

The Mystery of the Missing Puskat

By Lavie Tidhar

Densley Takes On A Case

He knows America well; there are cars in Detroit, and gangsters in Chicago. New York has the Mob, and Man Jew, and Broadway, and Hollywood is called La-la land and it is magical: it is where movies come from.

Father Ben has the books, and he lets Densley read them. Thirty or so: it is a vast library of knowledge. Women are called dolls; men use their fist, or a gun. Densley too has a gun; he has carved it himself, of the burau tree.

It is sava, dusk, when he returns home across the football field. He is deep in thought; the gun is in the waistband of his trousers. When he glances left he can see the sea beyond the trees, and rising above it, the volcano, obscured by clouds. When he goes past Eliezer's house he sees a girl, playing alone by the side of the road. When he comes closer he sees that she is not playing: she is crying.

'Olsem wanem?' he says. What's going on? The girl doesn't stop crying. She says, 'No gat' - but clearly, Densley thinks, something is wrong.

The girl's name is Isabel, and she is the daughter of his cousin Samson, not the one from Gaua but the one who once worked in the Public Works and had since disappeared, sans wife and daughter, into the bright lights of Luganville. He says, 'Isabel...' and waits for her to look up. 'Si?'

'What's going on?' He kneels down beside her. Isabel says, 'I can't find my puskat.'

Densley feels disappointment. Here, he had felt, was a client and here, he had felt, was a case. The moment he had seen Isabel cry (for she never cried) he knew that something was wrong, and his help would be needed. It was a promising encounter, but now... a missing cat?

'She probably went in the bush,' he says. Isabel shakes her head. 'She always waits for me when I come back from school,' she says. 'She doesn't like to go outside. The other children scare her.'

'Did you ask your mummy?' Densley says, and Isabel shakes her head again and says, 'Mummy's not home either,' and starts to cry again but makes no noise, which somehow makes it worse.

Densley stands up. 'Gerrap, doll,' he says. When she does he takes her by the hand. 'I'll find your cat.'

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They call the city Sola: for when the waetman came, he had asked in his language what the name of the place was, and the women roasting crabs by the sea had replied in their language: Sola, sola. Crab. Crab. To a visitor it is a sleepy coastal town, a village really. But for Densley, it is The City: it has two street lights, and indeed there used to be electricity here, until the town's generator broke; it has a police station (the only one in the whole province, which covers over fourteen populated islands); it has a clinic, a secondary school Densley goes to (the only one in the province), many shops, and many dark and quiet bars selling kava, where men sit on wooden benches and speak in whispers in the light of a single hurricane lamp. It is The City, running from the one creek to the other, sprawling across the solwota, lying in the shade of the tall green hills, a city carved into the bush by men. But the bush is never far away.

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He takes Isabel the short distance to his house. The house lies at the end of town, beyond the football field. There is a wide yard, a mango tree and eggplant shrubs and flowers, and a row of chilli bushes. They have a flush toilet. Densley's mother sits in the yard fixing his brother Maxwell's trousers. 'Isabel!' she cries, and she takes the little girl by the hand and takes her into the kitchen, where a fire is always burning, and bustles around her as if full of secret knowledge. Densley follows them inside. 'Where is the mami blong pikinini?' he asks. The mother of the child. Names are to be avoided when discussing people. Densley's mother shoots him a glance like whipping out a pistol and says, 'I don't know. She probably went into town.'

'But her cat is missing,' Densley protests, and his mother makes that guttural growl that serves as a warning to the kids, and says, 'Densley...'

Excitement, then, because he recognises it for what it is: a warning to stay off the case. He turns to leave.

'Densley!'

'What?'

'Where are you going?'

'No gat...' he says, innocently, and walks out.

The sun had set, but the moon is half-full, and there is light, and anyway he knows the road well. He walks back the way he came. He could go to Carlo's house, and play. He could go find Maxwell, who is probably diving for fish. He could go up to the Anglican Diocese, where there is a working generator and his aunty lives and where he could most likely watch a movie. But now he is on a case, and he has a cat to find, and so he chooses none of the above, but makes his way beyond the creek that marks the border of the town, to Isabel's house.

