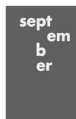


# COLUMBIA ROAD

*Of Blood and Belonging*

Linda Wilkinson



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## *Prologue*

Memoirs, like plays, have a through line. They can be linear, or non-linear. Run from birth to death, or describe a brief three weeks that change a life. There is no one format, no one way, except that the work is your recollection of your truth.

I never really left Bethnal Green. I carried it inside of me. Even when I thought I'd moved on to other spheres or inhabited different worlds it was there, even if I wasn't always aware of it.

Returning to Columbia Road after an absence of many years unleashed what can only be described as a tidal wave of emotions and recollections, and it is of no great surprise that I have spent the twenty-odd years since I became an author writing about the history of the place.

Coming home need not have been inevitable. I could have continued my life elsewhere, but I know now that there would always have been a part of me that was absent, empty of a richness that back then I barely understood.

## Chapter 1

# *The Return*

I come from a family of storytellers and mythmakers; the sorters of reality who keep tales of the ordinary alive. Yarns that may be true, or have the merest soupçon of truth embedded within them. Stories that give a relish to the belonging that we feel towards a person or a place.

I haven't thought about this for years, yet as I sit next to the Man with a Van as we crawl towards the Old Street roundabout I find myself remembering. It seems the best way to blot out both the mindless chatter emanating from the driver's mouth and the radio which is set to full blast. In the back of the beaten-up vehicle is the furniture I have culled from the past few years of my life and with which I am now heading home.

I am not drowning in sentimentality about this. I know where I am going has little beauty. No landscape to take the breath away, no cultural highlights of note, just a street of Victorian shops and houses to which I now know I undoubtedly belong.

It is Friday, 16 May 1986, and the sun is shining as the van pulls up outside the house that Carol and I now own. It is quiet, so quiet, more so than I recall it being. Carol has

beaten me here, the street door is open and she is unloading the final parts of her life from her old Datsun.

The Man with a Van luckily wants to return to north London, to climb up the A1000 towards the cheaper end of East Finchley from whence he came, so there is no delay in his desire to empty his vehicle and be gone. I give him a minor tip and he goes off in a belch of fumes and black smoke.

The sky is blue and small, intensely white, cotton ball clouds drift across it. Before I close the door I glance to my right. Less than twenty yards away I can see the sign with the name of the next street. An old sign proclaiming 'Columbia Road'. I have, it has to be said, been less than truthful about my desire to return to my roots, having pushed the economic argument with Carol that we could afford a house here for what a flat would cost anywhere else. That much is true. The deceit I have peddled has been that nobody would remember me. Convincing her that our sexuality would be no problem to East Enders had fallen flat, so I had lied to close the deal. It never works.

Within five minutes of my arrival the doorbell rang and my cover is blown.

Carol is almost quaking with fear as she finds me in the garden, having just suffered her first onslaught of an East End stare followed by the demand of, 'Where is she?'

'Somebody wants you,' she says, bewildered, as I head towards the open door.

She is older and her hair is no longer pure ginger, but shot through with white. Her teeth, long gone, are replaced

by badly fitting dentures which she rattles around inside her mouth like some out of kilter washing machine. We had never been friends, her gossipy nature and the difference in age had set us far apart, but there she is, one of the constants. She crosses her arms across now flaccid breasts. She is Ginger Lil.

‘You’re back then,’ she says with a mixture of curiosity and self-satisfaction.

‘I am,’ I say, and smile.

Lil stands on slippered tiptoe in a mock attempt at looking over my shoulder towards where she thinks Carol hides.

‘She your friend?’ The ‘friend’ is accented, weighted, full of Lil’s unsophisticated attempt at hidden meaning, yet also laced with humour.

I nod.

‘I had a “friend” like that during the war. She upped and died on me. Hope you have better luck.’

And she is gone, walking towards Columbia Road. At the corner of Baxendale Street, a mere ten yards away, she stops, turns and grins toothlessly, her dentures by now residing in a pocket. The wave and wink are warm, and I return the greeting with a laugh.

