

# Down in Demerara

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*Here we sit like birds in the wilderness  
Down in Demerara.*

Traditional song

This is a work of fiction. Resemblance to any persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. While I have endeavoured to remain true to the spirit of Guyana, the country I have written about is partly a creation of my imagination – certain names have been changed, distances warped, and details embellished.

## Part One

*Corriverton, Guyana, 1999*

I pulled back the dirty net curtain. The pot-holed road was flanked on both sides by a boardwalk. Behind were ramshackle clapboard houses, once painted white in the colonial style, but now a cracked grey. Men sat on door-stoops, waiting, seemingly doing nothing. Women sheltered from the sun under umbrellas at makeshift stalls selling fruit and drinks from cool-boxes decorated with slogans such as 'In God We Trust', 'I Luv' and 'Never Despair'.

Ellis, the only white person on the street, a petite figure as taut as a wire, strode across the road towards the Sweet Dreams Guest House. Even from this distance, I understood why Gordon wanted her checked out.

There was still a whisper of ocean freshness in the early morning air. I hurried downstairs. In the hotel lobby a table knocked up from a wooden crate was crowned by an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts. On the wall by the entrance was a condom dispenser, empty.

'Hi,' I said, putting out my hand for a quick, no-nonsense handshake. Ellis had a gamine haircut, a golden tan, and wore a tight fitting white T shirt and cargo shorts.

She blinked as her eyes adjusted to the shade. 'What's up with the fucking tie?' she said.

'It's top quality Chinese silk.'

'Jesus! Do you want to end up floating in the Corentyne River with a machete in your back?'

‘Gordon suggested it.’

‘Yeah, well, Gordon’s never been to Corriverton. What goes on in Slough isn’t necessarily the same as what happens here in Guyana.’

‘It’s not Slough, it’s Langley.’

‘I don’t care where it is. If you wear a tie people make a judgement.’

‘About what?’ I said.

‘That you’re a government spook.’

‘Spook! I’m here to help.’

‘Here to help! What are you? This isn’t Comic Relief, you know.’

‘I’m gathering data.’

‘That’s not what I’ve heard.’

‘I’m researching the labour market.’

‘You’re stepping into a minefield!’ Ellis put her bag on her shoulder. ‘I need something to eat,’ she said. ‘We’ll go to Renata’s.’

‘But...’ She was already out of the door.

We left the hotel and walked along a dusty street, busy with early morning traffic.

Ellis moved fast. She had the stringy pent-up energy of someone about to self-combust. A man staggered along the pavement and bumped into me. I apologised. He glared, and, without saying a word, wandered on.

‘Mercury poisoning,’ Ellis explained. ‘It makes people unsteady on their feet.’

‘How do you know?’

‘You’ll see lots of men like that. They get poisoned processing the gold. Brain damage, it’s irreversible.’

‘That’s tough.’

‘So,’ she looked me up and down like an agricultural auctioneer assessing livestock, ‘you’re the Department’s latest recruit.’

As we strode along the boardwalk I explained I didn’t work for the Department of Development Overseas. I was merely a consultant, zooming in, doing the work and zooming out. Ellis laughed. That’s exactly what DoDO had told her in 1996 and she was still here three

years later. I was freelance, I said. ‘That just means they pay you less.’ The pay was good, I insisted. Ellis said I should wait until the money was in my pocket and then decide whether it was good or not. I assured her I was on a swift visit to Guyana and I’d be leaving as soon as I had the information I needed.

We entered Renata’s through cowboy style double-swing doors. Out-front, the room was simply furnished, with wipe-clean tables and plastic chairs. Further inside, through an archway, there were scarlet velvet curtains and several softly lit cubicles.

We sat by a window with a good view of the crowded street. ‘Well, this is nice,’ I said, surprised by the choice of venue. My work as a labour market researcher provides me with some interesting experiences – but rarely are these experiences as interesting as eating breakfast in a brothel.

‘Best coffee in town,’ said Ellis. ‘Renata looks after me. I get less hassle here. The punters know what’s what – they understand I’m off-limits.’

‘How do they know?’ I could see this was a strategy that could misfire.

‘They can tell.’ Ellis stared angrily at me. ‘And if they don’t, they learn quickly.’

Even though it was breakfast time, the personal services side of the business was doing a brisk trade. There was a steady stream of punters leaving the back rooms with a far-away post-coital look in their eyes.

Ellis passed me a stained menu. ‘What do you want?’

‘What do you recommend?’

‘The eggs are good.’

‘What sort of eggs?’

‘Egg, eggs! What do you mean? You don’t want quail’s eggs or something pretentious like that, do you?’

‘I’ve gone off eggs. I’ll have a toasted cheese sandwich.’

She winced. ‘It’ll be processed slices. The tropics aren’t exactly famous for their range of fine cheeses.’

I felt uneasy as Ellis stared at me with her sharp, bright eyes. The temperature was rising: it wasn't even 9.30 am and I was sweating like a bastard. I slid a finger between my neck and shirt-collar, trying to loosen my tie.

'So, Felix, what really brings you here?'

'As I said, I'm doing a report on the labour market.'

'That's not some cover for another shady enterprise, is it? It pisses me off when MI6 or the CIA exploit NGOs for their own grubby agendas. It gives genuine development a bad name.'

'I'm applying a new framework.'

'Oh yeah?' she said mockingly. 'Tell me about it.'

'It's about jobs and how people earn their money.'

Ellis laughed. 'Oh my God! No wonder they're not employing you. You're not going to live long enough to draw your first pay-cheque!'

'What do you mean?'

'This is Corriverton, man.'

'So?'

'Look out of the window. What do you see?'

The dirt road was noisy with mopeds, trucks, buses and four-wheel drives.

'I see everyday stuff – people going about their business.'

'Exactly. People going about *their* business. And it's no business of yours.' Now that Ellis pointed it out, Corriverton had a liveliness and energy I hadn't noticed in laid-back Georgetown. People were talking on the boardwalk, shaking hands, doing deals, shouting across the street.

'But people work here, don't they?'

'They're not going to tell *you* about it. Especially if you're a government spook wearing a tie.'

'Okay, I get the message.' I slipped off the tie, rolled it up and put it in my pocket. I felt better without it.

There was a smell of eggs being fried. Ellis looked at me and shook her head. I couldn't tell whether she was bemused or concerned.

‘Felix, if that’s really all you’re here for, you are on one hell of a fool’s errand.’

‘So what’s going on?’

Ellis took a tobacco tin from her bag and was silent for a moment as she concentrated on rolling a cigarette. Jimmy Cliff was playing on the juke box: Let Your Yeah Be Yeah. She gestured towards her tin. ‘Help yourself.’

‘No thanks. I gave up smoking rollies a long time ago.’

‘Well, you don’t live in Corriverton, do you?’

Ellis lit the cigarette and blew a thin stream of smoke into the air. ‘Look, listen. As you may have noticed Corriverton is a busy place. There’s lots of money changing hands. There are shops, bars and brothels. But there’s no obvious industry – nobody seems to be ... to be working. Okay, you might think the money is being made up-country in the gold mines. Yeah, well, that’s probably right, that’s where the legendary land of El Dorado was said to be. But that’s only part of the story. If you go down to the waterfront tonight you will see it’s like a frigging regatta down there. Boats, all shapes and sizes, none of them with lights on, are scurrying over the river. In Corriverton, all you need is a rust-bucket that floats, the night vision of a cat and you’re in business.’

I nodded. I was beginning to understand what Ellis was hinting at: what we economists call the informal economy.

‘Across the River Corentyne is Suriname. It used to be a Dutch colony. It’s now one of the most lawless countries in the world. Guns, drugs, gold, credit cards, women, parrots, you name it, are smuggled over the border. Corriverton is the black-market capital of Guyana – the smuggling highroad of South America. Contraband from Brazil, Colombia, Peru and Bolivia all comes through here.’ Ellis paused, re-lit her tiny stub of a cigarette, and stared at me. ‘Nobody is able to stop it. In truth, nobody wants to stop it. Certainly not the government. There’s too much at stake.’

This news put an unexpected slant on my project. ‘Gordon said you’d be able to show me where to find the statistics I need,’ I said.

‘Did he? Gordon’s such a prick.’

‘Do you have any data at all?’

‘You really don’t get it, do you?’

