

Letters from the Marigold Café

Prologue

In a time of lockdown and isolation, especially for families separated from each other and the effect of this on their mental well-being, this is a story about the triumph of the human spirit in the face of great adversity.

In an isolated mental hospital during the 1950s, a mother endures a year of enforced separation from her family and her children. Then one day she is allowed out to visit the village café and decides to start writing letters home from there.....



Spring 1956

Next to each bed was a small cupboard. Her few possessions had been emptied into it and her brown suitcase labelled and removed to the store. Just before lights out, she had reached into the cupboard drawer and taken out with a trembling hand a small photograph of her three boys hidden inside a book. She had held it to her under the thin bedclothes. It brought her some comfort, to have them close to her.

Each day, she walked for an hour in the exercise gardens before lunch. Each day, she walked for another hour in the exercise gardens after lunch. She loved to be outside, even for

those brief moments, to leave behind the disinfected corridor as the doors opened and she could inhale the dew laden air into her lungs. To be able to listen to bird song, to pick up a leaf on the ground and hold it in her hand, to watch clouds moving across the sky. She always walked round in the same direction, as did the others, always through the same gates, all counted out, all counted in. As she walked around the perimeter of the red brick buildings, as they had directed, she passed from one garden to the next through locked gates, through four gardens and five locked gates, and was counted through each one. There was never any change to this routine, inside or outside.

She walked on her own, with her head down, thinking her own thoughts.

‘Mother and Father have gone away for 6 months to Malaya. That sounds an awfully long time and an awfully long way off. They will definitely miss my 10th birthday and maybe Christmas as well. That is very sad. Mother was wearing her best cotton dress and she could smell her ‘Soir de Paris’ perfume. Father was wearing his new linen jacket and panama hat. How she would miss them. But would they miss her? Mother says I can write letters but how long would they take to get there and for one to come back?’

Anthony is going away tomorrow to his new public school in Bristol. He is being very brave and grown up about it. Father said it is where all the boys in the family have gone for generations. But why does he have to go away too? It will be eight weeks before she saw him again. He seems very tall and grown up already but he is only twelve! Who am I going to play with now? The aunts and uncles are all too busy to play with me or take me out. It really is quite unbearable. I have decided to start a diary. It will keep me company and I can count off the days in it until Anthony, Mother and Father return.’

She came to the end of the walk and was counted back in through the gate.

Each morning she reported for duty in the Laundry. Laundry items had to be counted, labelled, washed and dried. She stood for hours with thirty other patients surrounded by the overpowering noise of steam irons banging, steam hissing, dampness in the air and always, the piles and piles of clothing. One morning, Stumpy, the head laundress who usually took no notice of her because she was so quiet, noted her very neat stitching on of labels and had her transferred the next day to the quiet atmosphere of the small sewing room.

There she sat, with five other ladies, bent over their sewing in silence, alone with their own thoughts.

'Mother and Father came home for four weeks but all too soon have gone back again. Anthony is seventeen now. We don't play the old games. He says he is far too old for them now and is thinking about university. I have a new friend, Erica now that I am at the Ladies College. I go to Erica's once a week for tea and we go for long walks together. Next year I will be taking Matriculation.

Aunty Kathleen has taken me under her wing and is a kind of companion, or maybe I am her companion? We go on educational trips. I write in my diary every night in bed. I wonder what it would be like for there just to be the four of us together in their own house, "we four," like King George VI and his family.

All I ever wanted was a proper family life and children of my own. And now it has all been taken away. If Mother and Father could see me now, they would surely hear my heart breaking.'

She laid down her sewing along with the others and was escorted back to the ward.

Then, one spring morning, she was called to the Superintendent's office. She stood outside trembling trying to think of any misdemeanours that could occasion such a summons. As she entered, the Big One looked up from his paperwork. Her work in the sewing room had been exemplary, he said. As a reward, she was to be allowed out alone for the first time. If everything was satisfactory, she could go again the following week. She was to walk to a little cafe in the village about a mile away across the fields. It was called the Marigold Cafe. It was the only one in the village so it would not be hard to find. *She must not on any account be late back.*

When she was on her own again, she sobbed quietly. She was not sure what it would be like setting foot outside the gates or how she would be, but she knew that she would go. She was to leave straight after lunch, and be back by no later than four o'clock. She calculated that it would take her half an hour to walk each way, if she took the short cut that had been suggested. That would give her an hour at the cafe. That would have to be enough.

