NARRATIVES OF THE BORDERLINE SELF

Four ordered transcriptions of interviews follow this brief introduction and are aimed at making meaning-making clearer, in developmental time and in different spaces/contexts. I created these re-representations, in order to clarify my answering of the research question; i.e. “What are the developmental issues of borderline psychopathology?” This re-representation allows the original words of the respondents to become their own statements of suffering and is intended to recreate the participants as their own witnesses, holistically, to avert the negative aspects of data fracturing in analysis and interpretation.

HELEN

Helen was 23 years old at the time of interviewing (July 1998), at Sterkfontein. She is English speaking, adopted, Jewish and materially privileged by upbringing, with an older brother adopted from different biological parents. She handed me this poem before we began the interview, which lasted for three hours:

The day has ended
my heart has to be mended
It fell apart
From the very start

I trusted him too much
My life is now being crushed
I won’t have friends
because of my amends

I need a map
to get out of this black, horrible world
Time is racing
My mind is pacing
Pacing at a rapid speed
Am I in need?

No, I am a waste of time
Helen had this to say about her growing-up years:

**About home**

Oh preschool! Preschool was also, my brother did well in preschool; I had to do well. One’s got to do it; the other’s got to do it, like follow the example. Oh, I was always expected to do even better than him because I was a girl. Boys just want to play and fight, you know, they’ve got to be men, you know, and a woman has to get the good marks, so I was also expected to do better than him, and I wasn’t getting it. I did average, nothing great. Oh well, my mother and father always had high expectations of me. They always said that I should get top marks and be top of the class. They always, like, expected me to be the best in everything. I mean, I felt like a failure my whole life because it started off when, even in nursery school I didn’t do as well as my parents expected me to, and they made me aware of it, as well..."Your brother did so much better than you, what’s wrong with you? Why can’t you do as well as him?"

Well...um... like his writing, he...um... would be like...um... he learned to write faster than I did. But then on the other hand when he got older we realised that he’s got a reading disorder and a spelling disorder as well. I mean, still to this day when he fills out forms and that, he asks me how to spell words. And...Um... So I felt in a way I got my revenge that I am better than him in something. You know my Mom even said, when was it, yesterday, to the Psychologist, K, that I am very jealous of my brother...there’s like great jealousy. It’s always because I’m being compared to him. Oh, from about when I was five, we used to play doctor, doctor and things like that, spread legs, like the other doctors did. I didn’t say anything because he used to say don’t tell mommy and daddy. And when I realized something was wrong, he said he didn’t do that. Sexual molestation only stopped once my parents knew. Physical abuse is still going on. I was waitressing and I had to go to work, with a handmark on my face, covered in makeup and still looked like when you’ve been sleeping with your hand on face. Like on my arm...

My father, well he more or less said to me as long as you do your best. Well he just accepted it. When I did well, he congratulated me and he’d say, no, you’re really doing well and when I did badly he’d say come on H, pull it up. I don’t know, I accepted him more because he accepted me, he expected me to cope. My Dad mainly [helped with homework] because my Mom was always busy marking and setting exams so my Dad would come back from work - he’d finish his work, come and fetch me from gym, I’d get home, I’d eat supper, have a bath and then settle down to do homework, because I used to finish gym at 8 o’clock at night. I got very tired. I mean there were times when I never did my homework; I’d wake up and think oh my goodness I’ve got to do my homework. I actually started waking up at 5 o’clock in the morning, do my homework in the morning, go to school, do gym, come home, eat, bath, go to sleep and do homework in the morning, that kind of thing.

But then my best wasn’t good enough. My mother was clearer, saying I wasn’t doing well enough. No, even at preschool. She was very predictable, I mean I can tell you, if you had
to talk to me about something and you would ask me what my mom would say I could give it to you word for word what she would tell you and that's how predictable she is. Like I say she's got high expectations, the expectations are high. Yes, no matter how hard I tried, if I got all A's - "Why didn't you get A plusses?" Like that time when they accepted me for that competition when I was chosen for the world championships, "Why didn't you come first?" No, it was never acceptable. Still to this day it's not acceptable. They never understood me; I never understood them. I was talking to my mom just before I came back here, and I said you don't understand me, you don't know how to react to me, how to treat me, don't know how to relate to me, you can't deal with me, and try! Twenty years later there's still a problem, you could have done something a long time ago. (Cries)

Gymnastics wise I was doing great, and family life wasn't great. And then when my parents saw how well I was doing in my gymnastics, why wasn't I doing that well in school? They said you've got to motivate yourself in school and then they were threatening me that they would stop my gymnastics if I didn't get my grades at school and they knew that that would affect me because I was training hard to compete in the World Championship and then because of the political situation... I didn't go and it was a week before we were supposed to go, everything was booked, and then they told me I couldn't go. I was really upset...

Then my brother got engaged and my father was told he had ten months left to live. And he went to see a different doctor after that, but I didn't know that. Meanwhile he hadn't gone yet and I thought well my father is going to die, my brother's going to get married and go and live with his wife. I'm going to be stuck with my mother, oh my god! I want to die and I took an OD [at school] on Prozac and alcohol. It didn't do a good job, but I didn't know that at the time... And they got me to the Joburg Gen and they pumped my stomach out and there I saw my mom, and I thought Oh my god, no, that's all I wanted to see was my mother, I don't want to see her ever again. You know, she was like the first face I saw and there was my father who was crying. Oh my god I've disappointed him, I'm a failure. Ah, you know, it all just came straight back again.

I have never been able to speak to my mother; still to this day I don't speak to my mother about my problems. And then I went overseas for six months and I got back on the 31st May. In June my dad had a back op, in July it opened and you could actually see the spine, skin, the fat and muscle, everything. Uh, you could see everything. You know how they sew it together again, so that just the spine sticks out, so it doesn't bleed, you know, you could see that. And he was just getting over that when he got tonsillitis, all his systems got infected which led to pneumonia, and he went into a coma...and I was holding his hand, it was about ten past one on a Wednesday morning on the 11th of August. I was holding his hand and he went (snorting noise), like that. I said enough. I phoned my brother to come to the hospital; I said you get back to South Africa, now. He was on the next plane out. When he was in Hong Kong, my dad died and when he arrived it was just in time for the funeral and he phoned from Hong Kong and I said, no, he had died. When I told him how he had died, he was actually glad he didn't see it. His memory of my father was walking him to work, across the park, to his work and that was his last memory of my father. My last memory of my father was gasping for air, not being able to breathe and I was holding his hand; it was ten past one. I said to him, dad, mom, K and I love you, go in peace. He stopped breathing and all the wrinkles just went, his skin was like yellow. Gone. He died at quarter past one. It was like, it was like, and he was in a
coma. And that now makes me feel that people who’re in a coma can hear you.

I stay on my own. I’ve got a cottage, ja. Even though he’s older, he stays with my mother. I just can’t live with my mother, because I don’t get on with her. I was staying at Threshold because I couldn’t live with her. I’m an alien in the family, I say to my mother, I’m the problem in the family and she’s going to get rid of that problem, she’s going to disown me, she’s going to sit Shiva. This is what she said to me today... Yes. They’ve got a conspiracy against me, my friends will phone to speak to me and they’ll say when you speak to Helen just tell Helen that this and this and I accept it and just leave it. I mean on Thursday night, remember that’s when I was so angry because I’d been with my mother on the Wednesday night. The Thursday night, I was so hysterical that they didn’t know what to do with me here.

I had my head in a pillow and I was screaming and I was crying, I was totally out of control, but totally, because of my mother, suddenly saying that I dump on her, I use and abuse her, I’m the only one in the family to be taken to Sterkfontein, I’m a useless person, crap, I don’t belong with others and don’t deserve to have had what I’ve had. She has given me everything and all she’s done is given and in a give-and-take situation, all I’ve done is take, take, take. And she collapsed, I don’t know if I told you about that, she collapsed and she got my brother to phone and tell me that she’s collapsed, and my brother said she was in hospital, which was a lie. She wasn’t in a hospital so I kept worrying and I couldn’t sleep the whole night because she said it’s all your fault.

No, you know what, I actually don’t want anything to do with her anymore, or my brother, as far as I’m concerned they must actually go and leave me alone, I actually don’t want to live, I don’t, I can’t. Ja, that’s why she wants to get rid of me. I’m worthless, I don’t to deserve to live, I’m a useless piece of shit. Hate ... hate ... I actually thought of killing her this weekend. If they’d let me go home, I would have killed her because I would have waited until night when my brother went out, and I would have done it. And they know that, otherwise they would have let me out ... It’s always been bad. It will never be okay, that’s why one of us has to die, because we can’t live on the same planet ... Ja, it’s my turn to go. (weeps, pause) I take it out on myself usually but I’ve been sitting here channelling my anger on the person that’s actually making me angry. I’m angry with my mother, very angry. I mean she embarrassed me so much in front of the psychologist, K. She even turned around to me and said K thinks I’ve become a witch. I said, oh, well, you are...

They don’t even let me see my boyfriend. My destination, my liberty. He’s sensitive, he’s so caring, when I’m down he’s always here to talk to me. I was always there for him. At 9 o’clock we’re not supposed to be in the kitchen and he will come and make coffee, for me first, make sure that I’ve got before anyone else. Ja, I even said that to him today. I said you don’t know how special you are to me. He said it’s a two-way street - you make me feel special. He was discharged yesterday. He went to my place but my family doesn’t know. He’s not Jewish.

About School

Although I’m Jewish, I went to a Catholic School ... well it was hard because sometimes we had to go to Church and it was like against everything that we were brought up to believe in. And eventually a Jewish teacher came to the school, and when they went to
Church, she ran a group for the Jewish pupils, her children and my brother and myself. There were five of us in that school at one time that were all Jewish, her three kids and my brother and myself.

I went to a nursery school in Klerksdorp and I did Grade 1 in Klerksdorp. I had a teacher there who threatened to cut our hands off if we held on to the pencil or the pen in the incorrect way ... and I wouldn’t go to school and eventually my mother sat with me at school for about a week or two. My mother also being a teacher knew that something was wrong and she overheard this teacher say to someone in front of me "If you hold your hand like that I am going to chop your hands off". My mother just cracked because I used to pull my hands into my jersey, and then my mother realized what the problem was there. I just remember that I hated going to school and I actually kicked her in the stomach when she was pregnant because she threatened to cut my hands off.

[I had a] fear of writing because I was scared my hands were going to be cut off. I was scared that it would be sore, cause she used to have a knife that she used to walk around with and she’d go: "I’m going to cut your hands off!" I only started writing in the second term of Grade 1, because I was too scared in the first term. It was only when she was on maternity leave that I started writing. When she came back I was writing already and was holding the pen okay so it was alright. I have like a vague memory of her threatening me with the knife and she had it in her hand and I can see it clearly, this knife in her hand, but its like a bread knife. She said something to me, I don’t know what she said to me, but I said, "I won’t take it, I won’t, I won’t, I won’t". She came for me, not with the knife to stab me or hurt me, but she came towards me and I was just on the defence and I kicked her in the stomach, and she actually fell over. Then I was feeling guilty and I started crying, I thought maybe I had killed her baby, I was going hysterical. I was actually taken to the doctor to get tranquillised and put to sleep, to calm down. I went on a total guilt trip because I had killed her baby, but I didn’t.

Then I went to the first term of Grade 2 there and that was fine. Still the problems of the Friday night thing but that was okay, then we moved to Johannesburg for the second term - that’s when we came to live in Johannesburg and ... I think things started getting better, I’ve actually got my reports somewhere at home. If you look at the term 2 and term 3, there was like a difference from below average to average in the same subjects from average to good. They were never very good or excellent. Well academically I just remained average because most of the time was spent in the gymnasium.

I just remember we had a teacher in Grade 2 who always loved to have her back tickled and she always used to ask me to tickle her back when she used to read stories and we used to sit on the carpet - she would ask people to tickle her but I was mainly one of them and I was teased because I was her pet and things like that and I think she was giving me more attention because she realized that I wasn’t doing my work the way I could have been doing or should have been doing, and so she was trying to give me more attention to motivate me to do things. Ja, no she asked me. Come tickle my back Helen and like don’t you want to read to the class you know, trying to encourage me but I would never - no not me, I don’t want to read and I was scared I was going to stutter but then I got used to do it. It was embarrassing, very embarrassing. But then I also got used to it because other people were also doing it and they must have had the same things I had.
When I got into Standard 1 and we were reading a story about a child who was adopted and the teacher turned round and said, Helen aren’t you adopted? I mean I wasn’t - to me it was like something special that I was adopted. When I was in Klerksdorp I used to stand up and say my name is Helen and I’m adopted, I’m special, but I never did that when I got to Johannesburg and then when the teacher did that it was - you’re a reject, your biological mother didn’t love you. Yes, and that’s when the rejection came in again. Your real Mommy didn’t love you, that’s why she gave you up. I just used to cry and cry and then I wouldn’t go to school and I wouldn’t participate in class. And I think about a month later I told my Mom what was going on and she phoned the teacher and it was sorted out with the teacher but never sorted out with the pupils right up to Standard 5 when new kids came to the school, one of the first things was “don’t go near her, she’s adopted, her biological mother didn’t love her, she’s a reject”.

Only in Standard 2 I got a progress prize, academically. I started working hard on my academics because I started doing badly because of the gymnastics and I was told I was going to fail the year if I didn’t pull my socks up and that’s when I got from like E’s because I used to start with cultural subjects and I was getting E’s and that for my cultural and I got straight A’s in all my exams and I came up with C averages. Well I couldn’t believe it because I actually still remember clearly that phone call, because you know when they phone to tell the parents to come to the prize giving and that. And I answered the telephone and it was like 10 o’clock at night and the teacher couldn’t believe it and she put on an American accent and she said could I speak to Mrs. J and I said ja. And like the next day is prize giving and I say “but Ma why are you coming, you never come”. “No, to see what its like”. And then when I was called up to the stage then I said it was that phone call last night from my teacher and she said yes, and she said she couldn’t believe it, marking your papers, that it was the same person, and then that’s when the threat of you’re a straight-A student became like really enforced in me. No, it made me feel great.

It was hard to concentrate because I used to daydream about being in the gym doing somersaults, you know like when you see girls like in movies like Nadia Comaneci and you see her sitting there daydreaming about somersaults and it’s exactly the same; you sit there and think could I do that and maybe I’m gonna, I’ll try and do that today.

Then again, you can do it: you’re a straight-A student. Ja, because in Standard 4, I’d get mostly As in all my subjects, Geography, History, everything. Well they kept saying in my reports that, look at this, its a swot subject just like Geography and you can get an A for that but with Geography you just don’t show interest - why? - and I used to say because it doesn’t interest me. Ja, like I didn’t care, if something interests me I will do it. If it doesn’t interest me I’ll throw it out the window and I used to tell them that. But also if I liked a teacher I would work hard for them. I remember in high school that, that I remember I had a very nice English teacher and I was getting a B for English and that’s not me. And then in that same year she fell pregnant and we got another teacher, I was getting an E and an F, because he was just rattling on and didn’t make the subject interesting. But then when she [the high school English teacher] came back after maternity leave my marks went up again. It wasn’t like just me; everyone’s marks did that. That’s one of the reasons they got rid of that teacher was because everyone’s marks dropped - I was getting a B and I suddenly dropped to an E so you can imagine the E people what their marks dropped to. And like my teacher liked my style of essay that I used to write and he didn’t - so when it came to essays I knew that I was going to get
50% or below ... I was a failure again, I can’t get anything right.

I remember a few of them but they were old cronies, they just were boring people and had this monotonous tone of voice, they just go on and on and on and on and you like ja, ja, ja, falling asleep. But as soon as something interested me, no matter how monotonous it was and how much they repeated themselves, I would listen and then maybe try and pick up more than the second time that they repeated themselves from the time before. Every now and then my thoughts would fly out the window and hey I’d wake up and be in class again. Ja, because I made myself, as soon as I was aware that something wasn’t going the way I needed it to go, I’d go straight back into like focus you know like zoom on the teacher and concentrate. As soon as I was going that way, I’d say, hang on a second, come back to the classroom.

Oy, Maths was my worst, absolute worst; I couldn’t do Maths to save my life. All the way through. All the way. I mean I finished matric with an F on Standard Grade Maths, which was a pass on Standard Grade Maths. And they raised the marks because we had such a difficult paper. And I mean the Higher Grade people were told as an example for our headmaster who was the Maths teacher, they were asked to write like the "A" students on higher grade, were asked to write the Standard Grade paper and they got like C’s - to prove that the paper was very difficult. I went for extra lessons and I just couldn’t get it right, and still today you know where they show those programmes on TV with like trigonometry and geometry and that I watch this and think okay well if that angles that, this angle should be this, now hang on a second, now this doesn’t work out and I think well I couldn’t do it then, I won’t be able to do it now.

