

mas. You all don't ask me, "Why, Daddy?" I tell you a' ready things dear in the shop and then the gov'ment ban them fancy things. Yoy think I don't know you all wo'k hard in the rice fields. True, I did say when we cut rice. Alright, definite next crop when we cut rice.

Cde. P.M., I sorry I give you the picture so raw, and I hope you understand. Do, try help out.

Yours Respectfully,

Rice Farmer.

THE MAN AT THE BOTTOM

His child ran through the overgrown blacksage bushes that choked the footpath leading from his hut to the public road. He ran into Mathura's arms, almost stepping on the smouldering cigarette butt beside the hut. Excitement peaked and dark in his small face.

—Wha' happen, Ten?

—Car! —cried the child, panting. —Car stop. Man come. Mathura rose from his squat. He stood on tiptoe and peered over the blacksage. The evening sun was like awara needles in his eyes. He could barely discern the shape of the car. His daughter in the hut came to a window over his head.

—Is you fren', —she said.

—Who da? Who da? —Mathura asked, a grin beginning to spread across his face.

—Samuels,— said the girl.

—Edgar Samuels—, Mathura nodded. —Wonder what he want now.

He shaded his eyes and looked again at the car. Now that he knew whose car it was its characteristics divulged themselves in his mind. He could make out the colour and the stickers that looked like large clumsy patchwork on the car's body. From this distance, from any distance, Mathura

could not read the caption on the stickers. But he knew by rote what message they carried, after hearing them from his elder children and his more literate associates. "All for the socialist revolution"; "Land to the tiller"; "The small man be a real man".

What did Samuels want at this hour, he wondered. Dried fish? Unlikely. Crabs? Mathura could not guess. More likely soliciting donations for his party. In the decade since his party achieved Independence, Samuels had really mounted the social ladder. He had, since Mathura knew him, virtually climbed from the bottom.

When Samuels was still at the bottom they worked for the same employer. That was during the pre-coalition days. Samuels was shop-assistant at Lall's General Store. He parcelled flour and he chopped salt fish. Lall himself stood at the cash register. But Samuels received money from customers and returned their change. Once in a while he was allowed to make small change. Mathura did odd jobs around the business premises, planting the lawn, sweeping the passage-way outside, spading rotten stuff from the store-room. He was not allowed in the shop except when it was closed, and then it was to shoulder in bags of potatoes or sacks of flour for the next session's needs. Samuels and he were good friends. Samuels was just married and his wife had a sweet tooth. When the shop was crowded he would beckon Mathura to a window and slip him a small parcel. "Keep this in you bag fo' me."

Later he would beckon him again to the window and passed him an onion, a potato. "This fo' you."

No one searched his bag. It was an untidy cloth affair, and the kind of scrap someone would be repulsed to delve in. In any case he was allowed to take home the less rotten fractions of potatoes and onions recovered from the dump heap. On the way home Samuels collected his parcel and gave Mathura a pat on the back.

"You is a good fren to me."

Soon Samuels was putting things into Mathura's bag without his knowledge. At first he told him afterwards,

but later he thought Mathura would realise he put them there.

On slack days while Mathura worked on the flower-beds, his meagre back lathered in sweat, Samuels came out of the store observing him. "How long you gon go on doing this work, Mathura?" he asked.

Mathura shrugged. He never gave the idea any thought. The money he received was adequate for his wife and the two children he had then. His life style was simple and he was contented.

"You is a hard working man", Samuels continued, "why you don't try get piece land and improve youself. Me, I wish I could do hard work in the sun like you. Man, I'd be a big one soon. I'd grab a few acres of farmlands and grow dollars. Afterwards open a business like this even."

Mathura never really thought about these things, and he did not know what to say. He nodded to show his appreciation for Samuel's wisdom.

"Is one of the wossett crime to be poor and to wo'k with other people", Samuel whispered. "You wo'k with youself you is a free man. Nobody to boss you round. Nobody to put a limit to you earning capacity. What you wo'k fo' is you one."

Mathura listened and nodded. He never gave the idea any thought.

Then one day the boss sent for him and asked him to bring his lunch bag. The shop-assistants were gathered along the counter. There weren't many, but Edgar Samuels was not among them. He had gone on some errand, Mathura thought. And maybe they were receiving gifts from the boss. Why else would he require them to bring their bags. Mathura tried to hide his embarrassment. His lunch bag was a disgrace to the premises.

