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one

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Abroad

nothing of my mother's voice
in the clicks of these women sotho or zulu
now smug and thankful for wounds
sutured by the sea
i answer the rasping of a coloured widow
who enters
behind her asthma and
buys my bread with stories of the sea
and its hunger

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1

JOHANNESBURG: JUNE 1995, EARLY WINTER

"Mr. Wilderson?" It is impossible to place the accent amid the newsroom clatter behind his voice. Not Afrikaans, but not completely English. At least not the pristine English one hears in the suburbs of Sandton, Parktown, or Rosebank. Those dulcet shopping mall voices made all the more tranquil by the resonance of Muzak, the purr of Mercedes, and the stabilizing presence of the army in the townships just over the hill. Still, I am put off by his voice and by the questioning tone with which he has answered the telephone. I am, after all, returning his call. A pause. "Mr. Frank Wilderson?"

"Yes," I say, anxiously, but not irritably. "I'm returning your call."

"Of course, thank you so much." He pauses again. "My name is Stefaans Brümmer. But then you know that. I'm an investigative reporter for the *Mail & Guardian.* You probably know that too."

I try to calm my breathing. "I've seen your by-line."

I am suddenly aware of Khanya sitting in the next room, no more than twenty feet away. She is watching me—or trying not to watch me—from the parlor that combines with the dining room. We have been married exactly five years. For all I know today could be our anniversary. Maybe this is why she called this morning, suggesting we end our separation. Perhaps she thinks that I, for once, remembered the date and that is why

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I suggested we dine at the Carlton Hotel. But if we were married five years ago today, why didn't she say something at dinner? She's testing me. That's the only explanation. I have a sinking feeling that if it is our anniversary and if she does believe I remembered, then this call from this man will not only cause me to fail the test but it will confirm the truth of her most biting criticism. "You love anarchy," she had said when we separated, "more than you'll ever love me."

The scent of heat on damp wool wafts from the parlor as her fleece, draped on the chair beside her, dries in front of the gas fire. I hear the Orrs' polite conversation trying to draw her attention away from me. Their failure is clear, a fertile void where Khanya's voice should be. I do not look at her.

We are still wet from having queued in the rain for a kombi on Bree Street. Earlier this evening, or perhaps the day before as it has rained all week, lightning hobbled one of the pillars of our would-be taxi shelter; a shelter that would have otherwise kept the heads, though perhaps not the shoulders, of six or seven adults dry. We will all have to stoop beneath its sagging roof if we want to stay dry, I thought, as Khanya and I dashed through the taxi rank. Instead, through the silent consent of African *ubuntu,* the adults relinquished the crippled shelter to several children who shared it with an old woman.

From lampposts some of us tore down cardboard posters that read The '94 Elections Brought Democracy to the Nation, The '95 Elections Will Bring Democracy to Your Community. Others tore down posters of Nelson Mandela with his eyes commanding us to VOTE ANC! We held them above our heads for respite from the lashing rain. But the soggy cardboard umbrellas upon which Mandela's face was painted soon surrendered and water ran mercilessly down our arms and legs.

I had tried to keep my spirits high by marveling at the play of lamp light on Khanya's high cheekbones and dimples, at how happy she was that we were reunited, and wondering, shamefully, how anyone could be happy to be reunited with me. It wasn't long before my thoughts wandered to our dissolving metaphor of protection—the new state president-cum-umbrella—and I found myself rehashing questions that seemed to

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be erupting across the country whenever and wherever Black people gathered to contemplate the future: Will the ANC improve the economic position of the poor or simply enlarge the middle class? Does Mandela's consolidation of power in the wake of Chris Hani's death portend personal rule from the top? Will we become a one-party state, like the US where the one party is capital?

But as alarming as these questions are, I know (as I hold my breath and wait for Stefaans Brümmer to link me to what only Stimela Mosando and his people should know about) that such questions are not the elemental source of the pit in my stomach. Which is not to say they are false or a ruse of concerns hiding a true anxiety. They are neither false nor a ruse. I do dread the New World Order. The "New" South Africa. The flag-and-anthem cardboard cutout of a country that we are fast becoming. But what I fear even more is the recurrence of an image I thought I had left in that country which, for lack of a more ambiguous word, I once called "home": my black face in the mirror.

My voice drops when I say "by-line," in an effort—I can only surmise—to draw less attention to myself. It has, of course, the opposite effect. Mr. and Mrs. Orr and Khanya lock in on me like radar. The more they try to go on with their conversation and pay me no mind, the more attention they pay.

"Is this a good time to talk?" Brümmer asks. Before I can answer he says, "Look I'm working under a deadline. The paper goes to bed tonight and I'd really like your side of the story."

"How did you get this number?"

"I did some research and found that you had had an ANC attorney for the Vista—" He stops short of calling my dismissal from Vista University in Soweto an "affair." He wants to be tactful. He wants to get a story. "Someone at Shell House…" Shell House was a tall office building in downtown Jo'burg that the oil company with the same moniker had given to the ANC in the hopes, we were all assured, of getting nothing in

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return. "Someone at Shell House told me Christopher Orr was your attorney. I called him and found that he was your landlord too. Look, I'm sorry about your dismissal. The new South Africa seems slow in coming."

"Yes," I agree, "slow in coming," acutely aware that he and I might agree only on the pace and not the destination, for he is certainly no communist. I have been standing the whole time. Now, I sit down on the small awkward chair the Orrs keep beside the wrist-and-elbow sized table upon which the telephone rests. "Is this about the university?" I ask, my eyes darting over to the parlor. Khanya and the Orrs have brought their conversation to a halt. They are looking at me looking at them.

"I'm afraid not." His voice betrays a tone that I have come to fear and dislike during the last five years of my life in Johannesburg. It is a tone of apology laced with accusation. A tone that White English-speaking South Africans are noted for. Unlike the Boers, they do not possess the iron-willed conviction that god has ordained them to rule South Africa, but nor are they willing to subordinate themselves to the ethical, much less political, authority of Black people. The Boer bloodhound has been good to them. His bark and bite have protected them from the uneven and unmanageable proliferation of Black rage, for they were disinclined to bark and bite themselves. No, the intonation of English voices is more difficult to assess. One must listen more carefully (What does this White man want of me? or What does he plan to do to me?), for their voices walk a line between subdued irritation and hazy patronization—and don't telegraph their intent.

I brace myself.

"One moment," he says, and slowly the din and bustle of the newsroom falls into emptiness behind his closing door.

I rack my brain across five years of political activity, some aboveground, some underground, some legal, some not, most in a hazy zone that will always elude clarity. What could be more damning than the storm around my dismissal at Vista and my solidarity with the South African Student Congress when we took the campus by force and held it for nearly a year?

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The kombis for Black people don't take you door to door like the metered taxicabs that were, until two years ago, reserved for White people. But nor are they nearly as expensive. So, Khanya and I had been dropped off several blocks from the Orrs' house. Mr. and Mrs. Orr, an English-speaking couple with affinities to the Freedom Charter but whose politics beyond that I did not know and did not ask, had spotted us as we hurried down their driveway to the carriage house in back which I now rented from them. Mrs. Orr dashed out of the house holding the *Mail & Guardian* over her head as an umbrella. In her hand she held a message. She said Khanya could dry off by the gas fire in the parlor while I used the telephone in the next room. On the back of an old shopping list she had written all that she'd been told: Stefaans Brümmer, *Mail & Guardian,* then the number, and *Please call, urgent.* The word *urgent* had been scratched out and the word *important* written there instead. No doubt, Brümmer did not want Mrs. Orr to alarm me and risk my not returning his call; or worse, prompt me to skip the country.

"No," Stefaans Brümmer repeats when he has closed the door and secured his privacy, "it's not the student/worker occupation of Vista University. Well, in a way it is and in a way it isn't."

"Then what," I hiss. I don't know what embarrasses me more about my sudden outburst, the fact that it was made to an otherwise sympathetic reporter who is only doing his job (and unlike our treatment in the mainstream press, his reporting on the Vista takeover did in fact cast us more as communards than as a blight upon civic stability), or the fact that Khanya and the Orrs overheard it and took note.

"It's about what the National Intelligence Agency is calling..." Another pause. "Your 'subversive activities.'" This is it, I think. But I don't say a word. The first one to speak, someone wise and now forgotten once told me, loses. But what has Stefaans Brümmer got to lose? Somebody tell me that. "Joe Nhlanhla," he continues, "the new NIA chief, thinks you're a threat to national security." He waits for a response. I am looking at my wife. She is looking at me. What can I say to make her turn away? Then he drops the other shoe. "So does Nelson Mandela." And he lets this sink in before adding, gratuitously, "The new state president."

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I can hear myself breathing. I am sure I can be heard breathing for a hundred miles. "Would you care to comment?" I almost laugh out loud at the irony of his canned question but there is a word blocking any such outburst: prison. I try to remember where I keep my passport. Is it in the carriage house out back or is it among the things at our house—at Khanya's house—on the other side of town? I wonder if I have enough money to make it to the border of Swaziland and whether or not they will let me cross.

"Mr. Wilderson, I said Nelson Mandela thinks you're a—"

"Yes...I heard you."

Sometimes, as I close my eyes to look at the sun or simply at the bulb in the lamp of my study, I see roses exploding one after another on my eyelids' inner canvas. But if I hold them closed too long, the roses melt with the bursts that bore them and I see flowers of a different kind, that bed of shy carnations and pungent chrysanthemums upon which professor Mureinik died. I see where his crumpled body has been removed. All that remains, besides the spectacles flung into the flowers on impact, are indentations of soil as though a two-toed ungulate tantrumed about in one place. I see empty bottles of prescription pills in Etienne Mureinik's suite on the 23rd floor and the "important documents" soon after impounded by the authorities. From this rich and subtle world the professor prepares to descend. Now rising, now airborne, now falling...a life opens...it opens...it is breaking...

I once asked Stimela Mosando point blank if I—if we—had killed professor Etienne Mureinik. Stimela was a thin Motswana man of medium height and sparkling eyes. His lean physique made it hard for me to think of him as a man who'd been trained in hand-to-hand combat in Libya, and who had used that training to take down Red Beard, a strapping Afrikaner from Special Branch, in thirty seconds flat. He looked more like a swimmer than a guerilla, much less an Umkhonto we Sizwe commander. And because he did not wear horn-rimmed spectacles like his younger cousin Jabu, or sit for hours pensively contemplating

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indecipherable mathematical equations (my jaundiced image of an engineer), I often forgot that he had also been trained in some obscure discipline that combined telecommunications with electrical engineering when MK sent him to the Soviet Union. He looked like an ordinary guy from the township. In response to my question he threw his head back and laughed in a way that soft-spoken Motswana men were not, supposedly, known for.

I'd been told that such raucous outbursts were what one could and should expect from Zulus but not from Motswanas. When Khanya and I were still engaged—it was either two days after Christmas in 1989, or two days after New Year's in 1990, though the holiday now fails memory—we drove from Pretoria to Botswana on a whim. I recall clearly that it was during the time when I still had a pocketful of US dollars (dollars that, in those last years of apartheid, I often tried to buy our way out of our black skins by buying our way into restaurants or lodgings beneath signs that read Not Multiracial or Right of Refusal Reserved). She wanted to show me how her people, the Motswana, lived when they were not under the boot of apartheid. I had been reluctant to go, for no good reason, or none that I can recall. But her older sister, who was under house arrest at the time for having traveled to Zimbabwe to see her boyfriend, a militant in the Pan Africanist Congress, and thus could go nowhere, said, "Go, go, you must go to Botswana. When you cross the border you will smell the freedom!"

