



Ms Margaret Peterson

11 September 2003
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The Secretary
Senate Community Affairs References Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir

Attached is my public submission to the Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care. I apologise for its lateness, but have only recently learnt of this inquiry.

When the Committee visits Perth for hearings, I would appreciate appearing before the Committee to give evidence.

Yours sincerely

Ms Margaret Peterson

In 1988, I received documents relating to my time spent under the care of the Sisters of 'Mercy' (more like the Sisters of Cruelty) at St Joseph's Orphanage in Subiaco, Western Australia. The receipt of these and the shock from finding out that I was considered not suitable for adoption because of having dark skin, resulted in me having a complete breakdown. Also at this time, I learnt from some papers in my file that I actually had two brothers and a sister. Right up until this time, I had made up an imaginary family in my mind.

In a weird way, I consider myself more lucky than some because I have had a complete breakdown and faced my demons. I feel a lot stronger now, but the real me is still locked-up – behind my face is absolute torture. I spent considerable time in Sir Charles Gardiner Hospital where the Doctor helping me would even lay on the floor with me as I screamed and sobbed as I relived my whole terror of a childhood.

I was encouraged to go public with my story and I did radio interviews and wrote to MPs, including the then Prime Minister, the Human Rights Commission and Bishop Desmond Tutu to let him know that Australia had a hidden past. Senator Jenkins even delivered a speech in Parliament about me. I have enclosed copies of some of this material, as well as copies of documents relating to my time in care.

Now to tell you my story of the horror I suffered as a child.

When my mother was 16, she was pack-raped by Afghan camel traders at Mt Magnet in the north-west of WA. My mother came down to Perth and stayed at St Josephs while waiting for me to be born. I arrived on the 24 April 1944 and my mother gave me up for adoption. However, because I had brown skin, welfare considered me not suitable for adoption. My life was then signed away as a state-ward for 18 years.

I still cannot come to terms with this decision – they have a lot to answer for. It has been one thing to get used to my mother not wanting me, but for welfare to rob me of any chance of being raised in a family has been just as hard to come to terms with. My lawyer said if not for the statute of limitations, "I could have sued the balls off the Government". But it's not money I want, I just want answers, I want some justice.

I was fostered out for a short time when I was 6 years old, but as I was sexually abused, I was returned to the orphanage about a year later.

I then remained at St Josephs until I turned 18. I never once left this place for holidays, weekends, not ever. People used to come and take kids out but I was never allowed to go. The only time I got out of the place was sometimes at Xmas when the Daily News would sponsor a trip for us to the Perth Zoo and arrange for us to get presents. We were never allowed to keep the presents as the nuns used to take them off us when we got back to the orphanage and would sell them at their fetes.

I witnessed and experienced terrible abuse at this place. For instance, if any girls ran away, when they were caught they were publicly flogged. Us girls used to have tears in our eyes watching this, but we couldn't do anything. Often these girls were caught at night and we would all be called out of our beds to watch them get beaten.

If you were caught talking in line, one nun would make you put your hands behind your back and would then slap your face really hard. If you tried to protect yourself, she would keep on slapping you until you kept your hands behind your back. Another nun would hit anyone starting at the top and working her way down the line. Another form of punishment was twisting your ear, or pulling your cheek.

There was another nun who was into kinky things. She would make the girls take off their knickers and touch their toes and would then bash you.

One nun was well known to fly off in a rage and if you were in her class and didn't know your tables, she would grab you by the hair and drag you out in front of the class. This happened to me a lot. It was not unusual for me to have bald spots on one side of my head from being dragged by my hair. She also would make us curl up our fingers and then hit you on the knuckles with a ruler, as well as make us roll up our sleeves and hit you on the inside of your arm and this would leave bruise marks. Also, if you pronounced Latin words wrong, you would be hit with a big leather strap continually until you got them right.

One incident that has remained with my whole life was when I was caught speaking in line and for punishment I was made to kneel in the church beside an open coffin of a nun that had died. The only light was from burning candles. I was petrified. It was not uncommon also for us to have to kiss the bodies of nuns to say goodbye to them after they had died. This was really hard as most of them were 'Irish bitches'.

I remember one day asking a nun: Why don't you kill me? I also told another nun once that they should never have been consecrated as nuns, she hit me so hard that my head split open.

Having showers was humiliating. Laughing, the nuns would watch us and would then smell our skin to make sure we were clean. Often they would tell you to have another shower just to be cruel.

The nuns were also cruel with their tongues. They were always telling us that we were 'sluts and brutes' and needed to go back to the gutters where we came from and that we should be thankful they were looking after us.

