



# Growing Stronger Together *1990 - 2020*

*Barnardos group support service to women whose children were adopted: Personal experiences over three decades*

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Growing Stronger Together 1990–2020. Barnardos Group Support Service to Mothers Whose Children Were Adopted: Personal Experiences Over Three Decades

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Cover (The Last Kiss), by Blanaid. All other art supplied by Blanaid.

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## How it all began

*In 1977, Barnardos set up an Adoption Advice Helpline. Attitudes towards single mothers were slowly changing and this was reflected in developments in the adoption world.*

Mothers began contacting Barnardos Adoption Advice Helpline in small numbers initially. Some of those who got in touch wanted more than a phone call and asked could they come in to meet with us. We realised that the one question all of the birth mothers who contacted us had was 'I don't know another woman who has had a baby adopted, are there other people like me?'. Many of these women had never spoken to another mother in the same situation and, as a result, had felt very alone and isolated, unable to share with family and friends. We began to arrange one-to-one meetings between mothers to enable them to share common experiences and support one another. We soon began seeing the huge benefits to be gained from this opportunity for sharing and the idea to start the groups was hatched.

Barnardos Post Adoption Service has been offering a confidential group support service to mothers since October 1990. The meetings provide an opportunity to talk about their experiences and perhaps prepare for contact with a now adult son or daughter. To mark the 30 year anniversary of the Post Adoption Service we invited mothers to send us their experiences of parting with children for adoption and of taking part in the Barnardos groups.

We are very grateful to those who sent us their stories, poems, artwork and songs and for allowing us to reproduce them in this booklet.

The participants showed great courage in coming to the groups and opening up about such painful issues, which are ongoing for many women.

Birth mothers tell us they have found a "safe place" in Barnardos where they get support and understanding from one another and that through this, many have been helped to move forward with their lives. Hopefully these stories will add to our understanding of how things were at a particular time in our history for some women in Ireland who found themselves single and pregnant.



The first meeting  
the mothers' stories begin to unfold

*Eight nervous women gathered one evening in October 1990 in a small office in Barnardos' first National Headquarters in the Harold's Cross area of Dublin.*

There were six mothers along with social workers Patricia White and Norah Gibbons who were running the group. All were equally anxious as to how the meeting might go on the night.

Common concerns for mothers included, 'Might there be anyone else there I know?' 'What if I can't stop crying?', 'Will I be the only one who feels so shameful?'. As this was a new project for Barnardos, staff were anxious to ensure that the group meetings were beneficial for the women attending. One of our great concerns on that first evening was, 'How will we handle all the emotion that will come up?'

Carol and Blanaid, who were part of one of our earliest groups, tell their stories of becoming mothers whose children were adopted and their later experiences of searching for their child, with very different outcomes. Blanaid also used her artistic talent to express her innermost feelings and the images on the front cover and within the booklet show how she achieved this so beautifully.

## Carol's Letter from Canada

**H**i Patricia, a blast from the past, great to see you are keeping up the great service to Birthmothers of Ireland, also adoptive children/ birth fathers who reach out for help. We are still living in Canada, all our family are doing great, 'normal' something that was not the case when I started back with you in Barnardos in 1993, just after we met our son. Things were very emotionally charged for me more than anyone else, I look back now and I so appreciate your SAFE place to talk and tell my story, knowing that it would not be repeated outside of Barnardos. Meeting other birthmothers for the first time, who went through the same ordeal as me many years before, a secret society full of shame,

about it freely without fear of judgement and knowing these mothers also had walked in my shoes. I could speak of what my birth mother story was like for me, for the very first time with mothers who knew the pain of separation from the baby they could not for whatever reason 'keep' their baby.

Thank you, Patricia and Christine, the two women from Barnardos that ran our group for your commitment and ease with some smiles as well, because sometimes there were tears. Your listening with advice helped me and in turn helped my family and son to get to a lovely place now more than 25 years later, where we have a loving, normal family with plenty of grandchildren

*...without fear of judgement and knowing these mothers also had walked in my shoes.*

sadness, regrets. Hope that your baby had been adopted by a loving caring family, we were blessed that our son found such a great family to nurture and love him.

He had the comfort to know that his family were behind him all the way, when he decided to look for his birth mother, what he found to his surprise, was his birth mother and birth father with 5 sisters and brothers. Understandably, very shocking. With the help from Barnardos and the other fine women in our group, talking

to love with their families. For me I must say when I heard about our son's mother and father I knew that I would love them, especially his Mom, her caring way of talking about his other mother's at night when he said his prayers, God Bless " his mother, Our Lady in heaven and your birth mother " what a wonderful gift to give to your adoptive son when he was very young.

Son, you have just more family to love you from the first day you were born until now.

We are Thankful for our family x

## Blanaid

**M**y home growing up was a very happy loving one, in middle class suburbia in south Dublin. Neighbours were friendly and everyone mixed. I finished my education with an honours leaving certificate, the only option for me was commercial college which I refused. So I started a job with an insurance company and hoped to do an art degree by night. Sadly things did not go to plan and I chopped and changed jobs for five years, also fitting in a stint as an au pair and a working spell in London. My parents were concerned by my lack of focus. I was enjoying my social life, I loved dancing, and it had always been my favourite pastime having studied ballet for many years. I would make a new outfit for each weekend and life was full if unrewarding workwise.

I was in London at the end of a relationship, when my mum had an accident; so on Paddy's night in 1975 I made the spur of the moment decision to return home. My intentions were good but I

instantly I was pregnant. I left his bedsit immediately regretting what had happened and knowing in some way my life was about to change. I was cross with him and cross with myself as I knew I had taken a chance. I had just landed a new job the computer department of a semi state company. I was on probation and was shattered to realise I was pregnant. My mum wasn't long in sussing, I was so sick. Off to her doctor who hardly knew me. He was a very conservative religious doctor and pointed out that if I was so irresponsible by becoming pregnant, how could I care for a baby. He shook his finger at me and sent me on my way with a plan. Starting with Ally, (Ally was a charitable organisation, which assisted single pregnant women, their role was to place mothers within a family here they obtained shelter and did house work and child care in lieu. This was meant to be a better alternative to a mother and baby home. They also could make discreet contact with her employers etc.) my employers were informed and they let me stay on a temporary basis to be reviewed when the baby was adopted. My life from that point was of secrecy and lies. My main challenge was to get through

*I felt so bad, the only sinner in town.*

did not help the family problems by linking up with an old boyfriend and getting pregnant after one night of lovemaking. Prior to that night we had no sexual relations, I was on the rebound. I knew

work and not reveal my condition. Life became very lonely... I continued to work for six months until I started to show. I had lost so much weight, no one guessed. Ally arranged for me to stay with a family. I was

miserable, my parents knew I was unhappy and after a soiree in which I was the topic of their hilarity she conceded and allowed me home, so long as I stayed out of sight. So until my son's birth I stayed indoors only slipping out to doctors, hospitals and adoption societies undercover. Life was very lonely and all I could think of was my baby making his presence felt. Jumping and kicking. I passed the time making baby clothes knitting and crocheting I had a few callers my immediate supervisor and an odd friend but other than that it was me and my family. I was so aware of how heartbroken and upset my parents were all I could do was follow the plan. I did not have many options. Respectability was so important and I felt so ashamed. My mum's immediate family knew, my neighbours thought I was in London and work thought I had a back problem. I went along with the lies feeling very powerless. Feelings of shame were constant I did not know any other single and pregnant person. My only outing was mass with my brother in another parish. My family were kind to me but I had stay with the plan.

On my visits to hospital I would be asked if the father would marry me, I still had not told nor heard from him. One day I was given my chart and I took a peep, I read my referral note and was disturbed to see the doctors description of me as being hysterical with mood swings and aggressive tendencies. At the bottom of page 'Baby for adoption'. I did not challenge anything I just absorbed it all. During my pregnancy I grew close to my baby, but I had to keep telling myself he was for someone else to make their lives happier. I had sinned and now I had to pay the ultimate price. Giving birth on your own in the seventies was a very scary experience but I got to the point of delivering not knowing at what step the baby would be taken from me. Early

Friday morning my beautiful son was put in my arms and he stole my heart from that moment to this day 43 years later. My time in hospital was joyous and painful the hospital was not near my home and I had just my parents and cousin visit me. It is a haze, all I remember is I dreaded the day we would be parted. As a single mum in those days staff would know and tell you off for small things. There was a real feeling of the fallen woman. I did not want my son to live with the stigma of illegitimacy. The day I handed him over to the nuns beautifully dressed with his bag of sleep suits was unbearable. I went to the agency signed papers and then directed to a nursery in Blackrock. I made my final handover over and asked through my tears if I could visit. I was allowed a visit if I rang in advance. During the three months I visited him often and made the most of my precious time with him. My poor mother who was also heartbroken to be losing her first grandchild accompanied me, they were sad journeys home on bus. During my son's time in the nursery I made contact with his father he had no telephone number, but I got on the bus and crossed the city to his flat. When he came to the door he did not recognise me I had changed so much. I told him on the doorstep what had happened and he agreed to meet me the next evening in town. That evening was two people with nothing really in common, he just wanted to embrace me and I was so hurt I just wanted an alternative plan so I could keep our baby. We were worlds apart and he could not believe I had become pregnant after one night. I left giving him a photo and telling him where he was. I never heard from him I probably didn't want him to make contact, I knew it would not work.

