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Dear Committee,

Please find a short submission to the 2023 Inquiry on Forced Adoption.

1. Statement
2. Excerpt from my 2016 Miles Franklin Winning novel, *Extinctions*. The novel deals extensively with the impact of forced removal, adoption (and to a lesser extent, foster care), on adoptees, families and the wider social legacy.

1. Statement.

I am a 64 year-old writer and academic, and the mother of two children, one of whom was adopted from China at the age of two, in 2007. But one does not have to be a mother, or parent a child, to understand the enormity of adoption and its impact on all parties.

Regardless of the 'goodwill' of government agencies and adoptive parents, the adopted child suffers. It is a myth that the 'good parent' or 'best practice' can mitigate the social and psychic impact of adoption. This is not to say that adoption is a 'bad' thing; rather, it is never a 'good thing'. Recognition of the limits of a practice, is, I believe, the duty of all levels of government, and I hope informs this inquiry. Such recognition released the adoptee from the expectation that they feel they are the benefactor of a significant windfall: a nice new (usually) heterosexual family who will offer, the story goes, stability and continuity. For this, the adopted child is supposed to feel grateful for their loss, and guilty if they don't.

It is the case that every generation is gifted with hindsight. It is hindsight that has shown us that what is thought at any particular historical moment as 'good practice' (in the case of adoption, as best for the child and best for the birth mother) is subject to revision and critique, and (in our case) revealed to be injurious to the parties involved. Insight and hindsight are the result not just of 'new policy' emerging top down from the sociology, psychology, and social research, but come from brave and often-lonely voices of wounded parties: that is, the adoptees and their families.

At the level of government, better practice comes from listening.

Even now, with open adoption practices and an understanding of the psychology of trauma and the significance of early child-rearing and attachment, powerful

parties (that is, government agencies, intercountry agencies etc) believe they are acting in the best interests of the child. We have to acknowledge that even now, we will look back and see how we have failed.

I write this in support of the women and men who have suffered and are still suffering. They are searching, and they need support. I know myself that not all searches will lead to answers; I have conducted research in the State archives, and more recently travelled to China with my daughter to try to access her adoption records. I know how recalcitrant and impenetrable the past can be when the opaque traces are buried in government files (in our case, in Mandarin).

We went looking in China, but we found no definitive answers. Was my daughter devastated? No; rather, she felt acknowledged; she felt that her adoptive parents believed there was something - somebody - worth looking for. She felt validated in her experience of profound loss.

Critics of processes like this inquiry may say that adult adoptees are looking for something they may never find, they may argue that recovery of what is lost is impossible, and that the past is the past. What these critics do not realise is that in acknowledging that the (adult) child has the right to search and *not* find, the community is acknowledging and honouring their loss.

On a practical level, I can say from experience that archival research and accessing closed files is difficult, even for experienced researchers. Adult adoptees need to be listened to, validated, but they also need practical support in the form of access and training, and funding to search – even if they do not find.

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2. Excerpt; *Extinctions*, UWAP, 2016.

Pages 200 – 204.

(Fred, retired engineer and the protagonist, is the father of an adult adoptee who is an Indigenous Australian. In this scene he is dining for the first time with his neighbour, Jan. Both are living independently in an upmarket retirement village in Perth.)

‘Perhaps I should tell you a story now, Fred. And look, just in time, more food.’

Jan took up her chopsticks and shook out a long length of pink fillet, dangled it in the green gelati, and then lowered into her mouth. She groaned. ‘How utterly decadent. So are you listening, Fred?’

Fred nodded.

‘My mother was South African. Her father was Scottish and her mother was what they called a Cape Coloured, a local girl. They both died when my mother was fifteen, in a plane crash. Her father was an administrative officer. He’d taken his wife with him over the Drakensberg Mountains from Johannesburg to Mozambique, in a Junkers Ju. That’s a small plane. Sam researched it all for me. They’d left my mother at boarding school. This was in the late ‘30s, before the National Party brought in Apartheid, before the ANC and well before Mandela. But my mother still had to endure segregation. She came to Australia with the money left to her by her parents. She had enrolled to train as a nurse. She always wanted to be a midwife and work in South Africa. She met the man who became my father in the hospital. He was a well-known doctor, a heart specialist—I always thought that was so ironic—broken heart specialist, more like it. He was older and very married. My mother was only eighteen—just a baby. She was very beautiful and she thought they were in love. He took her to the Adelphi Hotel, in St. George’s Terrace. It’s long gone now. Do you remember it, Fred, or was it before your time? I know it was the Adelphi because she stole a plate from the restaurant at the hotel. I still have that plate—remind me to show it to you.’