In Standard 5 my Dad had a triple bypass for the cancer and then when I went to Standard 6, I went to King David and my Mom taught there; now I was back to a Jewish school and my mother was there, and then my father was diagnosed with bone cancer and it all happened at once basically, and so I went to see the school counsellor behind my Mom’s back. I didn’t tell her, because I thought I couldn’t cope with my Dad being sick and that he was going to die and that kind of thing, and I mean cancer at 13 or 14, cancer was like a heavy word, like Aids now, then and I couldn’t cope and I went to the school counsellor and she went and told my mother that I was seeing her and told her everything that I had spoken to her about. I was devastated because I was talking about how my mother had been treating me and things like that and she told my mother everything and that’s when I started mutilating myself, like once when my mom came in, I was cutting my wrists.

A soon as I did start speaking to someone, I spoke to the English teacher that I liked, also at that time my brother was still physically abusing me and I didn’t tell my mother. I was in high school, I was at a gala and I wouldn’t take off my shirt and the PT teacher finally like actually took it off for me and there I had hand marks all over my back. Now my brother was four and half years older than me and he was weightlifting, bodybuilding so he was like very, very strong, I had welt marks ... and only then was my mother made aware of it. Now, according to my mother, I was speaking to all and sundry about my problems, but I never talked to her. Meanwhile I spoke to one teacher, and she spoke to the PT teacher, who confronted her because he knew that we didn’t have such a good relationship, now suddenly I was talking to all and sundry about our problems; and then D (the school counsellor) basically told the staff about my problems ... This left me feeling a total, worthless, useless, piece of shit.
That's when the bulimia started, because the teacher was. I used to talk to her and when she was pregnant, she was eight months pregnant, she didn't look pregnant. I asked her, now how do you stay this thin? I didn't know, because I had never heard of this. Because in my gymnastics, these things didn't exist to me. And she said to me, no what I do is I eat and I vomit it all up. So I said Oh! I'll try that, so I started like eating and vomiting, and I started like binges. On chocolates, chips and coke. I could eat like two, three slabs of chocolate and a big packet of chips, and coke and I used to throw it all up and I wouldn't eat for two or three days. I'd drink but not eat and then I'd just go on like this binge again and that's when I started with laxatives. I was taking up to 12 Senokot a day.

No, no-one knew until I was in Standard 9, for two years. [After an OD] I had such abdominal pains that I punched the teacher and knocked her out. And they rushed me to the Joburg Gen to have my stomach pumped. I did it at school. I have a diver's knife, you know those diver's knives, to cut my wrists, I had some Advil, I had a bottle of Malibu and this monthly prescription of Prozac. I had all of it and there I was, like cutting my wrists, with blood dripping down on me. The car, they were taking the car, and I tried to open the door half way up the street, of the car, you know and it's like slam on brakes and put the safety lock on you, you know the children's lock, so that I couldn't get out the car. I don't know, I was confused, seriously confused ...

Well, I was also sick in Standard 8 and I went to Israel in Standard 8 on Beitar tour. Not the Ulpan, because I couldn't afford the Ulpan. And the first week was OK and then I took an OD on Panado and they sent me back. It was holidays. It was school holidays. I was very upset, very upset. I didn't make it. But then I was also very homesick; my dad had been very ill; it was the first time I had been away from home. And my father wasn't well as I just said; how could I like do that?

Ja ... but then in April I took an OD of Panado and Prozac, that was Standard 9. I had just gone to Eden College. I went to Studywell in Standard 8 because I didn't want to go on with Hebrew and that's where there's a lot of Satanism at that time. I don't know about now. One of my best friends was involved and she tried to get me involved and that's why I left, because I saw a whole lot of things I didn't want to see ... drinking blood and all sorts of things.

Oh I loved it! [Eden]. My marks went up; I was into my education now because I didn't do gymnastics, you know my marks went up, I was interested in it. Oh, I didn't get the grades, like I said I got an F on Standard Grade Maths, but I got two Cs. OK, from not doing the syllabus, to studying from like after the matric dance, that's when I started studying for finals, you know. And so to get my two Cs for Biology and Business Economics, you know. Now my mom taught Business Economics, she had been teaching it for about seven years at the time so she knew like what spots, what had been asked and what hadn't, so I learned what she thought was going to come up, and they came up, and she marked that year as well. She came to me afterwards and said to me, this is where you messed up, you know. You know, because after that paper I went home and said this is where I'm stuck. You know how you always write your answers like briefly next to your questions on your exam papers. I did that and took that piece of paper home and she said, no, this is where you messed up, and she discussed it with me. My original mark was a "D" and when she looked at my answers she said there was no way I could get a "D",

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send it in for a re-mark and I did. And the reason I got it was my estimate was a D.

Ja. It wasn’t so bad academically, when I think of all the psychological problems, virtually dying for three months. My dad had changed doctors to Professor B. My dad, even when it wasn’t cancer-related, he was having urology problems, his bladder wasn’t working, now they did these tests and stuff, they can’t work out what it is, no “take this pill”, next day, right, go out of hospital. What kind of a genius does that? Then matric was OK. The vice-principal is kind of like a family member. She like married into the family. She’s not Jewish though, but she’s married into the family in a different way. She taught me Afrikaans in Standard 9 and then she taught me again in matric and now she was vice-principal. She had her own office and she used to call me in once a week to have therapy with her and she was like supporting me and she got me through matric.

About Peers

Well already I started feeling rejection [in nursery school]. I started feeling rejection from my peers. They would eventually turn around and say, well you can’t come on a Friday night so we are not even going to invite you. I went to Glenhazel Primary School and then it was like another culture shock, because now from walking around barefoot and in tracksuits, because it was in the dorp there, farms and, you know, walk around barefoot, I still to this day prefer doing that kind of thing. But there again we were teased, you know, because they would come in their jeans and their little Levi’s in Grade 2 already. Their little Levi’s and all their fancy Name tops and you know, there Helen comes in with her tracksuit pants and barefoot and runs around the school without her shoes on; and then I was teased then. Ja, it was hard and then it was first time I experienced Kugels. I mean, I was used to the Afrikaans thing, I was speaking 50/50 English/Afrikaans when I was there and then when I came here I had like an Afrikaans accent and so I was teased about that as well, because I would roll my R’s and things like that. So I was teased about my accent, those kind of things.

I had a few [friends] but I started losing them because I didn’t go out after school to them; you know how kids are, they go to their friends. Not me, I went straight to the gym and I’d be there an hour before and I would do flexibility exercises and stretch exercises and then when it was time to start, I would do them again with the class. Where I could have gone and worked on homework for an hour or so, I would rather have been in the gym doing that kind of thing.

I knew a lot of them were jealous of me you know, "how can she do that, how can she get A’s?" Because I was this reject and I didn’t deserve anything. Well then the kids were really like jealous and when it came to PT, I have got in my autograph book, and it says, "Thanks for being such a fantastic PT student". I never showed them my reports and that because I was so embarrassed about my marks from my previous years. I never used to show them my marks because they’re like "I got a B for this, what did you get?" and "oh well I got a G for it". So I would never say anything. So even when I got the good marks, I thought well I’d better not say anything because then what’s the difference? I got this and I got that and they got this and that - it makes no difference. It can only affect you personally.

That’s when I started making friends [Grade 6, age 12]. I got into the wrong crowd, but that’s when I got my friends. Because at that age, it was near the end of Standard 4, I
met some of the girls actually that had stayed back - Standard 4 that should have been in Standard 5, whose sisters were drug addicts and alcoholics already, and they were in high school and going slowly into Standard 5, I started drinking, at the age of 13, I was drinking and drugging and I was already smoking cigarettes heavily at the age of 13. I didn’t care, I thought I have finally been accepted, that people actually accepted me the way I was - it didn’t make a difference. Ja, and now still to this day my mother throws up my friends at that time in my face. She blames me, “you have such a lovely personality, why can’t you have a -” she used to say I’ve got so much - I’m sensitive and loving and I’m caring why can’t I have decent friends, why did I have to grow up being like a rebel and - I mean when I was 13, I was going to the Doors and in Standard 5 I was going to the Doors.

I mean I went overseas on my own in Standard 8 and then I went overseas when I matriculated on my own. I had never been on a holiday like with a family, like all the kids that were with me had. They like all go to Israel once a year with their family and stuff like that. Not everyone but, you know, most people.

[Now] I don’t know why. I don’t know why, but I get into fights, physical fights, maybe because of my strength from gymnastics. I don’t need just words, I know I can depend on myself physically. Like I had a physical fight with one of the patients here, a male. I won. He was sent to Ward 10, he’s back now, but he was sent to Ward 10.

About self in relation to others

We’re both adopted, from different parents. That’s one of my biggest problems at the moment, cause I’ve got like ... I’m having an identity crisis. Religion-wise, not knowing where I come from, who I am, where I’m going. I want to meet her, [her biological mother] I want to know about her, I don’t, all these feelings are like going through me, I don’t know what I want to do. Yes, all I knew was that - well I knew the story of why my mother could not have children. And I didn’t know quite the story that my biological mother was 16 at the time when she fell pregnant and I didn’t know that kind of thing. I was just told that she couldn’t look after a child and my mother now, couldn’t have children and this woman gave me to her to help look after and to raise, and to love and to care for, and that’s how it was explained to me. And that’s how I thought everybody else understood it but from what their parents had told them and they said "mommy, mommy, there’s the girl in our class that’s adopted" and they didn’t say, well this is how it happens, it’s like - I wonder why. And then the parents used to skinner, you know, "is that the little girl who is adopted?" Now am I not paranoid?

Well, I just ... as my parents said, I never reached my capabilities. I never reached their expectations. Also, right throughout my school career I was told I was a straight-A student, I never got those A’s. But I know that if I worked, the way I could work, I probably could have got all those A’s, but I was too involved in other things.

I started Gymnastics and that became my life. Because you did not have to be in a team, it wasn’t with a team, it’s not a team sport, it’s for your own self, your own discipline, everything for yourself. And that’s when my whole life changed, because, I think in Standard 1 I was training four hours a day, five days a week. Ja, I mean, when I gave up gymnastics I was training six days a week, five to six hours a day. It started in class in Klerksdorp and that’s when they had the high beam, you know the balance beam, and I
freaked out and I gave up, not a chance. I can walk underneath it and I couldn’t even get onto it, and I just gave up, I couldn’t handle it so I phoned my Dad and “fetch me, fetch me, fetch me”, I can’t you know. And then my cousin was doing it in Jo’burg and I was watching her and I thought I could be doing that type of thing you know and she said I’ll help you and so she started teaching me and that and I enjoyed it and then I went to the club one day to see what it was like and I could do things on my first day because she had taught me and the coach thought oh my goodness here we go, we’ve got a top gymnast coming up, on her first day she’s almost doing flick-flacks and stuff. Academically I just remained average because most of the time was spent in the gymnasium. It was hard to concentrate because I used to daydream about being in the gym. Doing somersaults, you know like when you see girls like in movies like Nadia Komenachi and you see her sitting there daydreaming about somersaults and it’s exactly the same, you sit there and think could I do that and maybe I’m gonna, I’ll try and do that today. I gave up gym when I was 16. ... And it’s still in me.

I brought my photos from overseas today to show some of the patients because they were always hearing me talk about my overseas trip. I looked at the World Championship photos that I went to watch in Australia. And I was saying I met her and I met her and, like, Nadia Comaneci and I spoke to each other! And that was like a dream come true, I mean watch the movie and - that’s Nadia. And then when I was in Standard 4, I was chosen for "Gymnastics Goes Hollywood" to perform at Sun City at the Superbowl and the woman that played Nadia in the movie was one of the gymnasts and I met her. Well that’s when my life turned around with my gymnastics because I was ten years old and I remember it was the 28th June and my birthday is on the 30th and we had a tumbling competition - it was in Pretoria and I came second and I get this form, you know you get these letters - congratulations you have been chosen for the Transvaal team - and I thought, oh, another one of those but when I read it, it said congratulations, you have been selected to compete in the World Age Group Tumbling Championships to be held in France and I thought, wow, what’s going on here! And then it was like all my hard work at the gym had paid off and in the three years - I only started gym in Grade 2 - Standard 1, Standard 2 then Standard 3 - so three to four years- and I was already chosen to compete in the World Championship.

Ja, but then it [gym] had nothing to do with my family and nothing to do with school, just me. But there again, that was a team sport; it wasn’t where I had to be with people, it was on my own. In a team, I would get disappointed and be another failure.

That’s when my life changed drastically. My father was diagnosed with prostate cancer then. I don’t know how old he was, I can’t remember, but he died in 1994. So I finished Standard 5 in 1988 so in 1987 - he must have been 40 something, 48 somewhere around there. And that influenced my life at school and in gymnastics in a shocking way. I mean my results at school went up because I thought my Dad is going to die so I’d better not disappoint him - my gymnastics went down. And then I thought no ways hey am I letting my gymnastics suffer - well my gymnastics was my life - you know I can coach gymnastics when I get out of here you know: what am I going to do with my school and that was my logic at the time, I didn’t think of university and the rest of my life, the rest of my life was going to be in a gymnasium, coaching, and so I changed right over back to gymnastics again.
Ja, it was dying down, I was getting older, I was getting heavier, like going through puberty. I developed very late, puberty, because of gymnastics, I was very thin when I was doing gymnastics, so you know I didn’t develop until, like, later. I only started menstruating; my first menstruation was the night before I was raped. I thought I was pregnant! One weekend, you know where you get the plastic cutlery and I sat there, just out of frustration, I was angry and I was bored and I just sat there and started sawing because like it’s a plastic knife and I wasn’t getting cut ...  

(Sighs, pauses, whispers)... At the cemetery [Referring to her father].

I think that was what he needed, the fighting, he lived those extra few years with pure guts and I think that is what I admire about my father, was his guts. And that’s what I’m trying to have now with me, is to get out of here and have guts to fight and get well. Every now and then, I’m slipping up ... I have got to get out of here, I have got to get right, because I know if I don’t get out of here, I’ll be here for the rest of my life, because those are my choices. I will not live a normal life, I have to be the best at what I do, and I’ve decided I want to carry on with a secretarial job, which I am qualified as. I started when my dad was sick and when he died I had this nervous breakdown. I was in hospital, Sandton Clinic, Tara, and Harley, all these hospitals. And I started this course and I dropped out and then I started it again the next year, I redid it and I passed, because my dad said Helen, whatever you do, finish it. My brother, then it was like we had reversed roles. He was like the role model, he hadn’t finished his course. He started Engineering then he stopped it, he started it and he stopped it, and there was me I wasn’t going to give up. I promised my father I was going to finish it, and I finished it. I got three distinctions in computers 100% / 94% / 93%, and then for Business Ec, I got 84%. My lowest mark was 67% and that was typing.

I was too upset about my father. I dropped out and then I rejoined the next year. It was a six-month course. Then I started in the June when my dad had the back op and then in August he died when I was three months into the course, when I had a nervous breakdown and while I was in hospital I was going to college. I was at Harley Nursing Home and then I was going to college, my aunt would take me to college every day and I did my exams and everything. I studied from Harley and I got those marks. I just carried on going into hospital, out of hospital. My longest stay out of hospital was last year out of Sterkfontein from Spring Day, 1 September until 28 April this year; it was the longest I have ever been out of hospital since my dad died. I went from Sterkfontein to Sterkfontein.

I can’t hold a job because I can’t concentrate, can’t sit at the computer, I’ve got to get up and walk around, I can’t have an office job and that’s what I’m qualified as because I have to be on the go, you’ve seen me here but you haven’t seen much of me. Even what you have seen, I’m up and down, up and down, distracted easily. Ja, I’ve always been like that. Ja, and that’s one of the reasons I cut myself is that energy, that excess energy ... to get rid of that.
Tony was 25 years old at the time of interviewing (October, 1998) at Walberton Manor. The interview lasted for approximately three hours. He is English speaking, Jewish, from a reconstituted family and relatively materially privileged by upbringing. He has an older biological sister, who lives in the United States. His stepsister, father and stepmother have also emigrated to the United States. He is visited or accommodated occasionally by his mother and stepfather who remain here. He began the interview, after listening to my introduction politely, by handing me a poem and a drawing.

Yes. Um (clears throat). I want to read something to you. "I lie awake at night wondering what am I doing here, the world seems like an alien place to me. O Lord, this world is alone to me. I’ll never make it. Why? I don’t know. Oh I just want to go back home to heaven. There I belong where I’m loved unconditionally and wanted unconditionally. Where you understand how far I’ve come and how much I’ve fought. I’m tired of fighting, so tired of not getting the recognition of how far I’ve come, how much I’ve matured, please take me home, please take me home." And then I feel ... well you can look at it (hands me poem and picture). That’s where I was, the living dead, you can basically explain it ... that’s me and that’s a wall, that’s barring me between having a successful life. Ja, ... and if I go back, I go back to the way I was and if I go forward, I’ve got the wall, so the only way I can actually go is up. There are other ways but I don’t know and I don’t know what the wall is.

