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# The Panther: Jean/Erin

The word I use to describe my childhood is 'violent'. I was born in 1952 in Sydney, the youngest of eight children and named 'Jean' after one of my aunts. My mother handed me to my sister and said, 'Take care of this.'

### Children's Homes

She disappeared but my dad was there; he died when I was two. Then I was put in Waitara in Sydney. My father was one of eight children and so was my mother. None of those aunts and uncles ever took any of us kids when we were young. They let us all go to children's Homes.

I lived at Waitara until I was three. That was when my sister Shirley got married and got me out of the orphanage. Her husband was in the army and they had permission to bring me to Queensland. Shirley had a baby, Lisa. I was three and I slept in the same room with her. Lisa died when she was a few months old. She choked in her sleep.

I used to think Shirley was my mother. I remember when I was eight, Shirley's mother-in-law said to me, 'When are you going to stop calling that bitch your mother? She's your sister.' She was a gossip and caused so much trouble. I asked Shirley why she didn't tell me the truth. She told me that she was waiting until I got older and she was going to explain to me what happened. I asked, 'Well, where's my mother?' She said, 'She's dead.' I found out that she had lied when I came home one day and she was crying. She said, 'Our mother died today.' I was shocked. 'You took

away my only chance to see my mother', I told her. That was the end of my relationship with Shirley. I never saw my mother. There's not even any pictures of her because my eldest brother Frank got rid of all the photos.

I loved Richard's (my sister's husband's) father. 'Grandad', I used to call him. He was a truck driver and he used to babysit me. We used to go fishing together. He took his dog and I'd take my dog, Sparky. He was a wonderful man. He said to me after he had his stroke, 'You were a bonza kid Jean.' I think those words kept me alive.

I know that my sister Shirley was living in pain because she had lost a baby and her husband's family didn't accept her. Shirley and Richard ended up having five kids and there was no help. It was really hard. Everything they got was from junk and op shops. She'd sometimes strip me to check that I wasn't stealing, not that I ever stole anything. She took it all out on me and said that our mother left because she didn't want me. I wasn't even allowed to have friends over. She was crazy and vicious. We lived in the bush and there was no electricity. Shirley used to hit me around the head with the pieces of wood that she had for the stove. I used to have welts all over me from the ironing cord. She sometimes threw rocks at me.

She'd say, 'Get out of my sight and go to school.' I couldn't even go to the bathroom to wash the blood off me. She beat me so badly that when I went to school the teachers used to take me to the hospital. But the teachers never asked about it because back then it was different. People never interfered with other people's families. That's when I started running away. I hit her back once. I must have been about 10 and I took off. I run like hell. The police from Southport station were always looking for me. I used to go to school with the sergeant's daughter. I can always remember his name. I kept running away. He always used to take me home.

Then the government got involved and they fostered me out to a family. That lasted all of about two weeks. I didn't fit in. The mother was a good cook. She used to cook for the Queen when she came out here but she wasn't a nice person. I hit their daughter because she was telling everyone at school about my personal business. So they took me to the police station and I was taken to Tufnell Home.

Tufnell was very strict. Me and two girls went out one night. I thought it was OK to go out and we came back to the Home in the morning. My brother Robert who lived in Parkes had made arrangements with the Children's Department to take me out for the day. He drove all the way

up here and he was going to buy me something and just have fun with me. But they wouldn't let me go because I'd gone out of the Home the night before. I was sitting there crying because they wouldn't let me go out with my brother. I begged him not to leave me.

My brother argued with the nuns, 'I've got permission! I've got the letter from the Queensland Children's Department!' But they wouldn't let me go. They said, 'If you take her off the premises, we'll call the police.' He got in the car and his wife—she is still alive and she is a lovely woman—said, 'I can't do this anymore.' It was heartbreaking for all of us.

When I went back inside, the head nun told me that I wasn't wanted and she hoed into me with a cane, saying, 'Stop crying. Nobody loves you. Nobody wants you.' I kept looking at the door and I'm wishing for my brother, 'Come back. Come back.' I knew that if he'd seen he wouldn't leave me there. But he never came back. I will remember that 'til the day I die. It broke my heart.

Once when I ran away, when I was 11, I met a widgie named Pat aged 15. She used to tease her hair. She went to Sydney to meet someone and I went with her. When we got to Sydney and the people she wanted to see, I didn't like them. I didn't feel safe and so I left and went up to Kings Cross. She came and met me three weeks later and we went back to Queensland but in the meantime, I met Tom. He was nine. He had run away because he used to get badly beaten by his father. He was sitting by the El Alamein fountain and we started talking. He asked me if I wanted to go to 'his place'. He slept under a church. I think the priest knew he was there because he used to leave food. We used to hang out at the Cross and sleep under the church at night. After that, Tom was on the fringes of my life forever because he was a brother to me.

## Mitchelton

They sent me off to Mitchelton—a laundry run by the Good Shepherd Sisters. Some of the nuns were OK but there was no schooling for me. Wherever they put me, I caused trouble. They put me in the ironing room. I lasted a few days there and I threw the iron in the pool because only the private kids could use the pool. I wasn't allowed because I was a ward of the state. So they put me in the mangle room, which was pretty hot.

I said, 'I'm not doing that!' So they put me in the washing room. Well I wasn't doing that. So they said, 'Well, you have to go in here.' It was the packing room and I was fine in there! I worked with Sister Ignatius. I used to have to count everything that come in—see that the blue tag was for the linen from the hotel on the Gold Coast. When they went back, everything had to match that order. If it said '80 sheets', there had to be 80 sheets. I was good at that because I was using my brain. I was happy there. I found my little niche and actually didn't throw a tantrum.

Sister Ignatius taught me to type and another nun took me out to a local high school to do a typing exam. I was 13. When I come back and we were having our meal a few weeks later, a nun on one of the mics that they used to talk on said, 'Jean! Stand up.' I thought, 'Oh frick, what shit am I in for now?' She said, 'You got the highest marks in Queensland.' I got 99.9 per cent. You see, they could tell that I was a brainy bitch and they should have fully educated me but they didn't. All I wanted to do was go to school even though when I was there I was in so much trouble for hanging out the window and talking to people. But when we had the exams, I was always top of the class and the teachers would shake their head at me because I acted like I was never listening. It was too easy. Once I knew something, I knew it.

