

Dear Diary: Bristol to Tijuana

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FX: BORDER TRAFFIC, CHINOOK HELICOPTERS, MUSIC

Summer 1996. The border of Mexico and California

Every day it's the same: on the US side there are patrols, helicopters and search lights, white jeeps parked on the bluff, their occupants surveying Mexico, and the sweat and grime of a border crossing. A tall corrugated iron fence marks the divide - stretching right out into the ocean.

On the Mexican side, the fence is covered with graffiti and slogans: El Mundo Dividido and Welcome to the New Berlin Wall.

Our bus passes through the checkpoint and drives on past hawkers selling papier-mache.

The highway crosses a ravine spilling shanty dwellings, and skirts past an incongruous green mansion with icing pink and white domes.

We enter the border town of Tijuana, known widely as a funnel for a continent's drug traffic, for its cheap and freely available sex, and, in more recent years, as a kind of international alternative health mecca for those with too much money or too much desperation.

INTRODUCTION

Bristol to Tijuana feels such a distance. A few days ago, surrounded by lists of things to be done, I realised *I don't want to go*, I don't want to go through this.

I've had a chronic illness for twenty-two years, since I was ten which has meant that I am usually in pain and always exhausted. For four years I was almost permanently in bed. One of the best decisions I made ten years ago was to start using a wheelchair as it means I can now do more. What really confines me is the way people are determined to cast me as a victim.

Trips to the doctors and alternatives have produced few results, so reluctantly, I have been persuaded to try further afield - a clinic in northern Mexico which offers a mixture of orthodox and alternative treatments, many of which have yet to be legalised in the US. I've no idea whether it will help or whether it's the right thing to do, but I've no idea what else is left.

I want to be clear - I am looking to be well, not 'cured', not to become someone or something other than myself.

Sunday 28 July

Jude (my sister) and her partner Ryan drove Mum and me down to the Southern California border town of San Ysidro. The place we're staying - 'home' for the next three weeks - is the International Motor Inn which is about as close to the border as you can get. It's Californian here in legislation and brand names but Mexican in most else, not least people and language (and, not so long ago, ownership).

The motel-cum-RV park is an intriguing 50:50 mix: the halt and the lame here to visit this secular Lourdes of the Americas, alongside the regular holiday makers here for the advantages of San Diego without the expense. What, I wonder, do they make of us?

The motel has half-a-dozen courtesy buses which provide a shuttle service across the border for those of us in search of our miracles. Half a block from here, across a 100 year dust driftland is the border fence - Tijuana rising beyond.

At the end of an alley and rising out of nothing is a sprawling, seemingly all American shopping mall - vast, sun-baked parking lots, single-storey mega stores. We hopped shade-to-shade from one patch of cool air to the next. There's K-Mart, a shambolic Woolies, goods strewn across the aisles which stretch to the horizon. We found ourselves an old-fashioned kettle and a couple of cheap mugs, so now we can make tea.

Monday 29 July

Okay, it's today, and there's no avoiding it. 7.00am. I'm lying here thinking, Well at least it's a beautiful day (it takes time to take this sun for granted).

We board our respective buses (the number 9 has a wheelchair lift) and eight of us sit in our own little glass-walled worlds to make the daily circuit of the 30-odd clinics. I entwine my fingers in the spokes of my wheelchair because it soothes and close my eyes as we travel through border control and into Tijuana.

FX: DRILLING, HAMMERING, BUILDING SITE.

Dr Andrade's clinic is surrounded by building frenzy - drilling and hammering that rattles the paper thin partitions. It can't be long before his clear view to the Pacific is obscured. On three sides the view is of colourful tumblings of houses, mountains and ocean haze.

Dr Andrade strides in shortly after nine, beaming at everyone and shaking hands all round. In his consulting room is a mass of photographs - grateful patients - some alongside Dr Andrade who sticks out his chest, throws back his head and beams like a genial, bountiful Father Christmas.

The basic pattern of treatment is a course of daily intravenous infusions of vitamins, enzymes and other medicines designed to deal with toxins and viruses and strengthen the immune system.

