

## From *The Soft Vengeance of a Freedom Fighter*

*Albie Sachs*

1

Oh shit. Everything has abruptly gone dark, I am feeling strange and cannot see anything. The beach, I am going to the beach, I packed a frosty beer for after my run, something is wrong. Oh shit, I must have banged my head, like I used to do when climbing Table Mountain in Cape Town, dreaming of the struggle, and cracking my cranium against an overhang. It will go away, I must just be calm and wait. Watered the tropical pot-plants, stared at the ten heads on the giant African sculpture in my beautiful apartment. Oh shit, how can I be so careless? The darkness is not clearing, this is something serious, a terrible thing is happening to me, I am swirling, I cannot steady myself as I wait for consciousness and light to return. I feel a shuddering punch against the back of my neck, and then what seems like another one. The sense of threat gets stronger and stronger, I am being dominated, overwhelmed. I have to fight, I have to resist. I can feel arms coming from behind me, pulling at me under my shoulders. I am being kidnapped, they have come from Pretoria to drag me over the border and interrogate me and lock me up. This is the moment we have all been waiting for, the few ANC members still working in Mozambique, with dread and yet with a weird kind of eagerness.

'Leave me,' I yell out. 'Leave me.'

I jerk my shoulders and thrash my arms as violently as I can. I always wondered how I would react, whether I would fight physically, risking death, or whether I would go quietly and rely on

my brain and what moral courage I had to see me through.

'Leave me alone, leave me alone,' I demand violently, aware that I am shouting in both English and Portuguese, the official language of this newly independent state where I have been living for a decade. I've forgotten my Afrikaans after 20 years in exile, I'm screaming for my life yet with some control, some politeness, since after all I am a middle-aged lawyer in a public place.

'I would rather die here, leave me, I'd rather die here.'

I feel a sudden surge of elation and strength as I struggle, making an immense muscular effort to pull myself free. I might be an intellectual but at this critical moment without time to plan or think I am fighting bravely and with the courage of the youth of Soweto even though the only physical violence I have personally known in my life was as a schoolboy being tackled carrying a rugby ball. I hear voices coming from behind me, urgent, nervous voices not talking but issuing and accepting commands, and they are referring to me.

The darkness is total, but still I hear tense staccato speech.

'Lift him up, put him there.'

I am not a him, I am me, you cannot just cart me around like a suitcase. But I am unable to struggle any more, I just have to go along and accept what happens, my will has gone.

We are travelling fast, the way is bumpy, how can they leave me in such discomfort, if they are going to kidnap me at least they could use a vehicle with better springs. I have no volition,

I cannot decide anything or even move any part of me. But I have awareness, I think, therefore I am. The consciousness fades and returns, swirls away and comes back, I am lying down like a bundle, there is a point in my head that is thinking, and then oblivion and then awareness again, no thought related to action, but passive acknowledgment that my body is being transported somewhere, that I exist, even if without self-determination of any sort. I wonder if we have reached the South African border yet, I wonder who my captors are, what their faces look like, do they have names? This darkness is so confusing.

More urgent voices, speaking with rapid energy, treating me as an object, to be lifted and carried and moved this way and that... I feel the muscles and movements of people all around me, above me, at my side, behind me. Nobody engages me as a person, speaks with head directed towards me, communicates with me. I exist as a mass, I have physicality, but no personality, I am simply the object of other people's decision. They point their mouths to each other, never towards my head, I am totally present, the centre of all the energetic talking, but I am never included in the discussion, my will, my existence is being violated, I am banished even while in the group.

All is very still and calm and without movement or voices or muscular activity. I am wrapped in complete darkness and tranquillity. If I am dead I am not aware of it, if I am alive I am not aware of it, I have no awareness at all, not of myself, not of my surroundings, not of anyone or of anything.

