

BEFORE JETS, EMAIL OR CELL PHONES

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I was all of 5 years old when we headed out to Trinidad by sea. This was circa 1951. My father had gone on ahead to take up his post as First Secretary at the Indian High Commission in Port of Spain, capital of Trinidad. My mother and us two sisters followed with the heavy luggage 2-3 months later.

Trinidad is perched 12 miles off the coast of Venezuela, in the south Caribbean Sea. It took us over 5 weeks by sea, first, on a P&O ocean liner from Bombay, through the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, and the Mediterranean, up across the Bay of Biscay, to disembark at Le Havre and catch another boat across the Atlantic to Trinidad.

The 9-day Atlantic crossing was storm tossed and traumatic for my diminutive mother, a 5 foot nothing dynamo of energy, laid low by chronic sea sickness. We boarded the Gascoigne, a Polish boat my mother called a tub when she viewed it with dismay at the docks. Our cabin was deep in the ship's bowels, on E deck, and the heavy oil paint smell infested our lungs throughout the voyage.

Re-crossing the always stormy Bay of Biscay, the ship pitched and yawed helplessly, twisting and sometimes lifting off entirely and landing again in the unruly waves. Its iron frame shuddered and groaned as it fell and rose with laboured slowness.

At last we reached Port of Spain, and my father received us at the docks and took us home to the big two story house on Alcazar Street. Painted mango yellow with green window shutters, it was fringed with a wide front verandah and coconut trees. A heavy wooden stair case took two right turns on its way upstairs to our bedrooms. The washerwoman, with her wooden wash tub and serrated washerboard, came with the house. She lived at the end of the driveway with her little daughter, Gloria. My sister and she spent hours playing dolls and house-house outside. The coconuts dropped regularly on the galvanized iron roof, bouncing and rolling off with loud thuds. I learned to play cowboys and indians in the hedges with Hamish, the neighbour's son, and raced him down the street on my blue 'scooter' with the red wheels. In the lazy heat-soaked afternoons, I lay on the wood timbered floorboards of the verandah and stared at the hawks circling the vivid skies, high up among the towering white clouds.

Every 5-6 weeks or so, we would hear the deep echoing boom of the foghorn from the docks, as the arriving ocean steamer lined up against the pier. My mother would say with restrained excitement, "There, the boat has arrived (with the diplomatic bag and the letters from home)". She would sit down at the writing desk with a business-like manner (meaning do not disturb), with her black Schaeffer fountain pen poised to write her replies, in time to catch the outgoing bag.

Once a year, towards Christmas, we received 3 or 4, or 5 Xmas cakes by diplomatic bag from my grandmother. They would arrive each wrapped in white cotton cylinders, neatly stitched with long basting stitches along the contours of the conical shapes. The top was plastered with Indian stamps and our address would be printed in my grandfather's neat hand in indelible ink. Inside we found the cakes wrapped snugly in sheets of wax paper turned brown with the butter grease they had absorbed. My mother would 'ration' the cakes so that we had at least 1 or 2 left for Christmas day. My sister and I eagerly looked for the green tinged silver coins in every slice my mother served us. I could picture my grandmother sitting on her mora on the front verandah, measuring and mixing the ingredients for the many cakes she sent out each year to her three children. She would set up a station on the wide front verandah and with help from my grandfather, would fill batter into an array of cake tins he had lined with butter paper and arranged on the wooden takht next to her. These tins would all be taken away in trays to the bakery.

Every once in a while, there would be cricket matches at the Savannah grounds, near the Governor's residence, when the Indian Cricket team was touring the British West Indies. We would get to see the

3 Ws, Weekes, Wallcott and Worrell, perform against the likes of Polly Umrigar, Nari Contractor and Lala Amarnath.

Trinidad and Tobago were one unit, and so we had to pay the prescribed official visit to Scarborough, the capital of Tobago. We boarded the half hour flight from Piarco airport, (my very first flight), alighting on a picturesque emerald island, embedded in a deep sapphire sea. We were housed in an old stone mansion on a rolling green hill, sloping down to some mouldering graves at its foot. With high ceilings and ancient timbers, the place was steeped in atmosphere. My mother kept the light on that night when we went to bed. Some hours later, we awoke to rousing piano playing and pounding chords. My mother asked me if I could hear it, and opened the door and looked down the passage to see where it was coming from and if there were any lights on. The next morning, at breakfast, the household staff told us they believed the British sugarcane plantation owner's daughter, who had passed away decades earlier, was given to playing the piano to greet new guests.

In three short years, in 1954, our entire family was able to fly to the next posting, New York. Our household effects trailed us by sea.

(Neuro-Scientists say childhood memories (first experiences) have a magical quality, filtered as they are through wide eyed wonder)