

The Good Old Days

My story about life within the walls of a Good Shepherd Convent in the 1960's

My parents, my brother and I immigrated to Australia from England in 1964. We came aboard the ocean liner SS Canberra. My brother and I did not want to come to Australia but our parents wanted to give us a better life. Although they both had good jobs over there the call of opportunity for young families was very appealing especially when there was so little opportunity in England. We came on what was called the ten pound scheme and it cost my parents twenty pounds to bring us here as they paid ten pounds each and the children were free. We went to live in Dandenong in Victoria next door to two lovely families who looked out for us and tried to help us along.

I went to the local school and found it extremely difficult fitting in. I soon learned that having a different accent and coming from a different country left you open to names like pommie etc. I could not settle and started to play truant and go into Dandenong and hang around the local bowling alley etc. I ran away from home several times and my behaviour and the trouble I was getting into brought me to the attention of the local police. My parents were at their wits end and decided that something would have to be done and the local police recommended the Convent of the Good Shepherd in Oakleigh.

I was booked in on an afternoon and the next day was to be my first day at the school. The convent itself had two "sides". The other side was the laundry area and girls from fifteen years of age to eighteen year olds would work in the laundry six days a week. There were also older ladies who worked in the laundry and lived on the other side. Our side was called Villa Mareta and it was for younger children ranging in age from eleven to eighteen and was focused on schooling. I was fourteen at this time.

After not sleeping very well on my first night we were aroused by the sound of a bell. This bell meant we were to get out of bed and put our dressing gowns around us then kneel down beside our beds and say our morning prayers. After prayers we had to get dressed (with our dressing gowns still around us for decency). Next bell and the dormitory doors were unlocked and we lined up ready to go downstairs to go to breakfast. After we were lined up downstairs one of the older girls called Carol, (who looked a lot like a chicken because the bones under her neck really stood out and when she walked it looked just like a chicken strutting) told me to pick up a basket full of tea towels and hang them out on the washing line. I did as I was told and then got back into line. As I did this Mother Thomas appeared ready to take us to breakfast. Mother Thomas was very tall and very strict. I had met her on my original interview. When she asked who had hung out the tea towels I automatically said that I had. Mother was very angry because apparently she had told Carol to do this duty and she wanted to see Carol in her office while the rest of us went to breakfast. Breakfast itself was uneventful and comprised of porridge and toast. On returning from breakfast I was shown which room I was to study in and when I went into the room Carol was waiting for me with her off sider Lorraine. There was no one else in the room and Carol just flew at me screaming obscenities

about dobbing her in. She started to punch at me and knocked me to the floor and got on top of me pinning my shoulders down with her knees. She kept punching me in the face. I am not sure where it came from but I just started to try and buck her off me and I got this surge of strength and managed to throw her over my head and get up. She came running at me again and I dodged her and grabbed her around the neck in a headlock. She kept trying to punch me so I tightened my hold around her neck until she went quite red in the face and she was screaming for me to let her go. I said I would let her go as long as she left me alone. She agreed so I loosened my hold and she went to fly at me again. As she did Lorraine grabbed her and said Mother Thomas was walking our way. They then quickly slipped out of the room and I was left to think about what had just happened. I kept my mouth shut and it was never mentioned again.

There were two classrooms divided by a wall with two windows. The main classroom was for the younger class and girls with learning difficulties. Our classroom was for girls that had the potential to learn and was conducted by correspondence and supervised by Mother Thomas. The levels would be equivalent to years ten, eleven and twelve. Mother Thomas taught in the other classroom and constantly checked through the window to make sure our heads were down studying.

There were five of us doing correspondence that first year, Lynette, Maureen, June, Denise and myself. There was quite a bit of pressure on us to succeed because it was the first year that the correspondence school had been used and Mother wanted us to do well. I must admit after how unsettled I had been at the other schools I had tried I settled into this form of teaching very well. I liked how the lessons were set out with the reading and then the questions. It was straightforward and if we had any queries we could ask Mother Thomas and even ring the correspondence school and talk to the teachers there. The other teacher we had was Mother Scholastica who taught Needlecraft. She taught us how to do fine needlework and crafts like drawn thread work and smocking. The first garment that I made was a baby's smocked dress. I received very high marks for this dress and everyone was pleased.

I got into the routine of things pretty quickly and managed to fit in. I became friends with Lynette and the other girls in the Correspondence Room as we used to call it. Life became very organised from the bells in the morning to wake us to the bells during the day to tell us it was time for lunch and time for end of school then time for after school activities and then dinner.

