

story of a stand

anne schuster

The experiences of Black Sash members standing with only a poster between themselves and the rest of the world are seldom recorded. Anne Schuster's account is a work of fiction only in that it is a compilation of various incidents experienced by her and other Black Sash members during stands.

I read the notice on the back of the placard. Things I can and cannot do. What to do if approached by the police. What to do and say if arrested. 'Protests must be single' — my support person is sitting in her car across the road. 'Protests must be silent — refuse to speak to anyone who approaches you.' All very organised and within the law. But really only my white skin protects me. And my white confidence.

My placard points at the oncoming traffic — 'To end violence, struggle for justice'. I look into each car as it passes. Most people glance at the sign ... what is it? ... what is she? ... Then they look away quickly and deliberately stare hard at something far ahead in the road. It's a new feeling for me and, I realise, quite a release, a freedom. All these men unable to look at me. All these men I can look in the face without getting a leer in return. Even the aggressive hand-signs and shouts are far easier to receive than my regular daily dose of leers. A crazy thought: for a woman who finds the strain of being a constant on-display sex object getting her down — one day a week, take a break, walk around with a political placard and have a leer-free day!

The women also look away mostly. There are a few who smile, hoot and give a thumbs-up sign. Gives me a full five-minute lift. And the odd black salute. An acknowledgement. To be allowed into the struggle. I'm embarrassed at how much pleasure it gives me. Yes, lady, white lady, your standing there is part of the struggle for justice and might well help to end violence.

It's the first time that I'm standing in Kalk Bay. Before I was in Muizenberg. Almost like a foreign town there. They don't know me. Here I know everyone. They all know me. Already two of my regular early morning swimming acquaintances have passed me with a surprised good morning and a knowing look at each other. They are locals. Women

from the little residential hotel, who float in their bathing caps in the middle of the pool and shout the daily gossip to each other. Somehow I always seem to get them at the beginning or end of my swim.

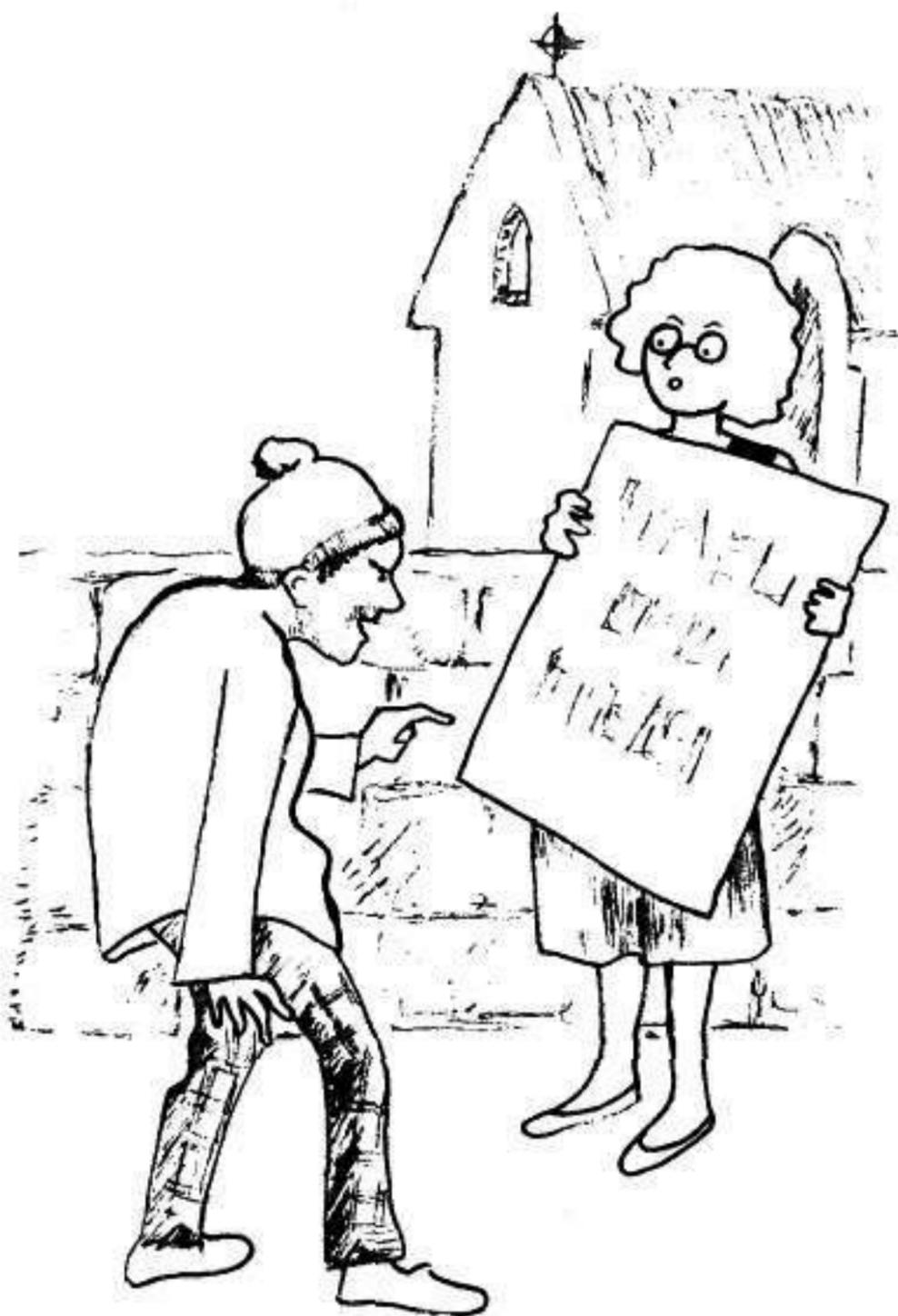
And here comes that violator of personal space — a round old man in a red bath robe and slippers. Wherever I happen to sit he takes off his bathrobe and slippers right next to me and engages in discussions about the coldness of the water today and whether it will be warmer tomorrow and how did I find it today? He is walking towards me now. I can see he intends saying something to me. Last time I saw a woman approach me with that look, she told me how stupid I looked and she wished I would stop a bullet. I was so surprised. I wonder if he will be rude or try to have an argument. I'm glad I'm not allowed to answer. 'Keep up the good work,' he smiles. I feel as if I've just been handed a copy of the complete works of Shakespeare by the headmaster at a school prize-giving.

