

5

Don't Shoot the Wounded: Tammy

Stolen

My Aboriginal mum was one of the Barkanji people, from Wilcannia in New South Wales. I understood that she used to travel to and from Cunnamulla in Queensland to Bourke in New South Wales. She got pregnant in Cunnamulla from a shearer named Billy. I was her first daughter, born in 1960. My mum was living in a place on the banks of the Warrego River. When I was three months old, the white police came and she hid from them behind a bush because she had had polio and couldn't run very fast. When the time came to go, she accidentally dropped me in the river. She couldn't swim and so she couldn't save me. The white police got me and took me to the government-run Diamantina Children's Home.

Adopted

The staff at the Home didn't let my adoptive mum take me home at first because I was very sick and they thought I was going to die. But I got better and I grew up with my adoptive mum and dad in Brisbane. Dad was a tram driver. They were really good to me. We'd go on holidays. One year, they took me to sing Carols by Candlelight in Sydney and I got up on stage and sang with Barry Crocker. One year, they took me to Melbourne and we went on the rides on top of the Myers building. They let me see the movies *Born Free* and *The Sound of Music* twice because

I liked them so much. They really loved me. We had a Pomeranian dog named Kym and a cat named Timothy. Mum also had a pet bird named Harry that would never shut up!

So I was a healthy and happy, innocent child that saw everybody in the world as being good and nice. I was brought up by a good Christian mum and dad who used to take me to Sunday school. I used to sit on a swing and sing while I swung up and down but I used to rock myself. I didn't see things the way other kids did. I used to do some strange things. When I was three I got on a piano and played up and down the keyboard, which I never, ever learned or played before. I would create things. I made buildings from plates and saucers and cups. When I was four, I was diagnosed with autism. When I was five, my mum didn't know if I would be able to go to a normal school so she took me to a psychiatrist and he would come to visit me at home and sit on the floor and watch me play. I was then sent to a neurologist who told mum that I had savant syndrome, which meant that he thought that I could cope with normal school, but they didn't know that I had dyslexia. That, together with autism, made school a lot worse. The smartness in me was the worst thing that I ever had because I knew I could do things but in different ways to everybody else and no one understood. I was frustrated and angry. I also used to wear these stupid shoes with callipers to stop me walking inwards. The other kids used to hit me and make fun of me. I used to look out the window at the birds because they had freedom. They didn't know about dyslexia at my school and so they just thought that I was a problem child. I used to get the 'cuts' all the time for not answering the right questions and for not doing my schoolwork. I hated going to school. It was terrible. I ran away from school to go home. Why should I go to school to get hurt? That's bullshit.

When I was six, a kid at school was making fun of me for being adopted. I didn't know what she was talking about. She lived in our street and my adoptive mum knew her mum who was called 'Courier Mail' because she had the biggest mouth in the street.

So I asked my mum and she told me, 'Mummy and Daddy couldn't have any children so we went and got you.' When I was seven, Kym the dog died, my grandmother died and my dad had stomach cancer. I remember visiting him in hospital and he told me that I had to help mum. He died. He was 52 years old. Mum had a breakdown and went into hospital. My aunts wouldn't look after me and I was put into Sandgate Home for

a couple of months. It was terrible there. I didn't want to talk or play with the other kids. When mum got out of hospital, she came and took me out of there. She didn't know what was wrong with me because I wasn't talking. She took me to a doctor who said that I was suffering from shock. Mum sent me back to school. The kids called me 'retard' and bashed me up and so I kept running away from school.

Wilson Youth Hospital

I was picked up by the police and sent to the Winston Noble Unit, a mental health ward in the Prince Charles Hospital, Chermside, Brisbane. I was seven. I remember the nurses saying that I shouldn't be there and they used to piggyback me around the grounds. That was great fun but I ran away because I wanted to be home with mum. That's all my crime was—running away from these places to go home to where I was loved. Then I was sent to Lawson House, then back to Chermside, then back to Lawson House. When I was 11, I was sent to Wilson Youth Hospital. It had three sections—Treatment, Remand and Privilege. I didn't like it because they drugged me up all the time. They gave me this green syrup that used to knock me out and also make me hallucinate. It was Melleril. I was on Largactil too. I used to fall asleep at the table with the other kids but they wouldn't let me sleep and they tried sitting me up all the time. I got nasty and grumpy with them and so I was kept in seclusion in a lock-up room. I practically lived there. They had to take me on 'dog' walks—it was a little corridor where I would walk up and down with the nurse and then they would put me back in seclusion. I was sexually abused by some of the staff because I was on my own, away from all the other kids. I was so doped up that they could do whatever they wanted.