Tony had this to say about growing up.

About Home

Well I was, I was, we was two. My parents were divorced. My real sister and me were treated like absolute shit, we were the scapegoats. I mean, and then my stepsister, she was treated, I mean she could never do anything wrong. So basically what’s happening is, what’s happened is that whenever my parents were cross with my stepsister they used to blame me or my sister.

Ja, and um, my parents, you know. My real mother and real father has always had conflict. I love them both but my father says that my mother is a snake in the grass, and she’s a, she’s a spider spinning webs and casting me into the webs and she is a real shit and she is a this and she’s a that. My mother says that because of my father, I am where I am today. Just emotionally and physically destroyed and they’re constantly at conflict with each other, since the age of two.

I was on, I was a very hyperactive child, I was on Epinuton. No. Sorry what’s the pills for very hyperactive children? Ritalin. I was on Ritalin for many a year. It helped, but it didn’t help. To just help me to focus and to calm down so basically it didn’t help but I didn’t know that at that time, and my parents I mean, they didn’t basically, they took
me to psychiatrists and to psychologists and to play therapy and to this one and to that one. Because they didn’t want to deal with me. They didn’t want to deal with me, so other people can deal with me that’s fine. But they can’t; it’s just too much trouble to deal with me.

Ja. And their excuse was “I don’t know what to do, you are a problem child, I can’t do anything for you”. It made me feel very sad, what have I done to deserve this? ... They helped me but basically, but they were like, oh, here he goes again. I have to help him with his bloody homework again. And then they said you know you are the only person, only child that I have to actually help with their homework. Ja. And they said to me “don’t worry, we’ll be there for as long as we can and when we die we’ll leave you financially dependent ... we won’t leave you without any money. You will always have money from us”. It made me feel like I’m a nobody. I felt frustrated because I didn’t know who I was, I didn’t know what I was doing. I didn’t know why I was so stupid and my parents didn’t talk to me about this. Ja. They said, all they said to me is look, you’ve got a big problem. We’ll support you for the rest of your life and we’re sorry. And we’ve done more for you, we’ve spent more money on you with psychiatrists and psychologists and play therapy and stuff like that than any other child of ours. So they put the guilt on me: I was costing them money. I go home [now, on weekends]. They’re furious with me at the moment, I mean I’m uncontrollable, I’m causing them a lot of strain and stress.

But I can’t cry. I used to get a hiding or I used to get my head banged. Me and my sister used to have our heads banged or I used to get a hiding. "If you cry I’ll give you something to cry about." My stepmother. Ja, so basically I’ve never been able to cry because it’s wrong and now that I know that, it’s one of the ways out of my depression and emotions to have a good cry is the best medicine, I can’t. I want to but I can’t. Ja. And the sadness and the hurt turns into anger. And the frustration turns into anger.

And my mother in the past, why they broke up, is because my mother was looking for boyfriends, having sexual encounters with boyfriends and eventually my father says look I am going to break up. I’m going to divorce you. She threatened to jump off the building and they caught her and they put her into a sanatorium and she became like a vegetable. She didn’t want to do anything, help herself or anything. She snapped out of it and she made a life for herself and she got a husband, a new husband, and she grew up. But yet she still doesn’t understand how hard I have tried. Yes. Because nothing I can do that is good enough. I mean my mother, I get irritated, she gets irritated with me with whatever I do. And I mean I try my best and just nothing I do is good enough for her and she doesn’t recognise how far I’ve gone. From the living dead to now. And she’s my mother and unfortunately it’s a sad case that I have to see her. Otherwise I wouldn’t choose her. If my heart wouldn’t yearn and cry for her, I wouldn’t choose her; I wouldn’t be with her, I would never ever see her again. But I can’t do that. She is a very motivated person. She became, she had PD [Personality Disorder] and she pulled herself out. She is exactly like me, the walking dead and she pulled herself out and she’s made a life for herself.

My father, since I don’t know when, he put himself in a job, he put himself in his work and that’s all he did, he didn’t associate with me or the rest of the family he just worked and worked and worked, that was his way out. Ja, and my father said no you must go to gym to get your anger out. Gym doesn’t do anything. And the man that I went to play therapy with said to my father, your son is gay. My father said my son is not gay and
its disgusting, despicable the thing that you have just said and I am taking my son out of play therapy. No, my father wouldn’t accept it. And then, about six years ago I went to, a what’s it, when they check for hormones? Ja and I went to two of them and they both said I am sorry your son is gay. So he said rubbish my son is not gay, my son is not gay, my son is a human being my son is not gay. And then I, my father forced me into having a woman and to have sex with a woman, and he said once I have sex with a woman I’ll not be gay. Because, why, if you think that you are gay, why other people think that you are gay is because you were sexually molested by three young men as a child. I blocked it out. My father said I spoke to him about it. He said I was young, Grade 1 or Grade 2. (Pause, break). My father...I felt that I am a dirty disgusting person because I’m gay. My mother accepts it but not my father and my sister of course, she burst out crying and she said you’re going to get AIDS, you’re going to get AIDS and I haven’t told anybody else; they know about it but I haven’t told anybody else.

And my sister, my real sister is also in America. I’m the only one that’s left with my mother and stepfather. And she’s working as a waitress. So basically I’m the only one that’s left here. We used to be soul mates, I mean I used to tell her all my problems and she used to tell me all her problems and then we reached puberty and she just, she blocked up everything inside. She wouldn’t tell me anything, she wouldn’t speak to me. I mean we used to bath together and everything. And she suddenly closed me up like everybody else. Alone and rejected. Ja. And she’s also got a learning disability but not half as bad as mine. She can actually focus, I couldn’t focus. So I had a learning disability with non-focus and then concentration. So my sister, sisters, and my brother, half brother, and my stepmother and my father is all in America and I’m left alone in Walberton Manor with my mother and stepfather. So they’ve basically abandoned me.

About School

Ja. Ja. Ja. Ja. I went to ... um... I can’t remember ... Temple David. I was living in Sandton, Morningside. It was fine. I stayed an extra three years there because they said that I had a learning disability and I stayed an extra year there, three years there. And then I failed Grade 2 and Standard 1 once and then I failed Standard 5 and then at end of Standard 8 I left. I went to Grade 1, Freda Muller and then Bella Vista, Grade 1 and Grade 2, and then I went to Bella Vista and I did Grade 2 again. I went to Bella Vista and then Crossroads and then Gresswold, so I have actually been to four schools.

Ja, Standard 1, they said I was stupid. Ja they said I was stupid, and they said I would never accomplish anything. The teachers and psychiatrists and psychologists... said I would do small jobs, menial jobs for the rest of my life; I won’t be able to have a degree. Ja. No, I had no future: they said I had no future.

I also had as a child; I went to a speech therapist as well. So basically I was a very stuffed up child, in the brain. I can’t read, I read like a Grade 2, my spelling is disgusting, my mathematics, I mean I can’t do the basic times table. I wasn’t able to focus. I was very, very unfocused, I mean I used to, I could only sit down for three to four minutes and then I had to leave, I had to, I was very frustrated and I wanted to do something, I wanted...Ja it was hard to sit. Ja. They said I must go to a Aid, what do you call it, a school for learning disability, remedial school. So I went to three remedial schools. Ja. I felt very stupid. I felt stupid, I felt frustrated, I felt what did I do to
deserve this. Ja. I didn’t feel like I was good enough. Ja. It was very difficult. I found it very difficult to do the basic things like sit down and actually concentrate. I was thinking about all the things. I was thinking about supper and I was thinking about different things. I can’t remember, I was thinking about all different things.

I loved the teachers. Every teacher was fantastic, I really loved the teachers. You see all my life I’ve actually associated with adults. Super, I thought she [a teacher] was the bee’s knees. Loved the teachers. A lady with, that I had in Grade 2, well all my teachers were fantastic, I can’t remember one in particular. The one in particular that I remember, she taught me that nobody else loves me but God. It gave me hope because I knew that nobody else loved me and I was searching and looking for somebody to love me, not for who I am, not for what I do necessarily, but who I am. Love me for me and that is what God does, he loves me for me. It made me very comforted even to this day and I couldn’t have made it this far without God. She was a very spiritual Christian she is a very spiritual Christian. But now I have got other, God made it possible that I have other spiritual teachers. It was very good.

The work is still very problematic. [Bellavista, Grade1] It was very frustrating, I felt very stupid. I couldn’t concentrate. I felt stupid; I felt like I couldn’t function. What is wrong with me? So I used to bang my head against the wall. Basically they said, oh, here he goes again. Ja. And psychiatrist and psychologists said I must go to Tara. So my father said no ways, my son is not sick, my son is just mentally disturbed. … When I was 13 [Crossroads].

I went to Crossroads Ja, one to five … It was better because they had more time for us. And there was about six in the class and the teachers used to speak to my parents at least once a week. And so it was better. Slow, but better. I was understanding a bit more, understanding half of it. I thought I was going to get help, I thought I was getting help, but in actual fact they were making it worse. Because they weren’t speaking to me about it, they were speaking to my parents. It was a good experience; I preferred … the best school I have ever been in was Crossroads. Because they actually, they knew what was going on and they spoke to my parents but they didn’t speak to me. Ja and they had a file since, from Grade 1 to Standard 6. They had a file like this thick on me. They used to call me the problem child. I didn’t know what that meant, but I knew I was stupid. The teachers were fantastic. But you know when I didn’t understand something they just said; Oh go to your parents let them explain it to you. You are not normal, you’re mad, you can’t sit still, you have ants in your pants, what the hell are you doing, things like that. Any normal person would be able to sit down and concentrate for three or four hours. I mean that’s impossible, that was impossible for me. Yes. It’s much better but it’s still difficult. And then of course when I was at school, when I had to study for exams that was a definite no-no. I used to put my studies on a tape and play it over and over again, and when my father walked in I was sleeping all the time.

And then I went to Gresswold from five ’til eight. Then I gave up, I gave up on life and it just went from bad to worse. Gresswold was a terrible school. Just as long as I do my - I just wanted to get 50% and that’s it. I didn’t want to function, I mean I didn’t want to work hard; I just wanted to get 50%. There were particular areas. Maths, reading, spelling, and that’s it, and studies. I liked Science, Biology, because I wanted to do dissect a man.
I went into hairdressing. I went to a college and surprisingly enough I passed with flying colours. Ja, surprisingly enough I passed with flying colours because I loved the theory. The practical was a pain but the theory was fantastic. I loved the theory. The theory deals with the hair structure, the skin, the bones, the chemicals in the hair, how certain chemicals affects the hair, what perm lotion does, the scientific factors of perm lotion, what shampoos do to the hair, what conditioners do to the hair, um, um, what colour does to the hair. I made the theory into the practical, so I used to do a lot of experiments and that made it fun. And I used to teach a class, which made it better. But I've been there for six years because I went there for three years and then I had a nervous breakdown. When I smashed my car. And then I went back and I finished my course. The practical. (Yawn) The practical training I have to do a perm, a set, highlights, lowlights, a tint, a male haircut, a female haircut, finger waves, pin curls, and that's it.

I've got a degree in hairdressing. I've got six months to go before I qualify and I just can't seem to push the qualification, because every time I go into a job, I tend to want to get out. I become claustrophobic. I've become, I'm better than the job and I want a better job. I feel like I am better than the job. It becomes very frustrating. And what G [residential therapist] says, is that I haven't got perseverance. Ja. She says as long as I have perseverance and stick it out, I'll be successful and I'll be qualified. She says because I've got a tremendous amount of talent for hairdressing but she says that I'll never get qualified until I stick it out.

About Peers

I felt like an idiot. And throughout my whole school life I didn't make friends because I thought that I was an ant and they were giants. I thought I wasn't good enough for them. Very lonely. And I never liked sports. I like to, like when the kids were playing I didn't play with the kids I was sitting there, since I can remember, talking to the adults or listening to the adults, because I felt more comfortable with adults.

When I was younger I went to play therapy and instead of playing with dolls, I mean instead of playing with cars I liked to play with dolls, I liked to play with dolls. Instead of climbing trees, I liked to play with Barbie and stuff. I don't know what woman play with anymore.

And then I remember when I was in Grade 2, no when I was in Standard 2, this one guy was playing with my ruler and running around with my ruler and I took a scissors and I flung it at him and it nearly hit his brain. It went right past his head, scraped his skull and pegged in the door. Basically I didn't know how to get the ruler out and I was furious and I was, I wanted the ruler back. Everything focused on the ruler and I will do anything just to get the ruler back. Which when I think back it was totally absurd because it's a ruler, but I went ballistic over the ruler. I said to him if you tell anybody I'll kill you. I remember saying to myself what have I done, what is happening to me, what have I turned into? A monster? Ja I was furious. But I didn't know how the anger, I mean the anger suddenly exploded. Ja I mean this other time, there was a woman and she went with her boyfriend and another girl, well there were two girls and a boyfriend and she came and was sitting on the chair. She came and she said excuse me but you are sitting on our seats. So I suddenly flew out at her, I slapped her and started to beat her up for no apparent reason. And I went to the office and I burst out crying and they let me off. Again I felt what have I actually done? From being a loving, caring person who
loved everybody to being a selfish, heartless, murderer. Ja and she spent a week off school. I would have just, could have just stood up and walked away. And then there is another time when this bully grabbed me and was shaking my head around and he was, he was much bigger than me and I took my fist and I smashed him and I broke his nose and he fell on the floor. He was unconscious. It’s not planned. Ja, totally out of my control and I’m not a violent person.

About self in relation to others

I haven’t got a car ... Ja, because I smashed two cars. The first time I got put down so much by my first boss who told me I’m a nobody, I’m a nothing, like my whole life. And I suddenly said well I’m not going to be on this earth, what am I doing on this earth, nobody loves me, nobody cares about me, I keep on messing up. So I drove myself, I drove my car into a tree and a wall. Smashed the wall down and I bent the tree. And they had to cut me out of the car and I crushed my heels and I was very, very close to death. And God didn’t want to take me at the moment, I don’t know why; I’m so furious with him for that. Ja, and I said well if you are not going to take me Lord then I’m going to take my own life. Then I’m going to kill myself and I tried to kill myself and they cut me out of the car and the whole thing, I spent six months in hospital. I fainted. My car spun out of control and I fainted. I was doing 80/90 kilometres per hour on the speed bumps so all in all I should have died because any other person would have died. Of course I was meant to have lived. And then I fainted and I found them cutting me out of the car and my back is skew, my spine is totally skew and they said I’ll walk with crutches for the rest of my life or in a wheelchair. They said I’d be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life and if I’m lucky I’ll be on crutches for the rest of my life, but I’ll never walk again. And I was determined to walk again and I did walk again.

And then the second time was quite recently. It was, about two or three months ago I was driving and I’ve got this insane, my body does the most weirdest things. I was driving and I was looking, I turned my head to the left to see the side street, to see where I must go up to go to work and my steering wheel went the direction of my head, my steering wheel went to the left. So in other words I took my head to the left and my steering wheel went to the left and I smashed, I went up the embankment and hit a traffic light, totally bent the traffic light. My car went, flew, drove on oncoming traffic, spun uncontrollably on oncoming traffic and I smashed another vehicle and I walked out of there, I walked out of the vehicle. I feel that my body is not in connection with my body, my head, my brain is not in connection with my body. Ja, it does its own thing. It’s like they are in conflict and it’s like my body is fighting ... it’s like the good in me is fighting the evil in me and sometimes the good wins when I’m sane and sometimes the bad wins when I’m ... (long pause) ... They just told me I’m PD [Personality Disorder]. I know what that is. It’s when I’ve got different emotions in me and I can’t actually, I have different emotions and I suddenly get cross. In other words I can’t control my emotions. I suddenly get angry for no reason, I suddenly get happy for no reason, I suddenly get very upset and depressed for no reason. I suddenly, when my head is on my shoulders, I have love and affection and I spend time with people.

You know a few years ago, I used to take stuff that was breakable like pottery and stuff. I used to say this is my life, I used take my life and I used to break it on the floor and I used to smash all over it, stamp all over it, and once it was truly smashed I
was happy. Overdoses, bang my head against the wall, tried to commit suicide with the
car, took dog poison the one-day and it went right through me. Mmm ... you know the
poison that you de-flea and tick the dog, which is in a powder form. I drank that and it
went right through me, it didn’t touch me. I didn’t get sick or anything. I am
disappointed because any normal person it would have killed, but not me. You see I don’t
belong in this world, I got put in this world to do God’s will and I don’t want to live in
here anymore, I don’t want to live in this world anymore I want to go back home.
(Whispering) He’s such a stubborn God, he’s so stubborn. No, you can’t go home, you’re
staying here. You can’t go up yet, you are staying here, you’ve still got work for me to
do. You still got work for me to do for me. No matter what I do I can’t kill myself. I’m
too bloody pieperig [cowardly] to take a cutthroat and slit my wrist, slit my throat or
jump off a 50 story building ...

