

Chapter Seven

## The Last Goodbye



Out of the blue – actually it was fifteen months after Marmie had left – we got a letter telling us she had made arrangements for all four of us to join her in England. It was during the August school holidays and Sandra and I hugged and danced for joy. Our prayers had been answered. We were on our way to being one big happy family again.

The time leading up to our departure was a hive of activity. We had two weeks in which to pack and say goodbye to everyone. Auntie and Uncle started being really nice to us. I suppose they wanted us to tell our parents how good they had been to us. This wasn't true, of course, but I forgave them; I would forgive anyone anything because I was so happy. I couldn't sleep at night, I was too restless with excitement. At that moment in time I had no sad thoughts about leaving my country behind, even though I might not see it again for a very long time. Nothing occupied

my mind and thoughts except being part of a family again.

Finally the day for our journey across the ocean came. My mother had asked her sister Olive to buy the tickets for all four of us. Auntie Olive lived in Port of Spain which was where we had to board the ship for England. We spent our final night with her before being packed into her car for the drive through the busy evening traffic to the port. I had been there before to wave goodbye to Dardie when he left the country. But now it was my turn to leave these tropical shores for the first time in my life. I was just about to begin a journey of a lifetime which would take fifteen days across 4,000 miles of ocean.

The excitement at the port gave me a tingle inside. I felt butterflies in my tummy. I could see the big ship far out in the water.

It couldn't come right up to the side of the wharf because the water wasn't deep enough so everyone had



to be transported to the ship in small motorboats. There was so much noise it was deafening, everyone was pushing and shoving, people were shouting, making sure their trunks and suitcases were safe as the boats ferried backwards and forwards. I felt bewildered, lost amongst the other passengers and those who had come to bid them farewell. Many were hugging and crying as they said goodbye. Prayers were being said for a safe passage. Suddenly I started to cry too. I felt scared, but of what I wasn't sure. Perhaps it was because I now realized what was about to happen. I was leaving my homeland, the land where I had experienced great happiness with my family. Maybe it was because I was frightened of going into the small boat as it bobbed on the dark, oily water – water which crazily reflected the harsh harbour lights like a liquid mirror and separated us from the waiting ship that seemed to be calling me to her. Maybe I was just scared of facing the unknown. I still don't know.

Eventually I managed to get into the boat after being coaxed along with Lester, Ellington and Sandra. We all held on to each other tightly and just

about managed to wave to Auntie Olive before the roar of the engine drowned out our goodbyes. She looked smaller and smaller as the boat left the quayside and neared the enormous ship. I became even more anxious as I realized that we were on our own, four young children without anyone to reassure, comfort and protect us. My thoughts were interrupted as the boat bumped against the side of the ship, alerting me to another challenge that loomed in the shape of a shaky rope ladder on the side of the ship which we had to climb. I really thought I was going to fall into the deep dark water. My heart thumped and my knees went weak but, encouraged by the sailors, I made my way up the ladder. At last I reached the waiting hands of the sailors who hoisted me on to the deck. I had made it.

Everyone was on board and I heard the loud clanking sound of the anchor being winched up. A thundering noise bellowed out of the huge ship's funnel and we started to move, slipping gently and quietly into the darkness. I'd never been out of the country before but as I stood on the deck of the ship that was about to take me on the longest journey of

my life, I smiled. This was the beginning of my great adventure, my new life.

I turned and looked back at the port lights twinkling in the distance. I looked for the last time at Trinidad and said a silent goodbye.

## Chapter Eight

# Life at Sea



The big Spanish ship, which had already picked up passengers from Grenada and Barbados, was like a floating skyscraper with stairs, numbers, letters and arrows pointing in every direction. On our ticket was a number and a letter which were called out and we were told to gather together with the rest of the passengers with similar numbers. We were then taken down into the belly of the ship to a tiny cabin with two bunk beds and a sink in the corner. Our cases were already piled up under the small porthole. This was to be our home for over two weeks. We climbed into bed, exhausted, and fell fast asleep.

The next morning I woke up feeling as if someone had beaten me over the head. I felt dizzy and nauseous. I had never had this feeling before. Sandra said she felt the same. We both rushed to the basin to be sick. The only relief was to stay in bed or to



crawl up to the deck and stand perfectly still while breathing in the sea air. I remember being given tomato soup and corn puffs to eat which, I was told, would make me feel better but they only made me even more sick. I still can't stand the sight of either. This was a disappointing start to my adventure, not the way I had expected it to begin.

