

1951

Myra's letters to her father, where she describes Grandma Rock's visit to her in St. Mary's hospital after the birth of her fourth son, Chris: August 11, 1951: "My first words to poppa over that miserable connection were 'Tell Momma she'll have to wait three or four more years for that baby girl.' He made some mumbling sound of question and I told him that I had just delivered another boy. Rog's mother came in for a few minutes last night to chat at me and go see little Christie. I knew she'd have a few derogatory things to say so I was all primed to hold my tongue. And it was good battle strategy⁶. When we go to the nursery window there were five or six little pink and bald-headed babies cuddled up in their trundle beds. Then up rolled little C.J.Sullivan with that full head of thick black hair and that ruddy almost-tanned complexion. Well, Grandmother Sullivan's first words on viewing her new grandson were: "Dear me. There's not much Sullivan in him. He looks like a Jew!" in a sibilant whisper. Then we he began waving arms and legs she said, "I'm afraid he's going to be nervous like you, Myra." Thank goodness these poor little boys have another grand mother who thinks like all grandparents – that their grandchildren are incomparable."

Myra, with more commentary about The Rock, August 18, 1951: "After I had put Christie in his bed the two boys stood on their little chairs beside the bed and silently stared for a long time. Until yesterday there were completely absorbed by the baby and everything I did with him. While Mrs. S. was here they were terrible—wouldn't go to bed without a fuss, cried at the slightest provocation, ate poorly and wet the bed. (While I was in the hospital there were fairly good, but when I got home with the baby, and tension among the four of us began rising, they were terrible.) But she left yesterday morning and it's been a great relief. The boys are good as gold and a lot happier and Roger of course is the most relieved of all. Life is comfortable again. I'll never have her here during such an "emergency" again – even if it means hiring someone else at considerable cost. Her visit during this pregnancy was awful for three mean reasons: 1.) She was more work than help to me. During all my pickling and canning she never chopped one cuke or carrot or washed a single jar. Yet through her entire stay she kept saying that we should not have asked her to come because there was nothing she could help me with around the house. Grrrr. 2.) She has no idea bout children or what they like or how they think and feel. She kept saying things like "You don't like turnips, do you, Kippie?" "I don't believe you like to have stories told to you, do you Kippie?" "I guess you *want* to wet the bed, don't you Jeffie?" And after the tenth repetition of course, they believe her. She was always hurrying them, always shushing them, always complaining about their being "nervous" or stubborn or disobedient. But worst of all was the way she treated Jeffie. He often shouted "No" at her if she insisted about something and she'd get insulted and swear she was never going to do anything for this little boy ever again. "And when you come to visit my house, I'm going to be mean to you too." She'd then sit with baby Christie and say, "We don't like Jeffie do we, Christie? Kippie's a nice brother, but we don't' like Jeffie do we?" If she had planned to stay longer, I'd have had to tell her she must not treat him that

way. But her time here was short so I simply tried to change the subject on each occasion. Even so, he was upset. The main reason I'll never invite her back here during a pregnancy is her effect on Roger. He is tense, jittery, irritable and quarrelsome whenever she is in the same house with him, which then of course gives him a guilty conscience to harbor such feelings about his own mother. Usually he manages to hold his tongue and all the troubles are between just her and me. But he was with her more this visit than usual and he almost lost his mind."

1952

Myra, January 1952: Rog is walking on air nowadays. Friday he did his first piece of major surgery independently. Out at the State Hospital. Did a hip-pinning and put on a McLaughlin plate on a woman with an intertrochanteric fracture. Imagine, one of the operating surgeons of the Mayo Clinic!

Myra, describes her fear of the polio epidemic, August 1952: "Christy is irritable, running nose, quite miserable at night (I'm writing this at 3 a.m. because I can't sleep for listening to him cry.) Maybe we're having a sub-clinical case of polio – we're having a severe epidemic of it here. Have not mentioned it earlier for fear of disturbing you but if it gets any worse I believe we'll come to Florida till it cools off. About 65 cases in hospital – 7 or 8 deaths – 10 or 12 respirator cases. So far it has localized in the NE section of Rochester but the first adult death was of a man farming about quarter mile farther north on our road. The children in same family up beyond our little country school are in but no with severe symptoms. There are four doctors' wives in, if those four Fellows, two are also in the hospital, One has a son in too and one a daughter. It is the conversation all over Rochester. We are taking every conceivable precaution. The boys and I take naps again in the afternoon, flies are combatted vigorously. Rog does the necessary marketing and the rest of us stay closely on the farm. It is terrifying because it is so mysterious – and Rochester and vicinity is certainly suffering a severe attack. But if it follows the usual epidemiology it should be tapering off soon."

