



NOVEMBER 1986

Produce a small-time bannable magazine for 10 belt-tightened years trying to catalyse a change that goes ahead and happens just as if you'd been manufacturing ashtrays or selling cars, and it's likely that in later life you'll ask yourself from time to time "what the hell was that about; why wasn't I building up reserves?" Then in a different millennium and a different country you might find unexpected moments of refocus, for instance when a publisher wants an introduction to a 1986 article by a mother and householder talking of daily life on the unenfranchised side of town. In the moment of re-reading the article it is very possible to think "yep, all that was about something, after all."

Diary of troubled times

*What the newspapers said every day was 'trouble in Soweto'. **Nomavenda Mathiane** amplifies that easy word 'trouble' until it means everything from terror and despair through family strains to motherly instinct to manly dignity to philosophy to hilarity to the blessed consequences of the dumb landlords building the kitchen door the wrong way round*

Tuesday night, August 26: I am seated in my living room, helping my 14-year-old daughter with her homework. The phone rings. It is my elder sister who lives in Rockville. I know immediately that something is wrong. She is not the type to phone for nothing. She is a very calm person by nature. In fact, she is the one who is always in control in my family when things go wrong.

I remember when my father died, I performed, screaming and throwing myself on the floor. My brother held me and tried to calm me down. Nothing could help. As if possessed by spirits, I continued crying. Anyway, it was my sister Catherine who simply said, "Look, it's Monday today and the old man will

only be buried on Saturday. Don't you think you had better save the energy for then?"

That did the trick. I sobered up. If this will help you understand her nature better, then I should also add that she is a nursing sister. Tough.

So when I heard her voice on the line I knew something had happened. One of my sisters? My brother perhaps? Or could it be the old girl? (My eighty-year-old mother who hardly ever gets sick). I held my breath.

"Noma, I don't know what is happening. We are hearing so much shooting and I believe people in White City are being evicted."

"What, why should they evict people at night?" was my first reaction.

My daughter closed her book and, with eyes about to fall out their sockets, looked at me, trying to follow the conversation. My sister told me that she had just returned from the "street committee meeting" where it was decided they keep their lights on at both front and back, and to respond to any neighbour blowing a whistle asking for help.

"There is so much shooting, I wonder if there will still be people alive tomorrow."

She thought it was about rents, which is a nightmare. If you pay, you can get the necklace. So nobody pays, but people are scared of being evicted, or of one day, when all this is over, having to pay months and months of back rent.

"There was also another problem: Two boys from my area have been stabbed to death. Apparently a gang went to a shebeen, held up the owner and got away with some cash. When they had to share the money, they quarrelled and one took out a knife and killed the two. Do you know what this means?"

"The families that have lost their sons might want to burn this boy's home and the shebeen owner is not going to take kindly to what these boys did to him. Where will all this end? Is it fair that we should be dragged in this mess? I mean, I don't know the inside of a shebeen, but when houses burn I might just get dragged in it. Is it fair?"

I tried to pacify her and tell her that things would get right. Nothing was going to happen to her. (But I was not sure). I wondered if I would speak to her

again. We held on to the phone not saying anything. I could hear her breathing on the other end of the line as we had gone beyond the mmm's and the ahhh's. She hung up. In the meantime, shooting was continuing. I now had to attend to my girl who had a barrage of questions.

“Will the soldiers come to Chiawelo too?”

“Why do they have to shoot?”

“Are people resisting evictions?”

“How long are we going to stay without paying rent?”

“Does it make sense to you, Ma, that we should just stay without paying rent?”

“Why don't they release Mandela to sort out all this mess?”

I tried as best I could to reassure her that they were not likely to come to our township because our matter was being attended to. That we started boycotting the rent long before it was a national issue because of the unfair amount we are being charged. I don't know whether I was convincing or not as I also needed somebody to reassure me right then. But eventually we called it a night, and I continued my reading in bed.

It first sounded like a firecracker and far away, but, strange enough, I could no longer concentrate on my book. I heard it again and this time I knew it wasn't Guy Fawkes crackers. It was gunshots. I sat up and put the light off. Then there were more gunshots.

I got off the bed, tip-toed into my living room to see what was going on. I peeped through the curtains and there was not a soul in sight. Then the dogs started barking. From all yards, dogs barked and the sound of gunfire was deafening.

I went into my other child's bedroom. She was sitting on her bed, eyes wide open. She asked: “What's going on here?”

I could not answer her. I went into the bathroom and when I came out both my girls were standing in the passage. The younger one asked: “Are they here now, Ma?”