‘I do,’ I said. ‘I understand. I’ll keep a low profile.’

Ellis gave a despairing sigh. ‘Okay, so what exactly do you want?’

‘Information on the labour market. Supply and demand, skills, assessment of local prospects. That sort of thing.’ Sitting in a bordello, it sounded an absurd thing to say.

‘Oh man! You might as well start here at Renata’s. Supply and demand, it’s right in front of you. The women have got it. And the men want it. Go out the back and ask the girls about their skills. Combine work with pleasure.’ She waggled her index finger provocatively. ‘You might learn something.’

The waitress, thin and disinterested, brought our food. Ellis had two fried eggs on a bare white plate. I pulled my dried toast apart to check the contents – a mastic paste difficult to identify as a dairy product.

‘What did I tell you?’ said Ellis.

She looked over her shoulder and then leant forward. ‘Okay Felix,’ she whispered, ‘we need to cut the bullshit and get down to business.’

‘Yeah?’ Oh God! I thought. She knows. She knows about Gordon’s crazyometer questions.

‘So when’s the ...’, she cleared her throat, ‘... the hardware arriving?’

‘The hardware?’

‘Keep your voice down.’

‘I don’t know anything about hardware.’

‘The shipment. That’s why you’re *really* here, isn’t it?’

‘I’ve told you, I’m in Corriverton to gather statistics.’

‘Yeah, and deliver hardware.’

‘Ellis, when you say hardware, can you be a bit more specific?’

She bent closer – our foreheads were almost touching. ‘Computers,’ Ellis whispered.

I was relieved. She wasn’t aware of the crazyometer, after all.

‘Why do people keep on asking me about computers? I know nothing about sodding computers.’

‘That’s why you’re in Corriverton. Everybody knows that.’

‘Everybody! Who is everybody? Everybody except me! What’s going on? Who told you about computers?’

‘Several weeks ago I heard a man from DoDO would be delivering some computers.’

‘Heard from whom?’

‘On the grapevine. Whispers everywhere.’

‘They must be talking about somebody else.’

‘There is nobody else. You’re the first person from DoDO to visit for months.’

‘I know nothing about computers, I swear.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course I’m sure. I was only told to come to Corriverton a couple of days ago.’

‘I heard about your planned visit at least a month ago.’

‘It’s not me.’

‘They mentioned you by name.’

‘They can’t have done. I only signed up for the project just over a month ago.’

‘It was definitely you.’

‘Who mentioned me?’

‘I don’t know! I can’t remember. It was probably an email from DoDO HQ.’

‘This is a case of mistaken identity. There must be another Radstock. It’s not an unusual name,’ I added.

‘You’re the first Radstock I’ve ever met.’

‘It depends where you come from. In Somerset every other person is called Radstock. It’s almost as common a name as Smith or Brown or Gummidge.’

‘What’s your contract say?’ Ellis asked.

‘I haven’t seen my contract yet. I’m just zooming in and zooming out.’

‘You ought to read it. Maybe there are other things you don’t know about. Other trips.’

‘What else did they say about me?’

‘Depends who you speak to.’

‘So?’

‘Some said you were travelling round Guyana. That you’d be coming here and then going up-country to Linden.’

I leant back, reassured. ‘That’s definitely not me. I’m staying in Georgetown.’

‘Yeah, so what are you doing here, in Corriverton?’

‘It’s a mistake. I’m not supposed to be here. And Linden? I’ve never heard of the place.’

Ellis shook her head. ‘I can’t believe I have to explain this. Linden is on the edge of the bush. It’s a quiet little mining town, though there’s plans to build a road to Manaus in Brazil. That’ll shake things up.’

‘No chance! I’m banned from venturing into the bush. At the moment Gordon is more concerned about things back in London. He wants me out of Guyana as soon as possible.’

The juke box was now silent and the back-room business had slowed. Apart from a lone man, legs stretched out, languidly smoking a cigarette, Renata’s was empty. Ellis sat back in her ketchup-red plastic chair and folded her arms.

‘Look, it’s just a rumour. Ignore it,’ she said.

‘Ignore it! You’ve got me worried.’ Traffic hummed on the street outside, footsteps click-clacked on the boardwalk.

Ellis continued: ‘Others said this person – who is definitely not you – would be dead within twenty-four hours of arriving in Corriverton.’

‘What! Ellis, I don’t like these rumours. I don’t like them at all. Dead! You’re trying to scare me, right?’

When I studied the Quantitative Research Methodology option in Lecture Theatre 4D18 at Bristol Polytechnic, the curriculum was about regression analysis, sampling and the standard curve of deviation. There was no talk, not even the tiniest bit of a mention, of threats of violence. Or, I swallowed at the thought, death.

‘Pay no attention,’ she said.

‘I am. You bet I am. I’m ignoring all this, completely.’

‘They were talking about somebody else.’ Ellis’s voice softened. ‘Relax, Felix,’ she said as if she was calming an anxious child. ‘I’m sure you’re right. There’s lots of people round here called Radstock. I just haven’t yet come across any of them.’

*There may be a few other small tasks*

I'd received the call a month before.

Winter had come early. It was a dark Friday afternoon in mid October and I was eager to go to the pub. The phone kept ringing – I eventually answered. A man who spoke in a charming yet detached voice said his name was Gordon Lewis and he wanted to know if I could help him with a project his department was undertaking.

To speed up the conversation I'd answered yes, yes, and yes, to all of his questions.

'Well, that all seems okay,' said Gordon, 'you sound like just the person we're looking for. Would you be available to fly to Guyana in two weeks' time?'

It was the sort of job with a sizeable income I'd been dreaming of. The Department of Development Overseas (DoDO) would pay me more in a day than I currently earned in a week. At this stage I wasn't entirely clear what the work entailed, but I accepted the assignment anyway.

'It'll take a fortnight, maximum,' said Gordon. 'We'll give you an open ticket. If you finish early you can grab a plane back to the UK.'

I put the phone down. 'Where's Guyana?' I asked Adge, my assistant.

'Africa.'

'Are you sure?'

'Why?'

'I'm flying there in two weeks time.'

Adge wasn't impressed. 'I wouldn't go there, man.'

‘What do you know about Guyana?’ Adge had never been further than the Tropicana Leisure Centre at Weston-super-Mare.

The dial-up modem was intermittent, so that evening I opened an atlas and searched for Guyana. I scanned the pages on Africa, I decided West Africa was its most likely location, but eventually tracked it down to South America.

By some quirk, Guyana is classified as being part of the Caribbean. For a moment I was excited, I thought of rum and reggae. And I was pleased to read they spoke English – the only English-speaking country on the continent. The one name on the map I recognised was Demerara. So that’s where the moist brown sugar I put on my porridge comes from. Further research was not so encouraging. Away from the coast there are no towns, just untamed rainforest, and rather than an azure sea fringed by white sandy beaches Guyana’s shoreline is a sluggish mud bath with mosquito ridden mangrove swamps. Down the coast was the infamous French prison, Devil’s Island.

Even so, in my current circumstances, a visit to Guyana suited me just fine. The money was good, but more important, Aurora and I needed time to sort ourselves out. We’d been living together for two years but I sensed something in our relationship was shifting. She’d said she couldn’t make me out, she could never guess what I was thinking.

A couple of months before, for no particular reason - it was a Friday night in 1999, with *Top of the Pops* and *TFI Friday* on the TV – we had both got deliciously drunk and stoned. We ordered take-away curries, went to bed, got up again, emptied a bottle of duty-free Thai vodka I had found in a cupboard under the stairs, and painted our faces with Nutella. We howled and moaned as we tried to lick each other clean.

Then I did something surprising. Aurora didn’t understand at first.

‘What did you say?’ she said.

Wrapped together on the sofa, I asked Aurora to marry me.

Well, I thought I asked her to marry me. The next morning as we changed the bed-sheets, cleared away bottles, roaches, and foil containers, I wondered if I'd made the whole thing up. Had I muddled it with the video, some Nora Ephron fluff-buster Aurora wanted us to watch? I didn't mention the proposal again. Neither did she.

This trip was an opportunity to figure things out; time apart would, I hoped, strengthen our love.

Over the following days Gordon, who said he operated from Langley, filled me in on the project.

'Langley? Washington?' I asked. 'Isn't that where the CIA is based?'

'No, it's Langley, Slough.'

'Slough?'