Her hand shook as she put one shilling and sixpence in her purse to pay for tea and biscuits. In her coat pocket was a letter from home, some plain paper, an envelope and a pen. She would read the letter from home and write her letter back while she was there each week, she decided. It would be a private place where she could be alone for a few precious hours with her thoughts.

The anxiety she had felt subsided and was replaced by a calm determination. She paced the exercise gardens with a fixed tread and purpose before lunch, never lifting her head, in case something happened to stop her from going out that afternoon. She ate lunch in a trance. The cutlery count proceeded smoothly. She went to fetch her coat. The hour had come.

The afternoon was cold and bright as she set off. She was to take a short cut from the grounds, across the Farm to join the main road. She hesitated as the door was locked behind

her and wild thoughts assailed her. She might have to turn back before she got to the café. The café might be closed. She might not be able to write her letter. She might be late back from the café. She might not want to come back at all.

She decided to count her footsteps, beginning with the first one that took her beyond the side gate and out of the shadow of the Red Tower. She would count to a hundred and then start again. Through the Farm she went, over the field and into a long straight road. She continued along to the corner where it joined the main road, then hurried along a narrow pavement, past the Old Forge, ending at the door of the Marigold Cafe. It was just where they had said it would be.

It was a small converted cottage with a grey slate roof, white washed walls and a green front door leading into the shop. There was a bow fronted downstairs window pressing out onto the narrow pavement. Through the window she could see a blue cut glass bowl on the window ledge and beyond it a neat little parlour. She stood for several minutes before pushing the door open. A little bell tinkled inside.

There were only three tables, two with four chairs each and the third, a smaller table with two chairs was placed in the bay window overlooking the main road outside. On each table was a small glass vase containing two or three marigolds, some dark orange, some yellow, glowing as if alight. As it was a cold day, a bright log fire crackled in the hearth. At the back was a small counter and behind that, a tiny kitchen.

The cafe was run by an elderly lady, Miss Amy Brignall. She did teas and coffees, and made all her own cakes. She was a kindly soul and greeted all her customers like long lost friends. Most of them were villagers, or walkers passing through. She asked the café owner if she could have the little table in the window, so that she could see everything going on outside.

‘Course you can, dearie!’ Amy had replied cheerily. She retired to the back of the cafe before returning in a few minutes with a large cup of tea and a plate of biscuits.

She placed her letter from home on the table. She was lost in thought for a long time, staring out of the window.

‘Father died during the Second War while I was nursing at the cottage hospital. They said it was from an old First War wound. Anthony is in the RAF training to be a pilot in Rhodesia. I had to get away after it all ended. I went to Scotland on my own. Anthony wanted to be a doctor but never finished his Oxford studies. He has gone away to America, I don’t know why. He is not well. Granny has come to live with me to help bring up the boys and run the house. After I took the boys to London on my own and the man crept into our room at night and stole all my money, they said I wasn’t fit to look after them. I must go away until I was better. They did not say how long that would be.’

At last, she turned to the letter from her mother.

‘My dearest dear,

Words cannot express my sorrow at your being away from us all but it is for the best. I know it is against your will, but you know that without going the social worker would have said the boys would have to go into care. But now this won’t happen and they have agreed that as grandmother, I can look after them until you come back, which we all hope will be very soon, darling. Please do everything they ask if you know it will help you come back to us sooner.

The boys are being very good. They try and understand from what little I can tell them. I have said that mummy has had to go away for a while as she wasn’t feeling very well and needs some special help which can’t be given here. But she says to tell you that she will write every week and please to write back and send pictures and drawings as many as you can.

We can't visit yet as they say it will be too unsettling for the children so letters are all we have for now. Do tell me if there is anything I can send you, if you need any more of your clothes, or things from your room. Are there any books you would like, I know you love the Friendship Book, shall I send that in a parcel? Or your favourite book of poems, Keats or Shelley? I know how you love the Spring time, with the trees budding and the daffodils and crocuses pushing through like they do in our back garden.

The office continues much the same. They have been very good and allowed me to reduce my hours so that I can be at home when the boys come home from school and in holiday time. I still go to the Tudor Tryst for my lunch most days. Welsh rarebit you know is my regular choice. The view over the roof tops from my perch stool is often full of the sound and sight of seagulls, I think they are nesting there and very protective of their young when they hatch out. I'm not sure but I think there may be a blackbird nesting in the apple tree in the back garden, what a thrill it will be if we can see the young ones flying off!

