

Chapter Twelve

Survival



The days and weeks turned into cold winter months and I felt as if my body was going to break.

White steam came out of my mouth as I spoke. I blew on to my fingers to try to warm them but nothing could get rid of the tight, stiff feeling deep inside me. When we first arrived in England I thought it was cold but now I knew what coldness really was. Then, there was an orange-gold look about the trees but now it was freezing and the trees had lost their leaves so they stood naked like skeletons exposing every limb. I wished the cold grey misty mornings would go away for I longed to see the warm sun and feel the heat of it on my back, penetrating into my soul.

The wintry weather made me feel depressed. The nights seemed to start so early, even before the end of the afternoons. When we came out of school it was already dark. Once we came out and it seemed as if

the world had disappeared under a grey blanket. I couldn't see anything except for fuzzy, distorted lights coming at me out of the distance. People also started to appear from nowhere and disappear again. As I stumbled forward I squinted my eyes in an effort to see more clearly but it made no difference – the thick greyness was impenetrable. There was a hushed, mysterious feel to the atmosphere; even the usual traffic noise was muted as vehicles slowly crawled along the roads, creeping in and out of vision. The cold, sooty air seeped into my lungs and made me cough; it tasted horrible. Later on the radio I heard someone saying that it was one of the foggiest days London had ever seen.

In my short time in England I had experienced all kinds of unpleasant weather: cold winds that felt as if they would tear the skin on my face; freezing rain (not the sort I felt like dancing in); and days upon days without sunlight. I could never be sure what the weather would be like and I began to understand why the English always talked about the weather. There was so much of it.

There was, however, one kind of weather that



made me feel happy even though it was cold. I so clearly remember the first time I experienced the thrill of it. On a cold morning, as I huddled under my thick blanket, the smell of the paraffin lamp still lingering in the air, I was awakened by a stillness, an eerie quietness. A strong, clear light shone through the curtains, not the usual murky greyness but a magical light. I sensed something was different about this day as I slowly went to the window. I lifted up the curtains and wiped the condensation off the pane. Then I saw it, a pure white blanket that dazzled me. It was a whiteness I had never seen

before and everything was covered in it. I gasped with wonderment. The landscape looked so beautiful, it took my breath away. Surprisingly I didn't feel cold, the beauty had warmed me. I had fallen in love with snow. We spent the rest of the day watching from the windows. Marmie didn't send us to school because it was snowing, but she got told off by the headmistress who told her that next time we had to come to school in the snow – it would not hurt us, we would survive!

By the time spring came my feelings of uncertainty about my new homeland were beginning to thaw. Happier feelings began to blossom in my mind. Perhaps it was because suddenly everything in the land started to come alive again. The yellow daffodils popped out and waved like flags. Cherry blossom decked the bare branches in pink garlands. I hoped that suddenly people's feelings would open up towards me and blossom too.

I hated the rejection I had experienced so far. Even going shopping was an ordeal. Sandra and I would stand at the counter waiting to be served but would be ignored, treated as though we were invisible, and that hurt. Other West Indian children in my school

had experienced the same hostility. We were treated without any respect and we were bundled together as coming from the same place. Our individual identity was never acknowledged. We had come from different islands – Jamaica, Barbados, Grenada, St Kitts, Dominica and Antigua – and spoke with different accents. We were brought up with different cultures and music. Each island in the Caribbean was as different as France is from Finland as Spain is from Sweden – even we had to learn to understand each other. I couldn't understand why English people knew nothing about our different countries while we knew so much about theirs. But they just didn't seem to want to know. I always found it exciting when I met someone from a different country as it expanded my knowledge of the world. I, too, was coming into contact with Jews, Italians, Africans and West Indians from other islands, but I didn't treat them as if they were worthless beings with no feelings. So many British people thought we had come from a land of coconuts and palm trees, huts and beaches, not realizing that our buildings, history and food had strong European influences. In fact, we probably





knew more about British history and culture than most of them. My uncle, like so many other West Indians, had fought and died for Britain in the Second World War. Hundreds of West Indians had joined the Army and the Air Force, and had fought to protect Britain, to make her a safe place to live. Little did that generation of West Indians know that their gallant action was to go unrecognized and forgotten and that many of their descendants would have to go through a gruelling survival course on

arrival in Britain, and be made to feel unwelcome and unwanted in the celebrated motherland.

I came to England feeling special, like a princess, but was made to feel like a scavenger, begging for a piece of what I thought was mine. I had been told that I was part of the British Empire. Was that a lie? My dreams and visions had been shattered but I was in England now and there was no turning back. I had to learn to survive.