

The Project, or How I Got Lost in the Jungle

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Prologue—page 21

I'm trying not to think about caimans. Or about piranhas. Or about water spirits. Just about the other side. It's not far.

I'm up to my hips in the swirling water, with my hands clasped around the rope. It's all that's left of the rope bridge. The river pulls and pulls. Birds shriek above the sound of the water, as if they're cheering me on: Come on, Eva! You can do it!

The other side. That's where I need to go. That's where he is. Somewhere behind that wall of leaves, trunks, stalks and lianas.

I take a step deeper into the river. The water comes up to my belly button, almost sweeping me away. But then my feet refuse to go any further. The rope is chafing my hands, and the muscles in my arms are starting to shake. I've travelled thousands of miles and now that I'm so close, I'm too scared to go on.

I look over my shoulder one more time. My backpack's hanging from a branch – and, inside it, my telephone and the project that started all this a few weeks ago. If I'd chosen another subject, I wouldn't be here now. I'd be sitting in the classroom as usual, next to the empty aquarium, and behind Luke.

CHAPTER 1

How I came up with the idea for this project

At first I had no idea what to do when our teacher told us we had to come up with a subject. It can be anything, she said, as long as it's something you want to find out more about. And it has to have something to do with biology.

“Then I’m doing Organic Tomatoes!” Wesley shouted. Of course he did, because his dad has a nursery that grows organic tomatoes. Easy-peasy. I don’t really think it’s a subject he wants to find out more about though. He already knows everything there is to know about tomatoes.

Actually, it’s pretty easy for most of the class to think of a subject. Anyone who has a favourite animal has chosen that, e.g. chickens, tropical fish or dragons. (Okay, dragons weren’t allowed. But at least Luke came up with something.)

I thought about it all week, but I don’t really have a favourite animal, all we have growing in our garden is grass, and I don’t have a dad who runs an organic nursery. I don’t even have a dad. All I have is a mum.

And then it suddenly came to me. It’s a subject I’d like to find out more about. And I don’t know a thing about it yet.

I’m going to do my project about Biological Fathers.

Note from my teacher

Dear Eva,

Are you sure you want to choose this subject? It doesn't seem like such a great idea to me.

I'm afraid it's too complicated.

Have a think about it. Let me know your new subject on Wednesday.

(And try to focus more on your own project this time. It's not very nice to say that Wesley's choice is "easy-peasy").

Warfare

“Aw, that’s lame,” Luke says, putting the note from the teacher back down on my desk. “I think it’s a good subject. And you’re right. Wesley is being pretty lazy. He can just ask his dad about everything.”

The bell has already gone. Left and right, kids are walking past us into the hallway. The sun is shining through the splotchy green glass of the aquarium and onto my desk, turning the note the colour of snot.

“So what am I going to do instead?”

“You could do it about biological... warfare,” Luke suggests.

“What’s that?”

“You know, like when they breed supersized mutant wasps to use in a war. Or put a virus in their enemies’ drinking water so they get a really bad itch.”

“Hmm, maybe. Dunno.”

“Can Eva do that, miss? Biological warfare?” asks Luke.

The teacher looks up, a pile of notebooks in her hands. Her permanent smile is only half working.

“It’s kind of you to want to help, Luke,” she says. “But that doesn’t really sound like the right subject for Eva, does it?”

I shrug.

“You’ll come up with something yourself, won’t you, Eva?”

I nod.

Her permanent smile is back. “Sleep on it,” she says.

When Luke and I walk out of the school door, we see Vita standing by the big oak tree with kids all around her. She's brought in her portable speaker again.

Music's rolling over the school playground. Some of the kids are bouncing along to the beat. I've heard this song a hundred times.

A few kids look over as we walk past and then come up to me. "Cool song!" they say. "Do you ever get to be in the videos?" "You should ask!" "Bet you'll be a singer when you grow up too!"

Vita snorts. "Eva? She always sings super quiet and if she ever does sing out loud, she sounds like an old crow!"

"Like you're such a great singer," snarls Luke.

I don't say anything. She's right. I really can't sing. My voice is too raspy.

A couple of girls from the year below us come over to me, giggling. One of them holds out a notebook and a pen.

"Can I have your autograph?"

"Mine??"

"Yes," she says. "Silla Loks is your mum, isn't she?"

Vita crosses her arms. "You think? Eva doesn't look anything like her, does she?"

The girl hesitates and looks at Vita and then at me. "Um..."

"Just look at her! Silla Loks is white and blonde. Silla Loks can sing like an angel, but Eva? Yeah, not so much."

"Cool it, Vita," says Luke.

