

Life in Exile¹

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Shocking news in East London

Sanjay parked his car in the garage at his residence and walked around to the letterbox. A strange excitement ran through his heart when he saw a large envelope poking its tail out of the letterbox. He was half expecting a letter from his university as a result of the email he had received from his supervisor. The university had made a decision about his Doctorate thesis that he had recently submitted. He was quietly confident about a positive result, but he had to see it in writing before he could believe that he had been finally awarded a doctorate degree.

His heart began to pound a little louder as he walked up the stairs of his one bedroom south west Sydney flat. He recalled a similar letter he had received at his London office back in nineteen ninety-three, some eighteen years ago. On that occasion he was waiting for result of his MA degree thesis. After successfully completing his BA Honours degree in nineteen ninety one he was fortunate to get support from his employer to complete a MA degree in Social Policy and Administration at the University of London while working fulltime as a Principal Race Equality Officer for an east London borough council. Sanjay had successfully completed all his coursework over previous two years and just a pass mark for his thesis would have secured him a MA degree. He had already secured a supervisor from the same university for a PhD candidature which he wished to commence the following year. He felt really proud that a very well-known academic and a respected Black anti-racist writer had agreed to supervise his PhD candidature.

Sanjay recalled his excitement as he walked up the stairs of his London office with the all-important letter from the university that eventually shaped the future course of his life for nearly two decades. He expectantly

ripped open the letter and hurriedly read through the contents. He saw the word 'fail' staring at him and his heart skipped several beats. The shock that appeared on his face must have been very visible because his administrative assistant, who was looking at him from the top of her large glasses, looked very concerned. She must have sensed something was wrong.

'Are you alright Sanjay?' She inquired

'Yes, Shirley, yes, everything is fine!' Sanjay stated blankly, not knowing what to say to her.

'It's the result from your uni isn't it?' Did you get it? She persisted

'Yes, it is,' Sanjay offered sheepishly. His mind was blank, unable to comprehend what was communicated to him in the letter.

Shirley did not look very convinced. Sanjay never was a good liar. He had also not faced a similar situation in his academic life. He was proud of the fact that he had never failed any of the examinations he had taken throughout his life. In fact in his first thirteen years of primary and secondary exams he always came first in his class. He was a bit upset when he came second with ninety three percent marks a few years ago in his final examination at the Metropolitan Police Academy in London. Sanjay did not know how to handle this news. He got up and put his jacket back on. Shirley was still looking at him.

'They gave me appalling marks! I never expected that kind of grade from the university. Damn it!' Sanjay mumbled. 'I am going to my supervisor at the Uni. Got to sort this out; otherwise I will not get to start my PhD next year.'

He lumbered down to his blue Mercedes and got inside. He had a few meetings to attend but was in no mood to talk to anyone at that moment. He called his personal assistant located at the Newham council office and requested her to rearrange the meetings. He resisted a strong urge to have a drink. Instead he drove through the Blackwall tunnel and parked his car near Greenwich Park. He felt a particular closeness to this vast park. He had learnt many years ago in Fiji that the 180 degree longitude line ran through Greenwich. The zero degrees longitude ran through Fiji, where the day begins for the world.

When he migrated to England in 1980 with his Fiji-born British wife, Greenwich Park was one of the first places he had visited. Fiji being his birthplace and a home for more than two decades of his life, he had felt very lonely when he had first arrived in London on a cold winter day, leaving behind the warm Fiji sun and even warmer Fiji people. Standing on the line that marked the Greenwich Mean Time on top of the Greenwich Park a few weeks later, he had wondered if a tunnel was dug straight

¹ An extract from a novel-in-progress.

down from there, whether it would take him back to Fiji. He had felt strange closeness to Fiji whenever he stood close to the Greenwich Mean Time line.

