From Robben Island: the Dark Years

This extract is from an autobiography called Long Walk to Freedom by the former President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela. In the book, Mandela describes his early life and later fight against the South African apartheid regime. He first became involved with the African National Congress (ANC) in 1942, supporting non-violent protest. (1) By 1962, he had been working for the party for more than twenty years. He started to realize that armed struggle was the only way forward and began to use guerrilla tactics. He was arrested in 1963 for political offences and sentenced to life imprisonment. In this passage he describes his time at Robben Island, a maximum security prison for political prisoners. (2) At this point in his life, he had been living in a small prison cell for many years.
A

Time may seem to stand still for those of us in prison, but it did not halt for those outside. I was reminded of this when I was visited by my mother in the spring of 1968. I had not seen her since the end of the Rivonia Trial. Change is gradual and incremental, and when one lives in the midst of one’s family, one rarely notices differences in them. But when one doesn’t see one’s family for many years at a time, the transformation can be striking. My mother suddenly seemed very old.

B

She had journeyed all the way from the Transkei, accompanied by my son Makgatho, my daughter Makaziwe, and my sister Mabel. Because I had four visitors and they had come a great distance, the authorities extended the visiting time from a half an hour to forty-five minutes.

C

I had not seen my son and daughter since before the trial and they had become adults in the interim, growing up without me. I looked at them with amazement and pride. But though they had grown up, I am afraid I still treated them more or less as the children they had been when I went to prison. They may have changed, but I hadn’t.

D

My mother had lost a great deal of weight, which concerned me. Her face appeared haggard. Only my sister Mabel seemed unchanged. While it was a great pleasure to see all of them and to discuss family issues, I was uneasy about my mother’s health.
Several weeks later, after returning from the quarry, I was told to go to the Head Office to collect a telegram. It was from Makgatho, informing me that my mother had died of a heart attack. I immediately made a request to the commanding officer to be permitted to attend her funeral in the Transkei, which he turned down. ‘Mandela,’ he said, ‘while I know you are a man of your word and would not try to escape, I cannot trust your own people, and we fear that they would try to kidnap you.’ It added to my grief that I was not able to bury my mother, which was my responsibility as her eldest child and only son.

Over the next few months I thought about her a great deal. Her life had been far from easy. (3) I had been able to support her when I was practicing as an attorney, but once I went to prison, I was unable to help her. I had never been as attentive as I should have been.

A mother’s death causes a man to look back on and evaluate his own life. Her difficulties, her poverty, made me question once again whether I had taken the right path. That was always the conundrum: Had I made the right choice in putting the people’s welfare even before that of my own family? For a long time, my mother had not understood my commitment to the struggle. My family had not asked for or even wanted to be involved in the struggle, but my involvement penalized them.

But I came back to the same answer. In South Africa, it is hard for a man to ignore the needs of the people, even at the expense of his own family. I had made my choice, and in the end, she had supported it. But that did not lessen the sadness I felt at not being able to make her life more comfortable, or the pain of not being able to lay her to rest.