

Tell Them Our Names: The Life of Pauline Dempers of Namibia

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A NOTE TO THE READER

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews, and a table of best practices in peacebuilding as demonstrated and reflected on by the peacemaker during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the table of best practices if you are interested in peacebuilding methods and techniques, or go to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemaker's own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemaker's work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

The Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights — as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women — those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation — must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.¹

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER — **PAULINE DEMPERS**

Pauline Dempers is a human rights activist from Namibia and co-founder and national coordinator of Breaking the Wall of Silence (BWS), a grassroots group that advocates for the rights of those affected by imprisonment, torture and enforced disappearances during the Namibian war of independence.

Dempers grew up in the country formerly known as South West Africa when it was ruled by South Africa's apartheid regime. Encouraged at an early age by her father's personal resistance to white-minority apartheid rule, she developed a powerful yet painful awareness of the injustices in her community. Dempers became involved with student and community political protests, eventually joining South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), the leading voice of the liberation movement, which would dramatically alter the course of her life.

When the political tension in her country intensified, Dempers fled to Angola in 1983 to receive military training with SWAPO. Along with many hundreds of young SWAPO recruits, she was later arrested by her fellow comrades, tortured and held underground in the "dungeons" of Lubango on suspicion of spying for the South African government. Dempers writes, "I experienced political violence at the hands of my own comrades. I was betrayed in the cause for justice and self-determination." The personal losses and human rights abuses took a devastating toll on her life. She was separated from her daughter for three years and lost her fiancé, the father of her two children, who was one of the many Namibians whose fates and whereabouts are still unknown.

After independence finally came to Namibia in 1990, Dempers was determined to continue her fight for peace, justice and freedom. She made it her mission to raise awareness about what transpired in exile, and co-founded BWS.

Under her dedicated stewardship, BWS has forged links with the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA). Her work with the national and international movement against gun violence is greatly influenced by her imprisonment and torture. She says, "That was done by the power of the gun. It made me realize the power that lies in a gun. I feel that there are people out there who are vulnerable, especially women. And I feel that I have the chance to make a difference."

Dempers is also a former politician with the Congress of Democrats and was chairperson with NANGOF Trust, an umbrella organization of Namibian NGOs that promote and protect human rights and strengthen democracy.

CONFLICT HISTORY — NAMIBIA

Pre-Colonial History

The “San people” refers to multiple hunter-gatherer tribes in Namibia who share an ancestry and way of life traceable to the earliest humans. Anthropologist Elizabeth Marshall Thomas has called the San culture one of “the most successful” known to history, “if a lifestyle can be called a culture, and if stability and longevity are measures.” The San people maintained for centuries a largely peaceful, often egalitarian society, with a gift-based economy.

Before Namibia became a colony of Germany in the 19th century, the dry lands were home to many other different communities, including the Nama people, known for their gifts in song and storytelling, and the Herero, known for their pastoral roots and distinct dress.

German Colonization and Mandate System

During the “scramble for Africa,” Germany purchased the area that now makes up Namibia without the consent of the people living in the area, leading to conflict. At the beginning of the 1900s, the German colonists carried out a brutal genocide of the Herero and Nama people, devastating but not eliminating their populations.

After World War I ended, the League of Nations deemed Namibia — known at that time as South West Africa — to be one of the many former German colonies “inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world.” The League of Nations ordered that South West Africa become a “Class C mandate” of South Africa, giving South Africa the power to determine the laws of South West Africa.

Life under South African Rule

The people of South West Africa continuously petitioned against South African rule under the mandate system, pointing to the undemocratic, racist South African administration.

When the National Party came into power in South Africa in 1948 and instituted the apartheid system, this legislation also applied to South West Africa. The majority population was relocated to the outskirts of city centers where they had lived for generations, and the white minority population of South West Africa was given representation in the whites-only South African Parliament. Even though South West Africa never became an official territory of South Africa outside of the Mandate System structure and oversight, South West Africa operated as a de facto fifth province of South Africa, receiving all the racist baggage and neocolonial oppression concomitant with that symbolic status.

The South African National Party used the education system to repress black advancement and liberation. Under the Bantu Education Act of 1953, black people, white people, Coloured people (black and white descent), and Indian people were required by law to attend different schools with distinct curricula that prepared them for separate occupational spheres of life. The darker your skin, the worse your education.

Schools for black students were underfunded and understaffed, and while education was mandatory for white people, it was optional for black people, who often couldn't afford the school fees. Black students who could afford schooling received an education of oppression: The apartheid education system haphazardly equipped them with the tools to serve the ruling white minority.

In 1959, tensions between the black South West Africans and the white South African leaders manifested in protest and subsequent violent suppression. When the administration called for the forced removal of residents of Old Location (outside Windhoek) to Katatura — a move that would lead to higher rent costs, travel expenses, and ethnic separation by neighborhood — existing resistance currents teamed up to halt the move. However, the police met the protesters with violence, killing 11 people and injuring many others.

International Intervention

International support for Namibian independence came for more reasons than one. Some saw South African rule in Namibia as an illegal occupation, and others saw the fight for the independence of Namibia as a way to weaken the apartheid regime at large.

However, in 1960 when Ethiopia and Liberia — the only African countries that had been members of the League of Nations — brought action against South Africa's rule over South West Africa to the International Court of Justice, the divided court ultimately ruled that Ethiopia and Liberia did not have the legal or special right to bring the case forward.

From October 1966 to May 1967, however, the United Nations General Assembly made rulings terminating the mandate's legality and placing the South West Africa territory under the control of the United Nations, which would "administer South West Africa until independence, with the maximum possible participation of the people of the Territory."

Rise of SWAPO and Military Combat

This international support gave SWAPO [South West Africa People's Organization] the affirmation it needed to justify its transition to armed struggle. On August 26, 1966, the first armed battle of the Namibian War for Independence broke out in Omugulugwombashe, when South African helicopters attacked the training camp of

SWAPO's People's Liberation Army of Namibia. This day became known as Heroes' Day (SWAPO Day).

The war was primarily fought in northern Namibia and Angola, where SWAPO could train with less South African intervention. Although SWAPO was never officially banned from Namibia by the South African government, leaders were frequently harassed and detained by the police. In 1976, the UN General Assembly declared SWAPO "the sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people," and by 1978, SWAPO's guerilla military forces had reached an estimated size of 5,000 to 10,000. They received military supplies from Soviet Russia, and received military training from Cuba and Angola. But then SWAPO found itself involved in the Angola Civil War.

SWAPO developed a multi-faceted resistance against South African rule. While their military headquarters developed outside of Namibia, SWAPO members and supporters practiced community activism and civil disobedience within the country as well. Around 1977, secondary students from villages and cities across Namibia began boycotting the Bantu Education System. Under the leadership of Rev. Hendrik Watbooi, the grandson of the famous Nama chief by the same name who battled against German imperialism, many young Nama people from Southern Namibia joined the SWAPO ranks, and fled Namibia in exile for military training.

In the late 1970s, military violence escalated, catalyzed in part by the assassination of Clemens Kapuuu, the Herero chief who advocated for Namibian independence but against armed struggle. Before his assassination, Kapuuu had participated in the Turnhalle Constitutional Conference, a controversial convening between 1975 and 1977 sponsored by South Africa with the goal of authoring a constitution for a self-governing Namibia under South African rule. The Democratic Turnhalle Alliance then formed as an oppositional party to SWAPO, electing Kapuuu as its president.

When Kapuuu was assassinated, South Africa blamed SWAPO and SWAPO blamed South Africa. While the assassin's allegiance remains unknown, the media blamed SWAPO. Distrust and violence immediately spread between the Herero and Ovambo people — the main ethnic group of SWAPO. South Africa used the murder as justification for cracking down on SWAPO in Namibia and for heightening military action in Angola and northern Namibia. In 1978, South Africa launched Operation Reindeer, which orchestrated the massacre of SWAPO militants and allies in camps in Angola. Hundreds were killed in what would become known as the Kassinga massacre.

As the size of SWAPO's military grew, so did the scope of its internal paranoia. In the last decade of the war for independence, SWAPO detained and tortured thousands of Namibians from within its own ranks on suspicion of espionage for the South African government. This internal violence and paranoia is most likely the result of many different factors, according to historian Marion Wallace:

1) generational tension between the young activists and the older activists;

- 2) an authoritarian culture in SWAPO that treated any sort of dissent as mutiny, and only grew stricter with the formation of the Security Organisation in 1981;
- 3) ethnic tension between Ovambo speakers (who made up the majority of SWAPO) and non-Ovambo speakers;
- 4) an internal bias against more highly educated people who could potentially “take” the jobs of higher-ranking, non-educated officers.

Hundreds of detainees were imprisoned in underground dungeons in Lubango, Angola. Many died from the harsh conditions which reportedly included food deprivation, beatings, being dragged behind cars, and much more. Many were tortured until they falsely confessed to espionage.

Transition to Independence

When Namibia finally achieved independence in 1990, all political prisoners and detainees were ordered to be released as instructed by the Settlement Proposal and Security Council Resolution 435 via the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG). UNTAG had a mandate of peacekeeping and ensuring democratic processes during Namibia’s transition to independence. SWAPO would immediately become the ruling political party by a wide electoral margin — a position it holds to this day. However, many people and entities have spoken out against the human rights violations committed by SWAPO during the War of Independence.

Breaking the Wall of Silence

The organization Breaking the Wall of Silence (BWS) was formed in 1996 by ex-detainees Kala Gertze and Pauline Dempers to advocate for the rights of detainees. BWS demands that SWAPO confess for the crimes it committed against its own people, using a model similar to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. BWS was named after Siegfried Groth’s book, *Namibia: The Wall of Silence*. The book contains first-hand testimonies of the violence committed by SWAPO in its detainment camps. BWS points out that even though the detainees were freed in 1989, SWAPO never cleared them of its charges of espionage, leaving their reputations shattered in the communities to which they returned.

According to the BWS website, “The vision of Breaking the Wall of Silence is to be a consistent voice for the dignity of Namibian ex-detainees of the liberation movement and the development of a more open and tolerant society in Namibia.” BWS continues to collect and document the stories of ex-detainees and the families of ex-detainees in order to create a more balanced, honest history of the liberation struggle. The testimonies may also be used as evidence for any future human rights’ trials.

INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in Namibia and *Personal History of Pauline Dempers*

1920

- After World War I, the League of Nations declares Namibia a mandated territory under the control of South Africa.

1948

- The National Party of South Africa comes into power, enforcing the apartheid system in South Africa and Namibia, then known as South West Africa.

1959

- South African police violently suppress protests of forced relocations of black people from the Old Location to Katutura.

1962

- ***Pauline Dempers is born.***

1966

- South West Africa's People's Organization (SWAPO) launches an armed struggle against the apartheid system and South Africa's control of the country.

1974

- ***Pauline's father passes away.***

1976

- The UN General Assembly declares SWAPO "the sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people."

1977

- Students across the country boycott the Bantu education system.

