

In 1972 I relinquished my baby daughter for adoption, in Sydney. I had just completed Nursing Training and had done my final exams. When I became pregnant I had not considered giving her away. When I told the father of the baby, with whom I had a casual relationship, he said "It's not mine. Have an abortion." Later, when I asked for some financial support, he sent me \$10.

When I first told my father he seemed quite happy to be a grandfather, albeit unexpectedly. My mother had been ill with chronic depression for many years and was confined to a mental asylum. My father had divorced her and had not long remarried.

After discussing the matter with my stepmother, who was pregnant with their first baby, they told me that I should have an abortion. I refused, saying that I wanted to have my baby and keep her. My father told me that he was ashamed of me and that I must leave Adelaide and go to another state. "I don't know what I will tell the neighbours," he said.

I saw a doctor, who said "Don't have an abortion and don't keep your baby." I visited a social worker at the major maternity hospital who advised me to go to Sydney. She contacted another social worker there who, she said, would help me find accommodation and arrange everything necessary for the birth. She advised me, strongly, not to even think about keeping my baby. "A baby needs two parents," she told me.

When I arrived in Sydney, I stayed for a couple of days at the YWCA. I visited the Social Worker at the hospital where I would have the baby. As I did not want to go to a home for 'unmarried mothers', she found accommodation for me with a family with four children. I lived with them, doing domestic duties and helping with childcare.

I felt lost, alone, bereft, betrayed by my family and constantly worried and fearful for myself and my child. Although I had told my father and stepmother that I would adopt out my baby I was not at all sure that this was what I really wanted to do.

One day, late in my pregnancy, and in great distress, I went to see the Social Worker. Crying, I told her that I did not want to give away my baby. She seemed angry. "What do you imagine your life will be like?" she asked me, almost shouting at me. "Tell me," she said 'what will you be doing with your baby?' I told her that I imagined us going for walks together, perhaps having picnics, flying kites. But I was so distressed, at the time, that I was unable to think clearly. She almost snorted with derision when she heard my ideas. "You won't be able to cope and you'll be bringing your child back when it's two years old, telling us you want us to find it a home."

I was appalled to hear this, thinking how terrible it would be if I did, indeed, do that. The woman in the family with whom I lived was kind but somewhat distant. I felt I had no-one to talk to. At no time, during my pregnancy, did my Social Worker offer any alternatives to adoption, e.g. short-term fostering, helping me find ways to talk

to my parents and enlist their support. Nor did she show any real empathy or support for me. She did not seem to be 'on my side' at all.

After this disastrous visit the Social Worker sent me to a psychiatrist. I don't remember discussing my pregnancy or my plight with him. I told him that I was eight months pregnant and alone in Sydney and confused about what I should do. I was astonished by his response. which was, "What are your sexual fantasies?"

During my pregnancy I wrote frequently to my father and stepmother and received angry letters telling me that I was not in a fit mental state to raise a child. If I wrote about the possibility of keeping my baby they told me I was being coercive and manipulative.

The woman of the family, with whom I lived, told me that she would stay with me during my labour. But, when I went into labour she went back home after taking me to the hospital. I had read books about childbirth and, despite my Social Worker's disapproval, had gone to ante-natal classes even though they were not provided for 'unmarried mothers' (I wore a 'wedding' ring on my left hand). My labour was not well managed. I was given drugs by injection, which I hadn't wanted and I was woozy and disorientated, not in control of myself. I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. As soon as she was born the midwife who delivered her immediately wrapped her and started bustling out of the room. I asked if I could see my baby. She told me "No!" but the doctor said to her "Sister, let Helen see her child." I was not allowed to hold her or touch her.

During the three weeks before my baby was born I had come to the inevitable conclusion that I must give her up for adoption. I didn't see any other way. My father and my stepmother were not supportive; soon their own child would be born. My Social Worker had told me of the dire effects of keeping a baby only to bring it back in two years time. I was terrified too about my stepmother and my father having told me that I was not in a fit mental state to care for a child. My mother was in a mental hospital. Perhaps I had a mental illness too.

Although I had decided on adoption I was by no means resolved. I certainly did not insist upon it. Up until the visit of the Adoption Officer I was not sure at all that I would sign the papers. Surely, I hoped, something would happen, someone would help me keep my baby. At no time was I advised, either by my Social Worker or the Adoption Officer, of the regulations of the Child Welfare Act 17, 1939. Namely:

*"A mother giving an adoption 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 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, 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 included warning her of the risk of dire future regret if she considers adoption). Only when a mother has considered these, and still wishes to proceed with the surrender for adoption, should the consent be accepted."*

On the day after my baby was born I went to the nursery to see her. A midwife blocked my way. She stood in the doorway with her arms stretched out and told me that I had no right to come and see my child. I tussled with her and eventually she let me in. I had named my baby . Now I saw that a different name, was on her crib. I asked the midwife about this and she told me that the midwife who delivered her had named her and that I had no rights to do so.

I went away, in great distress. I asked to see the Social Worker and told her about it. She seemed sympathetic but, the next day, my baby was moved to a nursery on a different floor and I was told that I had to make an appointment if I wanted to see her. I went to that nursery and was allowed to see her again and hold her but, for some reason, she was moved again. The next time I saw her was from outside the viewing window of that nursery.

The Adoption Officer was kind but she also warned me against keeping my baby, telling me the same 'horror stories' that the Social Worker had told me; i.e. tales of women who had taken their babies home only to bring them back at two years of age. Like the Social Worker, the Adoption Officer told me nothing about any facilities that were available to help me keep my child. Nor did she tell me that there was a 'cooling-off period', a time when you could change your mind and bring your baby home.

I left the hospital after about a week. I had been given Stilboestrol to dry up my milk and my breasts were bound. I visited my baby, in the nursery, before I left. I picked her up from her crib, quickly, while the midwife wasn't looking, held her, told her I loved her and told her to be brave. Then I put her back down and walked away from her forever.

At home, living with my father and stepmother, I tried to be brave and to 'get over it'. Neither of them spoke about what I had just gone through. (My stepmother recently told me that she thought that "If we didn't speak about it, you would soon forget it.") My stepmother gave birth to a little girl, within a couple of months of my return. I had returned to work in a busy public hospital. One day I came on duty and, without warning, started crying. I could not stop. I was sobbing uncontrollably. I was admitted to the staff ward and the consulting psychiatrist visited me. I talked about the adoption, the pain of relinquishing my baby but, so normalised was the practice of adoption, that he did not seem to take very much notice. I continued to see him for some months. He prescribed anti-depressants. However, my depressed state did not improve and so he admitted me to a private mental hospital. After I had been there for a week he told me that, if I did not get better, he would have to

administer electro-convulsive therapy (ECT). I do not remember him ever talking with me about grief or loss or helping me to make sense of why I felt so terrible. I managed to put on a brave face and eventually was discharged without being given ECT.

The next year I was fortunate to meet a lovely man who listened to me and who understood me. We married and have two beautiful daughters. I have recently become a grandmother.

I 'found' my daughter, when she was 21. We had very good communication for a few years and her adoptive mother was very, very supportive of our relationship.

However, sadly, her adoptive mother died within about 7 years of me meeting my daughter and re-connecting and now she has told me that she wants nothing to do with me.

The loss of my daughter to adoption has caused an enormous amount of grief and loss in my life and distress to my husband and children. I think of her every day and grieve for her at all times, especially on her birthday. There is no grave on which to place flowers, no recognition of the trauma, the anger and feelings of betrayal caused by being coerced to give up one's own child.

Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Lindstrom