The girl who wanted an autograph slinks off.

"If you ask me," Vita says to anyone who wants to listen, "when she was a baby, someone abandoned Eva in a basket on Silla Loks's doorstep."

There's a burst of flame inside my belly. "Silla Loks *is* my mum!"

"Then how did you get so brown?" she cackles.

"Duh! How d'you think?" I mutter.

Luke gently pulls my arm. "Come on, Eve."

But I don't move.

Vita puts her hands on her hips. "But you don't *have* a dad, do you? That's what you always say."

"That's true," I reply. "But I do have a *biological* father."

"So who is he? Where does he live? And why do you never talk about him?"

"I *do* talk about him," I snap. "In fact, I'm going to do my project about biological fathers!"

"Ha!" crows Vita. "Well, it's going to be a pretty short project then!" And hiccupping with laughter, she walks off, taking her speaker with her.

Worms

"I thought you were going to pick a new subject," says Luke as we walk across the playground.

"So did I. But now I'm certain that I have to do this one."

I kick a stone. Two seagulls who were fighting over a chip squawk and fly away.

"Are we going to yours or mine?" asks Luke.

"Let's go to yours. Mum's rehearsing."

"Crash! Splash! Dead," Luke suddenly shouts. Grinning, he points at my foot. I just stepped on a manhole cover.

It's a game we invented when we were little. Manhole covers are ravines, and you have to step over them, or you fall to your death. But I don't feel like it now. "Nah. I'm not playing."

"Oh. Okay," says Luke as we walk on. He puts his hands in his pockets. "Don't pay any attention to Vita. Just ignore her."

"It's the teacher too," I admit, "and that stupid note."

Luke shrugs. "I was mad too, when I wasn't allowed to do it about dragons," he says.

"But not very much is known about dragons and their biology."

"Is that because they don't exist?"

"I guess so. But then I found the komodo dragon online. It's a lizard, about three metres long, and it eats deer and even buffaloes. It's almost a dragon. It just doesn't breathe fire." He does a big jump over a manhole cover. "But hasn't your mum ever told you anything at all about your dad? I mean... about your *biological* father?"

I shake my head. "Almost nothing."

“Don’t you even know his name?”

“No. We never talk about him. And if she ever mentions him, she just calls him ‘that man’ or ‘that worm’.”

Luke raises one eyebrow. “A worm? Why?”

“Don’t know. Maybe because he wiggled off into the distance.”

We walk onto the street where Luke lives. “Wouldn’t you like to meet him one day?”

“No, thanks,” I say. “What for?”

“Where does he live?”

“No idea.”

“Underground, I bet,” Luke says, laughing.

My mouth grins along. For a moment. Until I see that he’s standing on a manhole cover. “Splash! You’re dead,” I yell.

“Noooo!” he says, and he gargles a death cry: “Uggghh...”

Behind us, a bike bell rings. It’s Luke’s dad. He comes wobbling past with Luke’s twin sisters: one sitting on the crossbar and the other standing on the carrier. I’ve never done that with Mum, standing behind her on the bike.

“First one home is the winner!” Luke’s dad yells.

Luke and I sprint after the bike. The sister standing on the back – I can see now that it’s Iris – is holding tightly on to her dad’s shoulders, as if she’s the coachman and he’s the horse. “Faster, Dad!” she shouts.

Suddenly the bike does a weird swerve and, with lots of shrieking, creaking and clanking, it drifts off into the bushes. Siri and Iris jump off just in time, but their dad disappears into the leaves, along with his bike.

A second later, he comes crawling out of the bushes, with a leaf sticking out of his collar. "Sorry, girls. Can you still walk?"

They nod, a bit dazed.

"But can you still win?" He winks.

Bam! The race continues, and they run home, with Luke right behind them. I can tell he's letting them win on purpose.

"First!" shout the girls as they reach the door.

Their dad cheers and waves his arms in the air. Then he looks at me and puts a hand on my shoulder. "And how's life treating you, Eve?"

"Fine, thanks," I say.

Luke's really the only one who's allowed to call me Eve instead of Eva.

He pulls his bike out of the bushes and rides the last bit home. I watch him go, with his wild hair and his mile-long legs. When he gets to his house, he picks up his champion daughters and swings them through the air as they scream with delight. He spins them round and round. Round and round. As I watch, I get a strange, hollow feeling in my tummy.

Mum's frying a fish in the kitchen when I get home. She's drumming a rhythm on the counter with a wooden spoon and dancing along with her shoulders.

