Netherland

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Published by HarperPerennial

Extract

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The afternoon before I left London for New York – Rachel had flown out six weeks previously – I was in my cubicle at work, boxing up my possessions, when a senior vice president at the bank, an Englishman in his fifties, came to wish me well. I was surprised; he worked in another part of the building and in another department, and we were known to each other only by sight. Nevertheless, he asked me in detail about where I intended to live ('Watts? Which block on Watts?') and reminisced for several minutes about his loft on Wooster Street and his outings to the 'original' Dean & DeLuca. He was doing nothing to hide his envy.

'We won't be gone for very long,' I said, playing down my good fortune. That was, in fact, the plan, conceived by my wife: to drop in on New York City for a year or three and then come back.

'You say that now,' he said. 'But New York's a very hard place to leave. And once you do leave . . .' The SVP, smiling, said, 'I still miss it, and I left twelve years ago.'

It was my turn to smile – in part out of embarrassment, because he'd spoken with an American openness. 'Well, we'll see,' I said.

'Yes,' he said. 'You will.'

His sureness irritated me, though principally he was pitiable – like one of those Petersburgians of yesteryear whose duties have washed him up on the wrong side of the Urals.

But it turns out he was right, in a way. Now that I, too, have left that city, I find it hard to rid myself of the feeling that life carries a taint of aftermath. This last-mentioned word, somebody once told me, refers literally to a second mowing of grass in the same season. You might say, if you're the type prone to general observations, that New York City insists on memory's repetitive mower – on the sort of purposeful post-mortem that has the effect, so one is told and forlornly hopes, of cutting the grassy past to manageable proportions. For it keeps growing back, of course. None of this means that I wish I were back there now; and naturally I'd like to believe that my own retrospection is in some way more important than the old SVP's, which, when I was exposed to it, seemed to amount to not much more than a cheap longing. But there's no such thing as a cheap longing, I'm tempted to conclude these days, not even if you're sobbing over a cracked fingernail. Who knows what happened to that fellow over there? Who knows what lay behind his story about shopping for balsamic vinegar? He made it sound like an elixir, the poor bastard.

At any rate, for the first two years or so of my return to England, I did my best to look away from New York – where, after all, I'd been unhappy for the first time in my life. I didn't go back there in person, and I didn't wonder very often about what had become of a man named Chuck Ramkissoon, who'd been a friend during my final East Coast summer and had since, in the way of these things, become a transitory figure. Then, one evening in the spring of this year, 2006, Rachel and I are at home, in Highbury. She is absorbed by a story in the newspaper. I have already read it. It concerns the emergence of a group of tribespeople from the Amazon forest in Colombia.

They are reportedly tired of the hard jungle life, although it's noted they still like nothing better than to eat monkey, grilled and then boiled. A disturbing photograph of a boy gnawing at a blackened little skull illustrates this fact. The tribespeople have no idea of the existence of a host country named Colombia, and no idea, more hazardously, of diseases like the common cold or influenza, against which they have no natural defences.

'Hello,' Rachel says, 'your tribe has come to light.'

I'm still smiling when I answer the ringing phone. A *New York Times* reporter asks for Mr van den Broek.

The reporter says, 'This is about Kham, ah, Khamraj Ramkissoon . . . ?'

'Chuck,' I say, sitting down at the kitchen table. 'It's Chuck Ramkissoon.'

She tells me that Chuck's 'remains' have been found in the Gowanus Canal. There were handcuffs around his wrists and evidently he was the victim of a murder.

I don't say anything. It seems to me this woman has told an obvious lie and that if I think about it long enough a rebuttal will come to me.

Her voice says, 'Did you know him well?' When I don't answer, she says, 'It says somewhere you were his business partner.'

'That's not accurate,' I say.

'But you were in business together, right? That's what my note says.'

'No,' I say. 'You've been misinformed. He was just a friend.'

She says, 'Oh – OK.' There is a tapping of a keyboard and a hiatus.

'So – is there anything you can tell me about his milieu?'

'His milieu?' I say, startled into correcting her mooing pronunciation.

'Well, you know – who he hung out with, what kind of trouble he might have gotten himself into, any shady characters . . .'

She adds with a faint laugh, 'It is kind of unusual, what happened.'

I realise that I'm upset, even angry.

