

Strange Meetings

Keith Jardim

Excerpt from *In the Garden of the Dictator's Sweet Delight* (a novel in progress)

Location: an island like Trinidad (Trinidad & Tobago) in the southern Caribbean, a few miles off the Venezuelan coast. There's been a coup attempt, and a sunset to dawn curfew is in effect. The powers that be (DEA/CIA agents, island government and security officials, representatives for Latin American drug cartels, arms traffickers, and gang leaders) are competing for control and survival. In this chapter, Andre Scott, one of the main characters in the novel, has been stopped at an army checkpoint north of the capital city, where he meets Captain Ashton Rodriguez, an old university friend, who assisted Scott and his group in drug and arms smuggling before the coup attempt. Ashton interviews Scott in a makeshift, concealed office on the side of the road. Scott has just been on the island's north coast, where he learned that Frankie, an informer of his, was killed a few days before. The other people mentioned in the chapter belong to Scott's group (Lena is also his lover), except Nunes, who everybody is concerned about because they believe he may be working for the Americans. Time: very much the present.

Andre winced at the glare. A repugnant light, he thought, clinical white, straight into his eyes. What were they looking for? A soul? He rubbed his wrists, sighing.

"Mr. Scott, I want you to listen to me. Carefully."

He knew the voice. Captain Ashton Rodriguez. An old friend. It should be okay; he was on their side. Well, maybe not. Not now.

"I'm nothing but ears," Andre said.

"Leave us," Rodriguez said.

The torch went off and the two soldiers who had ordered him to stop, wearing dull-green, brown-splotched fatigues and carrying heavy-looking Galil assault rifles, walked out of the metal room; it shook as they went down the stairs. There were no windows.

"Nice men," Andre said. "Did they have to bind my wrists with nylon, for fuck sake?"

Captain Rodriguez nodded and shifted in his chair. He was a broad man, muscular, solid;

his weight shook the room. A puffy face and stressed visage assessed Andre with interest. He was a man who'd long ago decided to ignore the profusion of shit in the world, especially the version the island had on constant offer, and side-step it whenever possible; it was how he'd lived his professional life. Until now: Andre could register the deep-locked anger in his hazel-green eyes.

"A precaution," Rodriguez said wearily. "All kind of people turning. You?"

"Like this thing real nasty. I haven't been in touch with anyone except madman Phillips. So I know fuck all."

"Ah. The enlightened one."

"Believe it. He certainly does."

"Is true he want to kill your friend in Guyana? What's his name? Nunes?"

"Yeah."

The captain nodded. "Ah. You see, Andre, we have a situation right now that's so very fuck up it's within an outstanding fuckery not seen since slavery. Most of us can't even begin to explain it, can't even *begin* to think clearly about what really goin' on. So that, I think he may well have to do it. And you will have to cooperate. By just letting him kill the son of a bitch. But not right away. Follow?"

Andre groaned. "Nunes a traitor? That's what your surveillance, your little personal Internet spy system telling you? Must be social media surveillance."

"You really better *listen* to me."

Captain Rodriguez stared at him with killer-hate. Andre took a couple of deep breaths.

Rodriguez held up a flat palm, lowered his head a bit and shook it; his heavy jowls trembled. "Don't fuck with me now, or we done."

"I have no reason to. 'Specially now."

Rodriguez stood and backed away, turning sideways to Andre as he watched the electronic equipment in the metal room. "So all this," he waved his arm in a half circle, "all of it is a waste of time? It never help you? *Ever?*"

"In times like these, we both well know, old friend, it's the worst thing to rely on."

"And what about before?" the captain asked.

"From after the coup to now it's all unpredictable, inscrutable. This situation, it's ..."

"What? What it is? Tell me."

Andre gave an exasperated grunt. "Man, like you said, a fuckery all wrapped in another, and fucking itself."

The time, he thought, it's getting dark, must be. He could delay you and not give you a pass. Curfew is about now. Cooperate.

Rodriguez had his hands on his hips; he remained positioned sideways to Andre; head lowered. "What were you doing on the coast?"

"Checking what I could. They kill Frankie."

Rodriguez shook his head and put a hand to his brow. "Of course," he said, "of course."

"By the way, you know anything about Neesha?" Andre asked.

"I was hoping you could tell me. We think she on the other side. With the Americans."

"Phillips thinks so too. You have no one who knows?"

"Working on it. They take her deep cover. A real blackout."

"Or whiteout."

