

Он не любит Москву?

Introductions

Call this a river.
Nothing stirs, nothing lurks beneath its dead grey surface. The tourist barges plod up and down: the Vice-Admiral Golubtsov; the Academician Berdichevsky.

Goldhaven knows about rivers. Real rivers, rivers that gurgle and gush and kill. Rivers bearing riches. Rivers that will snap at you, rivers with things stuck in their murky alluvium.

You had to be insane to go diving in it, or desperate, or both. Goldhaven was neither, and still he had jumped at the chance to put on the patchy old wetsuit, ripped and snapped at, one of its legs disconcertingly missing. Ouais il a pas eu de chance celui-là, the rig operator had said with a shrug when

Goldhaven asked. The rig was moored right in the middle of the river, it might have been the Kasai, or perhaps it was the Tchikapa, or maybe the Chari, they're all the same really, fierce and teeming and alive. What do I do now, Goldhaven had asked. You go head first and you point the nozzle, the rig operator said. OK, Goldhaven said, and he did. Goodness knows what the rig operator made of him, he probably thought him a suicidal nut, no one in their right mind would go and brave this camouflage-coloured broth, no one apart from a few teenagers from the village round the next bend in the river, and they had no choice. But what did Goldhaven care. Goldhaven was not afraid. Goldhaven is never afraid. Goldhaven dived in, holding his breath, with nothing more than the ragged old wetsuit and a leaky mask.

How was that, Goldhaven asked when he was back on the wobbly planks of the rig, the thick plastic hose jerking down into the water, the pumps belching, the gruel of rocks and sand splattering into a trommel out aft. Impeccable, the rig operator said.

Goldhaven stripped off the patchy old Neoprene, stood in the blazing equatorial sun in his boxer shorts, his wet hair glistening like a big black pearl. Well, Goldhaven said, in English, It sure is the craziest form of mining known to man. The rig operator grinned and nodded. He did not understand a word.

Et maintenant on va déjeuner, Goldhaven said, and jumped overboard, cutting back in a smooth fast crawl to the chalky riverbank where his driver was filleting the largest African snook ever caught in this stretch of the river, slicing it up into little white sashimi rectangles, laying a little folding table with white linen, the engine of Goldhaven's Land Rover running on to power the cooler for the Montrachet—

But this, call this a river?

It's there, but that's about the only meaningful thing you can say about it. It's colourless, reflects nothing, contained by concrete embankments, flanked by freeways. Goldhaven is bored out of his wits. He's tapping the side of the bottle, pink, Cuvée Rosé, Laurent Perrier, they add a zero to the street value when charging it to your room tab here, but who cares. Goldhaven's favourite colour is pink. The Russians are not smiling. Five, in black leather jackets and gabardine trousers, looking out past Goldhaven at the river as they drink his champagne, the city, grey specks and ash-coloured turrets. Pink, Goldhaven says, and takes out a pen. Like this, he says, drawing on a napkin. A double triangle, one on top of the other, upside down. Pink, Goldhaven says, and again he taps the bottle with his pen, and then he draws a dollar sign. Bolshoi, he says, and the Russians are not looking. Bolshoi dollar. Another bottle sir, the waitress says. Pretty, blonde, petite, heavily made-up,

purple fingernails. Goldhaven thinks she's been staring at him ever since he arrived. It's true that nothing becomes Goldhaven like north light. In profile, by the great curved window of the bourse, three storeys high, or here in the lobby of the Tretyakov Grand, cleft chin shaded by nascent stubble, his hair a lustrous carbon, his scar a romantic brass rubbing against the pale hue of his skin. But after seven measures of Khlebnoye Vino and too much overpriced champagne, who can tell.