She gives me a kiss. "My new song's doing pretty well," she tells me. "First day, and it already has I-don't-know-how-many listens. And guess what... The Flash Festival called. We're not playing in the small tent. We're going to be on the main stage!" She dances in a circle. "A crowd of twelve thousand! How about that?"

"Wow," I say. "Cool!"

Maybe this is a good moment.

I lean against the fridge. "Mum...?"

"Yeah?" She flips the fish in the pan and goes on dancing.

"We have to do a project at school..." I take a deep breath.

"A project," Mum repeats. She drums along and makes it into a song: "A pro-ject... a pro-ject..." Her arms wave around as if there are no bones in them, like they're a couple of snakes. "And? Have you got a subject yet?"

Her bright-blue eyes stare at me.

"Um..." I mumble. "Maybe I'll do it about... worms." (Why did I say that?)

"Worms?? Do you like worms?"

"Hmm. I don't know." I feel the blood flowing to my cheeks. "Maybe I'll choose something else."

Later, in my room, I put the sheet of paper with my first project chapter on it into a yellow plastic folder. Then I pull the bottom drawer of my desk out all the way. The space underneath is empty except for two dead spiders. That's where I hide the folder. I put the two spiders on top, like a couple of guards.

CHAPTER 2

What Is a Biological Father?

Anyone who has a navel also has a biological father.

That's because your navel is what's left of your umbilical cord and if you had an umbilical cord, then once upon a time you were inside your mother's tummy, and you must have got there in your biological father's sperm. The biological father is often the one who cut the cord and he may have tied the knot in it too.

I think every human being has a navel, which means they also have a biological father. You can have another father too, because there are other sorts of fathers, such as the stepfather, the adoptive father, the godfather and even Father Time. :) But no matter how many fathers you have, you always have *one* biological father. Everyone does – all except the very first Eve of all. She didn't come out of someone's tummy, but from a rib instead, so she didn't have a navel. If you see any pictures of her with a belly button, then the artist made a mistake. (But hey, I think it's a bit of a strange story anyway. Adam was made out of clay, which I can kind of imagine, but a rib is rock hard. How could God have made that into a woman?)

My name's Eve too – well, nearly – but I do have a navel. And so I must have a biological father too.

ILLUSTRATION, page 19

RESEARCH QUESTION:

DOES EVA LOKS HAVE A BIOLOGICAL FATHER?

YES!

EVIDENCE!!

Bio. father

NAME OF BIO. FATHER = Worm??!

according to bio. mother

Hello! I'm Eva's dad!

most unlikely

A Shower of Pinpricks

“You were going to choose a different subject, weren’t you?” my teacher says with a smile. She slides the sheet of paper with my chapter on it towards me. She’s written just one big red question mark. It’s screaming at me without making a sound.

“I was going to sleep on it,” I mumble. “And I did.”

She leans back in her chair and waits.

“I can’t think of any other subjects,” I say.

“Of course you can...” she says, still with that smile. “There are thousands of fun subjects you could come up with. Meerkats, polar bears, climate change...”

Suddenly my eyes fill up. I blink and blink but it doesn’t help. A drop splashes onto her desk.

“Eva...” She strokes my arm. “Do you really want to do it that much?”

I look at her.

She sighs. A very deep sigh. “Okay, okay... As long as you learn something.”

I nod and quickly dry my eyes on my sleeve. Then she says, “Have you talked to your mum about it yet?”

“Yes,” I lie. The littlest toe on my right foot starts tingling. Before she can ask me anything else, I hurry back to my seat.

There are six toes on my right foot. I was born like that. The doctor said it wasn’t serious and that it happens all the time. One child in every 3000 has a toe too many, or a finger. But I don’t know anyone else like me.

The extra toe looks really normal, just maybe a bit smaller and a bit more crooked. Mum's asked me a few times if I wanted an operation to have it removed. She doesn't believe me when I tell her I can do something really special with my toe. Something no one else can do.

Sometimes it starts to prickle and tickle. Like a shower of warm pinpricks. I never used to pay much attention to it. I just thought I'd had my legs crossed for too long and my foot had gone to sleep, but it was different. Later I noticed it only happens when I'm *lying*.

But perhaps the craziest thing about it is that sometimes it starts itching when *someone else* tells a lie. I have to be standing quite close to them, and I have to be concentrating on their face, but then, occasionally, it happens. It's as if my toe is tingling to tell me if they're lying or telling the truth.

Hardly anyone knows about it. But Luke does, of course. He calls it my gift.

Shooting star

Finally the plane starts to descend. The clouds open up like curtains, and the first thing Suriname shows me is trees. Lots and lots of trees, but not like in the Netherlands. Greener, fuller.

