CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY CLASSICS

Escape to Last Man Peak

Jean D'Costa

CHAPTER 1

The journey starts

'NELLIE! NELLIE ATKINS! Why you sleep so late, eh child?'

I sat up in bed, groaning and blinking, wondering why Matron wanted me to get up early when there was no school that day.

'Come *on*, Nellie!' repeated the voice more loudly, right in my ear.

It was Pauline, standing over my bed, comb and brush in her hands, and her old school uniform buttoned up anyhow.

'Bway!! What a way you sleep hard when you ready!' she went on in her normal voice. 'You lie down there like somebody dead an' every mornin' one of us 'ave to wake you up. Suppose the 'ouse was on fire?'

I threw the blanket off, yawning and shivering. Then, as I stretched out my hand for my duster folded across the foot of the little bed, a rush of cold fear filled my mind. Of course Matron was not there: she was in hospital—with the sickness. The ambulance had come and taken her away six days ago, and no news or message had reached us. We were not allowed to go into town, or anywhere near the hospital or clinics. Or anywhere else, for that matter. The sickness was spreading even in the countryside, and Kingston and Spanish Town had the worst of it.

Matron had put Jimmy and Pauline in charge of the rest of us when she fell ill. There were ten of us at Sunrise Home then; it was just a small orphanage, with never more than fifteen of us children, the Matron, and two helpers. Jimmy and Pauline were the eldest; Jimmy was over fourteen and big for his age, even then. Pauline was a few months younger, and she always helped with the housekeeping and looking after the smaller

children. Matron said that she was the only one of us who could remember anything from one day to the next, and do it properly, without being reminded all the time. She was tall and thin, and quite pretty, and she could run faster than any of the boys, but I liked her hands best: especially when she was doing crochet or knitting, and the needles twisted and danced in her dark fingers.

I looked around at the long room with its low ceiling, the small sash windows, and the rows of beds. I was the last to get up, and I would have to make the twins' beds as well as my own. We were used to looking after ourselves, in a way, because that was how Matron brought us up, and Doris the cook had been at Sunrise Home as long as Matron herself, and knew all about each one of us. I remember how grey and cold and ordinary everything looked that morning; yet that day was different from all that came before, and our lives changed, changed completely, once and for all.

It was about two weeks before Christmas, and I was eleven years old.

Pauline dressed the twins and I combed Myrna's hair. That day there was no breakfast. All of us got up early and went out in the yard behind the Home, where Doris and Mrs Hinds, the laundress, used to shout at us if we came too near the kitchen. The fridge in the pantry stood empty and mouldy, and the kitchen was very untidy; it smelt musty, old and stale, with not a trace of fried onions, escoveitched fish or roasting breadfruit, or anything fit to eat. The gas stove did not work, for there was no more gas; Doris had used a coal-pot, but she had not come to Sunrise Home for four days, and Mrs Hinds had vanished soon after the sickness reached Spanish Town. We were hungry all the time; some of the boys—especially Frankie—dreamed about food almost every night, and made matters worse by telling everybody what they had dreamt.

'Catch 'ere! Wheeeeeee! TAAA-AAARZAAAAAAAN!'

A mango flew across the yard and hit Pauline on her shoulder. The twins scrambled after it, but it was very green, too green even for them. Precious threw it at me, and the sap stained my skirt. It was my best skirt, too, dacron linen with fine stripes of orange, yellow and white. We never got the stains out.

'Come 'elp me catch them, Nellie!' called Pauline as she ran across to the huge Number Eleven mango tree and jumped up on the old barrel we used to get up to the lowest branch. 'Any ripe yet? Look up the top, Jimmy! Over the 'ouse-top! I sure I see some there!'

Just then a loud crash came from the kitchen, followed by the sound of breaking crockery, and crying. Then silence.

Myrna came out into the yard licking one hand. Blood dripped from the other. Her plaits stuck out all round her head because she would never keep still when you tried to comb her hair.

