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The Troublemaker

On 9 October 1963, Nelson Mandela joined 10 others on trial for sabotage, in what became known as the Rivonia Trial. While facing the death penalty his words to the court at the end of his famous "Speech from the Dock" on 20 April 1964 became immortalized:

"I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

It was not just grandstanding. Nelson Mandela was a man of his word. He had indeed dedicated his life to establishing democratic principles, advancing human rights and fighting the injustices of Apartheid.

His extraordinary journey, his Long Walk to Freedom, began with his birth into the Madiba clan in the village of Mvezo, in the Eastern Cape, on 18 July 1918.

He was given the name Rolihlahla, a Xhosa term colloquially meaning "troublemaker." Later he became known by his clan name, Madiba.

His mother was Nonqaphi Nosekeni and his father was Nkosi Mphakanyiswa Gadla Mandela, principal counsellor to Jongintaba Dalindyebo, Acting King of the Thembu people (a tribe of the Xhosa).

(You would have noticed in my strangled pronunciation, that the Xhosa language has fifteen click sounds, originally borrowed from Khoisan languages of the region.)

Mandela's father was a traditional Thembu man who followed tribal customs. Gadla was a polygamist with four wives, four sons and nine daughters, who lived in different villages. Nelson's mother was Gadla's third wife, Nosekeni Fanny, daughter of Nkedama of the Right Hand House and a member of the amaMpemvu clan of the Xhosa.

The landscape in the Eastern Cape where Mandela grew up, was tribal land, with rolling, green hills dotted with small villages, with clusters of round huts with thatched roofs — often painted a bright sea green. Ribbons of footpaths wove the villages together, and herds of spotted Nguni cattle grazed in the fields and hills.

Mandela later said that his early life was defined by traditional Thembu custom and taboo. He grew up with two sisters in his mother's kraal in the village of Qunu, where he herded cattle and spent most of his time outside with other boys, often engaging in a traditional Xhosa pastime, called stick fighting, in which two boys face off to fight with two sticks — one for fighting, the other for defending. The winner of these fights are called Inkunzi, meaning 'the bull'.

The owning of cattle was the traditional status symbol in Xhosa culture.

I describe this traditional upbringing, not for the sake of exoticism — but because I think Mandela's royal lineage made him unique. It gave him an inviolable sense of self, a dignity, a demand to be seen.

Both Mandela's parents were illiterate, but his mother was a devout Christian, and enrolled him at a local Methodist school when he was about seven. Baptized a Methodist, Mandela was given the name "Nelson" by his teacher, in accordance with the custom, born from White

reluctance to learn hard-to-pronounce Black names. When Mandela was about nine, his father came to stay at Nelson's village of Qunu, where he died of an undiagnosed ailment. Nelson later said that he inherited his father's "proud rebelliousness" and "stubborn sense of fairness".

He attended primary school in Qunu and later completed his Junior Certificate at Clarkebury Boarding Institute and went on to Healdtown, a well-regarded Wesleyan secondary school, where he matriculated.

Mandela then began his studies for a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University College of Fort Hare. Amongst other activities he took up ballroom dancing, performed in a drama-society play about Abraham Lincoln, and gave Bible classes in the local community as part of the Student Christian Association.

But he did not complete the degree, as he was expelled for joining in a student protest — a boycott against the quality of the food. It would not be Mandela's last protest. And amazingly his protests often concerned the quality of food.

On Nelson's return to the Great Place at Mqhekezweni, the King was furious and said if he didn't return to Fort Hare he would arrange wives for him and his cousin Justice. To escape this fate, they ran away to Johannesburg, arriving there in 1941, which was incidentally a year after my own father was born.

There Mandela worked as a mine security officer and met Walter Sisulu, who introduced him to Lazer Sidelsky, a liberal Jew sympathetic to the ANC's cause of equality and justice. Mandela went on to do his articles (or internship) through a firm of attorneys run by Sidelsky.

