

**YEAR 6 – WEEK 2 –
ENGLISH – CHAPTERS 5
AND 6 FOR ‘COMING TO
ENGLAND’**

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



when he spoke to us and you wouldn't dream of not paying attention, even though sometimes it was hot and uncomfortable. The women always brought fans with them which they would wave continuously as they shouted 'Hallelujah' every now and then.

At a certain point during the service the children would go to a room off the main part of the church. There we would have our own special service and be told Bible stories that taught us how to care for each other. We had to recite the ten commandments and say prayers for our families and friends. I always had a good feeling inside when I said my prayers. It was a contented feeling of happiness, and of understanding the difference between right and wrong.

You would have thought that all this was enough church-going for one day, but no. After lunch Marmie would take us to the Salvation Army Sunday school. I loved going there because, apart from all the singing and praying, we were taught to play musical instruments. Even though I was not much of a musician, I was a hit on the triangle and cymbals – just one note at a time though. All of us together must have sounded dreadful but it was great fun and it was a good way of letting off steam.

The weekly ritual still didn't end here. At six o'clock we would finish off at the local Anglican church for evening service. Although I was christened in the Anglican church, my parents took us to most of the other churches, as they thought it was important that we understood and appreciated how others worshipped. They felt it would give us a broader outlook on life. But the places of worship that intrigued me most, even though I never got the opportunity to venture inside, were the Hindu temples, of which there were many in Trinidad. I always wondered what went on inside those beautiful buildings, especially when they were all lit up with

hundreds of twinkling candles during Diwali, the festival of lights.

Out of all the services I did attend, I remember the ones from the Pentecostal church most of all because those were the most uplifting. The rejoicing from the congregation almost raised the roof. I used to watch open-mouthed, fascinated by the women who trembled and shook their bodies in the aisles as they felt 'the spirit'.

One Sunday, instead of going to church we all went to a river to see a baptism ceremony. Everyone was dressed in white: the women and girls in long flowing dresses with white scarves wrapped as turbans on their heads, the men and boys in white shirts and trousers. The tall preacher man looked more gigantic than ever as he stood at the water's edge. He spread out his arms, looked up to the sky and prayed for the souls of the people to be blessed. Then he called forward all those who wanted to be baptised and one by one, after a prayer with each, he ducked them under the water three times. They came out drenched but rejoicing, all except the children who seemed a little overwhelmed by the whole experience. The

spirit of the baptism was intoxicating, the smell of the ointment used tantalised my nostrils. The mood of the men, women and children, all bare-footed and chanting, is embossed on my memory.

Chapter Six

Coming to England



There was always talk of someone who had left the island, who had gone to England to be met with open arms. Fantastic stories of how life was wonderful and how much money could be made; of how the islanders were wanted and needed to help Britain build herself up again in the years after the war, and how people could better themselves overnight. The streets were said to be paved with gold. Life was far from unbearable in Trinidad but many people were tempted by these stories and couldn't resist the opportunity. Not only unskilled workers but artists, writers, musicians, students as well as assorted intellectuals made the decision to leave their tropical island home.

As children we didn't take much notice of all this talk. It was almost like the stories Dardie had made up for us. But all of a sudden the stories got very

close to home. While in bed one night Sandra and I overheard Dardie telling Marmie that he wanted to go and make a new life in England. He was frustrated by not being able to play jazz, the music he had heard so much about but got such little opportunity to play because the music in Trinidad was calypso, Latin and steel pan. A friend who had settled in England had written and told him he could not only get a chance to play jazz but also make lots of money. The discussion went on into the night and over the following weeks newspapers advertising jobs and boat journeys to Britain were left around the house. Some nights, in bed, I could hear Marmie crying, saying she would never leave us. I felt so reassured by those words, they were my only comfort during those restless nights. I started to have dreams, bad dreams, nightmares of being left alone, falling with no one to catch me. I told not a soul about my dreams and anxieties – if I did then perhaps they would come true and I didn't want them to. So I kept silent, pretended I didn't know what was going on. But the talk of going to England never stopped.

Then finally it was decided that all eight of us

couldn't go at once, so Dardie would go first and send for us later. I was so relieved that Marmie wasn't going to leave us too. I was sad to see Dardie go, so I cried a little when he left, but was soon back to my old self. Life hadn't changed much as Marmie was still with us, things were almost back to normal, no more constant talk of going to England. But then the unthinkable happened: Marmie started asking family and friends if they would look after us, because she was going to join Dardie in England without us. I was devastated; she was going to break her vow, she had said she would never leave us.