DIARY OF TROUBLED TIMES

I shook my head. I saw lights go on in my neighbour's house. I went to the phone and dialled. As someone said "hello", there was a sound of a gunshot. I dropped the receiver and ran to my bedroom. The girls said we should go under the bed, but my bed has a base so we couldn't. We huddled on my bed. How I wished there was a man in the house to protect us.

I have always felt my bed was too big. But with two teenage girls and myself on it, it was like a cot. My little one held on to me and her heart was pounding like a machine. We prayed with our eyes wide open, all of us at the same time. Sleep overcame us.

NEXT day I knocked off early from work, planning to have an early night. I thought of getting sleeping tablets to knock me out, but settled for a bottle of wine instead. When I got home, I called my sister who informed me her neighbour's son had been found dead from bullet wounds.

As I drew the curtains in preparation to sleep, I saw a neighbour who I have not seen for some time. I ran out the house and we stood chatting about the night before. Then, as we stood talking, we saw a group of about eight boys entering yards. I suggested we stand and wait for them as opposed to them finding us in our homes. They told us that the Boers were coming to evict us, so we should keep our lights on and doors open front and back so those being chased by soldiers could take refuge. I went back into the house and told the girls that there might just be trouble that night.

We were having supper when the first shot went off. We ran to the living room to see if there were any police cars about or went back to the kitchen but could only look at the food. We moved to the living room and sat on the floor.

It was getting very dark outside. We saw car lights moving on our street. I prayed that it would be a friend visiting us. But it wasn't. And we continued sitting in silence. Then a shot went off, followed by another, and another one. I started panicking. I needed someone to help us. I grabbed hold of the phone, I wanted to phone my brother to come and fetch us. But I realised there was no way he could drive past bullets and get here. I thought maybe phoning him and

THE BEST OF FRONTLINE

letting him know that we were in trouble would make me feel better. His line was engaged. Dare I scare my sister? I decided against it and suddenly wanted to speak to someone who wasn't caught up in the mess. I phoned a colleague, in the suburbs on the other side of town.

It was as though he had been waiting for my call. My voice could not come out. When it did, I told him there was lots of shooting and we were scared. He asked pertinent questions and ended by asking what was I going to do and what could he do. I screamed "Nothing".

At that stage I was shaking like a leaf. I let the receiver face the street so that he could hear the sounds of gunfire. He mumbled something I could not hear. I hung up while he was talking. I ran to my bedroom and changed into my pyjamas. My girls, realising the state I was in, started giggling. I suspect it was a reaction. In their shocked state it was a relief to laugh at mother making herself ridiculous. I knew they were equally scared.

Then the phone rang. I started. I was too scared to walk to the living room where the phone was. I feared someone might see me walk in the passage and shoot me. I crawled to the phone. Then my pyjamas caught on the carpet and I fell on my face. And the phone kept ringing while the girls laughed. Outside the shooting continued.

I reached the phone after many seconds which felt like many days. It was the friend I had called earlier. I told him not to worry and that I would phone him if and when I needed help. I hung up, hoping he had got the message not to phone me. As I was about to crawl back to my bedroom, the phone went on again.

"What is it?" I snapped. It was a friend from Cape Town. He wanted to know if we were safe. I told him there was trouble and he promised to pray for me and the kids. I thanked him and hung up.

One of the girls told me to tell my friends not to phone us. Strangely enough, she had also crawled to where I was.

Shooting was still going on outside as we crawled back to the bedroom. It now sounded as though they were shooting in the next street. We sat on my

bedroom floor, holding each other's hands. My big girl suggested that we stand against the wall next to the window so that if anyone shot through the windows the bullets wouldn't touch us. It sounded a brilliant idea. I asked her where she got it from. She quoted the "A-Team". I gave up.

Dogs continued barking. Then we heard footsteps in the yard and something fall. I closed Bongi's mouth just before she could scream and we waited. We discovered the next morning that it was a huge dog scavenging in my refuse bin. We went on our knees as we do in church, prayed and slept.

We woke up to a normal day with newspaper headlines of trouble in Soweto. I could barely walk. Sharing a bed with two other people is most uncomfortable and, added to that, carrying tension for two nights just about crippled me. I thought of phoning my boss to tell him that I could not make it, but realised if I stayed home I would probably have to deal with the soldiers.

WORK was a form of escapism. Even if for only 11 hours. I dragged myself to the bus-stop.

In the taxi, everybody was talking about the shooting. Their personal experiences and some of those of their relatives and friends were recounted. One woman told how her aunt had slept on top of her son, hiding him from the soldiers. The narrator was very dramatic and had the taxi in stitches as she drew the picture of her bigbosomed aunt squashing the poor boy beneath her. We drove past many *Casspirs* ... and ambulances.

