



Tumereng Landing Mazaruni River, British Guiana, 1962

THE LOTTERY TICKETS

Short story by Royden V. Chan. 1995

According to the Buddha, man himself is the maker of his own destiny. He has none to blame for his lot since he alone is responsible for his own life. He makes his own life for better or for worse.

When you read this tale of Aubrey and Elsie Robinson, you can decide if this is true or if we are powerless pawns manipulated by conditions and circumstances beyond our control.

**34, Waterloo Street,
North Cummingsburg,
Georgetown, Guyana.
November 26, 1972**

Dear Mrs. Robinson,

I got your name and address from the letter you mailed to your husband Mr. Aubrey Robinson, dated October 15, 1972. I am sorry to inform you that he died a month ago. He had been renting a room in my house for almost four years and I never knew that he had a family in New York or any relatives at all. He never spoke much and kept mostly to himself, but he was very cordial and friendly, and he always seemed to be in a good mood.

I knew nothing about him other than he was working for Lee's Diamond Company on New Market street, but from the way he spoke and conducted himself he seemed to be a well educated man who came from a cultured family background.

The hospital said that he died from a heart attack. He had to be buried by the Government because I checked his room and all he had was \$25.00 cash in his bed side table and he had no balance in his bank book or anything else.

There were some clothes and books, and some letters from you tied together with a rubber band. There were also thousands of lottery tickets; I found it strange that they all had the same drawing date – October 26, 1972 – which incidentally, was the same day he was taken to the hospital.

Let me know what you want me to do with his belongings.

Please accept my deepest sympathy.

Mrs. Ursula Cummings

**107-55A, 143 Street,
Jamaica, New York, 11438
USA**

October 30, 1965

My dear Aubrey,

We arrived safely and are now at my sister's home in Queens.

Colin and I are staying in the basement. It's comfortable but I cannot get accustomed to living in a place with no windows and not being able to look outside. The weather here is

very cold; it's like living in a freezer. And Aubrey you cannot imagine how immense this city is compared to our little Georgetown. The amount of traffic and activities get me confused and intimidated. I miss home so much that I can't stop myself from crying all the time. I will be doing the cooking and looking after the children for Evelyn and her husband. I am so grateful to them for sponsoring us; making it possible for us to get away from the hopeless and embarrassing situation we were facing in Guiana. But I am not sure that I can survive here without you. I still think that you should have come with us, but I understand how you felt about this. I hope that you will be able to join us in a year or so as you promised. Please write and let me know how you are making out with your new job in the interior. I miss you and love you.

Elsie

*Tumereng Landing,
Mazaruni River, District #3
British Guiana.
January 05, 1966*

Dear Elsie,

I am sorry for all the problems I have caused you. I made a terrible decision taking the \$500.00 from the payroll account at Bookers to pay for your surgery. But you know how desperately we needed that money. I would have been able to replace it without detection, if they had not done that mid-year audit. However, I was fortunate that they considered my 15 years of loyal service and dismissed me without filing criminal charges. However, our life had become so difficult after that; I could not get employment anymore and you had to resign from teaching because of the complications after your surgery. Worst of all, living in Guiana had become unbearable because of the constant shame and humiliation we had to endure. It was a relief when Evelyn offered to sponsor us to go to New York. It was also opportune that Mr. James Lee kindly agreed to employ me as the bookkeeper at his Tumereng Landing shop in the interior.

Travelling from Bartica to Tumereng by cargo boat on the Mazaruni River was a terrifying experience for me. As we crossed over the rapids, our boat was tossed from side to side in the surging turbulent waters, jolting upwards and plunging rapidly forward, then suddenly diving into swirling frothing eddies...resurfacing almost inundated, twisting and bobbing like an insect in a toilet flush.

Had it not been for the skillful handling of our sturdy bowman we would surely have been smashed onto the ominous rocks.

It was as if the ferocity of nature was showing us how puny and insignificant we humans are. I surrendered my life a thousand times.

