

Chapter 1: Going On



How could I have known that by the time my day to travel to Africa came, my ex-boyfriend Frank Valin and I would be getting back together? Now I just couldn't lose my thousand dollars. And they surely weren't about to refund my money the day before my scheduled flight. Frank should have tried to come back to me sooner. Why should I have wallowed in self-pity and tears over him? Why should I have continued hoping that he might find some value in me and try to make up before I put my "foot to the pedal" full speed ahead getting on with my life? My past broken hearts when I was at Olney High School, Lincoln University, and the now LaSalle University taught me this maneuver. Now here he is, looking so pitiful and sad because I'm going to Nigeria, Africa, for a month without him. I actually started feeling bad that I was going.

"Get, yourself-- together," I said to myself. Frank wasn't full of gloom all those nights I laid in my bed, broken hearted, waiting -- waiting to hear from him. So now, let him wait.

Frank and I kissed goodbye and the car drove off without him. New York, here we come! Darsalena Eze, her sister, and I, we were on our way. Gee, did they have a lot of luggage. We almost could not fit it all in the car. The suitcases were so large; the biggest suitcases I've ever seen. They should have required a "fork lift" to move, all of, their luggage from point A to point B. What in the world did they pack? I packed all my best dresses, accessories, and etcetera. I did not bring one pair of pants along. Definitely, the majority of my things were white in color. After all, it's very hot in Africa and they say white clothes are cooler to wear.

We were going to be at the university, where Darsalena's uncle was a professor. Huh! The university! And that's all I knew about Nigeria. Darsalena didn't inform me of what to expect. She said many months later, that her husband had told her not to tell me anything about Nigeria. She said he felt that I was just a spoiled American that should learn about the hardships of other people first hand.

Who would believe that a conversation between Darsalena and me, at a Temple University Graduate School dinner, would result in my going with her to her home, Nigeria, Africa? Within months of meeting Darsalena, in the month of December in the year 1988, when I had one

semester left to get my Master's Degree, I went to Nigeria. She had asked me to help her finish her research, for her doctorate's degree in sociology, and I said I would. Why not, I wasn't doing anything during our winter break from school? When she asked, I was thirty-one, single, without any children, and free from any other commitments or any relationship.

I was right! At the airport, the airline personnel reported that Darsalena's and her sister's suitcases were too heavy. Darsalena ended up having to pay fees for the extra weight. Did they have people, little people, in the suitcases? Darsalena did have seven young kids all of whom were below their teenage years. Maybe she didn't have the thousand-dollar round trip fare for a few of them and it was cheaper for them to travel in the luggage compartment. It wouldn't be the first time someone tried to pull off something like that. I couldn't wait to see what she had in those suitcases. But, I would have to wait for a while since we were being rushed away because our flight was preparing to leave.

After the flight attendant called out specific rows that could board the plane, a commotion broke out. People ignored her instructions. "It was every man for him-self!" No lie every person with a ticket crowded into the doorway of the aircraft. The people were pushing and shoving. I was waiting for the kicking and biting to start. Nobody wanted to wait for their turn. They all wanted to be first going into the airplane. The airline personnel attempted to restore order and to get some cooperation from the passengers. They made everyone wait in the doorway of the aircraft for about twenty minutes before anyone was allowed to enter the airplane. Everyone was all crowded and bunched together. But, the passengers would not cooperate.

In frustration, the airline personnel let the "rioters" board. It was embarrassing! Still it got worse! By the time we got to our assigned seats, someone had filled all of the overhead compartments on the plane, at our seats, with bags and things. Darsalena, her sister, and I, all ended up with carry-on luggage we had to put under our seats and under our feet, literally. It was awfully uncomfortable sitting, for about twelve hours straight, with our knees up to our chests. I mean no comfort at all. Others must have experienced the same irritation because out of nowhere one person started yelling at another something about, "Your mother."

I thought they were going to punch each other out. Imagine a whole plane full of Black folks acting rude, inconsiderate, and on top of that, having the nerve to be arrogant as well. I hoped for goodness sake that the air flight team wasn't Black. It would be something else for the cockpit crew to be operating the plane and fighting with each

other at the same time. I worried.