1978

- Under the leadership of Hendrik Witbooi, the Nama tribe joins SWAPO. South Africa killed SWAPO militants and allies in camps in Angola, in what became known as the Kassinga massacre.

1979

- ***Pauline's son Victor is born — named after the celebration of the liberation movement in Namibia.***

1982

- Suspicion and paranoia spread throughout SWAPO, as there are rumors that some members are spies for South Africa.
- ***Pauline and Frans decide to become engaged.***

1983

- ***Frans and Pauline go to Angola in exile as part of SWAPO.***
- Disappearances of people in SWAPO begin increasing.

1984

- ***Pauline's daughter Survival is born.***

1985

- ***Pauline is arrested by SWAPO, tortured and held in confinement in underground dungeons in Angola.***

1989

- ***Pauline is released from the dungeons, and repatriated to Namibia by the UN High Commission for Refugees.***

1990

- Namibia gains independence.
- ***Pauline's daughter Innocia is born. Pauline works as school secretary for the Peoples Primary School.***

1992

- ***Innocia's father is killed in a car accident.***

1995

- ***Pauline encourages survivors of the dungeons to participate in Pastor Siegfried Groth's book, Namibia: The Wall of Silence, by giving testimonies about the past.***

1996

- ***Pastor Groth's book is officially released, and Pauline co-founds the organization Breaking the Wall of Silence (BWS).***

1997

- ***Pauline is elected as a member of the management of BWS.***

2000

- ***Pauline resigns as school secretary.***

2005

- ***Pauline begins working for stricter gun control in Namibia, including with the International Action Network on Small Arms.***

2008

- ***Pauline continues to collect testimonies from survivors who were accused by SWAPO of spying for South Africa.***

2015

- ***Pauline is selected as a Woman PeaceMaker at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice.***

NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE OF PAULINE DEMPERS OF NAMIBIA

Rules Worth Breaking

Pauline jolted awake to the sound of pounding on the front door.

“This is the police — open up!”

It was 3 o'clock in the morning when the South African officers arrived to check the house for strangers. Pauline had expected this, but she was still scared.

During the Holy Days, Pauline's family had many traditions. They would take a bus from their home in Gibeon or Eirup to the Windhoek and Grootfontein bound train, eat watermelon and cakes with extended family. And now the Dempers had a new tradition born of resistance: Sleep at the police station for travelling without a Pass — a permit required of all travelling black Namibians under the laws of South Africa's Apartheid system.

What felt to her father, Simon, like a one-kilometer march of defiance was a walk of shame to Pauline. Her eyes stayed focused downward on her bare right foot — she had only hazily managed to find one shoe before the police rushed her out the door.

The behavior of Pauline's father did not surprise her anymore. After eight years as his daughter at home and his student in the classroom, she knew him well: his defiant pride, his teacher voice, his rebellious instincts. She had seen him march his proud, black, Nama body into “Whites Only” stores, not interested in getting anything from the market aside from respect. He wouldn't find it there.

Nor would he find it outside the municipal police station where they tried to sleep until the police could issue them passes in the morning.

Pauline looked around at her family of seven: Her two older sisters, Magdalene and Dorothy, rested on the ground taking turns holding their baby brother Ronnie. His eager eyes roamed around the room, too young to care that liquor brewers and other “illegal people” surrounded him. The youngest, Ignatius, slept calmly on his mother's shoulder.

And last, she looked into her father's always-opened eyes and asked, “Papi, why is it that you don't just do what these people want?”

He spoke to her like an adult: “How is it that the white South Africans can come to our country and demand that we carry permits? I will not carry a Pass in my own country.”

She loved him. But tonight, he embarrassed her.



Nama skin is not as black as the peaceful midnight skies above the canyons of Namibia. Nama skin is not Afrikaaner white and it doesn't want to be. Nama skin is chocolate. It is the black of strong coffee with a touch of milk. But it is not caramel black like the Coloureds, who were considered "better blacks" and were given better schools and better neighborhoods under the Apartheid government.

Nama skin is proud — stubborn proud. Resilient proud. Proud like the Namas who had fought the German colonists on horseback and proud like the Namas who would boycott the Apartheid Bantu education system in a few years' time. Nama skin curves like the waves of the sand dunes by the Namib desert where Pauline was born.

But as a fourth-grader, Pauline had not yet noticed all these colors.

She had begged her mother, who had recently fallen ill, to let her move to Rehoboth with her while she was receiving treatment at the city's local hospital. She wanted to be with her mom, but she also wanted to see somewhere new. Pauline's parents had a soft spot for their free-spirited, playful middle child, so they gave in to her persistent begging. She moved to the suburbs of Rehoboth where her grandmother's sister lived — a Coloured woman almost as white as an Afrikaaner. Though Pauline attended a Black Catholic school, she lived in a Coloured house and had to follow all the rules that came with it. But on the way home from school, the rules became blurry.

Pauline met up with her friends to play as soon as the dismissal bell rang. She could not wait to play netball — a game with a basket, a ball, and no dribbling or backboards. Each player has a designated section of the court that she must remain in. Pauline was always in the center, right in the middle of things.

When Pauline arrived back at her grandmother's sister's house, she asked her friends to wait outside while she changed out of her green and white school uniform. But as she left the house again to meet up with them, Pauline heard her grandmother's sister's voice pulling her back:

"Don't go play with the Black children!"

Pauline looked down at her own dark skin. She didn't understand. She was slightly darker than most Nama people, and much darker than her grandmother's sister.

"What Black children?"

Her grandmother's sister chased her friends away.

Suddenly, Pauline felt the divisive apartheid oppression from within her own family. She wanted to go back home to Gibeon, a traditional village on land owned by a white farmer. She missed the local chief politics, and her father teasing her that she had

to crawl when she went to the royal house. Pauline missed looking down from the schoolhouse to see her peers crossing the river for school. But she especially missed her rebellious father, and now she had learned to loathe the rules he broke.



When Pauline saw her father dying, it felt like watching a film — one of those movies with a story that felt so familiar but was too dark to be yours. It was like listening to one of the stories her father would tell by the fire, or like watching one of the dramas he had written for his school students. Death was for fiction and bad guys.

But when death did come suddenly, Pauline was right there. She was always close behind her father.

In the weeks leading up to his passing, Pauline followed him whenever he left the house to meet up with his friends. She knew this was adult time with adult conversations and adult beer, but she wanted to be with him. So she trailed him by 10 meters, hiding behind buildings and crouching beside donkey carts until they had travelled too far away from home for him to send her back.

When he finally turned around to see his young daughter five paces behind him, he said, “Oh! France Man, I told you to stay home this time.” He had wanted Pauline to be a boy, so he gave her this masculine nickname, abbreviating “Francis,” her middle name.

His friends would joke with her father, “Ah, I see you’ve brought your handbag with you again.” And then they would welcome both of them in to the dancing and joking.

But one evening she and her father left the party early because his back started hurting. It had never given him trouble before, but by the time he and Pauline arrived back at their house on the school grounds, the pain overtook him. It fastened him to the back stoop like a child stuck in a cradle, like a black family at a police station waiting for the offices to open.

“I’d rather die than suffer like this,” he said.

“You can’t die,” Pauline said. *That’s not allowed.*

He told her to go to sleep but she wouldn’t obey him like she normally did.

From the other room, she saw him pour the paraffin oil from the lamp all over his face and chest, causing him to glisten with desperation. She watched her mother take away the lamp and try to wipe him down. And an hour later, she heard him walk across the creaky floor to meet his sister’s son, Axalib, in the kitchen. She heard her father ask

for a match for a cigarette. And then all she could see was her father covered in bright, hot light.

Everything continued on like a film with actors who knew their expected lines: “Be strong for your family, Simon.” “Everything will be OK, Pauline.”

And finally, “I’m sorry, Matilda. We did everything we could do.”

His face was burned and his eyes were closed and most of his body was covered in a cloth. But this is not how Pauline would remember him.

She would remember his mischievous smile, which she admired so much. The smile he wore when he teased his wife until she would come and party with him, explaining, “If you don’t come with me, all the other women will try to get me.” Then he gestured to his undeniably fashionable appearance: his brown trousers and flowing pink shirt. His style was as timeless as he was.

And when the police would come knocking on the door, asking for his Pass, his calm excuses would always come with the smile.

A couple of days after Pauline’s father died, his students arrived in Mariental, where Simon was born, on a school bus with a light brown coffin they had bought for him. They were crying, confused, and loyal in their sympathy, with their matching school uniforms damp from sweat. Pauline imagined her father again at the front of the classroom, asking her once more a challenging question: “France Man, how do you pronounce ‘Firestone’?” And then the smile.

That smile could say many different things:

I know something you don’t.

I won’t do what you tell me.

I love you.

I will change the system you have designed to oppress me.

Later, when Pauline would become a political activist herself, she would think of him in times of struggle and isolation.

And where are you now, Papi — now that the world is not so simple? You were the one who opened my eyes; the one who made me smile.

Love and Hate on Fire

Fifteen minutes before Pauline was raped by a group of her classmates, she had met the love of her life, Frans.

Frans was tall, gentle and handsome. He was a young Nama man from a family that also barely had enough to get by. Frans asked Pauline if she wanted him to walk her home. But she said no. Why shouldn't she be able to walk wherever she wanted just like the boys? But she appreciated him asking.



The schoolboys didn't ask for anything. They took turns and laughed. It was too dark to see their faces, but Pauline could hear them saying each other's names in brazen encouragement: Moses, Adios, Lolly and a fourth name she can't remember because she would try and forget this night. And also the next night, months later, when they did it again.

Pauline couldn't speak to anyone about it, but everyone was talking about it anyway, twisting the narrative to paint Pauline as promiscuous and to laud the boys as manly opportunists.

The schoolgirls stormed into the restroom after her, asking with cruel giddiness, "Is it true? Is it true that they all had sex with you?"

She came back to the classroom to see her classmates writing fake mathematical word problems on the board, ending with the question, "Pauline was raped last night by how many boys?"

She cried angry, hot tears for what they did to her and for what they would never be punished for. She did not know then that this was not her fault.



Frans went to the AME church and Pauline to the Lutheran church, but when the congregations joined together for activities the two had the chance to meet and talk. At a church picnic, they walked down to the Fish River, which passes through Gibeon on its way to the Hardap Dam. From his pocket, Frans pulled out a pink and blue handkerchief decorated with small flowers. She thanked him and accepted it. And when she showed the girls from her school they giddily explained, "Oh Pauline, Frans wants to be with you!"

And she wanted to be with him. His company was the only place she felt like she belonged. She was no longer the playful, boisterous girl she had been just months previously. Pauline dreaded school with the boys who violated her, the girls who blamed

her, and the teachers who never stepped in. So when the education boycotts came, she welcomed them for reasons both personal and political.



The boycotts started 60 kilometers away from Gibeon at the boarding school of Pauline's sister Dorothy. Dorothy and the rest of the seniors refused to take their exams. The ringleaders, as the elders started calling them, could no longer participate in this South African Bantu education system that did not care about their future or the history of their people.

