

I spent time in incarceration with my twin sister Sandra in 5 different orphanages and children's homes around Sydney, NSW for the first 14 years of my life. They are as follows.

St. Anthony's Foundling Home, Croyden	1950 -1952
St. Josephs Home Croyden	1952 – 1956
Narellan Girls Home	1956 – 1957
St. Martha's Girls Home Renwick Street Leichhardt	1957 – 1963
St. Anne's Orphanage George Street Liverpool.	1963 - 1964

The Sisters of Mercy were never merciful. The St. Joseph' nuns were never saintly. The sisters of Charity were never charitable. They were violent and cruel with no remorse. They were unreachable and vile. I should have never been in their grasp.

There were many beatings practically on a daily basis, if it wasn't me, it was some other child. If I wasn't beaten every day, I was always afraid that I would be beaten. At the sight of the nuns the fear and stress caused me to lose control over my bladder whether I was beaten or not. The constant wet underclothes rubbed me and make me sore.

One of the cruelest nun's in St. Martha's where I was an inmate from the age of 7 years – 13 years, was Sister Bernice Jnr. She taught us school work in the class room. She suffered halitosis and was extremely violent.

My twin sister Sandra was struggling one day in the classroom with her school work in the 6th grade, as it was hard to concentrate with the perpetual violence. She said to Sister Bernice Jnr from the back of the classroom, "I can't do this damn work" Sister became so enraged, she flew down the aisle toward my sister, as I sat in the next aisle opposite her in the 7th grade, with her face red and distorted with anger and with venom in her eyes she started belting my sister in the back with her fist. She was relentless and would not stop. My sister was screaming and crying and I became extremely distressed as I watched the violence toward my sister. I yelled at her, "Sister stop, please stop" she wouldn't, so I pulled at her brown veil to make her stop. In doing this her forehead was exposed showing who she really was. She turned around at me and started belting me. She then ordered us into the back room with her following close behind us. Sister ordered us to take down our pants and lift our black tunics up over our backs exposing our bare bottoms so that she could proceed to strap us raw.

Sandra said to me as I started to take down my pants, "Don't do it sis, don't do it." We both stood united in defiance against her. I could not believe what my sister did. I would have bent over the table for yet another belting. Sister Bernice Jnr was surprised at our defiance and started to belt us around our legs as we stood together.

Sister Bernice Jnr was very violent toward many of the girls. I saw her beat many of the children in the classroom. In particular I remember her punching another set of twins named, Carol and Coral. One of the twins had a hump on her back, but that never stopped Sister Bernice Jnr from punching her in the back. Her sister too, cried out for her to stop as she punched into her sister's back at the back of the classroom. I was so distressed in witnessing this incessant violence year in and year out, urinating my underwear was a natural

occurrence. Hence, I was often beaten for urinating my underwear and called a filthy dirty child.

This nun terrorized many of us for years, leaving us with memories that only death will relieve. This same nun strapped the back of my legs on many occasions until she left purple bleeding welts (with the wide strap that held up her rosary beads where Jesus hung on the cross,) that took weeks to heal. When I showed my legs to my mother one visiting day. She replied, "You must have deserved it" I never showed her again. I hadn't given up, I had given in.

Sister Bernice Jnr also caned us across the palms of our hands until tears streamed down your face. She was pure evil, a violent and wicked person who brutalized us simply, because she could. It appeared she answered to no-one. It is written that God said to "Love one another, as I have loved you" She must have missed that sermon. All the nuns must have missed that sermon.

One of the most humiliating experiences for me in St. Martha's was on Wednesdays. As every Wednesday we changed our navy blue bloomers that we wore for a week. In the early evening one of the sister's, (I don't remember her name) used to sit in a chair at the head of one of the dormitories where we slept. We had to line in a circle with our underpants in our hands as we approached the nun. She then smelt the crotch of each child's pants and then called us dirty filthy children before throwing them into the middle of the floor in a pile. I was always so afraid in line, because mine were constantly wet and then dried as I wore them. She seemed to single me out and called me the most dirty filthy child of all. This was a weekly ritual.

I saw the nuns rub children's noses in their beds when they had accidents and humiliate them and belt them for wetting their beds. This also went on at St. Anne's, Liverpool. The nuns seemed to have an insatiable appetite for violence and degradation. We were easy prey.

I continued to be easy prey just by being in their grasp. This included the time I was taking a bath one day at the age of 8 or 9 years of age. I tried to make a shape out of a cake of soap when a nun opened the door and came into my cubicle. She screamed and yelled at me for laying down in the bath and playing with the soap instead of washing myself. She hit and punched my naked little body unmercifully calling me names. I put my arms up to try and protect myself, but this seemed to make her even angrier. She kept on punching me about the body as I fell under the water several times and was afraid I was going to drown. Then, she dragged me out of the bath by one arm as she continued to hit me with the other. I stood on the floor dripping wet and cold as she towered over me paralyzing me with fear. My bladder opened up again. She hit me and punched me until I cowered like an animal that was about to be devoured. Again, I thought I was going to die.

She dragged me all the way to the dormitory and through me across the bed. She screamed at me to get dressed. I put on my pyjamas even though my body was still wet and got into bed. I lay in my bed frozen with fear and shaking from the cold and the thought, that she may come back and continue to beat me. I cried myself to sleep. I don't remember her name.

I believe this incident is the reason that I am afraid of travelling anywhere by boat, or going out into the ocean passed my knees or hips.

I ran away from St. Martha's once, not that I knew what I was doing or what "runaway" meant. I was about 8 years old and out in the concrete playground with the other children. When one girl said to me, "I am going to run away, do you want to come as she opened the huge back gate?" I said, "Okay" as I looked out into the outside world and wanting to discover more. We walked up the street in amazement at the beautiful flowers in people's gardens. I thought they were so pretty. I never remembered seeing anything like this before. I never knew what beauty was. We had no supplies or change of clothes; we were just walking aimlessly about the street in awe of the outside world. I saw a dog for the first time. I could imagine my big brown eyes almost the size of saucers with my mouth opened wide at the

sight of a dog wagging its tail. It was the only time that I believed I was free to be "childish" and enjoy the beauty of what I saw from a child's point of view without being punished.