She shook out another ribbon of beef. He liked the way Jan ate. She revelled in her food. Martha was a great cook, but pushed and picked her way around a plate and would end up covering it with plastic and putting it in the fridge. ‘Cooking and eating don’t go together,’ she always said. He pushed Martha aside.

‘Go on, Jan.’

‘When she found out she was pregnant he arranged for her to go into a place up in North Fremantle. I used to drive up there to look at it. It was called Hillcrest. It’s all different now that they’ve knocked down the old buildings—I think it’s aged care, but up until the 1970s it was a place for unmarried girls. They arranged adoptions from there too. In the end I went to a couple that did their best, but they had no other children and it was hard. I was such a lonely kid. Back then everyone had to pretend that I wasn’t adopted and didn’t look different to my parents, although I did. There was so much people wouldn’t talk about — or couldn’t. My mother and father were such a pink and white couple it must have been a hard ask for them too, having a little olive-skinned girl with crazy hair. They had a little business in Fremantle selling adding machines and business stationary, but they didn’t have much formal education themselves, and I was a quick, smart girl who loved reading and writing. I gave them hell.’

‘I’m sure they understood,’ he said.

‘No, I don’t think they did, Fred. Nobody did, back then. Adoption was shameful. It was big secret. They were kind people, just very drawn inwards. I think I completely confounded them. I was loud and talkative and I loved to laugh. But I hated my skin and my curly hair. I liked my green eyes though.’

‘Your eyes are very striking,’ he said. So Jan was adopted. What were the chances of such a thing?

Jan took another mouthful. ‘Incredible,’ she muttered.

Fred nibbled at his food. He wanted to hear more.

‘Did you get on with them in the end?’

‘Oh, long before the end. We had to; they were all I had and I was all they had. They’ve been dead a very long time now. I became a Primary teacher, which I loved. I met my husband at a dance and almost straight away he asked me to marry him. We decided never to have children, but just to have fun. And we had so much fun. My parents loved Sam, and Sam loved them, even though they always wanted a grandchild. Sam was an Aussie, but his family was Italian way back, so he knew how to talk and how to cook. I was close to forty when my son was born, and we were thrilled, but shocked, as you are. But there you are, you got me talking again.’

‘So you located your birth mother?’

Jan laughed. ‘All these words you’ve got now, to keep things clear. I didn’t have those words when I was young. My birth mother didn’t have a good life. She never went back to finish her studies after the baby. It just gutted her. I finally tracked her down in Queensland. Sam helped me again. He was really good with research. My poor mother had been through some bad times with the wrong kind of men. She drank.’

Fred nodded.

‘She was stuck in a groove, or a ditch more like it, and she kept getting out and falling right back in.’

Fred didn’t answer. He took a mouthful of green mousse and quickly reached for the water.

Jan laughed. ‘They’ve used fresh wasabi, not the powder. We kept in touch. I sent her money. She always wrote me little thank you notes. I know it was very painful for her to give me up like that, but she really had no choice. All those years she had no idea if I was dead or alive. The first time we met she was so upset I had to leave and come back the next day.’

‘Did you find your father? Did you ever contact him?’

‘I knew his name, she told me that much. He was retired by then, but he was easy to find. He had an old colonial house up on the river overlooking the Yacht Club. I went there in my car and waited. Eventually he drove up in a big grey Mercedes-Benz. One weekend I parked around the corner and stood outside his house, right near the driveway. When he drove in I stared straight at him. I saw him do a double take. I could see his wife looking over at me, wondering why I was there. I like to imagine she knew as soon as she saw me. He knew, of course. I look just like my mother. He had children too, so I suppose I could have confronted him and forced a connection. But I had no truck with him. I just wanted to make him acknowledge me. He ruined my mother’s life, and I wanted to put a stone in his shoe for the rest of his life. In a different kind of story I might have got a gun and shot him, or demanded money or something, but no, I never actually met him. I sent him a note though, with some pictures of me as a baby and a toddler just to make sure he couldn’t do that thing that men do.’