Goldhaven came out here on the midday plane from Brussels on a scrap of hearsay. There's a geezer in Novaya Zemlya, deals with security in the processing plant. He's noticed some odd hues on the washing racks, some funny business in the sorting room. An additional container locked into the glove-box; boxes taken away outside the official dispatch slots; some new pieces of hardware in the compound car park, too fancy for a company salary. The geezer has a friend who comes to Antwerp on some tendering business. The friend has too many beers and starts chatting. And it does not take long for your average bit of Antwerp chit-chat to reach Goldhaven's ears. The kind of chit-chat that will prompt Goldhaven to speed down the motorway to Brussels and elbow his way onto the next plane to Moscow. Some intermediary who claims he has a line to the folks in Novaya Zemlya has arranged to

meet Goldhaven in the lobby. Goldhaven is playing it by ear. Goldhaven does not speak Russian. The Russians ask for cigars, start puffing on log-sized Cubans. You know how to get some interesting stones, huh, Goldhaven says. The geezers drink and puff. One of them says something in Russian, the others laugh. You got stones, Goldhaven tries. The geezers drink and puff. Bolshoi dollar, Goldhaven says, again, one last try. Fuck, Goldhaven says, looking out at the river. The Russians laugh, get up. Let's go, one of them says, in English. The tab goes on Goldhaven's room. They march Goldhaven out to a black Dodge truck with gilded exhausts. Through the smoggy twilight they ride for an hour, maybe two, maybe three. There's a Russian rapster on full volume on the car stereo, and the men are punching the air to the beat. Somewhere in the suburbs, crumbling concrete slabs covered in garish neon hoardings as far as the eye can see, the truck takes a sudden swerve into an underground car park. Goldhaven is taken to a lift, up a dozen floors, maybe more, in through an armoured door.

The apartment is empty but for an old metal desk in the centre of the living room. A man in a dark suit sits behind the desk. Money, is all he says, pointing at the desk. I'd like to see the goods, Goldhaven says. First money, the man says. This runs counter to any buying etiquette Goldhaven can

remember, but it does not look like he has much choice. He takes a bundle of crisp dollar bills from his pocket and drops them on the table. Nothing was said about numbers or transactions, so here is one hundred and fifty grand for starters. The man in the suit takes a scrap of paper from his briefcase, unwraps it carelessly. Two pale carbuncles, probably two carats each or thereabouts, tumble onto the scratched grey tabletop. Colour-wise, it is hard to tell from where Goldhaven is standing, though the stones seem to have a champagne twinkle of sorts. Goldhaven bends over, gets his loupe out. Instantly, the Russians are upon him, snatch the loupe away, have Goldhaven in an armlock. Whoawhoawhoa guys, Goldhaven tries as cordially as is possible in the circumstances. You buy we sell, the man with the suit says drily. And with that, Goldhaven is hustled out of the empty apartment, ushered down to the carpark and into the Dodge truck with the gilded exhausts. Goldhaven is dropped off on the quayside near the Pushkin Museum. He walks back to the hotel in a rage. In his hotel room, Goldhaven has a closer look at the goods. Even under the feeble bulb of the desk lamp, he can tell instantly he has been had. The stones are natural enough, but they are about as pink as a lump of charcoal: under a crude coating of pinkish-purple resin, the stones are a dirty khaki colour and awash with inclusions.

Goldhaven yanks open the mini-bar, crashes out on the bed.

At two in the morning, there is a knock on the door. Two suits and two uniforms. Goldhaven barely has the time to put his trousers on. Come with us, they say. The night receptionist looks away as Goldhaven is hustled out of the hotel and bundled into a grey Volga. A silent drive across town, somewhere downriver from the towers of the University. At length the car turns into a compound somewhere in the outer suburbs. Guards with sub-machine guns stand bored and shivering in the early morning chill. There is a flat concrete building at the centre, surrounded by a park and lit up by a blaze of floodlights. In a windowless meeting room with filing cabinets around the walls, a stocky man with a crewcut is waiting for Goldhaven. Have seat, he says, in passable English. We hope you enjoy stay in Russian Federation. You are here on business, yes, Mr Goldhaven. I'm a tourist, Goldhaven says. Of course you are tourist, the man says. We understand you undertake certain business activities, Mr Goldhaven. I am not sure I know what you are talking about, Goldhaven says. I am sure you know what I talk about, Mr Goldhaven. Or perhaps you want to call British consul. Or French consul? You are hard man to pin down, Mr Goldhaven. The man passes an old bakelite telephone across the table with a

