adequately for what I saw as an awful monstrosity.

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Towards the end of 1990, my mother told me that I would be going to live with my father for good. I was thrilled. I had never lived with my dad before, and I was eager to make the transition. When I look back on that now, I see how God used my father to lead my life into a new direction. My mother didn’t believe she could give me the kind of life and opportunities that I got through my father, but she did everything in her power to set me on a track towards success before my father took over. I know for certain that even though it may have been hard for her to see me leave, all she ever wanted was the very best for me. A short time later, I moved in with my father in a family home in Shandubala, close to where one of my schoolmates, Tuvambala

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(Selma Homateni), and her sister Kadjene lived. Tuvambala and I became very close friends, and I often spent the afternoons hanging out at her house.

Among the many memorable experiences that I had with Tuvambala, there is one that will never fade, and which we often laugh about to this day. One afternoon, when I had gone over to her house to play, Tuvambala and I got into an argument about who would win if the two of us got into a real physical fight. She was certain that she could beat me up hands down, and I believed I would be the Muhammad Ali of any fight we ever had. We argued about this until a physical fight actually broke out between us, right there in the backyard of her house. We punched, shoved and kicked each other, grabbing sticks and anything else within reach to prove our point that each of us was the better fighter. Neither of us was prepared to quit until we won the fight. Eventually, we realized that we were equally strong and both good fighters and no one was going to win this never-ending fight. We finally stopped fighting and called it a “draw.” Luckily, neither of us got badly hurt or bruised, and we immediately made peace and went about the rest of the day playing like the good friends we normally were, almost forgetting that we had just attacked each other over a nonsensical argument.

However, the very next day, during our school’s daily morning assembly, the principal called me and Tuvambala to the stage. There, in front of the entire school, she asked if the two of us had been fighting the previous day. We were shocked that the principal knew, and wondered who had snitched on us, and so quickly. The fight didn’t happen at school, but it had suddenly become a school matter. The Principal was not amused and wanted to make an example of us to the other kids. She whipped us on our buttocks that day at morning assembly in front of the whole school for fighting outside school. She stressed that no one from our school was allowed to fight. Really? I wondered how Exile, who once beat me up at school for liking him never got in trouble for it. The other kids obviously found our beating entertaining, and made endless fun of us afterwards. They said that as we received our beating, we looked like we were dancing as we tried to escape the Principal’s whip, and imitated us in the funniest possible way. Exile kids were not compassionate. They made fun of everyone and everything.

We figured that it was probably Kadjene, Tuvambala’s older sister, who had ratted on us. She was cool, though, and also treated me as her little sister. She was a beauty queen, always looking her best. One day I asked her to pierce my ears so that I could have an extra piercing in each ear. I had received my first set of piercings as a baby in exile, where it was done with a needle since we didn’t have piercing guns. Having more than one hole in each ear was considered taboo at the time, and it was said that only “bad and rebellious” kids had more than one hole in each ear. I
wasn’t a bad and rebellious kid, and neither was Kadjene. I just liked how she looked with her two earrings in each ear. So while still 11 years old, and without asking my parents for permission, I asked Kadjene to pierce my ears like hers. She took two stud earrings and pressed them hard into the flesh of each of my ears until they made a hole. It was extremely painful, but I endured the agonizing pain. As my mother had told me countless times before, “beauty doesn’t come easy.” I loved the way I looked.

When I got home and told my dad I had my ears pierced for the second time, he wasn’t impressed at all, and forbade me from wearing anything in the newly pierced holes so that they could close up. But when I went to visit my mother and told her about my new look, she didn’t object at all. In fact, she actually liked it and thought it was cool. I didn’t tell her what my father thought though, and figured that since one of my parents approved, it really couldn’t be that bad. So to honor my father’s request, I didn’t wear earrings in the newly pierced holes while in his presence, but inserted my studs when he wasn’t around. I liked my two piercings and that was the best compromise I could make. When I turned 13 years old, I started wearing my earrings openly, and my father didn’t protest.

One Saturday afternoon, sometime in the summer of 1990, my sister Nelao and I went to swim at the public pool in Katutura with some friends. We had a wonderful time there, but the fun turned into a nightmare on our way back home. As we were walking home, a bunch of bullies stopped us, blocking our way, and demanding that we give them food or money if we wanted to proceed. They had whips and threatened to beat us up if we didn’t comply. We refused to give them anything and ran for our lives. They chased after us, but we were too fast for them, and they soon lost us. We started walking again and talking about what had just happened. Just as we were doing so, a sports car drove past at high speed, almost hitting two girls who were crossing the road in front of us. The sports car disappeared, but turned back driving fast towards us. When it got closer to us, we thought it was going to stop, but it didn’t. To avoid being hit, we ran.

When the bad men from the sports car realized that we were running away, they quickly jumped out of the car and chased after us. This time we were really scared because the men were much older and bigger than we were. As we were running, someone from our group dropped a packet of chips. I saw it and picked it up. That slowed my pace, and the man behind me grabbed me from behind my neck and tried to drag me down. I struggled to get out of his grip, and eventually succeeded, but he picked up a big stone and threw it at me. It hit me in the waist, causing me to slow down again. When I escaped his second hold on me, he eventually caught me.
a third time pushed me to the ground and started beating me and kicking me with his soccer boots. I screamed for help, not knowing what to expect next. I was so scared that I peed on myself as I was being kicked for nothing.

This happened in the Damara Lokasie (location), an area of Katutura that we had to pass through to get to our house in Shandubala, which was in Wambo lokasie. See, the apartheid regime not only separated blacks and whites, but went as far as to divide black Namibians based on their ethnic groups, so that they wouldn’t come together and organize against the racist regime. So blacks were assigned to sections of Katutura according to their ethnic groups, bringing about ‘locations’ such as Damara lokasie, Herero lokasie, Wambo lokasie and so forth. To this day, the house numbers on some doors in Katutura still bear a letter before the number of the house, which identified the ethnic grouping of its residents. I don’t know if the people living in that area in Damara Lokasie – notorious even today for the level of crimes that take place there – were scared of the men who were harassing us. If they were, they didn’t show it as they stood behind the barbed-wire fences surrounding their yards, with blank expressions on their faces, just watching our nightmare evolve. None of them came to our rescue or tried to stop the older men from harassing us. I couldn’t believe my eyes. In Wambo Lokasie, whenever someone tried to beat up vulnerable people such as women or children, the whole street would join forces in a sort of community justice response, and beat up that person for picking on the innocent and vulnerable.

I was so angry with those men and the unresponsive onlookers. It was only through some divine miracle that nothing bad happened to me, and when they eventually left me alone, I quickly tried to get away from that area. By now, our group was scattered, and I couldn’t find my sister, who had just recently arrived in Namibia for the first time from exile in Zambia. She didn’t know the area well, and I worried for her safety – scared that the same horrible fate might befall her. Luckily, we found each other not too far from the site where that strange incident had taken place, and managed to make it home safely to tell our father about what had happened. I was hoping that those men would get arrested and thrown into jail for their actions, but we didn’t have enough information on them to file a police report. I couldn’t even remember what they looked like, and knew that the people who had seen the incident, and who probably knew the criminals too, would be of no help. We were forced to leave the matter there, having personally witnessed how apartheid’s division of ethnic groups had affected black communities.

During the Christmas of 1990, at our village of Okongo from where my father hails, I had the pleasure of finally meeting my Grandmother Rachel, after whom I am named. I also met many
more of my father’s relatives, and delighted in the discovery of who my family was. I loved being in my grandmother’s presence, and listened intently as she told us stories of how the South Africans would come to her homestead, as they did to many others in the north, searching for SWAPO combatants. In the process, they would beat them, mistreat them, and destroy their crops and houses. She was my only surviving grandmother as my mother’s mother had died when my mother was still an infant.

Much later, in 2004, I got to meet my mother’s father, Grandfather Aaron Hatutale, who was hard to meet prior to then, as he lived in Angola, close to the border with Namibia. During the liberation struggle, my Grandfather was buried alive by the South Africans, who used this as a means of torture during their brutal interrogation sessions. He was taken out of the grave before he could die, but developed hearing problems ever since then. It was hard for him to hear me, and I had to shout while speaking to him. It was then, that he told me the story of his torture, stating that the South Africans were responsible for the reason I had to shout.

I thank God for making it possible for me to meet one of my surviving Grandparents on each side. My wonderful God-fearing Grandmother Rachel has since passed away.

At the end of 1990, the CCN-Exile Kids School was closed down, after being open for one year. It had been set up as a temporary school, and it was presumed that within a year, most returnees would have settled, and would be able to afford to pay for their children to go to regular schools with other Namibian students. My father enrolled me into People’s Primary School (PPS), a paid school that a lot of other exile kids went to. PPS had its own liberation history. It was established in 1983 as a community school, when people from the Khomasdal and Katutura communities came together to establish a multi-ethnic school with an ethos based on critical thinking and participatory democracy for children and parents. This was in direct opposition to the apartheid government’s Bantu Education laws, which called for the separation of races and tribes in schools, and which directed little money to public schools, thereby compromising the education of black students. During the repatriation of Namibians from exile in 1989, PPS was recognized by the new government, and with the large number of exile children that joined its ranks, the number of students doubled from 600 to 1200 learners plus new teachers. Part of the national emergency fund was used to build new classrooms and hostels for the children and teachers returning from exile.

It was here, at PPS, that I met my good friend Star Ndatipo-Ashikoto. Star later became my neighbor when we moved from Shandubala in Katutura, to my father’s nice big house in town
where the white people lived, and where black people had not been allowed to live during the apartheid regime. While at PPS, I also met many other friends that I had previously known in exile, as well as many of my classmates from the CCN temporary school that I had attended the previous year.

Soon after that, I got the news that my father was being sent to the United Kingdom as Namibia’s High Commissioner (Ambassador). I was very excited at this news because it had always been my dream, ever since I was in exile, to travel abroad. From the little I knew about it, England had become one of my favorite countries at the time, and I was very glad that my father was posted there instead of elsewhere. That is except for the United States of America, where I was also hoping we would go. My father had been sent there for six months to open Namibia’s first embassy in Washington, DC as the acting Ambassador, so to speak, and I was almost certain that my whole family was going to join my father in America. In my over-excitement for America, although my father had told me to keep the news of his possible diplomatic postings to myself, I told all my friends that I would soon be going to America. I didn’t understand why it was so vital to keep such good news to keep to myself.

Needless to say, in mid-1991, President Sam Nujoma appointed my father, Veiccoh Nghiwete, as Namibia’s first High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. I had to swallow my words after boasting about going to the United States, but I was happy that England was regarded just as highly as America in my friends’ eyes, and my little substitution did not make look so bad.

On the evening of August 16, 1991, my late step-mother Julia, my two sisters, my two brothers and I boarded a plane with my father, to spend the next five years living in London.
Chapter Three in Pictures

UNTAG’s peace-keeping forces arrive in Namibia on April 1, 1989, in time for the repatriation of Namibians from exile and for the first national and presidential elections in Namibia. Courtesy: www.unmultimedia.org

Exiles arriving back home in Namibia after years outside their country. Courtesy: www.unmultimedia.org
Exile children setting foot for the first time in Namibia. This picture was taken at one of the reception centers run by the UN and the Council of Churches in Namibia’s RRR Committee. 

*Courtesy: Office of the Founding Father of Namibia.*

Exile children feeling at ‘home’ at the reception centers that were set up inside Namibia to receive them. The centers greatly resembled the camps in exile, and made the initial arrival in Namibia more familiar for the children arriving there. *Courtesy: Office of the Founding Father of Namibia.*
Valentina: The Exile Child

An exile child at a reception center getting tap water, which was a rare commodity in exile, where water was always fetched at a river. *Courtesy: Office of the Founding Father of Namibia.*

One of my early pictures in Namibia. I had just started to finally feel at home in Namibia where life was very different to what I was used to in the camps. Here I am pictured with my first local Namibian friend, Ndeshi, in Katutura, Windhoek in 1990.
Repatriated and local Namibians vote for the first time in an independent Namibia, in the UN supervised election of November 1989. *Courtesy: Office www.unmultimedia.org*
It was an honor to meet my only surviving grandparents at the time; my father’s mother, Grandmother Rachel, after whom I am named; and my mother’s father, Grandfather Aaron.
Although this picture was taken years later, it illustrates how Helena and I, fresh from exile, were trying to *shimbana* (to pound), before I injured my finger. At that time, Helena and I were 11 and 10 respectively, and didn’t know much about the skill required to pound millet grain into flour. I’m the girl on the right with a tank top with lindileni.
This is me at my father’s homestead in Okongo, in northern Namibia. Although this picture was taken more recently, it provides a close representation of what I saw when I arrived in Ohaukelo village for the first time in 1989, at the homestead of Tatekulu Hamweedi.
CHAPTER FOUR

England: My Country of Awakening

“I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye.”

- (Psalm 32: 8)

My family and I arrived in London, England on August 17, 1991. My first impression of London was “awesome.” As a little girl, it had always been my dream to travel abroad, and here I was in Britain. As I was growing up, I had heard so much about the land of kings, queens, double-decker buses, Big Ben and the Tube, and had always been curious about what it was like, since my father had studied there at some point while we were in exile. As soon as we arrived at the airport, we were ushered to the VIP waiting area, where we were offered refreshments, while we waited to be cleared by immigration officials. As diplomats, I guess we were too important to be standing at the regular immigration clearing points with the long lines.

After we were cleared, we were escorted to waiting cars that then chauffeured us to our hotel near Oxford Street, one of London’s major streets, flanked by hundreds of stores, boutiques, and attractions. I felt like I was in a fairytale. I had never stayed in a hotel before, and was awestruck by the luxury that surrounded me. We were being treated like royalty, and I cherished the feeling of having this wonderful upgrade in my life, from the humble refugee camps in exile, to the depressing village of northern Namibia, to the blend of ghetto and upscale neighborhoods of Windhoek City, and now to the dazzling streets of one of the major cities in the world, all in the span of two years. The city of London was so beautiful and full of people of all colors and creeds – a quarter of the city’s inhabitants being from varying ethnic minorities. I had never seen anything like it.

We lived in different hotels in London for a few weeks while waiting for our new home to be readied for us to move into. I enjoyed living in the hotels and didn’t get tired of them at all. In fact, if it were up to me, I’d still be living in hotels today. I remember that when we first moved into the hotel close to Oxford Street, my siblings and I were amazed at all the varied television channels we could watch. We were shocked to come across porn channels, and knowing that we would land ourselves in huge trouble if we were caught watching them; we avoided them for a while. But soon enough, our curiosity got the hold of us, and we worked up the nerve to watch them without feeling guilty about it. My siblings and I were divided into two rooms since there
were only four of us, and we’d call each other up to put on channel #123. Or sometimes we’d all just watch it from the same room, confused and captivated by what we were watching. The hotel should have blocked those channels from being accessible in our rooms since we were still children.

We eventually moved out of the hotel into our new spacious home on Bishop’s Avenue, in one of the most affluent neighborhoods of London. The three-story house was stunning. It had a beautiful big backyard with sprawling lawns, an indoor heated swimming pool with a sauna and Jacuzzi, and a lovely interior that made it feel palatial. Although we had housekeepers from the Philippines, and chauffeurs from Sri Lanka, our father made it clear to us that we were to make our own beds, wash our own underwear and on the weekends and holidays, he’d let the maids go home and we would do the house chores, such as cleaning and cooking. We couldn’t boss them around or tell them what to do. He wanted us to do as much for ourselves as possible, so that we could grow up to be independent, mature people with a real sense of responsibility. He told us to treat our house staff with the utmost respect, and to refer to them as “Uncle” or “Auntie,” as we would any adult at home in Namibia...even if they weren’t related to us. Such references to non-family members are considered signs of adoration and respect in most African cultures. My father wanted to make sure that we remained humble and capable of taking care of ourselves. He didn’t want us to get crippled and spoiled by the lavish lifestyle we were now living.

