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Part One

A Country Childhood

MVEZO IS A TINY VILLAGE on the banks of the Mbashe River in the Transkei. It is surrounded by rolling hills and fertile valleys. A thousand rivers and streams keep the countryside green even in winter.

The village is a sleepy and peaceful place where nothing much has changed for hundreds of years. It was here that I was born on 18 July 1918.

I was born into the Madiba clan, which is part of the Thembu tribe. Madiba was a Thembu chief who ruled in the Transkei many years ago.

My father, Gadla Henry Mphakanyiswa, was a chief and a member of the Thembu royal family. Although my father could not read or write, he was a wise man who knew much about the history of our people. He was a trusted adviser to the king.

When I was born my father gave me the name Rolihlahla, which means "pulling the branch of a tree". Put more simply, it means "trouble-maker".

He could not have known what lay ahead of me. But looking back at all the "trouble" I have caused, it was a good name.

My mother, Nosekeni Fanny, was the third of my father's four wives. Together they had four children, three daughters and myself.

Altogether, my father had 13 children, four boys and nine girls. I was the youngest of the boys.

When I was still a baby, my father suffered a great hardship which was to change our lives forever. He lost his chieftainship — all because of an ox.

One day, a man complained to the magistrate that one of my father's oxen had strayed on to his land. The magistrate ordered my father to appear before him. But my father, who was a proud man, refused to go to the magistrate. He felt the magistrate did not have the right to summon him — he believed that this was a tribal matter.

My father paid a heavy price for not obeying the magistrate. He not only lost his chieftainship, but he lost his cattle and land as well. We had no choice but to leave our home.

The move away from Mvezo took me to a place where I was to spend some of the happiest years of my life.

* * *

Our new home was in Qunu, a large village near Umtata, where many of our relatives lived. It stands in a narrow, grassy valley surrounded by green hills and clear streams.

Qunu was a village of women and children. The men were forced to leave and work on white-owned farms and mines. They came home once or twice a year to plough the fields. The hoeing, weeding and harvesting were left to the women and children.

From an early age, I spent most of my time playing in the veld with the other boys of the village. I learned how to shoot birds out of the sky with a slingshot, to gather wild honey and fruit, to drink warm milk straight from the cow and to catch fish with sharpened bits of wire.

Our favourite game was a war-game that we called *thinti*. We would stand two sticks in the ground, a hundred feet apart. Each side then had to try and knock the other side's stick down.

After playing with my friends, I would go home for supper. By the fireside, after eating, my mother often told us wonderful stories. These were more than just stories — they carried with them important lessons.

She once told the story of a traveller who met an old woman who could not see because she had cataracts growing over her eyes. The woman asked the traveller for help, but the man turned away. Another traveller came along and once again, the old woman asked for help.

This man was kind — he gently wiped her eyes clean. Suddenly, the old woman turned into a beautiful young woman. They married and became healthy, wealthy and happy.

It is a simple story, but with a strong message: if you are good and kind, you will be rewarded in ways that you can never know.

* * *

Both my parents were religious, but in different ways. My father believed in Qamata, the God of his fathers and the great spirit of the Xhosa people. My mother, on the other hand, became a Christian and baptised me into the Methodist Church.

My parents were friendly with two brothers in the village, George and Ben Mbekela. They too were Christians and had a strong belief in the importance of education.

Often, when I was playing or looking after the sheep, the brothers would come and talk to me.

I was just seven years old when George visited my mother and said, "Your son is a clever young fellow. He should go to school."

My mother kept quiet. No one in our family had ever gone to school before. But she told my father what George had said. My father decided to give to his son what he had never had himself — an education.

The schoolhouse was a single room with a tin roof. It stood on the other side of the hill from Qunu.

On my first day of school, my father took a pair of his trousers and cut them at the knee. He told me to put them

on and tied a piece of string around the waist. This was the first pair of trousers I ever owned.

Up until then, I had only worn a blanket, like all the other boys in the village. I must have looked very funny in my father's trousers, but I could not have been more proud.

