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I am now 60 years old and I still feel the effects of losing my baby to adoption in 1969 when I was 18 years old. My story is similar to that of thousands of other "unmarried mothers" who were deemed by society to be unfit mothers and therefore lost their babies to adoption.

I was disgraced and I had disgraced my family. I was living in a flat in my home town and at five months pregnant I finally plucked up the courage to tell my mother and to ask if I could move back home. To her credit she welcomed me back but great shame was felt. I continued to work in the typing pool up until two weeks before the baby was due. As I was still in my home town there was no point in pretending by wearing a wedding ring so I was a very visible 'unmarried mother'. Everywhere I went I felt and heard the animosity toward me. Society could not see past "unmarried mother" to see the pleasant, quiet young girl that I was.

My human and legal rights were ignored by public hospital staff who felt free to judge, condemn and shame me. I was treated without respect and my treatment differed to that of married mothers. I was discriminated against at clinic appointments and during my confinement. I was made to feel inferior.

During my 21 hour labour I was left totally alone and was in so much pain that I wanted to die. The gas mask was shoved into my hand and they left the room. I could not use the mask. After hearing me scream for hours a nurse finally put her head in the doorway and said "stop being a silly girl and get on with it." That was the extent of my care in labour until I felt the head crowning and called out for help saying "something is happening." The staff were shocked that I was ready to push and the room was then a hive of activity as they gathered around for the birth.

The baby was removed from me at the moment of her birth despite me saying "I want to see my baby". They literally ran out of the room with her. I never saw her or heard her cry. I was told "it's best for you not to". The staff would not tell me if I had a boy or girl. I will never forget my loneliness and emptiness when I was transferred to the ward without having seen the baby or knowing what sex it was. Over the next several days I continuously begged to know the sex of my baby and to see her. All my requests were denied. To add to their cruelty I was placed in a ward with married women caring for their babies. This was torture and I could not escape it. Looking back I can see that this was when I started to disappear into myself. Watching the other mothers care for their babies was too much for me when I was desperate for, and could not gain access to, my own baby. The staff had all the power, I had none.

Several days later (I am unsure of the time frame but it must have been before I signed the consent) I was unexpectedly taken to a room and the baby was placed in my arms. A nurse stood watching me and I felt her animosity toward me. I can't remember if it was said, but I felt acutely aware that I should not be seeing the baby. By this time I was in a state of extreme psychological distress and was numb. I sat in the chair with the baby in my arms and was unable to do anything. I did not remove her blankets, touch her face, explore her and I have no memory of what she looked like. Her face is blank to me.

I know now that it was my legal right to have my baby with me whenever I wanted to as I was her legal guardian until I signed the consent form. I could have at least had a sense that I had had a baby and that she was mine. The staff ignored my legal rights. During therapy I received a copy of my daughter's original birth certificate which had a blank space where her name should have been. I was devastated to discover that I had had the right to name my baby. Again, I was not informed of my legal rights.

During my hospital stay I was bombarded by comments from the staff such as "your baby deserves the best", "its best for the baby", "its best for you", "if you love the baby you will adopt it", "what can you give the baby", "the baby deserves two parents", "the baby needs a family", "how can you look after a baby". Coercion to adopt at its best!

Again, with no warning, I was taken to a room and put in a chair facing the Justice of the Peace for the signing of the consent. I cried uncontrollably and sobbed during the entire process and could not hear what the JP was saying. I was alone, with no representation from my family. I was also under the legal age of majority (which was 21) and therefore the consent to adopt was not legally enforceable (nobody was bothered by this). The staff in the room ignored me and the JP pushed the papers toward me and through my tears I signed. This was not informed consent. In view of my distress the proceedings should have been stopped and the JP should have made sure that adoption was what I wanted. Of course, this did not happen as the only outcome possible was adoption.

I was given no options other than adoption, which "was best for the baby". How can one argue with that? For years I whipped myself with the fact that I signed the consent form and thought that keeping my baby was as easy as not signing. Now I know that I was psychologically shocked and traumatized by the birth, the loss of my baby and my experiences in hospital. After all of this I was easy prey for a society determined to punish me and at the same time provide a healthy baby for an infertile married couple. I was totally alone, unsupported and powerless against authority.

After I signed the consent I asked to be discharged saying "I can't watch the babies anymore". Due to a medical condition I was told that I had to stay but no one offered me any support in my distress. I went back to my room to watch the babies. When I left the hospital they said "forget the baby and pretend it never happened." I could not do this and I don't know any mothers who lost their babies to adoption who managed to forget that they had had a baby. I left the hospital feeling bad and worthless; my self esteem was at zero.

The secrecy of adoption began and the baby was a shameful episode in my past. I went off the rails for a couple of years. My life was so abnormal without the baby but the baby was never mentioned and had disappeared. Everyone acted as if nothing had happened and nobody, including my family, acknowledged that I had had a baby. I managed to pull myself together, got married and had two children but of course they did not replace my lost baby. I began drinking (I am a recovering alcoholic). I understand that I drank to numb myself and bury my feelings. After I managed to stop drinking six years ago (after several attempts) I had nothing to numb me and my grief, loss and buried emotions began to surface.

The baby was never spoken of by me or my family until my daughter and I were reunited 20 years later. For those twenty years she was never out of my mind. I constantly wondered: Is she still alive? Is she happy? Is she well? What does she look like? Does she know about me? Will she want to find me? We both started searching when she turned 18 and were reunited by Jig Saw when she was 20. I was walking on air. I was finally going to see my baby, but of course she was no longer a baby. I did not begin to deal with this fact until I began therapy.

Reunion did not bring peace to either of us although I thought at the time that it would. Both my daughter and I have been damaged by adoption. We have a very on off relationship and are currently not in contact (my decision). At this point in time I cannot deal with our relationship. She is angry with me for adopting her. She feels abandoned and has said to me "there must have been something you could have done to keep me." In 1969 there was not, but it seems that the idea of mothers losing their babies to adoption simply because they are unmarried is so bizarre that it is beyond the comprehension of society now. I hope that one day my daughter and I can get past our issues and enjoy a fulfilling relationship based on mutual respect and understanding.

Six months after I stopped drinking I plucked up the courage to see a therapist and finally, after 34 years, I began to talk about the baby and my experiences. It was like a dam had burst and I was completely overwhelmed with repressed emotions. I have been diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder, complicated grief and depression. I have a better understanding of how I came to lose my first born baby to adoption, the effects of this loss, the psychological damage caused to me and my buried feelings. I am facing my ongoing grief and loss and trying to make some sense of the inhumane adoption practices I endured in hospital. Therapy is agonizingly painful and expensive but I have a much better understanding of what happened to me when I lost my first born daughter to adoption and how it changed me forever.

My journey toward healing and resolving my grief and loss is not over yet. Society said that adoption was in my and my baby's, best interest. It was not. The cruel and inhumane ordeal that was labeled adoption separated and damaged thousands of mothers and their babies. The abuses and violations of the legal rights of these women needs to be officially acknowledged and documented and the perpetrators of these crimes and inhumane practices need to understand how their actions seriously damaged women in their care.