I went back to work everyone was nice to me glad to see me back, I never really knew who knew what, but baby talk was not on

the agenda. I was relieved to be able to wear jeans again but I was so sad the same doctor prescribed antidepressants and a numb feeling took over. People expected me to get on with life and so I did. My mum did give me emotional support but I felt so bad, the only sinner in town. I still visited the baby and was anxious he would go to his new parents who could give him all I could not in terms of security. I was not able to say goodbye and when I was told my son would be going at the weekend I did not say my final goodbye. I felt I was doing the right thing I had looked at a few grotty bedsits but there was no way I could give him a good start in life.

Over the years I buried the pain I was a mother yet I wasn't. I would look into prams trying to see if it was my son. I started to socialise again I joined a sports club where I later met my husband of 32 years, now deceased. We had similar losses in our lives and within the year I had my lovely daughter and two years later my son. It was while I nursed and raised them I felt my loss deepen. I just buried the feeling and did not understand grief I was experiencing.

One morning in 1990 I heard a woman called Jacinta on a radio programme. She was doing a study on adoption and its effects and she touched a chord deep within me, I wept for days. My husband knew of my son and was supportive. In 1991 my father died and soon after my mother revealed her sister then deceased had also had a baby outside marriage. She was a professional singer there was no adoption then and her son had suffered hugely in his life and had stowed away to Australia. My mother had been unable to tell me this earlier. At least I wasn't the only black sheep of the family. 1991 was a year of many revelations within the church

and the same year I heard of Barnardos. I met Norah Gibbons in the Barnardos office in Harold's Cross and started to come in from the cold. The journey towards healing was starting. After some chats with Norah I joined a birth mothers support group it was empowering to hear other women's stories I began to identify with others for the first time. The feeling of isolation began to dissipate. I was actively involved over many years with Barnardos attending meetings and helping to lobby for the contact register. Sadly although the contact register is in place some years now, my son has not availed of it. My name and my daughters are on it. I know who my son is and what he does career wise. I don't know anything about his personal life, in his photos he looks like a great young man. Over the years I have made several attempts to establish some form of contact, but sadly he has not replied. He is a beautiful young man who looks like my son, doing great things with his talents. I am reassured by googling him and checking on what he is doing career wise. I hope someday we will meet but I have to respect his stance.

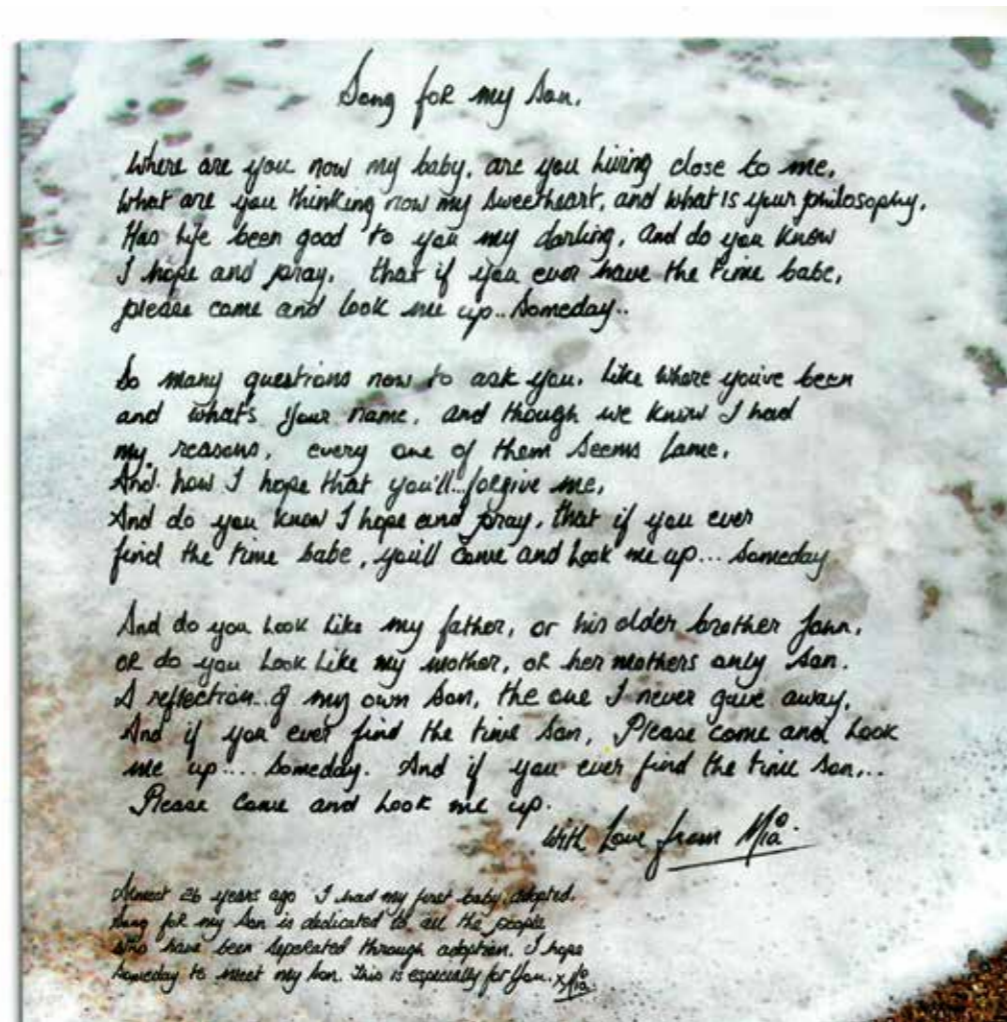
Sadly there is no happy ending so far in my story, but I have always believed we would meet again someday, I know we will.



Maternal Wings

*We know that mothers always wonder how their child is doing over the years and Mia has expressed this beautifully in her song “Song for my Son” (from her album Ocean and other stories) which she sang at an event we held in 2010 to mark 20 years of the group support service.*

## Mia’s song



*The age of mothers coming to groups has changed over the years. In earlier groups, our mothers were in their 20s and 30s, with their adopted children still in their childhoods and early teens. Mothers coming in more recent years are in their 50s to 70s with adult children in their 30s, 40s and 50s. While Teresa gave birth in the 1960s and her son was in his mid-50s when she recently attended a course, Anne M's son was just 10 when she came to one of the early groups. Now in his 30s, her son Chris has also contributed his story.*

## Anne M

**M**y story is a dream that has come true. After 20 years of loss and sadness my son has come back into my life, and I am a different person as a result. My whole life has been transformed by this reunion.

I attended Barnardos from the time my son was 10. He was being raised in England and until then I had never even heard the term 'Birth Mother'. It was the first opportunity I had ever had to speak openly about my situation, instead of whispering it over a few drinks and then regretting it afterwards. The support I got there was incredible, and this was largely due to the women who ran the course: they were so sensitive to us, and made it very easy for us to reveal our thoughts. At that stage I had no idea whether I would ever be reunited with my son, so it was a matter of dealing with the loss, and the prospect that I might never meet him. We cried a lot and also laughed as we got to know each other in the group, and as a result I made a lifelong friend of one of the other participants. I don't think I would have coped as well with the eventual reunion had I not had years of preparation, as we continued to meet as a group even after the sessions had stopped.

It is hard to explain the ups and downs of emotions that I had in the 10 months prior to meeting my son. Tears of happiness alternated with tears of sadness. I was very nervous in case he would resent me, but the moment we hugged I knew that everything would be fine. The physical memory of that first day will stay with me forever; before we knew it we were holding hands as though it was the most natural thing in the world. I still get that wonderful feeling when he puts his arms around me. It fills me with delight when he calls me by my Christian name, and I do not know why this is. There is nobody who can make me feel as elated - or deflated! - as he does, and although I am a naturally happy person, I sometimes have to go to sleep to shake off the sadness that can overwhelm me.