A few weeks after moving into our new home, we had the biggest scare of our lives. At the end of October 1991, a group of people came knocking at our door. They were wearing heavy makeup, masks and odd costumes, and looked incredibly scary. Our father was not home at the time, and the staff had already gone home for the day, so we had no way of understanding this strange phenomenon. We had never seen anything quite like this in real life. The people kept knocking on the door, and wouldn’t go away. We closed all the curtains in the house, switched off some of the lights and immediately called the police, thinking that these were bad people – thugs, trying to break into the house. When the London Police eventually arrived, and we told them exactly what happened, we could see they were trying extremely hard to contain their laughter as they told us it was Halloween. We didn’t celebrate Halloween in Africa, so we had no idea what they were talking about, and when they realized we still had puzzled looks on our faces, they patiently explained the whole concept behind the event to us. We laughed at ourselves for days after that first Halloween experience. It was a good welcome laugh to London and the western world.
I attended Whitefield Primary School, Year 8 (Grade 8), from September 1991 to May 1992. At the school, I made a lot of British and international friends, including my first white, Indian and Chinese friends ever. The friends that I made from different countries, made me aware of how big the world around us is. Through them, I learned about different cultures and fell in love with the international community. I found diversity to be beautiful, and ever since then, I’ve had a passion for travel, and for meeting people from different cultures. More than anything, I now consider myself an International Citizen.

It was also at Whitefield that I was introduced to the world of sports. I had never really played formal sports before. In exile and during my time in Namibia, our free time was consumed with playing simple games that we often invented ourselves. At my new school, I became fond of soccer and netball, which we occasionally played during our Physical Education (P.E) class. The first time I remember playing soccer was during the school’s sports day when I was randomly selected to play for the Red team. Being a naturally energetic person, I wowed the crowd as I ran after the ball, stopped the other teams from scoring and made good shots at the goal. Although none of those shots turned out to be actual goals, I thought my performance was quite impressive. I even surprised myself. Unfortunately I never took the sport seriously in my early age; if I had, I’m sure I would have made a far better soccer player than I am today.

In London, I always looked forward to weekends with my family. My favorite activity was going shopping in the department stores of the ever-busy Oxford Street, where people literally bumped into as you were walking because it was just so crowded. I also enjoyed going to Finsbury Park and Golder’s Green where we shopped for ethnic foods and black hair products; and loved going ice-skating with my siblings and friends – though I only mastered the art of falling. As a diplomat’s child, one of my highlights living in London also included attending diplomatic functions, dinners and house parties, where my new love for international cultures was further nurtured. I remember one of these days, when we were invited to 10 Downing Street to meet with the British Prime Minister John Major, and other diplomatic families. It was an amazing experience to be inside the famous residence and office of Britain’s Prime Ministers, and I savored every moment there. We were invited back to Downing Street a second time to witness one of the major events in London that honors the royal family, called ‘Trooping the Colors’. Held in June each year outside the Prime Minister’s residence, the event, which celebrates the official birthday of the British Sovereign, dates back to the 17th Century during the time of Charles II. I was highly amused by the event, in which troops on horses paraded around, while the Queen waved and saluted the large crowds that had come to witness the event. A marching
band of hundreds of musicians from different groups also marched and played as one. I enjoyed the Trooping the Colors parade, and was especially delighted when I got to see Her Royal Highness Queen Elizabeth II, and the rest of the royal family.

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After a year of attending Whitefield, I felt the most beautiful when my hair had reached the longest length it had ever been in my whole entire life. I was thirteen years old when I started getting my hair permed with the blessing of my step-mother, although my father wasn’t very comfortable with the idea. He felt we were too young to be putting such strong chemicals in our hair, and was concerned about how we interpreted our identities, as he didn’t much like the fuss we were making about having our hair straightened. But being naturally gifted, and labeled the family hairdresser for my siblings and myself, I quickly mastered the art of perming hair, including my own. One day, I relaxed my own hair, and it came out great. I received so many compliments from my peers at school on my long beautiful hair. I’d never felt so beautiful in my life.

A few days later, however, one of my sisters attempted to imitate me after she saw the rave reviews I was getting. She ended up burning her scalp quite badly. When dad saw it, he was furious. After all, this was the very reason he forbade us from perming our hair in the first place. It was the first time I had ever seen my father so upset, and what he did next proved a nightmare. Aside from banning us from using hair relaxers ever again, he took a pair of scissors, and chopped off all our hair. He cut our hair so short that we looked like ugly little boys. I cried so much that day, and I just wanted to die. As my dad chopped off my beautiful long relaxed hair, I picked up a handful of it that had fallen on the ground, held it in my hand, looked at it and cried hysterically. Our mother just stood there. She couldn’t say much, but you could tell she felt sorry for us. My father, on the other hand, felt no remorse, and chuckled at the dramatic way I handled the loss of my hair. I felt a great loss, and was deeply grieved. I had taken such good care of my hair to get it to grow that long. And you know that’s not an easy task for most black women.

After all my hair was gone, I retreated to my room on the top floor of the big house, to continue mourning my loss. That day was probably the most emotionally devastating of my teenage years; and I believed I was as good as dead. Thoughts of how to end my life occupied my mind. I was prepared to die with my hair. I contemplated going downstairs to the kitchen, taking a big knife and handing it to my father to finish me off, since he’d already taken a big chunk of life out of me.

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by taking my most precious possession. I rehearsed the script in my head on exactly how I was going to approach him about it. Overridden with emotion, the choice to die that day felt so right, and I was ready to go. But as I rehearsed my lines in tears, I cried myself to sleep, and never made it downstairs to ask my father to kill me. When I woke up the next day, I didn't feel so bad. Clearly, my life was more valuable than my hair. When Monday came, we had to go to school with our new looks. All the kids looked at us, wondering what had happened to the beautifully relaxed hair we’d donned just the week before. The questions and stares were unbearable. Luckily, we were due to transfer out of that school after the summer, and it was only a week from the semester’s end. As I sat in class during that last week of classes, I could only look forward to leaving Whitefield and starting afresh at a new school, where no one would know that in my previous life I had actually been a beautiful girl with lovely long hair.

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In September 1992, I began Year 9 at an international school in London, where most of the children were from Brunei. I had heard that the Sultan of Brunei was the richest man in the world at the time, so I was quite impressed with them. The rest of the children were from other countries around the world. But even though the kids at our new school seemed nice, they acted like racists towards me and my sisters. We were the only black people at the school, and the other kids avoided us like the plague. During break time, we would end up sitting together because no one would let us sit with them. In addition to this, whenever we shared the same stairs or hallways, they would cling to the walls or stairs in disgust, walking as far away from us as possible to prevent their light skins from rubbing against our dark skin. When our bodies came in close contact with theirs, they screamed “aarrrgghhh,” as they dusted themselves off and laughed. During those instances, I just wished we were back at Whitefield...hair or no hair.

We had never experienced direct racism before, and at first, took our fellow students’ behavior for a silly joke. But after a while of acting strangely towards us, their rejection started to bother us, and we wondered what we had done to deserve this kind of treatment. The experience made me wonder about how deep-reaching the effects of apartheid must have been, especially since it basically legalized racism, and the type of separatist treatment that we were being subject to in our school yard. My sisters and I decided to simply ignore their silly actions, and continued being the nice and respectful kids that we were raised to be. Eventually, the racist Bruneian students came to their senses and started accepting us, and within a few weeks, they were inviting us to their homes for birthday parties.
One day, our school hosted a dance party for the students. It was the first non-family party that I would be attending in London, and my first time dancing so hard at any party. It became apparent to me that I was naturally gifted at dancing when other students marveled at my dance moves and asked me to show them how to do what I was doing. I became the center of attention at the school party, and loved it, making up new moves as my schoolmates cheered me on. But that was also the most exercise I had gotten in a long time, and because I was so out of shape, my body went into “shock.” My muscles started to ache and I experienced my first muscle cramp in my right calf. I screamed in pain bringing the whole party to a standstill. Teachers who were chaperoning the party came to my aid and massaged my leg to get rid of the cramps.

The cramp validated my weight problem, and showed just how out-of-shape I was. Truth be told, ever since exile, I’d always been the chubbier, fatter kid out of all the skinny kids around me. Back then, my friends in the camps of Lubango nicknamed me “Lakela Kabushwa” - that is, Rachel the fat kid or “Fatty Rachel.” Now at 13, I had grown into an overweight teenager, weighing in at 187 lbs (85 kilograms). As my weight spiraled out of control to this point, my concerned parents often bombarded our doctors with questions as to why I was overweight, while my two sisters who were around the same age and height as me were much thinner, and within their healthy weight range. Both of my parents and relatives were naturally thin and it was not clear where I had gotten these “fat genes” from.

After the cramping incident, although my family, friends and classmates constantly made mention of my weight, it didn't bother me because as far as I was concerned, I was fine and healthy. I continued to deny my weight problem, but soon I started to notice my appearance and to my surprise, I was not happy about it. I thought that I looked ugly, and figured that it was probably because of my weight that I had reacted so emotionally to my father cutting my hair the year before. It was the one thing that I had thought made me beautiful, although I had subconsciously denied my weight problem. With the little knowledge that I had about God, I began saying a simple prayer every night: “God please make me beautiful and healthy.” Then one day at the age of 14, I was suddenly filled with a burst of energy, and started a workout program to lose weight and live a healthier lifestyle. I woke up early every morning to exercise for at least an hour to an exercise video that we had at home; and within a few weeks, the exercising had become so much fun, that I began to make a habit of it.

About a month into my exercise program, I found that the exercise video was not challenging me enough anymore, so I gave it up and started putting together my own workout routine that was more fun and challenging. In four months, I was able to get my weight to drop tremendously,
from the 187 lbs I weighed at the time of the party, to 132 lbs (60 kg). I looked better, felt better, and developed an improved self-esteem and a more positive outlook on life. My family, friends, and classmates marveled at my quick weight loss, and showered me with many questions on how I had gotten such dramatic results so quickly. My proud father – impressed with the discipline I had exercised in order to reach my goal - joyfully volunteered to become my weight loss spokesperson, jumping at every opportunity to tell my story: “*she gets up early every morning to exercise...*” During my weight loss program, I also learned to watch what I ate. Our chef had always cooked healthy food even prior to my weight loss, but I started eating smaller portions, unlike before when I simply ate too much, and snacked too often. I also did a lot of cardiovascular exercises for at least an hour seven times a week, including dance fitness, jogging and running, which are my favorite physical activities.

Initially, I had only planned to exercise until I reached my desired weight goal. But once I lost the weight, I didn’t want to stop exercising because I saw and experienced the joy and other benefits that fitness and a healthy lifestyle brought me. I started wearing tighter clothes to show off my new shapely figure that everyone took note of, and over which they showered me with compliments. I felt great, more beautiful than I ever had in my life. And my hair, which had nearly cost me my life the year before, grew back. I had a renewed sense of confidence and felt as if I was on top of the world, capable of doing anything that I put my mind to. A healthy lifestyle does that to you...even at 14.

As I became more confident about the way I looked, I also regained my interest in boys. I hadn’t even bothered looking at them since the time Exile beat me up and blew me off at the CCN exile school, but now I’d gotten my groove back. And my new groove almost made me break a leg once. One day I was outside the house in the backyard, when I heard my parents returning from a party they had gone to. I rushed into the house like a crazy woman, just to hear about the boy that I kind of liked whose parents were hosting the party. I had a whole list of questions ready for my parents: what was he wearing? Which other kids were at the party? Were any of them girls our age? Did he ask about me? What did he say? And again, did he ask about me? While running into the house to begin my interrogation, I tripped and fell on the sharp-edged stairs in our backyard. My right shin hit the sharp-edge of the stairs, and left a deep wound in my leg, exposing my shinbone. I had to be taken to the hospital, and luckily, did not fracture any bones during my fall. I did receive about twelve stitches to close up the wound though, and couldn’t walk properly for weeks. The doctor also advised me not to exercise until I had completely healed. All this, just for news about a boy!
My father made sure that I followed the doctor’s advice. But I had grown so accustomed to my morning workouts that I literally felt sick not being able to perform my dance routines, or to go running. I’d become addicted to exercising, and felt like I was experiencing withdrawal symptoms. My muscles begged for a workout. So early in the morning, when I thought my father was fast asleep, I would sneak downstairs to workout, without putting too much pressure on my injured leg. I managed for almost a week without being caught. But one day, my father walked in on me exercising downstairs and reminded me about what the doctor said. I pleaded with him to let me continue, saying that I was only doing sit-ups which had no bearing on my leg, but he forbade me from doing any form of exercise until I was completely well. Luckily, my body was in great shape prior to the accident which helped in speeding up my recovery, and it wasn’t long before I resumed my workout plan. I thank God that I didn’t break my leg during that bad fall, and that my father was there to keep me from causing any further damage to my leg.

My dad has always been a good and kindhearted man. Growing up, at times I thought he was too generous. When our friends would visit, for example, my dad would allow them to go shopping with us, and would buy sweets and other goodies for them. Or sometimes, when we were running out to the store, he would also give them money, even if they had their own, so that we all had a few pounds or pennies to spend on whatever we wanted. I used to be resentful at times, thinking these kids were just finishing my father’s money, while their parents never did the same for us. There could have been more clothes and shoes for me if they hadn’t come along, I thought. But I’m glad my father demonstrated such kindness and generosity. It taught me that one shouldn’t always do things with the expectation that it would be done in return, and to be unconditional in the expression of my good qualities.

After a year of attending the International Private School, I moved to Hampstead High School where I did Years 10 and 11 (Grades 10 and 11). There, I worked towards the two-year General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), a high school completion program that consisted of seven subjects, three of which were of your own choice. Hampstead High School was much bigger than the private international school and had a lot of British students, as well as international students. I loved this school more than the other two schools that I attended before in London.

My biggest crushes as Hampstead were Lee Underwood and a boy from the Caribbean named Phillip. Phillip was not the type of guy I usually liked as he was small in stature and very dark skinned, but something attracted me to him. He had the cutest smile which made him appear rather handsome. He was so flattered that I liked him that it seems he didn’t know how to handle
it. Like Exile had done to me some years back at school in Windhoek, Namibia, Phillip also embarrassed me for liking him. During lunch time, I was hanging with my friends Siobhan Dixon, Bhina Patel, Gemma Desouza and Gabby Stanton, when he and his group of “rude boys” approached us. Phillip, whom I had never spoken to before, yelled at me for liking him. He was reacting to a love letter and poem that my friends helped me write for him as a way of breaking the ice. Siobhan, who had known him since elementary school, was the one who delivered the love letter, and told him not to read it until later. Phillip was the first guy I wrote a love letter and poem to. The poem, titled ‘A Word in Edgeways’, read as follows:

A Word in Edgeways

Every time I see you
My heart beats faster
My feet get cold
And I break into a cold sweat.

I see you passing
I really want to get a word
In edgeways.
My mind says “yes!”
Go for it
But my body says “no.”

Every time I see you
I feel pressure.
We keep an eye contact
For long enough
My face glows with delight.
I start to wonder if
You feel the same way about me.

I really want to get a word in edgeways,
My mind says “yes!”
Go for it
But my body says “no.”

To me you’re someone very special
Someone I want to be with,
Boy you’re my destiny.
I see you pass by,
To me, it’s a sign of good-bye.
I long for you
To pass again
Hoping that this time,
I would have a chance
To get a word
In edgeways.

But whenever you pass by
My feet get cold
And I break into a cold sweat
I really want to get a word
In edgeways
My mind says “yes!”
But my body says “no.”

I wait for you to walk past again,
When my wait got longer
I realized that you weren’t coming,
I try to get on with my life
But my life is incomplete without you.

