

It was March 24, 2019, 3:08pm. I was on the soil of Africa. Magaliesburg, to be exact. I signed my name on the arriving guest log, grabbed my room key, a wooden cup of a tart, mango flavored nectar and walked through the lobby of *Valley Lodge and Spa*. Sweat ran down my back as I was still in the black cardigan I traveled in; my rainbow tribal-printed backpack slouched on my shoulders. To my right, a black and gold patterned rug laid on the ground beneath two circular glass tables, bamboo stools, and a camel-colored leather bench. A sign read above: “South Africa. Inspiring new ways.” The sun poured into the lobby as more black and brown women walked in, eyes wide, smiling in admiration. I turned to my left to admire the black and white poster of an indigenous woman in a traditional neck dress, with assorted beads and coin sized ornaments dangling from fine linked chains hung on the wall. Then, I stared at the black marble fireplace with *The Colored Girl* logo pasted on it. I still could not believe I was in South Africa. The air smelled of fresh palm, moving smoothly through my nostrils. I walked down the stone walkway to my room, which was more like a villa. These dark brown fluffy things that looked like moles mixed with chinchillas ran fast past my feet. I was met with a path of seven flattened tree barks and a patio of rust orange tiles. Two dark wooden chairs sat with cream-colored cushions and a table with a white ashtray at its center. Before walking into my room, to my surprise, the gold-plated sign read 24, my favorite number.

IMARA means “power, persistence, and endurance”. It means a “sacred space created by women for women to come together, have real conversations, grow, and let go.” The 7-day retreat was hosted by Tori Elizabeth and Victory Jones, founders of *The Colored Girl*, a boutique company that creates branded campaigns, hosts seminars of sisterhood, and builds awareness around the many issues faced by women. I had been to four different events hosted by *The*

*Colored Girl* in over a year upon deciding to join the retreat. I almost missed the opportunity because I had no one to go with. I even did a post begging on Facebook. No use. Almost to the deadline, I sucked it up and put down a deposit. The most expensive deposit I've ever put down on anything in my whole life, unless you want to count me and my sister's trip to Disney World. This was my first experience traveling abroad and traveling alone. No family meetups. No girls trip. Just me and the friendly skies. To me, this trip signified trusting my instincts, taking great leaps, and forming a deeper connection not only with myself but to the continent of Africa.

Magaliesburg is a small town in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Temperatures were around 72 degrees at the peak of the day and 57 degrees at night. It was autumn then, as the country falls under the equator. We were told to pack comfy socks, a jacket or two, an all-white outfit, and some pajamas for a self-care party. The retreat consisted of discussion panels, wellness activities such as guided yoga and meditation and nature hikes, three scheduled meals of authentic South African cuisine, and historically significant tours, which I was excited for. I was truly looking forward to making new friends and connecting with some of the speakers which whom I was inspired. I felt a strong sense that this trip would help me to find my community, or in other words, build a sisterhood. I wanted this trip to resemble me finally doing something for myself, caring for myself, and fully putting my *purpose* and *identity* into perspective.

### **Day One- Intentions**

The first night in Magaliesburg was beautiful. Once in room 24, I discovered goodies, including a branded bag and umbrella and *Shea Moisture* hair and body products. I thought, "Ah, this is what that three thousand dollars paid for!". The 'therapists' of Valley Lodge's Spa and

Hydra Therapy Centre gave complimentary foot massages and champagne. I remember being pissed that my toenail polish chipped when I took off my sneaker. I joined a small group to tour the grounds of the lodging of seven days, encountering bare bottomed monkeys and zebras roaming freely. Of course, the tourist in me took videos and multiple pictures. I could only imagine what those zebras were thinking. “Hey, the paparazzi!” Then there was the naming ceremony. The Sangoma, or African spiritual teacher, Gogo Dineo Ndlanzi, led the group huddled under a tented sanctuary draped in African cloths and pillows lit by the pink, fluorescent IMARA sign, zebras not too far away. After being serenaded with the sounds and song of the Sangoma in a Southern Bantu language and African drums, we gathered around a circle of rolled cloths pinned with a Setswana name and meaning. I can’t remember my name, or find the pin, but I remember the saying on the back reading, “hugs”. Gogo made her way around the circle, asking for volunteers to do a spiritual reading. Based on your cloth and assigned name, she will tell you what you’ve been facing and who you were destined to be. By the time I gained the courage to volunteer, we were out of time and needed to head to dinner. Of course.

