



# Robert

# Mangaliso

# Sobukwe

## new reflections

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# Sharing my grandfather's pains and hopes

Otua Sobukwe

*Otua Sobukwe is the granddaughter of Robert Sobukwe. Born in Washington, DC, she grew up in Kampala, Uganda, until the age of six when she moved with her mother, Miliswa, to Cape Town. She did her schooling there. She is a student at Wellesley College, near Boston, Massachusetts, pursuing a double major in economics and political science.*

In loving memory of my dearest Uncle Dini who recently passed away. I will love you endlessly, forever and always.

THE FIRST TIME I met my grandfather, I was four years old. At that time, he didn't have a name or a face but existed solely as a man whom my mother would occasionally speak of. It had been almost twenty-three years since his passing, but I was at an age when time, reality and space were convoluted terms that didn't quite make sense to me. And so, not having met this man, nor fully grasping what 'death' signified, my childhood imagination placed him in my private repertoire of mythological creatures: behold Santa Claus, the Easter bunny, the tooth fairy and my grandfather.

Each of them danced in my mind and visited me in my sleep, comforting me in times of loneliness. When I reached out to speak to him, I imagined that my grandfather was tall and had a deep voice, with the same calming presence that my mother had. I imagined

that he liked the same things I liked, and sometimes I imagined that he would watch me play in the garden. That he would see me speak to the flowers and butterflies, lost in my imaginary world, and that he would smile from a distance as though he were some sort of angel. As I got older, he developed a face with eyes like mine and a smile like my mother's, but it was not until years later that I remember looking at a picture of him and thinking to myself that this face, with all of its unfamiliarity, looked almost exactly as I had imagined it. From my earliest recollection, my grandfather was a presence in my life that I couldn't yet articulate or fully acknowledge, but I felt it was there.

The second time I met my grandfather was in 2005. I was seven years old and this time I met him only partially. I will explain this a little later. My parents had just separated and so my mother and I moved to South Africa to live on Robben Island with my Uncle Dini. The decision to leave Uganda, where we lived, was fairly abrupt. I remember feeling a deep sense of loss and disorientation when we landed in Cape Town. What was this place? What were the people like? Did they have butterflies here? My mother told me that we were going to live with my Uncle Dini, his partner and her son, and that it wouldn't be the same as Uganda but that I would be just as happy.

I remember the first boat ride to Robben Island and how it all felt so far away and unfamiliar. I remember feeling afraid that the waves were going to swallow us, or that the boat was going to capsize into the mouth of a giant whale. I remember thinking that my new home was going to be surrounded by vast amounts of water, and that I couldn't really swim. What if something happened and I had to swim? But this small island soon became my home, and I forgot about the water and the waves and the whales and I let myself be free. And this freedom created some of the fondest memories of my childhood.

My recollection of Robben Island is at times blurry. I remember it in fragments, without any real chronology. We lived in a peach-coloured house that had a big front yard, with a braai pit in the back where we used to cook most of our dinners. The house had three bedrooms, a dog and two cats that belonged to Auntie Gaby (my uncle's partner). Her son, Tshawe, was a few years older than me and went to the local school on the island. Other than the school, which had maybe just under 40 students, we were a fairly small group of kids.

Even though we were young, I remember immediately feeling like the odd one out. I wasn't fully aware of the different languages that were being spoken but their English accents sounded different from what I was used to, and at the time mine was Ugandan. I remember tweaking my words to sound more 'coloured' and was once teased for saying 'lekker kwaai' (cool), without knowing what it meant. I felt younger too, for some reason, and had to mature very quickly.

Despite our differences, we were all very close and treated each other as siblings. I had two best friends, Bianca and Allison, and we would spend hours walking along the seashore, looking for rabbits or playing with the stray turtles. Sometimes we would go into the forest and collect pine cones for a braai later that night, or we would visit Auntie Ruth. She was an artist who lived on the eastern part of the island, who always gave us small candy treats while teaching us how to make beautiful shapes with paint. If we had any money we would go to the only store on the island and get Simba chips and Chappies chewing gum. And if we had a bit more we would treat ourselves to hot chips at the café, which was always considered a luxury.