We listen to the radio quite a lot in the evenings, Children's hour of course and then perhaps a few games of Halma or snakes and ladders. I don't let them win of course, well sometimes perhaps. Bed times are the most difficult but we sing two of the old songs you sang with them- "Off to bed said sleepy head" and then ""Goodnight mama, goodnight papa". They always remember you and in their prayers.

Well goodnight for now, dearest, and God be with you, I will write again next week enclosing whatever they write or draw for you and will send you a parcel meantime from the post office on The Green.

We all send lots of love and think of you so very much.'

She put down the letter and stared into space, her lip trembling and a lump in her throat.

Amy did not try to engage her in conversation, realising that she needed time to herself. After a few minutes dealing with other customers, she took her over another cup of tea and a piece of cake.

‘No charge, dearie!’ Amy said quietly, ‘Enjoy it, the cake's home-made.’

She looked up and smiled gratefully at the cafe owner, before turning to the window so that the lady would not see the tears in her eyes at this small act of kindness.

Her eyes strayed to the road outside as a familiar green and cream bus drew up. Several passengers boarded the bus. Involuntarily, her body moved forward from the table, straining to join them. She walked unsteadily to the door to be nearer. The passengers on the bus looked at her curiously as she stood framed in the doorway holding the letter in her hand. The bus moved off and disappeared round the bend.

‘Take my love to them’ she whispered, waving until it had completely gone.

She slowly returned to the table and sat down to write her reply. She wrote nothing about the place where she had to stay. Instead she wrote about her first visit to the little cafe, about the cafe lady, the leaves on the trees as she walked along the lane, the green fields around the farm, and how lovely their carefully drawn pictures were and how much they meant to her.

‘Today I went for the first time to such a lovely little tearoom. It's the dearest place, called the "Marigold Cafe", it's only a mile down the road walking at a steady pace and I can sit here in the warm-there is a good fire going- and read your letters and write one back. Such a dear lady runs the café - she is very kind, she gives me extra tea and cakes and won't take any more money. I saw such lovely spring colours on the way here, the primroses and crocuses were out in the hedgerows as I walked down the lane, and you would have loved to see the little lambs gambolling in the field as I passed through the farm. The birds were in

very fine voice in the trees all along the road. I heard a cuckoo, and had to stop to listen- such a beautiful sound. Thank you so, so much for your beautiful drawings and writings, they mean so much. Must finish now to catch post".'

She ended with many kisses, always nine, three for each of them. She sealed the envelope and put on a stamp that Miss Brignall had lent her. She folded up their letter carefully into her pocket and paid for the tea and biscuits.

‘See you next week, dearie!’ called out Miss Brignall, adding on an impulse- ‘Amy Brignall’s the name. Most of my customers call me Amy, some Old Amy if they know me really well! But you can call me Amy, if you like.’

She smiled her reply, and nodded, but she wouldn’t call her Amy yet. Her mind was elsewhere. She closed the cafe door carefully behind her and took the letter to the post box a few yards away. She held the letter with both hands and placed it in the box. She heard it drop but still felt inside the box to make sure it had gone. She trudged back up the long, straight lane, past the Old Forge. The Red Tower appeared over the tree tops.

She turned off along the footpath that crossed the Farm. The short cut avoided having to walk up the main drive and she now knew how much it would help to prolong the feeling that she was still in the countryside, that she could still be free. She would soon know every step of the way. She entered the grounds by the side gate. The Red Tower now loomed above her. She crossed the yard and entered the building through the main doors. As ever, she turned to the left and walked slowly down the long green corridor. The heavy doors shut behind her. It was to be another week before she could return to the little cafe.



Summer 1956

She sat at the table by the window of the little cafe, as she always did once a week. The afternoon sun streamed through the window and shone on the blue cut glass bowl on the window ledge. A letter lay on the table beside a mug of tea and some biscuits on a plate. Folded into the letter were coloured papers in several childish hands, decorated with crayon drawings and many kisses. The bus had been and gone as usual. She picked up the letter from the table:-

'Dearest dear, the children were so pleased to hear your news when I read the letter to them and enclose their special drawings for you. I hope you haven't been too hot. It's what I call muggy here, especially in the office, I have to have the window up at the bottom but then the seagulls try and come in and I have to shoo them off. They are after my digestive biscuit! The boys are going to stay with Uncle and Aunty in London for a week each in August. It's too much for them having all three of them. They will go on the 10.07 to Victoria and Uncle will meet them at the station so there is nothing to worry about. They love having them.