When Pauline's mother asked Dorothy why she and the rest of the seniors returned home for the semester so early, she responded with silence — all of the ringleaders did. But they spoke to the younger students. They approached them on the playground with hushed voices and steady confidence to explain that the Bantu Education system was dividing the people by tribe and color. The blacker your skin, the worse your education.

"The whites are treated better, Pauline," explained the usually quiet Dorothy. "And now students all over Namibia are standing up."

When Pauline looked outside her window she saw a bright blaze. On the hill by the school grounds, for the whole village to see, the ringleaders had set fire to the textbooks.

The police never came but the white inspectors arrived in Gibeon with a warning for the students, the teachers, the principal: If they did not go back to school, they would all be fired or expelled. But Pauline did not care. She and the rest of her community would expel the system.

When You See a Fire Burning

Pauline looked out the window of the truck driving her from the SWAPO transit camp in Luanda to the training camp in Lubango, Angola. Far in the front of the convoy, the Cuban militants scanned the road, preparing to defend the cars from any attacks by the South African-supported UNITA rebel group — “cleaning the road,” they called it.

Pauline’s decision to join SWAPO in exile also placed her in the middle of the larger Angolan Civil War. SWAPO militarily supported the governing party of Angola, and the governing party let SWAPO plant military bases on their soil — a practical loyalty.

Behind the Cubans came the Angolan soldiers, and behind them the SWAPO truck transporting Pauline and seven other new Namibian exiles ready to serve SWAPO. She was eager to fight for Namibian liberation, but in her stomach she already carried a strange, unsettling feeling about the SWAPO she was coming to know in exile.

She remembered the words of the first woman she met upon arriving at the transit camp in Luanda:

“Why do you people keep coming here?” the Nama woman asked, sounding both hostile and desperate.

Pauline looked back at Frans in the backseat, wondering if he felt the same fear and excitement she was feeling going into their third week in exile. Through the back window, she could see the dust swirl up behind their tires. She remembered a cryptic, encouraging farewell another woman from Windhoek whispered into her ear as she packed up her few belongings: “The path that you are now traveling is a very difficult one, but you should be strong.”

To Pauline’s left, a car burned from within. No one cared to put it out. She thought of the last time she saw her son, Victor, before driving off in a taxi. Frans and Pauline, recently engaged, had left their home and their child behind with his grandmother to come to this training camp. SWAPO leaders were continuously harassed by the South African Police in Namibia, and the older SWAPO leaders discouraged the younger generation from leading, despite their proven dedication and abilities.

Their departure had to be a secret, explained the SWAPO leaders. If the South African police heard about their plans, they might try to forcefully stop them. So Pauline left her mother without a true explanation and kissed her son without a real goodbye. She told herself it would be worth it — for her liberation and for theirs.



Pauline mixed water into her thick slab of yellow porridge made of maize meal and garnished with small insects. She blew the ant beneath the surface, then took a quick sip before her tongue could notice what was happening. The porridge was slimy and bland, but she would need it to make it through the combat training.

The first time Pauline held a gun it felt heavy with purpose. She was scared, sure, but in a first-date kind of way — there was so much unknown, and so much potential. SWAPO required all trainees to carry their firearms at all times, as if their guns were their beloved children or their curious prisoners. Pauline's Tokarev pistol was smaller than the AK-47s of her male comrades, but even without bullets, the gun had a proud weightiness to it.

As Pauline ate her porridge alongside the other new comrades from southern and central Namibia, she imagined herself coming home from war after liberation, a celebrated military hero. The others joined in on her fantasy. Maybe there would be applause or a parade. Maybe they would show them how quickly they could take their guns apart and put them back together. Maybe they would all shoot a bullet into the Namibian sky that they could now call their own.

Frans was already out there, Pauline thought to herself, working toward freedom. Just a couple days prior, the SWAPO officers told Pauline that he and his friend Jouby went on a mission.

As she walked back to her hut, a small space she shared with nine other women, Pauline recognized the men in green fatigues walking toward her: Mr. Thomas, a friend of her father's; Mr. Basson, her old teacher; and Mr. Pieters, an old schoolmate of Pauline. They smiled and welcomed her, asking about her family and the Gibeon community school. Finally, familiar faces. The small talk felt like going home for the shortest, most necessary of visits. But as Mr. Pieters and Mr. Basson turned to walk away, Mr. Thomas lingered for a moment, looking directly into Pauline's eyes:

"Pauline. If you see a fire burning, don't add fuel to it. If you can't put out the flames, just stand back," he said. Talk less and listen more. And then he left with the others.



On Pauline's 21st birthday, SWAPO commanders called her on her "first mission." She felt ready. A messenger escorted her to the Screening Office, a dimly lit building with dirt floors and no doors — the same office that Pauline and seven other new SWAPO exiles came to on their first day at the military training camp.

She sat in front of two SWAPO military leaders, and the questioning began: Where did you come from? *Gibeon*. How did you get here? *Through Botswana and Zambia before arriving in Angola*. Why did you come here? *Because I want freedom*

and peace for the country I love. They asked her to narrate her life and travels, first verbally, then on paper.

When the men read her responses, they seemed more than just unsatisfied.

“You forgot something,” her comrade said, pushing the paper back in her direction.

“What did I forget?” Pauline asked.

“You forgot something. Go outside and write it down.”

They seemed so sure.

Pauline sat under a tree to read and reread her short autobiography. *What could I have forgotten? What do they know about me that I don't?* Nothing.

She walked back inside and handed her superiors the paper.

“No,” Pauline said. “This is me. If there is something you think I have forgotten, then please remind me.”

Before they could respond, a faint alarm went off behind them. Pauline immediately recognized the sound as the beeping of her own watch, which she had given to Frans in Luanda. She raised her voice now, “Where is Frans?”

The two guards looked at each other then back at Pauline. “It’s time for you to go.”

“Where is he?” she asked again.

“He has left for emergency training.”

“Where is my fiancé?” Pauline demanded.

The men called the messenger to escort her out.

As Pauline exited the office, she saw Frans’ towel and underwear hanging from the door of the outdoor shower. *Something is wrong*, she thought to herself. Turning back, Pauline cried as she said to the guards, “I have seen his underwear and towel, and I have heard my watch. What have you done to my fiancé?”

“If you don’t want any trouble, then you should leave.”

Pauline didn’t want trouble; she wanted the truth.

She talked to Mr. Thomas and Mr. Basson as soon as she could, explaining that she believed Frans and her friend Jouby never went on an emergency mission — that they had been in the information center all along. Neither man seemed surprised.

Mr. Basson looked at Pauline with both fatigue and sympathy. “I don’t know what they have against our people, but the Namibians who come here from the south and the central are not treated well here.”

He promised to do what he could to find out what was going on.



When Frans returned with Jouby a few days later, he was different — more closed-off, demure. He would not speak to Pauline, or even touch her like he used to — firmly on her lips, gently on her shoulder. Even when she told Frans what she heard in the Screening Office, he avoided her gaze.

He must have changed his mind about us, Pauline thought. He will be on his own, and I will be on my own. She was devastated.

Every day, the sound of a slow and steady clapping crescendoed as people gathered for the parade — a time when all companies in the training center came together for announcements and roll call. Only the leaders could speak, but afterward, the comrades had an hour of permitted socializing. After several days of silence, Frans finally asked to speak to Pauline. She refused.

Jouby came running to Pauline. “You have to listen to Frans,” he explained. “They hurt us, Pauline. We never went on any mission.”

Speechless, she followed Jouby to Frans’s hut. The other men cleared the room when she entered.

“I heard you in the Screening Office,” Frans said. “But I couldn’t say anything. I couldn’t do anything.” He took off his shirt, “I was tortured.” The fresh scars etched across his swollen back like a crooked ladder leading nowhere.

Pauline was filled with anger and disbelief. “How could you keep quiet about this?”

He begged her not to tell anyone. “They thought I was an enemy agent, but now they know for sure that I’m not. Now they can trust me.” It almost sounded like he was justifying what they did.

“I have to speak out because I have to know why they did this to you,” Pauline said firmly.

Frans grabbed his shirt with one hand, and his fiancé's hand with the other, "Pauline, they will kill me. They said if I tell anyone, they will kill me."

Survival

Ferdinand Witbooi was the first of Pauline's convoy to disappear. In the weeks before he "went on a mission," he refused to become a messenger boy, forgot to hold his gun in the kitchen, and drank too much off of the base. He was a rebel and a free spirit, but he was not a South African spy.

Pauline, Frans and Jouby were with him after the parade when he was called. Ferdinand turned to Pauline and the boys. "Let's smoke for the last!" He pulled out his lighter, "Because people are called and they never come back."

They inhaled the smoke deep into their lungs, and exhaled in silence as an offering to Ferdinand.

The disappearances continued daily. Sometimes it was the outspoken ones. Sometimes the ones with a university diploma. Often times the Namibians who were not from the Ovambo tribe — the northern ethnic group that composed most of the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), SWAPO's military wing. As they watched their innocent friends "go on missions" one-by-one, Pauline and Frans wondered when they would be next.



Their first child had been a surprise, and the whole Gibeon community shamed them for it. They were only teenagers. The first time Frans was allowed to see his son, it was from a distance. They were at a church service in Gibeon to "repent of the sin" that led to their child's birth. This confession and the subsequent shame were supposed to keep them feeling guilty; to keep them apart. It didn't work.

Victor, short for "Victory", was born on August 26, 1979, the 13th anniversary of the beginning of SWAPO's armed struggle — his name a celebration of the liberation movement.



Two weeks after Ferdinand's disappearance, Frans tried to convince Pauline to have another baby with him to protect her from that very same liberation movement.

"I don't know what will happen to us. Or who will be called next," he explained, keeping his voice low. "Let's have a baby. Maybe that baby will save you."

Pauline looked up at him in shock, but he continued to speak, leaning in closer this time. "Maybe you will not disappear if you are pregnant. But if you do, maybe the baby will survive, and tell the others what really happened here."

Pauline could not immediately agree to this. She had so much to think about and so many questions. *What if I have to raise this baby without Frans? What will happen to the baby if we are both taken? But maybe, she thought, it would work.* Maybe she would raise another baby with the man she loves. Maybe SWAPO would show mercy. “Maybe” was all they had.

She snuck out to see Frans, just as she had years ago after Victor was born when they were forbidden to see each other. She made it to Frans’s hut where he was alone repairing a radio, and she made love to him like their lives depended on it.



Pauline named the child Survival.

In the days before the birth, Pauline left her new home at the Kamati maternity base to trade the villagers some of her clothes for a live chicken. She gave it to her friend in charge of artillery to hide it for her until the baby arrived. Survival would not have her father, or a real home, or a traditional slaughtered goat, but she would have a chicken.