After nine months, I was sent home to my mum because a doctor at Wilson said I should never have been sent there. But when I got home, I had bad dreams all the time about the nurses touching me up. I didn't know what to do. Also, mum had to work all the time. Mum took me to a doctor who suggested that I only needed to put under observation for a little while but another doctor who was higher up, and didn't even see me, sent me to an adult hospital. I wanted to go home and they wouldn't let me, as usual, so I ran away and went home. Mum made me go to another doctor and so I went and knocked on the door of Wilson Youth Hospital because I didn't want to go to another adult institution but Wilson wouldn't let me in. So I ran away and the police took me back to

Wilson. I was treated as an uncontrollable child. I remember the priest in there.¹ He was on our side. I think it was shocking what they did to him. They sacked him. I reckon that when someone sticks up for us, they should listen. All they could do was tell him that he had to go. I reckon that was wrong.

Wolston Park

I was 13 when I was sent to Wolston Park from Wilson Youth Hospital. They just said that I had to be moved on because I was getting older. The first day I got out of the car at Wolston Park, the head doctor was standing outside Osler House, smoking his pipe and said to me, 'If I put you into an open ward, will you stay here or run away and go home to your mother?' All I did was shrug my shoulders and for that I was put into Osler House.

A couple of years later they tried me in Noble House, an open ward for two weeks but I was sent back to Osler House. Being there nearly killed me and it's a wonder I'm still standing.



Figure 3: Noble House, Wolston Park Hospital Complex, 2004.

Source: Photograph courtesy of the Department of Environment and Science, Queensland Government.

1 The personal history of the priest mentioned here is the subject of Chapter 6 in this book.

At six o'clock in the morning, they got me up and made me have a shower. If I was feeling tired because of the medication, they would drag me to the shower, and if I protested they would kick me. If I got a nice nurse, I would just have cold water poured on me. Male nurses would stand and watch me shower. That was wrong. They got great enjoyment out of that. Then we had to line up for our tablets and then we would have breakfast. Then they'd just chuck us outside in the yard that was fenced off. Then we'd have tea and then we were locked in our cells at 8 o'clock at night. The staff would play cards. They were getting paid for doing nothing.

Every night we were locked up in separate, isolated cells with a bucket. I'd be waiting for someone to come in and rape and bash me. Every night I was thinking, 'Is tonight the night that I'm gonna die?' I would feel the shame and feel numb and there was nothing I could do about it. My insides felt dirty. I was just a kid. In the showers at night I was also sexually assaulted. It depended on which staff were on. The nurse Joseph was the ringleader. He would bring others into the ward. These guys were sickos. In the hallways, you could hear screaming. There was other young girls in Osler House. We were too scared to tell each other what they did to us. I could smell the urine and vomit. I was drugged up all the time but I had to try to stay awake to protect myself from being attacked by a patient or by staff. I was on Melleril, Stelazine, Largactil, Cogentin and Lithium. I was also on Serapax and Serenace but I was allergic to them and so they had to give me other drugs like Artane to treat the bad side effects. Plus, at night I was on a barbiturate tablet called 'Phenobarb' and was also given a Modecate injection once a month. My god! They all got away with it. Everything was so covered up. If I reported being raped I was told that I was mad. I didn't get pregnant because I was given the Depo Provera contraceptive injection. The good nurses were too scared to tell anyone what was going on.

We hardly saw the Patient's Friend. If we spoke out I would be stripped naked and given a Paraldehyde injection. So what the hell was she there for if we weren't allowed to speak to her? We were wards of the state and the state was supposed to look after us. Child safety and mental health really fucked up. A judge used to come to Osler House once a month to see if there was anything wrong with the place and to see if anything was needed. The hospital would get a call from head office saying that the judge was coming. There were no toilets in the cells. When the judge was going to come, we had to clean out our buckets and then they'd be put away. So the judge wouldn't have known that we only had buckets

for a toilet. Did the judge write any reports? Are these on file? Some staff would make fun of me—bringing up my past. I was stripped off naked. I have scars on my arms today from being made to have blood tests every fortnight. I was also a self-mutilator because I had to keep my sanity. When I was raped or hurt too much I would cut myself because pain-plus-pain relieves pain. It would also stop me from hurting other people. That was my life for eight years until I was 21—being treated like a dog in a cage.

Mum came and visited me at Osler House three times a week. She would get on a bus, then she'd catch a train and then walk three quarters of a mile to Wolston Park and then all that to get home again. She did all that because she loved me. On some visits, she'd arrive at Osler House and they wouldn't let her see me. Wolston Park broke her heart. She tried to get me out. She went and saw the head of child safety. She went and saw solicitors. They told her that I needed to be there because if I got out, I would be a danger to myself. That wasn't true. Mum wanted me to come home. She understood what I was going through. I stayed alive hoping she would get me out.