Tumereng Landing is situated on the bank of the Mazaruni River, atop a reddish brown hill. It is landscaped and shaded by large spreading trees. There are several buildings in the compound. The largest building is the Tumereng shop with an attached dancehall and the diamond office in its adjoining tower. The other smaller buildings are the living quarters for the staff, the kitchen and mess hall, Mr. Lee's residence, the shop manager's home, and a guest house for the Lands and Mines warden or any other visiting Government official (Mr Lee is the Justice of the Peace for the Mazaruni district).

There are also some very small houses for other persons who live on the Landing (mostly prostitutes).

Tumereng is the brightest and liveliest place on the upper Mazaruni River. The whole compound is brightly lit by a powerful Delta lighting plant. There is a continuous throb of loud music and merriment emanating from the dancehall where men and women drink and dance with abandoned revelry. All the people who work and live in the areas along the river come here for their entertainment.

When approaching Tumereng Landing, on the river in the blackness of the night, it is a cheerful relief to see its bright glare like a halo in the darkness and to hear the exciting drumming of its music in the distance.

The lifestyle here is so different from Georgetown; wild and uninhibited, raw and indecent. It is hard for me trying to adjust to this raucous environment, but I am encouraged knowing that it will only be for a year or two.

Elsie, I know it is also hard for you, living in a strange country and being there without me. But as I explained to you; at my age and with no qualifications, it would take some time for me to find a suitable job in New York and I will not be comfortable living with and being supported by your family during that period. I will join you and Colin when I have sufficient money saved that would afford us to live there independently until I find a job. I assure you that this will not be more than a year or two, because all of my living expenses here are covered and I will be saving most of what I earn.

Also, I am convinced that if I continue to buy my lottery tickets, as I have been doing regularly now, I will surely win something big within that time and would be able to come to New York even sooner.

My love to you and Collin and give my regards to Evelyn and Harold.

Aubrey

107-55A, 143 Street,
Jamaica, New York, 11438
USA

October 06, 1966

Dear Aubrey,'

It has been almost a year now since I have been here.

I am gradually getting accustomed to this lifestyle and Evelyn and Harold have been very supportive. It's strange how one can be conditioned in due time regardless of how impossible it seems at first. I am coping with my daily chores and I feel more confident that I will be able to meet this challenge.

Life in the United States is a paradox; it is a country of egalitarian ideals but a society of insensitive prejudice. There are more opportunities here for education and jobs but you are harnessed and socially confined because of the colour of your skin. Social mobility is a struggle for people like us.

I still miss you very much and I am counting the days when you will be here with us. I have received only two letters from you this year. I hope you are okay and not having any problems with your job.

You have not mentioned anything about when you will reach your goal for coming to New York. I am doubtful that you will ever be able to achieve this on what you are saving from your salary. And, depending on winning a lottery seems to be wishful thinking.

Sometimes I think that you are not very realistic Aubrey. You should be more practical and just accept life as it is. While we are waiting for you to save the money you say we need, or hoping to win your lottery, we are so unhappy just being apart.

Remember what pastor Welshman said at our wedding - "Happiness is not having what you want but wanting what you have."

Aubrey I am having some trouble with Collin. He is no longer focused and outgoing. He sulks most of the time and is not interested in anything. He is not doing well at school and he has no friends. I have read that boys usually go through this psychological change during their early teens, especially if they are experiencing family upheavals. I am hoping that it's only a phase and that everything will be okay as he gets older.

I heard that our British Guiana is now an independent country and its name has been changed to Guyana. I am so elated about this. I can now admit with pride that I am a "Guyanese" I only hope that our Government will do well for our people and our country so that we can rightly take our place among the other independent nations of the world. So long my dear husband. Please write to me more often than you have been doing recently. Love always.