One of my friends came to the office. She was livid with rage.

"You know what my son has done? He has put us into trouble. The comrades came to tell him to join them. They did not find him and they left a strong message that he should join them or else they will set our home on fire. When he got back he refused to go. He said he was not prepared to be shot for nothing. Do you know what this means? They will burn our house because of him".

I tried to tell her: "What do you expect the child to do? He is afraid. Don't you understand?"

She didn't.

THE BEST OF FRONTLINE

“Look, I am also afraid, but he has to go. He is a sissy. He must just go. Otherwise we will all die”.

In the afternoon, my brother phoned to say our younger brother’s wife had been mugged and was in bad shape. He offered to take me to see her. I asked my boss if I could knock off early as I was not feeling too good.

Frankly, I did not have the heart to tell him where I was going. I just thought some things are better not told, especially as there was no logic in mugging a poor woman on her way to work. Mugging someone when the heat was so much on for more important matters. I mean, how does one explain that behaviour? I called home and told them I would be late as “uncle and I had to go somewhere”. They told me to be careful. I assured them that I would not fall. Apparently they have been entertaining people with stories of how I fell over my pyjamas in my panic and that I may seem tough on the outside, but I was a paw-paw inside.

THE weekend was uneventful. Come Monday and I started the day with a call from my friend whose son had refused to join the comrades. Now the comrades want to burn her. She told me the comrades had once more come looking for her son and when she objected to their manner of approach they got angry and said they were going to necklace her.

“Do you actually think they will do it?”

What could I say to that? How do I know the behaviour of people who necklace other people? Is there a pattern one could perhaps follow or read about to explain the thinking of such people? She was very worried. “I mean, all I am guilty of is asking these kids why did they have to be so rude when knocking on my door. They knocked as though we were harbouring criminals. Knocking at every door and shining torches all over. Now I am to be necklaced”.

I suggested that she should move in with me. “I have thought of that, but then they will think I am scared of them. No, I am not going anywhere. Let them do whatever they want.” (So far nothing has happened to her. Touch wood).

DIARY OF TROUBLED TIMES

In the meantime, there was mounting talk of the mass funeral to be held on Thursday. Rumour had it everybody had to attend the funeral. In the meantime, the Minister of Law and Order (What law? As for order, the less said, the better) has already banned the funerals. We were once more heading for what may be a fatal confrontation.

THE next day I am told there is talk about an indefinite stayaway from school, to go on until the troops leave the townships and release detained students. A friend calls me to a meeting for parents to give their views. The meeting is attended mainly by women and students. The women are angry.

“I don’t understand your logic,” says one woman. “The Boers are closing down the schools and you are calling a boycott. In whose interest is all this? The Boers do not care a damn if you go to school or not and you are playing right into their hands.”

The meeting gets out of order as it becomes obvious that there is no way the children will listen. One of the students goes on a long talk about how the parents have not taken any interest in their kids. “We have had enough. Try and read under the barrel of a gun. We are not wanting too much by wanting the SADF out the schoolyards.

“In fact, you mothers actually surprise me. If the white women were faced with the same problem they would have picked up their skirts and fought the army out of their locations. These people are there to kill us.”

It is a hopeless situation. In one corner of us, we (the mothers) admire those children and how determined they are. But we did not want liberation to be like this. The meeting went on with no more word about the adults’ concerns.

The children called the tune and our only role was to sit and listen, in angry silence. It was not even as if they were a majority. They were a handful.

WEDNESDAY found everybody worried about the next day (the day of the funeral). I knocked off early, anticipating transport problems. We had an early supper. Knowing we were not going to work the next day, we indulged in

watching a movie on television.

Around 10, a car stopped outside. We turned the lights off and peeped through the window. It was a friend. We let him in. He joined us, watched the movie and the little girl soon retired to sleep.

In between watching we spoke about the funeral and what was likely to happen. I kept teasing him that as an ex-political prisoner he was meant to know what was going on. He told me that people of his generation were regarded as “hasbeens” and the young radicals had taken over and “that lot does not listen to anybody’s advice”.

We were seated in that semi-darkness talking and watching the movie when suddenly dogs started barking. Soon there were whistles and voices. I stopped breathing for a second. I rushed to the window and looked through the curtains.

A group of young boys and girls were throwing stones at my neighbour’s house. I knew what it was. The next house would be mine. It is comrades collecting girls to attend the funeral vigil.

“Open up,” I heard the youngsters call. At that stage I was shaking like a leaf. Then I saw shadows move towards my house. I collected my nerves and told my friend to open for them at the kitchen door and ask them to wait while he wakes me up.