With a great deal of aversion and scorn Lall took the bag from him and emptied its contents unto the counter. Mathura turned his face. He was afraid of what the other shop-assistants, one of them a pretty young lady who sometimes send him to wild speculations, would see — his lunch,

a sada-rotie with some curried vegetables in the middle doubled up in a battered aluminum bowl. But an ominous silence descended upon the group, and Mathura returned his attention to the scene.

Lall was tearing open a small parcel which presumably also came from the bag.

Mathura had nothing to worry about. That probably belonged to Samuels. He would easily say so. Samuels would verify it when he returned.

In the parcel was a slab of cheese, a bar of chocolates and some money, about fifteen dollars, made up of singles and a five. Lall looked up. His face grim and cruel. Mathura had never seen him so stern. He tried to explain but Lall cut him off with a tirade of his own. A few minutes later some money appeared before him and he realised it was his wages up to the moment. He was out of a job.

He did not see Samuels again that day. He did not see him again for several years.

Within a few day of loosing his jod he had to give up his rented bottom-house. He carried his family to another district on the Essequibo Coast and built a hut on the present site. The land was no land. At present it was a mud swamp adjoining the sea.

Some periods of the year it virtually belonged to the sea. But the patch of land on which he built was the highest he could find, and it was dry. He cleared the middle-aged crouida and tamarind trees and in the tradition of Guyanese he built on stilts. Lucky for him that he did. For that same year the springs rose and threatened to sweep the hut through the crouida and mangrove to the sea. There were crabs all over the place, even in the hut. Mathura made a comfortable living selling them at the local market. Out of season he sold fishes - mullet, basha, paccu, all he caught within a kilometre of his home.

Then one day, almost two after Independence, he met Samuel again. He was outside the local market selling crabs when the car drew up beside him. Mathura held out a string.

—How much?

—Dollar—, Mathura said. He took a second, at the chauffeur and his face exploted in a grin. "Hi man Samuels, is you?"

Edgar Samuels cut a smile across his face and nodded his head. He has changed, Mathura thought. He looked more educated and he sported an unkemp beard like a University Professor. The inside of the car was fairly new, although the outside looked shabby and glue-stained. On the front passenger seat was a desk diary sitting on a disarray of thick files.

Samuels fished a dollar out of his pocket.

—Tek the crabs, Man—, Mathura said, —don't worry with the money. He went to the bag and untangled another string. —Carry this too, fo' old times—, he grinned, —I does still remember them days.

Samuels opened the trunk and Mathura placed the crabs inside.

—Well, what you doing now? —Mathura asked.

—Working. I working at the R.M.B.

—What da you doing so, selling rice?

Samuels allowed and amused smile on his face. "I'm assistant to the personnel manager."

—Good fo' you, —Mathura grinned, —you always has brains.

Later he tried unsuccessfully to find out what a personnel manager was.

For some months he saw Samuels passing in his motor car. He always lifted his hand high in greeting, his face wrinkled in an ungainly smile. He was proud to have a good friend so big.

Samuels stopped the car one day and reversed to meet him. Mathura stood with some friends in front of the labour exchange in Anna Regina.

—How the crabs? Samuels asked.

—Don't get crabs now. They not in season and the sea defence project driving them away.

—So where you working?

—Man want wo'k —Mathura said, —Is wo'k I looking fa. Now and then I catch fish.

"Look our party has a congress coming up in couple weeks time, I will really like you to attend and give you views." While Samuels talked to Mathura he searched for something under a pile of papers.

Mathura grinned, —Wha' I gon sey?

—We want ideas from the ordinary people, the grass-root people.

—Man want wo'k, Man—, Mathura said.

—Look, the congress will be kept right here in Essequibo, and we hosting the delegates from all over the country. We asking for a contribution to host the delegates. Gimme ten dollars nuh?

Mathura recoiled. —Man dey bad—, he piped, —me ain't got so much.

—How much you got? Samuels found the sheet of paper and fanned it before Mathura's nose.

—Things bad, Man ain't woking nowhey,

—Come! Come! —Samuels insisted, —this is a worthy cause.

—Things really bad—, Mathura said. He searched in his pockets and found four dollars.