I have no idea how long we had been gone from the home, but suddenly a car pulled up and a man told us to get in. He was the parish priest. He took us back to St. Martha's and walked us through the big gates and on into reception where the mother superior and my mother was waiting. Mother superior asked where had we been and I immediately wet. I was too afraid to answer. Mother superior said to my mother. Do you want to beat her, or shall I? My mother said, "You do it, sister"

Mother superior dragged me up into my dormitory and flung me across the bed. She opened my locker and took out my only possession. A solid wooden hair brush with my name scratched in it and marked with ink. She pulled down my pants in front of some other children and beat me across the bottom and the back of my hands as I tried to protect myself, yet again from an unmerciful beating. I cried out and screamed for mercy. I wanted her to stop. The beating seemed to go on forever. She beat me until my brush broke in half. They never seemed to hit you once or twice, it was always with such rage and lack of control over their senses. They beat you until they realized that they have perhaps gone too far and then would have some explaining to do to a higher authority. This of course never happened.

I was also cheap labour for the nuns. I had chores to do that were beyond such a young girl. Having to clean the chapel floor at St. Martha's was a mega task for a 7 year old. If I dared to rest on the pew, a nun would fly down the aisle in the chapel and punch me in the back like there was no tomorrow. After being battered, bruised and terrified by the nuns you just had to continue on with your work. They would not even know if you had broken bones. They would not care what happened to you. The nuns seemed to delight in any excuse to terrorize and assault you.

Working in the hot laundry was another huge task trying to put sheets in the rollers that one could barely see over. I was always terrified of making a mistake for fear of being bashed into unconsciousness.

The commercial floor polisher was beyond my control as well, but I had to polish the floors regardless. Up for left and down for right, or was it the other way around. The polisher sometimes ran away with me as it was so big for me to control, I was terrified of it. I was terrified of the homes and orphanages period. The nuns were child beaters and abusers who brutalized me. They were cowards.

The abuse was endless, year in and year out. For me it was a long 14 years. I cannot write down every beating, emotional abuse, mental abuse and the way in which I was made to feel. I was made to feel that I should not have been born at all. I wished my mother had drowned me at birth. That would have been kinder. The reason I am alive today is because I have children. I did make three attempts at suicide in my twenties and early thirties. If I never had children I would end my life so that I wouldn't have to continue living with my memories. Memories that never go away.

To this day I sometimes feel overwhelmed by the outside world. When I feel like this I go into hiding, or as my therapist call it, lockdown. I lock myself in my house and don't receive phone calls or answer the door. I go out to buy food simply to feed my children and then straight back home. I can do this for a couple of days, a week, a month or even up to 3 months. I still have problems functioning in the outside world. I feel terribly disconnected. I always feel different. To the outside world I may look like I am functioning normally. But I know I am not.

I am no good at relationships and don't know if I will ever find true love what ever that is. I divorced my husband 13 years ago and I have been on my own ever since with my children.

When I was at St. Anne's orphanage I was sent out to foster care. One May school holidays, and was placed with a family who sexually abused me. The wife was in on it too as she ordered me into the family bed with her and her husband. I was too weighed down with my misery and too scared to say no.

I resided with them from May 5, 1964 – May 24, 1964

Please find attached my holiday placement form with all the details that I got through the freedom from information service. Please put this up on the website with the other attachments. Including the note that Sister Philippa McGrath wrote stating that; “*We do not wish any of the children to go to this place any more” Sister Phillipa wrote this note because I told her what they did to me. She never bothered to phone the police.

As for my twin sister Sandra, I haven't seen her for about 12 years. I would love to know where she is. The last I heard she had moved from the Gold Coast back to Sydney around 11 years ago. Her name is; Sandra O' Brien nee Bragg. DOB 7.6.50

This submission is also for my sister Sandra, as she has her own story which I don't think she will ever be able to tell. What ever the outcome of this inquiry I want her to be included.

My mother was made to take us out of St. Anne's orphanage by the welfare, as the doctors complained to them about the nuns gross medical neglect which almost cost me my life. We were only out of the orphanage 4 months when my mother had us exempted from school with the permission of the government and put us to work at 14 years of age. She never asked us what we wanted. I was quite good at school and was devastated that I was not allowed to go back after the Christmas holidays. She put us to work in factories doing mind numbing work and got us our jobs as my sister and I were too institutionalized to know what to do. She took half our pay as she said she could not afford to feed us. Between my mother, the nuns, the child welfare and the government who owned us. What chance did we have?

The nuns used to call us sinners and that we were never good enough for the grace of God, let alone enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Who gives a shit where we go? Anything is better than here.

Do I forgive all my tormenters? I have been on the merry go round of the myth of forgiveness for years. And I have decided that I do not forgive anyone. They have to suffer the consequences of their actions whether I forgive them or not. If I forgive them, that makes it loud and clear, it is okay for them to hurt and brutalize me, and I am here to tell you, it is not.

It has only been the last 10 years that I have felt any human feelings. This includes my children. Everything I did in life and for my children was mechanical as I did not know how to feel or what feeling was. Although I do know what emptiness feels like. The very essence of who I was supposed to be, will be no more.

Attached is a document that verifies that my appendectomy operation was indeed an urgent one. However, the nuns neglected to state that they would not let me go to the doctors or hospital and that it was their gross neglect that I ended up having to have life saving surgery. They did not visit me every day, and I was not doing fine! I was so afraid of the other patients in the ward and having to be in the outside world I used to hide under my sheets. And when the doctor asked me everyday if I have opened my bowels, I always said yes. Because I didn't know what that meant and I was afraid to say no in case I got into trouble and was beaten again! I was absolutely traumatized being outside of the institution where I did not know how to function. All I knew was violence, loneliness, bashings, humiliation, confinement and emptiness. That was familiar to me. That was what I could recognize. That was how I measured my existence. For there was no life for me. I have never felt alive and probably never will.