No suitable veins could be found for the insertion of a drip. So it was decided I would need a sub-clavian catheter inserted - that's into my chest, under my collar bone and into a particularly large blood vessel near my heart. School biology has never seemed so real. And this my first day. Eight inches of flexible plastic tubing curling into my bosom.

The procedure over, and Alberto (Doctor Andrade's assistant) helped me to get dressed and back onto my chair, and then the adventure really began. I just started keeling over all over the place: couldn't sit up, couldn't open my eyes. And every time I breathed, I coughed, breathed and coughed.

Rapid-fire, three-way conversations in Spanish went on over my head. I half-sat, half-lay on a treatment room chair, lurching in and out of consciousness, aware that Mum is close and wanting to look at her and say 'It's okay' and 'I wish you didn't have to see this', and thinking 'O I'm so glad you're here'.

Soon it transpires they are concerned that the needle might have punctured my lung I was transported down in the elevator and we squeezed into Dr Andrade's tiny dusky-blue VW beetle.

Then we were bouncing through the streets, although I somehow missed all the sights, for an X-ray at the Oasis Hospital.

The x-ray thankfully proved reassuring - my lung is grazed, not punctured. Since I have been ill, my body goes into shock much more readily. Any kind of treatment, even as mild as going to the dentist, has a pretty profound effect. Still I was left thinking, what have I let myself in for?

Dr Andrade found a sofa for me to lie on to wait for the bus and over that hour my queasiness began to ease. By late afternoon it had all but solved itself.

Tuesday 30 July

Day 2 is going to be a tough one, after one hour's sleep and too much of the usual pain.

I have just signed an alarming paper which means I have acknowledged that they might not cure me (fair enough), that the treatment is experimental and that I forgo the right to sue if they make me worse. When they produced the form, my heart contracted. I'm sure the usual routine was to produce it on Day One, but from where I sat it felt a bit like 'We nearly killed her yesterday; get her to sign it quick, before the next disaster'.

An infusion of Vitamin C - okay. Vitamin B complex, glucose and insulin mixture, less good. Ozone, which is surprisingly part of the treatment, administered very slowly. It seemed to go fine, then I felt a little odd, before splurging into a coughing fit in which I struggled for breath, tears streaming, for hours.

I wondered this morning when I will have my first journey into Mexico with my eyes open - I was still wondering this afternoon as today's return trip was worse than yesterday, full of coughing, faintness, muscles gone completely. There was a long wait at the border, sitting in full sun.

The tall, white border guards in reflective glasses and reflective-white ordered us fairly civilly to "Show our passports or declare ourselves US Citizens." Our Mexican-American driver got a very different treatment. The immigration officer hurled abuse at him, before demanding to know his nationality.

There's a certain arrogance about the United States. All right, so as Mum points out, some would call it confidence. But in the current media coverage of the Olympics, medallists from outside the United States often don't appear on the screen or are even cut out of the picture, during medal ceremonies, and the international news reminds me of the Siamese map of the world in 'The King and I' - with the empire of Siam magnified and full centre and the rest of the world grouped round in a scattering of islands.

I was practically lifted onto my bed for the afternoon. Now my colour is better, although I am very tired, feeling lousy.

Wednesday 31 July

On the US side of the border, there are signs along the freeway, reminiscent of the British school road signs, but with an added sense of urgency - three figures - black silhouettes on yellow - a man, a woman, a child are fleeing, the child lifted from her feet in parental haste. To escape the law, illegal immigrants have been known to run across eight lanes of fast moving traffic. Drivers are warned to be alert. For the half-mile leading to the checkpoint, a high mesh fence divides the two sides of the highway. The authorities have planted clematis to beautify it. Just before entering Mexico, after a

host of directional signs, there is a final notice, almost too late: 'No U-turn to the USA'.

My body is a temple says the woman on the telly.

I had my second ozone treatment about an hour ago. Dr Andrade decided first to demonstrate the machine, just to show me how effective it is. The machine sits in a picnic hamper sized dark-green metallic suitcase, perched on top of the fridge in the treatment room. The lid is raised to reveal a small oxygen cylinder with a short hose. Dr Andrade switched on the machine which converts oxygen to ozone and held his latex gloves over the hose outlet. See how safe! he cried, as I watched his gloves disintegrate into ribbons before evaporating completely just moments later. Now how *that* was supposed to reassure me, I couldn't work out. What he hadn't told me was that the ozone targets artificial fibres and viruses, and not human tissue.