'Nellie! Nellie! Come look 'ere!'

Myrna is two years younger than me and used to do silly things, so no one paid much notice at first. Jimmy shook the big limb that spread over the roof of the enclosed veranda used by Matron as an office. Mangoes rained down and we ran to pick them up. But they were all green and hard as stones.

'What 'appen to you han', Myrna?' asked Sylvia. She was the only Chinese who had ever been at Sunrise Home, and she had been there only two years. She was nearly as old as Pauline, and liked to know everything. Myrna and I kept out of her way. She always acted very know-all, and when she had on her glasses she looked just like an owl. Jimmy called her 'Inspector Frog' whenever she bothered him. But when you are on the boxing team at school and bigger than the Grade 8 and most of the Grade 9 boys, you can say what you like to people like Sylvia. She used to get back at him by boasting about her marks, but he didn't care.

Myrna turned her back on Sylvia and went on licking her fingers.

'Nah talk to you.' She wiped her other hand on her skirt, spreading bloodstains all over the front of it. Pauline slid down the tree trunk and ran to her.

'Don' dirty up you dress!' she shouted. 'What you doin' dat for? You stupid, sah! Why you never stop 'er, Sylvia?'

Myrna went on licking each finger carefully.

'I fin' somet'ing in de kitchen. Unnu better go look, all a you.'

Pauline pushed the swing door and gave a shout. We all ran to her. Myrna stood in the doorway licking her fingers triumphantly.

The remains of two mixing bowls and several cups and saucers lay on the dirty tiles, along with a cracked jar of honey. That explained Myrna's sticky fingers. But above, in the upper shelves which had always been crammed with spare crockery, we could see another door let into the corner of the highest shelf. None of us had ever seen it before, not even Jimmy, who had been at Sunrise Home twelve years at least, and who was the only one of us Doris liked—not even Jimmy had known that such a splendid mystery waited for us in the kitchen.

Sylvia grabbed a broom and swept a path through the broken china, her mane of heavy black hair dangling to her waist.

'All you children keep one side!' commanded Jimmy. He pulled up the wooden stool and set it cautiously by the counter; one of its legs was bad, having suffered from the weight of Doris and Mrs Hinds over the years. 'Sweep off 'ere for me, Sylvia!'

He tested the stool in a gingerly manner.

'What you t'ink in dere?' Wuss-wuss asked from the doorway. He was the same age as me, and he did not say much, usually, because he was white all over—even his eyes—and we were a little afraid of him. Mrs Hinds called him duppy pickny behind Matron's back, and Matron punished Jimmy and Gerald for

teasing him. She said he was an albino, and that that could have happened to any of us. We mostly left him alone. They called him Wuss-wuss at school.

Jimmy tugged and tugged at the door. It was a sort of sliding door, without a lock, so he could not see what prevented it from sliding open. Frankie and Gerald climbed up beside Jimmy and were pushed off.

'I see it! I see it!' shouted Frankie, as he lost his balance on the counter and jumped down on the floor. 'See a little nail in the corner! You mus' take that out firs'!' He was rather fat, and did not do things like climbing very well.

'Which part you see nail?' Jimmy went on straining at the door. He did not like help from the smaller ones, especially those two, who were very rude.

Pauline and Sylvia climbed up too, and we all crowded below them.

'Pass me somet'ing to knock it with!' demanded Jimmy. I gave him the rolling pin, which was the only thing to hand. 'Move now, Pauline!'

The door was not nailed very well, for it came loose at the second blow, and Pauline slid it back as far as it would go. Someone gasped, and then we all tried to get up on the counter. Not everyone could hold, and soon the twins, Frankie, Wuss-wuss, Myrna and I had to satisfy ourselves with shouting at the others, taking the things handed to us, and dancing among the splinters on the floor.

