

# Twisted Roots. Standing Tall



*My Journey to Heal, Learn,  
and Rise from the Trauma of  
Childhood Sexual Abuse*

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# Chapter 1



## CRUCIBLE (1946-62)

**F**or many years, I told myself—and anyone who asked—that I had a happy childhood. It was only years later, as an adult, that I finally acquired the courage to look back and see it as it really was. At the beginning, some of it was still blurry, like a watercolor left out in the rain. But with each retelling, more of the pieces fell into place.

I was the firstborn, a beautiful, healthy baby. I was christened Anne, which means “full of grace”.

At the time of my birth, my parents lived in a small, second floor walk-up in Sydney, Australia. When I was about three, we moved to a working class neighborhood on the outskirts of Adelaide. Adelaide is the capital of the province of Southern Australia. It sits on the coast, its land mass jutting out into St. Vincent Gulf. Adelaide was a planned city, laid out in a grid as envisioned by Colonel William Light, the city’s first surveyor-general. The houses in our neighborhood were called “trust homes”, because the state had recently constructed them to provide low-cost rental housing for working people and their families. But these houses weren’t really built for the people who lived in them. They were

constructed primarily to attract industry to the area by advertising a ready pool of available workers.

All the houses in the development were the same. They were small and built in sets of two, with a fence in the back and front separating them from each other. Rows of these houses lined both sides of our street, and right behind our row was yet another identical row. But after that, the regimentation gave way to Nature. Beyond that last block of houses was a farm and pastureland, where cows roamed and wildflowers bloomed in the spring.

At the end of our street were two tennis courts, where in summer I would play endless games of tennis with my best friend, Bronte, who lived across the street. Next to the courts there was a playground with swings. A road curved around and through this area, and farther along it lay another set of State homes. The road, and the string of homes along it, continued on until it met up with the railway line, about 1 km (1000 yards) from our street. Not far in the opposite direction was Albert Station, where I would often walk to catch a train to go to ballet class, and eventually to high school.

Every house had the same layout. The living room and master bedroom were at the front. Along the hallway that ran the length of the house, were two smaller bedrooms and the single bathroom. At the very back was the kitchen. From there, steps led down to the laundry room, which contained a big round copper bin for washing, and a toilet.

This was a time when new ways intermingled with old. We obtained hot water by burning wood in a chip heater, a system that had been around since the 1880s. I remember how excited we were to acquire an icebox, the latest in refrigeration technology. Every week, the iceman came by with his horse and cart to deliver blocks of ice. The iceman was also the “rabbit man”, as he supplied us with meat. We also had a “fish man” because we were Catholic, and had to eat fish on Fridays.

Ours was a working class neighborhood. Bronte’s mother was a bookkeeper, or perhaps an accountant; she made most of the money in the family. The man across the street delivered milk in the mornings, and sometimes we kids would get up early and go with him, just for fun. The next-door neighbor on our left, facing the railway, was the

local butcher. The woman next door on the right was a seamstress. The man of the family one over and across from us worked at Port Adelaide.

There were four of us kids. My younger sister was born 18 months after me. Her name was Rosemary, the rose. A few years later, my brother Damion was born. Ten years after my birth, my youngest sister Dawn came along.

We all went to the Catholic school because my father's adoptive family had raised him Catholic. My mother hadn't been raised Catholic, and that was a big deal. So before they could marry, she had to promise to bring the children up in the Church.

Even as a young child, I sensed the power the Church exerted over our lives. Maybe that's why it felt like such a relief when once every year, the circus came to town -- pitching its tent right across the street from the school. One time, to the delight of us kids, some of the circus animals wandered into the schoolyard. There was even a time, while the new Catholic school was being built, that we all went to class in a circus tent. That was magical! After school was dismissed, we kids would stay to play "Doctors and Nurses", exploring our bodies in the plentiful folds of the tent.

Every day, my sister and brother and I had to walk to and from school, a journey that took 20-30 minutes. It took a toll on our shoes -- after a while, we had to use cardboard to cover the holes in our soles. Twice a day, on our way to and from, we had to navigate a railway crossing. Not only did traffic cross the train tracks there, but it was also a place where eight roads all converged. In addition, there were no fences to separate car traffic from train traffic, so it was actually extremely dangerous. In fact, I believe someone was killed there at one point. But even before, the place frightened me. I used to have nightmares about it. Once in a dream, I saw a big, powerful steam engine tearing down those tracks. It was coming with such force that I remember thinking nothing could stop it. But I was wrong. In my dream, the train screeched to a halt when the engineer saw three little children playing on the tracks. Looking back now, I think that dream was trying to tell me something about the power of innocence.

We were all innocent once. I remember it mainly from photographs.

One is a portrait of my father. It is a picture I continue to look at, seeking clues. In the photo, one can see that he was quite handsome. His hair was very blonde, and he wore it brushed straight back off his brow. I remember that like me, he was not very tall -- maybe 1.78m tall (5'10"). There was a boyish air about him, but he was also very intelligent and particularly good at mathematics. He played chess well, and even taught me how to play. A toolmaker by trade, he worked at a local factory, eventually becoming a troubleshooter there.

My father grew up in Sydney, but never knew his parents. The story is very strange. One day, a woman wandered into a delicatessen and asked to use the phone because she wanted to give her child away. When the deli owner and her daughters heard the story, they agreed to take the boy into their family. And so my father was adopted, at the age of two, by a woman of about 60. He grew up without a stepfather, and at some point, was sent away to a boarding school. Yet of my two parents, he was the more fun loving. In the early days, before things changed, he used to whistle a lot and loved to horse around.