'Yes, Slough. By the M4, under the Heathrow flight-path.'

'Ah.'

'I understand you have a framework,' said Gordon. 'Is it cross-continental?'

'It should be, so long as the host country adheres to the international standards. Of course, I'll have to tweak some of the variables, but it should be compatible.' In truth, I wasn't sure the Radstock Framework<sup>©</sup> fully functioned in the UK, let alone overseas.

'Good. Go to Georgetown, get the information, do your forecasting or whatever you do, and zoom out again. There may be a few other small tasks, but I'll tell you about them once you're in Guyana.'

'It would be useful to know in advance what these tasks are.' I was busking it already. I feared additional activities could well push me over the wire

'Certainly, I will give you plenty of warning.'

'I can then prepare the relevant information.'

'Of course. Quick and dirty, that's what we want.'

Quick and dirty was okay by me.

Gordon was more interested in my clothes than anything else. ‘You’ll need a light suit and you must always wear a tie. The Guyanese respect a man in a tie. And a hat. You can get a very good Panama over there. I will arrange for a hatter to come to your hotel.’

‘I’m not a hat wearer.’

‘Are you crazy? It’s over 100 degrees in the shade.’

‘I’ll need more than a hat, then.’

Gordon recommended mefloquine as an effective anti-malarial – it didn’t interact with alcohol and would help me sleep and get over jet-lag. He said I should take vitamin C. You could prepare your mind, it’s more difficult, however, to control what happens to your body. Was there anything else I needed to know?

‘I’m not sure,’ I said. ‘Do they have the right data? I’ll send you a list of what I require.’

‘Don’t bother,’ he said. ‘On your first day, you will have a meeting with the Minister and his colleagues. They will organise everything. DoDO is providing a vehicle for your sole use and a logistics coordinator will be at your disposal.’

‘Logistics coordinator?’

‘That’s what Human Resources call drivers these days. More kudos but paid the same. I will arrange for you to receive comprehensive briefing papers when you arrive.’

My preliminary investigations on the web uncovered little useful information. The Cooperative Republic of Guyana had an undeveloped homepage with links that led nowhere. The UK Foreign Office offered the usual warnings about being bitten by mosquitoes, dangerously erratic driving, and the need to always travel with doors locked and windows closed. The CIA World Factbook listed pages of statistics, years out of date, indicating high levels of poverty, chronic infrastructure problems and crippling external debt – ‘all signs’, it clarified, ‘of a failing, third world country with socialist leanings’.

‘Shouldn’t I have a letter of introduction or something?’ I asked Gordon.

He roared like a madman. ‘You’ve been reading too much Graham Greene.’

I felt painfully unprepared but hung onto Gordon’s assertion all the figures I needed would be available in Georgetown.

On the day before my departure Gordon phoned to go through the final details. What sort of ties would I be taking? Silk was best in high temperatures – though susceptible to being eaten by voracious tropical moths. And did I know how to tie a Windsor knot? An invitation to the British embassy might be on the cards. Gordon had also arranged my hat fitting. I wondered what century this guy was living in? It certainly didn’t sound like 1999.

‘Bring US dollars with you, the Guyanese currency is less than worthless. You need a wallet-full of notes just to buy a good claret. Mind you, I’m told Georgetown is a nice little place. It’s like a Caribbean Isle of Wight, but with guns. If you look after yourself and take precautions, you’ll enjoy it. Between you and me I’m rather envious. The Guyanese are a hospitable people – the women are convivial and the cuisine is spicy. Try the rotis: they’re the best in the Caribbean. I would have done this work myself, but with the millennium coming up I’m crashing on deadlines.’

Gordon’s final comment unsettled me.

‘Oh, Felix,’ he said casually, ‘if you get into any serious difficulties, we can always fly you out.’

Several times over the next few weeks I would find myself pondering the significance of this remark.

Aurora was too busy working on the illustrations for her latest book, *Beautiful Butterflies of Wessex*, to see me off at Heathrow. ‘Nobody does that these days,’ she said as we kissed goodbye. She’d recently dyed her blonde hair black and had taken to using heavy eye-liner.

I promised I would be back before Christmas.

'Watch out for snakes,' she warned.

'It's a business trip. I'll be stuck in an office.'

'Okay, watch out for spiders, then.'

We both laughed and hugged. As I looked into her preacher-blue eyes and felt sad, as if I was going away for a long time and losing something.

'I love you,' I said as she closed the door.

*The Radstock Framework<sup>©</sup> is born*

Perhaps I ought to explain how the Radstock Framework<sup>©</sup> came about. As a youth I'd been aggressively unambitious. Until my parents moved to the London suburb of Ruislip I lived in a remote village on a hill overlooking the Somerset Levels. I had a quiet, but happy, childhood: bike rides across the Levels, fishing for pike, hiding in garden sheds with apple-cheeked girls and fighting florid-faced farmer boys. I attended the local school, a red brick building with one classroom divided down the middle by a dusty curtain, and was taught by spinster ladies who smelled of lavender powder and wore long floral dresses and Clarks sandals. I achieved average marks, but excelled in Maths. Maths was the one constant in my life and my world. I loved to explore how numbers fitted together – I got lost in the figures; I saw patterns and colours and music. Nobody else in my school seemed to get that.

I spent many hours staring out of my bedroom window across the isolated moors, which shimmered green in the summer and flooded in the winter. As a treat, for Sunday tea we would eat Shiphams' meat paste on Hovis bread, as we watched *Great Expectations* on the black and white television the size of a grocery box.

The highlight of my year was the visit to the Bridgwater Carnival, an extraordinary parade of floats lit with as many light-bulbs as a generator would allow without blowing-up. The climax of the festival was the sinister *squibbing* – a row of macabre sack-clothed men igniting hand-held home-made fireworks. (There was no shortage of gunpowder: it wasn't a coincidence there was a government ordinance (bomb) factory nearby.)

My parents, CND beatniks who incongruously hated jazz, worked on a small-holding growing withies for basket-making. They told me contentment was the thing to strive for – happiness was fleeting, and riches inevitably brought misery. To please them I thought I might become a monk, a saddhu or holy man, something like that, but the rigours of the ascetic life put me off and, besides, I didn't believe in any god.

I wandered between education and temporary jobs. I'd always thought of work as entertainment, to be watched from a distance. It wasn't really anything to do with me. Money? I lived on a student grant, signed-on at the Benefit Office and pulled pints on the side. This provided enough cash for a roof over my head, a drink and a smoke to help me relax.

For over a decade I did exactly what I wanted, steering clear of life-changing decisions, giving the finger to the Man. I got drunk, took drugs, had one night stands with people I hardly knew and never tidied up. It seemed to me the perfect work-life balance was 25 years of youth and pleasure, 25 years of work and bringing up a family, followed by a final 25 years of fun.

But five years ago I hit a turning point. I can remember the moment well. I was twenty eight, and three years overdue for the big shift. Hung-over and grubby, I was walking along Nelson Street in Bristol. My brain felt desiccated and my breath reeked of sour cider. I no longer enjoyed my unfettered, drifting life. Recently, while drinking cider in the Long Bar in Old Market I'd had an existential revelation. I'd realised it was *me* who was out of step, and the world wasn't going to come round to my point of view. As I moved down that dirty street, past fly-posted walls and rough-sleepers in piss-stinking doorways I knew something had to change. If I didn't get my act together I could be one of those dossers, struggling to live even half a life.

So it was time to straighten out and get a job. A proper job, a secure job, a job with prospects and a contributory pension fund. As for bringing up a family, once I'd got a job, I reckoned a visit to the registry office would follow shortly afterwards.

But a job with prospects, how do you get that? How do you choose? Selecting a suitable career could be a full-time occupation in itself. I might not have liked work, but I did enjoy talking about it. I wasn't suited to a robust outdoor job, so I got my hair cut, bought a jacket from Next and became a careers adviser.

At that time there had been a national shortage of careers advisers, so I was offered a bursary to pay for my training. It was a generous grant, more money than I'd ever received from the Benefit Office. I studied for nine months at one of the new Polytechnics and then secured employment in a small cathedral city in the West Country, which, for professional reasons, I prefer not to name.

I was employed by a local government department. The conditions were modest – I received a small, but regular salary, I was signed up to a pension scheme and every morning, at eleven o' clock, a mug of milky coffee and a *Rich Tea* biscuit was put on my desk.

