

THE CAPE TOWN CASTLE

One evening, on his return from London to my grandmother's cottage in Pitsea, my father announced he couldn't find a suitable job in England. He'd spoken to several people about it, and they'd recommended emigrating. I didn't like leaving my grandmother behind, but travelling to new locales was always fascinating.

Only weeks later, we found ourselves on Southampton docks, ready to set sail on the Cape Town Castle. A sizeable crowd came to see the ship leave, and the excitement was palpable. Passengers on board and people on the dockside waved and called out farewells. After an interminable delay, the ship sounded its horn, and people tossed colourful streamers to form a rainbow of paper ribbons connecting the passengers to those on the dock. Slowly, the ship moved away, breaking the last links one by one.

In the gathering dusk, we descended into the bowels of the ship. The winter darkness cloaked everything outside the cabin's porthole, giving us nothing to see. We'd been in England less than a year, but I was eager for fresh adventures in a new country. We were on our way to South Africa. It would be my second ocean voyage and third country, by the age of five.

Only an hour after leaving the docks, I felt queasy. My mother said I needed something to eat, and I'd feel better. I looked forward to dinner, but halfway through, nausea set in; my first brush with seasickness. At that point, I didn't realise how long seasickness would last.

The next morning, I couldn't eat breakfast. Mid-morning on the second day, my mother persuaded me to go up on deck. The fresh air helped a little, despite the rolling waves and swaying ship. But the cold, grey, autumn skies were no comfort as we sat with blankets on our deckchairs on the deck.

Three days out, the ship docked at Madeira. The warmer weather and stepping onto dry land proved a temporary relief. We walked around the town and looked in the souvenir shops. Small red, green, and white knitted human figures adorned most souvenirs from hats to safety pins. They represented a form of traditional Portuguese dress.

Soon, back on board, the ship steamed on its way. The porthole's limited views soon lost their appeal, and by day four, it seemed as if my seasickness would never leave me. On the fifth day, my condition improved a little. Morning tea on deck was a pleasant surprise. The stewards came around carrying trays with cups of hot salty Bovril for the passengers sitting on the deck chairs. After several days of nausea and vomiting in the cabin, the salty drink was just what I needed to take the sick taste from my mouth.

By day six, I was much better. I wanted to retrieve one of my books locked in a trunk in the ship's hold. Gaining access on the voyage proved quite a process, but with a little backwards and forwards to the purser's office, we managed it. A sailor took my mother and me down to the storage hold. We entered an enormous room with hundreds of suitcases sitting on elevated racks running its entire length. My mother warned me to make sure I retrieved everything I wanted because a second visit would not be welcome.

The second week was more enjoyable. The weather improved, and halfway through the voyage came the Crossing the Line ceremony. Sailors dressed in garish pirate costumes and carrying plastic sabres made adult passengers walk the plank into the swimming pool. Most

of the kids couldn't swim, so they dunked them in zinc bathtubs overflowing with water. Everybody got wet, and we all received a certificate commemorating the fun occasion of crossing the equator.

Sometimes, my father took me to the ship's stern to look for the dolphins that liked to follow. I'd hoped to see sharks, but saw none. In the late afternoon or early evening, large schools of flying fish were a common sight.

Most of my toys remained locked away in a trunk in the ship's hold, but I'd kept my new football with me. In the evening before dinner, I'd go with my father to the games area on the lower deck and kick the ball around. Nets ran along the ship's railings to prevent any stray deck coits or balls going over the side. It seemed the perfect spot for me to play soccer with my father. But one evening, I kicked the ball, and it hit the net and slid down it, before falling into the ocean. All I could do was watch my football bob away into the distance. Upon checking, we found the net was the only unsecured one on the sports deck.

We arrived in beautiful Cape Town on a sunny morning, delighted to be back in a warm climate. From the docks, we caught a taxi to the railway station to leave our luggage and book our tickets to Pretoria. The train was leaving in the late afternoon, so we walked into the city before taking the cable car up Table Mountain. Although the views from the top were spectacular, it was the tearoom that held my interest. The scones and soft drinks looked most appealing.

Later that afternoon, we were on the train, heading for Pretoria. I can recall leaving Cape Town and passing through the beautiful scenery of the Cape Winelands and sleeping through most of the arid Karoo. But my most vivid memory is the sound of the xylophone calling the passengers to meals in the silver service dining car. Breakfast introduced me to the South African Grape-nuts cereal and Maltabella porridge, both of which remained amongst my favourite breakfast dishes throughout my life in Africa.

Soon, we'd be arriving in Pretoria, where we'd stay with my aunt's family, and I'd meet my cousins.