

## **Chapter 8: Me, Myself and I**

### **Florence**

Hi, my name is Florence. I'm a young girl. I'll be 52 in a few weeks time. I'm in London. Sitting across me is Eve, precious Eve [Eve laughs], who has done a lot for me actually, during my mental health crisis. I'm sitting on my bed. I've got a warmer under my bed, so it keeps me warm all the time. I've got lots of posters in my room, well not too many posters but it's inspiration posters in my room on the wall. I'm watching This Morning on the TV. Thank God I'm alive. I want to keep that going.

### **Eve**

Do you want to describe this poster to us, so we can imagine what it looks like?

### **Florence**

The one by my bedside is a poster of Jesus Christ. It says, "Jesus is my saviour". And the word that I always say all the time, not all the time, often, is, "I confess that with my mouth, that Jesus is my saviour". If not for him, I would have died. So I hold on to him as a pillar, or fortress, and comfort. And the other one, I've got another poster that when I want to sit down it's like a backup for me. It says, "Our Father who is in heaven..." I am fatherless, I am motherless, so if I'm praying now I will say, "My Father who is in heaven, hallowed be thy name". This is one of the psalms everybody knows, in psalm 23. And I always say that psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want". So these are the things that actually give me comfort, because if I live alone you don't want to be thinking too much.

### **Eve**

There's a lot in your room that I'm noticing and things that catch my eye - your clothes, the dresses here, your perfume and candles...

### **Florence**

I have an altar. I have my Bibles there, my oil, because I'm a prophetess as well in my church. I'm a pastor. I've got a degree in theology. I'm not going to say I'm a religious fanatic, but I believe in God. Oh yes, my radio! My radio is there, that plays music 24/7. Reason being that during the course of my suicidal [crisis] it was one of the things that the psychologist advised me, psychiatrist said I should look for something that is going to make my brain busy. So it's like a therapy. So I've got a CD player there, that plays and replays itself. And it stops me from thinking about my mental health issues, most times.

### **Eve**

What kind of thing do you like to listen to?

**Florence**

Christian music, to be honest. I don't listen to any other music. I just listen to Christian music, because I don't sleep in the night. I can't remember the last time I slept in the night, I think probably four or five years now, so in the night is my own morning due to so many things. So during the night I listen to those music. I want to get some distractions, because of my mental health issue.

**Eve**

Where do we need to begin with our conversation? Because I know bits and pieces of things that you've been through. We've done a bit of work together. We made a film together. And there are things that I have in my mind to ask you about, based on what I already know from talking to you. But where do you want to begin? Where's an important beginning?

**Florence**

Anywhere you want me to begin from. Do you want me to begin from my separated state that led me to go into prison? Or prior to then, when I was still living with my ex? Because it was then that I first had my mental health issues when I was still with him. That was the first time I had, I was diagnosed with high blood pressure. Or is it when I had my brain surgery?

The day I was discharged home, he was supposed to be with me. The moment I came back home he went out for a party, because then we were living in a maisonette and the rooms were upstairs, the toilet was down. I needed a wee, because it was a brain surgery and I still had this thing put in my nose to avoid leaking. Because there was this growth that was discovered at the top of my eye, and they had to take it out immediately because they said it was going to make me blind.

Well, for now my sight is 50/50 anyway, since the surgery. But because the surgery was taken out through the nose, I had this golf thing put in my nose, that I should not look down, which is still affecting me now. If I look down too much, it looks as if something is going to leak out from my nose.

So I tried to come down to go to the toilet, I missed one step, because I didn't want to look down because of the thing, that very day I knocked my head on the floor again. And I was there for about one hour. I just had to do whatever business I had to do there when I fell down. And I struggled, I couldn't go back up, so I stayed downstairs. So when he came back in the morning, I just looked at him, I didn't know what to say, this was back in 20-, my surgery was in 2010, and since then everything has been really, really bad. Everything has been very, very bad.

He was very, very abusive. Not physically, but mentally. I love myself, but I'm not a free spender. So because I know the kind of person he is, the flat we were living in then the rent was always taken out of my account. Reason being that I don't want a situation whereby he won't be paying rent and I'm going to have crisis. And he never paid it from 2005 til 2016 that I lost that accommodation, he never for one day paid the rent.

