

COFA Caribbean Over-50s Association

PLAY SCRIPT developed by the group through discussion and improvisation with Pam Schweitzer and Jennifer Lunn

Cast perform remembered actions such as washing, sweeping, sewing, picking fruit, to the music of "Island in the Sun"

SONG: *Oh island in the sun, willed to me by my father's hand*

All my days I will sing in praise of your forests, waters your shining sands

This is my island in the sun

Where my people have lived since time began

And though I've sailed on many a sea

Your shores will always be home to me.

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Introductions

(As each person finishes their introduction they move to a still image for the next section)

Veronica: My name is Veronica. I was born in 1932 on the island of Grenada

Carmen: My name is Carmen. I was born in 1935 on the island of Canouan.

Cynthia: My name is Cynthia. I was born in 1938 in Jamaica.

Gwen: My name is Gwen. I was born in 1939 in Jamaica.

Irma: My name is Irma. I was born in 1944 in Trinidad.

Shirley: My name is Shirley. I was born in 1947 in the south of Trinidad.

Earliest Memories

Shirley: We have been talking about our earliest memories. *(Cast take up frozen positions for coming stories)* Some of us remember having our ears pierced when we were very tiny. *(Frozen picture of ear piercing comes to life)*

Irma: An old lady came with a needle and thread to pierce our ears. She did my little sister, but I ran away and climbed up a coconut tree because I was scared it would hurt.

Carmen: I remember being dressed in white and going to my uncle's wedding. There were two women in African dress danced with the wedding cakes on their heads. *(Frozen picture of cake dance comes to life)* They called it "dancing the cake".

Gwen: *(coming forward with money)* I remember going to church with my grandmother and being pushed forward to put money on the collection tray. I don't think I wanted to.

- Veronica: My first memory was when Father Christmas came through the street in Grenada with music and balloons and he threw me a little doll, *(she catches it)* which I cherished for a long time.
- Cynthia: When I was about five years old, I had typhoid fever. Most people went to hospital and never came out so when I got it, my Mum wouldn't let me go. She worked round the clock to look after me, no medicine, no nothing. She had a big tub and she boiled up herbs and bush then she sat me on a plank on top of the tub with a blanket over me to inhale the steam. I recovered but I was very weak. I had to learn to walk again.

Views from Home

- Shirley: We have been remembering some of the sounds and sights of our childhood homes in the Caribbean
- Everyone: *(sounds and gestures of birds, animals, hooters, etc)*
- Carmen From our veranda I can see the beautiful Caribbean Sea and then there is a boat going up. Grandfather says "Carmen, quick, get the binoculars!"
- Veronica: A plum tree, an avocado pear tree full of pears, a lemon tree and coconut trees.
- Irma: My uncle has planted sweet corn, sugar cane and pigeon peas and behind them is the club house where the white people are. There is a party going on and some people are playing tennis.
- Shirley: I can see loads of flowers and a field where the children play. Lovely green trees, bread-fruit trees, grapefruit.
- Cynthia: We live on the bay, on the seafront. I can see the lovely blue ocean with ships going by and the fishermen out there casting their nets and pulling in lots of fish.
- Gwen: I'm looking over my veranda in the district. There are people moving around all the time. Men with donkeys, people going to work in the fields and coming home again and people going to the shops.

Mothers

- Irma: We would often get sent out to get things for our mothers. Some of us got distracted, some of us couldn't remember what we were supposed to get, but we were all told to be back quickly *(Everyone becomes their younger self out running errands for their parents.)*
- Everyone: Pound of sugar, pound of rice, pound of flour. Pound of sugar, pound of rice, pound of flour. Pound of sugar, pound of rice, pound of flour. Pound of.....*(They clap their hands over their mouths as they have forgotten what to buy)*

(Everyone becomes a mother)

Cynthia: What do you mean you forgot? You go straight back to the shop now!

Veronica: I'm pouring this water on the ground. You'd better be back before it dries!

Gwen: Don't let the sun go down on you!

Irma: Wait till your father comes home!

Shirley: No two women living in this house! You may think you're a woman, but you're not. So you come in when you're told.

Carmen: My mother sent me to my aunt's for something. But I loved the flowers and the birds and I didn't even remember what I was doing until I saw my mother following me with the whip.

Cynthia: (as mother) Where's that child?!

(Carmen runs to her auntie's)

Shirley: (as auntie) Quick, under the bed, under the bed!!

Mother: Where's that child?!

Auntie: *(standing between them)* Stop now.... you are always beating that child!!

