

I didn't submit a submission earlier because my interpretation of forced adoption did not embrace the fact that forced can be applied to situations where the policies of the day left no other option than adoption.

My story:-

At the end of 1972 at the age of 17 (Year 12 at Elizabeth Matriculation College) during my HSC exams my period was late and I was feeling ill. I was ,unbeknown to me at the time, suffering my first bouts of morning sickness. I felt the panic and told my boyfriend of 12 months. I had heard of a doctor in the northern suburbs who could give you an injection (I didn't understand what this injection was but I thought it would bring on a period). But....nothing happened and on another visit back to that doctor I was told that I must be pregnant. Abortion could be arranged over in Melbourne if I had my parents' consent. If only I had had the gumption to go this same doctor for the contraceptive pill but the possibility of me having sex and an ensuing discussion in relation to protection had never occurred with my parents and I was naïve and too scared to raise the subject.

I had to go home and tell my mother, my sense of fear and panic was immense. My mother a wise but non communicative woman said abortion was not an option. A practicing catholic grandmother ruled this option out.

I passed my exams and gained a scholarship to be a teacher, something I had aimed for since I was 5 years of age. A request to the Education Department to defer my scholarship due to the circumstances was rejected. I had to give up my place and my dream was lost. If that was today there would have been options, a way around it but there was just a flat rejection from the Department- no compassion, no alternatives, no suggestions and my path to become a Maths/English teacher was blocked.

In the meantime my boyfriend and I had still not told his parents about our situation. We finally did and the reaction was not good. I was at this stage past 3 months of pregnancy. My boyfriend was given by his mother medication called "green pills" and I was asked to consume a great quantity of these which I did but ended up unable to take them my body violently rejecting them. I look back and I remember feeling even worthless at this stage but I also look back angry at myself for not having a voice for being this timid person who was allowing this to happen to me, the indignation of it all.

I had already started to feel maternal and nature for me was working its magic. The bad part being that I was alone and that no-one else in my family felt any obligation or inclination to protect me, to look out for me.

The two families met for a discussion and there were options apparently one of which was that I be sent away to a place for unwed mothers and my baby be adopted. This option was decided upon by the my boyfriend's parents while my boyfriend and I were out of the room. Again no voice from me just an acceptance that this would happen.

I was booked on a plane to go to Melbourne, never been out of Hobart before and I was trance like. I didn't even know what was going to happen when I got there. I had no idea anybody was meeting me I had actually no idea about anything. I was being sent away, out of sight out of mind. What for? To prevent SHAME coming on my family.

I cried all the way on the flight, crying that came from the very pit of my stomach and as I write this the tears well again. Memories are still to this day 38 years later able to bring tears so readily.

I was met by a great aunt and a visiting auntie at the airport- I wondered where they had come from and know that if they hadn't of materialised I would have been a lost person within that airport.

I had been given some money by my boyfriends' mother to buy a dressing gown. I remember going to town to buy that dressing gown (it was aqua & white) and on the way back to my great auntie's at Caulfield just crying on a crowded bus. I was in a daze.

I was taken to Hartnett House by my great aunt, she quickly departed and there I was in a place that would be my home until confinement. As night drew in the sheer panic rose and like a caged animal I started pacing and demanding that I be let out of there and that I wanted to go home. I was settled by the Matron.

I was in a home that organised adoptions for new-borns and where children who were wards of the State were also housed and looked after by the expecting unwed mothers. Routine took some getting used to and a regular day was up at 6.30 with child caring, feeding and bathing duties, prayer after breakfast at 8.00am and then cleaning duties. I slept at night in a dormitory style room where the cold night air seemed to seep in and a request for an extra blanket was rejected. So I was often cold and would go to sleep at night alone and fearful.

I was on a Sickness Benefit payment as there was no unmarried mothers benefit at this time and from this my board was taken and I managed to save a little bit of money to buy me a few new clothes that weren't loose fitting for after the birth .

We would go to the Royal Womens' Hospital for check-ups. Marched in as a group of unmarried mothers and I was subjected to examinations more often than not internal, by a whole team of junior doctors. I would be prodded and poked and my baby would respond accordingly. Once again a voiceless young scared woman.

The birth was induced as a result of the early signs of preeclampsia .

Labour was a traumatic event I had no idea how to handle myself (no preparation), the staff were very unfriendly and with the onset into very painful labour I just thrashed around in the bed screaming my lungs out. For how long I would have no idea, I was then drugged I presume and at the time of delivery I could see nothing, I was in darkness, vaguely remember pushing, hearing a baby cry but I could see nothing. Looking back I wonder if I was blind folded or just drugged.