One of my tasks was to visit a remote comprehensive school, deep in the nearby forest. The woodland community was isolated and suspicious of strangers – there were murmurs of cousin coupling and Romany slavery. Local career opportunities were limited to tending sheep or working in the drift mines – little more than tunnels in the hillside. Few young people wanted, or had the sense, to move away.

There was a code I wasn't privy to. I noticed nods and winks from the foresters. I bought a Mini car which broke down a day later – the roadside repair man said the radiator had been filled with porridge to stop it leaking. I moved into a house with pigeons in the loft, rats in the cellar and a poltergeist in the living room. I felt constantly ripped off, short-changed and never given the full story.

And it didn't take long for all this talking about work to begin to rattle my nerves. I felt a fraud encouraging people into a consumerist existence I didn't subscribe to. Day in, day out – even using my newly learnt open-question techniques, I went through the same conversations.

'So why do you like the idea of this job?'

'coz it's interesting.'

‘And why is it interesting?’

‘coz I like it.’

Round and round it went. I noticed there was a crucial element missing in careers advice. It was blindingly obvious. Careers advisers talked about the content of work, but not the context. What people really want to know, is *where are* the jobs? How many jobs are there? And what are the jobs of the future? Surely there was a mathematical solution to this? I looked at sources of data and current projections. As I studied these figures I began to see patterns and shapes and stories. Over the following weeks I experimented with government statistics and developed a data model and a basic forecasting framework – largely built on a doubtful predictive tool developed by a team of Dutch social scientists – about how the labour market worked. It was an achingly slow process. After a few months I ran a trial of the projections. I matched my predicted numbers for the construction industry in the South West of England with current Job Centre vacancies. To my delight the forecast was spot on. I then did the same for jobs in the hotel and catering sector. Again, my figures for supply and demand (labour market churn) were right on the nail. The numbers were singing, it was like a choir of heavenly voices. I couldn’t understand why somebody hadn’t come up with this before. The Radstock Framework<sup>©</sup> was born and I had my own niche specialism.

My employers were impressed by the financial potential of the Framework and employed me as a Labour Force Planning Executive. I planned away to perfection and for the first time in my life I felt motivated, doing something both creative and useful. With the help of a fulsome grant from the European Commission I was shunted into a corner of County Hall and left to develop the concept.

I was contracted to undertake assessment and forecasting by Chambers of Commerce, Training and Enterprise Councils and other dubious quangos that had more money than good judgement. None of my bosses knew what I did, and they didn’t like to expose their ignorance by asking.

Of course, there was great interest among social scientists in the framework. The Journal of Development Economics and the Journal of International Development asked for articles, but even now, four years later, they haven't as yet published. These academic journals take a long time to go to print. Several universities asked for in-depth details, which I wasn't about to give. You can't copyright a theory – I was going to hang onto this little cash cow and milk it until its udders hurt.

In the end the local government auditors felt uneasy with a department generating income rather than spending it. The Public Sector making money! It didn't fit within local government philosophy. So my work was put out to tender. Of course, nobody else had the formula, so I was able to buy it back for a peppercorn sum and set up my own company.

People said I should have made heaps of cash, but somehow it never happened and the initial excitement of those early days soon wore off. Now, as I approached my mid-thirties, I'd run out of dreams. After my bungled proposal to Aurora, even that road to the registry office was proving to be rockier than anticipated. To be honest, I wasn't feeling too optimistic about my future. My life seemed to have stopped and beautiful things felt just out of reach.

*Welcome to South America*

I flew by Virgin Atlantic to Barbados, and then with some smaller airline to Trinidad. Crossing the Atlantic felt like an eternity as I watched the plane's progress plotted on the little TV screen in front of me. Thirty-five thousand feet up, with the nearest land a thousand miles in any direction, I had the unsettling thought I was just a few rivets and thin aluminium sheets away from oblivion.

I was concerned that I had little idea why I was flying to Guyana and what I was going to do when I got there. I'd been so busy arranging visas, anti-malarial tablets, suitable neckwear and giving firm instructions to Adge on watering the Swiss-cheese plant that I'd had too little time to consider my plan of action and do initial groundwork for meetings. I hadn't seen any briefing papers, let alone signed a contract.

I ordered another bottle of screw-top wine and reassured myself matters would become clear as soon as I got to Georgetown.

I daydreamed and thought of Aurora: her awesomely curvaceous body, her Carrara white skin and her wide summer smile. The first time I met her in Bristol Zoo, nearly two years before, there had been a blizzard. It was a snowy February afternoon and despite the cold, she was wearing a long, Indian cotton dress.

In the warmth of the tropical house, a large turquoise butterfly, a South American Morpho, fluttered about her outstretched arm. The butterfly landed on her hand but quickly took off again. It circled and re-settled on her palm. It was a serene moment; I'd never experienced anything like it. I swear all the animals went quiet. The room freeze-

framed, while I walked, in the stillness, towards her intending to speak, but I could see from her intense blue eyes she didn't want to be disturbed.

Later that day I spotted Aurora, her Nordic blonde hair pulled back in a pony-tail, drawing in a sketchbook in the zoo cafe.

I stood by her table. 'The butterflies like you. Is it your perfume?' I asked.

'Most people are too impatient. You have to be still and let them get used to you.'

I didn't bump into Aurora again for a while. I'd visit the tropical house every week hoping she'd be there - her calm, fragrant presence attracting those tropical jewels.

At Port of Spain, while I waited for my final connection, I talked to a well-juiced Canadian. He'd worked in a mine in the Amazon rainforest. 'There's a gold rush. And everything that goes with it - booze, prostitutes and violence. The land is up for grabs. It's out of control and dangerous,' he said.

'Tell me about Georgetown,' I asked.

He was silent for a moment. 'I only got to view it from the back of a cab.'

'And Guyana?'

He smiled. 'They have a national pastime. It's called 'liming'.'

'Liming?'

'Hanging out. Man, they take chilling to another level.' He gave a muted laugh. 'Chat and chill, that's what they do all day - lime.'

'It's a pity I'll be too busy to join them.'

'Watch out for the rainforest. It's a freaky place - you come face to face with your inner-self. It can be disturbing. Just drink the hooch and go with the flow. Don't fight it.'

From Port of Spain we flew over the Orinoco delta to Cheddi Jagan International Airport, the airport for Georgetown. The pilot was an Indiana Jones type I'd spotted earlier, knocking back shots of rum.

The jet engines shrieked as the plane shuddered to a halt on what felt like a dangerously short runway.

‘Welcome to South America,’ the steward said.

I stood at the top of the steps and breathed in the night air. It was thick and humid with the sweet taste of composting vegetation. I wanted to change into lighter clothes.

Apart from a few yawning officials, the Arrivals Hall was empty. I’d been flying for thirty eight hours across numerous time zones. I had no idea what time it was, but it felt late. I stood in silence by the luggage belt. I could hear the fizz of the strip lights.

‘Excuse me, how far is it to Georgetown?’ I asked a man in uniform who appeared to be overseeing the baggage collection.

‘Georgetown?’ The man rolled his eyes. ‘At this hour?’

‘Is there somewhere here to stay?’

He pointed at a wooden bench. ‘You can sleep there. But it is not recommended.’

I’d given up sleeping on benches a few years ago. ‘How long does it take to get to Georgetown?’

‘It depends. An hour, maybe two. It is not far.’

‘Depends on what?’

‘Whether the Demerara is in flood. Last year was El Niño. We had very hot weather and torrential rain.’

Before leaving England, I had visited Stanfords travel bookshop to buy some guide books. I thumbed through Lonely Planets and Rough Guides. There was scant mention of Guyana. One guide was diplomatically non-committal, saying that ‘...there is little to see. Just being there is an experience.’ It finished by advising ‘it is best not to arrive at night time.’

I was now the last person standing by the conveyor belt which had come to a halt.

‘That’s it. No more bags,’ said the official.

‘Where’s my case?’

‘Come back tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow?’

‘It’ll be here.’

‘I need it now.’ All I had was my hand-luggage: a shoulder bag containing my passport, wallet, a book called *Under the Volcano* and a multi-pack of giant Toblerone bars.

‘We’re closed.’

‘Wait. I need clean clothes. I want my wash bag. I have to take my anti-malarial pills.’

‘Tomorrow’, the official said over his shoulder as he walked away.

