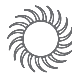
CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY CLASSICS

A Brighter Sun

Sam Selvon



CHAPTER 1

ON NEW YEAR'S Day, 1939, while Trinidadians who had money or hopes of winning money were attending the races in the Queen's Park Savannah, Port of Spain, a number of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution in Europe landed on the island. There was an almost instant increase in the rental of residences and business places, and later more refugees were refused entrance. A development plan costing $14,000,000 was approved by the Secretary of State for the Colonies but nipped in the bud when war was declared. In April, when pouis blossomed and keskidees sang for rain, local forces were mobilized. In May, a German training ship with a crew of 270 paid a visit. Emergency regulations were introduced, mail and telegrams censored, the churches prayed for peace, and the adjacent territorial waters were proclaimed a prohibited area. A man went about the streets of the city riding a bicycle and balancing a bottle of rum on his head. An East Indian, reputedly mad, walked to the wharf and dipped a key in the sea and went away muttering to himself. A big burly Negro called Mussolini, one-legged and arrogant, chased a small boy who was teasing him and fell down, cursing loudly, much to the amusement of passers-by. In September much rain fell; it was the middle of the rainy season. Usually it is Indian summer weather—the natives call it *petite carême*—lasting for a month. It is the best time for planting crops. War was declared and measures necessary for the preservation of internal order were intensified, and wartime regulations brought into force.

All activities concentrated on the 'war effort' in 1940. Money collected in various ways was sent to England. Six young men from the Air Training Scheme left to join the R.A.F. Negotiations

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between England and America for bases in the island came to a head when a United States major discussed the actual locations of the proposed bases with the governor. Air-raid precautions were introduced. French residents pledged their support to General de Gaulle, and a man named Lafeet died in a hut far in the hills of the Northern Range, and nobody knew anything until three weeks later. A model township was opened on the outskirts of the city to relieve the housing shortage. Land was rented to the peasantry in a 'grow more food' campaign. Teachers' salaries were increased and two buses placed at the disposal of schoolchildren to convey them from remote places to the handicraft and housecraft centres. The biggest budget in the history of the colony was passed. There were thirty-six strikes. Sugar and banana industries declined; the drop in sugar was the worst in four years.

In Chaguanas, a sugar-cane district halfway down the western coast of the island, the biggest thing to happen, bigger even than the war, was Tiger's wedding. The whole village turned up for it, Negro and Indian alike, for when Indian people got married it was a big thing, plenty food and drink, plenty ceremony.

Tiger didn't know anything about the wedding until his father told him. He didn't even know the girl. But he bowed to his parents' wishes. He was only sixteen years old and was not in the habit of attending Indian ceremonies in the village. But he knew a little about weddings, that Indians were married at an early age, and that after the ceremony, friends and relatives would bring him gifts until he began to eat; only then would they stop the offerings.

Every night and every morning for a week close relatives came and rubbed him down to prepare his body for married life. On the morning of the wedding he bathed. They dressed him in the wedding gown and put a crown on his head. His father said, 'Boy, dese people not so rich, so don't stayam too long to eat.'

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At the back of the bride's house a great tent of bamboo and coconut branches had been erected. Five goats and six sheep had been slaughtered, an extravagance which could be afforded only at a time like this.

Tiger looked at everybody and everything with a tight feeling in his throat. He wished he knew more about what was going to happen to him.

As part of the ceremony he had to rub a red powder through the path in the middle of her head when a white sheet was thrown over them. As he did this he lifted the veil and looked at her face. She must have been about his age. She had black, sad eyes, long hair, undeveloped breasts.

'What you name?' he asked breathlessly.

'Urmilla,' she whispered timidly.

Tiger didn't think that he would have to look at that face for the rest of his life. The whole affair had been arranged for him; he didn't have anything to do with it. He wondered if she could cook, but he didn't ask himself if she knew anything about what boys and girls did when they got married, because he didn't know either. He was aware of a painful exhilaration; painful because neither of them understood, exhilarating because it was something different in his monotonous life.