Escape

A new nurse arrived at Osler House in 1980. She was young and she didn't like what they were doing to me. She got into trouble for talking to me. After she had been working there for six months, she said that she would let me out and to go and hide in the church. She said that when she finished her shift, she would pick me up and take me home to my mum. She unlocked the door and I bolted. I hid in the church and waited for hours—all afternoon. The nurse came and drove me home. My mum jumped in the nurse's car and we drove together to Lady Cilento's house. My mum had got in touch with Lady Cilento, trying to get her to do something to get me out. She was a well-known doctor and wrote in the *Courier Mail* and started child centres. She was really important. Her husband was a doctor, too, and years before had been the director-general of health and medical services.

Lady Cilento saw me and said, 'My god! My darling! What are they doing to you? They are killing you with all these drugs.' I could hardly stand up. She got on the phone straight away and rang Wolston Park and said that they had to make sure that I would stay out of the place or she would

expose what was going on. I was really doped up but I still thought it was great that someone cared enough to do something. I saw her at her place a couple of times after that. She weaned me off the drugs with vitamins.

On the Streets and Parenthood

I had complex post-traumatic stress disorder. I would get up after a bad dream and if I didn't plant my feet firmly on the ground, I would get a flashback. I heard patients in Wolston Park screaming. I couldn't breathe properly. I felt hot. I got scared. I didn't know what to do. I was going off my head. There were times when neighbours rang the police. So I left home because I didn't want to hurt my mum. Those mongrels at Wolston Park made a real bad bastard out of me. I was an adult but I hadn't been allowed to grow up properly. They had stopped me from growing up with my mother's love. It was like being locked up again but on the outside. I was locked up with anger and revenge—locked up with hurt. I didn't know what to do with myself. I lived on the streets—under the Queen Street bridge. Sometimes I'd end up in the hospital because I was cutting myself. The only people who would take me for who I was were alcoholics and junkies. I had to stop people screaming in my head. I had to stop going back into that old place.

On 10 December 1982, I had a baby who I called 'Darren' with one of the guys I used to drink with on the street. I was really fond of that guy. His name was Graham but my mother didn't like him and she and I used to fight about him. Graham was more sensible than me. He had a job and a flat. Graham took care of Darren and he treated me nice. Darren was just like me and he was smart. But when he was five he got really sick. We found out he had leukaemia. We took him to hospital for transfusions and other treatments. I really hate the 31st of December every year, because that's when Darren got really sick. He died at 1:30 am on New Year's Day. Darren's death really upset Graham and he and I split up after that. If Darren had lived, I probably would have made a go of it with his father. I dream about all the possibilities of doing so many things with Darren. I miss him.

Then I had a dog that lived with me under the bridge. Once, he kept lying with his head on my stomach and pawing at me. I went to the doctor who told me I was pregnant. The dog had known. I didn't know who the father of this baby was. Sometimes I shot up too much drugs and anyone could

take advantage of me. I hated myself for that but it was the only thing that helped my PTSD. I found a place—a squat—and I rounded up all my friends on the street and got them to tie me to the bed to get me off drugs. I went through my own cold turkey. I kicked the habit. I could fuck my own life up but I couldn't fuck up a kid's life. I was 24. I started going home and asking my mum for help. The doctors were saying that the baby would have to be taken off me that I would never be able to look after it because I was Tammy-the-druggie, Tammy-the-alcoholic who couldn't read, who couldn't add up, who couldn't do anything. I was like a wounded cripple that no one could do anything with. I told my mum that I wanted my baby to be adopted into a nice family but there was a nurse in the Mater Hospital who told me that she never gave up on me and supported me through the whole pregnancy.

Another woman also taught me how to write. Before then all my writing was back-to-front. My 'ds' were 'bs'. My 'ys' were 'hs'. It was pathetic, actually. I couldn't see the letters properly. Then it got really easy for once. I learned that a 'u' was a toilet bowl. A 't' was a cross. I identified the things that I see every day with the alphabet. I just needed to get a picture in my head to get the letters right. Also, when I lived on the streets in the city, I sometimes used to go to the Coles cafeteria in town to get a coffee and I got to know this doctor who had his surgery upstairs in the same building. He spent time with me because he actually thought that I had brains and that I was the worst case of institutional abuse that he had ever seen. When he didn't have appointments, he taught me how to use a computer. He was decent. Once I learned, I was with it. That all helped to start the new Tammy.

