



A LONG ROAD TO FREEDOM

Told by Nelson Mandela

Adapted from his book *Long Walk to Freedom*

I **awoke on** the day of my release after only a few hours' sleep at 4:30 A.M. February 11 was a cloudless, end-of-summer Cape Town day. I did a shortened version of my usual exercise regimen, washed, and ate breakfast. I then telephoned a number of people to come to the cottage to prepare for my release and work on my speech. As so often happens in life, the momentousness of an occasion is lost in the welter of a thousand details. My actual release time was set for 3:00 P.M.

By three-thirty, I began to get restless. I told the members of the reception committee that my people had been waiting for me for twenty-seven years and I did not want to keep them waiting any longer. Shortly before four o'clock, we left in a small motorcade. About a quarter of a mile in front of the gate, the car slowed to a stop, and I got out and began to walk toward the prison gate.

At first I could not really make out what was going on in front of us, but when I was within 150 feet or so, I saw a tremendous commotion and a great crowd of people: hundreds of photographers and television cameras and newspeople, as well as several thousand well-wishers. I was astounded and a little bit alarmed. I had truly not expected such a scene. At most, I had imagined that there would be several dozen people, mainly the warders and their families. But this proved to be only the beginning; I realized we had not thoroughly prepared for all that was about to happen.

Within twenty feet or so of the gate, the cameras started clicking, a noise that sounded like some great herd of metallic beasts. Reporters started shouting ques-

tions. Television crews began crowding in. ANC supporters were yelling and cheering. It was a happy, if slightly disorienting, chaos. When a television crew thrust a long, dark, furry object at me, I recoiled slightly, wondering if it was some new-fangled weapon developed while I was in prison. Winnie informed me that it was a microphone.

When I was among the crowd, I raised my right fist and there was a roar. I had not been able to do that for twenty-seven years, and it gave me a surge of strength and joy. I felt—even at the age of seventy-one—that my life was beginning anew. My ten thousand days of imprisonment were over.

At my first speech, at a rally at the Grand Parade in Cape Town, I spoke from the heart. I wanted first of all to tell the people that I was not a messiah, but an ordinary man who had become a leader because of extraordinary circumstances.

Friends, comrades, and fellow South Africans. I greet you all in the name of peace, democracy, and freedom for all! I stand here before you not as a prophet but as a humble servant of you, the people. Your tireless and heroic sacrifices have made it possible for me to be here today. I therefore place the remaining years of my life in your hands.

It was my desire for the freedom of my people to live their lives with dignity and self-respect that animated my life, that transformed a frightened young man into a bold one, that drove a law-abiding attorney to become a criminal, that turned a family-loving husband into a man without a home, that forced a life-loving man to live like a monk.

It is from my comrades in the struggle that I learned the meaning of courage. Time and again I have seen men and women risk and give their lives for an idea. I have seen men stand up to attacks and torture without breaking, showing a strength and resiliency that defies the imagination. I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. I felt fear myself more times than I can remember, but I hid it behind a mask of boldness. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.

To survive in prison, I developed ways to find satisfaction in my daily life. One can feel fulfilled by washing one's clothes so they are really clean, by sweeping a hallway so that it is empty of dust, by organizing one's cell to conserve as much space as possible. The same pride one takes in consequential tasks outside of prison, one can find doing small things.

While I have always enjoyed gardening, it was not until I was behind bars that I was able to tend my own garden. A garden was one of the few things in prison that one could control. To plant a seed, watch it grow, to tend it and then harvest it, offered a simple but enduring satisfaction. The sense of being the custodian for this small patch of earth offered a small taste of freedom.

In some ways I saw the garden as a metaphor for certain aspects of my life. A leader must also tend his garden; he, too, plants seeds and then watches, cultivates, and harvests the result. Like a gardener, he must take responsibility for what he cultivates; he must mind his work, try to repel enemies, preserve what can be preserved, and eliminate what cannot succeed.

The authorities supplied me with seeds. I initially planted tomatoes, chilies, and onions—hardy plants that did not require rich earth or constant care. The early harvests were poor, but they soon improved. I coaxed a particularly beautiful tomato plant from a tender seedling to a robust plant that produced deep red fruit. Once the garden began to flourish, I often provided the warders with some of my best tomatoes and onions.

I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. Man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished.

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made

missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.

Freedom is indivisible; the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all of them, were the chains on me.

NELSON MANDELA

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