It was perhaps for that reason he thought he would bring his two children to the Greenwich Park once he had settled down in London for a few years. Today, more than a decade after he had first visited Greenwich Park, he sought comfort there once again. He was now divorced from his wife and spent time with his children only during weekends. His former friends from the London Metropolitan Police had forsaken him after he had resigned as a police officer in 1987, joined the anti-racist movement and the British Labour Party. In the recent months he was also at loggerheads with the local Labour Party over policy issues. His councillor colleagues did not support the stance he had taken against the Labour Party and tried to keep their distance from him whenever possible. He had developed new friends away from Greenwich in the borough of Newham where he worked as an Anti-racist professional. These friends were all at work at that time and he did not wish to trouble them during working hours.

The loneliness he felt was suffocating Sanjay. He felt a persistent lump in his throat. He walked slowly towards his comfort line at the top of the Greenwich Park, occasionally steadying himself by holding trees that were scattered in the park. His breath was laboured for a relatively young man; he was just thirty seven years old. Thirteen years after he first stood over the Greenwich Mean Time line reminiscing about Fiji, Sanjay found himself at the same spot once again. But today thoughts of Fiji did not bring him the same fondness and sense of belonging; the 1987 coups of Fiji had changed all that and more for him.

London calling

For Sanjay leaving Fiji was both sad and exciting. The choice he was presented with in the mid 1970s was not an easy one. On one hand was the country he was born in and loved dearly. The country that was heralded as a paradise and the way the world should be. On the other hand was the woman he loved dearly too, the woman of his dreams who had come all the way from London and had decided to marry him. Kiran now needed his support, burdened with acute medical condition as she struggled with her first pregnancy. A very petite and fragile woman, barely out of her teens when she got married on the opposite side of the world from where she had grown up, she had lost a lot of weight as her pregnancy

had progressed from weeks to months. Her several confinements at Suva's Colonial War Memorial hospital did not bring her much relief. Her condition was getting critical.

Sanjay was very troubled! He was happy with his life in Fiji. He had a good job and was completing a Bachelors degree from the University of the South Pacific. He had all his friends in Fiji and his relatives were spread all over the country. Initially Kiran had returned to London after their wedding in order to pursue her career. The idea was for Sanjay to join her when his visa to migrate to United Kingdom came through. The two had kept in touch with each other through almost daily exchanges of letters. One day Kiran informed him that she was returning to Fiji to live there with him. Sanjay was overjoyed. She arrived in Fiji soon after that, giving up her career in nursing. Both very were happy living in a nice flat in Suva. Life was good.

Kiran was settling well in Fiji until her pregnancy began to trouble her. At first there was not much to worry about; her problems were put down to symptoms of any first pregnancy. But as time went by she was plagued by dehydration problems, which began to worsen as time went by. Even the doctors could not diagnose the real reason for her declining health. She became so weak that she could not perform many of her daily activities on her own; Sanjay had to help her. When her parents become aware of her worsening condition they insisted that Kiran return to London immediately. She would spend many hours crying after talking to her mother on telephone. But she would not leave Fiji without Sanjay.

So the young couple made a pact: they would go to England for up to five years and then return to Fiji. This would give Kiran enough time to recover from her medical issues and also to complete her studies if she wished. Sanjay would work hard for five years in London and the two would try to save as money as possible. The idea was to return to Fiji with Kiran fit and fighting plus with some additional money for a comfortable life back in Fiji. The plan was good and Sanjay agreed to temporarily migrate to England. In fact he began looking forward to going to London. After all London had Buckingham palace, the home of the Queen of England. It also housed Scotland Yard, the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police, arguably the most respected police service in the world. But he was mostly looking forward to the birth of their first child, who travelled with them to London in Kiran's tummy. That child was born as a beautiful baby girl in the Westmead Hospital, located not far from Greenwich.

White men working

It was getting dark in Greenwich Park. The year was coming to an end and days were getting cold and shorter. Sanjay felt a need to drink hot tea to warm him up. He began walking towards a tea kiosk located near one of the entrances to the park. He hadn't realised that a chill had suddenly engulfed the park. He got a scarf from inside the jacket and placed it around his neck. After putting on his gloves he drew the jacket collars around his neck. He felt warmer.

