

# OPEN DOORS

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## Catherine's journey: a journey through abortion

"So I hurtled towards abortion with my mind and body in turmoil, hoping that when it was all over I would wake up and discover that the whole thing had just been a bad dream."

A highly personal and in-depth account of one woman's experience. A true story.

### Introduction

The experience of abortion drove me to the edge of my sanity and left me hanging on by a fingernail. The road since then has been long and hard. I used to think there was a final destination but I now realise that there is only the journey and it is on a one way street. I can never get back to where I was before the abortion. I must strive onwards even when this leaves me on an exposed and rough terrain. Mostly now I am able to find shelter in resting places along the way. Occasionally the going gets tough again - especially around anniversary time (of the abortion or the baby's "would have been" birthday) or when other life events are testing me.

What was happening in your life when you became pregnant e.g. relationships, stresses?

I had been in Australia a little over a year and was still getting used to a new country and city. I was feeling unchallenged and restless at work and was job hunting. My closest two friends were overseas, as was my family and I was still building a social network here.

I became pregnant in the early (and, as it would eventuate, the latter) stages of a relationship. We were only together for about 3 months.

I met "James" at a party and we embarked on a fairly intense relationship, spending a lot of time together and talking of plans for the coming months - plans as a couple. He seemed genuine and sincere, though retrospectively, I can see that he wasn't entirely honest and was less than caring in some of his actions.

I cannot be 100% certain but it is most likely that I became pregnant when he forced me to have unprotected intercourse. I had a prescription for oral contraceptives but was waiting for my period so that I could begin taking them. In the meantime we used condoms and I was, many times, a consensual partner to protected intercourse. However on one occasion he held me down, ignored my protestations of "no", and forced himself into me. He said he wanted to see what I felt like without a condom.

It took me a very long time to acknowledge this and name it appropriately as rape. This was at least in part because after the abortion I felt so guilty, so culpable, that I was unable to contemplate sharing the blame. If it wasn't for the abortion and its ensuing dreadful consequences, I may never have recognised his behaviour as an act of rape.

As I was starting to suspect that I might be pregnant, his attentiveness suddenly waned. When my pregnancy was confirmed, we met. Before I told him my news, he told me that he wanted to have a break. Not a permanent split, he said, just some time out on his own to think things over. This may not have been a deliberate lie, but as it turned out, we never got back together.

How did you feel being pregnant? What did being pregnant mean for you?

My menstrual cycle is usually very regular, so I suspected pregnancy for a couple of weeks before it was confirmed. I knew intellectually that pregnancy was a distinct possibility, but emotionally I denied it could be true. Even when breast tenderness, indigestion, nausea and morning sickness were increasing the likelihood, I told myself I "couldn't" be pregnant. I told no one of my concerns, as if verbalising it would make it more likely to become a reality.

James had told me of a couple of false pregnancy scares with a previous girlfriend, and of their needless worry. I wasn't going to be that kind of a girlfriend. I wasn't going to be paranoid. I tried to put on an act of normality. With the benefit of hindsight I can see that I probably failed miserably and that it was a mistake to shut James out. By the time my period was three weeks overdue, I couldn't ignore it any longer.

Even knowing that there was a good chance that I was pregnant, it was still an enormous shock to have it confirmed. I wasn't sure if I ever wanted a child and certainly wouldn't have chosen this time or these circumstances. This was the sort of thing that happened to other people. People such as irresponsible teenagers or those who were ignorant about contraception. How naive was I?

I felt betrayed by my body and angry that it had let me down. I felt hostile towards this child who had invaded my body without permission or invitation. I felt trapped and felt that I was being punished for enjoying a relatively casual sexual relationship. (In fact my feelings for James were no longer casual, but it became apparent that his for me were - contrary to the words he had said when we were together). I was repulsed by the thought of becoming fat, developing stretch marks and of my breasts sagging. However I also felt secretly proud that I could get pregnant and felt strangely protective towards the baby.

Such contradictions! Even as I was plotting to kill it, I was also nurturing it by stopping smoking, avoiding alcohol and by being careful about what I ate and lifted etc. I felt a lot of ambivalence about the pregnancy and the baby.

Being pregnant in my circumstances meant failure to me. I was acutely embarrassed and ashamed and felt guilty for being an intelligent, single woman, without a longterm stable relationship, and in this situation. I cried a lot and felt very distressed at the thought of anyone finding out. I was sure they would judge me to be a slut. Nevertheless I also felt excited. I was wondering how the baby would look and act and what its life might be like. I wasn't sure I ever wanted children. But it is one thing not to want an imaginary child, quite another to deny a child who was now a reality.

A first pregnancy is commonly a time for celebration. Other women receive joyful congratulations from all quarters. I felt sad and cheated that that experience would now never exist for me.

What help did you seek about pregnancy and what help was provided?

Pregnancy was confirmed by a urine test at my local health centre. Before telling me the result, they asked whether I planned and wanted to be pregnant. I responded that I didn't. They then told me that my test was positive - that I was pregnant. Their immediate assumption seemed to be that an unplanned pregnancy should be removed. Without asking for it and without any discussion of my feelings about or thoughts on the subject, they proceeded to give me a letter of referral and a list of abortionists detailing addresses, costs etc. They did suggest I discuss it with my boyfriend before deciding. However they offered no information about options other than abortion. No mention was made about adoption or single parenthood. It seemed in their minds there was no decision to be made, no options to be considered, that the obvious course of action was to terminate the pregnancy. They seemed oblivious to the fact that their news had thrown me into the middle of a major personal crisis.

I then sought help from the doctor who had previously provided me with contraceptive advice. I told her I was pregnant, that I hadn't made a decision but wanted information about my options. She proceeded to tell me that she could terminate my pregnancy. She explained the surgical technique, when it could be done and how much it cost. She did tell me that in her experience it was better to continue with the pregnancy if I was still unsure after thinking about it. She didn't elaborate on why it was better - and it was outside the scope of my experience to imagine what she could mean. Again no information was offered about alternatives to abortion. I was told to go away, think about it and phone for an appointment if I decided on abortion. If I didn't decide on abortion ... what then? No advice about financial support, emotional support, adoption, ante natal care etc was given - or about where I would access this advice.

I confided in 2 girlfriends about my situation and dilemma. One was during an overseas phone call in which she expressed confidence that I would do the same as she would. She said she didn't think I should go through it alone and that I should make my boyfriend come with me and pay for some of it. She didn't actually say so, but I understood "it" to mean an abortion.

Retrospectively, I see that the friend I told here was a poor choice of confidante. She was bearing too heavy a load of her own at that time to be able to share the burden of my problem or empathize with it. A widowed sole parent, she has had tough times and told me that single parenthood wasn't a situation she would have willingly entered. She sounded bitter as she painted a picture of hardship and struggle. At that time she was unable to perceive any rewards or pleasures from her children. She didn't directly suggest I have an abortion, but she did tell me that another friend of hers had one and seemed to be okay. Friends may care about you and may have the best of intentions but this doesn't mean they have the knowledge or skill to help you in your struggle towards a decision.

I knew I wouldn't be entitled to maternity leave from work but didn't know whether they would be flexible with my work hours if I had a baby. There were no workplace childcare facilities. I also didn't know whether I would be entitled to any government financial assistance, as I was not an Australian citizen then. I really needed all of this information to help me make a decision. But if I was going to have an abortion then I didn't want anyone to know that I had been pregnant. The questions necessary to access this information seemed too specific to pass off as rhetorical. It was a catch 22 situation.

I was unable also to find the strength to tell any of my family or ask them for help. Just thinking of them would make me dissolve in tears. I was too scared of their reaction which I wasn't sure would be helpful or supportive. I'd had some turbulent times as a teenager and worried that this would confirm my place as the black sheep of the family. I was afraid that they would express their disappointment in me. I was already disappointed enough in myself without having the responsibility of disappointing others.

