

If I was President for a Day

What an exhausting day. I've had meeting after meeting, made the same speech so many times my throat feels raw, and nearly all feeling has been shaken from my hand.

I've only been President for six days, but the workload has been a tsunami of stress, making the six days feel like six months.

I'm already in my pyjamas and silk slippers, but the sheets of my four posters are still pulled taut across the mattress, as I overlook the now darkening gardens of Mahlamba Ndlopfu my new home.

I don't take in anything though. I'm lost in thought, as the night creeps in. The last of my advisors have retired to their rooms, or driven home about three hours ago, and my silver wristwatch has told me that ten thirty has come and gone.

I can't stand it anymore. With a nod of my head and a swish of fabric, I slip into my silk nightgown. At the door of my room, I discard my slippers and proceed barefoot across the marble floors of Mahlamba Ndlopfu.

A sudden unease that comes with the night has accompanied me like a shadow.

Down a staircase and down a hall, the constant pattern making the house seem circular, never-ending. As I walk, excuses as to what the President Of South Africa is doing wandering around The Presidency flitter through my mind.

My own shadows claw at me like spiderwebs, dripping off of me like sheets of black silk.

Finally, I reach the doors to the portrait hall.

The doors open with the smallest of sounds, but an echo leaps into the room, and pounds on the walls; walls lined with the portraits of past South African Presidents. From Charles Robberts Swart to P.W Botha, the huge framed faces of the past presidents loom over me. Before I can even take my fourth step, a voice, gentle yet loud and filled with purpose, pooled into every corner of the room.

"I see you came for more advice, President."

I sigh, and walk towards the voice, trying to remain presidential, even if I was in my pyjamas.

I reach Nelson Mandela's portrait, his face wrinkled into a smile. "I knew you would come again. They always do."

"There were other presidents?" I ask, sitting down cross-legged in front of him.

"Only a few." Mandela is quiet for a moment. "Well then. What is the matter?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say as if taken aback.

“Miss President,” chuckles Mandela, his face filled with warmth. “You wouldn’t come if there wasn’t a problem.”

I bite my lip and wring my hands out. “I don’t think I can do this. I’m President, sir. *President*. The first female one of South Africa. I want to rid poverty and sexism, and drive out racism.” I take a deep breath and shut my eyes. “It’s pressurizing, and I’m scared.”

This time, Mandela just smiles and shakes his head. “Miss President. I was the first South African President of colour. I was in prison for 27 years. I was separated from my family and mistreated because of my colour. Yes, I accepted the people’s amends, and I became President. But the fear I had, that everything I had worked for would suddenly implode-it was with me every day. Something you must always remember, Miss President...It always seems impossible until it’s done. The way you lead this country is up to you. ”

“Yes, you will have fear or doubt somewhere inside you, with every step of the way. But your courage or success will overpower those emotions if you believe in yourself.”

“Thank you, sir,” I say quietly.

“ And also...eight out of ten times, the decisions you make as President will be good ones. It was for most of them.” Mandela gestures to the other portraits, and then his smile fades. “Well... not for that one.” My eyes follow his hand, which is pointing at Jacob Zuma, and I laugh.

I wake the next day, dress in a simple grey suit, then head to the dining room. I sit at the long table alone as the chef brings out my usual breakfast: a grapefruit, a fried egg and roast tomatoes with a glass of lemon water.

As I eat, my Top Advisor comes through the door with a clipboard and an expression of business. Charlize Kok is wearing an orange pantsuit with bright red lipstick smeared across her lips, and her usual beauty spot drawn on with eyeliner. “Goodmorningmisspresident,” she says in one single breath. “You have a speech today, at ten thirty and a meeting in the conference room now.” I’m still shovelling the last bit of grapefruit into my mouth before Kok whisks me away.

By ten thirty, I’ve signed seven different papers, held two meetings and am now walking to the filming room to address the country. *My country*.

Someone touches up my makeup, I ready myself behind the wooden lectern, there is a countdown, then the camera starts. I look down at my speech and freeze. I look up and see a portrait. Nelson Mandela nods at me from behind the glass.

I breathe in, and I start to talk, forgetting everything Charlize has made me practice, and say exactly what I want to say, what I’ve wanted to say since I was elected President. “I have doubts. I’m scared that I don’t make the right decisions...because I now make decisions not only for myself but for a country.” I gulp. “But I try not to think of what could go wrong...instead think of what could go right. Because once an old friend told me,” I look up at Nelson Mandela’s portrait, which is now still, but his smile and his way of greatness spears me on. “*It always seems impossible until it’s done*. So let’s get it done. Together. As a country.”