At the customs house, a small, hot pavilion in the middle of a desert road, two Botswanan guards had just shared a joke at which one of them was still laughing with the sprawling abandon of Stimela's laugh when I asked him if we had killed Mureinik. A woman who was old enough to be Khanya's mother but only old enough to be my older sister had the misfortune of having to stand at the counter and wait for the two customs officers to finish savoring their private joke, to wait for the one who could not stop laughing to dry his eyes and peruse her documents. When she turned from the window her face registered every emotion from exasperation to disgust. She spoke under her breath in Setswana to Khanya who, because she was facing the customs officers and had

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yet to have her documents approved, remained as placid and as non-responsive as possible. When we were cleared and had stepped over the line into Botswana, when we could finally smell the freedom, I asked Khanya to translate what the woman had said. "She said: 'The way they laugh you'd think they were Zulus. I can't believe I'm coming home.'" The woman would have been equally dismayed had she heard Stimela's laugh: not like a soft gust of wind and sand on a gentle desert night, the quiet, unassuming laugh, no doubt, of the man whom she had probably married and raised a family with, but a laugh like a Zulu.

"You're greedy," Stimela said. "A greedy capitalist. You want a little something for yourself; something that you can take back to America. But I'll tell you this," he added, "Etienne Mureinik killed Chris Hani."

The only thing that startled me more than Stimela's accusation that professor Mureinik murdered Chris Hani was my transparency, my neediness. It embarrassed me, for I did want something for myself, something to authenticate my involvement with him, and with his cousin Jabu, my ex-student Trevor, with Precious, and with Oupa (yes, even with Oupa). Something tangible, a representation from what Precious had called the three theaters: propaganda, psychological warfare, and operations: the shrunken head of a White man to hang from my belt. A little something for myself. Precious had demarcated and named three theaters not because they could be marked, named, and separated but because she knew that that was what I needed. They were all like that; even Jabu who gave me what I needed not by fabricating an answer but by asking me another question, thereby soothing my anxiety with the sound of my own voice. Their answers to my questions were cushions of stability, what I needed to go on fighting, that would be pulled from under me just when I'd settled on a clear, coherent, and respectable narrative of who we were and what we were about.

I recall a meeting where Trevor Garden, the lone White person in Stimela's network (or the only one I knew, for I never knew the true extent of Stimela's network), argued passionately with a former treason trial defendant, an MK commander who, after several years on death row, had narrowly escaped the gallows through some sort of last minute

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stay of execution or deal that was brokered between highly placed notables. "We're freedom fighters," the middle-aged Xhosa man insisted, pounding the table with his fist, "and the world should think of us not as terrorists but as freedom fighters." "No," said Trevor, "we're terrorists. It's not a term I'm ashamed of, for the simple reason that I don't give a damn what the world thinks. I don't even care what my parents think or don't think—they're White. That's what we mean when we say 'the world.' To the world I'm a terrorist—an albino terrorist, as Frank likes to call me," he smiled and cocked his head at me, "but to Soweto we're something else, and that's what matters."

Just seven months after Chris Hani's assassination, in December 1993, Nelson Mandela (or Madiba as he was known affectionately) gave the order for Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) to be disbanded. It was an order only two people could have given without being crucified. One was Madiba. The other was Jesus Christ. It shocked and demoralized Black South Africa. It shocked and demoralized Soweto, the township that was the heart and soul of the struggle, where twelve-year-old Hector Pieterson, the most famous among the casualties of the Children's Revolution of 1976, was killed—Soweto, the hub of the underground railroad through which thousands of youth had left South Africa and joined the ANC in exile. But for some reason, on the day it happened people in Soweto disavowed their feelings, and the day became one of rejoicing.

F. W. de Klerk had not as yet handed over the government and English capital was still as entrenched as ever. Chris Hani would have battled Madiba at the assembly of the National Executive Committee of the ANC, an assembly to which Hani had been elected with a 100 percent vote count of 2,000 delegates to Madiba's 1,995 votes, or 99.75 percent; which is to say that in all likelihood the room would have been split and Nelson Mandela's order would not have carried—leaving MK intact.

Thousands of people were in attendance, as though every African from the sixteen townships surrounding Jo'burg had come to see a secret army unveiled and retired. Next to January, December is the hottest month of the year. There was no overhang to shield us from the relentless sun as we sat in the stands of Soweto's Orlando Stadium. One by

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one the names of MK operatives boomed over the loudspeaker, and we would observe the figure of a man—and sometimes, though rarely, a woman—dressed in crisp green combat fatigues take the stage, approach Mandela, stand at attention, and stomp their boots in place as the swift blade of their hand sliced the air in salute. As Mandela and the insurgent stood face to face an MK commander at the podium continued to read: his or her field of operation, the pedigree of their training, and a short narrative of their most daring mission. Comrade so-n-so stole into South Africa from the camps in the Frontline States by wading across the Limpopo River with her gym shoes tied around her neck, then, making her way to Venda, she rendezvoused with her contacts, and proceeded to bomb the such-n-such installation of...and the name of a municipality would be drowned out by the cheers. Comrade so-n-so was captured by state security forces in the outback of the Karoo, where he was severely beaten and tied to the top of a Land Rover like a felled springbok, but en route he freed himself, yes, comrades, the comrade is no springbok, he's an MK soldier! Please, comrades, quiet, comrades, there's more, yes, there's more. He untied himself and kicked in the windows of that Land Rover, and those Boers, yes, comrades what do you think he did to those Boers, he moered them, yes, he moered the two Boers inside, thus securing his freedom, and then he went on to accomplish the mission he'd been sent to carry out! Then Mandela pinned a medal on the comrade and shook the hand of the man or embraced the woman and the crowd went wild with ecstasy and toyi toyied in the bleachers, shaking the whole stadium to its foundation.

The disbanding of MK was one of the biggest public relations bonanzas of all time, for I have no doubt whatsoever that every Black person in the stadium (and here I include myself for there were moments when I could not contain my joy and I, too, stood and toyi toyied) felt as though something of true value was finally being given to us, when in point of fact, one of the only true things we had ever possessed, a People's Army, was being taken away.

I was seated between Trevor Garden and Stimela Mosando. To Stimela's right sat Joy, whose surname I could never remember, and

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who was not—to my knowledge—an operative, but Stimela's fiancée. And next to Joy sat Jabu Mosando. On that sweltering December day in 1993, Stimela and Joy were in their late twenties or early thirties. Jabu and Trevor were still university students in their early twenties. And I was a lecturer pushing forty. Jabu had dreadlocks down to the nape of his neck and wore the horn-rimmed glasses that I always thought were out of place for someone majoring in sociology; they belonged on his older cousin. Trevor was the only White person in our section of the stadium, though not the only one in the stadium. Some were ANC members and supporters, some were police, and some were both. But Trevor was never mistaken for a cop for the simple reason that he did not carry himself like one. Oupa and Precious were not with us. But this wasn't unusual. Neither one of them had a formal connection with the University of Witwatersrand where I, so the cover-line went, met Jabu and Trevor while teaching there. I rarely met Precious out in the open; Oupa thought so little of me that he wouldn't consent to waste a moment with me in the open, or in the safe house, unless Stimela had ordered him to. Throughout the entire ceremony neither Oupa nor Precious took to the stage to be decorated by Madiba. Nor did Jabu, Trevor, or Stimela. As Mandela pinned the medal to the soldier who let the Boers know he was no springbok to be tied to the top of a Land Rover, I stood and toyi toyied and cheered. When I sat down, Stimela, who had neither risen nor cheered, looked at me sternly.

"That comrade is now useless as an operative. He's been exposed. That medal is a shackle. He's rendered himself inoperative and given his consent to the end of armed struggle—not to the temporary suspension, which is all this was supposed to be, but to the end. That's nothing to cheer about."

"But you're already exposed," Joy told him. "The bombing last April exposed you."

She had brought his uniform in a brown shopping bag, in case she could persuade him to change his mind. Throughout the ceremony she had chosen moments, discreet and understated moments, in which to gently press the bag to his leg and ask him to go down beneath the

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bleachers and change so that he might take his rightful place on that stage with Madiba and get the medals that were due him, get the cheers and adulation that were due him, let the air resound with the scripture of blows he struck against this racist state. "Yes," he told her, for though he was no supplicant for recognition, he was a man with needs, and what he needed now, what she knew he needed now, was for someone to speak his name and mark his moment in history before history came to an end. "Yes," he said again, "I want to go up there." He nodded toward his cousin Jabu and toward Trevor, two of the earliest members of his network. "I want them to go up there as well, they deserve it as much as anybody. But not like this, Joy, this isn't recognition. You don't disband an army," he said, now resting his arms on his legs and lowering his head to his clasped hands as though in prayer. "You don't disband an army."

As the ceremony ended, Jabu stood quietly and let his body be pulled into the sea of bodies that flowed out to the aisles and down the stairs. Stimela, Joy, Trevor, and I remained seated. The revolutionary music still blared over the loudspeakers, and now and then cries of *Amandla!* shot up to the blistering sun from the stands still vibrating from the toyi toying youth who did not want to leave. Without turning his head to look at Trevor and me, Stimela whispered, "Now," and we stood and let ourselves be jostled and pushed and swept from the stadium into the street.

"How many are with us now?" I asked Trevor as we minnowed our way through the crowds leaving the stadium.

Either he pretended not to hear or he was doing what he always did when he found himself on open ground: scouring the environs, listening for a sound that wasn't right even in the din of a crowd, watching out for the same face twice.

"What?" he said. Then it registered. "Do you know why Stimela never issued a firearm to you, why you've always had to borrow mine or Jabu's?"

I knew I'd like the answer even less than I liked the question.

"Because you seemed to need it," he said. "It would have been a crutch, not a weapon. The fetish that says 'I'm a guerilla.'"

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He declined to even dignify this with a laugh.

"You once said there were five thousand, maybe more, MK insurgents who were willing to back Chris Hani when the time came, ready to see the revolution through. It's only natural that I'd ask how many there are now—after today."

"After today? Okay, after today there are fifteen hundred. How does that sound?"

"Sounds okay."

"Or maybe five hundred."

"But you just said—"

"Fifty. Make that five. Why do you need a head count? What will the number do for you? Will it stiffen your resolve; take the place of a gun? A long time ago Stimela told me: 'You're White, which makes you more needy than most. Stop needing what you need.'"

But even when I left South Africa three years later, when I said goodbye to Trevor, Stimela, and the others and returned "home" in 1996, it was still an open question: had I learned to stop needing what I needed—notwithstanding the fact that I, unlike Trevor, was Black? And Stimela's laughter, what that woman at the Botswanan border would have surely called a Zulu laugh, let me know that I had not asked about professor Mureinik out of curiosity but out of my need for a narrative, for a causal link between his death and our actions under cover of night. It was as though a place in the narrative of Etienne Mureinik's death was the missing page in a narrative of my life. Something I'd been cheated out of and needed desperately to regain.

