

A black and white photograph of Nelson Mandela, shown from the chest up in profile, looking out a window. He is wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved button-down shirt. The background is a simple wall with a window frame visible on the left.

The Spiritual Mandela

*Faith and Religion in the Life
of Nelson Mandela*

DENNIS CRUYWAGEN

The
Spiritual
Mandela

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2018 First US Edition

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Originally published in South Africa by Penguin Random House, Cape Town.
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An Imagine Book
Published by Charlesbridge
85 Main Street
Watertown, MA 02472
(617) 926-0329
www.imaginebooks.net

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available.
ISBN 978-1-62354-530-7 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-63289-221-8 (ebook)

Printed in China
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother Marie,
her siblings Catherine Louise, Wallace, and Melvyn, the first people
to introduce me to the absolute joy of reading.
It is also in remembrance of my father Henry, an illiterate man
who slaved to give his children the education he did not have.*

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Acknowledgments

Writing a book of this nature has required me to travel to different parts of South Africa, and the support I received from friends and family who assisted me with accommodation and getting around in strange, unfamiliar places was essential in this regard. My sincere gratitude goes to Monty and Antoinetta Breytenbach, Magda Greyling, Justice and Carol Hofmeyr, Ruben Louw and Fred van der Linde.

For support, cajoling and pep talks, thank you to Professor Henry Bredekamp, my siblings Bennie, Roy, Vincent, Colin, Cheryl and Andre, and my sister-in-law Lebo Cruywagen.

Also deepest thanks to John and Lynn Bowles, Liezil Cerf, Jan and the late Toekie de Necker, Asa Kamalie-Fernold, Nicki Fourie, Sam Henkeman, Linda Jacobs, Ayjay and Maggie Jantjies, Anchen Knoblauch, Obie Labuschagne, the Manthatha family, Sharon May, Segun and Rachel Olipekun, Judith Roberts, Lionel and Rose Roode, Hannelie Smit, Maimie Steenkamp, Ted Thorpe, Siobhan Tregoning, Siviwe Tukwayo, Ina van Staden, Marietjie van Zyl, that ebullient raconteur and journalist Paul Vecchiatto, the indomitable Johanna Viljoen, and Ricardo Wessels.

To Colleen Sables (née Brink), who I have known since primary school when we used to play our own version of football in Heideveld: thank you for the years of support and encouragement.

I'm also grateful to Verne Harris and Sahn Venter of the

Nelson Mandela Foundation for often pointing me in the right direction during my research, and to Natalie Skomolo and her colleagues at the National Archives for being so helpful and accommodating.

At Penguin Random House, thank you to Robert Plummer and Marlene Fryer for believing in this book from the start, and for your faith, patience and confidence. Genevieve Adams added finesse during the editing of this book, which greatly improved it.

Thank you as well to the numerous individuals who I interviewed for this book. Your willingness to allow me to take a glimpse into your chest of memories and hear your precious stories was a gift.

Special thanks to the loyal Louise Korentajer, to my friend, comrade and sister Ayesha Ismail, and to Patricia de Lille. Most of all, thank you to Lianda.

DENNIS CRUYWAGEN
AUGUST 2016

Introduction

THE LIFE OF Nelson Mandela has been studied in almost exhaustive detail. Countless books, articles, television documentaries, films, websites and school essays have attempted to understand how a boy from rural Transkei in the Eastern Cape could grow up to become the first black president of democratic South Africa. Many accounts rightly attribute Mandela's achievements to the extraordinary amount of courage and perseverance he displayed throughout the years he fought in the struggle against apartheid, and during the long and isolating years of his imprisonment. However, there was also another side to Mandela, one that is rarely referenced in any narrative about his life, but which nevertheless played an integral role in shaping the man that he was to become. While he never revealed it publicly, and only rarely referred to it in private to individuals outside of his family and close circle of friends, Mandela's spirituality and the Methodist beliefs he adopted in childhood were inseparable aspects of his character, and went a long way towards informing his personal philosophy and some of his most important political decisions.

For obvious reasons, Mandela's political career dominates the majority of discussions about his life. Politics and his commitment to his political party, the African National Congress (ANC), consumed most of Mandela's existence before his imprisonment

on Robben Island, and influenced the way other people thought of him or understood him. For many years, to both black and white South Africans, he was, before anything else, Nelson Mandela the political activist, the man who was prepared to give up his life in the fight for black South Africans' freedom. The inherent righteousness of his cause, upon which depended the lives of millions of people, justified this intense devotion to politics and Mandela's reasoning for putting it first in his life, even if this meant that both his faith and his family suffered as a result. It also fostered a sense of pragmatism in him, which helped to propel his commitment to the armed struggle, even when other prominent members of the ANC, such as the organization's president, Albert Luthuli, voiced Christian concerns about using force to accelerate the resistance campaign.

Adding to the lack of awareness about Mandela's deep spiritual beliefs was his twenty-seven-year-long imprisonment after the life sentence he received in the Rivonia Trial. This was despite the fact that his religious beliefs would grow stronger in the eighteen years he spent on Robben Island, where he was, according to his own admission, "quite religious."¹ The prospect of spending the rest of his life on Robben Island no doubt worked towards developing his spiritual awareness, and religion became an effective and positive means of coping with the hardships he endured there. Even so, the isolation in which he and his fellow political prisoners were kept provided the apartheid state with an opportunity to advance an image of them that was in keeping with the type of Cold War propaganda that circulated at that time, when anyone who questioned or threatened the laws underpinning a Western rule of government was immediately branded an enemy of the state. In such context,

Mandela's opposition to apartheid automatically implied that he was both a communist and anathema to Western ideology and the beliefs that upheld it, including Christianity. But while the South African Communist Party (SACP) claims that Mandela was a member for a brief period, in 1962, this clearly did not prevent him, based on his own testimony and that of his fellow inmates, from participating in religious services during his imprisonment, or from interacting with ministers from a number of churches.² To many white South Africans at the time, however, the thought of even placing Mandela's name next to the word "spiritual" would have been a laughable or absurd notion.

Finally, there is the contribution, or lack thereof, that Mandela himself made towards the small body of knowledge that examines his religious beliefs. As mentioned before, Mandela was too pre-occupied by political concerns during the struggle to place any special emphasis on his faith in directing the path he took towards obtaining racial equality, although he did see the value of utilizing church support in advocating the cause among its followers. After his release from prison in 1990, Mandela hardly ever spoke about his religious beliefs in public or to the media. In an interview with Charles Villa-Vicencio in the early 1990s, before he was elected president, Mandela, when asked about whether he considered himself a religious person, denied it: "No, I am not particularly religious or spiritual. Let's say I am interested in all attempts to discover the meaning and purpose of life. Religion is an important part of this exercise."³

While this statement could be taken as definitive proof of Mandela's religious outlook, it also contradicts the accounts of a number of people who got to know him while he was in prison

and after his release, and who contend that he was indeed a deeply spiritual person whose faith formed the foundation of his policy of reconciliation after his election as president in 1994. Some of these witnesses include Mandela's personal chaplain, Methodist bishop Don Dabula, Anglican priest Harry Wiggett, who ministered to Mandela for three years while he was in Pollsmoor, and Mandela's grandson, Mandla Mandela.

Who then to believe? Mandela himself, or the many people who can testify to having witnessed his spiritual side, either while he was in prison or after he became president? It seems Mandela used to say one thing in public about his religious beliefs, and then something else entirely to individuals he encountered on a personal basis. In the same interview in which he denied being a spiritual person, he offered a possible reason for his public stance on religion in response to a question about his belief in God: "As I have said, the relationship between a person and God is personal. The question concerning the existence of God is something I reflect on in solitude."⁴

Mandela's answer makes it clear that he considered acts of worship and spiritual meditation to be private affairs. Those who engaged with Mandela on an individual level and were able to discuss religion with him confirm that he made a concerted effort to keep his religious beliefs to himself. Desmond Tutu corroborates this argument, adding that Mandela was "very, very private" about his spiritual life, even when he was given the opportunity to use religion to advance the political cause of the ANC.⁵ Regardless of this, Mandela still acknowledged the relevance of religion in his own life, as well as its tremendous ability to bring people together and to mediate differences:

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Yes, I certainly recognize the importance of the religious dimension of my own life. More important for me, however, is the significance of religion for countless numbers of people I meet both in South Africa and around the world. Religion is important because at the center of the great religious traditions is the pursuit of peace. South Africa needs peace, the world needs peace and I am convinced that if we were to put into practice the central tenets of Christianity, Judaism, African traditional religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and other faiths – all of which have a lot in common – there would be peace in the world ... I have no problem with religious belief. My problem is that all too often people fail to act on what they claim to believe.⁶

When Mandela said this, South Africa was undergoing a transition from apartheid to democracy, from a system of government that afforded human rights to only a privileged few, to one that would view all people as equals, regardless of race or creed. Mandela was going to be the leader of this new South Africa, and because he recognized the diversity of opinions and beliefs that made this country a “rainbow nation,” he had to ensure that they all obtained an equal standing in the eyes of government and the Constitution. As the living representative of this law, the individual required to uphold it regardless of any constraints, Mandela therefore saw it as his duty to personally stand up for the beliefs of every person it was required to protect. This is why he chose to keep matters relating to his faith private, even if it had been crucial in alleviating many of his anxieties and fears during the long years of his incarceration, and through all the challenges of his presidency.

Christianity had been a vital component of Mandela's spiritual makeup long before his imprisonment on Robben Island. With his traditionalist father's approval, he had joined the Methodist Church in childhood. Gadla Mandela's hope was that his son's baptism into the religion of the white people who had claimed authority over his birthplace would present Mandela with opportunities from which many black people were excluded at the time, such as an education. Gadla's hopes were fulfilled when Mandela obtained a missionary education that also ended up shaping his political ideology. Mandela would later credit the schooling that he and many of his fellow political activists received at Methodist institutions with creating the kind of independent minds that had contributed to the anti-apartheid struggle.

