

TAKEN AT BIRTH, HIS MOTHER DRUGGED, SHAMED AND SHUT AWAY THE STORY OF AUSTRALIA'S OTHER STOLEN GENERATION

Detained, stripped of their rights and often given false identities, thousands of unwed mums were bullied into giving up their babies. Stephanie Osfield traces one family's ordeal

From the 1940s until the early 1980s, more than 150,000 young and unwed Australian women were forced by churches and state authorities to give up their babies for adoption. "When these babies were born, it was common practice to forcibly push the mother's face down with a pillow so she never saw or held the child, who was immediately taken away," says Shurlee Swain, a history lecturer at Australian Catholic University, who is currently overseeing an Australian Research Council project documenting the shameful practice.

"To encourage compliance, medical staff often drugged these mothers

during and after the birth. Some were even told their babies had died."

This scandalous coercion – once considered a "community service" – involved government departments, women's hospitals, Catholic, Anglican and Presbyterian churches and the Salvation Army. It is the subject of a senate inquiry, which is due to report on February 29.

"Unwed mothers were treated as a moral threat to society," explains Swain. "There was a punitive attitude they'd had their fun and now were going to pay." For thousands of these women, the grief has never subsided. Here, *marie claire* speaks to a mother, a father and son who were torn apart more than 40 years ago. ►

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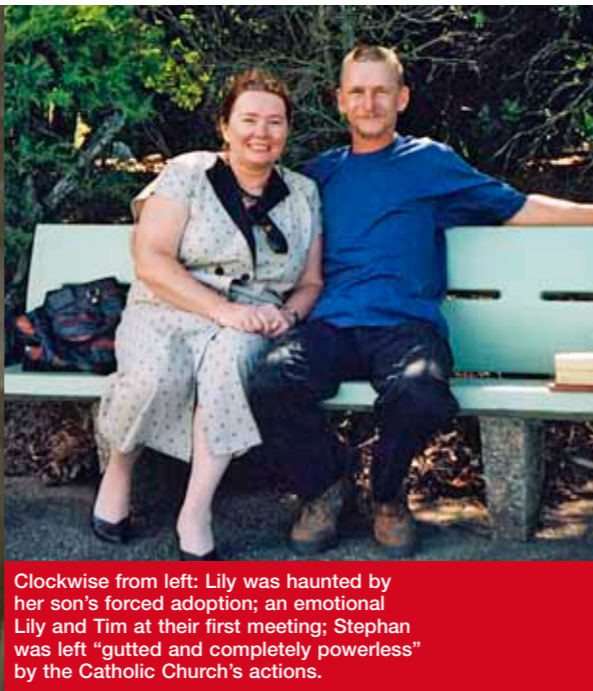
“I WAS SCANNING THE STREETS THROUGH TEARS, DESPERATELY LOOKING FOR MY STOLEN SON” – LILY, 61

On a warm Brisbane night, it was 11pm when two policemen burst into the home I shared with my boyfriend, Stephan Benko. Everything happened so fast, but I’ll never forget them forcing me out of bed, putting me in a car and taking me to a holding cell. I was absolutely terrified and spent the night vomiting and crying. It was February 16, 1967, and the nightmare that started with that knock on the door has never ended.

My crime was that I was unwed and six weeks pregnant. Because I wasn’t quite 17, they said I was in moral danger. Stephan and I had been together a year; we were very much in love and intended to marry. He was 19. I think the police had been told of my pregnancy by some meddling person from the mattress factory where I worked. My boss sacked me on the spot when I said I was pregnant.

The next morning, the Children’s Court made me a ward of the state and committed me to a Catholic home called Holy Cross in Woolloowin, Brisbane. Shortly after I arrived, the nuns cut my hair and told me that, from now on, my name was Leanne. They not only took my freedom, they stripped me of my identity. I felt wretched and terrified. For the rest of my pregnancy, I was forced to rise every day at 5am and work in the laundry. I had no idea they intended to steal my child.

