

To: Environment and Public Affairs Committee

Inquiry Name: Inquiry into Past Forced Adoptive Policies and Practices

Submission: Jane Dent (born Fiona Nicolson 24 January 1961)

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Western Australian Inquiry into Past Forced Adoptive Policies and Practices. Although I was not born in Western Australia, I have lived here for most of my life, my lived experiences as an adoptee echo those of Australian survivors of the Forced Adoption Era, and I have regularly needed to access services in WA to understand and manage the consequences of my adoption. This submission will be my personal story. I believe there is enough information out there, in the way of scholarly articles, scientific studies from various psychologists and others that explain the trauma of adoption and lifelong struggles we face after adoption no matter how loving our adoptive family may have been. Personal stories can bring theory to life, provoke thought, allow you to step into another's life and, ultimately, change minds. In my story I will attempt to detail how my life's journey was hijacked by my adoption and I hope to challenge the long-standing societal narrative around adoption that contributes to our distress from the point of view of the adult adoptee.

I have been involved with Adoption Jigsaw WA since it's early days, (1978), listened to the Western Australian Adoption Apology in 2010, the National Apology delivered by then Prime Minister Julia Gillard in 2013, participated in the Australian Government Institute of Family Studies research into Past Adoption Experiences conducted in 2012 and have followed closely the Victorian Inquiry into Historical Forced Adoptions (2021). Therefore, I find it hard to be confident that this inquiry will achieve the results we hope for but, for the sake of all survivors of past adoption practices in our state and those affected by donor conception or surrogacy, who face similar issues with identity, I will remain optimistic.

In this submission the parents who raised me will be referred to as my adoptive parents or Mum (E) and Dad (A). The parents to whom I was born, with whom I share my genes, will be referred to as my mother (M) and father (F) as that is how I have always thought of them.

"You can't really know where you are going until you know where you have been." Maya Angelou

Birth January 1961

My mother, a single, 34-year-old highly qualified district nurse, gave birth to me in a Mother and Baby home. I was named Fiona. My father was an older married man with other children; however, he did care for my mother. Apparently, after my birth, he travelled from his small village to visit us and to sign my birth certificate. Only years later would the significance of this visit be apparent to me. At some point my father (F) had made the decision to stay with his wife but offered to raise me with his family. My mother (M) had to decide whether she could raise me alone, allow F to take me or succumb to the unrelenting pressure from her doctor, minister and society in general to put me

up for adoption. Obviously, this was an enormous decision for her as, shortly after my birth, I was transferred to a Children's Home where I languished until my adoption many months later. My mother will not speak of this time and, as a mother myself, I cannot imagine what she was going through.

July 1961

My adoptive parents (A and E) received a letter from the church run adoption agency on 26th July 1961 informing them of 'a little girl available for adoption' and would they like to come to see this child. By the 30th of July baby Fiona was in the care of these random strangers, her 'new' parents, and was now to be known as Jane. Physically baby 'Jane' responded well. She put on weight after her failure to thrive in the children's home, although E said she had to be always trying to feed me...in the pram, in the bath...anywhere she could because most of the time I just wanted to sleep. I also caught up on the physical developmental milestones I had been lacking and was soon holding my head up, pushing up on my arms and learning to sit without support. But how was I socially and emotionally? Most babies can recognise their own name by six months and recognise and respond to their primary caregiver long before that. I will never know how I responded to my 'new' name, but I do know I have had lifelong difficulty with attachment, the ability to trust others and have been averse to any form of physical contact.

September 1961

After nine months and knowing that I was now in the care of prospective adopters, both my mother and father signed 'Consent to Adopt' forms.

My adoptive parents were now required to wait until my adoption was formalised and an Adoption Order was granted on 19th January 1962. With no oversight as to my wellbeing, by my first birthday we had left my country of birth and returned to A and E's home in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). I would never live in the country of my birth again. In 1964 we moved to England before migrating to Western Australia in 1968.

Childhood

Those strangers, who became parents to me, and my younger brother were good people. Having no extended family in Australia, we were a closeknit family. Mum and Dad loved us and each other very much, we were safe and comfortable. We always knew we were adopted, and I can never remember a specific moment I was told of my adoption. It was not possible to hide my adoption because, as far as I am aware, unlike most other adoptees, I never had a fictional birth certificate in my adopted name, with adoptive parents listed as if I were born to them. My only form of identification if I needed a passport, bank account etc, was my 'Certificate of Adoption'. While it was sometimes uncomfortable having to explain to officials why I had no birth certificate, I am now grateful that my start in life was not kept from me. As is common amongst adoptees of this era, I felt special, I believed the old trope that my mother was unable to look after me and had made the greatest sacrifice out of love for me. My father just didn't feature.

