

Betty Mahala Mills nee Wade
Circumstances of the Adoption of my son in England 1954
50 years of Secrets,Lies and Hidden Grief

My story begins over 50 years ago.In 1953 I completed my Nursing Training in England and I passed my final examinations to become a State Registered Nurse in August 1953.I was accepted by a London Hospital to obtain further qualifications in Midwifery—a one years course,My world fell apart when I discovered I was pregnant—my boyfriend was single and the same age as me.Unfortunately it wasn't a committed serious relationship,In those days to be an unmarried mother was almost a criminal offence,

My parents lived in a small village in Lincolnshire—my Father was a farmer and was well respected in the area.Their reaction to my pregnancy was of anger and shame.Following a stormy meeting with my boyfriends parents and my parents,the decision was made that I would go to London as planned and work as long as possible as a pupil midwife.John agreed to pay the fees for the Maternity Home and I would then have the baby adopted.Because I had no money and no family support I felt that I had no option other than Adoption.

I saw an advertisement in the Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal for a Maternity Home which stated it was private and confidential.The home was called The Old Mill House and was situated in the village of Great Bentley,Essex.Because the advertisement was in a well respected journal I assumed I would be well cared for especially as it was a private home.I have no recollection of what the fees were.

I coped fairly well as a pupil midwife working in the labour rooms,nursery and with the mothers surrounded by family,flowers and congratulation cards.I was well aware that the birth of my baby would be a very lonely event.I never mentioned to anyone that I was pregnant.One day I was confronted by the nursing supervisor who told me the pupil midwives were concerned that I was obviously pregnant but never discussed it—they were anxious to know what my plans were.She offered to give me a reference when I was able to return to work.

When I was aprox four months pregnant I was admitted to the Maternity Home.I was confronted by a very formidable woman called Sister [redacted].She told me I would not be allowed to mix with any of the patients and I would be confined to my bedroom.The room was small with only basic furniture and of course no TV in those days.All my meals were served in my bedroom by a kitchen maid.I was allowed to go out for a walk on my own each day.In spite of the bleak winter weather it was my only escape from solitary confinement.I have no recollection of anyone from the village ever speaking to me.Prior to admission to the home I was a proud trained nurse—I quickly lost my identity and became very submissive Betty—a nothing to nobody and at the mercy of this dreadful woman called Sister [redacted] [Hitler in knickers!]I never challenged my treatment because I had no where else to go.I also never had the courage to explore what went on in the rest of the building.On one occasion I was visited by my boyfriend—I never told him about the conditions behind the scenes.In six months he was my only visitor.I never saw or heard from him

again. He was notified by a social worker some months later when the Adoption of my son became legal.

On March [redacted] during the evening my labour commenced. I rang the bell and was told by Sister [redacted] to stop making a fuss and she would see me in the morning. She was a heavy smoker and I can still picture her with a cigarette dangling from her mouth. Throughout the night I was left on my own in my bedroom—there were no labour room facilities. I rang the bell again at approx 6am and demanded Sister [redacted] call a doctor as I was about to give birth. The doctor did not attend until after the delivery. It was the only time I saw a Doctor who was required to suture a large tear. This procedure took place in the bedroom and by some miracle I did not develop an infection. My son appeared to be a healthy and beautiful baby. He remained by my bed and he was bottle fed.

I only have a vague recollection of leaving the home one month later with Sister [redacted] and travelling to London where I gave my baby to a ? Social Worker. I have blocked out a lot of things because I was so traumatised. I then travelled by train from Kings Cross to Lincolnshire where my parents met me. No mention was made of the baby. My Mother told me she would take me out to the shops and buy me new clothes because I needed to return to work! [she in fact bought me quite an expensive outfit]

I returned to work two months after the birth of my baby. I was accepted for a one years post graduate course in Burns and Plastic Surgery near London. My first day on duty was horrendous—I was confronted by the stench of burnt patients many of them very disfigured. I had lost my confidence and I of course could not confide in anyone about the loss of my baby. Fortunately one of the Specialists introduced himself and said if he could survive as a POW of the Japanese in WW11 I could survive the course and to get on with it because they were very short of staff! I worked with a wonderful team of Doctors and Nurses and I specialised in this field of nursing for a number of years.

I served with the British Army for six years—with Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps initially as a Lt. and later I was promoted to Captain. My postings included three years in Singapore and Hong Kong. I am sure I would never have been accepted by the Army if they had known of my secret past.

Moving on a few years I emigrated to Australia in 1969 with my husband and our only son was born in 1969. I never told my husband or the Specialist I had another son. I regret I was not truthful with my husband. When my son was 10 years old my marriage ended in Divorce and I became a single parent which is rather ironical.

Again moving on a few years I visited my son and his wife in 2004 in California when their baby was born. When I said goodbye to my lovely new grandson it was like reliving a nightmare. I was very distressed much to the bewilderment of my son and his wife who had no idea my past had come back to haunt me. On the 14 hour flight from LA to Sydney I collapsed—became unconscious and had a seizure. The long journey became another nightmare.

