

Liza's Story

The phone rang at my dreary little Oakland office just three days after I had given my two-weeks notice. "Hey!" said my sister Amanda, "I have an idea!"

Having a sister who's a novelist, for someone with wanderlust, is like being an alcoholic and living next door to a liquor store. "Let's go to South Africa," she said. I agreed without pause – I needed no convincing. But I was recently engaged, and I should probably check with my newly dubbed fiancé. Plus I had just accepted a new job offer, so maybe I should ask my soon-to-be boss. While I made those phone calls, Amanda looked for flights online. Within the hour, the trip was booked. We would leave on the 4th of July, and I was excited to see fireworks from the air.

I knew next to nothing about South Africa at the time. Of course I had heard of Nelson Mandela and Apartheid, and I knew Dave Matthews was from the country, but that was about it. On the flight, Amanda had me watch movies about townships and Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. During the next 20-some-odd hours in the air, I started to get a sense of the magnitude of what we were about to experience. A culture, history and society like no other in the world. A country that has been through such recent and extreme racial turmoil and that is still plagued by segregation and discrimination.

We landed in Ghana, after watching every movie available on the free entertainment systems attached to our seats. (I even watched *The Pacifier* with Vin Diesel...twice.) We weren't allowed off the plane, but we added a few more passengers and the flight attendants created a thick fog with aerosol cans to fumigate the vessel. We acted, as we did frequently throughout the next seven days, like this was completely customary.

In Johannesburg, we switched flights for our final destination – Cape Town. I must have been pretty dazed because I don't recall much about Johannesburg, except that locals call it "Jo-burg" and foreigners call it "dangerous."

A few hours later we landed in Cape Town and took a taxi to our hotel. Part of Amanda's research required us to see the best and worst living conditions in the city; we started with the best. A man in full safari uniform greeted us at the gate and we drove up to the Mount Nelson. It was truly grand – pink and sophisticated. They were serving high tea, and while Amanda and I didn't want to spend the money (\$14 for tea and cookies?) we stared at the display of fine china and ladyfingers. The mural on the wall was a colonial African scene, complete with tigers, jaguars, and Dutch settlers. The upholstery was classic and elegant, with leopard-print accents.

Despite my pumping adrenaline, all I wanted to do was sleep. I didn't know what time (or even day) it was, and I was exhausted. But our journey would only last six days (Amanda couldn't be away from two-year-old son Ash any longer) and we had to soak up every second of it.

Each day we'd set out on a new adventure, exploring a different part of Cape Town. From the colorful Muslim neighborhood known as Bo-Kaap to the white sand beaches of Camps Bay, to the touristy Waterfront and backpacker-laden Long Street, we saw it all. Every few hours, I would say something like, "I think the main character is hungry," or "Nadine would really like a glass of wine right about now."

Aside from using the characters in the book for my own benefit, my job was head photographer. Amanda had already written most of *Forgive Me* before we even left the States. But we made the trip across the world to set the sights, sounds, smells and textures that would make the story come alive. Thus, I took my job very seriously, and took over 400 pictures during our travels.

Despite the absolute variance of every day, every morning would start out the same. We would take advantage of the free breakfast wherever we were staying, and Amanda would lay out the itinerary for the day. And afterwards I would say, "Tomorrow can we climb Table Mountain?"

Flat-topped Table Mountain was visible from nearly every part of the city. It was mammoth and stunning, and looked deceptively easy to climb. The views from atop were some of the most beautiful and dramatic I had ever seen – I knew because we had taken the gondola up on one of our first days in Cape Town. But I wasn't satisfied. I wanted to climb it.

But each morning, Table Mountain wasn't on the itinerary. Don't get me wrong, Amanda had planned unbelievable adventures for us, and I was very aware of how fortunate I was to be on this trip with her. As her "research assistant," I was able to experience a side of Cape Town that most tourists never see. We toured the area where non-whites were forced to live under apartheid, and spent the night in the Khayelitsha township, at "Vicky's B&B," a humble shack made out of tree trunks, corrugated iron and hardboard. While I had visited third-world countries before, I had never seen such third-world conditions within such an affluent and glamorous city. It was a sprawling slum inhabited by millions, and we were the only white people in sight. The residents, while incredibly welcoming, were also a bit confused by our presence. "Hey Patrick," they'd yell to our local tour guide, "Where'd you get those white people?" The people at the Mount Nelson had been equally as confused – it would have been like two young female tourists in San Francisco telling me that they were planning to spend the night in an SRO in the Tenderloin. But the warmth, graciousness and vibrance of the people in Khayelitsha turned out to be what I remember most about our trip to South Africa.

