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Nomavenda Mathiane was a clerk in a Johannesburg furniture store in the late 70s, when a friend told Frontline's editor, "I want you to meet this high-personality black chick." That sort of meeting was not common in those days. The high-personality chick turned out to have things to say and she said them in Frontline for 11 years. Not reporter-school things like investigating and quoting, more housewife things, in a troubled place at a troubled time. This piece shows her unique insight into day-to-day life in the latter days of apartheid

Appointment with the hangman

*Written on the day before the scheduled execution
of six people. By Nomavenda Mathiane*

They say hope springs eternal in the human breast and that where there is life there is hope. For relatives of condemned people, these are not jokes. From the moment the judge pronounces the death sentence, those involved will carry the fear and anxiety like an invisible cross. They will spend the rest of their lives asking questions such as: “Was he really hanged?” or “Is it true that they are kept somewhere in the bowels of the earth minting money?” (There are strong rumours in black circles that people are not hanged but are incarcerated in some building in Pretoria making money. This myth is strengthened by the claims that there hasn’t been anybody coming out of the black community who has actually professed to be working or having worked in a minting factory) or, “Why are we never shown the bodies?”

After the initial shock of the sentence and the mother or wife has recovered,

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these women will temporarily wipe the tears, pick up their skirts and move heaven and earth to save their dear ones from the gallows. Once more, lawyers are consulted. Special prayers are held. Inyangas are consulted. No stone is left unturned. The next shock to be suffered is when the date of the hanging is announced. The judge's words drum through your head.

The worst of all days is the day before the hanging.

Death is a mystery. Although we live in the shadow of death, somehow we never get used to it. One may have a very sick relative and be reconciled to the fact that he may be dying any minute. But when that minute comes, the very people who had accepted the inevitable reject the reality. Accepting hanging is difficult. The fact that one may die of choking from food or from a motor car accident is one thing. Knowing that someone somewhere is a special person who lives among people, a father, perhaps a lover, maybe a warm-natured person, a respectable citizen, who stops for old ladies to pass, never says anything untoward to anybody, and that person is the one who turns the switch that severs life from a person, is even harder to reconcile. Since the issue lies in the hands of someone with power, somehow the victim and all those involved nurse the hope until die last minute that there might just be a change of heart from the people who wield power. I saw an old woman of '70 who had been a Christian all her life lose faith and belief in the Almighty because of a son who was executed. She came out of the chapel after being shown coffins and being told that one of them held her son's remains. "Fancy for the preacher to lie to us and say our children have been called by God when they have killed them in front of us. Only a white God does that."

The eve before the hanging is the most cruel day for those visiting Pretoria maximum prison. That day, all concerned try by all means to visit their dear ones. People will be coming from all over the country. There will be some from as far as Cape Town or Zululand who may be spending the night at the prison. There are waiting-cum-sleeping rooms for those without accommodation at neighbouring townships. There are usually one or two whites to hang and a host of blacks, the place is always swarming with black, Indian and coloured people. It is not possible to see condemned white people because, true to South

African tradition, their cells are removed. One wonders if they use different coloured people as hangmen.

The large double doors open with the clang of metal. Behind the screen are huge men in blue uniforms. Someone once remarked that there is nowhere else where one finds boers as big as the ones at Pretoria Central. Tall, hefty, with blue eyes. They give visitors long cold stares while asking for the name of the prisoner and let you through. Security is so tight, they never bother to ask for visitors' particulars. There is nothing a visitor could do to let anybody escape once he is in there. You walk along the peaceful long passage in one of the cleanest prisons in South Africa. Maybe in the whole of the continent. There are broad tarred lanes where sometimes one can see a contingent of black men with shining heads in prisoners' clothes going through the exercises.

Out there your eyes are also enchanted by well-manicured sprawling lawns and flowers. No one watches over you but the feeling of being watched is with you all the time. As you walk in that corridor of death, you make a silent prayer that none of the remaining dear ones ever give you cause to have to come here. You want to turn back and lecture to your son and all your nephews. You will do that later. For now, you have to be strong and face the one to be hanged.

There is nobody to escort visitors. Somehow, you follow the crowd. After all there is only one reason you are all here. There is no rush here. Talking is in subdued tones. Others drift along like zombies up to the visitors' reception area. The most human black policemen are to be found here. They are the first to greet visitors, sometimes even ask after your health. They don't seem to have grown used to anguish. They are important people because tradition has it that on the eve of hanging, the one to hang the next day offers sweets to those remaining. The policemen are the ones who buy the sweets from the money left as gifts for the prisoners.

There is a step of hope. Hope that something drastic may happen. But as one enters the room and takes a place at one of the windows, one is enveloped by the great fear that it is your brother, sister, husband, friend's last day on earth. You wrestle with hope against hope that maybe it is not. You ask yourself the question "What do I say to him". You stand by the window next to the

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microphone while he is being called. Next to you a conversation might be in progress between a relative and a condemned person. You are able to hear all they are saying. Soon yours will emerge from the passage in front of where you are standing. He will be a picture of health. Remember they are fed well and they are not worked. He will be clean shaven in immaculate khaki shirt and shorts. He may be carrying a bible.

