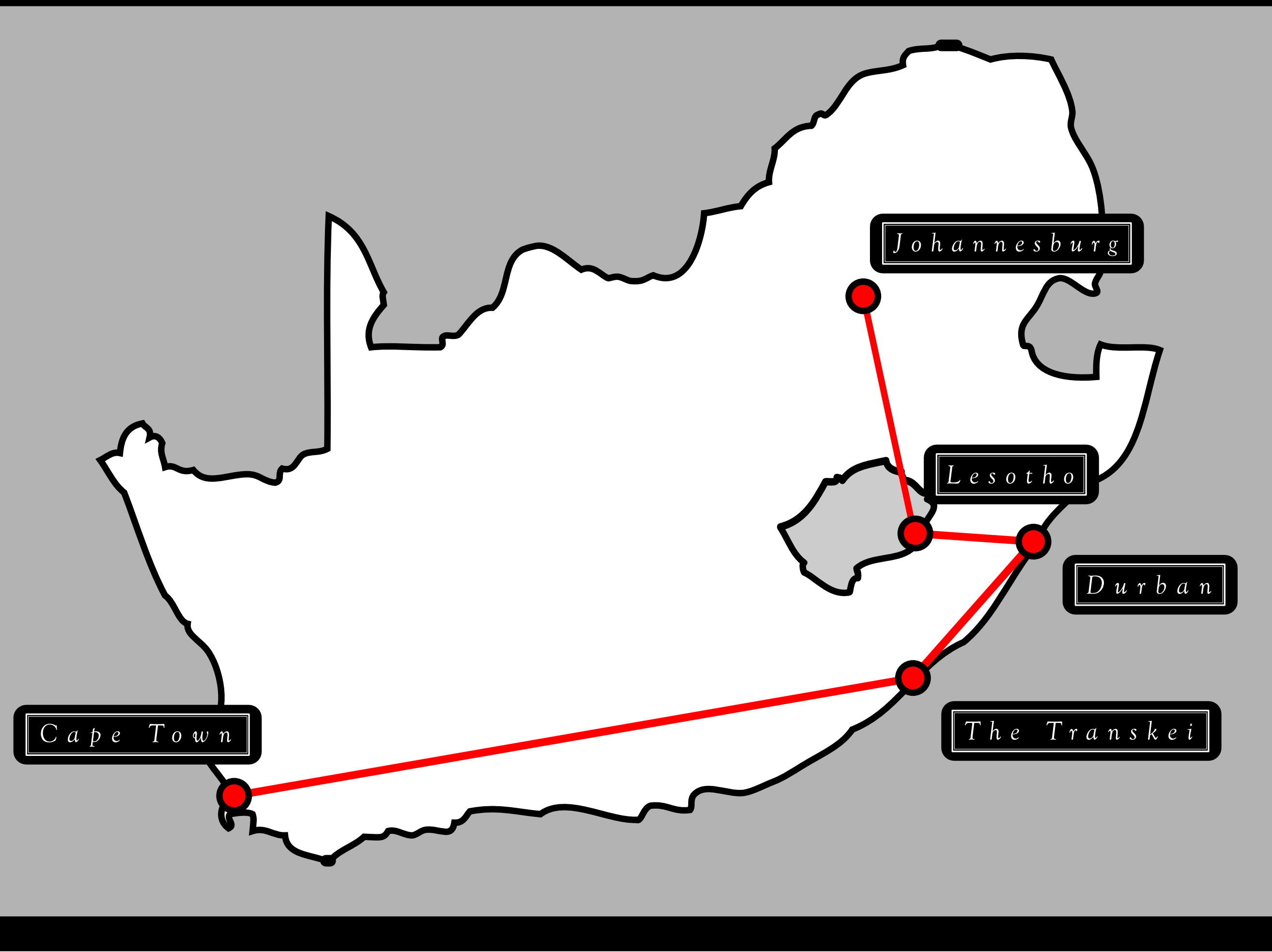


The THRESHOLD of AUTONOMY



Tim Peters

Carl 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.

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, "So so happy right now," immediately bubbled to surface of his mind.

But then Carl read "The Montevideo" by Walker Percy and began to see some very dark clouds billow up at the horizon of his hometown existence.

Many times from the novel left to Carl like a steady stream of lightning, lightning that illuminated the world in a horrible but beautiful glow and whose thunder rattled the walls of any possible shelter.

One such line was "Show me a nice line of people on an old lady and I'll show you two people existing in despair."

Another was "The only possible starting point for the image of a man's own, irretrievable quality."

"A dead was the phrase," the great philosopher of scientific humanism.