However, love alone does not negate the trauma of adoption. We still had secrets. Our adoption could be spoken of freely within our immediate family but was never to be mentioned outside, even to our closest friends. Mum explained that this was to protect Dad's feelings as people may judge him if they knew he couldn't father his own children. In hindsight I believe she was protecting her own feelings of grief at not being able to conceive. If asked by someone who we took after I was always tongue-tied while Mum would concoct some story. To this day, even after the death of my adoptive parents, I struggle with this deceit, always being cautious of what I say and to whom. Living close to Mum and Dad, my own immediate family have also been expected to 'keep the secret'. Many a kick under the table has my husband suffered for mentioning my original family, and how difficult it has been to be open with my children about my two families while trying to restrict what they say in front of their adoptive grandparents for fear of upsetting them.

I believe adoptive parents were as much victims as mothers and babies. They received no support to deal with their own grief over their infertility, no help to understand an adopted child's needs and, often challenging, behaviour and were erroneously led to believe that 'love was enough' to raise a child. Without a doubt, Mum's unresolved feelings of grief and shame, and bouts of depression permeated our lives. 'Keeping the secret' was always easier for me than having to deal with her hurt.

I was a quiet child; I was polite and reserved. I did very well at school, participated in sport and other activities, though often reluctantly, and seemingly made close friends at each of the schools I attended. Never in the 'popular' group, my friends have always been other outsiders of diverse backgrounds. I chose a life of obedience and acquiescence. This was the 'compliant' adoptee often spoken of in adoption literature. In fact, I was chronically shy, always allowing Mum to speak for me, often withdrawn, preferring to read a book than socialise, suffered severe separation anxiety and spent much of my time being called aloof or grumpy when I was neither. I just have difficulty showing emotion. On meeting my half-siblings and their families for the first time, my children, when asked what my biological family were like, announced that 'they are just like Mum, but fun!' Did I completely miss out on the 'fun' gene? I doubt it. Languishing in the children's home I would not have had the opportunity to bond with a primary caregiver. Lacking maternal mirroring in those early months as I was fed and changed to a schedule by a roster of busy nurses or care assistants means I was denied those early social experiences so vital to a child's sense of secure attachment, of being loveable, and even, of being there at all. Although I have no conscious memory of this time, throughout my life I have been haunted by a recurring dream, or perhaps vision, as I see it during waking hours. In a large, clinically white, high-ceiling room, with sunlight pouring through the large bay window are rows of white-painted, iron cots with crisp white sheets. Looking into these cots you expect to see contented, sleeping babies. In my vision, these cots each contain a cocoon, like that of a silkworm, spun in an unbreakable, single strand, the colour of autumn leaves and with no sign of what is within, and with no way of emerging. It is at this point that I awaken in panic. My separation from my mother, subsequent lifelong unresolved and unrecognised grief, means I have lived with complex PTSD, low-grade depression, panic attacks, poor self-esteem, hypervigilance and the tendency to catastrophise. During the recent Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry graphic details of

several cases of abuse by a staff member of this home have emerged. While these occurred after my time it brings home just how vulnerable I was and how young children in out-of-home care still are. I have attempted to access my records from my time in care but have been told by the institutions involved that no records from this time survive.

The teenage years provided some relief. The teddy I had clung to obsessively and never slept without was replaced with alcohol, drugs, nicotine and sex as I attempted to fill some, yet unrecognised void. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] so if I continued to succeed at school, this self-medicating allowed me to enjoy some space to let loose and try and discover 'me' and my own identity. And to escape the grief and trauma that adoptees feel but have no outlet to process. The battle not to succumb to these addictions is ongoing for me.

Searching

I began university in Perth around the same time Adoption Jigsaw WA was established to lobby for change to adoption laws in Western Australia, and to provide advice to adoptees wishing to trace original family. After reading an article in the local paper, I contacted Jigsaw founder Glennis Dees. Little did I know then that this would be the start of a lifelong quest, a journey that would inform everything I chose to do with my life thereafter. I withdrew from university (never to return), found work to provide funds for my search, and applied for my original birth certificate. My certificate duly arrived at my work. I didn't get it sent to home because I wanted to avoid the hurt, I knew my Mum would be unable to hide despite her outwardly being supportive of my search. Fortunately, that morning I had been assigned a solitary task at the far end of the long computer room. Perched on a stool I took a breath and opened the envelope. Finally, I had my name and my mother's name, but the next revelation was completely unexpected ...my father's name and address. I had always been led to believe that fathers were always unknown or uninterested and were never permitted to sign the birth certificates. I had the names and addresses of both my parents. I cannot even begin to describe what that feels like.