Your eyes will meet and you will look down, perhaps to stop a tear or trying not to let him see that you are about to cry. Maybe at that stage he may start a familiar hymn and fellow prisoners join in and the whole place becomes a church. Someone preaches. It's amazing how much of a blanket worshipping becomes. With everyone desperately trying not to crack, they all cling to the flimsy invisible anchor of Christianity.

There will be those who will be overcome by emotions and let the tears strewn down the cheeks. Some will go faint and be carried outside. There is no screaming. Those to hang may be musing or speaking softly to relatives giving last minute instructions on what to be done after he has been executed. If he is a father he will ask after the children who are under-age, who are not allowed to visit prisons. And perhaps his wife may have brought pictures of the children and show them to him through the glass barrier. He will then tell his wife to look after the children, ask her to make sure they go to church and to school. One by one, relatives and friends will go to the window and have something to say to him. At this stage, the prisoners are on another planet. They have made peace with their creator and are telling visitors how they are looking forward to meeting him. They console their dear ones and tell them to be brave and wait for the day when they'll meet. They all have smiling faces, perhaps dancing and singing to the hymns.

These may have been murderers, rapists or guerillas. But before the crowd then, they are loved ones whom they will be seeing for the last time that morning or afternoon. Beneath that veneer of Christianity, of bravery, of anxiety to meet one's God, there is still hope. Hope that the lawyers may pull out a card. Hope that some sudden new evidence may prove one's innocence. Hope that somewhere people in power may just have a re-think.

THE BEST OF FRONTLINE

Beneath that veneer one asks all sorts of questions. Just as one is asking questions today as the Sharpeville Six wait for tomorrow's appointment with the hangman. How a judge can sentence people to death on circumstantial evidence? How one can be executed for being part of the crowd? How many more such deaths before this country wakes up to realising that capital punishment will not bring peace? That jails will not stop people from demanding their rights as citizens? The fact that the six will meet the hangman simply because someone said they were there makes me shudder.

I have lived with all sorts of violence. I was once attacked by a group of 10 or 12 men and watched helplessly as they looted food, clothing and money from my house. I was lucky not to have been raped or maimed. My children had to live through that ordeal. I have seen a person being stabbed and die before my helpless eyes. I have seen a political mob at work, and I have seen people being dragged into actions they would not like to have done. I have seen 12-year-olds threaten old and helpless people.

During the first months of the rent boycott, I listened to an old woman narrate how youngsters harassed her the entire evening for having paid her rent. They broke every glass and furniture in her house, playing trampoline on her sofa and bed. I once watched 15 year olds beat up a girl of 12 whose crime had been to go to school when a boycott was on. They made a bonfire of her books and her uniform. She was released to go home in her panties. I know teenagers who were collected from homes for meetings to discuss the struggle. What do you do when you are told to necklace an informer, and refusing implies you are condoning 'sellouts' and therefore your home will be gutted? How many strong men have surrendered the keys to their vehicles at the threats from children? How many youngsters languish in prison for crimes they did not do? Victims of informers who had run out of stories, victims of petty jealousies and witch-hunting. It could have been my daughter or son seen with the mob and someone decided to tell the cops. I shudder.

At the height of 'comrade mania', my sister was stopped by youths for driving a 'target' meaning a car belonging to a white company. It was forcefully taken away from her and she had to find her way home. Later, she was sub-

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poenaed. At court, she was surprised to be shown a strange boy as the one who had taken the car. She told the prosecutor she had never seen the accused before. No amount of persuasion (friendly or otherwise) from the prosecutor could make her say different. The boy was acquitted. It turned out later that the boy had nothing to do with the youths who had terrorised her sister. In fact, they had decided to nail him with the crime because he had resisted joining them.

In 1976 when the security police were detaining students, they visited the home of an activist in a street where I used to live. When they got to the boy's home, his mother denied she had a son with that name. She said the Vusi they were looking for lived at house number such-and-such, down the road. When the police got to that house no questions were asked. The poor boy was bungled into the van and spent over 18 months in prison. He is now 27 years old, suffers from high blood pressure, without matric and without a job. A bitter man.

We know the story of the Soweto Eleven who paid for the crimes that took place during 1976. We know that there was no evidence against them except for the fact that they were the student leaders. There was not a single witness who saw any of the eleven lift a stone to cause anybody any harm. Nor was there a witness who saw any one of the eleven set any building alight. They were guilty of being leaders and of addressing meetings which, the court alleged, incited the students to go on a rampage. They spent two years awaiting trial. Some were acquitted while others were given a jail sentence. That, unfortunately is justice according to whites in South Africa.

For as long as blacks are not part of the governing body, and as long as the law is designed by whites without blacks and the judiciary displays insensitivity as has been happening lately, and as long as white soldiers can, because of Botha's protection, get away with crimes such as the killing of innocent civilians in Namibia, while black rioters are sent to the gallows on flimsy or no evidence, then hope and security for this country will remain a pipe dream.

Instead we are sure to see more blacks going to Pretoria Maximum Prison either as visitors or to keep the appointment with the hangman.