

A short story by Josef Essberger palm tree She was walking lazily, for the fierce April sun was directly overhead. The police closed their files on the case before the boy was cold." And he shook the last of the rain from his umbrella and slapped impatiently at a mosquito. You might have thought that the shock of Ravi's death would have induced in Ginnie a premature delivery. But quite the reverse. She attended the inquest and she mourned at the funeral. The expected date came and went. Six more weeks elapsed before Ginnie, by now thirteen, gave birth to a son at the public maternity hospital in San Fernando. When they saw the baby, the nurses glanced anxiously at each other. Then they took him away without letting Ginnie see him. Eventually they returned with one of the doctors, a big Creole, who assumed his most unruffled bedside manner to reassure Ginnie that the baby was well. And don't forget, you're very young . . . and you've both had a rough time. Wait a day . . . three days . . . his eyes'll turn, he'll soon have a healthy colour." The promise of commerce was in the air and the traders looked about expectantly as they loaded their stalls with fresh mangos or put the finishing touches to displays of giant melons whose fleshy pink innards glistened succulently under cellophane. They had made their fortune in retailing long before the collapse in oil prices had emptied their customers' pockets; and now Moorpalani stores were scattered throughout Trinidad and some of the other islands. As usual, a crush of people from all over Trinidad – distant relatives, old classmates, anyone claiming even the most tenuous connection with the dead man – came to mourn at the riverside pyre outside Mayaro. They had houses in Port-of-Spain, Tobago and Barbados, as well as in England and India, but their main residence was a magnificent, sprawling, colonial-style mansion just to the north of Rio Cristalino. If privately they felt their humiliation keenly, publicly they bore it with composure, and people were amazed that they remained on speaking terms with the man who had insulted one of their women and broken her heart. The rear door of the Land Rover swung open and Ravi Kirjani tumbled out, falling helplessly beneath the wheels of a heavily laden truck. At the inquest the coroner acknowledged that the nature and extent of Ravi's injuries made it impossible to determine whether he was killed instantly by the fall or subsequently by the truck. Afterwards, clutching the ragged flower that had been torn from her hair, she lay among the tall, sweet-smelling canes and sobbed until the brief tropical twilight turned to starry night. They were in high spirits and joked with Ravi while their servants stowed cold chicken and salad beneath the rear bench seats and packed the iceboxes with beer and puncheon rum. Its ribbed tyres beat on the reflector studs like a drumroll and the early morning sun flashed through the coconut palms. "Gods have mercy on you, Virginia! Watch the shape of your belly," cried Mrs Narine, exploding with indignation and pulling her daughter indoors, away from the prying neighbours' ears. The hardtop Land Rover cruised through Rio Cristalino to the crossroads at the town centre. Already the market traders were pitching their roadside stalls and erecting great canvas umbrellas to shield them from sun or rain. A few buffalo were tethered under coconuts, browsing the parched verges. When Ginnie heard of Ravi's engagement the loathing she had conceived for him grew into a sort of numb hatred. She was soon haunted by a longing to repay that heartless, arrogant brute. At last her words were exhausted and she sat down heavily, her weak heart pounding dangerously and her chest heaving from the exertion of her outburst. Outside you could hear the shrill, persistent sound of cicadas, while mosquitoes crowded at the screens, attracted by the bare bulb over the simple desk. So Ravi Kirjani was confronted with the pregnant Ginnie and reminded of that