The South African Tourism organization hosted a welcome dinner; by far, the most fresh and flavorful food I’ve ever eaten. I sat at a table with a few ladies I met at the airport: Jade, Yaritza (Yari), and Brittany. We connected through the IMARA Facebook group and decided we were going to stick together! It was enough that I was traveling alone and had a single room. I wanted to feel like I knew someone although they were still strangers. Through Brittany, I met her roommate, Victoria. I followed them to the bar. “This is our first night in South Africa, ladies! Let’s have fun. Who wants a drink?” Yari exclaimed. “Latrice don’t be an old lady! Drink something!” I explained probably a thousand times that I wasn’t a drinker, but cracked and bought a blue long island so I could fit in. Didn’t want the flack. I admired the long glass, red

plastic palm-shaped stirrer, and pineapple while the others took shots. It was 1:00am. I gulped the liquor and wished everyone good night.

## **Day Two- Identity**

The next day, I rose early to participate in guided yoga with Dr. Sanaa Jaman. I have practiced yoga with her before in the states, but something felt different. I was doing yoga in South Africa, for Pete's sake! My throat was feeling rather dry since arrival day, so I had been drinking a lot of water. I hoped that I wasn't getting sick. The day progressed into the first round of panels; the first was the founder's keynote with Tori and Victory, followed by Mental Health Matters moderated by Alechia Reese, and Daughters of the Diaspora, which was guided by Ivy Coco, Sheryl Lee Ralph's daughter. How surreal is that? The conversations were so heavy, making me think deeply into myself; who do I want to impact? Who do I need to impact me? I learned that mental toughness or mental empowerment meant realizing that things come in passing. At that point in time, you couldn't tell me that I wasn't suffering. It was tough to accept that in some or most cases, my mental struggles were imposed by myself. I took the scheduled free time to visit the spa and get a massage. I sipped from a cup of freshly blended apples, pineapples, and greens in a plush white robe, admiring the spa's modern aesthetic.

After snoring through my massage, I sat in the lobby and sipped on hot green tea. The room was filled with bright white lights, grey tiled walls, and furniture. The teal pillows gave the room contrast. I looked over to the jacuzzi where Jade and a few others took pictures in their bikinis. I thought about walking over to chat but spotted a House and Leisure magazine on the marble table. I shrugged and flipped through the bundle of gloss pages instead. I was too relaxed. I headed back to my room to get ready for dinner. There was a special chef this night and we

were required to dress nicely. Thank the lord for Fashion Nova! I pulled together a mustard yellow ensemble with a clear chunky heel. You couldn't tell me nothing! Yari and Jade's room was two doors down from mine, so I waddled through the grass and stones to meet with them. I remember walking into their room and thinking "what blew up in here?!" There were clothes everywhere. Makeup brushes, shoes, eyelashes. I immediately let go of the regret of rooming by myself. Yes. I was there to make friends and be around inspiring women, but I was glad to have some alone time too. This trip was more than just that. It was finally getting away from the hustle and bustle of New York, the back and forth with my grandmother, the hating of my job, the bickering within my new relationship, and the constant struggle to do shit for myself. Who knew the solution was to skip town on two airplanes to another continent?

### **Day Three- PIRL (Poppin' In Real Life)**

Guess who woke up with no voice? I knew there was something to the discomfort in my throat after that eleven-hour flight. I could not manage a word, not even a laugh, let alone a chuckle. My 'accountability partner', Brittany, spoke on my behalf for most of the trip, but more on that later. This was the beginning of my hot tea, lemon and honey binge. I thought maybe it was the night-long laughter at Samke expressing why we should date men with big penises. I didn't think I was yelling that much to be hoarse. So, making connections was out of the window. How could I do that without a voice? What was I going to do? Text? Carry around a pen and paper? This morning's panels were on working a 9 to 5 versus entrepreneurs. I was surrounded by entrepreneurs. Yari had a 9 to 5, but she was a makeup artist who owned a studio. Jade was running a nonprofit organization for those with scoliosis (and happened to spend the whole trip talking about the screws in her back) and did a lot of freelance brand work. Brittany was a self-employed graphic designer. It was a surprise to learn that she had done all the

branding for the retreat. Her social media handle sat on the back of the program booklet. She shied away from my shouting her out but that was dope. Sitting amongst them and all the other women made me wonder what the hell I was doing with my life. I talked a lot about being a licensed nail technician. “Why aren’t you doing that?” “Do you have a large clientele?” “Do my nails, girl. I’ll pay you!”

