

DIRTY HOME KIDS

My name is Shirley. This is an abbreviated account of my early life in the W. R. Black Home Orphanage at Chelmer, Brisbane, run by the Presbyterian Church of Queensland.

It is said that the early years of one's life have a big influence on a person. You can never forget them. Years ago, a local doctor told me "Your life sounds like something out of a Dickens novel. You should write a book some day". He had been treating me with Valium, 3x15mg a day, for depression. This was the usual medication in those days. It made me worse and I ended up overdosing!

In the Brisbane Sunday Mail, March 2001, I read the story of a woman who had spent 2 unhappy years at the W. R. Black Home. I was there 8 years from 1939/47. The same Matron was in charge. I remember actually being relieved to realise that others had spoken out. I went cold with shock.

This is not meant to be a "sob" story. I am not looking for sympathy, but it has been a nightmare throughout my life. My very well meaning Husband is sorry now that he didn't encourage me to talk more about my experiences, but I found it very difficult then to do so anyway. My children know very little of my past. I just kept it to myself.

My Mother died from Pneumonia when I was 2 years old. She had 9 children (3 boys, 6 girls). One girl died at birth. The eldest, a son, was 17 years my senior. My father re-married. I knew her as "Gracie". She already had a daughter of her own. Various brothers and sisters had left home, when, at 6 years, I was made a "Ward of the State" and put into the W. R. Black Home for orphans at Chelmer, Brisbane.

I can still remember standing with my Father, Gracie and Matron Gennon. "We already have a Shirley here. What are we going to call her?" Gennon asked. "What about Lurline then?" answered Gracie, and that was that! Matron Gennon proved to be a very harsh and cruel woman, who was determined to "Knock the BAD out of us". "Was this a Christian woman?" I ask myself. This was my introduction to The Church.

Then began 10 long years of extreme mental and physical abuse from "The Matron from Hell" as I now refer to her. We were told regularly "You are here because nobody wants you but The good Church is now looking after you" Unfortunately, "The Good Church", as far as I know, never spoke to any of us "One on One". We would have been too frightened to say anything, anyway! We just lined up when visitors came and sang Sunday School songs such as "Jesus Loves the Little Children", "Jesus wants me for a Sunbeam", etc. Bed-wetters had their faces rubbed into their sheets. A favourite punishment was to stand facing a wall, both arms raised above heads and woe betide anyone caught with arms down. She often would forget us and had to be reminded we were still there. Children would be crying with pain. I was always frightened of Gennon. Whatever weapon was handy, she used. One morning, before school, (while we were in Killarney) one of my jobs was to scrub the kitchen floor. I felt a searing pain as a tin dipper was slammed into my scalp, breaking the skin. "You stupid girl" Gennon yelled "Always put cold water into the bucket first before hot!". I went to school with blood matting my hair. My teacher asked about it and called another teacher over. They did nothing about it. After all I was "Just one of the Home Kids". Constant anxiety was my life.

We lived for 3 years at Killarney, on the Darling Downs. The orphanage at Chelmer was used as a Factory. After the war, we moved back to Chelmer. We attended the Graceville State School. Head lice, as still happens today in Schools, was found. All of us from the orphanage had our heads completely shaved and each given a beret. I don't remember this happening to other children at the school, only us. We were jeered at and called "Dirty Home Kids"

We attended the Ann Street Presbyterian Church on Sundays. We usually sat facing the congregation and every movement was noticed by Gennon, e.g. eyes open during prayers, fidgeting, whispering etc. I was constantly anxious. On Sunday afternoons, it was into the dormitory with our Bibles to read or learn one of the various Psalms, also the names of the books of the Bible to be learnt and heard at dinner time. I never got to read Fairy Tales or Children's books. As far as I know there were none!

One Christmas, goodies such as lollies and dried fruit (Surplus stock from a City Store), were left in a pillow-case at the end of the bed. I do remember being asked one Christmas what I would like. I yearned for pretty clothes. School uniforms, Church uniforms, I was so sick of them. I picked a Shorts and Top Set (Play-Suit, they were called). I had once been in real trouble for asking a visitor for a pretty dress. It was now exciting to be getting something pretty to wear as a Christmas gift. I never owned a Doll or a Teddy Bear. Those that did had to leave them in a "Special Room" on the top floor, where they would be shown to visitors, but rarely taken down for us kids to play with

Pilgrim's Progress or Bible passages were read after breakfast by one of the older girls. We had to listen to "Dr Goddard and His Book of Time" as a "Must" on the radio. I don't have a clue what Dr Goddard was all about, nor did I care. After all, I was only 10/12 years old. We always had to sit for Sunday School exams. This was deemed far more important than school work. Wednesday was my favourite day of the week, because this was the day Gennon caught the train to Ipswich to visit her family. I remember the relief coming home from school and not feeling anxious. Occasionally, she stayed up there over-night! It was a very Puritanical life. We were told God put a black mark beside our name every time we were naughty and we would have to explain them all to Him one day. "Christ is the Head of the House, the unseen Guest at every meal, the silent Listener to every conversation." This well known phrase referred to a plaque hung on the dining room wall. Talk about scared! I was scared of God!

I just hope these institutions are closely monitored from now on. These notes have only recalled a few of the abuses meted out on some unfortunate little Australian children, citizens of the future of our country. I am a survivor, but I know some are not.

My Father died in 1949. He had been refused visitation rights during my early years at W R Black Home. Upon leaving the Home, I lived with relatives until I was 19, then at GFS Hostel for girls at New Farm and Bulimba Hostel, Bulimba, Brisbane. I worked at T C Beirne, The Valley as an Accounts Clerk in "Country Orders", then at C T Coroneo and Co. My Marriage at 23 is the best thing that has happened to me.

I remember reading of Gennon's Death years ago. I just didn't care, I was relieved! I received a phone call in the 70's to attend a Re-Union at W R Black Home. I was shocked! That was the last place I wanted to re-visit. I said no, because of my awful life there.

I only ever saw one photo of my Mother. she was standing at a kitchen table bathing one of us children. "She looks like an Angel" I said. Today, I know she would be proud of me. My name is once again Shirley, the name she gave me.

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