Lastly, but definitely not least was James. It seemed that the only realistic option was abortion - unless he could offer me some support. I felt unable to make a unilateral decision. I had to know his views.

I was very anxious when we met and was battling to keep my tears at bay. It was important to me to maintain control over my body and my emotions. I wanted his honest views without him feeling swayed by my reactions. I didn't want his consideration of my feelings to get in the way of the truth. And it didn't! Just as he had disregarded my feelings when he raped me, he again showed no interest in what I did or didn't want.

Basically, he was my last hope. Unless he could offer some support then abortion seemed like the best solution. Sadly this offer was not forthcoming. He made it quite clear that he wanted me to have an abortion. He had already rejected me once and I hurt from that. I felt unable to risk a second rejection by directly voicing my desire for help and support. I neither expected nor wanted an offer of commitment to me but would have liked an offer to be an involved father to our child. However there was no expression of support and I felt my options narrowing. I think that is when I decided to have an abortion.

There were other sources of help and information that I considered accessing. Among them were places offering pregnancy counselling, advertised in the Yellow Pages.

I recognised that I was in a vulnerable state and so didn't pursue these avenues for fear of being pressured by radical pro-life or pro-choice people. I didn't trust them to put my well being ahead of their own ethical/social/religious agendas. I worried that they would try to steer me in one direction or another – not realising that I had already been swayed and subjected to pressures. I wanted the decision that was best for me. Yet in the end I made the decision altruistically with little regard for me and no comprehension of the consequences that would unfold for me.

#### What influenced you towards abortion?

I was influenced towards abortion by the belief that it was the only way to assert some sort of certainty over the future. It seemed futile to hope for the other options. They seemed to offer a doubtful future. A future too dependent on ifs and buts. I didn't recognise that abortion offered even less.

Everyone else seemed to assume that abortion was the obvious path to take and I allowed myself to be railroaded towards abortion by their assumptions. No one suggested that I would manage (or even thrive?) if I had a baby. Certainly no one expressed confidence that I would manage without a partner if need be. This confidence that was missing in other people's attitudes towards me was also lacking in my own feelings about myself. I was so doubtful that I would cope emotionally, physically or financially even in the short term, let alone for the next 16+ years.

I thought it was unfair to have James' child when he didn't want it; when he didn't want me as the mother of his child. I mistakenly thought that I loved this man and kidded myself that he was more likely to come back to me if I did what he wanted. If he didn't come back to me then I thought I would have better prospects of meeting someone else if I was without a child.

I guess everyone wants the best for their children - and I was no exception. It seemed that having me as its mother would be a pretty poor deal and I hurt at the thought of my child having a father who wanted it aborted. I thought this would be unfair on the child and that it would be resentful of my failings to provide sound finances, a loving father and an extended family.

Lots of factors seemed to stack up and suggest a difficult future for my child and for me. It didn't dawn on me that abortion offered my child no future at all – only death. And I had no idea that life after abortion would be so hard for me. However, even though I have suffered greatly in the aftermath of abortion, my child remains the biggest loser.

#### What information was provided for you about abortion (i.e. foetus, operation, after effects) and by whom?

When my pregnancy was confirmed at the health centre I was given a list of abortionists but no other information.

Then I consulted with the doctor who would subsequently perform my abortion. She explained the surgical technique that would be used e.g. that my cervix would be dilated and a suction catheter used to clean the walls of my womb in a procedure lasting 5-10 minutes. She told me that some doctors take longer than this, which increases the risk of infection. She also stressed that she would prescribe antibiotics to reduce the likelihood of infection.

The surgical technique was demonstrated to me using a clear Perspex model womb and a suction catheter. It was a very clean demonstration - no foetus, no blood in sight. Looking back I don't remember the words embryo, foetus, baby or even products of conception being used. I think there may have been an intentional avoidance of them. Or perhaps I blocked them out. If I didn't acknowledge exactly what was involved then it wouldn't be so bad.

The only other potential complication that was mentioned at this stage was cervical damage. I was told this could result in miscarriage in subsequent pregnancies, but this was dismissed as unlikely.

At the clinic on the day of my abortion I was seen by a nurse and given a leaflet, which detailed what to do and what to watch for afterwards. There was a lot of information to absorb on this sheet and yet it was only given to me about 5 minutes before the actual operation. I was dressed in a flimsy gown and was feeling sad, ashamed, anxious, nauseated and yet hungry. Hardly the optimal physical or emotional state to receive and absorb important information.

#### Having sought help, what was your understanding about abortion (foetus, operation, after effects)?

I think I had a good understanding about the actual surgical technique but not of the implications. I understood what the doctor would do but had no concept of exactly how a 6-8 week foetus would pass down a suction catheter. I still don't know what volume of blood is involved, what texture it would be, whether there would be lumpy bits, identifiable bits etc. At times afterwards I wanted that information.

I understood that there was a small risk of cervical damage and a small risk of infection, which could reduce future fertility. I knew that I would have some bleeding after the procedure and that there was a chance of hemorrhage requiring further treatment. I wasn't told but I knew that no surgery is without risks and that there was a remote chance that I could die from anaesthetic complications, allergy or surgical misadventure.

I was told by the doctor that in her experience it was better to continue with the pregnancy if I was unsure. However this advice was so vague that it was meaningless to me. I had no idea that having an abortion could lead to major depression and suicide ideation. Mind you, I don't know how this information could best be conveyed. No words could have imparted to me the misery and torment that is depression. But, had somebody tried, then at least when that did happen to me I wouldn't have felt abnormal.

With regard to the foetus, it is hard to remember whether I knew little or whether I knew more but denied the reality to myself. I knew it had the potential to become a baby but didn't know exactly what stage of its development it was at. On one hand I was thinking of it as a baby but on the other hand I was reducing it to a blob of jelly.

Had I wanted to obtain details I could have done so, with relative ease, from a library or bookshop.

But I chose not to. I also intentionally avoided the numerous pregnancy agencies that advertise on billboards and in the Yellow Pages. I was fearful of what they might show me, which implies that I did actually have some comprehension.

Yet if I did have that knowledge then why did I feel so awful, so devastated, so shocked and sick when I saw another woman's ultrasound picture of her 8-week pregnancy a few months after my abortion? Why could I think of blobs of jelly before my abortion, yet afterwards have absolute clarity that I had killed a child. My child. Perhaps what I knew and what I acknowledged were poles apart and certainly no one tried to bridge that chasm for me.

#### How did you come to have abortion?

Having an abortion was never a positive decisive act. I just seemed to be propelled towards it by various factors. I didn't want an abortion but neither did I want a baby in my circumstances. I couldn't imagine coping if I continued with the pregnancy. It seemed less hard to have an abortion than to face months and years of hurdles known and unknown. I just wanted to get some certainty back into my life. Deciding on abortion didn't seem so hard at the time, but I had never before, and have never since, made a decision that has been so troublesome to live with.

Retrospectively none of the problems seem insurmountable but at the time in my confused, hormonal, emotional state, I was unable to see a way through them. I was struggling on a day to day basis and just wanted all the confusion to stop. Abortion falsely promised that. Even the words used e.g. termination, deceptively suggest an ending, a conclusion.

Even the doctor who cautioned careful thought over my decision seemed to consider that it was either abortion or single parenthood. No one raised adoption as an issue. That option seems to be unfashionable, in fact unmentionable. Yet once it was considered to be the solution to the problem of unplanned pregnancy in single women. But publicity about negative effects for both adopted children and relinquishing mothers has driven adoption out of vogue and made abortion the favoured, acceptable option. But there are lots of unpublicized negatives to abortion too, including the major negative of death for the child. I don't deceive myself that the alternatives to abortion would have been easy. It is too late for easy options when you have a crisis pregnancy. But I wish I had at least been supported to feel that the other options were real choices.