But despite the significance he attached to the Christian religion in his own life, there was never any space in Mandela's worship of it to condemn or undermine other belief systems. In fact, Mandela's spirituality only strengthened his desire for reconciliation and forgiveness in a country that had almost been destroyed by prejudice and intolerance. During his presidency, and even while he was in prison, Mandela always found time to worship with different religions and Christian churches in his determination to promote acceptance among South Africa's various religious groups. The most remarkable product of Mandela's profound appreciation of Christian concepts, however, was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which he hoped would deal with crimes committed during apartheid without having to resort to Nuremberg-style trials for wrongdoers. Headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the commission determined to confront many of the wrongs

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that were committed under white rule, but in the spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Years before his death in 2013, Mandela had requested that his burial service observe traditional Methodist rites. With this final salute to the church that had cultivated his spirituality, Mandela had at last provided an answer to those who had always questioned his religious beliefs, or who had thought of him as an atheist or an enemy of the Christian faith. When his coffin was lowered into the ground, it was his friend, confidant and fellow Methodist, Bishop Don Dabula, who officiated over his burial, performing the traditional Methodist committal, in an act that illustrated the mutual love and regard that both church and follower had always held for each other.

Spiritual Origins

DURING NELSON MANDELA'S early childhood in Mvezo, a village situated next to the Mbashe River in the Transkei, he would often listen to tales told by his elders about the resistance efforts the Xhosa had waged against the advance of Europeans in their territory, and of chiefs such as Makana, the first Xhosa warrior to lead an attack against the British during the Xhosa Wars in 1819. Mandela was enthralled by accounts of Makana's courage and brazenness, both of which led to the prophet's imprisonment on Robben Island – the same prison where Mandela himself would languish for nearly two decades.

But that date was written far in his future. At this point in his life he was not a famous political icon, but a cattle-boy in his village, known as Rolihlahla to his parents Gadla Henry Mphakanyiswa Mandela, the chief of Mvezo, and Nonqaphi “Fanny” Nosekeni, the third of Gadla's four wives.

Born on July 18, 1918, Rolihlahla was Gadla and Nosekeni's first son, but the fourth and the youngest of all of his father's sons. Gadla Mandela was a member of the Thembu tribe, from the minor Ixhiba, or Left Hand House, where the king's counsellors resided. Although he was not from the Great House – the house of the kings – and would never be king himself, he was still possessed of a royal heritage. His wife, Nosekeni, was also descended from

royalty, from the Thembu's Right Hand House, and her son with Gadla could therefore boast a royal ancestry that had been bequeathed to him by both his parents.

But even with the privileged position Gadla held among the Thembu people, there was no denying the tragic and inevitable fact that his world was changing. The arrival of British settlers in the Eastern Cape in 1819 and 1820 had brought with it the encroachment of Western laws and ideas on the Xhosa, as well as the displacement of traditional Xhosa beliefs with the Christian faith, which British Christian missionaries sought to entrench among some of South Africa's indigenous peoples. By the time Nelson Mandela was born in 1918, white authority had continued to excel in its efforts to undermine long-established Xhosa social structures.

The British government had indeed contrived to settle a large number of British immigrants in South Africa's Eastern Cape as a means of enforcing their rule in the area, so that the likes of Gadla Mandela, so-called Xhosa royalty, could be kept in their place. Britain's intention was for the settlers to form an English-speaking human fence in the area that would defend the Cape Colony from the fearsome Xhosa tribes that had already fought several frontier wars with European settlers – a plan that was not communicated to the immigrants before they arrived on the Cape's shores. In December 1819 and January 1820, when the 4,000 British settlers sailed across the Atlantic to the Cape, enthusiastic, optimistic and hopeful, they naively believed that they were leaving the unstable economic climate of their homeland to colonize a natural paradise that would make them wealthy and the masters of large, fruitful plots of land.¹

The settlers were composed of individuals from a number of

Britain's social and economic classes. They included tradesmen, fishermen, sailors, manufacturers and artisans, as well as some farmers, most of whom were ill-equipped to handle the requirements of farming previously untouched land, and to defend the colony against dangerous Xhosa tribes. There were also settlers who were looking to do more than advance their economic prospects in Africa, such as those eager to spread the message of the Bible to the continent's indigenous inhabitants. The English missionary William Shaw belonged to this group.

Shaw came from a military family and, like his older brother – who was a sergeant in the same regiment – he was headed towards a commissioned rank in Britain's regular army. This all changed in December 1812, when Shaw, not yet fourteen, joined the society of Methodists at Colchester Barracks in Essex County. After embracing Christianity through Methodism, Shaw left his regiment in Ireland in July 1815, determined to become a foreign missionary. To this end, he applied for a job, but the news that he had been accepted never reached him because of postal delays. He decided to marry his fiancée instead, and since the Methodist Church did not accept probationary missionaries who were married, Shaw seemed to have destroyed any chance of becoming a missionary.

However, his hopes were raised once more when he heard that a group of tradesmen and their families, brought together by their Methodist beliefs, had formed a joint-stock party under the leadership of a carpenter from London and were planning on immigrating to South Africa. They needed a minister to accompany them, and Shaw got the job, sailing to South Africa in February 1820, and arriving in the country in May of the same year.

Shaw settled in the district of Albany, where he ministered to dejected and disgruntled settlers, as well as to British troops. Eventually, the members of his parish, which lay between the Bushman's and Fish Rivers, numbered 20,000, with an immigrant representation of 15,000, and the rest made up of soldiers, Dutch farmers and Khoi people.

Shaw clearly had a knack for missionary work, but something – a sense that he was needed somewhere else – had been tugging at his conscience for a long time. He soon came to believe that this nagging feeling had been placed in his heart by God as a sign that there was another group of souls – to be found among the Xhosa people – that needed to be converted to the Christian faith. Furthermore, these souls would have to be converted from their old customs and traditions in order to find salvation in the Christian religion and its saviour, Jesus Christ.

The idea was not new to Shaw. When he had first arrived in southern Africa, he had recognized the potential of its eastern coast as a “wide field” for establishing a string of mission stations beyond the colonial border, where scores of “unbelieving blacks” could be converted and ministered to.² Shaw would prove himself to be both uncompromising and single-minded in fulfilling this aim.

But inevitably, and in spite of Shaw's good intentions, the enforcement of Western beliefs and ideals on Xhosa culture met with a lot of resistance, for they experienced it as, in Noel Mostert's words, an “all-encompassing revolution against their ancestral past, the very fibre of their existence.”³ Many Xhosa people proved to be just as set in their religious and traditional beliefs as the Europeans who were trying to convert them. And in the latter's efforts to do so, there seemed to be no space for compromise on their part,

mostly because they considered Xhosa culture to be barbaric and inferior to the supposedly civilized Christian faith.

The missionaries looked down on a number of Xhosa practices and beliefs, including the Xhosas' view that there was no such thing as an afterlife, and thus no reward or punishment for anyone after death – an idea that many Christians would find distressing or absurd. Instead, the Xhosas believed that their forefathers were ever present in their lives, and that they had to be kept content so that they did not inflict punishment or retribution on their living descendants. There were other Xhosa traditions – such as the nudity they frequently displayed, their belief in witchcraft and the circumcision of teenage boys – which the missionaries found abhorrent, but these were rituals that had been practiced and revered for centuries. While Europeans could find it easy enough to regard an uncircumcised adult Xhosa male as a man, among his own people he would be scorned for not having followed the traditional rite of circumcision to manhood. This same conflict of ideas applied to the practice of polygamy, an acceptable custom in Xhosa culture. But to any claim of cultural relativism, Shaw responded, “The custom of the country is nothing. The law of God is greater than any custom.”²⁴

This Christianizing onslaught against Xhosa culture could not go unchallenged. Xhosas who refused to accept or adopt European customs found ways of intimidating those who had converted to Christianity, such as forcibly seizing their cattle. Soon, however, the upheaval known as the Mfecane brought refugees fleeing from the Zulu king Shaka into the Eastern Cape, forcing Xhosa chiefs to reconsider the protection that could be offered to them by the colonial military power, and thereby providing missionaries with an opening for the harvesting of potential converts. Missionaries

could communicate with colonial rulers while also offering education, which was seen by the Xhosa as a means of acquiring British skills and advantages. The Gqunukhwebe was the first Xhosa tribe to exploit these opportunities. Kama, the brother of the principal chief, the pragmatic Pato, was one of Shaw's most distinguished followers, although the missionary believed that Pato himself "greatly valued our mission, because it is a civil and political benefit to himself, but I fear he hates the Gospel."⁵

Nevertheless, the opposition to white rule and the missionary cause continued to escalate until a boiling point was reached with the cattle-killing disaster of 1856–57, when the Xhosa prophetess Nongqawuse predicted a resurrection of the Xhosas' power and the defeat of white authority if they collectively slaughtered all of their cattle and no longer cultivated their lands. If the prophecy was followed accordingly, Nongqawuse claimed, whites and the Xhosa refugees who had adopted their religion, along with all other unbelievers, would disappear into the sea, while those who obeyed the prophecy would experience a resurrection of their former power and wealth. The missionaries' warnings to Sarili, the paramount chief of the Xhosa, of the catastrophic effects that destroying their cattle would have on his people's livelihood went unheeded. Soon, vultures and other carrion eaters found themselves in a veritable paradise as rotting carcasses littered Xhosa territory, while starvation, poverty and the displacement of thousands followed for the Xhosa tribes. Many had to turn to the Cape Colony for relief from their suffering, with the knowledge that the killing of their cattle had had the opposite effect to the promised outcome.

The Xhosa, who had formed part of the migration of Bantu-speaking people from the Great Lakes region of subequatorial Africa

around 2,000 years ago, had contributed to the displacement of the Khoi people following their settlement in the Eastern Cape. Now they had become a conquered people as well. Having always kept their kraals closed to the missionaries, they were now forced to open them, and Shaw, that pioneering missionary, was free to establish his mission stations throughout the Eastern Cape and to educate Xhosa people on Western beliefs and customs. However, the Xhosas' acceptance of the religion of their white conquerors notwithstanding, they would not be their equals in this new society.

When Shaw finally left South Africa in 1860, four decades after his arrival, he could rest easy in the knowledge that he had fulfilled his vision of establishing a trail of Methodist mission stations from the Eastern Cape into Natal. With his efforts, the Methodists were able to institute thirty-six mission stations stretching as far as Edendale in Natal, with an estimated 5,000 church members, ninety-six school teachers and forty-eight day schools. It is due to Shaw's determination to spread the Christian message to the Xhosa people that they now make up the biggest group of worshippers in the Methodist Church in South Africa.⁶

For Gadla Mandela, this encroachment of Western ideals on the traditional Xhosa way of life had revealed its malevolence in the way that white rule had been exercised in Mvezo since the British annexed it in 1885.⁷ As a general rule, any opposition to British authority was judged not by laws with which the Thembu were familiar, but by foreign concepts, imposed with an iron hand.