My other sister Valerie had been fostered out and that family was very, very good to her. She stayed there until she was married. One time a year, in the school holidays, her foster father would pay for me to come down on the bus from Queensland and he would let me stay at their house in Sydney so I could be with my sister. She got a job on a switchboard when they had the wire things that went in and I can remember going to work with her. On my birthday she bought me a marcasite ring and necklace but Shirley made me take them to Mitchelton so they got pinched.

I had enough of Mitchelton and so I escaped from there. What also triggered my rebellion was Valerie's wedding. My brother travelled from Parkes and picked me up to go to the wedding in Sydney. Robert's wife Liz was a beautician in a chemist and she did my hair up and my make-up. She made me really happy. I loved her. She was so kind to me. I've got a picture on my wall of that day. I was with my brothers and sisters and I didn't see them for years at a time. The next day she left on a ship for Scotland. She'd married a Scotsman. Robert drove me back to Mitchelton. I missed my sister so bad. That's when all the trouble started. I couldn't handle the pain and no one seemed to care.

I was the first to escape from Mitchelton. No one had escaped because it had rolled barbed wire at the top of the fences. I hid in one of the saints. Those statues were hollow. I shimmied up against the wall and snuck in the back of it. All hell broke loose because I was missing. They were looking everywhere. I was thinking, 'Please don't find me. Please don't find me.' After they all went to bed, I crept out. I jimmed the lock because it was old. I was outside the laundry and got over the fence, in the corner where the barbed wire overlapped. I'd already worked it out. I cut my legs to pieces but I got down on the other side.

I hitchhiked to the Gold Coast and stayed with different friends. A week later the police caught me and took me back. I had to tell the nuns how I escaped. They made me promise not to tell anyone else. I was back in the packing room for two years. If you didn't behave yourself, you couldn't go home.

I thought, 'I don't care. I've got no home to go to.' I saw one nun, Sister Maria, hitting one girl and pulling her hair. I walked over and said to her, 'Stop doing that!' She turned around and started pulling my hair. Big mistake. I wasn't going to let her attack me. I pushed Sister Maria in the pool. Everybody ran. They had the police come and take me off to Karrala.

## Karrala House

I saw the fence with the barbed wire and behind it was a building in a U shape. On the right side were all the solitary cells. At the bottom were the doctor's room, the sewing room and an office where the nurses sat behind unbreakable glass. On the left-hand side are the rooms where you slept at night and you were allowed out of that room during the day. There were nine rooms on each side.

When you arrived everybody got put into solitary first because you were punished for whatever you did before you were sent to Karrala. There was no conversation about how I felt. No one spoke to me as a human being. You were just a thing. They already knew everything about me and just told me what to do. They showered me from head to toe, looked me over everywhere and made me put on striped pyjamas and then stuck me in a dark room for 19 days. The bed was a slab attached to the wall with a hessian bag on it. No pillow. There was a black potty. Nothing else. I was 14. I thought, 'What the hell is this place?'

They let me out in the morning to have a shower and empty my potty. I cried for days after they cut my hair. All the light switches were outside and so I was in the dark, unless I had a nurse who felt sorry for you who would turn your light on for a little while. Occasionally you would get a good one like that but you got no sunshine. There was no tap in the room for water. Some were mean and they wouldn't feed me—instead of getting three meals a day, you might get one. I never ate the cereal for breakfast because it had crawly things in it. There was no radio, no noise and I didn't know what day of the week or what time it was.

I remember this huge spider in the room. It was dark but I seen it when the light was on and I must have screamed for about three hours, 'Nurse! Nurse! Nurse!' No one came.

After 19 days I went to the other side—the 'good side'—of Karrala House. I actually had a bed there but we didn't have sheets. There was a stripy mattress, a pillow and blankets. On the 'good side' they let you out of your room during the day but you still weren't allowed to speak to anyone. Girls were aged between 13 and 15. You spent all day in the sewing room and it's where you had your lunch. Everything was done in silence. It drove you crazy! Karrala was in the middle of a mental hospital. No other patients were near us but we did the sewing—making pyjamas for the other patients. We worked on the sewing machines all day. Now I hate sewing. I start shaking if I have to sew and when I sew a button I make sure that it will never fall off. If it's got two holes, there's a big bulge in the middle where I've gone back and forth with the thread because I don't want to do it again.

Karrala was tough. It was like back to nature—survival of the fittest. A lot of people thought we were in Karrala because we were bad. No we weren't. Most of us had absconded from Homes. We weren't bad but they made us hate. They always used to give us milk and cake for supper. One night they gave us burnt cake. I have never seen such black cake in my life. It was like black shoe polish. I wouldn't eat it. I put my hand up. It was my turn to speak up. We got payback—punishment—from the nurses for speaking out so we took it in turns. It was my turn to complain this time. I asked, 'Can we leave the cake? It's burnt.' They said, 'No. You have to eat it.' I asked again. They still said 'no', so I picked up the plate and threw it against the wall. Then everybody did. Cake was flying all over the joint. The warders got there so fast. So it must have been a set up because warders usually had to go through two sets of gates but this time they were there in a few seconds. They grabbed me, took me to solitary, to Room 9,

which had nothing in it—just a potty but no bed. Room 9 was called ‘POP’, meaning ‘Place of Punishment’. They stripped me naked and left me there for five days. They had given me such a hiding, I’m sure they cracked my rib because I was in pain for a long time and I still have scars on my bottom lip where my teeth went through from being bashed that day. If you were in that room, you’d lie against the slits in the door so that the staff couldn’t look in, switch the lights on and see you naked. All the girls used to do that in Room 9.

I would yell out to the other girls in solitary. We tried to speak to each other. Sometimes, to pass the time, we would sing the songs we had heard before we came to Karrala—‘Needle in a Haystack’ was one of them and every night Barb used to sing ‘Paper Roses’. She had a beautiful voice, that girl.