Sadly I decided that an abortion would solve all of my problems - both real and imagined. Then I would get back to being me. The pre-pregnant me. Not realising that I could never be that person again. Abortion is sold to women as the great solution. A minor procedure to remove a major problem. But that hasn't been my reality. Abortion just released a maelstrom of new problems for me.

Imagine yourself alone on an out of control roller coaster. You are going up and down, feeling sick and scared. There is a dark tunnel up ahead - but you can't see how long the tunnel lasts or what is at the other end. Just before the tunnel is a station marked ABORTION. What do you do? Do you take your chances through the tunnel or do you jump off at the station? I jumped.

#### What did you feel about having an abortion?

I felt absolutely awful about having an abortion. I had an overwhelming sense of shame. I know it sounds very smug, but this was not somewhere I ever expected to be. I felt as if I was the world's biggest hypocrite. I had always philosophised that abortion was unacceptable unless the baby had a catastrophic congenital abnormality or unless the woman had been raped or was dying or some such scenario. And here I was having an abortion when none of these terrible things applied. (My earlier views had only considered rape by a stranger with violence and threats, not rape as I experienced it then).

Of course my pre-pregnancy views had never taken into account the feelings of fear, terror, panic and total failure that were now swamping me. The following poem was written many years before I became pregnant, but is still fairly representative of my views at the time I found myself in this situation.

*She says she's too young and still has life to see.  
She says she must study for her precious B.Sc.  
She speaks of her family and the shame it would bring.  
She says she can't afford to buy it anything.  
She thinks of her career and of how she had to toil.  
She cries for her ex-lover who left, when he should have been loyal.  
She says it's too bad, but the timing's not right.  
She remembers her jaunts to the pub and knows she would have to stay in at night.  
She talks about decisions and a woman's right to choose.  
She thinks she has nothing to gain but everything to lose.  
She talks of all these things but never mentions me!  
She ignores all the things I'll never do or see.  
Who is she?  
The cat's mother?  
No! The mother of me - the baby who may never be.*

#### Did you have any second thoughts or change your mind at any time?

I had 2nd, 3rd, 4th ..... 100th thoughts. Many many times I imagined what it would be like if I continued with the pregnancy, had the baby and raised it. I just couldn't visualise myself having the strength of character to do it on my own.

Then I would fantasise about my ex-boyfriend James offering his support. Not offering to be my boyfriend but offering to be a father to our child - an involved father. This fantasy relied on his actions and they weren't forthcoming. They weren't volunteered and I felt unable to ask for them.

So I hurtled towards abortion with my mind and body in turmoil, hoping that when it was all over I would wake up and discover that the whole thing had just been a bad dream. Even on the day of the abortion I was still hoping that somehow another escape route would materialise.

My hopes soared briefly when James was late collecting me. Perhaps he had changed his mind? But there was to be no reprieve.

How do you feel you were treated before and during the operation by the clinic staff i.e. counsellors, nurses, doctors?

At the time I felt as if I was treated in a kind and nonjudgmental fashion. Retrospectively I think I was judged and that their conclusion was that I was a woman whose best option was to have an abortion; a woman who lacked whatever it takes to go through with a pregnancy, and have the baby adopted, or to become a single parent. So they gave me no information about these options.

I didn't realise it at the time but I now recognise that they deprived me of the information and support I needed to make a true choice. I knew theoretically that there were alternatives to abortion, but the facts about them were withheld from me, thus negating the concept of informed consent. My decision may ultimately have been the same, but it would have been made with a greater awareness.

On the day of the abortion the staff were quite matter of fact. They did what they had to do efficiently and seemed kind without being sentimental. This suited me fine. I just wanted to get it over and done with and get out of the clinic as quickly as possible.

What type of anaesthetic did you have and what was it like for you?

I had a short acting anaesthetic/sedation agent. I remember climbing up onto the operating table, positioning myself and feeling exposed and vulnerable. I had an injection in the back of my hand and it acted very quickly. The next thing I remember was waking up crying on a trolley, being sat up and told to get dressed.

The anaesthetic was very easy for me. I recovered quickly, had no vomiting, and any nausea I attributed to pregnancy rather than the anaesthetic.

The ease of it has been a source of guilt at times since. I have wished that I'd had a local anaesthetic (this wasn't offered to me) and been awake to witness the full horror of my crime; witness every sight and sound, instead of doing it all by proxy. Even though I don't consciously remember any of it, I do wonder if the subconscious may have registered the trauma.

Were there any medical complications? How did you feel about them? What was their outcome? How do you feel about it?

There were no medical complications and even the expected side effects were mild. I had hardly any pain or cramping and only mild to moderate bleeding. Physically it was disgustingly easy. This felt wrong somehow. I thought that my body should have objected more fiercely to the forceful removal of its protégé. I had killed my baby, so surely I should have suffered more, had more physical punishment?

How did you feel shortly after abortion?

In the days and weeks following the abortion I had extremes of feelings that at times seemed contradictory. The anticipated sense of relief that I was no longer pregnant and the hope that things could now return to normal never happened for me.

Instead I felt terribly empty inside and had a sense of horror at what I had done. I couldn't quite believe it, nothing seemed real.

I felt empty, my breasts were returning to normal, I was bleeding and yet somehow I was also fantasising that I was still pregnant. Hoping I was still pregnant. I remember thinking that if my baby really wanted to live, really wanted me as its mother, then it would have escaped the suction device and might still be there. I mean my baby would have been really clever and it wouldn't be so hard to hide in my womb if it wanted to ..... right??? And if God's plan was really for me to have this baby then he would have helped it wouldn't he?

While I was thinking this some of the time, at other times I was filled with anguish and despair. In private I would cry and cry with body racking sobs. I would cry for the baby and for myself. I felt like an injured animal that just wants to curl up and lick its wounds.

I felt incredibly fragile, as if I would break if anyone said "boo" to me. I felt cut off from everyone, as I was so preoccupied with my tormenting thoughts. I shared a house with 2 others (including the owner) and life on the home front was far from calm. I was tense, secretive and anti-social. I spent a lot of time in my room crying. To them it must have appeared that I was totally over-reacting to the end of what had been a short relationship. I can't have been easy to live with, and there was a lot of friction between us. Tensions eventually culminated in a huge row and I was fearful that I would be made homeless on top of everything else. The only inhabitant of the house who I didn't fall out with was the dog! She continued to love me unconditionally even when I was at my ugliest emotionally. Her licks and bounding welcomes were the only thing that gave me anything remotely resembling pleasure in those days. (By some miracle I am fortunate enough to still be able to value my friendship with one of those housemates, which we have been able to maintain even though we now live in separate states).

While I was preoccupied with my confused thoughts and with struggling to maintain an outward façade of control and normality, I simply didn't think about eating. I had no spare energy to expend on it. I didn't even notice until about 10 days passed, when hunger pangs broke through. Somehow I concluded that hunger must be an emotional desire rather than a physical necessity. A weak emotional indulgence.

I was so scared of giving my emotions a free rein in case they overwhelmed me. So hunger became another emotion to be suppressed. With it came a sense of detached curiosity as to how long my body would function on minimal food before it packed in. I also felt a sense of power that I had discovered this secret about hunger that other people didn't know. There was the unintentional bonus that as I became thinner I would also become more desirable to my ex-boyfriend who'd said he liked scrawny women. This anorexic episode lasted about a month and I lost 11/2 stone (9kgs) before my appetite reasserted its control. However it set the scene for a troubled, warped relationship with food that was to haunt me for another few years.

I was also sleeping poorly. I was having disturbing dreams and would wake up crying with my heart pounding. Once I awoke to the sound of plaintive wailing - and realised it was coming from my mouth.