—Mek it up, mek it up— Samuels said. —Ask one of you comrades to loan you a dollar and let we call it a pound.

Mathura borrowed a dollar. Samuels passed the paper to him to sign his name.

—You write it, Man, you write it.— Mathura grinned.

I want wo'k, Man— he said while Samuels tumbled with the paper. —You can't say a word fo' me get through on the sea defence project?

—Why not? —Samuels said. —What's you name, just Mathura?

—Yes. The engineer is a white chap name Simpson.

—Where you live?

—Better Hope. Y can do anything. Anything. Is five chil'ren I got now.

Samuels replaced the paper among the others. —I'll see what I can do fo' you.

—Try fo' me, Mathura said. —I really dey bad.

For two or three months Mathura saw hin passing, but Samuels always seemed too busy to spare a moment when Matchura tried to stop him. And then he was missed entirely. Mathura learned later that he had been transfered to another district of the country.

Eventually he found work on a small fishing boat. It was not regular for the boat carried an ancient engine which was always being overhauled. The good thing about their fishing, however, was that the catch was always good. It paid the cost of time lost and faulty mechanics. By and by the owner acquired a new boat and a new engine al the work became more regular. One day the owner who was also the captain sent for him as he repaired a net on the seadam.

A strange car was parked on the road outside the house and Mathura thought the boss was entertaining friends. A pleasant anticipation warmed in his throat. Under the house were the visitors - two Official-looking men. When they turned to greet Mathura one was a stranger, the other was Edgar Samuels.

Mathura's grin spread across his face. He shook hands as an old friend. The captain introduced the Officers as the clerk and the Inspector of National Insurance. Samuels was the Inspector. They were there to register the captain as an employer and the three men who worked for him for benefits. At first Mathura did not understand. He thought it was the dreadful Income tax.

—Ow, Sah— he appealed to Samuels. —Is seven chil'-ren me got now.

Samuels smiled. You very progressive, Mathura. But don't worry, this will serve them better in case you run into accident or something serious. You pay a small contribution; your employer pay on your behalf also, and when the time comes you receive the benefits. He has some hand-outs, he'll explain in detail to you.

Mathura grinned. He still did not quite understand, but it seemed alright. The clerk completed the necessary forms to which Mathura affixed his thumb print. Then the form was passed to Samuels for his inspection and initials.

—I glad you find regular work— Samuels said.

—Is not of the best you know— Mathura replied.

—Still things better now. By the way we have another congress coming up later this year, I gon come round fo' you contribution.

—A'right, a'right— Mathura grinned.

—You don't get dry fish, Man?— Samuels asked.

—Not now. We hardly dry. Is mostly fresh fish we selling.

—Dry some and keep it fo' me nuh?

—I can do da, yes.

—You get shark?

—We throw them back.

—Why, Man? That's one of the sweetest fish when it dry. Mek the most splendid metem.

—A'right, I gon collect a couple.

—Do that—, Samuels said. —Dry some and some other fish too. I gon collected them from you. And don't put too much salt on it.

—A'right, a'right— Mathura said after him. —You gon find the house?

—I gon find it. Better Hope, you say?

Mathura nodded.

For a year more he worked at sea. It was no holiday cruise. Death in some of its most gruesome designs lurked just outside the bulwarks. Driving rain, blazing sun, the boat afforded little or no protection. Then in the middle of the night when the sea became as cold as a coffin he would be roused from dozing beside the engine to dive into the water to pin a not or untangle a float. It was not that he grew tired of the work, but he felt his body aging rapidly. He was only thirty-five and already his frame was shrunk and his skin dry and wrinkled. It was time to return to land. Get

a regular job in the public works or send his roots into some clean healthy soil.

He quitted the sea. He fished for small catch in the trenches and swamps. He hunted for a job... He hunted for land. In his discussions with friends about available lands he became drunk everyday. But he did learn of a new agricultural scheme in the Gozier area, about six kilometres from where he lived. Several thousands hectares of virgin land to be empoldered for agricultural expansion. Mathura said to himself that he only wanted ten or fifteen hectares.

Fifteen perhaps, because someone told him that the government was giving fifteen hectares to the landless. He'd grow rice on ten, ground provisions on five. He'd rear cattle, poultry, pigs. He'd grow coconuts, watermelons. He bristled with ideas. He'd homestead on the land so he could protect his crops.

