

Monday 5 February 1979

Dear Mary,

How are you? I am well.

(We have been told we have to start off our letter to you like this. I think it sounds silly. You wouldn't say something like that in real life. Did you have to start letters like that too?)

My name is Shell Whitby. Actually, my name is Michelle but nobody calls me that. When she wants to annoy me (which happens a lot) Scary Sharon calls me Mishy. I want to pull her ear when she says that but she is bigger and stronger than me so I just pretend I don't care. When I grow up, I want to be an actress, so pretending to Sharon is good practice, don't you think?

All of us in grade five are writing to our pen pals. Lots of people in my class already have pen pals with other kids from England and America. The difference is that our pen pals are from 1829. Our principal at assembly

said that it is a year of commemoration, because it's 150 years since settlers came here from England. We have been given a diary and an album explaining what life was like in your time. So, we are writing letters to you explaining what life is like now.

What I have been told about you:

Your name is Mary Ann Swift, and exactly 150 years ago, you were in Plymouth, England, on a ship called the HMS Sulphur.

(Do you mind if I just call you Mary? Like Mary in Little House on the Prairie? (I'm a poet and didn't know it, haha!) Okay, so I know you're dead and you can't answer me but I am asking to be polite.)

You were on a boat with Captain Dance and heaps of other people.

You were about the same age as me.

Your dad was called Patrick and he was a soldier, and your mum was called Eliza. You are a little bit younger than me but I'm going to pretend we're the same age. Is that all right?

You were one of twelve kids on your boat. There were lots of grownups: twenty-two wives, and 130 soldiers and crew. It must have been weird. What did you do for all those months? Did you run around and play chasey

and hide and seek? What games did you play?

Your ship was carrying sixteen boxes of copper coins, as well as medicines and slop. I'm not sure what slop is but it sounds disgusting. Slop, slop, SLOP! I hope you didn't have to eat it!

Things I want to know:

Did you get seasick? (I would have.)

Did you laugh at Captain Dance's name? (Did you make up a rhyme like, Captain Dance, has no pants?! I would have!)

Did you have any friends on the boat with you?

Did you know where you were going?

Were you excited?

Or scared?

Or both?

I realise you can't answer because you are dead, but hopefully I will find out.

Here's what happened to me today. We've been told to write as much detail as we can so you can really imagine what it is like.

So here goes.

I am so excited to be back at school. The holidays were

so boring (not as boring as being on a ship for months, but close)! My best friend Mel was away in Melbourne the whole time and even had her birthday over there. So, I couldn't wait to get to school this morning.

The first thing we did when we saw each other was scream and scream until we were laughing so hard we couldn't scream anymore. (You'll notice I did not say to her, 'How are you? I am well.')

Then we both said at the exact same time, 'Have you heard Chiquitita?'

Then we laughed and laughed again until Scary Sharon walked by with Stinky Simon and said, 'Shut up, Witch-face.'

'Shut up, Horse-head,' Mel replied. Sharon doesn't scare her, because Mel's not scared of anybody.

'Hi Sharon,' I added. I do not call her Scary Sharon to her face. Sharon doesn't scare me as much as she scares most other kids, because my mum knows her mum from school. Sometimes I go to Sharon's house with Mum, so that makes her a Sort-of Friend. I'd like to say that she's nicer by herself, but she isn't. She's Sharon, all the time.

'Mishy,' Sharon said. Sharon poked her tongue at Mel and kept walking, with Simon slumping after her. Mel pulled her best witch face at her back.

'So,' I said, 'Chiquitita!'

Chiquitita is the latest single from the best band in the universe, ABBA.

ABBA is from Sweden, a place which is very cold, and the initials stand for the names of the members of the group: Annifrid (known as Frida), Benny, Bjorn and Agnetha (known as Anna). Anna and Bjorn are married to each other, so are Benny and Frida. On the weekends Mel and I make up dances to ABBA songs and practice them until we have all the steps exactly right.

'It's so good,' I said, at the same time as Mel said, 'It's so boring.'

'What?' This time it was me talking.

'It's slow,' she said.

'But it's ABBA.'

There was a pause. I wondered if Mel had stopped loving ABBA over the holidays, but then she grinned her Mel grin and said, 'Yeah!' Then at the top of her voice she sang, 'Chico Roll please tell me what's wrong!'

(A Chico Roll is a kind of fried sausage roll that is so oily that it comes in a greaseproof bag with Chico Roll written in orange and yellow writing. I do not think they had Chico Rolls in 1829.)

'You are so disgusting and greasy,' I sang, instead of the actual words, which I don't know yet because it's hard to understand what they are on the car radio, which is usually where I hear them.

