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| **“Robben Island – The Dark Years”: From Mandela’s Autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*** | |
| We were awakened at 5:30 each morning by the night warder, who clanged a brass bell at the head of our corridor and yelled, "*Word wakker! Staan op!*" (Wake up! Get up!) I have always been an early riser and this hour was not a burden to me. Although we were roused at 5:30, we were not let out of our cells until 6:45, by which time we were meant to have cleaned our cells and rolled up our mats and blankets. We had no running water in our cells and instead of toilets had iron sanitary buckets known as "ballies." The ballies had a diameter of ten inches and a concave porcelain lid on the top that could contain water. The water in this lid was meant to be used for shaving and to clean our hands and faces.  At 6:45, when we were let out of our cells, the first thing we did was to empty our ballies. The ballies had to be thoroughly cleansed in the sinks at the end of the hallway or they created a stench. The only pleasant thing about cleaning one's ballie was that this was the one moment in those early days when we could have a whispered word with our colleagues. The warders did not like to linger when we cleaned them, so it was a chance to talk softly.  During those first few months, breakfast was delivered to us in our cells by prisoners from the general section. Breakfast consisted of mealie pap porridge, cereal made from maize or corn, which the general prisoners would slop in a bowl and then spin through the bars of our cells. It was a clever trick and required a deft hand so as not to spill any of the porridge.  After a few months, breakfast was delivered to us in the courtyard in old metal oil drums. We would help ourselves to pap using simple metal bowls. We each received a mug of what was described as coffee, but which was in fact ground-up maize, baked until it was black, and then brewed with hot water. Later, when we were able to go into the courtyard to serve ourselves, I would go out into the courtyard and jog around the perimeter until breakfast arrived.  Like everything else in prison, diet is discriminatory.  In general, Coloureds and Indians received a slightly better diet than Africans, but it was not much of a distinction. The authorities liked to say that we received a balanced diet; it was indeed balanced--between the unpalatable and the inedible. Food was the source of many of our protests, but in those early days, the warders would say, "Ag, you kaffirs are eating better in prison than you ever ate at home!"  In the midst of breakfast, the guards would yell, "*Val in! Val in!*" (Fall in! Fall in!), and we would stand outside our cells for inspection. Each prisoner was required to have the three buttons of his khaki jacket properly buttoned. We were required to doff our hats as the warder walked by. If our buttons were undone, our hats unremoved, or our cells untidy, we were charged with a violation of the prison code and punished with either solitary confinement or the loss of meals.  After inspection we would work in the courtyard hammering stones until noon. There were no breaks; if we slowed down, the warders would yell at us to speed up. At noon, the bell would clang for lunch and another metal drum of food would be wheeled into the courtyard. For Africans, lunch consisted of boiled mealies, that is, coarse kernels of corn. The Indian and Coloured prisoners received samp, or mealie rice, which consisted of ground mealies in a souplike mixture. The samp was sometimes served with vegetables whereas our mealies were served straight.  For lunch we often received *phuzamandla,* which means "drink of strength," a powder made from mealies and a bit of yeast. It is meant to be stirred into water or milk and when it is thick, it can be tasty, but the prison authorities gave us so little of the powder that it barely colored the water. I would usually try to save my powder for several days until I had enough to make a proper drink, but if the authorities discovered that you were hoarding food, the powder was confiscated and you were punished.  After lunch we worked until four, when the guards blew shrill whistles and we once again lined up to be counted and inspected. We were then permitted half an hour to clean up. The bathroom at the end of our corridor had two seawater showers, a saltwater tap, and three large galvanized metal buckets, which were used as bathtubs. There was no hot water. We would stand or squat in these buckets, soaping ourselves with the brackish water, rinsing off the dust from the day. To wash yourself with cold water when it is cold outside is not pleasant, but we made the best of it. We would sometimes sing while washing, which made the water seem less icy. In those early days, this was one of the only times that we could converse.  Precisely at 4:30, there would be a loud knock on the wooden door at the end of our corridor, which meant that supper had been delivered. Common law prisoners were used to dish out the food to us and we would return to our cells to eat it. We again received mealie pap porridge, sometimes with the odd carrot or piece of cabbage or beetroot thrown in but one usually had to search for it. If we did get a vegetable, we would usually have the same one for weeks on end, until the carrots or cabbage were old and moldy and we were thoroughly sick of them. Every other day, we received a small piece of meat with our porridge. The meat was usually mostly gristle.  For supper, Coloured and Indian prisoners received a quarter loaf of bread (known as a *katkop,* that is, a cat's head, after the shape of the bread) and a slab of margarine. Africans, it was presumed, did not care for bread as it was a "European" type of food.  Typically, we received even less than the meager amounts stipulated in the regulations. This was because the kitchen was rife with smuggling. The cooks - all of whom were common-law prisoners - kept the best food for themselves or their friends. Often they would lay aside the tastiest morsels for the warders in exchange for favors or preferential treatment.  At 8 P.M., the night warder would lock himself in the corridor with us, passing the key through a small hole in the door to another warder outside. The warder would then walk up and down the corridor, ordering us to go to sleep. No cry of "lights out" was ever given on Robben Island because the single mesh-covered bulb in our cell burned day and night. Later, those studying for higher degrees were permitted to read until ten or eleven.  The acoustics along the corridor were quite good, and we would try to chat a bit to each other before going to sleep. But if we could hear a whisper quite clearly, so could the warder, who would yell, *"Stilte in die gang*" (Quiet in the passage!) The warder would walk up and down a few times to make sure we were not reading or writing. After a few months, we would sprinkle a handful of sand along the corridor so that we could hear the warder's footsteps and have time to stop talking or hide any contraband. Only when we were quiet did he take a seat in the small office at the end of the passage where he dozed until morning.   |  |  | | --- | --- | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | | |  |  | | --- | --- | |  | 14 | | | |