I had medical examinations all the time but I only think I saw a real doctor once. I had to put my legs up and they did whatever. Then after that, the male warders would come and take you there and do the physical examinations. Some girls were put into solitary for refusing to have a medical examination. Everyone knew this was going on because when the men came and got us we walked past the nurses’ station and so the nurses saw it.

I can’t prove it but I think we were being given some kind of medication. They used to give some girls pills but they refused to take them and so there were no more. We then figured they must be feeding us drugs some other way and we guessed they were in our food. I don’t remember having my periods when I was in solitary. On the ‘good’ side, where you were let out of your room during the day, they gave us towels to use—like white hand towels but smaller. You had to use safety pins to keep it in place. After you used it, you had to wash it in the sink in the hallway. Under the sink was a white bucket where you put your towels after you washed them. They took the bucket to the laundry. But there were no sanitary towels or laundry bucket in the hallway in solitary.

My sister Shirley visited me once but they stuck us in a room with a hole in the wall and someone sat on the other side and listened to everything that you said. One day I got up in the morning and went to go to the day room and I seen my clothes and I thought, ‘Yes! I’m getting out of here!’ They sent me back to Mitchelton. By this time, I hated every adult walking the earth but I didn’t hate other kids. I had a foul mouth and I couldn’t settle. I was sick of being locked up. I wanted to go. They said that I was

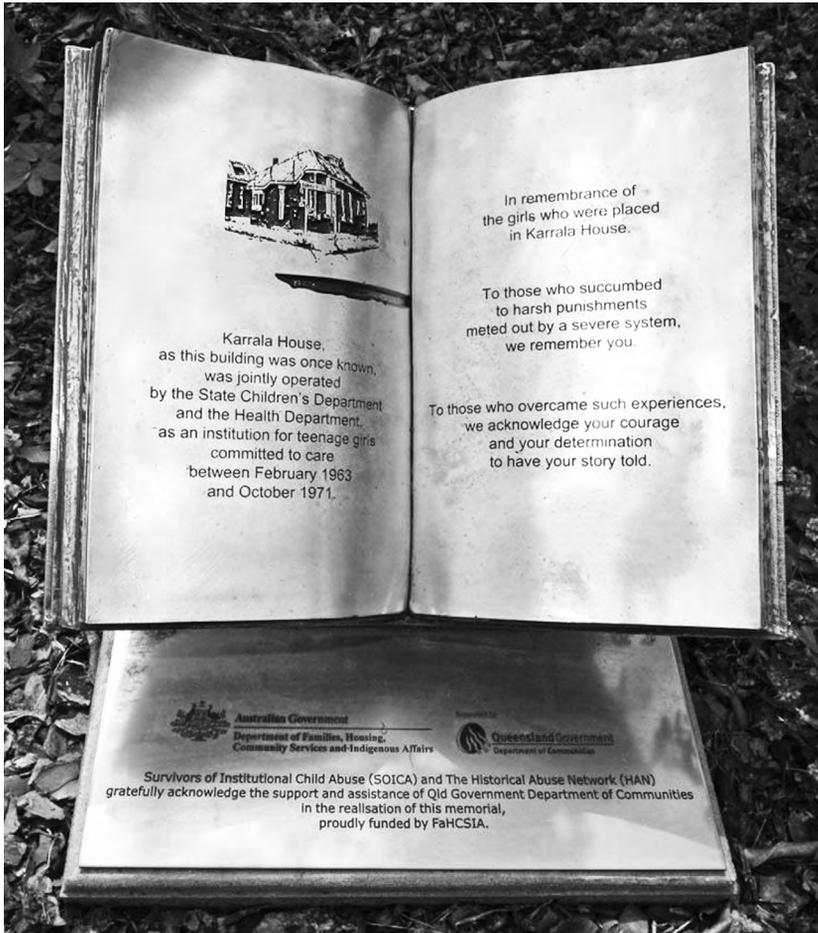
disruptive. Well, I just come out of Karrala—of course I was disruptive! I got into a lot of fights. I'd lost my humanity from the cruelty and the coldness of people. You can only bash someone so many times until they turn around and start to hate. I could feel the hate in me. So they sent me back to my sister's and she went back to her old tricks—bashing me and carrying on so I ran away. The cops got me but the sergeant at Southport Police Station was so nice to me. He used to give me food.

He'd say, 'Doesn't anybody feed you, you skinny little shit?' The police would put me in the cell at the back and leave the door open. They knew me. They'd come and talk to me. There were kind people in my life. I remember them and try to hold onto that. The Southport police got the call from Brisbane saying I had to go to back to Karrala House and they'd say, 'No. We're not driving her. You come and get her. We're not taking her to that place.' They wouldn't take me to Mitchelton either. It was the Brisbane police who took me to Karrala. When I got out of the car, I knew where I was. I still remember the despair that I felt. If I could have got hold of the policeman's gun and shot myself, I would have done. I thought, 'I can't do this again.'

What did they do? 32 days in solitary. How's that? That was the punishment for running away from my sister. I used to sit in my cell and think, 'What did I do?' There was a nice nurse at Karrala who used to leave the light on for me in solitary. I asked her for a book to read. She gave me *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When she went off shift, she'd have to come and take it off me. She'd say, 'I'll give it to you again tomorrow.' That's how I got to read all of it.

I also went to my meadow about a hundred times. It was the 'place' that I would go to while I was in solitary. There were trees and flowers in my meadow. On the edge was a waterfall. There was a little girl there. Of course I knew who that little girl was. She and I would swim. When I had to leave the meadow, I used to cry because I didn't want to leave her alone. So I created a big black panther for her. It came over the hill, down to the waterfall, sat beside her and put its head on her lap.

After 32 days they let me out. I was only out for a couple of days. Solitary was supposed to break your spirit but I came out really, really angry and so I was trouble. I wouldn't sew. I would argue and the mouth on me was like a wharfie. The thing they held over you was, 'If you don't behave yourself, you don't get to go home.' Well, I didn't have a home and so I didn't have a reason to behave. They pushed me that far that I didn't care anymore and I was put back in solitary.



