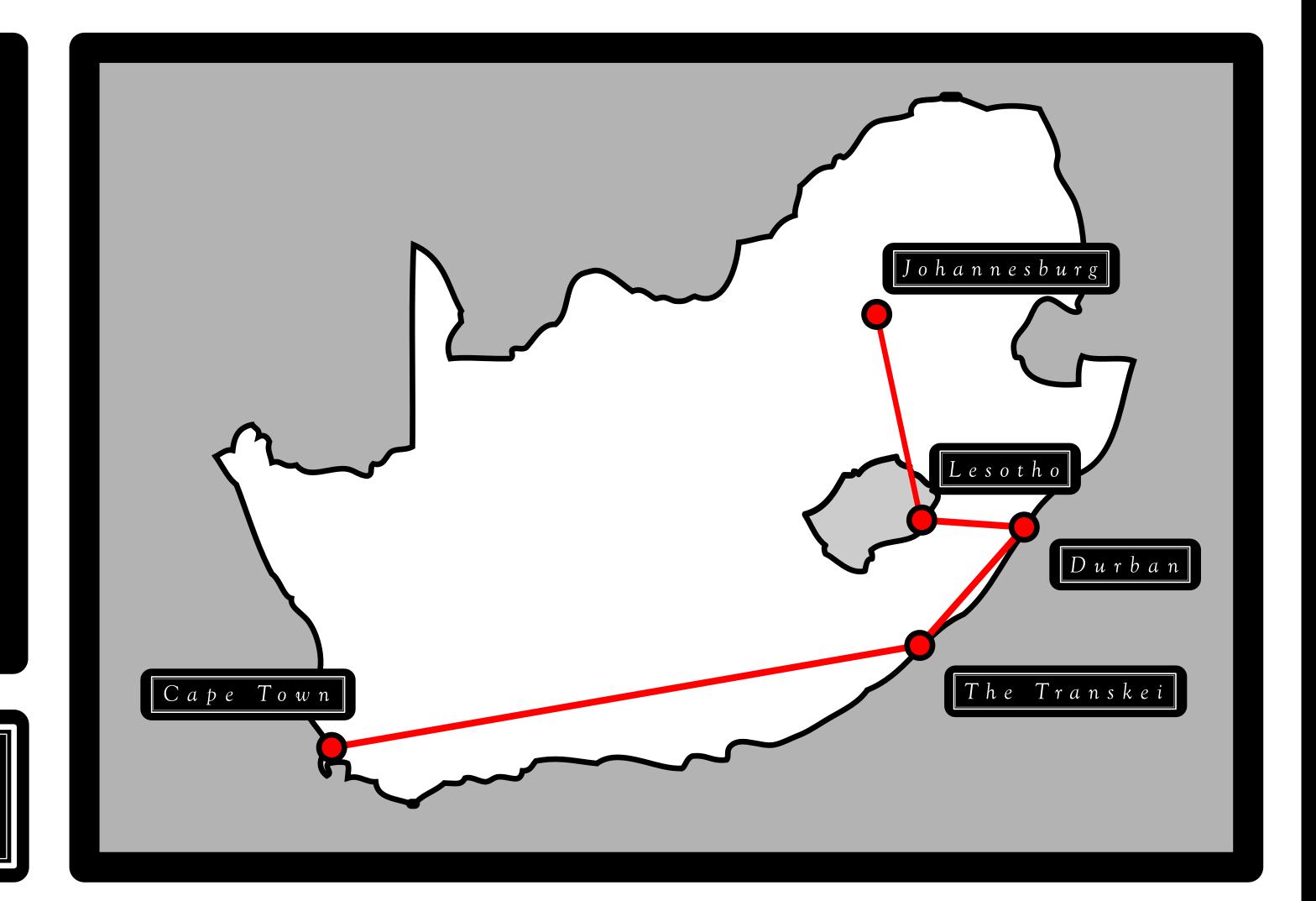
The AUTONOMY



arl was wedged into the backseat of a minibus taxi that was precariously speeding through the South African countryside along a narrow, hilly highway. He was feeling strung out from all that he had just experienced over the past two weeks and was clutching his backpacks while furtively observing the 23 Africans who were riding alongside him in the same van. Carl felt like this taxi ride was thrilling, novel, and would make for a good anecdote later on, but it also felt dangerous and reckless. He could not wait to arrive to the Shell Ultra City gas station to which he was headed and to once again clutch the tit of civilization and bathe himself in its interminable cascade of options and choices.