Not all of the stuff was much use, we thought. There were two tins of insecticide, which Frankie threw in a corner behind the sink. There were rolls of cotton bandages, bottles of disinfectant and medicinish stuff, and a row of large glass jars we knew well: Matron's store of prunes, currants and raisins soaking in rum for the annual Christmas puddings.

These were carefully handed down to Frankie, Wuss-wuss and me, and put on one side. Jimmy and Pauline would not let us open them. There were some old account books, a small diary and some pens. Myrna was given those to play with. She had a passion for scribbling and drawing long, thin things she called people. Pauline drew out a roll of papers, but these turned out to be dress patterns. The dust made her sneeze. All that was left after that were a bottle of iodine, a jar of aspirins, a box of Kleenex tissues and a tin of cough drops. Pauline said we should keep those, they might be useful. That was all. It was not very exciting after all, but there *were* the jars of fruit, five of them.

We scooped it out in handfuls, and rinsed off the rum under the tap. It tasted bitter, and the twins refused to have any, at first. But all of us were hungry, and we ate quite a lot before very long. Then someone had the idea of mixing the fruit with honey from the broken jar, and everyone had a generous helping, even the twins.

The best place to sit and eat was Matron's veranda. The low stone steps made a comfortable seat, now that being there was for free and not for punishment. We liked Matron; but it was nice to do as one chose, without being told not to do this and come and do something else all day.

The fruit and honey tasted too sweet after a while, so the half-empty jars were hidden in a corner for later, and most of us lay in the shade on the veranda, feeling a little sleepy and very contented.

Sunrise Home is an orphanage two or three miles outside of Spanish Town. It is not near to other houses, and the building used to be an old sugar estate house, long, long ago. It was made into an orphanage many years ago, after World War Two. All around us stretched a dusty, scrubby tract of open land, and then the housing estate, and the main road beyond that. Most of the people in the housing estate had died or moved away in the last few

months, and the supermarket at the crossroads was shut. Nothing went further past Sunrise Home but a dirt road leading to Mr Henry's dairy, and after that, as far as we knew, was just bush and more bush, rising up to the hills on the edge of the horizon. We were town children, and bush did not interest us.

I lay with my feet in the warm sunshine and wriggled my toes comfortably.

'Nellie-knooty-'ead-never-comb-'er-'air-dis-mornin',' chanted Pauline suddenly. It was quite true, of course, but I wished she would leave me alone.

Pauline reached over and pinched me and I rolled across Frankie, stretched like a lizard in the sun, and my elbow jabbed him hard. He grabbed at my arm, which meant that he would twist it quick and sharp, so I sprang over him and dashed across the yard to the gate. I was going so fast that I did not see the policeman until I was almost beside him. He was standing in the road with a large metal can in one hand, and he was very surprised to see me.

We looked at each other, and I began to retreat towards the house. He was a thin, sharp-faced man; his eyes were sort of mud-coloured, dead and restless at the same time. I did not like him.

'Well,' he said.

I felt uncomfortable, and wished that one of the others was with me.

'Anybody else 'ere?' he nodded towards the house.

'Yes,' I said.

'Who else?' I did not like his voice at all; it was soft and furry, like a voice from under a pillow.

'Jimmy!' My voice was louder than before, more like a call than an answer.

'Who?' repeated the man, moving towards the gateway. Half to himself, he said, 'Children out 'ere still! Mus' 'ave somet'ing in de 'ouse, den. I wonder—'

Jimmy and Pauline stood up as he appeared, and all of the others stopped talking and watched him. We should have been glad to see someone, but somehow were not. The rum-soaked raisins might have helped, or perhaps we just did not like him. I don't know.

'Mornin',' said Pauline, to break the silence.

'Why you children out 'ere?' he asked, setting the can on the ground and looking around sharply. 'Who is in charge?'

'This is Sunrise Home—' began Pauline.

'I know dat, girl,' interrupted the man rudely. 'I don' need you fi tell me. What I want to know *now*, is who out 'ere wid you, an' who in charge *now*.'

