

# VANISH VOICE

Autumn 2015



## IN THIS EDITION:

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'Without Consent' Exhibition.**

**REFLECTIONS ON THE OPENING OF THE EXHIBITION**

**PERSONAL STORIES**

Dear Members

It gives me much pleasure to present this issue of VOICE to you. There is always change and I have been keeping you updated with our regular VANISH news bulletin. In our last two editions of VOICE we have had a focus on providing you with information on the National and State Apologies and the advocacy VANISH has been doing on separation from a child and adoption, intercountry adoption and donor conception. We also provided you with a history of VANISH to mark our 25 years of service.

March was a significant time for members of VANISH as we commemorated the second anniversary of the National Apology for Forced Adoptions. Following from the National Apology in 2013 that the former Prime Minister Julia Gillard made to the thousands whose lives were affected forever by forced adoption, Ms Gillard was in Canberra on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2015 to open the National Archives of Australia's Forced Adoptions History Project, *Without Consent: Australia's past adoption practices*.

Ms Gillard recalled the privilege and solemn duty she felt on that day and said the exhibition would connect those who knew little about the adoptions with a hard, uncomfortable and emotional truth. She paid tribute to the courage and generosity of spirit shown by families who had come together and given a public voice to their pain.

"Particularly when across their lifetime, so many were told to bury this secret, to never acknowledge it, never speak to anyone about it. Our nation would not have taken the step of delivering the Apology without your courage and your preparedness to come forward and tell your stories."

National Archives director-general David Fricker said the touring exhibition: *Without Consent: Australia's past adoption practices* would give an insight into a shameful and previously hidden, period in the nation's past. "We want this exhibition to open the hearts and minds of Australians to a different perspective on the experiences of adoption."

At this time when we have been remembering and celebrating the second anniversary of the National Apology for Forced Adoptions, our thoughts take us to reflections on our own experiences.

In this edition of VOICE we wanted to take a more personal direction and focus on the courageous voices of our service users and

members and share with you some of the stories of separation from a child and adoption. The stories are inspiring in their honesty and provide stark information on suffering and on healing. Some of our VANISH Committee of Management members have also shared their stories with you. I trust this edition of VOICE will be of interest and helpful to you.

VANISH welcomes further stories, information and feedback at any time to [manager@vanish.org.au](mailto:manager@vanish.org.au)

**Coleen Clare**  
Manager, VANISH Inc.

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**The National Archives Forced Adoptions History Project, *Without Consent* Exhibition:**

**REFLECTIONS ON THE OPENING OF THE EXHIBITION**



The National Archives of Australia exhibition, *Without Consent: Australia's past adoption practices*, opened in Canberra in March with a series of talks and guided tours. Although I was not able to attend these, I visited the Exhibition on 23rd March, and I took a few family members as well, to see what impact the exhibition had on people not otherwise concerned with these issues. Here is a photo of me in front of the Archives.

The National Archives is a beautiful venue for the exhibition, set in parklands and close to Lake Burley Griffin. It is also close to sites of power and influence, Parliament House and Government offices, and the business of the Archives is to preserve records. This reminded me of some of the themes of forced adoptions, loss of power and control, and denial of information and knowledge, and the exhibition sets these out powerfully.

The exhibition is very well designed, easy to walk through, and uses a range of different media to present both historic and personal information. There are photos, video and audio clips, historical documents, and objects. I was especially moved by a beautiful knitted jumper, knitted by a young mother for her baby while she was pregnant, but never finished as her child was adopted.

I hope the exhibition reaches as many people as possible, to raise public awareness, and to respect the experiences of all those affected by forced adoptions.

**Cathy Burnett, VANISH Committee of Management Member**

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On Monday 30th March I attended the official opening of the National Archives of Australia *Without Consent* exhibition in Canberra.

Waiting for the event to begin I found myself reflecting on the National Apology made by the former Prime Minister Julia Gillard in March 2013 to the thousands whose lives were affected forever by forced adoption. You could have heard a pin drop in the great hall as those present hung on to every word spoken by Ms Gillard and one could not help be moved and appreciate the meaning of the Apology to so many people; the emotional release as the words 'we say sorry' were uttered was palpable.

Although the Apology was made on behalf of the Government, the Apology was delivered with such sincerity and compassion by Ms Gillard that it felt as if she was speaking directly to each person affected by adoption and saying that she understood and she was sorry.