In 1918, Gadla found out that it was better to adapt to these changing circumstances than to rebel and face humiliation. Shortly after his son Rolihlahla's birth, he was called before the colonial

magistrate following a complaint lodged against him by one of his subjects. Gadla, who questioned the magistrate's authority and stood by the principle that the customs of the Thembus, and not those of the king of England, should apply to him, refused to appear in court. He was a man steeped in custom, and a believer in Qamata, the god worshipped by his forefathers. He also occupied an important position in his village as an informal priest, which allowed him to direct rites for harvesting and the slaughtering of goats and calves, and to officiate at birth, marriage, initiation and funeral ceremonies. To the colonial magistrate, however, he was merely a subject of white rule, and his insolence was punished with a charge of insubordination and the removal of his chieftainship. Gadla's wealth, which came mostly from cattle and land, was also significantly reduced, and, no longer a chief but a peasant in the eyes of the law, he was unable to care for his family as he once did. Nosekeni moved with her baby to Qunu – the village that would become famously linked with her son's name, and where the course of his life would be altered forever.⁸

For the dispirited Gadla, the episode with the magistrate served as a valuable lesson, and he began to reflect on what the future held for his family and his people. He eventually came to the realization that life would be far better for individuals who possessed a Western education, as it would be the educated among the Xhosa who would be able to understand the ways of white people, speak their language, and thus be able to adapt to their world. However, such an education was a privilege provided only to those who attended school, and in the Transkei region it was the Methodist Church alone that ran schools for Xhosa people. If Gadla's fourth son was to amount to anything, he would have to attend a church school.

Gadla's belief that a church education would bring his son prosperity was based on his observations of the Mfengu, a tribe formed from the groups of people that had fled to the Eastern Cape during the Mfecane of the early nineteenth century. The Mfengu refugees had been among the first to work for whites, and even sided with them in the Frontier Wars, an act for which they were disliked by the rest of the Xhosa, who considered them traitors. They were also the first converts to Christianity, turning their backs on their old, traditional beliefs, and preferring to wear Western clothes and to reap the benefits of European culture. Many of them were educated and worked as policemen, clerks, teachers, interpreters and in the clergy. They were also generally more affluent than the rest of the Xhosa community, and were among the first to build houses and to utilize modern farming methods. The success they enjoyed, as well as their alliance with whites, engendered a large amount of animosity against them among the Xhosa people. But to the likes of the pragmatic Gadla, who could no doubt spot the link between their adoption of the white man's religion and their prosperity, the Mfengu, according to his son, "confirmed the missionaries' axiom, that to be Christian was to be civilized and to be civilized was to be Christian."⁹

Gadla was evidently a man who could look beyond the jealousies and petty resentments which the rest of the Xhosa harbored against the Mfengu, and he chose instead to obtain the same privileges for his son. While both he and Nosekeni were illiterate, Gadla recognized that being able to read and write would enable Rolihlahla to pursue the kind of career that was usually only the preserve of children of the Mfengu. He also saw the importance of religion in accomplishing this goal, and while he never converted

to Christianity himself, he had allowed Nosekeni to join the Methodist Church, a decision that was unusual for the kind of patriarchal society in which they lived. Gadla soon permitted his youngest son's baptism into the church as well.

Gadla counted as his friends the Mbekela brothers, George and Ben, who were both educated Methodists. To the brothers, there was something appealing about the young Mandela, something that stood out as they watched him play or herd sheep, or whenever they had a conversation with him. Their intuition about his potential moved them to act, and George Mbekela, who was a school teacher, had a discussion with Nosekeni in which he told her, "Your son is a clever young fellow. He should go to school."¹⁰

This was a pivotal moment for both the Mandela family and for South Africa, as Nosekeni's decision of whether or not to send her son to school would determine which path his life would follow: whether he would grow up to remain in Qunu and carve out a life for himself there as the son of a former chief, or whether he would go to school and learn a trade, stepping out into the wider world of the Eastern Cape, and perhaps the rest of South Africa. Nosekeni decided to bring the matter to Gadla, who, faced with an opening to give his son the kind of future that he had long wished for, immediately realized that Rolihlahla should go to school.¹¹

The school Rolihlahla would attend was situated in Qunu and run by Methodists, whose missionaries Gadla's grandfather, the great King Ngubengcuka – known as the father of the Thembus – had invited into his kingdom in the early nineteenth century. The kingdom, which included Mthatha and Queenstown, and which was occupied by peoples such as the Hlubi, Tshangase and Bhele, had been under threat owing to continual wars between its tribes

and to its many conflicts with Europeans. To prevent any further division between the peoples in his territory, the king decided to allow the missionaries to preach their faith to his people, which he hoped would unite the warring tribes with one another and with the Europeans in the area through a shared respect for a new god and religion.¹²

King Ngubengcuka never adopted Methodism himself, but it seems his descendant, the perceptive Gadla, had inherited his pragmatism. With the assistance and advice of the Mbekela brothers, the young Rolihlahla Mandela was to embark on a new life that would remove him from the rural and traditional one he knew as a member of his father's household and educate him in the ways and beliefs of the Wesleyans. He would become the first member of the Mandela family to attend school, these first steps into a Methodist education determining the path he would eventually take to his unlikely destiny as president of South Africa.

A Methodist Education

IN 1925, ON the day before seven-year-old Rolihlahla Mandela was due to start school, his father, Gadla, took him aside and told him that he had to be properly dressed for the occasion. Until that moment, the boy had only ever worn a blanket wrapped around one shoulder and pinned at the waist.

Rolihlahla's parents could not afford to buy a new school uniform for him. Instead, he watched as his father took a pair of his old trousers and cut them at the knees. When he tried the pants on, the length suited him fine, but they were too wide for him, so Gadla used a piece of string to tighten them at the waist. "I must have been a comical sight," Mandela said, reflecting on the occasion decades later, "but I have never owned a suit I was prouder to wear than my father's cut-off pants."¹

The next day at his school, where all lessons took place in a single room, the boy's introduction to a Methodist education was marked by his teacher, Miss Mdingane, giving him and the rest of her students a Christian first name. For the remainder of his time at school, Rolihlahla would be called Nelson, a name he would go on to wear for the rest of his life. His mother, who had been christened "Fanny" when she became a Christian, pronounced her son's new name as "Nelisile."² "This [acquiring of an English name] was the custom among Africans in those days and was undoubtedly

due to the British bias of our education,” said Mandela. “The education I received was a British education, in which British ideas, British culture, and British institutions, were automatically assumed to be superior. There was no such thing as African culture.”³ This emphasis on British values and superiority would underscore Mandela’s entire Methodist education, and greatly influence his way of thinking and how he perceived the world.

When he was nine years old, Mandela was in his mother’s hut when his father, who had an undiagnosed lung disease, suffered through the last moments of his life. Throughout his illness, he had been taken care of by Nosekeni and his youngest wife, Nodayimani. Now they were forced to watch as Gadla smoked his pipe for one last hour before quietly slipping away.

Before he died, Gadla – who had known that he did not have long to live – had ensured that his youngest son was suitably provided for. He sought help from the acting paramount chief of the Thembu people, Jongintaba Dalindyebo, who had become regent largely due to Gadla’s intervention, and the two men came up with a plan for Mandela’s future. Imploring the regent, Gadla had said: “Sir, I leave my orphan to you to educate. I can see he is progressing and aims high. Teach him and he will respect you.” And Jongintaba, mindful of the fact that he owed Gadla a debt, had promised, “I will take Rolihlahla and educate him.”⁴ With the attainment of this oath, Gadla would have been able to die with the knowledge that he had done everything in his power to give his son a better chance at a successful life. His appeal to the regent said much of his love for the boy.

Following his death, Gadla received a Christian burial, even though he had never converted to Christianity in his lifetime. The

ceremony was the idea of the Methodist Mbekela brothers, the young Mandela's early mentors, and revealed just how much influence they had over the Mandela family. In accordance with traditional rites, a cow was also slaughtered and Gadla was laid to rest in the local cemetery. For the young Nelson Mandela, who had greatly looked up to his father, the death marked a change in how he came to see himself. "I do not remember experiencing great grief so much as feeling cut adrift. Although my mother was the center of my existence, I defined myself through my father. My father's passing changed my whole life in a way that I did not suspect at the time."⁵ One of these changes required Mandela to move away from Qunu to live in the provincial capital of Thembuland, Mqhekezweni, or the Great Place, the home of Jongintaba and his family.

Mandela would have to leave his mother and set out for his new home following a period of mourning for Gadla. The loss of his father was thus not what distressed him the most during this time. "I mourned less for my father than for the world I was leaving behind," he noted. "Qunu was all that I knew, and I loved it in the unconditional way that a child loves his first home. Before we disappeared behind the hills, I turned and looked for what I imagined was the last time at my village."⁶

Nosekeni and her son shared a deep bond, and she, too, must have been greatly saddened about having to part with him, especially so soon after losing her husband. But the regent was not the kind of man whose offer of help could be refused, and in his promise to be a guardian to Mandela, Gadla had secured a great opportunity for his child. Mandela would be brought up in a Christian home and attend school, while still being educated on the traditions and rites of the Thembu by one of the tribe's great leaders. This was a

privilege that Nosekeni could not deny Mandela, and, spiritual as she was, she would have known that her son was in good hands.