'Matron is in charge,' said Jimmy. 'Miss Brown. She is the Matron, but she not here right now.'

'She not 'ere right now, eh?' He came closer and tried to peep into the house. Jimmy moved between him and the door so that he could not see properly. The man glanced quickly around at the chairs and desk on the latticed veranda.

'H'mm,' he said. 'You still don' tell me why you out 'ere, an' who lookin' after you right now. What you say to dat, baass man?'

He shot a sideways look at Pauline and me, standing in the corner behind Jimmy. A cold feeling began settling in my stomach, like how you feel on the morning of an exam.

'Matron left me in charge—me an' Pauline,' said Jimmy politely. He pulled a chair forward. 'You would like to sit down, sir?'

The man turned around slowly and sat down.

'I comin' from de 'ospital,' he began. Everyone pricked up their ears. 'Nobody else out 'ere with you?'

'Not today,' broke in Sylvia, before Jimmy could stop her. She always had to be important.

'I 'ave some news for all a you.' His breath came hard all of a sudden, and he coughed.

'Matron comin' out today?' asked Sylvia again.

'Can we go an' look for Matron?' asked Myrna, her eyes wide and serious. She missed her more than any of the rest.

'You can go look in de dead-'ouse if you want. She mus' be in dere wid de res' a dead smaddy-dem. You surprise to 'ear dat?' He laughed, and then a fit of coughing shook him.

We stared at him dumbly.

'Anyway, de 'ospital burn down las' night, an' all de sick people what was in dere dead off now. One or two hexcape into de yard, an' dead out dere. Is dat why I come check out dis place.'

Another fit of coughing shook him, and Jimmy said politely, 'You would like some honeyade to drink, sir?'

He coughed and nodded.

'Jus' wait 'ere, sah, an' we will bring some for you.' Pauline disappeared into the kitchen.

The man wanted to know all kinds of things: if there was still a supply of electricity (there wasn't), if there was fresh water, and why. When told that our water came from Mr Henry's spring, he wanted to know where that was, but lost interest when Jimmy said he wasn't sure, but it was somewhere in the hills. He asked if the health inspector had visited, and whether the officer had come to take us away.

This was very puzzling.

He coughed rather a long time, and then said, 'Some officer from Gova'ment suppose to take 'way all the people scatter roun' de place. I believe is the Army officer-dem, an' dem will put everybody into camp, especially children. But I will check you out all right, don' fret. I will check you out firs'.'

'What kin' of camp, sah? Like 'oliday camp?' Pauline sounded eager. She had gone to a camp in the Blue Mountains one summer, and she still talked about it now and again.

'No. Dem say is a labour camp.' His voice was slower, and he drank the honeyade noisily. 'Since everyt'ing mash up wid de sickness all roun', I suppose dem mus' be tryin' to start up somet'ing to get food an' buil' 'ospital.'

It did not sound attractive, but worse was to come.

'Dem sendin' roun' ambulance an' truck fi pick up people, especially children.' He paused and his voice became softer, more whining. 'You lucky. Dem boun' fi take you, but poor ole Corpie 'ave fi walk an' find out which 'ouse 'ave dead people, an' tell de 'ealth inspector.'

'When will they come for us?' asked Pauline. She had on her best voice, and sounded just like Matron.

'Soon, soon. I wi' tell dem to come.' There was another pause. 'You 'ave any gas out 'ere?'

That explained the large can.

'No,' said Jimmy. 'Matron give up 'er car long time. But we 'ave some kerosene oil.'

The man accepted the offered oil and, shortly afterwards, left. As soon as he had gone, Pauline threw his glass on the rubbish heap, broke it, and burned paper over the splinters. Jimmy crept along inside the hedge to the end of the garden to see if the man had really gone. Then we all retired to the old shed behind the back garden. Jimmy and Pauline looked very serious. Pet, the smaller twin, began to cry. Myrna had nothing to say for once.

