
SNEAK PEEK SAMPLE CHAPTER
CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY CLASSICS
Cricket in the Road
Michael Anthony

SANDRA STREET

MR BLADES, THE new teacher, was delighted with the compositions we wrote about Sandra Street. He read some aloud to the class. He seemed particularly pleased when he read what was written by one of the boys from the other side of the town.

'Sandra Street is dull and uninteresting,' the boy wrote. 'For one half of its length there are a few houses and a private school (which we go to) but the other half is nothing but a wilderness of big trees.' Mr Blades smiled from the corners of his mouth and looked at those of us who belonged to Sandra Street. 'In fact,' the boy wrote, '*it* is the only street in our town that has big trees, and I do not think it is a part of our town at all because it is so far and so different from our other streets.'

The boy went on to speak of the gay attractions on the other side of the town, some of which, he said, Sandra Street could never dream to have. In his street, for instance, there was the savannah where they played football and cricket, but the boys of Sandra Street had to play their cricket in the road. And to the amusement of Mr Blades, who also came from the other side of the town, he described Sandra Street as a silly little girl who ran away to the bushes to hide herself.

Everyone laughed except the few of us from Sandra Street, and I knew what was going to happen when school was dismissed, although Mr Blades said it was all a joke and in fact Sandra Street was very fine. I did not know whether he meant this or not, for he seemed very much amused and I felt this was because he came from the other side of the town.

He read out a few more of the compositions. Some of them said very nice things about Sandra Street, but those were the ones written

by ourselves. Mr Blades seemed delighted about these, too, and I felt he was trying to appease us when he said that they showed up new aspects of the beauty of Sandra Street. There were only a few of us who were appeased, though, and he noticed this and said all right, next Tuesday we'll write about the other side of the town. This brought fiendish laughter from some of us from Sandra Street, and judging from the looks on the faces of those from the other side of the town, I knew what would happen next Tuesday, too, when school was dismissed. And I felt that whatever happened it wasn't going to make any difference to our side or to the other side of the town.

Yet the boy's composition was very truthful. Sandra Street was so different from the other streets beyond. Indeed, it came from the very quiet fringes and ran straight up to the forests. As it left the town there were a few houses and shops along it, and then the school, and after that there were not many more houses, and the big trees started from there until the road trailed off to the river that bordered the forests. During the day all would be very quiet except perhaps for the voice of one neighbour calling to another, and if some evenings brought excitement to the schoolyard, these did very little to disturb the calmness of Sandra Street.

Nor did the steel band gently humming from the other side of the town. I had to remember the steel band because although I liked to hear it I had to put into my composition that it was very bad. We had no steel bands in Sandra Street, and I thought I could say that this was because we were decent, cultured folk, and did not like the horrible noises of steel bands.

I sat in class recalling the boy's composition again. Outside the window I could see the women coming out of the shops. They hardly passed each other without stopping to talk, and this made me laugh. For that was exactly what the boy had written – that they could not pass without stopping to talk, as if they had something to talk about.

I wondered what they talked about. I did not know. What I did know was that they never seemed to leave Sandra Street to go into the town. Maybe they were independent of the town! I chuckled a triumphant little chuckle because this, too, would be good to put into my composition next Tuesday.

Dreamingly I gazed out of the window. I noticed how Sandra Street stood away from the profusion of houses. Indeed, it did not seem to belong to the town at all. It stood off, not proudly, but sadly, as if it wanted peace and rest. I felt all filled up inside. Not because of the town in the distance but because of this strange little road. It was funny, the things the boy had written; he had written in anger what I thought of now in joy. He had spoken of the pleasures and palaces on the other side of the town. He had said why they were his home sweet home. As I looked at Sandra Street, I, too, knew why it was my home sweet home. It was dull and uninteresting to him but it meant so much to me. It was …

'Oh!' I started, as the hand rested on my shoulder.

'It's recess,' said Mr Blades.

'Oh! … yes, sir.' The class was surging out to the playground. I didn't seem to have heard a sound before.

Mr Blades looked at me and smiled. 'What are you thinking of?' he said.

He seemed to be looking inside me. Inside my very mind. I stammered out a few words which, even if they were clear, would not have meant anything. I stopped. He was still smiling quietly at me. 'You are the boy from Sandra Street?' he said.

'Yes, sir.'

'I thought so,' he said.

What happened on the following Tuesday after school was a lot worse than what had ever happened before, and it was a mystery

how the neighbours did not complain or Mr Blades did not get to hear of it. We turned out to school the next morning as if all had been peaceful, and truly, there was no sign of the battle, save the little bruises which were easy to explain away.