Narellan girls' home was also a terrifying place to be especially in the showers. We had to shower with 2 or 3 other girls at a time. Again it was always on Wednesdays. The nuns always stood and stared at us. I tried to hide behind the other girls as I didn't like the nuns

looking at me. I was so afraid of them and their violence. I was only 6 years old and far too young to know such terror.

One of the nuns that drove the station wagon in St. Anne's was Sister Jude. She refused to drive me to the hospital. All of the nuns refused to believe I was sick. No wonder I suffered traumatic amnesia for 41 years.

Sonia St. Claire nee Bragg DOB 7.6.1950 and I wish to include my twin sister
Sandra O'Brien nee Bragg DOB 7.6. 1950

827366/r/r

Telephone:
682-9987

THE SISTERS OF CHARITY
ST. ANNE'S
LIVERPOOL, N.S.W.

00012

17th August, 1964.

The Director,
Child Welfare Department,
Sydney.

Dear Sir,

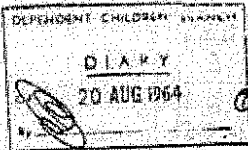
A short note to let you know that Sonya Bragg, one of our girls, was operated on for Appendicitis on 14th August, 1964, at Liverpool District Hospital. It was an urgent appendix case, and there was no way of getting in touch with you to ask for permission for the operation. We have been to see her each day, and she is getting on very well. Her mother was contacted on the night of the operation and has been to see her.

Thanking you and trusting these arrangements meet with your approval -

Yours sincerely,

Sister L. Philippa

Superior,
St. Anne's Convent.



copy { to Liverpool District Hospital on 14/8/64.

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Ⓢ Papers (urgent)

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**WARD
CHARITABLE HOME**

INDEXED

NAME Sosin, HARRY

BORN 2.6.50 Catholics



Chapter 4 - *Testing Times* -

Emotional stress is one of the major contributing factors to my developing rheumatoid arthritis, not only because of my Western diet food, but because of the stressful life I had endured since infancy.

I spent the first fourteen years of my life in five different orphanages and children's homes around Sydney, Australia from 1950 through 1964. The endless abuse and loneliness of those early years filled me with a perpetual melancholy and an indefinable loneliness that stretches back for as far as I can remember. Even now in my fifties, there remains a residual emptiness from those years that I do not know how to fill. Perhaps that melancholia and loneliness leached into my soul, leaving me emotionally and socially flawed.

When mother registered her two daughters, my twin sister and I, to the child welfare authorities as wards of the state of New South Wales, she could not have known of the ramifications of that decision. Nor would she have understood the nature of the recollections that were to be mine, as a mature woman, of the life that ensued from that decision. That the only recollections of my existence during those years would include abandonment, unspeakable sexual and physical violence to my person, pain and suffering, and intolerable and terrorizing fear cloaked by a pervasive melancholia that at times threatened to overwhelm me.

My sister and I are not identical twins, nor are we compatible. We were as chalk and cheese and each had our own friends in the orphanages and homes in which we lived over those years. We did not relate or interact with anybody

else on any level, nor with each other. As with everybody else, we were also strangers to each other, socially inept and increasingly institutionalized in our thinking, attitude and sense of self.

Mother told us that she wanted adoption for us but that the Catholic adoption agency would have separated us and she did not want that to happen. Presumably, she thought that in being under the same care, we would provide some sense of connection and solace for each other but neither my sister nor I were able to give such comfort to the other. It is ironic to consider just how separated we were in those seeming years of being together. There is also the bittersweet regret that comes from knowing that with separate adoption, our lives could have been so very different.

For the first 41 years of my life, I suffered from a condition known as traumatic amnesia. Not knowing any other way to digest the brutality meted out to me, I could only do what I had to do minute by minute in order to survive. As a child, existing in that minute time scale, there was no memory only the constant awareness of being terrorized by a force that I could neither combat nor understand. The tyranny of those who had control over my life paralyzed me. Any natural instincts to give or receive closeness and affection remained as undeveloped as an embryo in its uterine sanctuary. My heart had never held love and there was no memory of what love is, or could be. Love had no imprint on my soul, only the endless grief that consumed my entire being and threatened to engulf me. The only 'friend' I had during this period from age seven through to twelve years at St. Martha's Children's Home, Leichhardt, Sydney, was my locker. This safe haven was at my bedside and was where I hid in the darkness to escape the nuns and their violence. The hardest thing for me to deal with was simply being alive.

At seven years of age, I was scrubbing the floors of the orphanage's chapel floor with a toothbrush. My soul aches and my heart still bleeds after all these years for that little girl, and so many others, who were lost forever in the sadness and loneliness of their lives in such circumstances. I can still see myself, on my knees, scrubbing diligently with a toothbrush, trying to extract every particle of dirt from between the floorboards of the chapel, and glancing up at the statue of God at the altar begging Him to bring my mother to take me home, please, as my knees hurt. I told Him of my sadness, my loneliness, my longing for a life, *my* life.

The nuns seemed to be perpetually angry. Perhaps their anger had some of its origin in the unnatural cloistered life they led and the thwarting of any natural emotions or expression of simple kindness, let alone love. However, I knew nothing about such issues at that time. All I understood were my feelings of confusion and fear at the contradiction evoked by their attitude and behaviour. All I understood was my misery and how it felt to have a nun punch me in the back because I rested my exhausted body from scrubbing the boards by leaning back on a pew. The job was simply too big for me to do, and impossible for me to carry out to her satisfaction. The same misery, confusion and fear continued when, at about eight years of age, I was ordered to work in the hot laundry. Lifting the heavy sheets out of the copper tubs and trying to put them through the wringers, terrified of making a mistake or doing something wrong and attracting yet another beating from the nuns as they gave vent to their perpetual rage.