Once Carl safely arrived to the

Shell station, he greedily replenished

himself with a can of Coca-Cola and

three warm, curried-beef pot pies. The

sugar and the salt were a consolation

for all his disheartening experiences

thus far in South Africa, which involved

feeling trapped in the shopping mall and

electric fence wasteland of Johannes-

burg, then being misled by a charlatan

celebrity architect, and then going on a

very bad mushroom trip and feeling that

he, like Job, had had the veil pulled

from his eyes and was forced to gaze

upon the abyss and recognize his funda-

mental insignificance as a human being.

For the moment, however, he was safe in

an air conditioned gas station where his

money was good, the bathrooms were

clean, and the shelves were filled with a

cornucopia of well-known corporate logos.

Why was Carl traveling through South Africa for three weeks and what was he trying to do there?

After returning home to the suburbs from his failed big city internship, Carl was at first overjoyed to return to his simple life of reading books, riding his bike to the library, and eating his mother's food. The thought, "I'm so happy right now," involuntarily bubbled to surface of his mind. But then Carl read "The Moviegoer" by Walker Percy and began to see some very dark clouds billowing up at the horizon of his Many lines from the novel felt to Carl like nearby strikes of lightning, lightning that illuminated the world in a horrible but

truthful glare and whose thunder

rattled the walls of any possible

During his long flight to

South Africa, Carl was vaguely

hopeful that this trip would answer

some questions for him and that he

would come home better knowing

what he should dedicate himself to

and which form of living should be

his three-week journey. He had a

medium-sized hiking backpack and

a small bookbag. It would be

summertime in South Africa so h

notebook that his sister gave him

for Christmas, a recently updated

Lonely Planet travel guide, and two

dense, difficult books that he had

purchased years before as an under-

graduate but had put on his shelves

and avoided reading via elaborate

"Waiting for the Barbarians," b

J.M. Coetzee, and "The Wretched

on a South African Airways

jetliner, flying high above the coast

of Africa and nibbling at packaged

snacks, felt disgustingly appropri-

before but after having lived in and

backpacked through South

America, he felt he was ready. He

had an expensive prescription o

malaria medicine. He had a pair of

binoculars in case he went on :

safari. He had a swim suit,

pocket knife, a head strap

flashlight, and he had a Frisbee in

case he found any Frisbee throwers

nightmares days before leaving for

the trip, in which he was wander-

ing alone and confused through an

urban wasteland that was

populated by strange creatures and

Carl had had some weird

He had never been to Africa

of the Earth," by Frantz Fanon.

The two books were

Reading the latter book while

methods of procrastination.

He had one new Moleskine

didn't need heavy clothes.

the one he would call his own.

One such line was: "Show me a nice Jose cheering up an old lady and I'll show you two people existing in despair." Another was: "The only possible starting point: the strange fact of one's own invincible A third was the phrase, "the great shithouse of scientific

> Carl began to sense that to ontinue enjoying the comforts of his parents' house and their quiet suburban world would entail a downward spiral into an inescapable spiritual pit, from the bottom of which he would only be able to gaze upwards in futile longing for the more meaningful experiences, good and bad, of a real adult life.

> > Nevertheless, he was excited

Carl had seen MacDonald

to see a new part of the world and

he was particularly hopeful that

Wilson MacDonald would take

once before at a lecture at his

university. MacDonald had worn a

bow tie. He gave a very sleek Power

Point presentation that made many

members of the audience cry with

lecture was that our form of living is

destroying the earth and that a

paradigm shift is needed, one

requiring a new philosophy of design,

slide show with blueprints of

eco-villages in South Africa that he

was currently working on in

partnership with the South African

into an eco-city and an eco-nation

was MacDonald's grand conclu-

with this man, to challenge his

ideas, and to show that he, despite

being in his early twenties, was

these eco-villages and to meet with

local Africans that would be

difficult to meet with otherwise.

