

To be able to put into words after 55 years an horrific experience may be therapeutic in some way to give one some peace of mind, a daily memory that never leaves a mother who has given up a child for adoption.

At aged 19 when I found myself pregnant, my mother was insistent that the child would be adopted as it would bring shame and stigma to the family, and not only would she put me into an unmarried mothers' home, she was insistent that I was sent interstate so I could not be seen by anyone in close proximity.

My boyfriend, the father of the child, who later became my husband, also did not want his parents to be aware of the pregnancy, and it is only now that he is residing in a nursing home that I am not controlled and can put my feelings in the open without fear of repercussions. On my return after giving birth, my mother insisted I still marry him as no one else would want me after such a shameful experience.

In 1966 I was put on a train (alone) at Adelaide railway station to travel to Melbourne to become a resident at Presbyterian Sisterhood, 223 McKean Street, Fitzroy managed by a cruel matron. Treatment was barbaric, I often wondered if prisoners were treated more humanely. All mail received was opened and censored, (my only communication with the outside world coming from interstate); we were woken at 4 a.m. to scrub floors on our hands and knees, while being caned if we had disobeyed orders. Washing was all done by hand, public showers, no dignity. We were all expected to attend church on Sunday evening. How we were stared at by the congregation who knew exactly where we had come from, all these young girls in various stages of their pregnancies. Of course we were in disgrace, dirty little pregnant girls, which we were reminded of daily by Matron.

It was known my baby was in the breech position and when I went into labour in August 1966 I was taken to RWH for the agonising delivery, no pain relief, and told to be quiet – “you are just an unmarried mother, you should be grateful we help you at all”. With forceps delivery, I was torn to shreds. I could barely walk and was returned to McKean Street where drugs were administered to dry up my milk supply. My mother was advised that now I had delivered, my time at Fitzroy was at an end and she would have to arrange for me to be removed from the facility. I was sent to a private hotel in the city until I recovered sufficiently to return to South Australia while attending RWH for regular checkups.

I knew my baby was going to be adopted, (that had been instilled into me by my mother – no other option) but shortly after the delivery while still in RWH, a kind nurse asked if I would like a quick look at him, for which I will be forever grateful. It was gut wrenching knowing that would be the only time I would see his precious face, and things were to get worse.

To this day I have difficulty showing affection to my own family, and for many years I would look at people in the street wondering if strangers were actually my son walking passed me – sadly that was never the case.

My mother flatly refused to ever let me discuss why she had decided what would happen with my baby and it was only in 1988 I could no longer live with not knowing what had happened to my beautiful baby that I contacted CSV to see if there was any chance of finding out the whereabouts of my son and if he wanted any contact with me. I was contacted by Copelen Street Family Services in 1989. I met with them and learned that my child had tragically died in 1971 aged 4 years old, stung by a bee.

Copelan Street contacted the adoptive parents and they shared with me some of their memories of my/their son and they gave me photographs (and a lock of his hair) of the short time they had him in their lives, and I was able to visit his grave at Horsham cemetery and grieve for what I had lost – small consolation. A very sad day. A tragic experience for everyone.

I constantly ask myself if I had been able to bring my baby home with me would he still be part of my life and a loved member of my family; I felt like one of my limbs had been removed, a part of my heart was wrenched from me, when I left him at the RWH and I have never been a complete individual since - the shame I have felt ever since never leaves me. (I have lived in Victoria for years, but I have never been able to go into RWH, the memories are too painful.)

I went on to have 3 more sons, and every delivery I had difficulty bonding with these babies as there was a fear that they would be taken away from me.

I feel extremely inferior amongst strangers, and always feel like I am not good enough, that something is “missing” and I have very low self esteem. Over the years I have been to counselling at various times and always it gets “swept under the mat” the fact that I gave a child up for adoption as though it is too hard, or it doesn’t matter. Does anyone understand? Is it guilt, the nights I still lie awake thinking about it, and I am in my 70’s, I feel the distress I brought to my family as my mother constantly reminded me until her death in 2012 – perhaps she lived a long life to haunt me for the distress I caused her.

Society is cruel, and no apology will ever – **not ever** – erase the hurt a person who has given up a child feels, you do feel an emptiness inside. How could Julia Gillard be able to represent the Australian Government in providing an apology? She does not have children of her own, she has no understanding, no comprehension – it is just words. Too many individuals tell you to stop living in the past, you should get over things, don’t be negative, this is something that I will take to my grave, my first born, my eldest son. How I failed him.

Thank you for allowing me to share my experience and put what I feel in writing.

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