Elsie

**Tumereng Landing,
Mazaruni River, District #3
Guyana.
November 08, 1967**

Dear Elsie

It has been over two years that I have been here and I have found this job very challenging. I have reorganized the entire system of accounts and stock records for Tumereng and our other shops at Two Mouth, Imbaimadai, Seranamu and Kurupung, which I visit periodically. I have learned a lot about the diamond industry in Guyana. Most of the mining is alluvial - extraction from shallow pits and river beds, unlike the deep pit mining done in South Africa. However, I have been shocked by how unscrupulously the system is operated.

Mr. Lee is one of the four major diamond dealers in Georgetown who export their diamonds. They have shops in most of the mining districts of the interior. They are stocked with foodstuff, fuel and mining equipment freighted from Georgetown.

The shop managers send out prospecting expeditions to locate, stake and license diamond bearing claims. Diamond miners, locally called "Pork knockers" are permitted to work on these claims. They are provided with transportation, mining equipment, fuel and rations, which are charged to their accounts at exorbitantly marked up prices.

The diamonds they produce have to be sold to the shop at prices far below its export value. Whatever they owe on their accounts, including ten percent tribute for working on the claim, is deducted before they receive payment.

They are paid by "Cash Orders" which are like bank cheques, but issued by the diamond dealer and cashed at his office in Georgetown.

They do collect a certain amount in cash, which is immediately spent on liquor in the dancehall and on the prostitutes who live on the compound. Most of their Cash Orders are not cashed for months and some are not cashed at all, due to being lost or destroyed for various reasons. Whereas their diamonds are exported by the dealers and paid for many times over.

In effect, the diamond dealer finances a major part of his business by investing only pieces of paper (his Cash Orders)

This system is a blatant exploitation of poor hard working people.

It is so unfair that our family had to suffer so much because of my transgression, which was considered a major crime against society, whereas these unscrupulous injustices are conventionally accepted as normal business conduct.

Mr. Lee is a part of this unjust system, but he is really a compassionate and generous person. He pays his staff well and ensures that their families are well looked after in Georgetown. He treats everyone with respect and kindness. He is well liked by all who know him and is fondly referred to as "Uncle Jamie" or "Godfather". It is regrettable that he has to comply

with this corrupt and immoral system; the consequence of not conforming would be his inability to compete and the failure of his business.

I am sorry to hear about Colin. I hope that he is not being bullied at school, because of his small stature or because of his race. Try to give him all the support he needs.

I already have a fair amount of cash saved but still not sufficient to finance us for the time I would need to find suitable employment. I am hoping to realize this by the end of next year.

But if I hit the lottery jackpot, it will be a lot sooner.

I will try to write more often. Love to you and Collin.

Aubrey

**107-55A, 143 Street,
Jamaica, New York, 11438
USA**

March 08, 1968

Dear Aubrey

I am sorry to burden you with this terrible news: Colin was charged for assaulting and wounding one of his schoolmates with a knife. He has been found guilty and sentenced to serve three years in a juvenile detention center. They said that he was using drugs and claimed to have found some on his person.

I am so distraught and blame myself for what has happened to our poor son. I knew that something was troubling him...I tried best but it was hopeless...there was nothing I could do to help him.

Oh! Aubrey, I feel so depressed. I need you so much. It has been more than two years now and still you are not with us. If I did not have Evelyn here I would have gone crazy. I cannot stop thinking of Colin. It pains me so much.

I dreamt a few nights ago that you won the lottery and came to New York. It felt so real. I woke up with an overwhelming sensation of joy and hope. But even though I knew that it was only fantasy, it did suppress that constant gnawing ache in my heart, at least for a few days.

I will keep you in touch.

Aubrey, I know that you are not a believer, but please say a prayer for our son.

Love always.

Elsie

**Tumereng Landing,
Mazaruni River, District #3
Guyana.
June 06, 1968**

Dear Elsie

I am so sad to hear what has happened to Colin. I think that the emotional stress from all we have had in our family has had a devastating effect on our son.