We kept getting compositions to write. Mr Blades was always anxious to judge what we wrote but none gave him as much delight as those we had written about Sandra Street. He had said that he knew the other side of the town very well and no one could fool him about that, but if any boy wrote anything about Sandra Street he would have to prove it. And when he had said that, he had looked at me and I was very embarrassed. I had turned my eyes away, and he had said that when the mango season came he would see the boy who didn't speak the truth about Sandra Street.

Since that day I was very shy of Mr Blades, and whenever I saw him walking towards me I turned in another direction. At such times there would always be a faint smile at the corners of his mouth.

I stood looking out of the school window one day thinking about this and about the compositions when again I felt a light touch and jumped.

'Looking out?' Mr Blades said.

'Yes, sir.'

He stood there over me and I did not know if he was looking down at me or looking outside, and presently he spoke; 'Hot, eh?'

'Yes,' I said.

He moved in beside me and we both stood there looking out of the window. It was just about noon and the sun was blazing down on Sandra Street. The houses stood there tall and rather sombre-looking, and there seemed to be no movement about save for the fowls lying in the shadows of the houses. As I watched this a certain sadness came over me and I looked over the houses across to the hills. Suddenly my heart leapt and I turned to

Mr Blades, but I changed my mind and did not speak. He had hardly noticed that I looked up at him. I saw his face looking sad as his eyes wandered about the houses. I felt self-conscious as he looked at the houses for they no longer were new and the paint had been washed off them by the rains and they had not been repainted. Then, too, there were no gates and no fences around them as there were in the towns, and sometimes, with a great flurry, a hen would scamper from under one house to another leaving dust behind in the hot sun.

I looked at Mr Blades. He was smiling faintly. He saw me looking at him. 'Fowls,' he said.

'There are no gates,' I apologised.

'No, there are no gates.' And he laughed softly to himself.

'Because …' I had to stop. I did not know why there were no gates.

'Because you did not notice that before.'

'I noticed that before,' I said.

Looking sharply at me he raised his brows and said slowly: 'You noticed that before. Did you put that in your composition? You are the boy from Sandra Street, are you not?'

'There are more from Sandra Street.'

'Did you notice the cedar grove at the top?' he went on. 'You spoke of the steel band at the other side of the town. Did you speak of the river? Did you notice the hills?'

'Yes.'

'Yes?' His voice was now stern and acid. His eyes seemed to be burning up from within.

'You noticed all this and you wrote about Sandra Street without mentioning it, eh? How many marks did I give you?'

'Forty-five.'

He looked surprised. 'I gave you forty-five for writing about the noises and about the dirty trams of the town? Look!' he pointed, 'Do you see?'

'Mango blossoms,' I said, and I felt like crying out: *'I wanted to show it to you!'*

'Did you write about it?'

'No.' I just wanted to break out and run away from him. He bent down to me. His face looked harder now, though kind, but I could see there was fury inside him.

'There is something like observation, Steve,' he said. *'Observation.* You live in Sandra Street, yet Kenneth writes a composition on your own place better than you.'

'He said Sandra Street was soppy,' I cried.

'Of course he said it was soppy. It was to his purpose. He comes from the other side of the town. What's he got to write on – gaudy houses with gates like prisons around them? High walls cramping the imagination? The milling crowd with faces impersonal as stone, hurrying on buses, hurrying off trams? Could he write about that? He said Sandra Street was soppy. Okay, did you prove it wasn't so? Where is your school and his, for instance?'

I was a little alarmed. Funny how I did not think of that point before. 'Here,' I said. 'In Sandra Street.'

'Did you mention that?'

Mercifully, as he was talking, the school bell sounded. The fowls, startled, ran out into the hot sun across the road. The dust rose, and above the dust, above the houses, the yellow of mango blossom caught my eye.

'The bell, sir.'

'Yes, the bell's gone. What's it now – Geography?'

'Yes, sir,' I said. And as I turned away he was still standing there, looking out into the road.

It was long before any such thing happened again. Though often when it was dry and hot I stood at the window looking out.

I watched the freedom of the fowls among the tall houses, and sometimes the women talked to each other through the windows and smiled. I noticed, too, the hills, which were now streaked with the blossoms of the poui, and exultantly I wondered how many people observed this and knew it was a sign of the rains. None of the mango blossoms could be seen now, for they had already turned into fruit, and I knew how profuse they were because I had been to the hills.

