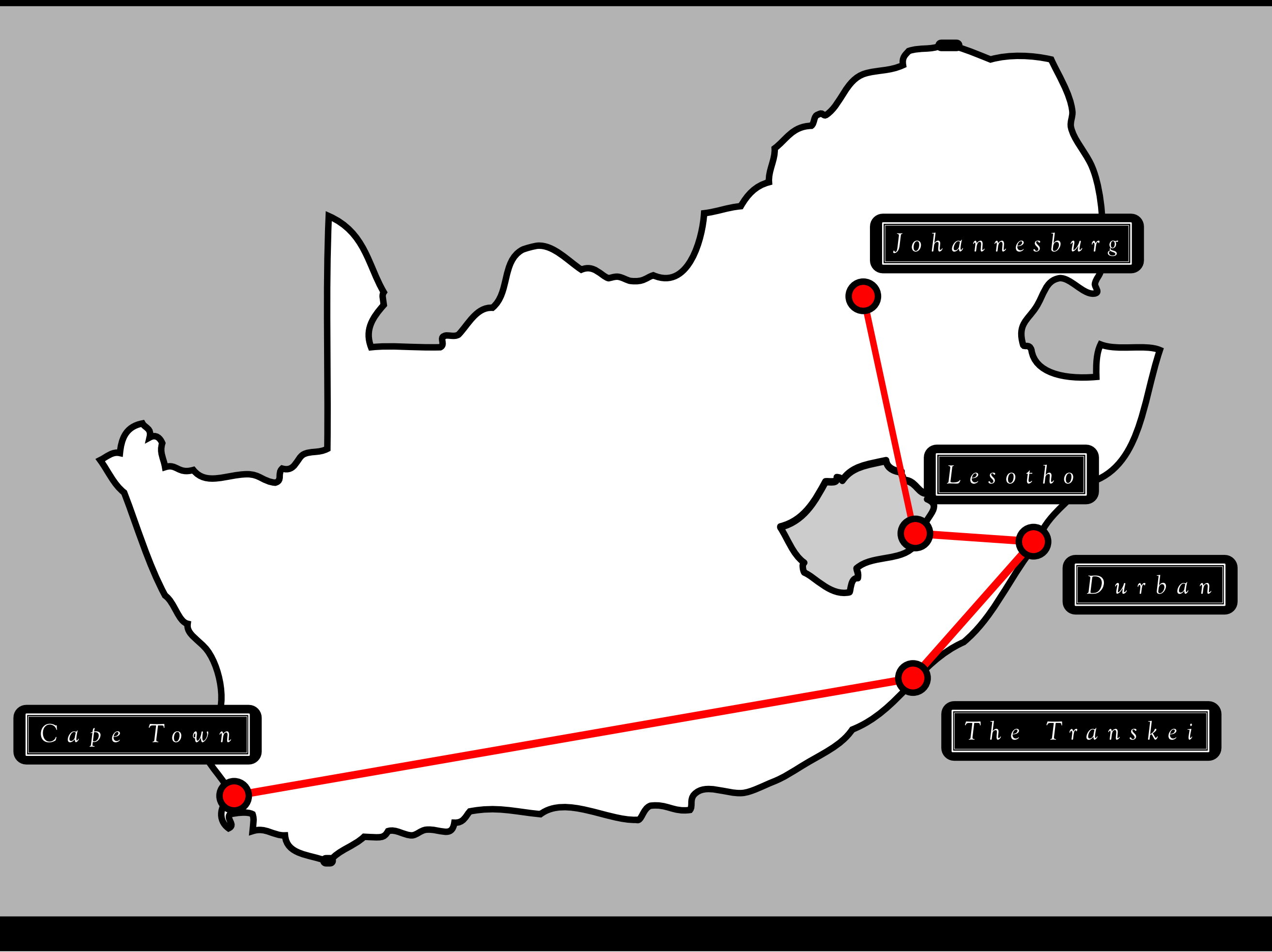


The THRESHOLD of AUTONOMY



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 billowing up at the horizon of his hometown existence. Many times from the novel Carl felt like he was riding a roller coaster, lightning that illuminated the world in a horrible but beautiful glow and whose thunder rattled the walls of any possible shelter.

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 the 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 to be the best kind of competition, which is to say it was well-funded, but poorly advertised.

SO

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 postgraduate Master program. Marty showed Carl and the two other students the good, cheap restaurants near the university where a common dinner consisted of spicy beef kebabs, fried dumplings, a bowl of noodles, a hotpot of Chinese herbs, and a soft-serve McDonald's ice cream cone for dessert. Carl felt that both the Frisbee team and Marty were rare and worth filming. The boys enjoyed games, practices, and some 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 conversations together, and when the trip was over, it was painful to say farewell to their new friend.