But apart from the time we spent together, what bonded us most was the daily commute many of us had to make to attend school on the mainland. I remember waking up at 5 am every morning to

take the island shuttle that would drop us off at the harbour. After the hour-long boat ride to the mainland, my mother and I would walk through the Waterfront to the taxi rank. The taxi would then take us to the station in town and from there we would walk up Parliament Street, then St John's Street, and turn into Hope Street, eventually arriving at my school. The commute could take two to three hours in total. After school, my mother and I would do the same trip back, leaving around 2.30 pm and arriving back on the island just before 7 pm, in time for dinner.

Sometimes the boat would be delayed and it would take two hours to make the trip from the island to the mainland; at other times it would stop midway through the journey to allow a whale to pass. By then whales had become fascinating creatures and us kids would all press our faces against the windows, peering into the dark water in the hope of spotting an eye or a flipper, and sometimes lying that we had. There were times when the boat wouldn't run at all because the sea was too rough. This could last hours, days or even weeks, and was common during the winter.

Looking back, this was a lifestyle that must have been unfathomably exhausting for a seven-year-old, but it was what we knew and it was our normal. In the early mornings, while it was still dark outside, we would sit next to each other on the boat and play card games, sometimes sharing stories of our favourite scenes from the latest episode of *Dragon Ball Z* on TV. And in the evenings, on our way back, we huddled at the same table on the boat and did our homework together, the older kids helping the younger ones, the whales swimming by. Life for us was simple and we were kids like any other, creating a childhood like any other ... Except that, in reality, we weren't.

Sometimes I look back on my time on Robben Island and feel a deep sense of conflict in my heart. I look back, and my immediate association with the island is its warmth and innocence. I think

of the afternoons I spent collecting seashells on the beach that I would later make into necklaces for my mother. Or when I rode my bike through the forest to chase springboks, or the first time I went fishing with Auntie Gaby and almost fell into the harbour because my small hands struggled to pull the rod back firmly enough. It is hard not to smile when I remember the names of all my friends and all the trouble we got up to, especially during the long, hot summer days when there was no one else around but us.

But how can it be that my immediate association with this place, this island, this prison, is not the hundreds and hundreds of men who were unjustly held away from their families, repeatedly broken and beaten by a regime that feared their hope more than anything else? How can it be that I was so oblivious to the pain and the weight of the island when the prisons were right there, and barricaded walls were right there, and the people from all over the world filling the tour buses would wave at us children, us 'children of the island', and I would put down my seashells and wave back, not understanding that their tour was my very own history?

I think what tinges my memories of Robben Island with pain is the acknowledgment that, as I said above, I met my grandfather only partially during this period of my lifetime when, physically, I was as close to him as I ever will be. To put it simply, and blatantly, I played where he wept. And, to be clear, the pain that I feel is not guilt, but is rather this surreal sense of being connected so uniquely, so unexpectedly, and, to some degree, so perversely, to a history that I might otherwise have never experienced with such intimacy.

Robben Island was my childhood home, and when I spoke to the butterflies and the whales, and even at times to the seashells, I still felt his presence watching me. I was a child who, 30 years after the death of her grandfather, would look up to the very same sky that he looked up at and count the very same stars he counted, but I was free and he was not. He was a prisoner, and I was not. We

both lived on Robben Island but the reality is that we lived in two different islands, because nothing can be more separate than the worlds in which that space bore our existence. To me, the blueness of the sky never lost its colour, as candyfloss clouds morphed into grey patches; the singing tune of seagulls never mimicked a pained cry; the tranquil ebb and flow of the sea never became melancholic, yearning; and the mainland, the shimmering lights, their faintness, were always picturesque, always romantic, never a cold reminder of the separating distance and the harsh reality, the harsh juxtaposition, that you are indeed alone.

And this was the case for us 'children of the island'. We were bound to a history that shaped our childhood before we understood the depths of that history, and that our small hands, our small fingers, our small eyes could perceive only partially. We thought the unjust incarceration of the black body to be an issue of the past, an outdated horror of the 'dark times' – how lucky we were to not be behind those bars. But yet, our black and brown bodies that ran wildly around the island were still trapped in invisible shackles; we just could not perceive them. To this day, our childhood still baffles, confuses and perhaps even torments me. I wonder sometimes whether its complexity, in many ways, is in fact a microcosm of the lives of the born-free generation – affected but unaffected, aware but unaware. The post-1994 born-frees, whose lack of freedom renders this date indeed insignificant, who are still fighting the same fight, I wonder, how much do we really understand? How much of our ancestors' sacrifices do we really comprehend? And, if we comprehend, if anything at all, how much are we willing to give for those to come after us?

