

Dear Wilmet

By Camilla Zajac

25 March 2020

Dear Wilmet,

'Dear' or 'Hello'? I never quite know which one I should write, so I will keep to tradition for now and use the former. I am glad that we started emailing. It's been sad to lose you as a neighbour but wonderful to gain you as a correspondent. If that is the appropriate word in relation to email, of course!

I'm sure you're finding life just as strange as we are these days. I've been busy making masks for all of our friends and, of course, for the NHS. It's certainly been keeping me very busy, which you know I enjoy. I think I may have made my first ones too large. Dear Mother did look a little peculiar in hers and rather startled the children next door today. And poor Father Ransome could barely see over the top of his during the service. But I'm certain my next lot will be an improvement. I must get working on those very soon.

Oh, I think I hear Mother calling me. I must sign off now or whatever one does with emails.

With love,
Mary

15 April 2020

Dear Wilmet,

I was so glad to hear you are all keeping well. I think we're doing splendidly, considering the circumstances. There has been a lot to do, whether that is keeping an eye on our friends or supporting the excellent work of the church in making sure local people have enough to eat. However, there was an incident last week when Father Ransome made his customary request for food donations during the service. Lady Nollard walked up the aisle there and then and deposited a large pile of potatoes on the communion table!

Father Ransome took the stoical route by leaving them *in situ* for the rest of the service. Gazing at large, unwashed potatoes as we worshipped did feel rather *pagan*. But as mother pointed out afterwards, it's not too dissimilar from what we do during Harvest Festival! Just a little muddier and less presentable. The potatoes, I mean, not the pagans. Anyway, I'm sure Lady Nollard's potatoes will be much appreciated by whoever receives them. I wonder if they'll be told that their potatoes featured in our Sunday service. If they do find out, will it have a bearing on how they decide to serve them? Perhaps they'll choose to make something more formal - sautéed rather than just mashed, perhaps? Or maybe even fondant potatoes?

That's enough about potatoes for now. I am glad to hear Rodney is able to keep working from his home office. I trust you're finding plenty to keep you occupied. If you'd like a pattern for the masks I'm making, you only have to say, and I'll send one to you. My masks are quite in demand now I've mastered which way round the strings go. Mother likes to wear hers around the house! She says she enjoys the practice.

With love,

Mary

9 May 2020

Dear Wilmet,

I hope you're feeling well. These days do seem to drag on rather, don't they? We all need some moments of joy to cheer us up. Thankfully, we had Mr Bason for that yesterday. He brought his little radio out of the clergy house and got all of the nearby neighbours dancing after we clapped for the NHS! It was quite a sight to see Father Ransome and Father Thames jiggling along gently to *Saturday Night*. They even made it into the local paper, with a lovely photo that I'm arranging to have framed for the clergy house. Men generally look rather comical when they are dancing, but the Fathers in their robes looked quite dignified, almost as if they were taking part in some obscure but vaguely significant ritual.

Mr Bason is really doing the Fathers proud. He has instituted a whole new regime to make the most of supplies. He has been organising all of the food into specific categories and is keeping a close eye on which ones need refreshing. There's always something going on there these days. In fact, Mr Bason seems to be cooking almost constantly when I pass the house. I wondered for a while if it was because they were going to be having people to stay for the duration of this crisis. But that doesn't seem to be the case at all. I must admit I do sometimes wonder if perhaps Mr Bason is now more in charge of the house than Father Ransome.

But what about you, dear Wilmet? Are you keeping calm and carrying on? I trust you are. I hope it's not too long before we meet again.

With love,
Mary

22 June 2020

Dear Wilmet,

I have no doubt that you're enjoying your freedom now the lockdown is over. Many of us of course are having to keep to our homes or just be very careful. Mother is making the most of the opportunity to catch up with her embroidery. I continue to make my masks for NHS staff and others. I so enjoy seeing friends around town sporting their Mary-designed mask!

Some news from your home town... I think I sensed some tension when I knocked on the door of the clergy house today and (at a safe distance) enquired about how they are all doing. Mr Bason insisted on answering the door and speaking for much of the conversation. I'm not sure that confinement (the modern kind, of course) becomes him. He was chatting nineteen to a dozen and talked right over poor Father Ransome. It was most uncomfortable to witness.

I have heard hints that the tension has something to do with Father Bode's failure to fully acknowledge the artistry of Mr Bason's Boeuf en Daube. Someone said all Father B and the others really wanted was baked beans on toast. Instead, they had to wait hours before they could eat. At times like these when food is such a comfort, that must have been very trying indeed.

