West London, 12.10.95, 9.15 am

'Mr and Mrs Mthembu (residents of KwaMashu township, Northern Durban, factory and domestic worker respectively) invite you to the marriage of their daughter Phumzile Mthembu (COSATU arts worker turned trauma counsellor) and Alex Slater (English public schoolboy, political journalist, DJ and committed herbhead). 11.00am sharp, Paradise Valley Nature Reserve, Durban, Natal.' David Goldblatt (London Jew of long lost South African descent) to attend as best man. People ask me what it will involve. I have no idea. I read some history and buy a suit.

Southern Natal, 31.12.95. 11.00 am

In a heavily loaded station wagon we pull onto the coastal drag of the N2. After three days on the road from Cape Town, the final stretch to Durban. We skirt past Port Shepstone. On Christmas day a few km from here 800 IFP militia paid a call on Shoshoshobane squatter camp. They burnt the place down. Twenty dead, hundreds wounded, thousands homeless. On the four-lane motorway, caught in the swarm of traffic, there is no sense that you are in a war zone. But we are. Three quarters of South Africa's murders happen here. Welcome to Kwazulu-Natal, the new province Buthelezi would like to run like the old Bantustan. The heat of the day is rising exponentially but no amount of sun can burn off the dense moisture of the
Indian Ocean. Behind the windscreon we start to swelter, watching the landscape change at an ever faster rate. Seaside towns, Margate and Scottburgh, with their strips of beach, hotel, buggies and boojies. Surf culture is in the air, on the road and riding the waves. Every town, every strip of commercial development, is paralleled on the other side of the road by its township. The vegetation is lush and deliberately placed, but it is pierced by breeze blocks, polythene sheets and wide dirt roads, by lines of hitchers and fruit sellers, and boys hunched on the hard shoulder poised to race across when the traffic drops. There are no crossings. South Africa's horrific road accident statistics are reported daily on the radio.

The road widens to six lanes and the Durban industrial corridor gathers pace alongside. I am in sociological overdrive. Late industrialisation in tooth and claw. The landscapes of the bricked-up and torn down West Midlands, the lunar greenfield Nissan boxes of Tyneside, dissolve. Factories, warehouses, factories, goods yards, factories, generators - the whole infrastructure of manufacturing hugs the road lined by pylons, cables and wirenetted fencing. Awesome and empty. Today is a holiday, but there is no mistaking the crucible in which a working-class is forged. And then on the hillock, the apartheid twist. Looking down on the corrugated metal rooftops, smoke stacks and ventilators - hostels. Red brick, unadorned, flat roofed on bare ground. Four storeys high, twelve tiny windows to a floor, seven in a row. Fenced round and wired up tightly. Thin figures on the slopes in their shadow on the iron flights of stairs, smoking and talking. I find myself using unfamiliar, almost biblical language.

*Umgeni Road, Northern Durban, 31.12.95, 1.30 pm*

800,000 people on one of Durban's poorest, hilliest plots of land, and no road signs. The only white people that used to come here were the army and they had their own maps. KwaMashu finally has road signs. We take the slip road, go on pot-hole alert, and merge with the stream of black taxis and beaten corporation buses. KwaMashu went ballistic in 1985. ANC street committees and Inkatha militia in the few hostels on its outskirts fought each other and the army for control of the streets. These days it is predominantly ANC, which may help to explain why the KwaZulu Natal provincial government has been so slow to spend any money here. But it means a certain kind of peace. Plain old criminal violence rather than political violence. Tootsicomrades - youthful freedom fighters turned gangster. The
phones have been out for over two weeks now - someone stealing cables for copper scrap - so we don't know what the mood is. More likely than not it will be OK, but Natal is volatile enough for it to be otherwise. The road begins to twist across the low but steep hills of Newlands East. An Indian township, untidy and cramped low brick bungalows, patches of affluence, Hindi temples, the odd swimming pool. Then, across the ridge, Newlands West with its waves of the characteristic state-ordained housing for coloured people, three storey, beige plaster. We mount another hill, a burst of unruly vegetation alongside, and there below and around is KwaMashu. The industrial districts of Phoenix and Inanda lie on the horizon. Outcrops of newly arrived squatter camps are erupting on its edges, filled by war refugees as much as economic migrants. 100,000 tin-roof, matchbox African order dwellings, seven to ten people to each, plenty with plenty more. Alex sort of remembers the way. We look for C section - the new maps have given the old sections names but it turns out that no one is using them. We're somewhere in the D thousands when we should be in the C twelve hundreds, then we're in E section. We panic a little. The kids we ask for directions are more confused or more frightened than we are. Finally a landmark catholic church. C1299, the Mthembu's. We are met with cheers and embraces, quizzical neighbours, and a detailed debriefing on our trip. Boiled chicken, steam bread, tea.