If you'll allow a side bar — it's worth noting the prominent role Jewish South Africans played in the anti-Apartheid struggle and in Mandela's own life. Many of these ANC sympathizers and fellow activists were descendants of Jewish immigrants from Latvia and Lithuania who fled Czarist pogroms at the end of the 19th century, often with strong Communist sympathies

and a passion for justice. In fact five of his fellow Rivonia trialists were Jewish, and the head of the ANC's military wing at Mandela's release was a Jew of Lithuanian descent, Joe Slovo, as was the head of the military wing's intelligence division, Ronnie Kasrils.

On the other hand, the man who prosecuted Mandela in the Treason Trial was also a Jew of Lithuanian descent, Percy Yutar, South Africa's first Jewish attorney-general.

Nelson Mandela soon got involved in African nationalist politics in Johannesburg, the city where I was born. He joined the ANC in 1943 and co-founded the ANC Youth League in 1944.

After the National Party's white-only government (which won power in 1948) established the system of Apartheid, Mandela and the ANC committed themselves to its overthrow.

Mandela was appointed President of the ANC's Transvaal branch, and made a name for himself in the 1952 Defiance Campaign and the 1955 Congress of the People. He was repeatedly arrested for seditious activities and was unsuccessfully prosecuted in the 1956 Treason Trial.

Many debate whether Mandela ever joined the Communist Party. There is evidence that he did so secretly. Whether he was a convert, or an opportunist, is still debated. Although initially committed to non-violent protest, in association with the South African Communist Party, he co-founded the ANC's military wing Umkhonto we Sizwe (meaning 'spear of the nation') in 1961 and led a sabotage campaign against the government. He was arrested in 1962, and subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment for conspiring to overthrow the state, following the Rivonia Trial.

On the 15th of August 1963, the same year Mandela gave his speech in the dock during the Rivonia Trial, I was born in Johannesburg, South Africa - a city founded in the Gold Rush of the late 19th century, and one that still had the feel of a rough-and-tumble mining town, though now also the fast-beating financial heart of the country.

This is how historian Charles van Onselen described the early days of the city:

“Like many late 19th-century mining towns, Johannesburg was a rough and disorganized place, populated by white miners from all continents, African tribesmen recruited to perform unskilled mine work, African women beer brewers who cooked for and sold beer to the black migrant workers, a very large number of European prostitutes, gangsters, impoverished Afrikaners, tradesmen, and Zulu "AmaWasha," Zulu men who surprisingly dominated laundry work.”

My parents were from the first generation of Afrikaners who were extensively urbanized and educated, after Afrikaners spent centuries as barely literate and often impoverished farmers. This progress was greatly assisted by the Afrikaners' ascent to power in 1948, and by the implementation of Apartheid, which gave Whites control of virtually the whole economy.

It was during my parents' early twenties that Grand Apartheid was introduced, a more systematic approach to segregation, championed by Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd. Amongst other infamies, Verwoerd wrote the Bantu Education Act, which devastated the ability of black South Africans to be educated. Verwoerd himself said the purpose of the Act was to make sure Blacks would get just enough education to work as unskilled laborers.

My parents grew up in a distant, dusty mining town, called Klerksdorp, in the Northwest of the country — my mother the daughter of one of the town's prominent citizens, the reverend (or dominee as they were called in the stern Dutch Reformed Church), and my father literally from the wrong side of the tracks — the son of an itinerant miner.

Unlike the Black majority, they had access to excellent, well-funded public schools, whatever their financial status. This allowed them great social mobility.

My parents were high school sweethearts, my father something of a math prodigy and a provincial rugby player, and my mother well-educated, well-read and sought-after for her elevated social position.

Eventually both moved to the capital city of Pretoria, where my mother studied to become a teacher, and my father studied to become an accountant, while also working at one of the first big Afrikaner accounting firms in the city.

In due time my father would become a CPA, and later director of a big bank, and my mother a teacher; until she devoted herself full time to raising her three children. We lived a comfortable life in a whites-only, tree-lined suburb north of Johannesburg, in a newly built house with a swimming pool and an acre of lawn that my brother and I had to mow every week, grudgingly.

To me, growing up swaddled in the claustrophobia of suburban, "white" South Africa, Nelson Mandela was a mythical, even ghostly, figure — shimmering at the edge of my consciousness. Never fully formed, always blurred by the noise, clamor and obfuscation that surrounded him. This very mystery made him more appealing.