I wrote that poem in 1994 at the age of 15 with the help of my friends, and reading it now, I think it was perhaps a bit over the top. But even though it may have been a little too mature of a poem, I thought he could at least have appreciated the effort and feelings behind it. He didn’t let me get a word in edgeways, as he broke out shouting all sorts of unwarranted and nasty things at me. My friends and I stared at him in disbelief and didn’t say a word. I was crushed! ‘Strike two!’ I thought to myself, wondering why seemingly “nice guys” turned nasty on me without even taking the time to know me first. My friends comforted me after he and friends left and told me not to pay him any mind because he was childish and immature...even though he was two years older than we were.

A few weeks after that humiliating incident, Phillip started being nice to me. He started acting as if he was interested in me, giving me attention and looking at me flirtatiously whenever my friends and I walked past him and his “rude boys.” But the humiliation he had put me through
had completely turned me off him, and I was no longer interested in him. But even so, we were able to end our school years at Hampstead on a more amiable note, and although he never apologized, his behavior after the incident proved that he was sorry he had humiliated me like that.

Fortunately, the only thing I stressed about during my teenage years was boys. One day at Hampstead High School, a friend told me something after I complained to her about yet another boy crush. She said, “At least boys are your only problem and the only issue you have to worry about. Some of us have bigger problems...” At 15 years old, I couldn’t imagine anyone in our age group worrying about anything else other than boys...and maybe school. Her feedback opened my eyes and I realized how I needed to start counting my blessings and stop complaining about such petty things. Boys were not everything; there were bigger problems out there and bigger things to worry about.

I ended my two years at Hampstead - with no more boy drama - when I successfully completed my GCSE high school exam in May 1995. For graduation, our class went on a boat trip party down the Thames River, celebrating the end of our high school. Unlike in the United States, British schools didn’t host a high school graduation ceremony or a prom. The boat trip was the closest thing we came to a prom.

After successfully passing my GCSE exams in 1995, I was accepted at Barnet College in London and enrolled in the A-Levels program in September 1995. A-Levels are almost like Grade 12 and 13, and prepare students for University. Students typically chose two to three subjects to concentrate on and I picked Business, English and French. I chose Business because I wanted to become a successful international business woman, French because it was the second most international language, after English, and English because I enjoyed writing. But a few months into my A-Level program, I decided that I hated French, although I had taken classes in the language in high school, and dropped the subject.

Attending Barnet College at 16 years old, I felt a new sense of freedom and maturity. I was no longer being chauffeured to school, and for the first time, I started using the public transportation by riding the famous London underground train popularly known as the “Tube” and the beautiful red Double Decker buses. I loved it! I felt a sense of independence with the freedom to go around on my own and whenever I wanted to without being monitored, as long as I was home in time for dinner. Our family dinners were an important time for the whole family to get together to eat, fellowship and update each other on what had happened during the day.
While at Barnet, I discovered that my friends were doing far more ‘mature’ things than I was, such as going to clubs, dating and having sex. My sisters and I had never dated up to this point, and we were as innocent as lambs. One day we decided to go to the club for the first time with our friends. We asked our father for permission, but he immediately objected, telling us that we were too young to go clubbing, and that bad things happened in such places. We weren’t convinced, and managed to sneak out of the house to go to Samantha’s - a popular night club in London with a hip-hop, R’n’ B and dancehall reggae flavor. Disobeying our father was not a good thing to do, but we didn’t understand his reasoning and thought he was just being very unfair. Needless to say, we were probably the best behaved club-goers at Samantha’s that night, and simply danced in a little circle, sipping on water and Coca-Cola.

When our first night of clubbing was complete, we tried to sneak back in during the wee hours of the next morning, but were not allowed back in the house. We ended up sleeping at a friend’s house. In the late morning when we got home, our father completely ignored us, and gave us the silent treatment for days. He was extremely upset that we had gone against his word, and didn’t say a thing to us because we had disobeyed him. He didn’t tell us off and he didn’t spank us either. He was just silent...which was probably worse than either of the other two options. Finally, about a week or so later, he forgave us, and we all forgot about our clubbing transgression. He’s such a good and caring father!

One day, Jehovah’s Witnesses knocked on our door. None of us knew about Jehovah’s Witnesses and thought that they were a cult, but I opened the door for them anyway, and listened to what they had to say. They were offering to hold private Bible study sessions for us at our house for free. I liked the idea of Bible studies since we didn’t attend church, and I thought they were very kind and dedicated Christians, who were spreading the gospel. I’d never had personal Bible lessons before, and my only experience with the Bible had been in attending Lutheran church services in Namibia. After telling my parents about the Bible study and reviewing the pamphlet that the Jehovah’s Witnesses had left, they agreed to let my siblings and I participate in the Bible studies on Sunday afternoons.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses came every Sunday and took us through the Bible, sharing many beautiful lessons. I took a great interest in the Bible stories and learned quite a lot. I asked a lot of questions during our study sessions, and had many things explained to me for the first time. My eyes were opened to the mysteries of God, and I became even keener to be a better and more knowledgeable Christian. I was surprised to learn in one of our lessons that it was a sin to have sex outside marriage. After every class, our parents would ask us what we had learned, and
would validate the stories and the messages we were receiving, including the one about fornication. “Of course it is wrong, you didn’t know that?” they asked us when we told them our new lesson. I responded that nobody – including them - had ever told me that. I was glad I’d found out about this sin before I became sexually active. I didn’t want to disappoint God by having sex outside marriage and I vowed to obey this rule.

Our Bible Studies sessions were going quite well, until one day when my father started hearing rumors from his friends that Jehovah’s Witnesses were a cult and not really a Christian organization. According to his friends, the Jehovah’s Witnesses apparently had a different doctrine that was contrary to the teachings of the Bible, and considered Jesus an angel, rather than the Son of God, therefore rejecting the idea of the Holy Trinity. My father’s friends also recited stories they had heard about smart and intelligent people who had become mentally disturbed after joining the so-called cult. My father grew very concerned about all that he was hearing, and didn’t want us to fall victim to any false doctrines. So to protect us, he immediately put an end to our Bible Stud lessons with the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

At the time we hadn’t gotten too deep into the Jehovah’s Witness teachings, as we were still learning the basics of the Bible. I didn’t see any harm in what they were teaching us, and didn’t believe the stories about people going crazy from learning about the Bible. I thought their mental breakdowns must have resulted from something else. I was devastated with my dad’s decision because I wanted to get to know God better, and felt as if he was taking something important away from me. Heartbroken by the ceasing of my Bible lessons, I cried and cried...almost as much as the day my dad had cut off my hair. But I was determined not to give up on my mission to get to know God better, and secretly communicated with my Jehovah’s Witnesses teachers and told them that I could still meet with them privately at a park not too far from my house. This arrangement went well and I was happy to resume Bible studies. My father later found out about my private lessons, but he didn’t stop me from going.

A few weeks later though, and before I could get deeply indoctrinated into the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ teachings, my father was posted to the United States as the second Namibian Ambassador there. I said goodbye to my Jehovah’s Witnesses teachers, and they encouraged me to continue in the Jehovah’s Witnesses faith by attending their church, Kingdom Hall, when I got to Washington, DC. They gave me the address and everything, but deep down, I knew that this would be my last encounter with their church. I wasn’t interested in attending Kingdom Hall church. I didn’t attend it while in London, and I wasn’t interested in attending it while in the USA. I just wanted to learn more about God and the Bible without being confined to a church, as
I found churches boring...well, at least the traditional ones I had attended thus far. Needless to say though, I believe God used my Jehovah’s Witnesses teachers to show me the basics about the Bible and about Him, and perhaps ended their lessons at a point where they needed to be stopped.

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One day in 1996, after five years of living in London, my dad told us that our term in Britain was coming to an end and that we would either be sent to Japan or the United States on a new diplomatic posting. It wasn’t finalized yet. Expecting the end of our term in London, I had often prayed to God that we wouldn’t go back to Namibia just yet and that we’d be posted somewhere even better than England. And the only place that I thought was better than England at the time, was the United States of America. I loved London and thought it was the best place to live in the world, but I prayed to God that He would please let us go to the USA next, so that I could pursue my dreams to the fullest. On a school trip one afternoon, we went to the London Greenhouse and Civic Garden Complex, where there was a pond filled with ocean water and a sign that instructed visitors to toss a coin in the water and make a wish. ‘It will come true’, the sign promised. So I tossed a coin and wished that we would be posted to America after London. I didn’t quite believe in that coin toss, but I believed God heard my prayers in the end.

I was overjoyed a few months later when my father told us that we were moving to Washington, DC!

As friends learned that my family and I were moving to America, they were so envious...but in a good way, of course. It was funny how people who had never been to America forewarned us about life there, and cautioned us to stay safe in a country that was apparently plagued by violence and crime in every corner of the city, as shown in the movies. Back in the early ‘90s, Washington DC was considered to be the murder capital of the United States. We were told not to wear our favorite shoes and clothes in public if we didn’t want to be shot and mugged for them; and were warned not to stare anyone in the face or straight in their eyes, as we would get shot and killed for that. I appreciated the advice but I was too happy and excited about my new home to take their comments seriously. I believed life in America was going to be great with all those Americans and their amazing accents and culture that I had fallen in love with from watching the movies and listening to their music. To me Americans were the most amazing people and their country was the best country in the world and I longed to be there. I was so heavily into American culture at the time, constantly listening to black American music. I
especially loved artists like Jodeci, Da Brat, SWV, Tevin Campbell, Mary J. Blige, Kriss Kross, Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson, and all the rest. I also adored ragga and dancehall music, with artists like Buju Banton, Patra, and Beanie Man. So I looked forward to going to America and attending a school with predominantly black Americans and Jamaicans because I thought they were the coolest people ever, and I was so completely mesmerized by their cultures.

At the time, I had just started dating a fine young man, Martin, who was from the Caribbean. He was tall, light-skinned and a “rude boy.” Rude boys were almost like bad boys but not that bad. They were just cool. Plus those are the kind of guys my friends and I liked. Even before Martin, I was ‘talking’ to another “rude boy” called Richard, whom I’d met at Barnet College. I was not attracted to African guys, unless they were from Namibia or anywhere in Southern Africa and it didn’t help that all the African guys I met in London were from East and West Africa. Thanks to the Bible study teachings, I never slept with any of the boys I dated in London because I believed sex before marriage was wrong, as I had been taught by my Jehovah’s Witnesses friends in Bible study.

As I told Martin of my departure to the States, I dreamed of my first black American boyfriend. I even told myself that I was going to get married to a black American. I thought they were the coolest thing in America and becoming friends with them would be the absolutely best thing to happen to me in America. I was beaming from ear to ear. This was exactly what I wanted, and I felt like a dream had finally come true.

While I looked forward to the day that we would land on American soil, I also cherished all the lessons that I had learned while in Britain. Being in this country was a totally different experience from my early years in exile, and my puberty-entering years in Namibia. In London, I had become more in tune with myself –emotionally, physically, and spiritually. I had come closer to myself by disciplining and training myself through a 50 lb weight loss. I had also come closer to God by learning more about Him and His will. Emotionally, I learned that life wasn’t just about boys...although I was looking forward to my first American beau. And intellectually, I had become exposed to so many new and exciting cultures, refining my outlook as a global citizen, and overcoming strange cultural incidences such as the racism my sisters and I experienced during our first year at school in London. There were so many ways in which my eyes had been opened in London, and I would never forget how all these wonderful experiences shaped my worldview. By molding my early teenage years through each of these small experiences, London had awakened me to the world, and prepared me for what would lay ahead.
July 1996 finally came and we packed our things for America. Our belongings went straight to Washington, DC, while we went to Namibia for a month’s vacation, where I would see my mother, and share all the wonderful adventures I had experienced in London. In Namibia, we stayed at the lovely Safari Hotel for a month, and on August 20th, 1996, we boarded the plane from Windhoek to Washington, DC.
Chapter Four in Pictures

Soon after my arrival in London, at my new school, with some of my new friends. From left: Fatima, Connie, I can't remember the other two girl's names. I'm the one on the right. Picture was taken in September 1991.

With my first set of friends at my first school in London, Whitefield School. In the picture from left is Melanie, me, Sadika in the back, Melanie Clutton and Rebecca. Picture taken in September, 1991

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Above: with my friends at Whitefield. On the right, I’m showing off the first cake that I ever baked during a Home Economics class at Whitefield.
With friends that I made at the International Private School. I can’t remember their names but if I remember correctly, the girl in the middle was from Singapore and the tall girl on the right was from Lebanon.

Feeling slim and sexy after I losing 50lbs in 1994.
My sisters and I going clubbing after our father flatly told us we couldn’t go. I like this picture just because it was our first time dressing up like this to go out partying to experience London’s nightlife. On the left is Nelao, me and Ndinelao.

With my Hampstead High School friends celebrating the end of high school in 1995. From left: Asti, me, Ruth and Lee Underwood.
At Hampstead High School with some of my friends: from the left Siobhan Dixon, me, Mohamed, Bhina, Darren, and Gemma in the front.

At Barnet College in London with Connie and Shaila.
Top picture: Enjoying the summer at Hampstead High School with my friends (l-r) Ursula, Asti, Silvia and Ashana. Bottom picture: (l-r) Ursula, Delia, me, Camille and Linda.
CHAPTER FIVE

USA: My Country of Growth

“And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.”

- (Galatians 6:9)

During our flight to Washington, DC, I played Mary J Blige’s “Sweet Memories” on my walkman non-stop. It was my theme song for that season as I thought about the sweet memories I was leaving in London, including my sweetheart Martin and all my great friends. The song also made the flight even more enjoyable as I looked forward to making many more sweet memories in America.

My day dreaming and reminiscing were temporarily interrupted by an interesting sight outside the plane. I saw clouds but thought it was snow as I had never seen snow before. In London, we’d only seen and felt rain, and on previous flights to or from Namibia, we always traveled at night, so never saw the scenery outside our windows. I told my siblings “Look at the snow!” and we all stared out the window wide-eyed and amazed, exclaiming “Wow!” in wonder. After landing, we discovered that what we had eagerly been observing in-flight was not snow, but clouds. The reality wasn’t as exciting.

We arrived in the most powerful city in the world and the capital city of the United States, Washington, DC, on August 2, 1996. I remember looking out the plane window when it landed and thinking, “Oh my goodness, it looks so cold out there.” It looked dark, gloomy, and cloudy as if it was freezing cold. But as soon as we got outside Dulles International Airport – going through our VIP immigration procedures – the weather almost knocked me over. It was so hot and humid; I don’t remember ever being that hot in my life, not even in Africa. How could it be so hot and humid when it looked so cold? There was no wind or breeze, just sticky hot humidity, which was unbearable. I was so hot I wanted to strip naked and wondered “what kind of strange weather is this?” I rushed to one of the cars waiting to chauffeur us to our residence, and was glad they had the air conditioning on maximum as I needed to be cooled down from the DC humidity before I died from heatstroke.

As we drove from the airport, despite the weather outside, I began to fall in love with Washington DC and its lovely landscape. The area was so green and beautiful, and the city was almost as clean as Namibia’s capital city, Windhoek. We finally got to our house in the
Georgetown-Palisades suburb of Washington, DC. I liked our new home, though I much preferred our gated London house. Although we had an outdoor pool in Washington, our London house had featured an indoor heated swimming pool with a Jacuzzi and sauna. Our new “aunties” and “uncles” (housekeeper and chauffeurs) in DC were all from the Philippines.

We were due to start school the week after we arrived in Washington, and used our first few days to get settled at home, and ready for the week ahead. Our father took us around to get all the things we needed for school, and as we perused the stores and streets of DC, we got a chance to mingle with a few Americans. I loved their accents, and people seemed happier and friendlier compared to the British who I found to be naturally “cold”. Everything appeared big and super sized in America. People were big and tall. Food portions were much larger than I was accustomed to. And life itself appeared larger than life.