They offered him a cow and a hut in Barataria and two hundred dollars in cash, besides smaller things. He didn't know where Barataria was. He didn't know what to expect, or whether he should wait for more gifts before beginning the feast. And then on a sudden impulse—perhaps it was fear, uncertainty—he took up a piece of *meetai* and bit it. That ended the offerings.

Afterwards his father caught him alone for a minute and hissed, 'Yuh fool! Could have gettam plenty more thing! Yuh eatam too quick, stupid boy!'

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But it didn't matter to Tiger. Vaguely, like morning mist, he found himself wondering what life was going to be like.

As was the custom, the bride had to spend three days at his home, then they would spend three days at her family's. After that, they could go and live in their own house.

When Tiger had handed Urmilla over to his mother, all the boys and girls from the neighbourhood came up and started to call out to him.

'Tiger! So yuh married now!'

'Yuh is a big man now, boy!'

Some of the older folk drove them away, but Tiger would have liked for them to come. He was familiar with them, he could make jokes and talk. But now he was a man. He would have to learn to be a man, he would have to forget his friends. After all, he thought, they still little children!

In the next three days his mind was in a turmoil. He went out into the canefields where he had toiled with his father and brothers. Wind blew strongly here: he liked to lift his head and smell burned cane. What had life been for him? Days in the fields, evenings playing with other children, roti and *aloo* in the night. Sometimes they sang songs. His father had a drum, and when it was Saturday night the neighbours came and they drank and sang. And now all that was gone. He felt a tremendous responsibility falling on his shoulders. He tried not to think about it.

The third day his mind was in a riotous fever. He sat in the yard under a mango tree with Ramlal, an old Indian who often consoled him when he was beaten by his father or mother.

'What I must do?' he asked Ramlal, and Ramlal laughed.

'Is how yuh mean, boy?'

'I mean—I don't know what to do when I go with the girl.'

'What, boy! Never seeam your *bap* and *mai* when dey sleeping in de night?'

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'Yes, but—'

'Well, is dat self. You doam same thing. You gettam house which side Barataria, gettam land, cow—well, you go live dat side. Haveam plenty boy chile—girl chile no good, only bring trouble on yuh head. You live dat side, plantam garden, live good.'

In those few words Ramlal summed up things for Tiger. But he didn't feel any sexual excitement at the thought of being alone with Urmilla. Even when he had looked at her face under the *purdah*—the white sheet thrown over them—for to him everything was a whirling, swift event, in which he was told to do this, and do that, and he obeyed.

The last three days at Urmilla's parents he was glad for this putting off of the unknown, this stretching of the few days before the overwhelming river burst over its banks and swept him off his immature feet.

The village of Barataria is situated about four miles east of the capital Port of Spain. Most of it lay on the southern side of the Eastern Main Road, until the war started and people began to look for places to live, the city being overcrowded with servicemen and jobseekers. House owners in the city put a few sticks of furniture in their rooms and charged exorbitant rents for 'furnished' apartments. Crafty men advertised themselves as house agents who could get you a house for a small fee. Once involved, it was a matter of paying small amounts from time to time, and when at last you saw the house you either didn't like it or had to pay a year's rent in advance. One Negro British Guianese did so well that he opened an office and advertised widely. In three months' time he had a staff of three and was extending business to cover second-hand miscellany. In six months he had a car; by the time the government decided to put up a rent tribunal he had built two houses and had a thousand dollars put away in the bank.

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The private estate that owned Barataria leased lots to enterprising housebuilders. In a short time bungalows were going up, to be bought or rented before completion. Roads were laid out, starting a little north of the main road, to run through the village for about half a mile. The railroad connecting other districts to the capital ran parallel to the main road, about one hundred yards south of it. Some of the roads crossed the railway lines. There were ten, running north to south. Then there were thirteen, running across these east to west. The down roads were called avenues, and numbered from one to ten. The cross ones were called streets, and numbered from one to thirteen. The roads were built roughly, with rocks and stones. If a taxi driver was asked to leave the main road and enter the village he said, 'Who, me? My car on dem macadam and big stone? Not me, papa!'

