



A Chilling Experience

Marcus, recently out of jail on bail, said in an interview he started sleeping with his stepdaughter Michelle, because his girlfriend Shantell was never at home and the child was there for him more than she was. He said that when he began to sleep with his stepdaughter, he was not aware that he was infected with HIV but after he found out, he was already in love with her and found it very difficult to stop.

Marcus has opted not to go and seek medical care even though he was recently diagnosed with tuberculosis.

Thirty three year old Shantell sits huddled on a stool, the lone piece of furniture in the dusty one room shack that has been home to her and her five children for the last year.

She stares at the broken dilapidated clock on the wall. As she leans forward to get a better look at it, the pink T-shirt on her frail shoulders slips off exposing her bony emaciated frame.



Her large brown eyes, seemingly even larger set in her gaunt face, reflect a pool of emotion as they fixate on every move the

minute hand of the clock makes, as though willing it to stop.

She is conscious of the fact that with each tick, the time draws nearer for her to leave the house and carry out a function that though is necessary, is dreaded.

Her two youngest children, four-year-old Jermain and two year old Maria, sit in the corner of the room playing with a few corks and what appears to be a bit of foil paper. They pause occasionally to glance up at their mother as though cognizant of her anxiety.

Two of her other children, aged nine and eleven are at school, but her oldest born, fourteen year old Michelle stands by the door, fully dressed. Her mother's face and the clock compete for her attention as she exchanges despairing glances between the two.



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I respect myself so I will condomise

I had heard of Shantell's heartbreaking story and had gone to visit her at her home in a little village in the countryside. As I stood watching this very humble family, I knew that they had gone through so much but that their ordeal was far from over.

I was respectful of the anxiety, the fear, and the sense of foreboding that hung thickly over this impoverished family, for I knew what this day meant to them.

Shantell turned to Michelle and opened her mouth as though to issue a directive, but what emanates is a series of hoarse, dry coughs that racks her frail body and leaves her breathless.

As though by rote, Michelle hands her mother the glass of water strategically placed next to her. "Get your sister; its time to go," Shantell instructs her daughter. Then for the first time in the hour or so that I had been in the house, she addressed me.

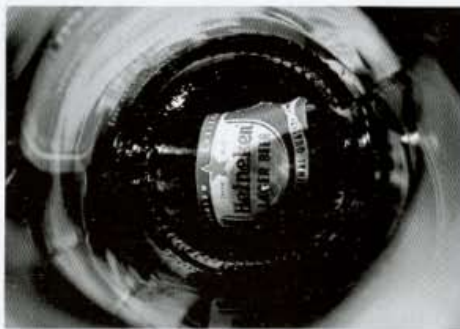
"Thomas, I have tried to be strong all through this nightmare, but if the tests today prove that my two daughters are also HIV positive, it would be too much for me to bear."

As we traversed the mile or so to the public road, to get a mini-bus to take us to the city, Shantell was quiet as she intently observed her oldest and youngest born as they walked ahead of us.

Her eyes registered a kind of wistful look and I knew that she was lost in thought, reflecting on another era in her life, before all of this... a period which in the few weeks we had become friends, she had related to me over and over. I knew also that she was pondering on how one decision had the ability to change the course of a person's life forever.

Rudolph

The second of three children, Shantell spent the better part of her childhood in one of the rural villages, where she lived with her grandmother. She attended one of the



village schools which catered for students who were slow learners. She also had hopes of becoming a nurse someday. She had just entered form two when her grandmother passed away forcing her to leave school to help care for her younger sibling.

The financial resources to carry out this responsibility came from her doing odd jobs around the village. A child herself, these duties proved extremely arduous and so when at age fifteen, twenty-six years old Rudolph, a fellow villager began expressing an interest in her and showering her with gifts. It was not hard for her to give in to his sexual advances.

A few months later, she was pregnant and decided to take up his offer to move in with him. For the first few months, things were okay, but with the birth of her first child, things began to change. The numerous gifts disappeared and were replaced by constant verbal and physical abuse. She soon realized that Rudolph was a bad tempered drunk and Shantell began to regret not getting to know him better before moving in with him. As the beatings increased in consistency and intensity, Shantell started to seek ways of getting out of the dysfunctional relationship.

"He would come home drunk almost every night and would beat me for nothing at all. I tried to go back home, but that wasn't possible. It was a horrible experience," she said. But when her two-year-old daughter also began to suffer abuse at the hands of her father, Shantell began to plan her escape. "A friend

had agreed to let me stay at her place for a while until I could get a job and earn some money to go off on my own." Just when the plan was about to be implemented, Shantell realized that she was pregnant again.