Walk to School

Veronica: On the way to school I met quite a few children. And we'd go together holding hands.

Song *There's a brown girl in the ring*

Cynthia: And there were some boys there, instead of going up to school their books were on the ground and they were playing cricket. *(Pause while they play)* And then further along there were some boys in the trees picking mangoes. "Oooh can we have some"

Gwen: (as boy) No climb up and pick your own

Cynthia: But we're girls and we can't climb the tree because of our skirts

Carmen: Go on then. Here you are. *(Handing her a mango)*

Shirley: And then when you climb up the hill to the school, and you have to go briskly because there's always someone waiting outside and if you're late you know what you're going to get.

School

(Girls go to their places)

Carmen: Good morning girls

Everyone else: Good morning miss.

Carmen: Sit down and fold your hands (*they smooth their skirts behind them*)

Everyone: (*Singing*) ABCDEFG HIJKLMNOP. QRS -TUV WX - Y and Zed,
Now you know your ABC, will you sing along with me.

(*They recite together*) A for apple, B for bat, C for cat, D for dog, E for egg, F for fish.

Veronica: Twice one is two, twice two is four, twice three is six, twice four is eight. (*She sings up to 12 X*)

Carmen: Well done. (*to the audience*) Now English history. Who can tell me when the Battle of Hastings was?

Cynthia: 1492?

Veronica: 16...?

Gwen: 1066.

Carmen: That's better.

Irma: We also learnt about our own islands. Trinidad is geographically and geologically part of the South American continent.

Gwen: Jamaica was not discovered by Columbus..... A lot of people were living here before he came.

Irma: We had to write with dip-in pens and put the nib in the inkwell.

Cynthia: You had blotting paper for when it splurged out.

Shirley: We had to fit the letters between the lines in our copybooks, so we learned to write neatly.

Veronica: Our exams were all English and our books all came from England. The Royal Reader for example. It had everything. Shakespeare, extracts from Great Expectations, poetry, everything.

Cynthia: And we had to come to the front and recite what we had learnt.
"The Daffodils" by William Wordsworth
I wandered lonely as a cloud....etc (*everyone claps*)

Leaving for England

Shirley: Most of us knew from early in our lives that we wanted to be nurses when we left school. And many of us had decided we wanted to do our training in England. I was 21 when I came to England.

Veronica: I was 24. That was in 1958.

Gwen: I came to England aged 19

Carmen: I was 22

Irma: I was 24

Cynthia: I was 20

Shirley: We were coming for about five years and for a bit of an adventure.

Carmen: Some of our parents were pleased for us, some found it harder to accept.

Veronica: *(to Gwen)* Your cousin has given you this wonderful opportunity to go to England to improve your enlightenment of things. I'm glad that you're going and I'm sorry that you're going because we're going to miss you. Try to keep yourself warm because I hear it's very cold. Always keep your coat on. Don't trust the sun!

Veronica: *(to Carmen)* We hope that when you get to England, to the hospital, that you will nurse the patients with all your heart and soul. First day you reach, you go and look for paper and pen girl and write us. And God speed be with you.

(Shirley and Cynthia comfort Irma who is sobbing and crying as her mum)

Cynthia: Mum, mum. We're going to England. We're going to be better people, we're going to get jobs, we'll be able to send you some money so we can look after you. Don't cry, don't cry.

Irma: My mum was a very simple person and it was very upsetting for her when we left. She never worked, so she was always home and her children were her life.

Shirley: We had to say goodbye to our friends, who were staying behind.

They all have a big hug and then split into two groups and wave to each other

Cynthia: Oh isn't it awful. I wish I was going. They're going there... all that adventure. We haven't got anything left at all. In a way I'm really jealous of them.

Veronica: Well, I'm hoping I'm going soon.

Carmen: Me too. I'm going to join my friends. They're going ahead and they'll let us know what it's like.

Veronica: Our turn will come.

Gwen: It's so sad. Tears come into my eyes. All this time, we go to school together, we go to church, and now we have to part. I'm going to miss you lot.

All wave again

Shirley: Friends and family came to say goodbye and to give us little gifts.

Carmen: I was given a manicure set in a leather case and I've still got it.

Irma: Bye-bye darling. Here are some earrings. Think of us each time you wear them.

Cynthia: God speed. Here's a little something. It will come in handy.

Gwen: You can go there, but don't get married, because then, if you want to come back you won't be able to. There's a little handkerchief. I made it. God bless you.

Veronica: *(bringing on her suitcase)* I still have the suitcase I came with. It's got my name engraved on it by an artist.