Why do they do this? What have I done to deserve this? Ja, I have done something
wrong and I’m going to rectify it. What can I do to help? What can I do to make money
for the family? What can I do to make them feel happy with me? Ja, it feels that some
things I do, what have I done, where has it come from? Why did I do this? Ja. I wish I
knew the answers. No value. (Pause) It was so frustrating, I mean, they have to tell me,
for example, they have to tell me their names about 60 times before I actually get it in
my head. And they get cross with me and I get cross with myself, I’ve got a brain why
can’t I use it. Look I mean to get out of it, all my life, even now, well I was younger I was
in a Peter Pan world and now that I am older I don’t want to be Tony ... I want to be
something else. I want to be a woman, I want to be a witch, I want to be an angel,
anything but Tony. Ja I can’t actually live with myself. Yes, I’ve got multiple
personalities. I’m a woman trapped in a man’s body. I’m a witch for revenge, I want to
kill them and curse other people that hurt me. I can be a very selfish person because I
believe that um, if I have got a conflict one wrong, oh if somebody wrongs me I must
revenge him. And yet God says two wrongs don’t make a right. Revenge is mine said the
Lord. Ja. I’m very sexually frustrated so I actually want to, I have got images of
cutting, grabbing somebody that I really think is gorgeous, cutting them up. Anger, a lot
of anger, physical, sexual, emotional.

Just sometime, you know, the giving up part, I just want to give up, just lie in my room
and wait to die. When I first came to this place I was sleeping the whole day; I didn’t
use to bath; I didn’t use to brush my teeth; I didn’t used to wash my hair. I used to slit
my wrist; I used to bang my head against the wall; I used to have major tantrums. I used
to eat a bit and I used to put my finger down my throat and I used to bring it all up. I
used to watch TV and that was my life. And from then to now I have come a long way.

It makes me feel confused, because I want to stick it out so badly but when I go into
the work situation, I collapse. I make myself get fired from the job or I leave. The
reason is, the true reason is I am a junior qualified and I expect myself to be a qualified
hairdresser. I expect myself to have 20/30 years experience. And unfortunately the
bosses also expect that from me. They do a haircut; they expect me to do a haircut
exactly as they have done the haircut. With the same, um, as good as them. And then
they say no I am not, I am only an apprentice, because I can’t do this and I can’t do that
properly, but I never actually got taught because what I got taught in college is the very
basics. And it’s a learning curve, and one way I am not willing to learn because I am too
proud and I think to myself I am better than them, and I am as good as them, and in
another way I think that I need to stick it out and learn. So my brain tells me that: go
for it stick it out and work and something else says that I am better than these people. They don’t appreciate me for my expertise, which is totally, I mean in the dream world. Then I must leave and I leave. Ja. I am always having a fight myself. I can’t get a job and I can’t hold down a job. I haven’t got perseverance to hold down a job. I become claustrophobic, I become - I think that I’m better than the job, I think that they are holding down on my - that they are distorting my hairdressing trade, you know like you can’t do this because you’re not ready and I know that I’m ready. Or you can’t do that but I know that I can do it. And so I leave. And then they say okay go ahead and I do an okay job or I do a shocking job and then they say but you can’t do it or they say yes you can do it but you’re not up to scratch yet. Then I say, well I’m leaving. Well if they don’t accept my talent and let me express my talent then, I’m sorry, I’m leaving.

Ja, I enjoy teaching. I actually want to be a teacher, that’s my calling, to be a lecturer in hairdressing. You see, I teach people even now. I teach people how to clean; I teach people how to cook, because my sister, she never wanted to cook. So I was with my mother in the kitchen and I was asking questions about cooking. I know how to cook; I know how to clean. The only thing I don’t know how to do is ironing. Because I point blankly refused to iron because I think it’s a total waste of time, you iron a thing of clothes, a garment of clothes and it’s beautiful and ironed and crease free and then you wear it once and you have to wash it and iron it again. It’s pointless.

[I’m] very artistic. You would look nicer with red hair. Not a red-red, I’m talking about a wine red. You know when you get those bottles, a deep wine red. Dark red yes, like a purply reddish colour. We can try it with a colour shampoo first. A colour shampoo lasts for six to eight washes, we can try with a colour shampoo but you must please yourself. If you want something done to your hair it doesn’t matter what other people think. You are happy ... Your family can say oh, you look beautiful as you are but if you want red hair, who’s stopping you, because you have to live with yourself. Yes. Stuff everybody else. I want this and I want that and I must live with myself because when the push comes to shove no one else cares, so I can break my back trying to please everybody else but I must please myself first.

I like to make people happy when they are unhappy because years ago I thought well I can’t make myself happy so I’m going to make other people happy. (Yawns) Sorry I didn’t sleep last night. My head spins at night, I think about all the things during the day and I can’t rest my mind. I feel we like the TV studio. (Room has one-way mirror). Carte Blanche. Yes. They usually deal with problems, like they found those people mistreating the elephants. Elephants are my favourite creatures. Do you know why they are my favourite creatures? Because they are strong, they have unbelievable love, they’ve got a brain, they can remember 60 to 70 years ago. An elephant never forgets. I mean you can mistreat an elephant for 20 or 30 years and they will stamp you out. Ja, and they are the most, I mean, when there is a family member that is dead, that has died or got slaughtered, they stay with that family member. And they don’t eat the dead family member, and they just stay with him or her for a month or two months and they feel and touch the bones and sniff the bones and they associate with the person, the elephant.

I had one huge, huge, loss. I had a dog, his name was Cuddles. God gave him to me and God took it, him away. He’s been dead for about a year now. He was my love. In other words, he was a person, he was my child. I regarded him as my child, my baby and I put all my love in him and he gave me all his love. God gave him to me. God made people give
him to me. I'm distraught, but I talk to him. I wanted to be a doctor to cure people, because I believe that doctors cure the symptoms but they don't cure the, they cure the symptoms but they don't kill, cure the, what's um ... They don't cure the disease, they cure the symptoms. And I want to cure the disease. And I mean I'm not a person that is money mad because money is a sin. So like when a person comes to me and they have for example a cut and the hair is very dry, excessively dry. I've got a treatment that I specifically bought for these people and they are meant to pay me for the treatment but I don't expect them to pay me. I do it out of my free will because God has given me this talent and I must use it for God's, for God's, for God not for people. I must give back what God has given me in other words. God has given me this talent and I must use it to heal or to make people pretty.

I've had seven or eight sexual encounters with different women just to get the gayness out of me because I feel like it's a disease, I felt like it's a disease, I felt like it was cancer. And I had six or seven, eight, women, different women. And it was just a bad taste of medicine: I just wanted to get the job done and that's it, to please a woman and that's it and then eventually I started to accept it and now I've accepted it. Because I'm gay and I want to dissect a man and I wanted to dissect a man. Yes, I wanted to inflict pain because the world inflicted pain on me. I hate men, I can't associate with men, I haven't got time for men, just men must leave me alone. Ja, I've never had male friends, always women. I've had relationships where I've given everything to the person, all my love and all my affection and they just hurt me or don't give a damn ... No. I was used and abused ... And lonely and empty.

I have trouble living basically. It's a big schlep for me to go out and bath every day or cook a meal or sit with a friend and her to talk about her problems or sleep or have food, have something to eat or go to the toilet, or just little things. It's very big for me, I have to force myself to do it, but I do it every day because I'm a person, I want to be a person. I want to be a person in society; I don't want to be a reject. God, that's the only person I'm close to. God, the Father. I'm a Jew for Jesus. Basically I never got any love, I never got any affection. I always got a rejection, I can never do anything right, whatever I do is not good enough. They don't appreciate me for who I am, not necessarily what I do. That's basically it.

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PAULA

Paula is a particularly attractive and artistic woman, whose art has been publicly acknowledged. She was 30 years old at the time of interviewing and had completed a Diploma in Fine Art at a Technikon and a BA at a university, in English and Philosophy. I interviewed her at my rooms in January 2000 over a four-hour period. She had been in psychotherapy for three years at that time. She comes from an underprivileged, Jewish, English-speaking background.
This is what she had to say:

**About Home**

I remember that bathroom, it was just so old, the bath was always old, it sort of disintegrated when you bathed, it was scratchy. And then we had these friends and they just seemed to have everything, it was my mom’s best friend and they were wealthy, they had a great house, they always had so many clothes, and in a sense there was this pressure to keep up with them, my mom would buy us clothes when L’s mom would buy her clothes and it was always don’t tell your father that I got you this, or tell him it was R5 when it was R20. Mm, Mm, ja. Because my parents honestly couldn’t afford basic things I think. Never, I was never told. I remember being told that my father was insolvent; maybe I asked for something and it was a case of YOUR FATHER IS INSOLVENT, and I didn’t understand that because it was never followed up we are poor, we cannot afford things, one day we will be able to afford things, but right now we cannot, and things are hard, and everybody has to bite the bullet, there was never anything like that, never an explanation.

My father, I remember him sitting and trying to do Maths with me and then it got to a point where he just couldn’t do it, he would get frustrated with me and I would get extremely frustrated with him because he wasn’t following - there was a system of how to get there, and you had to show step by step how you get to the answer, so my father would get to the answer and not really know how he got to the answer but he would get the right answer and yet he wasn’t able to teach me; it was like, what was the use, because that wasn’t how we had to do it at school, we just had to get the way to get there and we had to go by this specific process, that he obviously didn’t know, he just knew how to get there, and he couldn’t really teach me how he got there.

My dad was always the kind of guy who would go to the SPCA and find a dog or he would read in the newspaper or someone was giving a dog away and the next thing we would have this dog, or he would look at a picture in the newspaper, such and such a dog is about to be put down tomorrow, and my dad would run and get the dog, he wouldn’t have that dog but they would give him another dog (laughing) and my mother hated him for that; I think they nearly got divorced twice when he did that twice so I don’t think he will do that again, so we have still got the one.

I always remember my parents, especially my mother saying, Grade 2 - Grade 1, Grade 2, that I have - that I am slow, and once I get things, I really get them but it takes me a while to get them and I kind of - I don’t want to kind of over-analyse it, but I suppose slow and retarded ... Ja, once I got it, I really got it, I never really knew what that meant, once you get it, you really get it, doesn’t everybody get it once they get it? I don’t know, so, but the slow part I understood, and I believed. I believed her. I was not angry with her for saying that. I thought she was complimenting me. It came across as a compliment. You know, you are slow when you learn things, but when you get them, YOU REALLY GET THEM. Ja. I didn’t understand what she meant, truly, I never understood it and I still don’t. I managed to get it enough but it just seemed to take so much effort in order to get it.

I specifically remember when I was seven I said that - to my dad - my mother used to hit me a lot and I said to my dad, mother is a terrible wicked witch, and I would picture
her on this broomstick flying by the moon, typical witch behaviour (laughing) and my mother was a witch, and I always remember thinking that. Yet, when she wouldn’t come home or when she was late or whatever, I would be beside myself for worry for her and she’s dead, she’s gone, I didn’t think she’s left us but she’s dead, or she’s been injured.

She said that I asked for it all the time, she said I literally begged for it, because my sister and I would be in the car with her, we would be in the back and we’d be playing. I would get moody and whine, and she said whine and ask for a smack. I remember being sick once - I used to get stomach bugs a lot as a child - I remember being particularly ill and feeling awful and vomiting and I stayed home from school, I was little, maybe six, maybe eight, I don’t think I was even as old as eight. I was crying a lot and I was just obviously in pain and uncomfortable and she smacked me. She said if you don’t stop crying I am going to smack you, and I couldn’t stop it and it made me hysterical and she smacked me, and I thought that was tremendously unjust; I thought my mother was a really bad mother, I really, really, did. Mm.

I remember my mother telling me things and then in my mind I knew that it was wrong what she was telling me. I remember she told me one of the things that somehow enough, and I guess it’s about timing, she told me about drugs when I was seven. A lot of things happened when I was seven; it was an extremely significant time for me. My father would say but you are only seven, things like that, it was just a very sensitive kind of age. My mother said something about drugs and some kids take drugs, and for me, the way she conveyed it and how and what she spoke about drugs was a horror beyond horrors and I said to her I am too young to hear about this, I am only seven. Ja, and she said, "BUT YOU HAVE GOT TO KNOW ABOUT THESE THINGS". That whole incident sparked a lifelong sort of horror of drugs, horror and fascination and sort of something that I would have nightmares about throughout my life, even into my adult years, even up until recently. Just a sense of horror, devastation, which is disproportionate to what it really is about because I don’t feel the same way about suicide. Suicide is a tragedy and it is a horror too but it is not like the horror that drugs are, because of the age that I was when I internalised that.

I think she was a really bad mother, yet she loved us. She would play games with us; she would do things with us that other mothers didn’t do with their children. She would play, she was fun, I suppose she was fun, she would do fun things with us, she would be the one to take the kids, of all our friends, she would be the one to take the kids to the zoo. Because she was an art teacher I spent a lot of my childhood in the art room, a lot of it. I would play with clay, my friends would come over, um, my friends used to enjoy playing with me because they would come over and play in the art room. It was a bloody fantasy. They would come over and paint on the walls, we would paint our names on the walls; the art room was filled with names, everybody put their names on the wall and graffiti and different colours, and pictures. Mm. I did have good experiences with her but, it was always – there always seemed to be something that turned out kind of sad. I don’t know always every day if you were having fun, that made big tears later. No, it would always just turn out that way, it just happened that way, and when you were wild, someone is going to get hurt.

And my mother always used to sort of – the older I got, she just sighed, your sister is stupid, your sister is this, that and the other, whatever. Just screaming at my sister and me being really upset. Because my sister left the key under the doormat and that is the
most obvious thing. That was one incident and ja, I mean there was just a whole lot of
dynamics going on at home, I remember once having lost something, I don’t know what it
was, it seemed trivial to me, and I was sleeping and my parents woke me up to go and
find it, that was traumatic.

My mother never did homework with us. My friend, L, her mother did homework with her
every afternoon and I thought was incredibly indulged, I thought that was because L was
a spoilt brat and that’s why her mother sat and did homework with her because she was
a spoilt brat. I did no homework with my parents. If I had to learn for a test my mother
would ask me questions. My mother was always too busy, she really was, she was
teaching, she had to earn a living; my father went insolvent when I was eight and it was
obviously very shameful for my mother and for my father, I didn’t understand that. He
had a gun shop in B-fontein and um, that was quite early on in my schooling so for that
many years my parents could not afford to put me in the school, before that they were
starting up his business, and ja, my dad went insolvent

I don’t know, I don’t know if Grade 2 kids, if their parents are supposed to say “have you
got your books today” is this your Hebrew book, is this yours, this book, but my mother
never did that. We used to have a homework book that the parents would have to sign
and I came up with a ridiculous story and say I … and my mother would never sign it, but
I was sure it was because I always forgot to give it to my mother to sign. I would get
into trouble because she wouldn’t have signed it and this class teacher would say “why
has your mother not signed” so what my mother did, I assume that this is how she did it,
in pencil she signed her signature several times and I would just have to trace it into the
book by rubbing pen on the back and I didn’t know that it would come out backwards and
I got into big trouble for cribbing my mother’s autograph. But obviously this is
something that parents should take care of - have you got your lunch, have you got your
books, do you have anything that needs to be signed, do you have the right books this
year, and my mother didn’t do that kind of stuff.

I remember always not having the right books because my mother honestly couldn’t
afford them. We were poor, and there was always this pretence that we were not poor
but there was never money for bus tickets, and my mother would never say, “Look, we
just don’t have the money.” She would rather just avoid the issue and be very evasive
about everything and so I was confused. I didn’t know why I didn’t have the right books,
I didn’t know why I never had bus tickets and why I would always have to beg the bus
driver to let me on the bus. I didn’t understand any of that. It was a very shameful
experience for her, and she didn’t want to talk about it, so she became evasive. My
sister and I needed the same book in Form 1 and it was an expensive book, it was a
Chumash [Bible] and we only had one between us and we needed the same book every
day. I never had the right school gear - why aren’t you wearing a school jersey, or that
kind of stuff or this jersey is old and again I didn’t understand it was because we
couldn’t afford to buy those kind of clothes, we had to wear broken skirts because my
mother couldn’t afford to buy new ones and so on, there was this general lack of care at
home I guess.