On the morning that Mandela was to go and live with Jongintaba, he and Nosekeni set out for the Great Place. They walked for hours, throughout the morning and into the early afternoon, mother and son, up and down hills and on dirty roads, each step taking them further away from Qunu and closer to Mandela's new home and life. Few words passed between them, "But the silence of the heart between mother and child is not a lonely one," observed Mandela. "My mother and I never talked very much, but we did not need to. I never doubted her love or questioned her support."⁷

When the Great Place was finally within their sight, it was like something from a dream to Mandela: "a vision of wealth and order beyond my imagination," he remembered. He watched in awe as a Ford V8 drove up to the residence and the men guarding the gates stood up to acknowledge the authority of the driver with the traditional Xhosa salutation for their chiefs, "*Bayethe a-a-a, Jongintaba!*"

When Jongintaba, whose name means "one who looks at the mountains," got out of his car, Mandela was struck by his appearance. "He was a man with a sturdy presence toward whom all eyes gazed. He had a dark complexion and an intelligent face, and he casually shook hands with each of the men beneath the tree, men, who I later discovered, comprised the highest Thembu Court of Justice. This was the regent who was to become my guardian and benefactor for the next decade."⁸

The shy boy, carrying a tin trunk and clothed in a khaki shirt and old khaki shorts held up by a belt made of string, was entranced by the scene, which was unlike any he had witnessed in humble

Qunu. For the first time, Mandela, who had never been able to see his father lead a tribe, could observe the power and authority of a chief, and he felt something deep inside him respond to it:

Until then I had had no thoughts of anything but my own pleasures, no higher ambition than to eat well and become a champion stick-fighter. I had no thought of money, or class or fame, or power. Suddenly a new world opened before me. Children from poor homes often find themselves beguiled by a host of new temptations when suddenly confronted by great wealth. I was no exception. I felt many of my established beliefs and loyalties begin to ebb away. The slender foundation built by my parents began to shake. In that instant, I saw life might hold more for me than being a champion stick-fighter.⁹

When Nosekeni left Mandela with Jongintaba a few days later, a change had already set in for the boy, symbolized by the replacement of his well-worn clothes with a handsome new outfit purchased for him by his guardian. His parting with his mother seemed to lack any emotion, Nosekeni offering no words of wisdom to her son or giving him any goodbye hugs or kisses. “I suspect she did not want me to feel bereft at her departure and was matter-of-fact,” Mandela said. “I knew that my father had wanted me to be educated and prepared for a wide world, and I could not do that at Qunu. Her tender look was all the affection and support I needed.”¹⁰

However, just as Nosekeni left to return to her own world – her son’s former home – she betrayed some of the emotion she must have been feeling when she suddenly turned to Mandela and said: “*Uqinisufoktho Kwedini*” (Brace yourself, boy).¹¹ Mandela, excited

about what was waiting for him in the Great Place, would find all the motivation he needed in Nosekeni's parting words to face the unknown future that lay ahead of him.

At the Great Place, Mandela made friends with the regent's two children – Justice, Jongintaba's only son and heir, and Jongintaba's daughter, Nomafu. Four years older than the introverted Mandela, Justice was tall, handsome and outgoing, and was popular with girls. He became Mandela's new hero after the loss of Gadla, and would play a mentoring role in the impressionable boy's life.

Mandela's first school in Mqhekezweni was next door to the palace. His teachers, Mr. Fadana and, later, Mr. Giqwa, both took a keen interest in the newcomer, who excelled at his lessons through perseverance rather than any particular brilliance.

Jongintaba in the meantime was working on a plan that would ensure that Gadla Mandela's son lived up to his full potential. Jongintaba was adamant that Mandela would not become a migrant worker who would in adulthood join the annual exodus of hundreds of young men from Transkei to Johannesburg to work underground in South Africa's gold mines. Nor was he going to become another one of the millions of illiterate black South Africans who were reduced to working as cheap labor in a white-run economy. "It is not for you to spend your life mining the white man's gold, never knowing how to write your name," Jongintaba told his charge as often as he could.¹²

To Jongintaba's mind, Mandela's destiny was to become a royal counsellor, and there was no place where he could better prepare for this role than the Great Place. There was also no one more equipped or with better authority to guide him towards this destiny than the

regent himself, who knew much about culture and religion, the two principles that would govern Mandela's education at the Great Place. In this world where Mandela would have to enforce traditional justice as a royal counsellor while still assimilating the tenets of Christianity – which espoused as their primary values forgiveness and loving your neighbor as yourself – religion and tradition occupied equally important roles, although their relationship with each other could be rather fraught. In order to carry out his duties as both a Methodist and a member of the Thembu tribe, the young Mandela would therefore have to learn how to accord the required amount of respect and devotion to each of these forces in his life without neglecting one in favor of the other.

Before moving to the Great Place, Mandela had only been to church once, when he had been baptized at the Methodist church in Qunu. In his father's home, he had indulged in religion merely for his mother's sake, and had thought of it as simply a ritual.¹³ At the Great Place, however, the church and Christianity played a central role in family life. Jongintaba and his wife, No-England, who treated Mandela as if he were her own child, were serious about their family regularly attending the mission church, a legacy of William Shaw's work in the area in the early nineteenth century. On church days, men would dress in suits, and women, complying with the missionary-favored dress code, wore long skirts and high-necked blouses, scarves around their necks and blankets draped over their shoulders.¹⁴

The young Nelson Mandela was expected to join the family in church every Sunday without fail, and it was here, in the figure of the mission church's leader, Reverend Matyolo, that he began to witness the power of another, very different type of authority from

what he had encountered before. A stout man in his mid-fifties, with a resonant voice that regularly preached fire and brimstone in his sermons, Matyolo was as popular and beloved in Mqhekezweni as the regent. In the reverend's view, God was wise, omnipotent and vengeful, and did not let bad deeds go unpunished – ideas which made a powerful impression on the young Mandela. “For me,” Mandela said, “Christianity was not so much a system of beliefs as it was the powerful creed of a single man: Reverend Matyolo. For me, his powerful presence embodied all that was alluring in Christianity.... But the Church was as concerned with this world as the next: I saw that virtually all of the achievements of Africans seemed to have come about through the missionary work of the Church.”¹⁵

But even with this awareness of the reverend's authority, Mandela still found the courage to steal some maize from his garden, which he then roasted on the spot. Unfortunately, someone witnessed the deed and reported him to the minister. At prayer time that evening, a daily ritual in the Dalindyebo residence, No-England chastized Mandela for stealing from a servant of God and shaming the family.¹⁶ It seems that Mandela was pushing and crossing boundaries even as a boy.

In 1934, when Mandela was sixteen years old, he was compelled to participate in another ritual: the traditional Xhosa rite of circumcision. Jongintaba might have headed a Christian household, but there were some traditions that had to be followed if a Xhosa male was to be respected and thought of as wise among the Thembu – and, above all, if he was to be considered a man. Without undertaking this passage from boyhood, no uncircumcised Xhosa male could become his father's heir, or marry or officiate at tribal rituals.

“For the Xhosa people,” Mandela said of this momentous occasion in his life, “circumcision represents the formal incorporation of males into society. It is not just a surgical procedure, but a lengthy and elaborate ritual in preparation for manhood. As a Xhosa, I count my years as a man from the date of my circumcision.”¹⁷

In spite of the devout Christian beliefs held by Jongintaba and many other Xhosa people in Thembuland, circumcision still endured as a powerful means of conveying a boy’s journey to manhood.

There were twenty-six boys in Mandela’s circumcision school, which was situated in a valley on the banks of the Mbashe River. Their circumcision was performed by a respected *ingcibi*, or circumcision expert, who used his assegai to remove the foreskin during the procedure. Mandela watched as the *ingcibi* carried out the first circumcision. The boy shouted out afterwards, “*Ndiyindoda!*” (I am a man!), the traditional cry of initiates following their circumcision. It was Justice’s turn next. Of his own experience before the *ingcibi*, Mandela remembered:

There were now two boys before the *ingcibi* reached me, and my mind must have gone blank because before I knew it, the old man was kneeling in front of me. I looked directly into his eyes. He was pale, and though the day was cold, his face was shining with perspiration. Without a word, he took my foreskin, pulled it forward, and then, in a single motion, brought down his assegai. I felt as if fire was shooting through my veins; the pain was so intense that I buried my chin in my chest. Many seconds seemed to pass before I remembered the cry, and then I recovered and called out “*Ndiyindoda.*”¹⁸

Mandela was growing into a man of wisdom, undergoing the traditional but painful rite of circumcision while also learning to become a devout Christian through his regular attendance of church and his schooling.

In the same year that he was circumcised, Mandela began high school at Clarkebury, which was situated in the district of Engcobo, the core of a Methodist network of forty-two outstation schools in Thembuland. Clarkebury had a good reputation and was home to a teacher's college and a training institute for tradesmen such as carpenters, shoemakers and printers. For the Thembu people, the Clarkebury mission station held a particular significance because it stood as a reminder of Mandela's great-grandfather, King Ngu-bengcuka, who had promised William Shaw land on which to start a mission station. That land became Clarkebury, founded in 1825 by Reverend Richard Hadley and named after the British theologian, Dr. Adam Clarke.¹⁹

Jongintaba, a Clarkebury Old Boy like his son Justice, drove Mandela to the school on his first day in his Ford V8, but not before he had slaughtered a sheep to celebrate the boy's promotion from Standard Five to high school. This was the first party that was thrown in honor of Mandela's achievements. He also received his first pair of boots from the regent, which, despite being brand new, he proudly polished to wear on his first day at school.

During the drive, Jongintaba spoke to Mandela about responsibility, honor and reverence for the family name, just as a father speaks to his son before a significant event in the latter's life. Jongintaba urged his young charge to behave in a manner that brought respect to him as well as to his brother, future king Sabata Dalindyebo, and Mandela assured Jongintaba that he would not

let him down. During the conversation, Jongintaba also explained what Mandela's future role in Thembu society would be, and since this would be brought about by Jongintaba's tutelage, Mandela could be assured of his importance among the Thembu people. The regent explained that when Sabata was older, he would also be put in the care of the Clarkebury headmaster, Reverend Cecil Harris, whom Jongintaba admiringly described as a white Thembu. Reverend Harris would help train Sabata to become a Christian and traditional leader, so it was crucial that Mandela make the best of his education at Clarkebury under the reverend's guidance. "He said I must learn from Reverend Harris because I was destined to guide the leader that Reverend Harris was to mold," Mandela recalled.²⁰

When they arrived at Clarkebury, Jongintaba led Mandela – who at this point in his life had had very few interactions with white people – to Reverend Harris, who shook his hand. It was the first time that he had been greeted in such a way by a white man. Mandela was told that he would receive no special or preferential treatment at the school, although he might have assumed that his connection with King Ngubengcuka, who had played such a pivotal role in the spread of Methodism in Clarkebury, would give him some leverage there.