And we started stomping with our elbows out and singing 'blah blah blah' to the words until the siren went.

'You nuts,' said Lisa, as she walked by with Jody.

'Why thank you, Friends Squared,' Mel replied, with her best nutty look.

Lisa and Jody are best friends, and Mel and I are best friends, so we are in a club called Friends Squared. This is because Lisa, who is super-good at maths, said squared means when you times something by itself. So, for us we're two by two. Mel and Lisa go to Brownies together, and Jody and I do dancing. We always play together when we need four, like for skipping competitions or elastics. It's also good because it means I always have other people to play with if Mel's away, like when she had her appendix out and was in hospital for ages.

This year is going to be so great. The only problem is that we have Mrs B as our teacher. We had her last year and she's really strict. I really wanted the new teacher Miss R. She is young and has hair a bit like Frida from

ABBA. Oh well. At least Mel and I are together.

Yours faithfully (I'm supposed to write faithfully because you're someone I haven't met before, but now that I've introduced myself, I'm just going to say 'Yours'. That's what I do with Mel if we write to each other.)
Shell

Tuesday 6 February 1979

Dear Mary,

It's so unfair.

Mel and I have been separated.

It was your fault, Mary. I showed Mel the letter I wrote you and she started singing, 'Captain Dance, has no pants!' and I laughed so hard I couldn't breathe, and I couldn't stop even when Mrs B stood over me.

'Right,' she said when I finally sat up straight again, hiccupping. 'I decided to give you a chance, but you have disappointed me again, Michelle.'

'It wasn't my fault,' I said.

'You cannot control yourself,' she said. 'Pack up your things and go to room 12.'

'It won't happen again,' I said. 'I promise!'

To be honest, I'm not sure I should have promised

that. Sometimes Mel only has to look at me with a funny expression and I start laughing. If you could see Mel, you'd understand. But a person should be given a second chance, don't you think?

It was no use.

'Tell Miss R I sent you,' said Mrs B.

'Hey Witch-face,' Sharon said to Mel. 'You can sit next to me.'

'I'd rather eat my own intestines,' Mel said.

'If I hear one more peep out of any of you, you'll be getting the ruler!' Mrs B said.

Even Sharon, who doesn't usually care what teachers think, skedaddled when she heard that. Mrs B doesn't hit as hard with the ruler as the principal, but it's not exactly fun.

So here I am, Mel-less, writing to you. I am sitting next to Jody. I like Jody a lot but she talks more than me and Mel put together. Lisa and Mel are going to sit together in Mrs B's class. Lisa said at least Friends Squared are in pairs, and imagine if it had been one of us alone in a class with Mrs B, wouldn't that be really tragic, and Mel and Jody agreed. But just because things could be worse doesn't mean this isn't terrible.

Were things this unfair in 1829? I bet they weren't.

The only good thing is that at least now I have the new teacher, Miss R. She is really pretty and smiles a lot, and I bet she'll be fair. Unlike Mrs B.

Yours devastatedly (okay, so that might not be a proper word, but you understand what I mean),
Shell

Wednesday 7 February 1979

Dear Mary,

Sorry I blamed you for getting separated from Mel. It turns out that maybe that's not a terrible thing.

Before we started writing to you today, Miss R said, 'Students, I don't want you just to learn facts about 1829. I want you to imagine what it was like to be there! How people felt! How they thought! What they dressed like! What they smelled like!'

Everyone started whispering and giggling. They wouldn't whisper and giggle in Mrs B's class, but you could already tell Miss R is the kind of teacher who wouldn't mind. Even Simon likes Miss R and wants to impress her.

'Why would we want to imagine what they'd smell like?' asked Jody, without even putting up her hand.

'Did you know that in 1829 in England, people only

bathed once a month?’ Miss R explained. ‘Sometimes only once a year?’

Most of the class said, ‘Yuck’ or ‘Ick.’

All except for Stinky Simon, who said, ‘Lucky doers!’

Simon is already disgusting. He always has sleep in his eyes and toast caked in his teeth. He would be even more disgusting if he didn’t have a shower for a year.

‘So, can you imagine what it would have smelled like, with a hundred people sleeping together in the hold of the ship?’

‘Yu-u-u-uck, Miss!’

‘Exactly!’ Miss R said.

Meanwhile, Mel said Mrs B is making them copy down pages and pages of facts from the blackboard. If anyone makes a sound, the whole class has to stay in at lunchtime.