Because things were unsaid, I was sure that they were bad. There was no feedback in
the school system, a kid was never called in and told that it was parents evening. I
always felt parents’ evening was a conspiracy against me, where the teachers would talk
bad things about me to my parents – it would have been so much more receptive if they could say, my mother would come and give me second hand information and I don’t know what she left out; I always knew she left stuff out.

When I was a kid, I used to play; I used to be in my head a lot. My mom, I just remember she would go to the shops and leave my sister and I in the car for what seemed like hours and hours and hours, it just seemed like hours, I don’t know how long it was. We would play games and I just with that kind of boredom and frustration, what I did was I started [spelling backwards]. It must have been around Standard 3 because I knew how to spell and that.

I remember idolising my older brother, because he was just so heroic, he was so tall and he was good-looking and the girls liked him and the girls loved him, because - I mean he’s ten years older than me so when I was 12 he was 22 and when I was eight he was 18 and there were always girls around him and he was “my brother”, and um I felt - I guess – ja how did I feel? Well I loved him, as far as I was concerned he could do nothing wrong and yet, I remember always, always complaining to him and to my other brother and to my father about my mother. My brothers were so far apart I don’t remember how they grew up. The older brother is ten years older than me and the next is eight years older than me.

I loved my sister, I adored my sister, when we were growing up I adored her, we fought but I adored her. And she had this big box in the bedroom in front of her. I think she was 11 and she had to throw these - she was throwing all these teddies into the box and crying, she was crying, and she was throwing all her toys not the box and tears were just streaming down her face and I asked her what was wrong, and she said that she was too old to play with toys now and that’s so sad. She said I could have them, and I was kind of happy because I had suddenly doubled my toy quota overnight but I felt sad, I don’t [know] why she had to do that and there wasn’t any pressure from me to stop playing with them, but all of a sudden she didn’t want to play with them anymore.

My sister developed quite early I think she was about nine – I don’t know how old, maybe nine when she started getting boobs and they were growing quite rapidly and I was sort of really embarrassed for her. I internalised some kind of embarrassment. I was a year younger, I was eight. My sister could no longer walk around without a top on, and we used to play like that, and pretty soon I would also not be able to do that and I was upset about that. Her boobs were developing quite rapidly and the next thing my mother came into the room and she was very angry or she seemed very angry and she threw this book at us, written by some male, about everything you need to know about the birds and the bees or some shit like that. It seemed rude, and we had to read it even though it was rude. My mother just seemed really cross. She always used to say she was really late when she got her period when she was 15 and it was something she kind of gloated about and I always felt inadequate because I got my period when I was in Standard 5, I guess I was 12. I was happy that I never had big boobs, like my sister who obviously was teased quite a lot because she developed earlier than the other kids. My boobs just were never really big and they still aren’t so I wasn’t ashamed of that, but I remember just this sense of shame. My sister gave me my sex education, when I got my period, she said okay this is what you do, I didn’t run to my mother, I didn’t say there are brown spots in my panties, I ran to my sister, what do I do? Okay let me look, it was like that, it was just simple, and I was lucky, I had my sister, my sister wasn’t that lucky.
Another significant figure is my grandmother, but I will get back to her; we were all living in this tiny house and there were seven of us and we had my mother's bedroom, with my mom and dad, and interleading was a little room where my sister and I slept and then just to the right of that was both my brothers' bedroom and just behind mine and my sister's room was my grandmother's bedroom and that was the study and then there was the kitchen and the lounge and that was our house and, I just - (what was I saying? I've lost my train of thought because I was talking and thinking about my grandmother and trying to paint the scenario) - (silence). It was a very tiny house. The art room yes, the art room then became my brothers' room, they built upstairs, they built - every room that there was downstairs they built a room upstairs on top, the entire house, so then my brothers had a room upstairs each, my sister and I still shared a room, my grandmother had a suite to herself, my parents had a nice bedroom with a bathroom ensuite and ja, so the art room was downstairs but then we couldn't paint on the walls any more because it was a big room now, a little bit more fancy.

My grandmother was a very important figure. When my parents went insolvent, I think even before then. I think it was actually about the time when they went insolvent because um we had to move in with my grandmother, into her house. I hated my grandmother, I really, really disliked her intensely - I remember just disliking her and she and I fought all the time and she always tried - she was just a very nasty lady, she really was, she just didn't have any redeeming qualities. She was bitter, over - she used to smoke like a chimney and we used to call her the dragon, and that was our secret rebellion, my mom, my dad, all of us when she wasn't there. She was very domineering and there just wasn't space in the house, there were so many of us and there were two toilets, and in the morning we would have to hurry up and go to the loo and she would be going to work and my parents had their bathroom - it was a bit of a fight and squabble for everything. I don't even remember what it was that my grandmother was always on about. I just remember her waving like a lunatic and screaming and my mother and her having fights and often my father would just not talk to her. We would have to sit at the same dinner table and there was a time when he wouldn't talk to her for two or three months, it was ridiculous, they wouldn't speak, they wouldn't say a word to each other. It was extremely tense growing up with her. I hated her, she gave me a lot of uphill and I gave her back. One morning I needed to pee so badly and my sister was making a pee and there was the bath and I had to pee in the bath and my grandmother's underwear was in the bath and I peed all over it (laughing) and she said I was like a lunatic, I was a lunatic, what was wrong with me, was I insane, only insane people do that. I was deeply ashamed. Even my mother thought I was insane.

Sarah, the maid, I loved Sarah. She was also hard though, she was extremely hard. Um, and she was angry, she was black, she was angry about the way she had to live, she was angry the way my parents treated her, and I think she was justified, I really believe she was justified in being angry. But some of her anger spilled over onto me and I didn't understand why she was so angry with me. I did ingest that I was responsible for her position, I really did, and I did feel guilt, that's where the seeds of my guilt sort of started in the sense of apartheid. I really saw Sarah as a human being and she let me know at every opportunity that she was a human being. She was special, I liked her. I was very sad when she left and I kind of blocked out a lot of why she left. She and my mother used to argue a lot and I hated that she used to retract her argument and say sorry, sorry, sorry, the minute she realized she could get fired and that she needed that
job. It was shameful that she had to behave that way, she had to. I think a large reason why Sarah left was because of my grandmother, she used to fight with her all the time, she was so nasty, just so mean. I never understood why Sarah couldn’t live in the house, for God’s sake, she wiped my ass; she bathed us.

I do remember being satisfied, I remember wanting to have a Batmitzvah and the Batmitzvah is just an amazing experience. I remember wanting to go to Israel and begging my mother, and we had to apply for welfare. I used my Batmitzvah money to go to Israel and my mother gave me money in Dollars to spend so I remember really loving going. I was in Standard 8 at the time and I went for three weeks or a month. When my sister and I just had this love affair with horses, a lot of kids go through that, and Freud would have a theory for that I am sure, but we really loved the animals. My mom made sure even with our limited finances that she took us to horse riding lessons and it was amazing. In the beginning I didn’t do that great, and it was hard for me, it was very much discipline, horse riding, and especially dressage, it was a very sort of British stiff upper lip kind of shit, getting the horse to do all these unnatural things, and the rider too. Then we went to another teacher and I became brilliant at cross-country and I loved it: it was wild, I loved it, and I loved the horses.

About School

I remember the school context; I remember that feeling of missing things and then getting into trouble. In nursery school I have a feeling that I managed to catch up or that I managed to be in sync with the group but in Grade 1, we had to learn our times tables or something. I didn’t know my times tables and the teacher smacked me. I don’t know why I didn’t learn them but I didn’t go home and learn them and yes, I remember that quite clearly, and I thought it was very unfair that I had got smacked for it. The class was ahead of me, I was lost. I don’t know what it was, I just had this feeling at school that I didn’t have the right books, that I didn’t know what the right books were to have and that I just – sometimes it just seemed to take so much energy to focus on what the teachers were saying, honestly.

My mother was aware throughout school that I had learning disabilities and she took me to a remedial teacher and I remember really liking this teacher. Then there was this other girl, G, and G would say the most stupid things like bot, and I thought gosh that is so stupid. So it was just that I needed an extra little bit of attention. She was lovely and supportive and gentle and kind and she went at my pace, I suppose. She gave me one on one and I guess that’s what I needed. I must have been in about Grade 2, maybe Standard 1, it was probably Standard 1.

And then in Grade 2 I remember I had a Hebrew teacher, for some reason my Hebrew teachers weren’t very nice people. Not all of them, there was a nice Grade 2 Hebrew teacher, but she wasn’t my teacher. But this one that I had, she would come to our class as the Hebrew teacher, and going to school and every day dreading Hebrew and then she would come and give the Hebrew lesson and then she would say, “Paula, where is your book?” I never brought my book and every single day I would say, “Oh, I forgot it at home.” The class would tease me in a really nasty way and so would she, she actually joined in. After I don’t know how many months but it must have been a long time, every single day, I forgot my book at home, every single day. She one day said “Where is your
book?" and then I think she answered "oh" or something, because I used to say that, and I just burst out crying and she was delighted that I had a reaction. At least you care, or something like that, she said. She was surprised that it meant anything to me.

I felt truly that the teacher was being one of the kids and gossiping about this [other] girl and I felt bad, but in a sense I felt good because at least I wasn't the subject of this and usually I would be and what kind of became clear to me was that this is what happens with me, the teacher gossips about me with other kids behind my back when I am not there, and I'm pretty sure that she did because she just had no loyalty, I guess or whatever it was um, be nicer to her but at the same time she was trying to get the kids sort of favour her, she was talking on their level, gossiping with them. Indeed, there was a great sense of betrayal when O walked back into the classroom and her saying "I know you've all been talking about me" and I felt so ashamed, I felt the shame of all the class.

I had the most difficult time in Standard 1 and I nearly failed; in fact, they had to pull me through to the next year, to Standard 2. Nearly failing was purely, and I'm so sure of this because I hated the teacher, she was just the most horrible teacher. She was a bulldog terrorist nazi, awful woman, I don't remember much about class but I just remember dreading going to school - I dreaded going to school there, that year, that whole year. Eventually my mother had to be called in and it was drama, the whole year was drama. We tried to change the class but maybe it was too late in the year, I don't remember the details, but I do remember there was a whole drama. I don't think I concentrated in class.

And there was another important figure in my life and that was the ballet teacher, she lived next door and I suddenly had this passion that I was going to dance and I would hear music and I would just be this super prima ballerina, another fantasy. My mom sent us to ballet lessons next door to the teacher and she just was the most awful woman, she was awful, and she ruined the whole ballet experience. I remember crying, I don't want to go to ballet today, you've got to go, I would cry in the car, tears, and my mother would make sure that we got there. This woman used to poke our feet with sticks and kick us with these different kinds of sticks with different ends, a flat end and a pokey end, she was just mean, she was so mean. Later on I learned she was a complete anti-Semite. I had a continuing feeling of failure because I would have to repeat, in ballet there was pre-grade, then Grade 1 and then Grade 2, and so the three of us, my friend L and my sister and I would start off together, so we did pre-grade, and then I think she just put us into Grade 2 or whatever, we skipped a year, and failing Grade 2. Then my sister also did, but L went ahead so we did Grade 2 again and then my sister went through Grade 2 into Grade 3 and I was still in Grade 2 and then we changed to another teacher and I was still in Grade 2 and my sister was in Grade 3, but it didn't occur to me that she was only a year ahead, but what occurred to me was I'd failed Grade 2 four times.

One thing that I do remember quite clearly is my mother's report back from parents evening when I was in Standard 4 and that was when I realized that I was trying very hard to concentrate in class for the first time because I had some kind of respect for the teacher and that was um, she said to my mother, "Paula is the kind of student that every year she is going to do better and better and by the time she gets to varsity she will be excelling." That was like a germ of truth or something that fuelled me in a sense,
you know, I am not stupid I am just growing into myself or something like that. That inspired me. In Standard 4, I had a teacher that - I made a very big effort to concentrate in the class and my average was 60% or something, which was quite high for me, just over 60%, because I was usually getting 50% in the 50's and just thinking that the teacher was talking Greek, I was just having to concentrate so hard, shew! I remember not having a book, having to share, not having an explanation for not having a book, always that kind of vague, sense of vagueness and confusion, and it was that vagueness seemed to carry me through school - it seemed to carry me, at least into high school and Standard 8.

I think from Standard 4 and it is funny because in Standard 4 I had remedial Maths at the school and the Maths teacher was just not a nice person. I didn't seem to learn much from her, I just remember her repeating things over and over again, and still not getting it, not feeling stimulated by her. She was a buxom lady, and she had dyed blonde hair, large lady, something every angular about her, very large, very kind of brash. I never excelled with this person. This one teacher who called me into her classroom, it was Standard 4, and she said, “the kids said you can speak backwards”, and she made me speak backwards to the kids, but it wasn't good enough for her, she said write it down on the blackboard, so I would have to write it down on the blackboard which was all very well for me because if you are speaking backwards you have to spell it backwards anyway, so that was, I was a bit of a phenomenon in the backwards speaking circle. I had to always be busy I guess in my head, I felt that I had to, there was just always stuff going on in my head ... I used to speak backwards in class, in my head, mm. It wasn't like I'm going to become good at speaking backwards; it was a game. Most teachers affirmed my stupidness, the Afrikaans teacher in Standard 5; she just didn't know what to do with me she said she had given up on me.

Maths, I always felt like I had to catch up and I couldn't catch up and I missed this and I missed that and I was always too late to catch up and there was always this sense. The teachers expressed that you have to have the basics and those are the building blocks, and if you have the basics then you can add that da da da, and I always felt like, ah, I missed the day when we had the basics, I was quite sure of that. So Maths, Maths I remember looking out the window in all my Maths classes, daydreaming, having a blank look on my face, being a spare, just not being in the classroom, in all my Maths classes. I was just thinking that I have absolutely no recollection of what occupied my thoughts. I have no idea. I would go into a blank space, honestly. I don't even think I was fantasising about boys, maybe I was, in Form 1 or Form 2, I don't know. It was only later on in life that it became fantasy but then I just was in a stare, I was a spare in the whole class. I became good at when someone spoke, looking like I was paying attention when in fact I wasn't. Mm, ja. Yes, exactly, it was like a vicious circle, I could never catch up, could never catch up, could never catch up and then I didn't concentrate so I could never catch up, and I knew that, I was very aware of that circle.

One of the things I really wanted to do, and I was no good at Maths, but for some reason I was intrigued by Science and I really wanted to do Science, and I submitted to do Science and I was doing incredibly badly in Maths, and to do Biology and Art - Science, Biology, Art, English, Afrikaans and Hebrew. My mother was called in and there were these long discussions and eventually I was dissuaded from doing Science because my
Maths mark was not good. I contested until I agreed that there was no ways I would be able to do Science because my Maths sucked. I think I would have perhaps not been a brilliant student at Science but I am quite sure I would have passed because I was interested in the subject, it was very interesting, I don't know why, but I found it interesting, it made sense to me. Maths never made sense. Science seemed to be important.

And feedback from teachers, all we sort of got was negative feedback, you are a dumb class, or do you think I want to teach this class, stuff like that, the teachers - maybe they just didn't like teaching, but teachers generally do that, that was my experience of teachers. I had maybe three teachers that I could say were brilliant teachers. This Hebrew teacher who I had to battle to keep up with in the class, and I honestly did have to battle, she was a dragon, she was an absolute dragon, I was terrified of her, yes, I worked so hard for her. I had an English teacher in matric, she was just wonderful, to me she was wonderful, and I did incredibly well for her, so it wasn't a question of the teacher being - having to be nice in order for me to excel, it was I suppose just - there was something about that teacher that conveyed our situation, something the teacher brought across was you can do it, it is in you, you are not stupid.

In Standard 9 I was failing English. We had had this lovely teacher, and she had to leave after the first term and I was getting in the 60s for English and then when she left in the second term we got another teacher and then that teacher left after a month and then we got another teacher and this person was there three months and then we got someone else, and so on and so on, and my marks were just going worse and worse and worse. Eventually we had this teacher who taught at black schools and was obviously a liberal etc., but she was a terrible, terrible, teacher, she was just so bad. I remember just eventually flunking out in English. Because I got 60s the first term of the year, that was the only reason I passed English because I was getting in the 40s - I think I even got in the 30s in my final mark, I got 35 or something for the last test I did. This is how I went into matric with that kind of mark in English. This Rose C, everyone said she was a bore, she was this, she was an old, old lady and it was Rose boring C and Rose snoring C and things like that and I thought she was wonderful. I don't know what it was but I just loved English, and in my first prelim I got 75% for English. That was the first exam since getting 35% for English, it was just phenomenal. I was always good at orals at school, even as a kid, as a little kid, in Standard whatever, I was good at orals.

