

## Detention

*The first thing you do when you get into a cell is to do a calendar, the very first day because you lose track of days when you are in solitary confinement because the light was on for 24 hours and it was the brightest light – they never switched it off. You didn't know when it was sunset or daybreak; they never switched off the lights and in my case I was held in the death cell with three doors.*

— WINNIE MADIKIZELA-MANDELA 2012

### A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A DETAINEE

In the dim grim dark walls with the electric light burning day and night, the difference between day and night or daybreak and dawn is hard to tell when you can't sleep and all you do is to doze off now and again whenever the mind decides to stop over functioning for a while.

The cell measures 15' x 5'<sup>12</sup> or is it? I've walked miles and miles in this cell, round and round, backwards and forwards in a desperate attempt to kill the empty long lonely minutes, hours, weeks, months which drag by at a snail's pace gnawing at the inner cores of my soul, corroding it, scarring it, battering it about, tearing it to pieces in the second bout round number two<sup>13</sup> of the Terrorism Act boxing match between the 22 and the Security Branch.

The trouble with this match is that it has a biased referee; it may go on for years. The referee wants my side to lose, and he goes out of his way to break my

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12. This is in feet. South Africa metricated between 1971–73. This would measure 4.5 x 1.5 metres.

13. The journal was started after Mrs Mandela and her co-accused were acquitted and immediately re-detained.

side. No rules and regulations have to be observed by his side whilst my boxers are forced at gunpoint to observe rules and regulations. The match has already had a bad start for someone; history will decide who of these two teams had this bad start. All I know is that both sides are determined to win the main match at whatever cost.

The first bell rings at 6am means it is time to get up, make my 'bed' and clean my cell. To make up my bed takes about five minutes for I have just two sisal mats, four blankets, the bitterly cold cement floor as my bed. I roll up the two mats, leaving about one foot of the mat underneath sticking out so that I can put my cold feet on this when I sit on the folded mats on top of which I put the neatly folded blanket to make my chair higher and a little more comfortable.

Both the blankets and the mats tell many tales each time I fold them up. Perhaps the mat underneath has the worst story to tell for about a quarter of this mat is full of blood, may be the blood all over this mat on top is the same but how did it come to appear to have been sprinkled all over the top mat? I wonder if it's the same blood which seems to have been scrubbed hurriedly off the wall, beneath the window and right at the corner which I have chosen for my bed. Whoever scrubbed it used a lot of [V]im, the hands must have been shaking badly or trembling for some reason, it's very untidily scrubbed.

I am next to the assault chamber. As long as I live I shall never forget the nightmares I have suffered as a result of the daily prisoners' piercing screams as the brutal corporal punishment is inflicted on them. As the cane lashes at them, sometimes a hose pipe, you feel it tearing at your own flesh mercilessly. It's hard to imagine women inflicting so much punishment. I have shed tears time without number quite unconsciously and often forget even to wipe them off. These hysterical screams pierce through my heart and injure my dignity so much. The hero of these assaults is barely 23 years old, very often the screaming voice appealing for mercy is that of a mother twice her age but of course she is white, a matron [at] that, this qualifies her for everything. The prisoner is at her mercy, life and all. She even bangs their heads against my cell wall in her fury. As the blood spurts from the gaping wounds she hits harder.

This matron has formidable assistants too in this business from what I hear through my cell window just above the assault chamber. They are Scantsu and Joyce Scantsu is also known as Maureen, she has recently been paroled to the Minister of Justice because of her 'exceptionally good conduct' which earned her ten months remission because once in 1968 she chased and caught an escaped female prisoner whom she assaulted mercilessly as part of her 'good conduct'. These 'assistants' receive prisoners on their arrival daily from court after the formalities of entering them into the huge reception book in the front

office where matron Wessels spends most of her time. There is so much change of staff you never know who is doing what at a time, where and when.

I have been in this prison for over a year but I only have a vague idea of sections which I have been transferred to one time or another. I am whisked away so fast that I have been unable to draw a sketch in my mind of this prison. I know the row of six cells and the high wall in front of the cells. My door faces west, the wall on the extreme right of my cell is built very high, it is made in the shape of an entrance to the church cathedral, it looks so odd and out of place in these surroundings. This wall must be very old or rather the prison must be old. It's full of cracks and looks like it will tumble down at the slightest earth tremor. Just where my cell ends there is a corrugated iron wall extending from the corner of my cell right up to the stone wall, almost enclosing the church-like porch – this is the assault chamber – on the other side of the corrugated iron wall. The distance between my cell door and high stone wall is 1½ yards.<sup>14</sup> On the extreme left where cell number 1 is occupied by Acc. No. 7<sup>15</sup> there is a big grille gate which is permanently locked shutting us off completely from the rest of the prison. The exercise yard in front of our six cells is therefore 5½ x 1½ yards.<sup>16</sup>