When I arrived back in Australia I knew I had to confront my past but I had no idea who to contact. As far as I was aware at that time Birth Mothers still had no legal

rights to Adoption information. I was never told anything about my sons Adoptive Parents and I was not even allowed to have a photograph.

Following the huge amount of publicity in March 2005, regarding the Tony Abbott Adoption story I heard on the radio about the Post Adoption Resource Centre in Sydney. I listen to Tony Delroy's ABC radio programme on a regular basis and one night he invited listeners to ring and discuss Adoption issues. People rang in from all over Australia and many of the calls were very emotional. The following day I rang Sydney and spoke with a Counsellor from PARC. It was the first time I had spoken about my adopted son in 50 years. I was advised there was a Support group in Canberra called Mosaic and the contact person was [redacted] visited me at home and I will always be grateful for her caring and sharing.

I made the decision to search for my son but the first problem was that I had no documents. I must have destroyed all the documents when I was in the Army and working in different countries. I would have been afraid of anyone finding confidential documents.

[redacted] from Mosaic advised me that records were kept at the National Library of Births, Marriages and Deaths for the last 100 years from UK. She went with me to check the records and quickly located the information. There on the screen were the details of the Birth of my son. I was very distressed to discover my past was well documented in Australia! I then applied to UK for the Birth Certificate which took approx six weeks. The next step was to pay a fee for the General Register in UK to see if there had been any contact from my son. There was no record of any contact by him.

International Social Services advised me that they could conduct a search and I paid a fee of \$165 [concession rate] in August 2005. No progress was made over a period of 8 months and then I discovered that they did not have the Authority to conduct a search. In all fairness there was a lot of confusion regarding amendments to the Adoption Laws in UK. My fee was refunded [at my request!]

I contacted my brother in England—he is ten years younger than me. He was not aware of my secret past. He was more than happy to help me and it only took him two days to locate the Adoption Records. The records were kept at Croydon Council in London. A senior Social Worker called [redacted] became my case manager and liaison person. The Adoption Laws were amended in UK in December 2005 which gives Birth Parents legal rights to information from the files although no identifying information can be given without the permission of the Adoptee. Before a search could commence a detailed report was required from a Social Worker in Canberra. Josephine O'Hanlon became my liaison person with UK. 5 interviews took place in the format required by UK. The interviews were very time consuming for Josephine and quite distressing at times for me to give such intrusive details.

Once the authorities in UK had established that my mind was still intact the next step was to pay a fee of \$1000 to Norcap the only apparent approved provider to conduct a search [National Organisation for Counselling Adoptees and Parents]. It is a Registered Charity and is self funded dependent on subscriptions and donations. There appears to be very little Government support if any. Many of the services are provided by volunteers. An Intermediary is compulsory.

In March 2007 my long lost son was finally traced and contacted by the Social Worker[the Intermediary].He responded in a very prompt and positive way initially with the Social Worker.We exchanged e-mails,photographs and phone calls.Needless to say I was quite overwhelmed and thrilled with the outcome of the search.

I rang my son in California to tell him about my secret past and finding my son in England.In typical Aussie style he said'have you got Cancer,are you getting re married or do you have a love child?' When I told him my news his reaction was'great—I have a Brother!'

In May 2007 I travelled to England and had a very happy and emotional reunion with my son who was 53 years old.He invited me to stay in his home my first weekend in England which is quite amazing.I was able to meet his wife and his two lovely daughters as well as their boyfriends.I am very blessed that my reunion had such a good outcome after all these years.After I left UK I then travelled to California to catch up with my other son and his family.

Summary

I hope that never again will unmarried Mothers be treated in such a cruel and callous way. When I was in England four years ago, I visited the village of Great Bentley where my son was born. I had a meeting with a member of the Historical Society and she advised me Sister _____ worked in the kitchens initially in the Maternity Home—it is doubtful if she had any qualifications. When she retired she destroyed all the records. I also discovered the Maternity Home was for married women—there would have been labour room facilities. Unmarried Mothers seem to have been a way of making extra money. None of the village was familiar to me on my return—I seem to have blocked it all out. The Old Mill House is now a very impressive large house overlooking the village green.

At the present time I am trying to access more information regarding the Old Mill House and if the records were in fact destroyed. Also more information about Sister _____ To date I have also been unable to find Birth Mothers who were admitted to the home. It would be part of my recovery to be able to find out all the missing information.

I would like to see more awareness of the complex search process in UK and much better funding available. However I fully support the procedure of an Intermediary which is compulsory. Many Birth Mothers are on limited incomes in retirement and approx \$1000 is a large fee in comparison to Australia where the search procedures are far less complex and the fees are low.

I have no regrets searching for my son in spite of all the stressful procedures. Not knowing for over 50 years what had happened to my son and living with the shame and secrecy has been a huge burden to cope with. I am fortunate my reunion was such a positive outcome but the sad reality is that it is a limited relationship and I will never be able to make up for the lost years.

Betty Mills [Ms]