I feel that my son's upbringing and the support that he has had from his amazing parents have helped to bring our relationship to fruition. I think we have the same values in life and the same loyalty to our loved ones. We also share a sense of humour, which is very important. My husband has been my biggest support, and it can't have been easy for him to have had to relive my past, which after all did not include him. I count my blessings every day that my son and I have so many people who love us, and that they have shared in our joy. My son now has an Irish family who love him and this was obvious when we all travelled abroad to be at his wedding. The party included his biological father and his lovely partner, who are now also part of his life. He looks very similar to his father and I think this means a lot to him.

I have always told my son the truth about his past, even if it was sometimes hard to hear. I felt it was the least I could do. I think both he and I have suffered a huge loss over the years and we have both written journals to each other to try to explain our separate experiences. We



really have worked hard at our relationship and now we are at a stage where we can argue like any adults would, safe in the knowledge that we have a secure relationship. It took quite some years to get to this point but we are very proud of each other and what we have achieved. And now for the proudest moment of all: my son and his amazing wife (whom I love and greatly admire) have given the beautiful name of 'Ronan' to my grandson. That was the name that I gave my son when he was born. His parents chose a different name for him but kept Ronan as his second name. Now, all these years later, I have a baby Ronan in my life again. I still find it hard to believe.

I once gave a kidney to a stranger. Some people said this was brave. All I can say is that compared to parting with my son, parting with a kidney was nothing at all. So thank you Barnardos for all your support, and for helping me to make my dream come true.

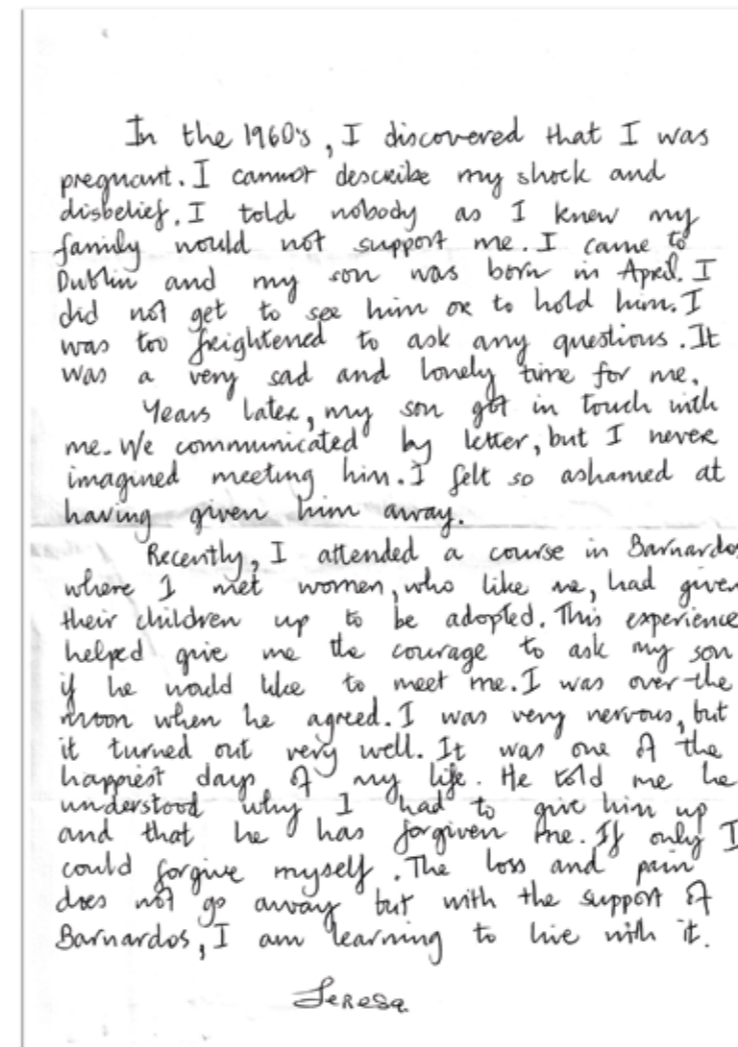
## Chris' Story

I was only 21 when I met my birth mother and I thought I was a lot more mature and ready than I probably was. Saying that I am glad I met her at such a young age, as I've been able to get to know her at a great time in her life. What I mean is, as emotional as she was she was in a good place and had a stable life; if she had issues – and you don't predict how giving up a baby is going to affect someone – I don't know how I would have coped with it at that age. You can't open the door and then say actually it doesn't suit me because I was expecting more from you. There is an element of pressure that comes with it. I think if we had met just the once and

didn't have a relationship I think it would have destroyed her. The process had been handled so well from the time we decided to meet up. We had 10 months of writing to each other to prepare us for our first meeting. It was like having a pen pal with your birth mum. She had sent cards to the agency every year on my birthday and it was very strange to receive them all at the age of 19. I could tell from year to year how slowly she was coping with her feelings of loss. The first cards had an underlying tone of resentment that she had to give me up, but as they went on they became more hopeful and optimistic that one day we might meet. As a result of receiving these cards, I had a feeling that we were starting a good thing before we met.

I always knew I was adopted and I was resentful at one stage. My mum and dad are amazing people and while I wish they had been able to have their own kids I wouldn't change my life for anything. They were so supportive to me in my decision to meet her because meeting her was something I had decided to do from an early age. It is hard to explain how it feels when everyone around you looks like someone else in the family and you don't share those biological traits with yours. It's the whole nature vs nurture argument, and while I had nurture covered I knew nothing about the nature.

I recently had my own son and decided to pass the name Ronan to him, not because I wish I hadn't been adopted but because I am proud of my story and I take the positives from it. It doesn't hold any resentment for me. It feels like such a taboo subject to be adopted but it made me the person I am today, and I'm proud to say I have two families. It was such a wonderful day to have both families at my wedding.



In the 1960's, I discovered that I was pregnant. I cannot describe my shock and disbelief. I told nobody as I knew my family would not support me. I came to Dublin and my son was born in April. I did not get to see him or to hold him. I was too frightened to ask any questions. It was a very sad and lonely time for me. Years later, my son got in touch with me. We communicated by letter, but I never imagined meeting him. I felt so ashamed at having given him away.

Recently, I attended a course in Barnardos, where I met women, who like me, had given their children up to be adopted. This experience helped give me the courage to ask my son if he would like to meet me. I was over the moon when he agreed. I was very nervous, but it turned out very well. It was one of the happiest days of my life. He told me he understood why I had to give him up and that he has forgiven me. If only I could forgive myself. The loss and pain does not go away but with the support of Barnardos, I am learning to live with it.

Teresa

## Teresa

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*Many mothers have also expressed their feelings of sadness and loss through poetry, as well as the artwork that you see throughout this booklet. Marian found that it helped her to write poems to her daughter over the years. She was reunited with her daughter Maeve on 11th October 2007.*

## Marian

### Out of Sight out of Mind (1989)

I dreamt of you the other night,  
but the dream was gone the next day.  
Just a faded haze of a little girl,  
a ten-year-old at play.

Sometimes I think it was all a dream,  
that you weren't born at all.  
But then I clearly remember your birth  
and the memories I recall.  
I can still see your tiny body,  
so slithery and blue.  
You cried aloud, I held you close,  
just for a second or two.

The nurse whisked you away too soon.  
How could I have guessed  
that I would never see you again?  
They said it was for the best.  
We bought a pretty shawl for you,  
and a locket for your neck.  
I also wrote you a poem,  
I wonder have you read it yet?

Writing these lines, my tears I cry.  
They're streaming down my face.  
To think my lovely, darling daughter  
is gone without a trace.

Yet I don't regret the decision I made.  
I did what I thought was right.  
I knew I couldn't have coped on my own,  
so I lost you from my life.

### Do You Ever Think of Me? (1989)

Do you ever think of me  
The way I think of you?  
Do you think I just abandoned you  
Believe me 'tis not true.  
Ten years on I still get sad,  
Thinking how things might have been.  
I loved you then, I love you now  
It was from that love I let you go.

I'm sure you're very pretty  
I'm sure you're happy too,  
But it would fill my heart with joy  
To get one glimpse of you.  
I would love to talk to you  
To tell you how I feel,  
Knowing that you'd understand  
Would make my poor heart heal.

You don't know you have a brother  
A real beauty too,  
He's not yet one year old  
And is a joy to hold.  
He has a Mammy and a Daddy  
Just what a baby needs,  
There's more to bringing up a child  
Than giving it its feeds.