Monday morning sounds like the busiest day in this prison but to me it's just like any other day or even Sunday for that matter. In solitary confinement my daily routine is full of nothing. My cell inventory is highly limited too, it's as follows:

- (a) Two mats (sisal)
- (b) 4 blankets
- (c) 1 filthy plastic bottle in which is my drinking water
- (d) 1 'pon' (sanitary bucket)
- (e) 1 metal mug
- (f) Soap (blue and carbolic) the latter for my face
- (g) All my clothes

On my detention I was stripped of my suitcase, books, handbag, hangers, nails on the wall which were my wardrobe, tinned food. All my clothes were savagely thrown on the floor, scattered all over the black cell floor as if in anger. They were tramped on too, they are full of foot marks with the black floor polish. I have three blankets to fold in the morning, the fourth is my suitcase and

14. 1.37 metres.

15. Joyce Sikakane.

16. 5 x 1.37 metres.

pillow at night. The seams of all four blankets are broken. Someone must have wanted to keep her mind occupied just like I did at the Johannesburg Fort in September 1968 when I served four days on a suspended sentence. I served the four days in solitary confinement. I was given six blankets, soft and clean. At the end of the four days I had undone the seams of all six blankets and had derived a great deal of pleasure from this. I was really highly privileged then, new blankets are a rare luxury in prison, how lovely it was to pull that lovely white cotton.

I have a small rag, my floor cloth which I use for polishing my cell floor, this rag is too filthy to be touched with the hands before breakfast and in prison we do things the other way round. It's common practice to eat breakfast before you wash. I have therefore never knelt down to polish, besides I feel I should not kneel down when I am a convicted prisoner. My feet are already used to the simple process – just one foot on the cloth and reach the floor with the toes. It's an enjoyable warming up exercise especially in winter, you end up almost jiving as you change the feet quickly. The only trouble is that the cell floor is very rough, rugged in fact. My feet used to get caught in some of the holes but I can now polish with my eyes closed after such long practice.

My colour scheme has an ominous effect on me, it is so depressing. My corrugated iron ceiling, home for the fattest and noisiest rats in Pretoria was originally white. The upper wall light grey and the bottom dark grey, the door is painted light grey, the peep hole is surrounded with black paint. In the evening I welcome the company of rats up there in the ceiling, at least it's something to listen to as they dart all over the ceiling. I often wonder if they are playing or fighting, or perhaps they are as cold as I am and therefore trying to warm themselves up.

In this cell so many of my people have spent tortuous moments. The walls are an encyclopaedia on the different types of persons held in the cell at one time or another. I scrutinise the cell walls daily to discover some rude and angry insults hurled at some prison official on the grey paint and underneath the dark dull layers of years of paint. It's so easy to tell what state of mind each prisoner was in, this mute expression – writing on the wall is the only emotional catharsis for a prisoner in solitary confinement. Why, you may even guess the prisoner's personality from this writing.

Most of the visible handwriting is extremely vulgar, it is mostly directed to 'Ma Britz se ...' 'Mrs Britz's something ...' scrawled all over the door in deep letters. Then below the peep hole is 'Unkulu-nkulu ukhona ndizophuma mn-takwethu, ungandilahle dudu'. This is Zulu meaning 'God is there my dear, I will be released, don't reject me my love'. On the right side of the wall is a

drawing of house and flowers, the house has twelve steps on which stand an emaciated (picture) drawing of a woman clutching two sinewy armed children with extended tummies, a thin dog, the apparent father of the children who is the fattest of all this group is walking right ahead of his wife. The faces of all are grim. There is an arrow pointing at the woman with the worlds below 'Le nto ephalwa ngeminwe, le jna ethanda isnanga-nanga.' I have since discovered that 'isinanga-nanga' is the prisoners' lingo for homosexual practice. 'This dog. You love homosexuality, you allow fingers to be used on you.'

On the lift wall is a 1964 calendar drawn from beginning of April. Above it is 'my third wedding anniversary'. This is covered with layers of paint. In the same handwriting, 'I will not be terrorised', beneath this is, 'Mandela your wife is a sell out', then, 'my mother is'. I burst out laughing alone when I discovered this in October 1969, a day after I was charged in the Pretoria Supreme Court with twenty-one others. I recognised the handwriting as that of Zozo Mahlasela. I learned from Swanepoel, the head of my country's Gestapo during my interrogation of five days and six nights that this Zozo Mahlasela was sent to my in-laws in the Transkei to take certain letters when my husband was facing the Rivonia Trial. The Mahlaselas fled the country in 1965 or 1964 after long spells of detention under 90 days.

In a frail handwriting almost at the corner, hardly visible is 'Ndopho was here from the 22nd of May on account of Joyce Sikhakhane's sake'. In the same handwriting, 'Joyce was also here'. This is Nondwe Makahla's piece. She looked as frail as her handwriting when I saw her for the first time the day she stood in the dock and declared, 'I refused to give evidence against my people.' Ndopho is her nickname.