The press had cheated me. Even the foreign press which often took a more critical view of White South Africans than, for example, Johannesburg's *Star* or *Citizen.* But even the obituary in London's *Independent* had tended miserly to my needs, imploring me to weed through the minutiae of what I already knew: Etienne Mureinik "was 42 when he fell," a verb tactfully spaced between jumped and was pushed, "from the 23rd

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story of a hotel in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, not far from the university, on Wednesday 10 July." It told me that he joined the faculty of law at the University of the Witwatersrand, or Wits, as we called it, in 1977, rising through the ranks—junior lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer—becoming a professor at the age of 32, dean of faculty, and advisor to the Democratic Party at the age of 37. All this and more was in the files we kept on him and his twelve collaborators. There was nothing there that fed my need, least of all the fact that his death was "a watershed event for the mainly English-speaking White liberal establishment in South Africa, suggesting severe strains in its relation with the aspiring Black middle class." This to me, though true, was a red herring, for the fire and brimstone antagonism between these two groups was, at some level, a simple disagreement over which color capitalist should accumulate the spoils.

I could have added Mureinik's favorite word to his obituary: calibrate. A word he chewed and moved around his inner cheeks like cud when he lectured. A word that seemed to steady his nerves as, year after year, he looked out across the lecture hall and witnessed how it seemed to blacken exponentially. He was wrong, of course. There was no exponential increase in Black students, no mass invasion of that Harvard of the south. Khanya, my wife...my ex-wife, could attest to that. She was one of his law students. One Black face in that delirious sea of Black faces. In point of fact, no more than two in ten students at Wits were African—in a country where 8 in 10 people are African. But Mureinik's mind had inverted the world and "calibrate" was a word that cured his motion sickness, restored his equilibrium, and kept him from falling overboard into that ocean of hatred that the Afrikaner, not the English, were known for. It also saved him from the tsunami, the rising clamor for socialism and what he once described as "naked, uncritical racial solidarity" among Black militants, a solidarity that could "destroy all hope" of equal accountability in a post-apartheid South Africa—should that day arrive.

If memory serves me right, it was a year after the call from Stefaans Brümmer and a month or two after the death of Etienne Mureinik when his name came up unexpectedly. I had moved back in with Khanya after

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a long separation. She was trying to put the war—against apartheid, against Mandela's people in the ANC, against the English architects of liberal hegemony—behind us. My confrontation with Mandela in March of 1994, when he told me in no uncertain terms that "we" in the ANC, are not going take power and seize control of the institutions that White people have spent decades, centuries, building—that too, Khanya thought, was well behind us.

If I had been honest with her I would have told her that we never singled out Mureinik as a target. He was too equivocal. Too torn between his need for African acquiescence and his need for African approval. But I didn't tell her because she didn't ask. And she didn't ask because, perhaps, she didn't know what or how to ask. But she knew how to look at me that day Ntombi spoke his name.

I could feel her gaze that day, like I'd felt it before, on the night Stefaans Brümmer called. Ntombi, Gladys, and Naledi (three young women with whom she had shared digs at law school) came to our house for tea. Ntombi and Naledi kissed Khanya and lovingly put money in her hand before coming through to the living room where I was waiting with Gladys. It was a custom among young African women who were gainfully employed to give a gift of money to their friends who were not so gainfully employed. Khanya didn't out me in front of them, which is to say, when the name Mureinik came up, she didn't ask if there was a trail of bread crumbs from Stimela's safe house in Hillbrow to the bell calling out the 23rd floor in the lift of the Parktonian Hotel, bread crumbs sprinkled along the carpet-hushed hallway leading to the room and around the luxurious suite with its sheets of Egyptian cotton that no one in their right mind would have ever abandoned for the vertigo of the balcony, for the cold steel of the rail, for the garden grounds rushing up to meet him.

"Remember how he balanced his spectacles on that long pointed nose?" Ntombi said as she lowered her glasses down to the bridge of her nose and scrunched her face.

Gladys and Naledi laughed heartily, egging Ntombi on, but Khanya and I were silent, neither of us wanting to prolong the topic. I cleared

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the spent tea bags from a saucer on the coffee table and asked Khanya if I should fetch fresh ones and hot water from the kitchen. "If you like," she said, flatly.

Ntombi and Naledi were dressed for success, smart business suits and leather briefcases, the way two beautiful high-powered lawyers would be expected to dress, two women who'd landed good jobs in the White world right out of law school. Khanya was, by the standards of all the men who, I used to note jealously, hung around their law school digs when I first met them, just as pretty as Ntombi—though none of those young men thought she could hold a candle to Naledi whose eyes were large and whose complexion was as light as a Coloured person's which apparently was all that beauty required. Khanya had chosen to focus her legal training on community advocacy and the NGO world. She dressed in jeans and casual wear much of the time, so as not to diminish people in the township among whom she moved. Gladys's attire was much the same as Khanya's. This had less to do with her post-law school pursuits (which for the life of me I can't recall) and more to do with the fact that she had dated the same man for fifteen years, since the day she turned fifteen, which accounted for the fact that her demeanor always eclipsed her attire and her demeanor was decidedly settled.

When I returned from the kitchen, Ntombi was in full swing, lighting up the room with her Etienne Mureinik impersonations.

"Do calibrate!" said Gladys.

Ntombi rose to her feet like an Oxford don. She unruffled her imaginary robes. She cleared her throat. "Calibrate," she said looking down at them through her glasses.

"Voetsek, professor Pinch-face!" Naledi interrupted. "What has calibrate to do with anything?"

"Without this word," Ntombi admonished Naledi, with a posh English tone, "the African will not be able to govern properly. Is the African ready to govern, ladies and gentlemen? That is the question. Or will he be hobbled in his attempts to take his place—his rightful place, of course—beside us in a free, democratic, and civil society?"

"I want you to take your place in my pot of English stew," Naledi said.

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"My dear girl, my dear, dear girl," Ntombi lorded over her, "shut—up!" She went on: "The law, ladies and gentlemen, the law. Jurisprudential reason. This is all we have at our disposal; all that can calibrate, yes, calibrate, the tension between this rising tide of Black economic, political, and social expectations that we are experiencing at the end of apartheid—legitimate expectations, make no mistake; apartheid is a blight upon civilization, unworthy of a European lineage—but only jurisprudential reason can calibrate the gap!...the tension between these rising expectations and our need for social stability free of both tyranny and anarchy."

"Please, me baas," Naledi implored, "I am a very hungry African and would very much like you for my English stew."

Ntombi waved her off.

"Let the fall, last Christmas, of the Soviet Union be a lesson to those of you in this lecture hall who still dream of socialism. I am well aware that some of you are members of the South African Students Congress and other such radical groups."

"No SASCO here, me bass, just cannibals."

"And I am well aware of your plans to push beyond the dismantling of apartheid for a socialist state and that your demand for the transformation of this university is merely a red herring—the first step in a takeover."

"Stew, baba, me just wants stew!"

"But where there is totalitarianism, there is no jurisprudential reason. And where there is no reason, there is no calibration. Now, for next time, I want you all to meditate on 'calibrate.' You must each write an essay on the social, political, and above all jurisprudential implications of this word."

Ntombi sat down and drank the fresh cup of tea I'd poured her as Gladys and Naledi gave her a round of applause. "Shame," she said, ruefully.

"What's a shame?" Khanya asked.

"The way he died. Professor Brassy told the papers that 'irrational attacks' had taken their toll, that the world 'just overwhelmed him.'"

"Irrational attacks have been levied at me all of my life and no one checked to see if I was overwhelmed," Naledi rejoined.

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"What irrational attacks?" Ntombi asked.

"Apartheid." It was enough to silence us all. Then Naledi continued. "I left work early when I heard the news."

"To mourn?" Gladys asked, in all sincerity.

"To celebrate," Naledi corrected.

"You're lying," said Gladys.

"I'm not lying."

"Where?"

"On the Concourse."

Gladys gasped. "You drove all the way from your law practice, to the university, to demonstrate and cheer with those...those militants? What if you were caught on television?"

Naledi shrugged her shoulders.

"You're not a student anymore," Gladys said to her as though she were her mother.

"I may not be a student anymore but I'm still a militant."

"Is that the way a grown woman acts?" Gladys insisted.

"We can't all be as grown as you, Gladys," observed Naledi. And then to all of us, because we all looked a little surprised, "Yes, I toyi toyied and cheered and sang right there on the Wits Concourse, with all those faculty and staff watching us, with their mouths hanging open, shaking their heads. 'Disgusting. Heathen. African.' To which our bodies said: True. True. True."

"Didn't you feel strange or embarrassed?" Khanya asked.

"I never felt better. 'Kill the farmer! Kill the Boer!' That's what I learned in his lectures."

"Hey, wena!" Ntombi cut in. "He wasn't a Boer, he was a Brit."

"They're all Boers," Naledi said without flinching. "There's nothing to calibrate."

Had Etienne Mureinik been dead the night Stefaans Brümmer called, my panic would have been more tangible and focused. In lieu of myriad

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offenses, my mind would have been able to concentrate itself on one accusation, the death of a White man, the only death worthy of expiation. Instead, my mind ran over a range of other episodes that no less violated the suspension of armed struggle Mandela had imposed. Brümmer himself seemed none too sure of what he was looking for. He knew that under Mandela's National Unity government, the National Intelligence Agency included MK operatives as well as agents from the secret world of the former apartheid state; together they were working to ferret out what they termed "extremists" on the Left as well as the Right, and I was the subject of such an investigation. That much he had tricked the chief of the NIA, Joe Nhlanhla, into revealing before he called me.

Brümmer needs me to help him fill in the rest. I am loath to oblige.

The war is over, Frank, we can live like normal people now.

Khanya hadn't said it just like that. But she had said it in her own way. Earlier this evening, when we dined at the Carlton Hotel, she might not have believed it herself. She had wanted to believe it. But how can she believe it if I won't believe it with her? I didn't tell her, 'Yes, the war is over,' but nor did I say the other thing.

For Christ's-sakes, Khanya, stop staring at me! Even the Orrs are being polite, chatting to themselves, pretending not to hear. She's worried. She's afraid. She thought tonight would be different. She'd spend the night here and then, maybe, over time, with some effort, some healing, some words of reconciliation on my part, some words of forgiveness on hers, maybe I'd come back home. Perhaps we'd be normal again. Were we ever normal?

Yes…it's true. I called her this morning. Or did she call me? No matter. We spoke on the telephone for the first time in weeks. That's what counts. We each said, "I love you." She didn't say, The war is over. I didn't say, It's just begun. We were trying not to argue. We met for drinks, expensive drinks, in the lobby of the Carlton Hotel and said, What the hell, if we're going to spend this much money we may as well go into the restaurant and have a nice meal. All through dinner there hung suspended between us the unvoiced question: are we going back to our separate homes or is tonight the night we start all over again? When the coffee arrived, she reached across the table and held my hand.

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"Okay, I'll settle the question."

"What question?"

"The one we've been avoiding. I'll come back to your place. We'll talk about the rest in the morning."

And we laughed and shook free of our nerves. We drank our coffee and had the waiter place two sweet, syrupy *koeksisters* in an elegant little box tied with a gold lace ribbon. We walked out into the rain, dodging the watery pellets as best we could, holding fast to the stone façades of Jo'burg's skyscrapers until we reached the taxi rank on Bree Street.

There, we held each other beneath Mandela's modest cardboard shield. We kissed. The war is over. The war has just begun. It hardly mattered. Not as long as we were silent. We dashed down the Orrs' drive with no more than a hot shower, a dry towel, a glass of wine, and a warm inviting bed on our minds. But Mrs. Orr intercepted us with a message from Stefaans Brümmer. Brümmer with his questions. Brümmer with his reminders. Brümmer with his perfect end to a perfect evening.