I imagined that if the cockpit crew ended up fighting and we crashed, it would happen so fast that we wouldn't know what happened let alone have a chance to feel upset about the situation. Oh what the heck, we're in the air now. They say, "What you don't know won't hurt you."

This was the longest flight I have ever taken. Twelve hours in the air, straight over the Atlantic Ocean with not even an island midway in which to make an emergency landing on. I got a little frightened by this thought. I decided to try to read, through my, groggy, eyes as a Dramamine (a motion sickness pill) addict, the book I brought along. It was no wonder that I didn't feel the air motion sickness. Shucks, you didn't feel anything after Dramamine went to work because I was sleep most of the time.

It always took me almost a full day not to feel the effects of those little powerful pink and white "babies" about two dollars each. They price them so high! And don't get caught without them and have to purchase them at the airport store. They may cost you thirty dollars!

My book, yea, let me get into some reading. A book called "Fear of Flying," just what I needed. I was already scared. Why did I bring this book with me? I know, I thought it would offer some suggestions on dealing with my fear of flying. Boy was I wrong! It turned out to be this story about a married woman who fell in love with another man. I can't keep one man and here's this chick with two men. The story was getting good but I just couldn't keep my eyes opened any longer. Dramamine, here I come or should I say here I go.

When I finally woke up, I didn't know how long I had slept. It had to have been a good little while because my arm had fallen asleep and my neck was cramped. My mouth must have dropped opened because it was dry like the desert I'd see in Africa. Well, I tried to gather my thoughts, but I was still woozy from those pink beauties that kept my stomach settled. I took a look around and most of the folks were asleep. Good! I'm glad all of the fighting finally ended without bloodshed, at least for now anyway.

I made my way to the restroom. Nothing like the relief it brings. Whoever thought of those little comfort zones (i.e., bathrooms on planes, trains, buses, and ships) was a genius. I wondered who it was. Getting to and from my seat was a cinch. This was some smooth flight; it felt as if we weren't even moving at all. Out of the window only darkness could be seen. Maybe we weren't moving, but we were like the earth just dangling in space on its imaginary axis. If the whole earth could do it, then why couldn't we?

Ooh! A little turbulence! I quickly concluded we were still flying

after all. How do pilots fly through the air in total darkness? It's amazing! Here come the flight attendants with our food. I'm starved. Anything right now would taste like filet mignon. I don't even know why I said that. Do I even know what filet mignon tastes like, please? Whatever the flight attendants were serving, I wanted it. And anybody that didn't want their food, I would have taken their food as well. No such fortune! People were eating their stuff like piranhas. I thought I was the only one who had forgotten to fill up my stomach before taking this long journey.

Um! I feel the sleepiness coming again. I'm not going to fight it this time. Sleeping makes the time go quicker anyway. I get so cold though when I'm sleeping. And it certainly didn't help that the plane's thermostat felt like it was set on forty degrees. I know it has been stated that a crowd of Black folks generate heat. They don't generate that much heat. Or, perhaps they have to be fighting to get the "sparks" going. I had on a blouse, jacket, and three blankets and the chill was still "knocking on my door."

Are we landing? Finally, we're here! The Motherland! It was still dark, however, we gained a day coming to Nigeria, what-a-deal. Wait a minute! I don't believe this! The whole lot of passengers fumbled and pushed with the same urgency, rudeness, inconsiderateness, as they showed when they had boarded the plane. I just sat in my seat and waited. Let them get off first, who cares I'm in Africa, the place from whence my ancestors came. This was such an overwhelming feeling for me.

Every, Black person, alive, should try to travel back to where their ancestors came from, at least once, in their lifetime. I guarantee them that their lives would not be the same again. No, they would not be the same again. The revelation you experience is like the account in the Bible when Eve's and Adam's eyes had been opened as a result of their eating the fruit from the tree of life. Once opened -- your eyes cannot be closed to the realities you experienced.

We finally found, all of our, luggage and we dragged it to be checked through customs. Finally, I would know if Darsalena had any of her kids in her luggage. Nope, only clothes and, oh, so many canned goods, soap, toilet paper, Ziploc bags, underwear, stockings, nightgowns, Lifesavers, gum, shoes, and etcetera were in the suitcases. The canned goods weighed those bags down. It looked like she had robbed a corner grocery store before we left. Things her relatives wanted I guessed.

