

In December 2017 my daughter got married.

I was not invited.

That experience summarises the journey I've been on – the lifelong gift of open adoption!

My daughter was born in 1987 when I was 17 years of age. Like many mothers of loss, I was from a family where sexual relationships were not discussed. My parent's ignorance and my age and vulnerability has caused more trauma in my life than I could ever have imagined.

I lived in a regional Victorian city with my Catholic parents and five younger siblings when I became pregnant. My pregnancy was a crisis. I was mortified and totally lost. My parents called in the Nun's. When it was discovered that I would have to leave my community if I wished to have a pregnancy termination, I wanted to run for ever. I was so ashamed.

It was decided that I would leave my community because I was too ashamed to stay. It was decided that I would relinquish my baby for adoption, as my parents and my partner thought that was best. The local church also supported this pathway. I had no idea what this would mean at the time.

I left my home when I was five months pregnant and moved to Catholic Family Welfare Bureau's (CFWB) home for single mothers in Glenroy to live with other vulnerable mothers until my baby's birth. The agency had me right where they wanted me – away from family and support systems and aligned with their social workers and Nun's. There was no way out.

My daughter's father was an ignorant 21 year old man. To this day, he has not made contact with my daughter, nor shown any interest in her.

I lived in Glenroy for 4 months, having counselling with the CFWB counsellor every week. In hindsight, this counselling did nothing to challenge the systems and mistaken views I had about my capacity to be a good mother to my child. There was an undisclosed view held by the agency that there were better carers for my daughter than me. There was no exploration of my desire to parent, no exploration of the support available to me in my home-town, no involvement of my parents or partner in the conversation about my daughter's future, no challenging the processes that channelled babies like mine to middle class, married couples. The agency knew exactly where they were sending my daughter. I was totally at their mercy.

I travelled back to my home-town after my daughter's birth in October 1987. I was distraught at leaving my baby in hospital – the baby I had held and touched and kissed and loved. I wanted my baby, but my back was against a wall.

My daughter went into foster care with a woman in her 70's in Melbourne. I named my daughter xxxxx, but this was eventually discarded and changed to xxxxx. I cannot begin to describe the significant negative impact her name change and falsified birth certificate had on me. This dissing of my role in her life, and the replacement of all I was to her, was profound and gut-wrenching.

I travelled down to Melbourne a couple of times to visit my daughter after her birth. Meanwhile, I was exploring the options for keeping her back in my home-town. I visited a local child welfare agency and was told that single parenting is very hard and without my parent's support, it was not recommended. Full of hope, I asked if my parents would help me. Misguided, ignorant, selfish and uneducated on the trauma of adoption, they said no. They believed she was better off with strangers than with me and our family.

In 1984, the Victorian Adoption Act was changed to include contact between the child and their natural parent/s and to ensure this relationship was legally protected. This was the only thread of hope I held, that I could continue to know and love my child despite her adoption. It was the carrot that it was clearly meant to be. And, in my case, it was a lie.

I was too young, too immature, too vulnerable and too scared to go against my parent's wishes. I was scared I would ruin my life and I was scared I would ruin hers. I really believed the propaganda that was fed to me. With my back against the wall, I signed adoption consent in February 1988 in Melbourne. I travelled to Melbourne by myself, conscious of the fact I had to return to school and return to life as I knew it. If only I could speak to that young woman now.

In the years after my daughter's loss, I discovered that my legally protected contact visits with my daughter were actually not legally protected. The adoption consent is written in a way that the parent's desire for contact and/or information exchange is written as 'wishes'. 'Wishes' can be included in the adoption order. What I did not notice at the time was that my legally protected rights only included information to be provided to the adoption agency twice a year by the adopter's. My face to face contact was to be negotiated between the adopter's and I. I have absolutely no recollection of ever having this ever explained to me prior to or after consent was taken. I was totally blindsided. Natural mothers don't have lawyers when signing one of the most significant, life changing documents they will ever sign in their life. Why not? Adopter's have lawyers. This is just one example of the huge (and abused) power imbalance that exists between natural parents and adopter's. There are many more examples. The fact that my legal rights to contact with my child were not protected would consequently prevent me from having contact with my daughter for almost three years, critical years in the development of her self-identity and our relationship. This is outrageous, unethical and should have been illegal.