**Figure 1: Plaque dedicated to former inmates of Karrala House, c. 2000.**

Source: University of Queensland.

## Lowson House and Wolston Park Hospital

I was then transferred to Lowson House in Brisbane Hospital because they said that I swallowed a sewing needle, but I hadn't. It wasn't true. In my files are my X-ray results, 'No foreign object found'. They lied at Karrala House. They just wanted me out because they only wanted those that they could control. Lowson House was a locked ward with about 10 beds. It was my first meeting with the crazies but they were sedated so they weren't too bad. They told me I was neurotic and they gave me pills.

I was in Lawson House for about 10 days while they were finding out about my mother. After they found out that she was dead, a social worker signed me into Wolston Park. Where did she get her medical degree? They took me there in an ambulance and I was taken to the admissions ward where there were adults in hospital gowns, doped to the eyeballs. I was locked in a cell at night and let out in the ward during the day. Everyone was docile. It was such a nothing in my life, that ward. No one tells you anything. You go and see a doctor but they've already got you on pills, so when you see a doctor, you don't know what he's talking about. There was one doctor who wrote to the Children's Department, trying to get me out. But other doctors were at me with their fingers and pressing my breasts. I don't know what that had to do with psychiatry! I was 16. I didn't know where I was.

I didn't last long there. At the back you could walk out onto the verandah and there was a lawn that went off into the bush. So muggins here takes off! But I didn't have any shoes on and there'd been a bushfire through there. Have you ever walked on spiky grass? I was running on that. Frigging hell, that hurt. I got to a road and the first car that come along was a nurse. I hadn't even left the premises. I was still in Goodna so they took me back.

That was my first go at Ward 8. I was an absconder and so they couldn't let me out for two seconds. I spent most of my time in Ward 8 for the criminally insane. You just looked at them and they were dead. They didn't have feelings for themselves or other people. There are two types of people—if you get caught by one type you can kiss your arse goodbye and if you get caught by the other lot, you can talk your way out of it. These people were like the first type. There was one other young girl in there, about my age and she was nice.

I'll never forget Ward 8. It was the worst thing ever. There was one old lady there and she used to bite and spit. At night they put her in a padded cell. They let her out during the day in a straightjacket and nothing else on, and they'd tie her to a canvas chair. That's where she'd sit all day. There were no books, no TV, no radio—nothing. Two patients tried to kill me. One had her hands around my throat and I saw the madness in her face. She was so strong that I blacked out. The nurses got her off me. After that, I sat with my back against the wall. I still do, everywhere I go.

One day I was in the bathroom and there was no nurse there. One patient grabbed me and held my head under the water in the bath. There was just one second where she loosened her grip and so I headbutted her. I had blood on my head from her teeth.

In the shower there was a cement floor and no curtains. All the patients were naked and they would touch me. And the male warders would wash me from head to toe.

I was starving and dehydrated. There were no taps in your cell. Meals were a joke. Other patients would take your food or throw up in your food. We were all given Valium at mealtimes. And there were heavier drugs. Haloperidol was to calm you down. Paraldehyde was to knock you out. Once I was given Haloperidol and then the nurses on the next shift came, a half hour later, and gave it to me again. They overdosed me. It's in my file—there's 'Haloperidol' with 'OD' and a question mark written next to it and the instruction, 'Keep walking her'. They nearly killed me.

I remember one time coming out of drugs in my cell and there was a fella on top of me. Another time I woke up with cigarette burns on me. Once, two male warders came in and after they finished with me, one turned to the other as they were leaving and said, 'We have to thank the government for sending us all these pretty young things.' An hour later somebody came in with a mop and a bucket, called me a dirty bitch and told me to clean my blood off the wall. I couldn't tell anyone. There was no-one to tell because everybody knew already what was going on. I was also threatened with, 'There are a lot of "suicides" in the Bremer River.'

My sister Shirley came to visit me there once. I got on my hands and knees and begged her to get me out. I never begged anyone for anything but I did that day. And fancy begging her for anything! She said, 'I can't. It's out of my hands.'

I was frightened of becoming like them—the other patients. One of the nursing sisters, Sister Allen, was really nice. She knew how bad it was for us young kids. She worked nights and she let me out of my cell and let me sit up with her and the nurses and we would play cards. Every night after midnight the male warders would have to go out of Ward 8 and do something else and that's when Sister Allen would say, 'Go and have your shower. They won't be going in there.' She organised it so that I had privacy. Before she left at 6 o'clock in the morning, she would lock me in my cell after giving me an injection of Paraldehyde to knock me out during that day. When she came on at night, she'd come and let me out. She could see what was happening to us young girls but she couldn't stop it, so she protected us the only way she knew how. She said to me when the male warders weren't there, 'We know you shouldn't be here.'

I was becoming a wreck. I was really skinny. I was shaking and my hair was falling out. They then sent me to the ward where they did the shock treatments. I never had it but I did see other patients have it. They'd bring patients in from other wards, tie them down to the gurneys and gave them mouth guards. Some patients after being brought in realised where they were and they would try to run. Some hid behind me and begged me to help them. I always get upset about those patients because they were so afraid and they asked me for help and I couldn't help them. The more shit I seen like that, the more I hated the world.

## On the Run

I decided to leave one night because this wasn't a secure ward. Before that I had got information over time because I knew I was going to leave. I had asked the nurses—just in conversation—where I was, in what direction was the next town, where do you get the bus to work? I'd worked it all out and I escaped at night, went off into the bush but I ran into the biggest spider's web. I was covered in web from head to toe.

Then I got into town. This fella on a big Harley motorcycle pulled up and said, 'You escaped from that place. There's a cop car around the corner so you better hop on because they'll grab you dressed like that.' I took a chance and jumped on the bike. He turned out to be one of the nicest guys I ever met but you wouldn't want to see him down a dark alley. He'd scare the living shit out of you. He had a beard and tats and everything but he was such a nice man. He took me to his place and he fed me. He got takeaway food. It was nice but I was sick. That place had made me sick. I didn't realise it at first but I learned that being at Wolston Park had made me an addict from being fed drugs all the time. I was shaking and I was throwing up. He used to bring me stuff to make me feel better—some dope to smoke and stuff on bits of blotting paper to put on my tongue. I couldn't survive without it.