And then what happened, how I carried it through into high school, this not paying attention, was (in primary school I was in all my classes), and in high school I would just not go to class. I don't know how the hell I passed because by the time I was in matric, joking with my friends, there were eight lessons in a day and I would go to five. When I was in matric I think I went to one term of Afrikaans and I just no longer went to Afrikaans, really and that's it. I still have nightmares that I am doing all my work and in my dreams I have all this work to do and there is one part - we are writing exams and there is one exam where I haven't even handed in the paper. I wasn't impulsive at school, well I was impulsive, my behaviour was impulsive, I would just bunk class when it occurred to me to bunk class, not thinking of the consequences.

There was always this one figure, and at high school it was the vice prinipale and she had
this thing for me, all the Form 1s were taken on a tour of the school and then they had
to go to JB's office and shortly after that I was called into her office for maybe coming
late to class, or - it was very, very minor, it was no big deal, and she said I'm watching
you, and that spirit in your eyes. I do remember she said this "by the time you leave this
school I will have broken that spirit in your eyes." I knew what she said was wrong and
bad but I didn't understand it, she saw something was. Well yes, and the bad was me.
There was something bad in my eyes that she was going to fix, but the way she said it
was mean, I mean I knew it was not right, but I did believe that there was something
bad that she saw. She was obsessed with me, she would come round from class to class
in a school of over 1000 people, I don't know how many were in the high school, but she
would come round from class to class looking for me, making sure I was in classes, and
some of my teachers stood up for me when I was bunking and they clearly knew I was.

Immediately I lost interest, immediately, and I didn't understand that it [the slow class]
wasn't my level I was bored, I was bored, the class bored me. I would be very punished
by this woman, she kept, she literally victimised me, this JB, she would say to me, I
would be walking from class to class or walking from the class to the toilet and she would
find me and say what are you doing here, why are you wearing so much make-up. I never
wore make-up to school. I really didn't, and she would then scrub my, she would make me
scrub my cheeks, so they would get even redder and then she would accuse me of
wearing blusher and why am I wearing eyeliner and "go comb your hair". I'd just had a
perm and the worst thing you can do is comb your hair when you have a perm and my
head just went like a bush and she was outraged. I had to go by her office and then she
would comb my hair in her office and this woman made my life a misery and I would cry,
I would dread going to school - when I was bunking I would always be on the watch out
for her footsteps and I would hear her walking in the corridor and I knew her walk, I
knew her walk down to a "T", and I would just run, I would hear her shoes and I would
run, and I was gone. Going back after school to fetch my art portfolio - I heard her
footsteps and I ran because I was so … (laughing) and I didn't want to bump into her
anyway. She used to call my sister in and say you are getting very thin and are you eating
and do you know what Anorexia is, why are you wearing such a baggie jersey.

With learning test type things, I have a feeling of failure. When I went to do my licence,
I had a terrible feeling of anxiety because my boyfriend had been killed in a car
accident that year, and I had this fear when I was driving that I would die and I just
had this terrible fear of cars and being killed.

Then when I was studying fine art, again there was this terrible drawing teacher who
was a really mean, horrible guy, he was an alcoholic, but I didn't sort of put that
together with his behaviour. Every time he came near me I was terrified of him, I was
absolutely terrified of him. Then there was another drawing teacher who was also a
horrible, nasty guy who felt so sorry for himself and nobody starved in this class,
obody knows what it is like to be really poor, except J, whom he ignored anyway and
"has anybody woken up without food in their stomach" and I would put up my hand and J
would put up his hand and he'd say "Well I have and no one else has, I have". I was failing
drawing and I was terrified by the time I got into Dr C's class, he was the head of
drawing. That was in my first year of Fine Art, I was getting 40's for drawing and I was
terrified of my drawing teacher, Dr C, who was a really nice guy and he had a sense of
humour and I had to work very hard in drawing. J and I were great buddies and J really
taught me how to draw. He said this is what you do, you find a nice spot, they were just
basic things I was missing out on, the place you put yourself in is always wrong because you are not in a good viewing stake. And doubting myself, and having negative input, negative feedback which just reinforced the way I felt about a subject and then I would perform really badly and then I would feel worse and I used to come with me, at lunch time we would draw, at lunch hour we would draw on the bricks outside until eventually I got confident. I got obsessed with drawing and I would sit in front of the television and draw figures coming past momentarily and I became really good at drawing. Dr C inspired me, he sort of believed in me and he had humour.

When I went to do my international driver's licence, because I was going to Israel for the year there was this tremendous pressure and I went to do it and I failed and then the next time I went to do it I failed again and then the next time - I would book a week, I'd fail, then I would book for next week and then go and fail and book for the week after etc., and I kept failing and every time I did, I got worse and worse and worse, eventually I couldn't even parallel park, and I never got out the parking lot. Where I could do ten things out of 12 eventually I could do three out of 12, it got so bad. I gave it a break and I went overseas and came back, did it again, and the guy said "You took a bit of a chance there," and I said "No I didn't," and he failed me and I didn't get out the parking lot and then I did it again and he said "You took a chance otherwise you would have passed," and then the next time I got it so all in all I think I literally went nine or ten times in my life before I got it, but that fear and that panic and the anxiety...

About Peers

I don't remember nursery school that well but I do remember feeling like I just didn't fit in with the other kids, I did have friends there but they were the margins, marginalised, (laughing) I was friendly with a fat girl. I thought this was wonderful and I wanted to be like the boys so they were jumping down from the top of the pole and I jumped down instead of sliding, and I broke my arm. Yes ... at the time I wanted to be like the boys because the boys were tough boys, they were jumping from the top: they weren't sliding down like the girls, so I wanted to be like that ... It definitely would have been easier, wouldn't it have? I don't ever remember wanting to be a boy, I was a bit of a tomboy but I liked girl things, I liked nail polish and I used to have a friend who was a real tomboy, she even had a boy's costume and I asked my mother to get me one and my mother didn't understand why I couldn't wear a bikini bottom, it just wasn't the same thing. And I used to go there with nail polish on my fingers and I'd say I woke up last night and in my sleep my sister painted my nails and I was always reluctant - I was a reluctant female to her (laughing) ... I had to create excuses for her creative mind (laughing). Well it was my right arm but for three weeks sitting with this plaster cast and it itching, I got attention at school, it was nice to get attention. No in fact, I am confusing it with Grade 2 when I broke my toe and it was really bad, I broke my toe in Grade 2 but in nursery school I did break my arm but I do remember crying and waiting for my mother to come and fetch me and being in sick bay and then going to hospital and then getting my arm put in plaster of Paris etc. In Grade 2 I broke my toe and the beauty for me about breaking my toe was that the kids gave me a lot of attention, they - at break time I would have to sit on a chair because I couldn't walk and they would come and sit around me - it was just bizarre that an incident like breaking a toe sort of catapulted one into popularity. As far as I was convinced I had made it, I had arrived.
There were several nasty children who teased me throughout school and even in high school these same people were there, from when I was in nursery school because they too had been right throughout the King David system. The children were terribly cruel, they really were cruel to me and I just was never part of the main I guess. Children really, really teased me and mocked me. In gym because I think I must have had a problem with co-ordination as a child and in the gymnasium, kids would say, even my baby brother can do better than things you do.

And there was a kid who was just the most evil, horrible, little boy. I think it was Standard 3. He used to be on the bus and I had this awful wart on my finger and it just grew and grew and he would say I'm a witch and look at this, it just shows you are a witch and stuff like that and this upset me terribly and just to get revenge on him I would go up to him and just tease him with this thing and shove it in his face. One day I just couldn't handle this boy’s taunting and I told my brother who is ten years older than me and at the time he was 6ft 5½ and he came before school one day and he said, “I am Paula's brother and I am 6ft 5½,” (laughing) and he grabbed this kid by the collar and he said if you ever, ever tease her again - I don't know, I don't remember exactly what he said but I was, I was chuffed that my brother had stood up for me. But I was absolutely ashamed as well because the kids were saying you have to get people to fight your battles and, and they were right, after all I had gotten an older person to fight my battles for me and that was cheating. But this kid carried on teasing me and one day I kicked him so hard in the shin I do not remember him teasing me again. I kicked him real hard.

And there was this great sense of shame and at school saying I've got a secret to tell you, my father is insolvent, that kind of shit, it was such a big deal, and not understanding why but just knowing that it was a big deal, something to be ashamed of.

I was friendly with a kid who was - I mean she was in Standard 3 and she smoked, her mother used to buy her cigarettes, she was 11 because she had failed and she was a very big kid and her mom and dad were divorced and she had an older sister, she looked so much older than she was, she was just so worldly, but she was really screwed up, the family was extremely screwed up, I was kind of scared of her, but also at the same time, intrigued. She was really ugly, she was not popular, so it was hard to be with her, because I definitely wasn't going to be one of the kids, but I kind of knew for sure that I wasn't anyway. If there was one person who would be teased any one more than me, it was her; if there was one person who was hated more than me, more and more unpopular than with the teachers than me, it was her.

I always thought that people were way ahead of me, that if I lost a day at school, I was at such a huge disadvantage, or if I was sick for a week or whatever it was, I would never catch up and that was the case with Maths, it really was the case, I never caught up, I was never able to be where the class was and the more I felt that, the worse it was, the less I was able to be where the class was and I always felt that I was miles behind.

I was badly teased at school and when I did get it, you can do it, and so, they'd make an issue of it. If I'd get an A for a test, I remember once getting 98% for a history test, I don't know I must have learnt for it and it was "you see, you see, you can" and I don't know,
and even once I got good marks for a Maths test and people were surprised and there was this pressure to keep it up, which of course I was never able to. I felt wonderful but I was convinced that it was fluke [unusual luck] and I wouldn’t be able to do it again. Always, Yes, all their expectations were different, it was “you see you aren’t a dummy, you can do it”, so if I wasn’t a dummy I didn’t have to hide behind, I had to - I was one of them I guess, and whereas I never felt like one of them. Well there is one instance I remember feeling extremely proud of myself and that was when we were in Standard 5, at the end of Standard 5 to get into Form 1 they sort of streamlined the classes so according to the class who needed the most, I suppose, attention, or what we would call the dumbest class, there is no euphemism required when you are a kid. They had these tests for every subject and the thing about the tests, most of them is that they were kind of impromptu and they were almost in a way, IQ type tests; you couldn’t really study for a lot of them. The one test was Hebrew and Hebrew I was the class dunce, I was literally failing Hebrew and that was in Standard 5, and in Standard 4, and in Standard 3, you name it, I always had problems with Hebrew, and when we did these tests I scored 80-something percent on a test and I found myself with a good seven people, six of whom were Israeli and were to be in the first Hebrew class, and I was shocked because I knew there was no way that, that it was an accurate assessment of my abilities. In Standard 4 or Standard 5, I was selected from the class, we did a general knowledge test and I must have scored really high on the test because we had this competition and I was more shocked than anyone else that I was up there with the other kids. I was completely and utterly intimidated and I don’t think I answered one single question, once I was up there on stage, I became that doff [stupid], I felt totally doff, in that situation I was very, I felt intimidated.

It [speaking backwards] was a skill that nobody could join me in; it was a lonely skill and I became a bit of a - (laughing) - I don’t know what, what you would call it, something that stood out at school, and people would ask me to perform backwards on the spot type of thing.

In Standard 6 when they streamlined the classes, I was in this class with Israelis in the Hebrew class and my class, my actual class, was the special class, the kind of remedial class. It was ludicrous because it was way, way beneath me: everything was way beneath me, and especially the boys. All day long, they would play games in the class and they were so babyish and they were noisy and they were just revolting people, I thought they were revolting, and I didn’t want to be with them in any class.

I had this friend R who used to be one of the people who teased me at school, we were in the same Standard 4 class and ironically enough we looked very similar, people used to say are you R, and even looking back on pics we were both - you know when you go through an ugly phase and we were both going through this ugly phase at the same time (laughing) and we both looked alike and we are still friendly today. But R - we became friends over a guy, we went to Beitar [a Jewish youth movement] together. Beitar is a significant part of my life as well, because for the first time I was belonging to a group that I belonged to and that I was popular in, yet hated at the same time by the girls because the boys liked me. Even my own friend, R, we used to have not nice incidents but yes, my friendship - I had a friend P, she was also a marginalised person. My mother couldn’t understand why I had friends who were all marginalised people, not once did it occur to her that I too was marginalised.
About self in relation to others

At school I was always so self-conscious that everything that I said, that came out of my mouth was very measured. Over-control, totally and utterly. Ja, to the point that I was so self-conscious I couldn’t express myself at school. Mm, Mm, and kind of everyone knew I was doff, that was how I saw the whole thing, I was sure everyone knew I was doff anyway. I was extremely nervous, very embarrassed when I didn’t know the answers to the questions, very, very self-conscious, when we were up on stage in front of the school. And I was very aware that everyone was watching me and listening to me, and that I was in, sort of under a microscope.

It’s that sense of being lost and everyone knows something that I don’t know. Like the people in AA say … when I was at school all the other kids, they seem to have the book of rules, and I never got that book, and I never knew where to find that book, but I was very aware that I never had what they had. They seemed to have absorbed this code or whatever it was, this is how it works that I just was not aware of at all. I knew I was missing it and I would try but I just wouldn’t be able to get it. And I obviously have this façade that I didn’t care as was mirrored by that Grade 2 teacher, the heavy teacher we used to say, oh, every time I forgot my book. And then in high school bringing my books, novels, to class and reading in class (laughing), drawing in class, writing notes to friends in class, writing notes backwards to friends in class (laugh) so the teacher wouldn’t get it.

It must have been Standard 2 and Standard 3 I started speaking backwards in my head and what I was doing was I felt sorry for all the – how it started was I felt sorry that – say the word WORD backwards is DROW so the D would never become first, it would never be first, and I always felt sorry that D was always going to be last, so by turning it backwards I would make it first and then I got to speak backwards really well.

I knew a lot about sex that other kids didn’t know, and we all had these theories about sex and one day, knowing was no longer a theory but now I knew because I had been sexually abused. I was consumed, I just remember … er … I don’t know what I said before – do you remember what I said? Oh yes, I was consumed – I remember after having been sexually abused and I cannot remember the exact age I was between five and seven and it was nursery school – probably six, probably between five and six, and just being consumed by guilt and even at school there was – there was always this feeling people are going to find out about this terrible bad thing that I did and these terrible bad things I knew about. And hiding my homework, or hiding my work at school and I was hiding so much more, I was hiding things with my hand over my work, with my arms over my work, and it felt that I was hiding this thing, this terrible thing that I knew about, that I shouldn’t have known about, it was dirty and horrible. And praying possibly for a year or two years, for a very long period of time I prayed to God that I wouldn’t fall pregnant. I would pray in the pantry, I would pray in the bath, I would pray in the toilet, I would pray in the kitchen, behind the bar wherever, I just remember little snippets – walking praying, oh you have a free moment, you had better pray, it was like that, I was consumed all the time with fear that I would be found out. I was ashamed, I was terribly ashamed and I was threatened by my brother who sexually abused me not to tell and he somehow conveyed that what I did was really bad and that I was responsible for what I
did. It was my dark secret that I never told anybody about it until I was 14 and it just sort of came out when I was in high school because of the trauma of being sort of exposed to adult males I guess, men, boys that were growing.

I just remember a very, very strong memory, it must have been the trauma that I was going through and my mom was teaching art and I would go to the - she held - she had a lot of art equipment in the pantry or there were balloons there or something and she said to me go to the pantry and get the balloon. Just being blank and terrified, what is a pantry, what is a pantry, I don't remember, what is a pantry, and there was this terrible sort of - oh my God she is going to find out that I don't know what a pantry is - I just went blank on words, words that I knew and that pantry was one case in point very strongly, but like kitchen, simple words I knew. I had forgotten what they were, what is a kitchen again, shit, and panic, panic, terrible panic, and I was so ashamed that day I said mommy what is a pantry again, where is the pantry, where is the pantry I said, and she just "it's in the kitchen", and like - where's the kitchen - really it was that severe and she didn't know, she didn't know, she didn't question it. I was ashamed and panicked. I didn't know what going crazy was but that was the equivalent of I'm going crazy, I am becoming retarded; I knew what retarded was.

I lived my head, I just lived in my head, I lived in a world of my own construction. Completely, even when I was with my friends, although I wasn't aware of that. I somehow I had a fantasy that things would be different, it was that it was a fairytale, it was a fairytale, I was really Cinderella, and one day I would be found out, one day I'd be Cinderella, they would find out that I was her and there was that fantasy, that fairytale about the princess and the pea and if they put a pea under my bed they would find out that I am a princess, because I'd feel it. When I was a kid I always had this sense that I would become something, somebody, it was I had this burning ambition but I didn't understand what it was and I was impatient, that I wasn't feeling it, or being it, or couldn't live up to my potential and yet I knew that there was something so powerful inside of me that was just burning. One day, trying to explain it to my mother, I was probably 14 or 15 at the time - it just is inside me, it is so huge and it's there, and it's like when I was a kid I always sort of thought I was going to be a famous artist, because perhaps that was my frame of reference, I always had this thing that I would be famous when I was a kid, I just kind of knew I would be famous, pop stars were kind of my brother's era and not really mine yet, so I was going to be a famous artist because there were art books everywhere, there was always art. I knew about Van Gogh before I could write or read, I knew about Van Gogh. I'd seen Van Gogh's paintings and I was going to be a famous artist but I couldn't understand it because all the famous artists were dead, so I would have to be dead, and it made me sad too.

