

Letters from my grandmother in South Africa 1904-07

By Bente Grue, Denmark

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Cape Town 1

Villa Craigmillar 1/3 1905

Dear Aunt,

I've now decided to reply to letters as soon as I receive them. I get so behind otherwise. And I really do want to receive letters - it's like a celebration when they arrive! The post arrives in Cape Town on Tuesdays, but I don't get my letters until Friday. They stay at the consulate until we collect them. Emma is free on Fridays and goes to collect them. It's quite a story - it takes a good hour when one walks quickly, and the office closes at 5 o'clock.

I could give you the address here to Craigmillar, but I don't know how long I'll be staying. I arrived on the 15th of January and got 45 Danish kronor - a far cry from a hundred! But next month I will be getting a half pound more - so it will be 54 Danish kronor in total. I am the cook here and Miss Lauridsen's sister is the house maid. It's nice being together, but I think we would have learnt more English separately. But, it will be ok. The masters and mistress of the house consist of 2 brothers and a sister, who run the house. Well, I suppose you could put it that way - she wafts about the house in her silk clothes and gives orders, but is otherwise quite nice. She is though somewhat capricious, especially towards Emma. When she has been unreasonable to me, she comes back afterwards and says she didn't mean it at all, but she has so many sorrows and worries. Then she gives me a gift and everything is "all right" again. If a rattling off of the gifts can interest you, here it is:

1. Light blue silken petticoat, a night dress, a handkerchief holder of silk with embroidered violets, 4 handkerchiefs, a lovely embroidered sofa cushion that she has made partially by herself - well, it's not stuffed, a platter, a doily med eau de cologne, jewellery box, ticket to an exhibition and tram tickets. She's also promised me a new hat, so that's quite nice. In addition, there are assorted chocolates and fruit. On the 1st of May she is starting a business in the city. She calls it the "Refreshment Department". I don't really know what it is yet, but she has promised me a job there, at 4 pounds per month - 72 Danish kronor, and with a pay rise after 3 months. It is going to be open from 8.30 until 6 weekdays, only until 2 on Saturdays, and with Sundays off. So, I have a fair amount of free time, which I will probably fill with hand craft. I also get to see more this way. I don't really know what I'm going to do there, but I will be supervising the negroes, both men and women, and have responsibility for purchasing food supplies and portioning it out. She herself will be staying out here in the villa at Sea Point, but will be coming in twice a day. If it wasn't for the new business, I would have already resigned by the 15th of March, as I can get a higher wage in other places. I never get any more than 2 1/2 to 3 pounds - 54 Danish kronor as the household isn't very large and we are 2 girls and all of the laundry gets sent out. But now that she has promised me this new job, I'll be staying until May. Apart from that we have quite enough to do - a two-storied villa and everything must be in order. In the 3 bedrooms, there are large tapestries that are brushed once a week and swept each day. In the large hall above there is linoleum, which must be polished so that it reflects like a mirror. The same goes for the bathrooms where the walls are white tiles. The spiral staircase has a brass railing. Luckily it's not my job to polish that. Underneath are of course the sitting rooms, the kitchen, and so on. They all get a going over once per day.

I have responsibility for the food, which must be exact. It all goes wrong if it is 1 minute too early or too late.

At 6:30, a cup of coffee to the master, 7 o'clock to the "missis", as we girls should say. Though, she is just Miss.

Places I would like to find and/or know about:
History of The Danish consulate in Cape Town

Places I would like to find and/or know about:
Villa Craigmillar at Sea Point, Cape Town

Could a local newspaper be interested in an article about this story?

Places I would like to find and/or know about:
Archives/museums etc. about life in Cape Town 100 years ago.



My grandmother Maren Olsen

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5 minutes before 8 o'clock breakfast – ham, egg, smoked fish, toasted bread, porridge, marmalade and coffee.

1 o'clock lunch – different types of meat or fish dishes, normally two, with vegetables, pudding, cheese and crackers, fruit, coffee.

4 o'clock tea with bread when they are home, but that is only on Saturdays and Sundays.

7 o'clock dinner. Soup – fish – roast – pudding – cheese and crackers, fruit – wine, coffee.

The different dishes can vary, different roast meats and so on, but always the same number of courses and in the same order.

In the afternoon we are free at 2:30 so there is a little time before 7, which is my own, but I don't get much done. She always travels to town straight after lunch and comes home at 6:30 so I have to take care of dinner. I don't have any peace until that's finished and then it's normally 9 o'clock.

At 10 o'clock we go to bed. You can see how much free time I have! Well, I do have a little time during the morning. The lunch isn't as much a hassle to make as dinner.

I can see you shaking your head when you read this. And I'm not surprised, as you know my predisposition for cooking! I'm managing quite well, despite my heart pounding a little! There is no one to help me, and the food and I should be "properly" as she says, so I have to pull myself together. Tomorrow we are going to have a dinner party. I wish it were over and done with. I am going to bed.

6/3

Well, dinner was a success. Turtle soup, salmon, pheasant, guinea fruit, raspberry pudding with custard, lobster, cheese and butter. Grapes, melon, peach and ripe figs, wine and coffee. It took some time, but English cuisine is quite simple and uncomplicated compared to Danish. The biggest and best grapes cost 1 d. per pound – 7 Danish øre. I, or rather we, don't care so much about them at the moment. We have so much fruit just now, as it is harvest time. I have asked a number of people how many degrees warm it is, but no one seems to really know, so they just say "It is too hot". The expressions of the English are rather limited.

Well, Miss. Lauridsen is here. The place she serves at is called Three Anchor Bay. She isn't married yet, and won't know when the wedding will be. Her fiancé was in the service of the government, or more correctly, in a battalion under the government. But now there is a new law, that all employees of the government must be British citizens.