It was fitting then that on the second anniversary of the National Apology, Ms Gillard was invited to launch the National Archives exhibition *Without Consent – Australia's past adoption practices* which identifies and acknowledges the experience of those affected by forced adoption practices

What a pleasure to be present at the opening of the exhibition and witness again the same sincere, compassionate and personal words of Ms Gillard as she spoke about the importance of the Apology and now the *Without Consent* exhibition. Ms Gillard recalled her memory of the Apology, in particular the many individuals she spoke with leading up to the Apology and then on the day. She spoke of her admiration for those with courage who have generously volunteered to share their experience with the Senate Affairs committee and now the Forced Adoptions History

Project.

Without the courage of those who fought for and contributed to the Senate enquiry there may well not have ever been formal State Apologies or a National Apology, and without the courage of those who have contributed to the National Archives Forced Adoptions History Project we would not have such rich exhibits on the website or in the current exhibition. Thank you most sincerely to all of you who have contributed, thank you for your courage in fighting for an enquiry and for sharing your experience so that others may learn.

Having the State and National Apologies openly acknowledge the past practices of forced adoptions has validated what many inwardly knew in their hearts but could not discuss openly. Now mothers, fathers, sons, daughters and family members have come together to share their experience for the National Archives Forced Adoptions History Project so that others can learn and understand the history of forced adoption practices in Australia.

Whatever one's unique individual experience is of adoption, we know it is a lifelong experience and cannot be rubbed out by apologies or exhibitions. On the contrary, we also know that such events have the potential to re-traumatise and trigger unwanted memories feelings and emotions.

However, formal apologies and exhibitions can go a long way in providing an opportunity for individuals affected by adoption to have a greater understanding about their own unique experience, an opportunity to open the door for dialogue with significant people in one's life and finally an opportunity for the community to learn about the history of former adoption policies and practices in Australia.

The National Archives team is to be congratulated on the Forced Adoptions History Project website and the *Without Consent* exhibition; both have been delivered with sensitivity and respect for the represented community and provide a rich historical account of forced adoption policies and practices.

*Without Consent* is on at the National Archives in Canberra until 19th July 2015.

For further information and exhibition details visit the Forced Adoptions History Project website at <http://forcedadoptions.naa.gov.au/>

**Liz Tomlinson, VANISH, Search and Support Coordinator & Counsellor**

# Without CONSENT

Australia's past adoption practices

On 30th March 2015 this exhibition was opening in Canberra and unfortunately, I was unable to get to Canberra for the event. Fortunately, however there was an event in Melbourne, at the National Archives Melbourne office, which allowed people to come together and participate in the opening of this exhibition albeit from a distance.

I have never really been able to tell my story especially in public to people who are unknown to me. Not sure why this is but it seems that when I try and talk about it I just get stuck in my throat and I find myself just changing the subject. So, I was very interested in seeing what would be in the exhibition and how various elements such as photos, letters, ARMS flags along with personal stories would be presented. Such a sensitive issue which carries powerful meaning for those involved with forced (closed) adoptions.

As I sat there amid friends and others feeling safe and secure knowing that everyone, whether, they had personal experiences of forced adoptions or not, were all positive. There was for me a feeling of anticipation to see what the opening would offer.

My personal sense was that this exhibition was not an ending of a long journey, rather, it is the beginning of a new journey. A journey where people can bring together their memorabilia and experiences to provide the basis for all Australians to learn about not only the practical details of forced adoptions but also the in-depth emotions and feelings of those who had been part of the experience. This is not limited to those immediately involved including mothers, fathers, adoptees, it extends to family and community. As we do not live in a vacuum, we are part of a community and an action such as adoption affects many, many people.

Julia Gillard was the guest speaker and her speech was gentle, sensitive and showed yet again her compassion and understanding of the importance of an apology to many, many people. She talked of the privilege in being able set up the reference group which went around the country talking to those most affected. To then be able to actually give the Apology, such an important element in repairing the damage

caused by the unethical practices of adoptions. She talked of how important it was for her personally and referred to the political shenanigans which took place on the day, and how even though other things were happening, for her the Apology was an important element in her Prime Ministership.