Don't blame yourself Elsie. You did the best you could have done...that any other parent could have done. He will be okay as long as we continue to stand by him and give him all the support he needs. You have had more than your full share of stress and your strength has been my support. As for me, I live every day with the feeling of guilt. I blame myself for the disgrace, the shame, the hardship, the displacement, the separation, and all the unhappiness I have wreaked upon my family. There is no redemption.

All I hope for now is that Colin will mend soon and will be readjusted, and that both of you will be able to have a good life. Let us discard my coming to New York for now.

I have about \$3,000.00 saved and I will send this to you through Barclays Bank. I want you to get a lawyer who can get Colin released on probation. I also want you to see a doctor for a medical checkup, to ensure that you are okay. I will continue to send you whatever I can every month from now on.

I think that your dream is an omen. When I win the lottery, and I truly believe I will, I will come to New York right away and we will be together again to give our son all the love and support he needs.

I have started praying every day now Elsie. I realize that survival without hope is impossible, and at this moment in my life the only hope I have is faith.

Aubrey

**34 Waterloo Street,
North Cummingsburg,
Georgetown, Guyana.**

July 22, 1969

Dear Elsie,

I am so happy to hear that Colin's behaviour has changed and that he will be starting college in September. We were lucky Mr. Barker was able to convince the juvenile court that Colin's sentence was too harsh and got it reduced to one year. And more so that he was able to encourage him to go back to school.

I was a bit doubtful when you told me that Evelyn had recommended a Guyanese lawyer, because I was not sure that he would have had the “American” experience, but now I must admit that I was wrong.

I was relieved to hear that your physical and mental condition has improved over the year due to your doctor’s treatment. I will continue to send you whatever I can every month to make your life less stressful and to help finance Colin’s education.

A lot has transpired since I last wrote to you. Mr. James Lee died after surgery at St. Joseph’s Mercy hospital. His son Ronald has taken over the business.

He came to Tumereng with the intention of closing down the shops because they were all operating at a loss.

He asked my opinion, and realizing that my job was in jeopardy, I decided to confide in him all the dishonest practices carried on by the managers – They shipped the diamonds to him at higher prices than they paid to the Pork Knockers and pocketed the difference. They credited the accounts with less than the Pork Knockers repaid, and pocketed the difference. They created fictitious operational expenses and pocketed those amounts. They sent groceries from the shop to their families in Georgetown without charging their personal accounts. They permitted operations on Mr. Lee’s claims, without his knowledge, and pocketed the tribute. They took out the better quality and larger stones from the parcels of diamonds purchased and sold them to unlicensed, itinerant foreign buyers who were able to pay higher prices because they had no investment risks, no mining and operational expenses and they paid no royalties or personal and export taxes.

Mr Ronald Lee realized that he could not continue to sustain those fraudulent losses, but he needed the rough diamonds which the shops provided. So, instead of closing them down, he transferred the shops to the managers (free of charge). They are now the sole owners, gaining all the profits but bearing all the operational losses.

Mr. Lee agreed to provide them (on credit) all the supplies they requisition and allow them to continue using his Cash Orders for purchasing their diamonds.

They are also allowed to authorize anyone to work on Mr. Lee’s claims and withhold for themselves, fifty percent of all the tribute collected.

In return they agree to sell him all of the diamonds they produce on his claims, at prices negotiated to the satisfaction of both parties. These transactions would be conducted at the end of every month and the amounts owing for items supplied and for Cash Orders issued for that period, are to be settled in full.

This was all concluded within the month.

Mr. Lee has promoted me to the position of manager at his office in Georgetown and he doubled my salary. I suppose he appreciated all that I had done, assisting him with the expedient transition of his business.

I am now renting a room from Mrs. Ursula Cummings, at 34, Waterloo Street, which includes breakfast and dinner. It is a short walking distance from my office.

I like being back in Georgetown.

I will now be able to send you a bit more every month. I will also increase the amount of lottery tickets I have been buying, because the more tickets I have, the more chances I will have of winning.

Elsie, I know that you will think that this is being impractical. But even though my life seems hopeless, I am still able to face the world every day with a bright spirit, because I have this dream that one day I will win the lottery.

