



*Alison Lapper, British artist, was born in 1965 without arms and shortened legs, the result of a medical condition called phocomelia. When she was **fitted with** artificial metal limbs she felt they only made her look less ugly instead of actually helping her, so she abandoned them and learnt to live without them.*

*The first 19 years of her life were spent in residential institutions for people with **impairments** and the story of those years and her following success as an artist and public figure can be found in her autobiography, *My Life in My Hands*.*

It was April 8 1965, the day after I was born. My mother lay alone in a small room at the hospital in Burton-upon-Trent. She had been sedated by the hospital staff and couldn't think very clearly. All she knew was that she'd been brought in to have her baby in hospital because it had been in **breech position**. She couldn't remember anything about the birth, but she did remember that she had come into hospital to have a baby. Where was

the baby now? Why hadn't they brought it in for her to see?

She could hear the sounds of hospital life outside her door and once or twice a nurse came in to check on her. Later in the day a cleaner came in to tidy up and mop the floor. She looked at my mother lying in her hospital bed and noticed that she was awake. "Can you hear all that screaming down the corridor? That's a baby that's just been born. She's in a terrible state. She's got no arms or legs and there's a big red mark all across her face. It's a horrible looking thing. The nurses say she'll die in a day or two, or else be a cabbage for the rest of her life. There's a bit of a panic going on. They don't know what to do. Neither do the doctors. I expect they're waiting for it to die."

Of course, the baby was me, but my mother didn't know that. Not at first.

My mother was released from hospital and a week later went to see her regular GP. She found enough courage to ask the doctor about me. His response was direct and to the point. He told my mother it would be best if I were looked after by the state and that she should put me out of her mind.

So there I was. Alison Lapper, aged one week. With no arms. And my legs had no knees, just the **thigh bone** ending in my feet, which weren't quite right, either.

Sometime before I was seven weeks old, I was shipped to a children's home where I remained for the whole of my childhood. We were about 250 children with a variety of impairments. The **staff** called us "the strange little creatures". By the age of one or two I think we all somehow knew we had been **abandoned** and, in varying degrees, we were traumatised by the fact. Even though some of the children had parents who visited them from time to time, they weren't necessarily happy occasions.

The nursing staff had been taught that it was not **advisable** to get close to the children, so they were not very **affectionate** or loving. Mostly we children looked to each other for friendship. I had two special friends, Peter Hull and Tara Flood. Peter had no legs, just his upper torso and two pointy stumps for arms. He was **persistent** and loyal. As an adult he won gold and silver medals for swimming at the Paralympics. Tara had short legs and arm stumps. She was the "bright one", **destined for** university and a **top-flight career**. We became a **close-knit trio** of adventurers and **mischief-makers**.



I was coming up to my fourth birthday in the spring and had been visiting the Tates since I was two and a half. I was completely **settled in with them** and they were very comfortable with having me. So much, so that they made **inquiries** with the authorities, to find out whether they could adopt me. I don't think the authorities at the home had any **objection**. They knew my mother had given me up at birth and had made no contact since. Of course, the authorities would have to contact my mother because she would be **required** to sign the adoption papers.

Life was not fair to Alison.

She doesn't have a close relationship with her mother, or with her relatives.

Since her family didn't want her, so Alison Lapper grew up in a children's home where kindness was mixed with outright cruelty.

When she was in her 20s she met Fran, a tall young man, who didn't have any problems with her disability. Soon she fell in love with him and they got married. On their wedding day, they slipped from the reception and...

...got a taxi back to the hotel where we were staying. We took the lift to our room, but when Fran had shut the door behind him, he turned to me with an odd expression on his face. "You're mine now and you'll do as I tell you!" he said in his broad Lancashire accent. It took me a second to realise he wasn't joking. And that was when the relationship changed.

He didn't want me to go to college. He didn't like me going out. He didn't like my friends and didn't like it when I went out with them. After a few months I went to see a marriage guidance **counsellor**, but Fran refused point blank to come with me to any of the appointments.

After an episode of violence, Alison got scared of him and filed for divorce.

She tried to have a baby four times and lost them all.

She got pregnant again, in 1999 and although her boyfriend didn't want the baby, and despite her fear of having a deformed child, she decided to go for it and gave birth to a healthy boy. She employed a nurse when he was a baby, but she is independent and she'd like to keep it that way.

She graduated from the University of Brighton in 1994 with a first class honours degree in Fine Art.

What do you think – true or false:

1. Alison has a driving licence.
2. There is a statue of her in Trafalgar Square.
3. When she was in Art school she used to paint beautiful people.
4. She is a teacher.
5. She is a single mother.
6. She has a nose piercing.
7. She was awarded M.B.E. (member of the Order of the British Empire) in 2003, for her services to the Art.
8. When her son was a baby she couldn't pick him up.
9. When her mother realized that her baby was deformed she wanted to run away from the hospital.
10. She started to draw when she was 3 years old.
11. Her son feels strange around her.
12. The authorities can take her son away if they think she is not capable of taking proper care of him.
13. Paris's father (her son's name) is involved in his life although they don't live together.



Vocabulary – synonyms

advisable, affectionate, persistent, staff, abandon, mischief, objection, inquiry, destined for, impairment, require, counsellor

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| 1. somebody who gives advice | 7. continuing despite problems |
| 2. want, need | 8. disability |
| 3. monkey business | 9. employees |
| 4. showing your emotions of love and caring | 10. intended |
| 5. investigation, examination | 11. protest |
| 6. wise | 12. leave someone for good |