\* \* \*

Lil had been there when I was born, well, not technically there. Mother had gone into labour during a snowy cold snap and Lil had helped her walk up to the hospital. There was no thought of a taxi, bus or ambulance in weather

like that and, as my mum was too old for home delivery, she'd had to get there somehow, trailing her broken waters behind her.

It was 13 March 1952 and Mum was thirty-five years old. In those days anything over thirty was perceived as an ancient age to be producing a child. So acutely did she feel this shame that she had taken pills to try and prevent my arrival into the world. It was a secret that she had never shared with anyone else, and people look at me in horror when I voice it. She had described to me how distressed she had been when the early menopause she thought she was having turned out to be me. The repugnance with which her swelling figure was viewed had upset her profoundly. It was as if the sexual act was restricted only to the young, without any quarter given to the fact that her husband had been overseas during much of the war years thus interrupting her fecundity. What few knew was that during the late 1940s she had suffered a septic miscarriage of twins and had been told that she was probably infertile. In 1952, as she lay expecting the impending delivery of this late child, the irony of her pariah status was profound.

She was a beauty, my mum, and to outsiders seemed to glide through life. Unlike many she had not been forced to take up relations with other men in order to survive those years of privation. She had not had to rely on the kindness of servicemen from more affluent nations to feed her family. She saw no stain on the women who had been forced into this, nor did she regard the frequent offspring of those liaisons with any disdain. It had just been a fact of war.

During those years, her life had been ‘blessed’, as she so frequently put it, by the presence of the Garcias. Jews of Spanish extraction who ran the grocer’s shop opposite our house in Columbia Road.

‘If it hadn’t been for Jack and his wife, I don’t know what would have happened,’ she said to me during one of our pre-bedtime chats.

‘I was really up against it.’

Such glorious moments they were, these shared conversations of my youth. Mum in a quilted dressing gown and smelling of talcum powder, me on her lap groggy with the lateness of the hour and the warm milk we drank at bedtime.

Every single day of my childhood we would cross the road and buy something from the Garcias’ shop. A sliver of cheese, a cut of freshly boiled ham, just something.

The hand-cranked machine and the elegant, balletic way that Jack caught the slices of meat before laying them reverently onto shiny greaseproof paper are indented in my memory. The smell, the sounds and in the background Mum saying, ‘Jack, I can pay you back now,’ and he waving her into silence with his hand.

Coins would be passed across the counter, the till would ring and we would go home with the small, beautifully wrapped parcels which formed the substance of the lunches she made for Dad.

‘He won’t take any money,’ she would say and Dad would shrug.

‘But Harry, without him we would have starved.’

‘They are good people Bella, don’t insult him by labouring the point.’



‘It doesn’t seem right.’

‘One day he’ll need our help and we shan’t be afraid to give it.’

Mollified she would go about making the sandwiches.

In the early hours of 14 March, Mother entered the final stage of labour, a fact which was ignored by the nursing staff, she being old and having no right to be there. They left her alone while they attended to the more youthful and rightful purveyors of the next generation. Finally, at 6 a.m. a nurse deigned to attend to her.

‘My baby’s arrived,’ Mum said.

‘Don’t be ridiculous, mother,’ the nurse said and walked away.

Mother screamed, the nurse acquiesced and pulled back the covers, to reveal me lying whimpering in the bed.

She was tough my mum; so must have been I, as I wasn’t suffocated by the bedding. Premature by a month and just over 5lbs, I was installed in a cot next to her bed with two post office directories beneath the legs to increase the circulation to my head; the 1950s’ East End version of paediatric care for the premature.

Visiting hours were defined and immutable but she knew that my grandmother Isabella was in the hospital long before she appeared. ‘I heard her metal-tipped walking stick hitting the floor in the corridor, you could always tell when she was coming.’

In unison the two ward doors had flown open, and making the grandest of theatrical entrances in she strode.