We always went to the shed for important things; it was our special place, sacred to us alone, where we kept kites, the doll's house, comic books and crayons, and the pieces of old radio from which Jimmy was supposed to make something to send out signals. We held our war councils there, to decide what to do when Gerald and Frankie got beaten up at school after football practice, and how to get Matron to let us go on the Baptist Church outing all the way to Negril Lighthouse. Matron said that the

shed was our private property, and she never would come in without asking us first.

Jimmy cleared his throat, but for once nobody interrupted him. Even Sylvia had nothing to say. The only sound was Pet sniffing and blowing her nose.

'You 'eard?' Jimmy looked around at us.

We nodded.

'What's a labour camp?' asked Wuss-wuss. 'Dem goin' lock us up?'

We had all watched television and read comics. We all had an idea, and it was not encouraging.

'I don't think I'd like it,' said Pauline positively.

'Me too,' echoed Sylvia.

'I'm HUNGRY!' wailed Precious, the larger twin.

'Get the raisins and shut 'er up!' snapped Jimmy. 'I 'ave to think.'

We all had another round of honey and soaked fruit, and suddenly felt much better. Pet stopped crying, and the cold feeling faded from my stomach. Wuss-wuss cracked prune seeds for the twins, and even Sylvia accepted two kernels from him.

'We can't stay,' Jimmy began, his mouth full. 'Remember what they said on the radio when the stations used to come on, an' Matron told us again: if people mix a lot, is easier for them to catch the sickness. They should stay at home. Out in the country. An' big people get it more than us.'

He paused and Pauline voiced the fear I felt.

'That man, now—that policeman—I sure 'e 'as it. *Sure*. That was 'ow Matron coughed before she went into 'ospital. She wouldn' let me come to 'er room door, even, an' Doris 'ad to wear a mask an' keep wettin' with disinfectant.'

'If we stay 'ere,' said Jimmy thoughtfully, 'they will come an' put us in the camp.'

'An' all the food finish now, anyway,' added Pauline.

Indeed, we had lived for many weeks on what we grew in the dry soil of the Sunrise Home garden, and the meagre Government supplies which Matron fetched once a fortnight from the Centre in Spanish Town. Mr Henry had sent milk, too, but none had come for days.

'But where can we go?' asked Sylvia, looking frightened for the first time.

'I don' know,' said Jimmy angrily. 'How I mus' know? You all come an' find me here. *I* don' know.'

There was a ghastly silence.

'*I* know.' It was Wuss-wuss, and everyone jumped as his voice broke the silence. Frankie and Gerald began to laugh, and Sylvia sniffed loudly.

'Yes, I know a place.' He peered shyly at us, his pale eyes squinting in the light from the open door. 'Is far, though.'

'How far? Where it is?' asked Jimmy. He did not look very interested: just polite. I felt a little sorry for Wuss-wuss.

'I don' know exactly. I did live there with Taata—with me gran'father. After 'im dead dem sen' me 'ere. But me know the way from Falmouth.'

'Falmouth! Das a' undred miles away!' exclaimed Pauline.

'What the place is like?' asked Jimmy, more interested now that it seemed real and not a made-up place. Wuss-wuss could make up good stories in the dormitory at night. Even Jimmy liked them, and stopped pretending to be big.

Wuss-wuss sat up straight and his eyes brightened.

'People call it Last Man Peak, an' is near a place call Windsor, where dem 'ave a big cave, deep deep into de groun'. But where we live is much further in. You 'ave to walk to reach dere; not even mule can go up to de 'ouse.'

'Suppose somebody in the house?' asked Pauline. 'Nobody live there since you gran'father dead?'

Wuss-wuss shook his head.

'Nobody ever go up dere, excep' me an' Taata. Not even Aunt Pretty. People say duppy in de 'ouse, but is not a real 'ouse either, so nobody wouldn' want it.'

Myrna's eyes were like saucers.

'I don' like any duppy 'ouse,' she stated.

