

# A Northern Life



***A L Mottley***

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by

**A L Mottley**

## An Ode

If you can chat with everyone in the shop - and not lose your place in the queue,  
Or walk with snobs whilst wearing a pinny - and not feel mithered, much,  
If neither the rent man nor bailiff can find you  
And you can count on the neighbours for a 'touch',  
If you can fill the wait at the bus stop  
With tales of struggle and bad luck,  
Yours is the North and everything in it  
And - which is more - you're a Manc, chuck.  
*With apologies to Rudyard Kipling*

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## Prologue

Joyce Holden watched sulkily as the woman in the next bed carefully dressed her baby. She had watched women come and go. Come in fat and alone. Go out a little less fat and accompanied by a baby, or sometimes two.

She walked wearily to the nursery.

"You can tell this place used to be a bleeding workhouse," she mumbled to herself.

Bare brick walls, painted in a pale mustard, with accents of the same sickly green that covered the walls of her bedroom at Mam and Dad's house. She'd covered it, as much as possible, with pictures of Frankie Vaughn and Victor Mature. She most definitely had a 'type,' tall and dark. She smiled to herself, and then a pang of sadness washed over her. He would have been here if he could ...

She continued down the dreary corridor. Two midwives passed. She looked back and saw that they were looking back, too. She gave the icy stare that she would become expert at in years to come. They returned looks of contempt and carried on up the corridor.

She arrived at the wall of glass at the front of the nursery and peered through, as if looking through a shop window, selling what? Cots? Babies? She giggled to herself. It would be good if she could buy one, especially after what she'd just been through during labour. Never again! Famous last words. "Bottle time again, Mrs Holden?" said the midwife, who upon seeing Joyce's nose pressed up against the glass had opened the door, baby in one hand, bottle in the other, standing there short, fat and pink-faced, not unlike a baby herself. Short woman, giant baby.

Joyce had noticed the emphasis on 'Mrs' and the tone. She twisted the wedding ring Mam had made her wear. *She can kiss my arse. She knows damn well I'm not married. The COW.*

"Where's my daughter?" The midwife gave a snooty sniff before pointing. "Over there, in the corner."

Joyce walked over to the cot and her heart exploded. There, swaddled and bound in a pink blanket lay the most beautiful human being she had ever seen. Chocolate brown hair and a tiny face peeped out from under the blanket. She looked just like one of the girls in *Mutiny on the Bounty*. "Come here, sweetheart," she cooed, picking up the baby ever so gently. The baby scrunched her nose and appeared to be peeping at her. "Are you looking at Mummy? Mummy's going to feed you, change you and decide on a name for you. What about Kimberly? I like Kimberly."

She carried on, talking softly, saying words that made no sense to the possible Kimberly. Possible Kimberly sucked on her bottle, and looked up at this big, soft and noisy person.

"Awww. She's studying me ... I'm your Mummy, little lady ... I wonder what's going on in that tiny little head of yours?"

Possible Kimberly stopped sucking, for a second as if to say 'Do you mind? And less of the tiny. You've given birth to a genius here. Anyway stop prattling on, I'm eating. Don't know about you, but I've had a traumatic few weeks and I'd like me tea in peace.' Mummy spotted a copy of *Woman's Realm* and settled down to read, while baby carried on developing a taste for Ostermilk.

Possible Kim, who later became Lesley as Daddy didn't want her named after a dog, and decided to name her after a man instead, gave her mam one of what was going to become one of many of her specialty dirty looks when she heard the news of the name change. Her mam put it down to wind, but was mildly suspicious.

The father of her child, her soon to be husband, Callie, had been away at the time of the baby's birth, dealing with a couple of problems. One, his divorce, and two,-the last two weeks of a prison sentence at HMP Strangeways, brought about by his "get rich quick" money making scheme. Or fraud, as the judge called it.

Callie, a handsome young man who'd arrived in the mother country a few years earlier, was destined to be the love, and the 'hate' of her life. He and Joyce had met at the Ritz in town. They had been inseparable ever since that fateful meeting.

Mixed relationships were frowned upon in those days. Callie and Joyce didn't care; they'd meet whatever problems when they came. They were in love and now they were parents, parents who were now being encouraged to part from each other and their baby.

Baby carried on having her dinner, while listening to those women, all dressed in the same frocks, rabbiting on, all about illegitimate blah blah and ruining your life.

Then it was a visit from God's first birthday present, the grandparents. After being cooed and awwed over, she burped, and closed her eyes. *I'd better remember all this. It may make a good book*, she thought, as she drifted off to sleep.

# Chapter 1

## The early days

So, there I was. Ten days old and already hitting the bottle.

The 60's were tough, and the 60's in Manchester, even tougher.

Me mam was having some problems too, and I don't mean rubber rings and stitches either. Not only was she an Unwed Mother, cue screeching violins and close up on face, but the hospital staff had their suspicions that my father was not from 'round these parts.' Cue close up on baby's face. Deadpan.

"She'll be a burden to you. MISS Holden." How prophetic!

"How will you live?" No such thing as 'Income Support' in those days. Women usually stayed home while men were the 'breadwinners,' and if the breadwinner was doing 'porridge,' well, you were a tad buggered.