How did I get here? What possessed me to emigrate from de facto apartheid in the US to official apartheid in a country I hardly knew?

I watch her watching me as Brümmer delineates my status, an enemy of the state, an enemy of the "New" South Africa. The "New" South Africa that I fought for and am still fighting for now, I want to say, to Brümmer and Khanya and the Orrs. And to myself.

I traveled to South Africa twice before I finally "emigrated," if that's the right word. Once in July and August of 1989, on a research trip funded by the Jerome Foundation on a grant for emerging artists. I was supposed to spend two months here, gather enough data to complete a novel, and get out. Get into apartheid South Africa and then get out. That was the deal. Plain and simple. But on the second day of my first sojourn, I met Khanya. Two weeks later we were engaged.

Then there were the two months after the Jerome Foundation trip, December/January 1990/1991. I was in love then, yes, that's it. I came back to South Africa because I was in love. Though I said I came back to complete my research. Each time I departed I returned. The third time, later in 1991, I thought it would be like the other times, nothing as short

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as two months, perhaps, but nothing as long as five years. But one by one, five years approached, arrived, and departed.

As I recall (and Khanya, no doubt, recalls it differently) the "plan" was for Khanya to come to New York while I finished my masters at Columbia. We'd go to Europe or South America and she would go to film school where the education was good and cheap and I would teach and write.

That was July of 1990, when the violence in South Africa that, unbeknownst to us, was to characterize the political climate of the next five years (by 1992 the massacres perpetrated by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and de Klerk's security forces brought the death toll to upwards of 300 deaths per month) was in its terrifying infancy. An estimated 100,000 impimpis were being transported from KwaZulu and Natal into the sixteen townships that surrounded Johannesburg. De Klerk, who had only been in office a year, had just lifted the ban against the ANC and the Communist Party and had released Mandela from prison. But part of the deal was that the ANC guerillas of Umkhonto we Sizwe and their fellow travelers would not be allowed to return to South Africa and would not be freed from prison until most of the ANC moderates had had a chance to return and fill the void with the common sense of bourgeois accommodation. The devil is always in the details. Mandela had agreed to this. Somewhere in the desert of the Karoo there may even be a time capsule chockful of documents, which someone will dig up in two or three hundred years and find that Mandela had not simply agreed to this, but had proposed it. Into this "compromise" de Klerk facilitated the "immigration" of Gatsha Buthelezi's fifth column from Natal into the Transvaal.

As a cool winter night in July settled over Johannesburg's bracelet of Black townships, Inkatha's impimpis tore through the thin wooden doors of old brick and corrugated tin homes, shattered kerosene lamps on kitchen floors, and watched ribbons of flame unfold to the beds of old people whose throats they had slit; as children cried wildly for someone

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to rescue them; as men who could run, ran, leaving their families behind; as women too young to die from one simple hack of the panga were raped and then killed; as the large yellow casspirs, de Klerk's armored personnel carriers, waited impatiently for their passengers to return. It was midnight in the townships. It was midday in Manhattan. The pasta was being served al dente at sidewalk cafés in Little Italy; the pigeons vied for a spot on the outstretched arms of the birdman in Washington Square Park; near Times Square, the cabbies were singing with their horns; and we were being wed at Tammany Hall.

We'd had an agreement, she and I. As ironclad as our marriage vows, to hear me tell it. A loose ensemble of suggestions, whenever her story got there first. Rio or Amsterdam, that was deal. By July of 1991 we'd be up on a hill overlooking Ipanema or down in a houseboat on a Dutch canal. She'd be in film school. I would teach and write. Soon we'd send for Rebaabetswe, my stepdaughter who'd turned three that May before we were married. We'd be free. Free of South Africa. Free of America. Black and free.

But one morning in February she woke up and said she was leaving.

"I'm going back to South Africa," she said.

My feelings whiplashed between confusion, sadness, and a biting sense of betrayal.

"Why?" I said.

"She told me she thought I was British on the phone. She said she had no idea I was Black."

"Just like that?"

"Not just like that. I could have handled it if she said it just like that. She was about to say 'Black' then she caught herself. That made it even worse. Why can't they come clean in your country?"

"It's not my country—why do you always call it my country?"

"They're in need of a certain—oh, I can't remember the word she used—a certain image for their point of sales people. I've got two years of law school and she's telling me that! She said she would have saved us both the trouble had she realized on the phone."

"We could sue."

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"Sure, with all the money from your student loans."

"It's a racist country. To the core. I told you before you came."

"You're supposed to have laws."

"Why are we arguing about this? I'm on your side. Besides I told you before you came."

"You already said that."

"I'm sorry."

"Why should I stay here?"

"Khanya, we agreed."

"We discussed. We didn't agree. Trade one South Africa for another? Does that make sense to you?"

"I graduate in May, we'll leave then, okay?"

She was already dressed. "Trade one Boer for another?"

"Why don't we take a shower together?" *Wrong thing to say.*

She put on her shoes, and then looked outside to see that a fresh film of snow had fallen in the night. "Besides, my family's there." She rummaged in the closet for her boots. "Maybe family doesn't mean the same thing to all of you—"

"Who's 'all of you'?"

"I'm an African. For me, family is everything."

I sat up in bed but I may as well have been standing on my hind legs. "Why don't you just say what you mean?"

"I've seen the way you treat your parents."

"Then you must have also seen the way they treat me."

"Doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter?"

"Our duty is to them, not vice versa. I thought things would be different here and then she said that to me. That White haus frau, said that to me."

"What are we talking about?"

"I'm leaving. I'm going back. I hope you can come when you're finished with school."

"You thought things would be different here? I told you they wouldn't be."

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"You don't know what I thought."

"You don't need a law degree to know that African immigrant is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. All it takes is a little common sense."

She stopped at the foot of the bed and looked at me. "I used to think that you were only occasionally impolite—I was wrong."

"A land of opportunity. A step up in the world. You were so inebriated with your arrival that you thought you'd pass through customs and be changed forever."

"Don't lecture me, I'm not one of your students."

"A vertical leap from kaffir to immigrant, when all you made was a lateral move from kaffir to nigger. That's what's eating you. You'd rather leave than be mistaken for one of us. Well, I've got news for you."

"When I want news I'll read the *New York Times,*" she said, leaving me in the bedroom.

I threw my robe on and followed her to the door. "That woman at Macy's—"

"I'm going to the travel agency."

"—the Human Resources minion who snubbed you—"

"Goodbye, Frank." She disentangled the menagerie of chains and locks and left.

I leaned over the banister as she twirled down the stairs. "An eight-year-old child could have done what she did without wasting time. Without shuffling papers. Just by pointing a finger and saying, 'Look, mommy, a Negro.'" I ran back into the living room and struggled mightily to lift the ice-sealed window. She scurried down the sidewalk and stopped at the light on 168th street. At last the ice cracked and the window jerked open.

"Hey!" I yelled, "October's not that far off, you can still be an immigrant for Halloween!"

The engines of morning delivery trucks were clearing their throats in the streets below, the cold grates of the bodegas were screeching open, and a barge horn blared as it pulled itself across the water from the Bronx to the Washington Bridge. She hadn't heard a word.

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—∞—

"He may as well be a White man." That's what her father said when she returned to South Africa. She'd gone home to Mmabatho in the "homeland" of Bophuthatswana for the weekend. She'd talked primarily about her returning to law school, hoping this would soften him up, show her reinsertion back into his fold, that she might broach the more difficult subject, the subject of her desire to marry me, without revealing the even more difficult truth, that we were already married in New York.

He grunted as he folded his Sunday paper, which was not the same as saying "No, you can't marry him," but could not be precisely translated as "Yes, Frank's a really wonderful guy, I'd have wished no one else for you." He stood up and looked around for something. What? He didn't smoke a pipe. There was nothing he wanted to see on television. It was too early for a drink.

"He'll pay the *lobola,*" she said, plaintively, hoping against hope that at least my willingness to pay the bride price would also soften him up. This "willingness" on my part was, in point of fact, a fabrication on her part. She might say "we agreed" that I'd pay the lobola, but I would say, "we *discussed*" it. Whose story crossed the finish line first hardly mattered to Mr. Phenyo. He folded the newspaper and went out into the yard.

The hot desert sun of Bophuthatswana baked his cheerless attempts at gardening or maintaining a lawn. It made him sad just to look at it. He used to raise cattle. Not here but where cattle could be grazed and watered. He used to plant crops. Not here but where crops could drink their fill and flourish. The good land had been taken by the Boers and he and his people had been sent here; here, where the earth's skin wrinkled before its time; here for "their own good." She came up beside him and tried to get his attention while he watered what for lack of a better word he called his lawn. She wanted to say, you're just making mud. But he might turn on her and tell her that he had eyes, didn't he, that he could see that he was just making mud, couldn't he, that if he wanted to make mud what business was it of hers?

"Did you hear me, papa, I said he'll pay the lobola?"

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"He doesn't put milk in his coffee," he said, more to the mud than to her, "or sugar. He's not an African, he's a White man."

In May of 1991, I graduated from Columbia University. I bought a one-way ticket on South African Airways, an apartheid-era airline as inviting as disinfectant.

I followed her to South Africa as blindly as she had followed me to New York. I went without the fat foundation bankroll of my first trip. I was going to have to live on rands, not dollars. The only American currency I had was five hundred dollars and a letter of recommendation from professor Edward Said. I was counting on the money to tide us over until the letter could land me a job. I had lied to get back into South Africa; just as I had lied in 1989 to make possible my first trip there.

My visa application had been denied in 1988. Someone in the embassy in Washington found it highly inconceivable that a Black American would want to vacation in Johannesburg, the industrial hub of South Africa, in July, the dead of winter. On top of that, Jesse Jackson and several Black politicos, clergymen, and academics had submitted their applications at the same time I sent mine. So I waited another year, then bit the bullet and shelled out a significant amount of money to hire a Washington based "visa consultant." The day he got my passport and application was the day he called me.

"Mr. Wilderson, I've got your passport in hand and I'm looking at your photograph. Mr. Wilderson, you're Black, sir."

"Last time I checked."

There was an uneasy silence. Then he said, "And you want to go to South Africa?"

"That's correct."

"Well, sir, we're a visa consultancy. We don't guarantee that our clients will get a visa. Have you applied for a visa from them before?"

"Last year. June of 1988."

"What reasons did they give for denying you?"

"They didn't give any reason."

"Are you sure?"

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"Of course, I'm sure," I said, though I might have been lying. I don't remember.

"Mr. Wilderson, now I don't know if you've read anything about South Africa—"

"I studied Southern African politics in college." *Wrong thing to say.*

"Did you, whereabouts?"

"Dartmouth College."

"You're a Dartmouth man! My uncle was a Dartmouth man." *Right thing to say!* "You must have been one of the first—well, it's just that there weren't any Blacks in my uncle's time. Okay, well fair enough. But I must tell you that from all indications South Africa could declare another state of emergency any day now. Are you sure you wouldn't rather have a visa for Zimbabwe, they've been inde—"

"I need a visa for South Africa."

"Certainly, sir. Now, Mr. Wilderson, I'll say one more thing and then we'll get down to brass tacks. You do realize that accommodations are still not what they call "multiracial"? That would mean you would have to stay—"

"I'll work it out when I get there."

"Of course, there is the Honorary White status which many Black American businessmen are accorded when they travel. And they stay right downtown with that status, at the Carlton Hotel. Are you a businessman, Mr. Wilderson?"