In 2010, I wrote to Mom, wanting to know a little bit more about Chris's bout with polio: Yes, your brother Chris indeed had polio during the dreadful 1952 epidemic! Do I remember "how it presented"? Yes, he was a sick little baby with a high fever, who crunched his little self into a tiny ball and cried when touched. And, yes, I remember the treatment. "Take him home and try to get fluids into him. When the fever breaks, you'll know if there will be any paralysis." For months very warm baths were the only relief from the muscle spasms.

Myra, August 1952: "Sorry I told you about the polio epidemic. Had not mentioned it till that letter I wrote in the dead of night. Does no good to worry, nor try to run away from it. Claire Johnson (whom Momma met) took her three boys to Massachusetts and two

were admitted to hospital with polio the week she arrived. Doesn't seem to have slacked off much but has moved farther away from our area of town."

Myra describes the day she found out her 4th son had polio, September 1952: "...by Wednesday, Christy's fever was over 104°, he was too drowsy to wake at all, and to my great distress he cried if I touched him or moved him out of his favorite position, lying on his tummy, knees tucked drawn up under him and his head hyper-extended. If I picked him up he screamed and cried and held his head back. If I put him down in the "pediatric position," he was immediately content and instant asleep. The danger now was of dehydration; so every hour, despite his pitiful wails, I turned him over and drop by drop gave him an once or two of water. But this time I was certain that he had polio. Roger admits now that he was equally positive at the same time, but that he knew there was no need to hospitalize him since he showed no muscular involvement other than the nuchal rigidity (stiff neck), so he kept his own counsel and assured me that the chances of Christy's having polio were one in several thousand. ¶ Friday morning he got worse. his temp was over 104°, his neck was extremely rigid, he cried if I even laid a hand on him. So I called a Fellow in pediatrics that we used to now in Portsmouth, Virginia, and he made personal arrangements with one of the Fellows in Pediatric Out-call to come out to see Christy. Roger was operating so there was no way for me to get him home. Shortly after noon, Joan Brady came and spent almost an hour examining him. He had all his reflexes in his extremities and the onset of the disease was not typical of polio (it should have been several days of fever, then higher fever with the stiff neck and other involvement) But Christy's temp had been too high and too consistent for her to believe it was polio. Still he had a stiff neck, so she thought it might have been meningitis. She said that he should go in immediately for lab work and just as she was leaving Roger came home. So we dumped everybody in to the car and went down to the emergency room at St. Mary's. Rog put Kip and Jeff in the Staff Lounge, gave them a Coke, and they sat there like little gentle men for almost half an hour till I could leave and do down with them. When we went in at first, the nurse asked if it was questionable polio and we were sent right back into an isolation section of the Emergency room. It's funny how the mind refuses to accept the dreadful till it is irrefutable; but even at that pint I was reluctant to take him somewhere that he might be exposed to polio. I left him there with Roger and went down to the Staff Lounge to wait. It's funny that there is a certain pride in not showing emotion. Even as Dr. Brady said he might have meningitis, I tried to keep an expression on my face such as might have been there if she said it was raining outside. And during that hour and a half wait in the Staff Lounge, chatting with whomever happened to be dropping in, I couldn't mention why I was there or what I was waiting for. But all the while inside I was crying, "My baby, my baby, my baby!" ¶ Then the news actually came in a brutal sort of way. One of the Orthopedic Fellows walked in and said, "Well, Christy sure has a case of polio, but Roger's bringing him down pretty soon and you can take him home. I feel sure that he thought that I already knew he probably had it, otherwise there would not have been that extreme bluntness that was like a sock in the stomach. ¶ It was about 3:30 when Roger came down with him and reported that his spinal tap had showed that he had 103 lymphocytes (per whatever it is) in his fluid, which was unusually high for a baby with no further muscular involvement that he showed. Actually the pediatrician who did the tap told Roger just before he took the specimen up