When my sisters and I went to test for our grade placements in school, I found the English and American terminology to be quite different, and this confused me during the exam. Although I passed the test to enter my age appropriate USA grade 12, I needed to get accustomed to the American education system before taking my college SAT exams and to get all the high school class credits that were required to successfully complete a US high school. To make up for my outstanding credits, I was placed in grade 11 instead of 12. At first I didn’t like the idea of being below my age grade and I wished I had just stayed in London to finish my A-Levels. But I eventually realized that this was the best option for me. Plus, it was an opportunity to experience America’s high school system and culture for two years.

The first week of school in America was awesome. I was so happy to be surrounded by all these Americans and their nice “rrrrroarrrring” accent. They were so cool...just like in the movies. I got even more excited when a cute black American boy chose to sit right behind me and always tried to get my attention by asking me for a pen, paper and assistance with the school work. His name was Anthony and he was a fine, tall basketball player, who wore really baggy clothes. He reminded me of the black Americans I had seen in the movies before coming to America. During my first class at my new school, I also became friends with a black American girl called Cantinique. She appeared to be one of those stereotypical black Americans to me, except she wasn’t as “ghetto” as those portrayed in the movies. In that first class, I also made friends with a talkative girl called Patricia, although I couldn’t pinpoint where she was from at first because she didn’t have an accent. It later turned out that like me, she too was an Ambassador’s daughter, and we soon found out that we lived very close to one another.
When I went to my world geography class, a girl who looked like one of those real loud, rowdy and ‘ghetto’ black American girls from the movies decided to befriend me. Her clothes were extremely baggy and she wore a long funky looking wig with different colors and a lot of gel applied to the front and side areas. I really don’t know what she saw in me, but of all the people in the class that she could have chosen to befriend that day, she picked me. Judging from her appearance, I thought she would be too much for me and tried to ignore her, but she just wouldn’t stop talking. So seeing as she really liked me, I decided to give her a chance. She ended up becoming my first close friend in the USA. Her name was Jaselle and she was originally from Trinidad, but she had grown up in Brooklyn, New York.

The following semester I became good friends with Ayana who was also from Trinidad. Before I knew it, my circle of friends at school comprised people mainly of Caribbean, African-American and African descent. Unlike in London, it didn’t take me long to settle and feel at home in America. I didn’t experience any culture shock. I believe London prepared me for life in America, as the experience there had made me accustomed to being friends with people from different parts of the world.

A few months after starting school, my family was invited to the White House to meet with the President of the United States, President Bill Clinton. There, in the walls of the Oval Office, my father presented his credentials to President Clinton. My heart almost jumped out that day, as I stood in the same room as the most powerful man in the world at the time. I was overwhelmed by his presence, and felt the weight of his influence and magnitude; I couldn’t believe that I was actually in his Oval Office, and I relished the wonderful experience of being in the presence of a President of the United States.

Life in America was certainly more fun than London. Although I was still in high school at the time, I could go out with friends to different events and stay out late. One day, my darling father drove me and my sisters to Ayana’s house on Kennedy Street, for a party. Kennedy Street is not a very good neighborhood in the NW part of DC and my father was reluctant to take us there, but we convinced him that we would be fine and safe. After meeting Ayana’s parents, our father left us there and told us to call him when we were ready to leave. We didn’t leave until 2am and we had so much fun dancing. Again my sisters and I never got into nasty businesses. We always looked out for each other and held each other accountable, knowing that wherever we went, we were not just representing ourselves, but our parents too. The way we carry ourselves reflects on our parents who raised us.
The first time I got into a fight in high school was with Cantinique, after we had stopped talking for no good reason. For some reason, she had starting to annoy me and I decided to cut her off for a while. We ignored each other for some time, but then she wanted to be friends again and wouldn’t stop pestering me to be her friend. I got so annoyed with her pestering, irate at the fact that she wouldn’t leave me alone and get the hint that I wasn’t interested in being her friend, that I started the fight. I don’t know what had gotten in me. I kick-boxed her and she cat-fought me and scratched me back. I kick-boxed some more – like I had learned from watching Jacky Chan’s movies and the Karate kid – and our fight continued in that manner: kick-box for cat-scratch. Luckily there weren’t too many students in the area where we were fighting, and no one reported us to the school leadership for fighting at school. I would’ve gotten suspended from school for the first time ever in my life if they had found out. Those who witnessed the fight laughed at my karate moves on Cantinique and marveled at what a good fighter I was. That was the first time I fought anybody since getting into that one crazy fight with my friend Tuvambala in Namibia, in 1990. However, I felt bad for beating Cantinique up. I felt that I was losing my “good girl” attitude and needed to refocus. I repented after the fight and apologized to Cantinique, and without any further ado, we resumed our friendship.

I was part of the track and field team where I preferred to run long distance, although my track coach always made me run short distance. I was also a Flag Girl in the Marching band. I regret not joining the school’s soccer team, though. Soccer is my favorite sport, and I often wish I had taken it up more seriously in my earlier years.

At school, I did really well in my classes; especially in my business classes where I realized my great passion for entrepreneurship. In the fall semester of the 12th grade, we were given a school project to start a business for the semester, and went off to New York to buy the products we needed for resale. I bought jewelry at a wholesale price and sold it at a huge mark-up to fellow students, eventually making US$1,000 from my small business investment of $50. I used some of the money to buy my dress, shoes and jewelry for our high school prom, and banked the rest. During that school year (1998), I was awarded the school’s business student of the year award, as well as the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) scholarship in business. The US$1000.00 NFTE award helped to purchase my expensive college books in my first year of college.

In my last year of high school, my “fetish” for black American guys eventually disappeared when I laid my eyes on people from the Dominican Republic (Dominicans), and decided that they were the finest and best looking people alive. I had never seen or noticed such fine people
as I had never heard of the Dominican Republic or Dominicans before then. One day, towards the end of 1997, a friend introduced me to a handsome Dominican guy, who I affectionately nicknamed “Pabby” because he was my papi chulo (translated as ‘hot boy’). He was the first guy to take me out on a date in America, and he took me to see the most romantic movie ever: Titanic. He introduced me to the Dominican way of life and I instantly immersed myself in its culture, listening to Latin music and learning to dance salsa, merengue and bachata. At Latin gatherings and parties, people started mistaking me for being a Dominicana. They would often speak to me in Spanish, and though I usually didn’t understand a thing they were saying, this always made my day because I thought being mistaken for a Dominican was a great honor and compliment.

In May 1998, I started preparing for my high school prom, a senior year dinner-party that most students looked forward to. My friend Jaselle came to my house with her makeup kit, and together, we got ready for the special night. It was my first time wearing serious makeup. On Prom Day, I couldn’t go with my Pabby since he wasn’t a student at our school, so I went with my friend Ricardo instead. I believe I was the best dressed at the prom based on the stares and compliments I got that day. My dress was very sexy. My dad didn’t see it until I was about to leave the house, so I’m not sure what he thought, but I thought I looked gorgeous. I had so much fun that night just dancing with my friends and not engaging in any of the common prom behaviors such as drinking, smoking or getting into any sort of sexual activity. I grew up believing that only bad young people engaged in such things, so I stayed far away from that. Up to now, at 30 years, I can honestly say I’ve never been a smoker or a consumer of alcohol, and I’ve also never been sexually active. I’m a big advocate for abstinence until marriage.

One day I found out that Pabby was two-timing me. This was my first time ever experiencing dating drama so I didn’t confront the girl as my focus was on dealing with the man. I never understood or agreed with women who took out their relationship issues on the women their men were cheating with. It doesn’t make sense. So I dealt directly with Pabby, and though he denied it at first, he eventually admitted that he had been cheating on me. I was so hurt. I had never gone through anything like this before. To process all the emotional pain, I went for a long walk in my neighborhood. I cried and cried, and the long crying walk helped to calm my emotions.

A couple of days later, following hundreds of apologies and promises of faithfulness, Pabby and I patched things up. One day I went to his house but he wasn’t there and I couldn’t reach him. Only his brother was home, so I hung out with him while I waited for Pabby to get back. After waiting for a long while, his brother let me go upstairs to my boyfriend’s room to leave a note.
But once I got in the room, I found some things that I wasn’t happy about - signs of continued cheating. I lost it! He was out with the other girl that day and that’s why he wasn’t home. Feeling betrayed, I ransacked his room and turned it upside down looking for more cheating evidence...anything that I could take to “blackmail” him with. I found a shoebox that he used to keep his valuable items so I took his credit card, his green card, his passport, his driver’s license, and all his other important documents. I found pictures of me, and also pictures of the other girl and I destroyed them. When I was done, I wrote him a long note confessing what I had done to his room, and what I had taken. I told him that if he wanted his things back, he would have to contact me to buy them back.

Later that night, I imagine Pabby got home, and got the shock of his life when he walked into his room and found a huge mess, with his legal documents missing, and my note on his bed. He immediately called me and was the angriest I’ve ever heard him. I was happy thinking that I had gotten a sweet revenge. It was a great, empowering feeling, which instantly healed me from the heartbreak. I told him that all he had to do to get some of his things back was to buy them back. He knew I didn’t need the money, but that was beside the point. I gave him three days to come up with US$600.

Extremely upset and fed up that he couldn’t get me to budge and return his belongings, he hung the phone up on me and reported the incident to the police, who then went his house that evening. The police called me from his house...luckily none of my parents were home as they were out of the country. In any case, I wasn’t scared of the cops. I didn’t believe I was the one at fault because I hadn’t started the trouble in the first place, and deep down I knew justice was going to prevail. All I had to do was play cool and stick to my demands. The policeman asked me if I took Pabby’s stuff and without hesitating, I told him that I did, just as I clearly indicated on the note that I had left. I told the cop everything that had happened that had led me to this point, and explained to him that the only way I would give Pabby his stuff back, was if he bought them back. The cop unsuccessfully tried to get me to change my mind about the bargain I was making, and in the end, it seems he sympathized with me. I overheard him telling Pabby: “If you want your stuff back, you better pay the amount that she’s asking for...” They left his house without filing an incident report on me, and left the matter at that.

I was glad everything was going in my favor. Pabby was fuming though. He couldn’t believe that the police had let me off the hook. He was so upset that he wouldn’t let me go to sleep that night. He kept calling my house non-stop until I disconnected the phones in our bedrooms. Even after unplugging the bedroom phones, I could faintly hear the phones downstairs ringing. But
they were not as loud and I managed to fall asleep peacefully with a sense of victory. When I checked the caller ID the next morning, it recorded the last incoming call from him at 6:24am. He didn’t sleep all night. I got many more calls from Pabby in the days that followed, but I played it cool as the lady in charge of the situation, and I stuck to my demands. I drove him so crazy with this situation that he stopped contacting me personally and spoke to me through his family. But as much as I loved and respected his family, they couldn’t get me to show their loved one any mercy. I believed he needed to learn a lesson and I wasn’t going to let him off the hook that easily. A few days later, Pabby was ready to buy his things back, and one of his brothers called to arrange a meeting place and time. I met his brother at the CVS store in my neighborhood, and when he handed me the money, I told him to give it to the cashier. I then asked the very puzzled cashier to check for the authenticity of the money, and when she verified that it was real, I took the money, counted it, and then gave most of his stuff back. I still had his credit card in my possession but for some strange reason, the thought of using it didn’t cross my mind. I didn’t know how credit cards worked at the time, and I’m glad I didn’t because I’d probably have maxed it out. And that would have landed me in hot water, as it is a federal offense to use anyone’s credit card without their consent. Ignorance can be a lifesaver sometimes.

The Pabby experience was my first dramatic personal event…no one had ever called the cops on me before. But I believe everything had been divinely orchestrated. If my father had been home that weekend, I’m sure I’d have gotten in trouble when the police called our house that evening. My dad would have made me give the stuff back right away and I wouldn’t have effectively fought and taught Pabby a lesson on how never to disrespect me again because I would go “crazy” on him.

As ugly as the situation was, I believe I had God’s favor and mercy in this situation, by being accorded the opportunity to stand up for myself against the hurt I’d been dealt, and in the end, to leave with a sense of empowerment. As a result I was able to heal faster from the heartbreaking experience, and I forgave Pabby. Two months later, Pabby forgave me for the hell that I had put him through with this situation that almost drove him crazy, and we became friends again. Soon thereafter, I left for college in Michigan, a state faraway from Washington, DC. We have kept in touch ever since then and continue to remain very close friends to this day.

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After I graduated from high school, my father took me to visit a college that I really wanted to attend because of my business interest: Northwood University in Midland, Michigan. I lived
close to American University (AU) in Washington, DC, and my father suggested that I apply there, but I felt it was too close to home, and I wanted to have a true college experience far away from home. My father has always respected and supported my decisions, giving me the freedom to make my own choices concerning my future without any pressure from him. Deciding on college was no different. He simply advised me and made suggestions based on his experience.

I fell in love with Northwood University (NU) the first day I visited the school, and in August 1998, my father helped me move into my dorm room at NU’s Midland, Michigan Campus. I got VIP treatment at that school as they were happy to have an Ambassador’s daughter enrolled there. I didn’t think being an Ambassador’s daughter was a big deal, but the school was honored that I had chosen Northwood.

My first year of college was so much fun. I instantly made friends and became quite popular at the school. Our first party was the Icebreaker Party where I was one of the centers of attention as my friend Dionne Noel and I partied the night away. We danced really well, and with so much energy, that although I don’t drink and had never gotten drunk, other students thought I was drunk or high on something that night. People make that mistake with me all the time at parties and gatherings due to my 24-hour high energy and the fact that I naturally get high on life and music. I don’t need to take anything to feel happy and in the mood to party. I’m sure we all have a natural highness off of life that doesn’t require us to abuse our bodies with toxins in order to feel happy. We just have to tap into that natural high and have fun the clean and safe way. It’s always worked for me, and I’ve never felt amiss of having a good time at a party.

In my first year of college, I joined the college’s track and field team, as well as the cheerleading squad. Due to my outgoing and fun-loving personality, that school year I was one of the students chosen for the school’s calendar, “Northwood’s Finest.” I modeled for the calendar in a cute workout outfit, since I was a fitness freak who loved to work out and stay in shape. It was an honor to be awarded such a title at school in my freshman year along with 11 other students in different years in college.

It was also during my first year at Northwood University that I found myself being naturally drawn to a deeper spiritual life. Although I had become a Christian in Namibia, I didn’t attend church, read my Bible or pray on a regular basis. One day, my roommate, Michelle Muse, invited me to go to her hometown, Detroit, with her. I enjoyed my time in Detroit, which was about four hours from Midland. I found people in Detroit to be very friendly. I also found Detroit to have a
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higher concentration of great looking black American men than I’d seen anywhere else before. The men were also very polite and well mannered. I was very impressed.

Before I left Detroit, Michelle took me to the church she attended: Church of Christ. It was my first time attending a non-traditional Christian church, and the singing and manner in which the people worshipped God amazed me. They were very active and involved in the service and sermon. When the pastor preached, they would yell “hallelujah, praise the Lord,” dance, and shout for joy. There was so much life in that church which I found amazing but puzzling at the same time. “Is church supposed to be like this?” I wondered. Everyone was just so engaged and attentive in the service. I couldn’t understand anything the Pastor was saying, but the people around me seemed as if they were really into it. I looked around, and some people – young and old – were even taking notes. I thought “Why would anybody want to take notes in church? What is the Pastor saying that is so profound that it needs to be noted?” What an interesting church experience that was for me.

Soon after returning from Detroit, some other students at Northwood University and I were invited to attend Faith Ministries Baptist Church in Midland. I didn’t know what kind of church it was, but agreed to go anyway. I figured that church was just church, a place where Christians go for fellowship and to worship God. Faith Ministries was the only black church in the small town of Midland, and was led by Reverend Anthony Revis. It was my second time attending a charismatic church where people sang and danced as if they were at some type of party. People looked as if they were really enjoying church. The way the Pastor was shouting and preaching and occasionally breaking into a holy dance was quite funny to me at first. The music then started playing, and members danced and danced. Some of the dance moves were entertaining to watch. I was having a true Baptist church experience, and I didn’t mind coming back to this church for more.