I wished night after night that it wouldn't happen. I thought my wish had come true when none of my family would take us – they all had too many children. Grandparents usually took care of the children when parents left for a new world but that was not to be the case with us, we had none. Marmie began to sell the furniture and all her jewellery as well as the silver we got for our christenings. She started singing in her own special way. The same song she sang before Dardie left – now she was singing it again and again:

*'This is the hour when we say goodbye,
Soon you will be sailing far across the sea
When you're away please remember me.'*

She would start to cry and hug us while she sang. Then we would all start to cry. I couldn't understand why she wanted to leave us. If she loved us why couldn't we all stay together, especially as no one wanted to take care of us?

But she kept telling us that she did love us and that is why she was going to England to try to make a better life for us. We couldn't all go together because she and Dardie didn't have enough money, but one day they would.

Unexpectedly two of our godparents said they would take us. We couldn't stay together though. Lester and Ellington would stay south in San Fernando, Sandra and I would go north to Tunapuna. The lucky two were Cynthia and Junior, the two youngest, who would go with Marmie to England. This was the day when a veil of unhappiness came down on my life. To be separated from Dardie was bad enough, he had now been gone for a year. But

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to be separated from my beloved Marmie and my younger brothers and sister was like the end of the world to me. My happy little world was beginning to crack and break into pieces, drifting away from me like flower petals scattered on a pond. We were all so very close, we all played together and had no other friends. Life was going to be sad and lonely and that soon proved to be true.

The people who looked after Sandra and me (we called them Auntie and Uncle as a sign of respect even though we weren't related) treated us like servants. Lester and Ellington were treated even worse by the people who looked after them. They had to fight each other for food, winner take all. They worked hard in the day and at night were forced to sleep not in a bed but under it! We were told every day that we were lucky to have someone to give us a home and that we should be grateful to them because we could have ended up in an orphanage. Later Marmie told us that twice a month she had sent us money, clothes and parcels but we never saw any of them.

Instead, we had to work from five o'clock in the morning cleaning the house, preparing meals and



washing, all before we left for school. I was so tired I didn't learn much at our new school. But I remember Sandra and me being bullied because we were newcomers. I was a good fighter and fought Sandra's battles for her too.

One of the most embarrassing moments I had there was when the elastic in my home-made knickers snapped as I ran to school to avoid being late. The knickers landed at my feet and all the children started laughing at me, especially one particular boy. I was so angry and humiliated that I lashed out at him. He was bigger than me, but I didn't care. I must have looked and acted crazy because from then on no one ever laughed, teased or bullied Sandra and me again.

After school it was no fun, except when we walked home during the mango season. The mango trees would be laden with ripe juicy fruit. It looked so tempting and irresistible that Sandra and I would risk all to get some of the sweet, mouthwatering fruit. We would climb over the fence and pick as many mangoes from the drooping branches as we dared before the owner chased us off. If the mangoes

weren't ripe we would both get tummy ache from eating them.

One day, on our way home, we saw the preparations for a funeral. A local man had died and neighbours were encouraged to go in and pay their last respects. Sandra and I persuaded each other to go in and pay ours. I didn't know what to expect or quite understand why I was going in; the truth was that I didn't want to go home and anything to delay us for just a blissful moment was welcome. So we shuffled into the hushed room where the open mahogany casket was laid on the table. I slowly edged forward until it was my turn to say goodbye. I looked down at the old man's face and was so surprised at what I saw. It was the most peaceful and serene face I had ever seen. He didn't look old and wrinkled but contented, almost smiling. I smiled back at him as I whispered goodbye under my breath. I wasn't scared, but happy that I had discovered something that, up until then, had been the unknown. The atmosphere at the funeral was quite different. This was when the mourners let their feelings out – they cried and wailed, some even threw themselves across the casket. Later that

evening the family had a 'wake' to celebrate his life and give him a good send-off. It was like a party.

There was nothing for me to celebrate when I got home, only work: ironing clothes, picking the husks off the rice, sweeping the big dusty yard and collecting the eggs. I remember once having to catch a chicken, wring its neck, pluck the feathers and prepare it for dinner. I hated doing it and cried myself to sleep that night. In fact most nights Sandra and I cried ourselves to sleep. We wrote to Marmie in England but our letters were always vetted and lines crossed out if Auntie and Uncle didn't approve of what we wrote. After a few months we moved to a new house with an inside bath and toilet. Auntie bought all the latest gadgets: a fridge, an electric iron – you name it, she bought it. She was a very superstitious woman and each day at the new house Sandra and I had to go through the bizarre ritual of waking up at four in the morning and sprinkling holy water around the house, especially across the doorway, to ward off evil spirits.

I couldn't understand why we had to do this as we were being treated in an evil way inside the house.

To me the evil had already entered. It felt as if our sentence of unhappiness was going to last forever. I prayed and wished for the day when I would be with Marmie, Dardie and all my brothers and sisters again, for the happy, carefree days of family life which gave me such a feeling of security and confidence. I had lost that feeling and longed to get it back.

