

Senate Inquiry into "Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices".

Preamble to Submission

I, _____, am a citizen of the Commonwealth of Australia, resident in New South Wales. As a citizen of the Commonwealth of Australia I have an inalienable right to protection under the Australian Constitution and the Common Law of this country.

As an Australian citizen, the Commonwealth affords me protection from the unlawful and harmful actions that threaten my right to life, liberty and justice from those who would deny me these rights, within and without, the borders of Australia.

What follows is my story. I gave birth to a baby girl in 1976, when I was 15 years old. Even though I stated quite clearly that I didn't want to place her for adoption, I was told that I really had no choice. Thirty-five years later I still carry considerable pain relating to the loss of my daughter. It has had a very negative effect throughout my whole adult life... as well causing emotional damage to the son I had one year later and didn't lose. My story is long and I do apologise for that... but once I started writing I felt an overwhelming need to tell the complete story.

I am going to start with some background on my childhood, because I believe it had a significant bearing on what happened to me in 1976. However, I am not going to document abuse that occurred at the hands of my parents when I was a pre-schooler. Just suffice to say there was some, and it no doubt also helped to shape my reaction to the difficult situations I encountered in my later childhood.

Mine was a difficult and painful childhood... and as a result I was a deeply troubled adolescent. In my family, where I was one of six girls, I always felt the "odd one out"... I felt that there was no place for me... that I was always overshadowed by my sisters... and that I was never understood. I was the ugly child amongst all the prettiness... I failed to display any interest in "girlie things"... and I struggled to develop any acceptable feminine characteristics. I was naturally shy and suffered with low self-esteem from an early age.

The first incident that had a big negative impact occurred when I was in Yr. 4. When I look back it stands out as being one of the specific points where life took a bad turn... where I was pushed onto the path which resulted in my future being such a disaster. My mother took me with her to a Red Cross fund-raising event. It was an afternoon tea affair, certainly not the sort of thing that I would have been taken to normally, as the ladies present were mostly in the "very nicely dressed and sporting a string of pearls" category.

My mother left me sitting while she went to speak to someone, and while she was gone two older ladies seated close by began to talk about me. The conversation went along the lines of "See that poor child, fancy having to go through life with a face like that", and "She certainly won't

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find herself a husband, that’s for sure”, and “She’s really cursed with that carrot hair *and* the freckles... no hope for her really” and etc. Yes, my freckles were horrendous... and my hair was flaming red. I was already well aware that I was not pretty like my sisters... but I had not yet considered the implications of that. However, after hearing those ladies pass judgement I was unable to stop thinking about it.

Even at that age, I already had so little self-esteem that I simply accepted what they said. I believed, from then on, that no boy would ever look at me... that I was too ugly to have any hope of finding a husband... and accepted that I was a lost cause and that I’d no doubt end up the old maiden aunt of the family. Also, for a few years afterwards, I harboured a really strong desire to be a boy instead. I felt that would be so much easier than being trapped in an ugly girl’s body... one which I seemed totally unable to manoeuvre in any sort of lady-like manner.

At school I was always the victim of teasing, in younger years because of my appearance. The teasing intensified into victimisation from Yr. 5 onwards, after I developed bladder incontinence when I laughed. This problem, which began as an occasional occurrence, deteriorated so that by the time I was in high school it was daily or multi-daily. It was never a small dribble, but the entire emptying of my bladder, which I was completely unable to control or stop. As a result my clothing would become soaked and a puddle form on the floor.

About 12 months after the problem started I was taken to the local Dr and put on a medication. When that had no impact I was referred to a specialist, who conducted various tests in an attempt to determine the cause. As none was discovered, it was dismissed as being the result of some psychological disturbance. At no time was I ever given any practical means of dealing with the problem... just sent off to school every day, to return home with soiled clothing and smelling putrid. No wonder I was victimised... that the victimisation deteriorated into severe bullying... and led to me being totally ostracised as time went on.

The overall strategy I employed for coping with the incontinence was to ignore it... to never acknowledge that the problem existed... and never react to the bullying. It’s the type of advice that is sometimes given to a victim of bullying... as in “don’t let them see they’ve got to you, it only encourages them”. So I battled on, and learnt to hide any and all feelings. I kept stuffing all the pain down inside me... and taught myself not to react, whatever the provocation. The result being that, upon reaching high school, a type of contest developed among my classmates, to see who could come up with the nastiest form of abuse... the winner obviously being the one who was able to elicit some sort of reaction from me.

As part of my coping strategy I also adopted the role of class clown, which was great for laughing a lot and bladder incontinence. I was “acting out” all the time at school. I exhibited a lot of disruptive, attention seeking behaviour... I was rebellious and defiant... and I strongly believed that

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no-one in the world cared one speck about who I was or what was happening to me. Today I think an adolescent exhibiting that sort of behaviour would more readily be recognised as having a psychological or emotional issue that needed attention... but in those days any suggestion of “mental illness” still had great stigma... so I was just labelled as bad.

The abuse and bullying took many different forms. It was verbal, in what was said to me and to others about me... abusive and derogatory things were written on the blackboard... I was often pushed, shoved and tripped up... and there was more serious physical abuse, as in an incident where I was strangled by a woollen rope during a sewing class (the teacher looked on and didn't react, it was another classmate who intervened instead)... there were times where I was hit... including being punched in the face... I was spat at (which is part of the curse of being a redhead... it goes “look out your hair's on fire” and then everyone spits)...or things were thrown at me, or left in my desk... like nappies, dog faeces and all manner of revolting rubbish... and there was vandalism of my books and schoolwork.

By Yr. 8 my mental health was in a very poor state. I was deeply depressed... and suicidal to the point of always carrying a razor blade with me. The thought that I possessed the means of ending the ongoing trauma, if it suddenly got too much to cope with, was about the only thing that enabled me to keep facing every day. That and the probably unhelpful notion that acknowledging the problem amounted to letting the abusers win. The end result being that if I couldn't even acknowledge the problem, then there was no avenue for asking for help... and I *still* doubt whether any would have been forthcoming at any rate. I felt totally trapped, and doomed to suffer my nightmare existence... the only possible relief I could see being if I was willing to end my life.