I started attending Faith Ministries church regularly after that first visit, and enjoyed the service every time. I was surprised that my eyes were still open after a two-hour service, unlike in my first church experience as a child, where I needed a nail clipper to keep myself busy. Fortunately, no one had told me in the beginning that Faith Ministries was one of those churches where people become “Born-Again.” If I’d known that, I probably would never have agreed to attend the church because at that time the term "born again" was considered taboo in my circle of friends and family. Although I didn’t know much about the “born again” church movement, I didn’t want to have anything to do with it as they sounded too radical for me and out of touch with the world, from the little that I had heard. I’m glad God kept that small detail from me.
because I would have missed out on many blessings. Contrary to what I had heard before, the term “Born Again Christian” literally means “born from above” and that is one who has made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ or one who has renewed a commitment to Jesus Christ. Those who are born again are usually called Evangelical Christians.

The Bible talks about being born again in John 3:1-21, when Jesus says, “I tell you the truth; no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Nicodemus then asks Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” Jesus answers him by saying, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’” (John 3:3-7).

I had attended traditional church services every now and then in the past, and although I appreciated them, I felt they were not for me, and that’s why I didn’t make it a habit to attend church on a regular basis. In traditional churches, I’d find myself sleeping fifteen minutes into the service and often didn’t remember what the sermon was about. I was not growing in my faith as a result. I didn’t start to enjoy attending church until I started attending long but inspiring charismatic church services. Faith Ministries’ church members were so good to me, especially the Holmans, an African-American family who became my family in Midland. I especially became close to Mrs. Linda Holman when I started braiding her hair. She would pick me up for church and drop me home every Sunday. God really used her to bring me to the Lord, and I’m grateful to her and her family for the love and kindness they showed toward me. I was so happy and empowered by the music and preaching at the church, and I soon started attending Bible Studies regularly on Wednesdays and Sundays.

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During my spring semester in college in 1999, my father was promoted to become the Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs in Namibia. Prior to his promotion, I had often worried about my dependence on him. I wondered what would happen to me if something he were no longer around, and I became uneasy with the idea of being too dependent on him. I yearned to become independent and live my own life; and his new promotion, which required my family to relocate to Namibia, was almost an answer to my soul’s yearning for independence.

I was almost half way done with my Associate Degree, and I didn’t want any disruptions in my personal and career goals. I was not ready to go back to Namibia for good, as I had unfinished business in the USA. Moving back to Namibia meant throwing away a lot of money that my
father had spent on my first year of college because my USA college credits (grades) would not have been able to transfer to an African higher education system. I would have had to start from square one. I also didn’t believe that I would be in a better position to pursue my long terms dreams of becoming a successful international businesswoman if I left. There was so much more I wanted to learn and do in America. I needed to grow, and I felt that God had placed me where I needed to be in order to be all that He has called me to be, and where He would shape and mold me for the great calling. I was where I’d longed to be - in the land of opportunity, reaching for the stars. I wasn’t prepared to let all that go.

I told my father that I was staying in America to complete my college education and pursue my God-given dreams. He questioned how I was going to survive on my own, and presented me with different options - starting university in Namibia or even South Africa - but it wasn’t what I wanted. I wanted an American degree that would be recognized and respected anywhere in the world. It didn’t take long to convince my open-minded father that I was going to be fine and would find a way to survive on my own with the grace of my faithful God, who promised never to leave me nor forsake me. It meant a lot to me for my father to fully support my decision to stay in America on my own at the age of 19, without trying to talk me out of my decision. His confidence and trust inspired me to aim higher and not disappoint him because he showed me that he wasn’t worried about me losing my focus in a foreign land at that age, without parental guidance. He believed in me and that meant the world to me. Before leaving the USA, my father wished me well and gave me a handsome check to send me off on my pilgrimage of self-discovery and growth.

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Now that I was on my own and responsible for footing my own bills, I decided to get busy. During the three-month school summer holiday of 1999, I searched for office work as a day job and for cashier jobs to work at night and on the weekends. My goal was to save up enough money from working two jobs all summer long, to take me through the entire school year - tuition, books, rent and other living expenses - so that I could focus on my studies instead of stressing over financial issues. Unfortunately, the best job I could get was working as a cashier at Hecht’s clothing store earning the low wage of only $6/hour.

I got a second job at CVS as a Salesperson earning the absolute minimum wage of $5.75 an hour. Although I was grateful to God that I got two jobs, I was rather disappointed as I believed He would work wonders and enable me to find an office job in the morning hours earning between
Rachel Valentina Nghiwete

$9-12/hour and then work the CVS/Hecht job at night and weekends. That would have put me in a much better financial position. But $5.75 per hour was better than $0.00 per hour. I stayed with family friends in Washington, DC, during that summer. I woke up at 5am to be at work at 7am every day, and didn’t make it back home until after midnight as my second job finished very late at night. I worked more than 80 hours a week to raise money for my second year of college.

To save money, I walked for an hour every day to work and caught two different buses back home late at night. I never felt so tired, stressed and alone in my life. Sometimes a Good Samaritan would see me standing at the bus stop in my good and safe neighborhood of Georgetown late at night waiting for the bus that would take me closer to home. They’d ask me if I wanted a ride and, when I felt comfortable, I would take the offer, and when I didn’t feel comfortable, I would say “No, thank you. My bus will be here in a minute.” By the grace of God, those few times when I got rides from strangers at night, they took me home safely without any incident. I believe God was just watching out for me. I wasn’t being irresponsible and careless about getting rides from strangers at night; I used my judgment well, and God was merciful towards me.

Towards the end of my summer holiday, I was at work when the new Namibian Ambassador who had replaced my father came to get me at work. I was surprised to see him there and wondered what was wrong. He had come to deliver the devastating news that my father’s wife, Mee Julia Nghiwete, had passed away in a car accident. I felt my father’s pain for losing his wife and my siblings’ pain for losing their mother. I mourned with the whole family and took that day off work, although my boss didn’t want to let me go, arguing that Mee Julia was not my biological mother. But I convinced her that she was a mother to me nonetheless, who had been there for me throughout my teenage years in London and the US.

With this news, I had to decide whether to drop everything I was working towards in America and move to Namibia. My father and I discussed everything, and he encouraged me to stay in America and focus on getting my education and building my career. He assured me that while Mee Julia’s death had come as a horrible and painful shock, the family would be fine.

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I moved back to Midland after the summer vacation to begin my second year of college at Northwood. Before leaving for the summer holidays, Tamekia Bell and I had secured a two-bedroom apartment for our 1999-2000 school year. By the end of the summer, I had managed to raise enough money to pay for my fall and winter term tuition, but I didn’t have enough to pay

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for the spring term, and decided not to worry about it just yet, to avoid stressing myself out further. I would deal with it later.

I started looking for a job, so I could work while attending school to raise more money because I had monthly bills to pay on top of my college expenses, such as rent, utilities, food, and other personal expenses. I applied for jobs, and was blessed to get an interview as an Office Assistant at The Dow Chemical Company, a major corporation with headquarters in Midland. I also applied for work at K-Mart retail store, where I was hired on the spot, earning the minimum wage of $5.75/hour. I took the job, while I prayed for The Dow to get back to me with great news.

I continued attending Faith Ministries every Sunday when I got back to college. Every Sunday, Pastor Revis would do an altar call, inviting people to give their lives to Christ and become saved or “born again.” After months of attending Faith Ministries, I didn’t feel I was ready to make this commitment and completely dedicate my life to Christ. I was happy with just attending the church, without entering into any form of “marriage.” My issue was not with committing to the Christian lifestyle of purity and holiness because I was raised a “good girl” who didn’t drink, use profanity, and was not sexually active. So I had no issues with living according to Biblical teachings. I was content and happy being the kind of Christian that I was without fully dedicating my life to Christ.

But even so, I could hear the scripture, “Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil. It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones.” (Proverbs 3:7-8) speaking to me. Deep down I knew that I was going to give my life to Christ sooner than later, as the desire to do so was burning deep inside of me. But while my body was ready, my mind was hesitant to commit just yet. I wanted to wait until I got a few things in my life in order, such as my education and career, before I committed to anything else. I argued that because I was one of those people that when I commit myself to something, I do so wholeheartedly and passionately, I’d have to wait a little longer. I noted in my heart that I’d dedicate my life to Christ in May after I graduated from college, as I believed by then I would be able to give God all my attention and I would be ready to do His work.

Before my spring semester began in January 2000 and about three months after my job interview at The Dow, I received a call from the company. They were offering me the job I interviewed for at $10.75/hour. Just before that, I had managed to convince my college student account director in a teary and emotional meeting to please allow me to register for the Spring Semester even though I didn’t have enough money to pay for it. I told him my situation and promised to pay the
outstanding amount as soon as I got a job after graduation. He agreed and no interest was applied to the “loan.” I was so happy things were working out for me and I was surviving on my own. It was a brand new year, and I was so glad to leave 1999 behind as it was the toughest year of my life in America. I shed so many tears of loneliness, stress and struggling to make ends meet. Although I could have asked my parents for assistance, I preferred not to as I believed I could handle things on my own.

One day, on Sunday April 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2000, Pastor Revis concluded his sermon with the altar call, as he usually did. I fought so hard not to get up and walk to the altar, to finally give my life to Christ. My body started to act up on me, shaking uncontrollably and a good warm and fuzzy feeling of unconditional love overtook me, as tears started to run down my cheeks. Everything that was happening was totally beyond my control at this point. I couldn’t fight the feeling and what was going on with me spiritually and emotionally at that moment. Overtaken by the “Call,” I found myself crying tears of joy as I got out of my seat and accepted the call to become born again. I walked to the front of the church to the applause and praise of fellow church members who were joyful that I had decided to give my life to Christ and to use it for His glory. I felt so liberated; I couldn’t stop crying. I wasn’t crying because I was sad, but because I was happy, and felt so honored that God would choose me to be on His winning side. He has called all of us to enlist in His army, but often times, we reject or delay the call, but tomorrow is not promised.

I stood at the altar with others who were also dedicating and re-dedicating their lives to Christ. There was so much joy, singing and dancing in the church, and I believe in the heavens too, as church members and angels welcomed us to the Kingdom of God. As I stood by the altar, I wept some more as I thought about God’s love, goodness and faithfulness to me. I meditated on the scripture that I heard so much about, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16) and ‘In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.” (1 John 4: 9).

I wanted to be more and more of the woman that He had called me to be when he formed me in my mother’s womb 20 years before. All throughout my life, he had always made a way for me. He was a good God and I just wanted to love Him and live for Him. That day, I gave Him full control of my life and let Him use it for His glory. I raised my hands in the air and just praised his Holy name for being the excellent God that He is, as I repented as the Bible commands us, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)
The Pastor emphasized that God’s greatest gift to us is salvation through the obedient act of His Son Jesus Christ. Through salvation, God gives us many benefits and blessings, the greatest one being eternal life in God’s presence. The gift of Salvation is available to all who choose to believe and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. God wants to bring us into an eternal relationship with Him, but that will only happen when we stop being separated from Him by our sinful nature. Pastor then led us into the prayer of Salvation as he reminded us that, “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). The "prayer of salvation" is the most important prayer you’ll ever pray. If you believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and died on the cross for your sins and desire to join the Lord’s army, feel free to pray this prayer, which marked a major transition point in my life, with me:

Father, I know and acknowledge that I am a sinner. I believe that you died on the cross for me. I know that I have broken your laws and my sins have separated me from you. I want to turn away from my past sinful life toward you. Please forgive me, and wash me clean with your Blood. I invite you to come and live in my heart, and become the Lord of my life. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me obey You, and to help me to live in a way that pleases you. Make me the kind of person You want me to be and do Your will for the rest of my life. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. I love you, Lord, and I thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. I am a new creation. Old things have passed away. Now all things become new. I ask You for the strength to love You more than anything else so I won’t fall back into my old ways. I also ask You to bring genuine believers into my life who will encourage me to live for You and help me stay accountable. Lord, I am truly grateful for Your grace, which has led me to repentance and has saved me from my sins. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.

Praise the Lord, I was now saved! No one had to scare me with hell and heaven to give my life to Christ; I’m glad love, and not fear, led me to Christ. I know without a shadow of doubt that if I die today, I’ll spend eternity in heaven.

After the prayer, the Pastor cautioned us that being saved does not mean being perfect. It means that we are forgiven of our past transgressions, and should strive to be more like Christ every day. The Bible says that, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” (2 Corinthians 5: 17). A couple of Sundays later, I got baptized in water, to publicly demonstrate my new life and as a sign of old things passed (washed) away and made new.
If you’re reading this book, chances are God is inviting you to give your life to Him or to rededicate your life to Him, if you have backslid. Please sincerely pray the Prayer of Salvation above and believe it in your heart and accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior today. You don’t need to wait until you have major issues to turn to God and become saved. Most people tend to believe that it’s only people who have problems that became born again Christians. We all have problems in life, but not everyone gives his life to Christ because he has issues. That wasn’t the reason I gave my life to Christ. I was content and happy with my life when I decided to give my life to Christ. But generally the sufferings of some people, not all, who are not saved, are sometimes used by the Holy Spirit to cause them to realize their need of salvation and to turn to Christ to repent and acquire a new faith and a new lease on life.

If you’ve prayed this prayer of salvation with true conviction and heart, you are now a follower of Jesus even if you don’t feel any different. Welcome to the family of God. I encourage you to seek out a Christ-centered, God-fearing, Bible-believing church to cultivate your new-found faith where you can be baptized and grow in the knowledge of God. Baptism as a born again is a way to wash away your sins, even if you were baptized as a baby. Baby baptism is more like a “baby dedication” because at that age, a baby has not confessed its sins to be washed clean as is the symbolic gesture of a true baptism. The Bible commands: “And now why tarriest thou? Arise, be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” (Acts 22:16)

Here are the four steps that proved vital to building my relationship with the Lord after becoming a born again:

**Step 1: Read your Bible every day.** The easiest and fastest way to “grow up” in the faith is to make Bible reading a priority and study the Scriptures. Jesus wants us to eat the Word to mature in the spirit and walk in fellowship with Him as we build a personal relationship with Him, just as we eat food to sustain our bodies. As the Bible says, “…blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it” (Luke 11: 28).

**Step 2: Attend church services and programs regularly.** Meeting together regularly with other believers is encouraged in the Bible in Hebrews 10:25 because it is fundamental to spiritual growth. Shop around for a good church where you feel at home.

**Step 3: Get involved in the church.** Pray and ask God which ministry in the church you should plug into and serve. Many people find their life purpose through church service and soar in their walk with Christ. The easiest way to finding your place in church is to start serving in the area of your passion and to use your talents to advance the Kingdom of God. If the church doesn’t have
a ministry for your passion or interest, talk to the church leadership about starting one or just make yourself available to serve wherever help is needed.

**Step 4: Pray daily.** Prayer is as easy as talking to yourself, except you are talking to God. There are no right or wrong words; God already knows what is in your heart, so just be yourself and pour your heart out to Him. Give thanks to Him daily as you pray for yourself and others, in any praying position, any place and any time.

As you embark on your journey of Salvation, remember that, “For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace” (Romans 6:14). Be patient with yourself and others and understand that it’s a process and it will take some time to fully mature in your Christian faith. Don’t get discouraged when you fail and fall along the way. Simply pick yourself up, carry your cross and finish the race. The Bible tells us in Philippians 2:13 to continue to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in us to will and act according to His good purpose. To lead a successful Christian life, follow the steps above and avoid playing with fire such as hanging out in places, with people and in situations that play on your weakness as you might get burned and lured into sin. “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

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In my last year of earning my Associate’s degree, I decided I was not going to continue for another two years to get my Bachelors, primarily because of a lack of tuition money. I decided to get my Associate Degree and move back to Washington, DC, to work and eventually start my own business. Bill Gates – my inspiration in business – had made it without a college degree, and I believed I could too…or well, at least with the Associate Degree I earned in May 2000.