I remembered that a little while earlier we had bought a new cupboard. Bongi gave it one look and said, in what I thought was jest: “Now I know where I will hide when comrades come looking for me.”

I bet her she couldn’t fit, and in fun she got in to prove her point.

That piece of childish fun was in my mind as I ran to my bedroom where Bongi was fast asleep. I rudely shook her. She did not wake up. I couldn’t carry her so I dragged her to the cupboard and locked her in. I then quickly took my dress off and threw my robe on as though I had just come out of bed. I met my friend at my bedroom door. He was accompanied by three boys.

The youths said they wanted my daughter. I looked them straight in the eyes and told them she was visiting my sister. I then walked past them to the door

in a gesture to show them out. There were, I found, more youths in my yard. If they did not believe my story, they did not show it as they milled out.

They moved to the next house where there is a teenage girl and boy. I went back into the house and ran to release Bongi before she suffocated. She walked half awake back to bed.

I peeped through the window and could see the youngsters moving into another house. Suddenly, I was gripped by another fear. What if they should decide to hijack my friend's car to the vigil?

"I think you must go," I heard myself say.

He suddenly became furious. "Why do I have to be dictated to by children? I will go when I want to. Besides, I have the papers to my car so there is no way they can say my car is a target."

It took quite a while to convince him that once they decided they wanted his car there was very little he could do to stop them. Besides, if they went away with the feeling that I was associating with people who refuse to transport them, then I might be in trouble.

Having convinced him of the wisdom of leaving, I also asked him to take my daughter away with him in case they came back to search the house. Again, he didn't feel comfortable with the thought of leaving me alone. Ultimately, reason prevailed and we bundled Bongi in the car and they drove off.

Alone, I had a good opportunity to work myself into a state. I was now too scared to even go to my bedroom. I put all the lights out – comrades' orders or not – and took the scatter pillows and placed them on the floor. I thought of phoning my brother but decided against it. What was the point of waking the poor chap, especially now Bongi was away and safe? I dialled my boss. We spoke in low tones. There was no light in the house except for the two bars of the heater. He suggested I get sleeping tablets. I told him I had none. He said I should get brandy. We both chuckled because he knows I never get beyond wine.

He sounded more worried than I. I was now sorry for having rung him. I asked him not to tell his wife until in the morning as there was no point in get-

ting everybody worried.

I looked at my watch. It was only ten minutes to one. I thought of dawn. The creaking of the asbestos roof, something that happens every day, sounded like someone throwing things on the roof. I do not know when sleep overcame me, but I remember waking up feeling cold and stiff.

Outside was a bright September morning. But already people were standing in groups outside yards looking at the main road where a contingent of army cars was moving towards Regina Mundi.

The day drags on with all sorts of rumours circling the townships. There are not many cars moving about. I walk to the main road where I find one taxi fellow being told to off-load passengers as no taxi is allowed to operate that day. People get off and start walking. One of them is a nurse coming from doing night duty in town.

Around Regina Mundi, a group of soldiers are standing in the church-grounds while some are parked outside the yard. I notice some more army trucks parked in the recreation park at Rockville. I meet a colleague who is making rounds of the townships. I join him in the car. We drive to the cemetery (Avalon) where we find soldiers guarding the main entrance. It is quite obvious there is not going to be any burial.

On our way home we notice a group of people going round the back entrance. We have no doubt they mean to bury their dead. At that stage the army helicopters dominate the sky as they fly this way and that. We leave the uncertain situation at the cemetery and go to the stadium. There is nobody there and the mood of the people around Soweto is angry. They cannot understand why they are prevented from burying their dead. I go home.

FRIDAY comes and goes without much happening. Everywhere people speak of the highhandedness of the law. In the taxi to work people are talking about the rowdiness and uncontrollable state of the youth. One woman was agitated by the government for its refusal to release Mandela.

“All what these children want to see is Mandela. I think he can put an end

to all this tyranny.”

Another was quick to say “Why don’t they just grab any old man and parade him before the kids as Mandela – the blighters don’t know him after all.”

The discussions centred around the youth and the soldiers. Everybody wanted something to be done to redress the situation. Everybody was crying for security and a return to a normal life: a life where people can bury their dead peacefully, where children can go to school and not be intimidated by the presence of soldiers in their school premises, where neighbours can feel free with each other and where children can roam the streets as children, not as comrades.

I don’t usually wake up early on Saturday mornings. It was about 8.30 am and I had just drunk my first cup of coffee. From my kitchen door I caught sight of a boy running towards me.