I chuckled to myself. *There is something like observation, Steve.* And how I wished Mr Blades would come to the window again so I could tell him what lay among the mango trees in the hills.

I knew that he was not angry with me. I realised that he was never angry with any boy because of the parts the boy came from. We grew to like him, for he was very cheerful, though mostly he seemed dreamy and thoughtful. That is, except at composition time.

He really came to life then. His eyes would gleam as he read our compositions and whenever he came to a word he did not like he would frown and say any boy was a sissy to use such a word. And if a composition pleased him he would praise the boy and be especially cheerful with him and the boy would be proud and the rest of us would be jealous and hate him.

I was often jealous. Mr Blades had a passion for compositions, and I was anxious to please him to make up for that day at the window. I was anxious to show him how much I observed and often I noted new things and put them into my compositions. And whenever I said something wonderful I knew it because of the way Mr Blades would look at me, and sometimes he would take me aside and talk to me. But many weeks ran out before we spoke at the window again.

I did not start this time because I had been expecting him. I had been watching him from the corners of my eyes.

'The sun's coming out again,' he said.

'It's cloudy,' I said.

The rains had ceased but there were still great patches of dark cloud in the sky. When the wind blew they moved slowly and cumbersomely, but if the sun was free of one cloud there would soon be another. The sun was shining brightly now, although there was still a slight drizzle of rain, and I could smell the steam rising from the hot pitch and from the galvanised roofs.

'Rain falling sun shining,' Mr Blades said. And I remembered that they said at such times the Devil fought his wife, but when Mr Blades pressed me to tell what I was laughing at I laughed still more and would not say. Then thoughtfully he said, 'You think they're all right?'

'What, sir?'

'In the 'mortelle root.'

I was astonished. I put my hands to my mouth. How did he know?

He smiled down at me: 'You won't be able to jump over now.' And the whole thing came back. I could not help laughing. I had put into my composition how I had gone into the hills on a Sunday evening, and how the mango trees were laden with small mangoes, some full, and how there were banana trees among the immortelle and poui. I had written, too, about the bunch of green bananas I had placed to ripen in the immortelle roots and how afterwards I had jumped across the river to the other bank.

'They're all right,' I said, and I pretended to be watching the steam rising from the hot pitch.

'I like bananas,' said Mr Blades. I was sure that he licked his lips as he looked towards the hills.

I was touched. I felt as one with him. I liked bananas, too, and they always made me lick my lips. I thought now of the whole bunch which must be yellow by now inside the immortelle roots.

'Sir …' I said to him, hesitating. Then I took the wild chance. And when he answered, a feeling of extreme happiness swept over me.

I remember that evening as turning out bright, almost blinding. The winds had pushed away the heavy clouds, and the only evidence of the rains was the little puddles along Sandra Street. I remember the hills as being strange in an enchanted sort of way, and I felt that part of the enchantment came from Mr Blades being with me. We watched the leaves of the cocoa gleaming with the moisture of the rains, and Mr Blades confessed he never thought there was so much cocoa in the hills. We watched the cyp, too, profuse among the laden mango trees, and the redness of their rain-picked flowers was the redness of blood.

We came to the immortelle tree where I had hidden the bananas. I watched to see if Mr Blades licked his lips but he did not. He wasn't even watching.

'Sir,' I said in happy surprise, after removing the covering of trash from the bunch. Mr Blades was gazing across the trees. I raised my eyes. Not far below, Sandra Street swept by, bathed in light.

'The bananas, sir,' I said.

'Bananas!' he cried, despairingly. 'Bananas are all you see around you, Steve?'

I was puzzled. I thought it was for bananas that we had come to the hills.

'Good heavens!' he said with bitterness. 'To think that you instead of Kenneth should belong to Sandra Street.'

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CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY CLASSICS

A sparkling collection of short stories set in Trinidad. Anthony takes our hand and walks us from the valley of the lush, green cocoa trees, to the sweet rivers flowing nearby. We pluck fruit from the sapodilla tree and feel the crisp, brown guava leaved carpet crunch under our feet. We see Mayaro and Port of Spain through the eyes of childish innocence and grown-up ignorance. Beautiful, evocative and poignant, the stories are sprinkled with themes of yearning for home, sad realisations and a longing for a lost time and place.

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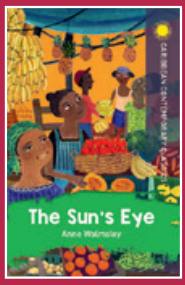

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hoddereducation.com/Caribbean-Contemporary-Classics

£9.99 / $12.99

ISBN 978-1-3983-4049-7

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