

PLAYING
THE ENEMY



NELSON MANDELA AND THE GAME
THAT MADE A NATION

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CHAPTER XIX
LOVE THINE ENEMY



"When the game ended," Morné du Plessis said, "I turned and started running towards the tunnel and there was Edward Griffiths, who had invented the 'One Team, One Country' slogan, and he said to me, 'Things are never going to be the same again.' And I agreed instantly, because I knew right there that the best was behind, that life could offer nothing better. I said to him 'We've seen it all today.'"

But Du Plessis was wrong. There was more. There was Mandela going down onto the pitch, with his jersey on, with his cap on his head to hand over the cup to his friend François. And there was the crowd again—"Nelson! Nelson! Nelson!"—entraptured, as Mandela appeared at the touchline, smiling from ear to ear, waving to the crowd, as he prepared to walk toward a little podium that had been placed on the field where he would hand the World Cup trophy to François Pienaar.

Van Zyl Slabbert, the liberal Afrikaner surrounded in the stadium—as he put it—by beer-bellied AWB types, was amazed at the new South African passion of his born-again compatriots. "You should have seen the faces of these Boers all around me. I remember looking at one of

them and there were tears rolling down his face and he kept saying, in Afrikaans, 'That's my president . . . That's my president . . .'

And they applauded with still more tears when Pienaar offered what would be the first of two memorable moments of impromptu eloquence. A reporter from SABC television approached him on the field and asked, 'What did it feel like to have 62,000 fans supporting you here in the stadium?'

Without missing a beat, he replied, 'We didn't have 62,000 fans behind us. We had 43 million South Africans.'

Linga Moonsamy, walking onto the field one step behind Mandela, looked up at the crowd, at the old enemy screaming his leader's name, and he battled to remember that he was working today, that while all those around him were losing their heads, he had to keep his. But he preserved enough professional sangfroid to remember that before the game began he had seen in the right-hand corner of the stadium those old South African flags. So he shot a glance toward that area again. 'But no,' he said, 'those flags were gone now. There were only new South African flags. And the people in that sector of the crowd were crying and hugging, like everybody else. So I let go a little and allowed myself to think how huge this moment was for the country, how I myself had done what I had done when I was younger, had taken risks, had fought for this, never imagining it would express itself on such a scale.'

Tokyo Sexwale, who was there in the stadium, shared Moonsamy's sentiments. 'You sit there and you know that it was worthwhile. All the years in the underground, in the trenches, self-denial, away from home, prison, it was worth it. This was all we wanted to see. And then again, 'Nelson! Nelson! Nelson!' We stood there, and we didn't know what to say. I was proud to be standing next to this man with whom I had spent time in prison. Look how high he is now! And you are just proud, so proud, to have supped with the gods . . .'

The gods at that moment were Mandela and Pienaar, the old man in green, crowned king of all South Africa, handing the cup to Pienaar,

the young man in green, anointed that day as the spiritual head of born-again Afrikanedom.

As the captain held the cup, Mandela put his left hand on his right shoulder, fixed him with a fond gaze, shook his right hand and said, 'François, thank you very much for what you have done for our country.'

Pienaar, meeting Mandela's eyes, replied, 'No, Mr. President. Thank you for what you have done for our country.'

Had he been preparing for this moment all his life, he could not have struck a truer chord. As Desmond Tutu said, 'That response was made in heaven. We human beings do our best, but those words at that moment, well . . . you couldn't have scripted it.'

Maybe a Hollywood scriptwriter would have had them giving each other a hug. It was an impulse Pienaar confessed later that he only barely restrained. Instead the two just looked at each other and laughed. Morné du Plessis, standing close by, looked at Mandela and the Afrikaner prodigal together, he saw Pienaar raise the cup high above his shoulders as Mandela, laughing, pumped his fists in the air, and he struggled to believe what his eyes were seeing. 'I've never seen such complete joy,' Du Plessis said. 'He is looking at François and just, sort of, keeps laughing . . . and François is looking at Mandela and . . . the bond between them!'

It was all too much for the tough-minded Slabbert, hard-nosed veteran of a thousand political battles. 'When François Pienaar said that into the microphone, with Mandela there listening, laughing and waving to the crowd and raising his cap to them, well,' said Slabbert, '*everybody* was weeping. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.'