'Yes,' I finally say. 'You have quite a story on your hands.'

The next day a small piece runs in the Metro section. It has been established that Chuck Ramkissoon's body lay in the water by the Home Depot building for over two years, among crabs and car tyres and shopping carts, until a so-called urban diver made a 'macabre discovery' while filming a school of striped bass. Over the next week there is a trickle of follow-up items, none of them informative. But apparently it is interesting to readers, and reassuring to certain traditionalists, that the Gowanus Canal can still turn up a murder victim. There's death in the old girl yet, as one commentator wittily puts it.

The night we receive the news, Rachel, in bed next to me, asks, 'So who's this man?' When I don't immediately answer, she puts down her book.

'Oh,' I say, 'I'm sure I've told you about him. A cricket guy I used to know. A guy from Brooklyn.'

She repeats after me, 'Chuck Ramkissoon?'

Her voice contains a detached note I don't like. I roll away onto one shoulder and close my eyes. 'Yes,' I say. 'Chuck Ramkissoon.'

Chuck and I met for the first time in August 2002. I was playing cricket at Randolph Walker Park, in Staten Island, and Chuck was present as one of the two independent umpires who gave their services in return for a fifty-dollar honorarium. The day was thick as a jelly, with a hot, glassy atmosphere and no wind, not even a breeze from the Kill of Kull, which flows less than two hundred yards from Walker Park and separates Staten Island from New Jersey. Far away, in the south, was the mumbling of thunder. It was the kind of barbarously sticky

American afternoon that made me yearn for the shadows cast by scooting summer clouds in northern Europe, yearn even for those days when you play cricket wearing two sweaters under a cold sky patched here and there by a blue tatter – enough to make a sailor's pants, as my mother used to say.

By the standards I brought to it, Walker Park was a very poor place for cricket. The playing area was, and I am sure still is, half the size of a regulation cricket field. The outfield is uneven and always overgrown, even when cut (once, chasing a ball, I nearly tripped over a hidden and, to cricketers, ominous duck), and whereas proper cricket, as some might call it, is played on a grass wicket, the pitch at Walker Park is made of clay, not turf, and must be covered with coconut matting; moreover the clay is pale sandy baseball clay, not red cricket clay, and its bounce cannot be counted on to stay true for long; and to the extent that the bounce is true, it lacks variety and complexity. (Wickets consisting of earth and grass are rich with possibility: only they can fully challenge and reward a bowler's repertoire of cutters and spinners and bouncers and seamers, and only these, in turn, can bring out and fully test a batsman's repertoire of defensive and attacking strokes, not to mention his mental powers.) There is another problem. Large trees – pin oaks, red oaks, sweetgums, American linden trees – clutter the fringes of Walker Park. Any part of these trees, even the smallest hanging leaf, must be treated as part of the boundary, and this brings randomness into the game. Often a ball will roll between the tree trunks, and the fielder running after it will partially disappear, so that when he reappears, ball in hand, a shouting match will start up about exactly what happened.

By local standards, however, Walker Park is an attractive venue. Tennis courts said to be the oldest in the United States neighbour the cricket field, and the park itself is surrounded on all sides by Victorian houses with elaborately planted gardens. For as long as anyone can remember, the local residents have

tolerated the occasional crash of a cricket ball, arriving like a gigantic meteoritic cranberry, into their flowering shrubbery. Staten Island Cricket Club was founded in 1872, and its teams have played on this little green every summer for over a hundred years. Walker Park was owned by the club until the 1920s. Nowadays the land and its clubhouse – a neo-Tudor brick structure dating back to the 1930s, its precursor having been destroyed by fire – are the property of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. In my time, a parks department employee, a phantom-like individual who was never seen, reportedly lived in the attic. The main room was rented out to a nursery school and only the basement and the beaten-up locker room were routinely made available to cricketers. Nevertheless, no other New York cricket club enjoys such amenities or such a glorious history: Donald Bradman and Garry Sobers, the greatest cricketers of all time, have played at Walker Park. The old ground is also fortunate in its tranquillity. Other cricketing venues, places such as Idlewild Park and Marine Park and Monroe Cohen Ballfield, lie directly beneath the skyways to JFK. Elsewhere, for example Seaview Park (which of course has no view of a sea), in Canarsie, the setting is marred not only by screeching aircraft but also by the inexhaustible roar of the Belt Parkway, the loop of asphalt that separates much of south Brooklyn from salt water.