Carl began to sense that to continue existing in the comfort of his parents' home and their quiet suburban world would entail a downward spiral into an increasingly bleak and nihilistic future. He felt that he would only be able to gain perspective in further longing for the more meaningful experiences, good and bad, of a real adult life.

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 competition being run by the U.S. State Department. The theme for the contest was "Mass Culture, Our World!"

Although Carl found that phrase to be rather optimistic, he knew he had a couple of months of 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 email 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 despised.

He also felt the competition was worth it, which is to say it was well-funded, but poorly advertised.

Carl went to the quiet, rural home of his college friend Brad, and spent several days editing together his video.

Carl used footage from a trip to Nanjing, China, he had gone on while an undergraduate.

The purpose of the trip was to make a documentary, but the professor in charge of Carl and the two other students said that, despite their non-existent Mandarin skills, that it was their responsibility to make something happen.

The professor then went off to visit his family and to work on other projects in the city, including interpreting a lecture for the well-known Sloanian philosopher Steve Zick. Upon being introduced to Carl, Zick seemed like an amiable and friendly but undeniably genius, like a hybrid of Woody Allen and Karl Marx.

With their cognate language, Carl and the two other students went to hang out on the plaza and nearby campus of Nanjing University.

Carl felt that both the filmmaker with him because of his difficulties in had been found one during his previous trip to China.

When he and the two other students went to the truck 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 Frisbee.

SO

Carl wanted this video to be a tribute to his brief friendship with Mary, and to the wonderfully fleeting possibility that traveling might be to have with him what he had referred to as a "seasonal romance."

On the book's front and rear covers were, cut out of colored construction paper, branches and blossoms like from an East Asian painting.

The image of those blossoms expressed to Carl the transience of certain young emotions and brief relationships that he had thus far experienced in his life, and that were convenient for him to continue experiencing given his supposed form of being.

The woman was not persuaded and rejected the offer, but he did keep the little book. Carl had a vision for this video. He would animate a branch and blossom in part of the scene, and have them surround like a frame around the rest of the scene in which he could place to many different photos and video clips.

The branch would flower and then the blossom would fall at the end of the video.

Carl created these blossoms using stop-motion animation. He read to get his friend Brad to assist him, but Brad was disinterested 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 being away in the remote Transkei. Carl also felt to compile all their footage into anything like a finished, coherent documentary.

SO

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

Carl submitted the entry, it was chosen as one of the finalists, 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 inflated with confidence, as if he had just won a medal.

He now had to decide where he would travel to.

He wanted to go somewhere far enough away to justify a free 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 South Africa.

His name was Willem MacDonald and Carl knew of him because of a philosophy class he taught as an undergraduate. He was taught by a former student of the architect.

MacDonald was the distantly best friend around which all the discussion and letters of the class orbited. The purpose of the course was to establish the intellectual ground for the architect's ideas of monumental, communal planning and human freedom.

Carl asked his former professor if he could get him in touch with MacDonald, and Carl knew of him from Johannesburg. Carl and the architect had spoken on the phone with MacDonald, and Carl had written to him in South Africa.

The professor did so, and after speaking on the phone with MacDonald, Carl was curious as to why he had been seen as a philosopher like he was a little kid and they were in a good way his basic sense of what was real and what was illusion.

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AS SUCH

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 Johannesburg, 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 fundamental 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.

During his long flight to South Africa, Carl was vaguely hopeful that the trip would answer some questions for him and that he would come home better knowing who he should dedicate himself to and which form of being should be the one he would call his own.

Carl packed very lightly for his three-week journey. He had a modernized hiking backpack and a small bookbag. It would be sometime in South Africa where he'd need heavy clothes.

He had one new Moleskine notebook that his sister gave him for Christmas, a recently updated Lonely Planet travel guide, and two dozen, affordable books that he had purchased years before as an undergraduate but had put on his shelves and avoided reading via elaborate methods of procrastination.

The two books were, "Waiting for the Barbarians" by J.M. Coetzee, and "The Wretched of the Earth" by Frantz Fanon.

Reading the latter book while on a South African Airways jetliner, flying high above the coast of Africa and sipping at packaged snacks, felt deceptively appropriate to Carl.

He had never been to Africa before, but after having heard of and backpacked through South Africa, he felt he was ready. He had an expensive prescription of malaria medicine. He had a pair of binoculars in case he went on a safari. He had a Swiss army, a pocket knife, a head strap flashlight, and he had a Frisbee to use he found at Frisbee tossers.

Carl had had some weird nightmare days before leaving for the trip, in which he was wandering alone and confused through an urban wasteland that was populated by strange creatures and strange people.

Nevertheless, he was excited to see a new part of the world and he was particularly hopeful that Willem MacDonald would take him under his wing.

