

Beginnings
A memoir by Cordella Lewis

The drought in the island had lasted four months.

Not just any four months, but the first four months of the year, signaling a bleak start to it.

January would normally have been special for children but not this particular year. There would be a shortfall on khaki uniforms with long pants – for boys, and for girls, on beautiful plaids in a variety of colours with well - placed pleats and collars. New ‘exercise’ books and ballpoint pens for writing Compositions, regulation shoes and socks recommended by the schools they attended, were not forthcoming. No wonder there were long faces and teary, if averted, eyes all round.

Christmas, with all its good cheer, had drained the available cash for gifts, items of self- gratification and obligation to dependents, who happened to be mainly children.

Regarding personal fulfilment in religious terms, for both Christmas and its post-script season of Easter, all those who had not attended church for the entire previous year, felt they should - at the dawn of this New Year.

They owed it to self, friend, family and foe to make it right with the Maker, to make their Path straight, to carve out a new goal-oriented way forward, in short, to begin afresh and to chart a new beginning.

Easter was another unmistakable milestone in the lives of islanders. From humble rural yards and hedges to urban manicured gardens, the magical Easter lily (even if no re-planting had taken place) would rise phoenix-like with heady-smelling blossoms of pure white or white striped with royal purple, to remind the guilty and unheeding that the season was ‘more than you’; it was out of the ordinary in its pristine message of redemption and new beginnings. Easter was also bun-and-cheese time when all bakeries great and small tried to outdo themselves in creativity with flour, raisins and the trusty yeast. Just not this Easter.

For myriad fruit had been blighted on trees lining lawns now parched and brown; the yams, chayotes and passion fruit showed blighted vines climbing nowhere soon; bananas and plantains – legitimate cousins - who had never shown reluctance to proliferate, now hung their heads in shame, their fronds despondently parched and lifeless. In short, there was nothing to reap and therefore nothing to buy or sell, whether on street corners or along the meandering self-generated market lanes.

Government agencies gave out notices and bulletins on how to conserve water, how to apply mulch, how to preserve seed for a future which held more promise .The grumbling grew louder:

‘Dey always late wid dey advice. Now dey tell we’, and folks hissed their teeth as they shuffled along in the dust. The deep sense of hopelessness was hard to shake.

Children were deeply affected, especially as they were the ones to be seen and not heard. As they washed their feet at the trickle from the communal standpipe in the yard as part of the ritual of preparing for bed, they heard the half-whispered comments which they were not supposed to hear or heed; they caught the self -deprecating gestures, the blue notes of hopelessness, the sense of distress under occasional light banter which overall, signaled a bleak start to an already shaky future prospect.

One writer had written that life has a stick to beat us with. The new year had done just that.