CHRISTOPHER

Christopher was 29 years old at the time of interviewing in July 1998, at his usual place of residence, Sterkfontein. He has spent most of his life in institutions since the age of 13. He grew up in an underprivileged family, which emigrated from the UK
when he was approximately four and they returned there briefly when he was 12. He has one younger sister. He began the interview by telling me

I have something I wrote, a poem I wrote, three more poems I wrote to go with it and they’re all with A (therapist) ... she’s arranging therapy programmes around it.

This is his story.

About Home

My mother more than anyone else tried to support me a lot. Give me catering, cooking, housework or anything like that. My mom bought a Hoover. It was my present because I like doing housework, the Hoover is mine.

I just didn’t have a nice relationship with my father. He was just drinking and screaming and shouting at everybody so I stayed away from him. Even when I was young, I just never - as soon as he was around I’d just clam up ... (pause). I never had a normal relationship with my father, I felt I was sacrificed. He knew nothing about me. I actually was upset that ... because I actually felt that ... I was trying so hard; I was trying to please him. And having the relationship I had with my father at the house and how he started with his drinking and screaming and shouting and his threats, and assaults, I also started hating it at home, so I started running away from home, to try and cope by myself instead. I wanted my mom to divorce my father because I was fed up with him and I thought maybe they would. I never had a chance to really experience childhood. I tried to grow up too fast. The problem at Tara was that we were all going to family therapy, that was the condition of my discharge. And nothing ever happened that way because my father just wasn’t interested in it. And going home, well my problems just all started to come back again in the same way and then I started to try and talk a lot to the normal general practitioner. Well the problem is the male, the cat is not really a man’s animal, says my father. I don’t like sports, so I’m not manly that way.

Well he tried to be supportive and caring, he tries to change but then he just kicks you in the teeth and changes back to his usual self. Drinking, swearing, cursing, belittle you. Tell you that you’re actually hopeless, worthless, swear at you. He has hurt me a lot and I remember before the courts got involved and I went to the children’s court. I remember the judge’s words to my father, that "you are the most despicable human being, you are the biggest culprit, you are guilty, you are the one that has done this to your son." I actually liked him. I actually wrote him a letter saying thank you because I thought maybe they wouldn’t believe. Then the social worker investigated the house and she picked it up and I actually thought now they’ll see your true colours, you swine, but nothing ever happened about it. He will support you for a little while and then he’ll go back into his usual ways. This time I ended up here he used to phone me and he was so nice and apologetic but for the last few weeks, he’s actually gone back to his usual self again. The biggest problem that I have is I can’t go back to the house, an unsafe environment, because he’ll go out of his way to make me feel I’m worthless.
I have a sister. We actually played a lot, we would actually do a lot of things together and be daredevils together, and she’d do a few things that I wouldn’t do and actually it was a good relationship, we were very protective of one another. If somebody wanted to fight with me during the school, she was there to help me, if somebody wanted to fight with her, I was there to help her. I remember that, nobody could hurt my sister apart from me. My sister was the biggest ... but she never ever got caught. She always got away with it until the one day she got caught. I remember one day she got caught, the cops caught her. She wanted to bunk school and her boyfriend picked her up. She actually was there for a while and then she decided she wanted to go for a walk, go away and she walked straight up the road into the cops with their uniforms on - what the hell are you doing here? And that’s when the truth came out that she also used to. But then she used to do it for alcohol and drugs and to be with her boyfriend.

About School

I do remember a crush I had when I was in Grade 1 with the teacher. Wherever she went I wanted to be with her. She was like my hero. I just liked her, I just connected. As soon as she was there she was mine. That was it. She was my teacher. Wherever Mrs D went I wanted to be with her. Then when she sent me for a test and then my mom saw her, she said she thought it was because we were quite similar in nature, I saw my mom in her.

I had been sent for lots of tests but I couldn’t concentrate on enjoyment, on life, and I couldn’t understand why they said I couldn’t concentrate on enjoyment or on life. I was too academic but after a while I was just totally lost and I just couldn’t concentrate any more. They’d say I just started daydreaming: I just used to like to bring little toys with and play with little toys because I got bored very easy. I’d concentrate mostly on the work to get it over and done with. And that’s where I couldn’t understand when they said my concentration was funny. Because they said I daydreamed a lot, but then always my tests and my marks were always high. They said that I was just too quick, if they told me to do that I’d get it over and done with in about five or ten minutes so the rest of the day that I was in the classroom I’d be bored. So I’d start doing whatever I wanted to do. I started playing with my toy cars and they used to stay, I remember reading it in one of my school reports. "Christopher must stop bringing little toys, he distracts all the others." But then I wanted to know why I actually always had good marks, why my marks were still good. And they were saying I was not working to full potential so I wanted to know why that was, what was I not doing, where was the problem.

At the time it was the teacher that I had - she was a remedial teacher but she had done psychology. H. After a while it will come. I’ve just got to think for a while and then the names come.

And she actually told me and then I had all these weird tests and she’d say do you see here and there? And I’d say what it was and then used to say you’re - you want to advance too quick for some reason. That’s what she told me. I wanted to get on - I wanted to speed up and get everything finished with but then you become far too bored too quickly and then you can throw something to the side and start with something different. She said you have a lot of boredom, your boredom span and it was easy to
become bored, that you'd lose interest with something if it wasn’t appealing to you and you just switch off.

I’d picture things, like I’d have the little police car and I’d have a little ambulance, driving around, speeding, like an Evil Knievel type of person. Driving around the corner and I’d have some police cars and turning round and thinking ha, ha, you’ll never catch me. The teacher would normally pick you up and tell you you were being naughty and I think that at those times “You’re naughty - go and sit in the corner”. So you’d sit in the corner and then when she used to turn around, you’d go aaah and get the class to laugh and then you’d turn around and see what she’d [Mrs. D] do. I used to get tired of it and at the time they would say “bend” and you’d get your little hiding, or when you’re in Grade 1 it was always the wee ruler and I was getting tired of it. I’ll always remember the pain. They’d say I was naughty and they’d tell me what I was doing wrong - you were distracting the class, you were doing this. I always used to turn around and say ha ha. I was always being emotional and I’d get back to my normal self again after a while. They always used to say that the kids, just laugh at her, so I did. I thought it was normal, that’s what you’re supposed to do.

She’d say wait until the next one. I remember she was the only teacher who affected me so much and I used to buy her Christmas gifts, and I’d give her little gifts. I’d draw picture with “thank you” and “I love you” and things like that. And I know she was my inspiration the once at school, this other teacher was there and I walked past the litter and I thought she would hit me because I used to walk past and wouldn’t pick it up and then Mrs D came to the rescue: "He’s a Grade One pupil, he’s not high up like the rest of them." That one I remember quite well. She [other teacher] was going to say I was insubordinate because I didn’t pay attention to the other teacher, but then I was in a daydream when I was walking past and apparently according to her she screamed to pick up the paper and I just walked past her and ignored her. I ran to Mrs D, because she started to chase me. Mrs. D actually turned around to her and said look here, small juniors have no control. Leave him alone. And I remember turning around and going I still like you, for some reason I don’t know, I just liked her or wanted to be with her. Apart from the behaviour was the fact that we could always talk to one another. She was just there for me. When I needed someone to talk to, I could talk to her.

It was actually nice because she was our Grade 1 and then our Grade 2 teacher. She stayed with and I actually thought that was fantastic. And then you got to get a bit strict going into the standards at the time and I remember the headmaster as well, Mr. M. He actually picked up a liking to me. But he actually built up a rapport with you. When you were naughty you had to draw a picture of what you did that was bad and then you had to explain it to him. He never used to punish you the other way. He wanted you to draw the picture and then he’d say can you now see what you did was wrong, that you were naughty? And then he’d say what should you do with that picture now and he’ll give you a red pen and you would have to put a big X through it and say that was naughty, not what you had done was naughty. He got a lot of respect out of you but if any of the kids did anything wrong forever, I used to find it easy to go and find him and say they’re doing something wrong, they’re smoking or they’re doing this. I started to actually tell him that because I actually started to like him a lot. And then when he left, it actually hurt me a lot and I remember crying a lot because my mom said she remembers me hanging onto his leg, pulling and tugging.
Because I was craving too much adult attention so I didn’t pay enough attention, even though I was getting the high marks. My handwriting was a bit untidy. I mean they all started joking about it saying you’re going to be a doctor when you grow up because nobody can read your handwriting. I just wanted to hurry up and finish so that I could chat or talk. So from a good, good, good, boy, I became the naughtiest boy in school. So I failed Standard 3 and I had to repeat it. The teacher would give me homework and I’d turn around and say you’re lazy do your own blooming work and then I’d get up and walk out and say don’t worry I’m on the way to the headmaster’s office. Standard 2, that was a bit come and go and then in Standard 3 I just totally changed, I got tired of not having kids and not getting anywhere so I changed. I remember the headmaster’s favourite words were “ah, are you here for pudding again,” and I’d say “yes”. Because he used to call it pudding and I used to remember at assembly and he’d say and “Christopher, please no pudding for you today, please promise me,” and I’d just have a smile on my face. That was the year they started saying there’s something extremely drastically wrong and they were telling my mom to take me to a psychiatrist because they wanted to understand how I just did that. “He’s not what he was like.” And they were told it was just a part of my growing up. Don’t make a big deal out of it. It will go away. Don’t push it at him or it will stay for longer. That was the year I failed. That was about – oh anything being naughty, planning things, doing my homework wrong, doing work my way.

The following year I still had friends for a while, but there were just a few friends. And I went back into my normal academic state because I hated the idea of staying in there and seeing most of my friends that were naughty and still managed to pass. So being a naughty boy, not wanting to work and staying a year behind, wasn’t working. I thought – what actually annoyed me was that I used to keep my school reports and that was the only one that I kept in my scrapbook. The year that I failed and was naughty and undisciplined. I repeated it [Standard 3] the following year and did extremely well. There were no complaints after that, I was actually told that I had started concentrating more and my work took me a lot longer because I always went through it a few more times, I just started slowing down a little. A lot of them said well he’s got a sense of humour. He’s been in this class before so he’s capable of helping us with problems.

Mrs D said oh well he’s back in this classroom and this year she said Purdy’s going to talk. It was like a swingball, a wooden bat and it was called Purdy. She said I’ve got a new toy, it’s called Purdy and he loves naughty boys’ bums. I didn’t believe she would ever do it. She’d do it to a few boys, and she’d say this is hurting me more. I’d say you’re useless, and she would say you’re always manipulating me in some way, I’ve now really got you and I’d say yes, yes.

School changed. I just about finished Standard 4 at Yeoville and then we went back overseas and when I went overseas I went straight to a secondary school. They take you according to age, so if you fail you always go up a grade anyway and I was in secondary school there and when we came back here I went straight to a high school and I couldn’t cope.

The following year we moved house and actually moved from Alberton and for a little while we were close to the Edenvale Hospital area and according to the medical practitioner I could handle high school and so I ended up in Sandringham High School. In
Standard 6, when I joined, the thing that was nice was the headmaster turned around and says well look you have a choice. You can either go to Standard 6 or 7. He didn’t know what the levels are overseas. I thought well I’ll stay in Standard 6 because I might be able to cope better and I was thinking the work is hard when you’re in Standard 8 and have to choose your subjects. And I still couldn’t cope. I actually used to go and visit the headmaster and say I just can’t handle it and that’s when I had this, that’s when I jumped...about a three-storey dilapidated building that they had. When I was actually feeling down. I couldn’t cope in Standard 6. That’s when I thought I’m hopeless, ... I can’t even handle this, a simple thing and the people are even younger than me, I’m the eldest one in the class and I can’t cope. I just couldn’t cope with the whole school set-up. I couldn’t cope and then after a while, I did this, and my arm was in a cast. The headmaster still tried to help me. He was trying to see if I could still cope with it and then they thought well, if they move me at least I’ll pass the year ...

The headmaster called me in and said you have no time for anything, not socialising. But I liked him so much. It was like a replacement father for me because I never had a meaningful relationship with my father no matter what and I was craving it. I was round about 14 or 16. After a while my schoolwork really deteriorated to such a degree very badly in all subjects, and I was hardly ever there, I wouldn’t do homework, I lost total interest in school and that’s when Welfare became involved. The school requested it because they said I’m on a self-destructive path, I wasn’t conforming to the rules, I wasn’t interested in even being at high school and I was always running away from home anyway. That was the time that I started testing the institutions. From Norman House to Boys Town to the Children’s Home to Tara. I had to leave the school, I wasn’t staying at home, I wasn’t staying at school.

At Boys Town they’ve got their own school there, in the Edward Children’s home they sent me to Germiston High School. I just hated the whole facility and the psychologist, because I ran away, their thing was I needed protection. And I couldn’t do my own schoolwork because if you’re doing protection, you are actually put under the care of an older boy in matric so wherever they went, you had to go with them, so I wasn’t even having the classes I was supposed to have because I used to basically go there and sit because he had to make sure that you don’t do anything naughty. They kept on saying you will learn, you will train, you will do this. What you were allowed to do was totally different. They were trying to help you realize you can rely on them but they were just hypocrites.

But I was happy that the social worker was at the children’s home. But because of all the trauma, that’s where the headmaster of the children’s home was actually very good; he could see what had happened in the past because he’d been filled in. And that’s when the headmaster actually got involved, get me in with a psychiatrist, get me sorted out that way, and he sent me to Tara. It [the school at Tara] was the first time in my life, I’d never ever had anything lower than an A, it was all A’s - I used to get B’s and C’s occasionally but there I couldn’t manage to get them no matter what. I was there for about six months and I’d finished the whole school term, the whole school term’s work, we had finished it! We were basically doing revision and extra work; it was just something totally different for me. The teachers were very good. I used to do extra work for credits; it was the atmosphere, that was a school where I could cope. It was so nice and quiet.
I mean at that time we had moved to Benoni. I wanted to go to a different school than what they wanted me to go to. I felt happy at Benoni High; I thought this was the school for me. Because when I was there and they were talking, for some reason when I saw Mr L who was the headmaster there, I pictured Mr M, just with his personality and all that. And I thought this is the school for me and I’ll fight, I just want to be at this school. It was Standard Eight. I thought there was this headmaster, there’s my new father.

But because of my history my mom thought I should go to the same school that my sister was in. Woodsworth High School. Because they thought that if I didn’t go to school my sister would inform them. But little did they know. I got on very well with the headmaster there and the teachers. The teachers actually wanted me to become a teacher myself. I was very involved with the student council, student programme, to help the students. I was heading the student council and then I became - and again I ended up as library prefect. I ended up as a class captain. Then the class that I was in, I was actually in a naughty class and I remember going to lessons with a teacher who burst out in tears when she saw our class arriving. And I thought I’m not going to get work done here and because, while I’d been going to that school, I’d only been seeing a general practitioner; he was the one that knew a lot about my background as well, he was the one who actually said I can’t really handle the way it’s going at this school. He had actually already started me on tranquillisers. I’m not sure which one but it was just to keep me relaxed during the day. And I actually wasn’t happy with the whole school set-up because basically they don’t give a damn whether our class did any work. And I always craved to be more academically involved, I wanted to get it done. And I was actually upset with that.

And because I was off school for a little while because the doctor put us off for flu or something like that, he gave me a break because he wanted to see me a bit more. That was actually a very nice doctor, he tried to help me. I remember the exact following day I got called to the office and I got changed in to a less stressful class, a more practical class. I thought maybe if I’m in a different class, not in a naughty class like that then I’ll probably relax a little more and I’ll be able to cope in school. It was okay, I just lost ... In the practical class you’re not pushed, you’re not made to achieve high. That’s what I didn’t like.

Being as I didn’t like it I asked my mom if I could go to technical college instead because there I could finish standard 8 and 9 in one year. I tried that year and I didn’t like it at all. Then I decided just to pass Standard 8. I changed goals and decided to join the fire department: you only need a Standard 8 for that. So I set my goals that that’s where I’m going to go. I left that school and went to a technical college and I finished technical college No Standard 8 and that was that. I decided I would leave it and not go on. To me what I hated about college was there the kids were in charge, not the teachers and I liked a school with a bit - I always wanted the teachers in charge: "You listen so what comes out there is the law! - Finished!"