Actually, I’d half anticipated this. With all the flight changes it would have been a miracle if my luggage had kept up with me.

I left the terminal and walked outside into the roar of a sticky tropical night. It sounded like the dry squeak of a thousand rusty doors. Mammals? Insects? Amphibians? Whatever animals were making this racket, there were a lot of them.

Despite what I’d been told, the taxi driver assured me the road to Georgetown was passable – the river bank had collapsed, but the flood level was lower now and God willing we would be okay.

I don’t know what I was expecting. Even so, my initial moonlit impression of Guyana came as a surprise. The streets were deserted of people and the single storey shacks dark. It was as quiet as a country under curfew. The driver negotiated his way at frightening speed around potholes, cattle, stray dogs and the occasional car coming directly at us. We passed a dilapidated factory of rusting silos and twisted pipes that looked like an oil refinery. ‘Demerara Distillers’ the taxi driver explained. ‘Twelve-year-old rum. Very, very good. You must buy a bottle.’

We parked in the courtyard of the Stabroek Lodge alongside a trio of black Toyota Land Cruisers. As I paid the taxi driver I asked him what made the chorus of noise in the night. He cocked his head and listened as if he’d never heard it before.

‘I think it is the car engine,’ he said.

*Hat fitting at this hour?*

The buzz of the phone by my bedside woke me. Early morning light shone through the window slats. I looked at my clock. 6.00 am.

‘My name is Roxy, Welcome to Guyana.’

Was this Gordon’s idea of a joke? My hat fitting at this hour? I couldn’t think straight. I’d had just two hours uneasy sleep.

‘I’m sorry, I’m very tired,’ I said politely.

‘I offer the best service in Georgetown,’ she said in an oddly seductive tone.

‘I’m glad to hear that. Please call me later.’

‘I will call you when you are more wide awake, Mr Radstock.’

‘Thank you. Oh, by the way, my size is seven and a quarter.’

‘Is that in English or French?’

‘English, I think.’

I heard her laugh. I put the phone down and lay spread-eagled on my bed, sweating. How complicated could it be to fit a hat? I only wanted to sleep.

The Stabroek Lodge, with its gables and balconies and louvered blinds, was built in the colonial style. Once the private house of a ballerina, it had a wide elegant staircase, polished teak floors and bug-proof rattan furniture. It was quiet now, but I could imagine the sound of dance and music once echoed around its spacious rooms. Apart from its green tin roof, every inch of the four-storey building was made of wood and at night, as I had discovered, it creaked and groaned like a tall ship under sail in heavy weather.

As I ate my breakfast of tropical fruits and a very large, blue-white hard-boiled egg, I looked out over a garden crammed with fleshy leaved plants and striking quartz pink blooms. A tiny opalescent hummingbird flitted from flower to flower using its needle-thin tongue to drink nectar.

My logistics coordinator arrived to take me to the Ministry. A handsome African-Caribbean man, he was immaculately dressed in a crisp blue and white striped cotton shirt, sharp trousers and shiny black shoes.

He was standing beside a white four-wheel-drive. I was pleased I would be travelling in some style.

‘Mr Radstock,’ he said with a bright smile, ‘Xavier Yolando Zeeland at your service.’

These days, I find it increasingly difficult to judge age – I reckoned he was older than me, perhaps thirty-eight. His hand was soft and he smelled strongly of spicy aftershave.

‘Pleased to meet you Mr Zeeland.’ He stared at me with his keen ebony eyes, as if searching for some secret. I was concerned he might find one.

‘Please call me Xavier. My job is to support you in every way I can. For the duration of your visit I will be constantly at your side. If there is anything you want,’ he said, giving me a wink, ‘anything at all, you must let me know.’

‘Do you have my briefing papers?’ I said.

‘I expect DoDO will have emailed them to you.’

‘I’d like to see if they’ve arrived.’

Xavier glanced at his watch. ‘We haven’t got time. We’re booked to see the Minister at ten.’

‘I’m not fully clear about my operational strategy.’

‘The Minister cannot be kept waiting. I’m sure, at this stage,’ Xavier said reassuringly, ‘a standard paradigm will suffice.’

‘Good idea,’ I said. I was impressed by Xavier’s knowledgeable recommendation. ‘Yes, a standard paradigm, I’ll go with that.’

This was my first opportunity to see Georgetown in the daylight. The roads were laid out in a grid. Alongside many of the streets were drainage ditches, some big enough to be canals. The limpid water was covered by delicate ivory coloured lilies. The wooden houses, built on stilts and set back from the road behind green lawns, had an agreeable, washed-out *belle époque* feel about them. I liked the look of the place.

We drove alongside an embankment, perhaps twenty feet high, with a candy-striped red and white lighthouse on it. ‘That’s the sea - wall. The ocean is on the other side. It is a popular place for families to walk in the evening.’ Xavier spoke with a precise, unambiguous BBC World News English accent.

Despite the grid pattern of the streets I soon lost my sense of direction. We passed the overgrown botanical garden, its grand iron gates locked and rusting. A flock of lime-green parakeets skittered from tree to tree. Xavier pointed out the cricket ground, ‘the legendary Clive Lloyd’s home turf’, and an interesting round thatched building the size of a circus tent. ‘The *Umana Yana*, a replica of a traditional Amerindian hut, called a *benab*,’ Xavier explained. ‘It is used for Amerindian Conventions. It makes the tribal people feel at home.’

We passed Shanta’s Roti Shop, ‘the best traditional Guyanese food in Georgetown, if not the country’, the Hibiscus, ‘good outdoor seating’ and then we were in the vicinity of the Stabroek Market, an area busy with workshops and stalls. The covered market, a vast hangar-like building of iron and corrugated steel, painted cream and rust, was topped by an incongruously large clock. The surrounding roads were swarming with people and vans. There was shouting and loud music – the air was filled with the smell of fruit and exhaust fumes.

Xavier’s driving skills were impressive as he weaved in and out of the unpredictable traffic and the ruts in the road. The car’s air conditioning kicked in – for the first time since I’d arrived in Guyana I felt able to think clearly.

Xavier appeared to know everybody. He slowed down outside ramshackle cafes and shouted greetings, pointing at me and laughing.

At one junction Xavier lowered the window, reached out and shook hands with a dreadlocked man wearing wrap-around *Super Fly* shades sitting in a 1950s American car.

‘That was Eddie Grant.’ Xavier said as if this would mean something to me. ‘He says he likes our wheels.’

‘Eddie Grant?’

‘He was in The Equals, he’s now a very successful record producer.’

Come to think of it I had heard of The Equals. They’d had some hits in the sixties. In those days Eddie Grant had a dyed blonde afro. Later – it was all coming back to me now – he rinsed his hair, grew dreads and re-invented himself as a British Bob Marley singing ‘Living on the Front Line’ and ‘Electric Avenue’, pseudo-revolutionary songs about Brixton.

‘I thought Eddie Grant was English,’ I said.

‘English! He’s my cousin.’

People looked up from their work and stared at our car, trying to see who was inside.

‘This Land Rover Discovery is unique in Georgetown. They think you are someone important,’ Xavier said.

‘Maybe I am,’ I replied.

Xavier looked at me and gave a condescending smile.

After half an hour of zigzagging across Georgetown – GT as Xavier called it – we drew up outside a large, shuttered wooden building. A peeling sign said this was the Ministry of Employment.

As I was getting out of the car Xavier handed me a cloth.

‘Mr Radstock,’ he said in his best authoritarian English accent, ‘can you clean the windscreen, please.’

Xavier squirted the washers. I wiped the glass.

‘Okay?’ I said.

‘On your side, there is a greasy patch.’ Xavier pointed to an area of the windscreen that seemed perfectly clean.

‘It’s fine,’ I said.

‘No, there is a smear,’ Xavier insisted.

‘Where?’

‘There,’ he said pointing.

‘I can’t see anything.’

‘You can only see it from the inside. You must rub harder,’ Xavier said, carefully adjusting a St Christopher medallion that hung from the rear-view mirror.

‘Okay, that is good. Now the rear window.’ Xavier waved at an armed security guard standing at the entrance to the Ministry.

I was getting hot. ‘Perhaps you could do this, while I’m with the Minister.’

‘We want the car to be spotless, Mr Radstock. Everyone is looking. It is important for you to create a good impression.’