What all these recreational areas have in common is a rank outfield that largely undermines the art of batting, which is directed at hitting the ball along the ground with that elegant variety of strokes a skilful batsman will have spent years trying to master and preserve: the glance, the hook, the cut, the sweep, the cover drive, the pull, and all those other offspring of technique conceived to send the cricket ball rolling and rolling, as if by magic, to the far-off edge of the playing field. Play such orthodox shots in New York and the ball will more than likely halt in the tangled, weedy groundcover: grass as I understand

it, a fragrant plant wondrously suited for athletic pastimes, flourishes with difficulty; and if something green and grass-like does grow, it is never cut down as cricket requires. Consequently, in breach of the first rule of batting, the batsman is forced to smash the ball into the air (to go deep, as we'd say, borrowing the baseball term) and batting is turned into a gamble. As a result, fielding is distorted too, since the fielders are quickly removed from their infield positions – point, extra cover, midwicket and the others – to distant stations on the boundary, where they listlessly linger. It's as if baseball were a game about home runs rather than base hits and its basemen were relocated to spots deep in the outfield. This degenerate version of the sport – bush cricket, as Chuck more than once dismissed it – inflicts an injury that is aesthetic as much as anything: the American adaptation is devoid of the beauty of cricket played on a lawn of appropriate dimensions, where the white-clad ring of infielders, swanning figures on the vast oval, again and again converge in unison towards the batsman and again and again scatter back to their starting points, a repetition of pulmonary rhythm, as if the field breathed through its luminous visitors.

This is not to say that New York cricket is without charm. One summer afternoon years ago, I sat in a taxi with Rachel in the Bronx. We were making the trip to visit friends in Riverdale and were driving up Broadway, which I had no idea extended this far north.

'Oh! Look, darling,' Rachel said.

She was pointing down to our right. Scores of cricketers swarmed on a tract of open parkland. Seven or eight matches, eleven-a-side, were under way in a space that was strictly large enough for only three or four matches, so that the various playing areas, demarcated by red cones and footpaths and garbage barrels and foam cups, confusingly overlapped. Men in white from one game mingled with men in white from

another, and a profusion of bowlers simultaneously whirled their arms in that windmill action of cricket bowlers, and multiple batsmen swung flat willow cudgels at once, and cricket balls chased by milky sprinters flew in every direction. Onlookers surrounded the grounds. Some sat beneath the trees that lined the park at Broadway; others, in the distance, where trees grew tall and dense at the edge of the common, gathered by picnic tables. Children milled, as it's said. From our elevated vantage point the scene – Van Cortlandt Park on a Sunday – appeared as a cheerful pell-mell, and as we drove by Rachel said, 'It looks like a Brueghel,' and I smiled at her because she was exactly right, and as I remember I put my hand on her stomach. It was July 1999. She was seven months pregnant with our son.

The day I met Chuck was three years later. We, Staten Island, were playing a bunch of guys from St Kitts – Kittitians, as they're called, as if they might all be followers of some esoterically technical profession. My own teammates variously originated from Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. That summer of 2002, when out of loneliness I played after years of not playing, and in the summer that followed, I was the only white man I saw on the cricket fields of New York.

A while back, the parks department had put a rivalrous baseball diamond in the south-west corner of Walker Park. Cricketers were not licensed to take the field until the completion of any authorised softball game. (Softball, my teammates and I observed with a touch of snobbery, was a pastime that seemingly turned on hitting full tosses – the easiest balls a cricket batsman will ever receive – and taking soft, glove-assisted catches involving little of the skill and none of the nerve needed to catch the cricket ball's red rock with bare hands.) The match against the Kittitians, due to start at one o'clock, did not begin until an hour later, when the softball players – ageing and

overweight men much like ourselves, only white-skinned – at last shuffled away. The trouble started with this hold-up. The Kittitians brought a large number of followers, perhaps as many as forty, and the delay made them restless, and they began to entertain themselves with more abandon than was usual. A group formed round a Toyota parked on Delafield Place, at the northern border of the ground, the men flagrantly helping themselves to alcoholic drinks from a cooler, and shouting, and tapping keys against their beer bottles in rhythm to the soca that rattled insistently from the Toyota's speakers. Fearful of complaints, our president, a blazer-wearing Bajan in his seventies named Calvin Pereira, approached the men and said with a smile, 'Gentlemen, you are very welcome, but I must ask you to exercise discretion. We cannot have trouble with the parks department. Can I invite you to turn off the music and come join us inside the ground?' The men gradually complied, but this incident, it was afterwards agreed, influenced the confrontation for which those present will always remember that afternoon.