He bursts in through the kitchen door, runs into one of the bedrooms and tries to hide beneath a bed. I run after him and ask “What do you want?”

All the child could say was: “It’s bad. The Boers are here.”

He dives into the blankets, clothes and all. I tell him how stupid it is of him to sleep with his clothes on. Who would believe him, whatever story he had. He gets the message, undresses and throws his clothes at me. I lock them in the wardrobe and find half full bottles of old medicines and place them on the floor next to the bed. All this happens in less than five minutes.

Outside I hear gumboot steps in the yard. I know the soldiers are here looking for him. I quickly move into the toilet. I hear them struggle with my kitchen door. One thing about my kitchen door is that it opens from outside. So you could be out there pushing when all you need to do is pull. No amount of complaining to the West Rand Board could persuade them to fix the door.

Ultimately, the soldiers got the door right. I heard them walk in the kitchen, I flushed the toilet and came out. Rifles were pointing at me. They seemed more surprised than I was. I don’t know what they expected to see. It was quiet in the room. My cat crept closer to my feet as the soldiers walked to my living room, looked around, opened one bedroom door after another. I held

my breath. They moved into the bedroom where my supposed patient was sleeping and let him to sleep.

Outside, more soldiers were scouting the area. Some were in the next yard and people stood outside watching. The ones in my house walked out. I started sweeping my yard so as to be in touch with what was going on outside. Having exhausted their search in my street, the soldiers moved to the next one.

I gave the boy an old shirt that had been lying around for some time. Having eaten the sandwich I had prepared, he thanked me profusely. But there was no way I could not have saved that child. To me, it was not an issue for debate. It had nothing to do with principle or morality. He was a child who had to be hid or killed. I didn't wait to ask him why he was involved or not involved. At the same time, I saw in my mind's eye a group of boys taking somebody's car. He could be one of those youths who are merciless when they want their way. He could have been one of those who came for my daughter. He could have been one of those who wanted my sister's car or he could be one of those who petrol bomb houses. How was I to know? What would you have done?

I have seen a mother in grief. I have seen a mother coming out of Pretoria Maximum prison after a visit to a son to hang the next day. I have seen a mother watching a corpse of her son covered in papers, waiting for the black maria to remove the body. I have seen a mother escorting a seven-year-old girl to hospital after the child had been raped by a man old enough to be her father. I have seen all that pain and I live with those memories I cannot erase.

Not so many months ago, a colleague asked me how I felt about necklaces. Proudly, I said they were the right treatment for sell-outs, all those people who collaborate with the system. I remember standing with one hand on my hip and carrying on just how we (the blacks) are weeding all the bad elements retarding our struggle. He looked at me with a sad face, and I went on talking about the killing by soldiers of three-year-olds playing in the yards.

"Is it fair?" I asked. Why didn't the whites condemn that as much as they condemn necklaces. I was convinced we were on the right track.

One afternoon three weeks later I was busy in my house typing away. My daughter burst in. I didn't like the look in her face. She stood there, her face los-

ing colour. I asked where her friend was. She told me she was at home. I went over and found her in bed. An irate mother said “You know these kids can really make one mad. They go about the streets and look now, they are scared out of their wits. They have just seen a person being necklaced. If they had been at their homes they would not have witnessed such a terrible thing.”

So, that’s what it was, I said to myself, I went back home, took my child in my arms and told her it would be over one day. We sat down and cried.

I decided to go back to my typing but couldn’t. Something said I should go and see that necklace victim, but I was too scared. Eventually, the journalist in me got the better of me and I went out amid protests from my daughter.

I made a few enquiries and people pointed the way the victim and mob went. A young boy ran past. His face had gone a strange grey colour. I was about to turn back when I saw a group of people. Some were seated, others standing. I wanted to turn back but realised that I might get into trouble and be asked why was I making a U-turn. I met some women in the way, talking in loud voices, condemning the killing.

“Poor child,” one woman said. “What has he done?” I asked.

They shrugged their shoulders and I went ahead. I didn’t actually see the victim. His charred remains were by then covered in papers and pieces of plastic. I saw the mother. She was crying, without tears coming out. If maybe you have seen a sangoma dance in a trance maybe you will begin to understand.

She was crying and talking all the time. Maybe she was in a state of shock. But she was mumbling that her child is not a witch, but is sick. And she was crying to her God in Shangaan or Venda. She looked at us without seeing us. We looked at each other. There were women mostly (it was during the week) and a few policemen around. No-one except the mother said anything. We just looked on.

People came, looked, got tired and left. It must have been sometime in the evening when the body was removed. Another victim of the struggle. Another day in Soweto.