Now the days are so long the boys are often playing outside in the front or back garden until well into the evening and I call them in for their supper. They have put a tent up in the back garden so I always know where to find them if they are not in view! I have the French doors open from the drawing room so can hear bird song and lawn mowing and other lovely

summer things. I do a little gardening in the late evening when it is cooler. I should be used to the heat after all those years in the Far East, but we don't get the monsoon rains here to cool things down and no one seems ready for heat, we get so little of it usually.

Write soon dearest, hoping that you are able to at least get outside for a little time each day and that your weekly visits to the little café are a comfort to you and a sign that things are going well.

With all our love, always thinking of you.'

She folded up the letter and replaced it carefully in its envelope. She picked up her pen to write her own letter, gazing for a long moment out of the window and feeling the warmth of the summer sun on her face. She wrote nothing about the place where she had to stay. Instead she wrote about the little cafe garden, about Miss Amy Brignall, about the summer sun as she walked along the lane, the green fields around the farm, and how lovely their carefully drawn pictures were and how much they meant to her.

'I saw so many flowers on the way to the cafe today, everything is so green, you will be so glad summer is here and the long summer holidays aren't far away and you can play outside all day . The cafe garden is looking very pretty. It has a huge willow tree which provides plenty of shade, and lots of marigolds of course. Amy (her name is Miss Brignall, but she likes to be called by her first name) says they like the full sun so she brings them on in pots round the side and then when they are nearly ready to come through, she brings them round to the front in the full sun and plants them in long green window boxes. They have been flowering here since May and will continue until October, which will be so lovely. When the days are getting shorter, I will still be able to enjoy their colour. Amy always has a little vase of them on the tables inside. Thank you a million times for your simply lovely pictures, they cheer me up no end. Must finish now to catch post'

She ended with many kisses, always nine, three for each of them. She sealed the envelope and put on a stamp that Amy had lent her. She folded up their letter carefully into her pocket and paid for the tea and biscuits.

‘See you next week, dearie!’ called out Miss Brignall.

She smiled her reply, but said nothing. Her mind was elsewhere. It was time to go. She trudged back up the long, straight lane, past the Old Forge. The Red Tower appeared over the tree tops. She entered the grounds by the side gate. The Red Tower loomed above her. She crossed the yard and entered the building through the main doors. She turned to the left as she had to, and walked slowly down the long green corridor. The heavy doors shut behind her. It would be another week before she could return to the little cafe.



Autumn 1956

She sat at the table by the window of the little cafe, as she always did once a week. The afternoon sun shone weakly through the window and cast a shadow across her table and the letter from home which lay on the table beside a mug of tea and some biscuits on a plate. The

envelope also contained some sheets of coloured paper with words in several childish hands and decorated with crayon drawings. They ended with many kisses. She picked up the letter:-

'My dearest dear, how time has flown, can hardly believe the summer is nearly over. How I shall miss the long warm days in the garden and have missed you being out there with me. The boys are not wanting to go back to school, but of course they have to. We have had the usual box of clothes delivered here "on appro" by the shop boy. I don't know what his name is but he always delivers very speedily when I tell them what we need. The boys have all tried on their uniforms again and fortunately most of them still fit, just one or two things needed, especially shoes, you know how fast their feet grow. They have all been re-measured at the shop near the office. They like going as the assistant measures their feet with a wooden rule and slider and then gets out several boxes of shoes to try on. They are so expensive though, I don't know how they expect people to pay those prices and the shoes don't last that long. But we always get the ones you used to, they cost a bit more but they are better quality.

The leaves have started to fall now and they love scrunching on them as we walk to school and back. There are lots on the way, including a lovely horse chestnut "conker" tree where they have to stop, so we are nearly late!

Well must go now, write soon and we all send our love and miss you terribly.'

She looked out of the window. Summer had gone but she saw instead the richness of the autumn that was upon them. She started to write her own letter. She wrote nothing about the place where she had to stay. Instead she wrote about the autumn leaves as she walked along the lane, the harvesting in the fields around the farm, and how lovely their carefully drawn pictures were and how much they meant to her.

