

I was fourteen years old when I got into a situation where a boy asked me for sex and I didn't feel that I could say no at the time. I was a virgin, but despite him using a spermicide, I fell pregnant. I never saw him again. I kept the secret until I was about six months pregnant. At that time I was experiencing a lot of abdominal pain and went to the Doctor who, on discovering I was pregnant, called my mother and told her.

Seeing her distress and later my father's, I immediately said that I would give the baby up for adoption to ease their embarrassment and to try and make it better.

There wasn't any counselling back in those days. Nobody, not even my parents, sat down with me and discussed any options, or asked how I was feeling. My parents told everyone that I had rheumatic fever to explain my absence from school and I stayed home for the next three months, hiding when someone called at the house. On only two occasions a friend dropped in so I had to greet them in bed with bedcovers covering my belly.

My parents took me to a doctor in the city. I cannot tell you how agonising my first internal examination was, in front of my mother, an old man, a stranger was putting his fingers in me. I had only had the one sexual experience and that was hardly an introduction to this.

This doctor told my mother that "these girls generally fall pregnant again straight away so you should put her on the pill as soon as she gives birth". He proved to be right, actually, as my mother never did allow me to go on the pill in case I had sex again, but that is another story. And so it began, the de-humanisation of me. People talking about me in my presence as if I had no intelligence. I believe I was treated worse than an animal. I was not comforted or supported in any way.

I was taken to a catholic hospital in the city before the delivery (I am not catholic) and stayed in the 'annex' where all the single mothers were kept before giving birth. We were indoctrinated that we were not fit to be mothers and that we should have to pay for our sins. I got the impression that we were in a baby making factory and that someone was doing very nicely out of it, but it wasn't us! We were given a tour of the labour ward, and our tour guide told us we had been chosen by God to provide babies for childless couples. After being told we were worthless for so long, I think it was small comfort.

We were set to work in the laundries and other areas. I had to sit in the autoclave room rolling up cotton balls into swabs from a long roll of cotton. Some girls got the job of erasing the names from the paper bags put over the feeding bottles for the babies in the nursery so they would be used again. The girls recognised the names of some of the babies as being from their friends who had already delivered.

Still no one asked me how I felt or what I wanted, nor did I know anything about childbirth. We had to visit the clinic downstairs once a week, and I remember lying naked on the table (we weren't given a sheet) while Drs and nurses walked by or popped their head in the curtains and commented on my breasts – or discussed me in third person.

Again, at least they would have said hello to a dog, or given it a pat.

Once I went into labour, it took me about 2 days to deliver my baby. At one stage my parents had come in to see how I was getting on, but I had to send my Dad out as he was looking a bit sick. Mum later went too. At one stage, I vaguely remember some nun bending over me reciting the Lord's Prayer. I suppose she was just trying to exorcise my sins but I thought I was going to die. I thought she pinned a St Christopher on my nightgown, but later I couldn't find it, so I gather she recycled it.

We had it drummed into us that we wouldn't be allowed to touch or see our babies and that they would be whisked away. This was so we wouldn't bond with the baby. A doctor who I hadn't met before, disguised in a mask, came in to deliver my baby and he couldn't have read the manual because to my surprise the baby was dumped on my stomach. I could feel the weight of the baby there as I squeezed my eyes shut, and then I thought 'Bugger this – this is going to be the only chance I will have to see the baby' – so I opened my eyes wide – and stared and stared and tried to memorise each part of the baby's features so I wouldn't forget. I held my hands in fists clutched tightly to my side so that I didn't touch the baby because I thought if I touch it, I can never let go. At this stage I didn't know or care if it was a boy or a girl, I just was concentrating on remembering every little feature. The baby did not cry at all. Just gave a couple of sniffles, but it was the most beautiful baby ever and I am so grateful I had the courage to look. For those brief seconds, it was my baby.

I must have had only a minute, maybe seconds, and they took the baby away, never to be seen again – and then my grief started. I asked about the sex and they told me it was a boy, so then I had to think of some boys names as I only had a girl's name picked out. I decided on the name of my brother whom my parents had lost before he was born, and my father's second name. I had been back upstairs in the ward for some hours before a nurse came up and asked me the name. She must have had some paperwork to fill in. It was then I was informed that in fact I had given birth to a daughter – so I was very happy to use both the names I had chosen all along.

I cried and cried all alone in that single room in the days that followed. I heard babies crying in the hospital – a sound which chills me even now. Was that my baby? No one came near me, except a nurse to do medical procedures. They saw I was crying but offered no comfort. We unmarried mothers, unworthy mothers were just meant to get over it.

On the third day after the birth the lawyer came to get me to sign the adoption papers. In front of my parents I had to recount the story of how I fell pregnant and then sign away my baby. Because I was under age, my father had to sign too. The lawyer told my Dad that there is a cooling off period of 30 days, but he advised that Dad should tear up the revoking papers as that "helps these girls to get over it quicker and the baby can get placed earlier". He also said to me that I could write to find out how she was later. (I did write 6 months later and got a letter about how she had been placed and was the apple of her parents' eye, and that was all – it didn't help). My parents came to pick me up from the hospital and we drove away as my heart broke.

So I have lived with this grief for 37 years. My friends and family had been told a lie, so I couldn't talk to anyone about it, let alone anyone who understood, and my parents never mentioned it again. I thought about my daughter every day.

I believe the harsh and cruel social practices and government policies of the time have robbed me forever of a beautiful daughter and have left me permanently emotionally and psychologically scarred. I believe it has affected my relationships and my perspective on life ever since. I will never recover and I can never get back my daughter. She is someone else's daughter. Eighteen months ago I decided to search for her and discovered, thankfully, that she is still alive and has two children. We have exchanged a letter, but we are still to meet. From the counselling I have had in the last year and the reading I have done, I realise I am stuck in that labour ward – looking at my baby - for 37

years. I have had to learn to move forward from that day, and leave it behind, and realise that I can never get my baby back. I hope that I will meet her and her children one day so I can start to build a new relationship with this intimate stranger.

I believe my daughter was stolen from me through intimidation and coercion. I was told to sign her away three days after her birth which I believe was illegal, in the presence of my parents. I was a minor and was not allowed to revoke the adoption, nor was I offered any support or alternatives so that I could keep my baby. Everyone won in this situation except for me and my baby. I feel violated.