"No."

"Well, fine, fine, that's alright. So...let's get right down to brass tacks. What are you?"

"What am I?"

"Your occupation."

"I'm a guard."

"A security guard," he said with a little too much enthusiasm.

"No, I'm a guard at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis."

"I don't think I understand, sir."

"I rotate through the galleries and tell children not to touch the paintings."

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"I see," he said with all the air escaping, "and before that?"

"I worked for various brokerage firms."

"As a guard?"

"As a stockbroker."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I was a stockbroker with Merrill Lynch, Oppenheimer, E. F. Hutton, and Drexel, Burnham, Lambert from 1981 to 1988."

"And you left that to walk around art galleries monitoring children?"

"It isn't as simple as that."

"It never is."

"Look, are they going to want to know all of that?"

"Mr. Wilderson, I have to ask this because it has been asked in the past: are you an artist?"

"No, I neither paint nor sculpt. I like modern art and the job is easy and lets me—" I almost said "write." I was shocked at myself but I almost said it. "Let's me have free time to figure a few things out in my life. See I'm coming out of difficult divorce." This was a lie, because I wasn't married to the woman I'd broken up with, but it put him back into a world he could understand.

"I understand, Mr. Wilderson, I do understand. Had a bit of a spat like that myself. Now, Mr. Wilderson, I'm going to cut right to the chase. You have to be truthful with me and I have to be truthful with the South African embassy. If I lie to them, if I lie to them just one time, when I come back with my next client they are not only not going to let me jump the queue but they will show me the door. They will know me to be less than an honest man and that will be bad for business. I'm an honest man, Mr. Wilderson and I believe that you're an honest man so I'm going to go over the more pertinent questions, boxes you've already checked but we just need to...well, you know."

"Shoot."

"Are you a journalist?"

"No."

"Are you an artist?"

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"No."

"Are you a writer?"

"No."

"Have you ever published an article in a journal or a newspaper?"

"Didn't you just ask me that?"

"Not, really, sir. Some people don't claim writing as an occupation, but they've published before."

"No."

"Alright, sir. And the purpose of your visit?"

"Tourism." *I hear the repression is divine this time of year.*

"Now, sir, that answer's going to raise a few eyebrows."

"Okay, then check something else."

"It's not a matter of checking something else, Mr. Wilderson, it's a matter of the truth."

"Then check tourism."

"Mr. Wilderson, they're going to ask questions, such as how well I know you."

"I went to Dartmouth with your uncle."

"Those are not the facts, Mr. Wilderson."

"Can't we be a little creative?"

"Creative is the one thing we can't be. You and I, with our democracy and our freedom of association, our freedom of ideas—what we might think of as creative the people in the South African embassy think of as, well...They're not very creative at the embassy. The fact of the matter is I really don't know you that well. And I have yet to work for a Black American trying to get a tourist visa to visit Johannesburg (which is not exactly a tourist destination) in July, the middle of winter. My credibility, you might say, is inextricably bound to yours."

"Fine, tell them the truth. I'm a poor museum guard who wants to take a vacation abroad. So I'm going to a typically non-vacation spot in the middle of winter because it'll be summer here—and too hot for me—and because off-season and off the beaten-track is all I can afford."

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He accepted this. He said he'd call me back in a week. Somehow he got the visa. In July of 1989, as P. W. Botha imposed his state of emergency, I bought a ticket on South African Airlines and flew into South Africa for the first time in my life.

I was terrified on that first trip into South Africa. I could not believe I was actually going. *Into South Africa.* Thirty thousand feet in the air, the insanity of what I was doing seized me. *Here I am, a Black American choosing to go into South Africa when every African with two rands to rub together is trying to get out. This is crazy.*

The buzz of Afrikaans coils through the cabin like bees. I understand not a word of it. The stewardess demurs to take my drink order. For the third time I tell her I don't speak Afrikaans. Now I must have the courage to ask these two men beside me (speaking perhaps of cattle ranching, or me, they must be speaking of me in their bastardized Dutch, waving their bratwurst hands in the tiny air) to rise so that I can pee or flush myself into the sky.

We break through the underbelly of clouds. Rain glistens on the windows. Here and there on the ground below, clusters of suburban light are broken by patches of blackness. I tell myself to get a grip; that those black lightless spaces are just fields where jack rabbits run and where the genius of developers waits. Tomorrow I will learn that those tracts barren of light were not fields at all, but townships like Thokoza and shantytowns like Phola Park; "locations" the Africans call them, where people live without electricity.

What possessed me to make this journey? I wonder why, when speaking of Europe, people speak of going *to:* "I'm going *to* France", "I'm going *to* Spain." And why, for a handful of other countries, people speak of *going into?* "We're going *into* Bosnia." "She got *into* Albania." "I'm *going into* South Africa." I look down upon the rising runway. Nothing reveals the truth of this country to be any different than others. What did I expect—the tarmac to be lit with luminous skulls?

Into South Africa...with no more companion than this diary with its empty pages waiting for my words and these black hands "stained" with the ink of

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fear. Are you out of your mind? They will kill *you. They kill hundreds like you every year. I've got to go back. This is mad.*

We bump and stutter and skid across the tarmac. In the driving rain we taxi to a halt. I have only one wish, to be airborne again.

I cleared customs without incident. I called Montshiwa Moroke, my contact. A journalist with Pan Africanist Congress affinities and one of three or four Black men who wrote for the Johannesburg *Star,* I'd met him in Minneapolis in 1987. He invited me to South Africa. No, he said I must come; that as a writer—a Black writer—it was my duty to see for myself, to bear witness to apartheid. He had promised me a bed at his house in Soweto.

Inside the airport, I called him. But he wasn't home. What complicated matters was the fact that I did not speak any Sotho languages nor could I make his mother understand my—to her ears—tortured and foreign English. She kept telling me that Montshiwa had gone to Zimbabwe. And I kept trying to explain to her that I was a friend who'd been promised a place to stay, that I was Black and alone and terrified with no one to turn to and nowhere else to go. She would tell me Montshiwa's in Zimbabwe and then she'd hang up. And I would call her back and desperately try to get more information out of her and she would repeat, Montshiwa's in Zimbabwe...and hang up. And I would call back and she would hang up. Finally, I ran out of change.

The last plane was towed into the hanger for cleaning or repairs. All the arrivals had arrived. All the departures had departed. I turned from the wall of windows and, for the first time in an hour I noticed the Black people in the airport. None of them were at eye level. Under the currency exchange window, women wearing *doeks* scrubbed the floor on their hands and knees. Atop tall ladders, I could see the ashen ankles of men, sockless in worn shoes as they polished lamp shades in silence. Soon, I thought, I will have to venture into this night and find a place to stay. *Why didn't I get Honorary White status from that visa consultant? Didn't want that in my historical record, that's why. To hell with the historical record. What am I going to do? A few years ago, they automatically stamped it*

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in the passport. He said something about it being in the bar code of the strip the customs agent taped on the passport. Could I take this to a hotel and get in?

It was late. I decided not to risk it. Instead I locked myself in a stall in the bathroom and removed my shirt. Strapped around my torso was a secret money belt. But more than money was in the belt. Into it I had folded photocopies of my favorite pages of Frantz Fanon's writings, along with three pages from the tour guidebook *Africa on a Shoestring.* Oddly enough, both books were banned in South Africa. The former because its subtitle read "The Handbook for the Black Revolution in Africa," and the latter because the authors had made the kind of disparaging remarks about apartheid which all the other guidebooks had shied away from. I sat on the throne and read. It said that there was a part of Johannesburg called Hillbrow-Berea which was "slowly" becoming "multiracial." The book described it as the Times Square of Johannesburg. This did little to excite me; I'd always avoided Times Square when I went to New York. But the allusion was certainly a drawing card for someone other than me. I wrote the telephone number of a bed and breakfast place on my hand. I started to leave the bathroom. At the door I panicked. I went back inside and spent a good ten minutes washing all the ink off my hand. *Memorize it man, don't let 'em catch you with anything written.* Still, I wasn't sure. I went to the coffee shop, ostensibly for change, but in reality I wanted to kill time and keep time from killing me.

An hour in the airport coffee shop nursing the same cup of tea with Black waiters and cleaners too cautious to speak to me; with the only conversation being that of errant barking from German shepherds as they pass each other, up and down the empty corridors under the silent leashes of soldiers. The coffee shop closed, so I bought a paper dated July 24, 1989—yesterday's news. I read the headlines. A renewed State of Emergency is being imposed. Three bombs have gone off in the last three days. Two in Jo'burg central, allegedly placed by Umkhonto we Sizwe. One placed by Whites, demolishing a township clinic in retaliation.

If there'd been a plane to Burma Shave, I'd have taken it just to leave. I was thirty-three years old. Too old to think that I could live forever; too young to have accomplished anything so worthy in life as

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to face death with equanimity and resolve. I was scared and alone. I went back to the telephone and let the last coins fall.

The woman on the other end spoke English with a thick German accent. At least she can understand me, I thought. “Come along my American friend,” she said. I was so elated that I put the phone down, picked up my backpack, and ran to the exit to catch one of the last shuttles into the city. It wasn’t until I was comfortably seated on the soft felt cushions, and my eyes began to close from the fatigue and fear of the journey and the calm reassurance of finally having a place to stay, that it occurred to me that I had neglected to ask if the Sommer House was “multiracial.” I sat up with a terrified start. I was set to jump off and call her back. *No, fool, don’t do that. Then what should I do?* The bus careened out of the airport and onto the highway, answering the question for me.

A young African woman came from the back of the bus and sat down next to me. I hadn’t seen any Black people get on the bus, only the last dregs of late arrivals—all of whom were White. She asked if I was an American. I said I was. She told me she was completing a BA in Biology at the University of Bophuthatswana. *Ha! You take me for a fool? You’re no student. You’re with Special Branch. They sent you. This is a trap. A set-up. Name and passport ID number, that’s all you’re getting, sister.* She asked why I had come to vacation in South Africa in the middle of winter. *I knew it, I fucking knew it. Stay calm, breathe, just breathe, don’t say anything that would incriminate you.* My heart was pounding so hard I thought she could hear it. I felt a panic attack coming on, like the early stages of angina. I did my best to keep my voice low and my answers vague. Finally, she asked if I was married. *What kind of question is that for a cop to ask?* No, I told her. Do you have a girlfriend, she said. *This is getting strange.* I told her that I didn’t have a girlfriend. Then who takes care of you? *Who takes care of me; is this some kind of newfangled lie detector test?* I don’t understand, I told her, no one takes care of me. Why don’t you have a girlfriend? We broke up almost two years ago, I said. And you’ve been alone since then? Hardly, there are hundreds of women in my life: Ann Petry, Toni Morrison, Assata Shakur, Toni Cade Bambara. Womanizer! she said with disgust. I thought Black American men were different—but you’re just

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like a South African man; no wonder your woman left you. What do you need four women for? Those are just the ones whose names I can remember, I smiled. She turned away from me and sucked her teeth. I'm joking, okay? They're not women, well, they're women but I've only met one of them, Toni Cade Bambara. A womanizer *and* a liar, she said. Look they're novelists, writers. I spent time with them in the Minneapolis Public Library. I read their books, okay? This made her laugh and it also seemed to relieve her. But then she said, you read books and you don't have a girlfriend? I wake up, I write, I go to the gallery—I'm a guard there, when my shift's up I go to the public library. Why? she asked. Because I can't check books out of the university library—I'm not a student. No, I mean why do you go to the library after work, why not go out with friends, you won't meet a woman at the library. I'm not trying to meet a woman, I'm trying to become the smartest person I know. You're worse than a South African man, she said. *Well, no one asked you to sit down.* There were moments of uncomfortable silence in which I thought that I should have been relieved to finally realize that she was not there to arrest me for visa fraud or for carrying contraband (Fanon's writings and *Africa on a Shoestring*).

