

Von Coates

Around 1942, my mother was sent to the RAAF base on the Fleurieu Peninsula, in South Australia. She had been trained in support service work. As a young woman in her early twenties she enjoyed the companionship of other young women in her group. There were other RAAF Personnel based at the same place and they socialised when off duty. She fell in love with a man eight years older, took him home to meet her parents and spent time with him. When she discovered she was pregnant, she expected that he would marry her. She was brutally informed by someone at the base that he was already married with a family.

That man was my Father and he was immediately sent home to Western Australia on a short leave and then posted to a remote island above Australia, in preparation for the expected invasion of the Japanese. While he was at home on leave, his wife, who already had given birth to four children, became pregnant again. That girl was born five months after I was in 1944.

My mother, at the time of her pregnancy was 24, was sent to the Kate Cocks Mother and Baby Home in Brighton, a beach suburb of Adelaide. Here she was, during the whole of her pregnancy, involved in scrubbing floors, washing and heavy housework. The home at that time did not have its own Maternity Unit and she was transported to the Queen Victoria Hospital for my birth. She talked little of the birth but remembered well the time afterwards. She was allowed to care for me, in that she changed, breast-fed and bathed me. No cuddling or picking up was allowed unless for personal care. She remembered that as being particularly painful and difficult as she was by nature an affectionate, caring person. She believed she had no choice in whether I was adopted and it was a for-gone conclusion that I would be taken from her.

My eventual adopters were visited by the agency, once formally and once informally without notice. The application was refused and no grounds given or at any rate told to me. My adoptive father was not happy with the decision and went alone to talk to the agency. My adoptive mother says she never knew what was said but the decision was reversed.

After a time when all the babies had measles, except me, the couple came to view me for adoption. My mother peaked from an upstairs window and thought they looked kind. On the day of placement she had to take me to a room where I was left by her and from where my adoptive mother and her friend collected me. Neither of them had any experience of raising children, not did anyone in the family. My mother was given drugs to dry up her milk, those that have these days been proven to be carcinogenic.

Within a few days I had succumbed to measles also and being abruptly weaned and removed from my mother was a trauma that left me looking like a survivor of a concentration camp. The photos tell the story. In addition my adopters, in their inexperience did not know how to properly mix the replacement formula, so that I was for some time being slowly starved. Fortunately this was noticed before I did starve, but it left me with life-long problems with food and food deprivation. Illnesses related or connected to food have been with me for life....eczema, asthma, food allergy, food intolerances, hiatus hernia, migraine.

At three years of age I was sent to a local Kindergarten so that I could be amongst other children, as I was destined to be an only child. My adopters, despite trying were not allowed to adopt again being deemed by this time to be too old. I have vivid memories of my deep longing for a sister, to be named Susan. My longing was I now believe to be with wanting, not only a sibling but someone who was related to me. I thought often, with a deep longing, of my mother, whose name was unknown to me, whose circumstances were unknown and whose whereabouts were unknown. I did not doubt, even from an early age that she existed somewhere in the world without me. I certainly had to exist in my life without her and to live out the life assigned to me. The hole in the heart left by being taken from her never heals, even after reunion.

I moved on to the local Primary School, a small village school, with children I had known at Kindergarten. My first years were full, I learned to read easily and developed a life-long interest in books, from which I have derived much comfort and companionship. The middle years of Primary School were difficult, as I was for some reason I never understood, picked on and bullied, particularly on the walk home when there were no adults to observe. Much pain and lack of comprehension on my part was involved and I learned later it was because I was a bastard, unlike the other children. It all ended eventually, when I took a swing with a school case at one of the minor players and split his lip. I had discovered the law of the playground. In addition I believe my adoptive mother 'had a word' with one of her friends, the mother of a girl in my class, who ever after was a steadfast protector.

I was sent to stay with other girls after school or at weekends and had girls to stay. I never particularly enjoyed these times because it interfered with the activities I had long learned to enjoy and derive comfort from...roaming the bush, watching insects and butterflies, reading, sewing, making things and enjoying the companionship of my pets. I didn't need anyone else. I had learned through painful trauma and experience to survive alone. I won't go into the mechanics of this, they are well known to anyone with an interest in adoption trauma and adoption syndrome. I suffered from all or most of those symptoms at some time during my life.

High School was slightly more pleasant, with a new set of friends, but there were some areas of learning and some subjects that were painful and difficult. Teaching methods were sometimes brutal and I suffered, sometimes being hauled out in front of the class to repeat Latin declensions. Looking back this was my first experience of 'adoption fog' descending on me making me unable to think or articulate thoughts or words. At times of extreme stress I become catatonic and have done all my life.

During these years I was sent to dancing classes with the teenage children of my adoptive mother's friends. I was immediately 'latched onto' by a boy who had been seated in front of me in my last year of Primary School. Eventually at 22, after moving to London with his family in 1965, we married. Adoption was a live issue in this family as the second son, in his second marriage adopted two girls from Korea and Vietnam.

