

1.

1974

“Push Andrea push. It’s coming. We’re nearly there. It’s nearly there, push, push!” It was Nurse Jenny Mahoney’s first night in the labour ward and the excitement in her voice carried all the way down the corridor, reaching as far as the maternity reception desk. Two expectant fathers sat uncomfortably in the adjacent waiting room and looked at each other nervously, as the sound of Nurse Jenny Mahoney’s excited squeals reached them. Inside the labour ward, Doctor Melissa Andrews grinned behind her face-mask, happy that things were going well and that, if nothing else, Nurse Mahoney was providing an amusing distraction, allowing her to concentrate on a successful delivery. Andrea Steedman, the subject of both their concerns was exhausted and her level of enthusiasm was not the same, as she grabbed hold of the oxygen mask for yet another gasp. “I’m pushing, I’m pushing you stupid, stupid woman,” she answered, her voice sharp, her eyes blazing with anxiety, and annoyed beyond comprehension at the perceived harassment.

“Excellent, excellent, we are nearly there,” Jenny said, ignoring what she knew to be the natural expression of apprehension, the natural response of a woman about to give birth.

“You are doing wonderfully. This is so exciting. Aren’t you thrilled? You are almost finished,” Jenny’s enthusiastic voice bellowed out again, aggravating Andrea beyond imagination. “Would someone take this person outside and shoot her?” Andrea cried out in desperation. Jenny burst out laughing. “Oh, you don’t mean that,” she chuckled. Doctor Andrews intervened. “You are doing well Andrea,” Doctor Andrews said, thinking it was time to bring an element of qualified encouragement into the fray. “Another minute or two and it will all be over.” Hearing the Doctor’s voice was a welcome relief for Andrea who had endured three hours of labour pains and was quite ready to die rather than endure another minute. Having also to put up with the overly enthusiastic ravings of a labour ward junior was not helping. Nothing had quite prepared her for what she was now experiencing. No self-help text book she had read over the past few months, quite matched the moment now at hand.

“Okay Andrea, now give it your best push,” Doctor Andrews said in a controlled, authoritative and reassuring tone. “This will be it, I promise.” Gritting her teeth and with one almighty, sustained effort to thrust down all the muscles of the pelvic region, Andrea did as she was asked, and, moments later, to her delight and unbelievable relief, discovered that the Doctor was right.

It was 1974, the International Year of Women and in Australia, Ruth Dobson was appointed Ambassador to Denmark. She was the first woman ever to be appointed Australian ambassador to anywhere. In the same year, Olivia Newton John won two Grammy awards, a Sister of Mercy recorded a vocal version of ‘The Lord’s Prayer,’ which sold more than two million copies. ABC television aired the landmark series ‘Rush’, and six school children and their teacher were kidnapped from their school at Farraday, in Victoria. People

were earning more money, and spending freely, but rising world oil prices, sent inflation soaring into the teens. Unemployment rose sharply and suddenly optimism made way for insecurity. It was a year of great economic instability as a relatively new Labour Government, led by Gough Whitlam, seemed to threaten long standing conservative values. ‘Advance Australia fair’ replaced ‘God Save the Queen’ as the country’s national anthem. The French and Chinese were conducting nuclear tests and Saturday mail deliveries came to an end. And on December 7th, the Queensland State Government under the premiership of Joh Bjelke-Petersen, won a thumping victory at the State elections. Earlier that year, Brisbane experienced the worst floods in eighty-one years, when six hundred millimetres fell, inundating the city. In some areas, in the ensuing floods, homes were swept away, and people drowned. But of all the events around Australia in that year, socially and politically, probably the least noticed, occurred in early December, at Princess Alexandra Hospital, in Brisbane, when a twenty-three year old woman from Melbourne, Andrea Steedman, gave birth to a girl, whom she called Mary Therese.

“It’s a girl, it’s a girl,” Nurse Mahoney blurted out, unable to control her joy. “How wonderful! Isn’t it wonderful?” she went on. Andrea let go the oxygen mask, released her iron grip on Mahoney’s arm, dropped her head back onto the pillow and let out a deep long breath. Finally it was over. She had done it. Journey’s end!