And there was a time he said he needed money. And I told him, "I don't have money". That was my first crisis with high blood pressure. Because he would always go in, go out, go in, go out, "Oh I need money, I need money, you don't want to give me money." And if there's something I don't like, if somebody's doing that to me. If you talk to me once, let's forget about it. But if you keep repeating the same thing, the same thing. As at this time I didn't know anything about mental health. I just felt sick one day, and I couldn't do anything.

Before then I was always having constant, constant, headache. I would go to the doctor. Fortunately for me, unfortunately for them, all of them has been sacked now. There's this particular doctor, I'm not going to mention her name, every time I go to her then I say, "I have headache". Because when my headache starts I don't want to listen to any sound, no lights, I didn't even know about migraine or anything.

And she will tell me, this is a GP that will tell me, "Oh, it's just a headache, it's one of those headaches, just go and take paracetamol". And I will say, "I have taken paracetamol! Is because it's not working, that's why I needed you guys to know". I needed somebody to tell me what was this headache was for.

Perhaps if I had been attended to quicker, maybe my sight will not be this 50/50 now. So if the doctor had suggested something good earlier, because it took me three years with that migraine pain for another doctor to send me for an X-ray. And it was then that they discovered that there was a ball sitting right on top of my eyes, I don't know, in my brain anyway.

And God was so good to me. Because the doctor that attended to me said, "Florence, we did X-ray, we did MRI, the ball we can see is too big, if we don't take it out immediately you can go blind." And I'm like, "I've been complaining about this to my doctor for over three years". I was so fortunate to meet another doctor at my GP surgery. So immediately, I think it was because it was an emergency, the operation was done the following week.

And then when the incident happened that I fell down, I lost trust in my ex. I started having high blood pressure again. Now I am on depression. I was placed on another tablet, citalopram, which is common with everybody, but it was not getting better. So I just felt, 2013, enough was enough. When I had

another surgery this summer, and it was fibroids anyway, it was taken out twice within 12 months, so I just felt enough was enough. If I don't let my ex know that my health matters the way things are I might die, because he was just getting worse and worse and worse.

So in 2013 he left, I don't know where he went, it was actually the week that I had the second operation for my fibroids taking out, and I didn't tell him then, it was in April. When I came back from the hospital I saw bags, bags, bags, bags. I just pretended not to see it. And he was always wanting me to notice that he's moving away. This is somebody that does not pay bills at home.

And anytime I cook at home, and I go to work, when I come back you will see him and his friends watching football and eating my food. Anytime I try to say anything, he tells me, "You call yourself a pastor. When somebody comes to you, and you give them advice, let them come to the house and see how you don't want to give your husband food." And I know this thing, this thing is an accumulated problem to my mental health. Because one I don't want a problem, so I would just rather just cook so that I can avoid him talking talking in the house. Yet I was not getting better.

So I said "enough was enough". "You're not going to get anybody better than me." So I said, "I don't even want anybody again. I just want to be alone now. If this is what God wants me to do, I'll just keep doing it, because you've been a burden in my life." "We met when we were young, we came to London and you changed." "No." I think I'd rather just be alive, because if I'm dead, he will still go on and meet another woman.

So why can't I just do things that's going to keep myself alive? So that I can have reason to talk to Eve like I'm doing. Because if I was dead, I wouldn't have met beautiful people that is taking care of me mentally. Like Professor Cruickshank in St. Thomas'. I have to mention names. I know sometimes you don't want to mention names, but that man! I think God purposely sends me to people that is just going to help me, to avoid me being a dead person.

Because when I was really suicidal, were living between Tower Bridge and London Bridge, when it is too much, when my head is too much, I will just walk down to Tower Bridge. Three times I've tried to commit suicide there. To just end it. To say, look, I've just had enough. Every time I do, somebody pulls me back.

The last time I did it, it was in London Bridge. I was just standing there looking at that flowing river, and I was walking down towards it. There was an old woman. I don't know where she came from. She just said, "Are you alright?" I said, "Yes, I'm alright". And she was looking at me and she said, "It's not worth it, you know?" Oh, I started crying. That word alone gave me a turn around. It's not worth it. When you die, you die with a problem.