I not only got a new pair of trousers on my first day at school — I got a new name too. In those days, black children were given white names at school because it was more "civilised". My teacher called me Nelson.

Maybe she named me after the great British admiral, Lord Nelson. But that is only a guess.

* * *

One day, when I was nine years old, my father came to visit my mother. I could tell he was not his usual self. He did not talk to me or play with me — instead, he lay in the hut looking pale and thin. He had a terrible cough.

My father's youngest wife, Nodayimani, came to stay with us to help my mother look after him.

A few days later, his coughing got worse. My father called for his pipe. My mother and Nodayimani thought it was a bad idea, but he insisted, and they eventually gave in. They lit his pipe and passed it to him. He smoked for an hour or so, and then with the pipe still lit, he left this world.

Soon afterwards, my mother told me that I would be leaving Qunu. I did not ask why, or where I would be going to.

After packing a few belongings, we set off by foot. We walked for many hours, along dusty roads, up and down hills, through valleys, and across fresh-water streams.

As the sun was beginning to set, we came to a village that lay at the bottom of a shallow valley. In the middle of the village, I saw the biggest and grandest house I had ever seen. We were at the Great Place, Mqhekezweni, where the paramount chief of the Thembu people lived.

My eyes were big, and they grew bigger as the largest and shiniest car I had ever seen drove up. Out of this car, a Ford V8, stepped a short, plump man. He was Jongintaba Dalindyebo, the most powerful man of the Thembu tribe.

When my father died, Jongintaba had offered to be my guardian. He said he would look after me as if I was his own. Jongintaba owed my late father a favour. It was my father who had suggested to the tribe that Jongintaba should become the paramount chief when his father died.

My mother left a few days later, leaving me with these simple words of advice: "*Uqinisufokotho, Kwedini!*" ("Brace yourself, my boy!")

In all honesty, I was not sad when my mother left. Instead, I was filled with excitement. I was in a new world that offered me many new experiences and pleasures.

* * *

At the Great Place I quickly became close to my two new-found cousins, Justice and Nomafu, son and daughter of the Regent, Jongintaba.

I looked up to Justice in every way. He was tall, handsome and a fine sportsman. He was four years older than me and was already at Clarkebury, a boarding school 60 miles away.

The Regent and his wife, who had the unusual name of No-England, brought me up as if I were their own. They called me Tatomkhulu, which means "Grandpa", because they said I was very serious and looked like an old man.

I had a full life at Mqhekezweni. When I was not at school, I was a ploughboy, a wagon-guide, a horse-rider and a bird-hunter.

On Sundays, there was only one thing to do — and that was to go to church. The Regent and his wife were very religious. The only time I ever got a hiding was when I did not attend church one Sunday.

My favourite pastime was listening to the tribal meetings that were held at Mqhekezweni. The Regent was advised by a group of wise men — the *amaphakathi* — who had great knowledge of the history and customs of our people.

These meetings were my earliest lessons in democracy. Every person had a chance to speak in an open and honest way — even if it meant saying things against the Regent. The Regent would keep quiet, and only at the end of the meeting, would he talk. His task was to summarise the discussions and find points of agreement.

At Mqhekezweni I learned about the glorious history of our heroes, such as Sekhukhune, Moshoeshoe, Dingane and Bambatha. The stories of these great African warriors caught my imagination.

The oldest and most wrinkled of the tribal elders was Chief Joyi. He liked to speak about how the Thembu, the Pondo, the Xhosa and the Zulu were all children of one father. The white man had come and divided brother from brother, he said. The white man had seized the land as you might seize another man's horse.

* * *

It is Xhosa custom that a boy only becomes a man after he is circumcised. When I was 16, Justice and I made our way to two grass huts on the banks of the Mbashe River, together with 24 other boys.

The night before the circumcision, women came from nearby villages. Together we sang and danced into the night.

When the sun came up, we bathed in cold water. At midday, dressed in blankets, we stood in two lines, watched from a distance by parents and relatives. When the drums started beating, we sat down with our legs spread out in front of us.