The prospect ballooned in his mind. He talked it over with his wife. He discussed it over and over again with his friends. Anyone with the time to listen and the wisdom to give him a new idea was bored to death with his enthusiasm and pestered with his questions. He learned where the state-land office was and how one went about making application. He toured the land.

It was an area huge beyond his stunted imagination. All he wanted, needed, was fifteen hectares of it all, he told himself. He sent his cutlass into the soil and it filled him with joy as he could effortlessly shove it up to the handle. The soil was black and rich, real pegasse. Anything would grow there, he thought, especially rice, ground provisions, coconuts. Mathura felt if he stood on the land too long he himself would send roots and sprout branches and leaves. He roved his eyes around and marvelled at the lush beauty of the land. There was hardly any tall tree, except for cork-wood which Mathura was confident of combating with an axe. In the distance heavy machinery growled for already work was begun on the canals and dams. There wasn't any time to loose. He must enter an application now.

Early the next morning he went to the state-land office. The officer was not there yet. It was after eight and the door was still closed. Mathura positioned himself as close to it as possible. He was tense and anxious. Something kept telling him that applications would be competitive and he must hurry. Others approached and rapped and questioned him if the office was not yet opened. Mathura felt that these people were there to rush the land. There cancered within him a sense of urgency with its attendant fear of loosing.

At nine the office opened and as the officer tried with the lock in the door, Mathura stated his business.

—Come inside— the officer said.

Mathura followed him into the room.

—Where this land is?

—Cozier, Sar.

The officer shrugged. He pulled a map from a corner, unrolled it on his table top and scrutinized it for a minute.

“I ain’t certain land is available there. I mean most of it been given out already. Anyhow,” he slipped across an application form to Mathura, “you can never tell they can squeeze you in somewhere. If you don’t send in an application you don’t stand a chance. Fill in this form and bring it back to me any time you like.”

Mathura thanked him and left. He tried to read what information was required on the form, but there was little he could read other than ‘name’ and ‘age’. The form had columns on both sides. He was hoping to complete it and return it before lunch. Now, he thought ruefully, he would have to take it home and ask some schoolmaster to assist him. On his way out of the compound his eyes fell on a familiar object - Samuels’ car.

Mathura brightened. Samuels was the man to assist him.

Samuels fired questions at him as he filled in the form. There was quite a lot of information required, thought Mathura.

—How much land you have already?

—None.

—No transport, no lease, right?

—Right.

—Cattle?

—None.

—Agricultural equipment, tractor and so on?

Mathura muttered negatively.

—How you propose to work this land?

—I gon wo’k it by meself.

—By manual labour.

Mathura nodded. “Is most bissi-bissi and wild-arrow it got.”

—How many children you have?

—Ten.

—Ten! Samuels stopped writing. He looked at Mathura, something more than admiration in his eyes. —Man, you should get an award for making children.

Mathura grinned proudly. —The last one born ‘bout a month now.

—What they name and they date of birth?

Mathura looked around as if they were the captions of posters in Samuels’ office.

—Look, bring the birth certificates tomorrow morning. All of them; yours and you wife’s also.

It was not until the following week that Mathura was able to submit the application form. Samuels had him running for three days, and then the stateland officer was unavailable.

The officer glanced over the form and nodded his head.

—You full it up yourself?

—No, Sar.

—Who do it fo’ you?

—Mr. Samuels, Sar.

—Edgar Samuels. Good, good. Since is he complete it you stand a good chance getting through. Five dollars to file it in.

Mathura slipped across the money and the officer made out a receipt.

—Mathura, how urgent you want this land? The officer's voice was quiet, gentle, without the slightest hint of curiosity or threat even.

—I want it bad, Sar.

—This application got to process, you know. It got to go before a committee, people like me and you. It takes time.— The officer passed Mathura a thin sly smile as if allowing him into a secret. —You know these chaps, they can speed things up. But they want something.

Mathura grinned knowingly. Say, how much you can raise?

Mathura thought for a while. Small two digit numbers passed through his mind. Fifteen, twenty, he would go as far as twenty-five.

—You can't raise two hundred?— the officer said. He caught a white look on Mathura's dark face. I mean ...let me explain... this money ain't going to one man. Is five or six persons on this committee and each of them got to get his cut.