I was so glad that I went to this launch and have decided that I will make the trip to Canberra to see this exhibition in person. I am aware that it is a travelling exhibition bringing to this country Your Story, Our History and I hope that thousands of people will visit the exhibition and become more aware of the reality of adoption.

**Tricia Lester**

**VANISH, Committee of Management Member**

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## HAS ANYTHING CHANGED?

Recently in Canberra (March 2015) we had the National Archives of Australia's launch of *Without Consent: Australia's past adoption practices*. This exhibition coincided with the second anniversary of the National Apology for Forced Adoptions and fittingly, was opened by the former Prime Minister Ms Julia Gillard.

In 2013, when Ms Gillard was Prime Minister, she offered a heart-felt and compassionate apology to all of those affected by past adoption practices and concluded her speech by saying, "We resolve, as a nation, to do all in our power to make sure these practices are never repeated. In facing the future challenges, we will remember the lessons of family separation. Our focus will be on protecting the fundamental rights of children and on the importance of the child's right to know and be cared for by his or her parents. With profound sadness and remorse, we offer you all our unreserved apology."

As all states and the ACT have offered their own apologies as well, I'm left pondering the reason

why the adoption of children still has such a high profile. Imagine the hue and cry if the Government reverted to the practices of taking indigenous children from their families/communities or institutional 'care' was reinstated after the Apologies to the Stolen Generation and the Forgotten Australians, however it seems that the Apologies to those suffering from the continued effects of adoption seem to be ignored; that is, in my opinion, no lessons have been learnt from our experiences – after all, what would we know?

We're just considered to be whinging and dysfunctional all because we are still trying to deal with our years of trauma; child separated from mother/father and mother/father separated from child. The Abbott Government obviously swayed by high-profile personalities seems hell bent on introducing an all-in-one shop in order to facilitate easier ways to adopt children from overseas. Whose needs would come first in that shop I wonder?

Is this because the mothers and fathers of these children are out of sight and out of mind and can't or won't be wanting 'visiting' rights with their child/children and therefore can't cause 'problems' for the adoptive parents. And 'shop'? To quote from an article by Patricia Fronek, "*Words are important. 'Shop' paints a picture of commercial transactions and places the emphasis on children as a commodity, which is distressing and offensive to many in the Australian adoption community, especially to adoptees ....*"

I would also include offensive to mothers and fathers as well. They still have to listen to the rhetoric of having 'given away' their children. I would suggest that a chat with a mother might dispel the fact that she 'gave away' her child; how much more offensive is it that her child appears to be up for 'sale'?! when the mother/father might be facing difficulties in parenting. In some states a child can be adopted, under certain circumstances, without the parent/s consent. Forced adoptions .... all sounding a bit familiar?

In the last few days I read a great article by "Wendy" in the *Jigsaw Pieces* April 2015 Newsletter entitled "Best for the Child". Some resonating points relating to this phrase, "... *the Chair of the government's Forced Adoptions Implementation Working Group ... talked about doing things differently and spoke about the need to put what is 'best for the child' at the centre of future discussions and actions concerning adoption and (no doubt due to recent international events), surrogacy. ... 'best for the child'... That line was what pregnant single girls were fed all*

*those years ago. ...So, was adoption 'best for the child'? Is that really the way it turned out? Who, in those days, knew what was 'best for the child'? Who really knows now? It seems to me that 'best for the child' is a powerful mantra that has been used very successfully in the past (and again now?) to shore up an individual or group's argument in the face of those who have opposing views."*

Every child has the right to be safe. There are thousands of children in foster care, moved around continually and living in a state of instability. What is being done to support families before children are removed from their homes? If, for some reason a child cannot be cared for by his family or kin why does adoption have to be a priority? There are other ways of formally caring for children without having a child's birth certificate cancelled and a new one issued as if those people gave birth to him/her. A cancelled/reissued birth certificate is not a true record of ones origins.

With the \$1.5m spent on the *Without Consent* exhibition I hope that people who do not have a direct experience of adoption might learn some of the facts and effects of adoption; this is a practice to be most definitely discouraged as, apart from the 'secrecy' aspect, nothing's changed. That the word adoption can be discarded in relation to children and can be permanently relegated to the animal kingdom and highways.

