I struggle to know how to put this on paper. Relinquishing my baby daughter to adoption is one of the events (I can't say 'actions') that has shaped my life and one that has had ripple effects through my whole family. For me it resulted in ten years of clinical depression. Yet mine is probably one of the happier stories about adoption. How to begin?

I was twenty –four years old. I was a teacher. In 1970, I fell pregnant to a Chinese Malaysian student just as our rocky and unstable relationship was breaking apart. He was as stunned as I was when I became pregnant and initially wanted me to have an abortion. But I was not sure that hell, even the hell of guilt, didn't exist particularly for people who had abortions so I couldn't consider having one. In any case, abortion was illegal in Queensland at that time. And some part of me was also saying that this baby was meant to be born.

I was still a catholic at the time, though not a very convinced one and I was beginning to change. I had grown up in a deeply conservative country parish in Queensland. Telling my family that I was pregnant was one of most difficult days of my life – I was deeply afraid that my father, who had a bad heart, would die when heard the news and sought a doctor's advice before I took the journey home to tell him and my mother. Driving over Cunningham's gap with my sister necessitated taking three valium. My mother was outraged and furious with me. She scoffed at the notion that I might keep the baby and described the life of the one single parent that lived in the town, a woman who struggled financially and was the subject of finger pointing and disdain. There was also no way members of our extended family were to 'find out'. She didn't even want my youngest sister to be tarnished with the news. My mother told me to be more contrite and humble.

Looking back I can see that I was young, inexperienced and confused. Catholic education had never encouraged us to work things through, to consider and make decisions. In any case the realm of decision making assumes there is a choice – and my choices were limited. In the conservative society that I knew, single parents didn't exist. I had no models. I didn't think keeping my child was a real possibility. I didn't know any single parents. Nor did I think I could do anything that seemed so hard to do. I trusted the ubiquitous advice of the time (I can't call it 'accepted wisdom') that it was better for my baby and better for me if the baby was adopted. If only I'd had the gift of foresight.

I was fortunate that during my pregnancy I was able to stay with friends. And I met many of their large circle of friends during that time. But I had to keep hidden from Brisbane relatives, and from people from my country town who would take the gossip back. So I was in hiding – I only went out to go to my obstetrician and to the milk bar at the top of the hill.

Still, I lived in cocoon of supportive friendship, happy enough while I could block out the enormity of what I was going through, the meaning of relinquishment. I was used to hoping things would just work out somehow. And I simultaneously held different ideas about my unborn baby: The notion that I had to eat well so the baby would be strong and healthy, have a good start in life lay alongside an ongoing denial that I was having a baby at all. I went with a friend who was a social worker to see the adoption officer at the Department and talked proudly about the likely genetic inheritance of my baby, gave instructions as to who the baby needed to be placed with (not a Catholic, with one Chinese parent)

I gave birth in 1971 at the Brisbane General Hospital. I was alone through labour except for the midwives and doctors, and they revealed very different attitudes towards me. A smiling women, probably a midwife, possible a doctor encouraged me to hear my baby's heart beat through her stethoscope. She asked what name I was going to give my baby. This threw me completely. In some way I had been trying to deny the existence of the baby in my womb, as I was expected to deny the birth and my child's existence after adoption. I remember saying to her 'but I'm not married', and her reply 'but it's still your baby'.

I had a very different experience in the dark hours of the morning, as labour progressed, and I was whingeing about the pain. The midwife in attendance gave cold comfort, something to the effect that it served me right, I should have thought about the pain I would experience when I was having fun.

Giving birth was the pivotal moment – the point from which I could no longer hide from myself what I was doing. But it was too late (I now know, that legally it wasn't too late but I knew nothing about rights and laws then). But it was also the point at which the adoption machine went into full swing. I was just another one, just one of the hundreds of young women whose babies were lost to adoption. Suddenly a well organised, well-rehearsed process was in full swing – a process that my doctor, the midwives, the social workers were all well versed in. So when my baby daughter was born, she was whisked away by a nurse, without comment, discussion or direction from anyone. They knew what to do; this is what they always did at that hospital. I raised my head from the pillow to see the little white-wrapped bundle disappear from the room, and past the windows to the corridor. Quickly, she was out of sight, hopefully out of mind. I hadn't even delivered the placenta.

After giving birth I was given medication to dry up my milk. I was placed in a shared room with a fifteen year old girl who was also relinquishing her baby. She was immensely kind and supportive once she got over the horror of having an English teacher in the bed beside her. She was more street-wise than me and knew where they'd put our babies. So down I went to see my little girl. Usually I could only peer at her through the glass, but if I was lucky an assistant nurse would check no one was looking and let me hold her for a few minutes.

Returning to my floor, I was heartbroken, weeping, confused and beginning to question the path I was taking. Suddenly the reality of relinquishment was cutting through my denial and through the self-serving process conservative society was imposing on unmarried mothers and their children. But somewhere also in the hospital instructions had been given about the procedures to be used with unmarried mothers. And immediate and complete separation after birth seems to have been part of it. On one occasion when I was returning from seeing my baby, I was stopped in the corridor and hauled over the coals by the ward sister, she continued to scold even as I cried. It was a very intimidating and humiliating 'dressing down', though I think she said it 'was no good for me to see the baby'. I was forbidden to go down to see my baby again. So I didn't. I returned to my room and wept.

I don't remember signing adoption papers. I only remember the searing pain I felt as I left the hospital, leaving my baby behind. In the weeks that followed I spent time with my parents who gave several moral lectures and no consolation. I was to put it all behind me. So I tried. And I stopped crying about a

year later and didn't cry much again over anything for seventeen years, until the possibility of tracing her became the subject of intense counselling sessions with a therapist and then a psychologist. While the years that followed the birth of my daughter are another long story and the search and reunion yet another, it may be enough here to say that what followed was years of depression and deep scars of emotional and psychological damage for both me and my daughter. I am very aware that my pregnancy had more support and was less punitive than most relinquishing mothers experienced.

Would I like an apology? The hospital has already given one, I believe. My mother has long ago wept and apologized. Shortly after my daughter's birth, the Federal Government introduced supporting mother's benefit alongside a wave of change in social attitudes. But before that, what role did Federal governments have in developing the processes around adoption and the attitudes that suggested that babies could be given up without terrible pain and suffering? For any active role government played, and any omissions by successive governments which denied the rights of mothers and their children, an apology is long overdue.

I also know that access to extensive counseling was essential for me to come out of depression – it was not a matter of weeks, but a matter of years. Medicare offers support for depression, but it is really only short term. For those women who have still to go through the process, much more generous time allocations are needed.