

Trying to write about my adoption experience is difficult for me. My memories are clumsy and unclear, as though I have reverted to that young woman of 21 years. From the time I found out I was pregnant to the time the two weeks lapsed following signing the adoption paper, it seemed I was on an express train I could not get off and all decisions were 'out of my control.' Without counselling, and with the larger frame of 'adoption personnel' running the process, and my family not there to support me, I was not able to make an independent decision alone.

My home environment back then was fractured. I had not seen my mother since I was twelve and a few years later I had a self-centred, meddling and immature step mother. At seventeen I moved out of home. When I was twenty I had a relationship with a Malaysian student who was worried that I might keep the baby and that his family back in Malaysia would 'find out.' He suggested I travel to NSW for an abortion. My doctor was catholic and didn't support his view. He suggested I have the baby through an adoption agency. I could go to Adelaide, he said. My baby was given to adoption through the Salvation Army and Medindie Maternity Hospital in Adelaide.

I have a vague memory that there seemed to be a seamless process of signing girls up for government benefits to pay for the accommodation with the Salvation Army.. However we also had to 'voluntarily' work in the kitchen and the hospital laundry, daily, right up until we went into labour to cover whatever costs there were. This kept the private wing of the hospital running as well as the part set up for adoptions. The work in the laundry was physically demanding, lifting wet sheets, hanging them out, taking off and folding them and washing and drying and ironing laundry for the hospital. It felt like a kind of penance. In recent years, I have occasionally passed what then was the Medindi Maternity Hospital and it generates a deep sadness in me and an odd feeling that it was a Dickensian tale about somebody else.

On Sundays we were required to attend Salvation Army church service. My recollection is that objection was difficult. Most of the girls found the sermons distressing. The topic of the sermon usually centred on 'sin' and we all assumed, and were probably correct, that it was directed at us. We felt like a burden on society and the message in our minds was that we certainly didn't deserve to keep our babies. For the few months I was there only one girl had the strength to keep her baby and resist the system set up for the adoption process. I remember having to 'steel' myself for the inevitable process of giving up my baby. Once in labour we were heavily medicated and I have no memory of the actual birth, but do remember staggering along a corridor just prior to birth feeling distressed and out of control of my situation.

For a long time after the birth I was grieving and crying continuously and I found it distressing that from downstairs I could hear the babies crying through the upstairs windows. We were encouraged to feed our babies (possibly to save the organisation money and reduce the workload on other staff). This gave me a week or so to bond with my baby. However, I signed the adoption papers because I couldn't see any other option - it felt like a punishment that I had to endure. Nobody counselled me about the possibility

of keeping my baby. However, I was told about the 'cooling off' period following signing the adoption papers. Two weeks after I signed the papers I phoned Major . to tell her I had changed my mind and wanted to keep my baby. She told me over the phone that I would find it too much of a struggle without financial support. Major assured me that my baby was being adopted by very 'nice' people. I felt powerless and unable to assert my request.

I buried the memory of not being able to keep him. It wasn't until the laws changed that I could summons the effort to 'remember' and make the slow, painful effort to contact my child who was an adult by that time. Contact was successful and his adoptive parents supportive, however, it took many years to 'trust' their level of genuineness, and I am always wary about how much I talk about the past - even to my son. I still carry the guilt and grief of having to give him up. To this day I have a strong sense of that burden of guilt and the degree of depression I carried, without even consciously connecting its source for so many years.

When I share my experiences with women I trust who have suffered the same loss, I can easily, and often do, slide deeply into that 'guilt ridden' place and blame myself for any and all the issues my family have suffered over the years. It quickly becomes a spiral and then I feel guilty for triggering that same connection of guilt in my friends' minds. It takes a huge effort of recognition and self-talk to reassess and to regain my calm. Sometimes someone will recognize what's happening and helpfully change the topic to stop that dreaded slide.

It seems even now, in 2011, there is a deep stigma and a lot of ignorance about government policy and agency policy and processes of the time that were designed to stream single mothers towards giving up their babies. I don't talk about the past to many people, because I feel most people still make judgments, based on ignorance about the social atmosphere of the time. When Kevin Rudd apologised to the 'Stolen Generation' I was in Federation Square among a crowd of Indigenous people, watching, on screen. Everyone was crying and supporting each other. I felt that apology was so long overdue and was so relieved for everyone involved that it had finally come. I later told another woman who lost her child to adoption, that, secretly, I was also crying for my own loss. She was very relieved to hear me say this and admitted that she too was also crying for her own loss.

I have been trying to write this for many months now and have only recently made the attempt in the hope that an apology will be forthcoming.

I feel an apology from the government and their agencies (in my case the Salvation Army) is many years overdue.

Margaret Bishop