That children can be cared for firstly by their parent/s, who when in difficulties can be helped to manage by the community and agencies and in the event of the need for non-familial care they can keep their identity and contact with their original family through other formal methods other than adoption and that these generous families are indeed looking out for what's 'best for the child' but more particularly the RIGHTS of the child and not their own needs. Fortunately there are some of these wonderful people out there.

#### ***A most concerned mother***

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/health/school-human-services-social-work/staff/dr-patricia-fronek>



## PERSONAL STORIES

### Life as a Relinquishing Mother

**The following piece was sent to us by a mother in Victoria. She wrote it over twenty years ago to present to members of her local Anglican church, something which she told us took a great deal of courage.**

Twenty four years ago this month of August, sees the anniversary of an ordeal that I went through as a young girl. It would have been one of the hardest things for me to cope with in life. This morning I would like to speak to you on my past and present experiences of being made a Relinquishing Mother at the young age of 17 years going on 18.

It was August 1969. I gave birth to a baby. I went through the pregnancy, keeping in good health, but in the back of my mind, was that whatever happened I would have to give this child up for adoption. Through the pregnancy I continued to live with my parents, on the farm. They really supported me and of course did all to help. A few weeks before I was to have the baby I left home and went to stay with an Anglican family, not far from here who are very special to me.

The birth of the child went OK for me and I was only in hospital a few days. I did get to hold my baby for a few minutes. My words were, you will sure make somebody happy. On my discharge from the hospital I went to stay a few days with my older sister and her husband who had a dear little boy just 12 months old. My days were spent helping my sister with her little boy. It wasn't easy for me. I then returned home to live with my parents on the farm, which I really loved.

In 1970, I moved to a regional centre to seek work. Here I met my future husband of almost 21 years. When we married it would have been one of the happiest days of my life. We waited almost 3 years before starting a family and we now have two lovely children. Believe me they are both very special to me. I became very ill after each of their births: I found it very hard to cope and to care for them both, but with family support and help I came through it OK.

It was back in June 1988, I decided to apply for special information concerning my child's adoption. In September 1989 I travelled to Community Services Melbourne to attend an individual interview. It was at that time I went to

pieces. I was handed a copy of the consent form along with the birth certificate and information taken from the court records of the adoption. Believe me it was all a very emotional time for me. From that day of receiving the information I now know an exact birth date and a christian name to go by. My counsellor at Community Services contacted me soon after my interview with the news that they had finally tracked my child down, who did not wish for any contact with me for now and was a qualified chef, travelling the country.

At first I was hurt and very angry, but I have now adjusted to it. I feel that he would be busy with his own young life. I have eventually come to terms that God chose me to bear a child, for those unfortunate people that could not have children.

In August 1990 I wrote a personal letter to my child, which was placed on file at Community Services. During the year I find the hardest times for me to cope are Mother's Day, my child's actual birthday, Easter and Christmas celebrations.

To this day there are still some of the family who have no knowledge of me ever having a baby at such a young age. My Mum quite often asks me if I have heard any news. She says her only wish before she dies, is that there would have been some kind of contact between my child and me. So for now it is a real waiting game, who knows what the future may bring.

In conclusion to this story, I would like to advise any young girl that does become pregnant to keep the child. There are now lots of benefits and support available for unmarried mothers; there were very few for us Mums back in the 1960's. Having to give up a child through no fault of my own, has had a terrible effect on my life forever. I will never forget what I went through.

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### Penny's Story

I was adopted in the 1960s, as were my brother and five cousins. I was placed at three weeks of age. It would have been earlier except I had digestion problems – common in babies separated at birth from their mothers, so I learned during my social work studies and subsequent career in children and family services.

My mother was 17 when she delivered me, having spent most of her pregnancy in a Mother and Babies Home. Such was her shame she never told anyone about her pregnancy – not

family, not friends. She told my father when I was 34.

I love and respect my adoptive parents deeply; they always did their best for me and my brother. Sadly, Mum didn't cope when I told her I'd successfully searched for my mother. I wasn't allowed to speak with Mum about "that woman" again. Nor did I speak with my extended adoptive family members about her in case they told Mum and upset her further.

I understood Mum's response. She and Dad had raised my brother and me as if born to them – complete with new birth certificates. They believed we wouldn't be able to learn the identities of our parents, let alone meet them. But Mum's attitude hurt me deeply. And it still hurts, even since she passed away in 2011 (Dad died in 1988).