It was a very Spartan type life and wherever they could the nuns would save money. Whenever new phone books came out the nuns would have the old ones delivered to the convent and we would tear all of the pages out and cut them in half and that was our toilet paper. We washed our hair once a week with one bucket of cold water. The first half was poured onto your head and then you washed your hair with laundry soap and then the second half of the bucket was poured over your head to rinse. We showered once a week and we were timed. We had three minutes. First whistle, one minute to get undressed, second whistle, one minute to shower and third whistle, one minute to dry and redress. The rest of the week we had quick washes.

Luckily, there was a swimming pool and we were allowed to use it most of the year. I could swim but while I was at the convent I learnt to swim very well and received my bronze medallion. I enjoyed the swimming lessons and tried very hard to be the best swimmer there. But that was not to be because no matter how hard I tried I could not beat Lucy. She could swim like a fish and I could never catch up. Lucy was the first Aboriginal that I had ever met. She was not full blood and going by her last name I presume she was of Aboriginal, Dutch decent. The training in the pool was hard and we were not allowed to play. We wore our towels around us at all times when we were out of the pool and dressed and undressed underneath the towels, for decencies sake.

We wore wide headbands on our heads not letting any strands of hair through on to our foreheads. Fringes were common or brazen. Dresses were to be worn below the knees and no bare arms were to show above the elbow.

Time started to fly and in fact I lost all sense of time. We had visits from our parents once a month on a Sunday afternoon. I was always glad when it was over and done with because that was not my life; now my life lay within the walls of the convent. These walls were at least ten feet high with a thick wrought iron gate at the front. I guess I had become institutionalised because I rarely thought about life on the outside and concentrated more on survival where I was. We were allowed to write one letter once a month and receive one letter a month. Both outgoing and incoming letters were read so I kept my letters straight forward and to the point not saying very much at all.

The first year went very quickly and at the end of it I was to go home for two weeks over the Christmas period. Everyone was pleased that I had passed my exams and I was to go up to do my Leaving certificate. The two weeks went very quickly and I did not feel very comfortable at home. My brother was away because he had joined the army and was training to go to Vietnam. My mother and father both tried to make my stay a happy one but I could not help getting the impression that they were as glad as I was when it was time for me to go back to Villa Mareta.

I had actually missed the other girls and the routine of life that we had at the convent. I had become absolutely intrigued by a group of nuns that were also cloistered with the Good Shepherd Sisters and they were called the Magdalenes. They lived an extremely humble existence and they hardly ever spoke, devoting their lives to prayer for other people. I started to go to mass every morning and got out of bed at the first bell and went to mass with Mother Thomas. I loved to look at the Magdalenes they always looked so peaceful and devoted so I decided that I wanted to become one of them. There were not many other girls who could be bothered getting up early and going to mass and I could feel that Mother Thomas was quite proud of the fact that I could be bothered. Ilona came along some mornings and that year we both became aspirants to become Children of Mary. We both received a big golden medallion that we both wore proudly and Ilona and I became fast friends that year.

There were of course many other girls staying at Villa Mareta some of whom I became quite close. One of these was a girl called Maria. Maria was of Maltese descent and seemed to have trouble learning in the other classroom. She was constantly being made an example of and humiliated in front of the other girls. After returning from a Christmas holiday she started to put on weight and become sick and eventually it became obvious that she was pregnant which a trip to the doctors confirmed. As soon as this was found out she became the victim of abuse and was called all sorts of names from being dirty, bad, filthy etc. There was a woman who looked after us when the nuns were doing their thing called Iva. It was Iva especially that victimised Maria. She had been institutionalised all of her life and was in her fifties. She was a particularly horrible person who had her favourites and Maria nor I were in that group. One night when Maria was crying I went to her and we talked. She told me that her father had raped her and that it was quite a common thing. I did not know what to do but I felt that something had to be done for her. I confided to one of the nuns that I liked and trusted and I had never seen her do anything horrible to any of the kids. Mother Fidelus must have taken things in hand because Maria was moved to a home for unmarried mothers and I thought that I would never see her again, but I did. A few years after I had left the convent and was in an abusive marriage I did actually literally bang into Maria and we had a talk. She had the little boy with her that she had given birth to and was married. She thanked me for what I had done for her and told me that the police had given her father a beating for what he had done but no charges were laid and he was left to terrorise the sisters of Maria. I have never seen her since.

Maria's story is one of the many sad stories that I could relate but I will continue with my own story that in comparison to others I was well off.

I went on with my studying and was doing very well but I had made up my mind that I was going to become a nun and advised my parents that this is what I wanted to do. I think in retrospect the reasons for wanting to become a nun is that I would not have to face a hostile outside world and would be looked after and yes stay institutionalised.

