

*My name is Sue Cutten. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1971 I gave birth to a beautiful baby boy who was forcibly adopted soon after. This is my story.*

**The year is 1970.** I'm 18 years old and still living at home in the small gold mining town of Norseman, Western Australia. I was seeing a young police officer who was stationed in the town, a relationship that was kept from my parents and the townspeople.

In November of that year, I began to suspect that I might be pregnant. I believe my mother also had her suspicions, given she tracked the monthly cycles of her three daughters. A few weeks passed and nothing was said until I was one Sunday afternoon.

My father, [REDACTED], called me into his office. Upon entering his office, I was surprised to find the Officer in Charge (*OIC*) of the Norseman Police Station. My father wasted no time and asked me directly if I was pregnant and who was the father. I hesitated for a moment, but then mentioned the young police officer's name and confirmed that I was indeed pregnant. I tried to reassure my father that everything would be fine, that I could have the baby, continue working part-time as a telephonist, and still live at home. Back then, the legal age of adulthood was 21. Little did I know how wrong I was. My father reached an agreement with the OIC that saw the unborn baby's father transferred to the Bunbury police station. None of this was ever mentioned to my siblings, and life carried on as normal, at least for the next few weeks.

One day my mother approached me with a bottle of red pills, and instructed me to take them, hoping they would induce an abortion. I later discovered that my parents had obtained these pills from an advertisement in a women's magazine that promised all sorts of remedies. (*Subsequent research would identify these pills as Coloxyl tablets, a medicine used to manage constipation*). I was furious with my mother and made it clear to her that there had better not be anything wrong with my baby.

As it turned out, I remained pregnant, and a couple of weeks later, I was sent to the Catherine McAuley Centre in Wembley (*Perth*), a place for unwed mothers. Once admitted, we were not allowed to leave until we had given birth to our babies. The place was a horrid establishment run by cruel nuns who viewed us as "bad girls." Our dormitory was dismal, and each day we were made to work, taking care of orphans and foster children, all the while knowing that our own babies would end up in similar circumstances. The treatment at the Centre was dreadful for the little ones, and I was determined that none of those nuns would deliver my child, nor would I allow my child to be raised in that institution. I was determined to find a way out.

Through a kind nun whom I knew from Norseman and who was residing in Perth, I managed to make contact and pleaded with her to help me leave the Centre. She contacted my parents and convinced them to let me live in Perth with a family friend from Norseman.

A representative from the Child Welfare Department, [REDACTED], contacted me and arranged for regular meetings. However, it became evident after a couple of visits that [REDACTED] had been speaking with my father, as the focus of our conversations was always on what was best for my baby and giving him up for adoption. These visits were emotionally devastating.

During my pregnancy, my parents would occasionally call, but only to reinforce the idea that giving up my baby was the best decision. On my final visit to [REDACTED], I gave her a teddy bear and a gollywog to pass on to my baby, as well as a message for the adoptive parents that I would always love and remember my child. When it came time to give birth, the process was rather dramatic. My baby was larger than expected, and I had to undergo a vacuum birth. After the birth, my son was quickly whisked away, leaving behind an empty cot with a triangle symbolizing adoption. I was cleaned up and placed in a large ward with other mothers and babies. However, unwed mothers were later transferred to the Kensington Annex, where our babies were kept in a nearby nursery. We could hear their cries, and our breasts continued producing milk, but we were not allowed to see them. It was a cruel and heart-wrenching situation. At one point, a nurse injected our breasts and bound them to stop milk production, all the while berating us as "bad girls" and warning us not to put ourselves in this situation again. We were informed that we would remain in the Kensington Annex with our babies for six weeks until the adoption process was finalized. The emotional toll became too much for me, and I discharged myself from the hospital, still wearing the breast binder.

Six weeks later, after the birth of my son I was instructed by my father to visit the Supreme Court to sign away my parental rights. As I was legally underage, my father had to sign these documents too. It was a gut-wrenching experience being forced to sign away your own child. I felt intense anger towards my parents for this.

Upon my return to Norseman, my father instructed me to tell anyone who asked that I had been on a holiday, and my child was never to be mentioned again. However, on my first day back in town, while walking home from the shops, a well-known gentleman in a car stopped me and callously remarked, "So the bike's back, ready to be ridden again." It was evident that the town knew where I had been.