It is very stressful when  
one is on their own,  
To hear a baby crying,  
knowing you're all alone.  
You need someone to help you  
To share the joy too,  
That's why I let you go  
To special parents just for you.

### Where Are You Now? (1990)

I think of you day and night  
and wonder where you are.  
Wondering what you're like  
and if what I did was right.  
Do you ask many questions  
about why I gave you up.  
Have you sisters and brothers.  
Do you wonder how I look?

I have a picture in my mind,  
it may be totally wrong.  
You're tall and slim,  
your hair is blonde,  
I think it may be long.  
A curious child, a freckled face,  
gone from my life  
without a trace.

For me it's sad, you'll never know  
the pain I feel inside.  
How could I know I'd feel like this  
those ten short years ago.  
I carried you so close to me.  
I looked after us very well.

But you were a big dark secret  
I was too ashamed to tell.  
I thought I wouldn't be able  
to bring you up on my own.  
I suppose I was very nervous.

### For Maeve (1992)

I gave you life but I couldn't  
give you hope. They found you parents,  
Said I wouldn't cope.  
I thought I couldn't care for you  
But always held you in my heart,  
Hoping some day we'd meet  
And never be apart.

I wanted to do the best for you,  
Give you the best start in life,  
I couldn't be a Mammy and Daddy  
At that time of my life. Now I'm getting  
older,  
You are in your teens,  
I hope some day we'll meet  
And end my sad tears.  
Your grandparents would love to meet you,  
Your aunts and uncles too,  
My father's nearly eighty  
But he knows all about you.  
Cousin Tara shares your birthday,  
And Emma shares your age,  
There are lots of things we have to share  
Let's open up this cage.

For some mothers who gave birth in the 1980s, it seemed like little had changed over the years. Despite some changes in attitudes and advances in Ireland such as the Single Mothers Allowances in the 80s, without family support it was still very difficult to raise a child alone.

One of the most painful aspects for many mothers was the lack of support they received from their families. Many mothers were deeply hurt that 'what relatives and neighbours might think' was more important than how they felt, and this changed their relationships with their families. Some of these relationships never fully healed.

## *Hundreds of Irish women travelled to the UK to place their babies for adoption in secrecy and returned home alone*

Hundreds of Irish women travelled to the UK to place their babies for adoption in secrecy and returned home alone, often going back to families who did not know the trauma their daughter/sister had been through. In many instances, these women disclosed their secret for the very first time to Barnardos staff and to fellow group members. Many found the courage as a result of this support to go forward and make enquiries about the child lost so many years ago.

Hearing first-hand accounts of personal experiences from the adoptive parents

and adopted people that we invite into the groups to share their experiences has been invaluable and many birth mothers have described this as a 'game changer'. The realisation that everyone in adoption shares common experiences of loss, rejection, shame, guilt and identity can be a major turning point. Geraldine, who attended the birth mothers groups after meeting her son, talks about how helpful it was for her to hear the stories of the three adopted people who came to a group meeting as this helped her gain a fuller understanding of what it is like to be adopted.

## Geraldine

I had a son in 1973. Because of circumstances & no family support, I had to go abroad & he was adopted at 6 weeks old. It was regarded as a family secret so no one talked to me about it again. In those days adoptions were closed, no information was given to the birth mother about their child after adoption. You were told to get on with your life & put it behind you. But I always thought he would contact me when he turned 18, when he had the legal right to his file & information.

When he was 16, I wrote to the adoption agency asking them to place a letter to him on the file, telling him about me & my life and that I would love to see him. I told him I was happily married with three children.

When he turned 18, I waited for a phone call, or a ring at the door. I fantasised about seeing him on the doorstep & that I would recognise him immediately. My heart would almost stop thinking about it. But no calls came.

Every year I would imagine a reason why he hadn't got round to it; he was working hard, he was in college, he was waiting till he was 21.

As the years went by I wondered would he only search for me when he himself had a child. I didn't want to initiate the search myself, I felt I had no right, I wanted it to come from him, at a time of his choosing.

I had to acknowledge the possibility that maybe he had died, as the years went by with no word.

Then out of the blue in 2004, when he was 31, I had a letter from the social worker in the adoption agency, telling me my birth son had made contact & was searching for me. I phoned her & that started off weeks of wonderful chats with her & a lot of tears for me, where she told me as much of his story as she could. She was very reassuring. She asked me to write him a letter, send it to her & she would pass it on. No identifying surname or addresses were allowed yet, it was all very carefully done. I got his letter a few weeks later, I couldn't stop reading it, I couldn't stop crying. I was so happy this was happening but the past came back cruelly. I found Barnardos so helpful at that stage when I phoned, they had a wealth of wisdom in dealing with these issues, & recommended some books which were a great help to me.

We then sent photos in the next letter & the social worker was happy for us to take over our own communication, as she knew we were both in a good place with it. We emailed, then had a long phone call. It was all wonderful & emotional.

We met a few weeks later where he lived in Canada, he was a lovely young man, but finding it hard to take it all in. I felt such a bond with him over that weekend, we both felt it. My husband was with me through it all & was such a huge support.

He visited us in Ireland a few months later with his girlfriend. He stayed with us & met his two brothers & two sisters. They all loved him. It was a bit overwhelming for him though, he hadn't expected us to be waiting for him all these years.

A few months after all of this I did a course in Barnardos for birth mothers.

It was the most incredible experience to sit in a room with 11 other women, all of whom had gone through similar experiences. In our group we had women who gave birth in the 60's, 70's & 80's, in mother & baby homes and hospitals. No matter which decade, almost all remembered shame, silence & family rejection.

Most of us had been locked in silence since the birth. Families did not want it talked about.

It was such a relief to be able to bring forth our memories & stories during that course, knowing everyone was in similar circumstances. Everyone of us had suffered in the past, memories were raw, but it helped to talk & to listen to others. Patricia & Christine were there to gently guide us through.

Some of the mothers were searching for their birth child, some had already had contact; not all had happy reunions.

We had a night where three adopted people came to tell us their experience of growing up in an adoptive family. Three very different stories. I found this really helpful. I really registered the fact that one man, met his birth mother more as an obligation and did not feel a huge bond. He was far more comfortable with his adoptive family. This was sobering to hear.

14 years on from first contact with my birth son, I can say it has settled into a comfortable, quiet place in my life & my heart. It has taken years to get to this point.

The reunion period was adrenaline rush, wonderfully happy but emotionally draining. The aftermath was difficult because I wasn't hearing from him as much as previously, and also a lot of memories had been dug up and I had to deal with them. I needed help with all of that. Barnardos were an endless source of wisdom & understanding.

We have had lovely contact with him over the years. Myself & my family have been over and back to visit him, we went to his wedding, we met all his family there. He now has two children & a very busy life. We know he feels connected to us, but we are just a part of his family picture.

I love it though that I can text him & know that I will get a reply back. Small simple ways where I can let him know I think of him. He is right there in my heart.

*I fantasised about seeing him on the doorstep & that I would recognise him*

*From the beginning, we have asked a mother who has attended the groups herself to co-lead a future course. In this way we try to respect/reflect the belief that only someone who has been through such a traumatic experience and 'walked in your shoes' can truly understand you. Christina talks about the benefits of this in her story and she has gone on to offer specific yoga retreats to other mothers.*

## Christina

I first attended the Barnardos First Mothers Group in 2011, so to take part in an eight week course run and facilitated by Patricia White from Barnardos Post Adoption Services, Dublin, Ireland.

I found the course very helpful in many ways. Firstly, just to have women in the room with me whom I shared a common bond with was a bonus. A place to talk about my own experience of the loss, grief and difficulties in adoption separation between myself and my adopted son.

Also to have "some" knowledge of what to expect in a reunion, and of course listening to other women share their stories and experiences was very valuable too. While also listening to the invited mother who assisted Patricia throughout the eight weeks was also very useful. I finished the course in May that year, and out of surprise I did have my reunion with my adult son, which thankfully went well. The experiences of the course help prepare me in some small ways.

The years have since past, and both myself and my son continue to get to know each other as mother and adult son. It has not always been easy, at times very challenging,

and at times it is okay. It had often felt like I was thrown emotionally back into the past. But I had to work through it, try to stay present to the best of my ability, and I did, and still do. I don't believe it gets any easier, as the loss will always be there, but I'm learning to live with it more as I continue to work through the grief. I have found ways to work through the trauma, which was at times painful, but it had to be done, so to set myself free of pain.