Over the years, I had convinced myself that I wanted to become a full-time nail technician, build a brand, and open a nail salon and spa. It inspired my going to nail school between college degrees and my undergrad choice of Business Management. I worked in two salons, one full time in 2013 and one on the weekends while I currently work as a bank teller. I received so many compliments on my own nails and had a cute following on Instagram, but even with my deep fascination for nails, my talent and what I had accomplished thus far, my passions did not lie there. Writing is where it was. I sat at a table for lunch with Brittany, Victoria, and the “Great Girlfriends” Brandice Daniel and Sybil Amuti. We were talking about (well, I croaked) what are goals were, what we did for work, and so on. “I want to write! I want to be an author!” I managed to yell across the table to Brandice. Her concerned eyes were distracting but she offered: “Well then, write. If that’s what makes you happy, do it.” I forced a smile and nod of understanding, but my mind yelled, “where the hell do I start?” I was beyond frustrated with my cracking voice by the end of lunch. Brittany rubbed my back in sympathy. I couldn’t express myself the way that I wanted to. I worried that I wasn’t convincing. Damn dry airplane air. I scurried out of lunch to stop Brandice and Sybil for a picture. Very fan-like of me.

#### **Day Four- Tribe**

We took a 7:00am guided hike on the Steenkoppie Trail, a nature reserve on the property of Valley Lodge. A “CAUTION: WILD ANIMALS” sign met us at the opening gates along with the owner of the lodge and his son. I learned the history of the lodge, what animals lurked in the grasses and trees, and how important it was for them to preserve these grounds. The trek was amazing, minus the frequent stooping and climbing. I reminded myself that I came for the adventure. I participated in a guided meditation that required me to envision what I most wanted in my life; I only drew a white space which now looking back makes sense. I needed clarity. I needed time to reflect. I needed an apartment. Then, the meditation guide said, “allow yourself to find your inner joy. Smile.” Ha. I started to cry. I could not smile. I could not find inner joy. My face was stuck. My emotions were shot. I felt everything but joy. It was enough that I couldn’t speak. My tears had no sound until I started coughing. I grabbed my bamboo purse and left in the middle of meditation. Still coughing, a local who was working on the grounds offered me his bottle of water. “You ok over there?” My throat was so dry, I coughed a thank you. He gave me an odd smile and walked off. I gathered myself to the best of my ability and marched to my room like a toddler. I hoped no one saw me.

As the day went by, the series of panels continued. One was on friendship. It featured the founders of *The Colored Girl*, Tori and Victory, and you guessed it, Brandice and Sybil. They talked about how their friendships shaped their lives and how grateful they were for one another. “Have you ladies always had close girlfriends in your life?” Tori asked the group. “I have.” Brandice replied. “Eh”, with a wave of a hand, went Victory. We shared the same sentiments. All the memories of failed friendships flashed through my mind. A woman sitting behind me got up and shared a testimonial about all her close friends turning on her and she cried. She asked,

“Why can’t I have true friends? What have I done?” I wanted to hug her. I wanted to text Brittany, who was sitting right next to me, what I wanted to say to her so she could tell her. I didn’t. I watched as people swarmed to hug this woman and tell her they were there for her and that this was what the retreat was all about. At least that was what I remember the speakers saying. At that point, my best friend wasn’t speaking to me, I had Brittany, but she was kind of my interpreter, and Yari and Jade started to distance themselves. They all were more successful at making friends. What friends was I going to make? Who was I connecting with? I mean, me and Brittany shared some things, both being from New York with Caribbean upbringing and not really liking Jade, but I wasn’t sure this was the foundation to a long-lasting friendship.

In the evening, the organizers hosted the IMARA Market. Various South African vendors, along with some of the entrepreneurs who were attending the retreat, showcased their products and services. There were beautiful hand-crafted dolls, authentic African garbs, and handmade jewelry and bags. I purchased a passport cover, gold-plated earrings shaped like the continent, bamboo sandals for my grandmother, and a t-shirt that read, “*Girl BOSS*”. I was happy to spend my South African Rands. Back in my room, I faceted my mother. “Janna, why you sound like that?” she asked. Janna is my middle name. I complained about my dry throat and the beginning of not being able to taste my food. She just wanted to see around the room. Thanks, Mom. I prepared a bubble bath with the remnants of my travel-sized body wash and lukewarm water. What’s next?