*Oh my little one  
You used to live in my dreams  
With fond thoughts of the day  
You would exist  
Not just in my imagination  
But in reality.  
And then the day arrived  
When the dreams became a nightmare  
And the terrors of the dark had to be slain.  
Oh my little one.  
Now you are back inhabiting my dreams.  
But the dreams seem empty  
Like my empty womb  
Empty arms,  
Empty heart.  
This time I think the terrors of the dark  
Will slay me.*

There seemed no escape, no prospect of relief. My grief was so pervasive. My whole life felt like it was disintegrating around me. I felt like I was losing my mind and going mad. Yet insanity would have been a welcome release from the hell I was living.

How did you feel a couple of months after abortion?

A few weeks after the abortion I started to feel better for awhile. I still felt fragile but I also had some optimism that things would get better.

I started exercising - usually swimming and walking - and usually in the morning when I was unable to sleep. I became a bit fanatical about it and was probably a bit high from the resulting natural endorphins. I was denying negative feelings and was diverting my thoughts by keeping maniacally busy - mainly around the house, in the vain hope that James would phone. But he didn't and this distressed me.

I hadn't spoken to him since the day after the abortion and I was bewildered by this. How could he be continuing with his life without a thought for me or the baby we had killed? How could he be so intimate with me one week, then appear to have no concern, even as a friend, the next week? I longed to see him, hear him, touch him. I don't think it was actually him that I wanted, but more the link he provided to the baby. For a long time it was confusing to me which feelings to ascribe to the abortion and which resulted from the loss of my boyfriend. The two events were so inextricably connected in my mind. When I thought of one, I automatically thought of the other too.

By about 9 weeks after the abortion I was feeling awful again. Probably worse than immediately after it because it no longer felt like a normal process that I would emerge from. Everyday was an internal battle and I was sure that I was going to be carted off to the asylum. It was very much a case of one day at a time. I found it impossible to look into the future and envisage feeling better.

None of my feelings made sense to me and I didn't have the trust to share them with anyone else to get a second opinion.

If I had made the right decision with the abortion then it wasn't rational to feel so unhappy ... and if I had made the wrong decision then it was my own stupid fault and I had no right to expect anyone else to understand or be empathic. Anyway how could someone else understand when I wasn't able to myself?

The intensity of my misery waxed and waned as time went on but I was unable to find a place of acceptance or peace. I was tired and lethargic, was disinterested in everything and had no enthusiasm for life. My depression became all consuming. I was irritated with myself and irritable with other people. I would listen to friends and workmates telling of how their car had been scratched or their washing machine flooded, and I would think SO WHAT! I wanted to scream at them that none of that mattered. I wanted to scream that my baby was dead and that I had killed it. Inside I was screaming and angstridden, yet outside I was composed and mask-like. In public anyway. In private I would sob with anguish. Where, oh where were all these tears coming from? I must have cried a lifetime's ration in a few weeks.

I was troubled by the presence of babies in the street or at the supermarket or in social settings. I hated the screaming, squirming, messy bundles that babies were. As if I was trying to convince myself that I wasn't missing anything of value. As if invalidating my feelings of sorrow would make them vanish.

I didn't feel able to share my feelings or confide my distress with anyone. Friends would surely abandon me or ridicule me and professionals would certify me. Not given any other avenues of expression, my thoughts and feelings continued to keep me awake at night. When I did sleep I would toss and turn with vivid dreams....

## **NIGHT BATTLES**

*Smothering, engulfing, all embracing misery, when will you go?  
You are an unwelcome companion - not a friend, but a foe.  
The battle lines are drawn and I'm ready to fight.  
Get out of my life and let me sleep at night.*

*Joyful, chuckling, bubbly happiness, when will you come?  
Please be my guest and accompany me some.  
The battle lines are drawn and I'm trying to fight.  
Come into my life and let me sleep at night.*

About 3 months after the abortion I did visit a couple of doctors. I purposefully selected medical centres, which advertised the presence of a psychologist. I complained of not feeling well, tiredness, tearfulness, not sleeping and loss of appetite since the abortion. I knew that there was a psychological cause for this but was unable to verbalise this for fear of being pronounced mad. Yet I wanted them to realise and to help me. However after physical examinations and blood tests failed to find a cause, I was dismissed and told that nothing was wrong.

Yet I knew that something most certainly was wrong. I had started to think that suicide was the only way to stop this incessant hurt. The only way to exert some control over my situation.

I knew this wasn't normal and definitely not just because I'd had an abortion. I mean abortion is a minor thing, isn't it? Not something to kill yourself over.

In the past I'd had occasional fleeting moments of "I wish I was dead" or "I should just kill myself". But they were never serious. They were flippant, transient and jocular by comparison to what I was now thinking. These were much more intense thoughts and were accompanied by a feeling of conviction that this was the answer. Yet the thoughts scared me and didn't sit comfortably.

By 4-5 months post abortion I was still struggling with my thoughts and feelings and my symptoms continued. However I was feeling less and less tolerant of them. I decided to avail myself of the offer in the post operative instruction booklet I had been given at the abortion clinic. This stated "following the operation you may get emotional, teary or feel a sense of sadness. If this feeling continues you may need to talk to us." I was feeling all of these along with a gamut of other emotions.

I made and attended an appointment (not with the doctor who'd actually performed the abortion) at the clinic. While I was in the waiting room, an incident occurred which should have set alarm bells ringing for me. Another woman came out of the consulting room and left looking upset. Then the doctor came out and discussed with the receptionist, within my earshot, that this woman was 13 weeks pregnant and had requested an abortion. The doctor was indignant and said, "God, 13 weeks. She's got a cheek to come here". I remember feeling angry at the blatant breach of confidentiality and sad for the woman that she had been subjected to such a lack of compassion. This episode should have alerted me to the fact that I wasn't likely to get a sympathetic hearing ... but it didn't! I had psyched myself up to reveal my pain and don't think I could have contained it even if I had tried to. And so I had my consultation with that "toxic" doctor.

I got into the room with her, started to cry, said how depressed I felt and pleaded, "When is this going to feel better?" Her response was to tell me that it may never feel better and that I had made my bed so would just have to lie in it. She said I couldn't expect to feel better when there were pregnant women and babies everywhere to remind me of what I had done. She told me that "life sucks" and proceeded to tell me about her own problems with infertility and her difficulty getting pregnant. She implied that I deserved to feel rotten for having an abortion and told me I should be glad to be upset because it meant I wasn't a hard bitch like some of "them".

Well, I wasn't glad to be upset. There is no gladness to be found in a state of depression. I was well aware that I had made my choice but I was having great difficulty living with it. Yet hers was the response I received at a centre supposedly familiar with the problem of post abortion depression. I knew I had done a terrible thing without her reinforcing it. Yet she was right. Of course I deserved to suffer for my crime. How could I have thought differently? My already considerable guilt and shame were increased by her attitude. To be told that I may never feel better didn't exactly raise my hopes for the future.

I don't think she tried to make that consultation therapeutic for me. It may have made her feel better to vent her anger, but that wasn't the aim. On a personal level I can empathise with her feelings towards a woman who had terminated a pregnancy when she was having trouble conceiving.

However this was a professional situation. She was choosing to work at a clinic that did abortions and her own feelings should not have come before my well being. She made no attempt to adequately assess my depression or to arrange appropriate follow-up care for me. Inadvertently she did help. My anger was now partially directed at her instead of me being its sole scapegoat (not that I realised then that I was angry with myself). This diversion gave me some release and allowed my suicidal thoughts to fade away for awhile, though I remained depressed.

Even after all this time and with the recognition that she was probably ill herself, I still feel anger towards that doctor. Her response to my confession made me very reluctant to seek help elsewhere and this delayed my treatment for over a year - a long tortured year.