Two weeks later, Stephan was allowed to see me for five minutes. He was frantic. He rushed to the station and jumped on a train to Sydney to get our parents to sign marriage consent forms. I signed my form, too, but the nuns refused to let Stephan see me again, so the documents were never processed. I had no idea what was going on. I kept waiting for Stephan to come and rescue me and when he didn’t I was completely heartbroken. I was sure he still loved me, but I feared he had changed his mind about marrying. I wrote letters to my family and Stephan, but it appears the nuns never posted them. Meanwhile, I had a baby growing inside me and with every kick I felt an incredible sense of connection. I looked forward to holding my baby so much.



Clockwise from left: Lily was haunted by her son’s forced adoption; an emotional Lily and Tim at their first meeting; Stephan was left “gutted and completely powerless” by the Catholic Church’s actions.



A family torn apart now reunited – the first meeting between Stephan (left), Tim and Lily. Left: a four-year-old Tim at his adoptive parents’ home.

On September 1, 1967, I went into labour and was packed off to the Royal Women’s Hospital. For the next 16 hours, barely anyone spoke to me. I spent most of the time in sheer terror, alone in a room with increasingly strong labour pains. I hadn’t been allowed to attend a birthing class or even read a book on having a baby, so I had no idea what was happening. When the nurses gave me an enema or shoved metal instruments inside me to break my waters, I felt humiliated and invaded. They acted like I wasn’t even in the room. As I neared delivery, they forced me onto my side with my right leg bent and my left leg tied up in a stirrup. My upper body was forced down and my face pushed into the mattress. It was an excruciating position to labour in and I was badly torn as my baby emerged.



I recovered in the so-called “heartbreak” ward (where they kept all the young, unwed mothers), nurses insisted I take painkillers that I now realise were barbiturates. They drugged us to keep us subdued so we didn’t cause trouble. It was the most awful nightmare and I couldn’t wake up.

Eight days after my son’s birth, a social worker from the Department of Children’s Services threatened that if I didn’t sign adoption papers, the state would lock me up in a maximum-security home. In total despair, I signed the forms. My reward? I was allowed to look at my son through the nursery window. To this day, I’m not even sure the baby they pointed out was him. My sister saw me briefly in hospital and got word to my mother I’d had the baby. She also sent a letter to Stephan. Six weeks later, I was released from Holy Cross, put on a plane and sent straight to Sydney to live with my mother and stepfather.

I sent a letter to Stephan’s last-known address, but never heard back. Though my parents had signed the marriage forms, they were opposed to our relationship. They wanted to sweep it under the carpet. I was grief-stricken, but our life together would never have been the same anyway. The carefree girl Stephan knew and loved was completely gone. Three years later, I was still so shattered that I went back to Queensland and had

When I heard my son’s first cry I tried to turn to see him, but a nurse pushed me down hard, pinned my shoulder to the mattress and held me there until my baby was rushed from the room. I couldn’t fight back. I had not agreed to any adoption, so legally, they had no right to remove my baby from me. I had no idea where he was going, or even if he was OK. I felt crushed and stricken with grief, but the pain was too deep for crying. Only hours later was I told I’d had a son. I named him Shane, but never got to hold him. For the next week, as

a friend drive me to the area around Holy Cross. I know it doesn’t make sense, but I was scanning the streets, through tears, desperately looking for my son.

I buried the pain for decades. A year after my son’s birth, I met a man who could offer me security and a good life. I eventually came to love him, but sadly never the way I loved Stephan. I married in part to get out of home. For me, the loss of my firstborn was a dark, shameful secret, so I didn’t tell my husband I had a son until 23 years later. By then, our daughter was 19. She was shocked, but pleased at the thought of having a half-brother. Though I loved her with all my heart, having another child had not lessened the hurt of losing my first baby.

In 1991, when the law allowed adopted children and biological parents to contact one another, I immediately started searching for my boy. After six years, I learnt his name was Tim, but that was all. I wasn’t given a surname, making it almost impossible to find him. He had filed a form preventing contact, so I couldn’t get his details. I was devastated, but vowed never to give up. I searched through almost two million names on the electoral roll, hoping some detail would point to my child.