Of course, all black people hovered silently in our world — present, but willed invisible. Matrons sipped from their fine china as maids in bright uniforms occasionally swooped in to clear tables — often while the very maids' 'laziness' or 'cheekiness' was being discussed. Gardeners clipped hedges and mowed lawns, as sunburnt tennis players lounged on their deck chairs after a game. Throngs of black workers scuttled to commuter trains as white motorists glided by. More than 80% of the city's population lived a shadowy, unimaginable existence in townships, comprising boxy houses or tin shacks, at the dusty edges of cities.

It was a particular, but effective form of anonymity, almost a wishing-away.

A refusal to believe that this was indeed Africa – a continent of dance, abandon, smiles, earth, sun and gritty, exuberant life. A continent that would not be held at bay by hedges and tea and dogs.

Nelson Mandela was hardly mentioned in polite society. He represented, in many ways, that society's greatest fear. A black man of unflinching dignity and bravery. And although he never said he was better than Whites, or at least equal to them — he didn't have to. There was nothing servile in his nature. He stood ramrod straight, unbowed and articulate. This very dignity was a quiet affront to Whites' supposed superiority.

Mandela was a man that demanded to be seen.

I knew almost nothing 'factual' about Mandela growing up. He was scrubbed from a history that focused on the famous victories over indigenous people, and a 'civilizing' often aided by the intervention of God, always on the "right" side. When the pious in their feather hats and dark suits murmured "deliver us from evil" during Sunday sermons, it was clear what was meant. Save us from the barbarians clamoring at the gate.

In fact, by the time I had any sense of the great man's existence, he'd been in prison almost fifteen years. Nobody even knew what he looked like then.

In the grainy images from his trial, he was forever a young, strapping man with a voice like thunder. Whites persisted to cast him as terrorist or saboteur, or even worse a Communist. Painting him with a red brush was likely considered the most effective undoing of the man and myth. Communism in a culture of pious white supremacy was considered akin to devil worship (and often described in the same terms).

And it seemed the rest of the so-called 'civilized' world agreed with us in the assessment of Mandela. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan placed Mandela's African National Congress

on America's official list of "terrorist" groups. In 1985, then-Congressman Dick Cheney voted against a resolution urging that Mandela be released from jail. American presidents in the 80's backed Apartheid because the regime was anti-Communist. Reagan, near the end of the Cold War, even called the Apartheid regime "essential" to global security.

Fear of Communism haunted the white minority government of South Africa from the 1950's to the collapse of single-party rule in Eastern Europe in 1989. So it's not insignificant that Mandela was only released after the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe.

Despite this, Mandela's ghost-like form continued to rise.

Every time there was a protest, he was evoked. His name was chanted, his likeness painted on walls and hoisted on banners. And there were many protests, often following a now familiar pattern of uprising, retribution, clampdown, and deathly silence — until the next time.

In my lifetime, the first big wave of unrest was the 1976 Soweto uprising. The first days of the conflagration killed more than 176 students, wounded thousands more and destroyed offices, schools, municipal centres, beer halls and bottle stores. The fury and destruction profoundly unsettled White communities. *

Predictably, the state's response was brutal and punitive. According to the government-appointed Cillie Commission of Enquiry, 575 people died, with 451 deaths from police action. It's estimated 3,907 people were injured, with the police again responsible for 2,389 of these injuries. About 5,980 were arrested for offenses related to the resistance in the townships.

In my sheltered, separate world, everything appeared calm, even wholesome, at least on the surface — a sunny paradise of tennis courts, swimming pools and bright green lawns — built on the backs of the Black Majority, and watered with the sweat of their brows.

To preserve our “innocence” - South Africans, of all races, weren't even allowed television, at least until the mid-seventies. The conservative, all-white parliament thought it a corrupting influence.

The political leaders of the day's pronouncements on the evils of television, gives a flavor of the attitudes held by Afrikaners under Apartheid. Then Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd compared television to atomic bombs and poison gas, claiming that “they are modern things, but that does not mean they are desirable. The government has to watch for any dangers to the people, both spiritual and physical.”