He said, 'I got someone I want you to meet.' He brought this girl around. It was Jan who became my best friend ever. She was a trained psychiatric nurse. She was about 20. Jan wanted to travel around Australia but she needed someone to go with her. He helped us and we got backpacks. Jan cut my hair and blonded it and changed my name to 'Erin' and the same surname as hers so that we could pass as sisters. I got a bank account in my new name. You could do that back then because you didn't need all those

IDs. My name was all over the Queensland radio because the cops were looking for me. Jan told me all about her family, her address, everything and I memorised it all.

We earned money when we needed it by going on the game—to get money to get drugs. Jan was on drugs too. When we were broke, we'd get off our faces with mixing milk and whole containers of nutmeg. Being on the game was no different than what the male warders were doing to me at Wolston Park, except on the game, the men behaved better. They were respectful. We hitchhiked.

The American sailors had come over from Vietnam. They had the good dope to smoke but they didn't have a never-ending supply. They were looking for girls. We would hook up with the sailors who had dope. Jan knew of this stuff—tobacco for asthmatics—that you could get from the chemist. We would put in a matchbox, pretend it was marijuana and sell it to sailors for ten bucks. We'd smoke their good gear first. By the time they got to smoking our stuff, who the hell cared what it was?

We hitchhiked and when we were outback, near Charleville, two guys pulled up and gave us a lift. Both their names were 'John'. We arrived at a motel and they got two rooms. They said that we had to sleep with them. We thought, 'Oh god!' They had these four pennies, which they threw to work out who was going to sleep with who. We were hoping that there were locks on the bathroom doors! They threw the pennies—Jan and I got the tails and they got the heads! We made them stick with their word, so Jan and I got a room to ourselves and they got the other room! The next day, they were travelling to do something—they were salesmen, something to do with farming stuff. They get to where they're going and we arrived at another motel. They said, 'Tonight we're not throwing pennies. It's happening tonight, right?' The car had barely pulled into the driveway and Jan and I took off. We were gone.

We got inside a slow train out west somewhere. When we got out it was dark and this copper pulled up. He was only a young fella. He told us hitchhiking was dangerous and took us home to his house and gave us tea and everything. It was nice. Nothing happened. He was nice. The next morning, he dropped us off. In another town, we got pulled up by the cops. I showed them my bank account and answered all their questions about who I was in the way that Jan taught me. They let us go and we decided to go south, to get out of Queensland because I was 'wanted'—this big, bad escapee from a mental home—good lord!

We hitchhiked to Broken Hill. We had a tent and got caught in a sandstorm. We lost everything just about, so we ended up in Melbourne. Jan got a job as a go-go dancer. I was underage and working as a waitress in the same bar. I lost my job when the fella who owned the place found out how old I was and Jan left with me. Then we both got a job working together knocking on people's doors selling orange juice, in the middle of winter. Then we got a job in a biscuit factory and we were the only two that spoke English so they wanted to make us bosses! We didn't want the job because I had itchy feet. I didn't want to stay anywhere. Plus, if you stay anywhere, you get caught. We were living in Fitzroy in this boarding house. Jan got a job around the corner in a coffee shop. I was talking to this man I met in the street. He was nice. We had coffee together. His mates seen him speaking to me. One night they came and did terrible things. These guys knocked on the door and grabbed me. I seen the guy I knew and he put his head down. I'll never forget. He put his head down.

When Jan came home and seen what had happened, because I was a bit of a mess, she said, 'We gotta get out of here.' We went to Sydney. We slept in a deserted, condemned house near the El Alamein fountain in Kings Cross. Other people lived there too. One night this man came at me with a knife. I hid in a wardrobe. Next, there were cops running around. Jan and everyone had run to the cop station. They got him. Jan said 'We're going to Queensland.' I said, 'I can't go to Queensland.' Jan said, 'I gotta get out of Sydney. Those people that are after me are still here.' Jan had been in Sydney before she met me and she was in bad trouble. It all had to do with drugs.

## Back to Wolston Park

I took my chance and I got caught, didn't I? Back to frigging Wolston Park. Coppers picked me up in the street in Brisbane. I'd been away for six months. Back to Ward 8. Barb was there that time. The girl who was in Karrala with me. I loved her. We were best friends. She always laughed, no matter how bad it got. But I went back to the drugs they were giving me, men showering me, warders touching me, patients hitting me.

I got a visitor. They said it was my brother Robert. I ran out and it was this person I'd never seen before. I yelled out, 'Hi Robert!', and I'm thinking, 'Who the hell is this guy?' The guy said, 'Jan sent me to tell you that if you can get away, she's working at Gladesville Psychiatric Hospital.' I said, 'OK! Thank you!'

I was deteriorating. I was becoming an empty shell and there was so much pain. The staff were vindictive. If they did come into my cell to see if I was awake, they wouldn't shake me—they'd kick me in the head. They broke my eardrums. I was bleeding from the ears. My hair was falling out. My teeth were green. I think the staff could see how bad I was. I was a wreck.

## Over the Border

They sent me back to my sister Shirley's place just for a week. I went to my sister-in-law's and asked her to give me a dress. I got on a bus and went south to New South Wales. The people who were after Jan had moved on so she was back in Sydney. I went to Gladesville and stayed in the nurses' quarters with her. One night we went to the Ball Pants coffee shop in Kings Cross where they played folk music. There was a guy behind the counter who was gorgeous. He—Bill—came and sat down and we talked. I went home to his house and I stayed there for 13 years.

One day Bill came home from work and he caught me and Jan shooting up. He threw a tantrum. He told me, 'You get off it or you get out!' I loved him that much that I went cold turkey. He had time off work and he was with me while I went through all the shit.

When our son, Will, was born he was taken from the hospital before I left and placed with another family. I was 19 and Bill and I weren't married and if you were a single mum they just took your baby off you and adopted them out.