Rachel

I had a caesarean and gave birth to Rachel in 1984. I left the hospital but Rachel stayed behind. She was a sick, preemie kid. Then something inside me made me run up the steps with all the stitches in me, I didn't give a shit, to where Rachel was on the top floor. And there she was. She put her little arms up to me. I really loved Rachel. I would visit and bath her and I took her home. But then the medical people 'ripped my guts out' because of my past. I took her to the Royal Brisbane Hospital for check-ups and they said that I was forgetting to feed her. Whatever she ate she wasn't putting on weight. They were trying to get my daughter

off me. I took her to the hospital when she got sunburnt. But I made a mistake—I was living with this group of no-hopers at Boreen Point at the beach and I didn't know about the rays of the sun. I took her to the hospital because she was crying. I did that three times. Next minute, they took her off me. Lunatic-me left her there at the hospital. When I came home without my daughter, my mum yelled at me. She told me that I gave them what they had wanted from day one. I went back to the hospital to get my kid back and they wouldn't let me see her. They got security staff. They told me that they had put an order on me so I couldn't visit my daughter. What could I do? I started drinking again. I had done everything that I was told to do. I fed her. I clothed her. They couldn't prove that I wasn't feeding her. I will not take the rap that I ever starved her. She was a hypertonic baby. Only recently I was told that she's lacking some muscles in her body. That's why she was underweight.

Anyway, one of the teams at the hospital said that I should be allowed to have a fair go and so one Christmas, an officer from child safety came and visited and said, 'Merry Christmas Tammy, I've brought Rachel home to be with you.' She was almost one. When Rachel was four, I took her to the hospital for a check-up. The night before I took her rollerskating. I always used to do that to get her muscles going. She liked it. We had so much fun and it would help her with her balance. I would also take her swimming. The water would support her. I knew what I was doing but the doctor laughed at me when I told him.

He said, 'If we don't do something about your daughter, she is going to die.' What sort of mother would I have been if I didn't let them keep her in hospital and look after her? I swear, I would do anything for her but they had no reason. This is what Wolston Park had done to me. The day they took her off me, I had to tell my four-year-old, 'I'm not allowed to come and visit you.' She said, 'Don't go Mummy.' I said, 'I have to go.' I gave her a kiss. She said, 'Don't go. It's important. You have to stay here.' I never heard her use the word 'important' before then. I didn't even think that she knew what 'important' meant.

I was so mad that one day I went to the Fortitude Valley Child Health Centre with two knives. I wasn't going to hurt anyone. I just wanted my daughter back. All these cop cars came. Oh boy—I was in trouble! I ended up in Rosemount Psychiatric Hospital. The head doctor at Rosemount had been my doctor at Wolston Park and had tried to get me out of Osler House. My stay at Rosemount was only supposed to be for 24 hours but

I stayed longer because they were helping me. He said he would help me get my daughter back. They rang and rang the Royal Brisbane Hospital where Rachel was. No one had the guts to tell us the real truth. Finally, they told me that they had taken her to foster parents. They had promised me a last visit. They didn't keep their promise. I went stupid. The doctors had to drug me. When I left Rosemount, I went back to the streets. Mum was wild with me. She couldn't believe that I was that stupid to give Rachel to the hospital.

Rachel's foster parents got to know me and told me, 'Child welfare should just see how you and Rachel get on together.' But it's never about how you get on with your child. It's about how you get on with the staff at child welfare and once you have a past, you always have a past. That's wrong. Why don't they give us back our files? My files are my life made into lies and that's what they look to judge how I am today. I was judged by my anger. I am not judged for who I really am. If I could go back, I would have just shut up and bit my tongue. Years later, they found out it wasn't my fault. I *had* fed Rachel properly but I am scarred for life because Rachel and I never got to know each other. We don't get on because we are two different people now. It's like my Aboriginal family—my brothers and sisters—we don't know each other the same way that we would have if we had grown up together. I think I came out pretty good given that I spent seven years in Wolston Park getting bashed and raped.

A social worker once said to me, 'You're nothing like how you're described in your files.' You see? I'm not a monster.

Work

After they took Rachel off me, I left Rosemount and went back to the streets. I tried to get my act together. I stopped shooting up. I tried to work out who 'Tammy' really was. I needed to create a 'Tammy' that I and other people would like—a 'Tammy' of brilliance, a good-natured 'Tammy'. I worked out how to get my own place. I needed to get a job. Even though a woman had helped me with my reading when I was pregnant with Rachel, it was only words. I couldn't comprehend big stuff. So I had to think what jobs I could do. I started selling the *Telegraph* newspaper on the streets. Then I got jobs at rides at the show grounds.