Before the start of play, one of our team, Ramesh, drew us into a circle for a prayer. We huddled with arms round one another's shoulders – nominally, three Hindus, three Christians, a Sikh and four Muslims. 'Lord,' said the Reverend Ramesh, as we called him, 'we thank You for bringing us here today for this friendly game. We ask that You keep us safe and fit during the match today. We ask for clement weather. We ask for Your blessing upon this game, Lord.' We broke up in a burst of clapping and took to the field.

The men from St Kitts batted for just over two hours. Throughout their innings their supporters maintained the usual hullabaloo of laughter and heckling and wisecracks from the field's east boundary, where they congregated in the leaves' shadows and drank rum out of paper cups and ate barbecued red snapper and chicken. 'Beat the ball!' they shouted, and 'The

man chucking!' and, raising their arms into the scarecrow pose that signals a wide ball, 'Wide, umpire, wide!' Our turn came to bat. As the innings wore on and the game grew tighter and more and more rum was drunk, the musical din started up again from the Toyota, where men had gathered once again, and the shouting of the spectators grew more emotional. In this atmosphere, by no means rare for New York cricket, the proceedings on and off the field became more and more combative. At a certain moment the visitors fell prey to the suspicion, apparently never far from the mind of cricketers in that city, that a conspiracy to rob them of victory was afoot, and the appeals of the fielders ('How's that, umpire? Ump!') assumed a bitter, disputatious character, and a fight nearly broke out between a fielder in the deep and an onlooker who had said something.

It did not surprise me, therefore, when I took my turn to bat, to receive three bouncers in a row, the last of which was too quick for me and whacked my helmet. There were angry shouts from my teammates – 'Wha' scene you on, boy?' – and it was at this point that the umpire recognised his duty to intervene. He wore a panama hat and a white umpire's coat that gave him the air of a man conducting an important laboratory experiment – which, in his own way, he was. 'Play the game,' Chuck Ramkissoon evenly told the bowler. 'I'm warning you for the last time: one more bumper and you're coming off.'

Apart from spitting at the ground, the bowler didn't respond. He returned to his mark, ran in to bowl, and delivered another throat-ball. With roars and counter-roars of outrage coming from the boundary, Chuck approached the captain of the fielding team. 'I warned the bowler,' Chuck said, 'and he disregarded the warning. He's not bowling any more.' The other fielders ran in and noisily surrounded Chuck. 'What right you have? You never warn him.' I made a move to get involved, but

Umar, my Pakistani batting partner, held me back. 'You stay here. It's always the same with these people.'

Then, as the argument on and off the field continued – 'You thiefing we, umpire! You thiefing we!' – my eye was drawn to a figure walking slowly in the direction of the parked cars. I kept watching him because there was something mysterious about this person choosing to leave at such a moment of drama. He was in no hurry, it seemed. He slowly opened the door of a car, leaned in, reached around for a few moments, then stood up straight and shut the door. He appeared to be holding something in his hand as he strolled back into the ground. People started shouting and running. A woman screamed. My teammates, grouped on the boundary, set off in every direction, some into the tennis courts, others to hide behind trees. Now the man was ambling over somewhat uncertainly. It occurred to me he was very drunk. 'No, Tino,' somebody shouted.

'Oh shit,' Umar said, starting towards the baseball diamond. 'Run, run.'

But, in some sense paralysed by this unreal dawdling gunman, I stayed where I was, tightly gripping my Gunn & Moore Maestro bat. The fielders, meanwhile, were backing away, hands half raised in panic and imploration. 'Put it down, put it down, man,' one of them said. 'Tino! Tino!' a voice shouted. 'Come back, Tino!'