The customs officer tore through the luggage belonging to both Darsalena and her sister. They didn't tear through my luggage in the same way they had tore through theirs. What on earth were they looking for? Why couldn't I have been the person carrying it,

whatever it was that they were searching for?

We finally got out of the airport and we had landed in Lagos, the capital city of Nigeria. We were in Lagos, on one dark and what would have been a winter night, in December, back in America.

At the airport, Darsalena's sister left us to travel to somewhere else. She had taken most of the luggage with her. Darsalena and I left the airport with one piece of luggage each. Darsalena's sister had planned to meet up with us later on in our journey to the university. Darsalena and I got a taxi. Wow! We were in a taxi just like the ones in America.

We arrived in a place called Ibadan. "What's that smell? It's awful! It's making my stomach sick. What is it?"

The taxi stopped and Darsalena and I got out. We then had to walk up this steep and wide hill for about a mile, each carrying our one piece of luggage. It was a dirt road and people were crowded together on that road like the people in the million man marches. At the top of the hill we ended up on a street that reminded me of the streets I've seen on the news in places like Cambodia. People were standing on balconies, walking in the streets, and sitting in doorways.

There was still that awful smell. Didn't anyone notice it but me? Was it me? It couldn't be. I could not believe that missing one day of washing, myself up, would make me smell that bad. Or was it my traveling companion? After all, we both have been unable to wash up since the day before. "Stop it," I said, to myself, "that's just an American stereotype that Africans smell bad." This place looked like a prostitute alley in New Orleans. The women were all half dressed and looking "needy." And, even though it was reaching the late evening hours, it was so hot in Ibadan. Maybe that's why the people were dressed in the way that they were.

We're here? This was it? This was where we were going? It couldn't be! Horrified, I tried to appear undisturbed by what I now saw. This didn't look like a university to me. I shuddered at what I might see next. Why did I have to be right thinking that things would indeed get worse? We walked up some steps into a building. It was dark on the stairwell and I couldn't see the stairs. I stumbled, "Shoot," I hurt my foot. Feet don't fail me now. I may have to make a run, for it, from this place.

We came to a door and I didn't know what or who would be beyond this door we were now standing in front of. If I go by how things looked in this place, "Freddie Kruger" could have lived there.

Oh my goodness, the door was opening. I couldn't even see who was there standing at the door because it was dark inside as well. The time had gotten to the midnight hour so quickly. I thought, "What's the thing about no lights anywhere? Do dark people want to

stay in darkness?" I thought that was only in America. Then I suddenly realized that there weren't even any street lights. There was only the light from the moon and stars.

"Boy," was it hot in that place. Steamy! Goodbye central air conditioning. I'm hungry! I'm tired! I don't feel so good! My stomach -- oh! Why was my stomach paining me all of a sudden? I felt sick.

As we walked inside the door to a darkened room, I asked, "Can I use the bathroom please?"

A voice in the dark said, "Sure."

"Well, why are we going outside into the hallway on the other side of the room?" I said. There was no answer given. But then I thought, "Oh, but, at least there is a dim light out here."

Why were so many people hanging around on the steps? Why did they stare at me so? Why did we stop at this door? The bathroom! The bathroom is out here? You got to be kidding! You got to be kidding! Outside! I opened the door -- no light! I didn't want to leave the door opened, even for a little bit, to let the dim light shine in because there were people standing right outside the door. So, I closed the door. Pitch black.

I reached toward the back of this enclosure. Where's the toilet? I couldn't feel the toilet seat and my hand hit the wall. Then I reached toward the left side and I twisted my foot on the edge of some opening in the floor. Where's the toilet? Now, I got to pee badly! I opened the door, a little, for some dim light to come in so I could see. Don't tell me they just pee on the floor in here. Judging from the smell in there, it certainly seemed as if they did just pee onto the floor.