I convinced myself that giving her to strangers was for the best. I talked the talk, and I walked the walk. Initially! I saw my daughter approximately twice a year for the first 10 years of her life. This contact always occurred at my request and was never initiated by the adopter's. Maintaining contact with your child over such a significant period of time, especially when you know you are seen as problematic, is something I am extremely proud of. Despite being continuously separated from my much-loved child, despite her not recognising me as her mother, despite the hostility from the male adopter, despite the distances covered, the funds spent, the challenges it presented... I persevered because I believed it was what was best for my daughter. This is something I will never regret, despite how it has panned out over 30+ years of her life.

From July 1988 until Jan 1997 I initiated 17 visits while I completed secondary school and attended University. These visits often entailed travelling for many hours, often requiring overnight stays. Unfortunately my daughter was placed with adopter's who lived five hours away from my home town. This significant distance, and the deliberate placement of my child in an area where I had no extended family, was an attempt to ensure our lives were kept separate.

On reflecting on my visits and my correspondence with the adopter's, I can clearly see how I was compliant, initially justifying my decision and determined I could suppress my despair by getting on with my life. My thankful letters to the adopter's for bringing my daughter to our visits were later used to undermine me, as they were used as evidence that they were accommodating, and that I was actually grateful to them. The distress at seeing the submissive, timid adolescent / young adult I was, and the way that was taken advantage of, cannot be underestimated. I had to think and act carefully to ensure I did not get the adopter's offside, least they make life difficult for me and my relationship with my daughter. Living in a state of constant vigilance, walking the line between

pursuing a meaningful relationship with my child and keeping the adopter's happy, is a mentally damaging thing to have to do. I knew I was important to my daughter, and I was determined to fight for our rights to know each other. I also knew that the adopter's saw me as a constant reminder of what they could never be to my child. I was an absolute threat.

This state of being- anxious, distressed, people-pleasing, guilty... whilst biologically driven to pursue a meaningful relationship with my own child, is a shameful indictment on adoption as a process of severance. Openness in adoption is trauma-inducing, enables game playing, and perpetuates the power imbalance between the adopter's and the natural family. It is not good enough to permit openness in adoption without providing the professional supports, legislative protections, resources and oversights that are required to ensure that the best interests of the child involved are elevated and prioritised. There is no doubt in my mind that being permitted to see my child, not being permitted to be recognised as her mother, being only permitted to stay at arms-length, not being permitted to love her and know her totally and without prejudice, caused life-long damage to her and I. The behaviour I witnessed by her male adopter was totally inappropriate – and it was supported by the CFWB Principal Officer. I was infantilised by the male adopter and the agency. I was challenged. I was dismissed. My rights to know and love my child throughout her life were not respected or protected. This is because the process of relinquishment and adoption told me that I am not really anyone important to her, just her former mother who is to be feared and contained.

At one stage the adopter's asked me to write down what my expectations of my future relationship with my daughter were. This I did! In hindsight, my vision would have been very confronting for the male adopter who very much saw her as his possession. It wasn't my relationship with her that he valued, but his fear of being questioned in the future if he didn't allow it. He saw himself as the master of our relationship. He did not want to be challenged. In hindsight, the adopter's did not bring my daughter to contact for me or for her. They adopters knew secrecy was no longer acceptable, but they still believed they were protecting her from her mother – their behaviours subsequently showed this to be true.

When my daughter was seven, I wrote a letter to them at their request, outlining my vision of our future relationship. They didn't like my response. They co-opted the Principal Officer from Centacare (former CFWB) and she started working with them to 'pull me into line'.

When my daughter was eight years of age, a mediation session with another worker from Centacare between me, my mother and the adopter's was held. I was not informed that the mediator worked at Centacare, and therefore had a conflict of interest.

When my daughter was aged nine years, my partner and I went travelling overseas. Prior to our departure, there were an agreement about the adopter's sending mail via my partner's mother and phoning me twice a year. They never phoned, but did send letters via my partner's mother.

When my daughter was aged 10 years, my partner and I returned from overseas. The adopter's decide to prevent contact between my daughter and I upon my return. This is because I sent mail directly to their home address when we were overseas, rather than through the agency. This is despite them knowing that I knew their name and contact details and had done so for years. This is because they wanted to maintain control over me and my relationship with my child. This is because of adoption and the power imbalance it creates.

The Principal Officer at Centacare sent me a letter telling me that adopter's will no longer allow me to have contact with my daughter. The letter reads like one someone would write to a naughty child.

In July 1998 I made a FOI request made to Centacare for my file in preparation for legal action at my own expense. I was livid. How dare these people who have custody of my daughter think they can cut me out of my daughter's life. I refused to allow them do this to her.