'Albie...' through the darkness a voice, speaking not about me but to me, and using my name and without that terrible urgency of all those other voices '... Albie, this is Ivo Garrido speaking to you...' the voice is sympathetic and affectionate, I know Ivo, he is an outstanding young surgeon and a friend '... you are in the Maputo Central Hospital... your arm is in a lamentable condition...' he uses a delicate Portuguese word to describe my arm, how tactful the Mozambican culture is compared to the English one, I must ask him later what that word is '... we are going to operate and you must face the future with courage.'

A glow of joy of complete satisfaction and peace envelops me, I am in the hands of Frelimo, of the Mozambican Government, I am safe.

'What happened?' I am asking the question into the darkness, my will has been activated in

response to hearing Ivo's voice, I have a social existence once more, I am an alive part of humanity.

A voice answers, close to my ears, I think it is a woman's, '... a car bomb...' and I drift back, smiling inside, into nothingness.

## 2

I am elsewhere and other. There is a cool crisp sheet on me, I am lying on a couch, aware that I have a body and that I can feel and think and even laugh to myself, and everything seems light and clean and I have a great sense of happiness and curiosity. This is the time to explore and rediscover myself. What has happened to me, what is left of me, what is the damage? I am feeling wonderful and thinking easily in word thoughts and not just sensations, but maybe there is internal destruction...

Let me see... A joke comes back to me, a Jewish joke from the days when we Jews still told jokes to ward off the pains of oppression and humiliation, from when I was still a young student and my mountain-climbing friend had a new joke for me each week, and I smile to myself as I tell myself the joke, and feel happy and alive because I am telling myself a joke, the one about Himie Cohen falling off a bus, and as he gets up he makes what appears to be a large sign of the cross over his body.

A friend is watching in astonishment. 'Himie,' he says, 'I didn't know you were a Catholic.'

'What do you mean, Catholic?' Himie answers. 'Spectacles... testicles... wallet and watch.'

My arm is free and mobile and ready to respond to my will. It is on the left side and I decide to alter the order a little, I am sure Himie would not mind in the circumstances. Testicles... My hand goes down. I am wearing nothing under the sheet, it is easy to feel my body. My penis is all there, my good old cock (I'm alone with myself and can say the word) that has involved me in so much happiness and so much despair and will no doubt lead me up hill and down dale in the future as well, and my balls, one, two, both in place, perhaps I should call them testes since I am in hospital. I bend my elbow, how lovely it is to be able to want again, and then be able to do what I want; I move my hand up my chest, what delicious self-determination, what a noble work of art is man... Wallet... My heart is there, the ribs over it seem intact, the blood will pump, the center of my physical being, the part

you take for granted is okay, I am fine, I will live and live robustly. Spectacles . . . I range my fingers over my forehead, and cannot feel any craters or jagged pieces, and I know I am thinking clearly, the darkness is now feather-light and clean, unlike the heavy, opaque blackness of before. Watch . . . my hand creeps over my shoulder and slides down my upper arm, and suddenly there is nothing there . . . so I have lost an arm, Ivo did not say which one, or even that they were going to cut it off, though I suppose it was implicit in his words, and it's the right one, since it is my left arm that is doing all the feeling . . . So I have lost an arm, that's all, I've lost an arm, that's all. They tried to kill me, to extinguish me completely, but I have only lost an arm. Spectacles, testicles, wallet, and watch. I joke, therefore I am.

## 3

So this is what it's like. I came close to death and survived. I am in the intensive care ward, there are tubes running into me like I've seen in the films and it always looked so uncomfortable, how could you bear to have a tube going into your nose or into your arm? And yet it is not difficult at all, the whole body feels slightly odd and the tubes are just part of the general strangeness. I know that time has passed, but have no sense of how, long it has been; when you sleep, your body clock keeps going, but not when you are being operated on. Somebody told me that the operation lasted seven hours, that is how they measure ops, and I remember the sense of pride in his voice. They explored all of me, looking for damage everywhere, taking out scores of pieces of shrapnel from all over my body and head, and I was proud of my complicity in this major surgical enterprise.

