

## Chapter Two

# School Life



The first school I ever went to was not far from my house. I was four years old at the time and every morning Sandra and I would walk there, dressed in our white blouses and blue tunics, our hair plaited immaculately. Marmie used to inspect us before we left because the teachers were very strict about school uniform – and everything else, come to think of it. Each morning there would be an inspection by the Headmistress to make sure our nails, clothes and shoes were clean. We would have to line up in the school yard. The latecomers would try to sneak on to the end of the lines but the headmistress seemed to have eyes in the back of her head and would always spot them. I was late once and I thought I would catch her out. I willed myself to be invisible. I felt sure I could sneak in and attach myself to the line without being seen. But no, old hawk eyes caught sight of me. It was the moment I



had feared. I had seen other children cry out as the thick leather belt was brought down from high above on to the palm of their hand. Now it was my turn to face the executioner. I slowly walked forward, my feet heavy as lead weights, my heart thumping like kettle drums, all eyes staring at me. When I reached the front of the line, I turned my face away and closed my eyes as the belt came down with a crack. Then it was over, but I barely felt it. The fear of receiving the punishment was far worse than the actual lash itself. But I didn't ever want to go through that torment again. So from then on I made sure I was never late or dared to do anything wrong at school.

The school was a big timber building on two floors with a staircase on the outside leading to the upper floor. The classrooms were separated by wooden partitions. In front of the rows of wooden desks was a large blackboard, and next to it was the teacher's desk. We were never allowed to speak in class unless spoken to. Everyone had great respect and admiration for the teachers who were firm but friendly, they stood for no nonsense. Most had dedicated their lives to teaching and their expectations of us were

very high. We were taught the British way, the 'three Rs': reading, writing and arithmetic because it was considered to be the best education in the world. As we were colonised and ruled by Britain before the island became independent, all our textbooks came from England and were precious to us.

Each morning, before schoolwork we would have to sing 'God Save the Queen', 'Rule Britannia' and 'Land of Hope and Glory'. We were encouraged to feel proud that we were British, and even celebrated British memorial days like Remembrance Day. The poppies looked striking on our royal blue uniforms.

Every day we went through the ritual of saying our times tables; the whole class reciting as one. I can still hear the sing-song chanting in my ears.

Occasionally the headmistress would randomly single out an unsuspecting pupil and ask them to repeat their tables. You never knew when it would be your turn so you had to be sure you knew them all by heart. It must have worked because I've never forgotten mine. We also



learned about Britain and how the British conquered the world. We learned about the heroes of British history, and other countries in the world, but nothing about our own people. We even learned about British poets. My favourite was Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and at the age of six I could fluently recite his poem 'The Beggar Maid'. I can still remember the first lines: 'Her arms across her breast she laid; She was more fair than words can say . . .'

The best time at school was break-time. The recess bell would go and we would file out into the school yard in an orderly way, but once we were outside, we would let rip. It was time to let off the pent-up energy, time to shout, scream, laugh and play with our friends.

Skipping and hopscotch were two of my favourite games as well as action and clapping games to which we would sing 'Brown Girl in the Ring' and 'I Am a Pretty Little Dutch Girl'. I also used to look forward to seeing the woman who sold treats. She sat on a stool with a tray in front of her laden with goodies. Pink and white sugar cake, which was grated coconut, sugar and colouring; tuloons – a mixture

of grated coconut and molasses; chana – fried chick peas; spicy marinated mangoes and snowballs, which were crushed ice covered in fruit syrup, all on sale for a few cents. The worst part was that I could never decide which to have, and I sometimes wished break-time would go on forever so I could try them all.

At lunchtime, everyone went home to eat as most of our mothers always stayed at home and very rarely went out to work. Sandra and I would hold hands and walk back home, always on the right side of the busy main road because the cars drove on the left, just as they do in England. We had to be careful as we walked along, because there were no pavements and the big American cars, single deck buses and wooden trucks were always driven far too fast along the narrow tarmac roads. An hour after one of Marnie's delicious hot cooked meals we were on our way back to school for afternoon lessons. Sometimes we would have nature classes, in which we learned about insects, birds and flowers. I remember the fascination of discovering how a chrysalis turns into a butterfly. For days we watched and waited to see the transformation; when it came it was like

a miracle. I marvelled at the sight of the delicate, brightly coloured newborn creature. I treasured the moment and it is locked away in my mind, together with all the other unforgettable memories of my early school days.