After graduation, I went to DC and moved in with my father’s former secretary, with whom I had maintained a good relationship. She agreed to let me stay with her in her luxurious two-bedroom apartment until I got a job, and my own place. God remained faithful, and not long after I moved back to Washington, DC, I landed a well-paying office job. A month later, I moved out of Geraldine’s apartment into my own one bedroom apartment in NW DC. She was thankful that I’d honored my word and didn’t overstay as many people do. Part of her didn’t believe I was going to move out that quickly. I was so proud of myself and the progress I was making. I was happy that I had my own beautiful apartment and a place to call my own. I invited my friends over for a house warming party, and we celebrated God’s goodness and faithfulness.
Soon after I moved back to DC, I visited a couple of churches looking for a new home church that was as good as my church in Midland. After a few unsuccessful church visitations, a Namibian embassy worker and friend, Auntie Liberata from Rwanda recommended that I try Bethel World Outreach Ministries in downtown Silver Spring. The next Sunday, I visited the church, and by the end of the service, I knew it would be my permanent place of worship. The church campus was beautiful and located in a good area. I received a warm welcome from the ushers, and the members looked happy. When the service started, I was amazed by the lively international praise and worship. The music was so good, I couldn’t stop praising the Lord and dancing. I must have gotten carried away dancing that first day in church because people near me kept looking my way. Or maybe it was just my beautiful dance moves that were hard not to notice. I’ve always had that effect on people; whenever I dance, they stop and stare.

If the music was not enough to convince me that this place would be my home church, the sermon certainly did. The Bishop of the church, Bishop Darlingston G. Johnson, came to the pulpit, and in an eloquent and powerful way, delivered a message that would have me coming back for more. I was moved by his anointed preaching and appreciated his teaching style that forces one to really listen and take note of every word that is being delivered. I prefer this calm, straightforward and to-the-point style of preaching which is easier to follow, than the shouting style used by some pastors, which I find unorganized, repetitious, and digressive. Two to three hours later, the church service came to an end and I wondered where the time had gone. The service didn’t feel that long. I was happy I found a church that reminded me of Faith Ministries.

Before long, I went through the membership class, became a member of the church in good standing and got actively involved in the church. I started to volunteer in the Children’s Ministry as a Sunday School teacher since I wanted to impact the young generation and was inspired by the scripture “Train up a child in a way that he should go so that when he’s old, he’ll not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). I also joined the church’s Dance Ministry because of my passion for dancing and my desire to use that talent for God.

On September 10, 2000, I took a month’s vacation to Namibia to see my family. I hadn’t seen my mother since 1996 before I first came to America, and I especially missed her. I had a great time in Namibia catching up with family and friends during that time. My family was doing great, and I praised the Lord that everything was going well and everyone was fine.

When I came back from my one month vacation in Namibia, I met the man of my dreams. Or so I thought. He too was Dominican, but had been born and raised in the USA. I’ll call him “D”. D had everything that I wanted in a man. He was saved, could sing and dance exceptionally well,
and like me, loved international music, especially from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. I believed he was a Godsend. We started attending my church together, which he loved, and he soon became a member as well. He was the best thing that happened to me in the love department after my other Dominican guy, Pabby. Things were going great. I couldn’t believe it: I had my own place, a man in my life, a healthy family, a good church and a good job. What more could I ask for?!

Everything on my prayer list was literally answered at that point and almost too good to be true. I was amazed at this God, whom I completely dedicated my life to. He could do such wonders. I was happy and grateful to God for all his blessings.

But things started to go haywire when “D” stopped attending church and got less involved in its activities as he drifted back into things of the world. I was upset at God for not keeping him in church. We could have grown together in the faith and probably gotten married. Or maybe it just wasn’t meant to be. Nonetheless, I’m glad that I kept my purity and didn’t have sex with him. Although I was upset that the relationship of my dreams had failed, I made sure that I stayed connected to the great source, God, who was my strength. Despite being discouraged and emotionally distraught, I continued to go to church.

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In 2002, I decided to venture off and pursue my passion: health and fitness, which had been an important part of my life ever since my 1994 weight loss. I soon landed a job as an Assistant Fitness Manager at Manulife Fitness Center, under the leadership of Nellie Washington, who had so much faith in me and encouraged me to grow in the industry. Around the same time, I helped to start the Bethel Health Ministry at my church, and became one of its leaders. We provided health-screening services to church members and the community through regular health fairs and various health related events. We also opened a small gym at the church. Later, the health ministry added a sports department, Bethel United men’s and women’s soccer teams (of which I was a member), and the Bethelites men’s basketball team.

Our sports teams participated in the Sports 4 Jesus League, playing soccer and basketball against other churches in the Washington, DC area. I was one of the founding members of Sports 4 Jesus and currently serve as the organization’s Executive Administrator. My passion for the health and fitness industry grew as I acquired more experience through my job and health ministry activities. I eventually embarked on my long dream to become a business owner, and started Valentina Total Wellness, which I later incorporated as The WellnessPlex, Inc. The business
started as a part time initiative, in which I supplied health and fitness services and products, providing personal training and selling wellness supplements.

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By early 2003, I had almost completely lost touch with Namibian culture. My command of my native language, Oshiwambo, had declined dramatically, and the only way I kept abreast with what was happening in Namibia was through reading whatever was available online. I didn’t want to forget my country of heritage, Namibia, but I also didn’t have the strong Namibian pride that I saw in many of my friends who had grown up in the country, and I wondered whether it had to do with my exile birth.

But the wondering stopped, when I attended the first ever Namibian Get-Together in the USA held in Washington, DC, on Memorial Day weekend 2003. The get-together was organized by an organization called the Namibian Community in the Americas (NCA) which was founded by Kandi Shejavali, Nangi Geingob and Gerson Kapi. When I’d first heard about the event, I made up my mind that I wasn’t going to attend, as I wasn’t interested in meeting or getting to know any more Namibians in the USA other than the few that were already my friends. When the event got closer though, my curiosity got the best of me and I decided to check it out. And I’m glad I did! I was impressed with the organization and had so much fun with other Namibians and friends of Namibia from all over the USA, that I was sad when the weekend came to an end.

Excited for future events, I eventually became involved in the NCA and made myself available to assist with anything that needed to be done in the community. At the next get-together held in Atlanta the following year, I was voted in as the first official Chairperson of the Namibian Community in the Americas (NCA) for two years. I held my first Namibian leadership post with pride, utmost dedication and commitment to my people. During my two-year tenure, we raised money and sent it to Namibia to benefit the orphans and vulnerable children. We also organized Namibian events in the USA and kept the community up to date and informed about what was happening in Namibia with regular news and email updates and the NCA website.

This new sense of community was intriguing to me, as I had never fully felt Namibian in the social context. But being surrounded by fellow Namibians and celebrating the things that truly made us people of ‘the land of the brave’ helped to nurture my identity as a proud Namibian, despite my limited actual experience of the country.

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As I continued in my work to establish myself as a foremost health professional, I felt the need to become increasingly knowledgeable in the health and fitness industry from a theoretical perspective. I had earned a couple of health and fitness certifications, but I felt needed a health degree to be more effective, marketable, and better-qualified at what I was doing. I needed to go back to school to get my Bachelor’s and Master’s degree. I could hear the scripture, “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15), ringing in my ear, and I knew this was something I needed to take care of sooner rather than later.

I looked around at different colleges in the DC area, and came across American University’s combined Health Promotion Management degree, where I could get my Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in a short period of time. I instantly knew this was what I needed, and went to meet with the program’s dean, Dr. Anastasia Snelling, to learn more. I was sold! I sent in my application, and spent the next few weeks praying and fasting as I awaited the school’s admission response. I was the happiest person alive when I got the acceptance letter from American University stating that I had been admitted to the school and that some of my credits from Northwood University would transfer to American University, saving me some time and money towards my Bachelor’s and Master’s combined program.

Acceptance to American University (AU) was the first step to realizing my dreams in the field of Health. The next stop was to find the money to pay for college. I deferred my admission for one year, which the school’s policy allowed me to do without losing my acceptance to the program. If I didn’t enroll the next year, my admission would be cancelled. God reminded me about a testimony that a sister in church shared the previous year, about how God miraculously paid her college fees. I held onto that testimony, and I kept meditating on it because if God could do it for her, I believed He would do it for me, too. I was convinced that God would pay for my college education and cover all my college-related expenses. I stepped out in faith to find the money for college before I started school a year later.

I started referring to myself as the Ambassador for Christ after Reverend Nicku Mordi preached a powerful message in church one day encouraging us to think like Ambassadors of Christ sent from the Kingdom of Heaven to fulfill a purpose on earth. God would provide for all the needs of His Ambassadors, the Reverend said, adding that if secular governments can provide all the needs of their Ambassadors, then what more the Ambassadors that are sent into the world to do a good work, by their all-powerful Kingdom of God? With that assurance, I stepped out in faith as a true Ambassador for Christ and didn’t worry about where my college tuition was going to
come from as I knew that God had already provided. Having grown up as an Ambassador’s daughter, I understood what Reverend Mordi meant. I took my work as an Ambassador of Christ by the horn, and used it to strengthen my faith and belief in God to provide for my calling on earth that He sent me to accomplish.

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Everything was going well in my life and the future looked very promising. I felt as if I was on top of the world, and I decided to celebrate my big 25th birthday in grand style to honor God and thank Him for his goodness and faithfulness to me for the past 25 years of my life. I was healthy, at peace, financially well, spiritually strong, faithfully serving the Lord and socially comfortable. I was proud of myself and where I was at that point in my life. My business was doing well, I had great friends all around me, and I had no drama in my life. Everything was in place, and I was happy.

Unfortunately, that feeling didn’t last long. Soon after my big 25th birthday celebration, things started going downhill. I was going through all kinds of issues and nothing seemed to be going right in my life. Everything seemed as if it was falling apart and I felt as if I was chained, limited from meeting my potential. I needed to break free. During this time, I looked to the Bible message of the Apostle Peter, whom God had delivered out of prison, after being jailed by King Herod (Acts 12:3-11).

I, too, needed a miracle to break free, and this story served to remind me that with God all things are possible. When Bishop preached on this particular scripture, he also pointed out the importance of being faithful and productive while in “prison” and to not let your problems overtake you, and so remain faithful in well-doing: “And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not” (Galatians 6:9).

These teachings kept me strong during this trying time, and in the midst of it all, I had peace and joy in my heart. As I faced my various trials, I kept my head held high and wore a beautiful smile on my face, as a manifestation of my faith in God, as I continued to trust in Him to work it out. I was determined to hold on to God’s unchanging hand and remain connected to the source of my life, no matter what. When you’re facing challenges, the last thing you want to do is to compromise on your faith and give up on God. Every time I started to worry, I meditated on the scripture, “Be anxious for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.” (Philippians 4:6). With that, my soul was brought to rest.
and I was determined not give the devil any satisfaction. I served him an eviction notice. If you reject him, he’ll flee from you. The battle is not yours but the Lord’s.

After a whole year looking for college tuition assistance from different sources, I came up empty handed for the fall semester of 2004. If I didn’t enroll in school for that semester, my admission would be cancelled as I was allowed to defer for only one year. I still had faith that God would provide because I believed it was His will for me to get an education and increase my knowledge in the area of my calling. He had called me to the ministry of health to help people live better and healthier lifestyles. Eventually, I managed to get a loan from a bank to cover the cost of my fall semester. Even though it was a loan, I was happy that I had at least gotten the money to pay for my first college semester, and I thanked God and continued to believe in Him for a full scholarship.

But at the end of the fall semester I didn’t have money for the spring. Fortunately, the school allowed me to register for classes because I was in good financial standing with the school at the time, and I hoped that before the semester was over, I’d get some funds to pay for the next semester. As the spring semester came to an end, there was still no sign of the money. The school cancelled my enrolment. Despite this, I decided to continue attending classes and doing the assignments, because although I was cancelled, I could still complete the semester but I just wouldn’t receive a transcript until I paid the outstanding balance. I believed the outstanding balance was going to be paid, so I continued with school as if there was no interruption of any sort.

American University gave me until August to pay off my Spring Semester or I wouldn’t be able to register for the next semester. Summer ended, and still no sign of money as collection bills from the university began piling up. Not to worry, I thought. God will make a way somehow, and SOON, I hoped, as time was not on my side. But I believed that “…my God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:19)

I worked harder in my business to get money to help with college. I applied to companies and organizations, locally and internationally, for a scholarship. I tried everything that I could think of to get my hands on a full scholarship. Those were trying times and a big challenge to my faith. On top of my academic stress, I had way too much going on emotionally, mentally and financially. Nonetheless, I had to be persistent and not give up. I had faith in my God to come through for me.

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After countless prayers, worshiping and praising God, fasting and deliverance sessions, “prison” doors were opened and I was set free. To start, I got a business offer in Dallas, Texas, to go to help an affluent client adopt a healthy lifestyle. Since the four month business contract was health-related, I spoke to my academic counselor at American University to allow me to use this opportunity as a paid internship for the following Fall semester, to avoid being dismissed from college and from the program of my dreams over an outstanding balance. The internship was approved.

My client in Dallas paid for my plane ticket and covered all my living expenses there. A few days before I was due to leave for Dallas, I got a call from the Namibian Embassy in Washington, DC, notifying me that there was an American family in the DC area that wanted to offer a Namibian student free accommodation for the duration of their studies. They asked me if I was interested. I thought this was too good to be true, and because I didn’t want to compromise the comfortable living arrangement that I already had at the time, so I asked to meet the couple first. When I met my new “Auntie” Ruth and “Uncle” Paul Manchester, I loved them instantly. And I loved their home too – a lovely four-bedroom house close to downtown Silver Spring, and not too far from my church. They were the only occupants of the house as all their children were married with their own families. I was like their new “daughter,” and they were my American parents.

My time in Dallas was blessed, and I had many divine experiences that strengthened me as I continued to work through the personal problems I was facing. I went on a trip to Oklahoma with my client, where we visited Oral Roberts University – America’s leading Christian educational institution. I also visited the Trinity Broadcast Network’s (TBN’s) studios in Irving, Texas, with my friend Ella Duncan Williams and her famous aunt, Michelle McKinney Hammond – a celebrated and powerful Christian preacher, singer and author. At the TBN studios, I met my favorite female preacher: Paula White, on whose series, ‘God’s Leading Ladies’, I had been meditating on for a long time. I was thrilled to bump into her! Her series had inspired me to dream big and go after those dreams with everything I had, no matter what the devil threw my way.

During the show on which Aunt Michelle was appearing, another guest, Pastor Charlyn Singleton delivered a message that I needed to hear. She said that when you go through STUFF in life, God is just preparing you for the ministry in you. The trials are part of your journey to your purpose, and you should count it all as joy whenever you are going through tough times. She added that before a diamond becomes precious and admirable in the eyes of many, it goes through several stages during which it is created and shaped, before being turned into a brilliant...
treasure. It made me see that I was a diamond in the making, and whatever I was going through was just part of the process of becoming a real jewel.

While staying in Dallas, I worshipped at the famous Bishop TD Jakes’ church, The Potter’s House, where I enjoyed his preaching even more in person. The audiences were huge, but the message was always personal, and I always remember his teaching that “When God does something nice for you, no matter how small, share your story to encourage someone.” All the while, I continued to pray and fast for God’s divine intervention in providing me a scholarship that would allow me to complete my education at American University. I especially meditated on a verse that a friend, Pastor Wale Tychus of Temple Praise International Church in Beltsville, Maryland, had shared with me: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28). This verse was very instrumental in encouraging me during my season of painful trials and tribulations, and as I meditated on it, my faith was strengthened and I just knew that God was going to do it. I was convinced that He hadn’t brought me this far to leave me, and I could hear a quiet voice saying, “Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.” (Psalm 46: 10).