This all changed for me one day when we were in a needlework class with Mother Scholastica. Up until that point I had related well with this nun and I had been getting great marks for my needlecraft. Mother had bought a magazine into the class and was showing us fashions by a new up and coming designer of the day called Mary Quant. Now Mother was talking about this designer and every time she pronounced her last name she mispronounced it and the word she used was a very bad swear word beginning with C. Now Ilona and I knew that this was a bad word but we could not tell Mother and reacted by laughing. Every time we looked at each other we burst out laughing and Mother was getting angrier and angrier to the point that she said if we did not tell her what we were laughing at we would be severely punished. We kept on laughing and as laughter sometimes does it got out of hand. The next thing I know I am being dragged of and taken to a little cupboard that was under the stairs. Mother opened the cupboard took out the light and told me to get in. I obeyed and got into the cupboard at approximately 3pm. It was cold and dark with nothing to sit on. I could not stand up properly because the cupboard was sloped being under the stairs. I sat cross legged and waited, and waited and

waited. I heard the girls go off to dinner but no one came for me. I heard them come back and start getting ready to go up to the dormitories for bed and still no one came. I kept very quiet and thought some one would come for me. I stayed in that cupboard all night without making a sound and I was very frightened. I was scared of the dark and that night the dark and I became one. I could not control myself and wet myself from fear. In the morning when I could hear the girls were starting to come and assemble for breakfast I could not keep quiet any longer and started to bang on the door and scream out to anyone that would hear. Eventually Mother Scholastica came and opened the door and said what have you got to say for yourself. I said that I had wet myself. Mother told me to go up to the dorm change my clothes and catch up with everyone else at breakfast which I did. After breakfast Ilona was locked in the cupboard for her part in our “shocking” behaviour but thankfully she was allowed out that afternoon.

After that incident I started to plan my escape and one morning the opportunity arose. I was given a set of keys to let myself out and hang up some washing and then I was to catch up with the rest of the girls at breakfast. I hung out the washing and took the keys with me and headed for the wall. There was a quiet corner and I tried unsuccessfully to climb over the wall. My knees were scraped from trying and I decided if I could not get over the wall I would have to go back. I made my way around the wall and noticed that the big iron gates that locked us in were open probably for a laundry delivery. I took the chance and went out of the gates without being noticed. I knew it would not be long before they noticed I was missing and made my way to the highway as quickly as possible. Ilona had given me a dollar that she had managed to hide away so I could get a bus but unfortunately I must have dropped it when I was trying to get over the wall. So I walked to my parents house. It was about ten kilometres and when I got to the house there was no-one home as my parents were both working and my brother was serving in Vietnam. I waited until my mother came home who was quite shocked that I was there and I told her the story and that if she sent me back there I would run away again but I would not come home and they would never see me again. My mum took this very seriously and allowed me to stay home and rang the convent and that was the end of my days behind bars but not the end of my suffering.

My mum and dad divorced not very long after this and I got a job in an office and went to live in a flat in St Kilda with four other girls. I was totally ill equipped for life on the outside and made many mistakes including marrying an abusive husband, drugs, alcohol. You name it – I tried it! After five years of abuse and having two children I knew I had to get away from this guy and I did manage to do just that. I was a single mother for ten years and feel that my parenting skills were not what they should have been but I did my best. I had a home based business using the skills I had actually learnt from Mother Scholastica and I made clothes and sold them at the markets bringing in extra income to support my-self and the children.

After ten years I met my current husband and we married in 1990. He is a very understanding man and he helped as much as he could with my children. Unfortunately my son was a very troubled boy and young man and committed suicide in 1996 at the age of 20. I still have not recovered from this although I go through the motions of life every day. I have a wonderful daughter and

granddaughter that I would do anything for and we are really close although I referred until recently that I was schooled at a boarding school. My mother is still alive but we never mention the Good Old Days and we are quite close and see and talk to each other on a regular basis. I honestly think that my mum thought I was going to a boarding school and not a reformatory and she was unaware of the abuse until the day I arrived home on the door step.

As I am writing this loads of other incidents come rushing back and I honestly believe I was one of the fortunate ones because there were so many girls that were so much worse off than I was. Not being a ward of the state gave my mother the choice of letting me stay at home and not being forced to go back and receive punishment for running away.

For the other girls and myself I would like to see some acknowledgment from the Catholic Church admitting that the way in which we were treated was degrading and humiliating and left us totally unprepared for the outside world. There needs to be National Support Services and counselling for those who wish it. I have blanked this part of my life out for so long now that I doubt that there is anything that could be done to help me. I still cannot handle being in small spaces and I am introverted and for a long time had no self esteem at all. I prefer to be on my own even though I am married to a great guy and I have chosen a life style where I live in an isolated region.

After reading an article in The West Australian Newspaper in regard to Good Shepherd Homes here in Western Australia it all came rushing back to me about my time in Melbourne. I was very glad to hear about the Senate Inquiry and find out about the organisation CLAN. It has been good for me to communicate with another person (Leonie Sheedy CLAN) who has been in similar circumstances because I think people who have been there are the only ones who really understand what it was actually like.

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