As the plane goes down and down, I have a ticklish feeling in my tummy, as if it's full of little balloons. Below us, I see a field of tarmac appear, with big trees around it, and I see some palm trees too. I close my eyes for a moment but it's not a dream. I'm still inside the plane. I started a project for school and now I'm here, all the way on the other side of the ocean, in my father's homeland, the country he loves so much.

With a bump, the plane touches the runway and rolls along. All around me, everyone starts clapping and I can't help smiling. I've done it. I'm in Suriname.

"Have a great stay. Or welcome home," says the pilot's voice through the speakers.

It seems to take hours for everyone to grab their bags and for the line of people to start moving. But Tosca stops me. "Wait just a minute. Stef's going to go on ahead, and then you can leave with Violène. We need to make sure we get some good shots of your first footsteps in Suriname."

So, by the time I'm finally allowed to go, nearly all the seats are empty. The stewardesses say goodbye to me and Violène at the door. I step outside – and Suriname grabs hold of me.

Really.

The air wraps its fat arms around me, the heat clutching me in a big, sticky hug. Bam.

I stand there at the top of the steps, just like in a movie. And it *is* a movie, as I realize when I see Stef down at the bottom with his camera pointing up at me. And that strange feeling comes over me again: is this really happening? I try to take a deep breath, but it doesn't really help. Luckily the wind's blowing a bit, but it's a warm breeze.

I'm wearing far too many layers. At the bottom of the steps, I take off my jacket. We walk across the runway and into the arrivals hall, where it's a little cooler. I try to look around but even standing on tiptoe I can see lots of backs and not much else. So I peek at the legs around me. I see red, white and yellow high heels, and slip-ons. Lots of flip-flops and sandals, with men's feet in them. I count, but no one has more than ten toes.

As the crowd slowly shuffles forwards, I send Mum a text message: *Landed safely. All okay.* I check to see if I can send the email to Luke yet, but there's no free Wi-Fi here.

A very dark-skinned soldier in a green uniform checks my passport. He stares so intensely into my eyes that it makes me nervous, as if he's peering straight into my head.

After picking up the luggage, we walk through another hall and outside. I have to shield my eyes from the bright sunlight, and the heat hits me again. There are a few palm trees growing beside the carpark. Taxi drivers are waiting out there. Calmly, they make their way over to the travellers, like slow fish that have spotted something to eat.

"Taxi?" One of the taxi fish has swum over to the TV crew. Tosca talks to him and asks if it's okay for them to film in his cab. He puts two thumbs up. "*No span! Get in!*"

The steering wheel of his taxi is on the wrong side. I have to sit in the front on the left so that Stef can film me from the back seat. He attaches a little camera to the dashboard too.

"We're just going to the hotel, aren't we?" I ask. "Why does that need to be filmed?"

“Leave it to us,” Violène says with a smile. “We know the good moments to film. This part’s about your first impressions of Suriname.”

I nod. Whatever.

“So don’t talk to us, because we’re not here,” Tosca explains to the driver. “Eva’s the only one on screen. And sometimes you.”

The driver looks curiously at the cameras in his car and then at me. “So you’re the shooting star?”

I don’t know what he means. So I just smile a bit.

He starts the car and drives out of the carpark, and down a long, straight road.

No span

Something's not right.

It takes me a while to see what it is. Everyone's driving on the left – that's it.

Violène leans over and whispers in my ear. "Have a chat with the driver. Ask if he happens to know a man called Rico Vrede."

I turn round. "A chat?" I whisper.

"Go on," she says.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. All I can do is stare outside.

At the trees, with those thin, pale-grey trunks and bright-green leaves, at the bushes full of red flowers, at the palm trees, and at the big billboards telling everyone to buy telephones or Surinamese rum and to leave turtle eggs alone. I see houses with yellow, blue and pink walls. I see big houses with fences around them and tumbledown houses with peeling paint and rusty roofs.

The wind's blasting through the open windows but it's still sweltering inside the cab. I lean over to the window and breathe in the smells: diesel, wood fire and the occasional whiff of sweet, swampy air. An old woman is sweeping her porch. A man with a big knife is cutting down a tree. Two dogs are scratching about in a yard.

There are ditches alongside the road, but otherwise it's nothing like the Netherlands. Nothing at all. The trees and bushes here are so green, so very deep green that it's as if the colours on your screen need adjusting.

"First time in Suriname?" the driver asks.

"Yes..." I reply.

He laughs. "I thought so. The way you're looking with those *bigi ai*. Be careful they don't pop out!"

"We'll have to close the windows," Stef says suddenly. "My sound's blowing away."