In the rainy season puddles of water and mud made the village just like the Laventille Swamp which bordered the western side of the area. The drains were never completely dry, as the land was level and drainage difficult. Mosquitoes bred by the thousands and frogs croaked the night away. Gardeners who had been living in Barataria before the house hunt started remained in the back streets, near twelfth and thirteenth streets, still living in their thatched huts. Most of them were East Indians. The concrete bungalows near the railway and main road went to middle-class families of various nationalities.

First man to put up a shop was a Chinese. It was at the corner of sixth street and sixth avenue, about the busiest spot in the village. Another opened a laundry. At the corner of sixth avenue and the main road, a good business spot because local trains halted there, shops—groceries, parlours, sweetshops, barber saloons—and general trade opened up. An Indian woman put a table with a coal-pot on the sidewalk and made roti to sell with curried potatoes at twelve cents apiece. With beef or mutton it

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was a shilling. An ice company put an icebox and a scale, selling ice at a penny a pound and snowball—shaved ice with syrup and condensed milk—from four to six cents. If you only had a penny you could get a 'press'—the shaved ice was rammed into a small aluminium cup and taken out and dipped in syrup.

The main road streamed with traffic all day and night. Those who worked in the city could wait at the halt for a train or catch a bus or a taxi on the main road, arriving at their place of work in ten or fifteen minutes' time. The main road itself was wide and asphalted, with sidewalks. Between seventh and eighth avenues a concrete bridge with iron rails spanned a small river. In the wet season the river ran under another bridge fifty yards from the main road, in tenth avenue, and emptied itself in the swamp. Villagers called the bridge on the main road Jumbie Bridge because they were superstitious about it. They said that every year an accident was bound to happen there.

The village was almost as cosmopolitan as the city. Indians and Negroes were in the majority. In the back streets the Indians lived simply, observing their customs and tending their fields, bringing the produce to sell in sixth avenue or going to the market in San Juan, a town bordering the eastern side. The earth was black and rich; they grew vegetables in the yard, kept a few chickens and perhaps a few cattle or a donkey. The Negroes were never farmers, and most of them did odd jobs in the village or the city. But it didn't need any knowledge of farming to dig a hole and put in tomato seeds; the land was so rich that nearly every villager grew peppers or bananas or string beans.

The government erected a school on sixth avenue; many children used to run away and hunt crabs or cascadura fish in the swamp instead of attending. Opposite the school was a large savannah on which cattle and donkeys grazed and children played. Anything would do for a bat and ball to play cricket.

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A coconut-palm branch, properly cut and shaped, made an excellent bat; fruit seeds, empty tin cans, even stones, served as an inexhaustible stock of balls.

So the people poured from the overfilled city, and though they grumbled at the mosquitoes and the stones in the streets on which they 'stumped' their toes, others followed them, filling up the area, which was not even a mile long or half a mile wide.

It was evening time when Tiger and Urmilla arrived in Barataria. A cow moaned in a field. A radio was playing jazz music, jarring on the quietude. Across the level stretch of land on the border of the swamp the sun sank splendidly in a pool of red, saffron, deep purple, and the coconut trees behind the land which Tiger was to rent later cast long, last shadows.

Tiger lit a fire of green bush so that the smoke would drive away the mosquitoes. Then he milked the cow under the rose mango tree. Urmilla watched him from the kitchen window. They had hardly exchanged any words since leaving Chaguanas. They had come to the hut and went about putting things away like two people who did not know each other.

There were two chairs, a small table, and some cooking utensils. The hut was one room. The floor and walls were smooth mud. The roof was thatched with palm leaves. The kitchen was behind and separated from the hut. It was, in fact, a miniature of the hut, except that there was an earthen fireplace, dug in the ground. And it was in a dilapidated condition, leaning to one side.

When Urmilla tried to lift the massala stone with which she would grind curry, she found it was too heavy. She turned shyly to her husband and asked him to lift it for her. It was the first time she had spoken directly to him. She swept the floor with a broom made from the stems of palm leaves, put wood in the fireplace, and went to catch water at the standpipe near the corner of the street.