Seventy-two years of age and eighteen stone in weight, dressed in a brightly coloured floral dress overlaid by a black woollen overcoat with fox fur collar, in a stentorian voice she demanded to see her daughter.

The ward sister bore down upon her like a tank; it was NOT visiting time. Nan apparently swatted her aside, having spotted Mum at the far end of the ward. I had been placed with her by the open window, in order that I could enjoy the fumes from the main road. I was small, ginger haired and very wrinkled.

Nan stripped back the blanket to observe her new grandchild. 'Is that all there is, Bella? Blimey, was it worth it?'

\* \* \*

So little furniture do I have in my new home that the sun is still shining when I come to unpack my books and come across the medical dictionary, which was Mother's bible. It is dated 1946 and she used it whenever an illness or a diagnosis seemed to her unusual or worthy of note. It was second hand when she acquired it, having the name Hilda Johnson written in red on the inside cover; books, like many things, were a luxury Mum could ill afford. She got this when she worked at the children's hospital on Hackney Road, where she made the uniforms for the staff and briefly had a sideline in making shirts for the male doctors.

It's been a long day and I sit thankfully and skim through the adverts for Do-Do tablets for asthma and 'Roboleine – the food that builds the body'. I am especially taken by the section on 'Gas Warfare Precautions', something nursing

staff surely have little need of today, in the 1980s. The thick squat pages bear the stains of god only knows what upon them. I come to a section I recall only too well. Under ear, it simply says ‘the organ of hearing’.

\* \* \*

At the age of four, I am blissfully unaware that both my mother and her mother, my nan, have a firm belief in home treatment for almost all ailments. That is, after all, all they had known until the establishment of the NHS a short four years before my birth. All that I know is that I am lying on a pillow on an armchair in the kitchen with a hazy awareness that Mum is flipping through the dictionary.

She looks at me once more. ‘Only one ear hurts?’ I point to the affected organ. ‘All right then.’

Dad is seated opposite reading his newspaper as she bustles past and out into the scullery. I hear the sound of glass chinking on glass as she searches for whatever treatment she has decided upon. I would love to sleep, but the throbbing ear precludes that. That day I was lucky, there was no 30 per cent peroxide left, one of her standard treatments for everything. Her diagnosis for ears was almost always that wax was the culprit, but today, thwarted by the lack of serious chemicals, she bathes my inner ear in warm olive oil and gently massages behind it.

‘Better?’

‘No.’

As I lay there, my great-aunt Clara knocks on the kitchen door. She and my paternal grandmother, Alice, occupy three

rooms upstairs and have done so since both they and my family had been bombed out of their homes during the war. Clara has a good heart and she has bought me a doll to replace Peggy, my favourite, who has suffered many assaults. Peggy's skull is held together with Sellotape and she has a black hole in the big toe of her right foot courtesy of an early experiment in smoking by my brother, Tony. All in all, she is a sorry sight.

The new doll on the other hand is exquisitely ugly. A kind of giant 1950s' Barbie, brash with bright-red lipstick and with a terrifying cry. One reason I love Peggy so much is that she is mute. Her soundbox, like much else about her, has ceased to work.

By now my ear is even more painful and I begin to cry. Clara is crestfallen, she thinks I hate the doll, which I do, but at that moment I just wanted the pain to go away.

It does go away, but only after a hefty dose of antibiotics. Mother finally acquiesces and rushes me to the evening session at the surgery, where the softly spoken Dr Marks declares that it is a bacterial infection. I don't know if Mum admits her attempts at home therapy to him, but I suspect he knows only too well that the locals practise it widely. Nan would have resorted to do-it-yourself surgery had she been able. Old habits die hard, but some ailments were beyond the realm of folk-medicine even for her.