Normally Mel is lucky with everything. She has got all these badges for Brownies, even more than Lisa has. She runs fast and she got every certificate at swimming, and is going to get her lifesaving next. Plus, she has an older sister. I am terrible at sport, I only got my Junior in swimming last year, and the only thing I’m really good at is dance. I am an only child, which once Mel said made me spoiled, but I’m not, I swear. But this

time, maybe it’s me who is lucky. I am really happy to have Miss R instead of Mrs B, and told Mel so.

‘Miss R is so much better than Mrs B!’ I said, and explained what we were doing.

When I finished, Mel said, ‘Well, Mrs B is the best maths teacher. And grade five is really important for maths, Lisa’s dad says.’

Lisa’s dad works in a bank. He gets Lisa to do mental maths after dinner, which is one of the reasons she’s so good at it. I think that sounds terrible, but Lisa thinks it is great.

‘You’re just jealous,’ I said.

‘No I’m not,’ Mel said.

‘Yes you are.’

‘Take it back.’

‘No.’

‘Yes.’

‘No.’

Neither of us said anything for a while. I wondered if we were going to have a fight.

‘Dead arm?’ Mel offered, holding her shoulder out to me.

I narrowed my eyes at Mel. Dead arm is what we do when we can't agree on something. It involves the person who is wrong but doesn't want to admit it getting punched in the arm. The person who is right gets one shot, and you can punch as hard as you like.

'All right,' I said.

I punched her in the arm and she pretended to fall to the ground, injured.

'Ow,' she wailed. 'My arm is paralysed!'

This was an exaggeration. One of the things about dead arm is that the puncher only punches as hard as the thing we disagreed over was serious. This wasn't that serious, so I didn't hit her that hard. Also, even if I did hit as hard as I could, it wouldn't have hurt. Mel is very tough.

But of course, it was just my luck that Mrs B was walking by on yard duty, right at that moment.

'Michelle Whitby!' she said. 'Stop this childish behaviour!'

'Miss, I didn't do anything!'

Mel stayed on the ground for another moment, clutching her arm.

'I saw you hit Melissa,' Mrs B said.

Then Mel jumped up and smiled angelically at Mrs B. 'We're just mucking about. See? I'm fine!'

'Hmm,' Mrs B said, looking at me. 'If it happens again, you're going to the office.'

'It won't!' I promised.

As soon as Mrs B disappeared out of range, Mel started laughing and laughing.

'Your face!' she said. 'You were so scared!'

'Was not!' I said.

'Was.'

'Was not.'

'Was.'

'Want me to dead arm you again?'

'That's not the rules,' Mel said. 'I have to offer, and I haven't offered.'

'You are so annoying!'

'I know,' Mel grinned.

Mel is my best friend, but I mean it. Sometimes she is really annoying.

Yours in annoyance,
Shell

Things that would surprise you: television

I have to explain to you the main thing that you would be surprised at if you suddenly arrived in 1979.

It would probably be planes and cars, but that's what most people are writing about. So I'm going to tell you about television.

Dad calls television 'the box.' That's because it's shaped like a box and sits in the corner of the living room. Mum calls television 'the idiot box' because she says it makes people stupid if they watch too much of it.

You turn the television on by pulling out the knob on the front. After the television warms up, pictures come up on the screen and sound comes out of the speaker at the side. When I was little, I thought people were hiding inside the television. But the pictures are beamed from the television studios to the antenna on top of our roof.

Last year we got a new television that actually has colour pictures! I couldn't believe it when I saw that

Grover from Sesame Street is blue. A lot of people still have televisions that are black and white.

My favourite shows are: Dr Who, The Goodies, The Sullivans, Little House on the Prairie, Brady Bunch and Young Talent Time. I also like all the cartoons on Saturday morning on Fat Cat and Friends, like Whacky Races, and The Addams Family on Channel Nine, which I'm allowed to watch if Mum and Dad are having a sleep-in. Mum likes watching the old Elvis movies they play on the weekend. Sometimes Dad stands in front of the television and does an Elvis dance, wobbling his legs together and singing in a funny voice. I laugh but Mum doesn't.

Mel and I love Doctor Who. I didn't like it so much with the last Doctor, but this Doctor is really amazing. We especially love that he eats jelly babies, which are our favourite too. We are both knitting super-long scarves so we can look like him. Sometimes we dress like Leela, who is really cool and not annoying like Sara Jane, but mostly we like to pretend to be the Doctor.

I also love Young Talent Time. This is a show that has kids singing and dancing on it, and it's on every Sunday. My favourite is Tiny Tina Arena, who is only one year older than me and has the most amazing voice, and has black shiny hair. I like singing but I would never get on Young Talent Time. But I can