Like thousands of adopted people from the pre-1980s, I experience the love associated with my adoptive parents simultaneous with the pain associated with the early losses of my first parents. I've established positive relationships with my mother and some of my half-siblings, but we can never get back the 33 years lost to us.

Such losses and their complex lifelong legacies were ultimately acknowledged by Prime Minister Julia Gillard in the bipartisan National Apology for Forced Adoptions on 21st March 2013. That Apology was important to me – it encapsulated a very public element of personal healing. Yet I was also disappointed from a professional perspective because it didn't extend to the many intercountry adoptions also characterised by coercion and deception in overseas countries.

Further disappointing was that Ms Gillard's fine speech was immediately overshadowed by a bitter challenge to her leadership. Inordinate excitement was generated in the media in response to the attempted Labor leadership spill, which was sustained until the federal election six months later. Public attention was diverted away from the Apology, undermining its significance to the broader Australian community.

The speed and ease with which adoption has since been re-popularised in Australia has alarmed me. New Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced on 19th December 2013 his commitment to making intercountry adoptions easier, faster and also cheaper for Australians. During 2014, the NSW and former Napthine Victorian governments passed legislation to expedite adoption of vulnerable children from out-of-home care – effectively legalising forced adoptions. Personally, any healing from the National Apology has been completely undone for me, as the new era of adoption as a preferred

family formation service has been ushered in.  
**Penny Mackieson**

***Penny is a VANISH Committee of Management member and has represented VANISH on adoption, intercountry adoption and surrogacy matters.***

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## **Family Me & Us**

**This is a true story about my early life and the continuation into my adult life.**

I was born in 1942 and this is how my early life began, how it eventuated into something quite amazing and emotional for me and my birth sister. I will start at the beginning of my memories.

I was placed into St Joseph's Foundling Home at the age of nine months and adopted out at the age of 2 years and 3 months. My adoptive parents had a baby boy when I was 4 years 6 months and when I was 6 years our father passed away after a long illness.

I recall at an early age, maybe 7 or 8 years of age that I was told, I believe by a neighbour that I was adopted. I asked my mother, "was I adopted" and my mother replied yes and reassured me that she loved me as her own child. I used to ask at times who my real mother was and why she did not want me. My adoptive mother did not reveal too much and discouraged further questions only to say my birth mother was unable to keep me. She remarried and in time had three more children.

The thought of being adopted faded into the background with five siblings and normal daily happenings of family life. The next few years passed with my parents and siblings and we were as one family. In time I married and moved away from home. We kept in constant touch with each other and throughout the following years all of us would gather for family occasions at the family home. In time my stepfather died and my mother passed away at the age of 79.

At times, particularly as I grew older, thoughts would occur to me; I did not look like anyone. When I had those thoughts I would feel alone and different, but did not dwell on it too much as my life was busy with working and my hobby interests. During the course of our lives I did not tell my siblings that I was adopted as I wrongly thought they would reject me.

Further on, October 2013, and I am now 71 years old.

This month my nephew's wife gave birth to triplets and as I had relocated to WA from interstate a few years earlier, I flew back to see the new born babies. It was a wonderful few days seeing them – just so tiny.

I am not sure why but as events turned out just wonderfully, the day before I was to fly back to WA my sisters and brothers decided to reveal all, as it opened the way for the following events.

They said to me that they had known for many years that I was adopted and thought it was about time it was brought into the open....It was a very emotional moment for me and them. I can only describe it as like a big frown had been erased from my conscious thoughts. Since then we talk about it naturally and they have encouraged me to seek my birth family.

#### Me and Us

Continuing on is the second stage of my journey

After the family revealed they knew I was adopted they said I should seek out information about my birth mother. I resisted for a while as I felt I was being disloyal to them, but they encouraged me to do it. I contacted the relevant department and in turn forms were sent out to complete and return back. They contacted me on receipt of my forms and advised it would be about 6 weeks for the documents to be retrieved. Having made the decision I was impatient for any information, but had to bide my time. In the course of time the department contacted me to advise the documents were ready. My researcher read out to me my mother's hand written letters which were written at the time of my placement to ensure I understood them. They also revealed I had an older sister which was a shock/surprise.

In time the documents were sent out to me and I was unable to open the letter for many days as I felt too emotional to read the contents. I finally did read them and it was emotional but I felt close to my mother and sister...