But when I am alive, I get people around me, helping me, like Professor Cruickshank who sees to my blood pressure. He is more than a blood pressure doctor. He has touched so many things in my life, simply because he says, "Florence, I don't want you to be dead". I had problem with accommodation. I don't know what a medical doctor's got to do with my accommodation, but he was always writing letters. Because I was not happy where I lived, and he said if I'm not happy where I lived my blood pressure is never going to come down.

When I look back, I don't deserve to be alive. But I thank God that I am alive. Because I know so many people that did not even go through half of the things I went through and are no more. Because when people are going through certain things, especially when you are going through it alone, with nobody to talk to, that is madness.

It got to a stage I started having problems with buying, buying, buying. I was in debt. And I'm thinking I need a turn around. I don't need these things. But then, even though I was a Christian, when you are in certain situation you don't believe in anything anymore. Because the first thing I was doing, I was questioning God, "God, why? Why? What have I really done? Have I not done your job?"

Especially when I when I had to go to prison for my ex. Because of the accommodation we were living in, he got it illegally, fraudulently. We lived there between 2005 on to 2013 and I lived there until 2017 when it was taken off from me. And this case did not come up until 2014 after he had left. They were always sending letters on his name. And I was always just sending it back to the sender. I did not know what the letter was about until probably six months or so later. A letter was addressed to me and I opened it, and it was, "Bring the documents". I don't know where he is. I couldn't locate him. All I know is he is no more in England, he's moved out of the country. I tried to get some few people in Nigeria to see if they know his whereabouts. Nobody knows it. So I know he's probably not in Nigeria anymore. So I don't know where he is. There was no way I could contact him to ask him for the papers for the house.

So before I knew it, I had to go to prison for it. And then I was questioning God, "I did not steal, I did not commit adultery, I did not commit any offence, and yet you have to send me to prison. Why? Why?" Three months I blanked out, I just couldn't be bothered. Said, "I have a degree in theology in a university. I have a degree in food technology. And I end up being imprisoned. Oh God, you don't exist." But then I got to know that most people that wrote chapters in the Bible, some of them wrote them in prison. So there must be a reason for me to go to prison.

After my head was cooled down, the fourth month or so, then I realised that there are lots of people in the prison that needed God. Outsiders cannot come inside to go and do that work. People say I should stop saying I went to prison. That some people will look at me as a prisoner. It doesn't matter to me. I always tell people. Reason is I did not commit any crime. I went there because God wanted me to go to prison. That's the only thing I can say.

Because even the officers in the prison was always looking at me and thinking, "You are not a candidate of this place". I would say, "I know". "You're not supposed to be". I say, "I know. Don't worry. Don't tell me what I know. I know I'm not supposed to be here, but there is a purpose". So I think it was my fifth month that I started the fellowship. And I got people coming on Fridays, worshipping God in our block. So I started having another good good relationship with God, though I still question it, that why me, but then it's gone now.

So when I came out, that started another chapter. There was another red flag in my life, because now I don't have a place to live. Now I don't have a job. The day I was sentenced, I was not expecting to be sentenced. Even the people there said, "They are just going to take the accommodation from you". So I could not put myself in order, so all my properties was taken to storage by the council. Now, where do I start from? So it was a pastor that I only met three months before the sentencing that allowed me into his house. It was my saving grace. At least I had a place to put my head. And I have another problem in the house. The wife was always thinking the husband is interested in me. She's always using negative proverbs to sink into my ears. Not even bothering about my mental health anytime she's at home.

So there was a day I had to go to my psychiatrist again. Dr. Moira, that's another lady that really helped me. Anytime I go to her she will go to Tesco, she must have gone to Tesco, and I will see a bag beside myself. Every time she'll buy me something. I don't know if it's been sponsored or so, but she makes sure that I don't kill myself.

I walk like a ghost. Sometimes it is until I hear the car horn that I realised that I'm not walking on the path I'm walking on the road. Because now I'm out of prison. Sometimes I don't want to go home, especially when the wife is at home. So I'd rather not go home at all.