Today Dr Andrade took the treatment oh-so slowly and talked me through a relaxation exercise the whole time. He even hummed to me a little. It eased it all so that I came through mostly unscathed this time. What physician I have ever met could find the time and compassion for this?

FX: GREASE

Thursday 1 August

My eyes stayed firmly shut on the journey to and from the clinic. A woman in the bus was describing a poster advertising Juan Travolta in the 70's retro-movie El Vaselino.

Dr Andrade is fairly hardline about the border: there's work in Mexico if people want it he says and no need for illegal crossings. Alberto, his assistant, tells me how his family crossed the border relying on fake documents and nerves of steel. He got an education there from the age of 12, until he was old enough to make his own decision and he escaped back Home. There's a US assumption that illegal border crossings are all about the lure of cars and swimming pools and the gleaming towers of San Diego - mind you, so what if they are?

Friday 2 August

I returned yesterday from the clinic, had three naps and still slept at night. It is pretty much all I want to do, left in my pit of a bed - rucked sheets, scattered books and diaries, pairs of glasses and splints surrounding me - just sleeping the days away.

So many questions. Will I improve? What does 'improve' mean?

My choice of words is careful. I don't talk about it *working*, but about it *helping*. With most other people, I am sure it's different. Their judgement about whether it has 'worked' will be in terms of virtual miracles. And their marker of progress is sure to be the Big W - is she Walking? As ever, *my* only relevant markers are activity levels - can I work? can I love? can I have a baby? - will I feel less exhausted?

The number 9 bus was broken down this morning so I had to climb onto a non-lift bus. Then it was a bum-shuffle up the six steps into the clinic, and that's me finished.

I am behaving badly today. I have had enough. I don't want to talk to anyone.

Saturday 3 August

Songs pop into my head. The other day it was Oh What a Night. This morning, I've got you under my Skin - so deep in the heart of me, you're nearly a part of me - my drip still there beneath my clavicle.

The other night found my Mum having to massage the right buttock of her 32-year-old daughter in order to disperse the fluid from an injection and make the pain subside. There seems little point these weeks in trying to hang on to dignity, to conceal the wobbles and dimples of flesh that have been my privacy for so long. We laugh.

Sunday 4 August

Through this treatment I've been reduced to thinking, I want my Mum, even with her sitting just across the motel room. It's certainly bringing me right down to an infantile level.

A sliver of melon, ready-cut. And Mum's trying to tempt me with a half-slice of toast now - cut into soldiers! I tell her soon she'll be singing me nursery rhymes and then, in a flash of inspiration, I realise the origins of the toast that accompanies the childhood boiled egg: all those soldiers lined up in a row unable to put Humpty together again.

I have never been so surrounded by, so acutely aware of, disease and decay as now. From the proceeds of all of us disintegrating individuals are built the dozens of clinics, research institutes and bio-tech labs of Tijuana and the Western States - those multi-million dollar gleaming-windowed temples to health.

Monday 5 August

I thought I would wear my brightly coloured hooped 'Miro' earrings today - just to say here I am! But even these lightweight loops of wire are too heavy and I haven't the strength for fashion statements. So I've taken them off.

A consultation with Dr Andrade in which he says I need to cooperate with him turfs me into turmoil: surely I'm doing all I can? how *can* I do more? But later it seems it is more a misunderstanding than an instruction - a combination of my hard conditioning and our different languages. All he means is this is proving tough to crack, we must work on it together. He goes on to say he will not give up, he does not give up, and smiles a wide smile. It begins to feel okay.

Later he says he might take me out to a beach so I can try walking in some sand! I don't know whether to believe him, whether it is a flash in the pan, blurted out and wished unspoken, or whether he means it. I'm not sure how I feel about it.