International adoption was seriously disapproved of in the world we worked in as it was believed in those days children, if they had to be adopted should be placed within their own ethnic group in their own country. It caused a rift in the family which lasted a long time and the effects of which are still felt today. I still maintain a firm belief that children should remain in their own country, speaking their own language and with family contact. Not enough has been done to make this possible as adoption is still seen as a way to cure infertility and make families. Little regard is ever given to the real needs of children through their growing up. This marriage lasted until I was 32, officially, but in fact less and was abusive, more emotionally than physically but ended finally with physical threats and rape.

My next relationship lasted almost 13 years and resulted in the birth of my now adult daughter, a bastard like me as he did not 'believe in' marriage! He is today married and one wonders about his motivation. His family was a large one and one of his brothers had a partner who was adopted. We felt a kinship and remain connected to this day. Adoptees often stick with their kind if they can find them as it is often a great relief to find others who understand how it is to be an adoptee.

This relationship was even more abusive emotionally for my daughter and for me and we both today bear the scars. I believe that the adoption trauma leaves adoptees vulnerable to further abuse and that it is extremely difficult to break the cycle and that the wounds of adoption never go away. There is a filter down effect into the next generation, due to the damage and suffering. My own experience bears this out, as does the experience of others.

Eventually I married for the last time and have been in this relationship for over twenty years. My husband is the only person who has never tried to use me as a blank slate and write or rewrite my story or my future. Many people have tried, all my life, including my first father-in-law who actually used me as the inspiration for a character in his novel. The character eventually commits suicide in the place where I was conceived by 'strange' coincidence. Part of the abuse by my second partner involved the invention of my life story based on a woman who had the same name as my mother but wasn't, but with whom I remained in contact until her death. My partner insisted she was actually my mother and that my father was also her brother.

I was steadily rejected by my adoptive father all my teenage years, for reasons unknown and never specified. In the 1970's he told me a story of someone he knew who had adopted a child who had found her mother. He asked me if I wanted to know my mother's name and my name, the name I regard these days as my real name. This happened just before the change in the law and I was unable to find proof legally. I did however, although am unable to specify how.

By chance my mother had exactly the same name and birth year as the woman I had written to for years and this red herring set me back many years in my reunion. Eventually when I was 50 I was reunited with the mother I lost at six weeks of age. This was a momentous occasion for us both and although she had me back and had a grand-daughter, nothing ever took away her suffering and the pain she had endured as a result of relinquishment. Her life was ruined, due to society's expectations and her treatment at the hands of those who believed she was undeserving and the producer of a bastard. She was punished as all women of her generation were and their offspring used as cures for infertility for those who couldn't produce their own children. She never gave birth to another child. She died some years ago but recognised me in her will, a very important gesture and freedom for her and a very touching and emotional one for me. I was not informed of her death or funeral until it was all over and suspect not until her will was read, even though we were in touch and the Home she resided in knew my details. I suspect this was to keep me from attending her funeral and was a final act of disempowerment by disapproving relatives.

I had what is usually described as a successful adoption and was 'a happy adoptee', that is I didn't act out, cause trouble or appear to be in pain. It has taken me many decades to reach a point of acceptance regarding my adoption. I have engaged in therapy, counselling a number of times and have had to work very hard to come to terms with my trauma. I know the damage remains with me always and am still learning ways to work with it. I am lucky to have a supportive, understanding family who have an interest in the issues of adoption, both in private life and professionally. I have only recently received my birth information, including my birth certificate. The birth records of the Kate Cocks Mother and Baby Home were not available, as they 'disappeared' in a fire some years ago.

I have also in the last year found my father's family. He is long dead, but my five half-siblings are now known to me. In the case of my only brother, in name only and of my sister five months younger than me, in name only, although we have had a short email contact. She as a teenager gave up a child for adoption and later, unable to conceive, adopted two sons. Her issues about adoption and the fact that her family did not know of my existence have made it hard for her. My other sisters accepted me and as an only child all my life, I have had to try to learn in my 60's to be a sister. I have also been able to access much family history from both sides and have found it has given me a solid base for life in recovery from adoption. I am able to trace one branch of my family back 300 years to a small village in Somerset, where the last member of the family died only a few years ago. All are buried in the churchyard and the plaques in the church record their names. This has had enormous significance for me, as has this family's role in the early settlement of South Australia and prominence in public life.

My working life has been in teaching and then in Social Work. I was a specialist in work with the elderly, but also in adoption counselling. After the changes in the law I was still living in Britain and part of my work was facilitating the reunions of relinquishing mothers and adoptees. I have maintained my interest in adoption practice through retirement and am an advocate for change in adoption.

I have reached a point on my life where I have made the best of things and am pleased that society's attitudes to unmarried mothers has changed and that illegitimacy has 'disappeared' in this country. Prejudice against adoptees however, continues unabated and adoptees are abused as much as ever, these days by an international adoption industry and by adopters who are ill-prepared, ill-trained and look to adoption as a cure for infertility as has always been the case. In addition the attitudes that seem to be more prevalent about the disposability of adoptees indicates that nothing much has really changed but the techniques are smarter. I am not a 'bitter' adoptee, rather a very realistic one, with a good overview of the way adoption works these days. It doesn't get better for adoptees, sadly it gets worse.