One night, when I was about eight years old, we were engaged in our nightly ritual; on our knees praying to the statue of Our Lord to make us good children. I realized I needed to go to the bathroom. In a very timid voice, I asked the Sister for permission. "You should have used the bathroom

before prayers you foolish child. Now come here to me at once!" She screamed, taking off her wide black belt that held up her rosary beads with Jesus hanging on the cross. I was so frightened by her and the thought of another belting I wet my pyjamas. I was trembling in fear and anticipation of what might come next. Like a lion in battle with me, the hunted animal – a quarry with terror-filled eyes, apprehended but not yet dead - she began to exert her strength and violent anger by belting me unmercifully about the legs and bottom.

"Please, Sister stop, it hurts; please." In tears, I begged for some degree of mercy, thinking in my childish way that she was, after all, married to God but she was relentless. "How dare you back chat me, you impudent child. Move your hands away, I say, now! Move them or I won't stop!"

I gave in as she swung me around the upstairs landing. My dressing gown flew open, making her even angrier. She seemed to be in a state of frenzy and continued to belt me. It was as though the taste of blood had unleashed a malevolence that was unable to be sated. Eventually, exhausted and exasperated, she threw me to the floor screaming at me to "Get down on your knees and beg God for forgiveness you sinful child." "Yes sister," I replied with tears running down my cheeks in a stream that would not stop.

The incessant violence practiced by day and night on my very flesh held me in continual terror. The statue of our Lord stood tall, watching over us and seeing and feeling all that was true. We prayed to Him by rote and begged for the forgiveness of our sins. My knees hurt, my heart ached, my flesh wept and my soul bled for my plight but the prayers went on, endlessly repeated night after night. .

After prayers, I crawled into bed and lay motionless not to attract Sister's attention. She quickly turned out the lights and locked us in. As I lay in my bed, surrounded by loneliness

and misery, the darkness filled with the coughing and wheezing of the other children echoing around the room as they, too, tried to forget their miserable existence. I looked over to the statue of the infant Jesus of Prague held so lovingly by St. Joseph that stood high up on a pedestal at the end of the dormitory over our beds, and asked, "Jesus, do you know where my Mummy is? Can you send her to me to take me home? I do not like it here; maybe you could please take me up to Heaven with you? When I wake up in the morning can I be in Heaven too?" I drifted off to sleep, another birthday over. I wished fervently to be taken up to Heaven for I was already buried within a system that was brutal and unrelenting in its searing violence against the young children committed to its care; children with no redress whatsoever.

The physical, emotional, verbal and mental abuse was endless, compounded by the ache inside me of not knowing at various times where my mother lived. She lived in Sydney but there were many moves. That ache, in the deepest recesses of my heart, was bloody and raw, and made increasingly bitter by the knowledge that she was not with me. Mother generally visited us on 'visiting days' which were sometimes fortnightly and at other orphanages, monthly. It was indeed a rare thing for my sister and I to be taken home during holidays and we were placed in foster care for those periods, though always to separate places. Those memories of my mother are not sweet.

Another beating that would be better forgotten but which I cannot erase from my memory, occurred one Saturday morning when, after breakfast, we lined up on the stairs between the verandah that led to the chapel and the downstairs bathroom and toilets. The nun called out from the top of the stairs, "Is there anyone who has not made their beds?" The line of children was silent. Trembling in fear, I wet my underclothes again as I hesitated to answer but knew that I must because she

knew that I had not made my bed. I quivered and quaked, and naïvely responded, "I haven't sister." "Get up here to me right now you insufferable child."

Cowering with my head down, and my stomach in knots, I slowly walked up the stairs toward her. "The rest of you children go to the playground," she said quickly.

She grabbed me by the hair and dragged me through the doors and up the winding staircase to the top of the landing shaking me about as she went; like a rag doll in the mouth of a vicious dog in a mad frenzy, punching me in the back of my head and yelling at me.

"Can't you do anything right? You useless child, no wonder your mother doesn't want you." She was almost frothing at the mouth, her face red with rage. Her veil had almost slipped away from her forehead, exposing who she really was, and her face twisted and distorted with rage and frustration as she towered over me, throwing me to the floor. She hurled me up to my bed in the dormitory. As I fell, she picked me up to punch me again in the back and about the head. Screaming like a wild dog in the woods, with complete loss of control over her senses. She threw me over the bed and belted into me screaming, "Make your bed now! You shameless insolent child; make it!"

I could not move around the bed fast enough to try to please her. I was so terrified at that moment and the emotion was so palpable that I thought I would choke on it, and die. I sobbed and cowered as she struck me again. The rag doll had lost and the vicious dog had won. I fell from her clutches to the floor, in silent submission to her will; her fists were too much for me to bear and I had no appeal against her. I lay helpless on the floor, too weak to move, my body in tatters, my spirit crushed and my bed half made. I died inside that very day. My

forsaken life knew only brutality, isolation and loneliness. Once again, the hardest thing was being alive.

The sight of me on the floor motionless must have brought her to her senses. "Get up, and finish making your bed, get up! Do you hear me? Get up!" There was urgency in her voice now, an edge of panic. There was no concern, no remorse; only the dawning awareness that this time perhaps she had gone too far. Slowly, I stirred and realized she was still hovering over me.

The panic was now taking hold in Sister's voice as she yelled again "Get up! Do you hear me, get up!" As she saw me try to grab at the bed linen to help myself up she left the room. I finished making my bed and crawled into my locker, my safe haven; my closest friend who in that darkness held my secrets for me, safe from the big people who hurt me. I crouched down onto my ankles, still sobbing. I pulled the door toward me and I tried to think beautiful thoughts to take away the pain, the memories, the injustices but beauty was of so little consequence to me it was virtually irrelevant. My life was never beautiful as I was only acquainted with ugliness and violence. There was no event in my life but sorrow. I measured time by the throbs of pain and the record of violence. Curious as it may sound, there was nothing else for me to think about other than my suffering. It was the means by which I existed; the only measure of my life. It was the evidence of who I was and that I existed.