Then, in November 1997, while I was searching the Queensland State Archives in Brisbane, I came across a boy called Tim, with a birthdate in September. Though the exact date was wrong, I had an uncanny feeling this was my child. Armed with a last name, I raced to the local electoral office and tracked down Tim’s address on the roll. Sick with nerves and terrified of

rejection, I went to his house and knocked on the door. Because he had signed an objection form, I was risking a \$6000 fine, but I didn’t care. Tim wasn’t home, so I handed his wife some journals about him and the adoption. His wife was clearly shocked I had been able to find him. The next morning, the phone rang. “I think you can stop looking,” said Tim. “I am your son.”

“A NURSE PINNED MY SHOULDER TO THE MATTRESS AND HELD ME THERE UNTIL MY BABY WAS RUSHED FROM THE ROOM”

I felt like my heart had stopped. It was like a strong, emotional, electric shock and I had to sit down before I collapsed. My family was jumping up and down, but I felt so overwhelmed I couldn’t cry. I could barely speak. After years of waiting for this moment, I was elated, but also terrified I might meet him once and he might not want to stay in contact.

An hour later, Tim and I met in a nearby park. It was incredibly emotional, but we both tried hard not to cry. I wasn’t very successful! I couldn’t stop staring at him. In my dreams for 30 years, he had olive skin like his partly Ukrainian father, but I was elated to see he actually looked more like me. I saw my Irish background in him and Stephan’s traits in his eyes and hands. It was bizarre to see a combination of me and Stephan in a man I really didn’t know.

I was grateful Tim had been open to meeting me, but I knew he must be

finding it hard. I felt overwhelming warmth towards him, but I didn’t want to crowd him or come on too strong. I was careful not to be overly affectionate, but later, when he put his arm around me for a photo, I felt that electric shock again. For so long, I had craved physical contact with my child.

It was important Tim knew I never gave him away, that he was stolen from me, and that he was the child of a man I had loved deeply all my life. I wanted him to know that his mother was not heartless and uncaring, but was imprisoned and never willingly gave him up.

We were together for about five hours. I was a shaking mess as I told him what happened to me at Holy Cross. I had promised myself I wouldn’t break down in front of him because I didn’t want the intensity of my emotion to scare him away. Tears kept welling in my eyes, but I held them back. When I went back to my mother’s place I was completely exhausted – like I’d run a marathon; one where I’d been running for my life.

Though he would always be my baby, I had to accept my precious son was now a man with children of his own. After our reunion, Tim’s then wife asked me not to tell the children of our relationship. She said they were too young to understand. She told me they would be confused with me being their grandmother as they had grown up thinking Tim’s adoptive parents were their only grandparents. I sensed she thought it was shameful to have this ►

in their family past. Though I was allowed to visit their house and meet them, the children were not told who I was. They found out many years later, but too much time had passed for me to be integrated into their lives.

Weeks later, for Mother's Day, Tim sent me a photo of him as a baby and my heart broke all over again. There he was, smiling at strangers on the other side of the camera; people who got to raise him and cuddle him and wipe away his tears. I was his mother, yet someone else had mothered him.

Now, 14 years after our reunion, my son and I have a very good relationship. We live in different states, but visit when we can, exchange gifts at birthdays and Christmas and talk regularly by phone. I hope it's not too late for me to take my rightful place as his mother. Tim is remarried now and I have only met my grandchildren a few times, so it has been almost impossible to get any connection with them.

I've seen a psychiatrist more than 200 times and know nothing can wipe away the pain of having my child taken away. I am as damaged now as I was more than 40 years ago, but I have learnt to contain the grief. I live in Sydney where I coordinate an organisation called Origins. My job is to advocate for and support women who lost their children to forced adoption. We want the truth to be acknowledged in the senate inquiry – we deserve justice and our stories should be heard.