And now, is it the same day or the next or the next? The darkness has continued, and I suppose I am quite heavily drugged, and I just do not know how long I have been here. I remember Ivo talking to me once, chatting to me with the intimacy of a friend, reestablishing a personal relationship after having cut up my body, and giving me his personal version of the bomb story that has apparently stirred all Maputo, telling me he heard a tremendous explosion shortly after he had got up, and that he dressed quickly and rushed to the hospital without waiting to be called because he knew from the violence of the bang that there would be victims, and then when he got to the hospital he

saw someone being carried in and looked closer and was shocked to see it was me in my bathing trunks. And then there was Anatoli, with the gentlest hands of any man I have known. I wonder what he looks like – from his name and the way he speaks Portuguese I guess that he is one of the Soviet doctors at the hospital – all I know is that he peels the bandages off with lovely delicacy, speaking softly as he dresses the wounds on my right side and then winding the bandages on again with equal fingerly kindness.

Someone has given me a rundown of my injuries: it seems there has been no injury to internal organs and no brain damage (I could have told them that, spectacles . . . testicles . . .) and that apart from the loss of the arm I have four broken ribs, a fractured heel on my right leg and a severed nerve in my left leg, lots of shrapnel wounds, ruptured eardrums, and, as for my eyes, they would know as soon as they took the dressing off which would be quite soon, all in all a miracle, if you had seen my car, it is still there, everybody is driving past or walking by, and nobody believes I could have escaped alive, it is just a heap of crumpled metal with two beach chairs peeking out the back.

From time to time I allow the fingers of my left hand to trace the slope of my right shoulder. The whole of that side is heavily bandaged and I do not want to press too hard, but I can feel the shape of the upper part of the arm, and then before I can reach the elbow, the bandages turn inwards and there is nothing more. If I did not feel with my left hand, I would not know that I had lost my right arm, it still seems to be there, it exists in sensation even if not in reality. What puzzles me is something else, and the doctors do not seem to have an explanation for it, and that is, why, after having been through what must have been a terrible experience, and lying in complete darkness with a mass of fractures and wounds, I am feeling so wonderful. [ . . . ]

## Epilogue

Was it worth it?

A long, slow, totally intimate yet highly publicised run was the affirmative way I had chosen to mark my stepping aside from organized political activity. The mayor of Cape Town gave me a kiss and a gentle push with her hands to send me on my 11-kilometer way, the traffic police cleared the road, television crews developed their calf muscles

while they ran backwards to capture frontal images of my elated panting, a waiter handed me a small cup of espresso (not a banned substance) when my legs pounded step by slow thudding step into the pavement outside Giovanni's, and the workers at the Arthur's Seat Hotel shouted 'Viva, comrade Albie, viva' as I jogged slowly and heavily past the palm trees on Sea Point promenade. The occasion was a repeat of my run 30 years before from Caledon Square Police Station to the sea. It was 1994, six years after the bomb, four years after my return from exile, and a month before the country's first free and democratic elections, and I needed to do something personal and physical to feel the involvement of my body in the process of transforming South Africa. The intense underfoot churning of the fine white sand of Clifton Beach was as joyous as I had long envisaged. As I eventually threw myself with narcissistic bravura into the cold waves, Basil 'Manenberg' Coetzee, one of the creators of Cape jazz, blew his saxophone loudly - he and I and the gathering crowd celebrated the simultaneous recovery of my body and the revival of our country.