## Chapter Three Celebrations



The biggest celebration we had at our house was for my baby sister Cynthia's christening. I was seven at the time, so old enough to look after Lester, Ellington and my two-year-old baby brother Roy (actually we called him Junior because Roy was also my father's name, which was quite a common thing to do in Trinidad). Marmie had got up early to prepare the food: curry chicken, rotis, souse (marinated pig's trotters with cucumber), peas and rice, exotic drinks and ice cream. She had done all the baking the night before and had made a special cake for Cynthia which was iced and decorated with pink flowers.

When it was time to go to church for the christening ceremony, baby Cynthia was dressed in a beautiful white cotton and lace gown which had been passed down. Sandra was the first to wear it so now it was on its sixth outing. That was one of the

few things Sandra ever got to wear new because, even though she was the eldest, she was also the smallest so she got all the hand-downs. I got the new dresses and shoes which were always passed down to her and she used to complain bitterly about this. After the ceremony the four godparents, along with family and friends, came back to our house to eat, drink and celebrate the baby's health. It was customary to give the baby a gift, usually silver, a coin or a small trinket like a bracelet and Cynthia got lots.

Dardie played the saxophone in his spare time. He played music at dance halls at weekends for weddings, dances and parties. But today he and some friends played music on the gallery for his daughter's christening. I loved the music and took great delight in showing everyone the latest dance.

I remember our Christmas celebrations, too. This was another time for feasting. It was the only time of the year we had apples – big, red, juicy, crisp ones. They were one of the special treats we had at Christmas time, along with ham and a rich rum fruitcake. We didn't have Christmas trees or snow but I would imagine what it would be like by looking

at the Christmas cards which came from England and America. We all sang carols at special services and got presents which were usually clothes and books. One year Marmie bought us all expensive toys – dolls, cars, spinning tops – but by Boxing Day we had broken them all, so she vowed never to buy us toys again and she kept her promise.

We celebrated most of the British holidays. Bank holidays were usually spent by the seaside. I loved it when we went to the beach up north at Couva and Chaguanas. Marmie would pack a large picnic and we would sometimes take a train to get there: small wooden carriages pulled by a steam engine which clacked along the narrow lines. We would sit excitedly on the wooden slatted seats and as soon as we left the station we would ask Marmie if we were there yet. The train departed from San Fernando and we would pass by the huge oil refineries, with pipelines leading in every direction making it look like a picture in a science fiction comic. We could also see the pitch lake where the mountains of tar waited to be transported around the world. We would pass through small villages which were next to sugar cane

fields and coconut groves. We could see workers knee deep in the rice paddy fields picking the grain in the hot sun. Dozens of tropical birds, such as salmon-pink ibis, would take off from the bird sanctuaries on the rivers as the noisy train rattled past. The cows and the goats would look up dismissively at us in the carriages as they grazed on the hillsides.

The journey took its time but was never boring. Passengers could move from carriage to carriage by walking along the narrow ledge on the outside of the train. This was exciting to watch but very dangerous and we were never allowed to try it. Musicians often played on the train and people would dance in the aisles, even the children. Everyone knew how to have fun. When we got to the beach we couldn't wait to strip down to our costumes and dash madly into the warm, blue, inviting Caribbean sea. After we had worked up an appetite swimming and splashing about we would sit on the golden sand and eat our picnic. Some people even cooked on the beach in cast iron pots over hot coals. The sizzling of fried chicken, rotis, curry and roast corn left a mouthwatering aroma in the air which mixed with the salty sea breeze.

Sometimes men would come round selling coconut water. They would slice the top off a coconut, still in its outer green husks and sell it for a few cents. We had to share one amongst all six of us, and the juice often dribbled down our faces onto our necks, but we didn't care – we would wash it off in the refreshing tropical sea.

Carnival is the celebration for which Trinidad is famous. It is held three days before Lent although preparations for carnival take a whole year.