I was sent for counselling that year... but it didn't have much positive impact on me. I initially was given a young psychology student, who I liked and clicked with... but she became very ill and had to leave the placement a few months after I started with her, which upset me and left me feeling abandoned. I was then given an older woman counsellor, but I found it very difficult to open up with her. Nevertheless she was more senior, and therefore no doubt more experienced. She seemed to recognise quite quickly that I was in serious trouble emotionally. She told me she thought I needed more help than she could provide... and that she wanted to refer me to a child psychiatrist, but needed my parent's permission. Needless to say, permission was denied by my mother. I felt totally let down, and couldn't bring myself to continue seeing that counsellor afterwards.

My mother had often encouraged me to go out for long walks, from when I was about 9 years old. I would go and walk along the beach and the cliffs, which were a few blocks from home. I always suspected that she really didn't like having me around the house... as she certainly didn't tell anyone else to go out for a walk and not come back for a few hours. But I was overjoyed that my parents had allowed us to get a dog when I was in

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Yr. 5, as I loved dogs and had desperately wanted one. From then on I was expected to go out twice a day to walk him, which I did enjoy doing. I also found I enjoyed meeting other people who were out walking dogs. Even though I'd always been so shy, I found I could talk to pretty much anyone about their dogs.

As fate would have it, I started talking to one particular man who I would see sometimes in the park with his dog. He seemed to like talking to me... asked me lots of questions about myself and all about the things I liked doing. I certainly enjoyed the attention... no-one had ever taken an interest in me like that... and it came to be, over time, that I would see him more and more often when I was at the park. Of course he was "grooming" me, but I didn't know it... hadn't been warned... was so naïve and unworldly. As a result, it culminated in me being sexually assaulted on several occasions, at the age of 11.

He warned me not to tell. But that was probably unnecessary... I doubt I would have told anyone regardless. Partly because I didn't really understand what had happened... didn't even possess the vocabulary to explain it... and I felt too dirty and ashamed of him doing things "down there" to have spoken of it. Plus I was already well entrenched in my "protective mechanism" of ignoring reality... of just not speaking about things that go wrong... and pushing down any feelings of shame and pain.

Afterwards I developed the idea that I was a "fallen woman"... which I probably got from reading a Jane Austen novel or something... and I thought that fact, like my appearance, would mean I'd never find a husband. I thought that I was no longer "pure", so no man would want me. But it was also starting to dawn on me that perhaps there was a way to still garner some male attention... where they may not care so much about how pretty your face is. I wondered if it was still possible to be popular after all... I felt I had nothing left to lose at any rate.

I became sexually active not long after I turned 13, though it definitely was primarily about needing some attention. Life felt really, really awful... school was a nightmare... I needed to feel I still had some value... and the only way I could see of achieving that was to have a boy pay me some attention. For a brief moment I felt I was finally beating what I thought of as the curse of my appearance. But of course, it would all end up disastrously.

I was behaving somewhat promiscuously... and no doubt word of that was passing around among the younger members of the surf club. (We lived 3 blocks from the beach). One night, while walking the dog along the beach near the clubhouse, I was spotted by a group of youths... maybe a dozen or so. I could tell from the some comments they made that they knew who I was, or had at least heard of me.

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I was surrounded by them. They grabbed hold of me and pulled me over to the sand... where I was raped by many of them. How many I'm still not sure. I did initially struggle and resist, but it was obvious I was not going to get away... so I soon adopted my usual reaction of blocking out the reality of what was happening... and pushing any feelings away down. I was very well practiced at it by then... which was just as well, because life was about to become an even bigger nightmare.

Of course none of those youths could have been expected to keep their act a secret... I'm sure they all bragged and boasted as much as they could. But I'm also pretty sure that the way they would have told the story to others, would not have included any suggestion of them having used force. From that time on there was an ongoing concerted campaign of harassment, bullying and verbal abuse.

Somehow a word was adopted that referred only to me. That word became a particular weapon of torture. Wherever I went there were people who knew of it... and who were happy to yell it out as loud as they could, while making it obvious they were referring to me. It seemed there was no way of escaping it... so I tried to just ignore it... to keep going as if I was deaf to it. Again that may have made things worse... perhaps made them more determined to get a reaction from me.

Occasionally it would escalate to more than just the verbal abuse. Spitting was quite common... and throwing rubbish at me. Or they would stand on the footpath and not let me go passed them, and then push their bodies up against me... grab my breasts... or shove a hand between my legs. It was horrible, humiliating behaviour... all the more so because it was happening in public. What happened at school was bad... but at least it was, for the most part, contained there.

I think the constant fear that I might be recognised anywhere I went, and then abused, caused a lot of the damage in me. I was unable to walk out of the house and down to the bus stop without hearing that word... virtually every single time. Plus, the fact that they did not let up on it for so long, also contributed to the amount of trauma. Though the frequency with which I was assaulted by the word may have decreased slightly over time, it was not until I had moved out from home, over four years later, that I finally escaped it.

My most pressing reason for making that move away was because I needed to remove my 2 year old son from the situation. They had developed another abusive word for referring to him, and in that way were starting to target him also. I knew I had to get him away from there, before it had a negative effect on him... or he started mimicking the word that was shouted so often near us. I could not have coped with hearing it uttered by my son... and I was becoming very afraid that we were not far off from that happening.

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My sister was also very damaged by that campaign of verbal abuse... for no other reason than the fact that she was my sister and would walk beside me. She tried to undertake Yr 11 at the local public high school, having previously gone to a Catholic school that only went to Yr 10. It was then we discovered it was where a lot of those youths from the beach went to school. Obviously she wasn't able to continue on there. It was a combination of the ongoing verbal abuse, her experience in attempting that Yr 11, and the enormous pressure of the job she got afterwards, working as a dental nurse (with no training or experience) for a dentist who was also abusive, that led to her breakdown and subsequent hospitalisation. Just one of the things I still carry guilt about.