Mandela spent three years at Clarkebury before transferring, when he was nineteen years old, to another prestigious Methodist institution, the Wesleyan college of Healdtown. Established in Fort Beaufort in 1855, Healdtown was even more impressive than Clarkebury, boasting more than 4,000 male and female students and offering a Christian and liberal arts education based on the English model. Colonial buildings covered in ivy emphasized that

this was a place where the African elite was being educated to become “black Englishmen as we were sometimes derisively called. We were taught – and believed – that the best ideas were English ideas, the best government was English government, and the best men were Englishmen,” Mandela said of the learning environment at the school.²¹

Sunday was the day of the week when the influence of British imperialism was on full display at Healdtown: boys and girls, dressed in white shirts, black blazers and maroon and gold ties, would march to the church, where the Union Jack was raised and the school brass band played as the students sang “God Save the King” and “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika.”²² Yet it was at this same breeding ground where young black people were taught to assimilate the ideals of a foreign civilization that Mandela found himself parting with the rather parochial view of life he had held until then, and the wider idea of his African identity began to assert itself. His Xhosa identity continued to maintain a profound place in his mind as well, and he would go on to see himself as being proudly Xhosa first and African second.

In his final year at Healdtown, in 1939, Xhosa poet and *imbongi* (praise-singer) Krune Mqhayi paid a visit to the school – an occasion that further fueled Mandela’s interest in his native culture. The *imbongi*’s songs, which predicted that black Africans would one day rise up against the interlopers in their land and achieve their freedom, touched and stirred the Xhosa heart beating in Mandela’s breast: “Now, come you, O House of Xhosa, I give unto you the most important and transcendent star, the Morning Star, for you are a proud and powerful people. It is the star for counting the years – the years of manhood,” Mqhayi chanted. These words

rooted themselves firmly in Mandela's mind and helped to feed the freedom fighter within him for many years to come.²³

At Healdtown, Mandela also witnessed another first when Reverend Seth Mokitimi, the house master of his dormitory, stood up to a white man's attempts to intimidate him.

Dr. Arthur Wellington, the stuffy English principal at Healdtown who ruled imperiously over the school and habitually bullied his staff, had decided to intervene one night during a dispute between two prefects over which Reverend Mokitimi was mediating. Mokitimi had been handling the affair very capably before Dr. Wellington arrived at the scene, behaving, Mandela recalled, "as if God had descended to solve our humble problem."²⁴

A group of boys, which included among their number Nelson Mandela – by this time long accustomed to seeing white people abuse their power over black people – watched keenly as Dr. Wellington demanded to know of Reverend Mokitimi what was going on between the two boys.

If they had been expecting Mokitimi to cower before his taller, white boss, they were mistaken. Speaking calmly and respectfully, Mokitimi assured Dr. Wellington that the situation was under control and that he would give the principal a rundown of events the next day. When Dr. Wellington insisted that he wanted to know what the issue was right then and there, Mokitimi maintained his earlier stance: "Dr. Wellington, I am the housemaster and I have told you that I will report to you tomorrow, and that is what I will do."

The boys in the dormitory, including Mandela, were stunned. "We had never seen anyone, much less a black man, stand up to Dr. Wellington, and we waited for an explosion," Mandela said.²⁵

But the blow-up never came. Dr. Wellington simply said, "Very well," and exited the dormitory.

The incident left a lasting impression on Mandela, as would the courageous figure of Reverend Mokitimi, who would go on to become the first black president of the Methodist Church in South Africa in 1963. In standing up to his white superior, the reverend had in an instant transformed the way that Mandela perceived black and white relations. No longer would he acknowledge Dr. Wellington as the god which the principal had previously portrayed himself to be, nor would the Reverend Mokitimi be regarded as a mere lackey. To prove his worth in society, a black man did not have to automatically defer to white people, no matter how highly ranked they were.

It was the second time in his life that Mandela had seen the influence that men of the cloth could exercise over others, having witnessed it before as a boy during Reverend Matyolo's church services. And it was just the beginning of his contact with the quiet power and authority that religious leaders commanded.

3

The Runaway

IN 1939, THE year Europe went to war, twenty-one-year-old Nelson Mandela arrived at the University College of Fort Hare as one of a group of 150 black students.

These students formed part of the elite in a world where black people were lucky to learn how to read and write, never mind receive a tertiary education. And yet even the potential success of this fortunate group of students would be tempered by the inequalities of the time, given that their university education would typically only take them as far as the civil service. Groomed as Mandela was for success, the most he could probably hope to do at this stage in his life, even with a university degree, was to work as a clerk or an interpreter at the Native Affairs Department.

Fort Hare had been a church-driven project, its governing council comprised of representatives from the Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian churches. Situated under the Amatola Mountains on the banks of the Tyhume River, it was built on land donated by the United Free Church of Scotland and opened in 1916.¹ By the time Mandela attended the college, it had established a reputation as an institution promoting strong Christian values among its students. Mandela actively participated in this religious environment, joining the Student Christian Association and teaching Bible classes on Sundays in the villages surrounding Fort Hare.² The kinds of minds

that were cultivated at the university at this time can be seen in the number of freedom fighters who form part of its alumni, including, in addition to Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Robert Mugabe, Seretse Khama, Dennis Brutus, Govan Mbeki and Robert Sobukwe.

The principal of the college, Dr. Alexander Kerr, was passionate about the English language, and he stoked in Mandela's mind an appreciation of English poetry. Decades after he had left Fort Hare, Mandela could still recite verses from poems that had inspired him during his studies at the college. One of his favorites was Alfred Lord Tennyson's "In Memoriam A.H.H.":

Strong Son of God, immortal Love
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove....³

Later in his life, Mandela expressed his gratitude to missionaries for furthering the knowledge of black Africans through the educational institutions they had established in the Eastern Cape: "Our generation was produced by Christian schools, by missionary schools ... when the government took no interest whatsoever in our education. It was the missionary that piloted black education.... So Christianity is really in our blood."⁴

Fort Hare, in particular, greatly influenced the social, intellectual and political development of the young Mandela, whose interactions in the worldly atmosphere of the university were far removed from the kinds he had experienced in rural Qunu. "Fort Hare's worldliness may not seem much, but to a country boy like myself, it was a revelation," he said.⁵ During his time at Fort Hare, Mandela

met and socialized with black individuals from other parts of South Africa and from further afield, and such encounters made an impact on the way he thought about the world. In this way, he was given the opportunity to assimilate ideas and engage in conversations or debates that were not limited by a purely religious or cultural rhetoric. It was also at the university that he was introduced to the kind of lifestyle that those living outside of rural areas generally took for granted. At Fort Hare, Mandela wore pajamas for the first time, persevering in sleeping in them every night, even though he found them initially uncomfortable. He also swapped the ash he had been using to brush his teeth for toothpaste, and replaced the blue detergent with which he usually washed himself with soap.

There were a number of extracurricular activities he took up as well, such as boxing and ballroom dancing, the mastery of which was considered an accomplishment by the aspiring young elite at Fort Hare. The dining hall became his training ground, where he would practice the foxtrot and the waltz in an attempt to emulate the moves of world ballroom-dancing champion Victor Silvester.⁶

On one evening, Mandela's love for dance nearly got him into a lot of trouble when he decided, in the hope of trying out his moves on an actual dance floor, to visit a dance hall that was usually out of bounds for undergraduates, although popular with the educated elite. Full of bravado, he requested a dance from a young woman, who, while in his arms, revealed that her name was Mrs. Bokwe. Mandela was horrified. Mrs. Bokwe was the wife of the respected and highly esteemed Dr. Roseberry Bokwe, the brother-in-law of one of Mandela's professors, Z.K. Matthews, who just happened to be in charge of university discipline. As soon as he could, Mandela apologized to Mrs. Bokwe and stole off. He had broken

a number of university regulations, but, to his relief, Professor Matthews never mentioned anything of the indiscretion to him.

This was just one of the many new and exciting exploits that were made available to the young man from Qunu by his university education. He would go on to join the Dramatic Society, learn how to box, and train in cross-country racing, an activity that impressed on him how a combination of dedicated exercise, discipline and diligence could count for more than natural ability. It was a value that he would apply to his work for the rest of his life. Many of the activities in which Mandela participated at Fort Hare were fun, too, and, having looked at things from a rather serious point of view before then – his nickname in the Great Place was *tatomkhulu*, or “Grandpa”, because of his somber bearing – he learned to take things less seriously and to start enjoying his youth.

At Fort Hare, Mandela found a new mentor in his nephew, Kaiser Matanzima, who was three years older than him and a third-year student. The two men had initially bonded over their familial connection, but soon the tall and confident Matanzima became one of Mandela’s closest friends, sharing a number of interests with his younger relative in spite of the latter’s lack of worldly experience. Methodism was one of the things that united them, and they regularly attended church together. Matanzima eventually arranged for Mandela to move into the Methodist residence in which he stayed at Fort Hare: Wesley House, a two-story building with room for sixteen beds. He also shared his allowance with Mandela, and introduced him to football. Matanzima would go on to become the first Xhosa chief to obtain a university degree, which indicates how ambitious and serious he was – traits that probably appealed to the impressionable young Mandela. The two

were inseparable at Fort Hare, as Matanzima would later fondly recall: “When someone saw me alone, they would ask ‘Where’s Nelson?’ ... We had warm hearts together.”⁷

The university was also the place where Mandela forged his first political connections, some of which would endure even during the turbulent years of the struggle against apartheid. One of these was Oliver Tambo, who, like Mandela, would go on to lead the ANC. At Fort Hare, Tambo became a close friend of Mandela and Matanzima, although he resided at the college’s Anglican hostel, Beda Hall, which was regarded as the most imposing residence on campus. Tambo was a more somber man than Mandela, but as a fellow Sunday-school teacher and member of the Student Christian Association, he shared Mandela’s commitment to promoting the Christian faith among the Eastern Cape’s youth. In fact, Tambo was such a devout Christian that he considered becoming an Anglican minister before his political obligations got in the way of this ambition.⁸ Tambo and Mandela are examples of the kind of free-thinking and revolutionary individuals that religious schools and universities helped to mold in a period of South African history when most black people struggled to receive a proper education.