Mental health comes in so many forms. Because sometimes you will think, "Is there a day that this thing is going to end?" And you will get an answer, "No". Then the next thing is, I might as well just end it all. That is why most people decide to end their life because they don't see any light after the tunnel. Anybody going through the tunnels like I went through. I know some people have gone through worse things. Anybody going through black

tunnels is difficult for anybody who is not going through it to say, "I understand", like my doctor at GP surgery.

It's not always good to look down on people when somebody comes to you, and tell them you understand. How do you understand? Are you going through what that person is going through? No, you're not. You can't understand what I'm going through. When I'm talking to you and you say, "Oh, Florence, don't worry, I understand". Okay, what do you understand? You understand being to prison? You understand before prison that you have to be paying rent and you have to be putting food on the table for somebody who works and had more than you? And you're telling me you understand? No, you don't understand. When you're going through things like that, you want to end it all.

Because when this thing started, I don't talk, even if they asked me to talk to any psychiatrist or psychologist or anybody. I will just sit down and listen to whatever they have to say. Because I've had enough of people telling me, "I understand". So what is the point of talking when I know at the end of the day, the person I'm talking to will say, "I understand". I don't know, maybe because I'm Black, or maybe because I'm a woman, or maybe because they see me as somebody who is mentally deranged, they don't want to talk, they just want to pass me on to the next person.

So they will just tell me, "I understand, go and take paracetamol". Nobody understand what's everybody's going through? It's an individual case. If anybody comes to you with a problem, because it took me a while for me to, how do I say it?

When I'm on the bus with my crutches, that's another problem. Disability is not written on people's faces. Some people will say, "I bet there's nothing wrong with her". Do you use crutches for fashion? Crutches is not for fashion. People will look at you and think, "What's wrong with her?" I was talking to my doctor the other day, I said, "Do I need a placard to put on top of my head or my chest to say I'm disabled?"

I never planned to be like this. When people look at me, that's another problem. I don't want people to see me as a madwoman. Yes, I've got lots of issues. I don't want people to pity me. I have learned a lot in this my journey. To know that if I don't kill myself, I will kill mental health. So the option is I will let go of mental health, because I want to be alive.

## **Eve**

There's so many things I'm thinking, as I've been listening. And I was noticing how a few times when you were talking you became quite tearful. And I wanted to know what was going through your mind when you were feeling that emotion.

## **Florence**

Emotions and tears, they are natural things. You know when I was talking about my prison experience, I remember one day I had my crisis. There was a lockdown and I had my crisis. I begged the officer to take me to triage, the nurse there. And this officer, I don't know what was happening to her, she just took one of the crutches away from me, kicked me, and everybody was shouting, "Leave her alone! She's sick! She's not one of those people that pretends, everybody knows". Because immediately when it happens to me, my blood pressure will go down, my diabetic level, my sugar level, will go AWOL. And I was on the floor. "Stand up! Stand up! Stand up!" You know, I started crying and look at myself. And I looked at the lady. My tears was uncontrollable. "What have I done? I only asked to go to the nurse's station, because I needed a shot."

When I was there, the clanking, the noise of the officers key every time looking at the door, looking at the hole, that is terrible because they do it most times in the night. So since then, 2017 to date, I don't sleep in the night anymore. So imagine all my years, all the years now, since 2017 to date, I don't sleep at night. When it started, they started giving me sleeping pills when I came out, and they had to stop it because I was getting addicted to it. I've gone through so many therapists to help me. No. It has deprived me of my sleep. It has deprived me of myself. I know within myself that I have lost everything.

The only thing I have is God, because I'm still alive. I have lost my pride. I have lost my person. I used to be bubbly, but I don't want to contact anybody anymore. Because I see myself as not being in their level anymore. They've never been to prison. They keep telling me it is my imagination, but no, I don't work, I'm not allowed to work anymore. How can I go back to that level? No. That alone is another mental issue. That when I look at myself, til now, I still think, "Is it really worth living?" When you can't do things that you used to do before, yes I cry, yes it brings tears to me, because I never wanted to be like this. I never prayed in my early years to meet somebody like my ex. To give everything and get nothing in return. And become suicidal [sighs] and start taking food from food bank. But what I am going through, I am going through it alone. It's me. And I don't want to be in this situation. No.