I had no family to tell what was happening to me and when welfare came, you never told them about the beatings etc as you wouldn't be believed and would just get flogged again. When welfare did come, they used to dress us up and give us shoes to put on. They would also put dolls on the beds and cloths on the tables in the dining room (see photos). They made it look as though we were being looked after well. If we had bruises or marks on our bodies from the beatings, they would tell welfare that you were unwell.

We never saw a doctor. One girl, actually died at the orphanage through lack of care, we all knew she should have gone to hospital. I remember getting boils a lot – they used to use a dry cloth and go round and round to try and get the core out. This was so painful and if you cried you got hit until you stopped. On a few occasions the police would come to the orphanage if one of the girls died. I remember once when a baby had died and the police came - we were told what to say

by the nuns, which meant lying. Till this day, I am absolutely and I mean absolutely terrified of the police.

Another incident I remember was when this girl went out for the day with her father. She was all dressed up, but when she got back she got a real flogging for having dirtied her dress, but it was probably more the case that she got flogged because she told the nuns her dad had sexually abused her on the outing. She never saw her father again.

I have scars all of my body to this day from the beatings and boils. Every one of them reminds me of those cruel nuns. I must say though, that there were some kind nuns who tried to help us, but they couldn't do much to change things. Sister Ansalum was wonderful. When I showed her my file when I got it, she cried. She died last year.

My whole childhood was spent in tears. I can honestly say I spent 80 per cent of my childhood in tears. I would pray for my mum or someone to come and tell me why these things were happening to me.

Also, we were always hungry and at meal times there was strictly no talking allowed, if you did, you would cop a swipe across your back with a cane. The nuns used to have good food to eat, especially on saints and other special days. These days were good because we used to eat the scraps and pinch some of their food when doing the dishes.

The only fun we had at this place was the fun we made for ourselves. The highly shined floors were great for skidding on and we also used to drink the communion wine and play confessions. Another way of having fun was playing truth and dare with the coffins where girls would dare each other to take the cotton wool out of the dead nun's noses or take their rosaries off.

We used to have pictures shown regularly, and this was good fun. If you were naughty, you were still allowed to go but had to sit with your back to the screen. What the nuns didn't realise though was that as most of them wore glasses and used to sit behind us girls, you could watch the movie through the reflection in their glasses.

I was actually taken out of school for good at the age of 13 to work in the laundry and the nursery and from then on my days were hell. (Even before this, some of us girls would have to miss school to work in the laundry or nursery). The laundry was hard work having to use the big mangles and presses. A lot of us have osteo-arthritis today because of this work. A specialist once asked me after looking at my X-rays "Whatever did your parents make you do when you were younger?"

I used to do the night shift. At about 6pm I would take a pillow and blanket to the nursery. First I had to chop the wood for the boiler then would prepare the food for the next days lunch, then I would go into the small nursery and change the babies nappies, clean their beds and feed them their bottles. After that, I would go into the big nursery and put the toddlers on the potties, change their beds if they needed it and get them off to sleep. Then I would have to scrub one side of a large veranda on my hands and knees one night (and do the other side the next night) and prepare bottles for the next feed. After this I would be allowed to sleep for about one hour on the

floor with my pillow and blanket or until the babies were due for their next feed. After this feed and nappy changing etc, I would then have to make up more bottles and then polish the nursery floor before getting the toddlers up for their breakfast and feeding them. I felt so sorry for the babies and young ones because they were never hugged or kissed, this was forbidden. If you did and got caught you would be punished. The nuns were just as cruel to them.

At about 7 or 8 am, I would then have breakfast after which I would have to work in the laundry until about 1pm. Then I would go up to the veranda where the night workers slept – we were segregated from the others – and was allowed to sleep until about 5 o'clock. It was then off to dinner and back to the nursery to start all over again. This went on every day until I left at the age of 18 and I mean every day, I never got a day off, not even on the weekends. I got used to it, but was really sleep-deprived and over-worked. All the time I was used as child labour at the orphanage I never got paid, not even a pittance.

Another thing that used to go on was that if the nuns thought you weren't the full quid, you would be sterilised, but not here, at Graylands Lunatic Asylum. I remember three child migrant girls who were thought to be 'out of control', when really it was nothing more than adolescent fun. They were told one day to get dressed as they were going out – they looked so pretty. A taxi came, but they were actually taken to the Graylands Lunatic Asylum. One of these girls recently told me that she used to be given Largactol and that she never saw the other 2 girls again and believed they actually died in there.