Mandela’s friendship with Tambo would grow stronger through the years, “into an enduring partnership that found firm expression in politics, law and life,” according to Tambo. But the same could not be said of their relationship with Matanzima, who came to be viewed by both men as a traitor to the anti-apartheid struggle following the support he gave to the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951, when he was chief of the “emigrant Thembus,” a subgroup of the Thembu tribe. The Act, which the apartheid government claimed would bring about the self-determination of South African tribes

through the creation of a federation of black states, naturally undermined the goal of freedom for black South Africans which Mandela, Tambo and the rest of the ANC were advancing. Tambo was particularly disdainful of Matanzima's choice, claiming that "Kaizer Matanzima was to become a political disaster for the victims of what became known as apartheid, and was a great gift to the strategists for the permanent European domination in South Africa. His contribution to the consolidation and survival of apartheid was to prove greater than any other black man."⁹ That his erstwhile mentor and role model became a major supporter of the National Party's dream of separate development, essentially stripping him and millions of other black people of their South African citizenship, disappointed and hurt Mandela.

During his time at Fort Hare, and even while he became more of a sophisticate, Mandela never lost sight of the fact that the love and sacrifices of others were what had allowed him to obtain the opportunities that had been made available to him. He might have been raised by the regent and his wife in the comfort of the Great Place, but a large portion of Mandela's loyalty and affection still belonged to his mother. She had always been the spiritual beacon in Mandela's life, the person whose Christian counsel, as described by writer and political activist Fatima Meer, was embedded in his "consciousness in spite of other ideological strains that enter it."¹⁰ Indeed, Nosekeni's devotion to the Christian faith was an anchor of stability in what would be an otherwise turbulent existence for Mandela, and it helped to remind him of who had fed his spiritual beliefs and had brought about his education at Methodist institutions. He felt a deep gratitude to her for the role she had played in the formation of his religious identity, and, because of this and

everything else she had done for him, he never lost the desire to improve her life and to make up for what she had lost when Gadla's chieftdom was taken away. In his second year at Fort Hare, in 1940, he therefore attacked his studies with renewed vigor, his eyes fixed on October when he would write his finals and be rewarded with a university degree – his passport to financial success and to restoring Nosekeni's wealth and prestige. "I would build her a proper home in Qunu, with a garden and modern furniture and fittings," Mandela remembered thinking at the time. "I would support her and my sisters so that they could afford the things that they had so long been denied. This was my dream and it seemed within reach."¹¹

But Mandela's upward mobility in student politics would defer this dream. When students at Fort Hare called for a boycott of elections for the Students' Representative Council (SRC) to express their dissatisfaction with the quality of the food being served to them, Mandela, a candidate in the election, gave his support to the boycott. Some students still went ahead and voted, and Mandela was elected. However, he and the five other elected SRC members resigned as they allegedly did not enjoy the support of the majority. They were outmaneuvered, however, when Fort Hare called for new elections and they found themselves re-elected. Mandela, who could not accept this result, resigned, but his five co-members did not – a decision which prompted Dr. Alexander Kerr to threaten Mandela with expulsion if he would not withdraw his resignation. Mandela agonized over what to do, but he eventually took Matanzima's counsel to not change his mind, and told Dr. Kerr the next day that he would not compromise on his decision to leave the SRC. Dr. Kerr advised that he think over this decision during the summer

holidays and return to university the following year only if he was prepared to be on the SRC.

When Mandela returned to the Great Place to inform Jongintaba of what had happened, he found an unsympathetic ear in his mentor, who instructed Mandela to return to Fort Hare in autumn. No further discussions would be brooked by the regent.

However, it was not Mandela's resistance to serving on the SRC that would take him away from Fort Hare, but rather Jongintaba's plans for his future. The regent had been ill for some time, and fearing that he would not be alive for much longer, he had made arrangements, without Mandela's or Justice's knowledge, for them to marry two women from the Thembu tribe. What is more, the woman Jongintaba had found for Mandela was actually in a relationship with Justice, who was in love with her. Mandela had no feelings for his fiancée at all, so he attempted to wiggle out of the engagement, approaching No-England, whom he referred to as the Queen, with an offer to return to Fort Hare, where he would complete his studies and only then find another woman, approved of by the regent, to marry. No-England agreed with the plan, but Jongintaba would not entertain the idea and insisted that Mandela go through with the marriage he had already arranged for him.

The regent, however, no longer had the same hold over Mandela that he had possessed before. Schools such as Clarkebury and Fort Hare had exposed Mandela to different kinds of people with different ideas and cultures from his own, and he was not the same naive boy who had been so awestruck by the regent's power when he had first arrived at the Great Place. His education, albeit under the watchful and at times severe scrutiny of institutions that advanced religious dogma, had helped to make him an independent

thinker who could decide for himself what was good for him. And marrying a woman who his friend was in love with, and with whom he was not, ultimately went against what he believed to be right. He chose not to submit to the regent's demands, valuing his loyalty to Justice above his ties to tradition, and he decided to leave the Great Place. Justice chose to do the same.

The decision naturally grieved Mandela, who, in running away from the Great Place to Johannesburg, would effectively be terminating Jongintaba's guardianship over him. He was not only openly defying the conventions of his people, but he had even gone so far as to convince the regent's son to do so, too. The rebel in Mandela, rather than the royal counsellor, had finally revealed himself. For the rest of his life after making this choice, Mandela would continue to value personal freedom above any system of belief that required blind submission from its followers. This aspect of his character would show itself most evidently in his political career and the commitment he showed to his future political party, the ANC.

Politics, Before Anything Else

IT WAS AT a place where the regent swore Nelson Mandela would never work that the young man found his first job in Johannesburg after moving to the city in 1941. Crown Mines, the biggest gold mine in Johannesburg, had lured thousands of migrants from rural areas throughout South Africa to work underground as cheap, exploited labor – and now it seemed that Jongintaba’s adopted son had also been taken in by the mines’ false promises.

Mandela, however, did not work underground during his time at Crown Mines. The former university student, who had herded animals as a boy in Qunu, was a night watchman at the company, standing guard at the compound’s entrance to ensure that only those who were authorized could enter. It was a job that would have been unworthy for someone of Mandela’s status back in Thembuland, a man who had been raised to counsel Xhosa leaders.

Justice, the son of the Thembu regent, also worked at Crown Mines as a security guard. He and Mandela had found their jobs through the mine’s chief *induna* or headman, Piliso, who had to be convinced by the two young men that the regent approved of them working there – the first of many lies they would tell when they initially arrived in Johannesburg. Mandela and Justice twisted their story in a way that made it at least half true, using the fact that Jongintaba had previously written to Piliso to arrange for Justice

to get a clerical job in Johannesburg as their reason for needing work in the city now. When Piliso voiced his doubt about this, Justice assured him, with another lie, that a letter from the regent explaining Mandela's presence was on its way. Eventually, after plying Piliso with falsehoods, Mandela and Justice persuaded him to help them. They were soon caught out, however, when they were heard boasting about their trickery to one of the men who worked underground. The truth reached Piliso who, incensed, castigated them before ordering them to leave the mine.¹ Mandela and Justice were humiliated, as well as destitute, as they had no place to stay and no job prospects.

They eventually found refuge in the home of Mandela's cousin, Garlick Mbekeni, who performed an even bigger act of kindness when he introduced Mandela to a man he described as "one of our best people in Johannesburg."² This man's name was Walter Sisulu, and he, along with Oliver Tambo, would join Mandela's ranks as one of South Africa's foremost freedom fighters. By the time he met Mandela, Sisulu had already distinguished himself in Johannesburg as an estate agent, prominent businessman and local leader. He was also the illegitimate son of a white magistrate, Albert Dickenson, who later became a judge at the Johannesburg Supreme Court.³

An urbane and confident young man, Sisulu was proficient in English, and was able to give Mandela the impression that he was a university graduate. He only grew in Mandela's estimation when Mandela learned later that Sisulu had not advanced past Standard Six at school. The success Sisulu enjoyed, despite his lack of education, would alter Mandela's belief that having a Bachelor of Arts degree was one of the hallmarks of a leader. Having witnessed so many kinds of leaders in the period before he moved to Johannesburg –

in Jongintaba's household, at school and at church – Mandela had been under the impression that having an education was the only way he could become a leader himself. However, through Walter Sisulu's example, Mandela learned, again, that ideas, no matter how entrenched, could be questioned and even overturned.

Mandela also impressed Sisulu. His dignified bearing, royal connections and ambition made Sisulu realize that he was, in his own words, in the presence of “a bright young man with high ideals.”⁴

Sisulu listened as Mandela, leaving out his reasons for absconding from the Great Place, spoke of why he had not completed his education at Fort Hare and about his plans to be a lawyer, which he would achieve by studying for a degree through the University of South Africa (UNISA) via correspondence. He hoped that studying law would provide him with the skills to fight for justice for black South Africans. It was clear by now that the fire the missionary schools had ignited in Mandela to become a useful member of society was burning more intensely in Johannesburg.

Sisulu promised Mandela that he would speak to a white lawyer, Lazer Sidelsky – whose firm, Witkin, Sidelsky and Eidelman, was one of the biggest in Johannesburg – about career opportunities for his new friend. Sidelsky was able to find a position for Mandela at his firm as a clerk, for which Mandela would earn two pounds a month. The young Jewish lawyer proved to be a good employer when, in 1942, after Mandela had completed his BA degree and was articled, he upped his salary to eight pounds a month. The pay was the same as that received by black factory workers, but for Mandela it was nonetheless a huge sum of money. In later years, Mandela would remember Sidelsky as “the first white man to treat me as a human being.” In fact, Sidelsky would become very much

like an older brother to Mandela, giving him one of his old suits and a shirt to wear to work, as well as a loan of fifty pounds to help him buy food and other essentials when he first began working at the law firm.⁵ Such acts of kindness from men like Sidelsky, who at the time were not obligated or expected to assist black people in any way, helped to shape Mandela's view – one that would survive even when he was an old man in prison – that good could be found in any kind of person, from any racial background or faith. Mandela's natural ability to draw in many types of people with his charm also worked on Sidelsky, who remembered him as being “conscientious, never dubious, tidy in person and in mind.”⁶

In helping to get Mandela settled in Johannesburg, Sisulu had disobeyed an instruction given to him by the then president of the ANC, Dr. A.B. Xuma, a migrant from the Transkei and an old friend of Jongintaba, who had explained to Sisulu why Mandela and Justice had fled to Johannesburg. Because of the disobedience they had displayed towards the regent, Xuma urged Sisulu not to help Justice or Mandela in their pursuits in Johannesburg. However, despite the rift that had formed between Jongintaba and Mandela, reconciliation between the two men would take place in 1941 when the ailing regent, while visiting Johannesburg, sent a message to his former ward inviting him to come and see him. It was not a request that could be refused, even if Mandela was nervous about coming face to face with the man who had raised him as a son, and whom he had betrayed when he had left his house. However, when he finally encountered his former guardian, he found a somewhat mellowed old man who did not mention Fort Hare or the arranged marriage. “He was courteous and solicitous, questioning me in a fatherly way about my studies and future plans,” Mandela said.