I have done this through professional counselling, sharing with friends who understand, my yoga practice especially, meditation and using other holistic approaches which have helped me to gain more insight and understanding into who I am, and the truth in what really happened, and to face that.

Going back to the meetings in Barnardos have been a great support. Meeting the other women, listening to them how things are going, seeing them progress is very positive, and getting to know them as friends. For the last five years I have also been facilitating holistic retreats for First Mothers twice a year.

Thank you Patricia and Barnardos for providing this ongoing space at Barnardos Post Adoption Services. It's really important to keep it up for us all, so those like myself have a place to go back to, and those that are new to coming out, have a place to open up also, as there is so little support or service for First Mothers. That's why I set up the retreats.

*During the course of the meetings, mothers are helped to prepare for the many outcomes they have to face if they search for or are found by their son or daughter. They learn to have realistic expectations and to understand the many complex issues and feelings adopted people have, both growing up and as adults. Siobhan, who did the course before she met her son, talks about how she was helped to build herself up and to feel more prepared when she met him.*

## Siobhan

**M**y story of motherhood.

In love and fairly contented in a relationship with my boyfriend James, I was sure we had a future life together. He declared his love for me and I believed him. We talked of marriage and having many children. He was eager for us to get engaged and for sex and knew all about contraception. It was the mid 70`s but as a couple we had little trouble getting a doctor to prescribe the contraceptive pill. I was on it for some time and immediately after I stopped taking it I became pregnant. So, I found out early and was not shocked or surprised.

I was very excited when I first found out that I was pregnant. It made me feel very special and protective. Giving life was such a magical experience. I remember clearly the little flutters and craving for milk. My boss, who must have suspected something, never disturbed me when he found me fast asleep at my desk. The nausea and vomiting though was not so pleasant. Overall, I had a very healthy pregnancy.

I knew that Ireland was hostile to unmarried parenthood so we set about

planning an escape abroad. When James, who had just become unemployed, said that he could not provide for a family and eventually left me I was devastated. Abandoned and suffering from fear, anxiety and depression, unable to function properly I sought the help and guidance of a counsellor. She painted a frightening picture of my circumstances and I followed her instructions while she arranged my future. In my naivety I was unaware that I had any choice. She had a network of safe houses where she could arrange my stay from all the hostility. In exchange for my keep I would have some domestic obligations to fulfil. The isolation in the countryside, living with total strangers was difficult. Cooking cleaning and child minding kept me busy but I cried myself to sleep many nights. My only friend and constant companion was the little one inside of me and his acrobatics let me know that he was doing alright in there too. A strong religious ethos prevailed within the household which made me quite conscious of my state of sin. Sexual relations outside of marriage was condemned by the Church. Life at the safe house was a test of endurance I just had to go through.

Eventually, I had to go to hospital where my baby boy was born. The hospital staff generally were unfriendly and unkind. I was in labour for a very long time and the delivery was a horrendous experience. Walking was difficult and my stitches burst open. I couldn`t understand why the nursing staff were so cruel. They took my baby away and wouldn`t give him back to me. All the other mothers had their babies with them. Eventually, one nurse relented and returned him to me. I loved having him with me and taking care of him was such a joy. He was beautiful and so perfect.

Family, friends and professionals all saw it one way, that a child should be reared by

a married couple with everything to offer rather than a single mother. A married couple would offer the stability of two parents, a home, economic security and the removal of his illegitimate status. I had nobody on my side to help and James wasn`t answering my letters. Life was so unfair. This couple who had everything but a baby, wanted mine, while I had nothing but my baby. I wanted and loved him very much but my longings or desires were not relevant and the sacrifice for his sake was expected from me if I truly loved him. Bending to the enormous pressure from all around I reluctantly consented to allowing the “married couple” adopt my baby. I went through the process like a zombie feeling defeated and unworthy. Brainwashed into thinking I was not good enough for my own child. The day we left the hospital and were taken to the Nursery was traumatic

*All I was left with was my scarred body and his little blue wristband.*

for me and my son. I cried hysterically with the injustice of it all. The only words I remember being uttered were “take the baby from her”. Afterwards, I was taken to a doctor for a paper bag of pills, which quickly made me numb and drowsy.

I started a new job and began the difficult process of reintegration into life “on the outside”. I visited my son in the nursery on certain evenings. Unfortunately, after such a long journey the visits allowed were all too short. I was confident he was well looked after there and the fee was

affordable. On my last visit I spent the time planning an escape with my baby, mapping out a route in my mind and where we could hide so the authorities would not find us. As I was getting closer to making my move the anxiety began to heighten and my son started to cry. I was gripped with fear of what they would do to me if I walked out with him and I didn`t want to go to jail. Then the door opened and a nurse indicated that my time was up. The despair was all consuming. He was going to be taken away by adopters the very next day and I had lost my chance to prevent that from happening.

I had told the social worker at the adoption agency that I didn`t want contact to end and that I wanted to see my son again. She led me to believe that I would see him again when he was eighteen but not before.

to make me feel used and discarded and contact faded for a number of years. One day I received an album of photographs which was wonderful but also sad for me. It

## *I often wonder, how could they have taken my baby and not considered me?*

was a painful reminder of how much of his life I had missed out on.

Following a post adoption program with Barnardos and meeting other mothers with an adoption experience helped me face the reality of what had happened to me and reconcile the two people I became. Here, in a safe environment, with the help and guidance of a professional team I was able to face reality and build on my sense of self-worth. In this new age of compassion openness and reconciliation Barnardos provides a much-needed service for all involved in the adoption circle. A reunion after closed adoption can be quite traumatic and involves many more people than a Mother and her offspring. It's important to have resilience, otherwise it can be too overwhelming to cope with.

After many years corresponding with my son he eventually called to see me. I was very anxious and excited to see him again, though a little weary from the long wait. It was lovely just looking at him after all those years. We've spent many hours and days in each other's company since and I've got to meet his adoptive family and circle of friends. We all get along reasonably well but it hasn't been an easy journey. Over the years there have been periods of great joy and elation and much celebration but also frustration disappointment and hurt. The feeling of not being good enough is still a challenge for me.

Occasionally, actions or comments made by the adoptive parents can make me feel hurt or uncomfortable so I try to avoid them as much as possible, rather than raise

the issues with them, which could lead to confrontation. After all they were good enough to allow me contact with my son. They were in a powerful position then and still are. As parents they did their best for him, but I only wish that it was me and not them. Knowing that this can never happen I have to accept the reality of the situation as it is.

I often wonder, how could they have taken my baby and not considered me? Did they believe I had no interest in my child? Did they think I had forgotten him? What kind of mother does this make me in their eyes? While they were fulfilling themselves with the joys and demands of family life I was suffering the loss in silence.

I feel a great injustice was done to me. The powers within the State and Church took advantage of my naivety and vulnerability. Information and support that could have helped me survive as a single mother was intentionally denied me and my Motherhood was disrespected because I wasn't married. Tragically, because of the separation when my son was young and all the secrecy that was enforced the damage done was a lifelong burden for us both, in different ways. However, that aside, I am happy that my son is in my life now and plays an important part in it.

*Edel's story illustrates how a lack of counselling or preparation can affect a future relationship and sadly her relationship with her daughter did not develop as she had hoped at the time.*

## Edel

I heard a woman recently say that her decision was borne out of strength. I wish I could claim the same but mine was borne out of weakness. Unlike many women and girls in the decades before me, whose decision was made for them by their families or their local priests, my decision was in my hands. After all, it was the mid-80s, there was 'Unmarried Mother's Allowance' and the St. Vincent de Paul could provide a cot and some baby clothes. I could get a flat from the Corpo. Other girls managed. But I was afraid. I needed my mother's backing, help and support but she wasn't on the same page.

I discovered when I told her that I was pregnant that she too had been in the same predicament 23 years earlier. In her case, her best friend told the parish priest who told her mother. She was shipped off to the Navan Road M&B Home. It turns out that she was one of the 'lucky ones', her older sister knew a solicitor who knew a family looking to adopt and it was arranged privately and quickly and so my mother was able to go back home and resume her life as if nothing had happened. It was never spoken about and the world continued.

When I was about eight months pregnant, I asked her if it took her long to get over it and she answered that she was married within two years and had me within three. I wondered if she had married as a rebound, somebody who knew about her fall from

grace and was willing to marry her anyway.

During my pregnancy I fooled myself that adoption was the right thing, that I wasn't ready to be a mother while at the same time buying books and magazines about pregnancy and window shopping for baby clothes.