I awoke in a hospital bed with an overwhelming need to relieve my bladder (which was a massive bulge in my tummy) I wasn't allowed out of bed and was presented with a bed pan which was filled to overflowing and once again the annoyance of the staff was tangible. I apparently had slept for 2 whole days. I was bound tightly with cloth across my breasts which were full of milk.

I did get out of bed and started roaming randomly, asking/demanding to see my baby and I was taken reluctantly to a ward on another floor and shown through the window a carriage containing a

baby with the name (my surname) wrapped in a blue blanket- a boy. I could not believe my eyes I could not believe that what I had gone through could have produced this baby.

I look back and the only person who was nice to me in that hospital was the man who came to take details for the Births, Deaths & Marriages register. My baby born 4lb 110zs. was to be kept in hospital for another 3 weeks. I walked away from that hospital who knows how. I went back to the home for a few days very sore, bewildered, voice-less and was called in to the Hartnett House Social Worker's office to sign papers for the adoption. Not much was said. I just signed where he indicated.

I came back to Hobart back to the family that had temporarily rejected me. I was a misguided mess but had become desperate for the need to be wanted and to come back to all that was familiar. I lived with the hurt and the pain quietly taking the blame believing I was shameful no-one within that family possibly understanding or even trying to understand the effect of what I had been through. The main aim always that no-one know or find out. A letter came from Hartnett House after the required time period asking if there had been a change of mind but there was no chance of that with no family support.

I continued with my boyfriend although or even because I was wrecked and I hated myself and behaved in a very jealous possessive manner as I was trying so hard to find some scrap of self – esteem, trying to regain my lost dignity. We eventually got married and I had after five years 2 miscarriages but then 3 more children- full siblings to the boy I now know is named .

The marriage lasted 23 unsatisfactory years during which time I tried constantly to find details of my relinquished son. My husband & I never really spoke about that time in our lives and I would have periods of extreme sadness and sobbing.

I was initially told that there were no records kept but in 1985 (I think) I was advised of a change in legislation and that after consultation my circumstance could be looked at. The adoptive parents of my son did not want correspondence from the Department sent to their home instead sent to their solicitors, the reception was not good. I then asked my husband to seek information and he registered with the Department. Non-identifying information came through and I learnt his name was and he was living in the family home in East Melbourne. On my son's 18th birthday the Department received a supposed letter from my son saying he did not want any contact from his birthing mother. I felt my quest for information had come to an end.

Several years later I contacted some-one from the relinquishing mother's association of Victoria and she suggested that I once again contact the Department and ask if contact could be made to my son now as an adult letting him know I was searching. The Department got in touch and it was agreed that I could write him a letter which he would receive. I sent it via the Department and he contacted them after receiving it and indicated that he would write back. He had indicated that the thing he had found hardest to accept from my letter was the fact that his father and I got married. How ironic! I got married to prove to my family that I really was good decent girl and in the back of my mind I wanted us to stay together in case my relinquished son came looking.

He had indicated to the Department that he would write back. The Departmental counsellor was aware there was a protectiveness from to his adoptive mother. I had indicated in my letter that I only wanted to offer my love, I did not wish to take anything from their family.

The letter from never came so I asked the Department to let know my email address or my mobile because I thought no young person today really wants to pen a letter. The

Department's letter with this information was returned with the words "Not at this address" I still pray that I will get contact some day- a phone call out of the blue.

My life now is on track. I have studied and am still studying making up for lost time. I am no longer voiceless, no longer timid, I have learnt many lessons in life and I am more ambitious now than ever. I am involved with politics, business, very community active, have many wonderful friends have a great job, a beautiful dog and have tried hard to forgive those whose own fears cast me aside temporarily.

I have a love inside for my child whose absence from my life has left me with an unfillable void and a pain so deep but I have to accept that does not want contact and that is the way it is meant to be.

What I went through has made me a better person. I love my family and have much to be grateful for but we all would open our arms and welcome in the one that has been lost to us!!

So is my story one of forced adoption yes in the sense that in those times the 70's a person in my circumstance – a young unmarried teenage mother- had no rights, had their dignity taken away , their baby taken away without any regard, any advice, any support so as to appease a so called respectable couple's need to parent a child. They were harsh heartless times and times of immense hypocrisy.

Thank you if you have taken the time to read my story

Kind Regards

Debra Thurley
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