Mathura actually gagged. As far as he could remember in his life he had never had two hundred dollars at any one time.

—I mean—, continued the officer, pressing home his point. —This land not theirs' but they controlling it. They can always bypass you application if they not satisfied. I mean you must know how bad you want this land.

For a long moment Mathura could not talk. He lowered his head and rolled the insignificant slip of receipt around one of his fingers. Another person came into the room and the officer's attention was directed elsewhere. Mathura inched out of the room. The officer glanced up as he came to the door.

—A'right— he said, —think about it and see what you can do. You fate in you own hands. The committee won't sit for a month yet.

It took Mathura five months to raise the amount. And it meant sieving the swamps for the smallest fish, while at the same time winding his belt around him like a clock spring. Eventually he handed over the money to the officer who daubed a fat smile across his face.

—The committee ain't meet yet. You still in time.

That was two years ago.

Since then the only response he received from the head-office was a letter acknowledging receipt of his application, and the number of his file. Several times he approached the local-office and was always told the application was still being processed; that the committee has not yet met.

—These things take time you know— the officer said.

—You have the letter they send you?

Mathura nodded.

—Keep it safe in case you have to make an enquiry about the application you show them the letter. They might call you for an interview anytime.

After several months and Mathura was not called for an interview he stopped making enquiries altogether. He felt his persistency was making him a nuisance. The land was still there, however. Hardly anyone occupied any part of it. Work was almost completed on the canals and dams despite the adverse conditions sometimes experienced. Mathura still hoped that he would be called for an interview any time. What he should do he thought, was to get some influential person to push things for him. The two hundred dollars had gotten him nowhere. At the moment Samuels was the only person he could think about.

He was glad he saw him now. He would ask him to assist.

—Well, how? —Samuels greeted.

—Me dey— grinned Mathura.

—Look, me ain't got much time. I want you give me an answer right away let me know what me doing, because I got other people willing and ready.

Mathura's brows lifted, alarmed. —Wha da, Man?

—Is because I know you so long I come to you fust.

And I know you need is genuine, so let me hear what you got to say.

So far Samuels had said nothing and Mathura felt a precarious state of suspension. A cavalcade of thoughts galloped through his mind. In the vanguard was that probably Samuels was able to locate a job for him. His face brightened at the prospect of something good.

—I got a piece land fo' you.

—Man, that's the thing! —exclaimed Mathura not the least disappointed.

—Is yours asoon as you ready, which should be now.

—I ready right away. What sort o' land?

—Good land. Anything will grow on it and it easy to clear. Fifteen acres will do you? Or you want twenty? Twenty? Twenty-five?

—Say twenty. Whey this land dey, though?

—Cozier. I'll carry you in and show you the exact area. Other people will move in near you later on.

Mathura was struck as with a sledge at the back of his head. It knocked the wind out of him and he could not talk for a while.

—Go on the land— Samuels was saying, —wo'k it, settle down, then we gon talk business.

—I didn't know you apply too—, Mathura said eventually, weakly.

—Yes, Man, I apply fo' three hundred but they cut me short. I only get two hundred.

—Who God bless—, Mathura mumbled. He felt robbed, cheated.

—So go on the land, work it, treat it as you own, then we gon talk over business.

FRUGAL MINDED

Nizam was late. At this hour when the dowsy sun rubbed its red eye upon the dawn horizon he should be out of the co-op farmlands, rather than approaching it. He had no right to be there, and he was well aware that it was unsafe to enter the farmlands even when mangoes were not in season. That was if he were caught. So far no one has been fool enough to be caught, and he himself had made countless incursions into the farm at all possible seasons of the year, bringing out bunches of plantains or roots of cassava whenever he chanced them in the overgrowth.

For that was the co-op farmlands. Inside everything else except farm crops grew and overgrew. It was veritable forest of wild trees, thorny shrubs and tall dense grass. Nevertheless it boasted the most succulent mangoes in the whole county. Any variety of mangoes one could call to mind, it was there in abundance. Much of it became lost in the grass and thorns, for during the swing of the season the members of the co-op or their children rarely ventured far into the woods. Once their baskets were full they returned home. The rest of the mangoes remained for whoever went for them.

In this way Nizam felt he was not stealing. He was helping himself. Really, he reasoned, he was preventing