So long for now my dear Elsie.

Aubrey

*107-55A, 143 Street,
Jamaica, New York, 11438
USA*

May 08, 1971

Dear Aubrey

I do appreciate the monthly amounts you have been sending. It has made life a lot easier for us these last three years, and without it Colin would not have been able to go to college. He has been doing very well and is determined to graduate next year.

But we still do not know how and when you will be able to come to New York. I can understand how hopeless and lonely it must be for you being all alone in Guyana, not knowing when you will be able to leave. I am hoping that this will not have to go on for much longer,

When Evelyn's boys start college next year I am thinking of getting a job. By then Colin would have graduated and should be working. Together we will be earning sufficient to be able to rent a place of our own and to cover our living expenses.

At that time there will be no need for you to send us anything. You will be able to save all of your salary for the purchase of your airline ticket to New York. And when you come, you can take as long as you need to find a job. If all goes well you should be here with us within two years from now.

I am sorry to hear how much the new currency exchange law is affecting Mr. Lee's business; all foreign currency remitted for exports, now have to be converted into Guyana dollars by the Bank of Guyana, at their fixed rate of exchange.

It is admirable of Mr. Lee for not smuggling out his diamonds and selling the US dollars on the "Black Market" as all the other diamond dealers are now doing. But, it is unfortunate

that he can no longer compete with the prices they are paying since he is recovering less Guyana dollars by exporting his diamonds legally.

I cannot understand how our Government can do this, knowing full well that financial restrictions will encourage smuggling. They will now lose, not only the foreign currency, but also the export duty, the royalty, and the income tax they were deriving from legal transactions.

I hope Mr.Lee will be able to survive, at least for the next two years...for our sake.

Take care and take comfort that in two years we will be together again and all our troubles will be over.

God will answer our prayers.

Love always.

Elsie

*34, Waterloo Street,
North Cummingsburg,
Georgetown, Guyana.*

September 15, 1972

Dear Elsie,

I have enjoyed receiving everyone of your letters during this last year. They have given me so much comfort and hope; hearing how happy, positive and optimistic you have become and how well Colin has been doing at College,

I was so overjoyed when I read your last letter that he had graduated with honours in July and will be looking for a job soon. I hope he has found one by now.

I am so proud of him.

I note that Evelyn's boys will be going to College in September, and that you are already looking for a job. Let's hope that everything works out okay.

Mr. Lee has finally decided that it is not possible to carry on his business any longer. He is in the process of liquidating his assets in Guyana, and is closing down the business. He will be migrating to Canada with his family by mid October.

He has generously offered to give me six months salary as my severance pay.

This is a windfall for us Elsie.

Now I will not have to wait until next year to come to New York.

As soon as I receive this money in October, I will use it to purchase my airfare and will be in New York as early as November.

I hope that by then you and Colin will both be working and living in your own rented apartment.

I am so happy how things have turned out. I look forward to being with my family soon and to enjoy spending this Christmas with you after so many years.

Love you both.

Aubrey

*123, Bedford Ave. Apt.17
Brooklyn, New York, 11210
USA*

October 15, 1972

Dear Aubrey

I was so elated when I read your letter, that you got such a generous severance pay from Mr. Lee. That you will now have all the money you need to buy your air ticket, and will not have to wait until next year to come to New York.

This is indeed a windfall for us Aubrey.

I was sorry to hear that Mr. Lee had to close down his business, but I am sure that he will do well in Canada. He is a good man and God will bless him.

Good news also from this end; Colin got a very good paying job with a company in Brooklyn and I was able to get a housekeeper position with a hospital, also in Brooklyn.

We are already settled in a rented apartment which is comfortable and conveniently located. You are going to like it here.

God has been good to us Aubrey; everything is working out perfectly and you will be here with us in November and will be spending Christmas with your family after so many years.

What more can we ask for.

God does answer prayers.

I am looking forward to holding you in my arms after being apart for such a long time.

Love always.

Elsie

End