Frans was off fighting somewhere, thinking of her, Pauline imagined, hoping his plan had worked. And for a while, it did. Survival gave Pauline purpose in an otherwise mundane, lonely SWAPO village in Angola. Pauline learned to plait her child’s kinky hair, sew dresses and convince villagers to trade these clothes for milk, and how to steal apples and pears from the garden where she worked so Survival could have more nutritious food than the small amount of rice and beans they received from the camp’s kitchen.

When Victor was born, Pauline’s mother had forbidden her from cuddling and picking him up when he cried. Nothing and no one could keep Pauline from Survival.

On her way to the garden one morning, Pauline stopped to exchange clothes for a tin of powdered milk. But a comrade interrupted the exchange and offered to buy the milk for Pauline.

“It’s OK,” Pauline said, “I do not have money to repay you, but I have clothes that I can give these women.” Even when turning down a favor, Pauline was confident and poised.

“I insist,” her comrade replied, not taking “no” for an answer.

He showed up at her house later that night, asking about the milk’s quality and accepting Pauline’s invitation to share the little food she had prepared that evening. She was thankful, after all, and happy to have another adult to talk with. But when the sun went down, she asked him to head home. “It’s time for me to get Survival ready for bed.”

He stepped toward her. “I think it’s too late for me to head back to my house.”

“OK,” she replied, stepping backward. “You can stay in my bed, and Survival and I will sleep at my neighbors’.” She grabbed Survival from the bed, and the comrade raised his voice, calling her ungrateful and rude. But she didn’t care. *I have to get out of here with my child*, she thought to herself. *I have to get away from him.*

“Why do you think I bought you that milk?” he yelled, as Pauline ran out of the door with Survival.



Pauline could not wait to see her fiancé to tell him what had happened. A week prior, a friend of hers told her that Frans was in the hospital nearby. She was almost too scared to believe him — it had been almost a year since she had last seen him. But there he was, older and physically stronger, but bed-ridden by a heart grown weary from the trials of war.

Still, when he saw his daughter for the first time, he lit up. His plan was working.



Pauline was not surprised when the officers summoned her to the main office the next day. *Good*, she thought. *That man will be punished for what he did — for what he tried to do.* In the office, the commander sat next to the comrade Pauline had run away from the previous night.

“Do you know this man?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“I do,” she said, and explained exactly how. She stood quietly, waiting for the commander to respond and reprimand the soldier.

“This is our culture, comrade. When someone does something for you, you have to return the favor.”

Pauline’s mouth dropped open slightly, *How am I the guilty one?* she thought. “But it’s not my culture,” she replied.

“This is the culture,” he said calmly. “You must return the favor.”

“This is not my culture,” she repeated, and left the room with a righteous nervousness churning in her stomach.



Days later, the SWAPO leadership arrested Pauline. She was a loyal fiancé, a proud Nama woman, a produce thief of necessity, and a fierce mother of two, but she was not a South African spy. She did not have the chance to say goodbye to Survival or Frans.

The first time she denied being an enemy agent, they slapped her across the face. They took Pauline and Memory, another mother from the Kamati maternity base, to a dugout and told them they would sleep there for the night. Memory was crying, the front of her t-shirt soaking wet with wasted breast milk. She lifted up her soggy shirt and grabbed her breasts.

“You have to bring my baby!” she cried, “I have to feed my son!”

Pauline thought of Survival. She had left her with her neighbor. Already, she missed her more than anything.

The second time Pauline denied being an enemy agent, they stripped her naked. She stood exposed in front of six men in the same office where she heard her watch beeping three years prior.

“If you’re not an enemy agent, then why do you have cigarettes and food in your bag?” they asked accusingly. “You were preparing to run away to Namibia.”

“That’s not true,” said Pauline, covering her breasts with her forearm.

“Who sent you here?” they demanded.

“No one sent me! I came for me and for Namibia.”

They beat her with fresh sticks. They took turns and didn’t ask for permission. They demanded the truth but couldn’t recognize it when she gave it to them.

The pain came sharp like a knife then trickled down her spine to her tied-together legs — the blood slowly streaming through her fresh wounds like a dark, salty river. They tied her hands behind her back and fastened a dirty cloth between her teeth — it didn’t matter what she said anyway — they would never believe her.

How long had it been? Ten minutes? Maybe an hour? She lost track of time. But she knew where she was: On the ground, thirsty and confused, far away from her daughter. They pulled Pauline up to her knees and untied her mouth before asking her the same questions.

“If you don’t want me here, then let me go,” she pleaded. “I will find my child. I will find my way home.”

“You’d like that wouldn’t you,” they quipped back, whiskey heavy on their breath. “You’d love to go home and tell your other spy friends what you learned here.”

What *had* she learned here? *Don’t accept favors from men who are strangers. Don’t expect the SWAPO at home to be the same as the SWAPO in exile. A child can save your life and a war can tear it apart.* Pauline fell silent and the beating continued.

When the pounding finally stopped for the night, they sent her to a room where two female guards waited for Pauline. They laid her down on a makeshift bed of hard reeds, then pressed boiling water to her fresh wounds. It felt like hell bubbling up to the surface of her slashed back and buttocks. But it closed the wounds faster, covering their tracks. The quicker the wounds closed, the sooner they could start beating her again.

These hazy poundings became the hasty rhythm of her life — her body the war drum that they would pound until she broke.

And the following day, she nearly did. When the beatings began, she started bleeding more than usual, this time between her legs. It was too much blood to be just menstruation. The men stopped, shocked, but unsympathetic. They didn’t want to see this.

A doctor came to visit Pauline and handed her some pills without explanation.

“Are you pregnant?” he asked.

She thought of Frans and the children they were separated from. She remembered the sacred few weeks they had together before she was arrested. Then she looked at the blood still wet between her legs. SWAPO had taken so much from her.

Later that night, Pauline woke to the sound of a baby crying. She recognized the wailing of Memory’s child. *Why would they return her child, but not mine?* It was Survival’s second birthday.



A fly whizzed around the room until it landed on Pauline’s battered head. She just let it rest. The room smelled of stale blood and piss. *Somebody died in here.* Even in her half-awake state, she could tell that much. *Where am I?* she thought, trying to remember her last wakeful moment.

There had been a sandpit and a group of comrades armed with sticks. She remembered the sharp sand pressing into her wounds. “Dig your grave, Pauline!”

Complying, she leaned toward the sand to shovel a hole with her hands. *How big did it have to be?* she wondered; surely she'd lost weight after two straight weeks of torture. They shoved her head into the sand and she began to drown.

But they didn't quite let her die. The guards pulled her arms behind her back, and tied them to her ankles, making a triangle of her limbs and torso. Then they threw the long slack of the rope over an elevated horizontal pole, lifting her inverted body into the air like a piñata, as one guard pulled the rope tight. She swayed and bobbed. The blood on her skin dripped off her shoulders onto the ground. The blood still in her body rushed to her head.

"Say it," they screamed. "Admit it!"

Even upside down, the guards looked so ugly to Pauline.

The rope broke. Her head hit the ground before the rest of her body could catch up.

That was the last thing she could remember. But the ground was different here. This blood wasn't all hers. As she lifted her head to look around the rest of the room, she heard a guard speak: "She's alive and awake!"

She didn't feel very alive.

"Then tie her up again."

The pain became monotonous in its relentlessness. She was just so tired.

"Yes! OK! I am an enemy agent!"

She lied, for a moment's relief.

And just like that, the beatings stopped.

Occasionally, a Flower Grew

The dungeon was pitch black when Pauline entered for the first time, but she could sense the presence of many other women. She could smell their dirty clothes and hear their curious murmurs filling the dugout. A woman guided Pauline to a rectangular pile of cardboard boxes — her new bed. When she lay down on her side, Pauline could feel one woman's breath on her neck and another woman's back against her chest. But when she closed her eyes to sleep, she flashed back to the torturing from the previous nights. Ten minutes after she confessed to being a South African spy, she took it back and told the truth. They slapped her out of her seat, so she changed her story again. This time they wanted details: Who were her bosses? Where did she train? She blurted out as many white sounding names as she could think of, and hoped they would believe her.

As tired as her body was, Pauline could not sleep in this dungeon.

"1, 2, 3," announced a woman 10 feet from Pauline, and everyone turned to their sides in unison just to allow this one woman to change sleeping positions. Essentially, the women lived in a rectangular hole. The ceiling was made of corrugated iron pieces that rarely allowed in any light, even during the day. Every surface was made of dirt, but occasionally, a flower grew from the wall.

On this night, and on every night over the next three years, Pauline heard the familiar wailings of other innocent Namibians who had not yet learned that the truth would kill them here.

Pauline thought about the rules the guards explained to her during her initiation orientation: No visiting the other dungeons, no sex, no reading or writing, no walking into the bush, no being outside after nightfall, no greeting villagers during trips to fetch water, no speaking any language other than Ovambo or English, no sleeping next to someone who speaks your language. SWAPO did not want them communicating — they tried to prevent them from learning about each other and learning about life outside the dungeons. It did not work.

They learned about the falsely accused spies who SWAPO threw off the edge of the Tundavala Cliffs — an otherwise beautiful, tree-covered escarpment, visible from the dungeon grounds.

They learned that if you break a tiny hole in the rice bags, the two-kilometer hike to the storage room would slowly get easier.

They learned that if you bring ash from the fires into the dungeon, the smell will neutralize for a few hours and some of the lice will smother.

And over the years they learned from the newcomers that Namibia was getting closer to independence, but they did not know what independence would mean for them, the wrongfully accused.

But most importantly, they learned how to save each other's lives. Many of the children imprisoned in the camp would play outside near the office where newcomers were tortured until they confessed. The kids ran and told the adults what they saw and heard. Pauline would deliver messages to the newcomers through the Ovambo-speaking prisoners who had more freedom to walk around. "Tell them what they want to hear," she would write on pieces of cardboard she tore from her bedding. "If you tell the truth, they will kill you."



After a year in the dungeons, Pauline spoke to one of the newcomers who had recently given her false confession. "If you want a turn reading a book, you have to fake sick for the day," Pauline explained to the woman as they washed their clothes. "Then wait 'til everyone has left, and use the little bit of light by the exit to see the pages." Pauline dunked another shirt into the laundry basin, "But read fast. You only have a day to finish the whole book."

Sometimes the "nicer" guards took pity on the women, offering them books every so often to break up the dangerous monotony of their lives. Most days, if the guards did not call Pauline out to the office for violent interrogation, she carried bricks for a mile or two across the compound with the other detainees. But they never built anything. SWAPO only wanted to break them down. Yet aside from restroom breaks and carrying food from the trucks to the kitchen, this heavy lifting was one of the only ways the detainees could spend time above ground.

Already this year Pauline had read a pamphlet on Marxism and completed *The Scramble for Africa* — a book about how the Western powers cut up and colonized Africa, starting all this mess.

But most of all, Pauline remembered reading Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare*. Specifically, she recalled the way he wrote about suppressing, stopping and hurting spies. *How could he really know they worked for the enemy?* Pauline had thought to herself, closing the book tightly. She used to respect the man.