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When I returned to Washington after my spiritually enriching time in Dallas, I found a letter from the Africa America Institute – one of the scholarship agencies that I had applied to. My hands shaking with nervousness, I opened the letter. As soon as I read the first line, “Congratulations …” I dropped the letter in amazement as I cried and shouted for joy, praising the Lord for what He had done. The scholarship covered my full tuition, my previous outstanding balances at American University, books and provided a living allowance. I didn’t have to work and worry about surviving while a full time student as God had provided everything, from free accommodation to a full scholarship at one of the most prestigious private colleges in the USA.

After that experience, I can confidently say that I know God and in Him I am blessed He is able to do exceedingly and abundantly beyond what we ask of Him, if we maintain our faith in Him. Sometimes we have to pass the “faith test” and learn to trust God, no matter how bleak things look or how often people question our faith in Him. But the Bible encourages us to, “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” (Proverbs 3:5-6).
After a financial, spiritual and emotional breakthrough, my life was finally on track again. I was even blessed with the added bonus of being one of a few Namibians to appear on NBC’s Good Morning America program, to comment on the massive media hype around the birth of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt’s first daughter, Shiloh Nouvel Jolie-Pitt, who was born in Namibia on May 27, 2006. I don’t know how NBC got my cell phone number, but I sure was happy and honored that they contacted me for a chat about the biggest entertainment news item in the world at the time. It was amazing being on national TV in America and talking about the world’s most popular couple. I certainly hope that Angelina and Brad were watching that day.

A year later, on May 18, 2007, I successfully launched one of my major business products – a unique, fun, challenging and entertaining dance fitness video called ‘Cheza.’ The word ‘Cheza’ means ‘dance, have fun and play’ in Swahili. This encapsulates the whole philosophy behind the DVD, which is a 60 minute non-stop International Dance Workout Party, that allows audiences to party off calories as they groove to catchy, high energy dances from Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas, Asia and Europe. With Cheza, I also launched my fitness clothing line “Valentina,” dubbed “the wellness look.” I was overjoyed at the red-carpet Cheza DVD and Valentina wear launch event which was attended by a good number of people. I believe in celebrating every milestone in your life, career and business as the Bible rightfully says, “Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?” (Ecclesiastes 3:22). Since then, I have also launched the Cheza TV Show, which airs on television in the DC area, and is accessible on YouTube.

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In November 2007, I had a major awakening to just how fragile life is, but also to the power of God’s love for me. As I was crossing a street one day, I was hit by an SUV. I had right of way, and it appears the female driver wasn’t paying attention. When she hit me, I was flung a couple of feet in the air, and landed sitting down in the middle of the street, with my back to her vehicle. I’d been hit so hard that I left a dent on the vehicle. The moment I realized I’d been hit by a car, I panicked and quickly picked myself up and ran as fast as I could to get off the road to the pavement area, before the oncoming traffic ran me over.

When I got to the pavement, the SUV that had just hit me was still in the middle of the road. The driver was in a state of shock, with her hands covering her face and mouth. People stared in shock and some came to me to ask if I was all right. I was shocked, confused and speechless as I tried to make sense of what had just happened. All I could think was “She could have killed
me...” After what seemed a very long time, the driver finally pulled off the road to the side and slowly came to me looking very scared. She asked me if I was okay, and all I could answer was, “You could have killed me...” She said, “Yes, I know and I’m so sorry, are you okay?” I didn’t know if I was okay.

The police and the ambulance came soon after and asked me a few questions. They also observed the big dent on the truck and confirmed with the driver that the dent hadn’t been there before the accident. Although I was not feeling any pain and all my bones seemed intact, I was advised to get in the ambulance and go to the hospital just in case I had internal injuries. At the hospital, the doctors ran several tests, including an X-ray, but were surprised that all the tests were negative and that I was able to walk away from such an accident without any scratches or injuries. They said that I was lucky, but I told them I was blessed. It was God who had protected me from grievous harm by sending my guardian angels to cushion me in that crash. The doctors sent me home that same night as they couldn’t find any reason to hospitalize me. They gave me painkillers believing that I would feel excruciating pain later, but the pain never came – not that night, nor in the days and months that followed. Sometimes, I would even try to concentrate real hard to see if I could feel any pain, but it was almost as if I hadn’t been hit at all.

A few months later, the driver’s insurance company paid the hospital bill for the tests that had been done as a result of the accident. They also gave me a nice check to compensate me for my trouble. I didn’t expect to get any money because I came out of the accident just fine, although some people encouraged me to sue the driver and the insurance company. But I didn’t think it was necessary. I was thankful for the financial blessing though. I give all honor and glory unto God for saving my life that day; had it not been for God, the worst could have happened.

The week of the car accident, I had seriously become romantically involved with Namibia’s #1 Gospel artist at the time, Naftalie, whom I had known for a year after meeting at Jesus Center church in Windhoek, Namibia. A couple of weeks after the accident, Naftalie declared his love for me and proposed. We set a wedding date for more than a year later: on August 22, 2008, and he soon set about composing a song for our special day, titled “Valentina” I thought that was sweet of him.

We successfully completed our marriage counseling, but when I went to Namibia on a seven month health and business project, it turned out that the man I was about to marry was not the man he had initially presented himself to be. I felt betrayed by Naftalie, and we broke our engagement off. In the process, I lost a lot of people who I thought were my friends as their true
colors came out. It was a trying period for me, and I didn’t sleep for weeks. But throughout that
depressing time, God reassured me through His Scripture, that He would protect, uphold, and
strengthen me, and that I should not be dismayed (Isaiah 41:9-12).

Despite the pain I felt, when I looked in the mirror after the break-up, I smiled because I had the
satisfaction of knowing that while I had given this man my heart, I hadn’t given him my body,
my temple where the Holy Spirit lives. He hadn’t gotten much from me, and I still had my self-
respect and worth. I still had within me the basis for pulling myself together without complicated
emotional entanglements. I hadn’t been “test-driven” (some men compare premarital sex to test-
driving a car), and my personal value hadn’t been diminished one bit. That is the power of
abstinence. Instead of wallowing in self-pity, I thanked God for the lessons learned and the
blessings in disguise that came with the break-up.

With a renewed energy, I engaged myself in projects that would positively impact my country,
Namibia, and her people. I worked on a manual about Orphans and Vulnerable Children with
Family Health International (FHI-Namibia). I organized an AIDS Awareness Tour featuring
various Namibian artists. I also hosted a Wellness Fashion Show, the first of its kind and a
resounding success. And I served on the organizing committee of Namibia’s biggest
entertainment event: the Sanlam NBC Music Awards.

All the events that I worked on during my seven months in Namibia received positive feedback,
and a good deal of media attention. Soon, even my personal life was being scrutinized by the
media, with skewed reports about my break-up with Naftalie making the rounds. But with the
help of God, I was able to control the situation, and prevent my name and reputation from being
maliciously dragged through the mud by a few misguided individuals. As the good, wisdom-
filled book reads, “For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of
foolish men” (1 Peter 2: 15). In fact, at the end of 2008, I added another accolade to my name as a
businesswoman, by founding my Namibian business: Valentina Events & Entertainment
Management Company (VEEM), built out of my passion for event planning and entertainment.
Shortly after founding VEEM, I started a community and entertainment newspaper, Exposé
Newspaper, which is published by VEEM. The online paper (see www.exposenewspaper.com),
was birthed on the premise of telling “the other side of the story,” after my experience with one-
sided newspapers that had sought to destroy my character based on their own agendas and
motives.
There were many other activities that I involved myself in during my time in Namibia. But of all the projects in which I became immersed, the one that stood out the most for me in cementing my personal identity was something innately connected to my history as a child of the liberation struggle. This project, which I had planned on forming for several years, became known as the Namibia Exile Kids Association (NEKA), and was essentially established as a means to honor and unite children born and raised in exile during the struggle. There have been conflicting accounts about the start up of this major association, and as such, I’d like to set the record straight within these pages.

I conceived the idea for an association of this sort during my time living in the United States, as I pondered over how I could make a difference in the country of my heritage, which I had lived away from for most of my life. As I contemplated the idea of the organization, my friend, Liina Nandago, who had also lived in exile as a child in the struggle, came to visit the US. I shared my idea with her, and she told me about an exile child project idea she had, to start a picture yearbook of exile kids. Together we combined our ideas and worked on a plan to bring it to fruition, baptizing the project with the name Namibia Exile Kids Association (NEKA).

Liina returned to Namibia and I stayed in the US, and several years went by without the ideas on our to-do list being executed. When I arrived in Namibia some years later in 2008, I met up with Liina again and told her that I was going to make NEKA happen now that I was on the ground. But I had been so out of touch with the people I had grown up with in exile, that I wasn’t sure where to start. Another friend, Ndeyapo Shilume, whom I had talked to about the idea behind NEKA, came to the rescue, and connected me to several other exile kids.

She referred me to Martin Ndamakele, who had organized exile kids' reunions in 2001 and 2002. I shared the plan with Martin, whom I was meeting with for the first time, and he immediately expressed his interest in the idea. I also called upon my old exile friends, some of whom I had gone to primary school with upon returning from exile, including Star Ndatip-Oshikoto, Liina Nandago, Selma Nanewo Neumbo and Benitha Nakaambo. They all loved the idea, and thereafter, we began meeting on a regular basis to formally establish the organization. On November 25, 2008, NEKA was launched, with me and Martin as the co-founders, and Prime Minister Nahas Angula as the launch event patron and Dr. Libertina Amadhila as the association’s patron.

With the launch, we outlined NEKA’s goals and objectives to be as follows:

- Celebrate, with pride, the exile kids and their rich history and heritage.
Foster pride in exile kids, their rich history and inspire exile kids to pursue their dreams to the fullest.

Help find financial, physical and mental support for NEKA members.

Unite exile kids for a unified cause, and to inspire, motivate and encourage exile kids to cultivate the exile kids’ mentality of “go getters” and getting things done for a better Namibia and their future.

To be a voice of reason for exile kids and to protect the interest of exile kids.

To promote political tolerance amongst exile kids.

Dr. Sam Nujoma, the former President of Namibia, who now carries the title of ‘the Founding Father of the Namibian Nation’ and whom I grew up honoring and respecting as a great hero of Namibia, officially launched NEKA at a special Dinner Gala. I was honored to deliver a speech that night in front of the leader of Namibia’s liberation struggle, and several other key leaders in Namibia. That day also marked the first time I was able to personally meet and talk to President Nujoma, the man who just a couple of decades before, I had been singing songs about and praising in SWAPO camps in exile (see picture gallery).

Our plans to form NEKA coincidentally coincided with a protest by another group of exile kids, who took to the streets to demand that Government provide them with employment, education and training. I later found out that the very first protest by exile kids was a grand march in 2001 by dozens of exile kids, under the leadership of Tangeni Nghikongelwa. During that march, the youngest of the protestors was 18 years old, and the oldest was 37 years old. The protesters demanded government and police and military related jobs, and camped near the SWAPO party headquarters in Katutura, Windhoek, for more than a month before many of them got arrested and put in prison, without their demands ever being met.

Seven years later on August 18, 2008, Tangeni Nghikongelwa resumed his vision to help the plight of exile kids by organizing another, larger protest – this time in the front of the offices of the Ministry of Veterans’ Affairs. This Ministry was itself a relatively new addition to the government’s portfolio, having been formed in 2006 after major protests by former veterans. The demands of the protesting exile children included jobs, education opportunities and training. They made it clear that they wanted permanent jobs, pointing out that they were not after temporary financial handouts. They also demanded national identification documents, such as Namibian citizenship, which some of them didn’t have due to the way their relocation to Namibia had been handled during the repatriation period. Some of them were regarded as
foreigners due to their place of birth (Angola or Zambia for the most part), and had been told to apply for Namibian citizenship “by descent.” For some of them, it was hard to prove from whence they had descended, having lost one or both parents as a result of the war.

The group refused to move until their demands were met.

The general public’s response to the protests of the group was varied. Some people were in support of the protesting “Children of the Liberation Struggle” – as they came to be officially recognized by Government – while others simply rubbed their complaints. In my own view, there was simply a general lack of understanding about the issues that affected exile kids. Our background differs from that of children who were born and raised in Namibia. Some children of the struggle failed to advance because they had no parents or guardians to pay for their school education in Namibia. Those who had parents to support them often struggled because having been engaged in battle, their parents never got the education they needed to find better paying jobs upon their return to Namibia. Some children simply couldn’t pass their grade 12 exams.

Furthermore, at the end of the struggle, exile kids had not been adequately prepared to come to Namibia. Unlike their parents, who already knew Namibia their country of birth, exile kids had no choice but to return to a country they had never known, and suddenly just had to adjust to a new system of purchasing instead of freely receiving as was the case under SWAPO’s protection in exile. Like outsiders, they were perceived as “strange” by local Namibians, who couldn’t understand them. Although some adjusted well, others had a tougher time and simply refused to accept the change. I believe that SWAPO and the UNHCR ought to have implemented proper accommodating structures – psychological, emotional, and economic – as well as other sorts of counseling programs as part of the reparation process to prepare and transition exile kids into their new life and Namibian environment.

The group of exile kids camped outside the ministry for three months from September 2, 2008, before the High Court of Namibia issued an eviction notice demanding that they leave the premises. The group was ready to defy the High Court’s order, but to prevent their possible arrest; the SWAPO Party Youth League stepped in by relocating them to a SWAPO-owned farm some 20km outside Windhoek.

The group stayed at the farm for a while, but was back in Windhoek a few months later – this time at the SWAPO party headquarters – calling for greater urgency in having their demands met. They camped out at the party’s headquarters in Windhoek for a few months, while exile kids in other parts of the country also descended on SWAPO party offices around the country,
determined to wait there until Government addressed their plight. With the impending 2009 elections around the corner, the Government relocated the various groups – which together totaled 540 angry protesting exile kids – to Berg Aukas in early November 2009.

The Government made available N$2 million for the relocation and provided basic amenities for them, such as food, sanitation, and shelter while they waited – and continue to wait – for their demands to be met.

That same month, Prime Minister Nahas Angula announced that the government would set aside all entry level jobs in the civil service for kids who were born in exile during the liberation struggle. By this time, more than 200 exile children had already been given jobs in the police and the army as a result of the protest, and many more positions were now being reserved for ‘struggle children’. Discussions on the children of the liberation struggle have continued in parliament and nationally to date.

Although the protest of the children of the struggle was marked by a great deal of drama, sometimes including NEKA, the demonstrating youth were able to achieve various milestones. For one, while camping outside the Ministry’s offices, Government was moved to carry out the registration of exile kids across the country. The registration process was to ascertain the scope and the needs of this spectrum of Namibian society. To date, more than 10,000 Children of the Liberation Struggle have been registered, with this number expected to go much higher than this. Of those registered, most indicated that they simply wanted jobs.

But the story of the children of exile is not the same across the board. While some continue to struggle, others have managed to fight the odds, and land jobs in both the public and private sector, to set up successful businesses, and to fend for themselves in some way or another. They have also brought social development to Namibia, especially in the area of arts and entertainment. ‘Exile kid’ celebrities continue to dominate Namibia’s arts and entertainment industry, and they include popular artists such as The Dogg, Qonja, Lady May, Tequila, Blacksheep, Mushe (from Exit and Mushe), Dione from PDK, Monica Diamond Shafooli, Setson Wahengo, Ras Sheehama, Chika, Black Door, Pablo, Fidel Odel Nambundunga, Jackson Kaujeua Jr., Shikololo, Fredro the music producer, Tashiya the popular radio DJ, Nomvula the event organizer, LazPak the videographer, Erickson Tapiso the TV producer, Robert Shipanga the entertainment manager and many more.

