

Chapter Nine

Land Ahoy



On 1st September 1960 I woke to the sound of seagulls. Watery morning light flooded through the porthole. We had gone to bed late the night before, after all the party revelling, so we were a little slow in reacting that morning. As always, Sandra was the first out of bed. ‘I can see England,’ she shouted. The rest of us scrambled up and pelted to the porthole. She was right, there was land ahoy. I couldn’t see much of it but it didn’t matter. It was England, we had arrived. What joy!

We hugged and danced around the cabin; our dreams were coming true. The first thing to do was to make ourselves presentable for our arrival.

We ran to the communal shower room and washed at breakneck speed. Marmie always told us it was essential to have a fresh body and clean underwear, especially on important occasions. Today was one of the most important of our lives. I plaited Sandra’s hair and my own. I was always good at plaiting, even at an early age, and on this occasion I plaited her hair extra special and decorated it with ribbons just like Marmie would have done. We had had beautiful dresses made for us which we put on proudly, together with white shoes, socks and gloves. Lester and Ellington looked dashing in their brand new outfits too.

We all looked quite regal, no prince or princess could have felt better. By now the packed ship had made her way up the English Channel and was gliding slowly up the the Solent towards Southampton. All the decks were crowded with a massive amount of luggage as well as our fellow passengers who, like us,