It was about then, shortly after [redacted] was hospitalised, that my life was altered forever by the arrival on the scene of [redacted]. He was the first male to have shown interest in trying to develop an ongoing relationship with me. I didn't understand why he was interested, it made no sense at all... and still doesn't. But I'd been rapidly sinking into total despair, losing the will to keep on going, especially since [redacted] was gone. So when he did turn up I grabbed hold and hung on tightly... like a drowning person clinging to a life buoy. We did have an exceptional chemistry together, which possibly negated the fact that we didn't have anything much in common. He was a very gentle, caring and giving lover... so it was with him that I finally discovered sex could actually be pleasurable. None of my previous experiences had given me any indication of that fact.

I think it was only four months later that I started to suspect I was pregnant... but I was saved the ordeal of having to confess that to my mother. It seems she had been keeping watch on my cycle, because she came to me and said she knew I was late and was it possible I could be pregnant. She took a urine sample off to the chemist... and came back with the news that I was indeed pregnant. I had not yet reached fourteen and a half years old... yet I did not feel at all distressed at this turn of events.

Initially there was a great amount of pressure put on me, to have the pregnancy terminated. I refused adamantly. When I look back now I'm not sure why I was so determined to have my baby. No doubt some part of it was simply due to the rebellious and defiant attitude I'd been exhibiting, for some years by that point, along with the attention seeking behaviour. I also know there was some degree of pleasure in seeing how much my pregnancy appalled my mother... and I was certainly getting some attention, at any rate.

Aside from all of that aspect, I did think the notion of there being a tiny little baby growing in me was totally wondrous... as much because it was *my* baby as anything else. It was as if finally I had something of value.... something precious. Something that was actually worth fighting for... something that was mine.

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was also pleased at the news... which was something I had not at all expected. His reaction was in part due to his Indigenous Australian heritage. Of course, I knew nothing then about the "Stolen Generation" then. He tried to explain that traumatic history to me... about all the families whose children were lost to them. He told me that some of his own siblings had been removed... and how at that time (1975) his family was still looking for them. I confess I struggled to completely believe his story. I couldn't see how the welfare would just take children away from their parents... unless they were being abused or not adequately cared for.

said that because of those painful past events, his family, and most other Aboriginal people, would do all they possibly could to stop any of their family from being lost again. He said that if I wasn't able to cope with looking after the baby, someone in his family would take it in, without question. He had spoken to his brother and sister-in-law, quite early in the piece. They had two young children already, but he assured me they'd said they would be more than happy to provide a home for our baby. At the time I doubted that... but of course I now know he was undoubtedly correct.

Once it was determined that I could not be forced into having a termination, my mother moved on to making arrangements to hide my pregnancy from the world. I was initially sent interstate to stay with my aunt for 8 weeks. While I was there I was given the news that my dog had been hit by a car and killed. That was my first ever experience of real grief... and it was terribly painful. Plus I blamed myself... I thought that if I'd been home looking after him it wouldn't have happened. I fell into a deep depression afterwards, and then I was moved to Carramar.

Carramar was a home for unmarried pregnant girls, which was run by the Home Mission Society (which is the welfare arm of the Uniting Church). It just so happened that the Home Mission Society also ran its own adoption agency, which I believe was one of the largest in the state at that time. Well, it's not as though they could have been expected to provide such a service for all the poor pregnant girls, without getting something back in return... could they? Virtually all of the residents who didn't keep their babies, which was about 95%, used the "in-house" adoption agency. It was only in rare cases, like my own, that the State adoption agency was used.

I don't remember at what point my mother initially raised the subject of adoption with me. I do think once I'd refused to consider termination, she immediately assumed that my baby would be surrendered for adoption. But I'm also fairly sure I hadn't told her that's what I would do. I distinctly remember when I first arrived at Carramar, and meeting the other residents. About the first thing you were asked was what were you planning to do with your baby. I remember them asking me... and I remember answering that I didn't know. I'm fairly sure though, that it was

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only two options I was considering at that point... either keeping the baby myself, or having family care for her until I was older.

I was about five and a half months pregnant when I went to Carramar. Even at that stage I was already acutely aware of how bonded I was with my baby. It felt like she and I were part of our own private little universe... encapsulated together in a bubble of time. I loved thinking about how she was so gently cradled inside me... and I loved that I was keeping her safe... and providing everything that she needed to grow and become strong. Her movement felt amazing... that joyous confirmation that there really was a separate little being inside me. I talked to her a lot... and late at night, when I was alone in my room, I would sing to her all the lullabies I could remember.

I don't have any complaints about the day to day treatment we received at the home; however we were subjected to intense propaganda, aimed at having us relinquish our babies. The most common line being: if we *really* loved our babies we would give them away, to a proper two parent family. A family who could provide them with all the things that we, as single mothers, would never be able to. We were told it was cruel to raise a child without a father... and that once we had a child in tow there wouldn't be much hope of us finding a husband, and therefore providing that father figure. We were told that as teenage mothers we had no chance of coping with a baby, or of providing the right environment to raise a child. We were also given incomplete information about what government support payments were available for single mothers, which made it appear much harder to manage financially than was the reality.

Also there was some discernable difference in the treatment of the girls who were keeping their babies. It only ever seemed to be one or two at any given time... out of about 20 residents. The staff made it quite obvious that they weren't considered to be doing the *right* thing. If you were keeping your baby you were not allowed to talk to the other girls about your decision or your plans. It also guaranteed you a single room... no doubt so you wouldn't contaminate your room mate's thinking on the matter of adoption.

After your baby was born you were allowed to go back to Carramar for 4 weeks, while you recovered from the birth and got organised to resume your life. However, if you were keeping your baby you were not even allowed back in to pack up your things... the staff would do that for you. The other residents were not allowed to visit you in hospital either, if you were keeping your baby... though visiting those who opted for adoption was almost obligatory.

My mother had told the staff at Carramar that I would not be keeping my baby, though I don't think I had said that myself. The social worker asked to see me a while after I'd arrived, and told me that I would have to use the State Government adoption agency, because the Uniting Church agency didn't have any prospective parents who would accept a part

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aboriginal baby. I wasn't particularly concerned, because I was still thinking in my heart that I would be able to keep my baby. I just hadn't worked out yet how to tell my mother. I already knew that she wouldn't be happy with that decision, which is why I'd put off telling her.