I then had to request a search for my birth family and in time I was contacted and told that my mother had passed away which was not a surprise considering the period of time passed... and they would continue the search for my sister. Again I was back for the triplets 1st birthday and my family no. 1 sister told me that she had located my birth sister – what a shock – I

contacted the agency to advise them and they told me they had also located her. The amazing wonderful thing is that my birth sister only lives about 20 minutes away from my family sister and I am in Melbourne at this time. Just wonderful timing!

As I had no idea if my birth sister was aware of my existence I composed a letter with the help of my family sister explaining who I was. Fortunately I had brought my documents with me from WA proving my identity. I decided I should do a letter drop so that I would be fairly certain that my birth sister would receive the letter.

The following day we went to her residence and feeling very furtive we placed the letter in her letterbox. We returned home shortly after that and a message was on the machine saying that it was my birth sister who had read the letter and could I please ring... We chatted for what seemed an eternity and it was wonderful speaking to her and she invited me to her place the following day.

My no. 1 sister drove me to my birth sister and took a photo of us and we hugged and kissed and spent the day talking about our beginnings and our separate lives. Our look alike to each other and similarities were amazing. She had no idea that she had a sister and it was quite a shock to her.

My birth sister used to say to her (our) mother that she would love to have a sister. She showed me photos of our mother's siblings (10) and I could see myself in many of them. She also showed me her wedding day photo and I had to look twice as we looked so alike. I felt a sense of belonging that there were others in the world that I resembled.

She recalled as a young girl saying to her mother that there was a girl called by my name in the cot next to her, but did not know where that place was, until as we were talking about our lives that she realised she must have been placed in the orphanage at the same time as me. It was an amazing realisation. She is presently tracing her own early beginnings.

It has been an emotional and happy time. I have a sense of contentment and I know that my birth sister is very happy as I am that we have made contact even at this stage of our lives. We are trying to make up for lost time.

My regret is that I did not search earlier in my life, but one cannot live with regrets, just be content with what is now. A feeling of settlement.

I would like to thank:

My family for their love and continued support and encouraging me to do it.

My husband, for his understanding and support during this, at times, wonderful and emotional period of my life.

My adoptive Mum and Dad; where would I be now only for them?

To the triplets, only for them this true story may never have been known or told.

And finally to FIND and VANISH for their compassion and sensitivity and keeping me in touch with their research.

**B.A & M.M.**

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## **Personal Story of Adoption Judith B. (Adoptee)**

Once upon a time there was a pretty, gregarious and care-free young lady living in England, in the quiet English countryside of Suffolk. It was a few years after the end of World War II and she had been a Wren in the Royal Navy. She met my father, and I was the unplanned result of their liaison.

She was pregnant at the same time as her older sister. One 'good' married daughter, one 'bad' unmarried daughter, accused of "spoiling" her sister's pregnancy. We were not separated at birth, but shortly thereafter my mother took me herself to a Children's Home in London, and there I waited to be 'chosen'. 51 years later I met her again.

My journey back to my mother was, as for many of us, incredibly difficult and painful with rejections and obstacles along the way (common in that era). My needs, like those of many adoptees, were pathologised, but eventually I found her.

My adoptive parents were good, decent people, with their own tragedies prior to my arrival (including loss of five of their own babies, for whom my adoptive mother grieved for the rest of her life; it was not her choice to adopt, but was a 'remedy' for her distress). I was not treated badly, although I never had any sense of belonging or connection to anyone.

At 21 after turbulent teenage years and with the help of my fiancé at the time, I set out one Sunday afternoon to the last known address of my mother. I sat in the car ('shook' in the car is probably a more accurate term) whilst this dear man knocked on the door. No luck, she had moved – to Canada. But, not all hope lost, her mother (my grandmother) lived in the next village.

Off we went. Said fiancé knocked on the door. No luck again, but another address of her daughter in the next village. Ten minutes later, third time lucky.

My grandmother who was then 75, came to the car where I was quivering with fear and anticipation in the back seat. I could not believe it, here was flesh and blood, mine, hers, ours, my ancestral line, hitherto unknown to me. I touched her hand as if I was a being from another planet exploring a new species. She said she knew one day I would come, she was welcoming, promising me weekends with my cousins and my aunt and uncle. I was in heaven, at last a sense of belonging.