Some woman from the TAFE who knew me when I was on the streets reckoned I could learn and said, 'Be there every morning'. She was talking about Yeronga TAFE. So I went and learned how to read on computers. I learned about 'what comes next'. I learned how to write 'firstly', 'secondly' and 'in conclusion'. People got to know me—not people from the system, like social workers—but normal people and they would talk to me and give me ideas.

I thought about starting my own business. I saved up for my first industrial washing machine. Then I got my first industrial dryer. When I got three of each, I rented a place at the Gold Coast and got my laundromat going. Someone I knew taught me how to screen print and so I made my own T-shirts and got a stall selling them at the markets at the Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast as well. Then I got contracts to make T-shirts for different organisations. I was earning good bucks. I opened another laundromat. I had two running and I was starting to feel that I was in control and doing something that could earn me money. Now I needed to look the part and I learned how to dress up like all the people who used to walk past me when I had been living on streets.

But because I could never get over losing Rachel and they said that I could never get her back, I went a bit crazy and ended up drinking and shooting up again and going back to the streets. I tried so hard to get Rachel back. I tried taking my own life a couple of times. I knew my child was special to me in many ways—the same way I thought of my adoptive mum.

Finding Mother

There were times when I wondered what my real mother was really like. When I was about 30 years old I wanted to know my real mum. My adoptive mum and I would fight about seeing my real mum because she didn't want me to get hurt. I wanted to find my real mum. I did my own detective work. I couldn't find her because she had got married and changed her last name. So I went to Cunnamulla to find her, where I was born. I started at the Aboriginal Co-op there and that search led me to the town of Bourke where the local Aboriginal community knew of my mum. I found out that she was living in Victoria then and I rang her up. When I met her she was so excited. I stayed with her for a couple of weeks with my other brothers and sisters. They accepted me. I felt great because I found my family. I pushed mum to tell me how I ended up being

adopted. She told me that she couldn't read and so she signed my birth certificate with an X. She told me about how the police came. She told me that she was sorry that she couldn't run fast enough and that she couldn't swim and that she dropped me. Later she had rung Diamantina Home to find out where I was because she wanted me back. They told her that I was in a loving home.

Captive

I also found out that one of my brothers was in jail in the town of Sale in Victoria and I travelled to visit him. On my way to Sale, I passed through Mirboo North. I needed somewhere to stay and asked at St Vinnie's for help with accommodation. They told me about this refuge. It was a safe house run by a guy, Dave, who used to be a Salvation Army officer. I rang the place and Dave came and picked me up. He was nice and he took me to the jail at Sale to meet my brother. But then Dave wouldn't let me do anything without him. He drank a lot. He told me that he had been in jail. I wanted to leave the house. He wouldn't let me. He locked me in. He had the keys and a gun. I couldn't move. Another woman in the house, Stephanie, who was blind, had keys too. She'd do whatever he said. Dave raped and bashed me. He was a criminal. He had it all worked out. He'd go to St Vinnie's, and all these places, saying that he ran a safe place for women. He'd get the down-and-outers who didn't know better and then lock them up and do what he wanted. This is what Wolston Park did to me—left me dumb and vulnerable.

I tried to escape by ringing an ambulance and they took me to the hospital in Traralgon. I told the doctor what Dave was doing and he didn't believe me. He thought it was too far-fetched and so he admitted me to the psychiatric unit! Dave came to the hospital to pick me up wearing his old Salvation Army officer suit, making everyone think that he was a hero. He told the hospital staff that it was all in my head and that I made everything up. The only way the staff would let me out of the hospital was if I told them that everything I had said about Dave was a lie. That was the only way they were going to let me out! No one believed me. He was the man in the uniform. He had the credibility. They believed him before they even listened to me. The hospital returned me into the hands of this criminal. I was back in prison at Dave's house.

Another Escape

Dave used to supervise my phone calls. He made me ask mum on the phone to send down all my furniture and belongings from Brisbane, including my piano keyboard—things that I would never have moved. Mum knew something was wrong. My mum had to come down from Brisbane to save me. She came and stayed at the ‘refuge’ with me. I told Stephanie to do the right thing—get the keys and let us out. She did. I was finally free. I had been locked up there for two years and left pregnant because he had raped me. I took his gun to protect us in case he came after us. We went to the police. They didn’t believe me. They said it was all my head. Mum went back to Brisbane. I wanted to stay and get my stuff back but that didn’t work.

