**Nelson Mandela : an excerpt from *Long Walk To Freedom***

**Part Eight – ROBBEN ISLAND: THE DARK YEARS**

AT MIDNIGHT, I was awake and staring at the ceiling--images from the trial were still rattling around in my head--when I heard steps coming down the hallway. I was locked in my own cell, away from the others. There was a knock at my door and I could see Colonel Aucamp's face at the bars. "Mandela," he said in a husky whisper, "are you awake?"   
  
I told him I was. "You are a lucky man," he said. "We are taking you to a place where you will have your freedom. You will be able to move around; you'll see the ocean and the sky, not just gray walls."   
  
He intended no sarcasm, but I well knew that the place he was referring to would not afford me the freedom I longed for. He then remarked rather cryptically, "As long as you don't make trouble, you'll get everything you want."   
  
Aucamp then woke the others, all of whom were in a single cell, ordering them to pack their things. Fifteen minutes later we were making our way through the iron labyrinth of Pretoria Local, with its endless series of clanging metal doors echoing in our ears.   
  
Once outside, the seven of us--Walter, Raymond, Govan, Kathy, Andrew, Elias, and myself--were handcuffed and piled into the back of a police van. It was well after midnight, but none of us was tired, and the atmosphere was not at all somber. We sat on the dusty floor, singing and chanting, reliving the final moments of the trial. The warders provided us with sandwiches and cold drinks and Lieutenant Van Wyck was perched in the back with us. He was a pleasant fellow, and during a lull in the singing, he offered his unsolicited opinion on our future. "Well," he said, "you chaps won't be in prison long. The demand for your release is too strong. In a year or two, you will get out and you will return as national heroes. Crowds will cheer you, everyone will want to be your friend, women will want you. Ag, you fellows have it made." We listened without comment, but I confess his speech cheered me considerably. Unfortunately, his prediction turned out to be off by nearly three decades.   
  
We were departing quietly, secretly, under a heavy police escort, in the middle of the night, and in less than half an hour we found ourselves at a small military airport outside the city. We were hustled onto a Dakota, a large military transport plane that had seen better days. There was no heat, and we shivered in the belly of the plane. Some of the others had never flown before and they seemed more anxious about our voyage than our destination; bumping up and down in a plane at fifteen thousand feet seemed far more perilous than being locked in a cell behind high walls.   
  
After about an hour in the air, dawn lightened the terrain below. The plane had portholes, and as soon as we could see in the half-light, my comrades pressed their faces to the glass. We flew southeast, over the dry, flat plains of the Orange Free State and the green and mountainous Cape peninsula. I, too, craned to see out the portholes, examining the scenery not as a touristbut as a strategist, looking for areas  where a guerrilla army might hide itself.   
  
There had been a running argument since the formation of MK as to whether the countryside of South Africa could support a guerrilla army. Most of the High Command thought that it could not. When we flew over a wooded, mountainous area called Matroosberg in the Cape, I yelled to my colleagues that here was terrain where we could fight. The men became excited and craned to get a better look, and indeed, the heavily forested area appeared as though it could shelter a nascent guerrilla force.   
  
Minutes later we approached the outskirts of Cape Town. Soon, we could see the little matchbox houses of the Cape Flats, the gleaming towers of downtown, and the horizontal top of Table Mountain. Then, out in Table Bay, in the dark blue waters of the Atlantic, we could make out the misty outline of Robben Island.   
  
We landed on a military airstrip on one end of the island. It was a grim, overcast day, and when I stepped out of the plane, the cold winter wind whipped through our thin prison uniforms. We were met by guards with automatic weapons; the atmosphere was tense but quiet, unlike the boisterous reception I had received on my arrival on the island two years before.   
  
We were driven to the old jail, an isolated stone building, where we were ordered to strip while standing outside. One of the ritual indignities of prison life is that when you are transferred from one prison to another, the first thing that happens is that you change from the garb of the old prison to that of the new. When we were undressed, we were thrown the plain khaki uniforms of Robben Island.   
  
Apartheid's regulations extended even to clothing. All of us, except Kathy, received short trousers, an insubstantial jersey, and a canvas jacket. Kathy, the one Indian among us, was given long trousers. Normally Africans would receive sandals made from car tires, but in this instance we were given shoes. Kathy, alone, received socks. Short trousers for Africans were meant to remind us that we were "boys." I put on the short trousers that day, but I vowed that I would not put up with them for long.   
  