There wasn't a dry eye in the country. The groot krokodil's old minister of justice and prisons, down in his crowded bar in Cape Town, was sobbing like a child. Kobie Coetsee could not stop thinking back to his

first meeting with Mandela ten years earlier. "It went beyond everything else that had been accomplished. It was the moment my people, his adversaries, embraced Mandela. It was a moment comparable, I felt then, to the creation of the American nation. It was Mandela's greatest achievement. I saw him and Pienaar there and I wept. I said to myself, 'Now it was worth it. All the pain, anything that I have experienced, it was worth it. This endorses the miracle.' That's how I felt."

Far away in dusty Paballelo, Justice Bekebeke felt the same. Five years earlier he had been sitting on Death Row, sent there by one of Coetsee's judges, but that suddenly seemed very remote now. "I was in heaven!" he said.

"When Joel Stransky scored the drop goal the rest of the guys were celebrating and shouting their heads off and so was this Doubling Thomas. I felt 100 percent South African, more South African than I ever had done before. I was as euphoric as everyone else in the room. We were all going absolutely nuts. And after the final whistle blew, after Mandela handed Pienaar the cup, we were running in the streets. So was everybody else in Paballelo. Horns were blaring and the whole town-ship was out dancing, singing, celebrating."

These were the same streets where Bekebeke had killed the policeman who had opened fire on a child; where the riot cops had gone berserk the night before the death sentences were passed on the Uppington 14, clubbing everyone in sight, sending twenty people to the hospital.

"It was unreal. And to imagine that these scenes were being repeated all over black South Africa only five years since Nelson Mandela's release, two since Chris Han's assassination. To have imagined then that I'd be celebrating a victory of the Springboks would have been the most unlikely thing in the world. Yet, looking back, I cannot believe my indifference on that morning of the final, that I did not care. Because there was only one way to describe my feelings now: extreme euphoria."

In Paballelo, in Soweto, in Sharpeville, and a thousand other townships, groups of youths were charging up and down the treeless streets performing their own Haka, the old war dance, the *Toi Toi*. But they weren't defiant now; they were seized by multicolored national pride, celebrating the victory of the AmaBokoBoko.

Reports washed in from the affluent suburbs of Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth, and Johannesburg that white matrons were shedding generations of prejudice and restraint and hugging their black housekeepers, dancing with them on the leafy streets of prim neighborhoods like Houghton. For the first time, the parallel apartheid worlds had merged, the two halves had been made whole, but nowhere more manifestly so than in Johannesburg itself, and especially around Ellis Park, where the Rio carnival met the liberation of Paris in a riot of Springbok green. One old black man stood in the middle of the road outside the stadium waving a South African flag, shouting over and over again, "South Africa is now free. The Boks have made us free, and proud!"

Across the road from Ellis Park were the offices of the black Sunday newspaper, *City Press*. Khulu Sibiyi, the paper's editor, was agog at the spectacle he beheld from his window. "I have never seen so many black people celebrating on the streets. Never. In fact, our stories the next day had more about the amazing fact of black people celebrating than about Pienaar and the cup itself. It was amazing."

Archbishop Tutu, who also had a keen nose for news, agreed. The black celebrations *were* the story. "What we saw that day was a revolution," said Tutu, joyous that he had lived to see his country give birth to a new model of revolution, one in which the enemy was not eliminated, he was brought into the fold; that instead of dividing a people, uniting them. "If you had predicted just a year—just months—earlier that people would be dancing in the streets of Soweto to celebrate a Springbok victory, most people would have said, 'You have been sitting in the

South African sun too long, and it's affected your brain," said Tutu. "That march did for us what speeches of politicians or archbishops could not do. It galvanized us, it made us realize that it was actually possible for us to be on the same side. It said it is actually possible for us to become one nation."

