DANCING TO A DIFFERENT RHYTHM: A MEMOIR

ZARINA MAHARAJ

CHAPTER 1

SUSSEX

I had just finished packing our suitcases after selling off the last bits of furniture and the kids had finally fallen off to sleep. I was about to call it a day when, at half past twelve on 25 July 1990, the phone pierced the silence of the Sussex night. Nervously I answered, thinking, no one rings me at this time of the night.

'Hi, Zarina,' a voice said at the other end. 'This is Valli Moosa calling from South Africa. We've never met, but we know of each other through Mac …'

'Is Mac okay?' I interrupted anxiously, almost rudely, as a shudder ran down my spine. Why would someone so senior in the South African liberation movement call me out of the blue at this time of night, just as the kids and I were about to board a flight to South Africa the following evening?

'Is there anything wrong, Valli?' I asked, still not giving him a chance to talk, afraid to hear why he'd called on the eve of our long-awaited return home. 'Mac must have told you how desperate we are to be reunited after all this time living apart. Will he be at the airport day after tomorrow?'

'No, I'm afraid not,' Valli said. 'Mac was ambushed on his way to my house this evening by the Special Branch police. He's in jail again. I don't think you and the kids should fly out tomorrow. We have no idea when he'll be released.'

Listening to his voice quivering with emotion made me feel even more jittery, even as relief that Mac was still alive flooded through me. There had always been the possibility that his work in the underground struggle in South Africa would be the end of him. We had often discussed this possibility with Oliver Tambo, the president of the African National Congress, in the months prior to Mac's departure from Zambia in 1988. It was because of these discussions that 'OR' – or 'Chief', as he was affectionately called by those who worked with him – had written us a note in which he thanked us 'for who and what you are to us all'. I still drew strength from his words, and kept the framed note on my desk.

'How long will Mac be in, Valli?' I asked, as relief gave way to new uncertainties.

'I don't know,' Valli replied. 'But no doubt we'll know soon.'

I asked Valli how they could have arrested Mac when he'd been granted indemnity from prosecution for political offences committed before 8 October 1990, and when the Groote Schuur negotiations for a peaceful end to apartheid had already started between the ANC and the government.

'Mac should have gone into hiding when Gebuza and Pravin and some of the others were arrested two weeks ago,' I said, puzzled. 'He surely must have known he would be next?'

‘I don’t know,’ Valli said patiently. ‘He might have been clearing away incriminating evidence.’

Sure. Mac would rather die than give in to the enemy. Once before, while in detention at the Security Branch head office in Johannesburg, they had tortured him very badly when he wouldn’t talk. Due to the injuries to his neck, his right arm was paralysed for three years of his subsequent twelve-year imprisonment on Robben Island. I trembled, trying to block any thoughts of what they might do to him now.

‘We should never have trusted those apartheid brutes,’ I said to Valli. ‘What gall to arrest Mac when no date has been agreed on yet to cease the armed struggle. And now we can’t go home! What do I tell the children? That they won’t see their dad for another two years? That we were simply not meant to be together as a family?’

In an attempt to deal with the shock of the news, I began talking uncontrollably and without pause – and Valli let me. I told him that, no matter what, I would be on the next evening’s flight to South Africa. At least we’d get to see Mac in prison. In any case, the house I had been occupying in Brighton had already been rented to someone else; I had just sold my car and furniture, taken both the children out of school and withdrawn from my studies at Sussex University. We had nowhere to stay and I had no desire to live in exile for another moment, not even for the essential treatment of the injuries I had sustained in a car accident in Lusaka, Zambia. (The UN had sent me to England for medical care in the hope that I would eventually return to work for them in Lusaka.)

And I just would not be able to cope with Milou and Joey’s disappointment. They were so excited about being with their dad again, and couldn’t wait to enjoy his undivided attention and listen to his jokes. Just being reminded of what he looked like had made their expectations soar in the last month.

‘Mac’s been arrested under the Internal Security Act,’ Valli almost whispered. ‘You know that this allows for indefinite detention, incommunicado, without trial, access to lawyers, medical care, friends or family. I’m really very sorry to have to tell you this, Zarina.’

This was a knockout blow. Indefinite detention and not even a chance of visiting him in prison – after all this time!

Sensing my despair, Valli continued. ‘If you’ve been at all involved in Mac’s underground work, you are at risk of imprisonment too – and how would that help to reunite the family? Are you there?’ he prodded, getting no response from me.

The chill down my spine grew icier. What if they knew about the huge quantities of RPGs, hand grenades, AK47s, Makarovs and other military hardware Mac had been requesting in his communications – which I had sometimes had to decode and deliver to OR and Joe Slovo, or JS, chairman of the South African Communist Party, through Ivan Pillay, chief administrator of Operation Vula? Would the cops have discovered my collaboration, and that I was the ‘Gemma’ in the communications? The safe houses, documents and now fingerprints … Would Mac have managed to clear all this evidence away, and what if they found it?