In November 1971 I met and later married my now husband. From the beginning, he knew about my past and that I had a child who had been placed for adoption.

We made the decision to tell our future children of their half-brother as soon as they could understand, the first of who was born in May 1973, a daughter.

A few years after my son's adoption, I was reminded of this painful experience. My younger sister and her boyfriend became pregnant. Underage and unwed, they travelled to England, where they were able to choose a family to adopt their child. A decision they were allowed to make as young parents. A decision that was supported by my parents. The difference that hurts me is how warmly her child was welcomed into our family. My parents would talk about and share photos of him openly, yet I had to keep my lips sealed about my first born.

In the early nineteen eighties, my husband and I agreed that I should attempt to establish contact with my adopted son, so I signed up to an organization called Jigsaw. Over the next few years, I received scattered and non-identifying information from Jigsaw about my son. I also applied for my son's original birth certificate, and received it, though with the names blacked out (*redacted*). With recent changes to the archaic adoption legislation, I have since managed to obtain a regular, non-redacted birth certificate.

Every year, I would send my son a birthday card through Jigsaw, hoping it would be passed on to him. I vividly remember sending him a card for his 21st birthday, only to be assured by the Jigsaw representative that it would be given to him after the special day to avoid spoiling his celebration. One evening, a couple of weeks after his twenty-first birthday, I received a phone call from a woman who identified herself as my son's older half-sister. She believed that my son needed to know more about my side of the family and asked if I could send photos. I asked her how she obtained my details, considering the supposed confidentiality of Jigsaw, though was not provided an answer. Before ending the call, I inquired if my son had received his 21st birthday card. To my dismay, she informed me that they decided not to give it to him. They wanted to 'preserve his special day'.

I openly communicated my concerns about Jigsaw with my siblings. Whilst Jigsaw was meant to act as conduit for the communication of parent and child, it appeared they were taking sides in how they were managing the information they were given. In their eyes, the relinquishing parent was at fault, and the child was the victim. If only they knew the pain of being forced to relinquish your first-born child. Sadly, we were both victims.

With the knowledge of my troubles dealing with Jigsaw, my eldest brother took it upon himself to track down my son and eventually spoke to him in the town of Merredin. The process of locating him was made easier, given they both worked in the same industry [REDACTED]. This made my son feel uneasy, and with the help of his eldest half-sister, he put a veto on any contact from myself or any member of my immediate family or relatives. I was informed by my counsellor at

Jigsaw that attempting to contact my son could result in a hefty fine or even jail time. Once again, the relinquishing parent suffered the consequences. This frightened me immensely, and I was angry at my brother for his actions, though understood his intention.

Some years later, our youngest daughter managed to establish contact with my son, as they both lived in the city of Melbourne. Through their discussions over several months, he expressed a desire to meet me, which we did. And what an incredible experience: 37 years after being forced to give up my son, we meet for the first time. I invited him to my hometown of Esperance to meet my parents, my husband, our eldest daughter, her husband, and their four children. I felt immense pride, introducing him to all my closest friends. Soon after he also met our son whilst in Perth. This was a bittersweet moment for both men, as they both expressed a desire to grow up with a brother.

My adopted son has since shared some insight into his upbringing. He was placed with his adoptive family around six to eight weeks after his birth and was legally adopted in late 1973. His adoptive father left his wife, and my son lost contact with his father a few years later. His adoptive father later died.

It's now the year 2023. I'm a 71-year-old mother to four children and am fortunate that my first son now calls me "Mum," and is a real part of our family. He fully supports me in sharing this story. As a relinquishing parent, my love and concern for my children never cease.

*There are many reasons for sharing my story with this committee. As a mother who was forced to relinquish her children, I have many questions. I've asked many of these to those people, and those institutes willing to listen, though struggled to receive straight answers. On this front, I hope this committee can succeed where I have not.*

*This committee also allows my story to be heard, and recorded so that it cannot be forgotten. The practice of forced adoption should never be repeated. And finally, an apology. I raised my children with good morals and manners. If, and when they make mistakes in life, they admit to them and apologise to those impacted. My aging father couldn't do this before he passed, but there's hope in 2023 that my government, and the institutions involved in the practice of forced adoption can.*