### **Day Five- Impact**

And that it was. Impactful. The Soul Traveller Tours organization took us on a journey to Soweto, the hometown of Nelson Mandela. We walked through the halls of the Constitution

Court guided by a South African lawyer, turned historian and activist, Lwando Xaso. She told such vivid stories of how the court was developed after the apartheid era and defined it as “conceived by the African imagination and built by African hands.” It represented social change, inclusion, and transformation. The experience put into perspective racism, colorism, and other injustices imposed on people of color. It is everywhere. This tour led into Constitution Hill, the remains of the men’s jail. We walked under the barbwire ceilings and stood in stone isolation cells. The Number 4 Exhibitions had since been converted into the Mandela Gandhi Art Exhibition, but the air reeked of tension and a bit of sadness. It even rained a little with a rainbow forming upon us looking down at how much the grounds had changed.

We then had lunch at the historic women’s jail. Another emotional experience where we were greeted by a group of elderly women who had been imprisoned there decades ago for their activism. A knot formed in my throat as others cried into their plates. Another fan moment for me, I apologized for my faint voice and asked Lwando if I could take a picture with her. “Aww. I’m so sorry. Are you ok?” she smiled as I took the selfie. I gave my usual spiel about the travel affecting my throat and that she was inspirational. We then proceeded to the Nelson Mandela Foundation and the Hector Peterson Memorial. It was beautiful to walk through the roads of Soweto. The streets were lined with vendors, mostly children, trying to sell hats or even dance for us. We were stopped by a group of male dancers in traditional headdress and briefs as they stomped the pavement barefoot and chanted. Many of the women in the group took pictures and offered money, but I chose to stand back and fully take in the culture. I observed our group, some women in t-shirts and shorts and others in flashy, name-brand ensembles. I observed how far removed some were from the experience and culture in which our roots lie. As glad as I was to be there, it was disappointing to see how some of them acted, spoke, and flocked in cliques.

Hell, we were late to the tours because some decided to go to breakfast at 8:53am when the buses were set to pull off at 9:00am. I was beginning to realize maybe this wasn't the community for me.

## Day 6- Soul Traveller

At this point, everyone on the property knew me as the girl with no voice. "Hey Latrice, still can't speak?", "It's ok. I got you. Relax your voice", "What?", or the infamous confused stare. Perhaps, the trip was made more for my other senses. We hopped on the charter bus on a journey to Maropeng, the *Cradle of Humankind*. According to the Sterkfontein National Heritage Site, the first adult cranium was discovered on those grounds in 1936. We walked through glass halls exhibiting the evolution of humans, time measurement with palaeomagnetic 'clocks', and various fossils including "Little Foot" and "Mrs. Ples". We were met by our guide, James, at the steps that descended into the *Sterkfontein Caves*. I was scared but intrigued. I wouldn't have been able to scream anyway. James probably repeated "don't climb on the rocks" or "Please stay on the trail" a good hundred times as we navigated the cool depths of the caves.

We came out into bright sunlight and a group picture then made a move to The Long March to Freedom, an exhibition of life-size bronze statues of those who have guided South Africa to democracy. Walking through the plethora of faces was overwhelmingly joyous. My heart was heavy. Faces like Haile Selassie, Walter Sisulu, Nelson and Winnie Mandela, and Martin Luther King stared back at me. The statues were placed in chronological order, all the way back to African warriors and chiefs on horses. This is when I knew I had made the right decision to come on this retreat. I realized how important my identity was as a black woman. These figures paved the way for me to live the life that I live, to afford these experiences, and

gain the knowledge that I have. Being on those grounds fueled something in me. I forgot about my voice being missing in action. I was grateful for life. I was grateful that I was there.