Densley Investigates the Scene of the Crime

Isabel's house lies beyond the creek, on Densley's family's land, which extends all the way from the end of town, beyond the point, and over to the other side and the small island that lies beyond. A narrow path leads to the house; it sits in a clearing in the bush. It is dark here, despite the moon, and there are many mosquitoes. It is quiet, and no lights are on.

As he approaches the house he calls softly to the cat, but nothing stirs in the bushes beside the black lizards that live there, and they scuttle away from him unseen with

a rustle of leaves. The door of the house is closed, and the door of the kitchen too.

He stops and looks around. There is a truck's tire lying on the ground, which might have once been a swing. The place feels abandoned, which makes Densley suddenly uncomfortable: homes, here, are to be lived at. They are rarely empty. He looks around again and notices that the wooden bench from the kitchen is outside. Guests, he thinks. Someone had been here - to see Esmeralda?

Esmeralda is Isabel's mother. She is pretty, a girl from the Torres Islands where people are a mix of Polynesian and Melanesian, and Densley likes her. He wonders who her visitor was. He notices that the mat has not been used, which suggests it was not a family visit: for doesn't family sit down with you on the mat? But perhaps it was an elderly person, who needed a bench in the absence of a plastic chair, like the ones Densley's parents have, which they bring out for the guests. He sits down on the bench. Why wasn't it returned to the kitchen before Esmeralda left? She must have been in a hurry, he thought. He looks down.

There is the butt of a cigarette lying on the ground. Densley is excited again; the case is going well. He carefully picks up the cigarette end. Esmeralda doesn't

smoke. Women don't. So the visitor must be a man. He looks - the cigarette hasn't been smoked down to the stub, but left when it was not yet finished. He had assumed it was a Peter Jackson, the only brand sold in the shops in Sola, but no - the writing around the base says it is a Marlboro. So, he thinks. A visitor, someone from out of town. He must have come on the flight from Santo in the morning; there are only three flights a week and today was airport day. Someone wealthy - he smoked his cigarette like a waetman.

Could a waetman have come to see Esmeralda?

It seems unlikely. But now that he has surveyed the scene (finding no trace, it had to be said, of the cat) he was provided with plenty of leads. He decides he had learnt as much as he could: the answer won't be here, he thinks; and he decides to pursue the investigation into the town.

Down The Mean Street Densley Must Go

Down the mean street of Sola Densley goes; for the city, his city, has the one street nomo, a wide dirt track running from creek to creek. It is a dark road, and a long one, but Densley walks it like one who is its master; for he had grown up here, on this swathe of coast, and knows the road the way he would one day want to know a woman. He

walks past the football field and there is a great silence around him. He walks past the wharf, and the moon glints off the dark water like a watching eye. He walks past the offices of the Province, and the empty police station, and the offices of Health and Education, and still he meets no one on his way. It is just another quiet night in Sola, and he can smell the smoke of many small kitchen-fires, and hear, as he draws nearer to the centre, the many small sounds of families at rest.

Yet one family at least is not amongst them. His cousin's daughter Isabel, who is now in Densley's house, crying for her missing puskat; and her mother, too, is not where she should be, in the house with her child, for she too is missing, in a town where it is impossible to disappear.

He reaches the town - a strip of stores and nakamals - and as he approaches there is the first light, and he hears singing, and he thinks of course, and feels disappointment again, for the solution is simple, and obvious.

He comes to the Market House. It is an open concrete floor, a high roof above it, and benches set down underneath the electric neon light from a generator. Sitting on the benches are rows and rows of women, clad in flowery island dresses, Mother Hubbard's they were called,

back when the missionaries came and brought them to the islands: and the women, aunts and cousins and neighbours to Densley, sit and sing with enthusiasm if not grace. They are the Choir, and they practice for their trip to the Solomon Islands in the summer, where they will represent the Diocese of the Banks and Torres in a great big gathering of the church.

