

"You're too high spirited & mark my words I'll break it out of you."

My name is Julie or it was until I changed it to 'Julia' to change my identity. I was born in Thomdale on 13th June, 1949 & placed in St. Patrick's Orphanage at age 4 or 5 with my sister who is three years younger. I have very limited memories of my life prior to being made a ward of the State except being tied to a tree in the hot sun at my father's work. He was a tin miner at Gilgai. The other memory will come up later in my story & you'll then see its significance.

Most of the Sisters of Mercy who cared for us over my many years in care were alright but there were a few who made my life a living hell. I was not a perfect child - far from it. I recall being hit around the head & bottom with a hairbrush, being put in cold baths & having my wet bedsheets rubbed in my nose by Mother "E." as a very young child. Having my head shaved & washed in kerosene for dandruff. Being constantly told by Sister "W" that I was stupid & too fat & ugly to get out of my own way. This really hurt me.

As if it wasn't bad enough being lonely & unwanted I didn't deserve to be ill-treated as well. The worst I recall was the treatment Mother "S" dished out. The constant beltings with a cane or feather duster (not the fluffy end). Constantly being belittled by her cruel comments you wouldn't expect to hear from a representative of God. Some of her comments were: "Mark my words you'll end up in hell." "If it wasn't for us ruins you'd be in the gutter." "Your own mother doesn't want you."

②

"You're too high spirited & mark my words I'll break it out of you". "You'll end up in the gutter or jail". These are only the ones she said constantly but they have left their marks & affected my self esteem all my life.

The first few years of my schooling was at the Orphanage with Sister Anthony & she was alright. The school inspector Mr. McEahan used to call us some times & we used to call him "Mr. McEan" not because he was mean but because we thought that was his name. When I was in Grade 3 the Orphanage children started schooling down town with the Ursuline nuns at St. Mary's primary school & St. Ursula's college (secondary). They were kind to us & I loved going to school down town because it got me away from what I called "this bloody joint".

There were the good times too, like going radduting & blackberrying with Sister Dorothea, doing a First Aide course with Sister St. John (I loved her cooking especially boiled fruitcake), some of us made our debut at the Catholic Ball down town, picnics at the Fittler Family Property on St. Patrick's Day, but to me unfortunately these were overshadowed by the bad times.

I copped a lot more beltings & humiliation than some children because I was outspoken & I believe because I had no family visits & being a State Ward. The ones who had families visit & were not State Wards were treated better & we used to call them the pets.

Most times I felt very alone & sad. My feelings now are "God created me & they desecrated me." The nights seemed far too short & most nights I prayed to Jesus that my father would come & get me, only to wake up disappointed. I was petrified of God (the punisher)

(3)

That's why I prayed to Jesus. Every time I was belted I was told God was punishing me.

Another of my early memories in the Orphanage was sitting in a freezing cold playroom crying because the chilblains on my fingers & toes were stinging & Armidale is bitterly cold in winter.

When we started going to school downtown, the Ursuline Sisters were kind to us that's another reason I loved school. The other children referred to us as the Orphanage Kids & I hated that.

Sometimes when I was in trouble Mother "I" would threaten to send me to Lempe or worse still Winton in Victoria (the hanging state). I don't know much about either of these places but they must have been bad.

In the earlier years in the Orphanage one punishment was being locked in the lift & even today I cannot handle confined spaces like lifts.

I didn't like my sister very much in the Orphanage because she (in my opinion) then was that she was one of their pets) because she didn't cop beltings or verbal abuse. We are close now.

The only thing I found comfort in was food - never enough of it. Sometimes some of us even took food out of the rusty pig buckets. It's a wonder we weren't sick.

At Christmas time we put on a concert for the public & we practised for months to get it right & Nanta came & gave us a present. When the concert was over we went for holidays with families. Most families I went to were great & I didn't like going back to St. Pats. You could see the Orphanage looming on the hill when you entered Armidale & I was overcome with deep sadness when I saw it but I did want to see my friends. I had one very special friend

(4)

named Beryl but sadly we're lost contact since the Orphanage days. There was one family I spent holidays with that made me do all the dirty work & didn't allow me to eat with them. They had meals in the kitchen but I had to eat outside (an enamel plate with sandwiches & an enamel cup of tea) while they had a hot meal & this made me feel like I was an animal not a human. When the holidays were over I was happy to be going back to St. Pats because I wasn't different there.

Just inside the entrance of the Orphanage right opposite the parlour was a statue of St. Vincent de Paul with his arm around a couple of children & it made me sad we didn't have this love.