Heaven, however, was not to last long. 2 days later I got an extremely unpleasant letter from her insisting that I never come near them again or contact my mother in Canada. She made me promise in writing. Broken, humbled, guilty, I did so. I kept my promise to her for 10 long years, after which time I thought I had kept my word long enough, and wrote to my mother, enclosing a photograph. She wrote back immediately from Canada rejecting me in no uncertain terms, telling me that she had a happy life with her children and husband and I was not to threaten it.

I waited another eventful 20 years before I had the courage to write again. This time I contacted her through a specialist agency thinking that might be less threatening for her. The contact was unsuccessful. I wrote again, reading my letter over and over before sending it. Three weeks later a letter arrived from her, and when I opened it in trepidation a photo of my mother in her Wren's uniform fell to the floor and I knew this time she had bravely opened her heart to me. I booked a plane ticket immediately. I thought I had won the lottery.

Six weeks later I left my home in Perth, WA and after meeting my three half-sisters in Vancouver, arrived at my mother's front door in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada with 51 exquisite baby pink roses – one for every year we had been separated, and a Baby Congratulations card, neither of which she would have had when she gave birth to me in disgrace 51 years ago. There is much more to this story, and it doesn't have a happily-ever-after ending, but we did meet again before she died and I am so very grateful to her for her bravery and for holding my hand and my heart once again.

Thank you for reading a small part of my story.

## Bobby's Story

**The following article about a VANISH member was published in the Bendigo Advertiser last May with the title, 'Bobby tells of cold history'**

Among the piles of paper and files that put together the jigsaw of his fragmented life, two documents stand out. One that reads: "an order may be made for the adoption of the above named male infant son" - amended with an arrow and the prefix 'un' before named. A prefix that removed any personal aspect of his life. Two letters that took away all that he was and who he was in the world.

He became a boy child with no name, about to change "ownership" in the County Court. The second is a piece of paper that tells of his mother's 'distant' nature at the time of his birth. "She knew what was going to happen," he said. "It's all cold, medical stuff from when you were born, baby unknown's weight, baby unknown.... baby unknown." That baby was born in Melbourne on July 16, 1957, as Bobby Maguire.

He was a much-loved son, born into a big family with three older sisters and three older brothers. By the age of six weeks, he no longer had a name. He then became known by a different name, before again being called Bobby Maguire. That went on for 14 months until his new name became permanent. He was no longer little Bobby.

Bobby Maguire's original birth certificate was stamped 'cancelled' and he was issued with a sixth schedule certificate, giving him a new name and new identity. But it was an identity to which he could never relate. An identity that was fought for the first 14 months of his life by Bobby's parents, who did not want to give up their son.

Bobby's father was wounded during WWII and contracted scrub typhus. "It got to a stage where he could not work any further, so he applied for the TPI pension and with that he had to look for a new home because they couldn't afford to keep the family home," Bobby said.

The family was offered a war service home on the condition that any further children be removed for adoption. "He had served his country and then had to relinquish his children," Bobby said. Bobby and a brother born three years earlier became the "property" of the Mission of St James and St John after their birth.

That brother was returned to the family several years after his adoption, because his adopted

family no longer wanted him. At that stage, his parents had housing and his brother was able to return, but Bobby was living with his adopted family and being raised in a world where he never felt he belonged. His adopted father was a minister and on the board of the Mission of St James and St John and moved a lot because of his role as a clergyman.

One of Bobby's first memories was being thrown down a flight of stairs, leaving him with a lifetime fear of heights. "The adopting mother ... was not very good at doing that mother thing, the hugging, things you would expect from a parent, none of that," Bobby said. "Dad was a vicar, but a vicar that had a hard heart, he was very harsh, very strict. "You did anything wrong, you were belted – I remember being choked, being thrown through a Sunday school window as punishment in a fit of rage, I remember him grabbing me and I think that was when I first realised I was different. "I started formalising in my mind I wasn't part of the family.