The consulting room in which we sit has a surprising set of French windows which open onto a garden. You can hardly believe that you are on Hackney Road such elegance do they imply. Today, as it is winter, they are closed, but

in summer the gossamer-thin white curtains which shield the room billow inwards, bringing with them the smell of roses which bloom outside in profusion. A gas heater in the corner warms the room as the doctor's black scribble makes its way across the page. He has a blotter on a handle which fascinates me. I long to ask him how many prescriptions he has to write before the paper is spent and needs replacing. He catches my eye and smiles. He is of Indian extraction and his tanned skin and pencil-straight moustache are a direct opposite to the colleague with whom he shares the surgery. Dr Rockveldt is from South Africa. He is large, white, bald and lugubrious, full of bonhomie and very popular with the older ladies.

Dr Marks blots his pad. 'I saw your mother today, Bella,' he said handing the script to Mum.

'Her heart?'

'Yes. I gave her some new pills. Keep an eye on her. She may dehydrate.'

'Is she worse?'

'Hard to say. She's no moaner.'

Mum nods and we venture out through a waiting room packed to standing, up a short flight of stairs onto the street and turn right.

The chemist shop we use is, like everything else around me, old. The wooden step you climb to enter is worn in the middle by a hundred years and more of the tread of customers. It sits on the corner of Hackney Road and Goldsmiths Row, which once boasted the eponymous alms houses but now has a run of tiny shops which you have to step down

into to enter and in which the smell of damp is overwhelming. They house tailors and bootmakers and a pet shop dealing in cat meat.

Inside the pharmacy three bentwood chairs are lined up for people to sit upon while the medicines are made. There are no boxes or bottles of pills except aspirin and the most common medicaments. Shelves are lined with powdered chemicals which the pharmacist mixes and then pounds into tablets using metal pill-frames and what look like wide pestles. The smells in the shop are so complex that they send my head reeling.

I sit on Mum's lap as we wait our turn. In spite of the throbbing in my ear I am fascinated by the large glass bottles shaped like pears, known as show globes, that sit in the window. They are the only bit of colour on Hackney Road.

My medicine comes pre-made in liquid form in the usual brown bottle. Mum looks at it. 'It won't cause her trouble?'

This is a weighted question as my brother had had some of the earliest penicillin available as an injection, to which he had been wildly allergic.

'No, Mrs Wilkinson, that's been sorted out.'

She is placated and takes the brown paper bag in which Mr Davis has wrapped the bottle and puts it into her shopping bag.

He leans over the counter towards me. 'Linda, you must take the medicine, all of it. Promise me?'

I nod and he gives me a small piece of rock twisted inside cellophane. My ear hurts so much I cannot even think of sucking it. I am grateful for it later, though, as an antidote

to the foul-tasting liquid that I have to swallow to get rid of the infection.

As soon as I feel a little better I remember the conversation Mum had with the doctor.

‘What’s dehydrate?’

She tells me and sighs, waiting for me to ask for more information.

‘So why will Nan dry out?’

‘Well, she’s bloated, her heart isn’t working well. Less fluid will be good for her.’

‘Why?’

And so it goes on.

Mother hopes that she has discovered an antidote to my continually asking questions. Every weekday afternoon, she stops machining for an hour. She is a piece worker; paid by the number of garments she produces. At the moment it is men’s waistcoats. I have learned to turn the small straps that she makes the right way out. Using a knitting needle I sit working on the floor by her feet as she machines at break-neck speed. We have some lunch and turn on the radio for ‘Listen with Mother’. I sit at the kitchen table and relish the words that flow from the brown Bakelite box on the wall.

I hadn’t spoken until late. Most of the family had thought that I was simple, but I am a watcher; something of a curse sometimes. I recall sitting staring at people and twisting one of the curls on my forehead around and around. Language that began in my head as a noise like bees in a hive had slowly organised itself into meaning and I began to speak.

Mother wasn't surprised, she always said that my actions weren't those of a simpleton.