As for Chuck, he now stood alone. Except for me, that is. I stood a few yards away. This required no courage on my part, because I felt nothing. I experienced the occasion as a kind of emptiness.

The man stopped ten feet from Chuck. He held the gun limply. He looked at me, then back at Chuck. He was speechless and sweating. He was trying, as Chuck would afterwards relate, to understand the logic of his situation.

The three of us stood there for what seemed a long time. A

container ship silently went through the back gardens of the houses on Delafield Place.

Chuck took a step forward. 'Leave the field of play, sir,' he said firmly. He extended his palm towards the clubhouse, an usher's gesture. 'Leave immediately please. You are interfering with play. Captain,' Chuck said loudly, turning to the Kittitian captain, who was a little distance away, 'please escort this gentleman from the field.'

The captain tentatively came forward. 'I coming now, Tino,' he called out. 'Right behind you. No foolishness, now.'

'Don't worry,' Tino muttered. He looked overcome by exhaustion. He dropped the gun and left the field slowly, shaking his head. After a short break, play resumed. Nobody saw any reason to call the cops.

When the match ended, both teams came together by the old clubhouse and shared Coors Lights and whisky Cokes and Chinese takeout and talked gravely about what had taken place. Somebody called for quiet, and Chuck Ramkissoon stepped forward into the centre of the gathering.

'We have an expression in the English language,' he said, as silence began to establish itself amongst the players. 'The expression is "not cricket". When we disapprove of something, we say "it's not cricket." We do not say "it's not baseball." Or "it's not football." We say "it's not cricket." This is a tribute to the game we play, and it's a tribute to us.' By now, all chatter had ceased. We stood round the speaker, solemnly staring at our feet. 'But with this tribute comes a responsibility. Look here,' Chuck said, pointing at the club crest on a Staten Island player's shirt. '"*Lude Ludum Insignia Secundaria*," it says here. Now I do not know Latin, but I'm told it means, and I'm sure you'll correct me, Mr President, if I'm wrong' – Chuck nodded at our club president – 'it means, "Winning isn't everything. It's only a game." Now, games are important. They test us. They teach us comradeship. They're fun. But cricket, more than any other sport, is, I want

to say' – Chuck paused for effect – 'a lesson in civility. We all know this; I do not need to say more about it.' A few heads were nodding. 'Something else. We are playing this game in the United States. This is a difficult environment for us. We play where we can, wherever they let us. Here at Walker Park, we're lucky; we have locker-room facilities, which we share with strangers and passers-by. Most other places we must find a tree or bush.' One or two listeners exchanged looks. 'Just today,' Chuck continued, 'we started late because the baseball players have first right to play on this field. And now, when we have finished the game, we must take our drinks in brown paper bags. It doesn't matter that we have played here, at Walker Park, every year for over a hundred years. It doesn't matter that this ground was built as a cricket ground. Is there one good cricket facility in this city? No. Not one. It doesn't matter that we have more than one hundred and fifty clubs playing in the New York area. It doesn't matter that cricket is the biggest, fastest-growing bat-and-ball game in the world. None of it matters. In this country, we're nowhere. We're a joke. Cricket? How funny. So we play as a matter of indulgence. And if we step out of line, believe me, this indulgence disappears. What this means,' Chuck said, raising his voice as murmurs and cracks and chuckles began to run through his audience, 'what this means is, we have an extra responsibility to play the game right. We have to prove ourselves. We have to let our hosts see that these strange-looking guys are up to something worthwhile. I say "see". I don't know why I use that word. Every summer the parks of this city are taken over by hundreds of cricketers but somehow nobody notices. It's like we're invisible. Now that's nothing new, for those of us who are black or brown. As for those who are not' – Chuck acknowledged my presence with a smile – 'you'll forgive me, I hope, if I say that I sometimes tell people, You want a taste of how it feels to be a black man in this country? Put on the white clothes of the cricketer. Put on white to feel black.' People laughed,

mostly out of embarrassment. One of my teammates extended his fist to me, and I gave it a soft punch. 'But we don't mind, right, just so long as we can play? Just leave us alone, and we'll make do. Right? But I say we must take a more positive attitude. I say we must claim our rightful place in this wonderful country. Cricket has a long history in the United States, actually. Benjamin Franklin himself was a cricket man. I won't go into that now,' Chuck said quickly, because a frankly competing hubbub had broken out amongst the players. 'Let us just be thankful that it all ended well, and that cricket was the winner today.'