Carl also dearly wanted to see

HOWEVER

worth taking seriously.

Combining the eco-villages

Carl was anxious to sit down

MacDonald concluded the

architecture, and human freedom.

The point of MacDonald's

him under his wing.

Carl was really starting to freak out. His consciousness curled into a loop of worries and doubts and desperate hypotheses He felt like he had to apply himself to something productive in order to begin climbing up from this stagnant suburban morass. One day, he received an email announcing an online video ompetition being run by the U.S. State Department. The theme for the contest was: "Many Cultures One World."

Although Carl found that phrase to be naively optimistic, h knew he had a copious amount o unused footage that he could edit together into a good video, a video with which to compete for the grand prize of a three-week trip to any country in the world on good terms with the State Department Carl received the emai because of the teaching fellowship in Argentina he had previously completed thanks to funding from the Department It felt fortuitous to him that he now had another chance - if he could only prove himself worthy to travel abroad courtesy of the U.S. government that he so often

He also felt the competition seemed to be the best kind of ompetition, which is to say it was well-funded, but poorly-advertised

home of his college friend Brad and spent several days there editing together his video. Carl used footage from a trip o Nanjing, China, he had gone on while an undergraduate. The purpose of that trip was to make a documentary, but the professor in charge of Carl and the two other students told them despite their non-existent Manda rin skills, that it was their responsi bility to make something happen. The professor then went of to visit his family and to work on other projects in the city, including interpreting a lecture for th world-renowned Slovenian philoso pher Slavoj Zizek. Upon being introduced to Carl, Zizek seemed

Carl went to the quiet, rural

like an unstable and frantic but yet undeniable genius, like a hybrid of Woody Allen and Karl Marx. With their copious leisure time, Carl and the two other students went to hang out on the pleasant and leafy campus o Nanjing University. Carl had brought a Frisbee with him because of how difficulit had been to find one during his

previous trip to China. When he and the two other students went to the track to play catch, it was a shock to see a team of Chinese and foreign students playing a game of Ultimate Frisbee using the highest quality discs.

AS SUCH

The boys began regularly playing with this Ultimate Frisbee team and they befriended its captain, Marty, who was from northern China and who was eager to practice his English, as he was soon applying for a prestigious Masters program. Marty showed Carl and the two other students the good, cheap restaurants near the universit where a common dinner consisted of spicy meat kebabs, fried dumplings, a bowl of noodles, a

bottle of Coca-Cola, and a soft-serve McDonald's ice cream Carl felt that both the Frisbee team and Marty were rare and worth filming. The boys recorded games, practices, and scenes of the city, and they also interviewed Marty and discreetly recorded some of their time hanging out with him. They shared many fun moments and long conversation together, and when the trip was over, it was painful to say farewell to their new friend.

Marty accompanied Carl and the other boys to their train and waved from the platform, through the window, as they departed. Carl tried to keep in touch with Marty once he returned home. but with the months and then the years, their emails became less frequent. Carl also failed to compile all their footage into anything like a

finished, coherent documentary.

Carl wanted this video to be a tribute to his brief friendship with Marty, and to the wonderfully fleeting possibilities that traveling opens up for being with others. Carl thought back to something he had made for a woman a couple of years earlier. I

what he referred to as a "seasonal On the book's front and rear covers were, cut out of colored construction paper, branches and blossoms like from an East Asian

was a little book about love that he

had hoped would philosophically

persuade her to have with him

The image of those blossoms expressed to Carl the transience of certain strong emotions and brief relationships that he had thus far experienced in his life, and that were convenient for him to continue experiencing given his uprooted form of living. The woman was not persuaded and rejected the offer but she did keep the little book.

Carl had a vision for this video. He would animate a branch and blossoms in part of the screen, and have them surround like a frame another part of the screen in which he could place the many different photos and video clips. The branch would flower and then the flowers would fall at the end of the video.