"IT WAS A SHOCK TO ARRIVE HOME ONE EVENING AND DISCOVER SHE HAD BEEN AT MY DOOR" – TIM, 44

When I was 23, my parents told me I was adopted. I was shocked, but felt surprisingly calm. My parents were clearly insecure about me meeting my biological family. I'd had a happy childhood and didn't want to hurt them, so I signed the form preventing Lily from contacting me. Also, I was busy with a wife, young family and my painting and decorating business in Mackay, Queensland. To be honest, I felt meeting my biological mother might upset the balance of my life.

It was a shock to arrive home one night and discover Lily had been at my

door. Part of me wanted to bury my head in the sand because I felt a reunion might be emotionally exhausting or fraught, but I felt I owed it to Lily after the effort she had gone to to locate me. I didn't want to reject her again.

When Lily and I met, I was nervous that maybe we'd have nothing to say but, at the same time, excited to meet the woman who brought me into the world. We hugged and talked at the park then went for a coffee. Much of what we discussed was mundane stuff about our lives, so as to break the ice. Lily showed me photos from her family album and I showed her pictures of my kids, who were then in their teens. I wasn't tearful, but felt very sad and angry for Lily. She was a victim of

"WEEKS AFTER OUR REUNION, TIM SENT ME A PHOTO OF HIM AS A BABY AND MY HEART BROKE ALL OVER AGAIN"

terrible government policies of that time and the heartache has lasted her entire life. I just hope the strong and close relationship we've built helps to ease some of her pain.

I'm so glad Lily got in touch with me because I've gained the friendship of a lovely, strong, wise and caring woman. I have wondered how my life might have been different if I'd been brought up by Lily and Stephan, but I've never felt I missed out on anything. Now we're the very best of friends and I feel privileged to know her.

"IT WAS SUCH A GREAT RELIEF AND JOY TO FINALLY KNOW WHAT HE LOOKED LIKE AND SEE HE WAS OK" – STEPHAN, 63

Lily and I were complete soulmates – she really was the woman of my dreams. So when the authorities took her away, they turned my world upside down. I felt gutted and completely powerless. Those in charge told me lies, withheld information and denied me any access to Lily, as though she was some criminal. The nuns blocked me from getting Lily's marriage consent form and without it, we couldn't marry. They were clearly stalling to make sure they got the baby.

Without two incomes, I couldn't keep renting the house we shared, so I was forced to move around for a while.

When my son was born, Lily's sister let me know, but Lily was still locked up in the home and I couldn't see her. I was devastated when I learnt my child had been given to another family, but was told there was nothing I could do. It was a very bitter pill to swallow.

When Lily was forced to go to Sydney, initially I didn't know where she had gone and I couldn't contact her parents because they had moved. We never saw each other again.

I thought maybe she didn't want to see me anymore, so I tried to get on with my life, but there was a huge void. At 23, I did meet another woman and fall in love. Before we married, I told her about the son taken from me and she was quite upset that our first child wouldn't be my first baby. We went on to have four wonderful children and I love them dearly, but for years I still thought

about my son almost every day. I worried how he'd been treated by his adoptive family. Then Lily tracked me down after 24 years to ask if I was OK with her trying to find him. I was incredibly pleased to see her and when she found Tim, I was elated.

My kids were very supportive when I told them about Tim, and my wife – now my ex – put on a brave face. Two weeks after Lily met Tim, I went to his house for a barbecue. It was such a relief and joy to finally know what he looked like, talk with him and see he was OK. He has become a lovely young man and was very warm and respectful towards me. One of the hardest things has been learning to call him Tim, as our son's name was Shane. On the way home from our first meeting, I sobbed and sobbed from the years of overwhelming emotion I'd kept inside.

Tim and I have a lovely relationship now, but the distance makes it difficult to see each other often. We may not catch up face-to-face for up to a year and a half, but we try to speak on the phone every few months and our daughters keep in touch via Facebook and email, which is nice. I am so grateful to Lily for bringing us all together again. It has allowed some kind of healing and resolution to our very tragic story. ■