'I saw harvesting machines in the field as I went down the footpath through the farm, they are very busy and trying to get all the corn in before the weather changes. In the lane, there were many leaves on the ground, all different colours, gold, brown and red, so lovely. I looked for conkers like we used to but no luck so far. I am drawing you an autumn picture to make up, and thank you so very much for your lovely drawings and messages. You remember the poem 'To Autumn' by John Keats- 'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness' - I love that line. There was no mist this morning but it was quite cold and there were one or two bonfires in the gardens on the way here this afternoon. I was glad I had my warmer coat on. I know you will think of the 'Wandering Hedgehog!' off on his travels. Oh, and there were two swifts on the telephone wire outside as I came along the road. They were getting ready to fly off to warmer climes. I wish I could fly with them to you all.'

She stopped suddenly and gazed out of the window. The swifts were no longer on the wire. They had flown without her. She brushed a tear away from her eye, and carefully crossed out the last line she had written. She could say no more.

'Must finish now, to catch post' she scribbled, her hand shaking. She ended with many kisses, always nine, three for each of them. She sealed the envelope and put on a stamp that Amy had lent her. She folded up their letter carefully into her pocket and paid for the tea and biscuits.

'See you next week, dearie!' called out Miss Brignall. She smiled her reply, but said nothing.

She knew every step of the way back. She entered the grounds by the side gate. The Red Tower loomed above her. She crossed the yard and entered the building through the main doors. She turned to the left as she had to, and walked slowly down the long green corridor.

The heavy doors shut behind her. It would be another week before she could return to the little cafe.

Unless, she suddenly thought, like the swifts *she* could fly away. The thought stayed with her through dinner. When she was alone for a few minutes that evening she carefully counted the coins and notes in her purse, some that she had been allowed to keep on arrival, others she had earned through her work in the laundry. It would be enough to get her somewhere, anywhere, she felt sure. She hid the purse inside some of her clothes. She tried to sleep but her mind was racing.

It was all quite simple. She would go as usual to the café next week. But instead of walking back to the Red Tower, she would get on the bus and go home. At last, exhausted by these thoughts and the anticipation of what was to come, she lay there counting the number of steps to the café as she did on her weekly walk. She started to 100 but only got as far as the Farm.



Winter 1956

She sat by the window of the little cafe. There had been no visits there for months. October and November had passed confined to the ward with only the twice daily walks round the

exercise garden to look forward to, as punishment for her escape. They could hardly believe that she had gone, such was her normally exemplary behaviour.

They had started a search of the grounds, then extended it to the route she would have taken to the café. They had visited the café and questioned the café owner. Yes, she could confirm that a regular customer of hers had visited earlier that afternoon, had had her usual tea and cake and had left at about the usual time. As to whether she had got on the bus, she couldn't say. Miss Brignall was quite firm on that point.

But they had then checked with the bus company and tracked down the bus driver. He remembered her well as he drove the bus on that route quite often and had never seen her before and she had seemed very nervous and unsure of how much the fare would be and had asked him to be sure to tell her when to get off. Yes, she had got off on the Green and then he supposed continued on foot. He didn't want any trouble, he had never had an absconding patient on his bus before and how was he to know?

They knew now where she had gone and called off their search of the grounds. It did not take long for the ambulance to arrive and take her back. She had not been allowed to see the children. It had all been for nothing. There had been so much crying. She would lose all her privileges. She would have to start again.

A nurse had sat inside the back with her to make sure she didn't do anything silly.

'You shouldn't have done that, dearie' she had said as they walked down the front path steps to the ambulance, 'caused us a lot of trouble you have.' After the rear doors closed, she never said another word.

The ambulance jolted and swayed its way back to the hospital, mile after mile until at last, the red tower had loomed over the tree line. The ambulance made its way down Straight Lane

and up the long drive. They alighted at the main entrance where a single shaded light gleamed above the steps. The porter in his white jacket was roused by the door bell and opened up, grumbling about the lateness of the hour.

Once more the heavy door had closed behind her and shut out the world of sunlight and life that she so longed for. With leaden steps, she had followed the nurse in silence back to the ward. The door was locked behind her. She had thrown away her chance. There might never be a second one.