The inevitable patriotic hysteria in the South African papers next morning, the sense that the country had changed forever, was summarized in the eight-column front-page headline of a newspaper that had the good fortune to be born that very day, the *Sunday Independent*. "Triumph of the Rainbow Warriors," the newspaper's very first issue screamed. The foreign press got in on the act too, with even the sports-writers almost forgetting to write about the game itself, like the rugby reporter from the *Sydney Morning Herald* who began his story, "South Africa emphatically became 'one team, one country' yesterday as the rainbow nation went into raptures." Adding, in a reference to the end of World War Two, "It was like a re-enactment of VE Day, involving similar waves of passion, and the feeling that something momentous and unforgettable had just occurred."

Van Zyl Slabbert, a big man, every inch a Boer, found himself in the thick of the post-match hysteria. "I went out into the streets, which were awash with dancing black people, and I had to find my way home, so I got on a black taxi." A "black taxi" is a half-bus, half-traditional taxi, a vehicle that one hails down but plies a regular route and carries around a dozen people. It is "black" because in South Africa it was always a form of transport used by black people: whites almost invariably owned their own cars. What Slabbert did, to hail and jump on one, was almost unheard of, especially for inhabitants of the posh northern suburb, not far from Houghton, where he lived. "I got in, and people were cheering and shouting and carrying on with as much passion as the Boers inside Ellis Park. I said to the driver that he could drop me off at the Civic Centre, there in town, but he asked me what my final desti-

nation was going to be. I said my home in the northern suburbs but I said that the Civic Centre would be fine, guessing it would probably be on his route. But the driver was very insistent. He said no, he would take me all the way home, which was about half an hour out of his way, and with the traffic and mayhem that day, probably more. Then I said, okay, but what about all these other people in the taxi, which was completely full. They all shouted that no, it was no problem at all. They would enjoy the ride. They were so happy, they said, that nothing else mattered. Eventually we arrived home, and as I got out I asked the driver, 'How much?' He smiled at me and said, 'No. Today nobody pays.'

No one on that taxi, Slabbert reckoned, had anything more than a dim understanding of rugby, but that did not temper the general celebration in Johannesburg any more than it did five hundred miles away in Paballelo. "In my township, among my people, there was not a single rugby lover," said Bekebeke, "Yet on that day . . . even my mother was ululating in celebration. We were celebrating as South Africans, as one nation. And we knew, deep down, that the Springboks had won because we had willed them to win. It was a phenomenal day! Such a young, infant democracy and there was the symbol of our transformation, Mandela. When he hoisted that cup, that was our victory. We knew at last that we were a winner nation."

Arrie Rossouw, the Afrikaner journalist who met Mandela in Soweto on the day after his release, echoed that point, but with even more feeling because he, as a white South African, had felt himself a loser, a pariah, in the judgment of the world. "We were no longer the baddies anymore," Rossouw said. "Not only did we win, the world actually wanted us to win. Do you realize what that meant to us? What joy? What enormous relief?"

Tokyo Sexwale said that Mandela had liberated white people from fear. That was true, but it went deeper than that. He set them free in a

larger sense. He redeemed them, in their own eyes and the eyes of the world.

And then he made them world champions. Kobus Wiese, François Pienaar, Hennie le Roux, Chester Williams, James Small: they all agreed, the Mandela factor had been decisive. They had won the game for him, and through him. "The players knew that the country had a face and a name," as Le Roux put it. "We were playing for South Africa but we were also playing not to let the old man down, which came to the same thing."

"It all came perfectly together: our willingness to be the nation's team and his desire to make the team the national team," said Morné du Plessis. "It came at just the right moment. And I am convinced it was the reason we won the World Cup."

Even Louis Luyt agreed. "We could not have won it without Mandelal. When I went down with him to see the players in the dressing room before the game—I saw it, he lifted them a hundred percent up! They won it for him as much as anything."

Morné du Plessis felt it was going to be South Africa's day the moment he saw Mandela on the edge of the field in the Springbok jersey receiving the crowd's acclaim. "I say this with no disrespect to a truly memorable All Black team, but the enormity of the man we had behind us, and the power that emanated from him and through him, struck me as a little unfair." Sean Fitzpatrick, the formidable All Black captain, admitted much later that Du Plessis had a point, that he did experience a certain awe on hearing the crowd's response to Mandela. "We heard them shouting his name," said Fitzpatrick, "and we thought, 'How are we going to bear these buggers?'"