The headmaster saw that and they got me involved in the civil defence which would keep me active as well and I enjoyed it because I love learning the fire department and the traffic - I actually enjoyed it and that’s what was pushing me towards using it as my career, so I actually did.
About Peers

I was teacher’s pet, then I was an academic, then I was strange, then I was gay, then I was homo. I was too quiet, I was always lonely. Because I didn’t want to be with anybody I decided to rather continue with my studies and if I just did Mathematics, I’d go straight to the library and I’d read up and things like that and people used to say that that was what made me different. I was too quiet, I was always lonely. That’s what I’m not too sure of. I’ve always wondered to know if I had problems that way. I know when I did have friends ... I’m not a fighter, I hate fighting. When I had friends I used to find it very easy to get into trouble. I would have extended school holidays in other words having extra hot days off school when you’re not supposed to do so. Things like that and there were also days when they would dare you to do this or dare you to do that and I used to take it, because I wanted the friends and I thought that’s what I had to do to have a friend. They’d get up to their usual naughty antics. Knock on doors. Got a catty? Let’s go break a few windows. Just to have a friend, to be with somebody.

The other children used to turn around; they couldn’t concentrate on their work because they said I was distracting them after a while. A lot of them used to just laugh and cheer. I remember that. I was glad, they were cheering for me. They’d say "yeah, go for it Christopher, go, go." So there was some form of response. I was always lonely, so I just wanted people to acknowledge, that I existed. I was lonely and I thought to have that feedback from any of them was just great. I was actually craving their attention. I was craving some form of friends. At break times I would go and sit next to the teachers. They said that because I didn’t have much friends, then I decided that maybe I just go and speak to the adults. Hang around with more adults and it was just to stop me from getting into trouble.

In Grade 2, same as before. Because I wasn’t getting many friends so I was always craving adult company and if I felt like sitting in the library reading a book, I’d sit in the library and read a book. I did very well until Standard 3. That was the year when I got tired of doing so well and not having friends. I just changed. I thought well let’s see what they want. I didn’t have friends, they would talk to me in the classroom but when it came to break, nobody wanted to talk to me. I didn’t know what I did wrong. All I kept asking myself is "why don’t I have any friends, I must be doing something wrong". That’s when I decided to call it quits. And after that I became very popular, everybody used to talk to me after that. I became the most popular kid in the school. If a prefect came up to us, I’d end up attacking the prefect just to protect them, saying pick on someone your own size or don’t be a pussy. You don’t come and just talk to us and say you’ve done this wrong or you’re not an adult, you’re not my mom, you’re not my dad. I was happy because I finally had a few friends. I mean the following year I still had friends for a while, but there were just a few friends. And I went back into my normal academic state because I hated the idea of staying in there and seeing most of my friends that were naughty and still managed to pass. So being a naughty boy, not wanting to work and staying a year behind, wasn’t working. Well at first I thought, why are you doing this because I know how to do it, then I thought well maybe they were just using me. Most of the time I just allowed it because I craved the attention so much. They were doing naughty things so they could hang around me or whatever, just be with me, but not really being a true friends, trying to help me, like true friends. I changed back because I thought to hell with the whole lot of them. I wanted to get my academic record back up.
Well in the first part of it, before anyone would talk to me, I was very on guard with anybody who did want to make friends and most of the time I decided well maybe what I could do is just do well academically.

When we went back (to the UK) it was hard for a while. I actually started getting a lot of friends. I actually didn’t want to come back to this country. I enjoyed the life over there. When we came back we stayed in this house, there was a spoilt brat of a kid that always got away with whatever she wanted to do and I just didn’t like it. With the other kids younger than me, I’d go ballistic, and I would always end up in trouble, because I was older. I just didn’t like her behaviour. She would go into your things, your room, break things. I couldn’t do anything about it and it would frustrate me and if I wanted to go and play with my own things, she wanted to come there and knock it down, used to annoy me. If I managed to push her aside or she would cry, I was always the one in trouble.

When we came back I used to go out, walking about, there were other people around at the time, I actually found it very adventurous and I started going places I had never been before. Mm, it was an extraordinary ... go out of my way go to places I’ve never been to, to see what it was like, I actually enjoyed that. I had to wait until after school. We formed this little gang. We had this little tree house and the gang would talk and have a lot of fun and it started off with just me and Al building a little tree house and in the end there were about 12. They all came, so we actually used to stay around challenging other kids. On TV there was this programme against the law and they get away with that and called it Equalizer and so that’s what we then called ourselves Equalizer.

[At Sandringham High] - That’s when I started getting problems again. I found everyone was stuck up and I never got anything I wanted. For some reason I had a label when I walked into that school. I was queer or homo or weird and nobody wanted to be my friend. As I came in I straightaway went and got involved in the student council, I got involved in the library and became a library prefect. I was the only male who was a library prefect and you don’t do that kind of thing. A lot of the times they actually walked past and would say how’s the tough bandit. They’d steal things out of my suitcase. Things would go missing or my suitcase would go missing so I didn’t have my books. It kept on happening, so I started hating school and that’s when I started staying away from school; I didn’t want to go to school.

And when I was at Boys Town [a school for ‘delinquent’ boys] I just didn’t like young kids being able to tell you what to do and I didn’t like the idea of real young people running the place, I thought an adult should run it, that’s what put me off. That’s when I ended up in the children’s home and I actually enjoyed it there, I just couldn’t live there - the problem I had there was the older boys. I remember my first day walking into the place I had to pull this guy up; I had to sort him out. It was actually funny to think and I was wondering what is this guy was going to look like and if he would sort me out. And then he walked in and he was slender but he must have been about six foot two and I thought what the hell are you trying to do to me here? I never hit it off with him but he was actually about the same age and I was put in a room with him.

I actually still preferred the younger kids; I actually preferred the companionship with them. And then I always knew that if I actually had younger friends I wouldn’t get into
trouble because I would be able to control the situation; I would be in charge. They
couldn’t intimidate me that way or get me to do something I didn’t want to do. That’s
why I always preferred younger kids, the companionship then I knew I wasn’t going to
get into trouble because every time I tried with my own age and they wanted you to do
this or that you’d end up in trouble. And what had happened with S. S had actually
threatened me quite a few times because you used to get pocket money and he made us
steal things, steal things or suffer broken bones. I didn’t want to fight; I was scared so
I did. And the first time he made me try to steal for him, I remember it was a Checkers
store. I was walking around, I hated what he was asking me to do, I’d walk around
wanting the people to notice my behaviour because they actually took no notice. You’d
have thought something was odd because I was walking up and down. I nearly got out but
I got sent back in again and we all got caught. And then when he came I was told they
will probably punish you more because you come from the Children’s home so just shut
up and let me do the talking. So I did and I ended up getting a caning. I actually formed
very good friends there. That’s why I probably always wanted to be around older
companion since I was younger, than my own age - I actually wanted a school where the
teachers were still in control.

The friends I had went to America. Once I got very close to a woman at Threshold but
she was ten years older than me and both of us actually said that age doesn’t count. It
lasted six or seven months but then we broke off our engagement. That was the only
person I wanted, we had the same childhood, it was a gift, a gift, then I lost her. We
had virtually the same interests. But she said I was too old fashioned. I believed we
should come home and cuddle and that was as far as it got. And she was actually pushing
for a sexual relationship and she said I was too old fashioned so I told her to go to hell.
Never had much of a relationship anyway.

About self in relation to others

When I was small, in Standard 2 or whatever, I wanted to be a hangman, an executioner.
I wanted to be the man to do the death penalty, I want to kill all the naughty people,
that was my comment, I wanted to kill all the naughty people. They said there’s
something wrong with you, it’s not you and then they just left it at that. And then when
I asked again later on, I watched a programme on TV called Emergency One and I was
saying I’m going to be the first person in South Africa to be a paramedic, I’m going to
be a paramedic in South Africa! And then I’d think if I got through work a lot quicker I
could get out of school. But the paramedics started before I got a chance to start. I
wanted to be the one to bring it to this country. I was looking at that and saying, yeah,
that’s my thing in life, I’m going to do that, I’m going to be the first person to bring it
to this country. And then A went and did it. Dash! That was my ambition in life.

The day I came back [from the UK] I actually started writing a little story thing about
my life, I’ve got it in a file at the house. I actually called it “One Life to Live”. I used to
just write about it. Later on I got a typewriter and was trying to get up to date, I
started with typewriting it. It was my little thing for life.

I actually hated it [Boys Town] in the end and ran away from the place quite a few times
and they caught me the once - I hated the place so badly that I tied myself down to a
railway track because I just wanted to die. I was actually woken up the following day by
people who had come out to look for me and I thought oh no, now what’s going to happen
to me? This was why it took such a long time to sort out. I hated Boys Town; I kept on running away, getting caught. They thought maybe if they gave me a bit of responsibility they could get me to feel alright.

Then I had all those mushrooms in the fields and I had poisoning and dehydration. They all told me that if you eat these you will die so I had seven. All I had was severe vomiting, diarrhoea and dehydration. And from there that’s when the social worker thought well maybe we’ll change the environment again, maybe he needs similar things to a normal house. And what actually surprised me was when I was a child, it all went back to the same thing that Mr M said, that the guy is going through a stage, he’s in a very bad state of depression. And they diagnosed me at the time with major depression personality disorder. I actually thought well maybe now I know where the problem lies; maybe I’ll get proper help. I remember thinking the doctors are so stupid because they say you’ve got flu or gastro meanwhile they weren’t really interested in trying to dig into why I was always having flu and diarrhoea. They weren’t interested meanwhile it was all the concoctions I was getting at the house, trying them. From the chemist, over the counter.

There were no vacancies in the fire department at the time so I ended up as a storeman. That’s when my Dad tried to get me this job for a while, he thought maybe I’d like that side, so I was a storeman and safety representative and I’d already done all those things in self defence. The only problem was the foreman in the toolroom area, an Afrikaans person who hated English people and he made my life miserable. And he went out of his way to make me feel unhappy in the place, and that’s when I started abusing cough medicine. I remember having a blackout in Olifantsfontein in the industrial area. I collapsed in the middle of it the one day, I started having blackouts. But what surprised me was when I went to the doctor he was worried about the blackouts and I got sent straight away to a neurologist because I was having headaches and blackouts. He did all the neurological tests first and found something wrong with my pituitary gland and my voice had not dropped properly. He turned around and he actually warned me, he said for your own sake above all else, quit that job now and I remember those words because he’d said if I didn’t I would have a breakdown.

And he referred me to community psychiatric clinic. That was in February 1989. I was going to the psychiatric clinic. The doctors didn’t take me seriously; I was starting to feel suicidal again. And it wasn’t until I shot myself that he believed me but before I shot myself I tried to jump off the bridge on the highway. The traffic department caught me and took me back to the community psychiatric clinic and all they told me was they were putting me back on tablets and told me to relax, calm down, to stop being stupid and sent me home. And it was exactly three days later I said to hell with everything and I got my gun and decided to shoot myself. The paramedics said to me I started to save my own life afterwards. The floors are ice-cold, I’d shot myself through the internal organs and I remember the pain was so much and I was lying on a cold floor. It slowed down circulation, it slows everything down! So I’m not going to have so much internal bleeding. I didn’t know that. I just lay there because I felt that I couldn’t walk any further so I lay on the kitchen floor. The pain started getting a bit too much so I ended up phoning the paramedics to come and help me, I just couldn’t remember, I didn’t think it was going to be so painful.

I remember phoning them to tell them what had actually happened and I still remember
the paramedic fighting with me in the ambulance while he was trying to get me to the Johannesburg Hospital. I was so tired. Well he didn't want me to fall asleep. They said if I fell asleep that I might not make it through, so he was punching me and I remember my arm was feeling bruised. "No, no you don’t want to fall asleep, squeeze my hand, squeeze my hand." The whole journey to Johannesburg Hospital and I also remembered him swearing on the phone, he was trying to get a helicopter at the time. And I remember when they went down - the primary school were having a sports day and the fire truck was going in and telling everybody to clear the area, clear the area so that they could get a helicopter to come and land. They cleared the whole primary school’s sports for the day, and I didn’t think it was that important actually.

I remember in the ambulance, the response car, the cop car that they had to escort and they had the traffic department vehicles and they say no this guy has to get to the Johannesburg Hospital now. Then I got told that I had started losing it, that I couldn’t fight any more to stay awake. And then from there all I remember was what they told me afterwards. Then I saw the Johannesburg Hospital video, it’s a training hospital and they show you this ambulance screeching down and it actually impressed me so much. It actually impressed me because the doctors were already waiting outside and it showed them whipping the doors open and it shows them shooting me on a stretcher straight through to the cleaning unit and then from there straight into operating and it shows you my operation. I said I’d like to see it and they actually allowed me to see it and I was actually shocked to find out how bad it was. I remember I didn’t have any will to fight, I mean they had done their emergency surgery and then I was in the trauma unit. It was the third day that I developed an internal bleed or that’s what they say so I was operated on again in the ward very quickly. Because I wouldn’t have made it down to the operating room and then I still lost this total will to stay alive, of wanting to come right.

But I had no will to fight and that was when my cat was brought in. And that was the day my Mom had lost it as well, she suffered from bad shock, but I had no will to live. But it was my cat that decided me and all of a sudden it totally changed my mind and I got that will to fight again. I had that cat from a kitten, but it was so close to me. When I went to school it would sneak into my school bag to go with me and it used to get me into trouble occasionally because you’re not supposed to bring pets to school but she’d sneak into my school case and then when I was about to pick it up to take it away I’d think no man, Katy, why are you here again?

I had to be hospitalised again, when they put her down and when this all started up again. I lost total - I went to Tara and I started eating mushrooms from the fields there again. But then these were deathcap mushrooms and if you looked at it these, these deathcap mushrooms it does actually state - I looked them up and they were supposed to be toxic and deadly. But nothing happened and that enraged me and I turned around and said you nurses don’t really watch us at night, I could go and hang myself because you didn’t give a damn, you only do rounds infrequently. And I was watching it quite hard, timing it to see when they did their rounds and then I hung myself.

But they found me and they brought me back and that’s when I was brought here, that’s when I got sent to Sterkfontein. This isn’t my first time, that was the first time I was here, but this is the third time that I’m here. In 1989 from Joburg Gen I went to Tara and I was told to stay involved in the Johannesburg outpatient programme. And in 1991 I had a relapse, that was my first admission here. The second admission here was in
1995 when I lost my cat and then the third was when I went from Joburg Hospital to here. I lost total will; I just wanted to be with my cat. I felt nobody would ever be able to help me, the suffering of losing my cat. I mean the cat slept in my bed and wherever I went I would have my cat with me, if I went for a bicycle ride my cat would go with me it would jump in the front basket and go with me and my cat was so good on the bicycle. That cat meant so much to me. The cat saved me a few times. One time I had a scalpel and she would run into the room and meow at me, and lick me and just talk. It actually made me burst into tears and cry so I’d hug her and calm down and I’d fall asleep. She was the person who distracted me. Deep down I believe she actually understood. At the time that the cat got put down I didn’t want anybody to talk to me and when my Mom walked in she knew what had happened, because she knew I was going to the vet that day. I even threatened the vet. I don’t care what you do, but you save her. You don’t want to know what I can do to people who kill my cat but he knew, he was quite understanding.

This time I actually blame it on what I was doing. Crisis intervention. I was tackling all the other people’s problems but not my own. I went to join the police force and that’s when I ended up trying crisis intervention. My whole history, I took pride and I actually told this one captain. She actually said to me that you’d be the ideal person because you would be more understanding with those people in that situation. Which I agreed with because even my psychologist agreed, and I’ve been seeing her since 1989.

Like next week Monday I’m on ten day’s leave and I’ve got to see her then. I saw her last Friday when I went home for the weekend leave; I went to see my psychologist then. I won’t break ties with her; she’s helped me quite a lot. There’s been times when I’ve been very suicidal and she’s helped me that way. And there’s been times when I had no choice, I just couldn’t control it anymore. That’s when she would get me hospitalised rather. She knew if I turned around and I really wanted to do it, she knew I’d do it, that they must take me seriously because she knows if I’m that way I’ll do it and she’s always fought that way for me. I feel she is the only one that’s really been willing to help me in that way. But she’s helped me a lot and when something major has happened like my cat, that was unfortunate.

I was working at the suicide prevention centre and this was all from the fire station where this all started. They told me that I’m more suitable for psychiatric paramedic work and that’s when they tried to get us involved there and I was mugged. I knew what was actually happening I wasn’t going to fight because I needed the money. I can’t believe at the time that that’s what they did to me. They basically cut my clothes and made me look indecent, my socks and everything. Ever since then I’ve been racist in a way. This year, I walked into Bruma Lake, into the toilets and I didn’t walk out. Three young youths walked in behind me and knocked me on the head, the scar has cleared now but they swore at me and were obscene ...