I didn't know how I would manage if I did keep my baby... I didn't know if I'd be able to cope... and I didn't know if I could trust [redacted] and his family to be my back-up plan. I know I did have the idea that maybe I could just go back home with my baby. There was a girl at school whose 17 year old sister had a baby and took it back home to live with her parents. So I know that's where the thought originated from, that perhaps my parents might let me go home with my baby. I also thought that an option might be to go with the baby and live in [redacted] house, with his mum and sister... as opposed to asking his brother to care for my baby, and me going home without her.

I was aware that I didn't know anything about caring for a baby, a point frequently made to us by the staff at Carramar, but I was still thinking that it couldn't be all that hard. I thought about how, in other parts of the world, it was more normal to have a baby as young as I was... and they tended to be more third world countries where the girls mightn't get more than a very basic education. Yet they could manage it... so couldn't I? Surely I could learn what to do, just as anyone older would have to learn if they hadn't been around babies. As I thought about those types of things, my resolve to hold on to my baby strengthened. I also began to find that the thought of not keeping her was very painful... that it tore at me inside with such intensity that I could become physically ill.

It was not legal to sign adoption papers until your baby was five days old. However at Carramar they liked you to fill out the forms at least 8 weeks before your due date. They told us that the reason for doing the forms so early was in case you had the baby prematurely... and that it also enabled them to start the matching process to find parents. However, I'm quite sure part of the reason was so you weren't doing it in the last stage of your pregnancy, when it was likely to be more emotionally challenging for you... and they certainly didn't want you to wait until after baby was born to do the paperwork, because by then you might feel very differently about your decision. Personally, I think their whole system was designed to make it harder for you to “change your mind”.

I remember the Carramar Social Worker asking me to go and see her... and when I got to her office she said it was time for me to start filling out the forms. I said no, that I had definitely decided that I wouldn't be giving my baby up. She asked if I'd thought about how I would manage as a 15 year old with a baby. I said I still hadn't worked that out... but if I couldn't cope then baby would have to live with her dad's family. [redacted] had continued to put pressure on me not to consider adoption, right throughout my pregnancy... so I knew the offer was still there... I just didn't know if I could really put my faith in him.

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As a boyfriend he hadn't proved to be very reliable, which worried me. I also think I was worried because of his story about aboriginal children being "taken" from their parents. I'm sure on some level I thought that it wouldn't have happened if they'd taken proper care of their kids. So it brought some doubt to my mind about whether I could trust them with my baby. I was certainly not racist... I hadn't been exposed to that sort of thinking... and it was not that kind of doubt. It was just that story didn't make sense to me... if I'd known how true it was I might have fought harder for my baby.

The Social Worker asked if I had talked to my mother about what I was thinking now... and then suggested she call her for me, since I hadn't done it. Later I was informed that the District Officer (DO) from Youth & Community Services Dept. (now DOCS) was coming to see me... and that my mother would be present for the meeting also. The DO asked me first up what the situation was, and I told him that I didn't want to have my baby adopted. I said that I wanted to keep her myself or have family take care of her. He turned to my mother and asked her what she thought of that proposal.

I was surprised at the vehemence of her response. She said she certainly wouldn't support me in any way to keep my baby... and under no circumstances would she consider letting me take baby home. I was somewhat taken aback, as I hadn't even got as far as making that request. The DO said that was a significant problem, because I wasn't 16 yet... and that it wasn't legal to live away from your parents under that age. My mother then said she'd be the first one reporting me as a delinquent if I tried to live with or his family... she said that I could be sent to a Girl's Home if I was judged to be an uncontrollable child... and also that she could have charged with Carnal Knowledge and sent to goal.

The District Officer didn't comment on what my mother had said... but just went on to say to me that it wasn't legal to give your baby to someone else to look after. I tried to argue that it wasn't just anyone, it was baby's family. He said that meant absolutely nothing because I wasn't married to . That unless we were married he had absolutely no say in the matter... no legal rights... no recourse to appeal. He then said that, given my circumstances, it was obvious there wasn't any way for me to keep my baby... and if I tried to remove her from the hospital, she would be taken from me, unless we were going home to live with my parents.

He went on to state quite firmly that my only option really would be to sign the adoption papers, because if I didn't my baby would grow up in an orphanage. He said once she'd been taken from me I wouldn't have much chance of regaining custody of her, because I would have to prove my capacity to care for her and to financially support her. He said given my age I wouldn't have any chance of convincing the welfare that I was a suitable mother for many years... and it would be very unfair to my baby

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to leave her living in an orphanage all that time, and then try to take her away when she wouldn't hardly know me.

He stated all this with a fairly abrupt tone and a matter-of-fact manner. There was certainly no attempt to break the news to me gently. Once he'd said all that I broke down completely. I cried and cried, until my mother grabbed my shoulders and shook me. She shouted at me to get hold of myself and stop being so hysterical... she said I'd hurt my baby... and she said she was going to slap me if I didn't calm down. I needed to draw on all my years of experience in controlling difficult emotions, in order to push the pain way down inside of me... and therefore regain some level of control.

The DO left... my mother saw him out the door and then came back into the room. “Well there you have it then” she said “and just so you know, I certainly wouldn't be willing to do anything illegal to help you... like telling them you were coming home to live when you were really going somewhere else”. She said that it would be best if I just forgot all about this baby... that I should start pushing the thought that I was even having a baby out of my head...that I could have other babies later in life, and that I'd be able to love them then. She went on to say that she wouldn't be allowing me to see _____ at all, after I came home again, so I should work on getting used to that idea too... which only set off another cascade of tears from me.

I began to shut down emotionally from that point on... I didn't discuss the issue again with anyone. I remember meeting my closest sister in town to visit together, and her saying she'd just passed a store with a display of baby things in the window, and why didn't we go and look. I remember hanging my head... I couldn't even look at her... and saying “they're not going to let me keep the baby”... and that was the end of the topic. I spoke to no-one else about it, aside from _____, from that point on. I stopped having the thoughts about being connected to my baby. I stopped talking to her, and singing to her. I stopped rejoicing in her movement. I had already set out on the process of losing her.

