



CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY CLASSICS

SNEAK
PEEK
SAMPLE
CHAPTER

Green Days by the River

Michael Anthony



CHAPTER 1

I HEARD THE dogs barking and I knew that old man Gidharee was coming up the road. I went out into the road and there he was, pulling his four dogs behind him and trying to ward off the neighbour's dogs that rushed out after them. There was much barking and it seemed to make an awful racket in the place. Mr Gidharee's dogs were very big Tobago dogs and I knew he had only to let one of them loose to have the others scurrying in again. He was having difficulty in pulling the dogs along, for the cutlass-case at his side kept getting in the way. Then, too, he had a sack strung across his shoulder, and he was also carrying a cocoa-rod.

I had watched him every morning and he had greeted me as he passed. He did not know me well as we had just moved to Pierre Hill. But he had seen how I had admired his big Tobago dogs, and he seemed very friendly towards me.

As he approached now I began to help drive away the other dogs. 'These *blasted* pot-hounds!' he said.

I laughed.

'Every morning,' he said, 'every morning it's the same damn thing!'

We managed to get the strays away, and now I was walking along behind him and I patted the black-and-white dog. I had just come to Pierre Hill but Rover knew me already. He wagged his tail. I did not go too near to the others, but they too had seen a lot of me and I was not very much afraid of them. I knew the brown dog was Lion, and the other two were Hitler and Tiger, but of these two I did not know which was which.

Mr Gidharee went along with the dogs, and every time he looked round, he seemed surprised I was still there. Now he turned round again and he said, 'You going far from home, boy.'

‘It’s all right, Mr Gidharee.’

‘How you know my name?’

‘Don’t know,’ I had not even thought about that.

He laughed.

I looked at the dogs now, and I said, ‘Which one is Tiger and which one is Hitler?’

‘This is Tiger.’ He pointed to the spotted dog. ‘And this one here is Hitler.’

‘Oh.’

‘I ain’t seeing you old man these days.’

‘He’s sick.’

‘Sick? With what?’

‘Something like water under the heart.’

He did not seem to have heard of that before. He inclined his head to one side, then the other, and he seemed to be working it out.

I did not even know that Mr Gidharee knew my father. I supposed he just thought it natural I would have a father. I doubted whether he had ever seen him. From the time we came to Pierre Hill, Pa had worked for a week, and then he fell sick. Somehow I wished he was as big and strong as Mr Gidharee, instead of being always ill in bed.

‘You know Pa, Mr Gidharee?’

‘Ain’t he the man who Rosalie showed the place – up here?’

‘You mean the *dougla* girl?’

‘That’s my Ro,’ he said, laughing, ‘the *dougla* girl.’

He seemed to be amused by my saying ‘*dougla*’, which was the slang everyone used for people who were half Indian and half Negro. As I watched him laughing I thought of her again and of the time my father had asked her the way. I remembered her own laughing eyes and curly hair which was very different from Mr Gidharee’s Indian face and Indian hair. He looked at me again and he said, ‘Her mother is *creole*, just like you.’

‘Yes, I know.’ I had already thought that out.

We had by now reached the top of Pierre Hill and the road was beginning to take the downward turn.

‘You father not working?’ he asked.

‘He’s sick.’

‘Yes, but I mean – in bed?’

‘Yes. He have asthma too.’

‘Good God!’ Then he said, ‘Well tell your ma if she could let you come with me one of these mornings.’

‘Where?’

‘In the bush. On my piece of land. A little garden thing, like. Cedar Grove.’

I did not know where that was.

He pointed ahead. ‘Just over the hill, by the Spring Bridge.’

‘I’ll ask her.’

‘Okay.’

I patted Rover, the black-and-white dog, and turned to walk back down the hill. In the distance were the tops of the coconut palms of Plaisance, and above them, the sea. The sun was big and silvery and I had to put my hand over my eyes, for the glare. I did not even know that this girl my father had asked the way lived on Pierre Hill. My father had seen her when he had gone into the café. She seemed to be about my age and I had even thought then how pretty she was. I could not remember seeing Mr Gidharee then. I just remembered the girl with her hair in curls. Thinking of her now, she was very vivid in my mind.

My mother had already gone down to Plaisance, by the sea, where she worked in one of the beach-houses. It was hardly any good asking my father about going to Mr Gidharee’s little place because if he said yes and my mother said no, it was no. I went into the house and there he was, lying on the little bed. This low, little bed was in a corner of the sitting room, and here was where he slept. He was awake now, and he was breathing rather hard with the asthma.

'Where you was?' he said. 'I was calling you.'

'I was out in the road with Mr Gidharee.'

'Mr who?'