Evelyn was Pauline's best friend. They had met on Pauline's first day in Angola at the transit camp. Evelyn had looked through Pauline's suitcase before walking back to her own pile of clothes. "Here, you're going to need these," she said, handing Pauline two pairs of her own underwear. Even though they had just met, the two young women shared everything: pots, clothes, stories from home.

Years later, Pauline and Evelyn reunited in the dungeons. Now they shared different kinds of stories as they tended to their hidden garden in the bush: Pauline told Evelyn how she missed the man she loved and Evelyn told Pauline about the SWAPO commanders who sexually abused her on the frontline. While picking red chili peppers and green beans, they shared dreams of running away, then hid the vegetables in their underwear before sneaking back to the dungeons.



When missiles fall from the sky, the ground jumps back in retaliation. It shakes and catches fire. Pauline's ears began to pound. She and Evelyn dropped the water buckets they were carrying and grabbed each other instead. Then they started running.

"Don't run, spies!" yelled a guard, covering his head and looking for shelter. *Don't move?* thought Pauline. *They would rather us die than run away.*

"Looks like you contacted your bosses," the guard added, pointing to the South African planes as he ducked behind a tree. "But you just wait. We're gonna blow them all up."

Pauline looked through the brush at Dungeon Two, noticing the latch was still locked shut. "Evelyn!" Pauline said frantically, gesturing to the dugout. "All of them are still locked inside." The guards had not bothered to let out the women before seeking cover. *They don't care about us at all*, Pauline thought, in the midst of the chaos.

Before Evelyn could respond, they saw a man, a fellow prisoner, run toward the dungeon. He tore at the door as bullets rained down from above. Finally, he forced it open. As the women ran out, Pauline heard shots from the ground fire up at the planes.

Pauline crouched on the ground, forbidden by one army to hide from the bullets of the other army. *Who is my enemy?* she said to herself. *And who will protect me?*

Then she prayed because she could do nothing else. She lifted up the same words she had uttered when SWAPO tied her hands behind her back, and the same prayer she would speak the next time they would beat her with sticks:

"God, please do not let me die this stupid death."

The shooting continued all around Evelyn and Pauline. But the shots from above diminished. Pauline's heart began to slow back down, allowing relief to settle in. But another emotion crept into her chest, one she was not expecting: Pride. Pauline shook her head. *After all they have done to me, how am I still so proud of SWAPO?*



Pauline's hair was plaited — braided tight — when she first arrived in the dungeons. The guards twisted out the braids and buzzed off all but two centimeters. She and the other prisoners had no say in this. But on Christmas, the women shaved off their hair completely, making their heads smooth in protest and celebration. They took chalk and crayons from the supply room and decorated their scalps. Pauline used all the colors, emerging from the dungeon for lunch with a rainbow on her head.

They all dressed up as best they could. Pauline borrowed a blouse from another woman, and sewed her army pants to take the shape of current fashion. A dungeon veteran gave one of the “nicer” guards old clothes in exchange for a chicken from the village. They smuggled it to the kitchen where some of the Ovambo-speaking male prisoners worked. And when Pauline walked their way to ask for a cup of water, one of the chefs winked at Pauline, handing her a cup of coffee instead. She concealed a smile before drinking it quickly — the guards had to believe it was water. The heat burned her throat, but at least it didn't taste like dungeon. For the first time in weeks, she felt awake.

And for the first time in months, they all danced. The guards gave them the day off. Some stood and watched them, trying to cover up their smiles. Others yelled at them to stop shaking, stop smiling, stop feeling anything other than trapped. Maybe these guards could not handle their visible, temporary joy. *Maybe, thought Pauline, these guards do not want to be reminded that we are human. Or maybe they just want to feel powerful.* The women kept dancing.



Early on, Evelyn invited Pauline to join her band, Survival. “I'm the lead singer,” explained Evelyn, “and we already have a drummer, but we could use a bassist.”

Aside from the drums fastened out of old food tins, the band was all a capella. They performed original songs and cover songs — sometimes Michael Jackson, sometimes spirituals. But the saddest song they sang was “Happy Birthday.”

They performed this one for all their children who they were separated from. August 26th for Victor and December 8th for Survival. On these days the women gathered yellow and white wild flowers from the field for the mother. If they were lucky, someone smuggled in a chicken. And they sang. But the song sounded somber. *Where were they now?* thought Pauline. *Who is singing to my children?*



They also sang on SWAPO Day, but not immediately. First they had to endure the public shaming. August 26th was the anniversary of the beginning of the armed struggle for liberation, the struggle the guards believed these women and men betrayed. The comrades lined them up in parade fashion then took turns yelling at them:

“You betrayed us!” they yelled. “You brought the bombs. You killed our freedom fighters. But in the end, you will lose and SWAPO will win.”

When the misguided verbal abuse finally came to a close, all of the detainees came together — the men from Dungeon Three and the women from Dungeon One and Dungeon Two. They sat side-by-side, sharing the real story of their SWAPO allegiance.

“I was beaten up by the Apartheid regime for boycotting the Bantu Education,” one woman from Windhoek said to the group.

“So was I,” another man added with pride.

“I helped organize a rally back home with Hendrik Witbooi,” Pauline said, thinking back to the SWAPO she used to know — the SWAPO that upheld values of democracy and freedom of speech. Evelyn grabbed her hand and began to hum:

“Nearer God to thee, why take so long to come to our aid?”

Pauline joined in with the others for the second line.

“Should all die, without us reunited?”

She thought of Frans, Survival, Ferdinand and Victor.

“We trust in You, my Lord, that your strength shall prevail

And through you, Namibia shall soon be free.”

They sang it through again — this song of the dungeons that they had composed like a prayer — hoping God would answer them this time.

What They Made from Bandages

Pauline woke up in a bed — a mattress not made of cardboard. And she looked at each corner of the room: the walls not made of dirt. Then she slowly opened and closed her eyes again to remind herself of her new freedom, and to adjust to all the brutal light that came with it.

In the days before the dungeon release, the guards had offered the detainees a fresh shower, new clothes and kind words, all without explanation. They needed them camera ready.

Then SWAPO returned the detainees belongings — for Pauline, a few pots, cups and a yellow tablecloth. But still, no one dared to hope that this meant freedom. “Maybe they will move us to a Siberian prison,” one detainee said. Even that seemed more likely than release.

The guards forced each detainee to make one last false confession, this time into a video camera lens, to preserve for posterity what never happened in Lubango.

But it was all the worried questioning that tipped off the detainees in the end:

“Will you talk to the UN about what happened here?”

“No.” Pauline said. By now, she knew what SWAPO wanted to hear.

“Will you talk to the Red Cross or the Parents’ Committee?”

“No,” she lied again.

Pauline would tell everyone. She made that promise to herself in the dungeon. She made that promise to the memory of her loved ones who disappeared: Frans, Jouby, Barnabus, Ferdinand, Onemus — the kind men who treated her like a queen while they still could. Pauline was the only survivor from this group of people she left Namibia with. On a thick tree in Botswana before continuing on to Angola, they each took turns carving their names — strong names etched in with hard sticks, engraving a feeling of loyal permanence, even then. Now Pauline would speak for herself and for them.

But first, thought Pauline, sitting up in the bed SWAPO prepared for her, I must find Survival.



Pauline recognized her daughter immediately. She was running in the distance with several other kids. She was three years older, her hair was shaved instead of

plaited, and she was taller and fuller. So it was all real then — time had in fact passed outside of the dungeons.

Pauline called out her daughter's name, and their eyes met. Survival ran to Pauline, trailed closely by the other children, stopping a few feet in front of her.

"Who is your mother," Pauline asked, as Survival caught her breath.

"Meme Pauline," Survival replied immediately.

"And your father?"

"Frans."

"Where is your mother?" Pauline pressed, firm in her eagerness.

"She is in the dungeons."

Pauline, three days free of that prison, asked her next question nervously:

"Why?"

"She was sent there by the Boers." So she would have to defend herself, even to her own daughter.

"Survival, I am Pauline. I am your mother."

Next, they didn't hug, didn't cry, didn't swap stories, didn't dance. There were three years between them, lies surrounding them, and war stains on their heels. So Survival just looked at her mother — studied her unabashedly. And for now, that was enough. Pauline was no stranger to waiting around for love.

Survival led Pauline to the home of the woman who she would continue to call her "Real Mom" for several months.

"So you're back," the woman said, tears falling immediately. It was so clear to Pauline how much this woman loved Survival. Pauline felt thankful for this love, but she also felt scared of it — scared of what she would do to keep it.

"I'm going to take Survival with me now," Pauline said.

"No," the woman explained, *I have already registered her to go home with me in the north. I love her. You can visit.* Pauline knew that if Survival left with this woman, she would never find her again.

"Well then, can she stay with me for the weekend?" Pauline asked.

“Yes!” the woman replied with relief. She packed a small bag of clothes for Survival. As Pauline walked away with her daughter, she felt both confident and guilty — she had no intention of ever bringing Survival back.



The military convoy pulled up to Pauline’s and the other ex-detainees’ makeshift campsite in the bush. The men had fled here from the houses SWAPO prepared for them, and the women had followed a week later. Jesus Auala, the brain behind the dungeons, stepped out of one of the trucks and looked around at the little home with no walls that the ex-detainees had chosen over the fully furnished SWAPO houses. Jesus, smiling, emboldened by the camera crew behind him, spoke loudly, “I want to know, who of you will come back with SWAPO?”

SWAPO had promised to release all of the detainees and exonerate them of all their “crimes.” But Pauline still didn’t trust them. An Angolan soldier, sent to reinforce the Red Cross, stepped forward, turning off the cameras defiantly. Pauline also wondered if she could trust the Angolans. After all, they had done nothing to stop the innocent blood dirtying their soil. She did not even know if she could trust the UN — they were the ones who had named SWAPO the sole and authentic representatives of the Namibian people.

So this is freedom, thought Pauline, but it feels so uncertain.

Two women stepped forward, tears pouring: “We will go with SWAPO.” Three others joined them, but Pauline could not do it. “I am leaving,” she said, and boarded a Red Cross bus, not knowing where it was headed.

Eventually, almost everyone else joined her — close to 150 in total. Once the ex-detainees arrived at the UNHCR tent village, the United Nations Transitional Action Group (UNTAG) representatives gave them options, none of them pleasing: *You can remain refugees, the UN recommended, or you can go get an education outside of Namibia — that would be safer for you.* But they wanted to go home, and they did not want to go home quietly. *But we’ve come with SWAPO this far, the UN officials explained in a meeting, and we just want the peace plan to go through.*

Pauline did not know what life would be like once she returned to Namibia, but she knew the passive acceptance of injustice was cheap peace at best.

The UN told the detainees that they wanted to protect them, explaining that they would not release their names until they were all reunited with their families.

“No,” said Pauline alongside many others. “Tell them our names. We want them to know who we are and where we’ve been.”