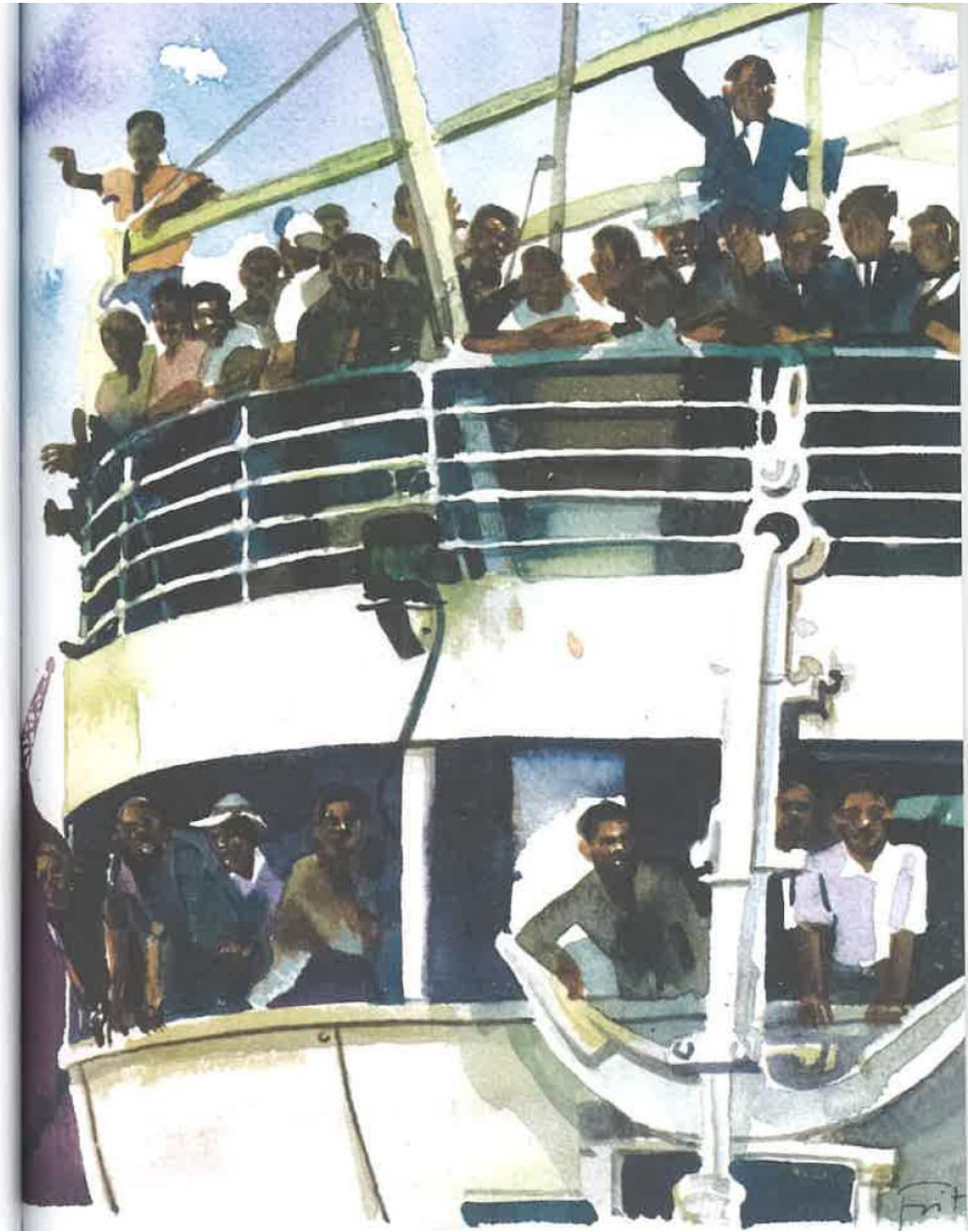


Coming to England

were dressed in their finery: the men in their baggy-trousered and wide-shouldered suits with stylish trilby hats; the ladies spruced up in colourful dresses with masses of crinoline under the skirts – and of course hats and gloves were a must.

Arriving at the port seemed to take forever, the excitement was overwhelming and everyone began to get very anxious. Lester was convinced the land was an iceberg which we were about to crash into. Apparently someone in Trinidad had told him England was as cold as an iceberg, so the nearer and colder it got, the more convinced he became that this was true. Sandra and I did our best to comfort him but secretly we both felt anxious and nervous about what was ahead of us. We stood on the deck trembling with cold but also with a little fear. The anxiety grew greater as we travelled cautiously into the dock, passing dozens of terminal sheds. In front of some sheds cargo and passenger ships were moored close to each other along the quayside.

The docks were a hive of activity, nothing like the small shallow one we had departed from in Trinidad. There were cranes, cargo boxes and people



everywhere. The terminal sheds were big barn-like buildings with long corrugated-iron roofs, which seemed to squat on the concrete wharf. In a few of the buildings we could see passengers who had arrived before us on other ships. Over and over I kept asking myself when was this floating vessel going to come to a rest? Surely it wouldn't take the whole day to dock. We seemed so close but yet so far.

At long last the ship appeared to be getting closer to the quay. I could see hundreds of faces looking up at us, trying to spot their loved ones. I looked desperately for Marmie, hoping I would recognize her lovely face amongst the crowd. Suddenly there she was, beaming with joy like an angel, waving frantically at us. She clutched her bosom and seemed to shake her head with a sigh of relief as if to say, 'thank goodness my children are safe'. Then she started to wipe away tears with her handkerchief and motioned us to stay where we were, which was not really a problem as the four of us couldn't move – we were too numbed with excitement. There was a man beside her who was not my father. I could see her talking to him and pointing us out. Eventually,

when the ship was anchored, he came on board up the gangway. He made his way over to us and introduced himself. He was a social worker whose job it was to meet passengers as they arrived and help those who needed advice about how to get to their new destination. Not everyone had friends or family to meet them on arrival so the social worker was essential. He looked after us because Marmie was not allowed to come on board and as we were children travelling alone he took charge of us. He bundled all our luggage together and swiftly pushed past the other passengers, the four of us in tow behind him.

My heart pounded loudly like thunder as I climbed down the gangplank, this time not with fear but with joy as I ran towards Marmie. We all made a dash for her and hugged her. She squeezed us so tightly I felt I would break. The love and joy that passed through every bit of our bodies was overwhelming. I was at last in paradise, clutching Marmie. I never wanted to be away from her again. When we finally broke loose from her she opened a bag and took out something for each of us. 'I thought you might be a little cold,' she said, 'so I got these for you.' She



handed me a powder-blue knitted Marks & Spencer's buttoned-fronted cardigan, embroidered with pink and yellow flowers. It was gorgeous; I adored it, my first English present. I squeezed it affectionately. I felt as if I had been sprinkled with magic dust and that all my dreams were coming true. I was back with my beloved Marmie at long last.