'Mr Gidharee. The man with those big Tobago dogs.'

'You just come up here but you know everybody already.'

'He asked me about you.'

'About me?' He turned round on his side.

'He just asked me if you wasn't working.'

'He have a job for me or what?'

'No, he only ask that. Just so. He want me to go down to his place – you know, a little plantation, like.'

'For what?'

'Don't know.'

'And where's this place?'

'Cedar Grove Road.' I knew he didn't know where that was.

'You better ask your mother,' he said.

I looked at him lying there on the bed and the *dougl*a girl sprang to mind.

'Pa, you remember that *dougl*a girl down in the café who showed you up the hill?'

He thought a little and said, 'Aha.'

'That is her father.'

'You mean the Indian man – Gidharee?'

'Yes. Her mother is *creole*.'

'Oh, I see.'

'He laughed when I called her *dougl*a.'

'Why? What else you could call her if she's Indian-*Creole*? It ain't no insult.'

'You don't mean Indian-*Creole* you mean Indian-Negro.' I was baiting him now. We had argued on this word *creole*.

'Okay, Indian-Negro, then,' he said.

'Because *creole* is –'

‘Okay, *creole* is the foreign settlers, as those silly teachers tell you in school. Anyway that girl is a *dougla*.’

His eyes avoided me for a moment because he knew I had won my point. Then he looked at me stealthily and we both laughed.

Afterwards I went on thinking about the girl again. If she lived so close to me maybe we’d begin talking somehow. I wondered if she was older than me.

My father saw me sitting quietly so he turned again and said, ‘So I suppose you want to go down to the beach to ask your mother?’

‘Yes, Pa.’

‘Bring that pipe for me before you go. You’ll find some tobacco by that jug.’

I did not move. I did not want to give him the pipe. He never smoked when my mother was here but as soon as she went out he would say, ‘Bring that pipe for me.’ The ridiculous thing was, he kept on hiding his tobacco from Ma, and tobacco was the worst thing to hide. The place reeked of it. He knew he was not supposed to smoke but he would keep on. And his asthma was worse than ever this morning.

‘Bring the pipe, Shell.’

‘Ma say you mustn’t smoke.’

‘Oh, is that so!’

‘Yes.’

He just shrugged and turned his face towards the wall.

I stood looking at him. From as far back as I could remember he had been ill – not throughout, but from time to time – and it was as though he was an invalid. And yet sometimes he would recover from the asthma and would be like any other man, and my mother would say he was as strong as a bull. She was always overjoyed to see him up. But he was never up for long.

I said, ‘Well, I going down to Plaisance now. Okay?’

‘So you not bringing the pipe?’

‘No.’

‘All right, well don’t stop whole day down Plaisance.’

‘Okay.’

‘And don’t look for the *dou gla*.’

I laughed. This took me by surprise. I was only just past fifteen but he always said this sort of thing to me. It was funny how he seemed to know things. As soon as I liked somebody, he knew.

There was a big cashew tree on Pierre Hill and it was in fruit. As I walked out of our yard, I picked up a few stones to see if I could pelt down a cashew. When I got into the road and looked towards the cashew tree, I saw some boys under it pelting. I went down to the tree and looked for a nice ripe cashew, and I began to pelt at it.

Three boys were there and they were all pelting and talking. The ground was littered with rotting cashews. Sometimes when one of the boys pelted and picked a cashew and the cashew fell and burst, the boy would just pick it up and dust it and eat it.

I was aiming at a nice ripe cashew but it was high and would be very hard to pick. I kept on pelting. The other boys were ploughing stones and sticks up into the tree, but the result was only falling leaves. Then one exclaimed, ‘Christ! Look I hit that brute and he wouldn’t fall. Come and see – he still shaking! God, that was a shot.’

I laughed. The other boys went round to see the cashew still shaking. I walked round to the other side of the tree and there was the cashew, still quivering from the blow. I was amazed at this, and forgetting that I did not even know the boys, I said, ‘That’s because it still green.’

‘That’s a ripe cashew,’ the pelter said. ‘Jesus Christ! You can’t see that cashew ripe?’

It was very high and it was hard to see if it was ripe. This was the red kind of cashew and even when they were young they were red. ‘It look green to me,’ I said.

‘Len, hear this man!’ the pelter said. ‘He looking at that rosy cashew and calling that green!’

The one called Len came and looked again. He said, ‘That’s a nice ripe, sweet darling. But it hard. Like your girl-friend. Nice and sweet but no easy picking.’

I started laughing. Len, seeing I was so amused, came up to me and said, ‘This man have a nice little jane, boy, *dougla* and thing, and living just over there, and she always talking to him and laughing and all, man, but he scared to tell her he like her.’