The hum of the airplane concealed the murmuring voices of the ex-detainees. The UN officials had offered to fly them each to their separate homes, but everyone declined. They wanted to go home together. But now worry spread among them. *Where was the plane really headed?* Pauline remembered hearing about the mysterious deaths of different SWAPO members — sometimes a heart attack out of the blue, sometimes “a car ran over a land mine” that somehow left other passengers unscathed. The ex-detainees decided who would take over for the pilot if it came to that. But then an announcement from the intercom allowed the ex-detainees to forget about death for a minute:

“We have crossed over from Angola into Namibia.”

Namibia, he had said. Not South West Africa. Not Namibia, German colony. Not Namibia, South African Mandate. Just *Namibia*. Everybody screamed with joy, jumping out of their seats. Namibia was free, and now so were they.



The children stepped off of the plane first, each carrying a tiny white flag. The white flags meant peace. All of the ex-detainees had spent the day before their departure cutting tiny triangles from old hospital bandaging napkins — the only white material they had. The same saturated cloth that had dabbed at the wounds on their backs and legs.

Survival exited the plane, raising her flag halfway past her head as her mother watched proudly. Pauline knew, even then, that for real peace — honest peace — Namibia would have to remember all of the wounds of war.



The UN and the Windhoek airport were not prepared for hundreds of families to come to the airport for the arrival of the ex-detainees. So they locked them all out, fearful of a security risk. Now locked doors and a windowless wall separated the detainees from their families. This much felt familiar.

Pauline pressed her ear to the doors, listening for the voice of her mother or her brothers or any other voice from home. Nothing. What she did hear, she immediately wished she hadn't: mothers, sisters and sons all calling out the names of people who did not come back on the plane. Someone else's Frans. One of the thousands of ex-detainees with whereabouts still unknown.

The UN officials loaded the ex-detainees onto buses and headed to the UN reception camp. The families, determined and surely confused, closely trailed the buses. Once inside the camp, a fence surrounded the ex-detainees, but at least this time, they could see through to the other side. The UN had the ex-detainees sign papers, gave them some food and a bucket, and then sent them off with their families.

Pauline searched for her mother, while other parents looked at Pauline with disappointed faces — she was not their daughter. Pauline was approached by Jouby's mother, then Ferdinand's.

"No," Pauline told them, wanting to break eye contact. "I have not seen him in years. I am so sorry."

Eventually a man came up to Survival and Pauline — an old schoolmate of hers. He explained to her that her family came to the airport, but then lost hope. "But your sister lives in Windhoek now," he said. "I can take you there."



Pauline waited in the car while her friend retrieved her sister Magdalene from the house. The first sound out of Magdalene's mouth was not a word or a gasp. It was a scream — a joy that shocked. She didn't stop screaming when she hugged her youngest sister; didn't stop when she led her inside to see her mother and her other sister. If Pauline had been dreaming, this sound would have woken her up. She started to weep — they all did.

When they finally began to speak again, not all the words were easy. "I love you" was simple and so needed. But "we've missed you" was harder. It reminded Pauline of what she left behind. "Victor asked about you everyday," her strong mother explained, always choosing carefully which hardships to share and which ones to keep inside. "I didn't know what to tell him."

Pauline looked around the room for her son and caught him poking his head around the corner. He ran to her and she hugged him for minutes, wanting to be sure of him. She still did not know what to tell him, whether to start with "Sorry" or "How are you?" or "Who are you now?" But she knew how to hold him.

When she finally let go of her son, she caught a glimpse of his green shirt, and read the words branded across it: "SWAPO Will Win."

Praise and Lament

At the least, Pauline had expected the support of the traditional leadership and the church. She had joined SWAPO under their leadership; certainly now they would speak out against SWAPO's sins. And even in the dungeons, she had never stopped praying and never stopped singing. The church she remembered sang songs of praise and lament. She needed both songs now.

But the church said nothing, and the traditional leadership just said, "Wait." She spoke her pain to Hendrik Witbooi, the captain of the Nama people, and three other traditional leaders. She explained that she needed SWAPO to acknowledge their crimes. He said he heard her, but he didn't prove it. "First," he said, "let's get independence through SWAPO. First let's get peace. Then later we can talk."

But peace without conversation was not peace to Pauline. It was a cover-up or disguise — it was a national lie hanging from a flagpole.

Only one of the leaders, Christian Rooi, really heard her and spoke his mind to the others: "Listen to our children. They came back and they are hurting," he gestured toward Pauline and the other young ex-detainees. "We need to act."

But this deputy's urgency was out-numbered. The older generation voted against the pain of the younger generation three to one. *So this generational tension hasn't eased up*, Pauline thought, remembering how these leaders had doubted the abilities of the student activists before many of them left for exile. They would have to get Namibia to listen on their own.

A few days earlier, they had tried. Pauline watched from the audience as three ex-detainees spoke confidently at their first press conference. When they removed their shirts to show their torture scars, the cameras zoomed in and the audience leaned forward.

Afterward, the SWAPO oppositional parties vied for the ex-detainees to join them. And for a period of time, Pauline and the others did. They worked with United Democratic Front, a political party representing the Nama and Damara minority groups. And with the help of this political party, the ex-detainees insured that SWAPO did not get the two-thirds majority in parliament that would give them a dangerous amount of power. But the political parties only worked with the ex-detainees when it was convenient. They only wanted to tear down SWAPO; they didn't want to lift up the detainees. Pauline began to realize that the political parties, the church and the traditional leaders were all unwilling to advocate for the type of peace she wanted. The ex-detainees would have to advocate for themselves.



Six years later, Pauline had a stage and an audience of Namibian soldiers, politicians, mothers and ex-detainees. This was not her first podium, but it felt like a significant one. So significant that she was almost too scared to come — to begin the needed but terrifying fight for truth and peace. So significant that she almost stayed asleep at a friend's house with the sluggish comfort of the previous night's beer.

But today was the day she would officially launch the organization she co-founded, Breaking the Wall of Silence — a group that would advocate for the rights of ex-detainees and would push for the truth from SWAPO. The group shared their name with the German pastor Siegfried Roth's book title. With her help, he collected the testimonies of other ex-detainees.

Now, Pauline shared the stage with him and one other ex-detainee. She spoke for 10 minutes about the torture: "I could smell the alcohol on their breath." Spoke of her separation from Survival: "I may never be able to forgive SWAPO for that." Of the people she lost: "I still dream that they are alive." And of the economic challenges that came with returning to Namibia with the label of "enemy agent": "No one wants to take advice from a spy."

The crowd seemed receptive enough.

But something snapped during the question-and-answer period. One of the SWAPO combatants took hold of a microphone: "How do you really know that SWAPO was not infiltrated?"

"I don't know that," Pauline said. "I just know that we did not infiltrate SWAPO."

"There is a policy of national reconciliation," another SWAPO man said, "so shouldn't we just move on and forget about all this?" His question hung in the air, angering the ex-detainees in the audience. One ex-detainee stood up, a respected SWAPO commander before his arrest and imprisonment. He unbuckled his pants in silence. He pulled down his underwear with angry confidence. Part of his buttock was gone. It had grown rotten from the beatings, so SWAPO had cut it off.

Some people looked at his eyes, some at his scar, others at the ground he defiantly stood on. Then he spoke: "I fought for the independence of my country and all that I got from the stupid Ovambos is this."

He silenced the room for three thick minutes. Then another ex-detainee stood up, a former senior commander of SWAPO: "I never killed a fly in anyone's home. I never killed a fly in your houses," he said, pointing to the SWAPO members in the audience. "But you killed my brothers, and you tortured me. I will always remember that."

The SWAPO members left the room. They didn't want to hear this. And a week later they bought all the copies of *Breaking the Wall of Silence*. SWAPO used to burn South African textbooks; now they burned the books of their own people.

On the TV a broadcaster made an announcement for SWAPO to the ex-detainees: “If you want a war, we’re ready.”

They still don’t get it, Pauline thought. We don’t want a war — we just don’t want the “peace” you’re offering.

Pauline just wanted a conversation. She wanted SWAPO to listen without leaving the room.

They printed more books.



Damien had understood exactly what Pauline wanted because he had wanted the same thing. Damien was also an ex-detainee from Gibeon. He comforted her and loved her, and when Pauline told him she was pregnant, he had stayed in the room. They moved in together. It had been such a brief, needed love. She still missed him now, four years after his death in a car accident. She had just had the dream, the one where he holds her. The one where Pauline says to Damien, “You do not have time for me,” and he stops what he’s doing to embrace her. “No,” he explains, with his mouth to her ear, “I was just busy.”

Some dreams are too long, Pauline thought, remembering the nightmares where bombs chased her and guards followed close behind. And some dreams are too short. But at least she could still hold their daughter. They had decided to name her Innocia — a symbol of their innocence in a country that still called them enemy agents, a label that made it so hard to get jobs or respect.

Now Innocia was a first grader, but it seemed like just yesterday when Damien was the one taking her on errands, carrying extra pairs of his daughter’s underwear in his pockets “just in case.” Innocia walked toward Pauline, wearing an earnest, confused look on her face. She explained to her mother how her teacher told the class to prepare kind speeches about President Nujoma for homework. It was his birthday. “But how can I say nice things to my class about the man who has treated you bad and has taken away Survival’s father?” Innocia asked.

Pauline could cry. She thought of all the other ex-detainees who were never welcomed back into their homes, considered traitors by their own parents and children.

“Write what you feel,” Pauline said to her youngest daughter. But Innocia hesitated. *What if she yells at me? What if she fails me?*

“Mighty child,” Pauline said. “If your teacher gets angry at you, come and tell me. I will talk to her.”

Innocia came home from school the next day and explained to her mom how she told the truth that day, and how when she finished her speech, the teacher said nothing. But at least the teacher didn't yell; at least she didn't light the paper on fire, or leave the room in denial.

Pauline was proud.

If Graves Could Speak

Pauline held in her hands the autobiography of Sam Nujoma, the SWAPO president and leader of the liberation struggle. She looked at his picture on the cover. When she had arrived back home to Gibeon after three years in the dungeons, a giant picture of Nujoma hung above her “welcome home” feast. When her family left the room that night, she tore down the poster and threw it in the trash.

Over 10 years later, his face still got to her. Pauline read the title again: *Where Others Wavered*. What did that imply? That some people wavered, but Nujoma never did?

Pauline wavered. Some days when the torture injuries came back to visit, sending a paralyzing pain from her neck down to her spine, she just lay in bed all day. Other days, when she woke up from a dream where she was chasing Frans and Jouby through a crowd, she managed to get out of bed. She managed to buy another bottle of wine and forget about their absence for a foggy hour or two.

Pauline flipped through the book she had read a year back, her and most of Namibia. Each chapter was another battle won. Each page was another inspiration. *No one’s life is made of just victories*, Pauline thought, pushing the book aside.

Then she remembered the last time she saw the president in person:

The dungeon guards took Nujoma on a tour of the grounds while the detainees waited in single file lines for the parade. They kept the kids in the dungeon though — the kids with nameless SWAPO fathers. The guards didn’t want the president to see that. But he knew. The kids cried as he passed by.

