LETTER FROM JOHANNESBURG...

FROM DUMISANI S. KUMALO

April 26...At a dilapidated school in Soweto, a long line of 80 and 90 year old men and women began forming long before sunrise. The dark, chilly autumn morning did not bother any of these people. Neither was their fragile and trembling limbs or their fading eye-sight enough to keep them away.

"Why are you here, Gogo," I ask an 85 year old woman. She reminds me of my mother who died without ever voting.

"We are here for Mandela. We are going to put him in the box," she says as the other grey heads around her nod agreement.

It does not matter to them that they have never seen a ballot box ever in their lives. Meanwhile, I am feeling guilty for having talked to this old lady because she has disclosed who she would vote for. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) warned us not to ask anyone who they would vote for.

"Gogo, you are not supposed to tell me or anyone else who you are going to vote for," I say.

"She is just telling you we are here for Mandela. Everyone knows that," says an old man with eyes almost shut with blindness. Again, all those around us shake their heads in agreement. So much for vote secrecy.

Inside the polling station another old lady is sitting at the Presiding Officer's table. Monitors, observers and party agents have been summoned to be with her.

"My child, I can't see anymore. I want you to put my cross next to Mandela's face. I am here to put Mandela in the box," she says to the Presiding Officer who immediately complies by marking the ballot as requested by the voter. He hands it back to the old lady.
She squints her gray eyes and tries to see the cross in the box next to Mandela's picture. But her sight is almost gone.

"Can anyone tell me if this boy put my cross next to Mandela? I don't believe this boy did the right thing," she asks loudly.

We confirm to her that the officer did as she wished. The old lady remains quiet for a while. Then she tries again to see her vote without success. There are hundreds of other old people waiting outside. No one knows how many would require similar assistance. There is fear that voting might go into the night. There are no lights in this voting station.

The following morning, April 27, I arrived at 6:15am at Holy Cross Church in Soweto. This was where I came to vote for Mandela. In fact, I cast my vote for my father and my mother who died without knowing this day would be ever possible. I also was voting for my son Mandla who couldn't be here to put Mandela in the box for himself. I also did it for Father Theo Rakale who for many years was the minister at Holy Cross. He spoke out against apartheid when it was dangerous and deadly to do so. Many of my generation were molded as freedom fighters by Father Rakale.

It is about 9:30 pm on the night of May 2. I am standing on a chair watching Nelson Mandela accept a landslide victory as the first democratically elected president South Africa has ever known. Next to me is my colleague and boss, Jennifer Davis, also standing on another fancy chair fit to sit an executive or a king. For forty years of apartheid, I would never have been allowed to sit on this chair let alone plant my dusty soles on it. That is if I was even allowed through the doors of this hotel. But on this night, no one cares about the damage to the furniture. Actually, no one cares about anything. Through smiles, tears and screams, we finally know why some of us went into exile, jail and even the grave. This was the moment we sacrificed for.

The ballroom at the Carlton Hotel is crowded with people from all walks of life - Blacks, whites, foreigners, Mkhonto soldiers, business people and so on. Even the waiters have stopped serving drinks. This is the moment our parents and ancestors never saw. We are not prepared to miss anything about it.

"You can proclaim from rooftops: free at last," says President Mandela. Big women and men weep without shame.

I cannot help but think about the semi-blind old lady in Soweto. She said she put Mandela in the box. She was right. Now he is coming out as President Mandela.

On the television screen along the wall, a 97 year old woman is telling a reporter, "Now I can die in peace."

I now know I will forever live in peace...