

Tessa. Trauma. Twins. Treatment.

Here is my story. And as it is about me, I see it is also about my babies. They are part of me now.

My grandparents drank too much. I can remember the arguments when they threw things and hit each other. I guess that helps me to understand a little bit about why my mother behaved the way she did but I still find it hard to feel sorry for her. She could have found a way of doing things better. Couldn't she? I don't even know who my real father is as Mum always had a different bloke in the house and she never told me which one was the dad to any of us. Just like in my grandparents' house, there was fighting and hitting and smashing and Mum was off her head with anything she could get her hands on and throw in her mouth. She made me look after the little ones and stop them crying and she would hit me if I couldn't do that. It wasn't fair. Who looked after me?

If they were hungry it was harder to make them shut up. One time I remember there was no food and my smallest sister was screaming and I told mum she had to get some food. She said she didn't have any money. I didn't know what to do. I went to the shops and I stole some bread from the supermarket. I guess that they don't really look to see what an 8 year old has in her school bag. Another time, we ran out of food and when I told Mum, she got mad at me. There was a new man called Joe in the house. He said to my Mum don't worry I've got lots of money and then he whispered something to her. She looked at me and said to him "She's only nine" and he said something I couldn't really hear and then she nodded and looked away. I didn't like the look on her face. He took me into her bedroom and he did things to me which hurt a lot and made me bleed but he didn't seem to care much. He gave me a towel to wipe myself and went out to see my mother. I was crying but he was with her so I didn't think I could go and speak to her. So I just shut up about it and then mum gave me some money and told me to go to the shops and buy something nice to eat. And she said "you've got nothing to complain about, you sook."

I can't really remember but I think it was soon after that that I decided to run away. It was the night that Joe was there and the way he was looking at me was scary. So scary that running out into the night didn't seem like a really brave thing to do until I was out that window and into the park just opposite where we lived. I had been in that park many times but never by myself and certainly not at night. Do you know how frightening a bird flying through the trees can be? I guess I startled it and it came zooming past me. It almost made me think that facing Joe again could have been easier but by then I was nearly across to the main road the other side of the park and so I just ran faster. When I got to that road, I didn't know what to do. A car stopped and a nice lady asked me whether she could help and so I told her I had run away from home. She asked if she could take me back but I started to scream so she got on her phone and called the police. There was a woman policeman and she sat in the back of the police car with me and told me they were going to take me to the children's hospital for a checkup. We had to wait there for hours and I was hungry but they went and got me some food from a machine. It seemed better than being at home.

Then the welfare came and got me. Mum had always said we had to watch out for the welfare as they were interfering busybodies but they seemed quite nice to me. They took me to a house with a family and a girl of my age and at first she played with me. But then she started to get jealous of me when I sat on her dad's lap and she started to say mean things about me. I told the welfare I didn't like it there so they took me to another family and they seemed alright at first too but then the big brothers started to do bad things to me so I ran away from there but this time in the day time. I was getting a bit used to what happened. First the police and then the welfare. Anyhow they took me to a nice house with no kids and that was better for a while but then I got teased at school and began to hurt myself by scratching my legs with a razor blade they had in the bathroom. The grown-ups, Elaine and Bill, didn't notice. I didn't think they cared much about me but I reckon I stayed there the longest. Sometimes they were quite kind to me but when I started to sleep over at boys' places they said I couldn't do that. So I figured out that wasn't the place for me either. I was sixteen, so when I ran away, no one asked me what I was doing out on the streets anymore. I learned how to find a place to sleep without freezing to death. One of the guys I got to know sometimes let me go to his house to wash when his parents were out, and I got to know my way around their bathroom pretty well. They had razor blades too and cutting made me feel better and so did some of the tablets they kept there. His mum had a lot of perfume and makeup and stuff, and I learned how to tissy myself up so I didn't look too bad. A friend of that guy ran a sort of club and asked whether I wanted to work there, serving drinks and chatting to the customers and stuff. I found out that the guys liked me and as long as I didn't expect much, it was Ok working there.

Then this bloke called Otto began to pay me a lot of attention and spend a lot of money on me. He bought me really nice dresses, didn't mind if I pinched his drugs, and kept saying I was beautiful. Made me feel good. When he said he wanted me to go with him to Queensland, I said yes and we shifted up there and he found a house for us. We hadn't been there more than a few months and things turned ugly. He began to pick on me for all sorts of reasons and we had some ding-dong fights. Sometimes he went out after those fights and I found out he had another partner who looked after the kid they had had together before he moved down to Melbourne.

One time, during a fight he began to hit me and I was scared he was going to strangle me, so when he left, so did I. Took some of his money and bought a plane ticket back to Melbourne that night. I thought I got food poisoning from the food on the plane but when the vomiting didn't stop the next few days I went to see a doctor. I was pretty shocked when she told me I was pregnant - I never knew where I was with my periods. And if finding out you're going to have a baby is frightening, imagine what I felt like when she told me that the ultrasound showed I was having TWINS. I think I would have terminated if it was just one, but somehow knowing there were two inside me made me feel rather special, like somehow it was meant to be and even though that arsehole was their dad, I couldn't bring myself to have them scraped out. They all told me that twins sometimes don't survive anyhow and I had always been a risk-taker so I thought I would gamble and see what happened as time went along.