Oh dear and here staggers one of the local drunks. He looks bad today, teetering on the edge of the pavement holding onto his life and the telephone pole. He looks like he constantly wants to cross the road, standing as if the end of the pavement is a tightrope. His arms swing wildly and then luckily his knees buckle and he sits heavily in the gutter just as a stream of cars goes by. I hope one of his buddies comes along soon and helps him. I'd hate to be standing here struggling for justice while he staggers across the road and gets knocked down by a truck.

I think he has seen me. Probably recognises me as the reliable soft touch for his 'ten cents, madam'. Yes, he does seem to be making his way indirectly towards me. Well, he can see I have no money on me. He weaves right up to me. Another violator of personal space. He breathes in my face, and on my early



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morning stomach! I step back. He reads my placard aloud to himself. Half-way through, his knees buckle again and he sits on the pavement and continues, 'To end vi- vi- violence ... ssssstruggle for ...' He looks at me. I look away.

'just- justice ...,' he says sitting on the ground. He reads it again to himself, weaving through the words. He staggers to his feet and looks in my face.

'Wasshit mean? Hey, lady? Wwatssit mean?'

'Can't tell you,' I mutter, staring at the oncoming traffic.

'Hey? Hey? Wwhat's that, lady?'

'I'm not allowed to speak to you,' I say firmly in a loud undertone and adjust my sign.

'It meanssh ththat? Lady? It meanss you mussent sspeak to me? Why? I'm not drunkk. Haven'tt had anything to ddrink today. Is it ffrom the Bible? I know GGod. I llove GGod. Goes Godd say you mussent ssspeak to me?'

He wails and sits again on the pavement half crying half singing some hymn-like song. He has a good voice but with the sobs he sounds like someone dying tragically in an Italian opera. With a final wail his head hits the pavement. He seems to have passed out. Oh please let him not have passed out.

I have a horrified realisation of what this scene looks like to the oncoming cars. A poor tattered black man lying sprawled out, looking dead, at the feet of a white lady with a sign saying 'To end violence, struggle for justice'. Oh no. How can I hold on to the seriousness of it all when this is so bizarre? Oh thank goodness he has started moaning again and now struggles to his knees. He starts to read my sign again.

'Go away,' I say fiercely. 'Please go away.'

'I — I can rread. I'm not sstupid. I'm ssstil learning,' He sings full throat ... 'I'm llearning to love you ... llearning to love you ...' His face slobbers towards me. 'Wwat's the notice mean, lady?'

'I can't tell you.'

He stares expectantly.

'The police,' I say meaningfully.

He looks shocked.

'The police will come.'

He looks hurt.

'Bbut I wassn't bothering you, lady, juss asked you a question, and I'm not ddrunk. Please don'tt call the ppolice, lady. I know you, lady, you know me, you won't call the police, lady?' He looks pleadingly at me.

And I know what I'm going to do. I tell myself I have to. I look at him and say with a white madam voice that I have somewhere at the back of my cupboard 'No, no, I won't call the police if you go away right now, right now.'

'OK, OK, madam, OK, I'm going, meaning no harm, madam. I'm going.' His voice is hurt and offended. He staggers away down the road, while I struggle on for justice. □