



I'm Winnie Winnie Mandela

By Zukiswa Wanner



We were young. We were exiled from a land we left when young or that we were not born in but that we were told was home. South Africa. Our parents were African National Congress (ANC) cadres. We were more politicized than children our age should have been. They had a name for us. Masupatsela. We were the young pioneers of the ANC. In retrospect, this seems a lot like the young pioneers in Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty Four*. Except we would never have told on our parents to The Party for being counter-revolutionary like the fictional Masupatselas in the Orwellian novel. We would, in fact, protect wayward uncles. When our mothers warned us about uncles we should not open gates to in their absence, we complied without questioning why the burden was on us, as children. We were, after all, children.

Enter Winnie Mandela.

For a young girl whose father was an ANC cadre, she was fierce and everything I wanted to be. Why couldn't all South African adults be like her, I wondered. Once, we were informed that she was coming to Zimbabwe. We spent weeks practicing revolutionary songs that we would sing to impress Winnie. Would she hug us? Say words to us?

After all those weeks of practicing, Winnie did not come through. There was some banning orders or other, we were told. Our fierce hatred, as only children can do, towards *amabhunu* intensified. Then, more than at any other time, we sang that Yvonne Chaka Chaka song, "I'm Winnie Winnie,

Mandela.” It would be years into post-apartheid South Africa that I would learn that we had been singing a mondegreen and the actual words and title of the song were “*I’m Winning (My Dear Love)*”. At that time though, I wonder whether we would have cared for the actual lyrics or we would have continued with the lyrics we preferred? We ended up singing all the songs we practiced to the ANC Representative and his friends from different exile organizations like PLO and SWAPO. We respected our representative and his friends but...he was not Winnie. He was just our Uncle Max.

It would be almost 20 years before I would finally first meet Winnie. My friend and Winnie’s friend, the late award-winning photographer, Alf Kumalo was being celebrated for clocking 50 years of freezing memories with a gala dinner hosted by some corporate company. Winnie was the subject of some of Alf’s more memorable photographs during apartheid, it made sense that she would be invited. When Alf first mentioned inviting her, I questioned whether she would come. Sure. They were friends but...she was Winnie Mandela!

Winnie came with her daughter Zindziswa.

She arrived later than the time the programme was due to begin.

I admit to being a little annoyed as I was hungry. But when she arrived, my annoyance melted. This woman, who had been first jailed at the age of 23 while pregnant with her first child; who had been thrown into solitary confinement when her two children were nine and ten; who had been banished far away to the village of Brandfort for years but managed to become a leader of that community...this woman, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela walked in with the genuine smile that lit up the whole room. She had been through so much but in encountering any person during that dinner, she made time for each one.. She listened, she smiled, she teased, she chastised gently and as she talked later of Alf, making him slightly sheepish, she spoke with love and sincerity. How could one who went through so much during apartheid and after apartheid, still be so humane? I learnt then, the importance of cultivating and maintaining friendships. She had, after all, known Alf for the 50 years of his career and still remained his friend. But I would also learn something else on this day. That Winnie Madikizela-Mandela was one of the most approachable people I would encounter. When one reads the diaries of her solitary confinement that is *491 Days*, it’s easy to see how she sometimes ended up meeting apartheid spies who she believed were comrades. She trusted to a fault and was a believer in the goodness of everyone even I, who had been a stranger hours before. On that day in 2005, she ceased being Winnie and became Mam’Winnie to me.

It was a no brainer, therefore, in 2009 when Alf proposed that we co-author the coffee table book *8115: A Prisoner’s Home*. As I worked on the script and captioning of images and needed verification of certain details, Mam’Winnie linked me up with Zindzi to clarify certain items. Sometimes, she said, she did not always remember as well as her daughter who was with her the most. Invited to talk about the book some months after it came out in 2010, the interviewer kept wanting to talk about Nelson. I realised she had not read any of the essays in the book or bothered to flip through and look at the images because the book was more about Winnie than Nelson. It was about the people that went in and out of 8115 Vilakazi Street from 50s until sanctions were lifted and Nelson emerged from prison in 1990. Most of these people were there at the invitation or under the protection of Winnie Mandela. But patriarchy is such that the narrative that suited our interviewer, as it did many, was of Mam’Winnie as Mandela’s wife who was in Mandela’s house and not a human being and a revolutionary in her home.

Immediately after Mam’ Winnie died, they were those who vilified her for a myriad of failings. It was sad and it hurt because anyone who had bothered to read up on her or who had met her, would never have dared to believe some of the stuff said about her. On the night of Wednesday April 11, one of South Africa’s television stations aired the documentary *Winnie*. I wish that it had been aired

while she was alive. I am however glad, that even though she has been laid to rest, the country now knows the Mam'Winnie I was lucky to have a glimpse of that day in 2005. I am happy that my fellow South Africans now know the woman I got to know while researching for a book. And I am relieved that my nomadic self just happens to be home in South Africa during this important time in our history: a time when the country's eyes have been opened to the immense contribution, at personal cost, of one of its patriots. Lalanoxolo, mama wethu. And as you sleep and watch, send a smile my way as I sing unapologetically, "I'm Winnie Winnie Mandela." I am sure sis Yvonne Chaka Chaka will forgive me for it.

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