

# Hannah Spanswick

## A Letter To My Friends.

Having spent a small fortune on psychotherapy fees, not to mention the time, effort and emotional energy I expended over a six-year period, I finally discovered that harbouring secrets can cause greater damage than the actual 'crime' that's been committed. The amount of energy it takes to repress the truth to conceal the real level of grief that lies within, ultimately takes its toll.

Part of the psychotherapy journey involved stripping away the layers of protection that had accumulated over the years so that some sense of normality could be projected to the outside world. Without those protective layers, it was impossible to face the daily grind of life. However, now that those layers of protective covering have been torn away, it has exposed another 'me' that I have to face and let others know about, or at least those that matter.

I learned to face the undeniable truth that by the time I was eighteen years old, the damage to my psyche had been firmly established whereby I felt entirely worthless, with no self-esteem and lacking any confidence. I have come to understand and accept that my aging parents did the best they could with the resources they had, but unfortunately their parenting skills were sadly lacking and consequently, I literally fell into the arms of the first man who came along who showed me some sign of affection and much to my dismay found myself pregnant.

At the time, I was working in my mother's factory without receiving any wages, one of the many ventures she embarked on over the years, and had no money to deal with an unplanned pregnancy. I slipped into a state of denial hoping that 'things would eventually right themselves'. Unfortunately they didn't.

After thirteen weeks I finally made an appointment to see a doctor who confirmed my worst fears. I was too scared to procure a back-yard abortion because of newspaper stories that I'd read that often detailed the gruesome consequences, but didn't have the money to approach the few doctors who performed the procedure, albeit illegally. In any event, the doctor told me it was too late as it was in those days, being 1964.

The father of my child had found someone else by this time and I was left penniless and pregnant, living in a dysfunctional family environment.

A friend of my child's father, M, took pity on me and offered to take me to Sydney for the remainder of my pregnancy, agreeing that adoption was the best option for everyone concerned. I kept hoping that some miracle would happen and I would be able to keep my baby, but no such miracle took place.

And except for the midwives who were mostly kind to me, if not somewhat distant, I laboured on my own for twenty-seven hours and at the moment of birth, the midwife held a pillow in front of my face so I wouldn't see the baby I had carried for nine months.

Although this action was punitive, I also knew in my heart that if I ever laid eyes on my baby I would never be able to go through with the adoption.

After the birth, I was transferred to the post-natal ward where I stayed for a day or so, among five other young mothers whose babies were brought out from the nursery every few hours to be fed. All I could do was turn my head away so I wouldn't see these young married women, feeding and cradling their babies.

I was then transferred to an Annex that belonged to the Crown Street Women's Hospital where I recall the Social Worker visiting me three days after the birth where she stood at my bedside until I signed the Consent Form for Adoption.

Despite my desperation in wanting to keep my baby, I knew I couldn't bring this child back into my mother's dysfunctional home to experience the same irrational and damaging behaviour I had known all my life. Unfortunately, my sisters' circumstances weren't that much better despite their offers of assistance. And M had made it perfectly clear that he would also disappear unless I came home alone.

They say "life's full of choices" but there was really only one choice for me and that was to sign the consent form to allow an adoption to proceed. I recall the social worker telling me to 'forget all about it' and work to make a new life for myself 'as if it never happened.' That was the extent of my 'grief counselling' not only for me but also for tens of thousands of other young women who were shameless and disgraceful enough to become pregnant out of wedlock. I think I have some inkling of what the term 'stolen generation' means.

I did as I was told and what I thought was expected of me and tried to 'forget all about it' When M proposed, I agreed to marry him because I believed that no self-respecting man would look at me once he knew of 'my past.'

The layers of protection had begun to be laid, the lies, the denial, the suppression of grief for the loss of this child, all became part of 'forgetting all about it ..... as if it never happened'

Within a short period of time the social landscape changed immeasurably and young women were not only having babies out of wedlock but also received financial assistance to help them provide for their offspring. The legislation also changed enabling reunions to take place, so in 1982 when my 'baby' turned eighteen, I registered with Adoption Triangle in case he ever wanted to search for his birthmother.

Life goes on and despite the arrival of three other children, a divorce from M and a re-marriage 'the secret' remained buried.

I heard nothing until 1986 when my husband and I returned from an overseas trip. A letter was waiting from Adoption Triangle. I was thrown into an absolute spin because I had done such a magnificent job keeping this part of my life so secret that even my husband and other children didn't know of my first child's existence.