Dr. Albert Hertzog, then Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, said that TV would come to South Africa “over his dead body,” denouncing it as “a miniature bioscope (cinema) over which parents would have no control.” He argued that “South Africa would have to import films showing race mixing; and advertising would make (non-white) Africans dissatisfied with their lot.” Which is of course exactly how advertising work — regardless of your race. The new medium was then regarded as the “devil's own box, for disseminating Communism and immorality.” *

We were literally in the dark, at the very tip of the so-called “dark continent.”

For me, the first prick of conscience, and spark of knowledge, were the 1976 riots that happened about 10 miles from our house.

The censored images flashed on our newly allowed television screens. Burning buildings, large crowds of young people chanting and dancing, and the famous image of Hector Pieterse's body being carried away by two young girls after the police fired on the crowd.

Pieterse was my age at the time of his killing, 13, with a lifetime ahead of him.

During this tumult, Mandela was in Robben Island prison, in the twelfth year of his long sentence. It would be another 15 years before he was released.

"I went for a long holiday for 27 years," Nelson Mandela once said of his years in prison.

Robben Island was within sight of the "mother city" of Cape Town, and the flat-topped mountain it backed up against. It acquired its name from the seals that once lived there in great numbers— robben being the Dutch word for seal. It's been a place of exile and isolation for three hundred years, both prison island and leper colony.

A warder's first words when Nelson Mandela and his ANC comrades arrived were: "This is the Island. This is where you will die."

The prisoners faced a harsh regime in a new cell block specially constructed for political prisoners. Each had a single cell some seven foot square around a concrete courtyard, with a slop bucket.

They crushed stones with a hammer to make gravel and were later made to work in a blindingly bright quarry digging out limestone. This did permanent damage to Mandela's eyes, and he could barely stand flashbulbs after that — a liability for someone who would be so often photographed. *

Prisoner 46664, as he was known — the 466th prisoner to arrive in 1964 - would be the first to protest over ill-treatment. For his efforts he would often be placed in solitary.

"In those early years, isolation became a habit. We were routinely charged for the smallest infractions and sentenced to isolation," he wrote in his autobiography, The Long Walk to Freedom. "The authorities believed that isolation was the cure for our defiance and rebelliousness."

"I found solitary confinement the most forbidding aspect of prison life. There was no end and no beginning; there is only one's own mind, which can begin to play tricks."

Still, his determination and his ever-present wit never faltered.

His lawyer George Bizos saw it at first hand.

"On my first visit to Robben Island he was brought to the consulting room by no less than eight warders, two in front, two on each side and two at the back... [He was] in shorts and without socks. And the thing that was odd about it is that, unlike any other prisoner I have ever seen, he was setting the pace at which this group was coming towards the consulting room. And then with all gravitas, he said 'You know, George, this place really has made me forget my manners. I haven't introduced you to my guard of honor.'"

After the first few months on the island, his life settled into a pattern, something unavoidable in such tight confines over such a long time.

"Prison life is about routine: each day like the one before; each week like the one before it, so that the months and years blend into each other," Mandela wrote.

Over time, and depending on who was running the prison, so-called privileges would be granted. Prisoners could apply for permission to study. Although some subjects, such as politics and military history, were forbidden, Robben Island became known as a "university behind bars".

ANC and Communist Party stalwart Mac Maharaj remembers a study dispute as a cause of a falling out with Nelson Mandela.

"He was urging us to study Afrikaans and I was saying no way — this is the language of the damn oppressor. He persuaded me by saying, ' Mac, we are in for a protracted war. You can't dream of ambushing the enemy if you can't understand the general commanding the forces. You have to read their literature and poetry, you have to understand their culture so that you get into the mind of the general.'

"Here he was showing right at the outset, this focus of thinking of the other side, understanding them, anticipating them and so at the end of the day understanding how to accommodate them."

While imprisoned Mandela taught himself to speak Afrikaans and learned all he could about Afrikaner history. He was able to chat with his guards in their own language, using his unfailing charm and sharp intelligence to reason with them, and try to understand the way they thought. This so alarmed the prison authorities, they replaced the guards around Mandela often, lest they become too lenient with their prisoner.

Mandela later said "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."

Despite this relationship with the warders, Mandela's 27 years in prison were marked by great hardship. The winter nights were freezing, the summer days scorching, the food generally awful, and the labor back-breaking.