*Don't go into the interior*

I was shown into an empty waiting room where I could hear the murmur of voices. The floorboards creaked with every step I made. I didn't sit - both the chairs were splattered with what looked like bird shit. I stood and listened to what was being said in the next room - or tried: the words were indistinct. The tone seemed serious, there was no laughter, and at one stage what sounded like a fist banged a table several times.

I studied a Bartholomew's wall-map, the first detailed large-scale map I'd seen of Guyana. I examined it with interest, standing on tip-toe to read some of the smaller italicised names. Guyana is a lozenge shaped country, bordered to the east by Suriname, to the south by Brazil and to the west by Venezuela. To the north it has an Atlantic shore, which is broken by a number of rivers - the Demerara and the Essequibo being the largest. Where the Caribbean came into all this I couldn't see.

What this map didn't show was how hot and sticky this tiny country was. I wanted to feel comfortable talking to the Minister and his team - but my collar was too tight and a fine rime of sweat was already forming on my forehead. There was a shuffling noise above me. A bird, the size of a pigeon, with a brilliant Van Gogh-yellow chest, was eyeing me from a rafter.

Guyana is an isolated country, rarely visited by Europeans, and really only accessible via the coast. What struck me looking at the map was the lack of paved roads. A highway ran along part of the coast, otherwise there was just one road, as straight as a rod, that led inland and came to an abrupt halt after 150 miles. The interior was either

impenetrable, uncharted, rainforest or remote savannah reachable only by plane. The map showed a number of grass landing-strips – useful, I guessed, for the transport of small, high-value goods. Otherwise, there was a dendritic sprawl of rivers, largely un-navigable because of perilous rapids and waterfalls.

I'd been waiting twenty minutes and wondered if I'd been forgotten. I looked up at the yellow-chested bird. It didn't seem to like my stare and with a rustle of its wings flew out of the window.

It seemed the majority of Guyana's population lived along the coastal strip. A text box at the bottom of the map gave a brief historical outline. The land was annexed by the Dutch West India Company and then came under British rule in 1815, due to a treaty at the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

At last, after half an hour, I was invited into the boardroom. The green, yellow and red national flag was pinned to a wall, otherwise the white painted room was bare. A dozen men, eleven of whom were formally dressed in dark suits, were sitting round a large mahogany table. The twelfth man, a vast, physically imposing individual wearing a vividly patterned orange and yellow African dashiki, introduced himself as Doctor Professor Lucas, the Minister of Employment. He had the most impressive shoulder muscles I'd ever seen – they went up to his ears.

'Now, what is it you are going to do for us?' said Lucas as he looked at his watch, an ostentatious Rolex.

Seeing this group of unsmiling men made me conscious of how unprepared I was for my assignment. It was beginning to dawn on me that I was a white face in a black man's world. I was glad I was wearing my tie.

'What would you like me to do?'

'You are the expert who has travelled all the way from London, you tell us.'

'My full instructions from DoDO are due to follow,' I replied.

A slight and earnest eager-looking young man sitting to Lucas's right spoke. 'Mr Zeeland has been appointed as your logistics coordinator and aide. He has been instructed to do all he can to help you. He is a good fellow. The best, in fact.' I'm sure I heard one of the twelve men – I wasn't sure whom – give a muted chuckle.

'So what is your strategy?' Lucas asked.

'I'm working on it. After an initial assessment I will need to make some adjustments to the standard paradigm,' I said, remembering Xavier's suggestion.

'You have a standard paradigm?'

'Yes, of course. It's based on a complex forecasting framework I've developed.' I hoped that might shut him up.

'I see. So what do you need from us?'

'Perhaps I can speak to your Office for Statistics.'

'I am sure they can supply you with all the figures you require.'

'Do you have age, gender and ethnic breakdowns? I'm assuming your figures comply with the International Labour Organisation's classification standards?'

'You will find our statistical data both rigorous and scientifically proven,' said Lucas in a manner that intimated there was no more to be said.

The men smiled; a couple of them clapped. I nodded and grinned in acknowledgement. This was going far better than I had expected. I imagined the surprise on Aurora's face (or, oh my God, shock) when I returned home early.

'Thank you. I appreciate that,' I said.

Lucas shrugged his massive shoulders. 'We are an hospitable country but it is best you do not go into the interior.'

'I will have no need to leave Georgetown,' I assured him.

'Mr Radstock, you must understand some areas are restricted. Ever since Reverend Jim Jones set up his community we have been wary of supporting settlers going up-country. People become intoxicated by the bush. They hallucinate – they think they are talking to God. And we all know what happens when people think they are

talking to God. Reverend Jones thought he was talking with God. But it was the devil he was communicating with. The bush may look like the Garden of Eden but visitors soon find existence is hard, and either return broken-hearted or drink poisoned Kool-Aid. To put it bluntly, they go up-country and they go bush crazy. It is not good for our people. It is not good for our international reputation. We need investment, we don't want to scare people away.'

'I'm a researcher, not an explorer.'

The Minister explained that the Cooperative Republic of Guyana was a rich country made poor by European imperialists with a superiority complex who had plundered the country's resources. Things had changed since the days of the Commonwealth. 'It is now payback time,' he said.

I shook my head, feeling uncomfortable with the implication.

'I hope my survey will prove useful.'

'So, when will our computers arrive?'

I tried not to look blank. 'Ah yes, the computers.'

The Minister stared at me in silence. Everybody stared at me. All I could hear was the screech of footsteps outside the room as somebody walked up the stairs. If only I'd received my briefing papers. My scalp was moist with sweat.

'I'm sure they are on their way,' I said at last. 'I will find out what's happening.'

The Minister sat back and folded his arms. 'Mr Radstock, we do not care for people who are here on false pretences. I will see you in a month's time when you will report on your findings.' With a wave of his hand he indicated it was time for me to go. I stood up. 'You must know,' Lucas said, 'you won't be permitted to leave the country until we have our computers.'

'They'll be here, I can assure you,' I attempted to say with confidence, but my words came out more like a series of high pitched squeaks.

Payback time? I didn't like the sound of that.

*I had no idea what I was going to do*

Xavier was standing by the car talking to a security guard. They were both laughing. When Xavier saw me he straightened up and flicked his cigarette to the ground.

‘Where next, boss?’

‘I need to go back to my hotel and work on my strategy,’ I said to Xavier. ‘Hopefully, the briefing document has arrived. Meanwhile, I would like you to book a meeting with the Chief Statistician.’

‘I have never heard of such a person. I will investigate.’

‘And later we’ll go to the airport to pick up my missing baggage.’

Alongside gourmet food and the best rum punches in Georgetown, the promotional brochure for the Stabroek Lodge boasted a ‘Twenty-four-hour business centre’. In reality, this was a stuffy, mosquito infested cell, with a low capacity computer, a printer with no paper, and a sporadic internet dial-up connection.

As soon as I booted up, the screen flashed with a virus alert. Gordon had warned me most computers in Guyana were less than useless, being riddled with herds of Trojan horses and other malicious programmes. Thankfully, Festus, who worked on reception, offered me the use of the work-station in the hotel office.

Gordon had still not forwarded the briefing paper so I spent half an hour composing a well-considered email describing my situation. I was about to press ‘send’ when the screen faded and the lights went out. Within five seconds the hotel’s back-up generator had kicked in,

but my two-page report was lost. My second email was shorter and more to the point.

*Hi Gordon*

*I haven't yet received my briefing papers. Please send ASAP.*

*I met the Minister today and he assures me all the statistics are available.*

*He also mentioned something about the arrival of computers. Do you know about this?*

*Best wishes.*

*Felix*

*PS Georgetown is charming and there are parrots everywhere!*

Exactly why I mentioned the parrots, I'm not sure. I suppose I wanted to add colour to a dull email.

After eating a chicken sandwich, I began to map out my strategy. I needed Xavier to procure data on mining, sugar and rice production – also the low-down on any other significant farming and fishing activities.

Surprisingly, for a former British colony, there was no apparent railway network. Good roads and railways oil the machinery of the labour market, but in Guyana transportation appeared undeveloped. I was disappointed by this. The train with its dense socio-interactions is the preferred mode of transport for economists. The railway carriage offers a perfect microcosm of society and provides a temporary bonding experience: passengers are rendered equal and have a shared destination.<sup>1</sup>

From what I could gather, most inland transport was by boat. But even then, the possibility of long river trips appeared to be limited. The

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<sup>1</sup> Elias, N., *Terminal Experiences*, *The Illustrated Sociologist* (1970), Vol.3, p.111 – 147.

forest was said to be rich in minerals and exotic hardwoods but with few reliable methods of transporting these natural resources they remained largely untapped. I was going to have to tweak the Radstock Framework<sup>©</sup> accordingly.