*KwaMashu, 02-05. 01.96*

Family have been arriving all week. We endlessly ferry mothers, brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews and nieces from Durban airport to all points KwaMashu. Too many trips, not enough cars, not enough people who know the way and can navigate KwaMashu's roads. The policy is that a car full of white people is not always politic - depending on time of day, route and context. We constantly tread the line between security and paranoia, liberal optimism and local experience. We 'make a plan' as all South Africans seem to say whenever faced by difficulty, inconvenience or intractable problems. The faith in inspired improvisation is infectious. C1299 is heaving with friends and neighbours, invited and uninvited. The temperature is in the thirties, but on some days the cloud is so dense we hardly see the sun. We all swelter together. Mrs Mthembu organises and orchestrates from behind the sewing machine, takes measurements, holds sittings, sips at her brandy. Every room is taken and she retires after and wakes before me all week. I never establish whether
she manages to sleep and, if she does, where.

Alex, Phumzile and I frantically live by our lists and phone cards, notes and memos. The social and economic geography of Durban ensures that everything is much more difficult than it should be. Phumzile's brothers and sisters are sent off on errands, shift rooms, book buses, soothe nerves, move beds, adjust and accommodate. Car hire in downtown, caterers in Umgeni, the search for barrelled beer and crates of industrial frozen chicken. Wood to heat the grey smoky Zulu beer brewing at the side of the house involves an iffy trip to B section, said by some to be PAC territory. The goat arrives, the ox arrives with Mr Mtombela - the Mthembu's leathery negotiator. Its thinness is remarked upon, but this is an urban ox from Inanda or Phoenix. It would have been better to go to northern Natal, but there is war going on there. Mr Mthembu and I discuss its merits, how to kill the goat, the significance of the ox's horns, the blessing of the ancestors and the virtues of menthol cigarettes. Money is missing from bank accounts. What happened to the transfer, searching for banks and forms and documents - we'll make a plan. How will we get the food to the wedding? Have we enough caterers? No, definitely not, the last plan did not quite work out. Mpu tries to round up volunteers to work through the night. Networks are mobilised, friends called upon, favours called in, new obligations established and options investigated. Relatives ring who have not received invitations, things to be smoothed out, differences to be negotiated. Notorious local freeloaders and professional wedding guests are identified and repelled.

Will there be speeches after lunch? Will the families exchange traditional gifts before or after? Will there be music then or later? People pause over the idea of a Quaker wedding service - no priest, short vows, silence. Then it clicks - if the spirit takes you, address the meeting. No Zulu speaker is phased by the idea of speeches, performance and an audience. Conversation is mainly in Zulu. Alex picks up the basics and we get selected highlights that always seem insufficient accounts of the dialogue, the gestures, the positions being outlined and the ground being staked. In the front garden, in the back yard amongst the chickens and the washing, in the crowded bedrooms, around the sitting room table, along the wall by the shower, we gather, meet, disperse, debate, assess. This is wedding by committee, but multiple overlapping committees, no one person knows everything that is happening, more than one plan is being made all the time. Conversation, huddle and conclave are the points
Soundings

of co-ordination. Talk is the medium of social solidarity. In a quiet moment Thanxolo, Alex and I pick over the differences on a point of translation. Thanxolo, for whom Zulu is his mother tongue, shakes his head in disbelief, 'My Zulu is not good. I do not always understand it. It is so deep, so deep.' Last minute shifts: food to come in a taxi from D section. I run through the plan with Shiekle the MC, chorister, bank-clerk and neighbourhood lynchpin. Duncan the juggling engineer from Zimbabwe arrives, late as always.

Johannesburg Airport, 10.01.96, 3.00 pm

Frankie drives me across the North Johannesburg suburbs. Slipways become freeways become loops, twist through a clover leaf and turn to dual carriageway. We take the scenic route, Frankie gives me a running commentary on the sites: malls, shopping centres, new superfortress block housing developments, the Holiday Inn. When the architectural features slip out of sight and all that is left is the residential prairie, we move on to comparative property prices. Fairways is somewhere in this horizontal grid. We drive up to their block. Two gates, security guard, underground car-park. Every flat is burglar barred, every flat has two doors, one discreetly signed - service. We discuss the problems of carrying such a large and complex bundle of keys.