I cracked the door open wider and there was this hole in the floor. It was just a room with no light and with a hole, the size of a large grapefruit, in the floor. Somebody stole the toilet seat out of the bathroom. I couldn't wait any longer. I had been holding my pee for so long by then. Maybe I could aim into the hole like a man does -- "hum mm," some men anyhow.

Suddenly, I could see that my panties were stained. It couldn't be my period! Two weeks early! For twenty years, it has not been two weeks early. It's been two weeks late several times. This told me that the stress and tension, in Ibadan, were already too great. A good thing I brought my pocketbook with me to this "false" bathroom. I was smart enough to carry some sanitary napkins just in case my luggage got lost.

Toilet paper! They took the toilet stool and the toilet paper. Boy, I just did not believe the way things were going. I ended up having to shake my coochy dry and then apply my "diaper." Ouch, the

cramps! Please let me make it back to the dark room to sit down, lie down, and die.

Uh, I made it back to where Darsalena was. "Darsalena," I said, "I'm not feeling good at all, could I have some hot tea?"

"There is no tea," said the voice in the dark.

"May I have something to drink so I can take some Anaprox (my pain medication)?"

Again the voice in the dark said, "There is nothing to drink, not even water."

For the first time in my life I struggled to swallow my "horse size" pill using my saliva. How in the world were people able to do that? I tried and tried -- the pill was dissolving and the taste of it was nasty. But, I had to get it in my system pronto. Finally, it was down. I wanted relief to please come soon.

"Can I lay down somewhere, please?"

The voice in the dark said, "There is no place to lie down." This little room, seven feet by seven feet, was the whole place. Woo me! The pain was getting worse. Darsalena said to lie down where I was sitting. So I tried. Whatever it was that I was sitting on it was lumpy, sunk in and short. Now, I was trying to squeeze myself onto this pseudo piece of furniture. There, I'm on this chair, table, or whatever it was. I thought, "Just let me get through this next twenty-four hours of cramping torture."

There was a knock at the door. When the door opened, I could tell by the voice that a man was standing there. Darsalena and the man spoke in their native tongue. I couldn't understand one word. They could have been talking about me for all I knew. The person came in and walked to the side of the room where I was. He was tall and very dark. He took a seat very near where I was laying. I kept looking at this man and his silhouette reminded me of Shaka Zulu. His presence!

As the daylight began to shine through the window, I could see that this man sat tall and appeared void of any body fat. I began feeling attracted to him just as I was to Shaka Zulu in that movie. In fact I fell in love with the actor who played the character of Shaka Zulu. I wished I could have been with him when his empire was great.

I must have drifted off to sleep for a little while because it was bright daylight shining in the room by the time I looked at this man again. At that point it became obvious that the man, still sitting where he had been from the time he arrived, was no Shaka Zulu. He was more shock -- of ugly. He was ugly, dirty, and filthy. And to think that last night, I was so drawn to this creature. And I had been halfway talking to him almost all through the night trying to get to

know him.

"We're leaving now!" "But, we haven't even washed up!" What am I thinking of, there wasn't even a toilet stool or toilet paper in the bathroom? I surely as heck don't remember a sink with running water. Oh, I'll just aim in the hole again and change my diaper.

Well, off we go! Funky I am for sure – after two days now of not washing my body parts off. Yet, as soon as we reached outside, there was that terrible smell again. Please don't let this be the fragrance of the air.

What in the world was all that stuff on the ground? There was garbage, soot, muck, and trash -- everything -- all over the street. It was no wonder that the air stunk so, I thought to myself. Their sewer system was above ground and not like America's, sewer system, which was hidden underneath the ground. Sickening! Who would plan it like this, just to run along the street exposed and where children could end up playing in it like they played in regular dirt (i.e., soil)?

I hoped that things were not like this everywhere, in Nigeria. Better yet, I hoped that it was just not like this wherever we were going. It was certainly a relief to find out we were leaving Ibadan and Lagos was merely a stopping off place before reaching our final destination. But, before we journeyed on, Darsalena took me to downtown Lagos to the shopping streets and to the telephone company to use a phone to call America.

Once at the telephone company, I had to pay a fee of about fifteen dollars for one minute of calling back to America. Ridiculous! The person at the desk took the telephone number, my money, and motioned for me to take a seat. Darsalena and I sat there and sat there. After about twenty minutes, they called my name and directed me to one of the many phone booths lined up against the wall in the room.

