



Fiji: **The true story of man who went to the ends of the earth for music**

Prologue

The alarm beeped. It had not been a good night... two-and-a-half hours of unpleasant tossing and turning and staring at the ceiling had occurred since I had laid my head down for a 'good night's sleep', which was a bit of a bind really. 'But these things happen', I told myself as I rolled out of bed and flicked the switch on my cheap plastic alarm clock (which was pink). The time was 3.01 (am). It was very, very early but then again it had to be, for this was the day I was going to Fiji to be a teacher. It was a daunting prospect. I had never been on an aircraft before (my uncle had been an airline pilot when I had been a boy, and his stories had rather put me off such ideas), and kids can be very scary. But neither of these things were my priority as I got the last few bits and pieces together for my departure. No, chief among my concerns was the fact that of the twelve thousand or so miles I was about to travel, the first twenty or so had to be undertaken in London's 'rush-hour'.

Shockingly, I started off quite well, despite my mind being a fuzzy, unfocused mess. I was trundling noisily down the street with my 'wardrobe on wheels', as it had been named by several of my friends, when it finally hit me... 'WHAT AM I DOING?!?' I had never been anywhere of note before, certainly nowhere grand enough to involve the use of a plane, and now I was about to go to the furthest point on earth! I suddenly felt weak. My stomach churned and forced me to slow my already slow pace to a crawl. My breathing shortened, and I started to feel nauseous. Panic advanced on all sides from the edges of my mind, and then, when I was at my lowest, the voice came again: 'What on earth am I doing?' quieter this time, but still with an intensity that froze my blood. I levelled my breathing and began to control myself. I tried reason. It was precisely *because* I had not really done anything before, that I *had* to do something now. There came no reply. I stopped for a second, took a deep breath and drew myself up to my full height. The fear in the pit of my stomach receded slightly, and taking in a deep breath, I opened my eyes with a new focus. This *was* the day, and the airport beckoned...

So it was that three days later I touched down in Nadi (pronounced Nan-di) Airport on the west coast of Viti Levu, Fiji's main island. In a bizarre sense of symmetry, the journey that had taken three days to half-circle the globe was about to end as it had begun: with a long bus ride. This time, though, my journey was rather better and the view(s) through the glass was a new amazing one. The bus had leather seats, air conditioning and a DVD player. So much for the third world! And so, by that evening, I finally arrived in Fiji's capital, Suva. And as I lay down to get my first proper sleep in what seemed like an eternity, I knew that things were about to get very interesting.

PART ONE: Teaching English

1. The first day in class

It was a warm and humid Wednesday morning when, three days after my arrival in the country, and just before 8am, I got into my taxi for the five minute ride across town to what would become the centre of my life for the next four weeks: Dudley Intermediate School. I was travelling with Kris, who would become my friend, companion and work colleague during my stay. He was originally from Belgium but lived and worked in London, and was to be my room-mate and fellow English teacher during my placement. As luck would have it, he would end up teaching in the class next door to mine.

The previous day Kris and I had been taken to the Fijian Department of Education by the volunteer co-ordinator to fill out the necessary forms and go through a little Q and A session. It was explained to us that the school system in Fiji was (and still is) split into three tiers: the Elementary Schools, roughly corresponding to our Primaries; the High Schools dealing with GCSE and A-Level aged students; and the middle section (roughly corresponding to our Years 8 and 9) being dealt with in the Intermediate Schools. As the Fijian system starts children one year later than in the UK, though, my class of Year Nines were actually known as '802'. The school itself was made up of eight classes split into two blocks, with a third being the school offices. Together, they formed a horseshoe shape, the interior of which served as the playground. The Intermediate School sat next to its big sister, Dudley High, which in all fairness dwarfed it. Both had been founded by the Methodists who came with the British during the period of colonization many years before, and I would suggest that those people who think religion has done little or no good in the world should do a little research on how it changed the Fijian Islands.

By pure random chance, I was placed in the class of Mrs. Ravoka, the Deputy Head. A woman of small stature, she nevertheless commanded great respect from colleagues and students alike, as only a natural teacher can. Kris however, got a younger teacher to shadow, and though she was perfectly competent, it subsequently became clear that I had got the better of the deal. It was also very quickly apparent that Mrs. R (as I called her) would be a very hard act to follow indeed, and though it was great to be able to see an experienced and competent teacher in action, it did present its own set of problems. Through that first morning, I thought of the inevitable moment during the next four weeks when, for some reason, the teacher would momentarily exit the classroom leaving me to step into the breach. It was a daunting prospect. I was shocked and stunned to say the least, then, when with nearly two hours left to run on my first day, Mrs. R took me to one side and uttered words to the effect of 'right, well I need to go into town and get my shopping done. I'll be back by the final bell. Will you manage?' The message was clear: roll up your sleeves and get on with it. I said something optimistic in reply though I really felt anything but, and with a friendly wave she left me to it as I turned to face the thirty or so little sausages, all of whom were now in my charge.

Now in my opinion, there is no greater actor than a teacher. No matter what they are thinking or feeling on the inside, the exterior they present the class is one of confidence and omniscience, of a person unperturbed and ever-watchful.¹ My previous experience in British schools had taught me that nowhere is respect harder earned than in front of such a group; if they sniff even a drop of metaphorical blood they move in for the

¹ In my experience as both an adult working in schools and as a pupil myself, teaching well requires the blending of the roles of leader, politician, scholar, policeman and support worker, and occasionally zoo-keeper too (in some UK schools at least).

kill without a second thought. With this happy thought uttermost in my mind, and in all honesty whilst also trying to hold back a fit of nervous giggles, I drew myself up to my full height, took a deep breath, and clapped my hands.²

Most looked round. One did not. 'You, young man' I said, pointing to the little cherub who had his back to me whilst he obliviously waffled on to his mate.³ The children around him gradually fell to silence as my 'teacher stare' (another well-used weapon in the armoury), locked onto the cherub and blasted full-beam. He turned slowly around to find that my attention, and now also everyone else's, was fixed directly on him. 'Thank you'. I smiled sweetly, with just a hint of sarcasm. Truth be told, the joke he was telling was actually making me laugh inwardly, and I actually liked the class from what I'd seen of them so far – I'd certainly met worse kids – but I couldn't let *them* know that. Not yet.