The programme finishes and she gets out some sheets of paper. They are from the factory that supplies her with work and are sturdy and brown and used to make clothing patterns. On them the alphabet is written. From somewhere she has obtained a large tin of shells of all shapes and sizes which carry the smell of the sea. Some still have a patina of salt on their surface, others are smooth, but whatever their texture I use them to outline the letters Mum has written. I have moved beyond mere copying to making the sound of the letter as I go along. It is a system of her own devising and for me it works. She hopes that I will migrate from this on to simple books and then others that may contain the answers to the questions that I constantly ask of her.

'She was born asking why,' she tells Raphael Landau, the albino owner of the clothing factory for whom she works, as he drops off a pile of waistcoats to be made. He has the heavy features of the Middle European Jews, but his hair is white and his eyes so pale as to be transparent. He wants her to run his factory; she is not so sure that she wants to leave me to be looked after by Alice, Dad's mother.

'You'll earn a lot more,' he tells her, as I fiddle with the bundle of garments at his feet.

'Why?' I ask.

'See I told you, Rafe.'

'Because, girlie, your mum has the gift for making clothes and I need her.'



He turns to her. 'There's more work about, Bella, a lot more. Fashions are changing.'

I sense Mum is not impressed by his plea. 'Maybe in the future.'

He shrugs and drives off.

Mum looks after him anxiously. Rafe is completely colour blind, including to traffic signals.

We return to our weekday routines. Life is not driven by them, but guided in a seamless fashion by mother. We may not have a fridge or anything other than a cold water tap and an outside toilet, but in one respect we exhibit one of the highest achievements of civilisation, cleanliness. In order to avoid the nits, bugs, scabies and other afflictions that poverty brings with it, our ablutions are monitored by Mum with an almost clinical precision, and our laundry treated with a reverence some reserve only for god.

On a daily basis, coloured washing is done by hand and hung outside to dry, but there is one routine during the week which is sacrosanct, the day we visit the laundry at York Hall. With shopping trolleys bulging with anything that could be boiled, Mum, Nan and I walked the half-mile or so up Hackney Road then along Cambridge Heath Road to enter a haven of female fortitude.

The first thing that met your eyes was the colour white; sheets that were white. Heavy, strong cotton, capable of withstanding the pummel and grind of the wash. Able to hold and caress the bleach and steam, the mangle and the iron. You could smell the laughter and the pain of the women who turned the paddles and dropped the 'bluing'

into the huge, bubbling cauldrons of water. Almost invisible in the mist, the women were mere ghosts to their echoing laughter. Heavy and huge the wheels of the mangles groaned and turned. Hot arms, aching backs and the drizzle of water onto the floor and all the time the conversation flowed: tales of love, lust and illness; tales of hopes, mostly dashed; tales. I would sit on one of the benches which lined the walls and listen, absorbing the emotions that flew around me. It was here that I first realised that I could feel through my skin. Not the pain of a cut or a bruise, but another kind of pain, that of other people's loss, or yearning for something which would never be. My forearms would tingle and I would know.

'Good riddance to bad rubbish,' someone would say on hearing a woman had been deserted by her husband. The woman would laugh in comradely agreement, coping as they all had to. My skin would scream in agony when she passed by or sat next to me, exhausted by the heat and life.

'Look at your nan,' they would often say, pointing.

And I would, her top peeled down, her naked bosoms hanging on her stomach as dripping in sweat she worked the mangle.

'They don't make them like that anymore.'

They were words of sheer admiration for someone who had survived.

The product of this labour of love takes centre stage on Sundays when those sheets in their recently reaffirmed virgin purity are laid anew onto the beds. Crisp and almost hard to the touch, they still smell of the laundry from whence they

came. I am too small to help Mum, but I try as best I am able. Smooth, tuck and turn.

A single blanket and a candlewick cover; it is summer. 'That's better,' Mum says, observing what to her is a work of art.

Sunday has its own rhythm and rites. After the changing of the beds Mum will check that the roast is ready for the oven that the vegetables are prepared and she will, for the first time that week, sit and read a newspaper. If the weather is fine in mid-morning Nan will visit for a cup of tea, but irrespective at noon Dad will go to the pub and come home for his meal and an afternoon sleep.

