

Letters from Isolation: A Mother's Life Inside the Common Cold Unit, 1959

Content note: Please note there is a historical language reference that now is considered racially offensive. While we would not use this language ourselves, we have retained it here to accurately transcribe a unique first-hand experience and it contextualises the attitudes of the time.

Transcript:

Harvard Hospital

SALISBURY

13.10.59

Dear Linda, Brenda & 'Daddy',

Its now 4.30pm. We have to get out letters in the post by 5 o'clock so this is just a very quick letter to let you know I've arrived safely.

Well, the hospital car met 8 of us off the train at Salisbury, one of them I afterwards discovered was to be my partner – a lady from Birmingham called Jean, who has a little girl of 4.

Then we all went into an office, then each in turn saw the doctor. After that we had dinner all in the canteen (there are about 15 of us altogether) - a lovely dinner, lamb, cabbage and roast potatoes, a cakey-tart in custard. Then we came to see our flat, which is very big and very nice, with 3 bedrooms. After that we went back to the canteen where the doctor told us all about this 10 day trial.

Then we came back to our flats and had to wait for the doctor & matron to come and examine us. While we were waiting the telephone rang & we were asked if we'd mind having another lady in with us.

So now there are three of us. Jean, Rene & Me. We were having a cup of tea when matron & doctor came in, so we scrambled into bed to be examined. They've just left us & now the rest of the day is our own.

Must rush now, but I will write again. Lots & lots of love

From Mummy

X to Daddy X to Skip XXXX

Harvard Hospital

Coombe Rd,

Salisbury

15th October, 1959

Hello Eddy Darling,

Its just 8.10am on Thursday morning, we've just had our early morning tea and are now waiting for breakfast to be left outside the door. Everything is deposited in a special box outside the front door & we have to wait until the bell is rung & we've heard the footsteps walk away before we go & collect.

They bring us a paper every day of our own choice, each, and really have thought of everything for our comfort.

We were allowed to choose between a bottle of beer or cider every day, or orangeade as required. I'm having "Zoyder" (hick) but Jean & Rene have orange squash. We are supplied with a few biscuits, scones etc every day & bread & milk, and the kitchen was stocked up with tea, coffee, butter, marg, jam, marmalade, condiments, etc. when we arrived. (I can hear the breakfast at the door – tata for now).

10am. Breakfast over! Weetabix, kipper, etc., flat tidied. Matron has been to take our temperature & pulse, & now we are awaiting doctors visit, to look at our throats & used paper hankies, & our reports. We don't appear to have caught colds on the way here. They put the drops up our noses on Saturday morning – that's when the tests really begin. Our duties are very light indeed & most of the day is our own.

Yesterday afternoon we had an X-ray & had to supply a "specimen". From today until next Thursday we just have the visit from Matron & Doctor each morning ---

10.30am Doctor has just been, and now the rest of the day is our own. We are listening to "Music While You Work"¹, Jean is making a felt golliwog, Rene is mending something, & we are all very happy & enjoying ourselves.

Now the flats. Its like a large prefab, centrally-heated, a long passage up one side – about 70 feet long! - all the room doors are to the left. First inside the front door is the living room, 2nd doctors 'surgery', 3rd kitchen, 4th bedroom, 5th my bedroom, 6th bedroom, 7th bathroom (with one bath & 2 showers) 8th lavatories & two wash basins. So you see its a very large flat. The beds are very comfortable – interior sprung mattresses.

The food is good. We have to do our washing-up & put the "vacuum-cans" outside the door again.

We are supplied with books & games, and can book for a game of tennis, badminton or table-tennis if we want to.

We have a beautiful view from our windows.

Just rolling downs & farmland.

We are allowed to go for long country walks – but must at all times keep 30 feet away from everyone except our companions.

We had a walk through the fields for 1 ½ hours before supper at 6 o'clock yesterday.

Its awfully funny to see us all detouring each other at 30 feet. And we think it must be the staff families that we meet up with. They always stop a good thirty feet away & let us pass & then go dashing on again. Its making us feel very contagious – we shall have terrible inferiority complexes when we come home.

Jean & I are getting on riotously – we both see the funny side of everything. All three of us are getting along excellently together. Rene is a spinster from Deptford, 45 years old. 11.15pm² My pint of cyder & our bread & scones have just arrived. So we are having a drink & scone.

Everything is completely up to expectations – we are very delighted with everything.

How are you & the children getting on dear. Is Linda back at school?

Is the television o.k.?

Perhaps Dad will be over today. I hope you all have a nice weekend at Bromley.

Could you possibly pop a few photos of you & the children in the post to me tomorrow dear, not forgetting Skip.

Cheerio for now. I'll write to the children again soon. Tell them I'm looking forward to a "Children's Exhibition of Plaques & Ornaments" when I come home.

All my love

Myra

XXXXXX

¹ Music While You Work, BBC Radio Programme on 15/10/59 featured the Lew Stone Sextet
<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/df9c672d232f40988e38e9ce5557ef8a> Listen for 1959
http://www.mastersofmelody.co.uk/mwyw_17aug59_lewstone.mp3

² Likely a mistake and means 11.15am

Harvard Hospital

Coombe Rd,

Salisbury

20.10.59

Hello Eddy Darling,

Here I am again – feeling very dozy. Jean & I had an afternoon sleep & Rene went for a walk & made a cup of tea when she returned. So we've just staggered out to drink it and then we shall all be off for a stroll together.

Jean & I are still free of colds, we are just feeling utterly relaxed & lazy (getting tireder & tirederer every day), but Rene developed a slight cold – she lost her voice all day yesterday & didn't feel too good, but she's o.k. again today.

We are all still thoroughly enjoying ourselves.

We have spent everyday knitting, reading and going for one walk. Rene usually goes for two. We have booked the table-tennis for an hour this evening until 8 p.m. Then its "Hancock's Half Hour"¹

We listen to the radio every evening, & part of the day.

Most of the meals are excellent, some a little disappointing. But then its hard to please everybody all the time with food.

Today for dinner we had lamb, mint sauce, greens, roast potatoes, apple pudding with spong (sic) top. Delicious! Sunday's dinner was roast pork, stuffing, apple sauce, roast potatoes, & greens & rhubarb tart. Also delicious!

I hope you had a nice weekend in Bromley, & that the children got on all right at the dentist's last night dear.

I won't write any more now. I'll be home some time on Friday afternoon, so till then. Bye for now,

all my love

Myra

XX Linda

XX Brenda

X Skip

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¹. https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/schedules/service_light_programme/1959-10-20

(on a small brown envelope with typed address Flat 3A)

THE GUINIE-PIGS' PICNIC (sic)

As things come to an end
You're invited to attend
You know where to come;
but where?
Thursday the sixteenth at eight p.m.
Bring a chair, bring a glass,
bring a bottle from the shelf,
or bring food, but especially
bring YOURSELF

JOHN & ANDREW
Flat 5B