The bus arrived at the rotunda on the White-entrance side of the Noord Street Station in the center of Johannesburg. She told me her name was Grace and that she'd gone to the airport to see a friend of hers off to London. The young man had said he was going to study, which is how he was granted permission to leave but, she told me, he just couldn't take it anymore and he was really going into exile. Why anyone Black would want to come to this country, she said, when all we dream about is leaving, that's a mystery to me—you're a mystery to me. I'm no mystery, I said, I'm a writer. I write fiction and poetry. I've won $13,000 in literary awards this year and I'm traveling. This, well, this is a research trip for a novel that I'm writing. What's it about? she asked. Well, I'm...I'm not exactly sure. How does one do research for a novel, she said, is it like research in the lab? Well, no...not exactly. Then what? I...I don't really know. You need someone to take care of you, she nodded, where are you staying? At a bed and breakfast place

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in Berea. They're not multiracial in Hillbrow or Berea, she warned. Oh, yes, yes they are, it's all in one of my books, my travel book. This place is multiracial, I assured her. I really don't think so; you must come to my aunt's house with me. She works in Auckland Park, but she lives in the Meadowlands, in Soweto. She'll put you up; you must stay with us, in the location. Thank you, but I'm already booked. Give me the telephone number of the inn, she said. I gave her the number. She walked toward the other side of Noord Street station, the Black side, to sit in a Black people's kombi and wait for it to fill to the brim with passengers for the Meadowlands.

As I approached the metered taxis a White woman who was ten to fifteen years older than Grace, a woman in her late thirties, apprehended me. "Did I hear you say you're from the States?" *Okay, here it is, yep, this woman, yep, she's the agent. Now, think, what did she hear, where was she sitting—behind you, in front of you, on the side. Okay, what if Grace was the decoy...or the set up...or the finger man...and this woman—yep, here it comes—she's the real cop. Don't answer any questions, just say, I want to call the American embassy.*

"I'm a...I'm...yes, from the States."

"Splendid, I love people from America. And you're going to Hillbrow, I heard you tell that African girl you're going to Hillbrow."

"That 'girl' has a BA in Biology."

"Yes, the Africans are cleverer than they've ever been—but are they ready to help us govern, that's the question."

"I'm not going to Hillbrow. I'm going to Berea."

"Hillbrow-Berea. It's all the same. Hillbrow's where the fun happens, the naughty, naughty fun. If you know what I mean. Berea is where one sleeps it off. C'mon we'll share a cab. I live in Berea. I'll show you the sights."

"I'm tired."

She leaned in: "You'll need me to help you get a taxi."

"I can manage."

"We're going to the same area and there's the cost—we could split it. It's late, you might need my help in getting—"

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"Fine." *I get the point. No, Frank, don't. She must be with the police. What can you get for a visa violation? There's a state of emergency on. You could get whatever they give you, that's what you could get. Please, somebody let me go home.* Surprisingly, one of the taxis in the queue had a Black driver; the rest were White and Indian. He was the only one who didn't turn away or roll up his window when we approached the queue.

She jabbered all the way from Noord Street Station to the neon lights of Hillbrow. And when we got to Hillbrow she turned into a tour guide. Those are the news kiosks for immigrants and others wanting newspapers from around the world; see how the cafés in Hillbrow serve coffee on the sidewalk—we're just like Europe here; and look, look up there, that's our Strydom Tower, it's our Seattle Space Needle, only no one can go up in it now, it's been closed for I don't know how long—bombs, you've heard of bombs, the Black communists—I'm not saying that all of our Blacks are communists—but those Umkhonto we Sizwe people, Mandela's people, they come from Russia with their bombs, it's a bother, such a bother, they've forced us to close the Strydom Tower. I want you to know that things are changing; we've eleven years to the new millennium, things may very well change by then. Look at all the lights, look at all the people, by the year 2000 this whole area will be multiracial. That's what my astrologer says. Do you have an astrologer? I understand that in the States you can pick up the phone and call them toll free, is that true? This whole area is soon going to be multiracial. Things are changing. But can our South African Blacks handle the responsibility? What if we do let them come to the city, then what, chaos, communism, anarchy? That's the question on our minds. Can our Blacks learn to behave like the Blacks in America and Britain? Is it time? Are they ready?

The African cab driver was silent throughout all of this. We left Hillbrow's main drag, Pretoria Street, and entered a quiet tree-lined street of well polished apartment buildings. We were in Berea. He stopped at a posh complex and got out of the car to help her with her bags.

"She didn't tip me," he said, when he got back in the car. He put the car in gear and pulled away. "The nice madam didn't tip me."

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When we got to the inn, he looked in the rearview mirror and said, "Hey, boss, you know where you're going?"

No, I thought, I have no idea where I'm going.

"Yes," I said, "this looks like the place. Say, I don't have rands. Don't know what I was thinking. I didn't change enough before they closed at the airport." *What was I thinking; that I didn't need rands because in reality I was going to be on the next flight home?* "Let me go inside, register, and get the concierge or someone to make change for me then I'll pay you. How does that sound—or would you like US dollars?"

"Concierge?" he said, quizzically, as though I'd told him I was going inside to get change from the penguin.

I rang the bell. The door opened. A White woman ("large" in White vernacular; "healthy" in Black vernacular) peered out and looked on either side of me. She seemed puzzled. Now, she looked at me and said, "Yes?"

"I'm Frank Wilderson. Frank B. Wilderson, the third." It was happening so fast, but one thought, one absurd thought flashed into my mind and then quickly out again—*she thinks I'm the cab driver*—due to its presumed absurdity. She hadn't said anything. She was still recovering her own wits. "I'm here for a room."

"We're not multiracial."

"I called you." I felt a forecast of tears in my cracking voice. *Don't cry, you bastard, you better not cry!* "You promised. I mean, you booked me in. I called you less than an hour ago."

"You didn't call *me.* You might have called someone else." She had a thick German accent that, for some reason that I can only think has to do with all the World War II movies I watched growing up, infuriated and frustrated me more.

"Now look," *you fucking Nazi,* "I called you from the airport."

"I've had one call all night and that was from an American."

"I *am* the American!" I tore my shirt open, which terrified her and would have sent her into shock had she not seen the pouch and the passport that I snatched from it. She looked at my photograph. She flipped through the pages upon pages of all the places I'd been in the

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world—first with surprise, then with envy, finally with irritation. She thrust it back at me.

"We're not multiracial."

All this time, she'd been blocking the entrance with her imposing frame. I dropped my backpack at her feet and turned toward the street. *Where am I going to go? What am I going to do?* I thought I was going to break down and cry. At the end of the walk, the taxi was idling. The driver's eyes met mine. He wanted to help, but he knew better than to get out of the cab. I walked over to him. I asked him what I owed him. He told me. If I pay you in dollars, but pay you double the amount, will that be okay? You don't have to do that, *baba.* Are you going to be alright? Yeah, I lied. I'm from Chicago, I lied again. *What could being from Minneapolis possibly mean in a fight?* That heifer best raise up, and quick! I told him, making extra damn sure that my voice didn't travel up the walk, 'cause I'm three seconds and counting off her ass. To which he repeated, Are you sure you'll be alright? I nodded, and kept nodding as he drove away. I turned back up the walk. She was still there, barring the door, my backpack at her feet.

"Now, look lady, a deal is a deal, okay?" I picked up my backpack. "I don't want to call the police."

This made the folds of fat in her arms shake with laughter. I pushed past her as she laughed.

"We—are—not—multiracial."

"The guidebook says you are."

"The guidebook is wrong."

I looked around for the register. The foyer and front area was void of a front desk, just a hard floor and a wide opening onto a living room, a narrow passage under the stairs, and another passage that led to the kitchen. *Eureka! There's the book on that little side table next to the stairs.* I rushed over to it and signed my name.

"Okay, lady, now my name's in the register. So you've got to be fair about it. We could call the police right now and they'd see that I'm registered."

"Use the phone in the hall and then you can wait for them outside."

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"Damn it, I don't have any place to go!" *If you cry, I'll kill you.*

"We're not multiracial."

She called softly up the stairs and her two sons (Bruno and Gestapo—okay, so I don't remember their Christian names) appeared. As they came down the stairs I sized myself up, 5'10," 189 pounds. But my musculature had diminished since I stopped being a stockbroker and began working at the Walker Art Center. I no longer lived in a nice apartment by Lake Calhoun, but rented a room in a boarding house, a room just big enough for my books, my typewriter, and me. I hadn't had the money to continue my gym membership—so I wasn't lifting weights. And I hadn't studied martial arts for almost ten years, which was about the last time I'd been in a fight. They reached the bottom and moved on me like zombies. Well, not exactly. The older one, Gestapo, was clearly in charge. With a flick of his wrist he motioned for his younger, slighter, blonder, brother to pick up my backpack. It was then that I noticed his little brother's eyes: they held even less resolve than mine. The older one, who must have been twenty-five, looked like he played rugby. This was just a scrimmage for him. He'd do what needed doing and clean me off his cleats with the mud. He slammed his palm into my chest.

"Alright, now!" I said, "Don't make me go off in here." He pushed me again. "Back the fuck up," I said, but it was I who was backing up. He kept pushing me toward the door. "I said don't touch me!" His little brother, who'd been walking behind him, was now beside him, holding my backpack in what I remember to be his right hand. I stepped to the side and punched the younger brother as hard as I could. He groaned and fell back. I fell upon him and kept swinging. There was nothing especially strategic in this move, for it left my entire backside exposed to Gestapo who had no more scruples about attacking me from behind than I did about attacking the least likely suspect. I was all over Bruno, and Gestapo was all over me. We fell into the table and something, maybe the register, perhaps a few knickknacks fell to the floor. I was trying to stay on my feet and trying to absorb the punishment I was taking from Gestapo and beat Bruno at the same time, but Bruno was fighting back and Gestapo was fighting me in the back. I grabbed the younger brother

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for not all the punches I threw were connecting, and we went down, with Gestapo straddling us from above. Somewhere from across a long distant border I could hear a voice, yelling, screaming, ordering us to stop. Bruno stopped. Gestapo stopped. I stopped.

"He can stay," she said. "We've got Germans from Siemens Corporation up above. Better he stays than we wake them." She ordered me to pay some outlandish amount. Right there on the spot. I said I only had dollars. All the better she said. Her sons backed away, but loitered by the banister. The ruckus had pushed us to the other end of the large foyer, all the way to the opening to the kitchen. I didn't want to wipe my mouth, but it was stinging. *Don't let them see that you're hurt. And don't you cry. I'll kill you if you cry.* My ribs ached. I was drenched in sweat and I was dirty from rolling on the floor. My backpack was on the floor over by the staircase, where the storm troopers stood. I retrieved it and faced them again. I wasn't squaring off with them, I just had to get past them to go up to my room.

"Not upstairs," she said.

"The rooms are upstairs," I insisted.

"I've got Germans, from Siemens Corporation. I'll not have you up there with them."