Anyway, I got the bus back to Brisbane and I got thrown off the bus, in town near Griffith, New South Wales, because I was sick. I had nowhere to go and so I went to a church. I started getting flashbacks. It was all so hopeless. I shut my eyes, said the Lord’s Prayer, pointed the gun at my chest and fired. It missed my heart. Blood came out of my mouth. The one thing that kept going through my brain while I was lying there bleeding was what my mum would tell me, ‘There is a lot of goodness in you Tammy, if you would just see that.’

The church neighbours heard the gun shot and rang the minister of the church. He found me and called for help. I ended up staying with the minister until I got better. He fed me and everything. He got the doctor to visit me every day and it was like living in a hospital with everything that was needed to treat me. He was a real friend. It took several months until I was better. I then got a bus to go home to Brisbane.

David

I rented a place to get ready for the baby. I wanted it to work this time. I knew that I could look after a baby. I wanted a boy. David was born in 1996 at Redcliffe Hospital. I named him after my adoptive father. All hell broke loose because when I had the caesarean, they accidentally put holes in my bowel. I needed surgery and was in intensive care and I couldn’t see my baby. In the end they got me a room in the maternity ward and so I recovered in there. I had two colostomy bags. For weeks, I would hear all the different women having their babies.

Some would be calm and say, 'I'm trying to do the breathing. I'm breathing. I'm breathing.' Others would scream, 'HELP! FUCKING HELL!' It was interesting—ha! Better than TV!

Then they let me go home with David. I showed them that I was a good mum and that I didn't starve my kids. They got me the blue OzCare—St Vinnie's nurses who used to come around. But no one knew that David had an arachnoid cyst on the top layer of his brain. I reckon they nicked his head during the caesarean when they put holes in my bowel. But they didn't believe me when I said that he wasn't behaving like a normal kid. Later, on our way home from another visit with my Aboriginal mum in Victoria, we stopped off at the town of Parkes in New South Wales. I took David to the hospital because something wasn't right. He wasn't behaving like a normal baby. At that time, in the media, there were all these reports about family child abuse. As soon as they saw me and David, the hospital rang community services and accused me of bashing David. That made me wild and of course I started mouthing off but I was hurt. I knew I was innocent. New South Wales child safety services were brought in and they took David off me. I slept in my car, in Parkes, waiting to get my son back. They sent him off for a CAT scan and that's when they found out he had a cyst so they knew I hadn't hit him. I rang the child safety people at Redcliffe in Queensland because they knew me. I couldn't believe it. They were wonderful. They organised David to be taken back to Queensland and to be returned to me. I drove back to Brisbane and the Redcliffe child safety office brought David to me when I got home.

In 1999, my adoptive mum was in hospital because she had a stroke. She was in her eighties. I wanted to take her home and look after her but they told me that she was paralysed down one side. She couldn't talk. Then they didn't expect her to live through the night. I got on the bed and I told her that she couldn't go anywhere—she needed to stay with me a bit longer. I told her that there'd be no one to ring if I got sick. I had no real friends. I just had her. She died. They let me sleep there for the night. She went cold but she was my mum. I organised the whole funeral. Everyone who came reckoned that my mum would have been proud of me that day.

When my adoptive mum was in hospital, Dave, who kept me locked up in his house at Mirboo North, got caught. Two of the women from his house had called out for help when he took them shopping. Those women told the police everything that I had been trying to tell them three years ago. The police flew up to Brisbane and asked me to testify in court but

my mum was dying and so I wouldn't help them, Besides, they didn't believe me the first time. Why should I help the cops? They didn't help me get away from him. Anyway, Dave ended up in Pentridge Prison.

David started at a school near Redcliffe. Some of the mothers volunteered to help the children in the classroom. One day, one of the mothers didn't turn up. Because I knew about computers the teacher asked me to help but the grade ones were not allowed to go to the library where the computers were. I thought, 'What bullshit!' So one day I led them to the library and I sat them down.

The teacher told them to call me 'Miss—whatever' but I said, 'No. Call me Tammy.'

I was really good with the kids. The school got me a government blue card so that I could work with children. At the school library, I made and photocopied computer workbooks for the children in grade one. The teacher was very impressed. My dyslexia made me a good teacher because I have had to learn how to break things up. I play a piano keyboard in a different way. I do it in dimensions that I make up—all minor chords are hit one, miss one, hit one, miss one and hit one. For example, it's C, F, G, A minor, D minor. I also crochet with the number eight. I count eight. You pull the thread around is 'one', you pull it through the hole is 'two' and so on. Every step has a number and that's why I can't get it wrong.