He could never forget the November chills of London. It was in November that he had first flown from the warm Fiji weather in Nadi and two days later landed at the cold Heathrow airport in London. In the hurried departure preparations Kiran had forgotten to inform Sanjay that he would be met in London by distinctly English weather. Therefore he had arrived at Heathrow in his warm Fiji clothes.

It was late November afternoon that Sanjay stepped out from Heathrow airport, with all his possession packed tightly in a yellow suitcase. Kiran still had her English winter clothing, which she pulled out from her suitcase. She looked alarmed as Sanjay was smacked across the face by a cold blast of London. She apologised profusely for not buying him a winter jacket in Fiji. She suggested they go inside to buy one for him before he developed a cold.

But as they turned to go back into the terminal, Kiran's parents appeared before them. Sanjay had met her mother in Fiji so recognised her immediately. He guessed that the handsome middle aged man walking beside her must be Kiran's father. Sanjay recalled that Kiran had many striking features of her father, including, by Indian standard, his light skin colour. The skinny young teenager walking beside them was Kiran's younger brother. He shyly shook Sanjay's hands and took the trolley from Kiran.

Kiran's mum, after a brief greeting to Sanjay, hugged Kiran and the two, unable to control their emotions, began to cry. Her dad was carrying a large furry brown jacket in his arms, which he handed to Sanjay. 'I brought this along, in case you did not have one,' he said as Sanjay gladly struggled into the jacket. He had never ever worn a coat this big before. 'You are a big man, no?' he added looking at Sanjay from top to bottom. Sanjay smiled politely as he walked beside them towards the car park. From the corner of his eye he saw his father-in-law glancing at him from time to time. He had only seen Sanjay in photos till then. He was not supportive of Kiran getting married in Fiji, but had to give in when Kiran and

Sanjay insisted on getting married there. He must have trusted his daughter's judgement in choosing a decent husband for herself half a world away from London. Now meeting Sanjay for the first time the look on his face suggested that his trust in his daughter was vindicated.

They got into the old Ford Capri owned by Kiran's skinny brother Ajay and headed towards their home on the other side of London. Kiran had told Sanjay that their house was located some fifty kilometres from Heathrow airport and approximately thirty kilometres from the centre of London city, across the legendary river Thames. Sanjay settled back in the back seat with his wife snuggled next to him, eager to take in all he could of the city he had heard so much about since his childhood.

Fiji was a former British colony and most of his life had been spent under British administration, till 1970, when the British handed over Fiji to local administration. He recalled that a large picture of the British royal family taken against the background of Buckingham Palace hung on one of the walls of his parent's home in his primary and secondary school days. He used to sing the British National anthem each Friday during his primary school days. His early days were very much shaped by the British administration and the history lessons that he had taken during the secondary school days. He had chosen to study Great Britain as one of his history electives in his secondary school. He could not believe that just four years later he was in the country to live; back then, for him five years were a long way in the future.

Even as a primary school student Sanjay was aware of the political changes occurring in Fiji which eventually led to Fiji's independence. London was very much the focus of news in the local media which reported the conferences held in London prior to the events in 1970. When independence finally came to Fiji on 10 October 1970, it was not a big event for Sanjay; he was too young to think about it seriously. He was happy to participate in the festivities and enjoy refreshments sparingly dished out at the school. Little did he know at that time that within ten years he would be travelling through streets of central London with a British wife and his in-laws.

'Will we see the Buckingham Palace on our way?' Sanjay leaned forward and asked Ajay. 'No, I have taken another route today'. He said in a heavy London accent that sounded strange to Sanjay. 'That route will be chock-a-block at this hour', he explained. Sanjay looked inquiringly at Kiran, not getting what Ajay had just said. Kiran smiled. 'He means there will be too much traffic on that route now', she whispered in his ear. 'You will get to understand his Cockney accent soon enough'. 'Oh shit! I can't believe this!' gasped Sanjay. 'Oh I'm so sorry, but was that a white

man pushing that rubbish bin?’ Sanjay turned around to have another look at a man pushing a rubbish bin, with a rake in his hand. ‘Yes, he is a road cleaner,’ Ajay stated, looking through his rear view mirror at the man collecting rubbish from the road and putting it in the dustbin in front of him.

