**Diary of a modern prisoner**

*Monday 11th March*

Many people think that prison must be a terrifying place with lots of violent women locked behind bars. It isn’t. My arrival at Holloway was smooth, humane and expertly carried out, involving quick fingerprinting and the BOSS chair (Body Orifice Security Scanner), essentially a metal detector.

There was no strip search but there are rules. It was clear I had brought in far too many clothes. I was allowed to keep just 12 tops (shirts, T-shirts and jumpers) and six bottoms (trousers, tracksuit bottoms and pyjamas).

No toiletries were allowed but I was given an emergency bag with prison issue and I bought a ‘welcome’ bag for £2.99, which would be subtracted from the cash I brought in with me.

It contained a bottle of orange squash, biscuits, a bar of milk chocolate, deodorant, toothbrush and toothpaste, a comb and some tea bags and sugar. I had the choice of that or a smoker’s bag. But I could take in my books, all 18 of them and many given to me by my children, as well as my writing pads and a couple of pens.

The welcome group and prison guards helped me and some other new inmates move our personal belongings, which had been transferred into transparent prison plastic bags, to landing A3, the reception landing, which ended up being my home for the next few days.

The lovely girl who had secured the food for me told me on the way that she had two more years to do but enjoyed doing the reception work because it kept her out of her cell until quite late in the evening.

That night was bitterly cold and I soon realised that the windows in Holloway cells do little to keep the chill out.

At first I was shown a cell with no curtains and my helpers tried to fasten an orange blanket on to the railings, without much success. Fortunately there was another single cell available with curtains, this time near the guards’ office, but the TV was not working so there was another quick changeover.

Then it was obvious that one thin orange blanket on the bed was not enough. Soon the girls were at my cell door with extra blankets even though that was apparently not normally allowed; within a few minutes I ended up with five and had to turn down the offer of a sixth.

And then extra fruit and sandwiches that the girls must have had in their own cells started arriving, and shampoo for the shower and extra toilet roll for the loo in my cell. I couldn’t believe the kindness of them all.

Many have commented about the solidarity in women’s prisons – yes, there is bitching and some bullying but there is also a lot more demonstrable empathy among the women prisoners than in a men’s prison.

They say that when that first lock-up happens and you are left alone in your room, reality finally takes its toll; when they finally lie in bed most new prisoners turn their heads towards the wall and start crying.

I watched the coverage of my case on TV and fell promptly asleep.

*Thursday 14th March*

In the morning, a female guard from a different floor told me that there had been discussion for me to move to D0, the enhanced wing on the ground floor.

I told her I was happy to stay where I was for the time being. Frankly, I had already become friendly with the girls on my landing and had no wish to move.

And I had learned quite a lot of things from them – for example, how to put a pin on the latch door and pull it shut, or almost shut, from the inside if someone had left the hatch open and the lights on in the corridor through the night. This also cut out noise. Strangely, it gave you a feeling of being in control, which was welcome.

At the same time the girls showed me what to do if an overzealous guard had locked the latch door and there was no one there to unlock it – the back of the plastic spoon worked very well as a key.

A morning spent outside my cell, given the horror stories of very long lock-ups endured by many prisoners, was a relief.

I went to see the lovely nurse, and an instant friendship developed. She filled in my personal medical history details, checked my blood pressure (which had gone down sharply after a couple of nights in Holloway) and suggested I should have a hepatitis B injection.

I at first refused as I don’t much like needles but she explained it was for my protection in case an inmate were to bite me.

There are a lot of drug addicts in prison who may be carrying the virus from infected needles. After her explanation, I did not hesitate for an instant.

My children came that Thursday afternoon for an hour. It was a tightly supervised setting, but it was brilliant. We had to sit opposite each other after we kissed and I reassured them that I was OK.

There were strict rules about moving around so we had to stay in our seats except when they got me a much-needed cup of coffee. I wasn’t allowed to do it myself.

It was the first I’d had since I went into Holloway, so quite a treat for a coffee addict.