Bill is a Maori man and when Will was born, a nurse said to me, 'I see you have been fucking black fellas!' I was so tired and upset that I didn't say anything. They put Will on the other side of the room so that I could not see him. This young nurse came in, picked him up and on her way out of the room, quickly came over and gave me a quick look. I could see she was so sad herself because of what she had to do. I did not know they were going to take him away until I had come to the hospital to have him. There was nothing I could do. I couldn't even run or tell his dad. We would have run away somewhere. I felt anguish and despair. This on top of everything I had been through at Wolston. But because Will's dad was 24, he went to a Chamber Magistrate and demanded his son back. We got him back about five days after I left the hospital.

Jan went to Perth but came back and stayed with us one night, after I had the baby. The next day she went and killed herself. She jumped off the cliff at the Gap. When she stayed over, I didn't pick up on it. The police came but I couldn't go to identify the body because I was only 20 and so Bill had to go and do it. Jan had written a letter before she died and posted it to me. It came after she died. She had tried to get help getting off drugs. She had flashbacks all the time. I'm still angry at her for doing it—my best, best friend.

Bill and I went to get married when I was 20. We went with the baby to Births, Deaths and Marriages in Sydney. I had to get permission because I was still a ward of the state until I was 21 and I was still on the run. I said to Bill about the baby, 'If they grab Will, you grab him and run. Don't ever look back to me. I'll take care of myself because if they get him, we will never see him again.'

We filled out the forms, sat there, ready. The magistrate called us in and said to me, 'You're wanted.' Mate, you never seen two people go to that door so quick. The magistrate said, 'Stop. Stop. It's OK. I read some of this stuff. I'm not going to say anything. But you're 20 years old. You'll be 21. Then go and get married.' He let us go. We went home, packed up and moved.

I was naive. Bill got a DUI fine in Bondi—\$400. Every week he would give me the money. I'd go up to the post office and get a money order 'til it added up to \$400. A month later, the police knocked on the door and wanted to arrest him for not paying the fine. He looked at me, 'What were you doing with that money I was giving you?' I said, 'I paid it. I got the money order. Look, I've got the receipts.' I showed them the money orders but I hadn't sent them anywhere. The police laughed at me, took the money orders and left. This is what the government did—they didn't teach me how to live!

After 13 years, Bill got too big for his britches. He started playing up with women and gambling. He just went nuts. There was Will to think of. I got a place and I gave Will what I never had. He played sport and his friends came round to our house. And my friend Tom, who I met in Kings Cross, when I was 11, he was like a brother to me and 'Uncle Tommy' to Will—he would help. A friend got me a job at Sydney Uni, clearing tables at the cafeteria. It was only three days a week and four hours a day to start with. I had to walk to and from work because I had no money for the

bus. When the girls found out, they were putting food in my locker for me to take home to feed me and Will. Another lady there used to give me clothes when her son grew out of them. Then, I worked my way up, running the food outlets at the Bosch, where all the medical students go. I was there eight years but it was term-only employment.

When I was working at Sydney Uni, I was working under an assumed name so it wouldn't affect my pension. I don't know why the government is so stupid—you go to social security for a review—back then, the single mother's pension was \$300 a fortnight. My rent was \$290! Nobody ever woke up and said, 'What are you living on?' So when I got a part-time job at Sydney Uni, I wasn't out buying blocks of units or cars—I was living on it.

When Will was 14, there were a lot of bad things going on in Sydney. His mates were getting into trouble. I was on my own. I felt out of my depth and so I come home. Bill, my ex, had found this stupid girlfriend and one night when him and her were drinking, he told her all my business. She went to social security and dobbed me in—said I was working on the pension but my friend's sister worked there and would throw the report in the bin. She knew I had no money but the girlfriend went into the office and told someone else. I had moved up to Queensland by then but they got me up here. Will was 17. The day I went to court I had a job at the Gold Coast City Council, to start on that day but they gave me eight months' jail. The judge asked the prosecutor, 'Has she got a criminal record?' 'Yes. She does, as a teenager.' I'm thinking, 'No. I haven't.'

## **Boggo Road Gaol**

I was sent to Boggo Road Gaol for stupid social security fraud. Everyone who goes there goes to maximum first. I was there for a while. I sat on Table 8 with a woman who'd killed a child. A screw said, 'You're working in the kitchen.' The screw was happy that she had someone in there for non-violent crimes that she could put in the kitchen. I said, 'Well, I'm glad someone's happy!'

It was still OK because I wanted something to do. The other girls said that if I wanna live, I was never allowed to speak to the child killer. They did all sorts of terrible things to her meal. I said, 'I'm not going to do that. That's not who I am but I will never say a word about it.'

The prison dentist took out all my rotten teeth—oh, the stench from my gums—stitched me up and gave me false teeth. When I got out of max I had to organise the deliveries of food and bread and make sure that they went to the right sections. Every time you go through a gate, they search you, almost to stripping.

So one day I went down there without any under clothes on and I'd just lifted up my dress. And they'd say, 'Jean! Jean! Put your clothes on!' I said, 'Why? You just want me to take them off all day!!' And you're forever carrying messages for people. I had a slit in my shoe where I'd put notes.

There was this girl who decided she liked me and all the time she was putting her hands on me. One day, she caught me with the big trolley choc-a-bloc full of milk going down to the max gate. She was going off at me and I could see her fist. I knew by the look on her face that she was going to belt the living shit out of me so I hit her first because I knew damned well it was the only punch I was going to get. She broke my nose. Milk went everywhere. Screws came running out, 'What happened here?! What happened here?!' She's looking at me and I'm looking at her because I could have got her put away. I said, 'I fell over.' She left me alone after that.

There was another woman, Kay, in there for computer crimes. She shouldn't have been in max. She was out of her depth. At least I'd been through Karrala and Wolston. She was a young, nice girl. She used to hang with me all the time. There was this other huge girl in there. When she was in solitary, she'd put big huge dents in the steel door. One day Kay came running into the kitchen and hid behind me. Then in came the big girl. I thought, 'Oh my god!' I'd been through this before in Wolston Park. I know when someone wants to kill me. I looked at the pot of boiling water for the potatoes and I said, 'If you touch me or her, I'm going to throw this all over you.'

