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Infection

by Sue Hitchcock

“It’s catching. She’ll have to be admitted to hospital.” our family G.P. explained to my mum and so I was shipped off by ambulance to the Neasden Isolation Hospital. I had had a sore throat for several weeks and the doctor’s penicillin injection had failed to cure it. My tonsils were almost touching, not to mention the white spots growing on them.

Where it could have come from I had no idea. None of my friends had it, nor did they catch it from me. Even the hospital didn’t know what it was until they did a blood test. It was glandular fever, otherwise known as the Kissing Disease. Well, like the character in the musical “Oklahoma”, I was a girl who couldn’t say no, but my first real boyfriend – I was nearly seventeen – was the only one I had kissed in months and he wasn’t ill.

The hospital was of the type built after the last war with single story blocks each having a ward at each end and an area for the nurses’ facilities in the middle. Some of the blocks housed polio victims imprisoned in iron lungs, their essential life support. I was trolled to the far end of the twelve bed ward and unloaded onto the bed which I was forbidden to leave for the next two weeks. Every patient seemed to have a different illness and there must have been laboratories where experts slaved over petrie dishes trying to identify the samples – blood, sputum, whatever bodily fluids could be collected.

My visitors came gowned and masked to my bed. It was my prison, my island in the ward, where all my toileting and washing had to be arranged. When my sheets were changed, I had to skoot down to the bottom of the bed, while the top was

tucked in, then climb back to the top and hug my knees, while the bottom end was tidied. None of us was very ill. One girl turned out to be allergic to lipstick, another was a Cliff Richards fan and sang constantly. An older woman opposite had a gut problem and almost caused a panic, when she offered me some magazines to read. It was forbidden!

My treatment was a fortnight of antibiotic injections in the rump, where gradually the bruised tissue refused to let the nasty goo to dissipate, but finally my tonsils began to shrink, though I hid a small piece that broke off. The test on which a pair of young doctors seemed to assess my progress was to dig under my ribs with their fingers to feel my spleen, which they said was still swollen.

I went back to school when I recovered and my life was changed, though who knows whether for better or worse. I had missed a Latin exam on which depended the plan that I should try for Oxford University to study languages. It hadn't been my idea and after the summer holidays, besides applying to study German at Bristol, I wilfully decided to try Fine Art at Reading, a more tempting idea.