#### How did you feel around 12 months after the abortion?

The days of feeling sad and confused spread into weeks, the weeks into months and then a whole year had passed. It all felt very fresh to me even though 12 months had elapsed. My pain and grief still felt so tangible. I was acutely aware that time - that supposed healer - was passing. Yet I was far from healed. I still felt such a profound sense of loss. I felt swamped by my feelings of depression and desperation, but think I had stopped fighting them as much. I accepted with acquiescence that this was where and how I deserved to be. Thoughts about the abortion and the baby were still occupying a lot of my time and using a lot of my energy. If I realised that I had missed thinking about it for a day or two then I felt guilty for forgetting. It felt like an omission rather than a positive step forward.

I don't think I experienced a single moment of true happiness or contentment in that year. I did have brief periods of remission when I felt better, but then I would relapse again. I could present the world with a normal outer face. I could laugh and smile and make appropriate responses, but inside me chaos reigned. I felt dislocated from it all. It was as if I was off stage in the wings watching the shell that was my body going through the motions of life.

I had tried to take my mind off it and reinvest in life but was still struggling terribly. I had taken up lessons in a foreign language, met new people and taken a holiday, but was still anguished. I had also taken out Australian citizenship. I am now happy and proud to be an Australian, but my initial motivation was fear. Fear that I would be evicted from this country and thus be forced to abandon my child. I didn't realise then that my "ghost child" can travel the world with me - for she now exists only in my mind.

There were 3 things that happened around the 12-month mark that did help for awhile. The first of these was seeing a billboard in a railway station, which read "Abortion and miscarriage can be a lonely and emotional experience. It is natural to want to talk it through. A skilled and caring listener can help you resolve these feelings". It then gave a phone number for Open Doors Counselling. It was a revelation to realise that there must be other women feeling as I did and that someone had recognized the need to help them. It was a huge relief to know that perhaps I wasn't so abnormal after all. I sat in the station and cried and cried. I didn't phone them for another 6 months. It was enough for awhile just to know that they

were there if I needed them. It was like being thrown a life buoy. I was able to keep treading water for a little while longer with the knowledge that help was near at hand.

The second positive thing was being able, finally, to confide in a friend. I was encumbered by this big dark secret I'd carried for a year. The couple of friends who knew of my abortion never mentioned the subject again. I think they considered it to be over the day I had the surgery. Not that I blamed them. I had expected it to be like that too and was totally unprepared for the aftermath.

It was such a relief to discharge feelings that had been pent up for so long. This friend was a very patient listener and it unburdened me to be able to talk and cry and have someone hear what I was saying. She may not have actually understood but she tried to see things from my perspective and she has been an ongoing source of support since then.

The third helpful thing was a book on abortion borrowed from the library. The source of much of my confusion was there in print. Until then my thinking had been dichotomous. I had only thought of my decision as right or wrong, black or white. This book acknowledged that there could be a greyness about it. It pointed out society's inconsistency in condemning women for having abortions while also failing to support single parents. I finally had an inkling of where some of my feelings of conflict and confusion originated. I felt cleansed by reading that book. I felt at peace and was able to be more gentle and compassionate with myself. I still felt sad about what I had done but I no longer felt the need to continually berate myself. These benefits lasted about 4 months, and then I relapsed and fell in a heap again.

## **MADNESS**

*Spiraling down, down, into the deep pool of my tears.  
Tossing and turning in bed as I do battle with my fears.*

*Stark, stark terror as I assimilate the facts.  
And shame, such shame as I try to deal with the consequences of my acts.*

*Does a murderer ever find peace? Will my confusion ever cease?  
Or will I always spiral down, down into the black welcoming void of madness?*

I was overcome with fresh waves of grief on the day that would have been the baby's first birthday - had I not aborted it. It was a very emotional day for me and I had the need to mark it with a symbolic gesture. I went to a cemetery, which seemed appropriate for remembering the dead. I spent about 3 hours wandering among the graves and crying. I talked to my baby and apologised for what I had done. I spoke to some of the graves and asked their spirits to look after my baby. The headstones with photos were good for this. I could look for a kindly face and imagine them with my child.

When I left there I felt washed out, fragile and sad, but I composed myself sufficiently to meet two friends for lunch as previously arranged. Unfortunately they were late and by the time they arrived I was in tears again - to my embarrassment and anger. I felt pathetic about crying just because someone was late for lunch and was angry at myself for being disloyal to my baby. I had vowed never to let the trivia of life upset me again - compared with the abortion it was unimportant.

I felt panicky about, and helpless to stop myself losing control again. I couldn't stop crying and felt myself becoming embroiled by depression and misery again. I bought and smoked my first cigarette for 3 months and phoned Open Doors Pregnancy Loss Counselling Service for an appointment. I couldn't continue like this any longer.

## **RIP**

*We met, united, joined as one.  
We parted, divided, split in two.  
But you remained - an ever-growing presence.  
An unwanted reminder of things past.  
We had you erased one Thursday morning as the sun shone.  
Now you are dead but never gone.  
Always present, not in my womb, but in my conscience, in my mind, in my heart.  
Rest in peace my precious one - for I never will.*

How has the abortion affected your relationships with your partner, children, parents or others?

The experience of abortion has stayed with me and had an influence on most of my relationships. Some of the effects have been positive, some negative, but few of my interactions have been left untouched.

I haven't had a really serious partner or boyfriend since the abortion. Initially it was a conscious decision to avoid romantic involvement because I felt so fragile and didn't want to risk further hurt. At first it was a protective mechanism, but later I recognized that what once protected was now causing me harm. The breakup with James and his behaviour before and after the abortion hurt me a lot. Even now, after several years, I fear feeling that pain again and am quite cynical when relating to men. Unfortunately some subsequent encounters with men have reinforced rather than dispelled this. It is hard to trust men and hard to trust my own judgement. Yet trust is vital in a meaningful relationship. The abortion probably wasn't the only cause of my relationship problems with men but certainly exacerbated pre-existing problems.

## **BACK IN THE CAGE**

*It took time - not much - but time, to accept my worth and slowly lower the barriers to let you in.*

*The pleasure once you were there in me. The joy of the simple things.  
The dimple in your chin, the sparkle of your eyes, the warmth of your touch.*

*I felt like the cat that got the cream ... but cream is fattening and so were you!*

*And when you saw my swelling breasts and my rounding stomach, the sparkle left your eyes and the cold crept into your touch.  
At first I hoped and then I prayed that you would see the error of your ways.  
But now I accept that you won't.*

*It took time - not much - but time, to denounce my value and put the barriers back up.  
This time they are impenetrable.*

My abortion and the aftermath have played such a big part in forming the person that I am today, that I would have to share that with a future partner. The one boyfriend that I have shared it with was dismissive of its importance and then refused to discuss it further because he said he could see that it was upsetting me. But his refusal to talk about it and its significance for me upset me more. I felt misunderstood. I'm not sure if this was due to his inability to listen or my inability to express it correctly.

The other problems with my partners are my refusal to be fully sexually intimate. I can't and won't risk putting either myself or a potential child into a situation where history could repeat itself. The consequences are too great to be gambled on. Yet it is hard to explain and reassure that this neither means I am unattracted to them nor that I am frigid. I miss the pleasure that full intimacy can bring, but the stakes are too high. I want any future pregnancy to be planned within a committed relationship. But I am now at an age where it is more likely that I won't have another chance at motherhood.

With regards to relationships with children, I don't have any of my own. The aborted pregnancy was my one and only. For months after the abortion I was disturbed by the sight and sounds of babies and couldn't bear to be near them. I was repulsed by them. As if I was trying to convince myself that I hadn't given up anything that was worth having. Gradually this changed until I would look at other people's children with longing and would feel jealous that others had their children while I had killed mine. It wasn't that I wanted their children to also be dead. More that I just wanted mine back. But she is irretrievable.