Rodriguez sneered at him. "Man, I real feeling to fuck you up, real bad, because that's what everybody doing to everybody else, but let me make a deal with you. You go to Guyana,

keep Nunes alive long as possible so you find out what you can, what he knows – *all* he knows.

What he's done is also what we need to know. I hope you understand that real clear."

"Okay. But I doubt he's with Neesha and the Americans."

Rodriguez took a few steps toward a desk and reached behind a computer. He removed a ballpoint pen from one of his pockets and scribbled on a card.

"Here," he said. "Keep this for the police and the guard outside, and any roadblocks on the way home, and best watch yourself with Phillips."

Andre stood. "You too." And as he went to the door, he looked back and said, "My old friend."

Rodriguez was standing before a laptop, fingering the keyboard and didn't look at Andre. "Man, fuck off before I change my mind about that pass."

Night. Breeze. Andre smelled decaying wood, ash, living soil and rotting vegetation, the blend like a faint whiff of unrefined cocoa powder. The trees around him were a voluptuous darkness of roiling leaves. Clouds sped across the waning moon. If he listened carefully, he could name the trees and plants by their swishing leaves in the wind. Bamboo was easiest, with the highest hiss. The awkward spindly-like, pale-grey trunks and branches of the *bois canot* were not difficult, though you had to be close; it was a tree, Lena had said, that seemed to be neither fully plant nor tree. Hog plum and cannonball were big, tall trees and gave cloying stinks, but he couldn't identify their sounds except to say they all, when the wind became forceful, sounded like the sea.

The night promised danger, as every night had since the coup, but he also sensed an absolute change beginning, of a future he couldn't predict. In that lay a kind of hope. What it

was, how it would appear, he couldn't even guess. He walked to his car and the man guarding it, relieved for the pass Rodriguez had given him, the weather to come.

Andre wondered if he should've been a naturalist – but no, human association was always inevitable, eventually. Necessary. A lone jungle cat of some kind maybe, tranquil in a forest secured from people who cared only about destruction in one form or another: Gold. Emeralds. Diamonds. Sugar. Coffee. Oil. Cocaine. Heroin. Mining. Human trafficking. Weapons. There was the illegal oil out of Venezuela, and the cocaine. Mining on occasion, too, and weapons. When he thought of Neesha, he felt a chill heaviness around his heart. If she'd gone over to the other side, they would all be going to Hell. Damned fast.

He remembered Nunes one night telling the story of a jaguar, about a mature female that took up residence for a few nights near a campsite in unexplored jungle near the Surinam, Guyana and Brazil borders for the purpose of observing a group of men documenting rare plants. They were major international pharma researchers.

The first late afternoon one of the men saw her near the latrine she was fully extended on her underbelly, her front legs together, rear ones hunched up and her tail still. She lay in the dappling sunlight streaming down through the primary-forest trees. The man, a botanist with the University of Puerto Rico halted at the lean-to's entrance and looked at the big cat. The jaguar stared at him without fear or threat, seemingly content to let him admire her pose and the way her coat enhanced the sunlight. But the cat, Nunes had said, was watching him for her own reasons. "It was her first encounter with humans." Nunes had looked fascinated by his own words. When the botanist left the thatched lean-to, she stood and began following him slowly, almost reverently, the botanist looking back, walking sideways and careful not to make any sudden moves.

At the camp the botanist spoke in a quiet voice to his companions, indicating their visitor who was just outside the camp's perimeter, observing the additional men with an unwavering curiosity. One man began taking pictures.

There were five men in all, but they didn't climb trees and have coats of hair (Nunes had enjoyed saying this). Their hair was minimal, atop their bodies, and they were unusually scented, an incredible discovery for the jaguar. But what would she do? That was what the men asked themselves. The jaguar lay there, watching. The men went about their business as best they could, wary of the cat, her polite yet not distant enough staring, and trying to act as if they were having a usual day in camp.

But they were unable to behave as before; and after a day and night – a night during which she tapped the foot of one of the men while he slept – they disrupted her vigil by joining their arms and standing against each other to appear as a large animal. They danced awkwardly, low kicks of their legs while making deep guttural sounds, shuffling closer to the jaguar. Then she surprised the men: she rose and walked toward them, and they froze. She circled, still inquisitive, until someone couldn't cope anymore and began shouting and roaring, imitating a red howler monkey. She switched quickly from alert interest to irritation and trotted off. For further discouragement one of the men beat a couple of iron pans together for two minutes.