Sunday afternoon in the dry season when the canes were ready for harvesting. The Moorpalani brothers chose a Tuesday for the outing – there was little point, they said, in going at the weekend when the working people littered the beach – and one of their Land Rovers for the twenty mile drive from Rio Cristalino. 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. 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. The beat of calypso filled her ears and the sugar canes towered over her as the cold draught from the air-conditioner played against her knees. Like the Kirjanis, the Moorpalanis were an established Indian family, one of the wealthiest in the Caribbean. It was a benevolent influence, of course, never abused, for people always said the Moorpalanis were a respectable family, and well above reproach. Sunita's five brothers even invited Ravi to spend a day with them at their seaside villa in Mayaro. 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. From the shade of her umbrella Ginnie peered up at a small lone cloud that hung motionless above them. Ravi Kirjani had been promised the hand of Sunita Moorpalani. She would give anything to humiliate him, to see that leering, conceited grin wiped from his face. It rattled persistently on the galvanized roofs until you thought you would go mad with the noise. Then one day in October, towards the end of the wet season, when Ginnie's family were celebrating her only brother's eighteenth birthday, something happened that she had been dreading for weeks. "How does you bring such shame upon us, girl? What worthless layabouts does you throw yourself upon? What man'll have you now? No decent man, that does be sure. And why does you blacken your father's name like this, at your age? The man as didn't even live to see you born. Thank the gods he didn't have to know of this. You sure got some explaining to your precious man of God, child." Dr Khan sighed and peered over the frames of his glasses. Then they scanned the sky for clouds and congratulated themselves on choosing such a fine day. Suraj, the eldest brother, looked at his watch and his feet shifted uneasily as he said: "It's time to hit the road." "It's true he's a little pasty, my dear," he said as a nurse placed the baby in Ginnie's arms, "but, you see, that'll be the late delivery. Her umbrella blocked its rays but nothing blocked the heat – the sort of raw, wild heat that crushes you with its energy. Occasionally a car went past, leaving its treads in the melting pitch like the wake of a ship at sea. 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. "But Ginnie, good Hindus go to the temple." The sun was beating down mercilessly and there was an urge in the air and an overpowering sense of growth. "It's air-conditioned, Ginnie. And you won't be late for chapel," he continued, reading her mind. But chapel must have been the last thing on Ravi's mind when Ginnie, after a moment's hesitation, accepted his offer. For he drove her instead to a quiet sugar field outside town and there, with the Mercedes concealed among the sugar canes, he introduced himself into her. Two weeks later the little market town of Rio Cristalino was alive with gossip. But while the Kirjanis were diplomats, the Moorpalanis were a commercial family. Prudently, they had diversified into banking and insurance, and as a result their influence was felt at the highest level. On weekdays she went to school

and on Sundays she went still to Father Olivier's afternoon service. Then Ginnie told her mother of the afternoon that Ravi Kirjani had raped her. "If anybody have to get damnation that Kirjani boy'll get it," she said. That night Mrs Narine took her young daughter to see Doctor Khan, an old friend of her husband whose discretion she could count on. There was no doubt about it. The child was pregnant. "I might arrange something for the baby once it's born. But it must be born, my dear. Your daughter is slimly built. She's young, a child herself. To you she looks barely three months pregnant. Don't fool yourself, if the dates she's given us are correct, in three months she'll be full term. Anything now would be too, too messy." Though Sunita Moorpalani indisputably had background, nobody ever pretended that she had looks. Even Ginnie was surprised at how little resistance he put up. "Perhaps," she thought with a wry smile, "he's not really so bad." The Land Rover turned east towards Mayaro and moments later was passing the cemetery on the edge of town. At last, on an uphill straight about six miles from Mayaro, the Land Rover was able to pick up speed. Three days later Ravi's remains were cremated according to Hindu rights. Some of them were convinced that they could see in Ravi's death the hands of the gods – and they pointed for evidence to the grey sky and the unseasonal rain. But the flames defied the rain and the stench of burning flesh filled the air. Then they watched as the ashes were thrown into the muddy Otoire River, soon to be lost in the warm waters of the Atlantic. Ginnie looked into her son's blue eyes and kissed them, and in doing so a tremendous feeling of tiredness suddenly came over her. In her long white Sunday dress you might have taken Ginnie Narine for fourteen or fifteen. 