Carl had seen MacDonald once before at a lecture at his university. MacDonald had worn a black shirt, a black shirt, and a red bow tie. He gave a very short PowerPoint presentation that made many members of the audience cry with hopefulness.

The point of MacDonald's lecture was that one form of being is deteriorating the earth and that a paradigm shift is needed, one requiring new philosophies of design, architecture, and human freedom.

MacDonald concluded the slide show with blurprints of encyclopedias on South Africa that he was currently working on in partnership with the South African government.

Combining the encyclopedias into a new reality and an ecosystem was MacDonald's grand conclusion.

Carl was anxious to see down with this man, to challenge his ideas, and to show that he, despite being in his early twenties, was worth taking seriously.

Carl also deeply wanted to see these encyclopedias and to meet with local Africans, that was "irrationally busy," and then get up and left.

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

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 hotel that served free breakfast and free food with that came from a Jersey cow kept on the property.

He took a 444 tour into Lesotho, which involved driving up a treacherous, switchback road, along one turn of which was a dead horse being eaten by ruff, hairy vultures.

Carl had never smelted anything fresh before. It was foul and nauseating, but also somewhat pleasurable.

While in Lesotho, Carl's group encountered a herd 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 444 expedition.

Carl then took a bus out of the mountains, passed through Durban, and then traveled into the Transkei, which is a semi-autonomous region of South Africa known for its dog farms.

Carl took a minibus taxi towards the coast, and stopped in the back of a pickup truck to be driven through dense forest to an eco-hostel along the coast. The truck was driven by a toothless old man who kept playing the same Afro-pop song over and over again at a very loud volume.

He entered a large and warm, 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 sought him out. Carl had heard this would happen. He traded a pair of socks for a pair of mushrooms, buying it would be a happy, fun, weird time.

BUT

Carl had heard of bad trips, and had seen some of his friends have them and stare desperately into the distance as they quietly screamed in pain. He had seen some people struggle with in such a manner.

Carl ate the mushrooms after his breakfast, which consisted of two bananas, several spoons of peanut butter, and a piece of bread. He then set off on a hike for a waterfall.

As he was leaving, some village children pointed at him and laughed shrilly. When Carl thought they did not work back.

Next, he saw a dog lying in the shade, looking unwell. A few young villagers approached him carrying beads, trinkets, and foil sacks of marijuana and sought him out. Carl had heard this would happen. He traded a pair of socks for a pair of mushrooms, buying it would be a happy, fun, weird time.

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HOWEVER

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 to Steve with his friend Candace in Spain. She told him that she had just broken up with her Spanish boyfriend. Carl asked if she wanted to come visit him, since the two had never been to Africa before and because she had vague plans to do humanitarian work there in the future.

Carl persuaded Candace to come and she would begin looking up flight information.

As he heard her give this hesitant yes, Carl's head exploded with dazzling sexual scenarios involving himself and his pen pal.

In the three years they had been friends, Carl had never been around Candace while she was single.

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 and because of an arcane South African regulation, she wouldn't be able to enter the country.

Carl felt devastated. His fantasies turned to ash and lightning flared to the ground.

He explained everything gleefully to Joe over a cappuccino.

"Hey man, there's no point in lamenting but for knowing at the door if you're going to be too depressed to get out of bed," Joe told him.

Joe drove off to return to his home along the sea and to work at his part-time job of building and boats.

Carl found Cape Town to be the most delightful experience 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 threatened.

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 blue Vika's Cafe.

Carl then ate lunch at Cape Malay restaurant he had heard of called Mamma's Kitchen. He ordered a nice sandwich called a whole that was served on a crisp and chewy 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 "Bitterkombi," which were nihilistically satirical comics that depicted life with a puny Mark Twain would be proud of - one all the collective spirit of South African society.

At the internet cafe, he could feel his heart pounding. This was fate knocking at the door, he supposed.

He hurried back to the hotel, called his hair, and asked the front desk if they had seen the girl.

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 tin 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 being even harder.

SERENDIPITOUSLY

A couple of days later, Carl was walking out of the hotel 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 at the same time and she smiled and asked where he was from.

She said her name was Diana and that she was born in Buenos Aires but grew up in Colorado. She wandered upstairs before Carl could say anything more.

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Carl called Diana out for breakfast. As they walked down the street, she enthusiastically greeted a stream of men, young and old.

All of them were very happy to see her and all of them actively avoided contact with Carl.

Diana explained over a cup of Rooibos tea the impressed and highly amused story by which she found herself in Cape Town. As she spoke, Carl felt like he was getting some sort of Rocky Mountain Holly Goliath.

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