theatrical flourish. Goldhaven, who certainly does not want to call any consul, shrugs indifferently. So what exactly is this about, he says. Violation of foreign currency legislation, or what.

The stout man picks up the phone. One of the suits who picked Goldhaven up from his hotel room arrives with a brown envelope. What is this, Mr Goldhaven? They are the stones Goldhaven bought from the Russian conmen. Lousy lumps, full of dirt, worst buy of my life, Goldhaven is tempted to say, but thinks better of it. Uh, don't think I've ever seen those before, he says. Mr Goldhaven, do you know what is penalty in Russian Federation for unlicensed acquisition of unpolished gemstones? You could take very long holiday in very cold part of our country. Now, this – the stout man points to the paltry stones on the table – is not Russian goods. This is very, how do you say, poor impression of beautiful goods our country produces. Where do you think this is from? Goldhaven shrugs his shoulders. No idea. He has a pretty good idea they are from Mbuji-Mayi, but why would he share his hunch with these people. Exactly, says the the stout man. Congolese, and not even nice ones. You would not look at this if offered to you in the bourse. So to pay one-hundred and fifty thousand is, how do you say, a bit over the odd, Mr Goldhaven? Goldhaven says nothing, but he can see it coming. The Russians would not have brought

him out here simply to read him his rights over a few carats of Congolese boart. Now you would not have come here from Antwerp for that, would you, the stout man says. And you do not come all the way here to meet Russian woman, Mr Goldhaven, did you. We know you like Flemish woman more than any other. Except African woman, maybe—

Goldhaven wasn't expecting this. The stout man picks up the phone. Would you like coffee, Mr Goldhaven? He puts the phone down. There is something you want, and it is not Russian woman. So we have supposition, shall we say, you want something else, something we want also. I think you have good idea what I mean.

Right now, the only thing Goldhaven wants is to get out and on a plane home. OK, he says, what do you want me to do. The stout man opens a file on the table. You are very gifted at finding stones, Mr Goldhaven, are you not. You have big, shall we say, reputation. So you will find pink stones, real stones. And you will find persons selling stones. You will find leak in the pipeline.

Goldhaven knows he is in no position to negotiate. Uh-huh, he says.

One month from now, you come back to Moscow. You stay in the Tretyakov. And you will have some stones. Big. Nice colour. Very pink. And names. The stout man gets up, signalling that Goldhaven is free

to go. Goldhaven shrugs, and walks out, along the empty boulevards. Goldhaven has no intention of honouring his promise to the Russians. Goldhaven honours his contracts, as long as they are genuine. Goldhaven is no con. But what's the contractual value of an ambiguous and non-binding Uh-huh, uttered under duress. Bugger-all. There's no way Goldhaven is going back to Moscow. Far too cold; the girls snotty and expensive; the cops too well-informed.

Goldhaven has hurtled down the motorway and across the German border. There are times when Goldhaven feels more at ease after crossing a border. A month has passed since Moscow. Goldhaven has stopped in Dusseldorf, hit a bar off the Koenigsallee. Black velvet, tall girls in strapless cocktail dresses. Slick square-jawed guys with shaven torsos behind the bar. Eighties music, shiny suits and deep décolletés in the soft upholstered twilight. No one will recognize Goldhaven here. Goldhaven squats on a barstool, orders scotch, gin, brandy, pours all three together, downs them in a single gulp. He is alone, tonight, though chances are he will not finish the night alone. Hell no. Goldhaven has come here to forget, for now. Na, a girl with a snake tattoo and black lipstick says. Hey, Goldhaven says. You come from far, the girl asks. Well, Goldhaven says. I've