_____ wasn't much help when I told him... his ideas for a solution were along the line of breaking into the hospital and stealing her, or breaking into the Registry of Birth, Deaths & Marriages, so he could find out who her new parents were and go and steal her. I told him he was crazy... and we had an argument about it. His other suggestion was for us to get married, so that he would then have parental rights. I thought that idea was crazy too. He was aware that it would take a court judgement for me to be allowed to marry him, but he didn't see that as a problem. Conversely, I couldn't see how any judge would have agreed to let me marry him... mainly because of his criminal record and the fact that he was nearly ten years older than me.

Also, I didn't know that I wanted to marry him anyway. I certainly felt I was too young to even think of staying with anyone for ever. _____ said

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that it didn't matter, because we could separate down the track, but getting married would give him the right to apply for custody. I had an awful picture of me being stuck at home on my own with the baby... while he was off running around doing heaven knows what. So we fought about it again... and in the end I told him he'd just have to accept losing the baby, if he couldn't come up with a better answer than that. In the back of my head I was waiting for him to come up with a better solution, because he was the adult in the situation... and I was too young to do anything other than believe what I'd been told, by someone who was an authority figure. Also, I think I was waiting for some sign that I could completely put my trust in ... a sign that he would really be there for me. I told him that regardless of the outcome I expected him to come and see me in hospital... and to see the baby.

I went into labour five days before my due date... and when it happened I was certainly not prepared emotionally. My contractions started early in the afternoon, but it was a few hours before I let on to anyone that it was happening. Worst of all, the matron of the home was out... and not back on duty till midnight. Her deputy was a woman that none of the girls liked or particularly trusted. Matron always tried to keep the girls home as long as possible... she was a midwife, so was able to monitor the early stages of labour. But the deputy was not... I was frightened because the matron wasn't there, so asked to be taken to the hospital at about 8pm.

That was no doubt a mistake, because ... wasn't born until 5am... and that was far too many hours for me to be alone with the pain in a Labour Ward room. For the longest time they seemed to only be coming to check on me about once an hour. I felt so lost and alone... and had not prepared myself for the pain, because at some point I'd decided to just not think about that part until it happened... my usual coping mechanism in effect. They had given me the gas mask not long after I'd been settled in the delivery room. I know I was using it a lot, no doubt too much, as I started slipping off to sleep, only to be jolted awake by the next contraction... and I was feeling very "out of it". I also remember at one point I was given an injection for the pain, but don't know what it was.

The rest of my labour is very hazy. I remember being alone and crying and calling out with the pain. Then I remember there being people with me, they put my legs up in the stirrups... and a nurse was shouting at me to stop pushing because I was going to tear, and then the whole thing would take longer, she said... and I remember them saying it was over and asking me did I want to know what I'd had. I nodded and was told it was a girl... I remember saying I'd thought I was having a boy. I remember being stitched up... that it hurt and that the doctor was cranky with me, because I complained about it hurting and couldn't stay still. Then I remember the staff all leaving... and the nurse saying she would leave baby there next to me for a little while.

One of the first things they asked you, as they were booking you into the Labour Ward, was whether you were keeping your baby. They knew

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straight away, from looking at your file, where you were from and that it meant you were an unmarried mother. We were told in one of the preparation classes at Carramar what the procedure was regarding hospital and the adoption process. We were told we would not be shown our babies after they were born. We were told that they would be kept in a separate little room in the nursery, so that they weren't visible to us if we happened to walk past at viewing time. We were told that we could see our baby once, if we requested it, but we had to ask for the hospital social worker to come and arrange it for us.

I don't know why my baby was left in the delivery room with me. I knew they were not supposed to do that. They weren't supposed to even let us catch sight of our babies after birth... no doubt to avoid the possibility of any bonding taking place. I don't know if the nurse thought she was doing me a favour, letting me spend some time with my baby before she was lost to me for ever... her voice sounded kind when she said she was going to do it... not like it might have, if she was trying to sadistically torture me. But mostly that was what it felt like... torture.

On the one hand I felt elated that it was over. There was a feeling of contentment that my baby was there... that she was okay... and that we were together. But I was also terrified that she was right next to me. Because if I'd reached out my arm I could have touched her... or if I'd raised myself up off the bed I could have looked at her. I knew I couldn't let myself do either of those things. I wanted to so desperately... I ached to lift her out of that little bassinette and hold her close to me. The need was enormous... an emotion stronger than I had ever experienced in my life before... and I felt like I was drowning in it.

I knew that if I gave in to that need it would destroy me. That if I saw my baby, or touched her, it would break me then to lose her. It would open the floodgates to send more emotions flowing out than I could possibly cope with. So I lay there on that bed... facing the little plastic bassinette in which my baby slept next to me. I could see the shape of her body there... but I did not touch her... and I did not see her face. Finally the nurse came back and told me it was time to take my baby off to the nursery... and shortly afterwards I was moved down to the ward.

My mother arrived to see me early in the afternoon on the day I was born. I was a bit surprised, as I hadn't expected her to come straight away. I also hadn't expected her to ask me if I would let her see my baby. I couldn't get an answer to come out, so I just nodded my head. She went off to ask for the social worker, to arrange it. A short time later a nurse came and started to get me up out of bed. Initially I didn't understand where she was taking me, and must have looked confused... until she said “have you changed your mind about seeing your baby.” I don't know if it was a requirement that I be present when someone else saw my baby... or if my mother had told them to bring me out. The nurse took me over to stand by the nursery window. I remember seeing my mother about 10

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metres away, talking to a woman who I assumed was the Social Worker. The next thing I knew the room was starting to spin... luckily between my mother and the Social Worker they managed to catch me before I hit the floor.

A nurse came running with a wheelchair and they lowered me into it. The nurse asked me if it was the first time I'd been out of bed, and started to wheel me back there... but the Social Worker called out that no, I had to stay. She then went into the nursery and down to the back, where the small room was for the babies awaiting adoption. There was another separate little room next to the nursery, with a viewing window like the nursery had. She wheeled the plastic bassinette that held my baby into that room and up to the window... and unwrapped the bunny rug so that she was well visible. Even though we were separated by glass, I was still afraid to look at her.

