

IN THE HUMAN FUNNEL

For some people, suicide can appear to be the best way to solve a difficult set of circumstances. But sometimes you survive the attempt. What then?

By **Oliver Roberts**

Illustration: **Lizza Littlewort**

ALICE was eight years old the first time she tried to kill herself. She climbed a tree, tied the rope of her tyre swing around her neck and jumped.

"But I didn't wrap it around enough times and instead of it doing what it was meant to, I spun out and got thrown off the swing," she says. "I got bad whiplash and landed in a messy heap."

Alice is 26 now. Seven years ago she attempted a more adult method of suicide by butchering her left wrist with a Stanley knife. If it wasn't for her sister, who found her and quickly squirted superglue into the cuts, Alice wouldn't be sitting in front of me at a coffee shop in Rosebank this warm autumn afternoon, telling me about the time she felt enough was enough.

It seems there's a kind of morbid physics behind suicide. A quantifiable science. Take this type of person, let X, Y, Z happen to them, and the logical outcome is a decision to permanently remove themselves from whatever situation they or somebody else has created.

Ivan, who you'll meet later, refers to it as the "Venturi effect". Technically, the Venturi effect is the reduction in fluid pressure that results when a fluid flows through a constricted section of pipe. In emotional terms, according to Ivan, "only so much can go through the funnel at one time, because you're a human being. Then your mind turns on you."

But what if suicide doesn't work? What then? That's what we want to know. We want to know what that failure changes, if anything, and what it's like to stand on that ledge, to have that conviction that the worst thing to do is the best thing.

Alice's Venturi effect occurred shortly after being thrown out of university for drug possession. The shame of this, combined with her unmedicated bipolar II disorder and a general lifelong narrative of melancholia, led her naked into a warm bath one afternoon, fresh blades in place.

"I lay there for a bit and just decided that this was definitely it. The further you go through the process the less chance you have of turning back. I was very highly strung but I wasn't crying. I had done my crying. I was nervous but focused. You have this great anxiety about whether or not it's going to work. You don't want to look like an ar-

sehole and deal with the consequences because you know it's a gamble."

Method is interesting. When there's only one option, there are so many options. Cut. Shoot. Hang. Swallow. Jump. Gas. It becomes ethnic, too. White men usually shoot themselves. Black men use a rope. White women take pills. In South Africa there has never been an official account of a black woman shooting herself.

For Alice, slitting was the natural progression of a history of self-mutilation. She says her method was the one she was "most comfortable" with.

WE go to a halfway house in Edenvale to see a man called Morné. His first attempt was in November last year. Lots of pills. And a few blood pressure meds thrown in to make sure the heart stopped.

It didn't. Instead, Morné fell into a deep unconscious and had horrifying visions of himself harming his beloved dogs. He also saw what he describes as a "troll" in the corner of the bedroom where he lay, and the ugly wicked thing was pointing at him and laughing.

Attempting suicide is almost never a spontaneous thing. You might specify the day and time, but the pressure in the pipes has taken a long time to reach bursting point.

Morné's progress towards it began in 2004, when he lost his boyfriend in a car accident. Morné was at the wheel, a tyre burst and he lost control. Shortly afterwards, he was bust for a drug lab he was running in his house. He ended up marrying the attorney who got him off the charge.

At the beginning of 2013 Morné was still struggling with the guilt of his boyfriend's death. Things also began to go "terribly, terribly south" between him and his husband. By then, though, he'd been through rehab and, he says, found God. Then he got a divorce summons and, in the process, lost everything, including his job and his house. There was a very real chance he'd end up on the street.

"It got to the point where I couldn't cope anymore," he says. "The whole God thing fell away and I just lost my head. I was tired of getting on my knees and asking God to get me out of the situation, to please provide, to please help."



Morné doesn't know how long he was out. He reckons he woke up about two days later.

"When I came around I thought, 'God, really? Are you teasing me?' I was terribly pissed off because it wasn't possible for me to come out of that, it just wasn't."

Second time around, just this February, Morné took more pills to make sure he was successful. "The want to be alive was gone, there was

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nothing," he says. "I was fully aware of what I wanted. I wanted to die, I wanted to put an end to it."

But he woke again, this time in hospital. And he was back to asking God the same old questions.

"There was no fear [about attempting suicide]," Morné says. "When you see everything that you love, everything that you're attached to, everything that gives you meaning, disappear, then you get to the point where you don't really care. Empty is not even a word.

There's nothing, just air inside. No emotion. Anyway, I've never had a fear of death. Being brought up as a pastor's son I was told that if you fear death, you're not ready for heaven."

Morné is convinced that God is behind his miraculous risings from the near dead. He wants to get involved in missionary work now.

"I believe that God wants to use me as some sort of tool to say, 'Shit happens in life, shit can get pretty bad,'" he says. "And as unpleasant as it might be and as much as it might hurt there has to be a God in all this."

MEDIA personality Karabo Kgoleng is so dismayed by the taboo around mental illness in African culture that she recently tweeted about her attempted suicide.

"You can live," she says. "That's what I want people to know."

