

South Africa 1991

In mid-1991, Elizabeth was assigned to organize a trip to South Africa. The delegation would leave in July. At that moment, she couldn't imagine how that trip would forever affect the lives of so many people. After all, that was no routine mission.

Twenty-one years before, South Africa had been banned from the Olympics due to their racial segregation policies. Now, acknowledging the fact that Apartheid laws had been revoked, the country was returning to the international sports scene.

From the very beginning, Elizabeth was surprised by the media coverage. The understanding that the country would meet the IOC conditions to reenter the organization was controversial. Some people argued that it was too

early to believe that racial segregation had indeed come to an end. Despite the image of a unified multi-racial sports structure, black Africans still didn't have the right to vote in their country.

However, as far as the IOC was concerned, the country had already normalized its sports relations with other African countries. In the end, revoking that law meant that the country was leaving behind the very reason why it had been banned from the event. From that perspective, Elizabeth agreed with the decision.

Whether said decision was hasty or not, the measure left all South African athletes hopeful. The measure would open up the Olympic doors to them the following year, in Barcelona. The last Olympic medal won by the country had been a bronze medal in the now so distant past of 1960. And that medal had been earned by a Caucasian athlete, because black players had been called upon to represent South African delegations since 1904. Now, they were excited with the prospect of turning the game around.

Their visit took place during a delicate political situation. Nobody uttered a word about it, but everyone was aware that having access to competitions and medals was not the crucial issue; the equal right to said access was really in question. In Ancient Greece, the Olympic Games had the power to put an end to wars, why couldn't it promote social advancement in South Africa through sports integration?

After the official ceremony between the government and the IOC, the delegation had yet another delicate item

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on the schedule: a visit to Vilazaki Street, in Soweto. Just as there were restrictions to black individuals everywhere in the country, white people were not welcome in that particular territory. Despite complicated circumstances, the IOC knew well what they were doing. That place was the home to two Nobel Peace Prize recipients: Nelson Mandela, before he had been arrested, and archbishop Desmond Tutu. If advancements needed to be made, that was the right path to be taken.

All members of the delegation fell silent when they spotted those houses. Located on unpaved roads that seemed to stretch as far as their eyes could see and well beyond, they were part of the local slums made of small houses of brick or zinc alternated across the horizon.

However, Soweto wasn't just another slum. Those sad, dry, colorful buildings were home to almost three million people. It was as if part of the country had been squeezed and condensed to fit along those streets. Most of them were descendants of native men and women colonized by the Dutch, as well as of slaves that had been imported from Mozambique, Madagascar, and India, who were holding on to what was left of their origins — evidence of which were the dialects spoken on the streets.

The wounds left open after decades of violent conflict were there, exposed in the open sewer and supported by the Vilazaki Street monuments. You can't visit a place like Soweto and leave the same person you were before.

Soweto welcomed them with open arms under the



beating sun that early afternoon.

Many people walked out of their houses to see such distinguished visitors up close. Community leaders took upon themselves to spread the news about what brought those people to their country. And that was all it took for locals to flash wide smiles and reach out their hands. And the children — there were so many children — started to jump up and down, happy to receive some balls that the Committee had brought to them as a symbolic gesture.

Those scenes deeply touched that woman's heart. Elizabeth smiled as women and children wanted to hold her in their arms, and as men greeted her in a language she could not understand. Amid that infectiously happy atmosphere, she hugged the little ones, kissed babies that were put in her arms, and patted the little heads of children who got near her with sparks in their eyes and bare feet.

When she bent forward to put a little girl back on the ground, she felt dizzy. A strong wave of heat went through her body and, once it reached her head, everything went red and she couldn't see anything in front of her.

When she came back to, she was sitting at a house with dirt-packed floor. Her wrists and lips were wet, and an older lady was offering her a glass of water. Confused, she accepted the offer and drank the warm, slightly cloudy water without paying attention to what she was doing. After taking a few sips, she thanked the woman for her help and got up slowly.

She noticed once again the effect that the temperature

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had on her body. It was the same heat she had felt while hugging those scrawny kids and shaking those sweaty, strong hands that welcomed her.

A few days after her visit, Elizabeth described that place to Mario as “an immense slum where you can breathe in the tradition, the twelve official languages, and the soul of the South African black community hanging in the air. Once you’re in that place, you can no longer ignore how three million people have been precariously living in the middle of the twentieth century.” She took a deep breath before completing, “You could only ignore it if you stopped breathing.” At that moment, a tear rolled down her face to conclude her report.

Mario didn’t make any comments or asked any questions. He could see how that trip had affected his wife. Since she had come back, she looked more contemplative, a little sleepy. And that’s when she started feeling sick. Their suspicion was confirmed after a visit to the OBGYN: There was a baby on the way.