Carl created these blossoms using stop-motion animation. He tried to get his friend Brad to assist him, but Brad was dithering and difficult to work with, which Carl knew was one of the reasons he had been dumped by the love of his life, Candace, who Carl was currently and quietly infatuated with and writing heartfelt letters to, despite her living across the Atlantic Ocean in Spain, and despite her being in a relationship with a Spaniard.

Carl finished the video and showed the final cut to Brad, who said to him, "I think this is going Carl submitted the entry, it

and then, after being evaluated by a panel of celebrity judges, Carl received a phone call from the State Department. He had won! And in being recognized as a winner, he felt briefly infused with confidence, a if he had just eaten a meal.

He now had to decide wher

ne would travel to.

was chosen as one of the finalists,

He wanted to go somewher ar enough away to justify a fre flight, but also somewhere he would have a chance of communicating with the locals. Carl remembered that there was a famous architect he greatly admired who was doing work in

His name was Wilson MacDonald and Carl knew of him because of a philosophy class he took as an undergraduate that was taught by a former student of the

MacDonald was the distantly beautiful star around which all the discussions and readings of the class orbited. The purpose of the course was to establish the intellectual ground for the architect's ideas of sustainability, community planning and human freedom. Carl asked his former professor

if he could put him in touch with MacDonald and if he could meet with him in South Africa. The professor did so, and after speaking on the phone with MacDonald, Carl and the architect had plans to meet in Johannesburg. Carl was curious as to why he

hadn't seen any photos of what

MacDonald was building in South

Africa, but the architect reassured

him that things were coming along.

After such an initial disappointment, what was Carl going to do with the rest of his time on the trip?

Once Carl got to Johannesburg MacDonald gave him the runaround and only met with him once. The architect delivered to Carl the same Power Point lecture as before, said he was "frantically busy," and then got up and left.

Carl felt trapped in Johannesburg and in his backpackers hostel, which at least had an interesting crowd of people in it. One such person was a prett Italian graduate student.

Wilson MacDonald. She said th eco-villages were a sham and that MacDonald sleeps at a brothel with a Zambian prostitute girlfriend. She said she was alread filming and producing a "FRONT LINE" documentary exposing the architect as a phallocentric fraud. When Carl asked if she needed any help with the documen tary, she said no. She also tole Carl that she too had read "Th Wretched of the Earth," but in the

original French.

It turns out she too had com

o South Africa to meet with

Carl took a Greyhound bus out of the city and into the Drakensberg Mountains, near the border of Lesotho. He slept at a very peaceful and remote hostel that served free chocolate cake and free fresh milk that came from a Jersey cow kept

He took a 4x4 tour into esotho, which involved driving up a treacherous switchback road, along one turn of which was a dead horse being eaten by tall, hairy

Carl had never smelled rotting flesh before. It was foul and nauseating, but also somewhat While in Lesotho, Carl's tour group encountered a band of young men smuggling large sacks of marijuana across the border, as

well as a famous South African explorer with an enormous white beard who was leading a 4x4 the mountains, passed through Durban, and then traveled into the Transkei, which is semi-autonomous region of South Africa known for its lax drug laws. Carl took a minibus taxi towards the coast, and then squeezed into the back of a pickup truck to be driven through dense jungle to an eco-hostel along the beach. The truck was driven by a

toothless old man who kept playing the same Afropop song over and over again at a very loud volume. Carl arrived to the hostel met the few Europeans who were staying there, and went for a walk A few young villagers approached him carrying beads, trinkets, and foil sacks of marijuana and magic mushrooms Carl had heard this would happen. He traded a pair of socks for a dose of mushrooms, hoping it Things were beginning to feel would be a happy, fun, weird time ominous and dreadful.