“He recognized that my life was starting in earnest and would take a different course from the one he had envisaged and planned for me. He did not try and dissuade me from my course, and I was grateful for this implicit acknowledgement that he was no longer in charge.”⁷

Jongintaba had raised Mandela in a strict Christian household, and in his ability to forgive his adopted son, he proved himself to be a good and devout Christian who prized forgiveness and reconciliation – traits which Mandela would adopt in later life in his dealings with apartheid injustices. For Mandela, this was an important meeting, as it freed him from the guilt he had been feeling for so long about leaving his home, and helped to restore his regard for the Thembu royal house. It also allowed him to continue pursuing a new path in life. “I had become indifferent to my old connections, an attitude I had adopted in part to justify my flight and somehow alleviate the pain of my separation from a world I loved and valued. It was reassuring to be back in the Regent’s warm embrace,” Mandela later confessed about the encounter.⁸

Jongintaba had reconciled with Mandela, but he still hoped that Justice would return with him to the Transkei to take up his royal duties. Mandela, however, was unable to persuade Justice to leave Johannesburg. Neither Justice nor Mandela would see Jongintaba alive again, as the regent died six months after his Johannesburg visit.

In the same year, 1941, Mandela moved to the overcrowded, squalid slum of Alexandra, which seemed to have no shortage of *shebeens* or gangsters. Residents of the township referred to it as Dark City because it had no electricity. But to Mandela, it was his own version

of heaven, an urban Promised Land where life constantly hung in the balance even while opportunities were never far away. It was in Alexandra where Mandela found his first home away from his old life and, as a result, the township always held a special place in his heart.⁹

His address was 46 Eighth Avenue, where he lodged with a fellow Thembu and family friend, Reverend J. Mabutho, a minister in the Anglican Church. Mandela chose to withhold his reasons for leaving the Transkei when he went to live with the reverend. As many of his elders would have thought his conduct dishonorable, Mandela found it easier to omit certain facts in his account of why he was in Johannesburg. Also, confessing what he had done to a religious leader was an intimidating prospect, and he would have been worried about being viewed as unreliable and a liar by a representative of the Christian church. He was nevertheless caught out in his lie when a visitor to the house recognized him and mentioned the Crown Mines affair. The next day, Reverend Mabutho asked Mandela to leave his house. However, fervent Christian that he was, the reverend did not entirely abandon Mandela, arranging for him to move into a room in 46 Seventh Avenue with the Xhoma family. Situated at the back of the property, the sparse room with its dirt floor and tin roof had been built by the Xhomas merely as a means of earning an extra income, and it contained no conveniences such as running water or electricity.

At night, Mandela had to study by candlelight and he seldom had anything to eat but a mouthful of food or the bread or occasional meal the secretaries at his work shared with him. Sundays were his favorite day, as he was allowed to join the Xhoma family for lunch and eat his only hot meal of the week. Food, studies and rent used up all of his wages, and he hardly had any money for

clothes. For the next five years he would wear Mr. Sidelsky's suit to work, and it was not uncommon for him to go without a change of clothing. He also had to walk to work in the morning and home at night on most days. And yet, even while suffering through all of these discomforts, Mandela was happy, because for the first time in his life he had his own place to call home. Christian schools such as Clarkebury and Healdtown might have helped him become acquainted with comforts like beds and pajamas, but living in the harsh, impoverished environment of Alexandra required him to recall the hardships of his childhood before he attended missionary schools, when he had nothing to call his own.

Mandela also found time for romance during this period. He was somewhat awkward and hesitant around women, but when he fell in love with a Swazi woman, Ellen Nkabinde, a friend from his Healdtown days, most of this shyness melted away. They spent whatever free time they had together, often walking in the surrounding veld and hills near Alexandra. Reverend Mabutho's wife, however, was averse to Mandela seeing non-Xhosa women and actively tried to break up their relationship, which ended anyway when Ellen, who had always given Mandela a lot of support and guidance, moved away. Soon after Ellen, Didi, one of the five Xhoma daughters, began to attract his attention, but she had given her heart to her wealthier boyfriend who drove a car and was a far better catch than the poor Mandela.

In spite of all of these romantic complications, Mandela was never distracted from his studies, and in 1942 he passed his final examination for his BA, which distinguished him as the first Mandela with a degree. He was still determined to become a lawyer and, the following year, enrolled as a part-time student at the University of

the Witwatersrand's law faculty, where he was the only African student. It was while he was studying law, in 1944, that he met Evelyn Mase, a beautiful young nurse, at Walter and Albertina Sisulu's house in Orlando, Soweto.

Evelyn was smitten with Mandela from the moment she met him. "I think I loved him the first time I saw him," she said. "The Sisulus had many friends. They were such genial, generous people and Walter had lots of friends who came to their home, but there was something special about Nelson."¹⁰

Mandela was swept off his feet by the quiet twenty-two-year-old from Engcobo. He flirted with her in the Sisulus' living room, and joked that he would visit her at the Non-European General Hospital in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, where she worked. True to his word, Mandela later appeared at the hospital to see her.

Soon they were engaged to be married. However, the couple could not afford a traditional wedding or feast, so they settled on a civil ceremony at the Native Commissioner's Court in Johannesburg as opposed to a church wedding. Both Evelyn, who was a Jehovah's Witness, and Mandela would probably have been upset by this. Mandela would also have been disappointed that he could not afford to have his beloved mother attend the wedding and that it would not be a traditional Xhosa affair, which she would have appreciated. He did not pay *lobola* (a bride price) for Evelyn either. The move to Johannesburg had required many sacrifices, including those related to tradition and religion, yet it had given Mandela independence, too. He was now free to marry whomever he chose, regardless of any constraints. Walter and Albertina Sisulu were the couple's witnesses at their wedding.

The Mandelas had very little money and lived in poverty, something that became a contentious issue in their relationship. A lack of money meant that Mandela could not take Evelyn to Qunu to meet Nosekeni. The couple, like many other black people at the time, also had to deal with the country's housing shortage and struggled to find accommodation, living at first with Evelyn's brother in Orlando East, then with her sister. In 1946, they moved with their one-year-old son, Madiba Thembekile ("Thembi"), into a two-roomed municipal house in Orlando East, and later took possession of a bigger house in Orlando West. Residents mockingly referred to the area as Westcliff, the name of an affluent neighboring area for whites, but there was nothing grand about Orlando West, and the kind of houses built for the residents of the township – the hundreds of identical, tin-roofed units situated on dwarf-like plots with no electricity or toilets, all running along untarred roads – reflected what the white government really thought of them. Nevertheless, Mandela was proud of the home he had found for his family. "It was the very opposite of grand, but it was my first true home of my own and I was mightily proud. A man is not a man until he has a house of his own. I did not know then that it would be the only residence that would be entirely mine for many, many years," Mandela said later in his autobiography.¹¹

But witnessing such poverty on a daily basis, and experiencing it himself, affected Mandela's perceptions of black society. Studying the Bible at school and church meant that he was well aware of the Christian concept that all people were created equally in the eyes of God. Yet this idea did not underpin the law of the supposedly Christian government of the National Party. Mandela just had to step outside his house in Orlando West and take a look at how he

and the rest of South Africa's black population were living to come to terms with the kind of inequality that had produced such living standards. Christianity also promoted learning and schooling among black South Africans, but the white government made a determined effort to keep them uneducated – an effort that would be realized in the Bantu Education Act of 1953, which enforced the creation of segregated education facilities for black people and basically put an end to the missionary schooling from which they had previously benefitted. The poverty that Mandela witnessed every day, as well as the desire his Methodist education had instilled in him to continue to better himself, helped to keep alive his ambitions to complete his university degree and become a lawyer.

In 1947, the Mandelas' second child, Makaziwe, was born. She was a frail baby who required constant nursing, and her parents feared for her health. When she was nine months old, she became ill and died a few days later. "We were heart-broken," Evelyn said of the loss.¹² The death of the baby devastated the Mandela household. Evelyn was distraught, as was Mandela, but he hid his grief so he could give his wife his full support.¹³ This ability to depend on his own, inner strength would become a permanent aspect of Mandela's character, one that he would put to good use throughout the struggle and during the many years he spent in prison. He could always find the motivation to focus on decisions and actions that would prevent despondency and inspire him to move forward. The birth of his and Evelyn's second son, Makgatho, in 1950, probably also contributed to soothing his grief somewhat.

Also in 1947, Mandela completed his articles at Witkin, Sidelsky and Eidelman, and resolved to become a full-time student in the hope that he could one day open his own legal practice. But this

meant he had to quit the firm, which lost him his salary of eight pounds. He took out a loan of 150 pounds, but the financial strain on the family was immense and a constant source of tension in his marriage.

During this time, Mandela became increasingly involved in politics. In 1948 he was elected national secretary of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL), his first official position in the organization, much to Evelyn's consternation. She was unhappy with how much time he spent away from home on ANC business. Thembi had even asked her at one point, "Where does Daddy live?"¹⁴

After 1948, a marked change in the politics of the ANC occurred as the party replaced previous resistance policies of moderation, such as deputations and petitions, with more militant displays of mass mobilization. Some of the activities defining this aspect of the resistance struggle were boycotts and strikes, which found ultimate expression in the Defiance Campaign of 1952. The campaign sought to carry out acts of civil disobedience on a national scale and through non-violent means, which included protesters deliberately breaking apartheid laws they considered unjust or against their civil liberties, and openly inviting arrest. Prior to the launch of the campaign, the ANC and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) had called on protesters to observe April 6, 1952, the day on which white Afrikaners celebrated the tercentenary of Jan van Riebeeck's arrival at the Cape, as "A National Day of Pledge and Prayer."¹⁵ The "prayer" aspect of the protest unequivocally helped to underline the fact that the God invoked by the apartheid government was also the God of the oppressed.

