

gwb

30 June 2021

INQUIRY INTO HISTORICAL
FORCED ADOPTIONS IN VICTORIA
MY RESPONSE

Attention – Yuki Simmonds – [REDACTED]
Legal & Social Issues Committee – [REDACTED]
Legislative Assembly – Parliament of Victoria

When I first made contact with the Inquiry, I was unsure whether my story would qualify as a “forced” adoption. I was more a relinquishing mother, but what occurred was so malevolent that I felt it might be of some value if my story can be added to the historical record. Ms Yuki Simmons has assured that it will be a worthwhile contribution, if only to ensure that such duplicity can never again be used to the detriment of a mother’s intention – and her child’s whole life.

The background . On my 21st birthday ([REDACTED]) Dorothy Maher was a somewhat naive, and certainly inexperienced, country lass in Wagga, eldest of eight children and still a virgin. Over the Christmas holidays I inadvertently saw my father involved in sexual dalliance. Given his prior preachings about being a “good Catholic girl” I reacted badly to this hypocrisy, and by Easter found myself several months pregnant.

Well aware that I was a “shotgun wedding” baby myself (born into Kew) no way I was going to marry as an easy option to hide my ‘sin’. Instead I carried on as if normal until June and then attempted suicide. Didn’t die, but now family knew. All panic, and much anger about being too late for abortion. Wouldn’t agree – another no, not never – I was adamant that though I might have goofed, it wasn’t the baby’s fault.

Within a week found myself on a train to Melbourne with postcard address arranged by my father for 100 Grattan St Carlton – which turned out to be St Joseph’s, ie home for wayward women. Instruction – stay there, don’t contact anyone (not even aunts who lived in Melbourne), don’t write/phone your mother, and don’t bother coming home when “it” is done.

The pregnancy. All I really remember about Grattan St is an immense inner calm. The nuns took me in, gave me a room – and a housekeeping role, mostly on my knees floorpolishing. It was 1962 and I just “knew” that the baby would have to be given away – as eldest girl (with three brothers immediately after) had lived enough in the non-stop of daily mothering to know that going solo-Mum was unthinkable.

I was quite alone – had no home, some floppy clothes, a rug, a suitcase, but little else: no family support, no job, no income, no career to go back to.

The one thing I did have was determination – to stay healthy and do everything possible to ensure that baby not only had the best possible preparation for being born, but then would only go to a family that valued books, and study, and music, and intellectual adventure – the kind of “better” life that I’d want to give, if only ever I could.

So, technically speaking, it wasn’t a “forced” adoption as such – but what happened was, to me, even worse than if it had been.

The bad birth. About 3am in early October 1962, I was taxi-ed to St Vincent’s hospital East Melbourne, given a blue hospital gown and hassled into a kind of tented blue bed, my legs strapped, arms helpless, contractions coming OK until all over about 6am.

Physically I think all went well. I can’t say for sure, because instead of the natural labour I wanted and had prepared so painstakingly for, suddenly a mask was over my face and all I knew was gas. Vile gas, and hands holding it down. I have no memory of anything else. Nothing hurt – because it was all a nothing.

So much a nothingness that even today I get the date wrong

I never felt the baby-body leave mine, though I have a faint echo of bossy words about placenta. I never heard a first cry, never held my child, never curled a tiny finger or kissed her head. Didn’t even know it was a girl, not until mid-morning next day when the nurse came with pills to stop the milk.

The awful after-birth Two things happened. The first was trying to call Wagga, to at least let Mum she was now a grandma, but I wasn’t even allowed to say hello – my father cut off the call. That was when I cried. There was no-one to even talk to.

The next was, I think next day, still in hospital but soon to leave. A meeting in the admin office to do the birth certificate and go over details of the adoption – I’d already filled out the form about these some weeks earlier. As agreed, the adopting family was to be a schoolteacher and his wife, who were looking forward to a sister for their two young sons both under 10yo. I was told they lived in a Melbourne suburb, the family well-regarded, and the home full of books.

I asked could I see the baby, just once, please. The answer – no, best not to. Just sign here and go away. Start a new life, they said.

So that’s what I did.

But they lied.

What happened? Despicable, unforgivable, irretrievable harm. My aim was a sad relinquishing, but they turned it into a kind of kidnapping, based on fraud. My inalienable link as a birth-mother was ignored. I was negated into another nothingness.

But, infinitely worse, that daughter’s life was given away forever, like some tuppenny baby-prize at a church fete.

And for going on three decades I knew nothing about the double-dealing.

That 30 year gap. After signing the adoption papers I couldn't bear to be in Melbourne so settled in Sydney. In a few years Dorothy Maher had built up quite a career in radio, then advertising, travelled, worked in several big cities overseas, had various relationships (but not marital, and nary a word about children – a denial that couldn't face loss like that ever again), lived in New Zealand for 10 years, added Emma as my new first name, finally returned to Sydney in the mid-1980's.