I held the door ajar just enough to see the statue of Jesus on his pedestal and wondered why, in his pity, he did not take me to Heaven. He was my only hope and I held on to it. I stayed there in my haven, numb to the core, trying to bury my thoughts deep inside but visions and images of my life continued to replay involuntarily in my mind, almost driving me insane. I listened for the rattling of rosary beads before venturing out from the safe hiding place. I slowly opened the

door and crawled out under the bed, still on guard and making sure no one was around before my head showed. I continued crawling out through the double doors on to the outside verandah. Suddenly, I heard the rattling of beads and heart pounding, crawled back into the safety of my locker, frozen with fear and not daring to move. I waited until the sounds of beads faded into the distance and ventured out again. Slowly, painfully, I stood up and walked along the passage and down the back stairs, toward the playground, in dread of seeing another nun.

I walked out onto the concrete playground and stood alone as the late morning sun touched my face, drying away my tears and filling my body with warmth while the breeze wrapped itself around me. I felt so alone, so not alive; so without hope. The other children looked over toward me, but in the unspoken code of silence that prevails at such time, left me to be by myself. I knew that I was not the only one; each child told a silent story. Standing there alone with my pain, a beautiful butterfly flew in front of my face and landed on my shoulder. It was the gentlest thing I had ever seen and in a rush of tenderness for its beauty and freedom I, too, wished for wings to fly away and disappear to escape my sorrow.

There were times when I did escape from the clutches of the nuns and life in the orphanages. I had an aunt and uncle who lived in a country town called Rylstone in NSW and spend some of the holidays in their foster care. My uncle who, was in his late fifties or early sixties at the time, did not regard me with innocent, protective paternalism in his eyes. Instead, he looked at me, a female child, in a way that frightened me and made me feel uncomfortable. My natural instincts told me he was no different to the nuns or the other big people who hurt me. I was used to nothing else. The touching of my flesh was only for abuse. I never knew what tenderness felt like. I never knew

innocence. I never knew they were not supposed to hurt me. I should never have been within their grasp.

During my visits, there were many visits to the neighbour's house to watch television. On nights when my uncle walked me to the neighbour's house to watch television, he always took me into the neighbour's barn before returning me to his house. It was there that he terrorized me the most. When he made me stand up against the barn wall and watch him undress before he forced himself upon me, I felt my spirit leave my body as it was the only way I knew how to escape what was about to happen to me. It was as though I was not even there.

I was ten years old and this was not the first time. Others had also had their way with me. The smell of alcohol and the odour from his large body almost crushing mine left me traumatized into a numbing, almost comatose state. This abuse by my uncle continued on many occasions over a period of three years. The foster parents also sexually abused me. It was as though I was just a toy to pass around to fulfill the depraved needs of others. The humiliation of these experiences left me like a robot, no longer a human being. I was already dead inside. I had died inside the day my mother abandoned me to depraved and abusive degenerates who took out their own pain, frustration and hatred upon me, a young innocent who knew nothing else; people who used me for the gratification of their repressed violence and sexual needs. In my living death, I was an easy prey for the abusers. They did these abhorrent things to me simply because they knew they could and because my mother's interests were for herself alone. I have no sense of a personal history or any connectedness.

Chapter 5

- A Road not Travelled -

Twelve years of my existence had passed and I was now residing in St. Anne's Orphanage, on several acres of land at Liverpool, a western suburb of Sydney. I had been in this orphanage since I was twelve. The geography was different but the cruelty and emotional neglect were unchanged. St Anne's also housed a cranky white horse. A feisty animal, he used to pig root, and bite and try to throw off any riders. He frightened me as well as the other girls but, for some reason, they looked to me to put the bridle on him. We had to stand on a huge, upturned wooden wheel to mount and when it was my turn, it was so exciting to feel the wind hit my face - I felt as though I could ride off into the sunset and never come back. There was no saddle so it was bareback riding and short lived though it was; the freedom of those rides was the most exhilarating thing I had ever experienced.

Another activity acted as a form of liberation from the misery of my life in those early teenage years at St. Anne's Orphanage. At 5'7" (170cm), I was tall, lean and very fast on my feet. I loved playing sport. From age 12 to 14 years, I played basketball and tennis and excelled at both. At basketball, I was the star player and the nuns liked the Orphanage to win when we played teams from outside. If Mother turned up out of the blue to take my sister and me out for the weekend, permission was refused for me to go on the outing as I made the difference between winning and losing; the Orphanage would lose the game.

St. Anne's brought in a coach to teach us tennis, a sport I loved. I practiced every day after school and could not get

enough of it. No one else wanted to practice after school so I served up balls at one end of the court and then down the other end to serve them back. I did this for hours and developed a fireball of a serve and played many aces. When I played competition tennis with outsiders, I was conspicuous in my second-hand yellowing nylon tennis dress but my opponents could not return my serves or backhands. I was known as 'the orphan' but all the submissiveness, timidity and fear implied by that word were revoked on the tennis courts where I was lean and mean; a powerhouse to be reckoned with. I was somebody, at least until the game was over.

I remember my mother once watched me play. The coach must have asked her to come for she would not have been there of her own accord. Seeking her approval, her love, I played my heart out for her but she never seemed to look my way. I felt her disinterest; it stung and the hurt settled like a heavy weight in some deep, dark place in my soul. About three months later, I learnt from the nuns that the coach had asked her to come and watch me play. The coach had also asked her if he could take me home to live with him, his wife and their three children, as he wanted to coach me to 'Wimbledon'. I did not know what Wimbledon was but he told me he had never before seen such a killer instinct in such a young player; that I played harder and faster than Yvonne Goolagong-Cawley. My mother said no.



It was Wednesday 12th, August 1964. I had developed acute abdominal pain and sought consolation and help from the nuns. They regarded me with scorn and treated me with contempt saying it was nothing; I was just pretending to be sick and to be gone out of their sight. Looking into their eyes, I

knew their dispositions. I already knew that tolerance, patience and kindness – not to mention, compassion – had no place in their hearts. They had no empathy or feeling towards us as children. They were unreachable. The needs of my body and my mind were not recognized let alone met. Moreover, I did not know how to humanize the nuns.

