

“She said things about my parents
which were not good”
by Janet¹



¹ Janet chose to use her real first name in her story.

² Artwork by Dale Scoles

What was happening in your life before you went into foster care?

I was born in Christchurch and was a premature baby. Between 2 weeks and 2 months old I was placed into foster care with a woman who was a friend of my father. She was 70 when I went to stay with her. I believe I stayed with her the whole time until I was 9 months old. I was then moved to my foster mother's house, who was a registered foster carer and had cared for children before. She also had her own children, two who were still living in the house at the time I began living there.

Do you know why you went into foster care? How old were you and where were you living?

I think this was because my mother couldn't cope with having me. Apparently she went into a psychiatric ward temporarily. I'm not sure of the timeframe for this. I don't really know the exact reason I was taken into care. I have a copy of some of my social welfare notes, but I want to request all of them. I lived in foster care until I was 17 years old.

My [older] brother never left our dad's house or lived in foster care. I believe social welfare was involved

somehow as he went to health camps when he was a kid.

What do you remember about the care/ being in care?

My foster parents' house was a state house in a street where there were a few other state houses, but a few privately owned state houses. My foster dad was good to me but I found my foster mother a difficult woman to live with. She was worse when my foster dad died. The foster family considered me to be 'spoilt', although in reality I wasn't.

My foster mother sometimes made fun of my birth father, and said I should go and live

with him. She said things about my parents which were not good and made me scared of them. When my mother came to see me I hid behind the couch because I thought she was going to hurt me. My foster mother said I had been hurt at my mother's house when I was there, and had been playing with matches. I don't know if this was true.

As a child I had a few operations in hospital where I had to stay for a few days. I found the nurses and an old lady there to be kind and friendly to me, and I would visit the nurses in the middle of the night when they were knitting. I enjoyed being there because

they paid attention to me and were kind to me, in contrast to my foster mother who I called 'Mum'. But later when I left home and had my own children I didn't want to call her mum because it hurt to call her Mum. She was not there for me emotionally. So after I had kids I decided to call her 'Nanna' to get away with no longer calling her mum which I'm sure my foster siblings wouldn't understand, nor try to.

I experienced sexual abuse during my years living in foster care, at the age of 9 in particular. The first incident took place on one weekend when I stayed the night at my foster family's relative's house.

There were other occasions, but I can't recall the exact timeframe of these events, but it was when my foster family's relative wasn't around. She was in her bed at the time (on the first incident) and then another time. There was inappropriate behaviour from the [abuser] in company of other family.

At age 15 I was learning to drive and there was an indecent assault and other indecent behaviour by the driving instructor (an older man). I told my foster mother and she got angry with me. The rest of the family turned against me and called me a spoilt bitch. Life was harder for

me from then. My foster father was also dying. He was good to me but got really sick. He was around 70 at this time. I was 16 years old and my foster parents were in their 70s. They said "if the social welfare knew we had bad hearts they wouldn't have let us have you".

I was fed quite well in care, probably overfed. My foster mother was a big (fat) lady but petite stature. She said that my parents were fat but they were a better structure than her. She also accused me of "looking like a [birth family name]". This wasn't a compliment, it was a way of saying I was being disloyal to the foster family because I looked like my birth

family. I was made to feel ashamed of my birth family. I had to still visit my birth family but was made to feel like I had to be loyal to my foster family.

When I was 7 I had a knife to my throat because my foster family's relative's boyfriend threatened to kill her.

From age 8 I felt really disloyal from visiting my birth family. One night, my father dropped me home and I gave him a note which said "I don't want to see you again". I never saw him again on a visit. I did see him down the street one time but didn't talk to him. He came to see me at my school play once.

The fact that I gave him this note has hurt me a lot in my adult years as I didn't want to tell him goodbye but I felt guilty for being a [family name] and his daughter. I was never adopted but I used the name '[foster family name]' instead of [my family name]. I felt embarrassed to be a [family name]. The foster family told people I was adopted but I wasn't.

When I was 16 my foster dad went into hospital. I then also saw my real dad who was in the hospital at the same time. I think I went into his room to say hello. I'm not sure if he

knew it was me. I felt so guilty for going to see him.