been here, and I've been there. Drink? Sure, she says. A Rhinegold. Rhine what, Goldhaven says. You're not from here, ha, the girl says. Liquorice liquor and gin. What do you do, she asks. Hoho, Goldhaven says. Easy now, easy now. I'm just a guy in a bar, having a drink. Trying to get over some bad shit. A woman, the girl says. Well yeah, Goldhaven says, you're pretty smart, huh. I can tell, the girl says. She was very close to you, ja? Yeah, Goldhaven says. Real close. She was pretty special, huh. Yeah, Goldhaven says. You know, when you think you got something real special, you think it's gonna last, and then someone comes along, takes it all away, you know? Yeah, she says. Guys, huh? Yeah, Goldhaven says. Guys. You ever been to Africa? What do you mean, Africa, she says. Ever seen an African sunset, Goldhaven says. Heard the lovebirds chattering in the branches at dusk. Watched the crocodiles watching you from the riverbank. Crocodiles, she says. See this, Goldhaven says, and shows the scar on his face. Crocodile did that, Goldhaven says. Mensch, she says, awesome, and moves her barstool closer to Goldhaven's.

There's a momentary hush in the bar. The music seems to fade for a split second; the lights dim in the batting of an eyelid. A cold gust whips in from the street. A stout shadow of a man, bullet-shaped, a long black leather jacket over combat trousers, has

stepped through the door, preceded by a boom of bad vibrations.

He sits down on a barstool next to Goldhaven. We talk, he says, not looking at anyone. But first we drink. Ginger ale and vodka. Ginger ale? The barman thinks he must have misheard. Ginger ale, the man says again, and the barman almost trips over in his rush to the fridge. Ah, ah, thirty euros bitte, the barman stammers. The man shrugs. He pays, he says, pointing at Goldhaven. What? Goldhaven has not paid much attention to the man in the long leather jacket. A nutter, or a bit of a joker, he thinks. He's joking, Goldhaven says to the barman. The man puts his hand on Goldhaven's shoulder, and it feels like Goldhaven's collarbone is being fed into a stonecrusher.

I pay, Goldhaven says. Fuck. Goldhaven takes a closer look at the man. Age indeterminate, broad nose slightly out of joint. Head almost shaved, a scar running from just below his eye to his upper lip, longer and etched more precisely than Goldhaven's. No tattoos. Ex-army, or ex-con. Or a copper. Something like that. A large steel pilot's watch with Cyrillic lettering on its blue and silver face. Oh man. Goldhaven feels a spasm in his stomach.

The bullet-shaped shadow of a man reaches inside his jacket, pulls out an envelope. He puts the envelope on the counter. Look, he says. Goldhaven picks

up the envelope. The girl with the snake tattoo shifts uneasily on her stool. Goldhaven opens the envelope. There is a single photograph inside, black and white. A mugshot of Goldhaven, a little dated. Goldhaven wearing a pith helmet, by a river, palm trees and smiling natives in the background.

I find you, the man says, and pours the ginger ale down his throat, followed by a quickfire shot of vodka.

Who are you? Goldhaven says.

No, the man says, his voice cold and dispassionate as a vending machine. You don't ask questions. Zog Shikzahl ask questions. The man's accent is sour, lugubrious and Cyrillic.

Zog Shikzahl, huh. Goldhaven has never heard the name before. It sounds like a joke, but Goldhaven is sure it is not.

Zog Shikzahl asks for another ginger ale and vodka, drinks in silence. Goldhaven turns to the girl with the snake tattoo, but she has slipped away. Goldhaven's skeletons have caught up with him. And Goldhaven will not finish the night alone. But now he wishes he could.