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Later they ate roti and *bigan* in silence. Tiger chewed slowly, tasting the food. At least she could cook, he told himself.

After the meal he sat on the floor with his legs drawn up under him. 'Get the cigarettes for me,' he commanded.

Urmilla hastened to obey.

Tiger had never smoked. He had only seen his father and the others. But he had decided that he was not going to appear a small boy before his wife. Men smoked: he would smoke. He would drink rum, curse, swear, bully the life out of her if she did not obey him. Hadn't he seen when his father did that? And didn't he know what to do when they went to bed? But he refused to think much about later, in the bed. Unknowingness folded about him so he couldn't breathe. He was afraid.

Urmilla handed him the cigarettes and matches. He pulled one out of the pack, beat the end on the box of matches, and put it between his lips and lit it clumsily and inhaled.

All this time Urmilla was fascinatedly looking at him. And when Tiger began to cough so that his eyes ran water she knew. Ordinarily she would not have dared to laugh. But her emotions were too tightly drawn, like ropes across her breasts. And she felt that if she laughed the tautness would snap and set her free.

It flashed in Tiger's mind that this was rudeness and that he should slap her into respect for him when she laughed. And then the humour of the situation broadened like a ring in a pond and pushed other thoughts out of its path. Tightness in Tiger went as he burst into a fit of laughter. They laughed until they felt less afraid of each other. The joke of the cigarette was just a starter; the rest of their laughter was to drown out uncertainty, the knowledge that they would do something soon which they had never done before. And after they laughed, for the first time the thought gave them a thrill.

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Urmilla moved away uneasily; Tiger ground the cigarette in the ground.

That night they slept separately on sugar bags spread on the floor. Tiger crept across the room and huddled up in the corner, afraid of his thoughts and wishing with all his heart that he could fall asleep. Urmilla cried silently in the bags she had folded as a pillow.

When Tiger got up in the morning Urmilla had already milked the cow and was kneading flour. 'Good morning,' she said shyly, not lifting her head. Tiger smiled but he didn't answer. He went out in the yard and cut a toothbrush from the hibiscus fence. He chewed at the end of the stem and scrubbed his teeth with it when it frazzled out. He dipped a calabash full of water from the barrel at the side of the kitchen and dashed it on his face. The sun was halfway up in the sky.

He decided that he had better begin to talk freely with his wife. That way she wouldn't know he was doubtful and fearful of the future.

'Now so, Urmilla, what you doing home by you?' he asked when they sat on the floor to breakfast.

Words came tumbling from the girl like water from a burst dam. 'Oh, Tiger, I have plenty work to do. Clean the house, cook, go out and graze the cattle—'

'Yes, girl, me too. Plenty things to do by my father house. Every day I go in the fields and work, work. In the evening we play. All the boys and girls come, and we play under the mango tree. I wish I was back home now.'

'But, Tiger, we married now! We can't go back to we father and mother house. We have to live here by weself.'

Tiger drank tea from a large enamel cup. 'Yes, I know that. Don't think I don't know. You must remember, first thing is that I is the man in the house, and you have to obey me.'

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Urmilla said quickly, 'Yes, Tiger.'

'Now second thing,' he said, 'is to get land. We go grow crop and sell. Is San Juan where the estate office is, I going up there now and make arrangement. I don't know the exact spot, but I could always ask somebody.'

He caught a bus on the main road, and by then the sun was high in the sky, and the wind warm and constant. It was easy to find the office, everybody in San Juan knew where it was. He signed a contract, marking a big 'X' for his name, to rent two lots of land. He was worried about the negotiation; he wished his father or one of his uncles was there with him. But the thought made him ashamed. He was married, and he was a big man now. He might as well learn to do things without the assistance of other people.

