

Holy smoke, it's hard to find Mother a home

Jenny Bardwell's mother, Mary, puffs away, pushed along by disapproving grandson Alfie

JENNY BARDWELL looked at 33 residential care homes before she found one prepared to let her mum light up

She said she wanted to die at home and lay in bed all day smoking her way through two to three packets of Silk Cut. It didn't happen, and now she is chain-smoking in the residents' lounge of her care home. Puffing away, she glances between television and newspaper, while other residents doze next door in the non-smoking lounge.

Surprisingly for her generation, Mum sits alone in what she refers to as her "office", none of the other residents being smokers.

My mother gave up during her four pregnancies because it made her feel sick; the other tobacco-related dangers were unknown in the Forties and Fifties. Apart from this maternity break, she has smoked since she was 15. As the girl with waist-length auburn hair, she could be seen at Kingston Art School, lying in the grass smoking with her first boyfriend, Kelvin. Then a year later, on the steps of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, where she was to win the comedy prize. When she tried to kick the habit in middle age, she had a mini-breakdown and said it felt "like losing a friend".

For much of her life, my mother has been preoccupied with smoking, along with talking and laughing with (and worrying about) her five children (one set of twins) and two stepchildren (also twins). By the age of 79, she passed most of her time in bed in Purley, Surrey, getting up occasionally to wheel her meals-on-wheels to the bin. Her heart, hips and knees were dodgy, and a slight stroke followed by six weeks in hospital left her in such a state of anxiety that she could not be left alone even for five minutes.

I dreaded seeing the red light flashing on my answerphone: "Are you there, darling? My head feels funny. I need to hear a human voice." Often there would be eight such messages waiting for me. One was accompanied by the mounting frenzy of *Carmina Burana* on Classic FM from her bedroom. This added to our shared sense of encroaching madness.

We tried extra help first — not wanting to visit those places, the residential homes just yet. "That nice lady from the church is coming to cook lunch for you on Tuesday." "Oh God, is she?" "I will be back at the weekend." "Will you darling? How lovely."

Eventually, my sisters, brothers, myself and Mum (now 80), agreed to seek out a home. On a mission, I took to the road trying to find the "ideal" place. Most daughters think only a five-star hotel is good enough and I really wanted the place to resemble one of those special-interest holidays with people stretching and chanting in one corner and



painting or singing in another. But, of course, if you were up to such jollity, you'd probably still be at home.

I looked at 33; some of my visits were a drive by — just enough time to glimpse a forlorn face within a gloomy interior and say "let's go" to the cab driver. Other visits with friends and siblings extended to a cup of tea and custard creams with a cheery manager. That one looked too dark and that one looked too much like all the others. "She is continent," I'd tell them "and she can get up on her own at night". Not too much trouble, you see. But then I would have to come clean, and add "but she does like her cigarettes" and watch their smile stay a little too fixed. This was an understatement; this one could give Simon Gray and his *Smoking Diaries* a run for their money. "No, she couldn't go outdoors to do it — not in January."

I eventually learnt how to save time. I'd say: "Hello, I'm inquiring on behalf of my mother who is a heavy smoker," so that if the reply came back, as it usually did, with "this is a no-smoking home, I'm afraid" I could thank them and put down the phone. Pity, the brochure pictures looked nice.

Mum went off for respite in a converted house in Caterham. Smoking was allowed only in the conservatory, where the budgie got quieter and quieter. "I don't know what's wrong with it — must be poorly," said a carer, blowing smoke into its cage. Unsurprisingly, it's hard to find a place where you can smoke indoors, particularly in older buildings — a confused person might forget to stub their fag out or drop it, and then the whole place goes up.

There was one home with a smoking lounge that was definitely a cut above; it was run by nuns as part of a convent. People were actually laughing and talking over lunch (with a modest glass of wine) and so the dining room had the atmosphere of a lively conference or a works canteen rather than the silence of a final staging post.

A chance at last of somewhere special and, as a semi-lapsed Catholic convert, I thought

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Mum might be in awe of the nuns and follow their advice on all matters — including when and where to light up. But she appeared to be so heavily drugged on her anti-anxiety tablets that she didn't look in any fit state to impress the Mother Superior and I knew competition was stiff to get a place.

As she sat on the edge of her bed, staring in a stupor out of the window, I pulled a pretty summer top over her head, combed her hair and then applied some make-up. "Look lively, Mum," I said desperately. But then my sister-in-law pointed out "I don't think eye shadow will fool those nuns" and I felt we were auditioning for *The Sound of Music*. The order would certainly have

started singing *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Mary?* if Mum started smoking in her bedroom. Staring into space, Mum responded politely to questions from the boss nun who, after 20 minutes, kindly patted her on the arm and said "I expect you're gasping for a cigarette".

On our tour, taking in the peaceful chapel and landscaped garden, another nun looked doubtful when she asked if Mum would be able to find her way downstairs in a lift to the smokers' lounge. We applied, sent in the paperwork, but never heard back — I think you had to know the right people.

Mum is now kept clean and comfortable in my second choice — the religiously named, but secular, Priory Court. Her face is bright with excitement when she first sees me but minutes later, as she counts her few remaining ciggies, a shadow passes over her and she says: "Could you ask at the desk for some more please?" Her expression changes again to rapture if I produce duty-frees from my bag. "Try a stronger brand," suggested one member of staff, "those mild ones aren't satisfying enough, so she smokes even more!" We have now switched to Mayfair to bring the cost to under £300 a month and these are delivered in bulk every week by the newsagent.

When the total smoking ban takes effect, the manager says it shouldn't be a problem as the home is technically her home now — "if it's an issue we'll build her a heated shed outside". Mum just says: "Oh I won't need to bother about that, will I?" and the click of her lighter is followed by a needy, sucking gasp.