THE GIRL WHO LOST HER VOICE

January 2023

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome on stage the woman who has revolutionized how we handle rape. Her product has been launched in over six European countries, but she has decided to launch it to her people. Ladies and gentlemen, please give a round of applause for Nana Matilda Wai.”

It feels good to be home, Nana thought to herself. She has dreaded this moment most of her adult life. But now, as the crowd welcomed her with a smile and so much pride, all her apprehensions faded away.

“Thank you all for coming”. Nana started as she took the stage. “This feeling never gets old. Whenever I walk into these launches, I am still shocked that these people are here just to see me, Nana. I am thankful for it and do not take it for granted. However, tonight is special because you are my people. This is by far my proudest moment.”

“As you all know, I am Nana Matilda Wai. I was born in Sierra Leone. I left at the age of twelve when my mum got a job in Canada. I did nursing at undergrad because that was what my mum wanted, but I told her I have done YOU after graduation. It is time to do ME. African parents,” She chuckled with the crowd. “So I started my entrepreneurial journey. I began selling cosmetics. It was the first of many failed businesses. But I was determined to make it work. There was just something inside of me telling me this was what I was made for. So I kept at it for a while until around 2011, when I heard on the news about a group of boys that were raped in church. Then, I knew it was time to take action. I reached out to a friend who is a software engineer. He was as excited as me. So, we set up the A2A Technology Company and developed the MyVoice device and app. A device that calls for help when you are in danger.

I am happy and proud to be home to launch this device. The first device that prevents the rape of children.

It is called MyVoice for a reason."

May 1998

It was a beautiful Sunday morning. Nana was playing outside with her friends Jola and FK. Nana and her mum had just come back from church. They lived in a government housing complex with Jola and FK's families. Her mum works as a nurse for the Government.

Weekends were Nana's favourite time of the week because she got to watch her favourite show and play with her friends. "Hi there, three musketeers", Mr. Momo, the Chief Security Officer, called out as he walked towards the trio. Mr Momo visits the complex every Sunday to check on the families there. But today, there was someone else with him.

"This is Mr T he is going to be your new security guard. Mr. T, this is Nana, FK and Jola. They live here with their parents, and I call them the three musketeers."

"Hello, Mr. T," the kids chimed. "Will you protect us from bad men and ghosts?" asked Nana. Mr T stooped down to Nana's height, smiled, and said, "I promise to protect you from all harm."

"Thank you." Nana smiled shyly.

"Trust Nana to get straight to the point." Mr Momo chuckled as they walked towards the flats. "Smart mouth, that one. If she sees anything, she tells her mum. She is always very opinionated and outspoken. Too bold if you ask me. Not afraid to say her mind one bit."

Mr T resumed work the next day. The security post was about two minutes away from the flat. Every day, as the kids leave for school, Mr. T will see them off at the bus stop and wait with them until the bus pulls away.

One afternoon, Nana stopped at Mr T's to collect the house key as she does every day. "Your mummy had an emergency at the hospital this morning and forgot to drop the key with me." Since Jola and FK were a year older, they went to a different school, which was farther away from the house, so they had not returned from school, and Nana could not wait with them.

Mr T offered to play TV in his post while Nana waited for her mum. "My favourite show is Teletubbies," said Nana. "I don't have Teletubbies, but I am sure you will love the one I have, and it will be your new favourite." Mr. T then proceeded to put a movie of a girl having breakfast. She must be my age, Nana thought to herself. The girl's dad walked in and gave her a peck like Nana's mum sometimes does.

"I wish my dad was with us just like this girl's," Nana said. Mr T came to sit close to her on the sofa. "Do you miss your dad?"

"Yes, he died before I was born."

"I am sorry about that. I also sometimes wish I had a daughter. "

"You do?"

"Yes. Tell you what. What if I pretend to be your dad, can you pretend to be my daughter?"

"Really? You will do that? You will do all the things FK and Jola's dads do with them?"

"Yes, I will."

"Oh, Thank you," Nana said and hugged him tightly.

"Okay now, young lady, let us not miss the best part of the movie." Nana turned her attention again to the TV and saw the girl's dad squeezing her chest.

"Why is he squeezing her chest?" She asked.

"That's what dads do to their daughters."

"But I have never seen Jola and FK's dads do that," she said.

“Dads do it to their favourite daughters.”

“But they say they are their dads’ favourite,” Nana said.

“Yes, their daddies say that because they do not want them to be sad. Since you are my daughter now, I can do it to you. You will love it, I promise.”

“Okay,” Nana said. “Can mummy also do it?”

“Noo, it will be our little secret. Anyone you tell will disappear forever and ever.”

“Including mummy?”

“Yes, especially mummy.” Mr T said.

Sweat broke out on Nana’s brow. “Okay, I won’t tell mummy; I do not want her to leave me like my daddy.”

“Good girl,” he said, stretching his hand to stroke her hair.

“Jola and FK will be jealous that you got to watch a movie here, so don’t tell them. They have always requested, but I never allowed them.”

“Why?”

“Come close, I will tell you.”

“Tell me! Tell me!” Nana said as she drew closer.

“Come sit on my leg; let me whisper in your ear.” Nana was eager to know the reason for this so she immediately jumped on his legs.

“I know you can keep a secret. I also know that you will not want anything to happen to your mummy, so you will keep this between us.”

“I am going to teach you all what daddies do with their daughters. I will kiss your cheeks and squeeze your chest as was done in the movie.” he proceeded to do both as he spoke. “I know you miss having a dad like your other friends.”

Nana winced in pain as he continued to squeeze her chest.