A year and a half of scrimping and saving later I was on my way, halfway around the world to begin my search. Although I had my parents' names, forever the compliant adoptee, I agreed to counselling and making contact through a social worker. This woman agreed to contact my mother but flatly refused to contact my father. Again, I was told that fathers never want to know but somewhere inside I knew if I was anything at all like him, he would want to know. While waiting to hear if my mother had been found I approached a male social worker who agreed to reach out to my father. Within days I was speaking to F on the phone and, while he was as nervous as I was, he was also delighted.

During this time, I was staying with my adoptive grandmother and aunt. While my aunt was supportive in a pragmatic fashion providing accommodation, arranging appointments, transport, etc., my grandmother was anything but, often asking me to think of my Mum and Dad and how

ungrateful I was being. It was a terribly lonely time until the male social worker put me in touch with a few other adoptees. This was when I first realised how important and validating it is to speak with others with shared experience.

The Fairytale

Many adoption stories speak of the fairy-tale of reunion and for me, for a moment, it was fairy-tale. On a beautiful autumn day, I got out of the car in a fairy-tale village, opened a little fairy-tale iron gate onto a fairy-tale path leading to a fairy-tale little white house. He was at the door and the next moments are unforgettable. My hand in his, the softness of his cheek against mine, his scent. I was taken aback by how familiar it felt, I knew immediately we had met before. Stepping through the front door I was further discombobulated on seeing, on the dresser, a photograph of me as a child. But, of course, it wasn't me. It was one of F's grandchildren, but this was the first time I has ever seen myself mirrored in someone else. I remember little else of that first visit except that it was over too soon, and it was time to leave. Then and there the fairy-tale ended, and the crushing reality dawned of how similar we were and how much we had missed in each other's lives. The truth that I had two parents who, while not together, had been willing to raise me was a revelation. No longer was reunion purely about satisfying my curiosity and obtaining medical information. Safely back in the car, it was now that my body betrayed what my mind had always managed to suppress. Shaking uncontrollably, I was unable to stop the racking sobs that seemed to come from nowhere. We pulled over and I was violently ill. It was some time before I was composed enough to continue the journey. With hindsight I understand that such an unprecedented, such a visceral reaction was a response to a long-buried trauma memory that had been triggered by my reunion with a father whom I had met before and who wished to raise me but was not permitted to. And it would not be the last time I would experience such a terrifying reaction however it would be many years and many hours of expensive counselling before I could recognise the root cause.

Mother

Soon I heard that my mother had been located, was living in New York but would leave to meet me immediately. A few years after my adoption she had moved to New York for a new life where she knew no one. In photographs before my birth, she stands tall, confident and full of life. In contrast, photographs after my birth show a ghostly figure shrinking into the background, a shadow of her former self. M has never married or had other children. I believe she has never recovered from the trauma of my birth and subsequent adoption. Since our first meeting we have become as close as is possible given the trauma we both carry. While I understand I am the most important person in her life it is still a problematic relationship. I have also met, and have an on-going relationship with, her brother and sister and nephews. However, she has never been able to speak of the time surrounding my birth except to curse 'that doctor and that minister!'

After the initial reunion with my mother and father I followed M to New York where I shared her small apartment for six months and we got to know one another. This was a difficult time. M has never been able to speak of her feelings. We did try counselling together but after one session she

refused to continue. After six months, unable to extend my visa, I chose not to return to Australia but to live in the UK where I could work and would be close enough to visit, as often as possible, both M and F, and their extended families.

Hiraeth (Welsh) A homesickness for a home to which you cannot return, a home which maybe never was, the nostalgia, the yearning, the grief for the lost places of your past. A pull on the heart that conveys a distinct feeling of missing something irretrievably lost.

I did return to Australia some years later but felt bereft. Yearning to be with my 'own' family meant they were on my mind each day. This yearning is not simply just missing someone but a physiological phenomenon that is difficult to describe and affects your physical and emotional wellbeing. Even experienced counsellors I've spoken seem to have a poor understanding of this feeling. My husband and I, and our children have never had 'just a holiday'. Everything, our time and resources, has centred around the next trip to be with my family, including our honeymoon. Of course, no matter how much time we spend together, how well we get on, how closely our spiritual and political views align (and they do), we can never make up for all those lost years, all those shared experiences that bind most families together in such a comfortable way.