Over and above all of this, the Sunday flower market takes place as it has done since the 1860s. I adore the fact that I can perch on the doorstep and watch the ebb and flow of people. Women wear the ubiquitous turbans over their hair as they purchase flowers, or bulbs. Not many men are out apart from the market traders who flirt mercilessly with the clientele, who give as good back. The hue and cry of the costers in the market is the same as many another. 'So many for two and six,' the numbers a moveable feast according to the season. 'The best bargain you'll ever have.' Goods are sold from the pavement, having come on handcarts or in small vans. It feels warm and safe and happy, and I hug my knees and relish the entertainment.

My grandmother is upon me before I realise it. Wearing her best dress she prods me with her walking stick. Her soft white hair is piled ornately under a pearl-encrusted hairnet and outrageous earrings dance and dangle with her every movement. She is in her late seventies and she

scares most people. 'Get up dreamer, let me by.' She pats me none too softly on the head and wanders down the passageway.

In the kitchen, I occupy my favourite spot on the floor where I can appreciate the enormity of both Nan and her personality. I love these visits.

I see her on Saturdays when we go to her flat near the Broadway Market to do her shopping, but having her here in my home feels special. I watch as she pours tea into her saucer, dunks toast into the cup and then sucks it. She has teeth, false teeth, but they sit in a handkerchief in her coat pocket. The slurping sound as she sucks the tea from the saucer is unrestrained.

'Mum!'

'I can't wear the teeth all the time Bella, they rub.'

Dad, who is ever present at these visits, rattles his newspaper but remains invisible behind it.

'Get some new ones.'

Nan seems fond of her black rubber dentures, but perhaps it's just that she hasn't got the hang of a new pair being free on the State.

'Lin's going to nursery soon,' Mum informs her.

'She'll have to speak then.'

'I can speak.'

'Can you now?'

'And she can read.'

'Don't be daft, she's only a child.'

'Mum taught me.'

She is unimpressed until Mother snatches the newspaper from Dad and I stutter through a few sentences.

‘She’s a strange one, all that staring at you in silence, now this.’

‘She’s just a bit different.’

They drift on to conversations not connected with me and I slip back into watching them. Tony, my brother, comes in; he and Nan have a great affection for one other. He is full of the bustle of a teenager on his way to manhood and I have to sit on a chair to avoid his stomping feet. Even Dad lowers his paper and joins in until twelve o’clock chimes. Nan leaves, Dad changes to go to the pub and Mum returns to the kitchen.

Later, once Dad has returned and eaten his roast, he falls asleep on the smooth white territory of the bed where I join him. Mother sits and snoozes in the kitchen, legs propped on another chair, but Dad and I lie down. He has a smell on these afternoons, a smell that I can never forget. In contrast to the sheets it is a feast of the earth. Sweat, beer and tobacco. In his armpits the black mat of hairs curl, unlike the dark straightness on his head. There is no grey there, well, perhaps a hint. Sunlight is deflected by the window of the house next door. It bounces weakly into the bedroom. The walnut veneer of the bedhead is warmed to a deep glow. I trace the black lines with a small finger. Soon he will have to wake. Soon the beer will clear from his head. It will be six o’clock and we will eat winkles, shrimps and white buttered bread. Later he will stand in the street, this summer street, and smoke in the darkness. I will sit on the window ledge next to him and listen to the soft banter that the neighbours exchange. There is no traffic and the other children race up

and down. He knows that I prefer to sit close to him; there are never any admonishments to go and play.

I kneel on the bed and look down at him. The vest and pants he wears are thick. Like the sheets they have survived the passage through the inferno of cleaning. Above the bed, behind the walnut, is a mantelpiece. On this stands a glass of water. I hear sounds of stirring and a kettle being filled. Gently I dip a comb into the glass. The drips fall like small crystals as I drag the teeth slowly through his hair. His eyes like mine are brown. Smiling, he stays my hand.

‘All right, kid?’ I nod, and he envelopes me in a glorious hug of love and understanding.