The old *ingcibi* raised his assegai, and with a single blow changed each of us, in turn, from boys to men. As the pain

shot through our loins, we cried: "Ndiyindoda!" ("I am a man!")

Afterwards, the *amakhankatha* — the guardian — explained to us the rules of entering manhood. We stayed in the huts until our wounds healed.

After the circumcision, there was a ceremony. The main speaker was Chief Meligqili. I have never forgotten the words he spoke that day.

"There sit our sons," he said, "young, healthy and handsome, the flower of the Xhosa tribe, the pride of our nation. We are here to promise them manhood, but it is an empty promise because we Xhosas, and all black South Africans, are a conquered people."

* * *

The Regent often reminded me that my destiny — like my father's — was to become a counsellor to kings. "It is not for you to spend your life mining the white man's gold, never knowing how to read and write."

So after my circumcision, I was sent to Clarkebury boarding school. The Regent drove me to the school, which was in Engcobo district, in his Ford V8. It was the first time I had ever crossed the Mbashe River.

Before we left, the Regent gave me my first pair of boots. I was so proud that I polished them until they shone brightly.

I learned a lot from the teachers at Clarkebury. They were more educated than the teachers that I had before.

At the school I met students from all over the Transkei, as well as from other places, such as Basotholand and Johannesburg. I also learned much from these students who were more worldly and wiser than I was. But in many ways, when I left Clarkebury, I was still a simple Thembu boy.

* * *

At the age of 19, I joined Justice at Healdtown, a college in Fort Beaufort, 175 miles from Umtata. It was the biggest college in the country for Africans, with over 1 000 students.

The principal of the college was Dr Arthur Wellington, who liked to remind us that he was from the same family as the famous Duke of Wellington.

Being at Healdtown was like being at a college in England. They tried to turn us into "black Englishmen". We were taught — and we believed — that the best of everything came from England.

The days were long and hard at Healdtown. The first bell rang at six o'clock in the morning. After a breakfast of hot sugar-water and dry bread — I could not afford butter, unlike some of the other students — we had assembly before going off to class.

We had a short break for a lunch of samp, sour milk and beans. Then it was back to class until five o'clock. After exercise time and supper, we studied until nine o'clock. Half an hour later, the lights were switched off.

My best friend at Healdtown was Zacharia Molete. He was Sotho-speaking, and he was my first friend who was not a Xhosa. I remember feeling quite brave at having a friend who was not from the Transkei.

One of my favourite teachers was Frank Lebentlele, who taught zoology. He was popular among the students because he was young and always ready to help us with problems. He was a Sotho and, to our great surprise, he was married to a Xhosa woman. It was not often that you found people marrying out of their tribes.

Another popular teacher was Reverend Mokitimi. One evening he found two prefects having an argument. As he was trying to make peace, headmaster Wellington arrived and demanded to know what was going on.

Rev. Mokitimi told him that everything was under control and that he would report to him the following day. But the

headmaster was not happy and again demanded to know what was happening.

Rev. Mokitimi stood his ground and said, "Dr Wellington, I am the house-master, and I have told you that I will report tomorrow, and that is what I will do."

"Very well," said the headmaster. I was amazed. It was the first time I had ever seen a black man stand up to a white man.

But it was not all work and no play at Healdtown. I did some long-distance running and boxing — but being tall and thin, I was much better at running than at boxing. It was only much later in life, when I put on some weight, that my boxing improved.