The sense of weariness was immense. I did not know what to do to relieve my physical pain and had no real understanding of it, anyway. Their abuse and neglect did much to exacerbate my melancholia though I continued to go to classes, attend Mass, say the rosary and evening prayers and do my daily chores. I knew only too well the consequences of upsetting or accidentally aggravating the nuns. The pain continued and I developed a fever. I was almost incoherent and during class the next day, I slept with my head down on my school desk. The art teacher showed me some compassion and instructed me to go back over the road to the orphanage, to seek help from the nuns.

As I tried to cross the road with my body slumped over, dripping with perspiration with my mind in a thick fog, I was almost run down by a car. The driver missed me by inches. I struggled to get inside the orphanage where I looked for one of the nuns to help me. I could not find anyone. In my confused state, I went upstairs and ran myself a bath thinking to cool my body. I undressed myself and tried to get into the bath but fell in. I lay there ill and lapsed into unconsciousness. Suddenly, I came too and felt terribly hot. I got out of the bath, dressed and went back downstairs. I refused to allow myself to surrender to the fever. Even then, I never gave up. I saw one of the nuns heading toward me and approached her for help. She ordered me back to class.

By the next day, Friday the 14th, the pain was extreme and I felt terribly ill. The following day was Saturday, we were

in the semi-finals and the nuns wanted the basketball team to win. As their basketball 'star' the nuns would not permit me go to the doctor because if I did not play, the team lost. After school at the orphanage, some of the other children asked the nuns if they would let me go to the doctors. They said, "No". My sister realized my condition and lost her temper, yelling at them in frustration. I had never seen her like this before. She screamed out at them. "I am taking my sister to the hospital (which was in the same street as St. Anne's Orphanage) and there is nothing you can do to stop me!"

"How dare you speak to me that way you insolent child, your sister is pretending to be sick because she wants to get out of playing basketball tomorrow," Sister retaliated.

"My sister loves basketball; sport is all she lives for in this God forsaken place. I am taking her to the hospital whether you like it or not. You have two cars parked over there, but you won't take her, will you!" my sister bellowed.

Never before had I seen such strength in my sister. To stand up against the nuns took great courage as she risked being dragged away for yet another beating but she persisted. With my body bent over and weakened by pain and fever, my sister cupped my hand in hers with compassion in her eyes and led me toward Liverpool hospital.

"Come on, sis, I'll take you to the hospital, I'll take care of you," she said with such assertiveness. "I know you will," I replied gently. "Everything will be all right, you'll see. We're nearly there, see? You can see the hospital already, can't you?" No one had ever come to my defense before. Her courage was revealed even in the face of the threat to her own safety. I never realized she was capable of such assertiveness for she, too, had been weakened by the misery of our lives. The venom of the nuns and their abuse over fourteen years had rained down upon all of us.

The walk to the hospital was slow as I was too ill to move in haste. It seemed as though I would never be free from misery and torment, and my unrelenting pain. In my young mind, Heaven was my only redemption. In thinking this, I somehow knew deep down inside of me that I was dying and, yet for me, I embraced it and was looking forward to leaving my God forsaken life. Suddenly everything felt white like a cloud around me and I had a feeling of peace that I had never felt before and the pain was gone. It was strange, and yet, it felt so good; so right, so peaceful. I was glad to leave the emptiness inside of me that I did not know how to fill. My heart had never known love and I did not want to live in pain and sorrow anymore. What was the point of my life, what was my purpose?

My life seemed insignificant and trivial. My mother did not value me; her arms were not there to wrap around me. Her heart was so barren. I knew that nothing would ever grow there, no love for me, for herself – for anyone. She never fitted the mother mould. I wanted to be released from this earth where humans did not know how to be humane. Where humans did not know what humanity meant. I wanted to go to Heaven where Jesus would fill me with love, wrap his arms around me and keep me safe because these things, my mother did not do. The nuns did not do. For me again - the hardest thing was being alive.

When we arrived at Liverpool Hospital, my sister held onto me as she took me to the triage duty nurse and said, "My sister is sick and she needs help." The nursing sister told us to take a seat and immediately picked up the phone. I sat down in the chair, somehow knowing that I was at the end of my short life. I was not afraid of death; it was living that filled me with fear. After a minute or so, when my name was called, I could barely raise myself from the chair.

With my sister supporting me, I staggered over to the doctor and fell into his arms. I remember his compassion as he cradled me and picked me up, placing my body on a stretcher trolley. No one had held me like that before. He did not want anything from me nor did he want to hurt me. "How long have you been like this?" the doctor asked.

"Three days," I whispered.

"Why did you not come to the hospital sooner?"

"They would not let me."

"Who would not let you?"

"The nuns at the orphanage."

"Does it hurt when I press onto your abdomen here?"

"No."

"Does it hurt when I let go?"

"Yes!" screaming out in pain.

"Where is your mother?"

"I don't know where my mother is."

"Do you know where she lives?"

"No," and fell unconscious.

I was rushed into the operating theatre for life saving surgery because I had acute appendicitis. Meanwhile, a doctor was speaking with my sister in casualty and he told her that had I not been at the hospital at that time I would have been dead within the half hour. When I awoke after the surgery, I remember being disappointed to find myself still there and not feeling the peace I had experienced through the pain in walking to the hospital.

Meanwhile, the doctors reported the nuns to the welfare people for gross neglect in denying me medical attention with the result that my mother was ordered to permanently remove my sister and I from the orphanage.

Were it not for my sister, I would not be alive today to tell this story. It took great courage for her to stand up to the

nuns and, despite everything; she was there for me when I needed her the most. She was my rock on that day and I will never forget that she saved my life.



Mother had a two room flat in the Sydney suburb of Dulwich Hill and although it was called home, from my observation and sensitivities it was clear that my presence had interrupted her life and routine; that it was not meant for me to be there. She worked from four in the afternoon until midnight five days a week and my presence denied her the privacy she wanted for herself and her male friends. Her cold and steely eyes spoke to me of her resentment while the stoicism of her nature and granite-like heart prevented her from showing me any love. Though I had never experienced love, I was desperate for hers and knew instinctively it would make me feel alive and wipe away years of anguish, loneliness and emptiness.