After breaking the news to my husband he offered to make the initial contact as an intermediary and arranged to meet with my son who had been named Peter (not his real name) by his adoptive parents. His then fiancé was also present. Peter was twenty-two years old. My husband reported

that all Peter wanted was some information about his medical history and to exchange photos. My husband brought back a photo of my 'baby' who had matured into a young adult. After that meeting I wrote Peter a long letter explaining the circumstances that lead to his birth and subsequent adoption and told him of my profound sorrow at having to relinquish him. I received no reply.

Then in 1989 when my 'eldest' son A was diagnosed with a particularly virulent form of bone cancer, 'my past' really came back to haunt me. I can still recall the moment when I heard the word 'malignancy' mentioned that my immediate reaction was *this is my punishment for giving away my first born son* and in that same split second I knew that I was also destined to lose A.

Within two years A had succumbed to the ravages of his disease and I was overcome with grief at his loss.

In 1996 some five years after his death, I still found myself shedding buckets of tears. The very mention of his name opened up the tear ducts as if there was no tomorrow and I found myself weeping, yet again.

I was finally persuaded to have some grief counselling. I tentatively took myself off to see a psychotherapist, terrified out of my wits that I would let my defences down and be unable to cope with the thought of revealing 'the secret'.

After a couple of sessions talking about A's illness the therapist asked to record my dreams. I attended my third session carrying pages full of the previous week's dreams, one of which had the Federal Police standing at my front door asking if I knew the identity of a man whose body had been discovered in a nearby river. I told them I didn't know who he was. The therapist asked if I knew anyone whose initials were FP or PF (Federal Police) however no-one came to mind at the time.

He asked me to keep the letters in mind as the name may come to me later.

The following weekend I was reading the Sunday paper in which there was an article about all the children left abandoned in Romanian orphanages. Then like a bolt of lightning I suddenly realised the meaning of my dream.

Through my work I was aware of an experienced paediatric nurse whose initials were P.F. who had left her job in Melbourne and travelled to Romania to work in one of those orphanages looking after abandoned children – just like the child I had abandoned all those years ago.

What's that other saying? "You can run but you can't hide". I could no longer run from 'the secret' because if I was going to grieve properly over my loss of A, I had to first learn how to grieve over my loss of Peter. Something I had never been allowed to do by others or myself.

At the therapist's suggestion I wrote to Peter again at the end of 1996 and met him for the first time in early 1997. Despite having been given all the trappings in life, I found him to be 'troubled' although a great actor trying to pretend that everything was just fine. A familiar trait! We met again a few times after that including one occasion when he met his half-sister and brother. However, he has been reluctant to keep in contact with us and in the meantime has married and become the father of two children.

After much soul-searching I think I've come to accept that I may never again see the son I lost to adoption or his family because although he can intellectualise the reasons behind his adoption it doesn't alter the fact that 'I gave him away'. And though he may never want to acknowledge me as his birthmother, he will always be my son, no matter how much he may want to deny it.

As a 'relinquishing' mother I continue to grapple with the lasting effects of that event that took place almost forty-six years ago and as time passes the grief and pain inflicted by that *primal wound* has not diminished. In fact, these feelings have worsened with the passage of time like any other incident of post-traumatic stress.

I have found it is ultimately easier to come to terms with losing a child to cancer than losing a child to adoption. When a child dies, society joins with you to mourn your loss. There are rituals that allow you to publicly grieve, such as a funeral service and a grave to visit, where it's possible to retain some physical and spiritual connection. And with time it's possible to achieve a sense of peace and acceptance.

Despite the oft-repeated words of the social worker to 'forget all about it....as if it never happened' it's a fallacy to think that anyone can simply walk away without recognising and acknowledging the life-long impact of adoption.

The purpose of this letter is really to try and relieve myself of the burden of harbouring this secret and while at times it's still difficult to talk about it at least I feel better knowing that I've shared it with you.

There does come a time when we do have to move on but equally we need to be able to do so honestly and openly so there is no longer a need to hide behind a veil of secrecy.

\*\*\*\*Footnote.

(i) I applied for my medical records from the Crown Street Women's Hospital and discovered that I was given large doses of drugs the night before and the morning of signing the consent form for adoption.

(ii) The legislation required a 5 day interval between the time of birth and obtaining consent however my signature was obtained on Day 3.

(iii) There was a Commonwealth Benefit available that I was eligible to apply for but was never told about it by the Social Worker who was involved in the adoption process.