Now I am able to enjoy other people's children and the contribution I can make towards their happiness. I may not have been a good mother but I can be a good friend, a good Auntie or pseudo Auntie. All of society has an influence on and a responsibility towards children's physical, emotional and social health. When I was pregnant I found it too big a load to carry alone and needed help which I didn't get. So now I try to help others even if it is only in a tiny way.

My relationship with my parents was also rocked by my abortion. I felt guilty that not only had I killed my baby but had also deprived them of a grandchild - even though they didn't know it.

In therapy I came to recognise that my parents' influences had helped to make me the person I was when I had the abortion. I hated that person and for a long time was sad about the effect my parents had had in the past forming that person. For a long time I tortured myself with thoughts of their reaction if they knew I'd had an abortion. I was so scared that they would express disappointment in me and would reject me. Eventually I realised that they, and others, could never judge me as harshly as I judged myself in reality or as harshly as I let them judge me in my imagination.

It took me 4 years to find the courage to tell my mum. It was one of the biggest and hardest steps I have taken in this journey and it helped me a lot to receive her support and understanding. I never told dad and when he died it was emotional to think of him meeting the grandchild he didn't know about.

Friendships were also affected after the abortion. A couple of friends became closer after I shared my experience with them.

They were able to accept me and my pain and have been an ongoing source of support to me. Having these people as good friends has been a positive outcome from the abortion.

Other friends became more distant when they weren't able or didn't want to accept the lasting effects that abortion had for me. Even casual encounters with acquaintances were affected for a long time. I used to feel that I was presenting a façade to the world. I felt that I should have had "child killer" branded on my forehead (not literally) and felt that I was lying by omission if they didn't know this about me. Praise and compliments were very hard to accept. I felt so unworthy of them and used to have the urge to scream at people that they had been deceived and that they shouldn't think nice things about me. All my interactions felt like a sham. I didn't think everyone had to know about my past, but the past travelled with me everyday for a long time. It still travels with me but its effects are less pervasive now. The abortion affected my relationship with myself more than any other - but that had a domino effect.

How has the abortion affected the way you feel about yourself?

It had a major impact on how I felt about myself. It badly affected my self-esteem. Afterwards I had expected to be me again. The pre-pregnant me. I didn't realise that person was gone forever. But if I wasn't me, then who the hell was I? I had to look at myself long and hard and try to salvage an identity.

For a long time I was filled with self-loathing. I hated the person who had killed my baby. I hated the weak person who had allowed herself to be swayed by others. I hated the person who, having made the decision to abort, was now feeling sad, angry, depressed, anxious and confused instead of just getting on with life. I hated that person; but that person was me. So I hated me. I hated me with a vengeance.

I had to reevaluate myself and my life -- and I found them wanting. I had to dissect every aspect of myself and put it under a microscope. Then I had to try and rebuild something, someone from what was left. Largely I have done that, but I miss a certain innocence and carefreeness which were no longer there for retrieval and which can't be recreated.

I still have trouble trusting myself and my decision making abilities. I let down my child and myself, yet at the time I thought I was doing the best thing. So it is hard to be confident in my judgements and I tend to procrastinate about personal decisions much more than I used to. I fear things will blow up in my face again. A degree of awareness is probably a good thing, but too much leaves me paralysed and unable to act.

For many months the predominant feelings towards myself were of despising and hatred. I felt that I deserved to be punished. Punished not only for the abortion but also for other perceived sins from my past, which came flooding back to both haunt me and increase my guilt.

Now I am much more gentle towards myself and can feel compassion towards the scared, confused person that I was at the time of my abortion. Occasionally the "hate thoughts" and "hate actions" return, but I now recognize them much quicker and can head them off at the pass.

### Have you had any health problems since abortion?

I've had no physical health problems related to the abortion - though for several months afterwards I did think something was physically wrong. I hadn't expected to grieve for the baby and anyway could never have imagined that grief could have such a profound effect on me, mentally and physically. I felt so run down and exhausted.

Part of me recognised that what I was experiencing had a psychological cause ... but another part of me hoped it had a physical cause. A psychological problem wasn't very acceptable to me or to some of the doctors I saw.

Though I could date my symptoms back to the abortion and even when examinations and tests failed to find a physical cause, still doctors didn't direct their attention towards my psychological state. They seemed to have trouble accepting what a powerful influence the psyche can exert not only on the mind but on the body too. I understand that they don't wish to overlook a physical condition and I wouldn't want them to. But I am concerned by their tunnel vision and disbelief. It angers me that psychological problems are dismissed as if they are somehow less important than physical problems. To the person experiencing them they are just as important and equally disabling.

### Have you had any psychological problems since the abortion?

Yes I have. Lots of them! Where do I begin? I suppose at the beginning with grief. I don't know whether it is correct to call grief a psychological problem when it is a natural reaction to loss. The thing is that I didn't expect to have a grief reaction. I had no anticipation or forewarning that I would feel that way. I didn't recognise that I had suffered a loss so couldn't understand from where all these feelings were flooding in. I was consumed by the need to keep my dark secret, so I didn't talk to anyone about how I was feeling and I didn't acknowledge my emotions. The more I tried to ignore and suppress them, the more tortured I became until I was totally bogged down and stuck in my grieving.

As I wasn't able to verbalise my feelings, they sought other avenues of expression such as vivid, disturbing dreams. This led to other problems. I was scared and threatened by the way my defenses were unintentionally lowered in sleep. I frequently woke up crying or talking or with a scream. Because of this I was afraid to sleep away from home, scared to sleep in anyone's presence. This increased my isolation because I would decline invitations to go away for a weekend or to stay overnight at friend's houses.

I have also had psychological problems in my attitude to food. I don't entirely understand the aetiology of this but it was only a problem after my abortion. Thankfully it has now largely resolved. Food became a source of comfort but also sometimes a means of punishment. It never actually felt like this at the time, only in retrospect. When I was depressed and denying or suppressing emotional needs, I also denied hunger needs. If, as usually happened, the physical need for sustenance overrode my emotional denials, then I despised myself for being so weak and eating. I then felt compelled to make myself vomit. Forced vomiting by sticking my fingers down my throat also reinforced my self-revulsion. It was an efficient way to demonstrate to myself that I really was a disgusting person. It confirmed to me that the feelings that I had about myself because of being depressed were indeed accurate feelings.

Intellectually I knew that this was a stupid and damaging action, but I felt driven to do it anyway. This conduct was not a constant feature of my depression. It was episodic and I could go weeks without experiencing the urge to behave in this way. It was just one of the many ways my psychological turmoil manifested itself.

When I first came to Open Doors, I just wanted someone to stop the incessant pain I was feeling. Someone to somehow ease the guilt that seemed to be indelibly seared to my soul. I had a notion that there would be a formula to follow. That if I did A, B and C then I would feel better. I had a sense of urgency and wanted to rush through this process and emerge "well" at the other end. If I had to do this journey, then I wanted to do it with a first class express ticket. I would never have envisaged that it was possible to start feeling even worse than I already did. This was beyond my comprehension but it became my reality.

I ended up having a total of 3 1/2 years of various therapy and eventually when it became apparent that therapy alone wasn't doing the job for me, I also had a long course of anti-depressant medication. That combination allowed me to finally turn the corner.

The experience of depression is very hard to describe, even retrospectively. No words can recreate or do justice to the sensation felt at the time. Sometimes its monotony is unrelenting. Other times its nature changes like a chameleon but each facet is as unpleasant as its predecessor. I had never understood the literalness of the saying "weight of the world on their shoulders" until my depression lifted and it really felt as if a heavy press had been removed from my head and shoulders. I hadn't realised it had been there until it was gone.

Initially in therapy I was encouraged to explore and express my reactions. However the days, weeks and months spread into each other and I became even more despondent about and confined by my prolonged grief. I was so tired of grappling with my conflicting emotions. My therapist tried to provide a safe haven where I could unburden myself, but I just felt like I was being sucked into quicksand and suffocated. I despaired of ever having any sort of catharsis or resolution. I failed to find any logical, acceptable reason for my depression in my life events or external environment, so I turned my thoughts inward to seek a cause.