The jaguar didn't return.

Andre had been impressed with the slow, careful way Nunes had told the story, pausing now and then to emphasize something about the cat's behaviour, her "spirit of inquiry", he'd said. "What could be more civilized than that?"

He'd never disliked Nunes; the man was strange, absolutely, but he'd consistently shown a passion for the world and Andre had warmed to it, an appreciation and joy of the man's

love of being alive. What was that? Human communication that passed on a love of the world? Wasn't that how a certain love was? Maybe it was the only kind of love that really mattered. Something like that, something mysterious, ancient and assured in the history of human imagination. But overall, it remained elusive, incomprehensible. The original flame, perhaps.

"Pass." The breeze seemed to draw out the hiss of the word.

The soldier guarding his car was exhausted, eyes and mouth drooped, the bliss of sleep, escape, drawing him away from this world. How young he is, Andre thought, no more than a boy, guarding a car, armed to kill. Yet he only wanted to sleep.

"A nice night for dreams," Andre said, trying to make small talk and handing him the pass Rodriguez had signed.

"I want to dead with sleep," the soldier said. He wobbled, his eyes half open.

"How bad is it?" he asked, hoping for something more than what he'd learned in Rodriguez's nest of high-tech surveillance. But the soldier said nothing, maybe he hadn't heard, and gave him back the pass. The breeze nearly took it away.

"Keep it safe, you go need it further down."

Andre said goodnight, got in his car, and opened the windows a few inches to sense the windy night. The road led to the outskirts of town, and as he drove, enjoying his lone-car status, his growing awareness of Rodriguez's state of mind changed his impression of the situation he, Rodrigues, Neesha, Lena, Nunes, and Phillips were in; their entire way of life was at stake.

The early evening hours seemed closer to midnight, hardly a vehicle in sight. When he came to a checkpoint (and there had been many of them before the trouble began), he didn't ask the four men on duty what was happening; they were tense and irritated too, no doubt preoccupied with their own worries and the future. Uncertainty was the only sure thing.

Andre drove on, an almost full moon sliding up into the sky, the island here descending to wealthy suburbs, and then lower middle-class neighborhoods; and always the hills behind and off to the sides and away, rising lush and dark against the moonlit night. The area was once replete with cocoa estates thriving in one of the richest soils in the world, producing the best chocolate. The industry was only now making a tentative comeback, smallholdings primarily located in the central and southern parts of the island where agriculture was still acceptable, even welcomed. In this area he was driving through now, gangs ruled.

He took his phone out of his shirt pocket and called Lena.

"You know how long I worried?"

"A checkpoint, then another," he said casually. He yawned in the way they had agreed on for unsecure connections: a sudden intake of breath, then a humming exhalation from deep in the throat.

Lena waited for her cue.

"How's our evening shaping up? Any wine?"

She laughed flirtatiously, her voice slow and smooth. "There's that, and other things. Feeling frisky."

"Have any mint oil? I'll massage your feet."

"Hmm, sounds perfect. Did you get any rest?"

"A bit. Met an old friend too. Seems like I should see him more often."

"I may not want that. Time is short."

"Funny, it always is, but we never realize." He paused. "Until it's too late." He wondered about his choice of words: he hadn't intended them. Was he playing to the other side already, signaling at turning? You are more afraid than you realize, he thought.

How easy everything had once been.

Her words about time were a warning he no longer cared for. A man grows tired of watching every move he and others make.

"Later," she said.

"Right." He dropped his phone on the seat beside him.

What to do? he thought. *Do not a fuck*. That's what Phillips had warned. And Andre knew he was right.

The road fell, curving, with smooth dips and mounds of pitch not yet ragged and torn by heavy trucks and weather, giving him the sensation of gentle bucking in flight. Electricity poles stood near legion alongside the road and against the clear night sky. During the last fifteen years, their increase, with clustered boxes of wire hurtling and increasing the blather of gossip and communication, had disturbed him. It was one of the ultimate ironies of so-called progress: the belief that having enough technology would make things better. All things. Rodriguez was a believer. The Israeli surveillance equipment the government had acquired a few years ago had made the captain a believer.