"That's where people stay and that's where I'm staying." Her sons barred my way.

"You can take this," she held the wad of bills I'd given her, "and let my sons throw you out. Or you can follow me and let me show you your room."

I followed her through the kitchen and out the back door. "You've got to be kidding," I said. "This is such a fucking cliché." She paid me no mind. "Where are we going?" Still she was silent. She seemed to know her way around the yard, even in the dark. She led me along a row of doors in a concrete structure that looked like a cross between a jail and a stable. She opened one of the doors with a key. She threw the switch. The floor was concrete. The bed had a thin sheet and blanket that looked, and ultimately felt, like horsehair. Later that night I would discover that the bed was 5'9" long as I found myself continually drawing

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my knees in an inch to keep my feet from falling off. It was wide enough for one person and had a pancake mattress over a mesh of springs. There was a sink, but no mirror. Where do I shower, I asked. She motioned outside with her head. Where do I find the toilet? She made the same motion. It's cold in here. She pointed to a space heater the size of squirrel. I saw that there was a good three inches between the bottom of the door and the concrete floor. I'll catch my death of cold in here, I said. She shrugged her shoulders. She said I could take breakfast in the kitchen but not in the dining room. She told me no visitors and no Africans—as though the two were somehow irreconcilable. She placed the key on the chair. She left.

I could not stop my body from shaking as I sat on the bed. I was convulsing as the terror and loneliness welled inside me. I threw myself on the bed and buried my face in the pillow and cried like I'd never cried before.

After a while the crying stopped. I went over to the sink and washed my face. I looked at my watch. It was almost midnight. *They're lucky that shit ended when it did. I was about to serve those two muthafuckas. Don't get me started. I will HURT somebody up in here! Talk about judgment at Nuremberg. Better thank your Nazi-ass mama she called it off when she did.* I lay back down on the bed and began crying all over again. *You should get some sleep. I can sleep when I'm dead. I'm here to research a novel. I'm a BLACK MAN, okay? Can you get that through your fucking head? Can't nothing faze you, alright. Not two punk ass muthafuckas like that. Hell, no. Hell—fucking—no! They almost got served…I swear to god! Shit, I don't know karate, but I do know ca-razy. I will act a fool up in here, okay? Don't get me started.* I drew my sleeve across my snotty nose. *How the hell does one research a novel? What the hell am I going to tell the Jerome Foundation? I don't know where I'm at or what I'm doing. It's cold as hell. You need something to eat. Like where, it's almost midnight. Why did Montshiwa leave me hanging? Get the street map, man. Get your jacket. Let's go. Let's walk. Let's hat the fuck up.*

For a good thirty minutes I walked in one direction, downhill; downhill from Hillbrow-Berea. I found myself on what I would learn was the underside of downtown Jo'burg. I passed by a mosque. To my surprise,

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many people were in the streets. Africans, Coloureds, and Indians; very few Whites. *So this area must be 'multiracial.'* But where were they going and where had they come from and what were they doing out so late? I dared not stop someone and ask them. *But that's what a researcher does, fool; he talks to people.* But I'd forgotten what I was supposed to be researching or what my book was to be about. I minnowed past the people on my way to god knows where, and wave upon wave, they swept over me on their way to the very same place.

I was standing on a corner gaping vaguely at the sights, listening to the sounds without knowing what I was hearing, crossing the street without waiting for the light, when a car ran over my foot. A tiny Japanese car, but a car nonetheless, and there were people in it. It cut so close to me that had I been one inch further into the street it would have dismembered my knee. I screamed in agony. As the wheel spun up my arch and over my toes I was so close to the passenger I could kiss him or reach out to hold him. I took his face into my pain.

Groaning, I sat on the curb clutching my sides. It did not occur to me to draw my leg back on the curb, lest another car come along and amputate it. I was in such a state of shock that I could not take my shoe off and look at the damage. *He was laughing at me. That face in the car was laughing at me.* No one paid me much mind. I took my shoe off. They were hiking boots with reinforced toes and a hard exterior. That's the only thing that saved me. Nothing broken, I told myself. (Years later, I was to learn that bones had indeed been fractured.) I pulled myself up a light pole. I braced myself against the pole and put pressure on it. The pain was still there, but it was bearable. I tried to stand on my own. Yes, I could do that. I walked. Yes, I could walk. And then, a sharp pain shot up my right side to my hip and I had to brace myself against a lamppost again. I was next to a *Bimbos* fast-food joint. *What a name. Why not just call it Burger King?* I went inside and, finding they did not cater to vegetarians, ordered a hamburger with everything on it. Nothing before and nothing since has ever tasted better to me than that food drenched in trans fats.

This was no window-order Burger King. They had table service with waiters, Black. They had cleaners, Black. They had a kitchen crew, Black.

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And they had a manager, White. I looked up to get the waiter's attention, only to find that he was standing at the counter with the cleaners and the kitchen crew. They were all staring at me. They were all smiling at me. I looked down and took another bite. As I chewed I looked only at my plate. A few minutes later I looked up and they were still there. Staring. Smiling. *What's up with this?* I smiled back and motioned for the waiter to come over.

"Hi, um, I'd like the bill please. I think I should pay."

"Yes, master," he smiled.

"I beg your pardon."

"You want to pay, master, is that it?"

I leaned closer to him. He leaned closer to me. "I don't think you should call me 'master.'"

"Yes, master, I'll tell the master you want to pay."

"No, I'm serious, that master thing, man, that's not cool. That's some old plantation shit—well...anyway, look why don't I just pay you and you bring me change for the tip."

"No, master," he lurched back.

"No?"

"Don't give me the money; I'll call the master for the money, master."

"Ain't you the waiter?"

"One moment, master." He started to leave, then he turned back and said, "May I ask master a question?"

"Man, look, cut that master shi—look, ask me, man, but don't call me master."

"Are you from America or Great Britain, ma—"

"America."

"Heyta!" He clapped his hands and bounced back over to the lunch counter. "Heyta, *m'china!*" I heard him shout to one of the kitchen crew, "I told you m'china, the gent's from America! Great Britain—*voetsek,* man! That's a *real* Black American in my section."

A short, obsequious White man with mean eyes came over to my table and took my money. He told me he ran an international restaurant and he

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was always pleased to see foreigners. I almost said, So, you are multiracial. But my foot was hurting and I needed to leave. I told him to bring me some change for the tip. Tip? he said, as though he'd never heard the word before. Yeah, tip, for the waiter. Ohhh, he said, you can give it to me; I'll see that he gets it. No, I'll give it to him. He looked over at the counter of onlookers. They don't handle money, he confided, I must handle money. Forget it, I said. I decided to stay until this little man went in the back again and then pay the waiter myself. I began to read the newspaper. There was no activity too minuscule—whether sipping my water, or turning a page of the newspaper—for the attention of my onlookers. I felt like an anthropology specimen.

Two young White women came over from a nearby table and (after they were seated) asked if they could join me. At first the Black men around the counter were startled, but after a moment it seemed to all make sense to them and they nodded and whispered approvingly to each other, and gave me even more of the total attention they'd been giving me all along. Great, I thought, just great.

"Are you from America?" the older and more vivacious of the two asked me.

"No, I'm from Transylvania, I just say I'm from America because I don't like to brag."

It took them a moment, but they got it, and they laughed. "Oh, you're very funny. Are you always this funny?"

"Always."

"May I see your palm?" said the one who appeared to be several years older.

She drew her index finger back and forth across my palm and I felt myself becoming aroused. "You have a long lifeline," she said. "And you've come from far away."

"New York. What are you a palm reader?"

"You are fiercely independent."

I repossessed my wrist and told them I needed to go. They told me that they had chosen me. That there were things they wanted to discuss with me. I was attracted to and aroused by the woman who'd held my hand and besides, where else did I have to go, back to Gestapo headquarters?

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"So, where we going for this interview?"

"Our apartment."

"Your crib, eh."

"We don't own a crib, why would you want one, do you have a child?"

"No, it's...look, what kind of questions? I mean what's this all about?"

"We're with the Church of Scientology."

"L. Ron Hubbard!" I leapt to my feet.

"You know him?"

"Of course he knows him," said the younger and taciturn woman, "he's from the States."

"I'm not interested."

"Why not? Have you been to any of his meetings?"

"Look, a car ran over my foot and I've got to go."

"A car ran over your foot? We must bring you to a doctor."

"No!... I mean, I don't want a doctor. Not in this country."

"We have good doctors here."

I made a beeline for the door. I don't remember if I tipped the waiter or not. I stumbled back into the night. I walked: walking into the pain of my foot; walking through the pain of my foot. I walked for two hours at least, across the southern edge of downtown Jo'burg, up the western avenues, north then east along Jan Smuts Avenue until I'd come full circle back to Eva Braun's bunker; back to my new "home."

I woke up around noon. The shower was outside, with a three-quarters wooden door across it. The warm water did not go the distance. The haus frau let me have some cold cereal as long as I ate it in the kitchen. There was a young Coloured boy, perhaps he was sixteen or seventeen, in the kitchen. I learned he was staying in the stall (or room) next to mine. He was from Swaziland and had actually come to South Africa for a "better" high school education. A private school, he said, for Indians

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and Coloureds. She got on well with him; they spoke to each other in Afrikaans. He was too obsequious for me.

She told me there had been a call for me. That's impossible, I thought, I don't know anyone here—not anyone who has this number. An African, she said, an African girl. I'll not have any Africans in my house. You'll be out without a refund. More puzzled than angry, I went to the hallway and dialed the number. It was Grace from the night before; Grace from the bus to town.

Grace told me to meet her in Hillbrow if I wanted to see a very nice part of Johannesburg. *Why not, it beats the Church of Scientology.*

I walked the five or six blocks through Berea to Hillbrow. I was famished. The milk and cereal had not exactly hit the spot. I sat down at a sidewalk café and felt a sense of hope, even joy, rise up from deep within me when the young White woman waiting on me did *not* say that they were not multiracial or that I was too late for toast and eggs. While my breakfast was being prepared I walked across the street to a news kiosk and bought the *Mail & Guardian,* the Johannesburg *Star,* and the *International Herald Tribune.* I crossed the street and took my seat by the sidewalk. It was a lovely day. *Everything's gonna be all right today. I can feel it.* Though it was winter I basked in the warm noon sun, sipping coffee, reading my papers, while awaiting my food in the sweet spot of the day.

Then the sirens came. Loud swirling sounds lancing the air, approaching from all directions. I began to sweat. I grew panicky. But the young waitress was beside me with my food. Stay seated, she whispered, and be calm. She placed her hand on my shoulder. Pretend nothing's happening, she said, eat your food. Relax.

Blue squad cars and yellow casspirs pulled up to the curb no more than ten feet away from my table. The same such vehicles had stopped at the opposite end of the block. White and Black policemen scurried out of their bellies like roaches. They swooped down on Black and Coloured men who, as far as I could tell, were simply walking or idling on either side of the street. Some slipped through the dragnet. Others were thrown up against the nearest wall, frisked, relieved of their identity documents. Some were detained. Some were released. Many were herded into the

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casspirs. It was like a dream that I was in but was not part of. Everything was so real and so close. Yet everything was so unreal, so cinematic, and so far away. I was a spectator and they, the police and their detainees, were simply figures on the screen. There seemed to be no plan or pattern to the whole affair. And it was over as quickly as it had begun.

"It's a good thing you were seated," she said, "they won't arrest you when you're seated and having breakfast. It's a state of emergency, you know. Lucky for you, you were seated. You should wait until all the fuss is over before you leave. Would you like more coffee?"

