

The Raised Fist, the Extended Hand

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IN 1952, shortly after he was made a Deputy President of the African National Congress and roughly a decade before he was first imprisoned by the apartheid regime, Nelson Mandela became a “banned person.” (Fifty-one of his peers in the ANC suffered this fate alongside him.) The phrase, which appears in his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, speaks well to the all-encompassing constraints imposed on political opponents of the ruling National Party—constraints that, Mandela would write, made day-to-day life a “walking prison.” As he saw it, the most insidious part of being banned was that “at a certain point one began to think that the oppressor was not without but within.” Just one example: he was forbidden by law from speaking to more than one person at a time. Meant to prevent political agitation and common cause, this statutory absurdity kept him from much more neutral occasions—his young son’s birthday party, for one.

This condition of Mandela’s walking imprisonment resonantly prefigures one of the main constraints of the literal imprisonment that would follow. After staring down the death penalty, he was sentenced with his fellow accused to a life term, on the grounds of sabotage, and ultimately served twenty-seven years before his release in 1990. For the duration, his tireless, determined contact with the world would take the form, almost exclusively, of the letter: one letter, one person at a time.

Again and again Mandela wrote to prison officials in protest of his treatment, always with the fresh expectation that sleeping consciences could be reasoned into action; he wrote to the children he was kept from seeing for so many years, reliably imploring them to keep at their studies; he wrote to his wife and comrade through the shock of her own imprisonment, almost never allowing—in his tall, neat script—any loss of heart; he wrote to the highest judges and political actors in the land, holding fast to his vision of a united South Africa but refusing to forswear the more violent means those in power had made necessary; he wrote to the proprietor of a restaurant he’d frequented as a free man; he wrote to the British nurse who’d thought to send him a ration of books; he wrote to Mike Tyson—maybe the only man on earth this genuflector-to-none would dignify, affectionately, with the name of “Champ.”

Just one extraordinary feature of the correspondence Mandela so faithfully sustained is that he was so often in the dark: he wrote without knowing if any

given letter would find its intended hearer. Often he had good cause to think one had gone astray. Each was prey, after all, to the caprices of the censors, whose indiscriminate eyes—and of *this* he could be sure—were on everything. He was forced to guard himself even in that precarious moment when his wife, Winnie Mandela, faced her own imprisonment for political agitation: “My sense of devotion to you precludes me from saying more in public than I have already done in this note, which must pass through many hands.”

Those hands did not do subtle work, commanding the wholesale rewriting of outgoing letters and blacking out swaths of incoming ones. Of his wife, Mandela would protest to the Commissioner of Prisons, “She makes a conscious effort to confine herself to family affairs, yet hardly a single one of her letters escapes mutilation.” The word was apt: the censors had begun to take to his text with razors in hand. Writing to her, he could only look forward to the day when “we will have the privacy which will enable us to share...tender thoughts.” When he closes by saying that “it has been possible to write this letter by kind permission of Brig. Aucamp,” that man may as well be his addressee; the show of gratitude functions as a savvy, charged acknowledgement of the eavesdroppers’ presence, calling them out from where they are. “I am sure,” Mandela continues, “he will be anxious to help you should you desire to reply.”

If his letters occupied a counterintuitively public space, the striking thing is not how often Mandela must speak as the tactfully public man but how often he refuses to refrain from personal confidences or soften the expression of political convictions. He did not simply leave it to the censors to take glancing note of the latter. He wrote directly to their highest superiors, with a self-possession befitting his royal upbringing, his revolutionary sense of mission, and, not least, his legal training. (Before turning more fully to the struggle, he had co-founded the firm Mandela & Tambo with the future ANC President, and one of the great secondary dramas of Mandela’s imprisonment is his heroically drawn-out progress toward an LLB, one he at last earned on the eve of his release.)