There was a movie night set up for us back at Valley Lodge. Dressed in pajamas, we piled together on blankets and silk pillows to talk self-care. After receiving beauty tips from Dr. Michelle Henry, we watched the debut film of a local South African female writer and director. It was interesting, but not as interesting as Tori and Victory announcing that we would be checking out of our rooms the next day. I knew that camping, or glamping as they called it, was a part of the retreat, but I thought that it was optional. We were told that we had to check out the next morning and some other fluff about the tents being amazing. The room erupted in chatter and confusion as the hosts swiftly left the pajama party. I was pissed. What did I pay for? The experience, I know but excuse me? I was not giving up my room especially because the camping didn't take place until the next evening. Where would I have put my things? I went to the reception desk and had to pay another 200 US dollars to extend my stay. Thank the heavens for American Express and no foreign transaction fees. Maybe I wasn't being a good sport. No. I felt bamboozled.

Brittany went back to her room, and I headed over to Yari and Jade's to get their take on the situation. They were excited to say the least. Although they felt it was a bit abrupt but expressed it to be a part of the "adventure". My voice was a little higher than a whisper, so I went off. "How can they not tell us we wouldn't have rooms?" "How are we supposed to take showers?" "What the hell did I pay for?" Tired of me, I guess, Jade chimed in. I was a mute for three days and was told to go lose my voice again. I felt that I would misdirect my anger, so I told them both goodnight and headed to Brittany's. I vented as loud as I could. She couldn't believe what I was told nor what was going on. She offered to come back to my room, but I

refused. I journaled instead. I was over the late starts to panels and tours. The missing information. The cliques of not so friendly women who weren't as approachable as they portrayed themselves to be. The fact that I had one-sided conversations with people because I couldn't speak. I sat in the room that I thought I paid for, and I asked myself, should I be confrontational or remain a mute? Mute it was. I could be so passive.

### **Day Seven- Alignment**

We went on safari with *Zemuelo Adventures* at the Askari Lodge, where lions roamed freely (behind fences), giraffes chewed and stared blankly, and elephants rolled in mud. We were able to feed elephants as they roamed around the Cradle Boutique Hotel, but I minded my business and took multiple photos. Upon arrival back to Valley Lodge, I showered and got dressed in all-white for the Waning Crescent Moon Dinner. Brittany came to my room to shower since she no longer had a room. I offered for her to stay in mine if she didn't want to glamp. It was a completely different resort. None of the decorations for IMARA was up anymore. They even changed the furniture I'm assuming back to their usual set up. I even had to pay for tea! Although I paid for an extra night, food was no longer a part of the amenities. Wow. On the way to the other side of the property for the festivities, I watched as women piled into the spa with their luggage to shower and change for dinner. At least, they were accommodating. I think.

The dinner was opened with a keynote from the founder of OnPurpose, Jovian Zayne and a bonfire circle where the women of the retreat shared how this experience had changed their lives. They cried about all the friends they had made and couldn't wait to get home to further their connections. Some cried about their relatives who had passed who they wished could have experienced the retreat. Then there was Jade, talking about those damn screws in her back. They

had to hustle the microphone from her. Too bad I still couldn't speak. I was going to ask Brittany to say it for me. I didn't. The women who decided to camp were assigned to their tents. I went to see Victoria's. It was nice. Big enough for the two twin-sized beds and nightstand. There was a bamboo rug covering the grassy bottom and a canopy net to keep bugs out. Dinner was finally served as live performances from Victory and another retreat goer ensued. Everyone was dancing while I sat at the table looking at the time. Brittany stayed back for the party, but I was ready to go. I wasn't sure if it was FOMO or the desire to go home, but by the end of the night, I was spent. I took off my heels and walked barefoot back to the lodge. As tears welled up in my eyes, one of the organizers waved and smiled at me. I couldn't help but feel that I didn't accomplish what I wanted to for this trip. Or did I?

### **Day Eight- Abundance**

Guess whose voice came back at the end of their retreat? My last day in South Africa was a bit of a blur, doing last-minute packing, taking another walk around the grounds of Valley Lodge, collecting phone numbers and social media handles. Brittany and I decided to skip the trip to Rosebank Market and went back to O.R. Tambo International Airport. We had lunch; the best burger I've had in my entire existence. I could taste it now. As Brittany's flight left before mine, I sat at my gate, writing in my journal a brief reflection on this trip. I was anxious thinking about the eleven-hour flight back to London, then six-hour flight to New York. This was a trip that evoked self-awareness, the significance of history to one's identity, and the meaning of community. I left with a heavy heart, full stomach, and a pocket-sized print of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.

“When the roots are deep there is no reason to fear the wind.”- African Proverb