"There was a woman there, who said 'well that's the way that little bastard should have been treated, you did the right thing vicar'." Bobby was at the age where he had a concept of what that word meant. He knew he didn't fit in: he didn't look like his family, his mindset and way of thinking were different. "My memories of my childhood are of loss, always a sense of loss, always a sense of isolation, always a sense of ...going to family events but I don't feel like I belong there and nobody's told me I was adopted," Bobby said. "I don't look like them, don't do the social thing with them because my mindset, my way of thinking, my way of doing is different to theirs. "The whispering words in the background, people saying 'him, him, him' and you're not knowing why they're saying that. "You're left out of every internal, very close family things and that extended right through teenage years – I found it quite distressing."

But on that day when he was thrown through the window, Bobby knew. He was about 14 or 15 years old, and old enough to know something didn't feel right. "By then you know enough about what's going on, and something clicks – 'hang on, I'm not one of those people' and you start asking questions - of course, I never got any answers." The answers would come many years later. But Bobby has never been told by his adopted parents that was the case. "It was not the 'done thing' to tell me, because it happened so often," he said. "It's like you were a piece of property, you weren't a human being. "It was another family member that ended up admitting the truth to me," he said. And that was long after Bobby started

searching for answers; long after he started asking questions as a young teenager.

“Being a teenager you become a young adult, you become rebellious and do different things in the world, you become dependent as a person and so those things are repressed, you put them aside,” he said. “But at the same time you act out, you have behaviours in your life, you can’t form relationships easily, friendships are very tenuous because you have a lack of trust “You feel like you don’t belong, not even to your family but to society in general.”

The catalyst to seek the truth was after Bobby had his own family and he wanted his medical history. After several years of heartache and searching, Bobby learnt his birth name. It was luck that would then reconnect him with his family. Bobby was on the internet one day, chatting to like-minded people about music, when a person with the same surname appeared. He kept seeing the name in the following weeks, and eventually sent a message asking if that person was related to a name he knew to be one of his brothers. “That night, I got a message back saying ‘yeah, why?’ “I said ‘I think I may be your uncle.’”

Fortunately, but something which is not the case with many people seeking their birth families, the person at the other end of the email was receptive and said they would contact their father. “The next minute I got a phone call from a man saying you better come down and see me and bring any evidence, which I did,” Bobby said. And so began Bobby’s reconnection with his family.

His eldest sister had left home before he was born and the others could not remember their mother’s last two pregnancies. “My eldest sister remembered mum being very sick for about four months, and she always thought it was a gall bladder thing, she said mum went into hospital for an operation.” Bobby is now close to his two sisters, and was lucky to form a close bond with his third sister before she died. He shares different relationships with his brothers, one of whom he sees little of, another to whom he shares a close bond and the third has taken a long time to form. “It’s taken a long time with him ... not knowing I existed, he felt he had been lied to all his life by mum and dad,” Bobby said.

“It’s a personal quiet communication, a sense of knowing we both did lose something in life. “But my deceased sister when we met, we knew we were brother and sister, it was unconditional love the second we met.” Bobby says life is now complicated, but he loves it.

After meeting his siblings, one of his brothers asked him away for a weekend. When he arrived, Bobby was surrounded by 60 people he had never met. Cousins, nephews, nieces. “That’s confusing again – this new world, new family ... which is your old family,” he said. Bobby had long moved on from his adopted family.

He cared for his adopted sister and her children before her death “because she was not being helped” by their adopted parents, but felt nothing to his adopted mother and father beyond that.

“She is still alive in a nursing home and I’ve done all that for her, she is an elderly person who should have decent final years even though personally I don’t love her,” he said. “Maybe I’m saying to her I’m giving you something you should have given to me as a child ... I’m giving you respect, I’m giving you dignity.” But despite meeting his new “old” family and moving on from his adopted life, Bobby doesn’t “think you can complete the story, there’s still mysteries out there”.

And he believes support groups such as VANISH are there to help those trying to find their way through that. “For three or four months the world can be good, but mothers’ day is a bad news day, birthdays are a bad news day ... birthdays are a reminder you were taken away from your mother”.

“I’ve got mum’s eulogy from her funeral, no mention of me and things like that. No two stories are the same, but there are others out there in the community that if you do feel isolated because of an adopting experience, you have other people there who want to talk with you, help you, show you how to search for family,” he said.

“You don’t have to do it on your own.”

**‘Bobby tells of cold history’, by Nicole Ferrie, Bendigo Advertiser 17th May 2014**

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**Please check the VANISH Website for details of Support Groups in Melbourne and Regional Victoria and upcoming events.**

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