An early letter to the Minister of Justice petitioning for his comrades’ release and for roundtable discussions makes clear from the outset that it is to be taken in political, not merely humanitarian, terms: “We are not pleading for mercy but are exercising the inherent right of all people incarcerated for their political beliefs.” Making no secret of “our revolution... planned for the future,” Mandela positions “our struggle to win for our people the right of self-determination” and “resist racial policies” as an ambition

in line with the highest “conceptions of the human family.” At the same time, he argues that there is an ultimate pragmatism in so much idealism: “our activities constitute the only solution to the problems of our country,” he writes, counseling the government to abandon its “short-sighted policies and crimes” on this basis. This is the same uncompromising Mandela who, conducting his own defense several years earlier, like a latter-day Socrates “wanted to make it clear...that I intended to put the state on trial,” as he wrote in *Long Walk to Freedom*—it being at last immaterial that he was the one who stood accused. Written in 1969, his letter to the Minister of Justice was well before its time: though release and roundtable discussions would come, it would be through the intervening space of some twenty years.

Undoubtedly the most painful part of the ten thousand and fifty-two days Mandela spent in prison was the separation from his family. “I have never regretted my commitment to the struggle,” he writes toward the close of his autobiography, which he had begun drafting while still in prison, burying the manuscript in a prison courtyard. “But my family paid a terrible price, perhaps too dear a price.” In the space of less than a year, he lost his mother and eldest son, Thembi; in each case he was denied permission to attend the burial and carry out the rites that traditionally would have fallen to him—official refusals he felt keenly. “I spent moments in my cell which I never want to remember,” he writes to a friend about his mother’s death, characteristically eschewing further commentary, “but nothing I experienced...can be likened to” receiving the news of his eldest son’s death in a car crash at twenty-four. In a letter to his wife, he movingly casts his mind back to the years leading up to his trial when, having come under the suspicion of the state, he could meet only furtively with his son:

I could neither accompany him to a bus stop nor see him off at the station, for an outlaw, such as I was at the time, must give up even important parental duties. So it was that my son, no! my friend stepped out alone to fend for himself in a world where I could only meet him secretly & once in a while... I emptied my pockets and transferred to him all the copper and silver that a wretched fugitive could afford. During the Rivonia Case he sat behind me one day. I kept looking back, nodding to him & giving him a broad smile. At the time it was generally believed that we would certainly be given the extreme penalty & this was clearly written across his face. Though he nodded back as many times as I did to him, not once did he return the smile. I never dreamt that I would never see him again. That was 5 years ago.

“Outlaw,” “wretched fugitive”: as an expression of paternal guilt, such Dickensian language makes a telling substitution for “freedom fighter,” the personally unencumbered phrase Mandela favors elsewhere in the letters. He and his fellow accused had shocked their counsel by their martyrs’ insistence not to appeal in the event of “the extreme penalty” (he cannot bring himself, here, to say death), believing that to do so would represent

a fall from principle. To be faced, in the remembering, with his son’s scared shows of assurance, and still no smile: written across the image is, yes, a deep and unquietable regret.

“**A**BOVE ALL...the life of another human being, of a citizen, is at stake”: Mandela may never permit himself so sweeping an appeal to simple humanity when it comes to his own case, but in raising his wife’s plight with the Minister of Justice, he cannot suppress the impulse. His letters, as a totality, let this line live as their great unspoken. One of the recurring, staggering experiences of reading them is having to remind yourself that the man turning out such steadfast prose—whether on day-to-day practicalities or matters of high principle—is doing so in conditions of the worst confinement, often after hours of hard labor. In the immediate aftermath of Winnie Mandela’s imprisonment, one source of anguished uncertainty was just who was taking care of their young daughters, Zenani and Zindzi, then nine and ten years old. Months before, he had written to the pair, by way of apology, that “the white judge said I should stay in jail for the rest of my life. It may be long before I come back; it may be soon.” Now he could not muster even that ambiguous comfort. Mandela very rarely allowed himself to dwell on misfortune, partly as a matter of temperament and partly out of survival, and it isn’t surprising to see him commend Norman Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* to his wife in another letter. Yet at this juncture, even he cannot manage his characteristic pivot from pain. Instead, in unusually unguarded language, he gives himself leave to imagine her plight—a kind of displaced commentary on his own:

My heart bleeds as I think of her sitting in some police cell far away from home, perhaps alone and without anybody to talk to, and with nothing to read. Twenty-four hours of the day longing for her little ones. It may be many months or even years before you see her again. For long you may live like orphans without your own home and parents, without the natural love, affection and protection Mummy used to give you. Now you will get no birthday or Christmas parties, no presents or new dresses, no shoes or toys... Gone are the days... Gone are the comfortable beds... Perhaps never again will Mummy and Daddy join you in House no. 8115 Orlando West, the one place in the whole world that is so dear to our hearts.

