

I am writing this on behalf of my mother who, at 16 years old, was sent to St Josephs in the late 1960s.

I wanted to provide a broader picture of the cumulative effects of forced adoption and its impact, not only on the mothers and their babies, but also on the subsequent children, loved ones, friends and the communities of the single women and girls who experienced this terrible injustice.

My mother grew up and lived in a small town in regional Victoria when she became pregnant with her first boyfriend. With her boyfriends family fearing their reputations and perhaps not knowing what else to do, it was decided that my mum would be shipped off to the institution where she was to stay throughout her pregnancy, until the birth of her baby, which she had, at the Royal Women's Hospital in Carlton.

My mum was sworn to secrecy and taken from her home, school, family, friends and the father of her baby.

Like many women and girls at the time, she vanished, only to return 9 months later. No one asked and no one told.

Having seen the pictures of these establishments, I can only imagine the fear, humiliation and anxiety she must have felt walking through the door.

At this time, and until the 1980s, there were many of these catholic-run establishments operating all over Australia. Their main purpose was to house girls and women who were pregnant out of wedlock.

It didn't matter if they wanted to rightfully keep their babies, or if they had boyfriends, supportive families and friends. If they were not married, this is where many young women and girls were sent.

At St Josephs, the nuns repeatedly told my mother she was dirty, not fit to be a mother and she had done this to herself. Not only this, she was told that she must work to make her keep.

Heavily pregnant women being told to scrub floors, do laundry and sew, day in and day out, brings to mind images that you might see watching *'A Handmaids Tale.'*

But it was real, it happened to thousands of women, and the effects are still felt, and will continue to be felt until this is properly addressed.

My mum once told me, after she had given birth to her baby girl she was not allowed to hold her; they took her immediately away to the nursery. She told me that while she was in the hospital, she used to sneak out of her room at night and look at her daughter behind the glass of the nursery window.

After this, she was told to just move on and get on with her life.

I can assure you, she didn't.

And how could she?

How could anyone move on from that experience?

The secrecy, shame and humiliation left its mark, and followed my mum throughout her life. Further babies, marriages and friendships couldn't heal what had happened or erase the memories.

My mum didn't have access to any form of after care after the birth, no check ups and no appointments with a psychologist. Nothing. She could not share what had happened to her, and subsequently said she found it hard to relate to other people. She had no one to share this experience with at the time and no way to process it.

Due to her repressed trauma and internalised shame, she did not believe she was lovable or deserved love. In her first marriage, she experienced further birth trauma, having suffered multiple miscarriages and even a stillbirth before eventually adopting two children herself.

In her second marriage she was able to give birth to another baby, but the marriage was a disaster, abusive, and created further trauma for my mother, my siblings and me.

My mother did not believe she deserved better. Her trauma impacted her choices and many of her relationships, including friendships and her relationship with her children suffered because of this.

In 2000 when I was 10, and my mum was then 47, she told me what had happened to her, and that I had a half sister.

My mum had tried to look for my sister before I was born, in the 80s and 90s with no success.

But in 2000, my sister had made contact with her and we were going to meet her. I feel very lucky we had this outcome for our family and my mum and half-sister were able to meet and form a relationship before she died, as I know that is not the case for many people with similar experiences.

I was too young to understand what forced adoption meant, I had never seen a nun and didn't understand the complexities of childbirth, relationships and all of that 'grown up' stuff.

But I understood her pain. The failed marriages, depression, anxiety, secrecy, tears, outbursts and the blood pressure medication she took for chronic stress.

It all made sense, but there was nothing I could do to make it better.

Nothing I could say.

This trauma has rippled through our family for three generations now; the effects have been widely felt and run deep, as I'm sure is the case for many other families too.

My mum showed signs of trauma related mental health issues though I don't know if she ever received a diagnosis or therapy. My siblings and I have each had our own struggles, like being unable to form significant attachments, issues with addiction and PTSD.

Sadly my mother passed away just before the official apology and did not get to hear that what had happened to her was wrong and illegal.

But, it is still only words.

Lives have been severely impacted because of these practices and there still needs to be appropriate access to personal information from church groups and hospitals and free specialised support services for victims of forced adoptions whose rights have been violated in these institutions.

The system has failed these women, who like my mother, are incredibly strong, resilient and remarkable women. But my point is, they shouldn't have had to be resilient.

This should never have been allowed to happen.