The driver shuts the windows. And suddenly it's stuffy inside the cab. And quiet.

Violène leans over to whisper in my ear again. "Go on," she says. For a moment, I wonder what she means. Oh yes. Have a chat. Ask about Rico Vrede.

"Um... Sir?" I begin. "Do you know a... Um, er, Vrede?"

The man looks at me in surprise. I feel my face getting even hotter. We're speaking Dutch – and the name Vrede means "peace" in Dutch. No wonder he's confused.

"Of course we know peace!" he says. "There's no war in Suriname. Not for a long time now. Everyone lives in peace with each other, whether you're white, brown, red or purple, or Muslim, or Jewish, or Christian or Hindu – that doesn't matter one bit. Did you know our big mosque is right next door to the synagogue?"

"No."

A drop of sweat drips down the side of my face. I look over my shoulder at Violène. She signals at me to keep talking.

"But... do you know anyone called that? Vrede? As a surname, I mean."

"Ah! Is that your name too?"

"No. But it's my dad's."

"There are lots of folk with that name!" says the driver. "My wife's cousin is a Vrede. A friend of mine has a neighbour called Vrede. I had a teacher called Vrede too – but there wasn't much peaceful about her." He overtakes a van. "And the guy who lives opposite me, he's called Vrede too."

"Rico?" I ask immediately. "He's not called Rico Vrede, is he?"

“No. Is that your dad’s name? So you don’t know where your dad lives?”

“No. Yes... Somewhere in Suriname.”

The driver laughs. “Suriname’s a big place. But, in a way, it’s kind of small at the same time. If you ask around here and there, you’re sure to find him.” He grabs his phone. “I’m going to call my neighbour and ask if he knows anyone called Rico.” He presses the keys and puts the phone to his ear. “Martin!” he shouts, and suddenly a different language comes flowing out of his mouth. Then he switches back to Dutch. “I have a customer here who’s looking for a guy called Rico. Rico Vrede. Anyone in your family called that? ... No? Nobody?”

He chats for a while before hanging up. Everyone’s silent for a moment. “Just ask around,” the driver says again. “And you’ll find somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody. You’re going to find him, I tell you.” He drums his hand on the steering wheel. “And if you don’t find him... *No span*. I never knew my father either. Dead. Like my mother. I don’t even know what a father is. Grew up in an orphanage. What I always say is: if you don’t know what you’re missing, then you can’t miss it. Look at me. I can take care of myself just fine. This car...” He pats the dashboard – *tok tok!* – “I bought it myself, with my own *duku*, I tell you. No daddy to help me. So don’t you worry. You’ll manage without a daddy too. You understand?”

“Yes,” I say, as we drive over a bump. “But my dad’s not dead.”

My room

She takes me into the kitchen. It's dark and stuffy. The fan on the ceiling is still.

"Here," says Esseline, opening a door for me. "Your room." She gives me a big grin.

It's a small room with a light, a simple bed and a cupboard with a vase of plastic flowers on it. The room has no window.

"I wanted to put a table in here for you too, but I couldn't get one that quickly. It'll be here soon though. But the sheets are washed. You can sleep here tonight. When you're done with the television crew this afternoon, I'll come fetch you."

"But Mrs... Esseline..."

"Auntie. Just call me Auntie."

"I have a room at the hotel."

She gapes at me. "You've just found your auntie. You don't need to stay at a hotel, do you? Sweetheart, you're at home here! Who's more family? Those Dutch TV people? Or your Auntie Esseline?" She stands with her wide body in the doorway. There's no way out.

I clench my fists and look down at my feet. *Someone has to come and rescue me*, I think. *Now*. I squeeze my eyes shut and picture my dad storming in, pushing Esseline out of the way and taking me with him.

"I have to go." I say quietly. It's as if someone whispered the words in my ear.

"What do you mean?"

"I have to go." It comes out very firmly now. "They're waiting for me."

"Who? The TV people? It's nowhere near two o'clock!"

“But they just sent me a text message,” I lie. “They need me. I have to go outside.” I try to ignore the tingling in my toe.

“They won’t let me have a moment with my niece!”

“Yeah, it’s a real shame. But I’ll come back. Could I just squeeze past?”

Finally she stands aside and I can leave the room. I walk straight to the door and head outside.

Esseline comes after me. “Are they here yet?”

“They... they’re picking me up on the corner. In the same place where we just parked the car. That’s what they said in the message.” I wave my telephone. The parrot has hopped back onto his perch. He’s flapping his wings and shrieking. In the distance, I hear the rumble of thunder.