The trees he was passing now, the vegetation, their movements and sounds easing now as the breeze fell, were green and black. There was still no other traffic, the night on this stretch of road empty of lights and people and blue-dark above, allowing him to sense the deep reaches of the night. Good marijuana, what Rathbone had given him a few times on nights like these, yet these nights alone were enough, brought on yearnings for another place, a better one, less familiar. He and Lena smoked together, cozy in their talks, the weight of all tension dissolved into sweet, frilly nothings, nothings that meant all possibilities were open. The night. The stars. Another country. Another life. That was the sensation, and he wondered how good it was; it

crept over him and then into him with a warm and soft lovingness, shutting out for a while the flickering eye-lights of busy demons edging along the corners of his mind.

Up in the hills Lena lay in a hammock, wrapped in its cotton folds. She swung back and forth a little, trying to relax. The balcony was open to the night, its varnished wood-topped railing and white iron palings gleaming in the moonlight. Her bare left foot pushed at the terrazzo floor, and the hammock swung again. She lifted a flute of sparkling wine off the small square table next to her, took two quick sips and tucked her curly dark hair into the neck of her jersey.

Frogs whistled, close and distant, and far down the road dogs barked intermittently. The sounds of the night were familiar. The air held moisture and there was a light wind across the balcony. She felt caul-snug in her long grey jersey stretched from her neck to around her lower calves.

The apartment belonged to Andre, his base near the city. It overlooked the Gulf and the island's capital and had a wide view of the west and south. To the west on clear days mountains in Venezuela were visible in faint blue-green tinges, air and light between the island and continent shifting lens-like, adjusting all distances and making them seem closer.

There were five other apartments coloured dull cream and multi-windowed like Andre's, square and rectangular concrete structures able to withstand severe earthquakes. They were presently unoccupied, holiday residences of those who had chosen to live abroad, returning to the island only when it suited them to live a version of the lives everyone had lost.

The residences were enclosed by a pillar-supported, high, heavy-chained-linked fence, its top thick with curling razor-wire, the blades of silver winking behind several tall casuarinas. The trees were at least twenty yards from the fence, fronted by a few short mango and avocado

trees. The garden was oval around the apartments, with modest areas of trimmed grass and flowerbeds of zinnia, pink hibiscus and bougainvillea; and against the lower apartment walls, ivy spread in a rich green that, during sunny days, looked hopeful somehow.

"Good night good night! I can see you can you see me?!"

Lena jerked instantly in the hammock – and the little table by her side with the flute of sparkling wine toppled over.

The voice came from beyond the fence, from the darkest part of the circumference. She remained still, gasping and cursing quietly. The table lay amid scattered shards of glass, and the flute's stem, broken from the base, had rolled against the parapet. She noted its spiked tip, dismissed the thought of reaching for it.

"Hello, Miss Lady, hello? I know you can he-ear me!"

The voice had an energetic rasp, as if each word were lashed out into the air. She knew well the frustration of the speaker, sensing it instinctively in a rush – a man, one of many roaming the island, their shoulders and backs weighed with plastic garbage bags or burlap sacks containing all they owned. Against her will an image of his head formed in hers: grey-bearded, Moses-like, with wild protuberant eyes in a gaunt face that had witnessed countless brutalities. Profession: street-theatre prophet.

She could not bring herself to reply; it would encourage him. She continued to keep still, realizing that he'd spoken with much confidence, barely disguising his irritation and hatred of the world and unafraid of being heard by anyone else. For there was no one else around, she thought, remembering, feeling her throat dry as a deeper fear asserted itself. Her vision became jittery, seeing movement darker than the night beyond the fence from where the voice came. He was out there, moving around, looking for something. Was he thinking of trying to climb the

fence? She doubted he would risk the barbed-wire razors. Something flashed over her head – an object the size of a tennis ball and white in the light crashed into the wall above and to the left of where she sat. A quartz rock dropped to the hard surface of the balcony, bits of the wall and the rock's glittering jagged surface sprinkling beneath the hammock. She was unable to move, thinking the extent of danger must first be gauged.

"You! Can you hear me now, Mistress? If so, *praise* the power of dark-ness!"

Lena tried to breathe, slow, deep, thinking she could call someone, if necessary, if he threw another stone. But there was the curfew, and the police and army were fully occupied. He couldn't get into the compound, she was certain: the fence was too high, the property secure. And she'd heard age in his voice, a weariness almost, a pleading. The shouting had required effort.

"I want to talk. Please talk to me, Mistress."

There was still a threat in the sound of his voice, but it had eased. She hadn't run inside, maybe that was why. Maybe. She would call out to him; she must show him she wasn't afraid.

"You throw anything again I will come out there and kill you."

