

Pamela Harrison, Board of Contributors, the *Valley News* 1/30/2011

"Stories of a Lifetime, Unpacked"

Often sleepless in the wee cold hours of Upper Valley winter, I rise and creep downstairs, light a lamp, add some wood to the stove, then pass the time remembering the year our little family lived and worked on a Caribbean island.

Three by seven miles small and populated by 8,000 people whose formerly enslaved ancestors inherited the land when their French and British overseers abandoned the sugar trade there, Carriacou belongs to Grenada and was in 1985 the informal storehouse of that larger island's unclaimed schizophrenics and political exiles. When Ronald Reagan ordered the invasion of Grenada in 1984, our military intelligence didn't realize until three or four days afterwards that Carriacou was a part of the deal.

By that time, the able Cuban medical team that had been caring for its inhabitants was long gone. Under the auspices of Project HOPE, my husband, Dr. Dennis McCullough, joined the lone remaining physician, Dr. Rama Rau, to provide needed care. Ken Nachajko, the saintly former Peace Corps volunteer who built and was the principal of Bishop's College, hired me to teach 7th and 11th grade English. Our family of three would comprise one quarter of those individuals who spoke standard English. Our daughter, Kate, aged eight, would be the only white and non-native child on the island.

Arriving in August at the start of the annual rainy season, we experienced the excitement of landing in a blinding rain squall on the narrow runway from which a herd of grazing goats scattered in all directions. In two jouncing trips, the hospital jeep hauled us, our long-haired cat, Margaret, and a year's worth of clothing, foodstuffs, books, and supplies to the lovely but lonely house sited on a hill where the unpaved road petered out at the island's deserted end. Amid a jumble of giant HOPE boxes, bags, and suitcases we were too tired to unpack, we waved goodbye to the driver and jeep. On the veranda, looking west over the trees as the sun sank through stormy clouds into the sea, we ate a first supper of crackers and sardines.

As daylight faded, and our awareness began to plumb the solitude of the lightless jungle that surrounded us, we retreated to the living room for our family's traditional evening ceremony of reading aloud. Kate hadn't yet made her transition to chapter books, and at this time of our lives we were thick into D'Aulaire's *Book of Greek Myths*. Imagine our surprise when we switched on the lamps and every curious six-legged thing within a mile shouldered in to keep us company. The air abuzz with whizzing wings while Dennis read, Kate and I sat with fly-swatters at the ready to fend away anything that flew too close. Coral-colored lizards laughed on the walls behind the bedroom doors. How was it no one had thought of window screens or hanging mosquito netting over our beds?? Kate, dear child, was the bravest Crusoe of us all.

Though we enjoyed the luxury of electric lights, refrigeration, and a full basement cistern for the collection of rain water (no mean concern on an island that had no streams and suffered eight months of drought), we had neither phones nor neighbors. The nearest fishing village was a mile away through the forest. Reggie, a long-haired Rastafarian of mysterious means, dropped by now and again to see if we needed

anything. He was a font of local remedies for sore throats and rashes, did a fine job of interpreting local customs to us and us to the locals, and he made sure that the single break-in during our absence was never repeated. As promised, the hospital jeep delivered us faithfully to and from work and school.

Ah, yes, school. Because the local elementary building consisted of a large cement floor, sectioned into four quarters by four blackboards and topped with a corrugated tin roof—no chairs, no desks, no paper, no pencils, no books, all learning by rote in a cacophonous din of three hundred children—we decided to home school Kate, who endured science and math lessons with her father before he went off to work, English, Social Studies, History and Art with me. Then she and I were driven three miles to town and the high school where, wearing her school uniform's fresh white blouse, pleated navy blue skirt, and navy hair ribbons for her long braids, Kate attended assemblies and study hall, learned cursive and spelling, participated in seventh grade English, social studies, geography, scripture classes, lunch, recess, did her homework, and mooned around the office while I taught. Mercilessly teased by the seventh graders who stole her lunch, hid her books, pulled her braids, and generally did anything to get her attention, she rose to their bait every time—the perfect little sister.

During that first sopping season, violent rain-squalls passed across the island every day in waves; water gushed in under the doors and pounded so loudly on the tin roofs of our house and the school that conversation was impossible. Laundry sagged for days on the line, and mildew sprouted from our leather shoes. Radio transmission was irregular or broken in static, electricity flickered on and off, and no one had television or movies. Playing outside was drenching at best and potentially dangerous with all the hidden cacti and poisonous plants, snakes, and insects. In those early weeks and months of adjustment, Kate played house with her dolls and Maggie the Cat or pored over her picture books. One particularly lonely day, I spied her in the garden as she passed the time braiding palm fronds into place mats. Freed from the braids required at school, her fine long hair fell around her to the ground, hiding her face, as the plaintive birdsong of her whistling filled the air. She was still months away from making the two close friends she earned by the new year. Still months away from being adopted by the grandmothers of the island to help make bread in bee-hive ovens, measure out rice and beans at their rum-shops, pass the calabash at the Big Drum dance, or—with a red hibiscus pinned in her hair by the cook and white towel folded over her arm—take thirsty guests' orders at one of the two tiny hotels.

Later that day, as I graded papers in the next room, I heard a frustrated cry from Kate as she threw a picture book hard against her bedroom wall. She'd had it with them. Had it with having no playmates. Had it with rain. The crisis had come at last. Smiling mysteriously and crooking my finger to have her follow, I guided her then to the hidden HOPE box we'd packed for just this moment. Unbuckling the straps and lifting the lid of the sturdy 3x3x4 foot waterproof box, I opened for Kate the collection of carefully selected children's literature whose chaptered stories and colorful characters would keep her company and enrich her imagination for years to come.