I wondered about Guyana's potential for tourism, but with no current access to the internet, all the information I had was from a handful of faded leaflets on display in the hotel lobby. I thumbed through scuffed flyers promoting the usual attractions: the National Museum ('opening hours are liable to vary, check before you visit'); St Georges Anglican Cathedral and the Promenade Gardens. The one brochure that did seize my attention featured the Kaieteur Falls. With an unbroken drop of 750 feet, it was described as 'one of the most magnificent water falls in the world'. It sounded impressive, but its location in the bush was remote, accessible only by light-aircraft.

I was encouraged, however, by Lucas's assertion the statistics were 'rigorous'. Apart from the computers, which I expected Gordon would advise on, my work seemed pretty straightforward. I'd probably be flying back to England sooner than expected.

I was waiting for Xavier in the hotel foyer when I was handed a note.

*Mr Radstock, due to unexpected family business, I am unable to take you to the airport this evening. Festus will arrange a taxi for you. XYZ*

I was surprised and annoyed. Xavier was my logistics coordinator, supposedly available at all times. But then a cautionary voice in my head told me to stop behaving like a colonial jerk.

'How do you want me to drive?' the taxi driver asked. 'Fast or slow?'

It was nearly dusk as we headed out of Georgetown and travelled alongside the mile-wide Demerara River.

'Safely,' I replied.

The river, the colour of Assam tea, was flowing swiftly, carrying along tree trunks and branches. Large anvil shaped clouds were

building and sudden gusts of hot wind buffeted the car. Despite the road being scoured by deep ruts and potholes big enough to paddle in, the taxi man drove at breakneck speed.

‘I want you to drive slowly,’ I shouted.

‘This IS slow. It is dangerous to go any slower.’

Apart from a couple of lethargic guards with guns the airport was empty. The check-in gates were closed and there were no flights listed on the arrival and departure boards. I found a counter marked *Enquiries*. There was nobody there. Through a window I could see a corpulent man lying in a chair with his feet on a table. I coughed. He didn’t move. ‘Hello,’ I called out. Still no movement. I knocked on the counter and shouted louder. The man shifted in his seat and turned his face towards me. He grunted and moved his head back and forth as if he was trying to focus.

‘You have a bad cough,’ he said.

‘I’m looking for my luggage.’

‘Ah. I have a list.’ I told him my name and he ran his finger down a sheet of paper. ‘Mr Radstock, your bag is at Piarco.’

‘Where?’

‘Port of Spain.’

‘That’s Trinidad!’ What’s it doing there?’

He ignored my question. ‘Do you want it? I will send a message.’

‘How long will it take?’

‘I will get for it you.’ He shrugged and shuffled back to his office. Through the door I watched as he took up the phone, sat back in his chair and put his feet on the table. He closed his eyes. I was afraid he was going to fall asleep again. Thankfully, after thirty seconds I could see him speaking.

‘Your luggage will be on the next plane.’

‘And when is that, next week?’ I said sarcastically.

‘You are in luck. God willing, it will be here in four hours.’

‘It’s not listed on the arrivals-board.’

The man gave a wry laugh. ‘The arrivals-board is misleading.’

‘What am I supposed to do for the next four hours?’

‘You are new to this country, yes? Things happen at a natural pace here. Sit down and take it easy. Breathe the cool night air. Enjoy yourself.’

I bought a bottle of Bank’s beer from a woman with a cool-box and settled on a bench outside the arrivals building to contemplate the wide amethyst sunset. Listening to the chorus of the night I watched a silent electrical storm illuminate the sky many miles away over the forest.

There was nothing to do but lime.

*I know exactly what Englishmen like'*

It was 6.00 am when my phone rang.

'Good morning, Mr Radstock, how are you today?' It was Roxy. I felt muzzy and numb. I'd returned from the airport at 3.00 am and had very little sleep, being woken frequently by the relentless howls from what I guessed was a dog's home behind the hotel. The suitcase, when it eventually arrived, wasn't mine. I was increasingly uncomfortable in the unfamiliar heat and longed for clean clothes. I was told, however, my luggage would definitely, it is guaranteed, be delivered to my hotel within the next twenty-four hours.

'I'm tired.' I said to Roxy, yawning.

'This is not a climate for rushing about. You need to relax.' I'd feel a lot more relaxed, I thought, if I stopped getting these early morning calls. 'When do you want me to come and see you?' she said.

'Not today, I have important business to sort out.'

'I will visit you tomorrow. Do you like a morning or evening visit?'

'Evening is best for me.'

'Do you like anything special?'

'You're the expert. I'll take your advice.'

She laughed. 'You like a surprise, I will surprise you.'

'Not too much of a surprise, I'm English you know.'

'I know exactly what Englishmen like.'

'Good, I will see you tomorrow.'

'Have a good day, Mr Radstock.'

Contrary to what Lucas had assured me, the data proved elusive. Xavier took me to a dilapidated two-storey building that once housed the Department for Statistics. The front door was locked. A sun-bleached notice tacked to the wall stated the office was closed, and information was available from the relevant individual government departments.

It was difficult to find anybody to talk to. With little success, we went from one department to another, there being no central government complex, with the ministries dotted around town.

‘Tell me about the Minister’, I said to Xavier as we travelled across the city.

He was silent for a moment, and then glanced at me. ‘You must be very careful of Dr Professor Lucas.’

‘It’s unusual to call yourself both Doctor and Professor.’

‘Professor is his forename.’

‘That’s his birth name?’

‘Some parents give their children aspirational names. The technical term is nominative determinism – if you call your son Judge, Prince or even President it is thought they are pre-destined to be high achievers.’

‘Interesting idea.’

‘It worked for Lucas. He’s not a medical doctor. He started his career in the police. He was a champion boxer and due to represent Guyana in the 1982 Commonwealth Games but had to withdraw because of a hernia. After that he changed plans and quickly moved up the ranks of the civil service. As soon as he became a minister he awarded himself the title of Doctor.’

‘Why not,’ I laughed.

Xavier said that while most people ignored their ancestry and thought of themselves as Guyanese, Lucas liked to emphasise his roots. It gave him a moral authority, especially with the Asians, who had come here of their own free will, the fools.

‘Do not underestimate him,’ Xavier said seriously. ‘He is very powerful. He has an entourage of bodyguards – we call them the Tonton Macoute.’

‘Like Papa Doc Duvalier’s thugs?’ I vaguely remembered an Alan Whicker TV programme about the Tonton Macoute, a murderous private army in Haiti, and their rule of fear.

‘Exactly.’

‘I see.’

‘And never question his qualifications. He has a terrible temper.’

‘I have no intention of upsetting him,’ I said.

We visited the Ministry for Youth Culture, the Ministry for Agriculture, the Ministry for Foreign Trade and the Ministry for Amerindian Affairs. It was always the same. I would be shown into a forsaken room lined with bookcases, but containing no books, and asked to wait. I would hear the scraping of chairs and a low murmur of voices in a nearby office and then be informed the data was too old to be of use, or was currently being updated and was not yet available for release, or the statistician was on extended sick leave.

*I thought she was going to blow me a kiss*

So far the hotel restaurant had been empty, but tonight there was an excitable party of eight at the table next to me. They were in convivial spirits, drinking Moët and Chandon, laughing loudly, and talking about a night-trip they were due to make up-river to watch caimans. With little silver hammers they were cracking what looked like giant lobster claws.

A woman, in her early 30s, wearing a striking traffic-light red trouser suit and lipstick to match stood up to make a toast. She had a North American accent. She caught my eye and smiled and then held up her champagne flute and – for a moment I thought she was going to blow me a kiss – mouthed ‘Cheers’. I felt self-conscious eating by myself but raised my glass in acknowledgement. With her immaculately styled ash blonde hair and her confident smile she was really rather attractive. I wished I could have joined her and her cheerful party.

The heat of the night was oppressive. A black insect the size of a chipolata dive-bombed the chandelier and crash-landed onto my table. To my horror I saw it was a giant cockroach. I never realised they could fly.