The warders pointed with their guns where they wanted us to go, and barked their orders in simple one-word commands: "Move!" "Silence!" "Halt!" They did not threaten us in the swaggering way that I recalled from my previous stay, and betrayed no emotion.   
  
The old jail was only temporary quarters for us. The authorities were in the process of finishing an entirely separate maximum-security structure for political prisoners. While there, we were not permitted to go outside or have any contact with other prisoners.   
  
The fourth morning we were handcuffed and taken in a covered truck to a prison within a prison. This new structure was a one-story rectangular stone fortress with a flat cement courtyard in the center, about one hundred feet by thirty feet. It had cells on three of the four sides. The fourth side was a twenty-foot-high wall with a cat walk patrolled by guards with German shepherds.   
  
The three lines of cells were known as sections A, B, and C, and we were put in section B, on the easternmost side of the quadrangle. We were each given individual cells on either side of a long corridor, with half the cells facing the courtyard. There were about thirty cells in all. The total number of prisoners in the single cells was usually about twenty-four. Each cell had one window, about a foot square, covered with iron bars. The cell had two doors: a metal gate or grille with iron bars on the inside and a thick wooden door outside of that. During the day, only the grille was locked; at night, the wooden door was locked as well.   
  
The cells had been constructed hurriedly, and the walls were perpetually damp. Many mornings, a small pool of water would have formed on the cold floor overnight. When I raised this with the commanding officer, he told me our bodies would absorb the moisture. We were each issued three blankets so flimsy and worn they were practically transparent. Our bedding consisted of a single sisal, or straw, mat. Later we were given a felt mat, and one placed the felt mat on top of the sisal one to provide some softness. At that time of year, the cells were so cold and the blankets provided so little warmth that we always slept fully dressed.   
  
I was assigned a cell at the head of the corridor. It overlooked the courtyard and had a small eye-level window. I could walk the length of my cell in three paces. When I lay down, I could feel the wall with my feet and my head grazed the concrete at the other side. The width was about six feet, and the walls were at least two feet thick. Each cell had a white card posted outside of it with our name and our prison service number. Mine read, "N Mandela 466/64," which meant I was the 466th prisoner admitted to the island in 1964. I was forty-six years old, a political prisoner with a life sentence, and that small cramped space was to be my home for I knew not how long.   
  
We were immediately joined by a number of prisoners who had been held in the general section of the prison, a squat brick building not far from Section B. The general prison, known as sections F and G, contained about a thousand mostly common-law prisoners. As many as a quarter of them were political prisoners, and a handful of those men were put with us in Section B. We were isolated from the general prisoners for two reasons: we were considered risky from a security perspective, but even more dangerous from a political standpoint. The authorities were concerned we might "infect" the other prisoners with our political views.   
  
Among the men put with us was George Peake, one of the founders of the South African Coloured People's Organization, a Treason Trialist, and most recently a member of the Cape Town City Council. He had been sentenced for planting explosives outside a Cape Town prison. Dennis Brutus, another Coloured political activist, was a poet and writer from Port Elizabeth imprisoned for violating his bans. We were also joined by Billy Nair, a longtime member of the Natal Indian Congress, sentenced for sabotage as a member of Umkhonto we Sizwe.   
  
Within a few days we had more company, including Neville Alexander, a prominent Coloured intellectual and member of the Non-European Unity Movement, who had formed a tiny radical offshoot called the Yu Chi Chan Club in Cape Town which studied guerrilla warfare. Neville had a B.A. from the University of Cape Town and a doctorate in German literature from Tubingen University in Germany. Along with Neville, there was Fikile Bam, a law graduate of the University of Cape Town and another member of the Yu Chi Chan Club; and Zephania Mothopeng, a member of the PAC National Executive. Zeph had been a teacher in Orlando, and was a staunch opponent of Bantu Education, and one of the most level-headed of the PAC's leaders. Three aged peasants from the Transkei, sentenced for plotting to assassinate K. D. Matanzima, now the chief minister of the "self-governing" Transkei, were also imprisoned with us.   
  
This became our core group of about twenty prisoners. Some I knew, some I had heard of, while others I did not know at all. Normally, in prison, one of the few festive times is seeing old friends and new faces, but the atmosphere in those first few weeks was so oppressive we were not even able to greet each other. We had as many guards as prisoners, and they enforced every regulation with threats and intimidation.   
  
