Ruth First. . . caged tigress

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LETTER bombs are not devices that your average crank can make over the kitchen table of an evening after work. "How's the letter coming on, dear?" as the dedicated man gets on with the job of addressing the envelope to be slipped into the mail tomorrow morning. Destination: Maputo.

And in careful handwriting or typing, the name: Professor Ruth First, Eduardo Mondlane University.

What kind of a person is it who can conceive the idea of blowing another human creature into fragments while in the harmless task of opening a letter addressed with one's name?

And where does such a person get his knowledge and skill and access to the sophisticated explosives required? Not in the public library and not in the local chemist shop.

I reacted perhaps primarily as a man at the news of the ugly death meted out to Ruth First ... communist and dedicated enemy of South Africa ... because I knew her as a woman not just strikingly attractive but with a rather frightening quality of inner drive.

As a newspaper writer in Johannesburg at the time and a bleeding heart liberal who gave columns to social injustice, she bombarded me with copies of New Age which carried enough material on social injustice to keep any columnist in copy.

As journalists we occasionally met in newspaper offices. Always she gave me the feeling- ...with that restless, searching look and burning contempt ill-concealed...that I was just another liberal wet.

I remember once going down in a lift with her. For 10 floors it was like being with a caged tigress.

New Age had just been banned. People like me were free to ramble on. What she had to say was too dangerous. I remember in a chauvinistic way thinking: what a waste of a woman...to burn herself to death with a cause.

The difference between the liberal and the communist being, of course, that the communist editor was out to anger her readers to the point of action while the liberal (myself) was really only in search of emotional material. And when our eyes finally met this is what Ruth First's eyes really conveyed. I was no revolutionary.

And when the Rivonia trials came a lot of people I had taken for nice, concerned citizens turned out to be conscienceless when it came to violence.

Perhaps they had not considered the consequences in terms of human life... perhaps they were true idealists seeing the glowing illusory landscape beyond the river of blood and pain inseparable from revolution.

Ruth First went on to become the intellectual power behind the ANC ... at least she was credited as such. And her husband was frequently named in sabotage and treason trials here.

In their dedicated hatred of the South African Government they had few equals.

Lawyer Joe has already escaped assassination in Maputo and those gunned down or blown up by ANC men have this pair of idealists to thank for their demise.

Ruth First's arrival in Maputo as Director of Research at the Centre of African Studies might have been innocent enough ... just a dedicated sociologist with a penchant for violence.

Apparently she was a bit too close for comfort for someone.

I can't help wondering what her thoughts were as she lifted that fatal envelope. Did she always think: maybe this is it.?

Or at 59, after a lifetime of intrigue, had she come to the place where it no longer mattered?