Back in my room, I telephoned Aurora. I hated long distance calls; all the time I was aware of the meter ticking and the cost mounting. There was too much pressure to say something significant. I wanted to tell Aurora about the exotic and unfamiliar world I had

entered. But I knew I would waste these precious moments asking what the time was in the U.K. and enquiring about the weather.

The call went straight to answer-phone. I sat on my king-sized bed and felt as unhappy as a lighthouse-keeper, far away from the one I loved.

I lay under the fan, trying to catch a whisper of a draught, and began to read *Under the Volcano*. It was set in Central America so I hoped it might give me some insight into Guyana. I'd heard somewhere it was the 11<sup>th</sup> best English Language book ever – but after twenty pages I found the endless descriptions of drinking a staggering quantity of alcohol were making me thirsty. I turned on the television instead.

I was watching an episode of *Friends*, the one where Rachel realises Ross is a tiresome jerk, when the phone rang. I thought it was Aurora.

'Hello, darling,' I said.

'Are you alright?' Came Gordon's voice.

'Ah! Yes!'

'Don't take this the wrong way,' said Gordon, 'but you sounded a bit over-familiar. Not the sort of telephone manner we expect from our field workers. We like our researchers to sound more assertive, and be respected.'

'Sorry, I was expecting a call from my milliner,' I lied. I wasn't sure what DoDO's policy was on paying for expensive long distance call-collect calls from loved ones.

'Really? Well, I'm glad I've got through to you. I'm using our special line. Anyway, I'm pleased you're having a good time. I thought you would. You ought to be paying us! I'm delighted to hear about the parrots. Do they have a small yellow patch on their head? If so they are yellow crowned parrots. It's a pity you won't see any macaws, they're only in the jungle. Look, Felix, I haven't got much time. Do you mind if we focus on work for just a minute?'

'Certainly, there've been some problems...'

‘We only have challenges in our department. How’s the car?’

‘What car?’

‘What car!? The Land Rover Discovery.’

‘Very comfortable.’ It was the one thing in this crazy country I felt I could rely on.

‘Well, keep an eye on it – it’s worth a life-time’s wages.’

‘Xavier looks after it.’

‘Good man. Now, you’ll be pleased to hear I’ve arranged for our contact in Corriverton, Ellis Deane, to show you round. Been there three years, Ellis has a good knowledge of the area.’

‘Corriverton?’

‘It’s on the border with Suriname.’

‘Suriname?’

‘Yes, Suriname, used to be Dutch Guiana. Corriverton is an interesting frontier town and will be an excellent opportunity for you to observe the grey economy in the raw.’

‘Are you asking me to leave Georgetown and go to Corriverton?’

‘Shoot down there in the Discovery. Your logistics man will know the way. You might see some interesting parakeets. Did you know there are twenty-eight species of parrot in Guyana? Of course you do, you’re the expert.’

I was beginning to regret mentioning the damned parrots. ‘Corriverton must be at least a day’s journey away,’ I said.

‘So?’

‘Dr Professor Lucas said I wasn’t to travel to the interior.’

‘Is that what he’s calling himself these days? Does he still wear that tribal kit? The last time I heard he was just plain ‘professor’.’

‘He’s not a proper doctor,’ I said.

‘Anyway, Corriverton is on the coast, it’s not in the interior.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Look Felix, it’s not as if I’m asking you to smoke hallucinogenic frog turds with Yanomani headshrinkers,’ Gordon chuckled.

‘My suitcase hasn’t kept up with me.’

‘Where is it?’

‘At Piarco.’

‘I wouldn’t hold your breath. At least it’s not still at Heathrow. I hope you packed a tie in your hand-luggage.’

‘So what should I tell Lucas?’

‘Don’t say anything.’

‘I’ve heard rumours...’

‘We’ve all heard rumours – politicians thrive on rumours. It’s part of the culture. Ignore it. Lucas’s a pussycat.’

I felt uneasy about this. ‘Will Ellis know where to get some stats?’

‘Certainly.’

‘If Georgetown’s anything to go by it’s not that easy.’

‘I understand, Felix. Working in an unfamiliar country can be very frustrating but you need to be flexible. If you can’t get figures, use observational techniques. Unpack the evidence, sniff around a bit, shine a light into the shadows, that sort of thing.’

I had absolutely no idea what he was on about.

‘Oh, by the way, I’d like you to check out Ellis.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Assess Ellis’s state of mind.’

‘Like how?’

‘Ellis’s predecessor had a breakdown. Corriverton is a tricky posting. Too much sun, too much rum. Or it could have been the long term effect of the anti-malarials. They can put the brain through the wringer a bit. Anyway, rumour has it Ellis is going the same way. Ask Ellis a few questions and check the score on the crazyometer. You know the routine: the day of week, who’s Prime Minister? How many wives did Henry VIII have? Why is a carrot like a potato? Just a quick report. We like to know what’s going on with our staff. We don’t like them to go native.’

Was Gordon serious? ‘But this is nothing to do with the labour market. I’m not trained for this sort of thing.’

‘I’m not asking much, a page or so. Put it on the invoice.’

‘Gordon, while I’ve got you, there’s a number of other things I need to talk about.’

‘Yes, go on ...’

The light in the room flickered and the connection faded. By the time the hotel generator had kicked-in the line was dead.

I was too wired to sleep. I decided to take a stroll to clear my head.

I left the hotel compound and walked along a deserted, traffic-free road. I wondered where everybody was. It was no cooler outside – the air felt thick with humidity. Perhaps, at the sea-wall the heat would be less intense. I ambled past a house where people were talking in low tones on a veranda. A woman was swinging languidly in a hammock, her hand gently brushing the floor. The homely aroma of spicy jerk chicken hung in the air. A large bat – or moth – zipped past. Guided by the pewter light of a bright moon and the occasional street lamp I wandered in the direction of what I guessed might be the ocean. A half-asleep watchman sat on a chair by a closed gate. The wide streets, with buildings set back from the road, felt safe. I remembered Gordon had warned me not to go out at night. ‘It’s a lawless place, Georgetown. You’ll be shot and thrown into a ditch.’ What did he know? That might happen in Langley, but not here. That was the problem with Gordon, deskbound and overly anxious. He needed to get out more.

In the window of a travel agent, among the special offers of flights to Florida and Canada, a poster advertised excursions by light-aircraft to the Kaieteur Falls. Although tricky to get to, this spectacular cascade looked beguiling, as did the lush rainforest with its fabulously coloured macaws and gorgeous glittering butterflies. Unfortunately the Falls were in Lucas’s exclusion zone – a trip there would be out of the question.

After twenty minutes I felt a touch of breeze on my face and could make out the shadow of the sea-wall. As I got closer I saw the silhouettes of figures walking on the rampart. I climbed the bank and in front of me was a shell grey ocean, glittering with hundreds of flickering lights. Groups of people were putting little boats into the

water with flowers or nightlights on them. The calm sea was shimmering with innumerable little rafts, made out of paper plates or polystyrene food boxes. Some of the vessels contained what looked like cakes or samosas. There was a smell of sandalwood joss sticks.

I sat on a bench and took in the scene. Behind me the land was perhaps fifteen feet lower than the level of the ocean. There were people, families, promenading along the broken concrete footpath catching the night-time sea breeze. Next to me a woman, wearing a gold-edged turquoise sari, and her little boy, were sharing a picnic. They looked at me with curiosity. The woman stood to take a photograph of her son. I pointed at her camera and indicated I could take a picture of both of them.

I asked what was going on.

'It is full moon, this is our festival of lights.'

'It's very beautiful.'

'Please, you must have some food. This is a time for sharing.'

Although I wasn't hungry I accepted a samosa. It was warm and tasted of potato and cumin. Apart from the Toblerone, it was the best thing I'd eaten since I'd left England.

I promised myself on another evening I'd find a little bar blaring out roots reggae and lime. I'd come all this way, it would be stupid not to. But it was already late and I had a busy day ahead.

I stared at the night sky. The stars appeared different, as if somebody had messed them up. The moon was also strangely altered. Was this the same moon I looked at in England? At first I couldn't work out the difference, but then I realised the moon was on its side.

Watching this festival in the warmth of the night, gazing over the shimmering ocean, with the smell of the sea, my sweet Aurora felt so far away.