And do you know what happened? Those babies just hung on in there and I got bigger and bigger and began to hate myself and them more and more but by then it was too late to do

anything. A social worker at the hospital found me somewhere to live and got me on Centrelink but life was dead boring and those twins made me feel fat and uncomfortable, kicking me and squashing me and probably fighting with each other already. And omigod, they told me it was two boys. What do I know about looking after boys? Can't look after myself. I did find out that a few people were kind to me because they knew about the babies. Frank from the club where I used to work, the older man there, and Phoebe, who worked there too, they both said that they liked me and wanted to help me and asked what they could do. Said I could stay at either of their places for a while and that they wouldn't mind learning about changing a nappy. Turns out neither of them had ever had kids and were sad they had missed the chance. Funny how you get to know people in a different way when your life changes.

Anyhow nature just moves it along. Out came those boys, little Frankie and Conrad, not at all like one other right from the start. God it was hard. They cried, they threw up, they farted and whinged. I couldn't stand it. Frank and Phoebe helped, but it was still too hard. Who got up at night? Who looked after ME? I was the one that needed help, not them. Frankie – he stared at me and smiled at me and that made me feel guilty. Conrad – he just looked away all the time and that made me feel angry. After all I had done for him.

I told the maternal child health nurse that things were getting on top of me and I didn't think I could make it. I had started to make plans to kill myself. Just wasn't sure yet what I would do with the kids. She got pretty alarmed when I said that and the next day some mental health people came and took me to hospital – said they had worked hard to find me a bed in a mother-baby unit. But that was worse. There were all these other mothers there, and some of them had partners to help them. And some of them even seemed to love their babies and want to be with them. Not me. I just wanted to dump mine or hit them or scream at them. I hated them. They were ruining my life.

I told the social worker in the ward I had decided to adopt them out. They were seven months old. Someone else could look after them and make them into whatever they wanted but I couldn't do it. The social worker thought that was a good idea and said she would start the process and meanwhile I took to my bed. I cried and I cried and I cried. For 24 hours I cried and screamed and hated and wailed and stomped and shouted until I was exhausted and went to sleep. And when I woke up and lay there and began to think about my babies, and them going to someone else, I felt even sadder and more upset and hateful. I thought about my mother and how I had longed for her to treat me nicely and how I would have given anything to have her love me when I was really little. I could see that I just couldn't give my babies away. Having twins was special after all. I must be special too.

I told the staff I had changed my mind and at first they said things like there are a lot of loving homes out there for adopted kids but that just made me more determined to look after them and do whatever I could to be a good mum. I asked the doctor what was wrong with me and she said I had a condition called borderline personality disorder. Weird! Borderline of what? I thought I was quite smart! She said it wasn't about my brains but about my personality and how I had been brought up, with all that abuse and no one to help me control my emotions. I could see she was spot on, that my emotions had always been all over the place and I just sort of let them all hang out all the time. Didn't mind getting

angry at people and just running away when the going got tough. Running away from my babies was different though. Could I stay with them and learn to do things differently?

The doctor told me that there were things I could do but it would be hard. I would have to learn to put myself second. Or third since there were two of them. And I would have to stick to something for the first time in my life, not just run away. I talked it over with Frank and Phoebe and they both kept saying they were in there for the long haul. Conrad, cheeky bugger, he began to smile at me now I was smiling at him a bit more, and he looked me in the eye now and I could see I had no choice.

So I began this program they call Dialectical Behavior therapy, invented by some woman in America. She knows about out-of-control emotions and learning to calm down and not let them take over all the time. Just some of the time now for me. But not in front of the babies, only if they are in their cots. And I was also sent to another group for mothers and babies where they taught us a lot about how to be a parent and I could see why I ran away from home in the first place. My mum was always just on about herself, and her latest bloke and keeping the kids out of her hair. I don't think she EVER really thought about me and what was going on inside me. No wonder it was hard to think about those babies and what was happening for them in their heads. I didn't even know at first that babies of that age could feel and think about things, I thought they were just scheming and out to get at me, not just responding to what I did and didn't do for them. That's the strange thing – the more I think about them and what's going on for them, the more they seem to want to tell me now they are old enough to speak. There is so much I still don't know about how to be a parent. I know I cannot do it like my mum so I try to remember what Elaine and Bill did – at least they tried to be kind. Oh yes, and maybe set some limits.

I think about those first few months with them now and what I didn't do with them and wonder whether I was good-enough. Did it make a difference to them? I wish I knew then what I know now. I know that Conrad must have been scared of me and that's why he didn't look at me. And Frankie – he had to work so HARD to make me love him! I know that I am doing the best I can but I still need lots of support. Twins IS hard! Toddlers are hard!! They run amok at times – they are boys after all. Stop that voice that asks Is it because I didn't love them when they were little? I have to focus on my special ways of calming down – now I just have to think about the things that I have in my special box that I made when I was doing DBT and I feel calmer. And when things get too hard, I ask my friends to take them for a night, sort of like grandparents would be. It makes me feel guilty but I know it's good for the boys to have other people in their lives. I still see a psychologist sometimes and she keeps telling me I AM good-enough! I know I love those boys more than I ever thought possible and they love me. We lie in bed at night and listen to the rain and they snuggle in and hug me close. It's GOT to be good enough! I think about life with my mother, although mostly I just want to push it right out of my mind and often I can't remember stuff. I just don't get it really. Why have kids if that's the best you can do? I know there is a baby inside me which never got cared for and I try not to let my kids see that part of me. I guess sometimes they must. But when I let a bit of that spill out, it just makes me want to work harder with those beautiful boys of mine. So I better go and see how they are getting on now – I know they will run and jump into my arms!