Mandela had to sleep on a thin mat on a stone floor, with one rough blanket, in his cramped, drafty cell, for most of his time on Robben Island. For many years, his wife was allowed only rare visits, and his children none.

During Mandela's time on Robben Island, a typical day looked like this: 05:30: Get up and clean up the cell. 06:00: Breakfast - corn porridge and corn coffee. 07:00-11:00: Work at the

limestone quarry. 14:30: Dinner - every second day, old meat is on the table. 15:00-06:00 the next day: Back to the cell — study and sleep.

My typical day as teenager in Johannesburg was quite different, though it often felt like a confinement of the spirit. The sort of confinement dreamy teenage boys in the suburbs often feel. The chafing of rules, the strictures applied, the lack of excitement, the dull routine of highly regulated schools, the frequent corporal punishment. *

The weeks were spent on school work and sport, mostly rugby and track. At night we listened to the radio and read. We played outside whenever we could — climbing trees, building soap box cars, riding our bicycles to the swimming holes and corner cafes.

Sundays we went to church. For Sunday lunch we always had leg of lamb, with sides of green beans and potatoes. My parents had a nap after, while my brother and I sat around the house, sulking and bored.

I should have complained about the food, but I never did.

There was no sport on Sundays, no movies, and even television showed either religious programs or nature documentaries.

Twice a week I'd go to the local community center to box — something my father believed was preparation for life's hard knocks — and he was not wrong. My trainers were two Irishmen with red-tinged eyes and crooked noses. They were real boxing classicists, who would not let me throw a hook in the first two years of training. This shaped me into the terror, known as the "Silver Assassin," that I soon became in the local flyweight division.

Although I didn't know it at the time, I was probably a better boxer than Mandela - maybe the only area in which I could best him.

Although Mandela never reached the lofty standards of the Silver Assassin, he was a useful amateur, and traded a few punches with Muhammad Ali. He also owned a world championship belt given to him Sugar Ray Leonard, who along with Ali, is probably my greatest boxing idol. *

Of his own boxing ability Mandela said:

“Although I had boxed a bit at Fort Hare, it was not until I had lived in Johannesburg that I took up the sport in earnest. I was never an outstanding boxer. I was in the heavyweight division, and I had neither enough power to compensate for my lack of speed, nor enough speed to make up for my lack of power.”

From 1967 onwards, prison conditions improved in Robben Island; black prisoners were given trousers rather than shorts, games were allowed, and the food got better.

In 1969, an escape plan for Mandela was developed by Gordon Bruce, a British left-winger, who had befriended Mandela.

Some details of this audacious plan: in one version, a senior prison officer would be bribed to lace two warders' coffee with sedatives, and then the same officer would help Mandela walk out of jail dressed in a warder's uniform. Bruce himself would wait offshore in a speedboat that would race Mandela, now disguised as a scuba diver, to the mainland, and then he'd ferry him to an airstrip where famous British aviator Sheila Scott would wait in a small plane, to fly him out of the country. (In another interesting twist, this plan was apparently bankrolled by John Lennon.)

But the plan was abandoned after the conspiracy was infiltrated by an agent of the South African Bureau of State Security, who hoped to see Mandela shot during the escape.

By 1975, Mandela had become a Class A prisoner, which allowed him more visits and letters. He also began his now-famous autobiography, which was smuggled to London, but not published at the time; prison authorities discovered several pages, and his study privileges were revoked

for four years. He devoted his spare time to gardening and reading, until he was allowed to resume his legal studies in 1980.

In the final prison years, the government treated Mandela more like an honored guest than a prisoner, in preparation for his release in 1990.

Prison officials smuggled him out for secret talks with two South African presidents. He met with government ministers at their homes, and they came to visit him when he was treated at a whites-only hospital near Cape Town.

In the last of the three prisons where he was held, Mandela lived in a cottage with a swimming pool in the backyard, and a glorious view of the nearby mountains

He had a personal cook, a white prison official who scoffed at Mandela's choice of cheap, semi-sweet wines and insisted on bringing more expensive, dry whites for the frequent family, friends and political colleagues who now often joined Mandela for lunch.