It was suddenly obvious that the children and I could not board our flight the next evening. I was too upset to carry on talking.

'I'll phone you when I've had a chance to think, Valli,' I said. 'I must go now. Thanks for all your time.'

Valli left me his phone number and a warm offer to help if he could.

As I put the phone down, my throat ached. Tears blurred my vision and the room began to reel. Mac was alive, but how badly were they torturing him this time? What do I tell the children? I wondered whether OR was well enough to have learnt of Mac's arrest. Mac was under OR's direct command, so he would get him out quickly, I consoled myself.

Following Mac's illegal entry into South Africa, OR had suffered a serious stroke in Lusaka. He was flown to London as an emergency case, where he remained critically ill for months. OR and JS had planned Operation Vulindlela (Open the Road) in the mid-eighties, at the height of apartheid repression, when the ANC leadership inside the country were either imprisoned, banned, in hiding or dead. They saw Vula, as it became known, as an opportunity to create the conditions in which the exiled ANC leadership could be resettled inside South Africa. This was a crucial new step in advancing the struggle. OR would be the overall commander, with JS as his deputy. OR had chosen Mac to enter South Africa illegally and head up the operation as its internal commander. Right from the outset, I fully supported Mac's appointment, as I saw it as our duty.

From the beginning, both OR and JS were deeply involved in Mac's preparations for entering and surviving inside the country, as they were with Gebuza's (Siphiwe Nyanda, later to become chief of staff of the South African National Defence Force in democratic South Africa), whom Mac had proposed as his deputy commander. I was involved in helping Tim Jenkin, who had escaped from Pretoria Central Prison with Alex Moumbaris and Stephen Lee in the late seventies, to develop the underground communications system, training Gebuza and other Vula operatives in its use. I also operated the system from the Lusaka end in the initial stages. My full-time job with the UN carried diplomatic status, which allowed us to live in an area that provided cover for Mac's work.

Once I'd put the phone down, I kept telling myself that, even if OR was still too ill to intervene to get Mac released, JS was involved in the negotiations for a peaceful settlement. He'd make sure, with the help of the ANC, that nothing bad happened to Mac.

I'd lived with fears and uncertainties for Mac's life and our future for a long time. Yet what helped and sustained me through the difficult moments was the knowledge that we were living out our commitment in a way that, for me, could not have been more meaningful. I felt a deep sense of fulfilment acting out my beliefs, despite the dangers and the risks, and perhaps because of them. In the difficult times, it gave me strength to know that I stood alongside Mac in the front-line trenches in the fight against apartheid.

'Our beliefs, our commitment to whatever the struggle demands of us, become personal – intensely – because in concrete terms we seek to build a liveable life for the Joeys and Milous. Would that the soothsayer at Fort Vic was right about the long life ahead of you and me … How glorious it would be if we could [live] through this to bask in the serenity of

Milou and Joey in their thirties! How even more glorious it would be [if] we had before then carved a society that grants us all a liveable life!'

Mac had written this goodbye letter to me in Moscow while completing his final preparations to enter South Africa illegally. These preparations were meant to minimise his chances of being caught in the underground by the apartheid regime's powerful security apparatus. If caught, he might not survive.

A loneliness that had been haunting me was unleashed by the night's chilling phone call. It suddenly seemed to engulf my whole being. Political widowhood constantly threatened by actual widowhood was bad enough. But not being able to share my insecurities, anxieties and fears with my friends and comrades – I had to pretend to the children too – had made this a desolate life at times. I couldn't even show anyone Mac's letter, as they would know from the contents that he was not in a Moscow hospital, ill with a kidney disease, as his legend had everyone believe.

Yet I also felt fortified by the depth of his love for us. 'When I met you … I had reconciled myself to living with a void in my emotions. As for children, a family, any fleeting thoughts had long passed out of my mind when I went to prison. Then there was you. And fullness in life became a flood. By the time we had Milou and Joey I gloried in the three of you: everything "familoid" in me gushed out – something I never knew I had in me … The pain of missing you through physical separation always lives in me. But at this moment the intensity of the pain sears my heart and mind. It is a pain born out of the joy of living, because you give me strength … it is pain born of the passion of my love for you …'

I couldn't share even this with friends or comrades. Anything that could alert anyone to Vula was under wraps.

When Mac later legally re-entered South Africa under an indemnity from prosecution granted to all ANC leaders following Nelson Mandela's release from prison, I couldn't tell anyone that he had actually been underground in the country for some time and not in Moscow. For even then the South African police were not supposed to know that he had been in South Africa at all. No one was to find out that I knew his illness had been faked, or that I had conspired to keep the police off his trail in South Africa.

In February 1989, with Mac already operating from inside South Africa, OR and JS arranged that I 'visit' him at a hospital in Yalta so that I would be able to describe the place if the need ever arose. Except for a handful of people, no one had a clue that I was part of the communications team of Vula.