A dark cloud descended on her and would not lift. She slept fitfully and dreamed that once more she was waiting at the bus stop. The bus appeared in the distance and she held her arm out to signal it to stop but instead of slowing down it accelerated and swept past. She turned desperately to go back into the café but the door banged shut in her face and the window curtains were sharply pulled across.

She awoke to the dreadful realisation that she was still there. Each day, once again, she would be walking for an hour in the exercise gardens before lunch. Each day, she would be walking for another hour in the exercise gardens after lunch. She felt a glimmer of hope pass through her. Unless they kept her confined to the ward, she would still have the sight, the sounds and the smell of freedom even in that small garden.

How she loved to be outside, even for those brief moments, to be able to stand and listen to bird song, to see the leaves on the trees changing colour, to watch clouds moving across the sky. She always walked round in the same direction, as did the others, always through the same gates, all counted out, all counted in. There was never any change to the routine, inside or outside.

Day after day, until it was time to go outside and after her morning work in the sewing room, she paced the long corridors as far as she could go, counting as she went, up to 100, then, at the last locked door, turned and started again. At exactly the appointed hour, the key was turned in the lock and she joined the others outside.

How soon these moments of freedom were over. The long days and nights stretched ahead, but she clung on to her brief moments of happiness, and waited patiently for the key to turn again and the door to be opened.

She often thought about the little café. Her whole daily purpose was now centred on being able to go there again. Without that sense of purpose, she had nothing. Only by showing them that she could be trusted would she ever see her family again. That must be her sole aim, her only plan. It was not about escaping. It was about proving that she could be trusted to NOT escape.

So, day after day, she worked hard in the sewing room and followed every instruction for the daily routine to the letter. She assisted in the cutlery count. She was the first through the door into the exercise garden. She was never late for meals. She always turned her light off at the appointed hour at night. No one saw or heard the tears that rolled silently down her face and onto her pillow every night or could share her dreams of what might be.

It was always the same dream. She was approaching a barred gate after walking miles down a long corridor clutching her small brown suitcase. Her steps were like lead as she dragged herself towards the gate. Through a little window in the gate, the sun cast a pool of light which dazzled her, but through which she could just see in the distance those dearest to her waiting for her. She pushed the handle of the gate but it wouldn't open and when she looked through the window again, there was no one there. That was how the dream always ended.

Then, one short winter's day she was called once more to the Big One's office. She had been very good and helpful he said since '*the incident*'. Her work in the sewing room was *exemplary*, as was her behaviour and willingness to please. So, she was to be allowed out, just for one afternoon, to the Marigold Café again. If she returned at the time expected, she might be trusted to go again the following week.

When she was on her own, she cried for joy. She was not sure what it would be like setting foot outside the gates again or how she would be, but she knew that she would go. She was to leave at 2 o'clock, straight after lunch, and be back by no later than 4 o'clock. She knew that it would take her half an hour to walk each way, taking the short cut. That would give her an hour at the cafe. That would be enough.

She put one shilling and sixpence in her purse to pay for tea and biscuits. She had decided that that was what she would have. It would all be as it was before. In her coat pocket was a letter from home, some plain paper, an envelope and a pen. She would read her letter while she was there and then write one back. It would be a private place where she could be alone with her own thoughts. As she thought of what this would mean to her, the anxiety she had felt subsided and was replaced by a calm determination.

She paced the exercise gardens with a fixed tread and purpose before lunch, never lifting her head, in case something happened to stop her from going out that afternoon. She ate lunch in a trance. The cutlery count proceeded smoothly. She went to fetch her coat. The hour had come.

The afternoon was cold and bright as she set off. The House doors closed behind her, and she crossed the yard to the side gate in the shadow of the Red Tower. She took the short cut from the grounds, across the Farm to join the main road. She started off, slowly at first and then a little more quickly as her confidence grew. She counted her footsteps, beginning with

the first one that took her beyond the side gate to the grounds. She counted to 100 and then started again.

She continued counting as she passed the Farm. She counted another 100 as she turned into a long straight road and hastened along to the corner where it joined the main road. She continued counting along a pavement for about a hundred yards, past the Old Forge, and ended the count at the door of the Marigold café. Miss Amy Brignall greeted her like a long lost friend and brought her tea and biscuits.