The Defiance Campaign was officially launched on June 26, 1952. Mandela, who by this time had been named president of the

Transvaal branch of the ANC, was made the Defiance Campaign's volunteer-in-chief who would lead the non-violent protests against apartheid laws. The first stage of the campaign maintained this stance of non-aggression, but by November of that year, violence had erupted in areas such as Johannesburg, Kimberley and East London.¹⁶ In the last area, crowds of rioters protesting white oppression engaged in a number of violent acts, including burning down institutions they associated with European rule, such as churches and mission stations. Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, as well as a Catholic mission station, were set on fire by the rioters, with the only thing remaining of the last building "a charred crucifix at the entrance to the school."¹⁷

Albert Luthuli, who was one of the leaders of the Defiance Campaign and who would soon become ANC president, was saddened by the destruction of such places of worship. However, he was not blind to the feelings that motivated the rioters as they targeted these buildings, saying of the damage that was done to the churches:

When a church is burned down, some whites say, "But a *church* – I simply cannot understand it." Others say, "There, you see! They even burn down churches because they are barbarians!" But how far is it not tragically true that these churches have become distorted symbols? How far do they stand for an ethic which the whites have brought, preached, and refused to practice? "You close your eyes obediently to pray," goes the saying, and "when you open them the whites have taken your land and interfered with your women."

How far do these churches represent something alien from the spirit of Christ, a sort of patronizing social service?¹⁸

With these words, Luthuli highlighted the hypocrisy with which the apartheid state used religion and the church to subjugate the black masses, the justification being that Christianity was the preserve of the white race, since all other races were either too barbaric or unworthy to be true believers. Luthuli went further by explaining the pointlessness of such a racialized notion of Christianity, given that the faith's aim has always been to unify its followers in a single system of belief and fellowship.

White paternalist Christianity – as though the whites had invented the Christian Faith – estranges my people from Christ. Hypocrisy, double standards, and the identification of white skins with Christianity, do the same. For myself, for very many of us, nothing short of apostasy would budge us. We know Christianity for what it is, we know it is not a white preserve, we know that many whites – and Africans for that matter – are inferior exponents of what they profess. The faith of Christ persists in spite of them.¹⁹

In his call for “apostasy” of the belief system that helped to sustain ideas of racial inequality in South Africa, Luthuli drew attention to the way in which the ANC’s political focus was evolving, as first indicated in the shift from more restrained acts of resistance to those carried out in the Defiance Campaign. No longer would the ANC allow the white government to dictate to them what was right or wrong in the furthering of their cause against racial injustice and segregation. This was the start of the party’s journey from peaceful protest to the armed struggle – to the idea that the continued infliction of a hypocritical apartheid ideology on the minds and spirits

of black people would have to be met with force. Mandela, who since moving from the sheltered traditional environment of the Great Place had rapidly assimilated political ideas calling for the autonomy and liberty of black Africans, and then of all South Africans, would fully embrace the idea of an armed struggle.

On July 30, 1952, at the height of the Defiance Campaign, Mandela had been part of a group of protesters who were arrested by police. He was charged under the Suppression of Communism Act, and in December of that year he was banned for six months from attending any meetings and leaving Johannesburg, and from talking to more than one person at a time.

The banning order essentially turned Mandela into a prisoner, restricting his movements and cutting him off from the politics that had become his lifeblood. He also experienced first-hand the painful psychological effects of the isolation that this kind of punishment engenders. "Banning not only confines one physically, it imprisons one's spirit," he said. "It induces a kind of psychological claustrophobia that makes one yearn not only for freedom of movement but spiritual escape.... The insidious effects of bans was that at a certain point one began to think that the oppressor was not without but within."²⁰ Luthuli also underlined this capacity of the apartheid state to infiltrate areas of everyday existence, such as religion, in order to impose its ideology on the minds of those over whom it exercised power. A complete oppression of the spirit of the individual was the result of giving in to this form of brainwashing, and was a fate that those who suffered under apartheid had to battle against constantly in order to retain the belief that they were not inferior to the people who were telling them otherwise. Mandela

would have to fight such ideas each time he was persecuted by the state in his struggle for freedom.

In an effort to counteract some of the negative effects of his banning order, he began to work on a plan that would allow banned ANC members to continue to interact with other members of the party without having to meet in public. Such a strategy would also be useful in the event of the ANC becoming a banned party, which was beginning to look like a real possibility.²¹ The plan became known as the M-plan, or the Mandela plan, and it required that the ANC be broken down into cells in order to keep operating underground even if it was declared illegal, taking as its example the procedures that the Methodist Church employed for its church-building and recruitment initiatives. Mandela himself, however, admitted that the M-plan only had a modest success rate in the ANC and was not widely adopted.²² Even so, it is telling that he turned to the church that had helped to nurture his political and spiritual growth during the unhappy period of his banning order, when he longed for “spiritual escape” and the means to continue participating in the struggle.

As miserable as Mandela was in his virtual exile, his neglected wife, usually so starved of his company, welcomed his confinement to their home.²³ By now, Evelyn, despite being married to a man she loved, was suffering from a deep loneliness, and she greatly resented the politics and the political group that were keeping her husband away from her. Perhaps in an attempt to find friends or to detach herself from her troubled home life, she had developed an intense devotion to her Jehovah’s Witness church, which had begun to drive a wedge between her and Mandela. This religious fervor had intensified soon after Makaziwe’s death, and Evelyn, in

her desperation for another daughter, had fallen into the habit of praying for another child. When she eventually became pregnant and gave birth to a girl, also named Makaziwe, in 1954, Evelyn viewed this as a sign from God. “It was then that I began my return to my Christian faith,” she said.²⁴

Thereafter, Evelyn dedicated her life entirely to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, a decision that caused her to clash regularly with her husband over their very different beliefs. At one point she made the almost unforgivable mistake of telling Mandela that her religious faith served a higher purpose than his political ambitions, and she tried to get him to join her church. The couple would draw their children into their squabbles as well, Evelyn taking them to church whenever she could, reading the church’s *Watchtower* magazine to them, and having them distribute church literature in their neighborhood. Mandela’s response was to teach them about politics and to not speak to his wife.²⁵ The kind of Christianity with which he had grown up, and which he had come to admire, had not been about complete submission to authority. Instead, it was a form of empowerment, the only means for many black South Africans to obtain an education or a career other than that of menial labor. He therefore could not and would not share the kind of devotion to religion that Evelyn possessed. “There was an obsessional element to it that put me off,” he remarked about Evelyn’s religious beliefs. “From what I could discern, her faith taught passivity and submissiveness in the face of oppression, something I could not accept. My devotion to the ANC and the struggle was unremitting. This disturbed Evelyn. She always assumed that politics was a youthful diversion, that I would someday return to the Transkei and practice there as a lawyer.”²⁶

Mandela and Evelyn's unyielding positions made a separation inevitable, and Mandela seriously began to consider divorce. "A man and a woman who hold such different views of their respective roles in life cannot remain close," he said. "We were finding no common ground and I was convinced that the marriage was no longer tenable."²⁷

But the ANC had not been the only focus of Mandela's attention during his marriage to Evelyn. In 1952 he had joined up with his friend from Fort Hare and the ANC, Oliver Tambo, to start a law firm in Johannesburg, which they named Mandela and Tambo. Although Mandela did not complete his LLB at Wits, he had received a two-year diploma in law, which, along with his BA degree, allowed him to practice as a lawyer – a career that he loved.²⁸ Mandela relished the moments he spent in the courtroom, where he was allowed to freely engage with white people in defense of his clients without any fear of being punished. His court appearances soon became legendary among Johannesburg's black residents, who found Mandela's exchanges with whites – devoid of the simpering or deference that was usually required from black people in these situations – liberating. He also gained a reputation as a sophisticated and suave man because of the smart suits he wore and the fact that he drove his own car, which was unusual for a black man during this period in South Africa's history. Mandela was clearly very different from the majority of men in his community, and people began to treat him as such, especially women. All of these factors naturally began to affect his behavior as well, and, for a while, politics and the temptations that power and visibility had brought him detracted from his devotion to his wife, contributing to the weakening of their relationship.

Mandela and Evelyn had been living apart since 1952 while she did a course in midwifery in Durban, and by 1953 rumors began to circulate about his infidelity with Lillian Ngoyi from the ANC Women's League. These rumors eventually reached Evelyn: "I could not place my finger on it at first. Nobody would tell me. Then the gossip reached me. Nelson, I was told, was having an affair with a woman member of the ANC. I knew this woman and admired and liked her. She visited us often and I got on well with her. I did not believe the rumor at first, but unable to bear it, I turned to Nelson. Who else could I have turned to? He was angry that I questioned his fidelity."²⁹

In a desperate attempt to rescue her marriage, Evelyn went to Sisulu for help, but this only angered Mandela. She then solicited the help of Kaiser Matanzima, who broke the sad news to her that Mandela no longer loved her. Hurt and angry, Evelyn had an explosive argument with her husband before moving out of their house to live with her brother. Mandela persuaded her to forget the incident and to return home, which she did, but by then too much had happened, and they both knew that their marriage was over. "That chilling, unbearable distance continued. I realized that I had no marriage," she reflected. She moved out of their house again to her nurse's quarters in the hope that her husband would come to his senses and work harder to keep his family together. But Mandela neither messaged nor visited Evelyn at the nurses' home.³⁰

By 1955, Evelyn had given Mandela an ultimatum that he decide with whom his loyalties lay – with her or with the ANC. But she had already reached her own decision about their marriage. On December 5, 1956, Mandela and 155 other political leaders were arrested in a raid and charged with treason. When he returned home

shortly before Christmas, an empty house welcomed him: Evelyn had left with their children and taken everything, even the curtains – a detail that Mandela found “shattering.” He was left with a mere shell of a home, devoid of love or the sounds of children playing and laughing.³¹

Mandela was now free to devote his time entirely to the anti-apartheid struggle. But this had come at a cost. Not only had he compromised certain aspects of his moral character to reach this point in his life, but he had also lost his family as a result.