The guards ordered the detainees to walk to the bush. Fear spread through Pauline’s body. How many people had she heard get shot in the bush? Nujoma met them there.

“You betrayed the nation!” Nujoma said. “You delayed the struggle.” *He said that last time he visited*, Pauline thought.

But this time he had a new question: “Now you have to tell me who is going back to their masters, the Boers, and who will remain with SWAPO.” Pauline did not know the right answer to this — the answer that would keep her alive.

“Namibia is on the verge of independence,” Nujoma added, “so let me repeat myself: Who is going back to their masters, and who will remain with SWAPO?” Nujoma’s army moved forward toward the detainees, cocking their AK-47s.

“We are going back to Namibia,” they all replied, knowing that did not answer his question. Pauline made eye contact with a rifle head. *The day I learn that Namibia will have freedom is the same day that I will die.*

The president repeated himself again, this time with more anger. A steady female voice from behind Pauline began to respond.

“Mr. President, where you stand, you are surrounded by graves of innocent Namibians. You did not witness how they were killed, but the grave that you are about to create is the grave that you witness and that you will answer to. Not only to our families, but to Namibia.”

Maybe something she said caused Nujoma to feel sympathy for the detainees. Or maybe he feared the sorrow and backlash their deaths would bring to a newly independent Namibia. Either way, he wavered: “Lower your weapons, comrades.” Then he turned back to the detainees, “If I had time to ask more questions, I would.”

She saved their lives — this Ovambo-speaking detainee named Lilona — and she did it without a gun.



On this day, that memory was enough to get Pauline out of bed and continue her activism. She would speak for the graves of her deceased friends, and speak against the guns that put them there.

Recently, Pauline convinced the Minister of Education to allow her to speak to schools about becoming gun-free zones. Pauline was a representative for civil society on the Committee Against the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons. She knew the power of the gun, and she did not want that power anywhere near school children.

Pauline started her activism at the school where she worked as a secretary. She gathered the teachers in a room and told them how she had seen guns force people into dungeons, kill people in the bush, and turn liberators into perpetrators. “Why,” Pauline asked, “do teachers who come to educate children need to bring a gun with them?”

The educators could not think of an answer. One woman, fired up by the conversation, announced that the principal brought a gun to school every day. Then she looked around the room and called out other teachers by name.

“What they are doing is not against the law,” Pauline responded. “But what if a student takes the gun from the office? What if another student removes the gun from a locker, not knowing the danger of what he holds in his hands?” More questions the teachers couldn’t answer, or didn’t want to answer.

The teachers agreed to make the primary school a gun-free zone — the first school of many that Pauline would convince. Several offices housing civil society organizations would soon follow suit.

For the public announcement of this decision, Pauline called the media, and gathered the students in the cafeteria. “Have you ever seen a gun?” she asked her young audience. “Yes!” the children proudly responded. “Do your parents own guns?” she continued. “Yees!” They yelled in unison.

Then without transition, she spoke of the danger of the gun. She called to the stage a man paralyzed from the waist down — shot for accidentally bumping into a side-view mirror of a stranger’s car. Pauline explained how guns could turn arguments into crimes and husbands into abusers or widows.

When the students left the event, they exited in silence.

They Will See

Pauline knew this story already, but she had to hear it again, and this time she needed it recorded on camera. She needed it to be on some DVD somewhere — a small, scattered part of Namibia’s history of liberation.

The story began with three brothers in exile — Danny, Lemmy and Mutani — and it ended with two: Danny and Lemmy. SWAPO arrested all three of them. Danny was the one who told Pauline the story. He was also the one who saw his brother — half of Mutani at least — shockingly and ruthlessly killed in Angola. He had to assume that an animal ate the other half. But Danny thought less about the animal, and more about the army who put his brother in the animal’s hole — the lazy grave SWAPO chose after killing him for the espionage. Mutani was never a spy.

“I paused for a few seconds to look at him, but they told me to keep marching,” Danny explained to Pauline. “Later they beat me for that.”

“How did you react after they beat you?” Pauline asked, knees parallel to Danny in the interview room.

“I was silent,” he said. “I washed myself off and went back to the dungeon.”

Danny was not silent now. He wept and wailed. Pauline forgot about the film and the microphones. She hugged her fellow ex-detainee, accidentally blocking him from the view of the camera. She paused the interview to hold him and to tell him she understood his pain, and how maybe if he could keep on talking, maybe some other Namibians would also understand. Maybe if he could keep on speaking, his son, whom he named Mutani, would know how to grieve and remember the uncle he never met.

Pauline did not need to explain the reasons why it was important to collect these testimonies in general: How they would create an accurate history of liberation and how they could lead to the holistic healing of the ex-detainees and Namibia as a whole. She would never try to convince ex-detainees to speak if they were not ready.

“Mutani means, ‘I will see,’” Danny reminded Pauline. And so they continued.



Sometimes Danny had played music. He told Pauline how he had started off in a band called Ndilimani — The Lion. They played at SWAPO rallies and parades until SWAPO arrested them as suspected spies. Danny played bass. In the dungeon, someone had made a lousy but beautiful guitar. That guitar played in the dugout after Danny saw Mutani. That way his friends could say, “We’re sorry, we get it, we mean it,” without saying anything at all.

When Danny came back from exile, he kept playing music with the four remaining members of Ndilimani, but they changed their name to “Minus Four” to commemorate the four men who were arrested and disappeared in exile. Minus Four played at homecoming, Breaking the Wall of Silence meetings, and the far-too-regular funerals.

They played this song at the funeral of Kala Gertze, the other co-founder and chairperson of Breaking the Wall of Silence — an intelligent, wise ex-detainee who always encouraged Pauline to use her leadership gifts. He had died strangely and suddenly of an asthma attack on his wife’s birthday. It was 2008 and Kala was 47 and Pauline wasn’t ready for that.

Pauline gave the eulogy and Minus Four provided the music. Kala had been a member of Parliament before his unexpected death. A Parliament member received a Parliament funeral — SWAPO would be in full attendance. The wife of Kala told Pauline how SWAPO came to her house, recommending she find a different person to give the eulogy. “This is a family affair,” they had reasoned.

“So I explained it to them,” Kala’s wife said. “I told them, ‘She is family. She was his best friend.’”

And she was. Pauline remembered excitedly telling Kala about the renovations she had made to her house: building a new porch out of stones. She had told him that she would have him over to see it soon. But then one day, weeks before his death, he just showed up at her door. And Pauline, surprised and pleased, greeted her wise best friend, saying, “Aye, what are you doing here?” He just smiled. “I don’t need an invitation to come see you and your new porch,” he said, placing BWS papers on the table. And he was right. Family members don’t need invitations.

She wasn’t nervous at his funeral, solemn and dressed in a blue trouser suit. She knew what she needed to do: Honor Kala and make SWAPO listen. Maybe those tasks were one and the same. But as the funeral began, she started to feel angry. In the distance, she watched the funeral procession: SWAPO members leading the way, SWAPO members carrying her friend’s casket, SWAPO members following behind it. It all seemed so fake. They cared for him better as a dead man than they did as an alive man, imprisoning him for six years in their dungeons, then ignoring his requests to address the crimes upon liberation. Everyone sat down as Pauline stood up to deliver her eulogy:

“Kala was emotionally tired. A young man that offered his entire life to help build the nation. How young could he be when knocking at closed doors, dealing with people with masks? Yet he had to contain his feelings to appear decent within the society.” Pauline looked out at the 600 people in the audience: some jobless ex-detainees, some widows, some SWAPO members.

“How many more should we exhaust? How many more should we sacrifice? Moments such as this are created by the Almighty. The passing away of Kala is once again an opportunity for us to reflect and to talk to those who are alive. Yes, we have lost thousands and we are still knocking on the doors of the church.” Pauline remembered the church who stood up against South Africa but closed the door on its own people: “How many more must we lay to rest before the church assumes its role?”

Pauline also knocked on SWAPO’s door. She didn’t need an invitation: “On behalf of Kala Gertze’s children and the children of all Lubango victims, I appeal to all members of Parliament to reconsider his motion to open the debate on the ex-detainee issue.”

She had said what she needed to say — to SWAPO and to Kala. And now, seated on stage, she couldn’t feel her legs. It was time to stand and view Kala’s body, but she could not move. Once she saw Kala, still and silent on the open casket cushion, that would make it official: the death of her strong, gentle best friend, the loss of the fearless BWS chairperson. Kala had always asked so much of her, but his death demanded even more: If he was gone, she would have to lead on her own.

Then the music chimed in from the members of Minus Four:

“We have lost, SWAPO has made us lose
SWAPO has created thousands of graves
Never again.”

The feeling returned to her legs and tears wet her warm cheeks, as if the two were related. She walked over to Kala and said goodbye.



Deon played drums for Minus Four. Over the past three decades, he heard the beat get slower — recognized the rhythmic shift from protest songs, to war cries, to funeral dirges and songs of betrayal. SWAPO arrested him and took his wife and children. SWAPO didn’t listen to him when he said he was innocent or when he asked them to get a doctor for the young man who died in his arms in the dungeon with a ruptured appendix.

“Homecoming was not so sweet for some of us,” Deon explained to Pauline and to the cameras recording his testimony. He had no one to come home to.

It was not so sweet for his bandmate Danny either, even after he found work as an air traffic controller for the Windhoek airport. He told Pauline how sometimes when the president of SWAPO travelled, he had to direct him safely to the landing strip. “And I always do,” Danny explained. “But they’re still suspicious every time.” He told Pauline

how the SWAPO members crowded his office as the plane descended, watched him closely, half-expecting him to crash the plane in some futile act of revenge. Twenty years had passed since the dungeons, and the subtle distrust Namibians felt toward Danny, Deon, Pauline and the other ex-detainees still persisted.

Pauline always saved this question for last in her interviews: “What would it take for you to be able to heal from all this?” Deon’s response stuck out to her: First he fell silent — an angry quiet that he was prone to these days. Then he responded.

“Reconciliation starts with respect,” he said. “And the second thing is the truth. SWAPO government hasn’t got the truth with them. We have the truth.”

And now they had the truth on camera.

Why They Laugh and How They Remember

Sometimes a friend would come back all splotched and streaked with blood hardened by the dust of the dungeons. And the detainees would laugh. Pauline would laugh because she was relieved that her friend wasn't dead. She would laugh because they had all guessed it — because the horrible had become the predictable and there was a terror in that, yes, but also a laughable, most unexpected predictability. They had become more than just the prisoners of SWAPO. They were the fortunetellers of the dungeon, anticipating the human cruelty that still felt foreign to their own capabilities. They had to think it was funny. Otherwise it was just normal.

Sometimes you have to let your body do something other than just cry. *You have to laugh*, Pauline thought, *otherwise you would just die*.