Now when it comes to computers, it's really easy. Inside the computer is the central processing unit but a child would never understand that. So what you do is call it 'the brain'. So I got the kids thinking about how their brain works. I got these grade one children learning how to save what they typed, to create their own files and to print. Some of the bloody mothers that got to help out at the school got jealous of me at one stage because my school shirt didn't have 'volunteer' on it. I had the same shirt that the teachers wore. That made me feel terrific. At the end of the year we invited the parents to a presentation where each kid explained something about the computer, 'This is what a mouse does', 'This is what a monitor does' and we sang songs in between—songs that I wrote.

But David wanted to live where there were more animals and I would do anything for him. So in 2002 we moved to the outskirts of Kingaroy. I lived for my son because I had nothing. He went to the local state school and the other kids bashed him up. The policeman told me that if he couldn't be safe at school, then take him out. So when he was in

grade four, I took David out of school and did home schooling. All the home school materials cost an arm and a leg. Also, I was having problems with it because I didn't know how to do all that bloody work. It was beyond me. It got harder and harder every year. So I was stuck with a child I couldn't teach properly. This was different from helping kids at the school. I knew about computers but I didn't know all the things I had to teach David. In the end, I taught him the wrong ways so that he would get on in life. I taught him how to cheat. That's all I could do at the time. So I ended up with a child who spent his time on computers instead of doing his schoolwork and all hell broke loose. I got angry with him and it made my complex post-traumatic stress disorder worse. We were arguing all the time. I didn't know what to do.

I couldn't help David so I went to child safety but I didn't want them to take my son from me so I said that I was asking for a friend who needed help with home schooling. They said that that child would have to go to a foster family that could teach him properly. I freaked out when they said that. They'd rather take a child off a mother rather than giving her a chance. That's wrong. That's too much 'take your child off ya!' That's too much 'Your past is your past'. And really, none of us girls should have been locked up in Wolston Park the first place and so our past is not our bloody past. It wasn't our fault. We didn't do anything wrong.

I couldn't help David. I didn't want him to get bashed up at school and I didn't want child safety to take him off me and so David left home when he was 13 to live with his half-sister Rachel in Mackay. She put him into school and he got in the wrong company. David's friend there was mixed up in everything and knew how to play the system. He introduced David to a lot of bad things but he stood up for David and so no one hurt him.

Canberra

I hit the road. I was lost without my son. The person I was staying alive for was gone. I took two overdoses. I ended up in hospital in Canberra. I used to visit the National Library because it was free and there I found out about the history projects about Forgotten Australians including the exhibition at the National Museum. The politicians made it happen and I reckon they made themselves look good by doing that but at least it got survivors to be able to say what happened and someone took notice of us for once. All our lives no one believed us. We were just seen as idiots.

In Canberra I met people who cared, including a doctor who convinced me to go back to Queensland. She wrote a letter to David explaining to him about my post-traumatic stress disorder and how I really loved him. I went home and David came home too and brought his friend from Mackay. That didn't work too well. David fought with me. David ended up staying in residential care. It was his choice. He went back to live with Rachel. It took two years before David told me that I was right about his friend in Mackay. He came home and his exact words to me were, 'I know now that you were trying to protect me.'

Return to Brisbane

Others who were institutionalised have kids like mine. When David gets mad he says things to me like, 'You should have got me another mother' or 'You're fucked up with no brains' or 'You're a retard' or 'It's your fault for not getting me proper schooling!' I live with this today. The system was never there to help me. The system just fucked me over, putting it nice and bluntly. I didn't stand a chance. We should have got counselling. We shouldn't have had to do everything on our own. David is 20 now and still living with me. He had a couple of sessions with a counsellor that helped him deal with his emotional stuff with me, and he is now studying Year 10 at TAFE so that eventually he can finish Year 12. And I am proud of him and Rachel because they still call me 'mum' and they still love and care about me in their own ways. David also thinks I'm a good person because I help others in need. So maybe time will heal. I wish I was normal.

In 2012, I was at the local free breakfast for R U OK? Day. A guy that works in mental health was telling me to 'get on with my life'. He got me at crying point. The then head of a Catholic social service organisation, who I knew, said I could make a difference. I thought, 'What the bloody hell would she know!' I went roaring off to the local newspaper. There was a new journalist there who did a story on me and the opening lines were 'If Tammy had a dollar for every time she was told to "get on with her life", she would be rich'.

I was still angry about the conversation at the R U OK? breakfast so that when I slept I had these strong dreams. The first dream was me on a treadmill going nowhere. The second dream was my working in a morgue with the dead yelling for help but it was too late—they were

already dead. The third dream was me back in Osler House and a voice said, 'You're still alive.' The fourth dream was my building the ark and all the animals helping me. The next dream was me running a drop-in centre.