### Teenage discovery

I met my grandfather again when I was 13 years old. This was by far our most significant encounter. My mother and I lived on the

island for just over a year. After leaving, in the years that followed as I grew up, I developed a slow understanding of who he was. While he was no longer a part of the mystical creatures of my childhood, he was in this strange, undefined category of 'other' that felt important but lacked context that I knew existed. South Africa is a place where, as a child, you will grow up hearing the word 'apartheid' used almost daily. For a long time I heard this word and I understood most of its meaning, but it was only when I was 13 that I really started to make the deeper connection between 'apartheid' and 'my grandfather'.

It is hard to recall the exact moment at which everything clicked because for so long things were so disjointed. Perhaps if I had not been at a French school the discovery would have happened much sooner. But the school that I attended for almost nine years was in many ways insulated from South African culture, and this extended into its curriculum, which was heavily based on French/European history. And so, the dates and the names from apartheid that we had learnt vaguely in primary school never piqued my interest or deeper understanding because I struggled to perceive their relevance.

But, you might ask, what about at home? What about my family, did they not tell me about him? And here's the thing: they certainly did, but my mother spoke of him mostly as her father, not as an activist. She told me what he did, historically, but when she spoke from her heart and let her mind wander, she would tell me stories of her childhood and the memories that she painfully missed. She always told me how gentle and loving he was, how when they would walk down in the street together everyone greeted him with a smile. How in the evenings, he would teach her Xhosa riddles while she helped cook for the family, and when she spoke in English he would always correct her pronunciation with encouraging remarks: 'Keep trying, keep trying.' She told me how he loved to give her small treats, how he loved Gogo.



These were the stories that captivated and stuck with me most as a kid, and so, for the longest time, my grandfather was this man who, through my mother's words, I had already begun to love as just my grandfather and who I only really knew as my grandfather. But when I was 13, everything changed. Earlier that year, my mother and I went to have dinner with Uncle Benjamin and his wife, Anne, who were visiting from Israel. Uncle Benjamin is the author of my grandfather's biography and over dinner he asked me if I had read the book. I was stumped. The book was on our bookshelf and I had certainly seen it over the years, and perhaps even skimmed its pages a few times, but I remembered always feeling overwhelmed and discouraged by the complexity of its words. I told him no, sadly, I hadn't, and he encouraged me to try again.

A few weeks passed after that dinner but the conversation stuck with me, and the burning desire to understand, to truly understand, this story and what it meant eventually pushed me to pick the book off the shelf and try again. I thought, *Robert Sobukwe: How Can Man Die Better*, what does that even mean? But I read, and I read and read and read. I was completely engrossed and paused only occasionally to ask my mother clarifying questions. Once, when I saw her name in one of the chapters, I leapt from my chair and yelled, 'This part is about you, Mama!' When I read about my grandfather's early childhood education, I remember thinking how bizarre it was that he and I shared such an intense love for words and language.

When I read about the Sharpeville massacre, I remember being amazed and then bewildered by how this had never been taught to me, how it had never been part of the national discourse. I read and I got angry. I got angry, and then I read. I started highlighting and cross-referencing words and places and events, piecing together things that I had half-heard in the classroom, things that my mother had told me in memories, things that I had seen on my

grandmother's bedroom wall. In a long sequence of late nights on my kitchen floor, reading, remembering and calculating, I began to fill in the gaps of a story that I felt had been stolen from me.

Reading that book for the first time was an experience I still struggle to explain, because how do you explain an experience that is both so uniquely exhilarating and devastating at the same time? How do you explain the discovery of a beautiful truth, only to realise that this truth has been systematically concealed from an entire nation? I met my grandfather as Sobukwe for the first time when I was 13, and to meet him as Sobukwe was, essentially, to re-meet him. While I might not have understood it then, 'Sobukwe' was to become a place of raw centring in my life, and, in many ways, a spiritual catalyst to a series of awakenings that continue to shape and challenge the authenticity and purpose of who I am to this day.