* * *

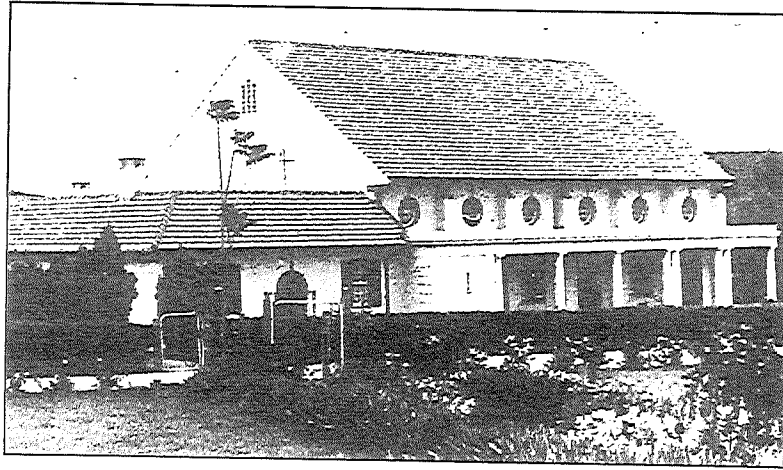
At the age of 21, I went on to Fort Hare to continue with my studies. The Regent was very happy that I was accepted at Fort Hare and gave me my first suit to celebrate the occasion. It was double-breasted and grey, and it made me feel on top of the world.

Fort Hare had only 150 students, who were the cream of African society. It was at Fort Hare that I rubbed shoulders with great African scholars like Z K Matthews and D D T Jabavu.

My closest friend at Fort Hare was K D Matanzima. Although he was my nephew, I was younger than him, and according to tribal custom, he was my senior. KD was a third-year student and took me under his wing. He even shared his allowance with me.

It was KD who encouraged me to become a lawyer, even though I had my heart set on becoming an interpreter or a clerk in the Native Affairs department.

The older students did not treat us first-year students very nicely. One of our biggest complaints was that we were not allowed to be on the house committees of our own dormitories.



Fort Hare – here I rubbed shoulders with great African scholars.

One day, the students in my dormitory got together and elected our own house committee. The older students were furious. But we stood our ground and won. This was one of my first battles with authority and it felt good to fight for a just cause.

Besides studying and taking up just causes, I found time for other activities. I played soccer for the first time and continued with my cross-country running.

As a member of the Bible Society, I taught Bible classes to people in the neighbouring villages on Sundays.

One of my fellow students on these trips was a serious young man from Pondoland. His name was Oliver Tambo. I was not very friendly with him at the time, but even then I could see that he would go far in life.

For a simple country boy, Fort Hare was a world filled with new experiences. For the first time I wore pyjamas and brushed my teeth with a toothbrush and toothpaste. Flush toilets and hot showers were a treat for someone who did not have them before.

* * *

During my second year, I was nominated to stand for the Student Representative Council. Before the election, the students met to talk about their problems and grievances. The students were unhappy with the food and wanted the SRC to have more power. They decided to boycott the elections until their demands were met.

When the elections took place, only 25 students voted. Six representatives were elected, of which I was one. The representatives met soon afterwards and decided to resign because we felt we did not have the support of the students.

The principal, Dr Kerr, arranged a second election in the dining-room. He thought that if all the students were present, the election would have greater support among the students.

And so the elections were held again — but once again, only 25 students voted. But this time, the other representatives decided to accept their positions on the SRC.

I did not, because I felt that nothing had changed. I felt that I still could not accept the position.

The principal called me in and asked me to reconsider my decision to resign. He said that if I did not do as he requested, he would be forced to expel me.

I did not sleep that night. Tossing and turning, I wondered if I was doing the right thing. Was I throwing my education and career away? Was the issue really so important?

As I walked into the principal's office the next morning, I was still not sure what to do. "Mr Mandela, have you reached your decision?" he asked. Suddenly, I knew exactly what to do. I told him that I could not serve on the SRC without the support of the students.

Dr Kerr tried to give me a second chance. The summer holidays were coming up and he suggested that I think about my position during the break. If I came back and still refused to sit on the SRC, he would have to expel me, he said.

I was not a happy young man when I left for my summer holidays in Mqhekezweni.

* * *

When I told the Regent about my troubles at Fort Hare, he was furious. He told me that when I returned there I must obey the principal. There was to be no further discussion about the matter.