'But dat is pure foolishness,' said Jimmy firmly. 'Go on, Wuss-wuss.'

'No duppy never in de 'ouse. Is only fool-fool people believe so,' he said, turning to Myrna. 'Me live dere wid Taata until I reach over seven, an' 'im tell me say me musn' frighten. Taata was a preacher, an' I tink 'im run off de duppy.' His face brightened again. 'It nice up dere fi true: all a you woulda like it. We 'ave one little spring, jus' down de 'illside—plenty-plenty fish an' shrimps in dere. An' me still 'ave some fish'ook put up, what Taata an' me did use. An' plenty bird in de bush, an' starapple an' mango an' plum an' otaheite apple. Taata did plant all sorta sinting, flowers an' all because 'im want me to come back. Matron 'ave a paper fi me, to go back dere when me big. An' me know where de paper deh, for she show me once.'

He looked around with mild triumph.

'Is in 'er desk lock up, an' fi me name an' Taata name on it. A judge sign it for me.'

We looked at the landowner with amazement. No one had dreamed that Wuss-wuss concealed such a great secret.

'I never tell any of you, excep' Myrna, because you laugh too much, an' you come from Kingston.'

It was Myrna's turn to be stared at.

'Well,' said Jimmy. 'I think we could get there, you know, if we had a map.'

This was a new and hopeless problem. Our maps were all in school books, and quite useless for planning any journey.

'We need one with roads on it,' said Jimmy.

'Matron 'ave one,' cried Pauline suddenly. 'It's in 'er desk.'

Jimmy jumped up.

'I will go with Wuss-wuss. I believe we mus' go. We can' stay here, an' we can' go to town.' Jimmy had always made up his mind fast, so we were surprised at his next words. 'Matron wouldn' let me go an' leave you, if you don' want to come. An' you can't stay here.' The possibility of the camp was never considered for a second. 'But everybody mus' vote this time, not jus' the big ones.'

We had another round of prunes and honey.

Frankie said, 'We could beg Mr Henry for some food. Or Teacher Mack.'

These were our two remaining friends. Teacher Mack was very old—about eighty years old—and lived in a little cottage on Mr Henry's land. He used to come and read to us, and tell us stories, and he always brought a bag of boiled sweets which his cook made very well. We thought of the sweets. We ate more of the prunes. And suddenly it was all settled.

'Today we will pack up here, an' fin' the map, an' the paper. An' Frankie an' Geral' an' me will make packs to carry our things.' Jimmy was enthusiastic. 'An' all of you mus' pack our clothes, but not much, since is we goin' to carry them. An' Pauline an' Sylvia better see what else we should take, an' we start before day tomorrow.'

Gerald and Frankie went off into Mr Henry's common to see if they could find anything for dinner. They were better at that than the others: Gerald was tough and stringy and could slip up a tree as swift as a lizard, while Frankie could always find something to eat no matter where. He could spot a ripe mango on a tree half a mile away. While they were gone, Jimmy, Pauline and Sylvia searched the house for useful things to take with us. We were busy all day hunting for things we wanted ourselves, or things

that they wanted and couldn't find. It took Pauline, Myrna and me over an hour to find the can-opener, which had somehow found its way into the boys' dormitory, and was at the bottom of a drawer of old clothes put by for mending or throwing away.

Jimmy and Wuss-wuss made the packs for us to carry. All of the boys had been on hikes, and Jimmy had three Scout badges. He acted very wise until Sylvia reminded him that we were running away, and could hardly leave trails since we did not want to be followed.

The packing of our own things went quickly. Myrna and I knew just what to take: our new jeans and gingham shirts, my beads, our crayons and coloured chalks, Myrna's little mirror with the pink handle that she won from the wishing-well at the last school fair, and my three favourite books. Pauline reminded us to pack underclothes, and to see that the twins packed theirs. Some hasty washing had to be done, because Pauline said it was no good taking dirty clothes with us. We took two pairs of pyjamas each, and our sweaters. It was mid-December, and chilly in the nights. Then Sylvia said that each person would have to carry the cotton blanket from off their bed, and one or two towels each. The twins objected, saying that they saw no need for any more bathing, now that Matron was dead. Myrna stared at them, but Pauline's eyes reddened suddenly, and she slapped Pet and made her cry.