Two of my most vivid memories are the ones which I felt were the most unjust. One is when I was in Form One & got my first period at school & thought I was dying. I went to the Principal's Office & she explained what was happening & showed me what I had to do, then she let me rest in her office for the rest of the day. When we got back to the Orphanage after school Mother X came looking for me because one of the other children from St Pats Orphanage had told her I received special treatment at school & when I explained why, she was so angry with me & belted me around the legs with the cane & said "How dare you show me up in front of the Ursulines." This was the worst belting I recall as my legs were cut badly. The next day my legs were still weeping & I had to wear school stockings & they stuck to my legs. When we were on assembly line at school the cold weather was making my cut legs sting & I was lifting my legs. The Principal noticed this & called my name to help her in the office. I was so afraid of being singled out & was shaking my head to tell her no. Luckily she

5

was astute enough to see my fear & called other names to help polish basketballs & other jobs. When she saw my cut legs tears came down her face & I felt guilty for upsetting her because I liked her. This was the first time I ever saw an adult cry.

The other occasion is when I was on holidays with a family I asked them to buy me a couple of packets of modest pads to take back because when a girl had her period she had to ask for one pad at a time & if you asked for more than three a day you were accused of messing around. I stashed these in my locker & still asked for one at a time but at least I had backups & didn't need ask for too many. Then one morning when we were in the refectory (dining room) Mother came in red faced (that's what she was like when angry), & she pulled me up from my chair, slapped my face & called me immoral. Everyone just looked. When she got me outside she told me she was sending me to the priest because in her opinion I only needed that many pads if I was messing around & she wanted to know who I was messing with. Anyway she took me into the priest (who was having his breakfast in the parlor after saying the Mass). I recall feeling very humiliated & didn't want to look at the priest because I was ashamed of what she thought. I thought she had told him so I blurted it all out & told him I hadn't messed around. I recall him telling me some joke about a cat chewing a hat (hat it chewed) meant to be (attitude). He believed me & that was good. I saw his wonderful breakfast & being an outspoken child, I asked him if I could have his apple peel & he gave me all his breakfast. This was the first time I'd tasted bacon. I recall telling him "I'll never get toast or

(6)

leaven in this joint. Mother ^{" "} came back to collect me & when she knocked on the door I remember the priest telling her he'd bring me out when we finished our talk. He let me finish his food because he could get more when he went home to the Bishop's House.

I have been damaged by the physical, mental & yes even spiritual abuse I received & it is only in the past 5 years I can see God as a God of Love. I have attended other churches in my search for the God of Love but always feel guilty because I knew I am a Catholic, but the hurts are still there as they are strongly embedded in my brain for me to reach my full potential spiritually. I have met many good Catholics but that doesn't help me. I find it impossible to forgive some of the things & I knew I have to forgive so God can forgive my wrongs. I pray & read my scriptures but still feel I can't forgive.

There have been lost opportunities (like being able to own my own home etc.) due to the lack of a good education, which has meant having less paying jobs or welfare over the years. My low self-esteem causes problems too as I can't accept compliments. I raised my children the best I could & we always struggled financially & I still do today as I am the legal guardian of my 6 year old granddaughter & have raised her since 10th August, 2001 & of course had to leave my job as a cleaner with the Army. I have five grandchildren. My 30 year old daughter & her husband have four children & the child I am raising is the daughter of my youngest daughter aged 25 who is mixed up in the wrong crowd & suffers depression. The granddaughter I am raising will never be caught up in the Welfare (Dept. Human Services) net - ever.

(7)

I was made leave school at the end of Form 1 & worked in the Orphanage laundry for a while before going to Technical College & doing a Secretarial Course (1966), then to work as a cashier in a Butcher Shop & still living at the Orphanage, then to a job with the Ormidale Newspaper Co. at age 16 until I was put off work there because of my bad bookkeeping skills. Then I was employed by the District Telephone Office as a Stenographer - still living in the Orphanage. I love this job but was taken away from it to work & live with a young couple with three boys aged 2, 4 & 6 years & the 4th child was expected & the mother had to rest. I wasn't very happy here but when the couple's fourth baby arrived I was sent back to the Orphanage. Here I worked in the laundry - no wages, no hope.

When I turned 18 Mother "D" left the Orphanage to go to Gunnedah to become the Reverend Mother of the Sisters of Mercy. I was happy about this.

Mother St. Luke came to St. Pats as the sister in charge. She was young, beautiful & kind & I thought of her as the "Madonna" because she reminded me of pictures I'd seen of the Madonna. One day she really shocked me because she was in the girls' playground & a fight broke out in the boys' playground & she strode the fence to stop the fight. I'd never seen a nun stride a fence before.

Well as usual good things don't last & now Mother "D" (now Reverend Mother) had me brought to Gunnedah. They gave me a flat (in the convent grounds) & paid me \$6 a week to teach backward boys at St. Xavier's school 5 days a week & to clean the school on Saturday mornings & help Sister Ryan (lay nursing sister) to

(2)

care for sick & elderly runs in the infirmary on Su
I felt I was still in prison as I had to be in early
every night except the night I went to Y.C.W. mee
then I had to be back by 9pm. Looking back now
was probably free to leave as I was well over 18
old, but I didn't know I could & had no where
go anyway. I loved the Y.C.W. (Young Christian
Workers) group & Father Jeggins who ran it for
me. I found respect & friendships in Y.C.W.