My own political evolution started in earnest only when I was called-up for two years of compulsory National Service - something I could have had deferred, because of a university pass, but chose to pursue, not for ideological reason, or a belief in the rightness of the cause — but because I had read too many Hemingway novels, and studied the history of brave ancestors from the Boer War. But mostly I wanted to escape the doldrums of the suburbs and have a grand adventure.

My efforts on the track and in the boxing ring meant I was fit and well-prepared for the physical demands of training. And I quickly figured out becoming an officer would spare me the more unpalatable applications of military discipline, such as the endless parades, the vicious corporals, and the specter of detention barracks.

After three months of basic training, I was selected for Officer School, and trained in reconnaissance and intelligence, which suited me, given that it assured I'd be left to my own devices — working in small teams in enemy territory, trying to stay out of sight.

South Africa had waged brutal guerrilla war with its neighbors for 30 years. This war was losing support even amongst white South Africans, because of high casualty rates among young white men.

The futility, the violence, and the profound racism of the war, changed something in me. And the aftermath of one landmine blast haunted me. It happened during a cross-border raid. Two anti-tank mines blew through the diesel fuel tank of a personnel carrier, engulfing the men inside in flames. None survived. We found them burnt beyond recognition.

By the time I was out of service and at university, my mind was opened to the possibilities of new, even radical, ideas — which led to my joining the anti-Apartheid struggle, in the late eighties, at the height of the unrest that would finally make Apartheid untenable.

I was committed to social justice and equality, but I was also drawn to the fight, the secrecy, the all-night parties and the tumultuous love affairs that are an intricate, and compelling, part of student politics.

I was often harassed, occasionally detained, but usually quickly released.

Security policemen, often in paternalistic and concerned tones, spent a lot of time trying to understand why someone from a good Afrikaner family wanted to end a system that benefitted my tribe so handsomely.

With the intensified struggle in the mid-eighties, a state of emergency was declared, followed by a brutal police crackdown on unrest. This quickly escalated into even more violence, with

the ANC committing 231 attacks in 1986 and 235 in 1987. The government started using the army as well as police to quell the resistance, and provided covert support for vigilante groups, death squads and the Zulu nationalist movement Inkatha, which was engaged in an increasingly violent struggle with the ANC.

When this happened I made a final break with the army, to which my National Service committed me to twelve more years of active duty, of a few months a year.

I became a conscientious objector, not wishing to fight against my fellow citizens.

I also became a member of the executive of the End Conscription Campaign - an organization that aimed to end the conscription of young white men into the armed forces.

The punishment for objecting was 6 years in prison — but it was seldom enforced, likely because that would undermine support from the white minority.

For this act, my commanding officer never forgave me. I know it worried and dismayed my parents. My mother especially was always very proud when I wore my dress uniform to church. I held onto this dress uniform for years, hidden in the back of the closet. Now I have no idea where it is.

On the 10th of February 1990, in a startling move, South African President F.W. de Klerk announced that after 27 years in prison, Nelson Mandela would be released the following day.

I was at a friend's wedding in a seaside town near Cape Town, and we watched the announcement in the bar after the ceremony, transfixed and elated.

On the evening before his release, Nelson Mandela was taken to a secret meeting with F.W. de Klerk, who told Mandela that he would be a free man the next day, honoring a pledge he made a week earlier, though without setting the exact date.

Mandela was still caught off-guard.

"I deeply wanted to leave prison as soon as I could, but to do so on such short notice would not be wise," Mandela wrote later in his autobiography. "I thanked Mr. de Klerk, and then said, that at the risk of appearing ungrateful I would prefer to have a week's notice in order that my family and my organization could be prepared."

Startled, de Klerk excused himself to consult with his advisers. He returned minutes later, and insisted that Mandela would have to leave prison the next day, whether he liked it or not. Mandela relented, and the jailer and the jailed shared a glass of whiskey.

On the day of Mandela's release, my friends and I, especially those who were fellow-activists, were in a jubilant mood, and we followed the expectant crowds to the Grand Parade in Cape Town to wait for our hero. It was a hot day and the crowd of more than 60,000 crushed into the space in front of the City Hall.