The seasickness lasted for about four days. On the fifth morning I felt surprisingly better. My body and head had got used to the ship's motion. I had gained my sea legs. Sandra still hadn't completely discovered hers. She had been given the responsibility of looking after us and making sure we behaved. Lester and Ellington and I tended to be a little wild in celebrating our new-found freedom and our antics made her anxious, but we weren't at all sympathetic to her predicament. We made a terrible noise and

ran all over the crowded ship exploring all three decks, including the shaded one where many of the passengers sat relaxing, reading and playing cards.

We discovered every nook and cranny on board the ship and sometimes went into places we shouldn't have, even deep down in the two cargo holds which were packed with goods bound for Europe.

There were many other children who were enjoying the freedom of the ship and some, like us, had no adult supervision. Even though Marmie had paid the shipping company for someone to keep an eye on us, no one ever did. As a result sometimes things got out of hand. One day Ellington had a fight with another boy on the deck. It started off as a rough and tumble, then it began to get out of control and, while Sandra and I pleaded for them to stop, they rolled closer and closer to the edge of the deck,

nearer to the guard rail. I thought they were going to fall into the deep Atlantic Ocean. Suddenly from high above a voice called for them to stop. It was the Captain who was watching the fight from his bridge. The last thing he wanted was children overboard. But the fight still kept going. Ellington was not the sort of boy to give in. The helmsman heeled the ship sharply over, which made us feel disorientated, but still the fight kept going. Then the Captain himself came down from the bridge and dragged the boys on to the deck just as they were about to fall in. He warned them both that if they couldn't behave they would have to stay in their cabins for the rest of the voyage.

The experience was frightening and shook us all, so after that the atmosphere and the journey became a little more controlled and we behaved less dangerously although we were still adventurous.

One evening at sunset, when the sea looked like waves of liquid gold, we saw the most amazing sight. Suddenly, as if by magic, the sea erupted with hundreds of arched shapes which dived back into the water. None of us had ever seen anything like it

before. Then we realized that it was a shoal of flying fish, dancing and skipping across the ocean. We watched the glittering spectacle until the sun died down and disappeared below the horizon.

We became friends with the Spanish sailors who cooked the meals down in the galley. There were hundreds of passengers on board to be fed and plenty of food to prepare. Mountains of potatoes had to be peeled everyday and the sailors entrusted us with that duty. At the time we thought this was because we were their friends. It was only later that I realized they only had us around because we were doing their job for them! Each day a diet of soup, tasteless meat or fish with little flavour and potatoes was served up. Although we helped prepare it, we didn't eat it: I think we mostly lived on bread, water and canned fruit – the only food we found edible.

The adults all seemed to enjoy being on the ship. They were always laughing and having fun. For them it was like being on a cruise. They were all accustomed to working hard for a living and for two weeks they had all the food, drink and nightlife they wanted. At night, we used to sneak up on deck in our

pyjamas and watch them dancing in the ballroom to the music. Many of the sailors also joined in with the socialising in the evening. One night we saw one of our sailor friends hugging and kissing a lady while they were dancing. We stared wide-eyed and drop-jawed at them for a while as they smooched together. We then giggled and ran back to our cabin with our secret.

We left behind the hot tropics and entered the warm Mediterranean where we stopped off in Spain. The sailors unloaded some of the cargo that the vessel was carrying. As we watched from the deck, I overheard some of the adults saying they wished that they could go ashore to see what Spain was like. That's how I knew it was Spain.

No one on board really wanted the voyage to end. It was a passage in time, laden with freedom and happiness, free of care and responsibilities. We were journeying towards the unknown. We all had romantic visions of what it was going to be like in England but still didn't want this part of our adventure to end. To tell the truth I hadn't thought of Marmie, Dardie or of seeing my brother and sister in England

since the start of the journey. It was only two or three days after we left Spain that these thoughts entered my head. Now everyone started talking about the 'big arrival' and a buzz of excitement was going round the ship.

I knew we were getting closer to England because the weather started to get much, much colder and the sun seemed to disappear under the low clouds. Marmie had written and told us that the place we were coming to was not as hot and sunny as in Trinidad. I now knew what she meant. Still, we kept warm by running around the ship frantically (walking never occurred to us). The day before we arrived there was an announcement that told everyone to pack their belongings; nothing was to be left behind. We didn't have much so it didn't take us long. That evening after dinner there was a big party at which everyone celebrated the end of the voyage. Life at sea was coming to a close but the memories of coming to England would linger forever.