

491 Days

Prisoner Number 1323/69

WINNIE MADIKIZELA-MANDELA

Foreword by Ahmed Kathrada

Ohio University Press Athens

LETTER FROM NELSON MANDELA
TO WINNIE MANDELA

August 31, 1970

Censor asked me to shorten the letter on the ground that it exceeded 500 words.

Dade Wethu,

Your note of July 2 was shown to me on Aug. 14 – 1 month and 12 days after you wrote it. It was the sweetest of all your letters, surpassing even the very first one of Dec. 20, '62. If there was ever a letter which I desperately wished to keep, read quietly over and over again in the privacy of my cell, it was that one. It was compensation for the precious things your arrest deprived me of – the Xmas, wedding anniversary and birthday cards – the little things about which you never fail to think. But I was told to read it on the spot and [it] was grabbed away as soon as I had reached the last line.

Brig. Aucamp attempted to justify this arbitrary procedure with the flimsy excuse that in the letter you gave his name for your address instead of your prison. He went on to explain that my letters to you were handled in exactly the same way, and that you were not allowed to keep them. When I pressed him for an explanation he was evasive. I realised there were important issues at stake which necessitate to the making of serious inroads on your right as an awaiting-trial prisoner to write and receive letters and a curtailment of my corresponding privilege. Our letters are subject to special censorship. The real truth is that the authorities do not want you to share the contents of the letters I write you with your colleagues there, and vice versa. To prevent this they resort to all means, fair or foul. It is possible that communications between us may be whittled down still further, at least for the duration of the trial. As you know, the privilege as far as my normal monthly letters to and from friends and relations practically disappeared with your arrest. I have been trying to communicate with Matlala since January last and with Nolusapho since November. On June 19 Brig. Aucamp explained that another department had instructed him not to forward these letters, adding at the same time that he was not in a position to give me reasons for these instructions, but that such instructions were not influenced by the content of the letters. This revelation solved the riddle of the disappearance of most of the letters I wrote over the past 15 months. The matter entails even more serious implications. I should

like to be in the position where I can always rely on what officials tell me, but I'm finding it increasingly difficult to square up wishes with experience. Twice during July and early this month, I was informed that your letter had not arrived. I have now established that the letter was actually here when I was being given assurances to the contrary. I was also disgusted to hear from you that Marsh had been applying for a permit to see me and that he had been informed by the prisons department that there were long queues of visitors for me. Nothing could be further from the truth. I had only three visits during the past 8 months – in January, April and June. It is easy to understand why they are reluctant to allow Marsh to come down. He is in touch with you and a visit from him would not suit Liebenberg and the S.B.²²⁰ who wish to cut me off from you. I have had numerous experiences of this nature and each one leaves me sad and disappointed.

Incidentally, I was told that you and your colleagues now enjoy better privileges. I asked for more details and was shocked to learn that even after you had been formally charged you were not allowed a change of clothing and food from outside. How can any honest and intelligent person justify this barbarism? To the best of my knowledge and belief, as an awaiting-trial prisoner you are entitled to clean garments and to food from relations and friends. These are not privileges but legal rights. The tragedy of the whole situation is the blissful ignorance on the part of the officials concerned of the implications of the offensive utterances they often make. I deeply resent to be told of so-called concessions which are invariably made so late in the day and which are so trivial as to cause more harm and bitterness than gratitude and appreciation.

But your marvellous letter! There are moments in the life of every couple that are not easily forgotten and the occasions you describe so feelingly, I recall with equal affection and I always think of them. The information on Zeni and Zindzi's manners and tastes interested me much. I should like to know more about them, and it will be a real joy for me when I break through and succeed in establishing contact with them. By the way, the other day I was reading the terrific telegram you sent 2 years ago on the occasion of my 50th birthday. It dawned on me that it will not be long before I become elder, the highest title which even ordinary men acquire by virtue of advanced age. Then it will be quite appropriate for me to purchase some measure of corpulence to bloat my dignity and give due weight to what I say. If obesity were my dream, I would have all the means of fulfilment at my disposal. To be able to swing my own pot belly all I need to do is take things easy and pack my wretched stomach

220. Security Branch of the South African Police.

with carbohydrates – mealie-pap at sunrise, mealies for lunch and mealie-pap at supper. But the trouble is your letters. They form a solid wall between me and senility. After reading one of them the natural processes seem reversed, and I am never certain whether I'm ageing or rejuvenating. The latter feeling appears dominant.

How I long for Amasi,²²¹ 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 – a healthy appetite. There was a time when I could polish off enormous quantities of food in any order. I could start with pudding backwards and feel just as happy and contented at the end of it all. I well remember the painful remarks of a housewife who was also medical student at the time. She and hubby had invited me for dinner one day. I had built quite some formidable reputation as a meat eater. After watching my performance for some time as the heavily laden dishes on the table rapidly vanished one after the other, and I concentrating more especially on the meat, she decided to share with me the benefit of her immense learning. Bluntly she told me I would die of coronary thrombosis probably in my early forties. I was foolish enough to challenge her statement, and tried to support my argument with the sweeping declaration that thrombosis was unknown amongst our forefathers in spite of the fact that they were great meat-eaters; whereupon she promptly produced a huge textbook out of which she read out emphatically and deliberately the relevant passage. It was a galling experience. I almost immediately felt a million pains in the region of my heart. That tip, raw and tactless as I was, made me cautious, and although I still relished meat I reduced its consumption. But my appetite was still as sharp as ever and I did not lose my colours as hero in this field. I long for the wonderful meals you could prepare so carefully at home, putting your whole heart into it – fresh homemade bread, macaroni with mince meat, egg and cheese, ox tongue and tail; chops; liver and steak, porridge and honey with the high flavour that was always mixed with your dishes. Above all I long for Amasi – the food for which I loved to sharpen my teeth and to stretch out my tummy, the act that I really enjoyed, that went straight into my blood and into my heart and that produced perfect contentment. A human being, whatever his colour may be, whether he lives under a regime of Christians, Pharisees, hypocrites, heathens, or those who chose to flirt openly with the devil, ought never to be compelled toward the taking of meals as a duty. This is likely to be the case if the product is poor, monotonous, badly prepared and tasteless. If I can only have Amasi. You remember how we

221. Traditional drink of sour milk.

carried a calabash [on our] way back from Mbongweni. What a lovely trip, Mhlope! I'm sure we will do it again.