I picked up the receiver and I could hear the line ringing. My mother answered. To hear her voice, I felt flushed with emotions. She said my voice was breaking up. Something like, Hi --ther ---- here --- I'm ----. I ---- you ---. Africa -- so ---ferent --an --erica. Click! The line was cut off with no warning just like that. I prayed that my mother would understand what had happened to the telephone line connection and not worry about me. It was hard enough for her to accept having her only child fly twelve hours away from home in the first place. But, then her only call from me was disconnected from her before our conversation was ever finished.

Our next stop was to the shopping tables and stores in downtown Lagos. It was so crowded in this marketplace. Wall-to-wall people were out there. You couldn't even see the pavement

when there was one. Darsalena and I were looking around at the merchandise that they had for sale.

At first, I didn't really see anything I was interested in buying so I didn't purchase anything. Then, much later on, there were these snake skinned pocketbooks I saw on some vendor's table that appealed to me. I bought three of the pocketbooks and a wallet. I purchased a purse for my mother, my Aunt Sadie and me. And the wallet was for my cousin Selena.

Into another taxi we went. We arrived back at the airport where we had left some of our luggage. We gathered it for our next flight out of Lagos on to our continued journey to Imo State, Owerri. The weather was very, very hot there. It was about one hundred and twenty or more degrees easily. The sunlight was shinning very brightly into my eyes. Where are my sunglasses? There that's better.

The next plane was very small. The turbulence was really bad. It was a good thing that I had suffered through my menstrual cramps last night and now today I felt much better. I felt born again. This was the first day of the rest of my life. It wasn't a very long flight. Almost as soon as we were up in the air, we were landing. I was certainly glad to get off that roller coaster.

We went into a small building to get our luggage. But, somehow our luggage ended up on another flight and we had to wait in the airport for it to arrive. While we waited, I began reading from my book "A Fear Of Flying" again. I felt hungry. Wait, but we haven't even eaten anything today. I told Darsalena that I was starving. We then walked outside of the building through a door away from the airport runway. There were some vendors, right outside the airport door, with foods I could not begin to identify or describe. But, Darsalena picked out, for me, this meat on a stick that was similar to shish kabob. It was good! I desired another one, but, I didn't want to appear greedy since she was kind enough to buy it for me.

I should have bought another one of those "meat-on-a-stick" for myself. I had money, but I wasn't thinking. I tried to put it out of my mind and it wasn't long before my mind got focused on something better than food -- a man.

Once we were seated, again, inside this small airport, in walked this guy, dressed elegantly. He was clean, neat, sharp, stunning, etcetera, etcetera. I ripped my eyes away from him so as not to appear to be staring. Occasionally, I glanced up and fortunately he didn't catch me looking. Moments later he approached us and I felt my heart skip a beat. He was coming right over to us. He stopped in front of us. I looked up and so did Darsalena.

He said, "Hello" with the most divine accent I could ever imagine. I remember feeling like I was melting from the sound of his

voice.

We said "Hello" back. But, then he began to speak Nigerian to Darsalena for quite awhile.

Then, he said, "Goodbye." Just like that, he was gone as quickly as he had appeared. I felt sad. I couldn't help asking Darsalena what he had talked about. She said that he had informed her that he wanted to see me again and wanted to know where exactly we were journeying to. I smiled, flattered and touched by his interest. But, would he really come to where I would be to see me, just like that? How romantic, I thought. What a gesture!

Our luggage had finally arrived and we gathered up our things and into another taxi we went. On our way some sixty miles on dirt road, we passed by a man on his knees, on the ground, at the back of his car. There was a soldier standing over him with an automatic rifle aimed at his head. I felt uneasy about seeing this and before I could comment our taxi driver was being motioned to stop by another soldier armed with an automatic rifle.

They asked Darsalena to get out of the taxi and directed her to the trunk where just her luggage was taken out. An argument broke out between Darsalena and one of the soldiers. Another soldier came to the back of the taxi where I was still sitting, frightened, but trying hard not to show it. He just stared at me. He said nothing. I said nothing. He just looked and I kept looking straight ahead at the back of the taxi cab driver's head. The taxi cab driver didn't move. He sat still like a statue. So I did the same as he did.