Too late, Fitzpatrick understood that his team might have Jonah Lomu, but the others were playing with a one-man advantage: they had a secret weapon against which the best rugby team in history had no answer. Joel Stransky could have taken credit for the triumph, but

handed it instead to the Springboks' sixteenth man. "The impact he had on the players was immeasurable. That day was a fairy tale come true, with Mandela at the heart of it. He won it for us."

And that day, he revealed in it. The ride home from the stadium took three times longer than expected, but, as Moonsamy said, it could have taken six times longer and Mandela would have asked for more. "All our best-laid plans went out the window. Our route was absolutely clogged. The whole city was transformed into a giant street party. But Madiba was loving every minute of it."

Moonsamy remained alert, but the notion that someone might now wish to assassinate Mandela seemed outlandish even to him. When the four-car convoy finally made it back to Houghton, a small crowd was standing outside his home celebrating. When Mandela got out of his Mercedes to greet them, an elderly lady came up to him. Moonsamy stood aglazed as she made a little speech to Mandela declaring that until that afternoon she had been an AWB member, but now, she told him, "I renounce my membership."

It was dusk now, around 6:30 in the evening. Mandela set his bodyguards free. "Chaps," he said, "go out and enjoy yourselves."

They took him at his word. "I got home, through the baying crowds," Moonsamy said, "and then my brother-in-law and his wife and kids and me and my family, we went down to Randburg Waterfront where the crowds were gathering to celebrate, and there I saw South Africa become one. Whites and blacks hugging and laughing and crying, late, late into the night."

Mandela opted for a quiet night in. "I came back from the rugby and I stayed here at home, happy and reflecting"—and following his inviolable routines. He watched the TV news in English at 7 p.m., then again in Xhosa at seven-thirty. At ten to eight he sat down for his habitual

light dinner—chicken leg on the bone with the skin on, sweet potato, and carrots. Nothing more. Before going to bed, one hour later, he sat down in his living room alone to take stock, as he would do in his prison cell every evening before falling asleep. What surprised and gratified him was the degree to which he had ended up being the focus of attention. For he understood that behind that spontaneous clamor from the white Ellis Park crowd—that “Nelson! Nelson!”—lay eloquent and convincing evidence that his hard toil had paid off. In paying homage to him, they were rendering tribute to the high value of “non-racialism” for which he had endured twenty-seven years of prison. They were crying out for forgiveness and they were accepting his, and through him, black South Africa’s generous embrace. It had begun with Kobie Coetsee that day in the hospital in November 1985, the first of his enemies whose heart and mind he conquered. Then Niel Barnard, then P. W. Botha, then the Afrikaners media, De Klerk and his ministers, the high command of the SADF, Constand Viljoen and his fellow bitter-ender generals in the Afrikaner Volkfront, Eddie von Maltitz, John Reinders and the rest of the staff at the Union Buildings, Morné du Plessis, Kobus Wiese, François Pienaar: one after another succumbed as he widened and widened his embrace until the day of the rugby final when he embraced them all.

John Reinders understood it perfectly. “The Rugby World Cup final was him at his best; that was him all over,” he said. “That was the day that the man we had seen in private the whole country now saw in public. It was the day that everybody, especially white South Africa, got to see him as he really was.”

“It was a day to remember,” Mandela said, with a smile that lit up the very living room where he had sat and tasted victory that night of June 24, 1995. “I never imagined that the winning of the World Cup would have such an impact directed towards an individual. I never expected that. And all that I was doing was continuing my work of

mobilizing South Africans to support rugby and to influence the Afrikaners, especially towards nation-building.”

“Influencing” was one way of putting it. The great task of his presidency, securing the foundations of the new nation, “making South Africans,” had been accomplished in not five years but one. At a stroke, he had killed the tight-wing threat. South Africa was more politically stable now than at any point since the arrival of the first white settlers in 1652.

Die Burger summed it up well. Noting that “sports isolation was one of the main pressures that precipitated political change,” the newspaper said, “Isn’t it ironic that rugby should be such a uniting force when for so long it served to isolate us from the world? For there is no longer any doubt that the Springbok team has united the land more than anything else since the birth of the new South Africa.”

John Robbie, who had wartime tight-wingers calling his radio show every day, put it more simply: “From that day on we knew everything was going to be all right.”