The bus came and went and she resolutely refused to look up while it was stopped outside. She opened the envelope and took out her letter. Inside, as always were some coloured papers with a few words in children's writing and many pictures in crayon. She read the letter.

'My dearest dear, words cannot express my sadness at what happened when you came home so unexpectedly. How I wish that you could have stayed and seen the boys, but my dear, it was night time, they were in bed and would not have understood what was going on and been so upset to see you taken away again. When you rang the bell I had a dreadful foreboding. It was so absolutely wonderful to see you there in the porch but my dear you put me in a terrible position. Should I let you stay and run the risk of the boys being taken into care or should I phone the hospital and tell them you were here and to come and take you back. You know that's what I had to do and that I did it for the best. When you had gone I went upstairs to them and they were all awake.

Oh my dear! They had heard everything from the top of the stairs and seen you go from the front bedroom window. I had to explain that it was all a mistake and that you had been called away again. It was all terribly difficult but eventually they went back to sleep. I sang them 'Goodnight papa, goodnight mama'. I know this must have been terrible for you too and that you only did it to see them and be with us but it can't be like that. They will probably stop you

going out at all for a while and that won't do you any good at all. I know how much the fresh air means to you. Please do everything they say from now on, darling, so that you can come home to us soon.'

For a while, she was unable to write anything in reply, eventually she picked up her pen:-

'I hope you are all wrapping up warm when you go out and have fires going now winter is coming on, I know there is always a good blaze in the cosy stove for evenings and the kitchen is always warm.'

Have you made your Christmas lists yet? I expect the shops in Kings Rd are getting all their Christmas things in and the lights will be up, what a lovely sight they are leading down to the station where there is always a huge Christmas tree and late night shoppers bustling about. Nearly all the leaves have gone from the trees now and I have seen a squirrel scurrying around collecting acorns for its winter store, sometimes there is frost on the ground and on the windows, it makes such pretty patterns I hardly like to touch it.'

Her hand moved involuntarily towards the café window with its diamond panes, closed against the winter chill. She shivered and pulled her hand back. The light was fading. *'Must go now, to catch the post.'*

She sealed the envelope, said goodbye to Miss Brignall and left the café. With both hands she placed the letter in the post box on the wall outside. She heard it drop but still felt inside the box to make sure it had gone. She trudged back up the long, straight lane, past the Old Forge. The Red Tower appeared over the tree tops.

She turned off along the footpath that crossed the Farm. The short cut avoided having to walk up the main drive, and she now knew how much it would help to prolong the feeling that while she was in the countryside she could still be free. She knew every step of the way.

She entered the grounds by the side gate. The Red Tower loomed above her. She crossed the yard and entered the building through the main doors. She turned to the left as she had to, and walked slowly down the long green corridor. The heavy doors shut behind her. It was to be another week before she could return to the little cafe.



Christmas 1956

The cold light of winter sent shafts of light through the window, but no warmth reached her. She kept her coat on while Amy Brignall lit a log fire in the hearth. Soon a bright blaze was crackling into life and reflecting onto the delicate Christmas decorations that Amy had thoughtfully placed on each table. Her hands began to warm. A letter and envelope lay on the table beside a mug of tea and some biscuits on a plate. The letter was typed onto headed paper. It had been given to her in the office that morning. Christmas was a time to be with family they said. It was a two week pass to freedom and might be extended. *It was the most precious piece of paper she had ever possessed.*

She checked the time on the wall clock above the fireplace. She folded up the letter into its official looking envelope, placed it carefully into her pocket and paid for the tea and biscuits. Her eyes strayed to the road outside looking for the familiar bus to draw up. Several

passengers waiting in the bus shelter outside stood up ready. She picked up her small brown suitcase and walked steadily to the café door.

‘Goodbye, dearie!’ called out Miss Brignall. She smiled at Amy.

‘Thank you for everything’ she whispered and on a sudden impulse turned and hugged her. She walked the few steps to the bus and handed over her fare to the driver. The door to the bus shut behind her. She sat down by the window. They would be waiting for her on the Green she knew, quite soon now, looking out for the bus as it came round the corner.

A week later, just before Christmas, the postman delivered a parcel to the proprietor of the Marigold Cafe. Miss Brignall untied the string and removed several layers of padding to reveal a small framed picture. It was an original watercolour painting of marigolds in a vase. They were glowing as if alight. The painting was not signed but bore the words ‘Thank You’.

THE END