In March 1999 I consulted a solicitor in Melbourne. I discovered I had no ability to vary the County Court adoption order, which I had previously discovered did not have my legal rights to contact included in it.

My understanding is that no-one had ever applied for a Contact Order in the Family Court before in an adoption situation, so there was no known precedent.

In May 1999 the Law Institute of Victoria's Pro Bono scheme confirmed they would fund my fight in the Family Court. Thank God for small mercies.

In June 1999 the adopter's appoint their own lawyer, a person by the name of [REDACTED]

In June 1999 a solicitor from Slater & Gordon was appointed to take mine and my daughter's right to contact to be reinstated to the Family Court.

In August 1999 we had the first hearing in the Family Court. The adopter's fought the hearing being held in the Family Court and tried to push it back into the County Court for a variation to the Adoption Order. They are well aware that I have no legal recourse in the County Court because you can only vary an Adoption Order with permission of the adopter's. Obviously they won't give permission, they've just stopped my contact. They are stalling.

In Dec 1999 an affidavit is prepared by my solicitor from Slater & Gordon.

In April 2000 the adopter's are trying to prevent me from being interviewed with my child for the purpose of preparing a Family Court report. The judgement was that it was up to the Family Court counsellor to determine who my daughter should be interviewed with.

In May 2000 I was interviewed independently and with my daughter by a Family Court Counsellor for the purpose of the Family Court action. This is the first time I've seen my girl for two years. It was a beautiful, special moment for us. It was heartbreaking that this reunion had to occur under such horrible circumstances. As a consequence of these interviews, the Family Court report indicated that my daughter wanted contact reinstated.

These were her words. I was vindicated. Her voice was elevated.

In July 2000 I applied for Consent Orders for contact in the Family Court. The adopter's were not willing to sign. They want the Consent Orders to be registered in the County Court. My solicitor finds out that if they then breach, the process for pursuing the breach and gaining compliance would be long and drawn out. There was no precedent that my solicitor was aware of. The adopter's were still trying to ensure that I had a long, difficult road to regain and maintain contact with my daughter.

In August 2000 we are still trying to come to agreement on the wording in the Consent Orders. Unfortunately, the Consent Orders were drafted by the adopter's solicitor. His words and tone were provocative. I argued against many of the insinuations he made, and conditions he tried to impose. The Consent Orders went back and forth and back and forth for months.

In Sept 2000 I am still negotiation with my solicitor at Slater and Gordon about the wording in the Consent Orders.

In Oct 2000 I am now pregnant with my second child. I continue to work with my solicitor to undo the harmful points the adopter's solicitor has put into the Consent Orders. I am unsure as to why he was allowed to write the orders, given his animosity towards me and his bias towards his own clients. This drags the process out for months.

By Nov 2000 my daughter has had another birthday, and contrary to what the adopters had originally indicated, I've still had no visit with her. The adopter's solicitors delay tactics are working in their favour.

In Nov 2000 the Victorian DHS (Department Human Services) have now got wind of my case and wish to become a party to the proceedings. We are almost at the point of having Consent Orders, and they've come forth with their own ideas about what my contact with my daughter should look like. My solicitor is not happy and tells them that they do not wish for my case to be delayed any longer.

In Dec 2000 agreement has still not been reached as adopter's are dragging the chain in reviewing the draft version of the Consent Orders.

In Jan 2001 the sticking points of the Consent Orders are the language and blaming that the adopter's solicitor has written into them. I refuse to sign anything that suggests I am to blame for the breakdown in the relationship with the adopter's. There are suggestions that contact should be 'supervised', that my conversations are to be held within hearing distance of a welfare agency attendee, and vetting of my correspondence before it goes to adopter's home. It is outrageous that people are able to continue stalling my child's right to see me and insinuate that I am unsafe with my daughter – and yet it happened.

In April 2001 we still going! The new solicitor I had at Slater and Gordon dropped the ball, was uncontactable and did no re-writes of the Consent Orders over a number of months.

In June 2001 the adopter's are no longer retaining a solicitor. I am so thankful for this development.

In July 2001 there is still no response from the adopter's about agreement with the amended, draft Consent Orders.

In August 2001 my solicitor wrote a letter to the adopter's asking them to respond to the draft Consent Orders. They are sitting on it and just hoping it will go away. They'd promised me a visit with my daughter in October 2000, and have managed to drag this situation out for almost a year since then. We will reinstitute proceedings in the Family Court if they do not reply within seven days.