There the umpire stopped, to faltering applause; and soon after, everybody headed home – to Hoboken and Passaic and Queens and Brooklyn and, in my case, to Manhattan. I took the Staten Island Ferry, which on that occasion was the *John F. Kennedy*; and it was on board that enormous orange tub that I ran once again into Chuck Ramkissoon. I spotted him on the foredeck, amongst the tourists and romantics absorbed by the famous sights of New York Bay.

I bought a beer and sat down in the saloon, where a pair of pigeons roosted on a ledge. After some intolerable minutes in the company of my thoughts, I picked up my bag and went forward to join Chuck.

I couldn't see him. I was about to turn back when I realised he was right in front of me and had been hidden by the woman he was kissing. Mortified, I tried to retreat without attracting his attention; but when you're six feet five, certain manoeuvres are not easily accomplished.

'Well, hello,' Chuck said. 'Good to see you. My dear, this is –'

'Hans,' I said. 'Hans van den Broek.'

'Hi,' the woman said, retreating into Chuck's arms. She was in her early forties with blond curls and a plump chin. She wiggled a set of fingers at me.

'Let me introduce myself properly,' Chuck said. 'Chuck Ramkissoon.' We shook hands. 'Van den Broek,' he said, trying out the name. 'South African?'

'I'm from Holland,' I said, apologising.

'Holland? Sure, why not.' He was disappointed, naturally. He would have preferred that I'd come from the land of Barry Richards and Allan Donald and Graeme Pollock.

I said, 'And you are from . . . ?'

'Here,' Chuck affirmed. 'The United States.'

His girlfriend elbowed him.

'What do you want me to say?' Chuck said.

'Trinidad,' the woman said, looking proudly at Chuck. 'He's from Trinidad.'

I awkwardly motioned with my can of beer. 'Listen, I'll leave you guys to it. I was just coming out for some fresh air.'

Chuck said, 'No, no, no. You stay right here.'

His companion said to me, 'Were you at the game today? He told me about what happened. Wild.'

I said, 'The way he handled it was quite something. And that was some speech you gave.'

'Well, I've had practice,' Chuck said, smiling at his friend.

Pushing at his chest, the woman said, 'Practice making speeches or practice with life-and-death situations?'

'Both,' Chuck said. They laughed together, and of course it struck me that they made an unusual couple: she, American and white and petite and fair-haired; he, a portly immigrant a decade older and very dark – like Coca-Cola, he would say. His colouring came from his mother's family, which originated in the south of India somewhere – Madras, was Chuck's suspicion. He was a descendant of indentured labourers and had little firm information about such things.

An event for antique sailing ships was taking place in the bay. Schooners, their canvas hardly distended in the still air, clustered around and beyond Ellis Island. 'Don't you just love

this ferry ride?' Chuck's girlfriend said. We slipped past one of the ships, a clutter of masts and ropes and sails, and she and Chuck joined other passengers in exchanging waves with its crew. Chuck said, 'See that sail there? That triangular sail right at the very top? That's the skyscraper. Unless it's the moonsail. Moonsail or skyscraper, one of the two.'

'You're an expert on boats, now?' his girlfriend said. 'Is there anything you don't know about? OK, smarty-pants, which one is the jolly jumper? Or the mizzen. Show me a mizzen, if you're so smart.'

'You're a mizzen,' Chuck said, fastening his arm around her. 'You're my mizzen.'

The ferry slowed down as we approached Manhattan. In the shade of the huddled towers, the water was the colour of a plum. Passengers emerged from the ferry lounge and began to fill up the deck. Banging against the wooden bumpers of the terminal, the ship came to a stop. Everybody disembarked as a swarm into the cavernous terminal, so that I, toting my cricketer's coffin, became separated from Chuck and his girlfriend. It was only when I'd descended the ramp leading out of the terminal that I saw them again, walking hand in hand in the direction of Battery Park.

I found a taxi and took it straight home. I was tired. As for Chuck, even though he interested me, he was older than me by almost twenty years, and my prejudices confined him, this oddball umpiring orator, to my exotic cricketing circle, which made no intersection with the circumstances of my everyday life.