When the soldier walked away, I turned to see what was happening to Darsalena. She was still arguing with the soldier who had opened all her luggage and was throwing her things on the dirt ground. Then the argument stopped. Darsalena began picking up her things and putting the luggage into the trunk again. I wanted to get out of the taxi to help her, but I was scared since I didn't know what was being said. I wanted to just stay still and not somehow aggravate the situation any further. She managed with her luggage without help from anyone and she got back into the taxi.

It had begun to get dark outside. Darsalena instructed the taxi cab driver to turn around and drive us back some miles. Darsalena told me that the army ruled Nigeria and they were very corrupt. She said that the soldiers stopped us because they wanted her to pay them money for them not to harass her. And she simply refused to give them any money. Americanized! So, they said we could not journey any further since in Nigeria women were not permitted to travel after dark without a male present. I guess the cab driver didn't count.

We ended up at, (get this), a high rise hotel, a real one. I was

happy! We got a room. We took showers and changed our clothes to go down to the hotel restaurant to eat food. Food! I wished my period would go away. How could women manage in military combat with periods? I declared it was a total mystery to me. They must have some real horror stories to tell.

Down in the dining room, menus, with delicious meals listed on them, were handed to us. I wanted steak. Meat! Meat! Meat! It was served with rice and some kind of vegetables. I was told over and over again to drink only bottled water while I was in Nigeria and I made it a point to do that. On this night, at the hotel, I ordered hot tea. No doubt, boiling the water was probably all right.

Served, I began to eat and before I got my first taste of this wonderfully prepared food, that stinky smell was in my nose again. The food had that stench I smelled from Ibadan. My eyes wanted this food and my nose didn't. I battled with holding my breath while I ate. It tasted okay. But it was definitely not as good as that meat we had purchased from the airport vendor though. Then I started wondering what kind of meat did I in fact eat? I better leave that thought alone. Eat and get sleepy -- perfect since I had a bed to get into with crisp white sheets. I didn't want to go any further than this place. Why couldn't this be our destination?

Morning came so fast. It seemed like I didn't even get any sleep. And I don't even remember getting up in the night to go to the bathroom like I usually did. Oh I wish I could sleep some more; perhaps for another day or a week maybe. But, Darsalena urged me to get ready as they were very strict with check out time in Nigeria. If you went over the check out time one minute, you had to pay for an additional night on your way out the door. Of course it wouldn't make sense to do that if we were not going to stay another night. So, I rushed to get dressed.

Another hot and sunny day! And it would be another long ride in a taxi cab. I finally mentioned to Darsalena that I had not liked Ibadan. She said most people didn't. She said that the people there were known for their filth.

Along the road we traveled, we passed through several towns that had only a few buildings. And then we were back on the open dirt road for miles and miles. We came to sort of a city and the cars traveling on the road were ordered to stop. Some official was passing through and for security reasons, only his car was allowed to drive on the road at any given time. All other people driving had to stop their vehicles. And they had to wait along the sides of the road until the car, with the official in it, had gone down the road -- way out of sight. What a law! In America, stopping traffic like this would be impossible to accomplish, especially in downtown Philadelphia.

Where we had stopped, along the side of the road, there was a huge building that had a fence around it. And posted on its fence was a flyer with black and white print that read AIDS in English and then had all of the rest of the print in Nigerian, I supposed. Whatever language it was in, I couldn't read or understand what the bulk of the flyer was saying.

Finally, we were driving again after being cooked like fried tomatoes in Nigeria's hot sun for about forty minutes. Every day the temperature had been a hundred and some degrees. No wonder many of the Nigerians were so dark skinned. It couldn't be helped with the sun shining so intensely on them all of the time.

The next place we passed through was a little town with its main road at its center. There was a crowd of people standing around there. I could not see just what they were doing but the oddest sight was seeing an albino Nigerian standing among so many dark skinned Nigerians. He had absolutely no skin color and his hair was, without any doubt, African in texture. It was strange how genes could affect people.