I looked at her tiny feet and her skinny legs... I looked up to the little nightie she was wearing and I saw her hands. But I couldn't bring myself to look up and see her face. Just like in the Labour Ward, I was too afraid. Afraid that the pain would tear me apart... afraid that the image would be seared in my brain and torture me forever. My mother said "She's a lovely baby... I'm sure there'll be a family that will want her". I wanted to scream out "I'M HER FAMILY, I WANT HER"... but I didn't. I stayed silent, because I felt totally powerless to change what was happening... and I thought the only way I was going to survive was if I pushed my feelings far down inside me... if I denied that they even existed.

The ward that was reserved for mothers who were relinquishing their babies, or the occasional woman whose baby had died, could not really be called a ward. It was just four beds... being two beds end to end on each side of a wide corridor... separated only by those pull back hospital curtains. The corridor was the passage way between the nursery and the private rooms of the maternity ward. So there was a constant traffic, up and down, of those plastic hospital bassinets, each carrying some other mother's baby. Even if you kept the curtains closed, there was no mistaking the sound of the wheels going past... or the cries of those babies, as they travelled to be fed by their mothers. It was almost impossible not to think that back in the nursery my baby was probably hungry too... but she was being fed by a nurse with a bottle, instead of at the breast by me.

To make matters worse, I also had the misfortune of being in hospital on Mother's Day. I struggled all day to keep my emotions under control. However, I was brought totally undone when a hospital volunteer came by in the afternoon. It was obvious that no-one had pointed out to her the purpose of those four beds. She came up to my bed and greeted me with a cheery "Happy mother's day"... and then asked me whether I'd had a girl or boy. I was too dumbfounded not to answer. Oh no, I thought... and sure enough, she reached into the wicker basket she was carrying, pulled out a package wrapped in pink tissue paper, and handed it to me. I could

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tell straight away it was a little pair of pink knitted booties. Even worse there was a tag attached which had a poem written on it about how special mothers are.

That was too much for me. I managed to control myself just long enough to get the curtains pulled around the bed... and then I threw myself upon it and sobbed and sobbed uncontrollably. After a while a nurse came and asked me why I was crying... after some effort I managed to get out that I didn't want to give up my baby. She was very short in her response to me. She snapped that it was a ridiculous notion for someone my age to think they could take care of a baby. She said I was just being silly... and I should be grateful that there was a set of parents out there somewhere that really wanted a baby... and that would be willing to take mine and give it a home. With that she turned on her heel and left me to it.

Eventually I managed to get the emotions stuffed back down inside me. So successfully, in fact, that I felt numb and empty from that time onwards. There was a feeling of hollowness... of being dead inside... that continued for a long time. I think it was years before I started to experience emotions normally again. It was not until more than ten years later, after I began to unravel my story and the associated feelings with the help of my therapist, that I became fully able to experience emotions. When I first started seeing her I found it almost impossible to express what I was feeling... I couldn't even identify the correct label for how I felt most of the time.

My stitches became infected, which led to me staying in hospital for a total of 10 days. However, I couldn't have gone home before day 7 anyway... because it wasn't until then that the man from Youth & Community Services Dept came to do my paperwork. For some reason I'm not aware of now, I hadn't filled in the information on the forms earlier on, at Carramar. The man who came from YACS was not very nice... grumpy and short-tempered. He snapped at me several times because I didn't understand the questions, or hadn't answered them correctly... and because I didn't know much about family history. He certainly didn't show any degree of compassion about what I was going through. I found this part of the experience very traumatic... sitting with this man who was a total stranger, having to talk to him about some things that were personal... and finally having to sign my name to that document that removed my baby from my life forever. Once again I only got through it by shutting myself away deep inside. How did anyone ever imagine that it was an okay thing to happen?

In reality I was still waiting for to come to visit me. I was waiting for the sign that I could really rely on him to take care of me and our baby. If he had turned up I think things would have perhaps ended differently. He was the adult in the situation... so he should have had the capacity to go and get legal advice... or to check that the information that the District Officer had given me was correct. Of course he didn't do that... though I recognise now that it was as much because of the great cultural difference

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between us, as anything else, that he didn't. Still I think if he'd come I might not have been able to walk out of that hospital without my baby. I might have thrown myself on the ground and kicked and screamed and shouted that I wasn't leaving my baby behind... and if I'd done that my parents may have relented. At the very least the hospital Social Worker would have been called... and she may have given me some more truthful information about my options for keeping my child.

So finally I was allowed to go home... but I don't have a direct memory of leaving the hospital. I know my parents came to collect me and drive me home. But when I think of leaving the hospital, I can't recall that from inside the memory... rather I can only see it from the outside looking in, like watching a movie where an actor is playing the role of me. I can see me with my parents... I can see myself walk past the nursery without a sideways glance... I can see myself walk down the corridor and out of the doors that led from the maternity ward to the car park. I can see myself getting into the car and being driven away. I can see myself leaving my baby behind. It's as if the very act of doing it was so intensely painful that I had to step outside of my body in order to survive the ordeal... and that the memory still hurts so much that it prevents me from being able to actually be myself when I try to remember. Here I am, almost 35 years later, yet still I can't endure the memory of what I did.

One week later I returned to school. I started back on the first day of the second term, in Yr 10. I had missed one whole term of the three term year. I had been enrolled in Correspondence School during my absence... but had found it very difficult to motivate myself, so therefore I'd done very little school work. The school principal had agreed to allow me to return, on the provision that I told no-one the truth about why I'd been away. I didn't need to tell anyone... it was well known that I'd had a baby, because I'd been seen on a few occasions by girls who were in my class. My mother had banned me from leaving the north shore area where Carramar was, but I'd ignored that in order to spend time with _____, who lived close to the suburb where I lived and went to school.

Despite having dealt with being bullied and victimised all throughout high school, I found returning to school very difficult to cope with. I was in no way ashamed that I'd had a baby, so in that sense I didn't care that people knew. But the type of comments that were made... the constant gossiping about me... and the ongoing campaign by some of my classmates, where they made crying baby noises whenever I was close by... made my remaining time there extremely painful. I was severely depressed and traumatised... and getting through from one day to the next was a huge ordeal. However, the fact that I was still feeling very numb and dead inside helped me to survive. Perhaps I would not have, if I'd had to deal with the true intensity of my emotions during that period.