So some people didn't understand the jokes they made on the fourth of July — the day of homecoming for the hundreds of Namibians who survived SWAPO imprisonment and torture. One woman, a mother of a former SWAPO prisoner, turned to Pauline on the 20th anniversary of the day the ex-detainees came home from the dungeons, "There is nothing funny about the torture and the imprisonment," she said with earnest good intention covering her face. "So please stop behaving the way you are."

Pauline could not argue with this woman — any humor that occurred in the dungeons had happened by accident or necessity — but she also couldn't obey her. Pauline told her next story to an ex-detainee friend because she had to:

"Mary, do you remember that time I said 'hello' to you by the well at Kamati Base and you ignored me?" The question was rhetorical. Mary remembered but Pauline told the story like a needed tradition. "And I walked up to you all smiles, saying in our Nama tongue, 'Mary! How are you? I've missed you! Where have you been?'"

Then Pauline explained how Mary replied in the tersest of English, "Good morning." — with emphasis on the period and on the English. At the time, Pauline felt shocked and offended by her friend's shortness. But now as Pauline finished the story, she laughed. Tradition and instinct demanded that of her.

"Yes," Mary chuckled. "I remember. I remember how they had just beat me, telling me to stop speaking my native language, and then who is the first person I see? Pauline Dempers." — Pauline, full of Nama blood and Nama good mornings.

They laughed again. The non-ex-detainees scowled. But still, Pauline was glad that they came. On the day of homecoming, the ex-detainees put a notice in the newspaper and invited everyone they knew to their event — a celebration and a memorial service.

The first homecomings had been informal and instinctual. Pauline would realize on the third of July what the next date would commemorate, and she would call her friends. Inevitably, they would end up at her house or theirs, around a fire or a bar table talking like it was New Year's Eve 'til the sun came up.

One year they took turns recounting the moment each of them thought they would die. Another year they talked about their SWAPO activism pre-torture and imprisonment. And always, they laughed. The detainees called themselves The Bangaes, meaning The Bandits — with a declaratory irony permissible only to them.

Eventually, Pauline decided to make the day of homecoming official. Over the course of two weeks, she typed up the names of every missing and deceased ex-detainee, and added the date of the last time each person was seen. No name was easy to type. The ones she knew — Frans, Jouby, Ferdinand — stung in a personal, particular way. But even the other 1,900 or so names hurt like lost potential. She printed them on four giant poster boards then laminated them. They didn't have gravestones yet, so Times New Roman acknowledgement and thin plastic casing would have to do for now.

At the homecoming service, Pauline watched people take turns reading through the list, acknowledging the names they didn't know, and crying over the ones they did. "This is important," Pauline said to a Breaking the Wall of Silence member near her. "But it is still not enough."



Pauline was struck by all the bodies not buried at the Heroes' Acre — a war memorial in Windhoek dedicated to those who gave their lives in Namibia's century-long fight for independence.

She noticed the grave of a SWAPO leader who was a chief of intelligence and one of the masterminds of the dungeon. Looking down at his gravestone, she read the scriptural epitaph: "You have fought the good fight; you have finished the course."

The fight was far from good, Pauline thought. And the course is far from finished. She did not want to dig up his gravestone, she just wanted to add to it. To tell the whole truth.

Toward the center of the acre, Pauline recognized the memorial of the Unknown Soldier — a giant statue of a bearded comrade who held a striking resemblance to former SWAPO President Nujoma. The soldier stood eight meters tall, gripping a rifle in his left hand and brandishing an anti-tank grenade in his right. Pauline didn't like it. She considered the name of the statue: *How could a human be so unknown?* She took a step closer to the bronze figure. *Unknown by SWAPO, but known and loved by their families.*



Pauline spent years talking to these families, collecting the testimonies of the parents, siblings and spouses of the ex-detainees who never came home. She wanted the families to feel heard and the missing soldiers to be honored — to write them into the history that was trying to forget them. But she also wanted to take the cause to court. If Pauline could present video and written evidence of when these family members disappeared and who last saw them, she could get these men and women “Presumption of Death” certificates. And with that, benefits and closure for the families. If she could prove that they were gone and not just missing, then she could build them a memorial, one that would make them feel more known than unknown.

Pauline knew that sometimes a woman must make sad things official. Sometimes a survivor must etch fading names into tree and stone.



Walking into the Ngapuruee household felt like entering a memorial space. Three sisters led Pauline through two large wooden French doors into the living room where their elderly parents sat. They looked, unphased, at Pauline — as if they didn’t know that they didn’t know her. One of the sisters walked up to her parents and slowly explained what was happening:

“Do you remember when your sons left this house and never came back?”

They stared back at her.

“Do you remember how they would protest the South African system and then how they decided to go fight for freedom in exile?”

Pauline could not tell if the parents were offering a moment of silence or if they simply had forgotten.

Then the father spoke, announcing the names of each of his four sons. That’s all he could remember.

“Yes,” his daughter replied. “Well, this woman is here to learn more about them and to record their stories in Namibia’s Liberation history.”

Sometimes grief silences you, makes you forget, thought Pauline, remembering all of the family members of ex-detainees who lost their memories or lost their lives prematurely — the grief that kills. *And sometimes grief makes you speak up*. Pauline sat down to listen to these loving, grieving sisters.

Pauline decided not to record this interview on camera, sensing a sensitivity surrounding the conversation. The eldest sister spoke first, explaining why they decided to come to Pauline after all these years:

“We haven’t seen three out of four of our brothers in decades,” she said. “Three of them were arrested and one of them fled to Germany only to return to Namibia last year.” But he came back with just enough time to pass on. The new president of Namibia came to the funeral. Their father, who had a bit more of his mind with him at that point, approached the politician after the service. The father was a loyal SWAPO supporter, but he was also a reluctantly grieving father.

“What happened to my sons?” he asked, simply and calmly. The president turned to the man and said, “Ask Moses Garoeb.” Moses was the SWAPO secretary of administration. He had been dead for over 15 years.

“And what did your father reply?” Pauline asked.

“He said nothing. He was a pastor,” the sister added as an explanation. “But then we knew it was time to talk to you — that it was time to speak for our brothers.”



Pauline has thought of all the places she would memorialize the missing ex-detainees and her lost loved ones if she could. She would put up a big plaque at the top of the Tundavala Cliffs in Angola to remind the sightseers how so much evil occurred on top of such expansive beauty.

She would put up a memorial in a city park in Windhoek — a place where people could play and laugh, but also honor and remember. She wanted her fellow ex-detainees to be known and saluted, and for the SWAPO betrayal to be acknowledged before it was forgiven.

And Pauline also thought of her father, the one who inspired her activism so many years ago. If she could, she would take her father’s grave home to Gibeon to rest with his wife. He once said to her brother Ronnie, “You will go to the moon, son,” punctuating the sentence with that confident smile of his. It was 1969 and he was excited about space exploration, America, and the birth of his first son. Pauline’s father had high hopes for what his children could achieve.

Now it was 2014 and Pauline was travelling all over the world telling the stories of the dungeons in an honest, memorializing tone — but wondering, still, if she could ever get to the story’s conclusion.

During the liberation struggle, Pauline’s other brother Ignatius had changed his name to Uhuru, meaning “Freedom.” But now, looking at his sister, maybe he realized

they were not quite there yet — that real freedom and true peace were only found in the remembering and the reconciling.

He put his arm around Pauline, “Sister, you are the one who will go to the moon.”

CONVERSATION WITH PAULINE DEMPERS

The following is an edited compilation of questions and answers between Woman PeaceMaker Pauline Dempers and her peace writer, Jenna Barnett, during the 2015 residency.

What influence did your family have on your life and activism?

As a child, I watched my father find ways to reject the system. He would not carry the Pass when we travelled. He would go in shops with “Whites Only” signs. All of us would be there when the police came. I said to him, “You are something else. Why don’t you just obey?”

Now you have become something else.

[Laughs] So, he helped me realize that things were not OK.

You have also described your mom as a very strong woman. What characteristics from her do you think you have now?

I have her endurance and patience. Well, I don’t know if I’m as patient as she used to be. When my father died, she became a political activist. Naturally, she was a quiet person — a doer with very few words. Her actions spoke louder.

Do you consider yourself to be a quiet person?

Yes. It’s only the liberation struggle that has made me talk. The life that I have experienced has made me speak — to speak out when something is not right.

Currently, SWAPO has a Policy of National Reconciliation that looks a lot like historical revisionism. They don’t talk about the dungeons. You have referred to this current state of peace in Namibia as “cheap peace.” What type of peace do you want for your country?

I imagine it this way: Namibians will sit down, and those who were part of this conflict will acknowledge what happened. I want to hear what it was like for the SWAPO leadership. What was it like to make these decisions and to have thousands of Namibians called spies? What was it like when the leaders in the bureau were arrested as enemy agents? I believe that they were also human. I think some of them could be trapped by this idea [of South African espionage] when they were losing battles, thinking somebody must be here that is betraying us.

But then I also want us to listen to each other to find a solution. This should be the foundation on which we build: honoring the ones who could not make it back home, acknowledging that this was a real situation that we have to deal with. We must put a human face on this history, and say never again will we get there. Then build in

strategies and policies that prevent that with the help of both the ones who have lost and the ones who have caused the pain.

Why do you think so early on you advocated for reconciliation and peace instead of punishment?

You have to look at the bigger picture, and in the end we have only that one Namibia. We must also look at how things could have gone wrong: That fear — SWAPO also felt vulnerable, whether they want to admit it or not. They were fighting against a very strong, more educated army. So they were vulnerable and would do almost anything to justify their losses. And unfortunately, they picked the “spies.” I don’t have the answers or the justifications for what SWAPO did, but I understand their vulnerability.

Is that why you advocate for a restorative justice approach?

In part. I know what it is like to have lost. And what will I get if I ordered [former president Sam] Nujoma to be tortured today? They didn’t think then, but I have the opportunity to think now. Why would I cause his grandchildren that pain? I know how it feels. Whether they want to admit it or not, they must feel ashamed. I am saying this because of the few individuals who have told me. Acknowledgement is key.

BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER —
JENNA BARNETT

Jenna Barnett is a freelance writer and editor. She also works for the International Rescue Committee in San Diego, where she coordinates educational opportunities for refugees in the organization's large urban gardens. She first fell in love with creative social justice writing while working for *Sojourners*, a faith-based social justice magazine and advocacy organization located in Washington, D.C. As editorial assistant, she found herself continually writing articles about women artists, athletes, activists and politicians. Before her year with *Sojourners*, Barnett lived and worked at Jubilee Partners, a service community in rural Georgia where she taught English to refugees. After gardening, cooking and sharing a classroom with strong women from Burma and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, she realized the powerful capacity women have to build unlikely bridges and narrate injustices. Follow her on Twitter [@jennabarnett](https://twitter.com/jennabarnett) and on her website: www.jennabarnett.com

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE
at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ), based at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies, is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the university to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice.

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives in places like Nepal and Kenya, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute is home to the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series and WorldLink Program, and produces several publications in the fields of peace and justice.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article “‘Women Cannot Cry Anymore’: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict,” by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.