Also, another girl, Millie Italiano, spent 3 years in Graylands. I didn't know this until I bumped into her just before she died last year. She looked so frail (was anorexic) and sad and although she could barely talk, we did spend some time talking about the past. It was obvious that she had never psychologically left the orphanage and she had a real fear of being sent back to Graylands. She also told me that she had lost her daughter to a drug overdose. When I found out that she had died, I felt so guilty having just seen her and thinking that I should have helped her, but the grief was just too much for her to cope with.

I know that some girls from the orphanage have gone on to do really well, but most of them haven't – some have even committed suicide. I remember one night listening to talk-back radio and this woman was talking about having taken an overdose and about the abuse she had suffered at St Josephs. When they got to her place, it was too late. She was already dead.

I left the orphanage at 18. Just after my 18th birthday, I got a letter from the Child Welfare Department wishing me 'the best of luck' for my future from 'your friends of the Child Welfare Department' (a copy is attached). This was the last time I ever heard of them – there was no follow up at all. I certainly never contacted them as I was too terrified to. This fear is still with me to this day. Anything at all to do with Government departments sends me into a state of panic. I even refuse to vote – I will always attend to have my name marked off, but then I just rip up the voting papers.

After leaving the orphanage, I went up north and ended up working at Exmouth as the head waitress in the North West Cape Lodge. It was here that I got pregnant to Peter,

an American working at the naval base up there. He really wanted to marry me, but I chickened out at the last minute because I just couldn't go through with it – I just had too much baggage and couldn't trust anyone. I wished I had married him because I really idolised him. The crunch really came when he said to me: "How am I going to tell my family you're coloured and illegitimate"? He returned to America.

I came back to Perth and spent the last 6 months of my pregnancy in a private room in Heathcote Mental Home because I had no family or anyone I could turn to. The night my daughter, Tomie, was born, was the night they discharged me. I went to the home of an English couple I had met while in Heathcote (their son was mentally disabled). They were lovely and supportive and I stayed with them until Tomie was about 2. Then I applied for a Homeswest home and lived as a single mum.

I had no support at all as a single mum. Tomie's father didn't pay any maintenance as he was too upset and angry that I had not married him. I continued though to keep him informed over the years of Tomie's progress with no support and that was really hard. I was always terrified that welfare would come and take Tomie off me. Once she got bacterial meningitis and had to go to hospital, well I never left her side for one minute the whole time she was there because I thought if I did, they would take her away.

When I turned 21, I finally met my mother, quite by chance, but that's another story. When we met, she stood at the door and said: "Well its like this, I didn't want you then and I don't want you now". This meeting was so important to me. I needed to know something about my dark skin, my identity. I did try in the following years to be accepted by her, I would send her flowers on mother's day and Xmas cards, but never once did I get an acknowledgement. She had another four children after me but none of them were made wards. I have met them but don't see them much. They don't feel like family, more like acquaintances. One of them told me they find me embarrassing because I am illegitimate and have coloured blood. Apparently I also have aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, but I have never met them, nor has my daughter. Even though I have been sort of accepted by my step-siblings, its like 'being a nigger in the woodpile'.

My mother is in hospital dying at the moment and I have been asked to go and see her so that I can forgive her before she dies, but I cant and wont do this, I'll never forgive her.

I have been and continue to be a loner. No one since I left the orphanage knows about my past, except for some former child migrants I was in the orphanage with. None of my friends know how upset I get, but inside I'm crying out "Why? Why? Why?" Counselling has never really helped. Since I left the orphanage, I have been in and out of psychiatric wards as I had no family, no one to turn to for help. Imagine what that has been like, being locked up with lunies, even when I was pregnant?

My daughter had no idea of my abuse and suffering and when she found out, she went to the orphanage and really told them off. She's missed out on so much growing up without an extend family. However in 1995, Peter, her father, made contact with us and she has since been over to the US to meet him and his family, as well as her step-brother and two step-sisters. She now also has grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins and they all totally accept her. Her father has also travelled back to Perth and

has met T-Mony, Tomie's son and our grandchild. I am friends with Peter now and we talk often.

All my life I have carried guilt and felt ashamed because of what has happened. Being told that I was ugly, black and unwanted has left me with one big hang-up. People sat on their backsides while children were being physically, sexually and emotionally abused. I still suffer with extreme anxiety and stress. The nightmares have eased now, but every now and then I have a flashback about the orphanage and a wave of nausea hits me – the feeling of wanting to vomit is really strong and usually I do. The Doctors tell me this is post-traumatic stress disorder.

Since my breakdown, I have felt for the first time nothing but respect from the medical profession, patients, my friends and others. I can now speak out and would really appreciate having the opportunity to appear before the Committee when in Perth.