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The rest of the school year is quite hazy in my memory. I know I didn't do much schoolwork and I remember that I was frequently sent to the principal's office... so no doubt I was acting out a lot of the time in class. The one thing that does stand out clearly in my memory from that time is my second pregnancy. My daughter was born in May, and during the September school holidays I had a pregnancy terminated, at approximately 8 weeks gestation. My mother had banned me from seeing ... and after he had not shown up at the hospital I had myself intended to sever the relationship. But I felt compelled to go and see him one more time, with the intention of just telling him what a bastard I thought he was.

However, once I did see him I was overcome with the need for some comfort... and he was willing to just hold me and let me cry on his shoulder. No-one at home had even mentioned what had happened to me, let alone attempted to offer any comfort. He did apologise... he said he'd felt he couldn't face seeing a baby he was going to lose. While I didn't accept that as a valid excuse, and I told him so, I chose to overlook it... as my need to feel comforted and cared for was so great. Needless to say, after a short time I resumed a sexual relationship with him, though I did insist that he use condoms. The second pregnancy was the result of a condom breakage.

I didn't tell anyone I thought I was pregnant. I'd been told there was a new doctor at the local GP practice who had been working at a termination clinic, so I went to him for a pregnancy test. Luckily the government had introduced the Medibank system shortly beforehand, which was what allowed me to see the GP, and get the referral for a termination, without having to tell my parents. The doctor told me if I lied and told the clinic my age was 16, rather than 15, that I wouldn't need any parental permission, and that they would bulk-bill Medicare so I wouldn't need to pay for the procedure either. I had absolutely no qualms or second thoughts about going through with it. ... was not happy... but he at least seemed to recognise that it was too much to expect me to do otherwise after what I'd already been through. He attended the clinic with me, and comforted me when it was over.

Shortly afterwards he disappeared from the scene, with no word at all to me. I was home sick from school one day when a knock on the door revealed a policeman standing on the step. He was looking for me. He said that any instance of a girl under the age of 16 having a baby was referred to the police... and that they were obligated to investigate and lay charges of Carnal Knowledge if the father could be identified. I had to go to the police station and make a very detailed statement about my relationship with ... which was totally humiliating, as well as distressing and painful. It wasn't until many months later that I learnt that ... was in goal... not for the offence of Carnal Knowledge but something to do with a break and enter I think. He did plead guilty to the Carnal Knowledge charge, so that I would be saved the ordeal of having to appear in court... and was given a sentence to be served concurrently

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with the time he was already serving in prison. By the time I discovered he was in goal I was already pregnant with . I had once again had a contraceptive failure... just bad luck I think, as I was on the pill and hadn't missed taking any doses. It was the last thing that I wanted to have to deal with at that point in time... but I felt that either it must have been fated, or else I was being punished.

I chose to believe that it was the former, rather than the latter. I thought that being pregnant three times in the one year couldn't possibly be pure chance... so I took it to mean that the baby I was carrying then was the one I was meant to keep. I still had to fight my parents over it... but I knew I would be over 16 by the time he arrived, so that the previous threats of the YACS District Officer would not apply. Ultimately I had to tell my parents that I didn't care if they disowned me, and never spoke to me again... I was not going to lose another baby.

In reality, I think that having was what saved me. Yes, I was still very psychologically disturbed... I was deeply depressed and still feeling numb and empty. But it was his arrival that enabled me to gradually start to have some feelings again... as he was such a delightful baby. I wanted him from the moment he was placed into my arms after birth... and I vowed to try to give him the best life I could. Having him didn't erase the pain of losing ... he was not a substitute for her... but he was most certainly an enormous gift to me. I'm sure I would have deteriorated much further, psychologically, had he not arrived. Basically he gave me a reason to keep on living, even in the periods of very dark depression that I experienced... and he forced me to try and stay reasonably well together. In another sense I felt a strong need to prove, through him, that my mother had been wrong about my inability to care for a baby.

For myself, I have never for one instant regretted having him... or regretted that I didn't have a chance to live a life of my own, because I became a mother at 16. However, I do carry guilt that he didn't have a very good childhood. We were always poor, so he missed out on so much that a child should have when growing up. Also, he never had a father figure... because apart from a relationship that lasted 18 months, from when he was 3, I chose not to look for a relationship at all. That was primarily because I was too concerned that he may get attached to someone I was seeing... and then have to deal with the loss if the relationship ended. In addition I continued to struggle with low self-esteem and severe Social Anxiety, which made it unlikely that I could find or maintain a relationship anyway.

I did tell , when he was fairly young, about his sister... and I promised him that we would find her one day. I didn't want her to possibly turn up at some point, and have him be angry or upset that I hadn't told him. However, it did cause him a lot of distress and pain over the years... in hindsight I think I should have waited until he was older before I told him. He was a lonely child, who would have loved to have had a sibling... especially during those times when I was battling severe

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depression and therefore was not very available for him. At one stage, when he was about 10 and having difficulties at school, I went to speak to his teacher. She said she'd asked him if he had anyone to talk to at home when he was having problems... and that he'd given her a very strange response, as she put it. He had told her that he used to have a sister... but that she'd been adopted and now he didn't have anyone. It just about broke my heart when I heard that.

Over all those long years that my daughter was lost to me, it was impossible to not remember her. There was definitely no chance of “forgetting her”, as I had been told to do. I thought constantly about her... about where she was and what she looked like... and most of all I worried about whether she was being loved and cared for enough. I cried on her birthday every year for 18 years... and always felt very sad at times like Christmas. I couldn't stop myself from thinking about what gift I might have bought her at whatever age she was.

It happened that 2 of my sisters had daughters who shared a birthday, both born just 3 days after my birthday. Having to attend 2 little girl's birthday parties, in that same week when I always grieved the most for my lost daughter, was incredibly painful. When I look back I wonder how I ever managed to sing “Happy Birthday” without having all the pain and anger that was inside me erupt and spew outwards. Also whenever there was a large family gathering, and a fuss was being made about the whole family being present and together at once, it was very painful... of course there was never any acknowledgement that for me one part of my family was always missing. In fact, once I returned home after my birth the subject of my first pregnancy was never mentioned in my family again... except on a few rare occasions when I raised the issue with my closest sister.

