

## Chapter 8

I am now about nine years old, I speak no French, I am out of my comfort zone in a strange country and really not too happy about things.

The entrance to Port Louis from the sea is spectacular and we approached as the sun rose, the best time of day. We were met by my uncle Dick I think, and taken to our new home in Curepipe. We drove in a Rover 14, registration number 361, which belonged to Uncle Dick, who sold it to us.

Curepipe is very, very wet, with, I believe, 120 inches of rain annually.

Our new home was in the Colonial French style built of wood with towers at each end and a glassed in veranda at the front. The wood was full of ants eating the walls as one looked. Small rounds of wood came out of holes all round, they had to be swept daily. The electricity supply was poor and erratic so lighting was by 40 watt bulbs and no electrical appliances.

The house was set off the ground so one could crawl underneath. The temperature rarely went below 60 or over 80 degrees. On one side lived the Chevereau family and on the other was an empty plot very overgrown and quite an adventure playground; although I do not remember playing there much. Some giant bamboo grew there.

We had a “dependence”, really a wooden two-room shed, where our maid lived. The servants “loo” was a small shed, “a dunny”, half way between our house and the dependence. The bucket was taken away and replaced, weekly I think, by prisoners who volunteered for this paid work.

Our bath was in a corrugated shed next to the kitchen. The boiler was a wood burner and the water trickled through the coiled copper pipe into the bath, as there was no drainage the water ran across the stone floor to the garden outside. I remember reaching for the tap to adjust the flow and burning by arm on the metal chimney, I had the scar for many years after.

We had an in-and-and out drive with a lawn in the centre which was cut by contractors who used scythes. Much later lawn mowers had a big influence on the look of Mauritian houses. The grass near the kitchen was elephant grass which was sharp and could cut one, it harboured wasps. We had a bread-fruit tree there. Bamboo hedges eight feet high surrounded all the houses.

I remember: having Enid Blyton “Sunny Stories” delivered every month. The smell of Yardley’s lavender soap which my mother used. Having jaundice which meant that I had dry toast and boiled chicken for about six weeks. It was then that I had a small child’s book on Greek myths, the first book I ever read to myself. (I must have been about eleven). Flying ants that got everywhere, one could kill anything up to eighty of them just by sitting on a plain coloured armchair; the wind in the telegraph wires and the sound of the frogs in the botanical gardens. Mr O’Connor down the road who grew orchids, his house was in danger of collapsing at any minute due to the ravages of ants, he was reputed to have the best collection of orchids in the Southern hemisphere, his name now appears on the Leonid Column in the Ramgoolam Gardens in Pamplemousses; the extreme humidity and the sound of rain on the corrugated roof outside my bedroom. The corner shop, run by the Chinaman was probably not very hygienic but well stocked. It was said that he rolled three Bulls Eye sweets at the same time; one under each arm pit and one between his palms. The “gâteau-piment” merchant at the cross roads had his stall near the tin-smith just over the bridge. I learn to ride a bike in the Curepipe Botanical Gardens, only a short walk from our home. People down the road owned three giant tortoises. These things and more are quite vivid in my memory.

We had a cook and a maid.

*Our cook Kassim* was a tall devout Muslim who invariably wore The Fez, his wife was called “Mummy” and their dog “Boy”, they had five sons and five daughters all their names beginning with “A”, Ali, Abou, Aziz and so on. Kassim had been cook to Shah Reza Pahlavi of Persia (now Iran), who had been exiled to Mauritius by the Allies. All our cooking was over charcoal. Kassim had a poor impression of the Persian children, thinking that they were spoilt rich kids.

Kassim and “Mummy” had a cow which lived with them, I don’t know if it was named or if its name began with “A”. We bought the milk but they watered it down quite a bit, nevertheless we were fortunate to have this supply. We had a hygrometer but I am not sure that we used it. “Mummy” went out daily to cut fodder for her cow. This would be bound into a long bundle and carried home on her head. The cow hardly ever saw the sunshine.

In about 1950 we had a burglary and my mother had all her jewellery, of much sentimental value, stolen. There is no doubt that it was one of Kassim’s sons but I do not think anything was proved, and we did not blame Kassim who we believed to be an honourable man of principle,

*Our maid was called Marie*: Did Marie have a family? Did she live alone? How old was she? Where did she learn her sewing skills? I think I neither knew nor cared; she was the maid and that was it. She made the beds, cleaned and kept the place going; everything apart from the kitchen. She had to suffer a rebellious kid who treated her badly, where are my shoes? Where is my shirt? Did she have any personality? I doubt it. She was one of those that kept her counsel, said nothing and tried to do her duty and keep out of trouble. I think I quite liked her but had no interest.

I do remember once talking to her about the cyclone of 1896. This cyclone arrived out of nowhere and caught everyone by surprise, many were killed and it caused devastation. Marie had been brought up with this as part of her life, it was real. Time dilutes the experience of these things. Should we just live life as it is now or look at history? I am one of those who likes to look at the past and perhaps learn from it, maybe that is why I am writing this.

One of Marie’s monthly duties was to recover a stool of mine to send off to the analyst, she was always astonished that there were no worms showing. The analyst invariably came back recommending that I be purged. I had to take a huge pill to kill off the worms and then castor oil to get rid of them—unpleasant.

The method of polishing floors was to get half a coconut put some polish on the inside hairy part and with a foot on the top dance around the floor applying pressure as required. In 1990 this method was still being used. Thelma is fortunate that we have fitted carpets!