That was not to be the case. Carl ate the mushrooms the following day. It was the second time in his life he had taken such psychedelic drugs. The first time, while in college, eating mushrooms made him feel ecstatic and wondrous, they made him laugh hysterically like he was a little kid and they reset in a good way his basic sense of what was real and what was Carl had heard of bad trips, and had seen some of his friends have them and stare despondently off into the distance as they quietly

struggled with whatever it was a person struggled with in such a Carl ate the mushrooms after his breakfast, which consisted of two bananas, several spoonfuls of peanut butter, and a juice box. He then set off on a hike for a waterfall. As he was leaving, some villager children pointed at him and laughed shrilly. When Carl waved, they did not wave back. Next, he saw a dog lying in the shade, looking unwell. Around its mouth were a dozen large tick embedded into its snout and gums Carl then walked along a path into the jungle, but the path hit a dead end at a fence with rusty

The shadows of the trees egan to look like spider webs. Carl wandered to the beach and sat down in the shade. A British lady from the hostel was also on the beach, but further down. She was eating passion fruit that the village boys had sold her and was sunning herself near a herd of cows that were also gathered on the sand. Carl's stomach was not feeling well. He walked around a boulder, out of sight of the British lady, dropped his swim trunks, and

went to the bathroom. He felt better, but the sight of his waste was like a glimpse of He sat back down in the shade and his mind started to race.

Carl was soon crying and eeling cosmically guilty. His thoughts dragged him along a logical and grim sequence the conclusion of which was that there was no escaping his existence, there was no easy form of being - no way of living without stress, pain, and suffering - and that in a very real sense he was and would forever be alone in a void of As Carl's thoughts slowed down, he began to feel a sadness

around him that was like an insufferable humidity. He decided to leave the hostel the next day, return to the Shell Ultra City along the main highway, and move on somehow to

Carl returned to his hostel

Her purse was open and he

He reached in, snatched it

She grabbed the envelope

out and yelled, "You don't deserve

back from him, removed severa

or his bags and saw Diana.

ould see his letter inside.

As Carl sat at the gas station, he began reading "Waiting for the Barbarians" and thinking about which bus to take towards Cape Town. A young South African man with poofy blond hair approached Carl and asked if his notebook was a Moleskine. He and Carl began talking. The young man was named Joe. He was a vagabond surfer who walked everywhere barefoot and an aspiring writer who dolefully obsessed over his failed romances with women. He had also just been in the Transkei, eating psychedelic mushrooms, fishing in the sea, and camping on the beach. He offered to drive Carl to Cape Town, as he was headed back there anyway. Carl graciously accepted the offer and suddenly felt the onset of a momentum that would pull him through his final week in South Africa.

Earlier in the trip, while still in Johannesburg, Carl had spoken over Skype with his friend Candace in Spain. She told him that she had just broken up with her Spanish boyfriend. Carl asked i she wanted to come visit him, since she too had never been to Africa before and because she had vague plans to do humanitarian worl Carl persuaded Candace and ne said she would begin looking p flight information. As he heard her give this esitant yes, Carl's head exploded with dazzling sexual scenario involving himself and his pen pal. In the three years they had

been friends, Carl had never once

been around Candace while she

By the time he arrived to the Shell station, Carl had not heard back from Candace about her plans and he was starting to worry. While he and Joe were driving to the Cape, she called Carl on his cell phone. She said that her passport book was filled be able to enter the country.

and because of an arcane South African regulation, she wouldn't Carl felt devastated. His fantasies turned to ash and limply floated to the ground. He explained everything glumly to Joe over a cappuccino. "Hey man, there's no point in listening for fate knocking at the door if you're going to be too depressed to get out of bed," Joe

The boys finished the drive to Cape Town and Joe dropped Carl at a backpackers' hostel on Long Street. Joe drove off to return to his home along the sea and to work at his part-time job of building owl Carl found Cape Town to the

be the dialectical opposite of Johannesburg. The air was breezy and the humidity was low. The downtown was filled with all sorts of cosmopolitan characters and you could be there without feeling Carl wandered through the streets and walked off the pain of not getting to see Candace. He went first to The Company's Gardens, then to the art museum, and then he hung out at the very chic Vida e Caffe. Carl then ate lunch at a Cape

Malay restaurant he had heard of called Miriam's Kitchen. He ordered a spicy sandwich called a salomie that was served on crisp and chewy roti bread. For the fifteen minutes while he ate his sandwich and drank his Coca-Cola, Carl was at peace. He then went to a bookstore and discovered "Bitterkomix, which were nihilistically satirical comics that dumped bile - with a gusto Mark Twain would be proud of - onto all the collective stupidities of South African society.