I think my sister gave up on our mother many years earlier but I needed my mother's love as I needed air to breathe. Looking back, however, I can now see mother's incapacity to love or to feel any emotion. The inspiration, the connection, the acknowledgement, the tenderness that I wanted was totally beyond her nature and ability to bestow on me, or anyone. Nonetheless, I was aware that the humans who had ostensibly cared for me had proved fatal to my happiness and well-being. I was tired of living in a cocoon of fear and being at the mercy of others. What lessons had I learnt? What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of my life? Still, I behaved in accordance of whatever was necessary to survive. I blended into her life and though I accepted that my mother did not have to love me, I wanted her to at least own me. So that I might feel some sense of belonging. Less than three years later, my

mother moved into a house she shared with a man. By that time, I was seventeen and my mother's boyfriend asked me to leave. My sister had already left a year earlier.

Over the years, I learned new skills to make me more adept in functioning within society. At least what passed for it in the world of my imagination, beyond the barricades. I remember my first night alone at seventeen. I lay awake for hours and pondered why I could not sleep. I had been so institutionalized that it took a few minutes to realize there was no one to turn out the light. I remembered the other girls at the orphanages and how much I missed them. I wanted to be with them; as they were the only family I knew; there were no relatives who would claim me.

I reflected back on my life as I lay in my bed that night. Memory is a funny thing, the way recollections slip in and out but I know that night I crossed the threshold from childhood to a young adult. The lessons I learned played a big part in my life and though I knew nothing of the outside world yet I had experienced more than most. I was naïve and young in years but in other ways, mature beyond my years. I had to learn every bend in the road of life by myself, one blade of grass at a time. Because the outside world was foreign to me, I had fear of it and there was no love or encouragement from a mother or father. It is curious to reflect now on the fact that at that time I had no recollection of a sense of a family. What a family could have meant in my life. It was quite simply unknown to me and as foreign as the outside world.

How does one prepare for that kind of life? How does one prepare for life without love? Or family? There is no time for preparation – one just has to live it and learn from living it, one minute at a time, one hour at a time, one day at a time. To escape my aloneness, I moved in with a man almost ten years my senior. He was handsome and charming but I soon

discovered it was the biggest mistake of my life. A violent sadist, he was the cause of the death of two of my unborn children and almost the death of a third, with his physical violence and sexual demands. Though I left him several times, he always found me and forced me back under his control.

With nowhere else to go, I spent many a night with our baby daughter sleeping in the bus shed on cold rainy nights to escape his brutality. I was not afraid of the dark as darkness was always my friend in the orphanage where I found solace and hid in my locker from my tormenters. It was daylight and the living that scared me the most. Finally after three years I left him for good.

At the age of 20 and a toddler in my arms, I wandered aimlessly through life trying to fit in, especially into the family of mother's older children. However, I always felt like an outsider, with no sense of belonging and feeling terribly disconnected. I was also moving from place to place, job to job, accumulating more and more emotional baggage, the scars of which by the time I was twenty-four had achieved a critical mass. I suffered a nervous breakdown and spent over a month in hospital. My coping and mothering skills were nil. While I was in hospital, my daughter, at age five years, was placed in a home and hence, the cycle was repeating itself. Something I never wanted to happen. I was advised to leave her in the home to give her some kind of stability and time for me to try to get my life in order. I visited my daughter when I could and took her home with me at every opportunity. When she was nine years old, I took her out of the home for good.

I continued to move around Sydney and still had great difficulty in functioning on the outside world and holding down a job. What frightened me the most about employment was the confinement in the job situation and the strangers with whom one had to deal. In a society where I was certainly aware

of the brutality of the system because I grew up in it, I wondered if it spilled over into the outside world of employers and other people unknown to me. I knew what adults were capable of but never knew whether abuse was going to be part of the experience or not. I was unable to hold my head up and look strangers in the eye. There was always the fear that I may antagonize them in some way and thereby induce a violent rage. I had no interactive or social skills and did not know how to communicate on a level that was positive enough for my own needs to be met. Though yearning on the one hand for freedom and independence, my earlier institutionalized experiences prevented me from functioning in the outside world. Added to which, the demands of many of the jobs were beyond me.

Meanwhile, I still maintained contact with my mother, but she was of no support physically, emotionally, financially or any other way. She was also very needy and continued to find solace with men. Although, over the years I hoped and prayed she would tell me the words I needed to hear, "Sonia, I love you and I am so sorry." That would have helped make the pain easier to bear. I never had the confidence or the courage to ask her, "Why did you leave me? Why did you not love me? Why did you give me up?" As a child, I always thought mother gave me up because I was not pretty. Mother and the nuns told me I was ugly. If *love* is in response to beauty then I was surely ugly.

By the time I was thirty I had met a man who was a violent and controlling alcoholic. After knowing each other for only three months, he asked me to marry him, and I said yes because he wanted me. He was also offering me the family unit and family home for which I was aching. I thought he would love me in the way that love was intended to be experienced. Over the next ten years, we had two children. I spent most of

the marriage sleeping with my children at night in the car, parked a few streets away. This was the only way to escape his drunken, vulgar, violent rages and his coarse language and ugly words when he came home from a drinking binge after work, tearing up the house and anyone who got in his way. He had no friends, no dreams, goals or passion in his soul. My thoughts were not too magical either. When he consumed alcohol and the effects took place it exposed the hideous truth of who he really was.

Many times when he was in this condition and we were out, I drove the car home fighting for my life as he tried to push me out of the car by opening my side door as he leant across in front of me. I screamed in terror as he tried to undo my seat belt with me trying to hang on desperately to the wheel and keep myself within the moving vehicle as I tried to keep the car on the road in the black of night and not run off into the bushes on the isolated road that led to our home. I cowered and begged him to stop but he took pleasure in frightening me, and abusing me. He knew that I was under the influence of great emotional distress as he converted his own self-abasement into rage against me.

This was my husband. This was the father of my children and he too had altered me. He was toxic to my life and happiness. His ugliness became terrible countenance; his coarseness and crudity disgusted me but his violent, abusive behaviour revealed who he really was.