Mandela next tries to put a bravely political face on things: “All that I wish you always to bear in mind is that we have a brave and determined Mummy who loves her people.” He is soon drawn back, however, to a troubled recollection he might ordinarily have kept from his daughters. On returning from travel in 1962, he says, “I was terribly shaken when I met Mummy... she had suddenly lost weight and was now a shadow of her former self. I realized at once the strain my absence had caused her.” The letter makes for heartbreaking reading in its unsettled conflation of the political and personal, of determinedly child-friendly language and starkly adult reality.

As more and more time passed, bonds even with those dearest to him

grew uncertain. “I don’t know whether I should address you as son, *mninawa* [young brother] or, as we would say in the lingo, my sweet brigade,” Mandela wrote to his twenty-year-old son Makgatho in 1970. He would write later that Winnie Mandela “married a man who soon left her; that man became a myth; and then that myth returned home and proved to be just a man after all.” (The marriage was to survive his imprisonment but not his release.) Though a letter from a friend could make him feel “as if the whole world...has been squeezed into my tiny cell,” and though he was heartened throughout by “the powerful current of goodwill” of an increasing number of supporters around the world, the fact remained that he was cut off from the present life of his family and of his country. What was a prison cell but a way of confining a man to the past? He wrote plaintively to the proprietor of a restaurant where he and his comrades used to gather:

Sanna, I wish I could discuss the present or future with you. What man with deep yearnings and ambition wants to live in the past? But I have no choice in this particular matter. In order to discuss viable issues one must have authentic sources of information and enjoy greater freedom to express himself. I have neither one nor the other. Do you now understand why I must unearth the skeletons of beloved ones now late, and why I’m talking about things that occurred a long time ago? I wish I could freely discuss the future with you! I miss you and your family, and now that I’ve written this letter, I am sure the yearning will recede.

Writing to his wife, he tried to find the good in his situation, now it was hers: “You may find that the cell is an ideal place to learn to know yourself, to search realistically & regularly the process of your own mind & feelings” and so find “the foundation of one’s spiritual life.” The cell also had a way of crystallizing acts of ordinary kindness that might otherwise go unobserved or unremembered. Thanking his brother-in-law for looking after his daughters and sending him books for his studies, Mandela writes:

Often in normal life, when happy & free, we build for ourselves ivory towers into which we retreat & within which we swell with pride & conceit & treat with indifference & even contempt the generosity & affection of friends. Behind iron bars such artificial towers easily crumble & acts of hospitality become priceless jewels.

To another friend he says simply, “you have to be behind bars for at least 7 years to appreciate fully just how precious human kindness can be.”

The same Mandela who took a moment to wonder at kindness never lost his capacity to recoil at its obverse. “Had I not been a Black prisoner born and brought up in South Africa,” he wrote in a painstakingly argued late letter to the Commissioner of Prisons, ranging from history to the present conditions of his confinement, “I would not have believed that normal human beings could be associated with such a mania for persecuting their fellow men.” To recognize compassion on an intimate scale was to see—and that militantly—the need for justice on a national level. A recognition that pro-

ceeded, in turn, in the other direction: here was a radical who believed in radical civility, a self-described firebrand who held fast to the ideal of concord, one of the most uncompromising things about Mandela being his fierce avowal of the need for cooperation. Repeatedly in letters to prison and political officials, he invoked “the human family”: no throwaway phrase, but rather three well-weighted words at the core of everything, for how could anyone who believed in *that* seek cover under the apartheid doctrine of separate development?