‘Which is what?’

‘Pretend something didn’t happen when it did.’

‘Right,’ said Fred. ‘I suppose you mean me.’

Jan picked at the fillet and shook out another long thread, like a bird determined to get the worm.

‘It’s a sad story,’ he said.

‘All adoption stories are sad. How can they not be? My parents were good to me. They were just too quiet. Quiet people are hard work.’

‘What happened to your mother? Your birth mother?’

‘I find that a bit hard to talk about. Give me a moment.’ The waiter came for their plates.

‘Thank you,’ said Jan, ‘that was wonderful.’

Jan rolled her wine around her glass.

‘I don’t know how it was for your daughter, but the hardest thing about not knowing your biological mother or father is you feel so alone. It’s like being

the first of a brand new species—or the last, one of those sad, old beasts in some horrible zoo with a plaque saying, ‘The Last of the Something or Others’.
Jeanette—that was my mother’s name – she had cancer, but she didn’t tell me. I was overseas with Sam for two months. It was very quick, only six weeks from when she was diagnosed. I was contacted when they went through her things and found my name. They wanted someone to collect her body and pay for the funeral. She had no one of her own. It was so terrible, Fred.’

‘Pardon, Jan, what did you just say?’

‘I said there no one with her when she died. Are you even listening?’

‘No, not that; what did you just say, about being the last one?’

‘Being adopted, you’re the last of your kind—you know, the Thylacine, and the Dodo.’

‘It’s something my daughter is working on. What you just said about animals made me think of it.’ Could that be it? Was this exhibition all about adoption?

Jan tossed her napkin on the table and laughed. It was another of those laughs that meant the opposite of funny.

‘You’re incredible, Fred. I don’t think I’ve ever met a man like you. I just shared something with you that was very painful for me. My mother died and I wasn’t there. She was completely alone. I even stopped talking because I didn’t want to cry in front of you. Do you remember a little pause in the conversation? Or were you too busy working out how my story could help you work out your story?’

Silence had always been Fred’s best line of defence. When he and Martha disagreed he would argue right up to the point where she worked herself into a frenzy, and then he would stop talking and wait. Eventually she would calm down and apologize and he would forgive her. But it wasn’t working now. Jan called the waiter and ordered steamed rice. She looked out into the dunes. When the rice came, she turned to her meal with purpose. He was going to have to try something different this time.

‘Caroline is working on an exhibition about extinct animals. I never understood why it was so important to her. What you said made me see a connection. I’m sorry I was so caught up when you were speaking about Jennifer.’

‘Jeannette. My mother’s name was Jeannette.’

‘What a co-incidence— your names, I mean.’

‘It’s not a co-incidence at all, Fred. My parents knew my mother’s name. They gave me her name—almost. I loved them for that.’ Jan sighed loudly. ‘Do you

want rice? And I stand by what I said about you. This dinner is doing my head in, as my son used to say. How does Caroline feel about her birth mother? Has she had contact?’

‘Actually, for years she never wanted to contact her or find out anything about her birth mother. Unfortunately she died when Caroline was in her last year of school. The woman had a difficult life. We always encouraged her to contact her mother, but she always said she was quite content with us.’

None of this was true. He would explain it all to Jan later, when she was feeling better.

‘Really, Fred? I find that hard to believe, given all the things in the paper about forced removals and broken families. I know how it feels; if you don’t know your mother you have no one to measure yourself against. When I met my mother I looked at her and saw myself. I grew up hating my hair and my skin and my big mouth. Those things made me stand out from the people who raised me. But if you grow up loving your birth mother you grow up loving yourself. It’s not rocket science, is it? Could you pass the rice? You spend all those baby-years staring into her face, it must make it so much easier to love yourself—most of the work has been done for you. Do you see what I mean?’

‘Yes,’ said Fred. He saw exactly what she meant.

He passed the rice to Jan. ‘I suppose that Caroline has had a difficult time liking herself,’ he said slowly. ‘Not only is she adopted, but she’s Indigenous. Many people don’t see that she is Aboriginal; they think she is some exotic mix, or they don’t want to see it because of her light skin, and they think she doesn’t have the right to call herself Indigenous. She held herself apart because of it. Will you excuse me, Jan, I’m just going to remind Arial to watch out for the RAC van.’