

The Chapel

She was walking lazily, for the fierce April sun was directly overhead. Her umbrella blocked its rays but nothing blocked the heat - the sort of raw, wild heat that crushes you with its energy. A few buffalo were tethered under coconuts, browsing the parched verges. Occasionally a car went past, leaving its treads in the melting pitch like the wake of a ship at sea. Otherwise it was quiet, and she saw no-one.

In her long white Sunday dress you might have taken Ginnie Narine for fourteen or fifteen. In fact she was twelve, a happy, uncomplicated child with a nature as open as the red hibiscus that decorated her black, waist-length hair. Generations earlier her family had come to Trinidad from India as overseers on the sugar plantations. Her father had had some success through buying and clearing land around Rio Cristalino and planting it with coffee.

On the dusty verge twenty yards ahead of Ginnie a car pulled up. She had noticed it cruise by once before but she did not recognize it and could not make out the driver through its dark windows, themselves as black as its gleaming paintwork. As she walked past it, the driver's glass started to open.

"Hello, Ginnie," she heard behind her.

She paused and turned. A slight colour rose beneath her dusky skin. Ravi Kirjani was tall and lean, and always well-dressed. His black eyes and large white teeth flashed in the sunlight as he spoke. Everyone in Rio Cristalino knew Ravi. Ginnie often heard her unmarried sisters talk ruefully of him, of how, if only their father were alive and they still had land, one of them might marry him. And then they would squabble over who it might be and laugh at Ginnie because she was too simple for any man to want.

"How do you know my name, Ravi?" she asked with a thrill.

"How do you know mine?"

"Everyone knows your name. You're Mr Kirjani's son."

"Right. And where're you going Ginnie?"

She hesitated and looked down at the ground again.

"To chapel," she said with a faint smile.

"But Ginnie, good Hindus go to the temple." His rich, cultured voice was gently mocking as he added with a laugh: "Or maybe the temple pundits aren't your taste in colour."

She blushed more deeply at the reference to Father Olivier. She did not know how to reply. It was true that she liked the young French priest, with his funny accent and blue eyes, but she had been going to the Catholic chapel for months before he arrived. She loved its cheerful hymns, and its simple creed of one god - so different from those miserable Hindu gods who squabbled with each other like her sisters at home. But, added to that, the vulgarity of Ravi's remark bewildered her because his family were known for their breeding. People always said that Ravi would be a man of honour, like his father.

Ravi looked suddenly grave. His dark skin seemed even darker. It may be that he regretted his words. Possibly he saw the confusion in Ginnie's wide brown eyes. In any case, he did not wait for an answer.

"Can I offer you a lift to chapel - in my twenty-first birthday present?" he asked, putting his sunglasses back on. She noticed how thick their frames were. Real gold, she thought, like the big, fat watch on his wrist.

"It's a Mercedes, from Papa. Do you like it?" he added nonchalantly.

From the shade of her umbrella Ginnie peered up at a small lone cloud that hung motionless above them. The sun was beating down mercilessly and there was an urge in the air and an overpowering sense of growth. With a handkerchief she wiped the sweat from her forehead. Ravi gave a tug at his collar.

"It's air-conditioned, Ginnie. And you won't be late for chapel," he continued, reading her mind.