I was so lonely in the last four months of my pregnancy, so isolated, cut off from friends and life. I visited the councillor in the adoption agency as often as I could as it was the only place that my pregnancy could be acknowledged apart from my hospital visits, where I sat with my head hung low in shame, hoping that I wouldn't bump into anyone I knew. I remember my first visit and I was made to strip naked for an internal followed by a breast check. I tried not to eat so much so that I would not put on weight, I fainted at one hospital visit. About a week before I gave birth, I was taken into hospital due to high blood pressure. I envied the other women who were excited, happy, looking forward to meeting their offspring, but I couldn't join in, they wouldn't understand, they would think that I was a cold, uncaring monster. At the same time when it was time to be discharged, I didn't want to leave because in there, doctors and nurses would visit, check my tummy, talk about my baby and ask me how I was. I could be a pregnant mother, I didn't have to hide or pretend.

I was only home a few days when I went into labour and it was time to go back into the hospital.

The night she was born, I sat for hours holding my beautiful daughter, rocking her and feeding her in the nursery at the end of the ward. The nurse was chatting to me and asked me 'How did it happen?'. I should have said "You're a mid-wife, if you don't know by now.....", but of course she was commenting on the fact that I was an

'Unmarried Woman' who should not be sexually active.

I spent six days in hospital with my precious daughter and on the sixth day had to leave without her. The video of those moments is imprinted on the inside of my eyelids. She spent the following five weeks in Temple Hill where I visited her every week. I knew that I shouldn't but I had to see her, to be with her. She was placed with her new family when she was six weeks old. I understood why it was called a 'broken heart' because the physical pain in my chest was overwhelming. I rocked myself while I cried in the house on my own every day. I didn't want to be alive without her.

When she was three months old, I was staying in my aunt's house and that morning her son called at 6am to say that his wife had given birth to a baby girl. Everyone in the house was so excited and so happy and there was such a buzz. I thought to myself that this is not fair, nobody had congratulated me when I was pregnant or when I gave birth, the opposite in fact, it was all secrets, lies, doom and gloom. I decided that day that I was going to take my baby back. I was going to go to the St Vincent de Paul and ask them for any help that I could get. I went home to tell my mother of my decision, but she said 'No'.

She had brought me up on her own as my father was an alcoholic and they split up when I was very young. She was a 'Deserted Wife', which was just slightly up the social ladder from an 'Unmarried Mother' and she had known stigma and hardship. She told me that I didn't understand how hard it was to raise a child as a single parent. I was devastated as I felt I couldn't do it on my own. Looking back, I think she would have come around in time, particularly as Ireland changed so much in subsequent years.

I didn't want to live, I wished I was dead. I felt numb. I regularly passed the Coombe hospital on the bus and wished I was back in there with my baby. I found myself looking at pregnant women with envy.

When she was six months old, the agency contacted me as it was time to go to sign the papers. I remember climbing the dirty stairs in an old smelly solicitor's office in Abbey Street. I went through the motions, did what was required of me and signed an oath of some sort. I wiped the tears from my eyes and went to the Oval pub with the social worker for a coffee. I wondered if the barmen knew what I had just done, I wondered how many other women had sat there in the same seat having done the same thing. After the coffee, I went back to work, a normal day.....what a terrible person I was.....am!

I contacted the agency on a regular basis but they were not encouraging. I asked for photos and updates. I was told that I needed to move on. I was sold a lie. More than 30 years later and I have not 'moved on'. No parent recovers from the loss of a child, but it is made more difficult when nobody knows. My daughter is not in my life. My grandchildren are not in my life. Nobody told me that this would happen.

Nearly 15 years later, I received a letter from the agency asking me to contact them. My heart raced, had something happened to her, was she alright, I was in a panic. She wanted to meet me. I was ecstatic, but I was about eight weeks pregnant at the time of the letter. Having met with a social worker and exchanged letters with my daughter, a few months had passed. I wanted to meet her so desperately, but the timing felt wrong. How could I meet her when I was so obviously pregnant with a child that I was going to be keeping. I had to delay our meeting until after the birth and so we met

about six weeks before her 16th birthday. The meeting was in the agency. I wondered if her parents were hiding in a doorway somewhere watching out for me.

cognisant of her age but still perhaps I spoke to her as if she were an adult, like I said, there was no support or advice. She met her sisters, she came to my house,

*I understood why it was called a 'broken heart' because the physical pain in my chest was overwhelming.*

I walked into the room and there she was, so beautiful, an amazing smile, such a warm lovely wonderful girl. This was my precious daughter, we were reunited nearly 16 years after I had last held her in my arms that day in Temple Hill.

The advice and support was completely lacking and I don't think that I managed the following years very well. Perhaps our expectations were very different, she was a young teenage child and was probably bored, perhaps curious. I don't think anybody had the proper counselling. The social worker thought it was 'karma' because when my daughter contacted them, she checked the file and could see that I too had made contact only a few weeks previously. If she had looked in the file, she would have seen that I had in fact, always kept in contact hoping that it would make it very easy to find me.

I suppose my hopes were that she and her family would see me and my other daughters as part of her extended family, but I was very naïve and foolish. We met many times, firstly in the agency, then we swapped numbers and we would meet in town or close to where she lived. I was

she even stayed over once to babysit when myself and my husband went to a wedding. She even came to a party in my house.

But then something went wrong, somewhere along the way and I just don't know what it was, if I said or did something, I just don't know. Our reunion lasted about six years, then she moved to Australia. At first, we kept in contact but then it dwindled out and I noticed a coolness that I had not been aware of before, perhaps I didn't want to see it.

I met her for a coffee a year later when she was on a visit back to Ireland. That was the last time that I saw or touched her, but I could see that she was not interested, her embrace was limp and looking back, I think she couldn't wait to get away from me.

She has since moved back to Ireland, is married with two children but she doesn't want me in her life.

*Patricia discovered that, for her, it worked well to have personal therapy alongside the support provided by Barnardos. This helped her deal with and understand her feelings and she thinks this benefited her relationship with her daughter.*

## Patricia

In 1982 I arrived at the offices of Cura in Dublin city. I was a terrified young girl whose boyfriend had abandoned her when she discovered she was pregnant. Bishop Eamonn Casey was involved with Cura at the time and I found myself in Galway hidden away for many months, alone and terribly helpless. My social worker was a nun and I was taken in to live with a family that were in the process of adopting.

The professionals at that time saw this as appropriate and all advised me that my baby would get a good home with two parents and I would go home and continue my life and forget. Adoption was presented as a win win situation for all involved. As we all now know this was not to be the true reality.

During those months something incredibly special happened, in that mother and baby bonded. I would have little chats with her as she grew inside me.

I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl mid summer by caesarean section due to complications. The consultant was to inform me later on that I would never be able to give birth naturally in the future.

The city of Galway was vibrant and alive at that time and my world was falling apart. Of course I could not give her up so the plan was changed. A foster home was arranged and I went home with the intention of telling my Dad and hoping

I could return with her. That day will be forever etched on my mind. My parents had called it a day on their marriage. At that moment I realized that the home I had grown up in had been an unsafe place for me and I knew I could not bring my daughter there.

I did return without her and continued on. I met the most wonderful man and went on and had three more children, by natural birth. I now know that another professional missed the psychological piece in the story. Nobody saw that maybe this mother did not want to lose her child and the child did not want to be separated from her mother.

It was, of course, bigger than just physical.

To the outside world I was living the dream. I had a beautiful family, a home in the country and a career. What the world did not know was that part of me had died the day I lost my firstborn daughter. I became an expert at burying how I felt to survive in the life I was now living.

It was to be 22 years later when I was reunited with my daughter. One of the first things her adoptive Mam said to me was how I had put them through the trauma of the fact that they might lose her. I had not signed the adoption papers for 15 months. In that moment I knew that this lady seemed to have no concept as to how that happened and the letter I had written was either not given or not read.

We all entered the reunion carrying all our buried emotions. There were no winners here, we had all lost and here we were thrown into the deep end with no survival aids.

We were all acting out but at the time did not realize this. When we would meet my daughter would constantly get telephone calls and texts from her parents. I could

see this frustrated her as after all she was safe with someone she knew. They were, however, acting out of their place of loss. My daughter was to later tell me that I appeared much traumatized and I frightened her. She felt she did not want to be a part of causing me pain. Of course, she was the innocent party in this. It was my trauma and I had a choice to deal with it or continue to bury it.

In the intervening years these feelings were deeply buried but played out negatively in my relationships. I acted out my anger

*There were no winners here, we had all lost and here we were thrown into the deep end with no survival aids.*

at the people close to me; unaware of the damage it would cause. Those close to me did not enable this to continue and once I became aware I might lose the important people in my life, I made the choice to enter therapy.