"Let me give you a bit of advice, chuck. Why don't you let us put her in a nice 'home' far, far away, and you can pretend this never happened, and who knows? One day you might meet and get married to a nice 'local' man. Someone you can have REAL children with, if you know what I mean." *What was I? A doll?*

Suddenly, the door bursts open and there stand Batman and Robin! Or as I came to know them, Nana and Grandad.

"Never you mind how she's going to 'live'." Nana shot the trademark dirty look, which I was to use to great effect in the coming years, at the nurse.

"We'll support her!"

*I thought she just said they shouldn't mind?* Nana continued her rant. "And as for putting MY grandchild in a HOME ... A HOME? A HOME?"

When she was angry, she repeated herself. Loudly. "The ONLY HOME this Baby is going to is, number (not tellin' cos I don't want all me fans flockin' there plaguing the new tenants for memorabilia) soddin' Romney Street. Isn't that right 'r Bob?"

"Yes, dear," said 'Robin.'

"Right come on 'r Joyce. Get your stuff together and let's get out of this place." Her comment was accompanied by a glance so withering Bette Davis would have hamstrung Joan Crawford, just to get to Nana first, for lessons. It hadn't been easy for Nana and Grandad to make the decision to support Mam. They were of their time and had been greatly hurt at her getting pregnant before marriage, and positively apoplectic at her being with a 'coloured' man. In all fairness Nana wasn't really 'mithered'. She herself was the daughter of a Russian Jewish émigré and a Yorkshire lass. But Grandad? Well Grandad was a Victorian! He was born in 1886. He was 29 years older than Nana. But not so you'd notice, except in his views on 'Other Races'.

"A Bloody WOG? She's courting a WOG? What the bloody hell have you been doing to her Flo? Int it bad enough, YOU coming from bloody Yorkshire and the Russian Front? It's them bloody films at the Adepfi. I told you to keep an eye on her when she kept asking them daft questions."

"Dad?"

"Yes, pet?"

"Why are the coloured people always the maids and butlers?"

"Because that's the way it is, pet"

"But why can't they be the other people, too? Like the bosses and the lovely ladies?"

"Flo, pass us a match for me pipe. Do you want an ice-cream 'r Joyce, before the interval's over?"

If you can't answer a question, change the subject. That's how it went in our family.

But, several years later, here they were, coming to the rescue of the daughter who had 'shamed' them. Who had caused divisions in the extended family.

"If you ever let her over your doorstep again, me and you are finished as brother and sister."

I never ever met any of Grandad's brothers and sisters, so you can work out for yourself how THAT threat went down with him.

None of that mattered though, because of two things.

Mam was an only child therefore severely limiting their choice in grandchildren.

But mainly, it was because when they saw me, any prejudice, ill-feeling towards Mam or racial stereotype, went out the window.

They saw me and I was perfect, the best grandchild they could ever have been given.

I saw them, and the feeling was mutual.

All in all, it appears I was born into 'turbulent' times, amidst a backdrop of racial tensions.

No wonder I drank!

\* \* \*

Two buses later and here I was, all snuggled up in my pram, pushed up against the sideboard in the back room of our house in Romney Street, Moston, snoozing contentedly in the house that was to bring so much fun and happiness to my life, with the

people who were to raise and nurture me, and guide me along the pathway of life. *To this day, the little boy in "Baa Baa Black Sheep" lives on Moston Lane.*

Let battle commence ...

I was spoilt rotten as an only grandchild, and didn't have to share them at all for the first two years of my life.

Then, Mam and Dad decided I needed a playmate and sister number two came along. I could tell you some stories about her, the original 'Damian' in a skirt. Quickly followed, and I mean quick, by sisters number three and four. Then, da-da-da-dah, her son. I'll tell you about him in Chapter 6. And finally, sister number five. Me mam constantly had 'sick' on her for the first eight years of her marriage, and I being her firstborn and witness to all these new arrivals, was convinced she was fat. It took me years to get the connection between big tummies and babies. Innocent times. If she wasn't boiling stew, she was boiling nappies. That's diapers, if you're reading this on the other side of The Pond.

Now I know what you're thinking nowadays reader, as you scroll down on your Kindle.

She was two weeks old, how could she possibly remember all that now?

What can I say?

I'm a Mancunian. We learn quickly. We are blessed with Northern Wit, and we don't forget a kindness or a 'slight'. There's a saying, probably made up by a Manc. 'On the sixth day, God made Manchester.' That says it all. Don't ask me to define 'Mancunian' because I can't. Wikipedia may help you with that. *I just know*. There's something in us that makes us see the 'funny' side of life.

And boy, can I tell you some funny stories about my family. In the following chapters I'm going to introduce you to the characters and the community that contributed to my northern life and taught me that there's always something in a 'bad situation' that you can get a laugh out of. And that is as close as I can get to explain being Mancunian, without the use of props.

I loved my northern life. And, it was about to get a lot more crowded. But, the bigger the cast, the better the entertainment, or so they say (though I've not got a clue who 'they' are).

I'll introduce you properly, to the grown-ups first.