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. It was a little book about love that he had hoped would philosophically persuade her to have with him what he 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 screen, and have them surround like a frame around part of the screen in which he could place to show different photos and video clips. The branch would flower and then the blossom would fall to the end of the video.

Carl finished the video and showed the final one to Brad who said to him, "I think this is going to be...". 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 eaten a meal. 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 a former student of the architect. MacDonald was the distantly beautiful star around which all the discussion and terms 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 felt that his former professor if he could get him in touch with MacDonald and Carl knew of him because of a philosophy class he taught as a former student of the architect. MacDonald was the distantly beautiful star around which all the discussion and terms 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 felt that his former professor if he could get him in touch with MacDonald and Carl knew of him because of a philosophy class he taught as a former student of the architect.

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 this 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 modicum of hiking backpack and a small bookbag. It would be sometime in South Africa where he didn't need his 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 and he was about to backpack through South Africa. 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 in 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. Carl felt devastated. His fantasies turned to ash and light floated to the ground. He explained everything glumly to Joe over a cappuccino. "Hey man, there's no point in listening but I'm knocking at the door if you're going to be too depressed to get out of bed," Joe told him.

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

BUT

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 beer with that came from a Jersey cow kept on the property. He took a 4x4 tour into Lesotho, which involved driving up a treacherous, rutted road, along one side of which was a dead horse being eaten by tall, hairy vultures. Carl had never smelled anything fresher before. It was foul and nauseating, but also somewhat pleasurable. While in Lesotho, Carl's four-year-old dog 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 4x4 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 to a hotel, which at least had an interesting crowd of people in it. One such person was a pre-law graduate student. It turns out she had come to Transkei to meet with Willem MacDonald. She said the colleagues were a sham and that MacDonald slept at a hotel with a Zambian prostitute girlfriend. Carl arrived to the hotel, but 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, being told it would be a happy, fun, weird time.

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 such a moment. 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 returned, they did not wave 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, being told it would be a happy, fun, weird time.

The shadow of the trees began to look like spider webs. Carl wandered to the beach and sat down in the shade. A British boy from the hotel was also on the beach, but further down. He was eating passion fruit that the village boys had sold him and was leaning himself against 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 boy, dropped his own truck, and went to the bathroom. He felt better, but the sight of his boy was like a glimpse of evil. He sat back down in the shade and he had never seen so many mushrooms before. Carl was soon crying and feeling comically guilty. He thought dragged him along a logical and grim sequence, the conditions of which was that there was no escaping his existence, there was no safe form of being - no way of being without stress, pain, and suffering - and that in a very real sense he was and would never be alone in a world of nothingness. As Carl's thoughts slowed down, he began to feel a sadness around him that was like an insufferable hum. He decided to leave the hotel the next day, return to the Shell Ultra City along the main highway, and move on somehow to Cape Town.

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, 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 and she said she would begin looking up flight information. As he heard her give his contact her name, Carl's head exploded with startling 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. Carl felt devastated. His fantasies turned to ash and light floated to the ground. He explained everything glumly to Joe over a cappuccino. "Hey man, there's no point in listening but I'm knocking at the door if you're going to be too depressed to get out of bed," Joe told him.

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 hipnotically 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. 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.

That afternoon, Diana had to go to see a friend and run an errand, and Carl returned to the hotel to a trip. As he laid on his bed, he could hear the pop song "Take Me" being played in the hotel office. Carl felt sentimentally moved and got out of bed. He fixed his hair, grabbed his backpack, and marched down the street to a Cuban cafe. He ordered a large and weak lemon-yellow stationary and a furious and elaborate five-page letter to Diana. It contained a final paragraph explaining how he felt he was finally ready for a healthy 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 response word for word. She began reading it, and was charmed, and grateful, and said 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 bunch of Slovenian musicians that she had recently befriended. Carl agreed, happily.

Carl returned to his hotel for his bags and saw Diana. Her pants were open and he could see her letter inside. He reached in, snatched it out, and yelled, "You don't deserve this!" She grabbed the envelope back from him, removed several 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 Joe for a sleepless weekend of whiskey, chess, MDMA, good conversation, marijuana, homemade pizza, games, and swimming in the ocean. Carl then spent a few more days in Cape Town, frantically "Waiting for the Barbarians," and flew back home to America.

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

SO

They got lunch at Mimi's Kitchen and then went to the art museum. At an Internet cafe, Diana asked Carl to leave a literature comment on her Facebook wall so 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 open lips. Carl forgot all about each one of the previous disappointments of his life when he said that.