It is easy to become a British citizen, but Grostøl doesn't want that in case war breaks out. In addition, he wants to go back to Norway, so he had to leave his post. Now he has a new job, but it isn't a certain enough income to get married on.

I have been introduced to many families by Miss. Lauridsen at the library in the Scandinavian club. I have exchanged pleasantries with several nice Scandinavians. I have many places to go, but little time. There is so much to do in Capetown, but the trams so expensive.

A journey that costs 10 øre in Copenhagen costs 9 d. here – the same as 63 øre. For less than 2 shillings I can't get out for even an hour, and walking gets you nowhere. I only have from 4 until 10 every other Sunday. My paper is being too quickly filled because of the long story about the household work, but I thought that you, Aunt, are possibly interested in it.

Places I would like to find and/or know about:

Knowledge about domestic servants in Cape Town 100 years ago

Places I would like to find and/or know about:

Danes/scandinavians in Cape Town 100 years ago

Places I would like to find and/or know about:

Three Anchor Bay

Places I would like to find and/or know about:

The Scandinavian club - at that time and now

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Craigmillar 20/3/1905

Dear Aunt and everyone else,

Well, you are probably a little surprised to receive a letter already, as I'm not normally generous about writing letters! Although a short time ago I promised myself that I would write every fortnight. It's just getting so expensive. But this time there is another reason. I'm thinking of travelling to Johannesburg in Transvaal as early as May so you can't send me letters until I send you my new address there.

You won't be able to get my address until the beginning of June, which means of course I won't get any letters until July. Can you say to the family at Gravngaard that letters sent from there after the 11th of April won't reach me?

The last time I wrote about a job here, and now I want to go to Johannesburg. That probably doesn't make sense to you, but everything is so transient here. You never know what tomorrow will bring. Now this coming journey is confirmed. Next week there might be something completely different brewing. It really isn't like at home where one is able to more or less work out where one will be at the same time next year. So, I have the feeling that you think I have the life of vagabond, but the conditions over here dictate it, and to be able to commit oneself, one must conform to it. The plans one makes one day are nigh on impossible the next. I said to Miss. Lauridsen that it would be unbearable in the long run, but one does get used to it so in the end. It becomes a necessity.

Miss Lauridsen's wedding is now confirmed for Saturday the 25th. It is the 5th time, and if it is really to go ahead this time, I'm uncertain. Her husband-to-be has got a job at a diamond mine in Johannesburg and is travelling on Monday the 27th. She is in work now and at the earliest can resign on the 5th of April, and travel on the 5th of May. But they will have the wedding here, because they don't know anyone in Johannesburg and so can't get any witnesses.

Miss Lauridsen is taking her sister Emma with her – she who is the chamber maid out here. She has such a hard time learning the language. She'll probably never learn it, so she can't stay alone here. I've also seen all there is to see of Cape Town. The only thing I haven't seen is Constantia and the Cape of Good Hope – but I'll probably get to see that sooner or later.

I can have the job the Mrs. promised me, but I will be declining the offer. I've learnt a lot here about language and cooking. (Of course I don't think I'm very good at cooking – I'll never be. You shouldn't start to think that I imagine myself in that way.) Mrs. speaks of course well in English as she is English – a colonial, as they are called. They are born here, white, and speak English and Dutch with each other and nothing correct.

Miss. Lauridsen thinks I should also go to Johannesburg – the wages are better than here and there is the battlefield (from the Boer war), so it should be very interesting. On the other hand I've good friends down here in Cape Town and know quite a few Scandinavians, and that is something I really appreciate. When I or we arrive up there we'll be complete strangers again, and one has to be cautious with ones acquaintances.

I have sent 5 pounds to Maria, so my debt (for the ticket from Denmark to Cape Town) is soon paid off. It is of course about time now that I began saving a little for myself now.



Bente Grue



*Maren Olsen,
Cape Town 1905*

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I'm considering staying here for two more months and will wait to hear if things are well in Transvaal, that's of course the smartest thing to do. But it is a long and rather troublesome journey, and when we are more we can travel in 3rd class. If one travels alone one must of course travel in 1st class. One does stay on the train night and day. Of course one won't be beaten to death, but other unpleasantries can easily occur. I probably shouldn't have written that! It all runs rather smoothly. Five years ago one had to travel in an ox cart for the last day to Johannesburg, but now the train goes all the way there, and even further.

At the moment the heat is tropical. Never before in my life have I imagined such heat – everything quite simply quivers in the heat. We go around in partial darkness – shutters on every window. I suffered so greatly the first few days, and got permission so that I didn't have to make food on the stove. It was almost impossible to eat hot food. Now the heat is more tolerable. It has such an effect and means that one can't think properly, so this letter might be a little strange.

I think I've already told you that Villa Craigmillar is situated at the foot of the Lions Head, which a bit further up is forested with pine or something similar. They call it pine, but it isn't the same as at home. Along with the heat, a fire started up in the forest on this side of the mountain, where we live, and the wind – that nasty desert wind, carries on, so the smoke clouds were blown right over us, together with an unbearable smell and heat. But, it was an amazing sight. The fire is out now.

Out in our backyard (or whatever name I should give it – it can't really be called a yard, there are walls and a floor but no roof) there is a small stunted fig tree that I have been watering and taking care of during the time I have been here. Yesterday I got my reward – 3 lovely ripe figs, the first I have ever picked, and I think the first and only the tree has ever borne.

Regards to all,
Maren.



*Places I would like to find
and/or know about:*

**Railways history in SA
100 years ago.**

*Photo of my grandmother
Maren in Cape Town,
taken by a street
photographer.
In reality, she had to walk,
if she wanted to go
anywhere.*