We go, Zog Shikzahl says at long last. Goldhaven rues the sixty euros he has blown on ginger ale and vodka. He thinks of the night he could have had with the girl with the snake tattoo. He rues the two hundred clicks on the motorway. Zog Shikzahl lays

his hand on Goldhaven's shoulder, and it drills a spasm into Goldhaven's left side. Where to, Goldhaven says. I ask, Zog Shikzahl says. He gets up, walks out, Goldhaven in tow, preceded by a wedge of worse vibes now than even before. Scheisse, was war'n das, the attendant kouroi mutter, and the girls, no shrinking violets either, press up against the walls in terror.

You drive, Zog Shikzahl says and walks close behind Goldhaven. There is a large bulge in the pocket of his leather jacket, and Goldhaven is not taking any chances. Key, Zog Shikzahl says. Goldhaven hands over his keys. In, Zog Shikzahl says. Goldhaven gets behind the wheel of his black beemer. Zog Shikzahl closes the door, aims a sharp focussed kick at the lock, gets in on the passenger side. Drive, Zog Shikzahl says. Goldhaven drives. Down the Koenigsallee. Down to the river, down to the Rhine. Past tedious meadows and sleeping cows. Up a concrete ramp. Onto a sliproad. But, Goldhaven says. Oh shit, Goldhaven says, and slows down.

No swearing in presence of Zog Shikzahl, Zog Shikzahl says. Drive, Zog Shikzahl says.

Goldhaven drives on, knocks over traffic cones, crashes through a wooden barrier, scrunches over a pile of gravel. Baustelle, the sign says. What the fuck does that mean, Goldhaven asks. No swearing in presence of Zog Shikzahl, Zog Shikzahl says, and

lays his leaden hand on Goldhaven's shoulder. Goldhaven keeps driving, drives right on up the bridge. There is a sudden lurch, the nose of the car drops, a painful grating sound, the flash of sparks in the night. Stop, Zog Shikzahl says, calm, bored. Goldhaven hits the brakes. The airbag punches Goldhaven in the face. The car alarm comes on, blaring out into the still night.

An oily black surface passing way down below the car, occasional ripples in the scant moonlight. The Rhine. Another bridge fragment, ahead, across the river. The car sits balanced on the frazzled edge. Goldhaven tries to open his door, finds that it is jammed. Zog Shikzahl's kick. The man must be wearing steel-capped boots. Now we talk, Zog Shikzahl says and takes out a flickknife. You fucking psychopath, Goldhaven says under his breath. Zog Shikzahl puts his hand on Goldhaven's shoulder. The pain is like the sudden surge of an electric drill on full hammer setting. Zog Shikzahl pokes his flickknife at the airbag. It pops like a balloon. You have job, Zog Shikzahl says. You give word. No idea what you're talking about, Goldhaven says. Zog Shikzahl takes out a big felt-tip pen and starts writing in giant characters on the inside of Goldhaven's windscreen. ДУРАК. Dumbo, dumbo idiot, Zog Shikzahl says. You go to Moscow. You go in deep trouble. You make very angry very important people with

much money. You promise you come back with good. Durak. Where you got good? Good?

Goldhaven doesn't get it. Good, he says, I don't know about good. Zog Shikzahl rubs two fingers together. Uh-huh, Goldhaven thinks, the goods. I got ripped off, he says, not my fault. Nothing to do with me. Durak and all that, yeah.

Zog Shikzahl gets out of the car, slams the door shut. Phew, Goldhaven thinks, and rues the write-off of his beemer. But then the car starts to shudder and move. Goldhaven looks in the rearview mirror, sees the cold expressionless face of Zog Shikzahl, his arms stretched out, pushing the back end of the beemer. The car starts to see-saw gently.