I was so angry at myself for having the abortion and causing myself so much pain. I was also angry at other people but didn't realise it and couldn't express it. I had an abortion because I thought having a child would be too hard and would ruin my life. Yet paradoxically, because I had killed my child, how could I ever hope or deserve to feel better? How could anyone understand or help me to resolve such a conundrum? Being told I was grieving was no help. I didn't feel entitled to grieve. This was something I had chosen after all. Even though I now had someone to talk to, I still felt very alone and unworthy of help.

I didn't want to be alone. I wanted to be with my child. I missed and ached for her. My arms and my heart felt so empty. The world presented a desolate landscape without her in it. I felt possessive towards my child and towards my thoughts. When asked by my therapist to share my thoughts and to let my child go, I was filled with panic. As if sharing would somehow leave less for me. This misery was awful, but it was all I had left of my child. If I relinquished my misery then I risked being left with nothing.

*They asked me to say goodbye to you.  
But how can I say goodbye when I have never even said hello?  
I have never even held you, never cuddled you, never watched you  
grow.*

*I have loved you though my darling.  
Loved you so deeply.  
I parted from you once and it hurt so much.  
I can't let you go again.*

*And that is why I won't say goodbye.  
Can't say goodbye.  
Because I am longing for the day when we meet again - and say  
hello.*

I was still filled with anguish. It was like a physical pain and mental torture that went on and on and on. I felt such a failure for being depressed. Felt unacceptable to myself and to others. At times I felt like a brittle shell; numb and dead inside. My brain felt as if it was filled with smog or wrapped in cotton wool. Everything was flat and fuzzy and out of focus. I was unable to connect with anything. I withdrew even further and became more introverted, irritable and intolerant. I couldn't respond to anyone's concern for me and became increasingly constricted by my negative thoughts and sense of shame. Alone I would cry and rock. I just wanted to curl up in a ball and die.

I continued on my progressive decline and was totally unable to visualise a bearable future. I couldn't imagine any solution to all this — until the night when thoughts of suicide returned. It is hard to explain, but this wasn't something I actually thought of. This idea seemed to come from somewhere outside and lodge in my brain. What a welcome thought it was though. It was like a religious experience. Although its presence surprised me, it also uplifted me. It wasn't merely the thought of suicide and death. It was the method, which came to me in a very specific manner. To splatter myself on the front of a train seemed perfect. I had splattered and dismembered my child, so now I would splatter and dismember myself. Die. Then be reunited with my child and tell her how sorry I was and try to atone and make amends.

For the first time in months I had hope. I had the trump card; the power and means to end my pain. It should have been the perfect plan. An eye for an eye and all that. Except that I was too slow in carrying it out. The nature of suicidal ideation is that it doesn't last forever and I was too much of a perfectionist.

I studied the train timetable looking for express trains that wouldn't slow down at the station. I spent hours on the station platform trying to work out where to jump from and the timing of my jump. Trying to guarantee the perfect execution of my plan. Trying to ensure maximum impact for me and minimal impact for the train driver. I spent so much time doing this that my suicidal urges receded. The thoughts stayed for a long time though. Death continued to beckon invitingly. It continued to tempt and tantalise me. But whereas before I had been fearless about killing myself, later I felt scared about jumping in front of a train.

*What is progress?  
Is it healing .... to move from one dark, dark place to another just  
as loathsome?*

*Is this it?  
To exist ... somewhere that brings no comfort, no joy, no peace.  
Just more torment.*

*Is the answer to be found ... only in the thought of cessation under  
the wheels of a non-stop express?*

It was ironic really. I felt so guilty for robbing my child of life. Yet life didn't feel like something to be valued. Not my life anyway.

Even when my strong suicidal urges faded, I continued to berate myself. I still had a compelling need to punish myself - to punish the woman who had killed my child. So much inner tension and conflict remained. Hurting myself helped to reduce this. I would sit and hit myself with a hammer or bang myself violently against the corner of a wall until I was covered with bruises on my arms, legs, pelvis and ribs. I then gained comfort by looking at those bruises and feeling that something was being done to avenge my child's death - that the person responsible was being punished. It was a way to exert some control. It made sense at the time but I suppose it was a psychological problem. I know it is not normal behavior.

I have also had psychological problems with touch. Not only with intimate sexual touch, but with everyday touch. At times I felt so touch deprived that I was sure I would shrivel up if I didn't get a cuddle or feel someone's skin next to mine. Contrarily there were also times when I felt so filled with evil that I was afraid I would contaminate others if they got too close. I would feel panic if someone sat next to me on the tram or stood close in the supermarket queue. Even doctor's examinations were traumatic at first following the abortion. They felt invasive and violating. It took about 3 years to psyche myself up to having a Pap smear. I warned the doctor I was anxious and why. Though she was very concerned and gentle, it felt like having the abortion again. I felt panicky and started to shake and cry and my heart was pounding in my chest. I knew intellectually that I wasn't going to be harmed, but my feelings told me otherwise.

The only touch I wanted was that of my child. I longed to hold and kiss my child; to tell of my love and my sorrow for what I had done.

I remember being encouraged by my therapist to attend a Pregnancy Loss Memorial Service. It was portrayed to me as something that would be beneficial and healing and I was persuaded by this beacon of hope. However it proved to be detrimental to me. It just wasn't the right time, was too soon to be helpful. I wasn't ready to say goodbye to my child. I certainly wasn't ready to write a name on a card with a message that even one other person may read. I hadn't even committed to my baby's gender in my mind, so how could I give it a name? But how could I not give it a name? Here were other bereaved mothers doing this; walking to the front of the church with their cards. I couldn't even manage to do this for my child. I felt like the worst kind of mother.

Months later I was able to read the order of service and gain comfort from the readings and prayers. But at the time the only thing that connected with me was the Lord's prayer. Our father who art in heaven... forgive us our trespasses..... I started sobbing uncontrollably. I was so in need of forgiveness but felt so undeserving of it. My guilt and distress escalated.

Four days after this service would have been the baby's 2nd birthday and my fragile coping mechanisms deserted me. The day following this I was finally referred for medical help and prescribed medication. This wasn't a magic wand but it gave me enough relief to enable me to respond successfully to therapy.

It may have been two steps forward, one step back, but the corner, tentatively, began to be turned.

My psychological problems began to slowly lessen and over time, with lots of help, have largely resolved. Occasionally they flare up again at times when other life events are testing me. I think all these psychological problems arose for me because I was so burdened by my dark secret and by my inability to share it. Abortion is such a private loss and there is nothing tangible to grieve for. There are no mementos, no photos, no memories to share, no grave to visit or take flowers to, nothing recognisable to anyone else. It all takes place in your imagination.

For the first couple of years after my abortion it was possible to think of "the baby". But when that baby became a toddler and then a young child in my mind, it was no longer possible to imagine it in gender nonspecific terms. This was another source of distress and conflict for me. I thought it would be letting my child down again if I thought of it as a boy and it was actually a girl - or vice versa. For a long time I was in a quandary about this and strenuously resisted committing one way or another in my mind. Eventually I listened to my inner most feelings about it and allowed myself to grieve specifically for my daughter. I believe that my sixth sense, my intuition (mother's intuition?) was telling me the truth and I believe this was later confirmed for me.

This was when another life event was distressing me and was closely followed by the anniversary of the abortion. As usual on this day, I visited a cemetery. Prior to this I had been very well for a couple of years - no therapy, no medication. But I was probably headed back towards depression at this time. I wandered among the graves for a while and then sat on a bench to have a cry and a contemplation. It was then I saw a little girl skipping through the grass. She came to me and said gently, "It's O.K. mum. Let me go". I don't know whether I actually saw her ghost, whether I imagined her or whether I hallucinated. I do believe it was a message of forgiveness from my daughter and that comforts me. Especially at those times when I'm still not sure if I have forgiven myself. Sadly I have not been able to entirely grant her request to let her go.