How necessary and yet how sad that my generation of freedom fighters had been compelled to transmute the painful and distinctive ecstasy of our lives into the run-of-the-mill emotions of any other contenders for office. The great and poignant paradox of our lives was that we had fought with all our passion to create a boring society. Although the quest for human rights would never end, the forms it took would now be different. I felt that we had won the right to embark upon new careers that had been unthinkable as long as apartheid was in place, and, much as I admired my colleagues from the struggle who were willing to carry on with political work, I wished to shout my last 'Viva!' and be considered for appointment as a judge or, failing selection, to make movies. At the conference in a hot crowded hall to ballot for persons to be placed on the ANC election list, exhausted by nonstop traveling during the negotiation period, I had gripped the table in front of me and drunk several glasses of water to make sure I stayed awake. My fear had been that I would fall asleep before the Ss were reached and wake up effectively a member of Parliament. I wouldn't enjoy electioneering - vote for us, we've got the finest policies, we're the best, we're the most honest - as if integrity were something capable of calibration. I hadn't wanted to find myself anx-

iously waiting for a telephone call to see if I had been chosen for some high government post. At last I heard the words 'Sachs, Albert Louis,' stood up, and said 'Please take my name off the list,' and with this short sentence weaned myself from 42 years of total personal commitment and disciplined loyalty to the cause. The values would be the same, but the context and format quite different.

As I eventually stood in line to vote I wished I hadn't felt so tired and tense, my sleep destabilized by the weight of history, my waking moments upset by a terror that some madness would overcome me in the voting booth and force my hand perversely and shamefully to put my cross next to (my vote was my secret) instead of next to (my vote was my secret). The elections were meant to be the most joyous period in my life, yet the only moment when I wept with real tears of unforced emotion was when I saw on TV the elderly and the infirm being the first to vote. [Mommy, you must live, we need your vote, there are special assistants for the blind.... My mother knew what I was saying: it wasn't the extra vote, it was a reminder of what her life of 90 years had been about, ever since as a rebellious schoolgirl she had sung: God save our gracious King, when we get hold of him...] Elderly African men and women stood with a quiet, disciplined sense of achievement and told the interviewers exactly what I knew they would say: we have waited our whole lives for this moment, and we, the crazies, the idealists, the holders of impossible dreams, turned out to be right, our lives were valid after all, our beliefs justified. Suddenly, for three days we had become the normal ones, and the rest of the disbelieving world the oddballs.

Yet the shock of having suddenly reached my life's most wondrous day seemed to have left me disturbed rather than elated. Shuffling forward in a queue to make two anonymous pencil marks, I was about to consummate the most precious asset any person can have, the hope for a glorious future, and at the same time to extinguish it. Could it be that once we achieved our ideals, we could no longer live for them? I felt miserably neutered by the normality for which we had fought, and which had produced not only the desired political equality between black and white but an unsettling equality of emotion and existence between ourselves and those who, offered a choice between

human rights and a piece of chocolate, would have selected the chocolate each time.

I thought with amusement, part smug, part wry, about the one previous time I had received a ballot slip. It had been during my second detention, nearly 30 years before, in a doubly-padlocked cell in Roeland Street jail, and I was recovering from torture by sleep deprivation. To save himself the complicated routines required to unlock both padlocks, Captain Rossouw of the Security Police thrust his hand with the ballot slip in it through the bars of the window and said: Advocate Sachs, this is a democratic country and you have the right to vote, and I answered: No thank you, Captain Rossouw (we freedom fighters were well brought up), I would rather not, and I saw the ballot slip float back past the bars.

Now with my left hand which, disappointingly, would produce the identical feeble scrawl of my former right hand, I picked up the pencil provided in the voting booth, and thought of the words of Albert Luthuli, the ANC President who had died in banishment: After decades of knocking patiently and vainly at the door asking for improvement of our conditions, our life is worse than it was before, and the only road to freedom now lies via the cross. The cross on the ballot paper, the cross of sacrifice.

It hadn't just been the solitary confinement, the sleep deprivation torture or the bomb; it had been the surveillance, the bugs, the raids, the informers, the unrelenting pressure wherever we were, every hour of day and night, to wipe us out because we had the vision that one day in South Africa everyone would be equal. ('You mean, you seriously believe in one man one vote?') Truly, whatever else it signified, the Bill of Rights in our new Constitution was the negative biography of our generation, the 'never again' of our lives. Our confrontations had been real and directly experienced: the suppressed panic, the unrelenting tension of underground work, the comradeship of the embattled, the pain of isolation, the constant secrecy that had compelled the most honest amongst us to become the biggest dissemblers. It had been dark and intimately and intensely our own, and, oh, so sharply and personally experienced.