He searches for Esmeralda. This is where she would be, of course: for she too is in the choir, and will be going to the Solomons later in the year.

Yet he cannot find her. Scanning the benches he sees no trace of her, and so he waits, until the conductor of this orchestra, the august Augustus, a wide and genial man who had only ever beaten his wife before their children came, approaches him in one of his circles around the hens. 'Yes, Densley?' Augustus booms a whisper.

'Is Esmeralda here?'

Augustus turns to check and returns a puzzled face back to Densley. 'No,' he says. 'I haven't seen her.'

Densley turns back. She is not at the house, nor at his mother's. And she is not at Choir. It leaves him with little; and yet, knowing where she is not is a clue in itself, a way of eliminating the easy answers. Think, then; and he does - of the visitor of Esmeralda's, with the

expensive cigarette. Was he staying in one of the guest-houses? There are three, and he had already passed the first. But he thinks of that cigarette, and he thinks he knows where he should go: for it is long after sava now, and the kava-bars are open, and a man who smokes, women business or no, has only one place to go at this hour. And so Densley turns, feeling again the comforting butt of his gun against his hip, and though he is a boy, he decides to check the nakamals.

An Encounter in a Kava-Bar

The nakamals of Sola are many and varied; huts with wooden benches and small quiet yards, and a single dim light. Densley goes through them, but cautiously. He is not sure what he is looking for. He is going on a hunch. When he goes into Father Sol's nakamal the place is almost deserted, only the old priest sitting behind the counter, and two men from the village of Vetuboso, from the other side of the island, sitting quietly in a corner sharing a cigarette of lif-tabak. 'Yes, Densley?' Father Sol says, 'Are you looking for your father?'

Densley's father is a great drinker of kava; and sometimes Densley or his brothers must carry him back from

the nakamals, and particularly on second Fridays, for they are pay days here, in this Province town. But not tonight. 'Have you seen Esmeralda?' he says, and sees Father Sol's surprised frown, and a shake of the head given, Densley suddenly thinks, a little too hastily. 'This is a nakamal,' Father Sol says, and implicit in that the gentle rebuke: it is not a place for women.

But Densley knows that sometimes, women do come to the nakamals. They sit on the benches outside, and they come accompanied by their men, and many get their kava to take-away and drink in the privacy of their homes; and he hears that in Port Vila, the great capital city of Vanuatu, which has many trucks, men and women mingle freely in the nakamals. But this is not Vila; this is Sola, and some things here are simply not done.

Nevertheless, he persists. He goes to the Vice-Chairman's nakamal, and to the Former Secretary-General's, and to the Chief Mechanic's, and it is there at last, right by Qiqi Store with its generator noise and electric light, that he makes a discovery.

'Densley...' says a voice he had half-expected to hear, and the way his name is pronounced, with half a growl and half amusement, makes him suddenly tense. He says,

'Samson?' and turns around to the dark figure sitting by its own on the bench outside.

'Come here!' His cousin rises and hugs him. The smoke of his cigarette curls behind Densley's back and reaches his face. Samson smells expensive: aftershave, and smoke, and just the hint of alcohol on his breath, which is the mark of a successful man, for beer is expensive here and hard to come by.

'What are you doing here?' Densley says when Samson at last releases him. His cousin's movements are slow and careful, and he sits back down on the bench with a sigh suggesting much kava. 'Family visit,' Samson says. 'Let me buy you a shell.'

'I don't drink kava,' Densley says, and Samson laughs and says, 'You are a man now, Densley. Come!' and he rises again and takes him and leads him inside, and says to the man behind the counter, 'One shell for my friend here.'

The man pours two measures of brown dank liquor into the polished coconut shell, and the same for Samson.

'Drink!' Samson says. Densley takes the shell. But he doesn't yet drink.

'Where is the cat?' he says.

'The cat?' Samson says, eyes opening in comical surprise. 'What cat?'

'Isabel's cat,' Densley says.

'My cat,' Samson says, and the humour leaves his eyes.