How do you feel now about the abortion?

I no longer feel depressed about it and thoughts of it no longer fill my days. But I am still sad that I had the abortion. Sad about what it did to my child and to myself. I will never feel good about it and nor would I want to. I will never think of it as a positive decision because it wasn't.

The experience only occupies a small corner of my mind now, but I am still occasionally hit with a pang of guilt or sadness. Guilt if I feel happy - am I betraying my child if I feel happy when she is dead? Guilt if I feel unhappy - didn't she die so that my life would be happier? Guilt if I respond in the negative to the question "have you any children?" Does my "no" answer deny and betray my child again?

I am saddened by the thought that I am probably the only person who grieves the loss of this child. I doubt her father mourns her passing. Others such as pro lifers may grieve for the collective loss of aborted babies; but not specifically for my child and not specifically on the days I consider significant and worthy of remembering. I also feel sadness that I may never have another chance at motherhood. Sadness that I may not be able to fully commit my love to a future child if I am fortunate enough to have one.

I believe my abortion experience has predisposed me to a life long vulnerability and fragility that I would not otherwise have had. I have read theories that women who react as I did following abortion were in some way "defective" prior to their abortions. Perhaps I am in denial, but I don't think this was true for me. And if it was true, would my defects ever have become apparent if I hadn't had an abortion? They certainly hadn't revealed themselves previously.

Even the happiest events of my life are now shadowed by a secret sadness. Nevertheless I wouldn't want to turn back the clock if it meant giving up all the things I have learnt in the years since. That statement severely tests my loyalties. I feel guilt that I wouldn't go back and save my child. But how could I part with the knowledge and selfawareness that have been acquired through so much pain and hard work? I couldn't because then I would again be the person who had the abortion - and I don't want to be that person. The fact is that nothing can bring that child back but she will always have a special place in my heart.

Have you had any other pregnancies or desires to be pregnant after the abortion? How have you coped with them?

I'd had no pregnancies prior to, and have had none since the abortion. I have had desires to be pregnant. Or more accurately, have had desires to be a mother. It is probably what I want more than anything. But I don't want it at any cost. I want that child to be the result of a committed, loving relationship, not the result of a casual encounter. Especially not the result of an intentionally casual encounter. I couldn't just go out and find a "sperm donor". I can't risk recreating history in case I find myself reacting in the same way again.

When, if, I do have children, I want to love them as they are and for whoever they are. I want to enjoy and nurture them. I am afraid that I may still be wanting the child I cannot have - the child I killed. Could any future child live up to my idealised ghost child? And should I risk burdening another child with that responsibility?

Has the experience of abortion and what has happened since then had any positive effects?

I don't think the actual abortion had any positive effects, but yes, certainly there have been positives in the aftermath. It took a very long time for any of these positives to be revealed to me. It has been a very painful journey of discovery. However now that I am aware of them I wouldn't want to relinquish them. Other positives have occurred as a result of a conscious decision to create them as a legacy for my child.

One of the most valuable lessons learnt has been in the art of compassion. This was repeatedly demonstrated to me by my therapist and counsellor at Open Doors and I learned through their example. At first I was very resistant to any non-punishing treatment given to me. Gradually I came to accept it. Now I find I can use that compassion towards others in both my professional and personal life. I realise that I don't need to fully understand someone else's position or circumstances to be able to empathise and to accept wherever they are at. I feel privileged to be able to share someone's pain or confusion. I think this has helped to make me more tolerant and less judgmental. I value this, even though at times I still struggle to treat myself with compassion.

However neither can I join voice with those who blindly celebrate a woman's right to choose without recognizing what a devastating effect that choice may have on a woman's future life.

Another positive effect has been discovering how important communication is. I can now see that I created many of my own problems by my inability to express my needs and share my feelings. Especially the less acceptable ones, the ones that don't fit other's expectations, the ones that may rock the boat. My awareness of the destructiveness of internalizing everything has increased ten fold. I am far from mastering it all, but I continue to learn.

I have also created some positives from my grief. The first few Christmases, being as they are so focused on children, hit me hard. It is a difficult time for many people for a wide variety of reasons - many of them far sadder than mine. I now deal with it by going to one of the department stores and buying a gift to leave under their charity tree. I select with great care and love, something for a little girl the same age as mine would be. Then on Christmas day, instead of getting melancholic, I can think of another little girl hopefully being happy as she opens her present. I have found this ritual helpful and healing for me.

I also recently started sponsoring a little girl in Zambia through a children's charity. I had such a deleterious effect on my own child and feel honoured to perhaps be making a positive contribution towards another child's well being. I didn't get the help I needed to cope and fulfil my own child's needs. So I hope that my sponsorship also helps her parents to know that someone else cares, and that their burden is lightened by sharing the load.

Perhaps the greatest positive can come from telling my story. Having an abortion took me to a dark and tortuous place and left me plummeting alone into an abyss. It was a place I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. Yet ultimately mine is a story of hope. That place showed me a depth of love that I never knew existed and I have used that to claw my way back.

My ghost child lives on in my heart and conscience as a legacy of that love. If my story can increase awareness, change attitudes and give hope and support to other women, then that helps to provide a reason for it all. Perhaps in death my child can have a meaning that I denied her in life?

Anything further you wish to add?

In view of my experience it may seem strange that I am not against abortion per se. I would get up on my soapbox and defend any woman's right to have an abortion if she has been fully informed and still decides on that course of action. I have friends for whom the choice of abortion has worked well. But my soul, my very being, tells me that for me, at that time, abortion wasn't the best thing for me. At another time, in different circumstances, I just don't know.

There have been times when I have wished that abortion had not been available to me as an option, because then I wouldn't have made that terrible choice. However if legal recourse wasn't available then I may have resorted to self induced or illegal abortion - as so many had to in the past. That may have left me with even more problems, or left me dead. Therefore I cannot relate to the strident cacophony of zealots who damn aborting women as if they were the devil incarnate. These are usually the same people who condemn single parents as a blight on society and regard large families as social pariahs and fail to support either.

How can you make a valid choice - and live with it - if you don't have the information and the support? I feel strongly that crisis pregnancy counselling must include information about all options and about both the positive and negative effects of these options. It is of paramount importance that women are given whatever help they need to make a decision that may affect them for the rest of their lives. I don't think doctors and counsellors are maliciously propelling women towards abortion. They are probably deluded, as much of society is, about abortion being a minor thing.

I also think that medical staff, especially those working in the abortion industry, should educate and inform themselves about post abortion depression and should provide treatment for this or have a plan of referral. Ignoring the problem doesn't make it go away - not for the woman suffering it.

#### Postscript

I have had a lot of help and support in my travels along the path to peace and acceptance. I am so grateful for that and don't think I would be here without it.

It is only rarely now that my abortion experience dominates my thoughts. But sometimes still something will happen to trigger a forceful return and increased intensity of my feelings about it all.

I sometimes liken it to a kite on a string. Mostly I am happy to let it soar far away in the sky; let it go almost out of sight as it mingles with the clouds. But at other times I am compelled to reel it in close again; to examine its details and confirm its existence; to make sure that I am not just holding an empty string and that I didn't imagine it all. Perhaps one day I will feel safe enough to release the string from my grip and let the kite and myself be free?

"Catherine"

(Names and other identifying details in this true story are fictitious to protect the author's confidentiality.)

#### OPEN DOORS COUNSELLING

Coping with an abortion can be a lonely experience.

Many women feel very isolated with few people they can talk to.

Because of this OPEN DOORS has established a specialist counselling service for women needing support following an abortion. Skilled and caring listeners can help ease the pain and confusion of hidden or unresolved grief.

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