

Kathy Maczkowiack

I lost my first child to adoption when I was just 18 years old. This experience has had a devastating effect on my life.

I am the eldest of seven children born to a violent, drunken man and a gentle woman who was afraid of her husband. My childhood was scary due to my father's violence. Domestic violence, poverty, alcohol and gambling were what I grew up with. I was a fearful and anxious child and when I first began school I was unable to speak due to fear, so my sister would speak for me. My father also sexually abused me and although I had the classic signs of an abused child no one seemed to notice. I was a bright child at school and always achieved high grades until I went to high school when my grades fell. I had my first sex education class in high school and discovered how babies were made and was horrified because of what my father had done to me. I thought then I was pregnant, I was 13 years old at the time. It was an awful time for me.

I discovered I was pregnant when I was 17 years old in May 1964. I was terrified, frightened and alone. I couldn't tell anyone due to the shame. Adelaide in the 60's was a very conservative city and single pregnant women were outcasts. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't tell my mother and was too afraid to tell my father. I decided to travel to Western Australia where my boyfriend lived. He had returned home a few months previously. I left Adelaide when I was 6 months pregnant (nobody had noticed I was pregnant) with a girlfriend who was 17 years old, she did not know I was pregnant. We arrived in Perth by train on a Sunday morning and were met by my boyfriend. When he discovered I was pregnant he did not want to know me. I have had no contact with him since. My girlfriend and I quickly ran out of money and had to go to welfare agencies for help. I felt degraded and humiliated by this experience but we were desperate as we had not eaten for days. Eventually we ended up in a homeless shelter in Aberdeen St, West Perth where we stayed for a couple of months. I saw a doctor in Perth when I was seven months pregnant; he referred me on to the King Edward Memorial Hospital. I only had four visits to the hospital before my baby was born. I saw the hospital almoner on one occasion prior to the birth of my baby. I was told by the almoner my baby would be better off adopted. Although I thought earlier on in the pregnancy I would adopt out my child I began to have doubts about this option. Feeling my baby move inside me made my pregnancy real for me and I planned a life with my baby.

I was working up two weeks before my baby was born. I was being used as cheap labour by people approaching the shelter looking for girls to housekeep and clean. One family did not pay me on the day I worked and as I had no money I had to walk about two hours to get back to West Perth. A few weeks before my baby was born I moved from the shelter to a boarding house where my girlfriend and I shared a room.

My baby was born on the 18th February 1965 at King Edward Memorial Hospital in Subiaco. I was alone and frightened during labour. I was left in room by myself, no one spoke to me. I was given an enema and was shaved (common in those days) I felt humiliated, dirty and ashamed and I felt the doctors and nurses did not want to touch me. When my baby was born she was whisked out of the room and I only had a brief glimpse of her. I was left in stirrups while a doctor stitched me.

I was taken to a ward with other mothers, mothers who had their babies brought to them. I asked to see my baby but this was refused, I left my bed continually and went looking for her but was taken back to my room. This was very distressing for me. When my baby was one day old I was taken from the hospital and taken to Kensington hospital, an annex of the KEMH. I believe this was done because I continually kept asking for my baby.

The day after my baby was born a woman visited from the Child Welfare department and took details of myself and my baby's father, e.g. eye colour, hair colour, height, religion, education, family background. I continued to ask for my baby but I was never given access to her or any information about her. I left the hospital after six days and went to work at the Western Australian Egg Board. When my baby was twelve days old I went to the Child Welfare department and requested my baby back but was informed my baby was placed with a family and I could not have her. I was very upset by this and was then taken to the court house where I was pressured to sign papers agreeing to my baby's adoption. I was powerless, unsupported and devastated by these events. I left Perth to return to Adelaide when my baby was six weeks old. I was heartbroken at leaving my baby behind. I found out years later when I accessed my records that I was lied to and my baby was still in hospital.

I married later that year and was pregnant three months after the wedding; sadly I miscarried my baby three months into my pregnancy, and shortly after my marriage broke down. These events were very distressing and I became very depressed which is not surprising considering my losses.

I began a new relationship with a much older man and we had two children. Although I wasn't married to the father of my two children I had a Mrs. in front of my name I knew this would prevent my children being stolen from me for adoption. I lived with this man for twenty years; the relationship was abusive and violent. I finally left the relationship when my children were in their late teens.

I married again and had another child; this relationship has been a happy one.

The loss of my first child impacts on all aspects of my life; I think of her every day and mourn my loss constantly. I never knew where she was or whether she was alive for 22 years when I received a phone call saying my daughter wanted contact with me. I was overwhelmed and couldn't talk without breaking down and I finally got to meet her for the first time in 1989 in Western Australia. She is a beautiful person and has three children.

I still have contact with my daughter but we do not have a close relationship, however, I am grateful for the relationship we have.

I travelled to Western Australia recently to hear the apology to unmarried mothers who lost their children to adoption I hope this apology will let my daughter know she was not an unwanted baby but was stolen from her mother by coercive, illegal and brutal practices.