One

Up the River

I

If it wasn't for Goldhaven, I'd still be counting beans for the Indians behind their shop on Hoveniersstraat. A cosy commute from Mechelen to Antwerpen Centraal, nothing to write home about, but the pay was decent enough—

And then Goldhaven walks into the picture. Just my luck. I was babysitting for the Indians, taking a couple of Angolans out for dinner, and who's sitting at the next table but Goldhaven, his slicked-back hair shining like glazed Zirconium, his white shirt unbuttoned down to the wiry black fleece on his chest. He's dining some Flemish Barbie type but, soon as he sees the Angolans, he gets up and comes over all chummy, next thing you know he's going Saúde with the Angolans, Barbie's getting jumpy

and throwing noxious glances, but Goldhaven knows a goldmine when he sees one, and *boy* would he like to get up close and cosy with these Angolans and their big shiny marbles.

Now, anyone tells the Indians someone's chatting up their Angolan connection, most of all a notorious renegade like Goldhaven, and I'll be on the next ferryboat back to Hull. But Goldhaven's not about to overplay his hand. He's managed to swap cards and arranged for the Angolans to drop in on his offices the next day. With that, Goldhaven's back at his table, sweet-talking Barbie, getting her in the mood; and I've had a slap on the back and a Keep it Up, Kid.

Next time I see Goldhaven, I'm over at the bourse with the Indians. Goldhaven's just loitering about the tables, on the lookout for some easy trade, and when the Indians go upstairs, briefly, with the client, Goldhaven sidles up like an old friend, all smiles. Ever thought what it would be like to get your hands on a big pink stone, he asks, be the first to see it, to feel it?

I leave Mechelen in a hurry. Too much of a hurry. I barely have time to kiss Kaat goodbye. We make love in a rush, in a night that's too short, alarm going off at five, thunder rolling on and off in the distance. Kaat does not come. A short sweaty night.

What exactly is this about, Kaat says. You know,

I say, business. You never travel, Kaat says in her blunt Flemish way, you're just an accountant. The Indians want me to check out the audit trail for some stuff, some complicated stuff. They don't trust the people down there. But you of all people, Kaat says. You wouldn't even know where to find it on the map, this St Andrew's, Kaat says, staring at the ceiling. It's on the coast, I say. The Caribbean. Beaches, rum. Calypso in the sun. I think.

Kaat does not like the sound of that.

Calypso in the sun. You bet. Skimpy bikinis in turquoise lagoons. Hot fun in the summertime. Bugger-all. Kaat need not have worried. The closest you get to the sea in St Andrew's is the backside of the sea-wall. There's no beach. Hundreds of miles of coastline, and not a single beach. Lumps of concrete piled up against hurricanes and floods. And the sea itself, about as turquoise here as a concrete barrier along the Antwerp–Brussels motorway. Mingle, Goldhaven had said, blend in. Be a tourist. What does Goldhaven know. There are no tourists in St Andrew's. The only people on the plane in from Miami were immigrants on home leave, grannies with bulging bagfuls of Hershey bars and DVDs, little girls all dolled up in beauty-pageant princess kitsch, and young guys, wannabe toughs with mirror shades and badly cut leather jackets back from driving airport cabs in Queens or stacking shelves in downtown Philadelphia.

They looked at me, unfeelingly, as one might at a lost sparrow flying up and down a supermarket aisle. Kaat need not have worried.

I hate broccoli, always have done, sight of it makes me want to throw up, and here I am, like a fly getting its nose pushed in the broccoli pie. Nothing but broccoli as far as the eye can see, green bump after green bump, and sometimes a stream snaking, milky-tea brown, going nowhere. And all of a sudden, the plane banks and goes into a stomach-churning dive. Cayata, the pilot says, pointing down with a grimace, and the broccoli morphs into trees, silly green spears just standing around, waiting for nothing, with not even a breeze to move them.

Cayata is a loose smattering of shacks by a bend in the river. You can get here in a couple of hours by renting an Islander at Willaerts Field back in Hopeton, the capital, on the coast, or you can come up here by boat, and goodness knows how long that'll take you, or whether you'd even make it.