## Sobukwe today

*Dear Tata,*

*I am sitting in a room with my boyfriend, a boy whom I have been dating for a few months, a boy who on our first date identified himself as an anarchist, and I am here, in his room, meeting a friend of his for the first time. They are mid-conversation about campus politics and their student-organising group when he turns to me, noticing that I am silent and says, 'Otua, tell my friend about your grandfather.' I choke. Immediately I am small and speechless. My body not only feels paralysed but also invisible as I begin to scramble together words to describe you and your legacy, which is constantly being erased. In my poor attempt at an explanation – Where do I begin? How do I summarise? Who am I to discern what details are or aren't important? – I fail and stutter, and in this incoherency I feel as though I am erasing you again and again.*

*I am sitting across a dinner table with a group of elders when one of them turns to me and says, 'Otua, tell them your story.' And when I begin to tell 'my*

story' – my passion for writing, my studies, my dreams – their puzzled faces look back at me and I am instantly reminded that I misunderstood. I correct myself. To them, 'your story' is 'my story' and so I speak about you, Sobukwe, and I forget about Otua, and this is always really hard.

I am standing in a classroom of seniors in an Africana studies class at my American college, focusing on the South African liberation struggle. I was invited by the professor to speak about my heritage. I am defending you, I am telling your story, I am explaining to the class that history cannot be rewritten and all efforts of the struggle need to be acknowledged. I am faced with rebuttal comments from the professor and told that I am speaking from 'a position of bias'. I fight back the tears, and this is always really hard.

I am speaking with someone and they mistake our relation and confuse you with my father, and when this happens I always choke. When I correct them and say, 'You mean my grandfather?' I am betrayed by my own voice that shakes at the idea of having you so much closer to me. Imagine. Imagine if you were my own father. But instead I think of the father that I do have, that I don't have, and I am reminded of a juxtaposition between two men who could not be more opposite.

I am 21 years old now and I keep meeting you, Tata. The encounters happen more frequently now, almost on a daily basis, when small things that I would ordinarily not perceive to be significant remind me of you, and, inadvertently, remind me of why I am here. And by 'here' I mean in this world, in the spaces I occupy, in my relationships. I meet you when I look up in class and realise that I am the only black student in the classroom. I meet you when the white lady at the grocery store asks me where I am from and congratulates me on my 'perfect English'. I meet you when my white friends praise me for 'not acting that black' and when my black friends call me out for acting 'too white'.

I meet you when I open magazine covers, read a book, flick through the TV channels, go to the cinema to watch a movie – any form of entertainment in this world – and I am reminded that my black skin will never be the default. I meet you when the world feels like it was not designed for people like me and

*when doors that do not open feel like they will always remain closed. When the news outlets tell me that my black skin is still a crime. When black men walk past me at parties to talk to lighter-skinned girls, white girls, because I am a representation of everything they were taught to hate. When professors discern my abilities before knowing what I am capable of.*

*I meet you and the pain is so real, it feels like you are right here with me. And sometimes I want you with me, but at other times I feel like I am losing myself in this dual identity. Because the hardest thing about carrying your name is feeling as though, at times, mine is lost in the process. And so, it is especially hard to be so proud of someone, so thankful for someone, so inspired by someone that you are so closely related to while knowing that, in reality, your lives are greatly different. And so, it probes to my very existence and purpose on this earth every time I am reminded of you, because it forces me to remind myself of our separate realities. Was your sacrifice worth it? Would you be proud of the current state of the world? Am I continuing the fight? Who am I?*

*And so, I meet you mostly when I am afraid, and afraid of myself. But the fear helps me. Like all other things, I am forced to remember that my fear is not new, that my pain or discomfort is not new, there have been many before me who have feared and suffered far worse things, and together, these shared pains and shared hopes can only push us forward.*

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© Published edition Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2019

Published in South Africa in 2019 by  
JONATHAN BALL PUBLISHERS  
A division of Media24 (Pty) Ltd  
PO Box 33977  
Jeppestown  
2043

ISBN 978-1-77619-004-1  
ebook ISBN 978-1-77619-005-8

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Cover by Michiel Botha  
Cover photo by africamediaonline  
Design and typesetting by Catherine Coetzer  
Set in Bembo