Sometime soon after 1987 I learned that Victoria now had new laws about release of adoptive information, found a phone number, made a call, sent a letter, expected nothing. But suddenly, within months I was taking a phone call, talking to my now-28yo daughter [REDACTED] married with three sons and living in Frankston.

Given distances, it was a gradual getting-to-know-you. There were a few visits to Melbourne. [REDACTED] had a daughter, divorced, started a small computer consultancy, met and married nice guy – was happy to have Emma and now-partner [REDACTED] to visit if they could get down from Sydney.

Then, on one fateful trip, the full story emerged.

What really happened. Despicable, unforgivable, irretrievable fraud. It seems that about the same time I was in East Melbourne polishing floors and working out details of that Adoption Agreement, in a small village 150kms north-west of Melbourne, a woman with family connections in the Catholic Church was planning to use her Bishop-cousin to short-circuit due process at St Vincent's Hospital and thereby have her pick of the prettiest baby girl that came up for adoption next month.

And that's what she did ! One way or another, and probably within days of my exit, the adoption arrangement I'd agreed to was torn up, and re-made as if for Mrs [REDACTED] and husband of Maldon.

They probably had to forge my signature to do it. – but why bother about legalities like that when you're really changing a child's whole life on a whim.

How do I know all this ? Because [REDACTED] told me so. And worse – so did [REDACTED] herself – gloating to my face at how clever she'd been to beat the system and get her way. Not an inkling of the emotional ramifications, or grief caused.

In one way you could say that this was a “forced” adoption –because [REDACTED] was the force, and she used that force to pervert the adoption process itself.

It's bitter irony to realise that I got the story from its perpetrator – that she's the one who filled in the details of why, and how, there was no schoolteacher or young brothers for my daughter – no home full of books, no future with music and good education.

Instead, she went to a family that was utterly unsuitable and a home context that I would have despised.

For a start – in October 1962, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] was about 44yo – just a few months older than my own mother. She already had four children - three boys with the eldest 21yo (ie same age as I was then) and girl [REDACTED] going on for 11 when [REDACTED] was born – and with my own next-nearest sister 10 years younger, I know from personal experience just how huge that growing-up “gap” really is.

As a member of the Maldon community, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] was known as a very forceful (that word again) personality, not afraid to speak her mind, enthusiastic about racing and liked having a bet or two, or more.

According to [REDACTED] [REDACTED] husband was in his 50’s, not well and no longer much interested in kids. It’s a mystery as to why he agreed to a fifth child - and a sadness to [REDACTED] that she never really had a father, given he died when she was about 8yo.

When telling me about it all, Ms [REDACTED] was certainly pleased with herself for getting him to go along with her plan – though I suspect it was possibly a ploy to keep Mr [REDACTED] involved in “family” and distracted from his own failing health.

The question of WHY did she do it haunts me every time the name [REDACTED] comes to mind. It’s such a selfish, self-indulgent blind-eye about what it means in other lives. When I’m feeling especially bad about being cheated, I ask Why- why- why ? She didn’t need more children. Her sons didn’t need a mini-sibling. Her daughter was nearly teenage – the baby doll stage was long gone.

That “prettiest baby” was all for [REDACTED] [REDACTED] herself – a whim, and maybe some kind of suppressed peri-menopausal panic about her role as “Mother”. How I hate the thought.

Consequences keep coming. From what I’m told, [REDACTED] had a curiously constrained upbringing, and often felt “out of place”. She had little interest in school and couldn’t wait to leave. This happened at age 15, with next step being to leave home. Between 16 and 17 she was in love, engaged, married, and moved to Melbourne to be full-time housewife – no job, no career. A few years later, 3 sons. Her husband would drink, get abusive and by the time she first met me, violent to the point of rape, and a daughter was born. She moved out, got a divorce, started the IT business, met a lovely man, married him, they bought a home, and now it’s another 20 years on. The kids are gone, [REDACTED] downsized with her dream man to her dream cottage, and no doubt, happy.

And I’m happy for her – but we no longer have anything other than a vague connection. Sometimes I’ve phoned, and always it’s hard to know what to say. Embarrassing even. Our backgrounds are so different the only things to talk about are superficialities that soon run out. Health, weather, garden, decor.

It means that at 80yo I still grieve for the baby I never held. And my arms feel even emptier because I no longer have any context, or contact, with the daughter that I did once have. She’s long gone.

Mrs [REDACTED] “forced adoption” lives on. That’s what it means for me today. *ends*

Thank you. [REDACTED] Emma Brooks Maher