Drop-In Centre

The next morning, I decided to make that dream come true. I would start a drop-in centre because there was nowhere for me to ever go when I needed it and so I thought that I would create the thing that had been missing in my life. I started ringing people up—individuals who helped me when the system didn't. Together we rent the church hall and run a drop-in centre from nine in the morning until 9:30 at night every Monday. Anywhere between 45 and 65 people come and everybody helps each other. We have a cook there and we serve meals to the homeless. Mothers come and bring their children. We teach people how to budget. I spend hours with these people. I get to know them. I get to know what they like. I am their friend. Local police and hospital staff refer homeless people in the area to me. When they phone me, I ring around and ask people I know if they would give someone a bed for the night. Sometimes, I sleep over with them to help. Sometimes I ring organisations and say I need money to put a homeless person in a motel for the night. Sometimes I drive the person-in-need for several hours to get to the nearest homeless shelter. There's a lot of people in my area who help me because they know I am really trying to make a difference.

This world is in a bad place—the greed—how can people get better if the government can't get a system right? There needs to be understanding of what it's like to be hurt instead of people staying away from us. There needs to be more emergency accommodation, support for parents-in-need instead of taking their kids off them—find out what their needs are—practical stuff. I have worked my arse off and I now have a Certificate III in micro business operations, a Certificate IV in training and assessment, Certificate II in IT and have completed the first six units in frontline management. I also have certificates in senior first aid and food handling and safety. At the moment, I'm doing an online diploma in mental health studies. Next, I'm going to do a course in being a facilitator in mental illness recovery and a Certificate IV in peer support training. In 2013, I graduated from the federally funded Leader for Tomorrow program. I've bettered my maths and English. I've trained in public speaking. I went

to weekend workshops using music computer software because I like composing music and writing songs. I also have awards for my volunteer achievement. I won the Community Spirit Award at Brisbane North TAFE for all the work I was doing for my community and for helping other students.

It's taken years but now, finally, major organisations want to come on board and help us at the drop-in centre. I don't get paid but what I'm getting out of this is people give their understanding back to me. I speak at forums. I attend mental health case management meetings and speak up for clients if I think the professionals haven't done the right thing. The 'experts' ask me for my opinion. I have over 70 letters of support but we need more funding. It doesn't cost much to run a drop-in centre that helps people get to know each other—the old, the lonely, addicts, those with depression, war veterans—and it's great. We have fun. We even party on! We run a dinner and dance ball each year for the homeless or for those who are experiencing hardship. I have just started a drop-in centre in Nanango. I'm trying to at least get three drop-in centres running this year and another three in 2018. It will happen because I will make it happen. And it's needed.

My real mum is in an aged care home in Mildura. She's got a bit of dementia. I saw her last year at my sister's funeral. My other sister took her to the viewing of my sister's body and I met with all my family there. We keep in touch through the internet. I was the only one in the family who was stolen because I was white. My sister Kerry said to me that she wished that we grew up together. It was wrong that they split us up. It was wrong that the white police went running after my mum to get the white baby off her. That should never have happened.

I live for my daughter and my son. I hate being different. I wish I could just be normal but I try to make a difference in helping other people and I really want justice. I've got complex post-traumatic stress disorder. The only thing I was taught was how to hate and fight. The ones who are supposed to help me—doctors, social workers—are those who in the past hurt me. I don't trust them. I never will. I'm very angry with them all. When I was a kid, they gave me no reason to trust them. How can we be proud Australians without justice? I just wish that I didn't have to do drugs and drink alcohol to forget. There's a song 'Don't Shoot the Wounded, Some Day You Might Be One'. I think about that.

No one was supposed to be in Wolston Park until they were 21 years of age. When I speak about this, I am seen as a problem. It's been proven that I am not the problem because the Queensland Government said 'sorry'. We were just kids. For years people said it never happened. My adoptive mum knew the truth. Hospitals and institutions are supposed to be reliable and so people thought that it was all in my head.

I do have some good points as a person, even though I live in a mind that is scrambled up and confused. I'm not psychotic but what they did to me back then has had a hell of an impact. When things happen that are not your fault, life is a hard blow. I hate what life's done to me. My life was a stuff up. Now I'm a learning junkie. I want to learn more. When I learn, I understand things. If it wasn't for my kids, the people at the drop-in centre and my learning, I probably would have diced myself up. I hope for healing, for my anger to be taken away and to be normal. I want to forgive. While there is hope, there is life. While there is life, there is hope.

This text is taken from *Goodna Girls: A History of Children in a Queensland Mental Asylum*, by Adele Chynoweth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/GG.2020.05