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'Never lock eyes with an orang-utan' and other lessons learnt from boarding school in Sixties Malaysia



Cute but strong and potentially dangerous: students at Uplands were warned not to make eye contact with orang-utans when out for walks CREDIT: ALAMY

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Scents unlock memories

By **Alison Ripley Cubitt**

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My old boarding school, Uplands, in Penang, Malaysia, has been on television every Sunday evening lately - doubling up as a filming location for Channel 4's Raj-era drama *Indian Summers*.

Seeing it on screen as an adult, I can now fully appreciate the dazzling scenery and surroundings: all I could think of as a small child, as I trudged up and down the hill between the infants' school and 'big school', was how steep it was.

I was in the middle of writing what would become *Castles in the Air*, a story about my mother's life, when *Indian Summers* was first broadcast last year.



Channel 4 location scouts discovered that Malaysia provided the perfect backdrop CREDIT: CHANNEL 4

I saw the little bungalow (next to the Royal Simla Club), and for one crazy moment, I half-expected to see Sister Ripley, as she was known there, walk through the door in her starched white nurse's uniform. Mum had taken a job at the boarding school in 1963 for two terms, on the condition that her four-year-old came too.

• The Mrs Beeton of British Malaya who pioneered fusion cuisine

As we lived on a remote rubber estate in Perak, Mum had reluctantly agreed to send my brother and sister away to Uplands at a very young age. Dad, who was recruited from England as an assistant manager, was sent out to Malaya (now Malaysia) in 1948, as the Emergency was taking a dangerous turn.



This building, the former Crag Hotel, was turned into Uplands Primary School in 1955 and has lately been used as The Royal Simla Club in the Channel 4 series Indian Summers CREDIT: UPLANDS 40TH ANNIVERSARY MAGAZINE

We three children had all been born in Malaya and regarded it as home. Mum had moved out east with her family from England as an 11-year-old and was herself a boarding school veteran. But as a mother separated from her children, she found it difficult to cope without them, and this was her way of keeping her family together.

"For the first two weeks, I cried myself to sleep every night. But once I got over the shock, I began to settle in"

I was excited at what sounded like a great adventure, but when I got to Uplands, it was made clear to me that I wasn't going to be allowed any special treatment, just because my mother was the school nurse. I was sent to the infants' school, Grace Dieu, where I had lessons and slept

in a dormitory.



Sister Molly Ripley and assistants, Uplands, 1963

For the first two weeks, I cried myself to sleep every night. I can't have been more than fifty yards from the main school, but at the time, it might as well have been 50 miles. And Mum was so busy seeing to the needs of all the other children that I barely saw her. But once I got over the shock, I began to settle in.

It was always warm, and we could play outside, where we ran around, hiding inside the cave-like roots of soaring tropical trees. On jungle walks, we were told not to lock eyes with the orangutans as they can be dangerous if they feel threatened.



Grace Dieu infants school, Uplands, 1963 (the author is seated, second from the left).

After leaving Uplands after two terms I went to day schools until age seven, when I joined my sister as a boarder at Holy Family Convent in Littlehampton, Sussex. There, we were surrounded by walls, had to obey a vow of silence in the corridors, and were barely allowed to play outdoors.

"We ran around, hiding inside the cave-like roots of soaring tropical trees. On jungle walks, we were told not to lock eyes with the orangutans"

It was seeing Uplands on screen that triggered many memories, as it reminded me of a time when we children had all been together, and it helped me navigate the difficult and emotional parts of the story I was writing.



The author (on the left) with her sister, Susan, in Uplands uniform

I had begun to write about my past, since returning to the UK after ten years abroad in New Zealand and Australia, where my husband, an academic, was working.

• How expat life inspired the tale of a prodigal son

As the trailing spouse, I was finding repatriation hard. Although adjusting to a new life was something I was getting used to, I began to think about the difficulties my mother faced when she had to do the same thing.

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Reading between the lines of her letters and diaries, I found the clues, which helped me understand why she had struggled to settle in New Zealand, where we moved to after Malaysian independence. Mum's letters and diaries had been written at key moments. She began them as an adolescent schoolgirl in colonial Malaya at the onset of the Second World War and then resumed later, in her challenging middle age.



Uplands boarding school in Penang CREDIT: DONNA BELL

And here I was, writing about her, at a pivotal point in my life. I had fictionalised episodes of Mum's life in *Waves*, a short film drama screened at film festivals in Europe and North America and in a short story, but narrative non-fiction was new to me. I felt that writing the book would enable me to make sense of my past, reclaim it even, so that I could get on with my new life. I chose to focus on telling a story about mothers and daughters and family secrets.

"Writing the book would enable me to make sense of my past, reclaim it even, so that I could get on with my new life"

Sitting down to watch the second series of *Indian Summers*, which began earlier this month, I can say that the act of writing this book has brought me catharsis. As I look out for the locations so familiar to me as a child, I hope that one day I can return to Penang, with my brother


and sister, and we can stand up on the top of that hill and look down and think just how far we've come.

Alison Ripley Cubitt is an author and novelist, living in Hampshire. *Castles in the Air: A Family*

Memoir of Love and Loss is available in print or as an ebook.

• *Indian Summers is currently being screened in Britain on Channel 4 at 9pm on Sundays*



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