“Well done Andrea,” Doctor Andrews said behind the mask. Suddenly a squeal echoed around the labour room walls, followed by a fully charged cry straight out of the lungs of a one minute old baby girl. Doctor Andrews handed the tiny frame over to Nurse Mahoney who ever so gently placed it into the arms of her mother.

“Isn’t she beautiful,” Mahoney gushed. Five minutes earlier, Andrea would quite happily have had this bubbly junior nurse lined up against a wall and vaporized. But that was five minutes ago. As she took her first look at the miracle that was this tiny bundle in her

arms, all that animosity and anxiety faded away. “We must let your husband know,” Mahoney said without thinking. “Is he outside?” Andrea looked up at Mahoney with a forlorn vacant expression. “There is no husband,” she said. “Oh, I’m sorry, of course, I wasn’t thinking. Is there someone we can call? Your mother or someone?” Andrea looked down again upon her baby daughter, and tears welled up in her eyes. “No, no mother either. Just Louise. Could you tell her? She’s outside in the waiting room.”

Mahoney looked across to Doctor Andrews who looked back and nodded. As Mahoney left the ward, Andrea kissed her baby on the forehead and her thoughts focused on the journey thus far, on where she had come from, to get to this point, and on the immediate future. Unmarried and alone in a strange city, she had achieved what she had set out to do. She had delivered her baby safely into the world without having to reveal her pregnancy to her mother. She had avoided what she perceived to be the shame of having to tell her family, and left open the various options that she had considered during her confinement. Having skilfully engineered herself into this position, she now faced an agonizing choice. She could return to Melbourne and reveal to her family, the real reason she had come here. Or, she could place her daughter up for adoption, and return to the comfort and security of her home in Melbourne, as if nothing had happened.

Andrea was no stranger to the idea of adoption. It was her birth mother’s lustful folly to conceive her in a moment of unguarded passion, with an incredibly good looking and persuasive young man, who backed her up against the garden shed early one Sunday morning in the nineteen fifties. Her mother, she was told, chose to go to term with the resulting pregnancy and acknowledge that the baby was hers rather than succumb to the pressures of an image conscious family intent on disguising the baby’s unwed parentage. But

inevitably, social pressures brought to bear, and her mother gave her up for adoption when Andrea was three months old.

It was Elsie and Arthur Steedman, who chose to adopt her back in 1952. At that time they were parents to seven year old Richard, an intellectually disabled child and to both five-year-old Warwick, and three-year-old Margaret. Richard had become too difficult to care for adequately and had just been placed into institutional care at Elm Tree Cottages. Elsie had been advised by her doctor that it might be wise not to have any more children. Emotionally tortured with the pain of giving Richard up, she turned to adoption. Throughout Andrea's life that gave her cause for great joy. She had been chosen. The fact that her adoptive mother also had a habit of bringing home just about anything that strayed into her path from time to time did not bother her. It was not unusual for Elsie to bring home the odd cat or dog that needed a good meal; even a pet turtle that she later discovered had roamed from its rightful owner.

Andrea therefore had some experience when it came to adoption. Five years after she was adopted, and quite unplanned, Elsie gave birth to baby Robert. Then disaster struck. Robert was just two years old when his father Arthur, decided to go swimming in the river one warm Sunday morning. Arthur was seen by several people that morning as he swam up and down the river parallel to the bank and none noticed anything amiss. The coroner's report stated he drowned after suffering a heart attack. Elsie was suddenly a widow with four children to support. It was a shock that sent a shudder into the heart of each child, but Elsie endured out of sheer necessity making whatever sacrifices were necessary to raise her children.

For Andrea, the guilt of finding herself pregnant and facing the ordeal of telling her adoptive mother, weighed heavily on her mind. She never told the father of her baby daughter that she was pregnant. She knew from the beginning, that she would be on her own. It was

at a point only four months into her pregnancy, and realizing that she was in exactly the same position as her birth mother, that she decided not to reveal her condition to Elsie, or any other member of the Steedman household. Demonstrating admirable inner courage, she decided to absent herself from her family in Melbourne. Confiding in her closest friend and work boss, Terri Carney at Flyworld Travel, a solution to the problem was found. Terri secured for Andrea a transfer offer to Flyworld's Brisbane office, classified as an internal lateral move, and the Brisbane office nominated one of their rising stars to take Andrea's place in Melbourne.