'My girl. What's it to you?'

Densley shrugs, feeling clumsy and small beside his cousin. 'Drink,' Samson says, and he pushes the shell gently up until it reaches Densley's mouth.

He drinks. The kava tastes like earth and mud, and as he drinks it he almost gags, but doesn't. The kava makes his lips numb, and he feels a slowness spreading through him, a heaviness that wasn't there before.

'Good!' Samson says, and he claps him. 'Give me your shell.' He takes it from Densley's hands and returns both shells to the counter, and measures out two hundred vatu onto the counter. 'And one for yourself,' he says, and tosses another one hundred vatu coin onto the counter.

'Come!' he says, turning to Densley. Already he has a newly-lit cigarette in his hand. 'Let's sit down and talk.'

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The word, in Bislama, is storian, which means to talk, to chat, to story. Yet Densley's tongue feels heavy and unresponsive, and his cousin, for his part, seems content

to sit back, his shirt off, the cigarette casually dangling from his lips.

'Where is the cat?' Densley says again, at last, and his cousin laughs and lays a hand on his shoulder and says, 'I have the pussy.'

He makes Densley uncomfortable. 'Why?' he says.

'Because I'm taking it with me,' Samson says, and his smile is lazy, but his eyes are not. 'What's mine is mine, Densley. And it stays mine.'

'Where's Esmeralda?' Densley says. And then, 'Are you taking her too?'

The smile remains.

'But you left her.'

'And now I'm back. So?'

'So does she want to go with you? And Isabel?'

'You drink kava, but you are not yet a man, Densley,' Samson says, and the smile flickers and dies. 'Go. Go back home to your mummy.'

'Isabel wants her cat,' Densley says.

'And she'll have it. And all the cats she wants, in Luganville.'

'You're going to take her away? But she doesn't want to go!' Anger makes him stand up, and clears the weariness of kava.

Samson flicks his cigarette away. The light arcs overhead and falls by the side of the road. Suddenly he rises, and before Densley can do anything to stop him Samson cuffs him, hard, on the back of the head, and then a slap, and another, and another: an assault Densley is helpless against.

Samson moves away. He is breathing hard. His teeth gleam in the dark. 'Go home, boy,' he says. And then, patiently, almost gentle: 'When you're a man you'll understand.'

He pushes Densley, not hard, towards the road. Densley goes, not looking back.

Densley Cracks the Case

When he gets home his mother is furious, but not at Samson. At him. 'I told you -!' she says, and stops. Densley says, 'What?'

'Why do you have to get into trouble? What did you do?'

'I found Isabel's puskat,' Densley says, and then he smiles, even though it hurts.

'Isabel is asleep,' his mother says, and she suddenly looks tired. 'She has a long way to go tomorrow.'

'But why?' Densley says.

'Because sometimes we don't do what we want,' his mother says, and her eyes make him uncomfortable. 'When Isabel grows up and becomes a woman, she will understand.'

Densley doesn't argue with his mother. But he goes and looks for Isabel, who is sleeping on the mat in the next room, and he gently shakes her awake. 'Gerrap, doll,' he whispers.

'Densley?' she says, opening big round eyes full of sleep. 'What is it?'

'Your cat,' Densley says, and he extracts the small furry animal from its makeshift hammock inside his shirt, and gives her to Isabel.

'Puskat!' Isabel cries, and she hugs the sleepy animal and smiles at Densley and lies back down, and in a moment both her and the cat are asleep.

'Where did you find it?' his mother asks when he comes out again.

'Olbaot,' Densley says, and he says no more, and his mother doesn't ask. For he did not go home after leaving the nakamal, but rather to the one place where he knew he would find Esmeralda now: Samson's mother's home, which lay beyond the creek towards the airport. He had gone, and he had found Esmeralda there, sitting alone with the old

woman, both staring at the small fire in the kitchen. The cat was whining softly against the door.

Densley took the cat quietly and went home. It was only when he went to bed that night that he realised that, somewhere along the way, he had lost his gun.

THE END.