

## *The Mark*

*This story was prompted by my wife noticing what she thought was a mark on my jeans but was a button on a pocket flap. She said, "I thought it was a grey smudge." Simultaneously we both said, "Grace Mudge." An hour later I had the story line. The historical context is factual but the story and characters are fictional.*

WHEN THE SECOND WORLD WAR ENDED IN 1945, there was a period of uncertainty for ordinary people in many countries and England was no exception. Soldiers returned home, responsibilities and relationships had changed, families had to make adjustments and many homes had to be rebuilt. Food was short and some items stayed on ration. Jobs had to be found and money was very tight.

After a couple of years, people began to feel a bit more settled and some decided they could start a family or add to their existing family. In fact many couples in England had the same idea at a similar time, so when lots of babies were born in 1948, it became known as 'The Bulge Year'.

One such couple was Fred and Deidre Mudge. They lived in a small terraced house in South London. When their baby was due, it didn't seem to want to come out. They waited and they waited. Deidre got frightened for the baby but at last, when it almost seemed too late, she was admitted into hospital. The doctor said, "We'll have to use forceps on Mrs Mudge." Deidre only found out because she overheard him talking to the matron. In those days most medical staff didn't talk to patients like they do now. Even the young nurse who seemed so friendly called Deidre 'Mrs Mudge' and would never have dreamed of using her first name.

Anyway, after a very protracted and difficult birth, with the doctor using a pair of forceps that looked to Deidre like industrial grabbers, her baby was delivered. "It's a girl," was all they said to Deidre, before whisking her baby off to the weighing scales. "7lbs 10ozs." The matron gave the baby to Deidre to hold briefly but then took her away without explanation.

In that first precious moment of contact, Deidre noticed a mark on her baby's temple—a grey mark like when someone tries to rub out a pencil line with a finger. Left on her own, Deidre hoped it hadn't been made by the forceps.

The baby was only brought back as Visiting Time approached. Men didn't attend the births of their children as they often do now. It was not expected of them and nor would they have been welcome. They would have been unlikely to get time off work and Fred would not have dared to ask his supervisor. Fred came into Deidre's ward nervously, holding his cap in both hands, feeling like a trespasser, an intruder.

"And don't be too long," boomed the voice of Matron behind him.

"Are you all right, Deidre?" Fred whispered, glancing back over his shoulder.

"I'm sore. But look. Here is your daughter."

"Well done, Deidre. She's beautiful. Takes after you, love."

"Take her then."

"Oh, I couldn't. I might drop her. What's that mark?"

"I noticed that, Fred. Don't suppose it's anything."

"What are we going to call her? I'd thought of a couple of names for a boy but..."

"Grace." Deidre was surprisingly assertive. "Frankly, dear, if we'd been through what she's been through just to get into this world, I think we'd have been done for. Grace it took to get her and Grace will be her name to remind her. And us."

"Grace Mudge. I like that," said Fred softly.

"Out you go. Mrs Mudge doesn't need you breathing over her." Matron was back dominating proceedings. "Name of baby?"

"Grace," answered Deidre as Fred bent to kiss her goodbye. He had just got to the door into the corridor when Matron's voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Grace Mudge. Ha! Grey smudge. Well it fits. Yes, it certainly fits."

Summoning up every bit of his courage, Fred re-entered enemy territory. "You may well mock, Matron, but good will come of this, you'll see." And he fled down the corridor before he could be chased out.

Good came sooner than anyone could have expected. The hospital had limited space for mothers and babies in the maternity ward. With the influx of post-war babies the staff were struggling to cope. In the nursery, extra cots had been squeezed in. The young nurse had been given so many orders that she had forgotten her job of attaching name bands to the babies' wrists. Now she stood by the cots in blind panic, clutching a batch of name tags and gazing with glazed eyes at babies that all looked the same to her inexperienced eyes. She dared not guess. But she dared not tell Matron.

Then Matron came in. Instantly she sized up the situation. Just as quickly she realised her own reputation was at stake, possibly even her job. She snatched the name tags out of the nurse's hands and with frightening speed fitted one to each baby.

"Silence is all I require of you, young lady. Silence."

When the time came for Grace to be brought again to Deidre, she took the baby in her arms. Immediately she called out to the nurse, "This is not my baby!" The nurse came back and read the name on the armband.

"Yes it is. Look. Grace Mudge."

"This is not my baby," repeated Deidre, louder and more firmly. "Call Matron."

The nurse hurried away, leaving the baby on Deidre's chest, and returned behind Matron.

"What's all this nonsense I hear, Mrs Mudge?"

"I know this is not Grace. This is not my baby. There has been a mistake. Do you really think I can't recognise my own child? Grace has a mark on her temple. You smirked about grey smudge. Remember, Matron?"

Matron remained silent.

"My husband," continued Deidre, "said that smudge would turn out for good and he was right. Here take this child to its mother. With a speed that caught Matron and the nurse on the hop, Deidre got out of bed, dumped the baby in the matron's arms and almost ran to the nursery. By the time Matron had offloaded the baby into the

nurse's care and caught up with Deidre, Grace was secure in her mother's arms. Deidre was ready to fight against all comers.

"This is Grace. See? You know it's true. This mark will always be a sign of blessing. This baby is Grace Mudge and I'm glad it sounds like grey smudge."

The young nurse appeared in the doorway. Fred was immediately behind her.

"Take us home, Fred. I'm getting dressed and you can take us home. I don't think anyone here will dare to make a fuss. Grace is coming home."