"They have free hospital care in Queensland," Terri told her. "You will be able to have the baby at hardly any cost. What do you think? Are you interested?" It didn't take long for Andrea to decide to accept the offer, and a few days later, when the arrangement was finalized, Andrea broke the news to Elsie.

"It will only be for eight or nine months," Andrea told her adoptive mother. "They are experiencing unprecedented growth up there. They are literally run off their feet up there. They need an experienced person to step in. Our office here is half a person overstaffed anyway, and they'll put on an apprentice to cover me," she fibbed.

"Where will you stay?" Elsie asked.

"The company will subsidize fifty per cent of my accommodation. I might be able to share a flat or something. They will put me up in a motel for two weeks at no charge to begin with." Andrea replied. All of this was true. Terri Carney had called in a few favours, and pulled a few strings to help her friend.

"I'll miss you so much," Elsie said. "Who will help me feed the cats and dogs, and the turtle?" she asked, resigning herself to the inevitable. "You should have returned the turtle years ago. You know where it came from. Serves you right," Andrea said with a chuckle.

The parting was a tearful one as mother and daughter embraced each other. Elsie was sad at losing her daughter albeit temporarily, but

consoled herself somewhat in the belief that this was a good career move for her. Andrea was sad to be leaving her mother and siblings and the only home she knew. But her sadness was compounded by the deception that concealed the real reason for her departure. Nevertheless, with nothing more than a meagre suitcase containing pretty much everything she owned, and a doctor's certificate in hand, Andrea arrived in Brisbane in late July. She took up her position as consultant at Flyworld Travel, found shared accommodation with a fellow employee, also arranged by Terri, established contact with Melissa Andrews, the local family doctor, and settled in for what would ultimately be a life changing experience.

Andrea's flat mate was a woman, thirty years of age. Her name was Louise Whiltshire, single, attractive, and highly motivated, she was a career woman on the move. She owned the flat Andrea shared with her, and Andrea negotiated a fair rent. Up until the time Andrea's baby was due, money was not an issue. Flyworld valued her services and paid accordingly. Louise was friendly, and accommodating in matters associated with the pregnancy. She recommended Doctor Andrews to Andrea. She assisted by driving Andrea to the doctor for most of her monthly appointments and encouraged her to sign up for antenatal classes. As the birth date drew closer, Louise organized a baby shower, ensuring many of the essential items were provided as gifts from her friends. She became a confidant, someone Andrea could talk to with honesty, and share her feelings, and her fears.

But as most people know, little in this world happens as we wish. Andrea's waters broke mid-morning of the day she gave birth. The contractions began in the early evening and Louise was there to help her pack, reassure her, and drive her to the hospital. In every way, Louise was a caring, thoughtful friend, providing all the support Andrea needed. It was a busy night that Sunday night. In the space of just two hours, four babies were born.

When Nurse Mahoney returned with Louise into the labour ward, Andrea looked up and burst into tears. At that precise moment, Louise was the nearest thing to family Andrea could embrace. Louise beamed a smile as broad as the doorway when she looked down upon mother and daughter. “You did it,” Louise said, as she kissed her on the forehead. “Congratulations, you actually did it.”

2.

Andrea spent just four days in hospital before returning with her baby daughter to her flat and the selfless care of Louise Whiltshire. Nothing was too much trouble for Louise. But, as Andrea grappled with the demands and complexities that are an integral part of caring for a new baby, not even the re-assuring presence of Louise could hold back the ever encroaching, physical, psychological, and social dynamics that haunt the mind of those who face the prospect of single parenthood from an unplanned pregnancy.

While breast-feeding her daughter Mary Therese, emotional depression began to intrude upon Andrea’s initial joy, and erratic, uncharacteristic behaviour overtook sound judgment. Andrea thought that motherhood would be a joyful experience, but with a nasty dose of colic, Mary Therese provided Andrea with little joy, little sleep, little opportunity to bond, and a perception of failure as a mother in that first month. In the early days of 1975, as Andrea watched on television the ongoing aftermath of Cyclone Tracy’s devastating