When he got back to Barataria it was evening. He dropped off by the corner, and seeing the rumshop open, went in. The same spur which had made him smoke now tickled him to get drunk. Only men got drunk, not boys. He remembered once in Chaguanas his father was drinking in a rumshop and he had to go and bring him home. When his father saw him he said, 'Ohe, boy, come an' take ah little one, it go killam all de germs in yuh belly.' And he took a little one, urged by his father's companions, and the rum coursed down his throat as if pitchoil had been soaked in his mouth and a match set to it. Then men had laughed loudly when tears sprang to his eyes.

He ordered a drink.

The men in the rumshop, talking and laughing, looked at him briefly. He stood with the glass in his hand and looked around. Acutely conscious that they were not looking at him, he gulped the rum with an effort and chased it with a soda water. He wanted to buck up his courage and say something to show them he was a man, that he could swallow rum just as they did.

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But no one cared if Tiger was a man or not.

Warmth travelled over his body. He went to a dirty table around which two young men were sitting. There was a slop pail near and one of them was leaning from his chair and spitting in it.

'You living in Barataria?' Tiger asked.

'Who is you?' one of them demanded. 'Why yuh want to find dat out?'

'Is just that I newly come here to live. I don't know the place good yet, man.'

'Well, sit down nar,' they invited. 'Have ah liquor wid we. But you must buy.'

It was a chance to prove he was a man. 'Call for another bottle on me, man,' he said, pulling a bill from his pocket. 'All of we is Indian together; let we drink and make merry.'

Already he owned land, he boasted to his companions. He had a house, a cow, a wife. And he thought to himself that he ought to have done it last night, only he couldn't summon up enough courage. Tonight he would show her. Nobody had told him he was still a boy, but they didn't have to speak for him to know.

He got up suddenly from the table. He was feeling giddy. He staggered through the door and he knew they were laughing behind his back, but he didn't care.

Urmilla had lit the kerosene lamp and was waiting anxiously. Through the fog in his brain he could see fear in her eyes.

'Why you stay so long, Tiger?' she asked gladly.

He sulked. He was the man in the house, he could come and go as he pleased. He didn't answer.

They ate in silence. Tiger watched Urmilla out of the corners of his eyes. Now that he had decided to do it, she appeared altogether different. Her hair was glossy in the lamplight, her eyes shining. Almost as if she knew. He wished that he knew more about

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everything—about planting crops at the right time, about living with a wife, and exactly how to go about the thing. In some way he sensed that unless he did it he would never cease to be a boy, to be treated like a boy.

Later they sat silent. Urmilla shelled pigeon peas she had bought from a passing vender for the next day's lunch.

He watched her. Did he have to tell her first?

They went to bed. For a long time he lay looking at the thatched roof, making up his mind. Then quietly, like he was stalking a deer, he drew his bags near to his bride.

Urmilla moved and opened her eyes. She knew what was going to happen and she tried not to be afraid. Her mother had said, '*Beti*, whatever happen, don't frighten. You is a woman now.'

It was the same thing with Urmilla: she felt she had to prove herself a woman in front of Tiger.

Young passion burst and swept them so they didn't know really what they were doing. If Tiger had known that this powerful force was going to grip him so that he wouldn't be afraid, it would have been so easy for him to let himself die and switch on the force. Because afterwards he was aware that he of his own accord had taken no part in the thing. A great desire for his wife had come over him, possessing his brain.

Before they fell asleep in each other's arms he told himself that the next time he would just die and let the power do its work.

And the next morning they lay lazily on the bags on the floor, looking at each other with the wonder of the new knowledge.

And they did it again.

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A Brighter Sun

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'Tiger thought, To my wife, I man when I sleep with she. To bap (father), I man if I drink rum. But to me, I no man yet.' Trinidad is in the turbulent throes of the Second World War, but the war feels quite far away to Tiger. Young and inexperienced, he sets out to prove his manhood and independence. With his child bride Urmilla, shy, bewildered and anxious, and with two hundred dollars in cash and a milking cow, he sets out into the wilderness of adulthood. There is no map or directions for him to follow; he must learn for himself and find his own way.

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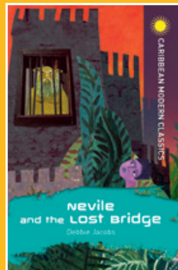

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