"Coffee? Yes...please."

"Are you an American?"

"Yes," I said, hopelessly, "I'm an American."

"I would love to visit America one day."

"I know."

"How did you know!" she said elatedly.

"I just knew."

Grace and Emily were two Motswana sisters ten years younger than me. The home they took me to was in Auckland Park, a suburb on Jo'burg's western perimeter, just west of Braamfontein where the University of the Witwatersrand is located. The kombi let us off at a regular stop and we walked several blocks to our destination. Grace asked me if I had ever seen houses like these. I said yes, adding they were modest compared to the homes in Kenwood where I grew up. The two sisters took this not as a form of boasting but as an out and out lie.

When we came to the house, I saw two White women wave from the bay window of the living room and I started up the long walk toward the front door. "Where are you going?" Grace cried. Her sister clenched a fist full of sweater along my spine and pulled me back. There'd been no time to argue with them, and besides, I didn't know what to say. But by the time we reached the back of the house I was livid.

The two women from the living room materialized at the kitchen door. Emily was quiet and Grace was a bit too deferential for my tastes as she chatted with the woman whose house it was. It was as though I was witnessing my mother or my father in Louisiana, ten or fifteen

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years before my birth. On our journey, Grace and Emily had been having the most animated and uninhibited conversation; suddenly, having reached our destination, they had taken on new, unrehearsed but uniformly subordinate, demeanors.

From a small hut at the end of the backyard an old woman emerged. She stared at me blankly until Emily began to speak to her in Setswana. Several years later I was to learn what was said: I was, she said, a Black American whom her sister Grace had met at the airport last night while seeing a friend off to study in London. Emily told her that it was my first time in South Africa and I was so nervous that I was prone to telling lies, such as I lived in a triple-story mansion in America. The old woman had told her niece that I looked a little stupid. Was I dull in the head or just using my mouth to catch flies? Emily assured her aunt that I would be alright after a few days, and that I was intending to marry Grace and take her to America. At this the old woman smiled at me and continued smiling for the better part of the visit. At the time, all of this was lost on me for Emily did not, of course, translate this for the benefit of Samantha, the woman whose house this was, nor for me.

Samantha and her friend Margaret placed three stools in the middle of the sun-tortured driveway and beckoned us to sit. This pushed the mercury of my anger even higher. Then they gave Grace, Emily, and me each a glass of translucent tap water while the two of them sat shaded beneath the awning of the back door and drank ice-cold Cokes. Samantha had bought a whole new wardrobe, for tomorrow she was leaving "this wretched place" and immigrating to Houston, Texas, where her husband had been accepted into medical school. Grace and Emily were there to pick through her old clothes. After a while my silence became an item of concern and Samantha, in lieu of speaking directly to me, chided Grace for being too rude to introduce her "new beau." Say what! I thought.

I offered my hand to them, coolly. She asked me to say something, anything, just say something again. I did. And now she chided Grace more vigorously than before, this time for not informing her that I was an American. Offering me Coke and ice and trying to tug the tap water

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from my hand, she apologized to me with more contrition than a lapsed Catholic. "We're drinking tap water," I said holding the glass firmly. This, my first gesture of political solidarity on South African soil, was lost on just about everyone including—especially—the African women. Neither Grace nor Emily nor their aunt seemed to appreciate my refusal of Coca-Cola when one was on offer.

Margaret stared at me with the glow of someone meeting Denzel Washington for the first time, while Samantha hollered at the top of her lungs for her husband and Margaret's husband to "Come, now! Now! I say, come meet our American friend!" The joy of Grace and Emily's aunt, having registered Samantha's, swelled to cosmic proportions.

Two men appeared at the kitchen window. They looked out and saw three stools, three tap waters, and three bloody kaffirs. They gave their wives that *you-two-been-drinking?* look and disappeared.

"Men are so ignorant," Margaret said.

Samantha riddled me with hundreds of questions about the States. Never in my life have I been as monosyllabic as I was with her. Grace and Emily gave me the evil eye. The evil eye, I thought, now there's something that didn't get lost in the Middle Passage. *They want me to stop acting a fool; to stop before Samantha and Margaret catch on that I'm not shy but arrogant.* I was all set to refuse the sisters' evil eye and Samantha's questions when I was seized by a most delicious idea.

When I was eleven, I stole my mother's copy of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* from her library. For four nights I read it under the covers with a flashlight. Each night I wet the bed. The book was so terrifying I vowed to give up reading completely, lest I find myself forced to leave the light on at night for the next twenty-five years. The vow lasted only a month, books were my life; but the images of what happened in that Kansas farmhouse never left my mind. *If it worked for me, it should work for Samantha.*

"Where did you say you were moving to, Dallas?"

"No, I said Houston. Houston, Texas. My husband's going to study there."

"You mean at the university?"

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"Yes, you know it?"

"Well, not exactly...but...never mind."

"What is it?"

"I shouldn't alarm you. After all I'm from Minneapolis. It might not even be true."

"What might not be true?"

"Listen, Sam, may I call you Sam? Sam, look, forget it. Really. When you get there you should check with the local police, let them tell you. On second thought, they can't be trusted."

"You mean they're like our police?" Margaret asked.

"Can't be trusted how?" Samantha said, growing frustrated.

"They just want your money," I said, "that's all. Foreign trade. They're on the mayor's payroll. What can you expect? On top of that they want to hide their incompetence. After two years, you'd think they'd have caught the bastard. But noooo. My guess is, you and your husband ask them and they'll stonewall you. We call it covering your ass where I come from. Plain and simple, covering your ass. The cops won't say a word."

"A word about what?"

I lowered my eyes. I looked at my hands. I thought any minute I'd guffaw and blow it, but I held my nerve. I made Samantha promise me that if I told her she wouldn't hold the telling of this information against me; that it would be unethical on her part to want to kill the messenger. She agreed before I finished asking her. Very well, I said, I'll tell you. And with that I launched into the most stimulating recapitulation of *In Cold Blood* imaginable. I tailored the narrative to fit the needs of her imagination. For example, the killers were not operating in the 1950s but in 1989, not in Kansas but in Houston, and not only had they *not* been apprehended and executed but they were very much at large, due to a royal *kaak up* by the Houston police. Then, pushing the whole thing further over the top than I'd ever intended, I told them that the m.o.—*modus operandi*—of these serial killers showed a jingoistic, even rabid, predilection for foreigners. That's why so many of the murders had occurred in the vicinity of the university's International House.

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"And that's why the damn cops can cover the whole thing up. If they were killing Americans you would have heard about it on the news. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you. Maybe you should change your accent on the plane, or try not to speak to anyone until you get the lay of the land. Or just stay inside."

When we left, Margaret, who heretofore had been green with envy over Samantha's ticket to paradise, was emboldened enough to actually console Samantha and promise to come and visit and check in on her (here the sincerity in her voice trailed off).

Grace and Emily were pensive riding back in the kombi. It never occurred to me that that they actually believed that whopper.

Then Emily said, "Shame, what if we never see Samantha again?"

I thought they would appreciate the joke but when I told them it was all an elaborate form of retaliation they soured on me. I told them that Black folks in America pull that kind of shit on White folks all the time.

"It takes different forms, I'll admit. Break the Xerox machine, steal some supplies, give 'em southbound directions on a one-way street going north. But we manage to get our licks in."

You have too little *ubuntu,* they told me.

"And you have too much," I replied.

"All this because they made you go to the back and drink tap water?"

"Because she's who she is, where she is, when she is."

"I suppose you visit Boers all the time where you come from," Emily said.

"Whenever I feel like it."

"Don't you remember, Emily," Grace said, "his father's house is larger than a Boer's."

"How could I forget?" And they laughed.

The other passengers in the kombi had taken little notice of our conversation. But when Emily said, "I suppose you walk right up to a Boer's front door, ring the bell, go into the living room, and start drinking tea?" I felt everyone's eyes on me. I could see the driver looking at me in his rearview mirror.

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"He even sleeps in the White woman's bed if he wants to." Now one of the passengers chuckled. In the rearview mirror the eyes of the driver were also laughing.

"Damn skippy, I do. I do or else."

"Or else what?"

"Or else I blow the muthafucka up!"

Someone in the kombi let out a soft cry. People muttered to each other. The driver's eyes flashed in the mirror. He screeched over to the curb. "Hey, m'china, out!" He came around to the side. He slid the door open and gesticulated wildly. "Out! Out of my taxi. I'm a businessman, you hear me? I'm no Umkhonto! I'm no Inkhata! I'm no *tsotsi!* Nothing like that, m'china. I'm a businessman. Out, *m'china!"* I'd completely forgotten that in the past week three bombs had gone off in Jo'burg and the surrounding area. Under the circumstances, my rhetorical flourish was not appreciated as a rhetorical flourish. He'd hear no explanations. He told the two sisters they could ride on without me and, for a moment, they seemed to consider it.

The three of us left his taxi and walked two miles to Newtown where a flea market was in full bloom outside the famous Market Theatre. Indian cloth vendors had come from as nearby as Mayfair, that part of Jo'burg where they'd been allowed to live under the Group Areas Act. There were tables of woven baskets from the "homeland" of Venda. Shona craftsmen had brought their soft stone sculptures from as far away as Harare.

As Grace, Emily, and I descended down the slope into the market, I noticed four beautiful young women moving from table to table together. One of them wore a bright yellow dress and a maroon sweater draped around her shoulders. I found myself drifting ahead of Grace and Emily. I was headed straight for her. Her cheekbones were high and when she smiled she dimpled. I was excited by the way she held the soft stone sculptures in her knowing hands and wanted those hands to hold me that same way; how she laughed and shook her head at the artist whose opening bid must have been too high for her.

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Tell her you're an American. They all seem to like that. Then what? Then feign vulnerability. Remember, Grace said I needed someone to take care of me. Maybe she wants to take care of me. Something simple like, hey, baby, can you help me with the metric system, or the exchange rate, or help me bargain for this piece of art work that I'm planning to buy for your foxy self. Yeah, that oughta get it. Well...don't say, "baby" and not "foxy" she might not dig that. Anyway, can you help me... that I'm lost and alone persona. Right. Okay. Show time!

As I drew within ten feet of her she turned and smiled at me. *Well, goddamn, I ain't said word one and she's already hot for me. Shit, I'm the MAC in macaroni.* Then she waved. *We ain't even gonna need a rap. Don't wave back, just smile, that's right play it cool.* Then she began to walk toward me. As we met I managed to get the first croak, though not necessarily the first syllable, out of the word "so" which was to be coupled with the query "what's happening"—but she walked right past me.

I turned to find her kissing first Grace and then Emily. Her three friends followed her and greeted Grace and Emily similarly. Now, I found myself on the periphery of six Motswana women speaking gaily to each other in their language, aware only vaguely of my presence if aware of my presence at all. I cleared my throat, prompting Grace to tell me how sorry she was for ignoring me, but she hadn't seen these women in ages. They'd all been at university together in the "homeland" of Bophuthatswana. But these four had come to Jo'burg to study law and that was the last she'd seen of them. This is Ntombi. This is Gladys. This is Naledi. And this is Khanya.

"Khanya," I said, stepping forward, "what a lovely name," and taking her hand. "My name is Frank. Like, I'm from New York," Grace and Emily shot me a look, "by way of Minneapolis."

I was suddenly aware of my foot and its searing pain.

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