De Klerk's insistence that Mandela be released at short notice created conditions for chaos. The Grand Parade turned into a heaving dance floor as people swayed and sang. But the long wait — as Mandela's motorcade was mobbed and delayed by throngs of supporters — turned the dancing to looting, stampeding and vandalism — which provoked a predictable, violent police response.

That provided one of my most vivid memories of the day. Looters had smashed the big display windows of a department store on the square, and started ripping clothes from the dummies. In response three white policemen raced around the corner, right behind us, and blasted away with shotguns.

I saw a young black man collapse under a hail of lead. I stepped forward, waving my arms furiously, to prevent more shots. The closest policeman pointed his shotgun at me for a few agonizing seconds, then winked, and walked away.

At least two were reported dead and hundreds more were injured on that day. It wasn't until Mandela appeared on the steps of City Hall to address his supporters that the violence stopped.

His first words were:

“Comrades and fellow South Africans, I greet you all in the name of peace, democracy and freedom, I stand here before you not as a prophet, but as a humble servant of you the people.”

As *Guardian* journalist David Beresford remarked: “Mandela once said that some people are made by prison, others are broken by it. He was, of course, made by it.

Which made him a man worth waiting for.”

And I didn't have to wait much longer, for soon after, I met Mandela.

He was tall and gracious with a booming laugh. The first thing I noticed was how people leaned closer to him than was usually appropriate — as if warming to an imperceptible glow.

'So this was Nelson Mandela,' I thought, and then waded into the admiring cluster around him, reaching for his hand.

The crowd was well-heeled, and almost exclusively white. All invited by a liberal white farmer from the Stellenbosch area, who wanted to introduce them to a man they until recently would have considered, if not a terrorist, then a dangerous agitator.

We were comfortably ensconced in a restaurant with a sophisticated take on regional cuisine, and Mandela seemed totally at ease — even though he had been out of prison only a few short months, and I imagine that experience was quite the opposite of the stiff white table cloths and circle of beaming, candle-lit faces.

He grabbed my hand firmly and asked my name. I felt the flush of reverence inspired by his full attention. His eyes were alive with feeling, flickering with mirth. "Erasmus, your name is famous. You must be a philosopher. So good to meet such a clever man," he said. I was dumbstruck, but returned his grip vigorously.

I was at the dinner, because after Mandela's release I was back at university pursuing a postgraduate degree in journalism. Through my protest activities, I befriended the son of the liberal farmer who invited Mandela to the town — and I managed to parley this friendship into a coveted invitation to the dinner.

On the night I wore my only jacket, an old school tie, and slicked back my long, unruly hair as best I could. I drove my rusty, noisy Beetle to the good side of town, and parked behind the trees, far away from the luxury cars in the restaurant's well-lit parking lot.

After our first handshake I managed to get close to Mandela again during the dessert course. By then all the women had swarmed around him — raptly listening to his stories, and thrilled by his infectious laugh and impeccable manners.

But he noticed me, and motioned me over. "Erasmus – come and tell me how I win over young men like you." He listened intently to my youthful advice, but he of course, already knew. He had mastered the art of being human, by the simple act of recognizing the humanity in all of us.

I'll end with a quote by an American president who will remain nameless, though you might be able to guess his identity:

"There is a word in South Africa – Ubuntu – a word that captures Mandela's greatest gift: his recognition that we are all bound together in ways that are invisible to the eye;

that there is a oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others, and caring for those around us.

We can never know how much of this sense was innate in him, or how much was shaped in a dark and solitary cell. But we remember the gestures, large and small — introducing his jailers as honored guests at his inauguration; taking a pitch in a Springbok uniform; turning his family’s heartbreak into a call to confront HIV/AIDS — that revealed the depth of his empathy and his understanding. He not only embodied Ubuntu, he taught millions to find that truth within themselves.”

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Key Sources:

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3. "South Africa: The Other Vast Wasteland". TIME. 20 November 1964.
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6. McKendrick, Brian; Hoffmann, Wilman (1990). People and violence in South Africa. Oxford University Press.
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Additional:

On August 31 1970 Madiba wrote to his wife Winnie from Robben Island prison:

"How I long for amasi (traditional South African fermented milk), thick and sour! You know darling there is one respect in which I dwarf all my contemporaries or at least about which I can confidently claim to be second to none – healthy appetite."