

A parent comforts her heartbroken son, reminding him that HIV does not define his worth or his chances at love.

BY MICHAEL AGABA

Across the sitting room is Denise, a 55 year-old, a mother of 30-year-old Moses. She was folding laundry when she heard the sharp thud of his phone hitting the mattress. She walked over and knocked softly. "Can I come in?"

Moses opened hesitatingly. Denise sat next to him. "Another one?" she asked gently. He shrugged. "Yeah. I told her early. Thought I was being mature about it. She said she respected me. Then... just disappeared. Sent that message this morning." Denise reached over and squeezed his hand.

"You're cool, but I'm not sure I can handle... all that. Sorry."

He sighed and locked the screen, heart heavy. Moses perinatally (from mother) acquired HIV and was diagnosed of the same at the age of three. He would get on treatment since, and his viral load is now undetectable, but the stigma still feels louder than death.

"I don't blame her, Mum. I mean, who would want to date someone like me?" he said, his voice cracking. "No matter how healthy I am, they just see the virus." She paused and said: "Moses, look at me." He hesitated but lifted his eyes. "You are not a disease. You are a whole person, brilliant, kind, stubborn like your mother and yes, living with HIV,

but that's not the end of your story. It's just a part of it."

He looked away. "It doesn't feel like just a part. It feels like a wall." She sat back down. "Son, the right person won't see HIV as a wall. They'll see it as something you're living with, not something that defines you." She said. Moses nodded slowly. "I want to believe it. But I hate the awkwardness. The fear in their face when I tell them. Like I'm dangerous."

Denise sighed. "It's not your job to educate everyone, but it is your job to protect your peace. You don't have to rush into relationships to prove anything. And when you're ready, you will lead with your truth, not your fear."

"I just wish I could talk about it without feeling ashamed."

"Well," she said with a smile, "you just did. And I'm proud of you."

Tomorrow is World Aids Day. It is a global day to raise awareness about HIV/Aids, celebrate achievements in fighting the pandemic, honour those who have died, and call for increased solidarity and action to end the disease as a public health threat. "Stigma is still with us, people living with HIV still struggle with it, affecting their physical and mental health. Strengthening strategies to overcome them can go a long way towards improving their mental health, says Ms Christine Matama, a public health specialist and counsellor.