[Albie, I don't know why you want me to dictate my memoirs, I wasn't important. . . . Mommy, that's exactly why. . . . I was able to get a visit to Albie while he was held in Caledon Square under the ninety day law. Johnny had just undergone an

open heart operation in London and I phoned the police and cried over the phone that my one son was in hospital and my other son was detained: so I was able to visit him. I bought a new dress, and had my hair and nails done. I came along looking as bright as I could. I never wore that dress again, only that once. The visit had the opposite effect on Albie to what the police had expected. They thought I would be crying and pleading with him to talk, and what happened was the contrary. He wanted to say something, and I put my hand to my lips because I was sure there would be a microphone somewhere. After that we just spoke about trivialities. Even though it was a chilly day, Albie chose to meet me in the yard rather than in his cell, not only to get fresh air, but to avoid being bugged, yet I was sure there would be a microphone there as well. It didn't matter, though, it was enough just to see him. Later, after his release, Albie wrote to Johnny about me, saying 'poor Mommy, her son the doctor went to hospital, her son the lawyer went to jail.']

Today, I thought with dismay, my life and my smile were becoming more public, while my emotions were growing ever more private. Once upon a time our success had depended on deep secrecy, now it flowed from intense publicity. Instead of putting on gloves to hide fingerprints and be invisible from the police, I would choose attire to make me look handsome, trustworthy, and wise on TV. What mattered was no longer the intrinsic quality of the things we did, but the excellence of the way we presented ourselves. Our emotions, once intensely and rawly our own, were now parasitic on the experiences of others. Fevered by sound-bites on the screen or radio or snippets in print, we were unable, even unwilling to immunize ourselves against electoral cholera. We ended up investing the banal exercise of counting ballot slips with the intense and over-furnaced emotions of history. And just as our feelings came from watching and reading about the doings of others, so did the world at large witness with pleasurable disbelief the queues of black and white voters waiting patiently to participate as equals for the first time in our elections, and declare that our negotiated revolution was a miracle.

It wasn't a miracle. It didn't just come to pass. Our transition had been the most willed, thought-about, planned-for event of the late twentieth century. I had once written that all revolutions were impossible until they happened, then they

became inevitable. In our case the movement from impossibility to inevitability seemed miraculous to many, particularly to those of little faith, who could only anticipate racial war and mutual ruin. That was the irony – the relationship between history and miracle had been reversed; for the total doubters, it had been a miracle, while for those of intense belief, it had been entirely rational. We believers knew that the transition had been the product of intensely thought-through planning and had been based on meetings and yet more meetings, endless, endless meetings, above-ground, underground, in prison, on Robben Island, in exile, meetings, some boring, some interesting, all with their ‘agendas’ and ‘matters arising’ and ‘any other business,’ meetings, meetings – I used to believe that freedom meant no more meetings, but still they continued, more and more meetings . . . we would have a classless society long before we achieved a meetingless one.

Did things just happen, or did we make things come about? I knew that nothing we were living through had just come to pass. We had willed it all, worked for it, never given up, never let go of the basic ideas. Yes, we had believed – belief had been fundamental – but we had backed it up with endless hard work, and learned how to do things together, and to accommodate the fears and interests of others, and to survive the sarcasm and disbelief of those who regarded themselves as more knowledgeable than ourselves about what they called the real world, and we just kept going on and on until at last the impossible became first feasible then real and finally inevitable.

I marked my clumsy cross next to the photograph of (my vote is my secret) folded it with my teeth, and dropped it in the box. Sufficient unto the day was the banal goodness thereof.