

Chapter Eleven

Settling In



It took us a few days to get over our disappointment and to adjust to living in the big city of London. During that time we got used to being with Junior and Cynthia again, who had both changed quite a lot. They had made so many presents for us at nursery school and also painted pictures of what they thought we would look like, which was most amusing. They had longed to be with us and asked so many questions about Trinidad and our adventurous voyage. They loved hearing the story of Ellington nearly falling into the ocean which got more and more exaggerated depending on who was telling the tale. The room was our playground and the noise we made inside those four walls was unbelievable. We were forever being told to be quiet, that we were not in Trinidad now where we could run free and play in the yard. Our new home didn't have a garden and Marmie would never allow us to

play in the streets because it was far too dangerous.

One of the few times we were allowed to go outside was to collect the bottles of silver- and gold-topped milk left on the doorstep. At first I thought someone had left them as a free gift for us until I realised Marmie had to pay for the milk at the end of the week. In Trinidad, we used to buy milk from a man who came round on a bicycle with a small tank full of cow's milk on the back.

Marmie had made arrangements for us to go to a local school and after just ten days of being in England, I was on my way to my first English school.

When I arrived at the school, many of the children rushed over and touched me then ran away giggling. I thought they were being nice to me. At that time I didn't realize it was because I was different, a novelty, something to be made a fool of and to be laughed at. The dingy Victorian building squatted in the large grey playground like a bulldog ready to attack. It was surrounded by high wire fencing, a hopscotch game was marked out on the ground and on one of the walls a bull's-eye pattern was painted.

Above the school's main door were some letters



engraved in the stone; they were Latin words and I never did find out what they meant. Inside the school the walls of the long corridors were tiled halfway up making the building feel cold. The tiles had been painted a mushy green, some of it flaking off where it had been scratched over the years by passing children. The ceilings and upper half of the walls were a pale dull beige colour and the floors were covered with worn and splintering wooden parquet. Off the corridors were separate, unwelcoming classrooms, each with its own door, not partitions like the ones in Trinidad. But the desks and the blackboard were the same. I felt a little comforted when I saw them. At least they were something I'd seen before.

The structure of the day was also a familiar routine:

lessons, playtime, more lessons, lunch and play, then ending the day with more lessons. The work the teacher gave us was so easy and simple compared to the work I was used to. Yet the teacher treated me like an idiot because she couldn't understand my Trinidadian accent even though I could understand her. I felt like a fish out of water.

School took a great deal of getting used to, especially during the first few weeks. I found some things new and exciting – simple things like the taste of cold milk during the morning break. I would grip the small glass bottle tightly as I plunged the straw into the silver foil top and sucked out the creamy liquid. The only thing I wasn't so keen on was the thick, furry feeling it left in my mouth afterwards. There wasn't a stall selling treats in the playground but the children did play clapping and skipping games which made me feel at home. There was one game, however, which I didn't understand at first but in no time at all I began to hate. The first time I saw the children play it, I knew it was wrong and cruel. I was standing next to the wall with the painted bull's-eye when some boys came up and spat strange

words at me, words that I had never heard before but from their faces I knew they were not nice words. They were words which told me I was different from them and that they felt my kind shouldn't be in their country. I looked at them, confused and baffled like a trapped, helpless creature. What was 'my kind' and why shouldn't I be in the country I was brought up to love? The land of hope and glory, mother of the free. I began to feel angry and violent as I stood and watched their ugly faces jeering at me. But they might as well have been talking in a foreign language because I didn't understand the words they were shouting. I didn't let them make me cry though, I had learned how to be tough during the time Marmie had left us in Trinidad. When I got home and asked Marmie what the words meant, she looked sad and sat us all down and slowly explained that because of the colour of our skin some people were going to be cruel and nasty to us. But we must be strong, make something of ourselves and never let them get the better of us. That was the day I realized that in the eyes of some in this world I was not a person but a colour.

I looked down at my hands and desperately tried

to understand why my colour meant so much to some and disturbed them so deeply. In Trinidad there were people of all races, from all over the world and they all lived together in harmony. No one felt threatened or was made to feel bad because of his or her colour. So why all the fuss in England? I felt so confused. A picture flashed up in my mind of Sandra and I holding hands and laughing as we skipped along Marabella main street to our friendly wooden two-storey school. Tears welled up in my eyes and I wished I was back there, happy and innocent again. For that was the day I had lost a certain innocence, and I would never be the same again. I, too, would now see a person's colour first and wonder whether he or she was going to hate me.

The next time the boys shouted racist words at me they ended up against the wall. My battle for survival had begun. I was determined not to be the loser and I never was because Marmie told me over and over that no one was better than me and to be proud of who I was and of the colour of my skin. I liked myself and if anyone had a problem with my colour it was going to be their problem, not mine.