The biggest parade took place in Port of Spain, the bustling capital of Trinidad. Some of the houses there looked like Scottish castles made out of wood. There was a very strong British, Spanish and French influence in the architecture which came with the people who colonised the island over the years. There was a huge park called The Savannah where the big carnival ended up after the people and floats had paraded through the streets. This was called 'playing mas'. We usually stayed in Marabella to watch the people 'play mas' on their way to San Fernando, the next biggest town. Some of the costumes were fantastic. Each one would have a different theme, like

the undersea world, the galaxy, the animal kingdom, birds or flowers. My first memory of carnival was not a nice one though. I remember someone in a bizarre towering monster costume dancing up to me. It was a frightening sight, and I screamed in terror, ran into the house, and hid under the bed. It was only as I grew older, I appreciated more and more the spectacular, colourful carnival extravaganza, and like all Trinidadians every year I looked forward to singing calypsos and dancing, or 'jumping up' as we would say, to the steel band music.



#### Chapter Four

### Darkness and Light



There were usually two kinds of weather on our tropical island, which was not far from the Equator: hot or rainy. When it

was hot, from October to June, it was very hot. In the mornings we would wake to brilliant blue cloudless skies with a bright yellow sun beating down on us. The only relief was the occasional cool breeze that drifted in from the sea. You couldn't move fast in the heat, so everything was done at a slow pace. You could feel the heat coming through the soles of your feet as you walked along. People would often stop and stand idly on street corners chatting while they wiped away the sweat.

The ground was dry and dusty and the tarmac roads sometimes used to melt. The smell of the tar was overpowering as the traffic drove over the black, gooey mixture leaving their tyre marks in it. By midday the heat haze shimmered high off the hot



ground, the sun baking everything in sight, forcing people to look for some shade away from the furnace-like heat. Mercifully at round about five o' clock it began to grow cooler. Then a sudden darkness would fall as the sun dropped out of sight below the horizon where it would slumber until the next morning. The darkness came so quickly after the light, it was like someone turning off a switch. But you could always be certain the sun would rise gloriously again and again during the hot season.

I loved the sun because the heat warmed my inner soul and gave me a free, happy, relaxed feeling. I also got a good feeling when it rained – and when it rained, it really rained. The heavens would open and torrents of rain would lash down. We would dance and splash in the warm, tropical scented water. It didn't matter if we got wet because, after the downpour, the water would evaporate in no time, drying our clothes in a instant.

It rained most heavily in the mountainous, tropical rainforest area where the land crabs, toucans, exotic parrots, huge toads and snakes lived, and where fragrant lilies, orchids and other vibrantly coloured flowers grew. Here the trees were immensely tall, exceptionally green and lush with thick vines entwining themselves around the trunks. The sun rarely got through to the dense undergrowth but the rain did.

Some of my cousins lived up there and near their house was a waterfall. We carefully used to make our way to it from their back yard, across the boulders and stones, pushing aside the branches and vines which hung down. We could hear the rushing water



tumbling over the rocks and would shriek with delight as we stood under the cool water which felt like silk on our skin.

One day I remember experiencing weather like I had never seen before. One minute there was brilliant sunshine, the next a great darkness enveloped the island. At the same time the ground trembled, causing cracks to appear under my feet. A water pipe erupted, flooding the main street. I really thought the world was going to end and I screamed for my mother in terror. She told me it was freak weather, an eclipse and a slight earthquake happening, amazingly, at the same time. She held me tight and told me that it wouldn't last long. I was only seven years old and I didn't fully understand at the time what was happening. All I knew was that my little world looked and felt different. Then an almighty downpour of rain started to fall and for once I didn't dance in it.

## Chapter Five

# The Baptism



When you are six or seven years old and are made to go to church regularly it can seem as if you are there for most of your life.

Every Sunday morning Marmie would dress us in our Sunday best: starched cotton dresses with puffed sleeves, white socks worn with freshly whitened sensible shoes, and hair pulled back in tightly plaited bunches, decorated with brightly coloured ribbons, which all went together to give us that 'Sunday best' feeling. Perhaps that's why I still love dressing up today! When she finally got all six bickering and excited children ready, which was quite a feat, we would go to early morning service at the local Pentecostal church. The preacher there was a huge tall man – he looked as tall as the church, especially when he stood on the pulpit. I thought he was a giant! His skin had a rich, dark, ebony sheen; it was truly black! His expressive eyes shone like a torch