In September 2001 the adopter's finally respond. I follow my solicitor's advice and sign the Consent Orders, despite still not being happy with some elements. It took three years to get to this point from the time the adopter's notified me they were preventing my contact. Three years! This should be of significant cause for concern to the government.

In Nov 2001 DHS try again to intervene in the proceedings at the last minute. They tried to reduce my agreed contact to 2 hours from 6. They tried to argue than any longer than 1-2 hours was likely to jeopardise the development of a positive relationship between my daughter and I. They suggested that in their experience, their staff have to encourage and facilitate conversation as parties usually don't have a lot to say to each other. They then said they wouldn't be able to supervise for more than 2 hours (I refused to work with Centacare into the future due to their bias and the damage they had caused me and my child). It took me two years to get to our agreement, and they throw this into the mix. I was furious that they had the audacity to intervene in a situation

that they had no experience in (infant adoption with contact is very different from a Child Protection placement). They spoke as if they were experts in this space, when they were nothing of the sort. They had forgotten that I'd had an established relationship with my child for ten years. They'd forgotten that there was no history of abuse. Their proposal did not acknowledge that I was an expert in my relationship with my child, not them. How dare the government abuse its power in this way!

DHS tried to change the reference to the parties to identify me as the 'biological mother' and the adopter's as the 'mother' and 'father'. They also made comment about me being referred to as the 'applicant' rather than the 'applicant mother'. This dissing of my connection to my daughter was consistent with DHS's whole approach to intervening in this case. Their behaviour was shameful and obstructionist.

My solicitor disagreed with their actions, and I do not know whether any of these suggested amendments went through. I do know my level of contact was not reduced to two hours. DHS were petty and unfortunately, had the gall to try and reduce my significance in my daughter's life to almost non-existent. Their intervention was uninvited, lacked rigour and had the capacity to cause significant grief to me and my child. They should not have been able to get away with their unprofessional involvement in this case.

We finally got Consent Orders signed and I had 2-3 visits with my daughter before she turned 17 and became independent from her adopter's. She contacted me via text one fine day and I've not had to have any contact with the adopter's since then.

Whilst my daughter and I have had intermittent contact over the years – always at my instigation and travel, it is clear that she is conflicted. The court action caused significant harm to my daughter and our relationship. It should not have been allowed to occur, and it should not have been able to be dragged out for so many years.

I am a staunch opposer of adoption – ever. Whilst long term forms of care should be available for some children who can't live with their parents, the institute of infant adoption is an indictment of a society's capacity to preserve the sacred bonds between a mother, father and their child. It is a human right that is wilfully and legally abused. It should not be seen as anything other than a cost and resource saving to government. It is not and never has been a service to children in need. 'Vountary' infant relinquishment discourse should be re-constructed to be seen as a tragedy. Human beings deserve to be supported adequately in caring for their own children. It is our society's responsibility to find other options for those who do not wish to relinquish care of their children. We should be bending over backwards to maintain a human's right to have an ongoing and meaningful relationship with their family members.

My reflection on what happened to me causes me significant distress. My daughter is harmed. My family is decimated. My other children lost their sister – alive, but missing. My parents lost their first born grandchild. Our family is broken. We will never heal. This pain and trauma was totally unnecessary and is a direct result of the institute of adoption and the coercive control the systems and processes around us had.

My journey after relinquishment ensured that the powerlessness I experienced as a teenager continued – my child and I both had our rights repeatedly violated by the adopters, the adoption agency, the legal system and through unrequested government involvement. This human rights abuse should not have been allowed to be perpetuated unchecked as it did. It was perpetrated by those systems that should have been hell bent on protecting my child's rights to her own sacred

family relationships and history. Instead they actively worked against her and I. This has got to change.

We know there is no need for adoption in our country. We know that a person's human right to their own identity is paramount. We know that adoptee's are harmed by adoption. We know mothers and fathers and siblings and grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins are harmed by the loss of their family member. We know of adoption trauma. What will it take for our country to say no more to this barbaric practise?

My daughter got married without me. My daughter had her baby daughter without me. My daughter has separated from her husband without me.

As life goes on the impact of relinquishment all those years ago becomes clearer and clearer, and more and more painful. It's now a deep, pervasive, cancerous grief. A wound that will never heal, for her nor I. A traumatic experience that should never have been. I wanted my daughter. I should never have lost my daughter. My daughter did not deserve to be raised by strangers, she deserved me.

Now is the time for change.

Do it.