I met a very person centred therapist who journeyed with me in telling my story. In telling the story I was then able to go on and do some work around Post-Traumatic Stress. Talking about my feelings of anger, shame and guilt was very difficult as I had them so buried. I began to look at the feelings and understand them more and in so doing learn to express them in a more positive way.

At the time of re-union, my daughter's adoptive parents told me that they were offered counselling but felt they did not

need it. My belief is that all of us in the adoption triad would benefit hugely from exploration. I also believe however if only one party engages in personal therapy it can sustain the re-union into the future.

Sadly my daughter's birth father could never take that step and I was informed that he had taken his own life some years on, leaving behind his own family devastated.

Healing from adoption is a lifelong process and requires all involved to work extra hard at maintaining our mental health. Personal

therapy and engaging with a support group such as Barnardos can be a lifeline. Finding something healthy to sustain us at the difficult times is essential. Connecting with nature and animals is my thing but we can all find what works for us. Lowering our expectations of each other and learning to accept our vulnerabilities can be hugely beneficial.

I wish you luck, peace of mind and happiness on your continuing journey.



*Everyone's story is different and, in our experience, certain situations can make mothers feel particularly isolated. By coming to the groups, however, mothers soon realise that theirs is not such a unique situation and they get the chance to meet others who have had a similar experience. These include mothers who did not have further children, those who had more than one child adopted or those who went on to marry the birth father. Mae's story illustrates this last scenario very well.*

## Mae

Where to start? It has been fifty-five years, but it is a story I still find very difficult to tell. The memories and emotions it evokes are so upsetting. It began in 1963 when, at the age of 17, I became pregnant.

My boyfriend and I were to get married. However, the Catholic Church had other ideas. My boyfriend was a Protestant. I recall the meeting we had with my parish priest to discuss the situation. He made his opinion very clear when he said, "You want to marry a non-Catholic, and bring a baby into that marriage?"

Everything changed after that. I was sent to St. Patrick's Mother and Baby Home on the Navan Road. My boyfriend was only informed of this afterwards, when he called by my family's home to see me. Shocked and upset by the news, he hurried home to tell his Mother. As few homes had a telephone at the time, she immediately wrote a letter to my Parents. She asked them to remove me from St. Patrick's, and said I was more than welcome to stay in her home. My boyfriend cycled to the GPO to post the letter, and it arrived the next day.

I was in St. Patrick's for two days. The nuns were so unfriendly. I was given a uniform several sizes too big for me, and was told to put it on. I was brought to a dormitory and shown my bed. After changing, they took my own clothes away.

Later, I was brought to a large room where there were other girls. Some had already had their babies. We were not allowed to use our real names, but I can't remember what name I was given. In yet another large room I was taken to, everyone was working. Some girls were sewing. Others were making rosary beads. I was asked what I could do and I was put at a table making rugs. My uncle made lovely rugs. When I was younger I had spent many fond weekends at my Aunt and Uncle's home. They taught me how to make rugs, although he had to go over every loop I made, as I never pulled them tightly enough.

St. Patrick's was a sad and lonely place. Everything about it felt cold, and I felt hopeless. Then, to my surprise, my Dad arrived. He had come to pick me up, to take me into town to meet my boyfriend. My boyfriend took me home with him, to his mother – a lovely, kind and caring person. She made me feel so welcome. The days went by, but there was still no sign of us being allowed to marry. No plans were being made, and everything seemed to drag on.

Then the day arrived – in January, 1964. My boyfriend's mother and my mother took me to the Rotunda hospital. I was completely unprepared for the difficult labour and was in a state of shock. The labour was so hard that I cried. The nurse slapped me hard on the thigh and said, "Be quiet! There are other mothers here who are married!"

I gave birth to a beautiful little girl.

I was placed in a ward with six beds. The other mothers assumed I was married. But one girl came over to me and said, "You're not married, are you?" She could see how the staff were treating me differently.

My boyfriend and his mother came to visit me, as did my mother. I can't remember who else might have visited me. It was a shocking time. I felt so alone.

When we left the hospital, we were brought to a house on the North Circular Road – a

When I got back to the house, my baby was gone!

My world fell apart. She had been taken from the house while I was out. I stood there, looking at the empty cot. She was just gone! My parents were there at the house. They had packed my bag. They brought me into town. We had tea, I remember, in Clerys on O'Connell Street. There, sitting at a table, my father told me that the matter was not to be discussed again. I was to get on with my life. I was supposed to just forget about my baby.

*St. Patrick's was a sad and lonely place.*

house for Mothers and Babies. However, that house was full. We were then taken to another house, a private house, again on the north side of the city. It was a nice house. We lived with a family, and I took care of my baby. I had been told by my mother not to handle the baby too much. "Why not?" I wondered. At night I would have my baby in the bed with me. I remember her little cold hands and the bliss of her touch. I had no idea what was to happen in the weeks that followed.

A priest had called to the house a few times, to see how we were. He asked some strange questions. He asked about the colour of my boyfriend's hair and eyes. My 18th birthday came and went during those short weeks. Then, out of the blue, I was sent to the hairdressers to have my hair done. I recall telling the hairdresser that it was a birthday treat from my parents.

My boyfriend knew nothing about what had happened, nor did his mother. She was a widow for many years, and worked outside the home. She was a protestant from England, and did not so readily conform to the authority of the Catholic Church. She was utterly shocked by what had happened, but could do nothing to help us. The priest and my parents had arranged it all.

I truly believe that fear compelled my parents to do what they did. Fear of the Church. Fear of what others might think and say. The Catholic Church controlled everything.

Time passed. Eventually, I was brought by my parents to sign the adoption papers. I was numb. I had held off doing so for many months, refusing to go. But, eventually, they wore me down.

Four years later, I married my boyfriend,

the father of my baby. We went on to have four more children – two boys and two girls. We got on with living, but we never forgot our little girl. Over the years it has been so hard not knowing where she was at Christmas, or on her birthday, or when my other children were starting school. Was she well? Was she happy?

*I truly believe that fear compelled my parents to do what they did.*

The years passed. Every year on her birthday, my sister would call to let me know that she was thinking of my little girl. My sister often accompanied me on visits to the Pro-Cathedral in Dublin, to see a lady from the Rotunda Girls Aid Society, hoping that this time they would have any work or news about the whereabouts of my little girl. She was never helpful. So, one day, my sister and I decided to go and look at the birth registers. We found records for three babies that were born on the same day. This was the start of our breakthrough.

Some 37 years after she was taken from me, I finally met my beautiful daughter again. We hugged and cried, and talked a lot. A wonderful couple had adopted her. They prayed for us every night as she grew up. They told her often just how special she was. She was loved. She was happy.

In the summer of 2003 she met my other children, and we were finally all together in my home. She and her adoptive parents also attended the weddings of two of my other children. Her adoptive parents were such warm people. They died a matter of

weeks apart, and I miss them very much.

Before I met my daughter, I attended a Barnardos meeting one evening, a talk being given by Christine Hennessy. My sister came with me. I cried the whole time I was there. Christine was so kind to everyone there. I then went on to attend one of the many courses there, and some

meetings too. They were a great help to me and had so much to offer. It was lovely to be with other people who knew how you were feeling. Every story was different. It was so good to be able to talk, to cry, and know that they understood what I had gone through. I will be forever grateful to Christine and Patricia in Barnardos. They helped me more than they will ever know.

We continue to see my daughter from time to time. We speak on the phone quite a lot too. I could go on longer and tell you of our other children – how good they are, and how welcoming they have been to their sister.

To Barnardos, I say a Big Thank You.

*Sadly, many thousands of mothers in Ireland have never had any support after their child was adopted. Clare, an adopted person, writes about her mother Mary, whom she eventually met.*

## Mary & Clare

In 1956 Mary was 20 years old. She'd had a happy childhood growing up on the family farm. She fell for a handsome young mechanic from the town. Her parents disapproved of him because they felt he was unreliable, not their sort. At the same time Mary discovered, to her absolute horror, that she was pregnant. She had no-one to turn to. She wrote to her sister Kathleen, who was nursing in Liverpool at the time. Kathleen wrote back to Mary, enclosing the cash that she would need to make the journey by train to Dublin and then board the Mail Boat to Liverpool. There, Mary found some work to support herself. Kathleen contacted the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mary and Joseph to ask if they could advise the best course for Mary to follow as her pregnancy advanced.