I decided to let the matter rest for a while, and to enjoy my holiday at Mqhekezweni. Justice, who was now living in Cape Town, was also there. We were happy to be together again.

Then something happened that not only solved my problems at Fort Hare, but changed the direction of my life altogether.

One afternoon, the Regent called for Justice and myself and said, "My children, I fear that I am not much longer for this world, and before I journey to the land of the ancestors, it is my duty to see my sons properly married."

He told us that, according to Thembu custom, he had found women for us to marry. I was to marry the daughter of the priest in the area.

As much as we respected the Regent, Justice and I could not go along with his plans. In many ways, it was because of him that we could not do what he wanted. He had given us an education and allowed us to see a bigger world — a world where people married for love.

Justice and I decided there was only one thing to do. We would run away. Our destination would be Johannesburg.

We secretly planned our escape. We would leave on the morning when the Regent left for a meeting of the Transkei parliament.

We packed the few clothes that we owned into one suitcase. We had no money, but we had an idea of how to get some. We took two of the Regent's best oxen and sold

them to a trader in the area. He gave us a good deal, thinking that we had the Regent's blessing.

When we got to the station and asked for tickets to Johannesburg, we were in for a bit of surprise. The station manager had been warned by the Regent about two youngsters who were trying to run away. He refused to sell us tickets.

We made our way to the next station, 50 miles away. From there we caught a train to Queenstown.

In Queenstown we bumped into Chief Mpondombini, the Regent's brother. We told him that we were going to Johannesburg for the Regent and that we needed travel documents. In those days, Africans could not travel around freely.

He took us to the magistrate, whom he knew well. The magistrate was very helpful, but thought it right to telephone the magistrate in Umtata and tell him what he was doing.

As the magistrate in Umtata took the call from Queenstown, he was busy chatting to an important visitor. The visitor was none other than the Regent himself.

When the magistrate from Queenstown told him about us, we heard a familiar voice shouting down the telephone, "Arrest those boys!"

He did not arrest us, but he did not give us travel documents either.

As luck would have it, we met a friend of Justice's, who arranged a lift for us to Johannesburg with an elderly white woman. She agreed to take us, for a fee of 15 pounds. It was nearly all the money that we had.

At ten o'clock that evening, after travelling for many hours, we saw before us a world glittering with lights. Never before had I seen so many cars travelling on the road at one time.

The old woman drove to her daughter's home in the suburbs of Johannesburg. I had never seen such big and

wonderful houses. The smallest house was bigger than the Regent's house in Mqhekezweni.

We were sent to the servant's quarters, where we slept on the floor. But we did not mind. Our hearts were filled with excitement. We were in *Egoli*, the City of Gold, and we believed that the whole world was at our feet.

Part Two

Johannesburg

IT DID NOT TAKE US LONG to find out that Johannesburg was not the promised land that we had imagined. The City of Gold was not all glitter and sparkle. It had a dark side.

At dawn on our first day there, we made our way to Crown Mines in search of work, which we needed desperately.

Crown Mines was one of the biggest mines in South Africa. It was an ugly place. A large wire fence surrounded the dusty ground that was scattered with rusty, tin buildings. The noise was deafening. Everywhere I looked I saw black men in dusty overalls looking tired and bent.

We went straight to the chief *induna*, or headman, whose name was Mr Piliso. He was expecting Justice, because the Regent had written to him a few months earlier, asking him to get Justice a job on the mines.

But he looked at me with surprise. Justice pleaded with him to give me a job too. He said there was a letter in the post from the Regent, asking him to help me as well.

The old man believed us. Justice was employed as a clerk and I was taken on as a mine policeman. I started work immediately. I was given a uniform, a new pair of boots, a helmet, a torch, a whistle and a knobkerrie.

It was a simple job. I had to stand guard at the compound entrance under the sign that read: "Beware: Natives Crossing Here."

Justice and I thought we were so clever. We boasted to a friend about how we had run away and tricked our way into jobs. The friend — whom we thought we could trust — went straight to Piliso and told him the truth.