“Shhhhhh, you are a brave girl.” Then he kissed her neck and put his hand on her leg. The room was so quiet now all you could hear was Mr. T’s breathing. The sound of a car horn blasting broke the silence. Mr T bolted from the seat, with Nana almost toppling over. He steadied her and held her by her shoulders, squeezing hard. “Remember, this is our little secret. Now smile for Daddy.” Nana smiled with her lips quivering. The look Mr. T gave her made her a little scared. But she was so happy to finally have a dad like her friends, so she did not mind. It was sad that she could not tell her friends because they were jealous.

Mr T then went outside to check who was at the gate.

This continued for months. Whenever Nana was alone in the house, Mr. T took her to his post and played the daddy-daughter movie. With each movie, it proceeded from the chest to the legs until one day, she saw blood on her panty when she left his post.

That day, Mr T had laid her on the bed and tried inserting his “little friend,” as he told her to call it inside her, but it hurt so bad that he had to stop when she started crying uncontrollably. The week before, he had used his finger. That too had hurt, but it was not as painful as this.

She cried the whole night because she was scared she would lose her mummy. After all, when she sees the blood on her panty, she would have to explain to her, and as Mr T had told her countless times, that will be the last day she sees her mummy. She will disappear forever, just like Daddy did.

Who will take her to her favourite restaurant? Who will tuck her in at night?

Maybe if I wake up first thing in the morning and shower, mummy will never know. She thought to herself. Mummy has been telling her that she must start showering for herself now that she is eight.

That morning, Nana woke up as early as 5 a.m., tiptoed to the bathroom without turning on the hallway lights, and deliberately avoided the creaking floorboards.

The moment she turned on the bathroom light, she saw her mummy using the toilet. She had forgotten that her mummy does not turn on the light when she wakes up to use the bathroom so that she is able to go back to sleep.

Immediately she saw her, she burst into tears as she realized she would not be able to hide her panty from her anymore and she would have to explain the blood, which would make mummy disappear forever.

Mummy bolted from the seat in fright and rushed to Nana. “What’s wrong, my love.” Nana hugged her and started wailing. “Don’t leave mummy, please don’t leave me like daddy, please.”

“Hush baby. Mummy is not going anywhere, I promise.

“You promise?”

“Yes, baby, why do you think I want to leave you, pumpkin?”

“You promise, mummy?” she asked again.

“I promise,” Mummy said as she kissed her. “I will always be by your side. Now tell me where you got this idea from.”

“Mr T told me.”

“Mr T, the security guard? What about him?” Mummy continued.

“Well, whenever I am in the house, Mr. T calls me to his post and plays the daddy-daughter movie for me. The movie is about a girl who is her dad’s favourite, so he is always kissing her, rubbing her chest and doing other things daddies do to their favourite daughters.”

Nana could feel her mum shaking. “Are you cold, mummy?” She asked innocently.

“Yes, baby, but please continue.” She croaked.

“Since he said I am his favourite amongst three of us and daddy was no more, he has been teaching me that daddy-daughter stuff.”

Nana’s mum ran to the kitchen and rushed to the front door. Nana followed her, confused.

“Mummy, where are you going? Are you leaving like Mr T said? Mummy?” But she just kept walking. Nana followed her outside, screaming, “Don’t leave me, mummy, please don’t leave.” At this point, Mummy was now running. Nana’s screams woke up the neighbours. They rushed out, asking Nana what the matter was. She pointed to her mum in the distance, crying, “Please tell mummy to come back; tell her not to leave me.” Jola and FK’s dads immediately jumped into action, chasing her. The commotion also woke Mr. T. Immediately, he saw Mrs. Wai he started running. By this time, the dads had caught up with her. They saw that she was holding a knife. They rushed to restrain her. “I am going to kill you she screamed” as Mr T ran off. “I will kill you. Leave me.” She was now fighting to be set free. “Leave me, let me kill this monster,” she wailed. “Please don’t stop me she said as she fell to her knees.” But they still held on to her.

Finally, they got her back in the house and called Mr. Momo. Nana was asked to explain what she told her mum. She told them everything, including when he tried inserting “his little friend”. Her mummy was just crying in the corner. Mr. Momo left and promised to make sure Mr. T paid.

After that, no one said or asked Nana anything. Not even mummy, who was just crying. All the adults were talking in hushed tones. Then, mummy’s nurse friend came, and Nana was asked to follow her into the bedroom. She put on her gloves, asked her to lie down, and, like Mr. T, put her fingers in her. After she asked Nana to dress up then, she went outside. Nana entered the sitting room just as she said, “My thumb can fit in.” Then her mummy burst into fresh tears. But Nana did not understand why. So she sat in the corner. Her mum was finally convinced to take a shower in the afternoon. Nana

had not eaten but was too scared to ask since everyone had forgotten she was there. She didn't want to draw attention to herself.

Then she heard the nurse friend saying to Jola and FK's mummies. "So you want to tell me that outspoken Nana, Miss Smart Pant, could not raise the alarm earlier? She must have enjoyed it. And when I was doing my observation, she winced, and I thought, you didn't find it painful when that man kept doing it for months."

Nana ran into her room crying. Is this what mummy thinks, too? She thought to herself with tears rolling down her cheeks. Is that why she has not said anything to her since she told her this morning? Was this what Mr T was talking about when he said she would lose her mummy? Mummy will not leave but will never be like the mummy she used to know. Didn't mummy see it was because she didn't want to lose her that she never said anything? She should have listened to Mr. T. He was right.

"I will never talk again." She said to herself. "If I do not have a voice, they will never blame me again."

Present day…..

"So that's why my anti-rape device is called my voice. It speaks up for you when you cannot call for help. With this device, you do not have to call for help because it will do it for you."

The crowd roared with a standing ovation. "Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you MyVoice. An eco-friendly wearable that empowers parents to protect their children from abuse while addressing climate change.