I was overjoyed when, not long before my 18th birthday, the law was changed to allow birth mothers to access their relinquished child's amended birth certificate. Nevertheless, it was still difficult to embark on the course of finding her. Much as I had promised myself and my daughter that I would do so, the fear that she might possibly reject my attempt at contact was enormous. So much so, that for a little while I considered placing a veto on her contacting me. It was certainly a great blessing that she didn't reject my contact, once I finally went ahead. The most difficult part, however, was the discovery that her parents had left Sydney when she was 5... and that they had been living in Darwin since she was 10. Not only did that mean that there was a great distance between us geographically, but also culturally.

It is now 17 years since that initial contact was made. My daughter does see herself as part of my family, but we do not have the type of relationship that I had wished for. That is because I had imagined that when we finally met up we would then be able to spend time together on a regular basis... that she would come to family gatherings and events... and as a result that she would gradually become part of the larger family group. In reality

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we have spent precious little time together over all those years... plus it is quite common for us to go as long as 6 months without speaking on the phone. Basically the physical distance between us had stopped us from becoming closer on an emotional level.

She came to Sydney the first time for [redacted] 18th birthday in 1995, as that had been his big birthday wish. Although it was wonderful to meet her finally, and to discover how much alike we are, it was heartbreaking when she left again after 2 short weeks. Watching her walk through the boarding gate at the airport, not knowing if or when we would ever see her again, tore at my heart. I collapsed on [redacted] shoulder and sobbed... and he joined me and cried also.

[redacted] in particular found it very painful after that first visit from [redacted]. I had not realised he'd been thinking that, once she met us, she would want to leave her other family to come and be with us instead. I couldn't get him to understand that her parents and brother *are* her family. As a result it was over 12 months before he agreed to even speak to her on the phone again. Also [redacted] found Sydney to be a huge culture shock coming from Darwin. She made it very clear that it was not somewhere she would ever consider living... but [redacted] just couldn't understand why that was. She came again for 2 weeks in 2000, when there were cheap domestic flights due to the Olympics. After my mother died in 2003 I received a small inheritance, so I paid for her to come to Sydney for 2 weeks at Christmas... and then I went to Darwin for 2 weeks in 2004.

When my granddaughter was born, very prematurely, in 2005 one of my sisters paid for me to rush to Adelaide... where [redacted] had been medevac'd to because there weren't appropriate care facilities available in Darwin. As baby only weighed 720 grams I was very frightened that she would die... and I couldn't bear the thought of losing her without me having seen her, because of my not having seen [redacted] face as a baby. I stayed in Adelaide for 10 days. I found it quite painful that baby was in a humidicrib and therefore I wasn't able to hold her at all... but being able to sit and watch her as she fought to grow and get stronger felt good. I was free to sit and watch her face as long as I wanted to. But when I had to return to Sydney saying goodbye and leaving that tiny baby behind in the hospital felt far too much like leaving [redacted] as a baby had... but at least I was able to cry about it, which I had been unable to do in 1976.

I found the fact that I finally had a granddaughter [redacted] suffered 3 miscarriages prior to that baby), yet she was too far away for me to be able to afford to visit, was extremely painful. I have been on Disability Support Pension since 2001 so I am once again living below the poverty line, as I did for most of [redacted] childhood... which makes airfares to Darwin completely out of reach. I had hoped that having a granddaughter would bring some further healing for me... because she would be the little [redacted] that I didn't get to have. In reality I felt that it had brought even more pain.

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It felt like the baby daughter who I had been prevented from holding in my arms, had turned into the baby granddaughter that I was also unable to hold... and that pain, along with my feelings of anger at the unfairness of it all, was immense. Again one of my sisters came to my aid, and paid for me to go to Darwin when my granddaughter was 9 months old. However for various reasons I was only able to stay for 4 days. She will turn 6 in May this year (2011), yet I have not been able to visit again since that time, 5 years ago, when she was 9 months old.

Basically, the situation will never be right as far as I’m concerned. Although I am one of the very lucky ones, who was able to reunite with my lost child and build an ongoing relationship with her... nevertheless the pain continues undiminished... and I doubt there will ever be a time when it is not so. Had her parents not taken so far away from where I live... as I am in Sydney and she is in Darwin... maybe my feelings would be different by this point in our relationship. Perhaps if I’d been able to have regular visits over the past 17 years, or spend a reasonable amount of time with her, I would not still be struggling with the ongoing feelings of loss and grief. Or maybe the grief would still be with me regardless of how much time I’d been able to spend with the adult she has become... it may be that finding an adult child is never enough to erase the pain of losing a baby.

When I was doing some research, before writing my story to submit to this enquiry, I came across an excerpt from the 1956 publication titled “Children in Need”. That publication officially outlined the responsibilities of the District Officer towards an unmarried mother. I am going to include that extract to finish with, as it brought me enormous pain to read how things should have been handled... along with a very strong feeling of having been betrayed by a government department which was supposed to have been acting in my interests. Note this publication was dated **20 years prior** to my contact with the District Officer who handled my case.

These regulations explain that:

“A mother giving a consent must be fully aware of the import of her action and, must be emotionally and mentally able to appreciate all the implications of such consent. A consent should not be taken if there is any suggestion of indecisiveness, or that she has not given sufficient consideration to the matter”.

“To avoid any misunderstanding, or any suggestion that the mother was misled or uninformed, District Officers are instructed to explain fully to the mother, before taking the consent, the facilities which are available to help her keep the child. These include homes licensed under the Child Welfare Act for the private care of children apart from their natural parents, financial assistance to unmarried mothers under section 27 of the Child Welfare Act, admission to State control until the mother is in a position to care for her child, and assistance to affiliate the child and obtain a maintenance order against the putative father.”

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*“When all of these aids have been **rejected**, the officer is expected to explain to the mother the full implications of the act of surrendering her child. (this includes **warning her of the risk of dire future regret if she decides on adoption**). Only when a mother has considered these, and still wishes to proceed with the surrender for adoption, should the consent be accepted.”*

*“However, having taken all the steps referred to previously to ensure that she is aware of the alternatives to surrender for adoption, the officer advises the mother that **the decision must be her own**. If there is any sign of uncertainty or vacillation the officer will insist that the mother consider the question further before signing the surrender. **A consent is never accepted from a mother until she is quite firm in her decision.**”*