Or, for that matter, accept a mandated return to the “homeland” of Transkei, one of the Black-only areas that formed the foundation of apartheid? When, as early as 1974, with international pressure and calls for sanctions mounting, the state offered to release Mandela and his comrades on this “humiliating condition,” there was never a chance of their accepting. Ten years later a similarly vexing offer was made, this time requiring that the ANC issue a public renunciation of violence. Without hesitation, Mandela wrote directly to then-President P. W. Botha to deride his “cynical politicking,” refusing to make any such declaration when this would only mean allowing the apartheid state to “enjoy [a] monopoly” on the very same—as, for instance, in the infamous Sharpeville Massacre, in which sixty-nine protesters were gunned down and hundreds wounded. When he and his comrades had first been brought to Robben Island (“Here you will die,” one guard intoned) and were marched toward the infamous prison, their keepers complained that they weren’t moving quickly enough. So Mandela and a friend took matters into their own hands. “We went to the front,” he remembered in an interview, “and we walked even more steadily.” And if, as he contended in his letter to Botha, “every day we spend in prison is merely an act of revenge against us,” he was prepared to withstand many more such revenges until the terms of his freedom did not so insult the terms of his vision. To Botha, he plainly laid out what he and his comrades would need from the government, what the country would need for peace:

1. The government must renounce violence first;
2. It must dismantle apartheid;
3. It must unban the ANC;
4. It must free all who have been imprisoned, banished or exiled for their opposition to apartheid;
5. It must guarantee free political activity.

IT WOULD take more than five years, many more letters, and a number of secret meetings between Mandela and those at the highest levels of government before, in the face of continued international pressure and protests at home, Botha’s successor, F. W. De Klerk, saw to his release in 1990 and began dismantling the apartheid state. Touchingly, right to the end, Mandela could not help but question the uncertain dream of freedom. “You talk of imminent release? I am no prophet, but it is my prerogative to express serious doubts,” he wrote to two friends as late as the fall of 1989. To the president of the protest group Black Sash, he cau-

tioned that their ambitions might “not be realized in our lifetime.” And when, with a release date at last set, his wife sent him a “smart suit” for the occasion, he could not bring himself to set down in writing what at last had been won. “I will certainly wear it on the occasion you mentioned,” he told her. Surely the censors knew which occasion he meant.

In 1994 Mandela would stand opposite De Klerk in a presidential debate. “Although I was never over-hopeful, I did not rule out the possibility that the impossible might happen,” he had written in one letter, lamenting a longed-for visit that hadn’t come to pass. After vehemently denouncing many of De Klerk’s policies and allowing that “there is no organization in this country as divisive as the new National Party,” he surprised the man by extending an entirely uncontradictory hand and saying, “I am proud to hold your hand for us to go forward.” This, as readers of the letters will realize, was entirely uncynical politicking. The gesture had always meant much to Mandela—it was as much a part of his character as the raised fist that became such a potent symbol of the anti-apartheid struggle.

There is another handshake that hovers enigmatically over Mandela’s life story. Just before his sentencing, when he was facing death and life as equal specters, the state prosecutor sought him out in a court office, asking Mandela’s legal adviser to excuse them. The verdict had come down only a day before. Mandela remembered the moment:

“Mandela,” he said, after Bob had left, “I did not want to come to court today. For the first time in my career, I despise what I am doing. It hurts me that I should be asking the court to send you to prison.” He then reached out and shook my hand, and expressed the hope that everything would turn out well for me. I thanked him for his sentiments, and assured him that I would never forget what he had said.

It is an extraordinary exchange, an extraordinary thing to bear with him to Robben Island on receiving a life sentence: sympathy and complicity in a single breath. Something in Mandela was ready to accept whatever was pure in the gesture, to commit that handshake to memory as a solacing act of humanity—just as, on the other side of his long sentence, he remained ready to extend a hand to De Klerk. In the punishingly long interim, as a writer of letters, “I shake her hand very warmly” was something he could only say, not do: a power of presence known only through metaphor. And to his wife, too, Mandela had written, “Now & again we shall visit the farm, walk around with the fingers of my left hand dovetailing with those of your right.” It is among this very public man’s most intimate, and indelible, reveries of freedom. □