Sworn to secrecy, I could not draw on the support that my friends and comrades in Brighton and London would readily have given me if they'd known what I was going through. To them, my difficulties seemed typical of a single parent with an absent, sick husband. Of course they helped me when they could in this regard. But this void was exacerbated by the silence and pretence that I always had to maintain, whether I was relaxing with my Sussex friends, or in discussion groups with comrades or my fellow students, or during university outings, in single-parent groups, at school functions, children's parties, or out in the wonderful English countryside.

But now I would have to tell the children why we wouldn't be boarding our flight home. This would be the first time they would hear the truth about Mac's situation since he left home in Lusaka to go underground. I wondered whether I should tell them the truth, or whether I should make up some story to soften the blow. I decided to leave making a decision until the morning, when my head would be clearer. Then I'd also think about finding us new accommodation.

I made my way to bed at 4 a.m., checking on the children in their bunks in the tiny bedroom next to my mine. Joey, the five-year-old in the lower bunk, had kicked her bedding off as usual. I covered her and, as I stooped to kiss her, noticed how much she resembled her namesake, my mother Jo. She opened her eyes, smiled happily and murmured something about the old zebra tracksuit – a favourite of her dad's – that she would travel to South Africa in. My panic grew about telling them that we would not be going home after all. Cancelling a movie or some other much-anticipated outing with a child is usually disappointing enough for them. What about a flight home to meet your long-absent father? Using the nearby footstool, I reached up to kiss Milou, the eight-year-old. To my surprise, he was sucking his thumb, something he'd stopped doing when he was three. I was too exhausted and upset to give it much thought. I cuddled him, tucked him in and switched off the light.

At 6 a.m. the next morning, the shrill ring of the phone woke us all up. I rushed to the lounge to take the call, and noticed how stark and soulless the place had become without the Makonde carving, Malangatana drawings and Ben Macala painting which so nurtured my being, lifted my spirits and nourished my South African roots in this distant land. Sealed in boxes with other such pieces, and now airfreighted back to South Africa, it was as if a radiant life force had been extinguished from this terraced house in suburban Sussex. How much more cold and alien England already felt again!

'This is John Carlin from the *Sunday Independent* newspaper in South Africa,' the caller introduced himself. 'Mac was arrested here yesterday. He was the internal commander of Operation Vula, which had been setting up underground structures countrywide for the past two years in preparation for a military uprising … Can you comment on that and on his arrest?'

This question really threw me. I was supposed to think Mac had been dying in Moscow, that he was now recovering and that, like other ANC leaders, he'd just returned from exile to South Africa under an indemnity from prosecution. For Mac's safety, I still could not reveal any more than this. So the pretence had to continue.

'As far as I'm concerned,' I said, 'his arrest is unlawful, since he was under an indemnity granted to all returning ANC leaders. What he's been arrested for, I don't know for certain. All I know is that our family is devastated. We were about to go home this evening.'

At this point, Joey confronted me. Milou was still sucking his thumb. 'Whose arrest, Ma?'

I hadn't realised they had followed me down to the phone. I had considered telling them another story for the moment, to ease their pain, but now the secret was out. What could I say? That their dad had been arrested yesterday, but I was not yet sure why? That as soon as I knew the reasons I would tell them? I thought that would be quite enough of a blow for them to absorb for the time being. So I told them that he would not be in custody for long, as it was an illegal arrest and Uncle Oliver and Uncle Joe would ensure his release soon. Until then, we could go away somewhere nice for a while, if they wanted to.

Milou's reaction shook me. He said nothing, just sucked his thumb harder and stormed off towards his bedroom. Joey began sobbing uncontrollably, which was just as disconcerting. I held her tight as she sobbed in despair, calling out for Mac. I was wracked with their pain, but dared not shed a tear.

I went to check on Milou, who had crawled back into bed. His face was tear-stained, and he still wouldn't talk. Then the phone began to ring incessantly. Journalists, friends, comrades, relatives from South Africa. I was tempted to unplug the phone so I could talk to the children and mull things over, but Milou and Joey wouldn't let me, just in case someone was phoning to say that it was all right for us to come home.

During breakfast, Milou remained silent. Even Joey could not get him to talk. I suddenly remembered we had nowhere to go. Just as I was about to dial our neighbour Nicola to check if her attic was still vacant, a call came through from my landlady, who had just heard of Mac's arrest on the BBC. She said that if we needed to stay on in the house for a while longer, she would be happy to accommodate the new tenant temporarily in one of her other houses. One less complication to handle, I thought, and jumped at the offer.

I suggested to the children that we go to the beach for the day, but first we had to retrieve the odd bits of furniture stored in Nicola's garage to make our place habitable again. We could be here for a very long while yet.

Still in shock, we started to unpack our suitcases.