Scribbled almost hurriedly it seems or perhaps in deep meditation two feet<sup>17</sup> from the floor on the door is, 'Trust in the Lord thy God, in Him I shall be saved. Pray no matter how difficult times may be, never lose faith. He will answer your prayers.' This was Shanti Naidoo whom I still see vividly in my mind, her dark hollow eyes, her thin arms hanging loosely out of that pale yellowish sleeveless dress, her slanted head when she craned her neck in the dock with her misty eyes strained to hear Justice Bekker<sup>18</sup> on that memorable day when she declared in a firm voice which left no doubt, 'I will not be able to live with my conscience for the rest of my life if I give evidence.'

How I loved her always and even more now. My admiration and respect for her is doubled. Only a person who has been through solitary confinement

17. 0.6 metres.

18. The trial judge, Simon Bekker.

would realise the amount of sacrifice that lies behind those few words. To my horror hot tears rolled down my cheeks in the Supreme Court when Shanti said those words – I concealed my face from the press reporters by shielding behind accused No. 5's<sup>19</sup> shoulder, then No. 4.<sup>20</sup> The prospect of screaming headlines in the so called non-white papers, 'Mandela's wife weeps in court' was not a very palatable thought.

Scrawled untidily in cursive is 'October 17th I shall never forget' followed by a number of scratches. This is my sister's mark. Beneath this is a half hearted attempt to draw a calendar, she recorded just the first few days of each month. It's amazing she is just like that at home too. Nonyaniso Madikizela is as stubborn as a mule, has no continuity of purpose. If she cleans the house she will do all the rooms at the same time and leave them halfway if she feels like it. She can be exceptionally neat and just as exceptionally untidy. As a child only father managed to discipline her when she started with her tantrums. He had to give up placing her in boarding school because she packed her clothes and went home if she was fed up with the teachers. That's how she ended up in day schools whilst all the other children were in boarding schools. I can never get over the shock of seeing her as a submissive docile witness for the state in our trial with half her weight gone with the brutality of solitary confinement. At that moment I felt so bitter that time will never heal the bleeding wounds inflicted on me by this experience. From now henceforth I prefer my feelings left at that, perhaps this will justify my own attitude of tomorrow.

That reminds me that this is the third cell I've occupied since my arrival on the 12th of May 1969. On this date I was taken to a cell upstairs. At the entrance to the prison there is a big door on the left. From inside this door there are 39 shiny black steps which lead to the cells upstairs. There is one cell however separated by a locked grille/gate from the rest of the two long rows of cells with a long passage between. The door of this isolated cell faces north west, one small window faces east and another large one much higher facing west. The first three days I spent in this cell were the most wonderful days I've ever had in prison because of the small window which I reached with ease, opened it and gazed at the outside world from the moment I finished my breakfast.

My daily routine in all three cells was the same, full of nothing. After cleaning the cell I washed my mouth, face and hands into the sanitary buckets with the drinking water poured into the mug. There are no lavatories in all three cells so I had to use the same bucket for everything. I trained my stomach to

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19. Elliot Shabangu.

20. Jackson Mahluale.

work once a day, in the morning just after washing my mouth, face and hands because this 'pon' is changed once a day, in the morning only.

When the second bell rings at 7am the wardress opens the cell door. I take out my 'pon', bottle of drinking water, the mug and the Dixie.<sup>21</sup> These I put just outside my door where I find already waiting for me a bucket of washing water, a plate of porridge, a clean 'pon' rarely with a disinfectant. Once when my 'pon' was the enamel type with a flat lid, my dixie was put on top of the pon. The wardress then pours into my mug black sugarless coffee or just so little sugar it makes very little difference. The door is closed. The porridge is seldom cooked, often I am compelled to do without breakfast. This porridge is dished up about 40–50 yards<sup>22</sup> from my cell, by the time I take it it's already cold and covered with dust. No hygienic rules are observed in prison, the food is not covered. I also bring in drinking water.

I eat before I wash as I would like to eat warm food, then I wash and get dressed, I wash my teeth with toothpaste if I have it, into the washing bucket. I also wash my mug and spoon into the washing bucket. After about an hour the door is opened again for me to take my washing water out with the breakfast dixie. Sometimes I also go out at this time for exercise for about 15 to 20 minutes. I exercise by going round and round the exercise yard. When the wardress is not looking I knock on the doors of my colleagues to greet them. For months this was our only means of communication until we decided the Aucamp<sup>23</sup> lot could go to hell, we just shouted to each other at night and pretended we did not hear the Afrikaans-speaking wardress screaming at us to keep quiet. This is down at the punishment cells. The lunch is served at 11.30am. Our menu is as follows:

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21. A steel plate.

22. 36.5–45.7 metres.

23. Commissioner of Prisons Brigadier Aucamp.