'Pet! Oh, Pet!' Pauline dropped the towels she was holding, and hugged Pet hard. 'Never mind, Pet! I didn't really mean to slap you! Hush, Pet—don' mind, please?'

Pet let her dry her face, and then Pauline said.

'Matron was nice, you know, even if we 'ad to wash an' tidy an' do things we didn' like. An' we won't see 'er again, forever an' ever.'

Her voice was very serious; we had never heard Pauline talk like that before. She got up quickly and told Myrna in a hoarse voice to hurry up and clean her shoes, and make sure to clean

the twins' shoes too. Later on she went in to the bathroom for a long, long time, and I am sure she was crying all by herself in there. She kept all of us, especially Myrna and the twins and me, very busy with one thing or another all day, and I had no time to think about anything except searching for Wuss-wuss' good pyjamas, Frankie's T-shirts, and sewing the buttons hastily on Gerald's new school shirts, because they were the only things he had that were not falling into holes, or too small for him. But there was a heavy lump in my chest that would not go away. That night Myrna cried herself to sleep, and I had awful nightmares all night long.

I woke once in the night and heard someone whispering. It was Frankie, who had come from the boys' room because he could not sleep, he kept hearing things, and did Pauline think Matron's ghost might come back in the night? He was only ten, and not as brave as he liked us to think. I don't know what she said to him, but the last thing I heard was Frankie chuckling away to himself as he went back to the boys' dormitory.

The moon was shining on my face when I woke next, and someone had lit the lamp with the last of the oil. It was dark and chilly, and the bundle of clothes piled neatly by the bed did not look inviting. Precious was up and dressed, and Pauline was combing Pet's hair.

I got up and went to the bathroom, where Myrna was brushing her teeth. There was a dim light in the boys' room, for they had made a sort of lamp by floating a bit of string in a little pan of rancid cooking oil. It smelt nasty and made more smoke than light, but they were very proud of it.

We had a sketchy breakfast of boiled breadfruit and weak condensed milk. Pauline insisted on tidying up afterwards, and she packed the remains of the rum-soaked fruit in a plastic box to sustain us on our first day's journey.

'Come an' let me see what everybody 'ave now: all de packs.' Jimmy put the lamp on the dining table, and everyone came up in turn. The twins had the smallest and lightest bundles, as they were only about six years old. Each pack was really a raincoat that spent most of the year folded up in the press. Jimmy and Wuss-wuss had knotted the arms, buttoned up the front and sewn up the necks so that each made a long sort of bag which could be folded over twice, and the arms tied round your neck, or over your shoulder, like a schoolbag.

Each of us had at least two full changes of clothes. Jimmy made us take an extra pair of shoes or sandals, if we had any. Everyone had a toothbrush, comb, towel, and of course a small blanket. We were wearing our sweaters. Jimmy wanted me to leave my books, but Pauline said I should take them, and more, if there was space.

'Well, what about all these other things?' asked Jimmy. 'We can't go without rope, an' knives, an' things like that!' He waved an arm to the table, laden with the Special Things put there by him and Pauline the day before.

They had turned the house inside out, and had gathered a length of rope, six plastic mugs, ten plastic plates, the clothesline, the remaining matches, sugar and salt, a machete, two kitchen knives, a frying pan and two pots that fitted inside each other, the first-aid kit and travelling-clock from Matron's desk, a tin of talcum powder (Pauline insisted it was good for cowitch), cough drops, aspirins, bandages, iodine, and a little box with thread, needles and scissors.

'What's that?' asked Sylvia, picking up a plastic bag full of papers in brown envelopes. 'Can't we throw that away?'