My mother, on the other hand, was more serious. She was a milliner by trade. However, there was not much demand for custom-made hats in Adelaide. Nor, with four kids, did she have much opportunity to work, so she was a stay-at-home mother. But she was a very good dressmaker, and she made all our clothes with the help of our neighbor, a professional seamstress. I remember one time when my parents were invited to a dinner dance, and my mother made herself a beautiful dress to wear. I thought she looked lovely.

Mum also loved gardening and grew all the vegetables for our table. Dad made her a greenhouse where she planted tomatoes and other things. She also had an orchard with many fruit trees. After the harvest, she would put up jars of preserves, and I would help her. Mum was a wonderful cook. She made beautiful meals, like lamb chops and vegetables, with a desert of custard, and stewed or preserved fruit.

Mum was an extremely hard and disciplined worker; in fact, she was always working -- whether it was gardening, cooking, preserving, sewing, mending or cleaning the house. I learned my work ethic from her, and I learned the power of money. Money was tight in our

household, so whenever she needed some extra, she would set to work making pasties, pies, donuts, and Kitchener buns -- a sweet pastry filled with jam and cream. Then she would enlist us kids to sell them to the crowd at the local soccer game. We were always so proud to see how much money she made. It made us feel good too, because we knew the money was for us.

As kids, we helped a lot around the house. I loved polishing the copper tap in our front yard and the brass handle on our front door. After meals, we all had to do the dishes. It was a family ritual that began when we were not yet tall enough to reach the kitchen sink, so we had to stand on a black shoebox. I was always the one who helped Mum the most, whether in the kitchen or elsewhere. Whenever she needed fertilizer for her garden, for example, I would volunteer to walk behind a horse and buggy and collect the horse dung.

Mum wasn't as social as my dad, but I remember some wonderful times after dinner when she would linger around the table. She would look deep into our eyes and give us kids a reading about what she saw, like an amateur iridologist. She would look at our palms too, though she was more secretive about what she saw there. I think she had a very spiritual side, even a Buddhist sensibility, as she would always tell us never to kill an ant or any other living thing.

There were nice times I remember with my father, too. One winter while Dawn was still very young, we kids would sit on the floor around the fireplace while he read a book called *Daddy's Little Darlings*. I do not remember anything about the story itself, but I remember the feeling; it was wonderful.

In many ways, life back then was idyllic. There were many children in our neighborhood, and in the warm weather we would all play games like hide-and-seek together. Bronte was my best friend and she and I were very close. Bronte had an almond tree in her backyard, and when it was time, a bunch of us would get together to pick and shell the almonds. I always shelled the most. I could keep it up for the longest time. Since then, I've always thought that if I were an animal, I'd be a nut squirrel.

I have memories of many good times involving food. For example,

Bronte's father loved to go fishing down at Port Adelaide early in the morning, and frequently my Dad would go with him. I always wanted to tag along, and sometimes he would let me. They would fish off the docks where all the ships from overseas were moored, leaving me free to roam around, study the ships and dream of all the far-away ports I would visit when I grew up: London-upon-Thames, Istanbul, Bombay and the gateway to India, San Francisco and its spanning bridge, Caracas in South America, Canada, and the Panama Canal. I loved the magic those ships conjured up, and I promised myself that when I grew up I would set sail from these docks. I would walk their decks into the unknown, take my chances, and never look back. Meanwhile, in the background, I could hear the seagulls squawking and fighting, flying all around because the smell of fish was in the air. Then suddenly a voice would call, "Anne! Anne! The fish are biting, come!" Some days they could catch six-dozen or more, and that meant I could have as many as I wanted for breakfast. I loved fish, so that was fabulous for me.

I remember the spring days when we kids were charged with going out to the cow pastures to look for Portobello mushrooms. Whenever we came back home with our baskets full, we could have as many as we wanted, on toast. Heavenly!

One summer my sister, brother, and a friend or two decided to put on a fete in our backyard to raise money for a charity. My sister and I were both ballet students, so we had plenty of costumes and we knew how to perform. Mum made cakes and toffee apples to sell. A reporter from the city even came by. The next day, we were excited to see our pictures in the local paper.

Those were happy days. But then, as the years went by, things began to change. At first, the changes seemed subtle, barely noticeable. When did I first realize that most of our original neighbors had moved away? When did I realize they had done so because they had saved enough money to purchase their own homes? This didn't happen for us. Instead, my father was the first on our street to buy a car. We were also the first family to have a TV. When did I begin to realize that he always bought playthings, not long-lasting things? After my youngest sister was born, he would often say we were lucky to have her, instead of a house. Why

couldn't we have my baby sister and a house, too? It felt like poverty, and I hated it.

Then there were the times when, out of the blue, my dad would erupt in a rage. This usually happened when he had been out drinking, which he seemed to be doing more and more often. His anger was so explosive that we all stopped breathing. He wanted our full attention, so we had to drop whatever we were doing to listen to him rant and rave until it finally blew over, and things went back to normal.

And so at some point, I remember feeling like there were two distinct worlds. One world was safe and beautiful, the other was dark and scary and full of danger. In a child's mind, this might have seemed like living in a fairy tale in which the world turned dark and scary for a while, but not forever. I always knew that sooner or later, I would find myself back in the safe world. But one day I realized that I had been cast out of that safe world for good, and I could never, ever get back. I believe it first began when I was about five.