The nuns said that their order ran a Mother

*...there were no paid employees, the girls did all the work...*

and Baby home called Sean Ross Abbey in Roscrea, Co Tipperary and that they would contact the home to enquire if there was a place for Mary. So when the time came, a heavily pregnant Mary managed, all by

herself, to board the Mail Boat back to Dublin. She then took the train to Roscrea and installed herself in Sean Ross Abbey.

She soon discovered that life in the Abbey was like nothing she had ever experienced before. There were no paid employees, the girls did all the work, the laundry, the cleaning, the gardening, the cooking, etc. The nuns were harsh and cruel to the girls, whom they looked upon as wicked and sinful.

Mary was utterly miserable and lonely. When it came to the birth, she was very frightened. There were no kind words of encouragement and there was no pain relief offered. Fortunately for Mary there were no complications during or after the birth. She delivered a healthy baby girl. The baby was baptised the next day in the local parish church and named Mary Teresa.

The recently delivered mothers were forced to breastfeed their babies as there was no alternative offered. During the daytime the babies were lined up in rows of cots in the nursery. When Mary's baby cried, a nun would come to wherever she was working and order her to the nursery to feed her baby.

When the baby was three months old, a nun came into the room and told Mary to

pack her bags immediately, she was to go home. The nun told Mary that her baby was to be adopted in America. The nun then wrenched the baby out of Mary's arms and left. Mary was stricken with shock and fear. So many questions: why was her baby

snatched so suddenly; how would she get home; how would she explain her sudden arrival to her parents and siblings; how would she ever survive the pain of what had happened, with no-one to talk to. She couldn't tell her mother for fear of the shame it would bring upon the family in the local parish.

Somehow, by the grace of God, she managed to get through without a breakdown. Mary's heart was still broken but a young man called Tom seemed to bring her some comfort. She had known Tom all her life. He was steady and reliable. She agreed to marry him. They went on to have five children together.

Mary was a hard worker and competent in all the various tasks on the farm. Life was pleasant and the farm a success but not a day went by when she didn't think of her lost baby with a shudder going through her.

*Mary's heart was still broken but a young man called Tom seemed to bring her some comfort.*

One sunny morning in 1991, Mary answered the door to two social workers. Straightaway she knew who and why they were there. Her lost baby was looking for her at last.

However, full of joy at this development, Mary now had to digest the fact that 35 years ago, she had been told a lie.

The nun had definitely told her that the baby was being adopted in America. Now Mary was trying to understand the reality.

In fact baby Mary Teresa was now Clare Mary Teresa. She had been given to her adoptive parents, who lived in an upmarket suburb of Dublin, with nothing but her birth certificate and no other instructions.

Mary now had to face the fact that on the one hand, she had been told a lie about the baby's adoption, she also had to deal with the joy that came with the knowledge that her lost baby had made all the effort to find her. This effort had been hindered by Sister Hildegarde, who had repeatedly insisted that all the records were destroyed in a fire at the Abbey. However, the then 35 year old Clare was more than a match for Hildegarde and so Mary finally met Clare.

Unfortunately Mary died in 2003, she died with her secret in her heart.

*For the past 30 years, the group support service has provided a safe space where mothers can feel whole and be totally honest in the company of others who understand them. Jane describes her longing to be called Mum by her son 'just once' and the benefits of being with people in the 'same boat'.*

## Janes's Poem

I now only need you to call me your mum  
Just once; after all you are my son.

I believe you were told that I didn't love you  
That I 'gave you away' because I was not true.

Did you hear that you were unwanted, a mistake?  
In the middle of the night alone, did your heart break?

I matched your grief, I matched your pain  
I mourned your loss, my heart ripped; in vain.

'He needs two parents; a mum and a dad  
You, a sinner, you have no right to be sad'

Dismissed. I went on about my way.  
Struggled through every long day

My heart was ice but my love was pure.  
The pain the loss, no option but to endure.

I relive the acts played by the parties involved.

The nuns, the priest and society; the quiet mob.

The social worker who advised me at her kitchen counter  
'I have a child's birthday party today; sign here, this is a favour'

I took it all, I believed they were right  
I 'gave you up' without a word or a fight

Nobody on my side, no family no support,  
Legacy of the time in charge of the church

The adoptive parents who benefited from pain  
They say they 'didn't know' that our loss was their gain.

The lies, the deceit, the ignorance and the abuse  
At the end of the line I thought what's the use?

When you came back everything had changed  
I was caught in a time loop, I felt deranged.

My actions to be judged by the standards of today  
'You upset family dynamics; keep out of the way'

I sought out support, I sought out help  
I learned there were others, my type, my ilk

We sat in Barnardos and opened that attic door  
In a safe haven our pain was allowed to pour.

We took out those crates, one box at a time  
We sorted the contents, I packed what was  
mine.

The loss so insurmountable was tempered  
with tea.

We learned respect for each other person  
that was 'me'.

The past can't be changed the past is as it  
is,

Our children have gone, water under the  
bridge.

For just one moment I would like to feel  
That my beautiful first born son was real.

I now only need you to call me your mum  
Just once; after all you are my son.

*We sat in Barnardos and opened that  
attic door  
In a safe haven our pain was allowed to  
pour.*

### **Outline of the Group Support Service**

Over 600 mothers have availed of the group support service over the past 30 years. Their first contact with Barnardos Post Adoption service is usually through our dedicated helpline or email support service. Staff give callers information about the groups as part of the support we can offer them. We then offer them an appointment to discuss their situation with us and help them decide if the group may suit them.

#### **Initial course**

We invite eight to 10 birth mothers to each course guided by an experienced social worker along with a birth mother who has already completed a course. Mothers are gently led through their experiences from past to present and looking ahead to the future in the six / seven session courses that explores:

- The past (discovery of pregnancy, sharing the news, birth, parting with baby and afterwards)
- Aspects of your life since it was affected by the adoption (ways of coping)
- Relationships with partners and family (parenting further children, decision making, self-esteem)
- Adoptive family experience (hearing a personal story)
- Being adopted (opportunity to hear adopted adults' perspective)
- Issues in common shared with adopted people and adoptive parents (loss)
- Making the decision to search for son/ daughter or being found (what is involved, differences)
- Preparing for reunion and other challenging outcomes
- What happens after reunion (stages and changes over the years)

### **Follow up support group meetings**

Barnardos holds regular support meetings for women who have attended the six session courses. As many as 30-40 women attend these informal and relaxed support meetings where a range of topics are explored. Sometimes they come because they have a particular issue they would like to talk about and seek feedback from others as to how they might deal with it. Others come to share good news of a much longed for reunion taking place, or just to re-connect with the group.

We also cover topics in further depth depending on what mothers have requested. Last year, for example, we held a meeting that focused on the fathers of children who were adopted to which we invited one along to share his story. At another, the women had the opportunity to hear the experiences of adult children raised by their mothers who discovered they had a sibling adopted and how relationships developed between them.

Mothers in the Kilkenny/Carlow area, many of whom have taken part in Barnardos courses, have started their own local network and meet on a monthly basis in a local hotel. This has been of great help to mothers who cannot get to the Dublin groups or who want additional support in their own area. We would love to see this welcome development extend to other parts of the country and are happy to offer any support we can with setting this up.

The courses and groups run by Barnardos currently only take place in Dublin, but the service is national and women have travelled from all over Ireland to take part.

Hopefully in the future we may be able to extend our group support service nationwide. We also hope to be in a position to offer a service to mothers who have been unable to raise their children for other reasons, children who may have been fostered, informally adopted or raised in the care system. It may also provide a useful model in the future to offer group support to the many women who were in Mother and Baby Homes or Laundries.

# Conclusion & Acknowledgments

For the social workers involved in running the groups over the years, this work has truly been a highlight of our careers. To have offered this service consistently over such a long period has not always been easy, but we are very proud that we have achieved this. It has been very sad and hard to deal with all the grief but we have also had lots of laughs together. As colleagues, we also give each other great support with this important work. The positivity gained from linking mothers with each other has been amazing as we witnessed them blossoming over the weeks with the sheer relief of being able to share this difficult part of their lives with others who understand and 'get you'!

Barnardos would like to sincerely thank all the women who contributed their stories, poetry and artwork to this book. We dedicate it to every mother who attended our support group service over the years and we remember Norah Gibbons, our friend and colleague, who died in 2020.



Mum and Babe



Big Hug

The Barnardos Post Adoption Service:  
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(01) 454 6388

  
**Barnardos**  
Because childhood lasts a lifetime

**TÚSLA**  
An Ghníomhaireacht um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach  
Child and Family Agency