In the meantime I know that your courage will rise with danger and that you'll fight with all your might. Fight, as your gallant forefathers did from the Zuurveld to Ngwavuma, from Nxuba Ntaba Busuku, the Lulu to the land of Nyabela. Fight as worthy heirs of Mafukuzela, Seme, Makgatho, Rubusana and the constellation of heroes that have defended the birthright of our people. This Sept. 26 will be your second birthday in jail. May the next one find you free and happy. My warmest congrats! I think of you always, Ngutyana. I will join battle and do my best when counsel calls.

A million kisses and tons and tons of love to you.

Devotedly
Dalibunga

LETTER FROM NELSON MANDELA
TO HIS SON MAKGATHO MANDELA

August 31, 1970

Heit my Bla,

I don't know whether I should address you as son, mninawa or, as we would say in the lingo, my (pronounced meyi) sweet brigade. The bond of parent and child that has kept us together for 2 decades gradually weakens as you grow full size, whilst that of friendship becomes stronger and deeper. I'm beginning to see in you an intimate colleague with whom I can discuss hopes and despairs, setbacks and achievements, one with whom I can chat as an equal; to whom I can open my heart. It is to such a friend that I now write; to you Lewanika, my bla, as the guys up on the Rand would put it. To you I can write freely and forget about formal or elevated language.

You must be frightfully busy; I have not heard from you these past 7 months. I know you'll write as soon as you can. I should have liked to leave you alone, but I long for you and am anxious to hear how you are getting on. What is even more important is that this September 8th you will turn 20 and that alone is sufficient excuse for me to intrude. Naturally, it will not be possible for me or Mummy to be at home to organise a birthday party, give you our warmest love and special wishes, to sit round the family table and feast, sing merrily, tell stories and rejoice with you with a full heart. But we will be thinking of you. The family is very proud of you and watches your progress with real interest. May good things come to you, fortune and the best of health and achievement. I hope you now received the card that contains our greetings and good wishes.

I have been reminiscing a great deal these days and events from the past in which you prominently featured come to mind – active moments in the gymnasium with Jerry Moloï, Simon Tshabalala (He was brutally tortured by the Security Police in 1964 resulting in the breaking down of his health.), Joe Motsepe, Joe Mokotedi, Eric Ntsele, Freddie Ngidi, Selby Msimang and other wonderful boys; the pennies we spent to provide you with the pleasure of swimming at the Huddlestone Pool, accompanying Nyanya to see the presentation of King Kong at Milner Park, the amount of fish you consumed as we travelled together from Qamata to Johannesburg and legions of other episodes. I remember all these as if they occurred only the other day. Those were the days when you lived a happy life free of problems and fenced from all hardships and insecurity by parental love. You did not work, grub was galore,

clothing was plentiful and you slept good. But some of your playmates those days roamed around completely naked and dirty because their parents were too poor to dress them and to keep them clean. Often you brought them home and gave them food. Sometimes you went away with double the amount of swimming fees to help a needy friend. Perhaps then you acted purely out of a child's affection for a friend, and not because you had become consciously aware of the extremes of wealth and poverty that characterised our social life. I hope you're still as keen today to help those who are hard-hit by want as you were then. It's a good thing to help a friend whenever you can; but individual acts of hospitality are not the answer. Those who want to wipe out poverty from the face of the earth must use other weapons, weapons other than kindness. There are millions of poverty-stricken and illiterate people, masses of unemployed people, men and women who are grossly underpaid, who live in dirty and overcrowded dwellings, who feed mainly on dikgobe, papa, mngusho, motoho and marhewu, whose children never drink milk and who are exposed to all sorts of disease.

This is not a problem that can be handled by individual acts of hospitality. The man who attempted to use his own possessions to help all the needy would be permanently ruined and in due course himself live on alms. Experience shows that this problem can be effectively tackled only by a disciplined body of persons, who are inspired by the same ideas and united in a common cause. Most of us never had the opportunities which are enjoyed by the present youth – a wide variety of progressive literature dealing with man's struggle to master nature's physical resources; the immortal classics that stress, on the one hand, the dependence of human beings upon one another, and on the other hand, the social conflicts that flow from distinctive interests, that split society into various strata. I was almost 35 when I began reading works of this nature systematically, and what a difference it brought to my own outlook! You appear more militant and a better democrat than I was at your age and hope you'll be selective in your readings. We shall discuss the letter more fully on your next visit. In the meantime, I hope you'll enjoy 'And Quiet Flows the Don' by Sholokhov. Did Tellie get her letter of March 6, 1970? I also wrote [to] you [on] 31.3.70 and to Maki on 1.5.70. Once again, hearty congrats on your 20th birthday. Keep den 8115 safe and clean.

Affectionately,
Tata

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Ohio University Press title.

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