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. And then they would squabble over who it might be and laugh at Ginnie because she was too simple for any man to want. With a handkerchief she wiped the sweat from her forehead. Ravi gave a tug at his collar. Ginnie was in a daze. But outwardly she was unmoved. And if it stopped the air was as sticky as treacle and you prayed for it to rain again. She was lying in the hammock on the balcony, playing with her six-year-old nephew Pinni. Her voice was loud and hard and there was a blackness in her eyes like the blackness of the skies before thunder. There was a long silence after that and all you could hear was Mrs Narine wheezing. Ginnie's sisters were awestruck. "Marry her off, quick as you can," the lean old doctor replied bluntly. Mrs Narine scoffed. A welcome breeze came through the slats of the surgery windows. Then he lowered his voice and spoke wearily, like a man who has said the same thing many times. "And if it's born," asked Mrs Narine falteringly, "if it's born, what does happen then?" "No, Ma, I want it anyway, I want to keep it," said Ginnie quietly. "And who's to look after you, and pay for the baby? Even if that Kirjani does agrees to pay, who does you hope to marry?" "Kirjani, Ma. I's going to marry Ravi Kirjani." Doctor Khan gave a chuckle. Mrs Narine was staggered. Whatever his reasons, you had to admit Ravi acted honourably. And so did the jilted Moorpalani family. The road to the coast was busy with traffic in both directions still carrying produce to market, and the frequent bends and potholes made the journey slow. But it was clear at least, he felt, that Ravi had been alive when he fell from the Land Rover. The verdict was death due to misadventure. Did not the Moorpalanis have a compelling motive? It made little difference that it was a Moorpalani truck that had finished Ravi off. Moorpalani trucks were everywhere. "Anyway," said one old mourner with a shrug, "who are we to ask questions? She sighed at the irony of it all, the waste of it

all. "Hello, Ginnie," she heard behind her. She paused and turned. "How do you know my name, Ravi?" she asked with a thrill. "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. "It's a Mercedes, from Papa. Do you like it?" he added nonchalantly. But she told no-one, not even Father Olivier. "Girl, you sure does have a lot to confess to that whitley," her mother would say to her each time she came home late from chapel. "He's not a whitley, he's a man of God." The months passed and she did not see Ravi again. And then it rained. All through August the rain hardly stopped. She cursed herself for it and harsh questions burst from her lips. When at last she spoke, her words were heavy and disjointed. "Shall we take her over to the health centre, Ma?" asked Indra. "The midwife comes today." "And what can us do, Dr Khan?" asked Mrs Narine. "I'll marry, don't worry." "You'll marry! You does be a fool. Who will you marry?" "I told you to marry her off. And the Kirjani boy's worth a try. What does she have to lose? She's too, too clever!" To the surprise of the Narines he did not argue at all. He offered at once to marry Ginnie. It may be that for him it was a welcome opportunity to escape a connubial arrangement for which he had little appetite. Or possibly he foresaw awkward police questions that might have been difficult to answer once the fruit of his desire saw the light of day. And as Ravi had been a friend of the family all his life he saw no reason to refuse. His brothers gave a laugh and clambered on board. It was an odd, sardonic laugh. A few spoke darkly of murder. They were so very, very blue, so like Father Olivier's. Was the Creole doctor really so stupid? Surely he knew as well as she did that the pallid looks could never go. Otherwise it was quiet, and she saw no-one. As she walked past it, the driver's glass started to open. "How do you know mine?" "Can I offer you a lift to chapel – in my twenty-first birthday present?" Young as she was, she barely understood what was happening to her. The arranged marriage would be the social event of the following year. "That's as may be, child, but don't forget he does be a man first." "How could she have been so blind?" "Is you crazy, girl? You all does know how that woman does run she mouth like a duck's bottom. You all leave this to me." "Who would take her now, Doctor? I does beg you. There's nothing? Nothing you can do for us?" "Don't be a fool, child." "It's my baby. Ma. I want to have it. I want to keep it." "So, your daughter is not such a fool as you think," he said. Suddenly a terrible thing happened. And not by chance did they have the opportunity, and the means. But mostly they agreed that it was a tragic accident.