"I couldn't go anymore, I had to stay, because I would not be able to find a job so easily because I was pregnant and the friend said she could not take on the responsibility of me in that state."

In addition to alcohol abuse, Rudolph soon began to use marijuana and cocaine which worsened the already horrific existence of Shantell and her children to the point where she contemplated taking her own life many times. She however refrained for the sake of her children.



"I felt like just ending it all many times. Rudolph would kick me in my belly even though I was pregnant and beat me for hours. Once he kicked me down the steps. I knew if I killed myself, my children would suffer, because of the type of father he was. So I endured the torment and began making plans again," she said. Weeks after the birth of her second child, Shantell waited until Rudolph was out and fled with her children. She went to stay with an elderly aunt in another part of the country and took care of her.

However, that arrangement, though it provided a shelter, proved to be incapable of providing for Shantell and two babies. It soon became apparent that a few boys in the neighbourhood were interested in the teenage girl that moved into the village without a partner. They began to make

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their interest known. Needing help for her children, Shantell responded positively to the advances of one particular man whom she describes as "extremely nice."

A little help was indeed forthcoming for Shantell and her children, but six months into the relationship when Shantell informed him that she was pregnant by him, the "extremely nice" young man disappeared.

Marcus

The sun had just set one Sunday evening and Shantell now three months pregnant was walking along one of the major roads in the community that she had settled into, pondering the cruel hand that life had played her and thinking about the stupid decisions she had made.

With another child on the way, no job and no one to take care of her or them, she was lost in her thoughts and so ignored the consistent honking of the car horn behind her.



"Sweetheart, you got to look where you are going. It would be a sin to knock a fine thing like you down," she heard a voice say. Looking around Shantell saw a dark skinned man leaning out the window of one of the more fancy cars, addressing her. She smiled at him and he offered her a lift home. That's how Shantell met Marcus.

She recalls that even though she was

distrustful of men in the wake of her past two experiences, Marcus's attitude soon caused the scepticism to disappear. "From the inception, I knew he was different. Without asking me for any sexual favours, he began to help me out financially. He would work and bring all of his money and give me. He really started caring for me and the children," she said.

Marcus, a taxi driver, was so good to her that Shantell felt comfortable enough to disclose to him that she was carrying another man's child. That discovery failed to daunt Marcus from his noble intentions and he promised Shantell that he would always be there for her and the children. When her old aunt passed away shortly after, Marcus immediately stepped up to the plate. He suggested that they move to the capital to begin a new life together as a family.

Shortly after moving to live in the capital, Shantell gave birth to a baby boy and, keeping his promise, Marcus not only signed for the baby as his own, but named the baby after him. Marcus continued to work as a taxi driver and Shantell began to vend confectionary outside the city market to supplement her partner's income.

Then the rumours about Marcus and other women began circulating. "At the city market area, nothing don't hide and bit by bit, people started telling me that they seeing Marcus with different women all over the place."

When confronted, Marcus denied the allegations of infidelity. However, Shantell began seeing him around the place with various women. While she was concerned about such behaviour, she was reluctant to cause too much of a fuss in the fear that Marcus would leave her, so she consoled herself with thought that he was good to her and her children and ignored everything else. "It was a small price for all that he was doing for me," she said. When



she found out the following year that she was pregnant, she was very happy.

Maybe the reason that Marcus was promiscuous was because he wanted a child of his own. Now that he would be getting one, he would curb his habits, Shantell reasoned. But with the birth of Marcus' child, nothing changed; if anything, it worsened and one day Shantell even ended up in a physical altercation with one of his many women. That incident ended with Shantell being charged by the Police for assault.

However, Shantell forgave her partner for this incident. After all if she ended the relationship, it would be unlikely that a man would want a woman with five children and no proper job. At least the money from Marcus continued to flow so he must still love her. "I knew that Marcus loved me but he just had a woman problem. Why else would he be bringing all his money and giving me? He was just using those other women because they were stupid, but I was his queen. So I stopped worrying myself over his little mistakes."

While her parents were at work, Shantell's eldest daughter, Michelle would be left with the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings. Both parents worked long into the night and Shantell admired the fact that on her arrival home each night, Michelle would have already tidied the place and her siblings would be in bed. She was also pleased with the relationship that Marcus had with the children. They were extremely respectful of him and he seemed to have a good relationship with them especially Michelle.



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