Tuesday 6 August

As ever, my mind runs far ahead of my body. Pride comes before a fall, as I have found out before, but I can't switch my mind *off*. If I get 'well-er', this will not be some blaze of glory or victory parade, but a slow, timid emerging. Behaving differently, 'well-er', in front of people who have their own ideas of what I am like because, to them, I have 'always' been that way will be tough. Tough too in front of those who observe or comment on the minutiae of my progress, as I know they will. I would have so much learning to do - re-learning, growing up. It had never dawned on me until Mum said it, that so

will she. For her it would be the first time that both her daughters would actually have flown the nest and she would have to learn how to behave without parental responsibilities, long after her contemporaries.

A journey across the border with dark glasses, one eye part-open, part of the time. Progress. I see the sand of the hills and the uneven rusting of the barricade. In Mexico, little clusters of people gaze into California.

Today, Dr Andrade brought in his 12-year-old son Gustavo, who had been coughing and spluttering half the night. So we two reclined on our next-door chairs whilst he dripped vitamin C and I dripped glucose, insulin and all the rest, and we both inhaled some atrocious aroma from a vaporiser. He was a welcome diversion and taught me a few words of Spanish.

Dr Andrade mentioned walking again.

Tomorrow is ten years of using a wheelchair and I intend to mark it somehow. Perhaps a few sips of wine, a few steps in the sand and a demonstration wheelie is fitting. That way I keep all my options open.

Wednesday 7 August

Dr Andrade had an injured foot, so no beach trip and no wheelies, and the antibiotics rule out alcohol. I marked my tenth wheelchair anniversary in my head; it was significant, just not auspicious.

Thursday 8 August

A better day.

Dr Andrade suggests I take a week off before continuing treatment. I think they have been disconcerted not to see me responding more rapidly - I am still collapsing everywhere - it looks as though I am rather iller than they first thought.

The logistics are complicated (air tickets, fares, Mum's term dates, etc), but it feels right.

I think all this had gone on for years longer than I ever realised. I remember a mountain walk - Mum, Dad, sister Ju and Jackie Dakin, me dragging behind and whinging because I was too tired, because it hurt, and being told not to be a baby because everyone else was striding out; and late teens, walking down Park Street to Broadmead and my legs *aching* so much. I thought everyone's legs ached like that - perhaps I was unfit - or was it my shoes? I didn't think it wasn't meant to be that way.

Saturday 10 August

6.00am and a morning that evokes early November school day mornings, snug in bed, curtain open to the half-light, street lamp, chill to the air and the battering of rain. Then I remember that the rain is the roar of air conditioning fans and the haze will have burned off by late morning to blue and sun.

Mum has produced a wallchart of dosages - and I thought I had got a week off. She is responsible for dosing me at the appropriate times but keeps remembering things she has forgotten to add to the eight or so medications already there. I must inject my interferon twice daily, but we found an ex-nurse by the pool for the larger injections, so Mum at least has a reprieve.

Sunday 11 August

67 pills
 40 injections
 25-30 drip bags
 15 bruises
 14 days' coughing, so far
 and a whole day of mostly sleeping.

So far.

Monday 12 August

Evening, we have found ourselves too weary to go out, too distracted to read, and so have spent time exploring the best part, or perhaps the worst, of the 72 available TV channels. When not engaged in assorted medical diversions, we confine ourselves to Channel 32's round-the-clock news.

Sunday 18 August

Jude and Ryan arrived yesterday evening for 24 hours.

We visited the House of Pacific Relations, in San Diego, a village of front rooms all under separate roofs and kitted out from selected countries around the world. Each 'house' is adopted by a couple or family group who deck it out according to their own nationality or heritage. The nations represented were pretty much white, as were the people strolling through, and I guess it's the latter that determines which nations are selected. The idea is to go round and view pictures from Poland and gaze on currency from the Czech Republic, to share a cup of tea or an indigenous morsel, and then emerge to world peace and international harmony. In 'Scotland' our guide sported an ancestral kilt and a US accent. This being the United States and the Americans with Disabilities Act in force, I was able to take my world tour pretty much unimpeded. Until England. England's two-stepped entrance kept me firmly on the outside, which really seemed to say it all.

FX: CANARIES

Tuesday 20 August

On the bus I'm beginning to take more notice of the journey. In the front courtyard of a hospital, on the clinic circuit, I see a 20-foot wire mesh dome filled with the flutterings and chitterings of brilliantly-plummaged canaries. I have no idea whether they are native to Mexico, but I felt a need coming upon me to buy a pair of wire cutters. I could not come here every day and restrain myself.