Everyone shows what they packed and puts it in the case)

Irma: I took a coat. I made it. Fake fur. I made one for myself and one for Christiana my sister.

Veronica: I had a lovely set of clothes made by my auntie. And lots of dresses.

Cynthia: I embroidered a pillowcase and sheet. It had rosebuds on it. Three here, three here and three down the middle. Hand embroidered.

Carmen: My auntie was a seamstress. She made me some multicoloured flannelette pyjamas.

Gwen: Poor me! I didn't have nothing. I came as a pauper... Except for...a bottle of rum. *(she mimes the outline of a bottle)*

All: A bottle of Rum!

(all mime packing the rum into their cases, closing the cases and come into a line)

Fashion parade

Cynthia: Veronica is wearing a royal blue suit made by her mum and a red hat and red shoes.

Veronica: It was a flattish, small hat with a bit of lace at the front. You know you have to look smart when you when you came to England.

Irma: Shirley left Trinidad by plane. She is wearing a cream trouser suit, brown shoes, brown handbag, and a knitted cream hat

Shirley: And my mum had made me a winter coat. It was sort of salmon pink, bright, felt, nice.

Carmen: This is Gwen coming by plane from Jamaica. She's all dressed up in a pink dress and black shoes. She had a hat with a lace veil.

Gwen: It was a linen dress, well-made, with a half-moon hat, and I had black patent shoes.

Shirley: This is Irma, coming to England on a cruise ship with yellow trousers and a multi-coloured top, brown shoes and a handbag, no hat.

Irma: But I did get the hat in Portugal where the boat stopped

Veronica: Cynthia had a cream dress made by her auntie with a cream hat,
brown shoes, smartly dressed and ready for England. (*Veronica picks
up case and holds it during song.*)

*All sing "My Bonnie lies over the ocean" while waving to the front. On "Bring back, bring back"
everyone turns and waves to the back, then turn back to the front as song ends.
Gather in a group facing front looking outwards at London to share first impressions*

dark

cold

Taxis

Red buses

Foggy

Crowds

Everyone in suits

Joined up houses

Street lights

Everyone smoking in the street.

Hats and umbrellas

Freezing in the sun

Young people almost making love on the street

The pace, the speed of it all.

(All take new positions as if eating from a plate)

Irma: It took a while to get used to the food

(Everyone in turn sampling off mimed plate in hands)

Sliced white bread

Toad in the Hole

Junket

Spotted Dick

Fish and Chips

Cups of tea

Song Endless cups of tea
 I like a nice cup of tea in the morning
 I like a nice cup of tea with my tea
 And when it's time for bed
 There's a lot to be said
 For a nice cup of tea

Gwen: And everybody looked at us.

Veronica: Some people said darkie or chocolate

Carmen: An old lady took my hand and said "Oh, you're one of the black ones."

Shirley: They'd ask us "do you still wear grass skirts and live in trees?" and we'd say "yes, yes, of course".

Irma: Some patients were rude to us in the hospital.

Cynthia: A patient once said to me, "Take your black hand off me!" So I told her: "You're lucky I'm here to look after you."

Nursing Days

Veronica We always dressed neatly. We were very proud of our uniforms.

(in pairs mirroring each other putting on uniforms then all face front)

Shirley: Starched apron, with pins at the front and buttoned at the back.

Irma: Nice stylish white hat.

Gwen: Black stockings and flat black lace-up shoes.

Carmen: White cuffs.

Cynthia: No jewellery or nail polish

Veronica: And of course, our nurse's watches.

("Rock around the clock" plays as everyone moves about doing nursing tasks)

One two three o'clock four o'clock rock

Five six seven o'clock eight o'clock rock

Nine ten eleven o'clock twelve o'clock rock

I'm gonna rock around the clock tonight

I'm gonna rock rock rock till broad daylight

I'm gonna rock around the clock tonight .

Everyone freezes mid - task

Carmen: Sister says to me "Straighten up those corners, and pull your stockings up"

Shirley: We did 8 hour shifts

Veronica: But you could have 3 meals a day and tea breaks. So much food

Irma: We came skinny and look at us now.

Cynthia: You were on your feet all the time. Some sisters were very strict.

3 nurses left: (out front) Let me take your temperature

3 nurses right: (out front) Let me take your pulse

Shirley: We worked in all different fields of nursing

Veronica: I was a midwife

Carmen: I was a district midwife visiting people in their own homes.

Gwen: I was an auxiliary nurse, but once you've been there for a while, you do the same things as all the other nurses.

Irma: I worked as a cardio thoracic nurse

Shirley: I did lots of different kinds of nursing, but being a theatre nurse was what I loved.