'Oh, no!' Jimmy snatched the packet from her. 'Tha's very important—we found some birth certificates an' other things in Matron's desk. All the papers she 'ad for us—I think we better keep them.'

'Oh.'

'One of them is mine?' asked Myrna, forgetting all about the journey for the moment.

'Everybody 'as one,' said Jimmy solemnly. 'You know, I goin' to read all of them out, so all of us know, an' since is the last time we'll be 'ere.'

He fumbled with the package and spread out the papers one by one.

'James Seaford Anderson. Tha's mine. Nellie May Atkins. Myrna—what's this? Oh!—Myrna Oliveen Campbell. Pauline Jenkins. Precious King. Petisha King. Prince Edward Jones. Gerald Lambert. Franklyn Phipps an' Sylvia Chin. Well. We might need them some time, you know, so I will wrap them up an' keep them.' His face somehow did not look as round and cheerful as usual. He folded up the papers carefully and put the bundle in his pack.

'What's all the rest?' persisted Sylvia.

'Oh, don' bother me now,' said Jimmy impatiently. 'We found the judge's letter Wuss-wuss was talking' about, an' some pictures we took las' Christmas. An' other things. Matron's little radio. But I can't find new batteries. Don' waste time now.'

Everything was divided up among the bigger ones when Pauline suddenly had an idea, and suggested that everybody take a knife, fork and spoon for themselves. Gerald and Frankie objected, but were overruled by Jimmy.

At the last minute, just as we were about to blow out the lamp for the last time, Pauline suddenly ran along the passage down to Matron's room.

'Bring the lamp! Jimmy! Bring the lamp for me!'

Grumbling, but just as curious as the rest of us, Jimmy took up the lamp and we followed him down the passage.

'Please—please—can I take these?'

She had pulled up a chair, and was dragging a cardboard box from the top shelf of the cupboard where Matron kept sheets, towels and extra clothes for us.

'Nothing more—' Jimmy began, and then the lid fell off the box, and everyone gasped. Inside, all wrapped in cotton wool, peeped little glass balls, stars and spangles in deep, brilliant colours—rich blues and reds, glittering silver and gold, orange, emerald green, and rose pink and frosty violet. It was the box where, every New Year, Matron and Doris packed the Christmas tree ornaments to wait for the next tree, twelve months away.

'Well—' began Jimmy.

'*Please*.' Pauline got down from the chair and held the box to her chest, her eyes large and dark. 'I'll carry them myself.'

'Oh, all right. But you'll throw them away if we have to—right?'

After that we filled five bottles with water, to be carried in turn by the bigger ones, even Frankie.

Wuss-wuss had a special task: he carried the fruit and the first-aid kit. No one else could be trusted with them, and Jimmy, Pauline and Sylvia already had as much in their packs as they could manage.

The moon had gone down when we crept quietly out of the front door, and stood looking out across the garden where Matron had dug out all of the flowers and put in vegetables when the sickness started. The night was deathly still, but a few lights shone over towards Spanish Town.

'Look!' whispered Sylvia.

A dull glow seemed to grow along the edge of the sky, lurid and reddish. It brightened rapidly. There could be no mistake. Soon we all could see the glare lighting up the sky over the town.

'Let's go. Come on.'

Jimmy turned his back on the flaming sky in the south, and unlatched the garden gate. Silently, the nine of us followed him out and across the dusty road to the open lands and Mr Henry's house.

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SNEAK PEEK SAMPLE CHAPTER

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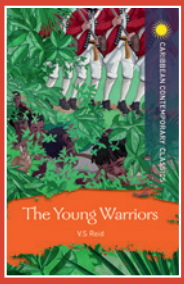

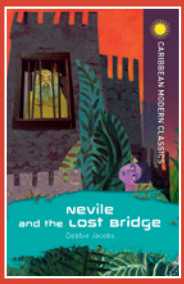

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