Siblings

I have three older half-siblings who didn't know of my existence until my father died. Clearing out their parent's home they found my letters and photographs all carefully kept together. Since their first letter to me, informing me of my father's death, we have been in constant touch. This first letter demonstrates how disappointed they were that they hadn't known about me sooner and how welcomed I have been into the family. Another example of the ripple effects of adoption, how it affects not only the parents and child but extended family as well.

Some years after this first contact with my siblings, my niece invited us to her wedding, and this would be the first time we would all meet. My children spent time with their cousins and afterwards my oldest son, who was sixteen at the time, described feeling as though he had come home. Not least because he shares his red hair with most of his cousins. My children all play a variety of musical instruments despite neither my husband nor me growing up in musical families. My two sons always preferred the drums, a passion, we discovered, that is shared with my two brothers.

Once the wedding celebrations were over, my siblings came to the station to see us off. As the train pulled away, I again experienced the uncontrollable shaking and crying. My children were shocked and scared to see their normally calm, collected mother in such a state. This episode frightened me enough to know I needed to invest in more targeted therapy. Unfortunate I have yet to find a suitable therapist truly able to address the impact my adoption has had on my life. Living in a regional area has also added to the difficulty and expense of accessing appropriate professional support.

Language as culture

To many people language is communication but to indigenous populations it is widely acknowledged that language is far more than mere communication. Language is recognised as culture, incorporating history, place, spiritual belief, kin and, most importantly, identity. The role of language to our First Nations people and reconciliation is so fundamentally important, that our government, and others around the world, fully support efforts to retain and strengthen these languages. I do not speak my mother's first language. I never had the opportunity to learn it because, until our reunion, I was not even aware that English was not her first language. Of course, I heard it spoken for the nine months before my birth and the short time we were together after my birth. She expects me to understand and uses it often when we meet and in letters...after all I am her daughter. It certainly explains why hearing her language in conversation or in song has always triggered great sadness in me. Spending time with my mother's extended family and within their small community I feel on the one hand, accepted and very much at home because my physical appearance allows me to fit in but on the other hand I am very much on the outside because we do not share a language. Stepping onto the ferry from the mainland to my mother's island home, English drops away as the crew and most fellow passengers use their native tongue. The dislocation I have always felt within my adoptive family and adopted country also drops away as I feel like I have arrived home, it is so comforting, like donning a warm blanket.

Today

At sixty-two years of age, I am still coping with the consequences of my adoption. My last visit to my mother's home in New York was late 2015 and I fully intended to return as soon as I could. Being primary carer to my aging adoptive parents this was not possible until both had passed away. Of course, by now Western Australia was in the midst of the Covid pandemic and international travel restrictions were in place. While my mother and I were able to speak on the phone this was bearable, however at some point I was unable to contact her and became increasingly concerned about her health, given the horror stories we were hearing about Covid in the USA. I attempted to contact her doctor but received no reply. Eventually I received an email from a local police officer who had conducted a welfare check and then transferred M to hospital for a minor skin condition. He informed me that my mother had then been admitted to a nursing home against her will. I was able to speak with her, but she was very distressed and wanting to go home. I then lost all contact when M was moved to a room with no telephone and my calls and emails to the aged care facility went unanswered. In January 2022, out of the blue, I received a copy of an 'Application for the Appointment of a Guardian' from the Supreme Court of the State of New York because my mother had been assessed as unable to manage her own affairs. I attempted to contact the facility and M's court appointed attorney however they refused to speak with me. Shortly afterwards I was invited to appear at the Guardianship hearing. This was the worst experience of my life! After answering several questions, under oath, from the judge, I was informed that an objection to my presence had been made and I was therefore excluded. Never have I felt so helpless. Even with proof of our long, loving relationship plus being listed as a beneficiary (nursing home staff and attorney had searched

my mother's home) I have absolutely no rights as regards my own mother's care and welfare. I also have been unable to find out what has happened to the contents of her apartment or retrieve personal items (letters, photographs etc from myself and my children).

In due course the outcome of the guardianship hearing arrived with the name of the guardian. As M has no family able to fill that role and I am not considered family, this is a state-appointed official.

As soon as WA's Covid travel restrictions were lifted my husband, daughter and I flew to New York. I was surprised to see M looking so well and stunned when the nursing home nursing staff kept asking why she was there when she was quite capable of looking after herself. Despite my efforts I was unable to speak with the guardian and the social worker did not attend the appointments I made with her. I am left feeling very much persona-non-grata. I cannot call my mother, and no-one replies to my emails, so my only option now is to engage my own lawyer for advice. This will be a substantial cost. Now nearing the end of her life, I feel she has been stolen from me, just as I was once stolen from her.