We spent two days in the townships, under Patrick's wing. We ate freshly slaughtered lamb grilled on the side of the road; visited "Dance for All," a nonprofit organization that gets kids off the streets and into ballet shoes; saw (from afar) the bush country where teenage boys get circumcised without anesthetic; visited entrepreneurial endeavors like a 6'x6' shack with a brush and some styling gel called "Queenie's Hair Salon," and a bar with views of only the shantytowns called "The Waterfront;" and listened to the local language of Xosha while watching the busy life of the township pass by.

The following morning, as Amanda and I ate corn flakes and sour milk at the B&B, she laid out the plans for the afternoon. We were nearing our final day in Cape Town and Amanda's schedule spoke nothing of Table Mountain. Maybe it was the lack of sleep the night before (Vicky's was right across the street from "The Waterfront"), or maybe it was the result of bottling up my opinion for too long, but I kind of lost it. "You have made every single decision so far," I said. "Why can't we just do the one thing I've wanted to do this whole trip?"

Whatever the reason for my sudden outburst, it worked. We would be climbing Table Mountain that afternoon, after checking into our next hotel.

The Blue Iguana B&B had incredible views of the city, and you could see Table Mountain from our Treehouse Suite. We put some gear and water into a backpack and headed out. Two sisters, trekking in Africa – it was going to be great.

The owner of our B&B, a French lady named Esther, set us out with a map and a smile. “Just follow this road ‘til it dead ends, and you’ll see the path. You can’t miss it,” she said, waving. Well, we did. At the end of the road were a few chickens and a creepy neighbor who informed us that we were nowhere near the trailhead. But his directions didn’t get us anywhere, either. “Fuck it,” I said. I didn’t come this far just to be deterred by a few wrong turns. “Let’s bushwhack.”

Eventually, we found our way to the trailhead, and it had already been over an hour since our departure from the B&B. Esther had said it would only take an hour-and-a-half round trip! Either she was an Iron Man athlete, or she had absolutely no clue what she was talking about. (We would find out later that it was the latter). Regardless, we had to be showered and ready to meet a friend of our Uncle Ivor’s at 5:30pm, and it was nearing three.

We started meandering up, and as the cliff became steeper, the trail got narrower and narrower. It was utterly terrifying. We were the only hikers in sight, and I was starting to see why. I was thrilled when Amanda said it was time to turn around or we wouldn’t be ready in time for cocktails. “Oh, alright,” I sighed, feigning disappointment.

Later that evening, when we met our uncle’s friend Jennifer at the Seven Apostles for a cosmo, she reaffirmed our decision to head back down. “Oh yes,” she said. “You’re quite lucky. Turns out because of the winds that they had to stop running the gondola, and you never would have been able to make it down on foot before dark!” (Little did we know this happens on occasion, and I frequently picture Amanda and I huddled at the top until sunrise – her cursing my relentlessness). I took a big gulp of my cosmo, as I winked at Amanda for not sharing my stubbornness with our new friend.

When I got my advanced copy of *Forgive Me* and I read the dedication, I couldn’t believe it. Not only was I touched, honored, and incredibly flattered, but I was also amazed that Amanda had chosen that memory, amongst all of them, to reference. It was our only fight on the whole trip, it was a total disaster, and it was really the only unfinished journey we’ve ever set out on together. But it is also a memory that I look back on fondly. That experience illustrates our relationship as sisters, and exemplifies our unique bond. A bond so infallible that we know we can get through anything together – every challenge just makes it stronger. Amanda is always proud of my accomplishments and successes. But it is almost more reassuring to know that no matter what wrong decisions I make or misguided turns I take, Amanda will always understand, pick me up, and forgive me.