Then things calmed to silence. They started at me, expectantly, and I stared back. Something had to give. Clutching at straws, I asked a question, a simple general-knowledge one to stall for time. Knowing me it would have been something to do with spelling the name of a capital city, or something about the war. To my surprise, almost immediately, hands shot up and so I picked a kid to give an answer, which was correct. They were happy and their friends frustrated as they hadn't had a chance. Feeling the vibe in the room, I asked another question, and, over the next few minutes, my one-off stalling tactic evolved into a full-blown impromptu quiz. Playing the advantage, I divided up the class into three teams ('A','B' and 'C'), and then started firing questions on absolutely anything I could think of, keeping a tally chart on the black board as a score. It was magic. Time sped up, and before I knew it, Mrs. R, popped back into the classroom just as the bell went, and my first day was over.

It was a good feeling. I had made it through the first day alive and the bar beckoned. As I said goodbye to my new colleagues and went off to meet our fellow volunteers for a drink in town, it was only just beginning to dawn on me that in surviving the day I had by chance written myself a strategy on how to survive teaching in Fiji.

2. Volleyball

Though I had volunteered to be an English teacher for my trip, it soon became apparent that all the volunteers in the school (including me) were expected to fill-in as and when necessary on all subjects, and so when the next day started much as the previous one had (with Mathematics), my heart sank. There are few things I truly despise in the world, but I must confess that maths is chief among them. I quietly sat and observed from the corner of my eye as Mrs. R took the class through some long division and other horrible bits, whilst I myself prepared for the hand-over at half past ten. During the subsequent two-hour session before lunch time, I would teach English under her supervision. I had spent most of the previous evening writing out a set of questions for my quiz the next day, checking my answers with a calculator, atlas and dictionary respectively. My thoughts at the time were that if the quiz had gone well when I had been 'winging it' they should go better still when I was planning it.

But, as I was to find out, life is never that straightforward. A fellow volunteer was in the process of finishing his last week at the school. As he had no personal interest in

² The signal to the class that they should stop whatever it is that they are doing at that moment and (in theory at least) give me their undivided attention.

³ At this point I cursed myself for not remembering his name. In my experience, nothing surprises them like a new teacher-type person addressing them personally, particularly if they are under the impression that the new teacher-type person in question doesn't actually know their name yet.

becoming a teacher – he was actually there to support his girlfriend who was – he had put himself down as a P.E. instructor; as a result Class 802 were expecting a volleyball lesson on the field down the street... but nobody had mentioned it to me! With a pragmatic sigh, I put down my ring-binder full of quiz questions and various bits of lesson plan loosely alluding to English grammar, and headed out into the monsoon for the Class 802 girls vs. boys⁴ 4th weekly Volleyball match.

Now, when I say that there was a monsoon in full flow as we walked down to the playing field, I am being serious. I know here in England we have our fair share of rain, but seriously, our drips and drops do not even come close to what the good folks on the other side of the world have to endure when it comes to wet-stuff-coming-out-of-the-sky. Peering out through the sheets of rain, the sports field I saw in the distance reminded me somewhat of a non-league football ground; a rugby pitch with a rather battered terrace-type stand (including leaky roof) running down one side of its length. As we squelched over the field, the PE chap informed me cheerfully that 'even in Suva, it's not normally this bloody bad'.

'Lucky me', I thought as I trudged over to the decrepit stand for a little shelter. My relatively dry exclusion from the game however, was sadly not to last; the pitch was so water-logged that no matter how many times they tried, the combined might of the teacher and class simply were not enough to drive the posts into the muddy ground to such a point where they would stay upright. So it was that I became a 'post'. The entire pitch was moved over next the stand, and one side of the net was firmly secured to an appropriately high bit of its roof, with me holding the other end. It was indeed a very muddy morning, but in the end I must confess that even I enjoyed myself a bit, and it is certainly true that the class were far less unruly when we eventually got around to my teaching slot.

Over the next few days, Mrs R and I developed what would become a kind of 'layer-cake' approach to running the class: the first section of the day from about 8 until 10.15 would be under the care of Mrs. R, who would do all the maths and Fijian classes, as she would in the afternoon. I, in turn, would have my two hour slot in the middle of the day, and the last half an hour or so before home time to run my quiz. It proved to be a very good system, with the score board I had on the board for the quiz also being of great assistance in the enforcement of discipline. If a child was naughty, I would punish them by taking a point from their team's score. As you can probably imagine, this did not go down too well with the offender's teammates, and so very quickly things developed to the point where the children policed themselves. On the flipside, good behaviour during the day would win a child/team some extra points, and at the end of the week, the team with the most points won some of the prizes (normally pencils/pens/books) I had brought from home. Ultimately, I found that healthy completion – on or off the sports field – maintained discipline in the class far better than all the yelling in the world ever could, (though I am certainly no knocking it) and at the end my first week/third day, things were beginning to settle down nicely, and I was looking forward to a hard-earned weekend. But what does one do in Fiji at over the weekend?

⁴ You'd never get away with that up here!