It's been raining. The red soil has the springy feel of marshmallow pie. The smell's not good. There's all sorts of winged mischief in the air. By the patchy track leading from the airstrip to the first few houses, rubbish piles up in messy little mounds. From down here on the ground, the forest doesn't look one bit like broccoli. More like sticks planted randomly in the ground with torn green rags thrown on top.

Among the dozen or so huts that make up Cayata, I need to find the one that accommodates a certain Jocelyno, or Juscelino, or the like – Goldhaven wasn't sure. But Goldhaven told me to find Jocelyno, and mention his name. From then on, it should be a simple in-and-out job. Jocelyno has the stone, and all I need to do is take it back to Hopeton and out of the country.

It takes some asking around to find Jocelyno's hut. Most of the locals shrug, suspiciously, looking up from their rickety tables, on which the tools of the trade are set out. The scales. The lamp. The sieves. They're Lebanese, mostly, round here, and keep themselves to themselves. Jocelyno, an old man sitting on a trunk by the river says at long last. Try dem dere hut, and he points to a stilted shack on the edge of the settlement, gnawed at by the soupy darkness of the jungle.

The stairs are shaky; there's a stained old tablecloth with tulips and windmills in the doorframe for a curtain. Up in the corner, a TV set is blaring out some Brazilian plantation soap. Where's Jocelyno? In a patchy armchair, a teenage girl lounges, olive-skinned, black-haired. Jocelyno's daughter? His mistress? Little droplets of sweat have formed on her forehead. A packet of doxycycline lies in her lap, carelessly torn open. Sitting at the only table in the room, by the open window, a little boy is playing

with a set of grading sieves. Hi, I say, I'm looking for Jocelyno. The girl does not move. Staring immobile at some spot in the middle of the room. The boy shrugs his shoulders. Não há, não sei, he says, and points vaguely to the window, the forest.

Beyond Cayata and Jocelyno's name, I have nothing. No Plan B, no contacts. Not even a proper map. I swear, noisily. The girl keeps staring, doesn't bat an eyelid. The little boy gets back to clanging his sieves together, gliding them over the dirty tablecloth like a bevy of luxury yachts.

There's nothing for it but to stay. I stomp back to the airfield, tell the pilot he can fly back to Hopeton.

I wasn't planning on this. The only place in Cayata that will put up visitors is the brothel. It doesn't have a sign. There's a couple of Brazilian girls sitting on the patio outside, and three chicken-coop cubicles inside, wood-framed, hung with patchy curtains. At nightfall, occasional clients start trundling in; and the patio in front of the shack turns into a social club of sorts. A handful of buyers; a miner or two, fresh from the bush. Jocelyno, I ask, Jocelyno? It turns out Jocelyno went upriver a couple of days ago, out buying. Upriver? Only one way up, one of the miners says, and no way back, haha. Keep going long enough and you'll get to Brazil. But by then you'll be dead, man. Haha. Still, with a bit of luck I might get a boat tomorrow: one of the buyers is

going to a landing upriver, a place called Marlow's, or Marlowe's, and he's got some space in the canoe, if I'm willing to pay. I am.

Where you going, man, one of the punters asks me, later, as things get into full swing and I sit watching the hands of my watch, thinking about the very big pink stone. Upriver, I say. Marlow's. Shit man, he says, what you doin' yourself Marlow's for, ain't no good never come out of Marlow's. I'm a tourist, I say. Birds beasts waterfalls pretty flowers. Shit, you got yourself the wrong country man, he says. You wanna do Guyana. You wanna do Brazil. You don't wanna do this place, man. Ain't but one reason to come and do yourself this place, he says, and rubs his dirty thumb and index together. So you going to Marlow's, huh. Knew a man who go to Marlow's once, he a good man, he want to hit the big one. He never come back, man. So what happened, I ask.