So, more to the point, did Constand Viljoen. Those worries that had tormented him, the thought that he had been wrong to choose elections instead of a Boer freedom war, or that a war might yet start without him, were all gone now. “This rugby event convinced me that I was right in my decision,” he said. General Viljoen’s relief emanated from the understanding that, when the rugby hordes chanted “Nelson! Nelson!” a huge responsibility had been lifted from his shoulders. In that gesture the Afrikaner people were transferring the responsibility from the general to themselves, making his devotion to Mandela their own.

“To see him, the icon of the black people, being so jubilant wearing that Springbok jersey, to me was deeply reassuring. It had been very difficult for me to make my decision and I never imagined I would see myself justified in a manner that was so spectacular.”

In this sentiment, his brother Braam, the “good” twin, found

common ground with Constand at last. "I have been exposed to the wrath of Afrikaner politics all my life and that this could have happened is, to me, a miracle," he reflected. "The charisma of that man! The leadership of Mandela! He took my brother's arm, and he did not let it go."

Did Mandela have any flaws? Sisulu knew him better than anyone. His answer was that his old friend had a tendency to trust people too much, to take their good intentions too quickly at face value. "He develops too much confidence in a person sometimes," he said. "When he trusts a person, he goes all out." But then Sisulu thought for a moment about what he had said and added, "But perhaps it is not a failing. . . . Because the truth is that he has not let us down on account of that confidence he has in people."

Mandela's weakness was his greatest strength. He succeeded because he chose to see good in people who ninety-nine people out of a hundred would have judged to have been beyond redemption. If the United Nations deemed apartheid to be a crime against humanity, then what greater criminals were there than apartheid's minister of justice, apartheid's chief of intelligence, apartheid's top military commander, apartheid's head of state? Yet Mandela zeroed in on that hidden kernel where their better angels lurked and drew out the goodness that is inside all people. Not only Coetsee, Barnard, Viljoen, and P. W. Botha, but apartheid's ignorant henchmen—the prison guards, Badenhorst, Reinders—and its heedless accomplices—Pienaar, Wiiese, Luyt. By appealing to and eliciting what was best in them, and in every single white South African watching the rugby game that day, he offered them the priceless gift of making them feel like better people, in some cases transforming them into heroes.

His secret weapon was that he assumed not only that he would like the people he met, he assumed also that they would like him. That vast self-confidence of his coupled with that frank confidence he had in others made for a combination that was as irresistible as it was disarming.

It was a weapon so powerful that it brought about a new kind of revolution. Instead of eliminating the enemy and starting from zero, the enemy was incorporated into a new order deliberately built on the foundations of the old. Conceiving of his revolution not primarily as the destruction of apartheid but, more enduringly, as the unification and reconciliation of all South Africans, Mandela broke the historical mold. Yet, as his reaction to the crowd's response to him at Ellis Park showed, he surprised himself along the way. He underestimated the strength of his charm.

One Sunday a few weeks after the Springboks' victory, Nelson Mandela visited a church in Pretoria. This church was Dutch Reformed, the denomination that had once sought to provide biblical justification for apartheid; that had persuaded Constand Viljoen there would be separate heavens for blacks and whites; that had exiled his brother Bram for calling the new doctrine a heresy. "That was the occasion," Mandela said, his eyes sparkling, "when I saw that the impact of the rugby match was going to last, that the attitude of the Afrikaners towards me really had changed completely." During the service he addressed the faithful in Afrikaans, and afterward they surrounded him outside the church door, pressing in around him like a scum. This was exactly what had happened to him at a hundred ANC rallies in townships up and down the land. Everywhere he went the black people treated him as if he were a cross between Michael Jordan, Evita Perón, and Jesus Christ. Now here the whites were doing the same. "From the crowd, hands reached out wanting to shake my hand. And the women—they wanted to kiss my cheek! They were so spontaneous, so enthusiastic. They were falling over each other, and as for me, I was bounced from pillar to post. And I lost a shoe. Would you believe it? I lost a shoe!"

Mandela was almost doubled over with laughter as he recounted the story. He laughed because it was funny, but also because he was describing the consummation of his life's dream, the moment he understood that South Africa was one country at last.