“But it’s going to rain,” says Esseline, pointing at the dark, heavy clouds. “I’ll walk with you. I have an umbrella.”

“I’m okay, thanks.”

“You’re going to get yourself soaked!”

“It’s only a short way.”

“Eva...”

“I have to go. They... they’re in a hurry.” I grab my backpack, put my phone in it and step off the porch.

“Not without a *brasa*?” She holds out her arms.

“Um...” Before I know what’s happening, she’s grasped me in another clammy hug. Her arms squeeze me to her breasts. “I’ll see you again tomorrow, won’t I?” she mumbles in my ear.

“Nyeah...” I manage to say. Finally her arms go limp.

I stumble, step back, between the bushes, give her a quick wave and make a run for it.

Then the sky cracks open.

Rain

Surinamese rain is a warm shower.

My sneakers stamp *klitsh klatsch* along the muddy road. I jump – no, I fly! – over puddles. My backpack swings to and fro. Raindrops in my hair, my eyes, down my neck. I run onwards, onwards, no idea where to, and I don't want to think about that. Away, away, away.

I don't slow down until I'm around the corner.

All I have in my little backpack is a wallet, a T-shirt and a telephone. And a project. So what's my plan?

My clothes are already soaked through. I take a deep breath and feel the cool air flowing through my lungs. The leaves of the palm trees beside the road are shaking in the drumming rain. A corrugated iron roof clatters loudly, and a dog barks somewhere. Red and yellow flowers on the roadside bend and spring back up. Music from a radio plays inside a house. Everyone has taken refuge inside their homes. The street is just for me.

I splash through the puddles in my sneakers. They're already wet anyway. Then a blue-green creature darts across the street, and I stop in my tracks. It dashes to the other side of the street almost on tiptoe, clumsy but really fast. A big lizard, no, an iguana – it has a line of dragon's spikes on its back. It's waddling along so weirdly that I burst out laughing; it looks like it's scared of getting its feet wet. I wish Luke could see it.

I tilt back my head and let the rain run over my cheeks.

I'm going to find my dad. Suddenly I'm absolutely sure of it; I'm going to find my dad. Without my half-aunt and without a TV crew. If it's true that he's afraid of cameras, then I'm never going to find him with a TV crew around me. I'm better off looking on my own.

Okay. The next step in this expedition: to the Interior. (Is it far? A few hours? A whole day?) Departure time: if possible, before 14:00. (That's when Tosca and her team are coming for me. Then they'll realize I've fooled Esseline – and them too.)

I speed up.

I walk past houses, a garage, a shed full of rusty pipes, and a tumbledown building with a sort of palm tree growing out of the balcony. A trickle of water runs down the back of my neck, making me shiver. For the first time since I arrived in Suriname, I feel cold for a moment.

A woman and a boy are hiding from the rain under a shelter. The boy is wearing a helmet and holding a blue moped. On the wall behind them is a painted advertisement for kidney beans. I go and join them in the shelter.

The woman says something to me in a language I don't understand.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"That you're not scared of a bit of water!"

I shrug. "The rain's warm," I say with a smile.

We listen to the splashing of the raindrops. It's slowing down.

"Shouldn't you be at school?" asks the woman.

"No, I need to go to the Interior," I say. It sounds like I know exactly where I'm going.

"Then you need to hurry, girl," says the woman. "The bus to Atjoni leaves in fifteen minutes."

"Atjoni?"

"You're going to the Interior, aren't you?" she says.

"Yeah," I say casually. "Where does the bus leave from again?"

"From Saramaccastraat." She points.

“Oh, yes. Thank you.”

The rain has almost stopped now. I start walking in the direction she pointed.

“Are you going to walk?”

“Um... yes?”

“Then you’re going to miss that bus.”

“Oh. I’ll just catch the next one.”

“You mean tomorrow?”

I stop. “Aren’t there any more buses today?”

“Ronny,” the woman says to the boy, “you’ll take her, won’t you?”

“To Saramaccastraat?” asks the boy. “Okay.”

“My son will give you a ride. Then you’ll still make it.”

He climbs onto his moped and starts it with a kick. Then he looks back at me over his shoulder and pats his saddle to tell me to sit there.

I don’t have a helmet, the thought shoots through my head. I don’t know this boy.

Mum wouldn’t approve. But my legs are already walking towards the moped.

“Have a good trip!” says the woman, waving at me.

“Thank you! Thanks so much for your help.” I climb up onto the saddle behind Ronny.

“What’s your name?” he shouts above the rattling of the moped.

“Eva!” I yell back.

“Hold on tight, Eva!”