Sanjay sank back into his seat and remained silent for a little while. Ajay looked at him in his rear view mirror and shook his head slightly, perhaps trying to work out what the big deal was. For Sanjay it was a momentous occasion; till then he had not seen a white man working, let alone collecting rubbish from a street. As far as he knew the white men back in Fiji lived charmed and privileged lives. He rarely saw them on the streets, aside from the rich-looking tourists who appeared to be always buying duty free stuff or enjoying themselves in classy hotels. The local whites lived in large houses built in residential areas which appeared to be exclusive to them.

‘Oh I am sorry, it's just that I've never seen a white person working back in Fiji’, Sanjay broke the silence in the car. ‘A white man working as a street cleaner; this is unbelievable!’

‘There are millions of buggers like them here, doing all sorts of shitty jobs,’ Sanjay's father-in-law stated without mincing his words. ‘The buggers fooled everyone in Fiji and the colonies,’ Ajay looked at Sanjay in his rear view mirror and smiled again. He appeared to be enjoying himself. He was not able to handle his sister getting married so young to a man living in a tiny island thousands of miles from their home in London. He had probably decided not to make Sanjay's life any easier in London.

By this time the old Ford Capri had crossed London Bridge and moved steadily along what Sanjay later found out to be the Old Kent Road, which wound its way from the outskirts of the city to past where Kiran's home was. Rows of terraced houses, interrupted by tall tower blocks endlessly lined the road as Sanjay desperately looked out for the farm on which he believed Kiran's home would be located. Climbing to the top of Blackheath revealed welcome greenery and Sanjay thought farmland would follow soon. Then they entered Charlton and the endless rows of terraced house lined the road again. After about twenty minutes they travelled through a vast concrete jungle called Thamesmead. Sanjay was still hopeful of seeing a farmhouse when the car stopped outside a terraced house and Ajay announced that they had reached home.

Sanjay's jaw dropped as he stared at the two storied house flanked by a row of similar old terraced houses. His mind went back to their farmhouse in Fiji. A row of six homes placed on a ten acre farm, with a river running a few hundred meters from the lawns of the homes. He had ex-

pected a farmhouse at least as large as his homestead back in Fiji. He naturally assumed that people in a country ruled by the queen of England to live on larger farms than in Fiji. The fifty kilometre journey from Heathrow airport to the outskirts of London had taught Sanjay an important lesson: to expect the unexpected!

Kiran nudged him to get out of the car and he followed her into the house. The inside of the house was unexpectedly spacious and well decorated. Kiran invited him to accompany her upstairs and led him into a room that was to be their bedroom for the next few months. After dumping their luggage in the room Sanjay went outside to explore the gardens. He felt claustrophobic and wanted to get some fresh air. The back yard was not much bigger than the front. It looked smaller because of a wooden garden shed that stood in one corner. He went inside again and grabbed a chair. Ajay saw him walking towards the front door with the chair.

‘Hey dude, what are you doing?’ Ajay wanted to know. ‘Just going to sit in the front garden for a while’, replied Sanjay. ‘Man, we don't do things like that here, not in the winter anyway’, Ajay said laughing. ‘Come into the kitchen, mum has prepared tea for you. You must be hungry after your flight’. Sanjay wasn't. But he had nothing better to do; so he followed him into the kitchen. He realised he had much to learn in England.

Meanwhile in Greenwich Park he had finished his warm cup of tea. It was after five and quite dark in the park now. He got into his blue Mercedes and drove back through the Blackwall tunnel and headed towards Newham in east London. He was meeting a friend in a pub before joining the curry club members for dinner in a nearby restaurant. He was in the mood to drink tonight. Unable to tell anyone his disappointment he was going to drown his sorrows in drinks; plenty of them. He wound his way slowly towards the pub in Newham.