That first week we began the work that would occupy us for the next few months. Each morning, a load of stones about the size of volleyballs was dumped by the entrance to the courtyard. Using wheelbarrows, we moved the stones to the center of the yard. We were given either four-pound hammers or fourteen-pound hammers for the larger stones. Our job was to crush the stones into gravel. We were divided into four rows, about a yard-and-a-half apart, and sat cross-legged on the ground. We were each given a thick rubber ring, made from tires, in which to place the stones. The ring was meant to catch flying chips of stone, but hardly ever did so. We wore makeshift wire masks to protect our eyes.   
  
Warders walked among us to enforce the silence. During those first few weeks, warders from other sections and even other prisons came to stare at us as if we were a collection of rare caged animals. The work was tedious and difficult; it was not strenuous enough to keep us warm but it was demanding enough to make all our muscles ache.   
  
June and July were the bleakest months on Robben Island. Winter was in the air, and the rains were just beginning. It never seemed to go above forty degrees Fahrenheit. Even in the sun, I shivered in my light khaki shirt. It was then that I first understood the clich;aae of feeling the cold in one's bones. At noon we would break for lunch. That first week all we were given was soup, which stank horribly. In the afternoon, we were permitted to exercise for half an hour under strict supervision. We walked briskly around the courtyard in single file.   
  
On one of our first days pounding rocks, a warder commanded Kathy to take a wheelbarrow filled with gravel to the truck parked by the entrance. Kathy was a slender fellow unused to hard physical labor. He could not budge the wheelbarrow. The warders yelled: "Laat daardie kruiwa loop!" (Let that wheelbarrow move!) As Kathy managed to nudge it forward, the wheelbarrow looked as if it would tip over, and the warders began to laugh. Kathy, I could see, was determined not to give them cause for mirth. I knew how to maneuver the wheelbarrows, and I jumped up to help him. Before being ordered to sit down, I managed to tell Kathy to wheel it slowly, that it was a matter of balance not strength. He nodded and then carefully moved the wheelbarrow across the courtyard. The warders stopped smiling.   
  
The next morning, the authorities placed an enormous bucket in the courtyard and announced that it had to be half full by the end of the week. We worked hard and succeeded. The following week, the warder in charge announced that we must now fill the bucket three-quarters of the way. We worked with great diligence and succeeded. The next week we were ordered to fill the bucket to the top. We knew we could not tolerate this much longer, but said nothing. We even managed to fill the bucket all the way, but the warders had provoked us. In stolen whispers we resolved on a policy: no quotas. The next week we initiated our first go-slow strike on the island: we would work at less than half the speed we had before to protest the excessive and unfair demands. The guards immediately saw this and threatened us, but we would not increase our pace, and we continued this go-slow strategy for as long as we worked in the courtyard.   
  
Robben Island had changed since I had been there for a fortnight's stay in 1962. In 1962, there were few prisoners; the place seemed more like an experiment than a full-fledged prison. Two years later, Robben Island was without question the harshest, most iron-fisted outpost in the South African penal system. It was a hardship station not only for the prisoners but for the prison staff. Gone were the Coloured warders who had supplied cigarettes and sympathy. The warders were white and overwhelmingly Afrikaans-speaking, and they demanded a master-servant relationship. They ordered us to call them "baas," which we refused. The racial divide on Robben Island was absolute: there were no black warders, and no white prisoners.   
  
Moving from one prison to another always requires a period of adjustment. But journeying to Robben Island was like going to another country. Its isolation made it not simply another prison, but a world of its own, far removed from the one we had come from. The high spirits with which we left Pretoria had been snuffed out by its stern atmosphere; we were face to face with the realization that our life would be unredeemably grim. In Pretoria, we felt connected to our supporters and our families; on the island, we felt cut off, and indeed we were. We had the consolation of being with each other, but that was the only consolation. My dismay was quickly replaced by a sense that a new and different fight had begun.  
  
From the first day, I had protested about being forced to wear short trousers. I demanded to see the head of the prison and made a list of complaints. The warders ignored my protests, but by the end of the second week, I found a pair of old khaki trousers unceremoniously dumped on the floor of my cell. No pin-striped three-piece suit has ever pleased me as much. But before putting them on I checked to see if my comrades had been issued trousers as well.   
  
They had not, and I told the warder to take them back. I insisted that all African prisoners must have long trousers. The warder grumbled, "Mandela, you say you want long pants and then you don't want them when we give them to you." The warder balked at touching trousers worn by a black man, and finally the commanding officer himself came to my cell to pick them up. "Very well, Mandela," he said, "you are going to have the same clothing as everyone else." I replied that if he was willing to give me long trousers, why couldn't everyone else have them? He did not have an answer.