Like Alice, Kgoleng has had a history of depression. At 15 she had her first psychotic breakdown as a result of moving back to South Africa after a childhood spent in exile in Botswana. Her father, an Anglican pastor, got a parish in Stilfontein ("The worst place in the world,"

says Kgoleng) and she moved from her liberal international school in Botswana to a staid, slightly racist Catholic school in Johannesburg.

"All these kinds of events conspired to... look, there is a history of mental illness in my family that's never spoken about," she says. "It's a source of shame. My father's brother had depression. My cousin committed suicide. My father was a wonderful man, but he would say you get depressed because you don't pray, and that it will go away if you ask God for forgiveness."

After giving birth in 2000, Kgoleng's post-natal depression went untreated. Then there was the violent dissolution of her relationship with the biological father. By the end of the decade she was enjoying success with a book show on SABC and was heavily involved in the literary scene. At the time, her daughter wasn't living with her and, despite having what she and her friends perceived to be an enviable existence, she'd come home every night to an empty flat.

What she labels her "unraveling" started in 2011. Then, she was functioning on a cocktail of psychiatric meds and alcohol. She recalls doing radio interviews with

the South African Depression and Anxiety Group while, privately, she was losing the battle with herself.

She took her first overdose at the end of 2012. After being hospitalised for that, she returned home and basically did not get out of bed for 18 months. Her landlord was bringing her grapefruits from his garden, just so she would eat something.

"I stopped getting phone calls and invites, I knew there were whispers," she says. "I was on meds but they weren't working so I stopped. That time is very murky."

Last September: "A friend came over to check on me and I didn't tell her I'd taken an overdose. She went to run the bath for me and when she came back I was out and cold. They did resuscitation and pumped my stomach. I woke up with a sore throat and my dad and a family friend, also a priest, a lovely blonde-haired woman, were looking over me."

You wonder, is there a point when suicide seems inevitable, especially when it appears to be woven into the fabric of your genes?

"I don't know," Kgoleng says. "I was in a place where you don't have a vocabulary for the emotion when

you're at that point of desperation and all your demons are laughing at you. You don't sleep at night and when the first birds start tweeting, you feel like they're mocking you and that you can't show your face to the world and you're such an abysmal failure that it's better to end with a big splash. I felt like even my daughter would be better off if I were dead because then I'd save her from the trauma of growing up with a mom that has mental illness."

Since this second attempt, which left her flatlined, Kgoleng says she feels she has been freed from her historical, familial tendencies. On Valentine's Day this year, Kgoleng's younger sister Keabetswe is thought to have committed suicide by jumping from the third floor of her townhouse following a fight with her husband.

YOU don't decide on a Tuesday afternoon that you want to do it. It's something you're either born to do or you're not born to do.

That's Ivan, from the previously mentioned Venturi effect. Except here he's not talking about suicide. He's talking about what he does — being a bodyguard.

Ivan has been studied by psychiatrists and has had a thesis written about him. He is among the 5% of the world's people who do not have a self-preservation instinct. This means he has absolutely no fear of death. This means he will never hesitate to leap in front of a bullet, even if he doesn't like the guy it's headed for. It makes him very, very good at what he does. It also made suicide a logical option for him

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when shit got bad.

It started when his wife had an affair and left him. Then, within the space of two years, he lost custody of his daughters, two companies he started collapsed, and a woman he fell madly in love with left him without any reason. Eventually, he was deeply in debt and had just R730 to his name.

"You can be sitting watching a movie, feeling great about yourself, in 3D, and out of the fuckin' blue, like a draft that comes in through

the window, it will hit you and you will feel lonely," he says. "The loneliness that hits to the core so deeply that you actually feel that you're not meant to be here."

There were other options, Ivan concedes. But Ivan is a man whose cold reasoning has saved his own life and the one he's protecting over and over again. He's been shot six times, stabbed 187 times. Systematic analysis told him that suicide wasn't the only solution, just the best one.

"There were many options," he says. "And I gauged them. What is the resistance, what is the outcome, what is the probability, the likelihood, and what's the chance of success? Every one of them. What's it going to take to get me from here to there? It's going to cost me something. Financially, emotionally, spiritually, it's going to cost me, it has to, it's a transaction. You give, you get, it just works that way. How could I take the tools that I have and achieve the goal that I wanted?"

Ivan now has his daughters for two days out of every 15. Not ideal, but at least he sees them. He also runs courses on quantum dynamics, which is essentially a form of

human profiling. He says that with the right processes in place, you can predict the outcome of a developing situation five weeks in advance.

It was August last year when Ivan tried to shoot himself, but the gun jammed. Immediately afterwards he took 30-odd sleeping tablets and lay down on the couch. Four days later he woke up and has not considered it an option since.

"It's the hardest thing you'll ever do," Ivan says. "You're thinking, 'What happens if it's not like they say? What happens if I'm not going to those pearly white gates? Is it more of this? Forever?' That was the big question for me — where to from here? But this life just wasn't an option for me anymore." **LS**

● **Help for suicide survivors, the bereaved and anyone suffering from mood disorders can be found at www.suicidesurvivors.co.za, or contact Lorraine Mitchell on 084 560 1003. The South African Depression and Anxiety Group can be found at www.sadag.org.**

For a suicide emergency contact 0800 567 567.