Other than that, dear Wilmet, I have no other news for you. We are all well, thank goodness. Your little updates help to keep me entertained. Looking forward to the next one soon.

With love,
Mary

11 July 2020

Dear Wilmet,

What a delightful surprise to have seen you – albeit briefly! You looked so well and I did love your ensemble. Rodney seems to be on good form too. Your brief visit to the village certainly got people talking! It was wonderful for us all to see a familiar yet fresh face! New experiences mean so much more these days.

That's why I enjoy my regular walks around the area. We've gathered together rather a nice little neighbours' walking group to help keep up our spirits. A few of us leave our homes at around lunchtime to make sure we have some daily exercise. Then we go for a pleasant perambulate around the place. We all maintain a safe distance from each other, of course.

The group includes Lady B who strides along in front and makes the rest of us rather hurry. Then there's little Miss Prideaux who has rather a habit of stopping in front of the nicer houses and declaring loudly that they aren't as fine as the houses in her youth. Most embarrassing when the owner of the property is in their garden or by the front door! But Miss Prideaux is a marvel. She keeps going and going like a fine wine. So we allow her her eccentricities.

We are also joined on our walks by another of our neighbours, a lady called Miss Pym, who works in an editorial role for some sort of anthropological institute, I believe. Rather interesting. It certainly sounds as if she has worked on some fascinating projects though I have heard whispers that she finds time to write some rather amusing novels too. I have to admit that while I like Miss Pym, I do sometimes get the feeling she is studying our own little tribe!

Yet another member of our walking group is Father Bode, who is wonderful at sharing bon mots and thoughts for the day as we potter around. It's all rather pleasant and something that I hope we will keep up when all of this is over. Oh, and Mr Bason insists on joining us on occasion. I have to admit I find his presence rather changes the atmosphere. Last Monday, he went so far as to insist on us going one way while the rest of us wished to go another. It was a choice between a very lovely tree-lined avenue and a rather unpromising little street.

Mr Bason simply stood and glared at us all because the way he wished to walk would take us past an antique shop that wasn't even open! It was terribly awkward – Mr Bason all but stamping his foot and Father Bode gesturing wildly with his arm towards the “chosen path”. It was quite a stand-off. I am sure you can guess who won in the end. We all ended up trooping along Mr Bason's route, like school children on a trip, and had to put up with the extra half-mile it added to our walk. He was so delighted with his victory that

he marched ahead calling “Come along, everyone! I must see what new bibelots Sankey's have in their window!”. Since that episode, there have been whispers about making plans for walking at a different time, when Mr Bason is otherwise occupied.

Golly, what a long message! It's time to go downstairs before Mother thinks I've forgotten her.

With love,
Mary

6 November 2020

Dear Wilmet,

It is no longer a mystery as to why a certain someone has been in such a fluster recently! Such news. Mr Bason announced on today's walk that he has been accepted to compete in The Great British Bake Off! He has also told the Fathers he won't return to the clergy house if he gets through the first two rounds! I had heard Father Thames complaining about Mr Bason being in a flurry of whisking, whipping and glazing these past few weeks, but just assumed it was his way of coping during these difficult times.

I suppose we must just wait and see how well he does. From what I've heard, the Fathers are rather less upset by the news than Mr B would have liked. In fact, I have it on the best authority that there has already been a conversation about a return to peace and quiet good plain food by bringing back Mrs G!

It's a pity all this excitement is accompanied by the rather sadder news about our return to lockdown. Do you feel prepared? Thankfully, Mother and I have been very organised. You know I would never stockpile, but over time we have carefully built up a decent supply of embroidery thread, good biscuits and port. All mother's favourite things really. So, we're ready and we're busy making sure our friends and neighbours are too. There is to be a meeting of the neighbours out in the street tomorrow. We will all keep our distance while planning how to make sure everyone stays well. Masks firmly on!

The initial episode of The Great British Bake Off should be shown during the first fortnight of the lockdown, which seems appropriate somehow. I wonder how Mr Bason will fare? I'm not sure he's all that good under pressure and I strongly suspect we may see some dramatic scenes in the Bake Off tent followed by a swift return to the clergy house.

So, Wilmet, here we are again - back in lockdown. I am glad we have our emails to keep each other up to date and entertained. I think it's lovely how our friendship has endured, despite your move.

Mother would say I'm being fanciful, but I feel as if we were destined to become friends somehow, whatever the occasion and era. Perhaps even some time in the past. Imagine that!

With much love,
Mary