He slowly isolated me from my few friends. He did not allow doctors or even an ambulance to come to our house. I was his prisoner and subject to his control. Violence, isolation, and aloneness was familiar, it was all I knew. I knew nothing else. My eldest daughter left when she was almost eighteen years of age.

One day I started to think deeply about my life and felt compelled to change it. I discovered that people were not supposed to hurt you. That some people were actually nice to others and that some people were even kind to their children. I started to question many things including the Catholic religion. I realized I wanted to live a positive life, a life filled with kindness, tenderness. I wanted to know happiness but most of all I wanted to be touched by love. I knew I would not experience these things with my husband who abused our children and me whenever it pleased him. So, at almost forty-one years of age and with two children aged five and three years, I left.

With my children, I flew to Perth on the other side of Australia to escape anybody and everybody who had hurt me. I had to keep them at a safe distance because I was still vulnerable. I bought a computer and started putting down my feelings and my memories started flooding back. My childhood started to flash up on the monitor in living colour, like a moving picture. I was seeing things I did not want to see. Feeling emotions I did not want to feel. I was used to being numb to the core, and I did not know what to do with these memories, so in my endeavour to erase any ability to recall the past, I asked a doctor to perform a lobotomy on me. Naturally, she refused. I did not know how else to deal with my childhood and what does one do with the memories. Where do I put them? How do I digest them? I did not want to remember.

Death would have been a welcome relief. I even regimented my demise down to the finest detail and was ready to exit this God-forsaken place but if I did follow through who would love my children? There was no one else. They would have gone into a home and God knows I did not want what happened to me, to happen to them, and this is why I am here today. This is the only reason I am still here today. Therefore,

somehow, some way I had to accept and digest, slowly and carefully, the events of my childhood one memory at a time.

I lived one day at a time, coped one day at a time. Stayed alive, one day at a time and tried to parent my children the way I wished that I had been parented - one day at a time. For me again, the hardest thing was being alive. A year and a half had passed and my memories were a little easier to bear. I filled my days with my children and books on positive thinking and self-help. I was learning the skills that I never learned as a young girl. Skills neither the nuns nor my mother had taught me. Instead, they taught me that adults were cruel, violent and unrelenting in their anger. They had taught me that I was of no value, of no worth. They taught me that adults were full of rage toward innocent children whom we describe as gifts from God. They taught me about fear, hatred and violence. They taught me that I did not fit in.

I filled my nights questioning whether God existed at all. And if he did, what was my purpose for being here? What was the purpose of all the violence and sexual depravity that others had forced upon my flesh? I did a lot of soul searching, looking for what was truth and what was not. Books taught me some of the things I was supposed to learn as a child. Reading filled me with answers I had not known.

I was on the move again but now thinking with much more clarity and growing as a person. I relocated to the Gold Coast, Queensland and I went into therapy every two weeks for nine months. I was now gathering strength and making some kind of sense of my life as opposed to accumulating more emotionally generated scars. I was making wiser choices in my life and being the best mother I could be. I stayed away from negativity and instead chose to be around positive people who had goals and dreams. Then, I heard that my mother was in a nursing home and was pretty much at the end of her life.

I flew to Sydney to visit her, knowing it would be for the last time. I made the decision driving to the nursing home that I would ask her why she gave me up. I still hoped that before she died she would tell me the words I had never heard her speak, "Sonia, I love you and I am so sorry."

When I arrived at the nursing home, I sat down in front of her. I looked into her eyes and saw her emotional pain and her sorrow. If only she could see mine. I also saw that she was now the helpless child in the home where no one cared; the irony of it all. I said, "Hello mum." I waited for her to answer me as I gazed into her eyes. I needed mother to call out my name, and wrap her arms around me, to behold me, so I could regain my lost sense of identity; to hope and in that hope to regain my sense of belonging. To take away my emotional ache and bury the deep dark hole within me. To take away the indignity, humiliation, violence and pain of which my world had comprised for so long. To take away the sorrow that had filled every part of my being, to make my sorrow hers so that in the sharing of it, it would have been easier to bear. I was ready and eager to receive love and affection. I wanted the beauty that lay dormant within me to come to life to show her I was worth loving.

I needed her to reveal her love for me. I needed her to be my mother, I needed her to look at me just once with love in her eyes and I could have forgiven her for everything. A kind smile would have wiped away years of anguish. Then, she looked up into my eyes and I could see that she did not know me. I was devastated. She had dementia. I lost her and yet, I never had her. She was never mine to lose. I thought I would never recover because now she was incapable of telling me, she loved me. She did not even have to say she was sorry. I do not know what her path was in life, but it was not to love me. I could not understand how one can live so long in such a state

of feeling nothing for a child who craved that love so much. I was desperate for her love and her loyalty. I thought it would be the greatest thing of all to love somebody and have that person love you back. Six months later she died. She was almost eighty-two.

Her death brought back many memories and I had to deal with them all over again. I grieved for what could have been. I confronted the naïvety of the continual hope throughout my life that while she drew breath there was the chance that she would one day tell me, that she loved me. That hope was now gone.

Although mother never loved me, nor showed me any tenderness or compassion and was often cruel and vicious with her beatings, I always loved her. I could not hurt her the way she hurt me. When she was sick, I bathed her flesh and dried her with love. I enthusiastically made curtains for her living room. I cooked and cleaned for her because I wanted to help her. I tried to make her happy. I tried to make her love me. I tried to make her mine. I tried to humanize her. Most of all, I told her; that I loved her.

It is now thirteen years since I left my husband. My mother has been dead for over eleven years. My two youngest children are now almost seventeen and eighteen years old. There are just the three of us but I embrace them, I love them, I wrap my arms around them, I validate them, I care about them and I am fiercely loyal to them. I tell them, I love you.

To every soul reading this book, I hope you have been touched by love and kindness at some point in your life and I wish you 'divine love and peace' When my youngest daughter Olivia was in her primary years she used to say, "Love is beautiful - when you know what it means." I wish my mother had known. I wish her mother had known, and her mother before her. I especially wish that the nuns knew.