One night when I had just left a Y.C.W. meeti
& was on my way home a chap I'd met through a
Y.C.W. friend pulled me up & spoke to me. He
ret a local but a Renaware Salesman from Syd
& had been in Gunnedah for a few weeks. He seen
a nice guy so I stopped to talk but that was the
biggest mistake I ever made, there were 2 other blo
in the car & they got out & forced me into the car w
a knife pointed at me. These other bloys were fr
a place called Barrell just out of Gunnedah. Well
they raped me. I had been seeing a nice chap from
Y.C.W. & he hadn't even suggested having sex w
me & I wasn't ready to anyway as I was afraid of
going to hell. I told him next day what had happene
& swore him to secrecy as I felt very dirty & blam
myself. Not long after I was sick & saw a doctor onl
to find I was pregnant. I had to tell Mother & I
she didn't believe I'd been raped & accused me of
having sex with my bloefriend or sleeping around.
This was too much to bear, but what else could I
expect from her. I don't want your sympathy, but
it would have been nice to have some comfort right
then but no it was only me - Julie (worthless).

(9)

Mother "S" had arranged for me to go to Villa Maria Home for unmarried mothers in Maitland (also run by the Sisters of Mercy). Mother "S" & Sister Catherine took me down on the train. The nuns at Villa Maria were very kind to us mothers to be. Mother Rosario was in charge. I stayed until I gave birth to my lovely daughter on 19th June, 1970 at the Mater Hospital. (six days after my 21st birthday). I held my precious angel & then she was taken away as Mother "S" had told Villa Maria nuns the child had to be adopted out. Three days after her birth the social worker had me sign the papers - This was one of the saddest days of my life. I eventually left hospital without my baby & kept looking back. I had no job & had to look for somewhere to live. I stayed with a lady in Maitland for a couple of weeks & then left to do a Registered Nursing Aide Course at St. Vincent's Hospital in Sydney & I grieved for my daughter. Just before the exams (12 month course) I was afraid of failure & left St. Vincent's Hospital & the nursing friends I'd made. I moved to Melbourne & got into a violent relationship & ended up in Prince Henry's Hospital because I tried to commit suicide & then was taken to Royal Park Mental Hospital. This was very scary but it woke me up. I was only there a few weeks & then got work at St. Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne as a nursing assistant & I loved it because people needed me. I made many friends there. I still grieved for my daughter & cried myself to sleep most nights. I would love her to know she was not an unwanted child - as there's nothing worse.

(10)

By the way I don't know the names of the 2 animals from Barrell who raped me but I do know the name of the one from Sydney — they will one day have to face up to this.

I nearly forgot to tell you the second of my memories prior to being a state ward. Well when I was a young child in the Orphanage this memory used to upset me. I recalled a lady in a red dressing gown, with long black hair burning in a fire & an ambulance taking her away. The nuns told me I imagined this & before long Mother "I" had me going to the psychiatrist (Dr. Moriarty) in Lamworth once a month & he had me on pills called Stelazine I didn't mind going to the Psychiatrist as a couple of others went too & we always had a picnic on the way to Lamworth. My sister & I have found out our mother died in Stockton Mental Hospital with Epilepsy and yes we have her medical records & she was burned in a fire when she had an epileptic fit before we were orphanage kids, so I was drugged up for nothing. We have only found all this in the last 5 years.

I hold the N.S.W. Child Welfare Department & the Catholic Church responsible for the damage they have caused me & my family & would like them to pay for counselling. Their lack of care has caused much physical, mental & spiritual problems throughout my life. Mr. Wicks the Child Welfare Officer could have at least checked on us more often & could have spoken to us & not just taken Mother "I"'s word we were alright. I have written a small poem which says it all. Thanks for your patience

11

in reading this long letter it was very difficult to cut it short as there are 20 years or more of my life. I am deeply saddened that like many careleavers, we have no childhood photos except one my sister gave me of her & I & the Orphanage overlooking us, I don't know how she got that one. It is so difficult to access our records as well - it's like we didn't exist. An apology from the Church or the Child Welfare Department would be an empty gesture because it's only because the truth has finally come out.

Should the Church or Child Welfare Dept. want the names where I've put "Mother A", "Mother C", or "Sister W", I can supply this to them as I hope they also get to read this & put it right.
IT'S ABOUT TIME!!

My poem.

My heart is broken
And my spirit crushed
Up until now it had to be hushed
Because I am supposed to be grateful
... but instead I am hurt & hateful.
My family have been damaged too
because their mother finds it hard to trust.
Please do the right thing & help restore
my stolen childhood
All I want is to be what I was before you
got me, a child of God.
Oh if only I could.

Julie Byrnes.

The words of Jesus "Suffer the little children to come unto me, & forbid them not; for such is the kingdom of God." MARK 10: 14.