EPILOGUE



Twelve years after the Rugby World Cup final, in August 2007, a bronze statue of Nelson Mandela was unveiled in London's Parliament Square alongside ones of Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill. Reporting on the event, one British national newspaper described Mandela as a "black leader." No offense was meant, presumably, but it still felt vaguely insulting to see him described in such terms. As it would have been to see Lincoln or Churchill described merely as "white leaders."

To identify Mandela by his race is to diminish him and to miss the point. Tony Benn, a veteran British parliamentarian, was closer to the mark when he described Mandela at the unveiling ceremony as "the president of humanity."

But it is also to miss the point to imagine that Mandela, then eighty-nine years old, was some kind of an aberration of nature. As he said when his turn came to speak, frail but with steady voice, "Though this statue is of one man, it should in actual fact symbolize all those who have resisted oppression, especially in my country."

Mandela's modesty could be affected sometimes, but this time it was not. He was the expression of the best his country had to offer. I saw it myself time and again during the six years I was based in South Africa,

between 1989 and 1995, a time when, amid all the hopeful forward movement, terrible violence was unleashed in the black townships, especially those around Johannesburg, where I lived. The best thing about South Africa was not Mandela, but that the country was awash with mini-Mandelas, with people like Justice Bekebeke, his girlfriend, Selina, or "Terror" Lekota, the premier of the Orange Free State who invited Eddie von Maltitz to his birthday party.

The first time I interviewed Mandela, early in 1993, I asked him how it was that the ANC's message of "non-racialism" had captured black South Africa's imagination at the expense of the rival PAC's vengeful "one settler, one bullet." He replied that history had shown his people to be warm, kind, and generous, even in dealing with their enemies. "Bitterness does not enter the picture," he said, "even when we fought against something we regard as being wrong." The message of the African National Congress, he said, had "merely consolidated that historical pattern."

The truth of that was borne out by my experience, but it was not the whole truth. A different kind of ANC leader could have elected the easier option of tapping into the indignity and hurt black South Africa had endured and channeled it toward violent confrontation. It took a rare wisdom for Mandela to say to his people, as he paraphrased it for me in that same interview, "I understand your anger. But if you are building a new South Africa you ought to be prepared to work with people you don't like."

His generous pragmatism was all the more unlikely given the historical pattern of his own life. Albert Camus wrote this in his book *The Rebel*: "Twenty-seven years in prison do not, in fact, produce a very conciliatory form of intelligence. Such a lengthy confinement makes a man either a weakling or a killer—or sometimes both." In defense of the French philosopher, he died in 1960, before Mandela had even been jailed. Few would have disputed the logic of what Camus wrote when

he wrote it. Mandela was a first, and quite possibly a last. He was to South Africa what George Washington had been to the United States, the indispensable man. As Archbishop Tutu remarked to me, "We couldn't have done it without him, you know."

Mandela stopped a war from happening but that did not mean that he bequeathed to South Africa a state of perfect peace and harmony, any more than Washington did in the United States. After apartheid South Africa shed its global singularity, it ceased to be the paragon of injustice and the (entirely merited) scapegoat for humanity's incapacity to overcome its racial, tribal, nationalistic, ideological, and religious antagonisms. It became a country that had the same challenges as others in similar economic circumstances: how to deliver housing for the poor, how to combat violent crime, how to fight AIDS. And there was corruption, there were unsavory examples of political patronage, there were doubts as to the ANC's efficiency in government. And humanity's eternal bane, the regressive problem of skin color, did not magically disappear either, though by the start of the twenty-first century the transformation was such that there were not too many countries whose black and white citizens engaged as naturally as they did in South Africa.

It was also true that the political fundamentals remained as sound as Mandela had left them at the end of his five-year presidential term: the country remained a model of democratic stability and the rule of law remained firm.

Whether this would remain the case forever, who could possibly know? What would endure was Mandela's example, and that glimpse of Utopia his people saw from the mountaintop to which he led them on June 24, 1995. When I asked Tutu what the lasting value of that day would be, he replied, "It's simple. A friend in New York gave the answer when he said to me, 'You know what? The great thing about everything good that has happened is that it can happen again.' Simple as that."