She left because I stood up to her and the day I was released she called out, 'Erin!', and gave me the thumbs up.

As I was leaving this horrible nurse said to me, 'You'll be back! You'll be back!' The screw who was standing next to me answered for me, 'This one? No she won't.' I make a good impression everywhere I go!

## Bearing the Cost

I had got out after four months, on parole. When I got out of jail, I found out through freedom of information what my juvenile record was because I knew I didn't do anything wrong. My juvenile record was 'charged with being neglected' but the prosecutor hadn't told the judge that and so he thought that I was a bad person. The prosecutor lied. People don't tell the truth and they don't understand about Forgotten Australians.

I was working in a fish shop and the government was ringing me saying I had to pay the pension money back. They told my boss that they were going to take my wages. I objected. I got the court records and found where the judge had written, 'No restitution.' I said to them, 'You can't have the money and the body.' They've changed the law now. If you go to jail now, you still have to pay the money back but this was in 1988.

I'm an insomniac. I won't take sleeping tablets. I sleep with the lights on. I don't like darkness. I can't stand any doors in my house being closed. The memories they left in our heads; we should never have them. After my son was born, when it got to September, every year, near my birthday, I became petrified. I was fearful for my son because I had this feeling that I was going to die and he would be put in Homes. When I got the records, I found that the 32 days that I was in solitary at Karrala started on 1 September until 2 October—two days before my birthday. I still get anxious in September but I'm not fanatic about it, now that I know why.

I was talking to my local doctor at the time—she was in her 80s. I found out that she used to work at Lawson House. I said, 'Oh really? They had me in there when I was a child.' She asked, 'When?' I said, 'In the '60s.' She was there then, I'm pretty sure of it. You should have seen her face. She never took me as a patient again. She backed right off. She never had me back.

It's hard to get a decent doctor. When you explain what's wrong with you and they ask why, they don't believe me when I tell them. A doctor told me once to get out of his office and stop lying. About 10 years ago I found a good doctor—an ears, nose and throat fella—because I had an ear infection.

He looked into my ears and said, 'What the hell happened to you? No one looked after you when you were a kid. Do you know how much scarring you've got in these ears? You must find it hard to hear.' He was so nice to me. He said, 'If I can fix that, I will and I'll do it for free.' He was upset. He sent me for so many tests and I never paid for any of it. When I went back, about a month later, he sat there and he had tears, 'I can't help you. It's so bad. You'll end up deaf. There's so much damage. It's unbelievable what they did to you.' I've learned sign language.

Tom, who I met in Kings Cross when I was 11, had rheumatic fever when he was about 12 and was left with a hole in his heart. They said to him that he would never live 'til he was 21. I don't know what the hell for they're telling people this. He walked away from the girl Christine who he loved because he thought he was going to die. And he lived until he was 58. He never married. Anyway, he led a wild life. He never broke the law but he was a wild boy. He was a forklift driver and moved up to Queensland in 1986. He was family. I taught him how to read and write. He was a smart fella. He just hadn't gone to school. He loved my son and his children and he was part of our family. We loved him. Him and my family all call me 'Morning' or 'Morn' for short, because that's how I would greet everyone each day. He was 'Uncle Tommy'. I sat with him in the hospital while he died. The last word he said was 'Morn'. I've got his ashes. I had to move heaven and earth to get them. The state was just going to give him a pauper's burial.

I have a funny relationship with food. I was hungry for years at Karrala House and Wolston Park. There'd be arguments over food because everybody was hungry. I was talking to a doctor about it once and he said that there's an old saying, 'If you've ever really been hungry, then you're never full again.' That describes my life. I have to eat everything on the plate. I can't waste food. I can't throw food out. Even if I'm full, I have to eat it. I don't enjoy eating and I very rarely eat in public. I don't do it anymore—Tom got me out of the habit—but I used to hide food in the house. I used to overfeed my son. I had to stop that.

I found out the other reason why they took me away from my sister. It wasn't only because I was running away. Two years before she died she said to me, 'I owe you an apology. I accused you of stealing. I found out later that you didn't do it.' I said, 'Let me guess how you knew. Whoever was doing the stealing was still doing it even when I wasn't there!'

I later read a letter in my files, which she had written to the government asking them to take me away because I was stealing. Nobody asked me. I went through all those years and all that suffering and I didn't do it. I got punished for something that I didn't do. Shirley found out later who really was doing the stealing—taking money out of her purse. It took me years to understand Shirley's life. Before she died, we were mending fences but we just didn't have enough time. She was also molested, by an uncle. The week before she died I asked why she always hated me. She said, 'Because when Lisa choked, you should have woken up!'

Ken Blanch, a journalist from the *Courier Mail* did an investigation into Karrala House in 1967 but he didn't know about Wolston Park. He said no one ever told him. No one at Wolston Park had the guts to tell him what they were doing to us kids. They could have tipped him off anonymously. The story could have come out in 1967. Instead, it wasn't until 1996 that it all came out in the newspaper. After Ken Blanch wrote the story in the weekend paper about children having been locked up in mental institutions, a survivor asked him to publish her post office box details so that other survivors could contact her if they wanted. Ken printed the address in the next week's paper. Some of us sent letters to it. From that, eight of us got together. Only three of us from that group are left. The rest have since died. We've been fighting for 20 years. We're dying off. No one cares—hey!

We would meet in West End, in Brisbane. Some of us were members of SOICA—Survivors of Institutional Child Abuse. Then came the Forde Inquiry in 1998 and I spoke to the inquiry about being in Tufnell and Mitchelton. I was allowed to speak about Karrala, but only very, very lightly. When I talked about Wolston Park, they turned the recording off because it wasn't in the terms of reference. In 1999, after the Forde Inquiry, we kept in touch. The best counsellors for us are each other because only another person who was there knows. I know other counsellors try but it's platitudes they say at you. It's what they've learned out of a book. I think, 'You have no idea what I'm saying to you. I'm trying to tell you something.'