Cynthia: I was a theatre nurse too, until I switched to social work because the money was better. Of course things got more complicated when we had our own children and had to go back to work after 6 weeks maternity leave.

Veronica: I had a very nice West Indian woman living in. Actually she had been my guide captain back home.

Cynthia: (*As old lady*) I've been looking after my grandchildren to help my daughter out, but it's not working out. When the cricket season's over, I'm going back home.

Veronica: Don't go home. Come and live with us and help me look after my children. She stayed with us into her 80s. And that's how I was able to keep on working well we had a mortgage and we needed the money.

Irma: Luckily my sister, Christiana, was with me and between us we arranged our shifts so we could look after my little girl, Victoria.

Shirley: I would drop my daughter off at the childminder's. In fact I switched jobs and worked in dental nursing because the hours suited me better.

Carmen: After several years nursing, I felt I needed to do something higher, I applied for a nursing officer post.

Shirley: (*As boss/interviewer*) Although we were very impressed with you, we can't offer you the job."

Carmen: An English girl got the job.

Irma: (*As a white girl*) That's our privilege

- Carmen: After that I understood a lot of things.
- Cynthia: During our working lives, we all had our ups and downs. My husband went back to Jamaica and expected me to follow, but I'm my own woman so I didn't follow although he'd built the big house.
- Veronica: Well my husband and I did split up, but good things came out of the marriage, especially the children and we are still good friends
- Shirley: My husband and I had our bumpy times early on, but now we do everything together. I'm settled and content. But I do go home as often as possible to see everyone and have a holiday.

Going home

Postcards from West Indies written together, stamped and posted like chorus

- All together: Arrived safely. Having a wonderful time. Lots of fruit and fried fish. Oh and the mangoes! Weather good and hot. Out bathing in the sea everyday. Seen a lot of friends, weather's hot, wish you were here, see you soon.
- Song *Long time girl I never seen ya..... Come let me hold your hand (X 2)
Peel head John Crow, sit on the tree top, picking the blossom
Let me hold your hand gal, Let me hold your hand*
- Cynthia: *(To others)* Do any of you ever think about going back to the West Indies to live?
- Irma: I'll probably go back and live there eventually....
- Cynthia: I thought about it a few years ago, but I wouldn't go back to Jamaica, maybe another West Indian Island, but definitely somewhere in the sun.
- Gwen: I'd do 6 months in Jamaica and 6 months in England, so I don't miss out on anything...
- Carmen: I was planning to build a little chalet for myself on my family's land, but they've built a power station on that land now, so that's not going to happen
- Shirley: I've never thought about going back to live, only to visit
- Veronica: I'm settled here and my children are here, and my grandchildren Oh by the way I've brought some photos of the grandchildren to show you

The next generation

Photo bee, all pulling out their photos at once. All pushing in front of each other with pictures

- Veronica: Seriously though, most of us are grandparents, so we say to them: *(Addressing the advice out front)* Listen to your elders...
- Shirley: Mind your manners

Carmen: Read as much as you can. That's how you gain knowledge.

Irma: Have someone or something to believe in & stick to your values

Gwen: Show respect to others

Cynthia: And have respect for yourself

Looking back and reminiscing

Irma: Now we're retired and we look back on our careers and we're proud of the work we did.

Cynthia: We all worked for 20 to 30 years and we miss our work.

Gwen: I miss caring for sick people and watching them get well again.

Veronica: I miss the babies. I have to stop myself picking them up out of their prams cause they look so nice.

Cynthia: I miss the company and that's why I meet up with the group. It has been really nice working on the play together.

Veronica: I've learned a lot from other people's stories, their sadness and their joy.

Carmen: I've got to know the group much better from doing this play because I didn't know anything about their backgrounds.

Gwen: It's been a great pleasure working with these ladies for the first time, and now I feel at home, part of the group,

Cynthia: We've known each other for six or seven years but we haven't ever shared anything like this before.

.Irma: When you act out the memories it brings it all back. Especially when I was acting the scene about leaving home, it made me empathise with my mum for the first time. I felt like she probably felt when we were leaving, me and my sister, the two of us.

Carmen: When we did the scene about leaving home it brought tears to my eyes.

Cynthia: But now, England is my home. This is where we've made our lives.

Veronica: But we still look back fondly on our younger days in the West Indies.

Cynthia: And oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude
And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances with the daffodils.

*Exit to song: Oh island in the sun, willed to me by my father's hand
All my days I will sing in praise of your forests, waters your shining sands*