Since the death of my adoptive parents, I feel a great weight has lifted as I no longer need to balance the conflicting needs and emotions of my two families. For the first time in my life, I feel free to display photographs around my home. This I avoided in the past because I wanted to incorporate all my families, but this would invite comments from my adoptive mum that exposed her hurt and bitterness and, in turn, hurt me and this was something I wasn't prepared to deal with. For the same reason I felt unable to invite my mother to my wedding as much as I wished her to be there. As some acknowledgement we chose to marry on her birthday.

Also, upon the death of my parents, as executor of their estate, I asked for my adopted status to be recorded on their death certificates only to be informed that there was no provision for this piece of truth telling. I suspect it will also be difficult if not impossible to be listed as my mother's daughter on her death certificate when she passes away. Future family genealogists will run into roadblocks as certificates do not reflect correct relationships or align with DNA results.

Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to consider my submission. Telling my story publicly for the first time has not been easy. Fortunately, I am not included in the higher-than-average statistics of adoptee suicides, or incarceration but I continue to struggle with 'The Primal Wound' describe by Nancy Verrier and those core issues of loss, rejection, guilt, grief, identity and intimacy identified by D. Silverstein and S. Kaplan. A link to a summary of their work by the Victorian Adoption Network for Information and Self-Help (VANISH) is attached below.

<https://vanish.org.au/media/17323/lifelong-issues-in-adoption-by-silverstein-and-kaplan.pdf>

Since my first contact with my own family, I have tried many and varied forms of therapy to enable me to cope with the challenges I have faced. Many are prohibitive financially; others are inaccessible on a regular basis as I live regionally and those that are affordable and accessible are

usually unproven. Ocean swimming, yoga, supervised gym sessions and contact with other adoptees are what currently keeps my stress and anxiety manageable. Along with the thought that, if I stay strong, keep persevering and keep searching, then, like Dr Who, I will find that elusive portal to that parallel universe where I am living the life that could have been. It will also not be perfect but perhaps is a place where I do not always have to be 'good' to avoid being abandoned. Where birthdays are a time of celebration not mourning. Where no-one invalidates my experience by telling me I am 'lucky' or 'better off' or 'to be grateful'. Where I have just one life. A life where I know who I am and where I fit.

I request the committee consider –

- Funding for research into the long-term effects of adoption, and research into the most effective wellbeing and psychological support for survivors.
- Examining the role of the State government, health services, institutions and medical professionals in the promotion of adoption as the only option for single women. And the treatment of these mothers.
- How widespread was the use of the, now discontinued, anti-lactation drug Diethylstilboestrol (DES) was, and what the effects are on the mothers, their children and grandchildren of this carcinogenic drug. And provide appropriate screening.
- The provision of free, easily accessible support services for survivors. These services are delivered by professionals highly trained in the specific needs of those persons affected by adoption in conjunction with those having lived experience. Services need to include, but not limited to, search and connect, psychological support, peer support, medical and legal advice. A one-stop shop perhaps.
- Search agencies are permitted to access all records and information they require to facilitate contact and reunion. At no cost.
- The provision of a Gold Card (or similar) to ease the burden survivors face to meet the cost of ongoing physical and psychological health concerns.
- The provision of all documentation pertaining to a person's adoption, including original birth certificate, birth and medical records, court process papers and any other documentation deemed important to said person free of charge and without current extended wait times.
- Ensuring tertiary training of health professionals includes more extensive coverage of adoption related trauma and treatment.
- Funding for research into alternatives to adoption where the rights of the child are first and foremost, and a child can retain their identity, connection to kin, culture, language and religious ties.
- Ensuring history does not repeat itself under a different guise i.e., open adoption, donor conception or surrogacy.
- Adoptees retain their original birth certificate and are issued with a Certificate of Adoption and not an amended birth certificate.

- Effective ways to raise public awareness of the trauma of adoption (past and present), particularly amongst health professionals and community service providers.
- Mandatory disclosure of adopted status and ban on all contact vetos. Locate and inform all adopted people of their adopted status, through a supported process facilitated by trained psychologists.
- Curtailing the promotion of adoption as a family creation option, particularly amongst celebrities, influencers and religious organisations.
- Allowing adoptees, a clear and simplified pathway to revoke their adoption order fee free.
- Allowing adoptees to have their father's name added to their original birth certificate.
- Establishing provision for adopted people to have their adopted status noted on the adoptive parents' death certificates. Similarly, to be named on the death certificate of the natural parents. Which parents will be listed on my own death certificate when the time comes?
- Allowing representatives from adoptee support and advocacy groups a place on advisory and reference committees, and input into policy and planning regarding adoption and other permanent care for children.