SERENDIPITOUSLY

A couple of days later, as Carl was walking out of the hostel to go to an Internet cafe, he saw a slim, short, and hypnotically beautiful girl with dark hair and dark eyes walking towards the entrance. They approached the door a the same time and she smiled and

asked where he was from.

and that she was born in Buenos Aires but grew up in Colorado She wandered upstairs before Carl could say anything more. At the Internet cafe, he could feel his heart pounding. This was fate knocking at the door, he He hurried back to the hostel, styled his hair, and asked

the front desk if they had seen the

She was in the patio out back, they said. Carl walked out there and saw Diana sitting in a chair, one strap of her sundress dangling down her shoulder, smoking marijuana from a tiny green apple. He sat down next to her and they began talking. Diana was soon happily going on about Woody Allen, Plato, "The Wild One," Michel Foucault, "Some Like It Hot," and other sophisticated intellectual topics. Carl could feel his heart

beating even harder.

Carl asked Diana out for breakfast. As they walked down the street, she enthusiastically greeted a variety of men, young and All of them were very happy

voided eye contact with Carl. Diana explained over a cup of oibos tea the improvised and highly amorous route by which she found herself in Cape Town. As she spoke, Carl felt like he was gazing upon some sort of Rocky Mountain Holly Golightly.

They got lunch at Miriam's Kitchen and then went to the art museum. At an Internet cafe, Diana asked Carl to leave a flirtatiou comment on her Facebook wall so as to make her ex-boyfriend - who was a wealthy Lebanese banker living in Cape Town - jealous. Carl said he would do it, but only for the price of a kiss, which Diana gave him, with slightly opened lips. Carl forgot all about each

one of the previous disappoint

ments of his life thus far.

That afternoon, Diana had to go off to see a friend and run an errand, and Carl returned to the hostel to take a nap. As he lied on his bed, he could hear the pop song "Take on Me" being played in the hostel

Carl felt sentimentally

roused and got out of bed. He

fixed his hair, grabbed his backpack, and marched down the street to a Cuban cafe. He ordered a latte and wrote on lemon-yellow stationary a furious and elaborate five-page love letter to Diana. It contained a final paragraph explaining how he felt he was finally ready for a solidly unconditional romantic commitment, and that Diana should leave Cape Town with him. As he finished the letter and sealed the lemon-yellow envelope, Diana called. Carl invited her to the cafe. She came and he gave her the letter. It matched her turquoise sun dress. charmed, and grateful, and said

She began reading it, and was that she had never received such a long and thoughtful letter before. She then folded it up, placed it back into the envelope, and asked Carl to come hang out with a trio of Slovenian motorcyclists that she had recently befriended. Carl agreed, wearily.

That night, Diana, Carl, and the Slovenians went to a dance By the end of the night, as Carl was saying no to a soft-spoken

and pleasant Congolese prostitute who had approached him, Diana was straddling a motorcycle and embracing a sweaty, sunburned Carl slept only a couple of fitful and heartbroken hours and awoke to find the Slovenian passed

out on the floor of the hallway, outside Diana's door. Carl called Joe. Joe took Carl out for coffee, consoled his pain once again, and invited him to spend the weekend at his aunt's cottage in a small whale-watching

U.S. hundred-dollar bills she had placed inside it, and dropped the letter to the floor. Carl picked it up, put it in his pocket, and went off with Jofor a sleepless weekend of whiskey, chess, MDMA, good conversation, marijuana, homemade pies, garettes, and swimming in the ocean Carl then spent a few more days in Cape Town, finished "Waiting for the Barbarians," and flew back home to America.

How was Carl going to tell the story of all that had happened, and who would be willing to listen?