



The Secretary

Senate Community Affairs References Committee

Parliament House

Canberra

This is a difficult process. I have spent 44 years not writing this story, and it is hazy at best, owing to my age and the lack of 'reference points' in my life at that age. I appreciate the extension of time that has been granted so my story can be included as part of the Senate Inquiry.

As a previous Home child I would like to tell you my story. It is not one of gross physical or sexual abuse, although some minor sexual abuse did occur. My early years spent in "care"- (what a euphemism!) has affected me in every way, and has had a lifetime of repercussions.

I was born in November 1959, to my father, a career soldier and alcoholic, and mother, and I have a sister Christine, 3 years older, and a brother Sean (now deceased) 2 years older than me. My parents separated when I was a baby, 6 months or so, and my mother had a nervous breakdown. My siblings were variously farmed out, and a friend of my mother's cared me for for a few months as well.

I went sent firstly to Ashfield Babies Home for approximately one year -- I don't know the exact details as I resent paying \$50 for my 'records' to discover that there are no details as to who I was, only that I was there- and I know that already. My sister and I were then placed in St Josephs Children's Home at Croydon on the 23rd of February 1963. I don't know the whereabouts of my brother at this time. I have gained a copy of my records from St Josephs and they don't amount to anything. I spent 11 months there, and I don't remember a lot about the experience, except mainly the dormitory sleeping arrangements.

In the dormitories there were massive statues of Jesus and Mary between the beds, which frightened me. I always thought one would fall on me and kill me while I slept!

My most nascent memory that I carry is of me, lying in a cot, crying out to my sister that I wanted to go to the toilet. Her bed was on the other side of a large partition. She responded to my crying, saying to

the nun that I needed to go to the toilet. I remember one of the nuns brusquely shouting 'be quiet!' (I wet my bed until I was 11 years old.)

I don't remember very much else, other than being afraid, and being separated from my sister, very much alone. I was never a 'ward of the State', as my mother always believed she would come back and get us -although sadly, in all the time I was in care, I never once remember her visiting.

Around age 3 I stopped talking, no doubt due to trauma. But for nominal records I would never have known that at four years of age I was 2'6" tall, and weighed 2 stone 11 pounds. No photos, nor anecdotes, just a slim green file, with a sentence devoted to Kerry, who was 'a good girl'. A girl so deeply traumatized, what else could I be, but silent, shy, and desperate to not attract attention.

After 2 or 3 years my sister and I then went to a Dr Barnardo's Home, in Keiraville, Woollongong, in January 1964, and we shared a room and got to know one another a little. Few incidents, although I remember being caught smoking along with some older children - I must have been only about 6 years old. My sister tells me the 'carers' had a distinct interest in ensuring that our vaginas were scrupulously clean, other than that, I remember nothing.

I was reunited with my siblings and family when I was 6 and a half, on the 26th of April, 1965 and I moved in with a 'family' of strangers. My sister, being 3 years older, had an already established relationship with our mother. I never had, so I spent my childhood years being very afraid, and unsure of my relationship with my mother. Would she get rid of me easily if I misbehaved? I never wanted to find out. I can remember accidentally smashing a glass, and being so hysterical in my fear of how I might have been punished for the misdemeanor, even my mother was alarmed. I grew up fast, and left school early as independence was what I craved. I left home at 16, and have had a good life as an adult, self directed, but not without trauma.

As an Adult - well I know this letter is hard written... I know is I carry many, deep set difficulties that I cannot seem to shift. I am a bright, intelligent and capable person. I have done some psychotherapy, and looked deeply into my own life. Yet I carry the legacy of somehow being a 'reject.' My sense of self-confidence is always the barest thread, yet I have been a visual artist for nearly 25 years, and a reasonably capable one, yet I struggle constantly. There is a sense for me that I have no 'legitimacy', and where beginning life in an institution, where you are fed, watered and bathed, and nothing more, is the overwhelming legacy of that experience, that is what is so hard to live with.

That sort of 'bedrock' is just not enough to develop that crucial sense of self we all need to carry ourselves through life with any success. I can so relate to the Stolen Generation, and all their suffering. Although my culture has not been completely destroyed as well, so it is not quite the same, but a kind of 'suffering' is shared.

I sent an email to CLAN about the Kathleen Folbigg case, of that poor woman who murdered all her babies. Her feelings of uselessness, her inability to nurture, even down to her choice of a crap husband who slid out of any responsibilities, and ultimately, helped convict her, can only have come about from her shocking beginnings, some of them as a Home child.

Having a beginning such as mine also means I fear 'exposure', I guess from the sense of shame I carry. I deeply fear being in the spotlight, and this anecdote neatly explains what I mean.

At the first meeting of CLAN, 4 or so years ago at the Exodus Foundation, they were filming the proceedings. I sat on the right of the chapel, wanting to avoid the 'exposure' or spotlight that that might incur. I sat in front of a woman who seemed to carry the same mortal fear as me - and she put it so succinctly-

"I just want to be invisible" is what she said.

If I took nothing away from that meeting, it took that.

I owned that. It's so hard to live every day with that as an overriding principal in your life.

Anyway, that's it. Connecting with CLAN, has given me a slow forum, for myself, to come to terms with myself... But I still don't like the exposure.

I feel that having a beginning to your life such as mine has been, can only give cause for great reflection;

I don't know that what I've presented will be of any assistance, but it is my story.

Regards

Kerry Blake