

KEPT IT SECRET

Keeping a secret for forty years was so very easy for me. I refused to let any part of my personal trauma come within a mile of me, 'forever'. That's the promise I made to myself in the doorway of my room at the psychiatric section of Concord Repatriation Hospital. It was about midmorning, the start of the second week inside this very strange place. It was 1973 and I had just turned eighteen. Hiding this secret was how I survived all these years from my physical and mental nightmare.

The first week was total confusion for me, I think I was just fitting in. The quarters were like the ones back on base at HMAS Nirimba with the exception that nearly every man walking the corridors had a dazed look in their eyes. I had been sent from the Hospital at HMAS Nirimba to another hospital somewhere in Seaforth with WRAN nurses to here. Here being, the Concord Repatriation Hospital. At first I had no idea I was a patient in the psychiatric section of the hospital.

During the first week I felt so alone residing in this place. Continually looking around, wondering why I had been put in here with all these weird old men. Men all wearing dark blue hospital dressing gowns, even I had one. I would turn away from their gaze hoping they didn't know I had tried to commit suicide. I would walk tall and pretend to be strong because I read that the weak will always be preyed on.

Of an evening I would pray that none of these men would touch me, like they did back at the base. Looking out through the old wooden framed window from my room I would think, 'God, why didn't you let me die, I took enough pills didn't I, and now they have put me in here, locked up with more defence men'. I was so bloody scared, I couldn't run, hell I didn't even know what city I was in. All I had with me was my ID, my wallet, bathroom gear and some closes. At this point in time I had lost all faith in mankind and would not trust any of the men in here.

This second week would be comforting for me, I was informed mum and dad were coming to visit me. I felt so relieved, I could tell them what had been happening to me at the base and somehow they could get help and get me out of here and go home. Going home was the better of two evils, but what else could I do.

Today was to be the day. Visiting hours started at one o'clock and my parents would come and get me. Not showing any emotion I carried on as normal. Ha, normal as I could in here.

Breakfast was nearly the same format as on base, line up get your food and all sit together. I would sit watching them eat, it was a strange affair. One guy had a lit cigar in his mouth, a thin one and smoked it while he ate his porridge. A brown stain would run down his chin and onto his pyjamas. What a mess, yet it never seem to bother him. He was quite an old returned serviceman and was in here because of the war. Someone said a bomb had gone off near him, I think it was more than that, his gaze went no where. Even if he was looking at you he wouldn't even see you. He just ate and slept. And the others, well if they started talked to me I would walk away, I couldn't be sure of any of them.

Our morning session on this day was four hours sorting nails into sizes for some hardware store. This was supposed to be therapy for psychiatrics. I think it was just a money raiser for the hospital to buy arts and crafts stuff for other psychiatric sessions we undertook during any given week.

After lunch I waited and watched the visitors come through the main gate. There were hundreds of visitors pouring in, like ants but none coming this way towards the outer northern buildings. These outer buildings, more like huts were along the river at the northern end of the hospital grounds. Known as the Blue Dressing Gown Zone or the Blue Zone.

'Has he ever been on time' I thought, thinking about all the years at home when as kids and we had a function to go to, dad would be late, pissed again at the pub. 'Will I ever get out of here', surely I thought. Then all my emotions began to come forward, I could see them coming towards the Blue zone. It was around quarter to three, at least they are here.

They were a bit stand offish when I approached them for a hug. Thinking this was understandable as they were not sure of what I would be like. Told them I was fine and asked them how they were and were they staying at Marrickville. After some chit chat with mum, dad asked, "What the hell was going on?"

I told him of the sexual abuse at the base and he said, "what do you mean?"

"I've been raped by two men for months on the base and my only way out was to commit suicide" I said.

"Didn't you tell someone?" he bellowed at me and continued, "This is just bullshit you little upstart".

"I told the Medical Officer several times and he just brushed aside like you are now", I explained.

With that he gave me the biggest punch in the face I have ever had. He continued to belt me until two male nurses pulled him off me and escorted both him and mum off the hospital grounds.

After recovering from the hiding I truly believed that the only person who has believed me all along was God. From that day I have never spoken to another soul about what had happen. I didn't even tell the psychiatrist because he would be just another military person in the chain.

Two days after this visit, one of the male nurses who escorted my parents off the grounds gave me some books to read and he said 'I don't believe you belong in here at Concord'. I read those books every day during the many months spent in there. I learnt to stand tall, and look for good in people. The last bit, looking for the good has been so hard but I have managed.

There are instances where people have taken such secrets to the grave, I was one of the unfortunate ones who had the memory rear it ugly head two years ago during a news article on television.

It was my choosing and I had kept it secret not knowing what effect it has had on me and others. Others close to me. For those who believed me and stuck by me, thank you from the bottom of my heart. It's quite difficult for me to say but I love you all dearly.

Kenneth AA