Among the exile child population, there are also many who simply want to move on with their lives, and who have refused to allow the ‘exile’ label to keep them from progressing. They had
been taught in exile what it meant to be a fighter, and had adopted this fighter mentality in their lives by working against the various adversities that the struggle may have thrown at them, and working towards their personal successes. So it is not surprising that some exile kids felt insulted by the protestors, who they saw as ‘begging’ for a living, as opposed to ‘fighting’ for one through their own initiatives. In their view, exile kids should be hardworking catalysts for positive change, making a positive contribution to the overall development of the country, alongside their Namibian born and raised youth.

I didn’t always agree with all the demands made by the protesting group of exile kids, but even so, I found that their protest did have its merits. Their fight for what they believed was right helped to shed a lot of light on the issue and plight of exile kids, who had largely been ignored following Namibia’s independence. These issues, to a large degree, stem from the failure to properly integrate them into the Namibian society when they first arrived in the country soon after the cease-fire in 1989.

I was also impressed by how the protestors remained resolute in their stance to overcome the difficult conditions in which they found themselves, so that they would be able to have their basic human rights met. Although humiliated, insulted, ridiculed and rejected, they stood their ground with the unwavering spirit and attitude of their parents who fought for the independence of Namibia that is being enjoyed by all Namibians today.

In general terms, the demonstration of the protesting children of the liberation struggle also provided a clear example of the power that Namibian youth possess, and how, if they put their minds to it, anything is possible.

We, exile “kids” may differ in our current disposition – both economic and political, both in terms of our worldview, and it terms of the way we perceive our history. We may differ in our expectations of what is owed to us by SWAPO, and by the Namibian Government. We may differ in the way we’ve adjusted to our lives in Namibia, the way we view our country of heritage, the way we’ve processed our exile experience, and the way we see our Namibian born and raised counterparts. But in whatever way we differ, it appears to me that we have one thing in common...something that was perhaps imbibed upon us as we watched our parents fight for their freedom and independence. Our commonality is that we are fighters. And as such, we pursue what we believe in with the same passion and zeal that our freedom fighter parents possessed in liberating their beloved country, Namibia. If the liberation of Namibia was possible for our parents, anything is possible for us. This fighter mentality isn’t unique only to us though.
There were many within the borders of Namibia who assumed the struggle, and contributed to the nation’s independence. They, too, might see these lessons of the struggle in the same way.

My heritage is this resilience…this stamina to keep going, to keep pushing, despite life’s knocks. This is the gift that I’ve taken with me as an exile child, and one that I aim to apply in every facet of my life. My heritage is to be a fighter, and to win the battles that come my way – emotionally, spiritually, mentally, intellectually, physically, in my various business endeavors, in love, and in life. And on my battlefield, I have chosen God as my friend, my compass, my protector, my shield, my rock, and my indestructible guiding force to the finish line.

Exile is such a difficult concept to define, and tends to affect people negatively, positively or even both. To me, exile has become a form of globalization, and as an exile, I see myself as an “international citizen”. I didn’t choose to be born and raised in exile; exile chose me and transformed me into an international citizen. Most people have a physical place they rightfully call ‘home’. Based on my experience and background, I’ve found that I really don’t have a physical place to call ‘home’. I haven’t been back to my country of origin, Angola, since I left in 1989, although I hope to visit soon. When I am in Namibia, my country of heritage, I don’t always fully belong, because I’m hardly considered ‘Namibian enough’. The fact that my native Oshiwambo language is not fluent and my Oshiwambo accent still sounds ‘foreign’ doesn’t help much either.

Funnily enough, when I’m in Namibia, my long natural hair and looks often cause people to mistake me for an Angolan. In America though, I’m often confused for an Ethiopian; and when I attend Latino gatherings, people often think I’m a Dominican – a mistake I still find enormously flattering to this day. I don’t recall ever being ‘confused’ for a Namibian while abroad. My accent also seems to get people confused, and makes my nationality even harder to identify, with its varied elements influenced by the four countries that have molded me – Angola, Namibia, Britain and the United States. People are always trying to place my accent, and I’ve often tried to get rid of it by making it more American, but I naturally have a thick accent that can’t be credited to any one country. I’ve learned to accept it as a beautiful mixture of all the different cultural and national experiences that I’ve had. As such, I’ve coined it the “Rachel-accent” – the twang of an international citizen.

As an international citizen, my identity is not tied to only one culture, tradition or nationality. It is defined by my life experiences. And although I don’t have one physical place to call home, I feel that I do have a space to call home, where I feel like I belong and am free to pursue my
purpose. And this space is, in essence, the world at large. I feel it would be dishonest to restrain my identity to only being a Namibian – although this is the land of my heritage – and the country that issues my passport. It would be dishonest because it would essentially deny the importance of the land of my origin (Angola), the land of my awakening (England), and the land of my growth (USA). Moreover, because I have now found a home, I can no longer call myself an ‘exile child’, although this fact shaped much of my life experience. Like in exile, as a child being moved from one home to another, I have found that my home is where my heart is, and that this is true no matter where I am in the world. I know it might sound cliché, but it’s one of the truest facts of my life. So I define myself, finally, as Valentina: The International Citizen.
Chapter Five in Pictures

Top: It was an honor to meet the President of the United States, Bill Clinton, in the Oval Office in the White House, in October 1996, when my father went to present his credentials soon after becoming Namibia’s Ambassador to the United States. Bottom: My family and I at the White House. Courtesy: The White House.
Celebrating the end of my high school in the USA, as part of the Woodrow Wilson Class of 1998.

Left: At my high school prom with my date Ricardo. Right: At my graduation with my friend Wilbert Quantanilla from Argentina.
At my high school graduation with my dad and my sister Nelao in June 1998, in Washington, DC. It was a glorious day. I like seeing my father this proud of me.

My father took me to visit my new college, Northwood University, in Midland, Michigan. I enrolled there in 1998 after completing high school.
One of the most emotional days of my life. Here I was being baptized as a born again Christian after giving my life to Christ at Faith Ministries Baptist Church in Midland, Michigan. I cried tears of joy with others witnessing this moment. Glory be to God for His Amazing Grace.

After being “dipped” in holy water (baptized), I became a new creation; old things pass away!
With one of my favorite inspirational speakers and preachers, Paula White. It was an honor to personally meet her at the TBN headquarters in Austin, Texas in 2005.
I love to play and watch soccer; the greatest game in the world 😊. I played for my church’s soccer team, Bethel United, which was a team to be reckoned with in the Sports 4 Jesus League in the Washington, DC area. Our team won countless championship games. *Courtesy: Henry Teage.*
One of the happiest days of my life; graduating from American University with a Master’s Degree in Health Promotion Management, with a concentration in Global Health. Here I am pictured sharing the moment with my best friend, Alecia Orticke.
I’m a proud American University (AU) Alumni! Indeed, “Once An Eagle, Always an Eagle.”
In 2008 at the launch of the Namibia Exile Kids Association (NEKA), I had the honor of meeting and chatting to one of my heroes, the man I grew up hearing a lot about in exile, former SWAPO president and the First President of Namibia, His Excellency Dr. Sam Nujoma.

In 2008 while in Namibia, I had the pleasure of meeting the man who was responsible for my education in SWAPO camps and currently Namibia’s Prime Minister, Hon. Nahas Angula.
While visiting Namibia in 2008, I had the pleasure of reconnecting with the lady who is nicknamed “the mother of exile children”, and who was in charge of our health and well being, Dr. Libertina Amadhila. When I lived in London, Dr. Libertina Amadhila and I used to exercise together when she visited us. She’s also an inspiration to me in the field of health, as a former Health Minister of Namibia.

My good friend Star Ndatipo-Ashikoto and I meeting with one of the SWAPO women leaders we grew up hearing about in exile, Mee Pendukeni Ithana. We had gone to meet Mee Pendukeni about the work we were doing with the Namibia Exile Kids Association (NEKA).
Top: It was an honor to meet and talk to Tatekulu Andimba Toivo Ya Toivo, a founder of SWAPO who – like Nelson Mandela – was imprisoned on Robben Island for several years.

Bottom: It was also an Honor to reconnect with Minister Nangolo Mbumba, who was also in charge of my education in Exile. These pictures were taken in 2009 at a Conference on the Liberation Struggle, held in Windhoek, Namibia.
I enjoyed meeting Dr. Ben Amadhila, one of the heroes of the Namibian liberation struggle, in 2009.
Above pictures: I grew up under the wings of these liberation struggle heroes in exile, Lubango. On the left, I am pictured with one of the greatest Commanders of PLAN and former Chief of the Namibian Defense Force, General Martin Shali; and on the right, with another great field commander of PLAN, Tate Elias Haulyondjaba, who was also there at my mom’s efundula wedding when the South African army attacked them in 1978. Picture taken in 2009.
Valentina: The Exile Child

Left: Pictured with my American parents, Ruth and Paul Manchester. Right: trying to make the best of the major snow storms that hit Washington, DC in 2010.
I returned to America in January 2009 after a seven-month productive and stimulating time in Namibia, where I was finally able to reconcile my history as an exile child, with my present.

In the Spring of 2009, I officially graduated with my Master’s Degree in Health Promotion Management from American University. The day I completed my Master’s Degree was one of the happiest days of my life. The degree was a testimony of the personal struggle that I had endured and overcome, towards living my American-Namibian dream. It was also a testimony of the way in which I had allowed my heritage as an exile kid to take hold in my life...fighting for my dreams and my personal freedom and economic independence, in the same way that my parents and their comrades had fought for Namibia’s political independence.

Reaching the point of my Masters degree was a huge accomplishment for me. I had fought against all odds, with God on my side, to ensure that I could become an educated professional in my full right. And this was no easy task. In fact, it was one of the hardest and most faith-testing journeys of my life. It’s not easy being an immigrant in America, especially at a young age and without family readily available to render their support. But God always sent me people who became family. I felt extremely favored at my graduation, when I was asked to be the first in my class to walk on stage to receive my degree. I walked with pride, with my head held high, to the applause of my health promotion department leaders – Dr. Anastasia Snelling and Dr. Robert Karch, my friends and several strangers that I didn’t even know. And as I walked, I felt
that they were all sharing in my joy and relief at having finished the race, without throwing in the towel after so many challenges.

My tears and sweat had paid off, and I thank God for the three degrees to my name: Associates Degree in Computer Science Management from Northwood University, a Bachelor’s Degree in Health Promotion and Master’s Degree in Health Promotion Management from American University. I knew that education would be my key to a bright future, and that in order to stand out from the crowd, I would have to reach a high level of knowledge and understanding in my field. And while I didn’t have the means to finance all these degrees, I held onto the motto that: where there’s a will, there’s always a way.

With this motto in mind, the help of God, and the heritage I carry of being a fighter in life, I continue to be committed to building my businesses – The WellnessPlex and VEEM – into empires with international reach. As an entrepreneur, I have made mistakes and some bad financial investments in my quest for financial freedom. But I’ve also learned to take lessons from these mistakes, and not allow them to discourage me on my path to economic independence. After all, you can’t be a true entrepreneur without taking risks, and I believe that success in entrepreneurship comes with mastering the art of taking calculated risks for long-term financial gain.

But with all that has been said and done, I know that I have not yet arrived. God is not finished with me. I am grateful for all the experiences – good and bad – that I’ve had to go through. They have shaped and molded me into the woman of God that am. As a baby in Christ, I used to sing songs to God and praise Him without fully understanding who He really was. I used to cry out to God to show and prove Himself to me and to help me to know Him better. Little did I know that the walk with God can be painful at times, but that’s how character and trust are built in any relationship. It’s through these trials and challenges that I came to know how BIG my God is. Had it not been for some of the tough things that I went through in life, I would never have grown and I would never have been able to make my boast in God. As Jeremiah said, “But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise loving kindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD” (Jeremiah 9:24).
Faith without action is dead. Therefore, let us continue to press on to a higher calling and believe that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13).

I pray and hope that my book has inspired you, on any level, to be all that God has called you to be, to go where God has led you to go, and to fulfill the Call that God has created you to perform on this earth. Amen.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a book is no easy task! It’s an energy-draining, creativity-demanding, sleep-depriving, time-consuming exercise, and perhaps one of the most difficult projects I’ve ever undertaken. It’s tough work! But it’s also extremely rewarding, especially when one is blessed with the love and support of people who are passionate about seeing the success and completion of both the work and the author.

I’ve been blessed to have support of so many people, who kept me going even during those times when I simply didn’t feel like writing, when my creative juices refused to flow, and when I just didn’t have the strength and inspiration to write. During the one year course of writing this book, these people have provided their insights, shared their stories, lent their ears and their time, and been a source of encouragement and motivation in this special journey, and I thank the Almighty God for placing these special people in my life.

First and foremost, I wish to thank the thousands of exile children whose stories in many ways match and intertwine with my own. Our common struggle and our common heritage is reflected here, and while our individual post-exile experiences may be very different, I hope that you are able to read this book with a sense of familiarity, and with pride. Thank you for your inspiration and courage.

I thank my parents, Ambassador Veiccoh Nghiwete and Martha Hatutale-Andjaba, whose constant love, care and presence in my life has given me the strength to keep going. Thanks Papa God for giving me the best parents in the world. I love you mom and dad!

A great deal of research went into writing this book to reflect the historical events against which my personal story takes place, with as much accuracy as possible. I want this book to be about more than just my personal life. I want it to be a meaningful reference on various events and topics that helped to shape my life that may be meaningful to the reader. In this respect, I thank my exile friends and my parents, all of whom helped me in detailing my story with as much historical data as possible. My story essentially takes place under the umbrella of the SWAPO party, whose movement sheltered me in exile, and I thank those SWAPO officials who entertained my questions
and queries in providing a unique historical perspective to my exile experience and story.

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A million thanks to everyone who played a role in the journey of this book, and who continue to touch the lives of exile children with dreams across the world. God bless you.

Rachel Valentina Nghiwete
Washington, DC, 2010

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My (Father Side) Family Tree

Rachel Ndemweeta Kaxuadi

Andreas Nghiwete

1. Paavo
2. Moses
3. Esther
4. Oscar
5. Enoch
6. Sandreas
7. Zepafu
8. Nathaniel
9. Evelyn
10. Ndapewa
11. Nepeti
12. Paulus
13. Veiccoh

Paavo: 1. Aankonda
2. Bala
3. Nghefamo
4. Hans
5. Nangula
6. Nadula
7. Penda
8. Kanemo
9. Paulina

Moses: 1. Hafeni
2. Tuhaneni
3. Ndahafa
4. Andreas
5. Panduleni
6. Manase
7. Pefele
8. Sacky
9. Angula
10. Julia

Esther: 1. Maria
2. Martha
3. Samuel
4. Weyulu
5. Josepfat
6. Leonard
7. Veiko
8. Kaboy
9. Ndapewa
10. Rachel
11. Naipole
12. Nepeti

Enoch: 1. Paavo
2. Esko
3. Sophia

Oscar: 1. Olavi
2. Olivier
3. Louisa
4. Otilia
5. Cornelius
6. Joshua
7. Justina
8. Oiva
9. Lisa
10. Lucia
11. Elvy

Nathaniel: + died at infancy.

Andreas: 1. Rauna
2. Nepeti
3. Paavo
4. Timothy
5. Rauha

Epafu: 1. Nangula
2. Emilia
3. Taimi
4. Kalufale
5. Meke
6. Nauifiku
7. Helia
8. Rosilia
9. Elina

Evelyn: 1. Nepeti
2. Epafu
3. Nelama
4. Wilhem
5. Paavo
6. Malika

Veiccoh: 1. Rachel
2. Ndineia
3. Ndapewa
4. Nelao (twin)
5. Kalinasho (twin)
6. John
7. Nghiwete
8. Paulus
9. Kaindi
10. Kamboke
11. Veiccoh Jr.
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