for examination that he did not think it would show anything (had he had meningitis the fluid would have been white in color an instantly recognizable without microscopic work). So it was something of a surprise to everyone to get the report that he definitely had polio. We were a sad pair driving home in the car that night with that little baby, you can well imagine.” • **Chris came around. Years later, Mom told me that the “cure” was just waiting it out, waiting to see if the fever got worse. If it got worse, well, that wasn’t good.**

Myra, October 1952: Thank you for the political ammunition but fear it was wasted on my husband. Having listened to Rog and everyone else around here sound off on how great the GOP is, I was getting lonely and uncertain. Your letter at least made me a staunch 1952 Democrat. Will write more of Rog’s violent partisanship later. Keep the ammo coming please.

1953

Myra, March 1953: “Roger is in one his periodic ever-recurring dumps, depressed about money and the lack of it. Says he sees no future for an extra dollar for pleasure for the next fifteen years, etc. So what, I say. We’ve got the essentials for happiness and that’s all I care about.”

Myra, April 1953: “We ran out of coal about a month ago and darned if we’d buy another \$21 worth at this time of year. We’ve been burning scrap lumber that we bought for \$2.50 a truckload but that doesn’t keep the house very warm. For the past week it has been in the 20s and you could see your breath in our house all day. I kept the boys well bundled up and didn’t bathe Danny here at all. As Rog says, ‘It’s amazing the amount of heat you can get our of a Sears Roebuck catalogue.’ We had several donations of catalogues at the last bridge club so we stayed warmer for a few days.”

Myra, April 1953: Thank you for Roger’s birthday check. I till put i in an envelope and give it to him Monday along with a book I got for him. His mother sent a five dollar check “and much love on his 34th birthday.” Imagine, she doesn’t even know how old her only son is.

Myra describes her feelings after a miscarriage, September 1953: “Well, things seemed to have settled back into their usual set. This miscarriage was similar to the other – over and done quickly with no after effects other than a terrible depression. No, there was no reason for the miscarriage other than the possibility of it being an anomalous thing. I have done less this past month than I have all year.”

Myra, October 1953: “I have passed my emotional crisis now and seem in the mood to write again. For a while I could burst into tears at the faintest provocation. If the milkman was out of cottage cheese or if my shoestring came untied or if a fly eluded my swats. Yet somehow, like you Mom, it had never seemed real anyway. I was only just beginning

to plan and hope. Still I can expect a swift return of depression when April 10, 1954 rolls around. No good crying, must just forget.”

Myra, December 1953: “So Danny’s a year old already! The years have never slid away from me so fast as they have since the birth of my first baby in ’47. And my little baby is now a year old, has two teeth and can get from room to room without his mother, and the next thing I know he’ll be playing ball in the back yard without the rest of the boys. Some day I am going to have to stop and I tell you now I’m not going to life have a *last baby!* I sure hope that’s not Danny. If Roger has his wishes, he is; but oh how I hate the thought of putting away diapers and high chairs and cribs and belly binders forever! It I could always keep a mewling toothless constantly-wet child in this house, I’d be happy. As you can see, today’s birthday has also had its depressing aspect for me.”

An early reference to drinking in a letter from Myra: “Intolerances? ... Drinking is another one I did not include because we share that violent antipathy. I took my faint little fling at it after I was married, but I’ve not had a drink, even wine, in my hand for a long time. It’s sometimes difficult when we’re out in the evening because that’s the first thing thrust at you before you get your coat off. Most of our immediate circle now knows my stand on the matter and do nothing more than try to tease me into it. But these occasional Staff affairs are sometimes embarrassing; when I say “Coke, please” their immediate reply is “With what?” The subject sometimes comes up for discussion but with one outstanding exception I’ve “converted” no one. After a year’s debating it with Myra Peters I swung her around to my views. And good I feel about it too. I may as well go out and buy a Women’s Christian Temperance Union button!”