I want to look for Florence. I don't know where Florence is. I want Florence back. I want me back. I don't want to be suicidal [begins to cry]. I don't want this mental thing. I don't want to be crying every time. Now I ask myself, "Is it really worth living?" Yes. Because I get people around me that tells me it's worth living, but how long? Sorry I don't want to be emotional but it's just...

## **Eve**



No you don't have to apologise. I feel very emotional as you're talking. The way you describe the things that have happened to you, the process of trying to get help, having these horrific headaches, pains for three years...

**Florence**

Yeah, and a doctor who says it's just headache go and take paracetamol...

**Eve**

And then you find out you have a tumour...

**Florence**

That there was a growth, yes, I have a tumour in the brain which was causing the headache.

**Eve**

Why do you think it is that you got told it was a headache and take paracetamol?

**Florence**

It's the nonchalant attitude of some doctors. I'm not going to condemn all the doctors. Because it was one doctor that said, "You're always complaining of headache, go and take paracetamol." It's another doctor that sent me to MRI. So I'm not going to say NHS is bad, no no, no, no, no, no, no. There are very very good eggs in NHS, but the bad ones need to be flushed out.

And I used to have very bad, bad bad periods. Mine was one of the highest classes of periods. When it starts when I was working, everybody in my workplace know that Florence is having a period. So I had to go to HR to tell them, "Please I'm calling in sick, take it out of my holiday". Because that's another mental thing. Because everybody knows you're having your period pain. Because once it starts, I cannot walk. It's going to be like serious cramping, which was one of the reasons I had to do the fibroids was taken out, twice in 12 months.

But then some doctors will say, "It's just normal periods". She prescribed co-codamol for me. Co-codamol is good but then it stops you from going to toilet sometimes. She said, "You told me you have period pain, you've told me you have headache, you said paracetamol is not working, go and use co-codamol." And I will say, "Do you think I'm a baby? This thing is not working". Now, it's another doctor that prescribed something else for me that was giving me a little bit of relief, not 100% relief to be honest.

For your information it was a woman that was always telling me it's just an ordinary headache. A woman that I expected to understand woman-to-woman feeling. And it was a doctor, male, that helped me out in the end. It was because I was insistent. If I did not persist to go, go go go go

go go, some people will just give up and say, "If I go there now they will say take paracetamol". But because I was always saying, "No, no no." Something has to be done. They took the tumour out, but the harm was already done.

### **Eve**

I keep thinking of when you're describing trying to get help and support, and you keep hearing people say, "Oh yeah I understand, yeah, I understand". How does it make you feel when you get that kind of a response from people?

### **Florence**

I'm trying to remember the first clinic I went to that I got that response. So the doctor I met there said, looked at the letter on the screen and said, "Oh, I understand, just try and take it easy, it's one of those things, what are you even thinking?" And I'm like, "Why are you asking me what I'm thinking? I came to you for help. And you're telling me you understand?" And he was looking at me as I did ask him, "What do you really understand?" He said, "I've had three patients already with the same thing, it's a normal thing."

No. See patients as an individual. Please doctors out there, or whoever is listening in the medical field, don't tell patients you understand. You can't understand. I don't know how you understand, except if you have gone inside my brain and you are sharing my pain. That's the only time you understand what I'm going through. Suffice to say, it is me, myself and I.

### **Eve**

Can I ask you about your experiences of trying to get support for feeling suicidal? You mentioned going to Tower Bridge and people pulling you back, strangers. Were there any mental health professionals that you'd talk to at these times?

### **Florence**

Yes. Tuesdays then, there's this lady that usually goes to the GP surgery. And then all of a sudden, when I went to her, she said they've stopped her contract. I said, "Why?" She said NHS can't afford her to be coming to see people one-on-one. I said, "So what do they want us to be doing? So they just want us to go and take citalopram and sit down, without having somebody to talk to weekly?"

So when that stopped, obviously, the suicidal thoughts will be high because there is nobody that will talk to you every week, "Florence, how are you feeling?" Now this time I'm blank. Now is just me, myself and I. And the tablet, that is just a tablet. So my brain was full, because there was nobody to talk to anymore. NHS cannot afford it anymore.

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Gallery



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