Some of us were visiting each other and we were going to different lawyers. This was all new and I think most didn't believe us. I rang an advocacy group and all of us had a meeting with them. They found lawyers for us who did 'no-win, no-fee' but it was early days. Everyone was naive. They also found us a private detective who did background work for us and didn't charge anything. A law lecturer from a university also came on

board. So they started a class action against the Queensland Government for the eight of us Wolston Park survivors. There were more survivors that we met later but at this stage it was just us. Our lawyers had to try a single test case to see if it would get past the time limit on how long you could bring something to trial after the event had happened—it's the statute of limitations. If the lawyers could get one test case through, then they'd go to court for the other women. The test case was me. I didn't want it to be me. I don't know why it was me. The only reason I can think why was because I lived in the street next over to the lawyers' office! Why didn't they use someone who was in Wolston Park more recently?

It took so long to get to court. We went to Brisbane. The lawyers presented my evidence—my personal records of my time in Goodna. The rest of us sat against the back wall. The judge turned the case down because of the statute of limitations. He said that the opposition—the Queensland Government—couldn't defend itself because it happened too long ago. But he said that our lawyers could argue in terms of fiduciary duty—the government's duty of care. It would mean another hearing. I was really upset afterwards. I felt that I had let everybody down.

One of the government lawyers who was defending the State of Queensland saw that I was shaken up and came up to me and said, 'If there was ever a case that I wanted to lose, it was this one. But you were never going to win. That judge is a good friend of the premier of Queensland.' We didn't get a decent hearing. That was bullshit!

The government lawyer gave me his card. Later I rang him to get a transcript of my test case because I didn't have the money to pay for it through the normal channels. He was really nice to me. I've met a lot of nice people. A couple of days later, the court transcript arrived in the post.

Then nothing happened. That law lecturer was supposed to present papers to the court so that we could leave our case for the issue of fiduciary duty and he never did it! So I can never get my case heard again unless we get permission from the court. That lecturer bugged things up for us. We would need to get a lawyer to go back to court and argue that it wasn't our fault that the case wasn't left open and to argue for another chance. We were very naive back then. I'm mad at the legal system. It's only for the rich. It's not set up for poor people who usually have crimes committed against them so it makes you a victim—a victim of the legal system. It's expensive to get all you need to go to court. We each had to pay for a psych report as evidence of how Wolston Park affected us.

However, later, a similar case did get through the courts—for a woman who had been in Karrala House. Because she had the old punishment book from Karrala as evidence, the judge let the case go through without worrying about the statute of limitations because the time limit is discretionary. It's not a law. That woman got a payout. It was a different judge than ours.

I don't trust the legal system and I don't like the way we've been treated in all the inquiries. I also rang the nuns of the Good Shepherd, asking them for my pay for working two years in the laundry and they said I was doing 'work experience'! Don't you love that?!

My son Will had a partner but she took a hike when he got sick. At 22 his brain tumour came. When he has blood tests, you see on the paperwork, 'Reasons for tumour – Haloperidol'. That's one of the drugs I was on at Wolston Park. He'll never get better. They won't operate. He's 44 now and no doctor will give him clearance to work. His two sons, aged 18 and 22, are very close to their dad.

What they did to us back then was so cruel. What sort of people were they trying to make? I want what they took away. I would have owned my own home. I would have been able to visit my sister in Scotland. I want a home for Will because he's sick. He can't work. I don't want him worrying about rent.

What they're doing to us now is so cruel. We've been fighting this for 20 years, trying to tell people what they did. We're still fighting. Nobody listens. They don't have any idea. They just push us aside like we're nothing. It's like we're an annoyance. I write a letter to a politician. I take a day or two. They send me back these form letters as if I'm nothing. They don't answer the letter I wrote. It's like I'm not important. It's the same feeling as being in Wolston Park. No acknowledgement. Why do my fellow Australians hate me? I've had a wasted life. I could have done so much. It was all taken off me. I give them the credit of having brains by taking the time to write a letter.

I've always felt intellectually alone because my life has never been what I could have done. I used to be able answer all the questions from those quiz shows on TV when I was 16. I like Greek mythology. I read everything—about five books a week. I like the author Sven Hassel—all about the Second World War. I'm an online gamer. I'm number 26 in the world. My friend in Romania with a major in economics, she's number 27.

I said once, ‘My way of looking at this earth is that the strong have to help the weak, to make their lives better. Whether you’re a boss or a parent, you have to pull people up.’ The looks I used to get from people, so sly and horrible, so you pretend you’re stupid, then, ‘When did you get so smart?’ I’m starving for intelligent conversations.

In the mid-1980s, I went through the phone book to find my relatives. I rang them and I found a cousin, Jan, and I met her mum, my aunty who I was named after. Jan said that they couldn’t take me and my brothers and sisters because there were eight of us. I said that there were only four of us that went to Homes because the rest were grown up. I got a call from a cousin who remembered me as a kid. He said, ‘Do you know that your mother’s Aboriginal?’ The first I heard about it. In 2015, one of the staff from Lotus Place looked up the records and confirmed that it was true. She was a Wiradjuri woman from New South Wales. I reckon that’s why all the photos went missing. I reckon my eldest brother got rid of them because back then it was bad to be Aboriginal.

My brother Robert and sisters were here many years later and we were talking and I said, ‘You know how the youngest in the family is supposed to be the spoiled little bitch and gets everything she wants? Well, when does it start?’ My brother looked at me and gave me a big hug.

We need the government to admit that back then, what they did back then, was a big, big mistake and to ask, ‘What can we do to fix a little bit of it?’ I look in the mirror sometimes and I can see that girl from Wolston Park. I can see her green teeth and balding hair. I see her looking back at me.

I love panthers. I’ve got pictures of them on my wall. I’ve got a soft toy panther on my bed. They’re so strong, independent, solitary, solid. A couple of years ago, I heard about a litter of cats on the way to the pound and of course I had to look, didn’t I? I chose a black one—my very smart mate.

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