She spoke firmly, with as much confidence as possible and hoping to sound both serious and unafraid. His voice seemed to falter. His face began to form in more detail in her mind. The eyes were large, angry and wanted revenge. The world would pay.

"Yes, yes, I understand. As it is written, I shall treat you how you treat me. I shall obey the good book."

She knew the schooling. "What do you want?"

"To talk, Mistress, to talk."

"Don't call me that. I am not anyone's mistress."

There was silence. She regretted speaking, especially in that commanding and orderly fashion; it would provoke. Yet she felt assertion was necessary.

"Miss... Lena?" the voice asked in a tone that mocked politeness. "You is... Miss *Lena*?" He was enjoying himself.

Her heart throbbed. *What the fuck is this?*

"Did someone send you?" she asked, immediately regretting the change in her voice, the surprise, which is always vulnerability. This was danger. And he knew, she thought, exactly how to use it. He was silent now, letting it work on her, shape her thoughts and incite her fear.

A breeze swished the plants beneath the balcony and the lower leaves of the mango and avocado trees between her and the voice in the night. The fence rose tall and silver in the electric light, netting the dark beyond. He'll speak again, she thought. She had the urge to threaten him but knew it would be unwise. Where was Andre? *Where?* She grabbed her phone and called. No answer: she let it ring off.

She waited.

"I have message for you, Miss Lena. You want to hear it?"

A screech owl answered the voice in the night, its cry a warning, an ancient sound she knew now; an awareness of threat that went back to the beginning of living. She was unable to prevent her hands from trembling. The dogs far down the hill had ceased their howls and barking. The breeze had gone and there was weight to the darkness, the coolness no longer pleasant. The stars arced above: icy-blue dabs of other worlds. The moon hung in the east, but she couldn't recall having seen it earlier, and this lapse in memory served only to unsettle her further.

"I am the voice of Darkness!"

His voice was completely assured now because, without doubt, the two of them were the only people here.

“We should have a drink, mistress. Sit together and talk... About *things!* The island, the world. Such madness people carrying on with. Look how we squeeze up between two mad-ass countries, Russia and America. If we not careful, the region going to turn into another Middle East! Is how the world make, not so? Long time now, it all come from five hundred years of drawn out deterioration. An accumulation of degradations. A series of molestations due to lack of educations! How you like them old time *tion*-words, mistress, from our first prime minister, the historian from Oxford University? Remember *he?* From Doctor to bobolee – in three elections! With limited *see*-lections! But truth to tell, I did like he. Say what you like, the man did have style – and education – but was sugar hold him in the end, and before his time! Not an old man at all when he dead. No. But sugar will kill you easy and early. Fuck up your head too!”

There was an earnest absurdity in his words, his tone, yet she felt he believed them, had seen the effects of the island’s politics from childhood as she had, and no doubt the island’s history had marked him permanently, a systematic process of indifference and deprivation, which was how a new and even more obscene elite had been created. Maybe he even knew the historical importance of his words. Sugar. Slavery. The old story. There it was. Always.

The night owl called again. Its ancient sound carried the darkness of time through her blood. She was waiting to hear her name again, dreading it, but knowing his calling might open some kind of communication that could put her at ease, or at least cause her to feel less threatened. After all, his knowing her name was not that surprising, she now reasoned: the area was not densely populated; he probably passed by many residences lower down regularly during weekdays, a man begging, known to be harmless, unlike some of the others. Though she had

never seen him.

But then he said something completely unexpected, yet what he said, she realized, was what she'd been subconsciously fearing all along. She knew then that to speak those words was why he'd come; not just to intimidate her or make her think he'd hurt her after a break-in, if that was manageable for him. He had come to tell her the future, the meaning of her dreams, the dreams she had shared with no one. The sound in the distance below, of Andre's car returning, winding upward into the quiet hills, was the beginning of the confirmation of the prophecy. He knew where she was going, and what she would do and see. He knew the world that was waiting for her, for all of them.

Keith Jardim is from Port of Spain, Trinidad. His writing has appeared in many publications, including *Denver Quarterly*, *Mississippi Review*, *Kyk-Over-Al*, *Wasafiri*, *The Antigianish Review*, *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, *Southeast Asian Review of English*, *The Haunted Tropics: Caribbean Ghost Stories*, *Seepersad & Sons: Naipaulian Synergies*, *Short Story*. His first book, *Near Open Water*, was a semifinalist for the 2012 OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature; later that year, it was included on *World Literature Today's* Nota Bene list, among other honors.