The others were choking with laughter. The pelter pretended that he was not listening and he kept on stoning the high cashew. Then after a little while he dropped the stones he had in his hands and said, ‘That bastard too hard.’

‘Like Rosalie,’ Len said.

‘Like your – ’ And the pelter checked himself.

‘Say it,’ Len said, walking up to him, his fist clenched. ‘Say it, and I’ll make you swallow it.’

The pelter just grinned and walked back a few steps. Len was bigger than him, and looked the toughest of the three. The other fellow was disappointed it did not turn out into a fight. Somehow Len did not even seem cross. I felt they were just having fun together.

Now all three of them sat down on the bank under the cashew tree. There was a drain just before the cashew tree and they sat with their feet in the drain. The pelter said, ‘If I only get vex I’ll climb and pick that bugger.’

The one who had not said anything yet said, ‘I don’t really want no cashew. This cashew too rack. I only feel like pelting, that’s all.’

I said to Len, ‘Rack? What’s that?’

‘Oh, what we call “rack” is when this sorta funny juice sorta tie up your tongue, you know. Make your mouth feel sticky and funny.’

‘Oh, I know.’

Len turned to the pelter again. ‘So how your little jane? Let’s talk about your little thing, man.’

The other one said, ‘Yes come on, Joe.’

I was walking round the tree, pretending I was looking for good cashews to pelt at, but I was listening to them.

Len said, ‘So how’s little Rosie – how things going, good?’

I drew nearer. From the time the talk went on Rosalie, my heart began racing.

Joe pretended he did not know what they were talking about, and the one called Len looked at me and shook his head. He said, ‘Boy, this man! Some people have all the luck!’

‘Who is this girl?’ I asked.

‘She living just over there,’ he pointed to the house almost opposite. ‘A first-class little *dougla* jane.’

The one who had spoken very little, said, ‘He’s a new feller, he wouldn’t know.’

Len snapped, ‘Why you don’t shut-up shop! He know more about Pierre Hill than you.’ Then he turned to me. ‘You don’t know that little sugar-plum, boy – the mother is *creole*, and father, Indian?’

‘With big Tobago dogs?’ I said.

‘See what I mean?’ Len cried. ‘You saying he don’t know nothing. He know more about them than you.’

The quiet fellow looked shame-faced; Joe, the pelter, seemed very surprised that I had already known this.

I said, ‘So that’s your girl-friend, Joe?’

‘My girl-friend? This Lennard is a joker, boy.’

‘Oh, come on, Joe,’ Lennard said, ‘you know she have a soft spot for you.’

Joe looked at me rather shyly. ‘Don’t bother with them,’ he said.

I was looking at the ground now, thinking of Rosalie and remembering that face again. Then I said, 'She's nice.'

The one who had looked quiet said, 'Joe, you'll have to watch out for this man.'

Lennard turned round at him. 'Why you don't shut your trap! Why you don't leave the feller alone!'

They had all forgotten about pelting cashew now and the talk was all Rosalie. I listened to them for a while longer and then I said, 'See you fellers. Have to go down to the beach.'

'Going already?' Lennard said.

'Yes, have to go now.'

'Okay, then,' he said. The pelter looked round and said, 'Okay, then.' The other one said, 'See you.'

I could not help thinking about Rosalie as I went on – and about the three boys, especially the pelter. We were all about the same age, around fifteen. Lennard was the most friendly to me but somehow he seemed a bully. The pelter looked quite easy-going, and he was nice-looking, and I could imagine Rosalie liking him. He was only excited when he was pelting the cashew. The other fellow had spoken the least of all and I did not even know his name. I was glad, though, to have made friends with them. They were my first friends of Pierre Hill.

It was close on a fortnight since I had seen that *douglas* girl and yet I could not get her out of my head. In fact, having just heard the boys talk about her, she was more than ever in my mind now. I wondered whether she really liked Joe, or whether those two fellows were only having a game with him. I wondered if she was a friendly girl or if she would be hard to get to talk to. And then I thought of Mr Gidharee and how he and I were growing to be friends. I would certainly like to go to Cedar Grove with him now, wherever it was! I put on some speed in my walking and in little time I was on the beach.



Green Days by the River

Fifteen-year-old Shell tells his story directly and we see things through his eyes – his confused feelings first for Rosalie and then for Joan, his distress about the illness and death of his father, and his admiration tempered by fear of Mr Gidharee, Rosalie's father.

This iconic, universal 'coming of age' novel conveys the confusion of a teenager growing to maturity, and the difficult choices that have to be made.

Shell is gradually led out of childhood and into a deeper understanding of the human condition.

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