No one know what happen in Marlow's, he says. They say Marlow's got the jinx. You pay me a thousand bucks, no way I'm going to Marlow's. Bad people in Marlow's. Bad things happen in Marlow's. You ask me what happen in Marlow's? I say there's a bad man in Marlow's, he take your body and your soul, he tear you to bits.

The punter lets out an eerie cackle. The flimsy door to one of the cubicles opens, one of the girls beckons.

You listen to me man. You want a good time, you go where I go now. You don't do yourself Marlow's, man. And with that, the punter is gone.

The shack shudders in the night with groans and thrusts. Do I love Kaat? I like Kaat's no-nonsense Flemish smile. I like Kaat's long Flemish legs. I don't like Kaat's no-nonsense parents, cement merchants in some hole up by the Dutch border, all swimming-pool showrooms and garden centres and gnomes. And I know they disapprove of me. Do I love Kaat? I almost proposed to Kaat, once, in a tacky hotel on the Normandy coast one Valentine's Day. I'd started looking at rings in the displays of the pile-'em-high merchants everyone in the industry tells you to avoid at any cost. I didn't, in the end. We fell out just as I was about to pop the question over a *trou normand*; had some petty argument over something I have long since forgotten, drove home in a rush, didn't see each other for weeks. At times, perhaps, it has felt like love. At times I have just been glad I could pick up the phone, stuck in my suburban Flemish rut. I like Kaat's legs, long and smooth.

That was before. The shack shudders, the curtains rise from time to time; clients stick their head into my cubicle, pause, curse in some strange Portuguese creole, glower at me.

I'm woken at dawn by a shrieking racket in the

green canopy outside. The boatman's name is Old Road. *Old Road?* Place where I was born, he says. And with that he's cast off from the wedge of sand that is Cayata's harbour. And then it's wilting green stalks and heat. The buyer sits stony-faced in the bow, his arms folded around a rubbed-down leather attaché case. I sit amidships, and Old Road brings up the rear with his coughing outboard. No one talks; the forest murmurs; occasionally the canoe will hit a bump under its keel, and Old Road will shout *cayman* with no other purpose than to scare his passengers. Some two hours into the sweltering morning, the river narrows; there's a makeshift dam of sticks and white sand, and dodgy earthworks by the starboard bank.

Uh, so, is this Marlow's, I venture. Marlow's, Old Road says, Marlow's long way up the river, man. I never seen *this* place before.

Up on the riverbank, a rough path has been cut into the sponge-green.

We gonna be long, I ask Old Road. Nobody knows, Old Road says. You know something? I don't know nothing, he says with a dark cackle. Old Road steers over to the riverbank and ties the boat to a tree. What's all this? I got to fish, he says. Fish? *Jaws*, he says with a chuckle, and throws a line into the olive-hued broth.

I get out and follow the path up into the green.

There is a clearing further in, or what might pass for a clearing here. Nothing's ever clear here, everything just grows, turns foul, sinks into the slime or is swallowed alive by the creeping chlorophyll. Huddled up against the bunched greens on one side, patches of canvas lean on rickety shafts. A rough table, old aluminium pans, bits of bedding, cans of *feijão verde*. A boxy old TV set. A generator. Whoever set up the camp left in a hurry. An old issue of Frowstein's Market Monitor. Opened on a feature on how to price *fancies*. *Fancies*? Maybe this was Jocelyno's camp? But then again, Brazilian diggers are a dozen a dime, this neck of the woods.

Across the white sands, the brown river gurgles and foams, steadily eroding the dam back into the flow of things. At this rate, there won't be anything left a month or two from now.

When Old Road hauls in his line, the sun is filtered through the canopies that line the river bank. Clouds of mosquitoes rise from the dirt-brown pallor of the river. All of a sudden, Old Road is looking worried. Move on man, he says, move on. We late. We push and shove the canoe across the makeshift dam.