The flat is white, white, white. Carpets, sofa, walls, linens - except of course for Nancy, the domestic worker from Alexandra. Sheila, my cousin, ran a boutique down the road for years. Frankie was in textiles. Now they're here in paradise, retired, comfortable and paranoid. This seems to be the deal. They hover between bitterness and resignation, though even Sheila has been charmed by the good looks and smooth talk of Cyril Ramaphosa, the ANC's general secretary. We spend the afternoon trading family history, trying to keep clear of politics, eating scones and chocolate cake. But why and how Alex and Phumzile got married, and how I could live with Africans for a week, are charged questions. Frankie asks me in authentic disbelief, 'When did you acquire such a...such an Africanist point of view?'. We find common ground on the subjects of death and dying, illness, hospitals and funerals. My mum's, Frankie's, Sheila's parents. Excitedly, we retrace my grandfather's movements. School in Ladysmith, runs away to Mozambique after the First World War. Joins the British army in India, goes Awol two years later. Sheila hasn't done this with anyone for some time. I realise
that the family here has fragmented. The clan I was expecting has long since been frayed by geography, labour market and family feud. We tie some skeins together. The trail gets confused after this. Time in Hong Kong or Shanghai - my Grandfather could always count to ten in what he said was Chinese - time in the merchant navy. Then, in 1931, he turns up on the door of Sheila's family, Ealing West London and works in their cinema business. Meets my grandmother, never leaves, never writes, never follows Sheila back to Jo'burg. I am left with the questions: Who would I have been had he done so? Would I have done the right thing here? Frankie has been digging through the old photo boxes too. Waving an old theatre programme 'Des O'Connor, I saw him at the Palladium in 1959. When you could really go somewhere on the Rand. Fantastic'.

Grant, my younger cousin, comes and saves me - we go out for a night on the dual carriageways and burger bars of Randburg. Stop off at his amazingly authentic English pub on a long strip of car dealerships - horse brasses, shelves of books and pewter junk. Pissed Scotsman and England losing at cricket are familiar, outdoor pool tables are not. We end up on Fountain Hill, topped by an old concrete water tower. A lone peak in the suburban flat lands. White teenage hippies smoke, snog and chatter, invisible drunk Afrikaaners crack open another can. Grant translates - they are arguing about women. We all stare out on the daisy chains and fairylights of the autosprawl below. KwaMashu grass turns them kaleidoscopic, blue and green.

Johannesburg, 11.01.96 11.00am

Frankie, Sheila and I drive to Brixton on the northern edge of downtown, behind the characteristically ugly public sector architecture of SABC's HQ and television studios. An old wooden hall marks the entrance to this Jewish cemetery, long full up. The gilt on the star of David above the double doors is pretty thin, but the floors and the gilded wall boards of benefactors are newly polished. Somewhere, here, is my great grandfather. We check the book, plot 1364, Isadore Goldblatt, died 1933. And there it is. It's the biggest stone in the place, seven foot high, red and brown stone, stark black letters unmissably read GOLDBLATT. In the near distance the office towers and strict grid of downtown, beneath my feet the red earth of southern Africa. Everyone's story has to start somewhere. Mine starts here.
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Johannesburg, 11.01.96, 7.00pm

The freeway heading East to Jo'burg International. The signs rushing by overhead still say Jan Smuts. Grant laughs and violently exhales the last of his joint. 'Don't worry, you can say goodbye to all the Heindrik Verwoord Avenues... when they get around to it'. We are speeding through rain so dense that the endless line of heavy trucks beside us is hidden by a curtain of driving water. The huge plates of rain that have covered the road in front of us are invisible until we feel the car shuddering through them. Grant makes me nervous. 'Where are my Stuyvesants?'. His bare knees hold the bottom of the steering wheel as he stretches across the dashboard, blindly tapping around on the black plastic shelves for the packet. My feet press harder on imaginary brake pedals. The weight of traffic is only revealed by a massive streak of lightning. Transvaal storms are epic. The black and purple arches of the sky are rent every few seconds by a fork of crackling white lightning. My eyes are pinballs from lightning to speedometer to sky to the road to Grant grasping his soft pack and lighting up, knees still on the wheel.

On our left is Sandton - another paranoid suburb. But not just any other suburb, this is Jo'burg's Beverly Hills. As Sheila said to me The best people live here. The best hotels are here and oh, Frankie, look. There's that new cluster compound, its almost finished'. Frankie, 'Boy, that'll cost you, that'll cost you.' Sandton also boasts the most luxurious and fortified mall in the northern suburbs, Sandton City. You can't get in on foot. The complex lies in a maze of dual carriageways and slip roads without pavements. Brick ramps run up into the portcullis entrances of the first and second floors. Arrow slit windows dot the giant walls of the complex. Only high above, in the crenellated towers and walkways, do proper panes of glass appear. Inside it's wall to wall cappuccino, expensive shopping and squeaky clean courtyards framing a square of sky. On our right - Alexandra. One of the few inner-city townships to escape the bulldozer, it remains in the heart of the Jo'burg suburbs. A quarter of a million people crammed into a bowl half the size of Sandton and one of the most organised and militant centres of The Struggle in the Greater Johannesburg area. The dense lattice-work of street lights in Randburg and Sandton gives way to a pool of darkness. Only the two main roads that bisect Alex are lit. Along the horizon the last of the sun leaves an intense red strip illuminating the slow swirls of coal smoke. They disappear into the canopy of smog that hovers above.
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