I put my hands on his waist, he revs the engine, and we drive off with a roar.

No cigar

From: evaloks@mail.nl

To: lukedejong@net.nl

Subject: Day 2 – and I'm done with the lot of them

Dear Luke,

You're absolutely right. Komodo dragons shouldn't be kept in cages. They should be set free.

I've set myself free too.

You might think I've done something really dumb. But I couldn't stand it anymore. I thought the TV crew would bring me closer to my dad, and I thought my half-aunt would help me, but she drove me crazy, and so did the crew, and everyone else.

My heart's still pounding away, my clothes are still sticking to me from the rain, it's sweltering and stuffy here in this minibus, but I feel like I'm floating. There's no one telling me what to do, where to stand, what to say, who to hug, or that I need to do everything all over again. And there's no one going on about how meeting my dad won't do me any good or whatever. I'm going to look for him myself. And it's going great so far. I asked some people how to get to the Interior, then I got a ride on the back of a moped, and now I'm sitting in this bus. It's going to be a long journey, but every minute, every second, I'm getting closer to my dad!

I was at my half-aunt's place this morning, but it turned out she couldn't tell me where my dad lives! Or she didn't WANT to tell me. I think she's hiding something. I could feel my toe tingling. ;)

She might be nice, but when she says mean things about my dad, I feel a kind of flame flaring up inside me and I just want to put my fingers in my ears or run away really fast. Okay, so she's my aunt, but I've only just met her and she's already crushing me with hugs like a boa constrictor. She thought I should move right on in and stay at her place. She'd already got a room ready for me. I'm sure she means well, and she's probably a bit lonely in that house with that parrot, but I'm not here to see her. I'm here to find my dad, and she won't help me. She said he's scared of everything, including cameras. (How does she know that? She must have spoken to him!) I don't think he's that scared, but cameras drive me crazy too, so I can understand that. That's why it makes much more sense for me to keep looking for him without the TV crew.

Luckily she let it slip that Rico lives in the Interior. As soon as I got the chance, I escaped. The plan now is:

- Take the bus to Atjoni.
- Ask around when I get there.

Luke, you have to promise me you won't say anything, especially not to Mum. She'll obviously freak out when she hears I've gone off on my own. She's got a big show in a few hours, by the way, so she really won't want to be disturbed now. I'll phone her later, after the show.

I just don't want her to worry. Everything's fine here. I know roughly where I need to go now, and I'll keep you updated. Okay?

The bus is bouncing about all over the place. I stop typing on my phone. We drive over a couple of potholes, and I shake around and bump into the old woman sitting next to me. She doesn't seem to notice. The whole journey she's just sat there without moving, staring out of the window. She smells of coconut and something else, and there's a chunk missing out of her ear. Every now and then, she uses her wrist to wipe a circle off the steamed-up window.

The road is long and straight. We drive past lots of green, and I only see the occasional house here and there. The grass and the trees are still steaming from the rain. The drops on the leaves sparkle in the sunshine. I can see a tall factory chimney in the distance, with a flame coming out of it.

I put my telephone back in my pocket. There's no network here, so I'll have to try sending the email later. My wet backpack is on my lap. Luckily my yellow folder is made of plastic, so only a small corner of my project got wet. There's a blue feather in there now too, from Rico's old parrot.

I should really start my research here on the bus. Ask around a bit. But I can't get out of my seat – everyone's packed in so tightly. (I never would have thought twenty passengers would fit inside such a small bus.) I don't dare to ask the woman on my left any questions. She's so wrapped up in herself. And the boy on my right is asleep. On a birdcage. He's folded his arms across it. The bird chirps now and then but the boy just goes on sleeping.

In front of me, there are a couple of boys who probably wouldn't be much help either. They're both about a foot shorter than me. I'm not the only kid travelling without adults.

I'll just have to speak to a few people in Atjoni. I wish I was a confident journalist with a notebook, the sort of person who could just stroll up to people and ask: *Do you know a man called Rico Vrede? Or someone with eleven toes? Or someone who had a parrot called Edje who keeps shouting "yamakpa"?*

I asked Ronny with the moped if he knew what the word means, when he dropped me at the bus stop. But he'd never come across it before. "Who did you hear the word from?" he asked me.

"From... a parrot."

He looked at me like I was pulling his leg.

Maybe the woman next to me knows what it is. I open my mouth but then close it again. I'm not one of those journalists. I can't do this at all. And suddenly a feeling of regret comes over me, like a swarm of buzzing mosquitoes chasing after me: *You sure you want to do this all on your own? What have you got yourself into?* I shake it off, try not to listen. I'd be better off looking outside, at the trees.