Wednesday 12 August

I'm still deeply tired and I wake feeling exhausted, but I improve as the morning wears on. What's more, the previous day's exertion seems to clear overnight, which is a new experience.

Dr Andrade wants me to walk, just a little, then a little more each day. And it's smiles all round if I do. But for me, the reservations are, as always, that walking brings pain and exhaustion. And then of course walking in public, people become voyeuristic.

Sunday 25 August

This has been a shapeless, confusing week. Week 1, so ill; week 2, so feeble; week 3, so tired' week 4, so everything - ill, weak, tired, defensive and improving, all tangled.

Wednesday 28 August

Autumn is coming here. It's Labour Day on the US side of the border - the official end of summer. Temperatures are dropping slightly, the sunset is earlier, air conditioners roar a little less at night.

Really a good day it transpires. I kept going and going.

Thursday 29 August

If I'm seen to walk today, then tomorrow I must walk better and further. They don't seem to consider whether or not it's appropriate to *me*. There is a pressure in other people's expectations. They think they want me to walk for me, but really they want me to walk for them.

With such an intensive course of treatment, the clinic wants something to celebrate. Walking is their marker of progress, because it's tangible, but really other things matter more. It's work and love and life that I'm after, and I can do that sitting down.

I walked five steps which pleased them.

Friday 30 August

One week from today, I will have finished here. For all that it has been impossible to look around us beyond the motel, bus and clinic, a kind of fond familiarity has sprung up over the weeks that will be hard to break from.

A woman said to me today 'When you got here, did you feel the whole world was ill?' 'O yes!' I replied. Yes, I wanted to say, and it dragged me down and I wanted run from all this disease and decay as I've never done before. But somehow over the weeks there has been a shift and an easing into this place. Perhaps the whole world is ill, but I'm not drowning in it quite as before.

Thursday 5 September

This morning - our last clinic morning - Mum spent at the pharmacy with a sheaf of prescriptions: supplements of minerals and vitamins, repeat courses of anti-biotics, anti-inflammatories for joints and muscles. And on her return she drew up my drink, pill and jab schedules: daily, weekly and occasional.

Today really has to have been the weirdest of all. Treatment complete for the day, 'my doctor' drove us out along the coast. On the journey, I felt I should sound lively and interested, so I was lining up

questions and conversations as we drove. And then when Dr Andrade mentioned I might like to relax as we had an 80-kilometre drive ahead of us, I realised I couldn't keep up the pretence any longer, leaned back against the head rest and gazed out of the window. That was the beginning of being myself.

FX: RESTAURANT AND MUSIC

We went to Puerto Nuevo's Lobster Village where every single restaurant in the settlement sells the stuff. They feasted on that, I on rice, beans and tortilla, and we all drank down the local Tecate beer.

Next the beach and through a mixture of them hauling and me bum-shuffling I was transported over the and down to the water - and then I was up and paddling and enjoying the forgotten sensation of heels sinking into sand.

In a sense I walked for the hell of it and not because it meant a great deal to me. But I know that it still matters greatly to Dr Andrade and I suppose, in a way, it was my thank you gift to him, even though I knew that later I would be completely exhausted. But Dr Andrade has gradually come to understand that it's not as simple as treatment and effect.

"Does this whirring sound mean the camera's taking pictures?" calls Dr Andrade, as he shot the *entire* reel and it rewound into the spool. Are you *sure* this man is a doctor? asks Jude when I relay the tale.

And then we sat back in the sand, burrowing and wriggling toes. There we were, in a row, three adults spanning three decades, sculpting and swirling and scooping the damp sand.

Back in Bristol and everyone seems to think that I've been for a three-week bullet cure, isn't that great, why aren't I up and jumping? Or else they've completely forgotten what I went for, did I have a nice holiday and how come I haven't got a better suntan.

Ten months later, I call Dr Andrade. 'How are you Liz', he asks. I tell him the positive side of how I've improved - everything in fact, apart from the issue of walking. 'And how's the walking', he asks. But we both know that walking isn't the grand finale.

I was never after some miracle cure: I wanted my life back and I feel the very beginnings of that life returning.

END