After a while, the scenery changes. On our right, tall electricity pylons. On our left, trees and lots of sand. Sometimes we pass huts with corrugated roofs. Sometimes some kind of wooden bus shelters, but without any boards with timetables on.

At a bus shelter in the distance, I see a big grey cloud of smoke rising into the air. I crane my neck to get a better look. The smoke is coming from a metal barrel. There's something on a stick above it. As we come closer, I see that it's a sort of dead alien, the size of a dog. It has armour, a thick tail, claws and a pointed snout. My jaw drops. "What is that?"

The woman with the chunk out of her ear looks up for the first time. "Armadillo," she says.

I stare at it as we drive past. Its mouth is hanging open, and I can see its sharp teeth.

“Tastes real good,” says the woman. Then she turns back to the window.

“So you’ve eaten it then?”

She nods. “In the old days. They sometimes used to catch them. In my village.”

“Are you from the Interior?” I ask.

“Yes.” She looks at me properly now for the first time. “From Koffiekamp.”

“And they have armadillos just walking around there, do they?”

She smiles but closes her eyes for a moment, as if there’s something she doesn’t want to see. “There’s no one walking around there these days. The village has disappeared.”

“Oh,” I say.

She falls silent and scratches her damaged ear.

The bus swerves around a young woman pushing a wheelbarrow full of bananas.

I don’t dare to ask any more questions. But then she starts telling me herself. “The village had been there a long time, hundreds of years, you know. It was founded by Africans who had run away from the slave owners. But we couldn’t stay there. Our village had to go. They drowned it.”

“A whole village?”

“More than twenty villages. All those houses are on the bottom of Lake Brokopondo now. They needed a reservoir, for electricity. They warned us. They said: the water’s coming, you have to leave, a new village is being built for you. But we’d lived by the river for generations. The river is our life! And that new village wasn’t on a river. Why would we want to go there? So we stayed. Until the water came. First up to your ankles, then your knees. We took as much as we could carry in our canoes, even the floorboards. But the obias, the spirits of our ancestors and of the earth, the trees, the rocks.... we couldn’t take those with us. So where did they go? Are they still living there, under the water?”

The bus gets out of the way of a lorry carrying some huge tree trunks. We sway around. The bird in the cage beside me flutters up into the air for a moment. The woman smiles sadly. "The old Koffiekamp is gone now, as if it was never there. It feels like a piece of me has been erased."

I nod. She's gazing out of the window again. I stare at the ear with the missing chunk.

It's quiet again, except for the sound of the engine. I swallow. Now I feel brave enough to ask.

"I don't suppose you know a man called Rico Vrede, do you? He comes from the Interior too."

"Rico Vrede?" She shakes her head. "What's his nickname?"

"Nickname?"

"There are lots of folks whose real names we don't know, but we do know their nicknames."

I shrug. "No idea. Do you know anyone with eleven toes then?"

She smiles. "*Lekeleke finga?* An aunt of mine has six fingers on each hand. But I don't know if she has extra toes too." She takes a phone out of her bag and shows me a blurred photo. "You see? Twelve fingers."

"Yes. But I'm looking for a man. A man with eleven toes." I take the folder out of my backpack to show her the photo of Rico's arm. But it got wet in the rainstorm after all, and now it's stuck to a sheet of paper. Really carefully, I pull it away, but a piece of his arm gets left behind on the paper. "Oh no..."

It makes a big white scar. It feels like I've torn off a piece of my own skin. "That was his arm."

"Oh." She points at the blue feather in the folder. "And what's that?"

“That’s from his bird. Rico used to have a parrot. Red and blue. And it shouted *yamakpa* all the time.”

“Do you mean *I nya makpa*?” As she says it, her mouth makes a strange clicking sound.

“You know the word!” I shout. “You know it!” The boy on the birdcage is startled awake.

“It’s not one word,” she explains. “It’s three. *I nya makpa* means something like: “Nope!” or “No cigar!” If I ask you a riddle and you give me the wrong answer, then I say to you: *I nya makpa!*”

I frown. Why did my dad teach a parrot to say “No cigar!”?

“What language is it?” I ask.

“Saramaccan,” she replies. “That parrot must have learned it from a Saramaccan.”

I think about that for a moment. “And where would I find Saramaccans?”

She nods ahead. “When you get to Atjoni, go up the river in a canoe. Most Saramaccans live in the villages along the Suriname River.”

“The river...” My dad talked about that on the cassette too: *The river where everything disappears*. So I’m on the right track, I think.

I lean back in my seat. You see. I don’t need that TV crew at all.