My foster dad died when I was 16. I was devastated. He was the one I predominately spent time with if I wasn't with the neighbours. He was retired but still 'worked'. My foster mother was very old school and had some very archaic rules, like I wasn't allowed to talk to boys, and would question me about what people said if I stayed at their house on the weekend ("did they pump you for information at Mrs X's house?" or "if you go to Mrs H's house don't be very long"). I remember having one picnic with Nanna, but I don't have many memories doing

activities with her. I went on a 'bus tour' with Nanna and some older retired people around the south island, which apparently made me 'spoilt'.

At 17 I had to go to fill out a form for a family benefit/ some payment because I wasn't going to be getting money any more.

What did you do after you left foster care?

I moved out of the foster home when I was nearly 18 years old. My foster mother said I could go and flat with this girl but when I went to move out my foster mother accused me of being a "certain kind of girl" as

"only certain kinds of girls go flatting". She embarrassed me in front of my friend. I still ended up moving out with her.

At age 21 I married and I had two children. Our family moved to Australia, and later I separated from my ex-husband. I moved out with my daughter, and my son stayed with his dad because my ex-husband said he would fight me for the kids if I took him. I struggled financially for a number of years. I divorced my ex-husband in 2008.

I am currently living with my daughter in Sydney. I am estranged from much of my birth family, although my

maternal second cousins have made me feel welcome with their part of the family. I don't really have much family.

I have some connection with some of the foster family, but I am conflicted. I had experienced a lot of psychological abuse and manipulation from my foster mother/Nanna. She died in approximately 2010?

I have been seeing a psychologist for around 10 years.

What are the high points in your adult life? What are your strengths?

Having my children, completing my Bachelor of Health Science, and nearly completing my Bachelor of Laws. Having some true friends who love me for who I am. I am a good speaker and natural advocate. I am resilient and patient, and have been described as having "tenacity and fortitude".

What would you tell policy makers/the Royal Commission etc about how to ensure children are kept safe in the future?

Better assessments of the foster carers and better matches of families with the foster child. I was from an

educated family and placed into an uneducated family who didn't have the security of their own house and were dysfunctional as a family as well.

The welfare/child protection department should understand the risks the child faces outside of the house they're placed in (i.e. my abuse was outside of my actual foster home, but I was still at risk of abuse). The physical abuse I faced was pretty much never in my actual house. It was sexual abuse outside of the actual home, but from my perspective it felt like continual psychological and emotional abuse from my foster mother

at home. 18 was too young for me to leave the house, and because payments were ending my foster mother didn't seem to want to care for me after age 17.

More frequent assessments of foster children and visits without an appointment (my foster mother said I had to be on my best behaviour when the social welfare came to visit). They never asked you how I was. They asked general questions. I felt too scared to say anything against my foster mother.

End of first email

Continues

Thank you very much for this Janet. That must have been very hard to do.

Yes it was hard to do but knowing I have only 2 subjects left in my degree to do helps.

The knife to throat incident happened in another house and there was a young baby in the house at the time. That fact was concealed from the Social Welfare. I was either 6 or 7 at the time. I was very upset, crying and they gave me my seizure tablets after I had run two blocks back to my house... He abused me sexually about 2 years later.

That was traumatic in a different way.

As this is a project focussed on neurodiversity (including autism) and state care would you be able to tell me a bit about that. For example, how and when were you diagnosed? Looking back did this affect your experience in foster care in any way?

Because I know that as a person with a disability that is unseen that any psychological or emotional triggers can affect me but I'm resilient & have coping mechanisms now, but I've only recently this year learnt about 'cognitive overload'.

(I look fairly normal and I don't receive a lot of help because of that and I don't want pity so I go out of my way to seem 'normal' but I struggle with some areas of functioning.)

I was actually born premature and with some brain damage to my brain stem.

As a child I had epileptic seizures (my dad was known to have seizures) I'm not sure if there's any connection. [Janet does not remember having any seizures and is not sure about the accuracy of the diagnosis. Janet remembers some involvement with CCS – Crippled Children's Society - as a child. As a toddler she

also experienced IHC respite care.] And I remember that I have got evidence from a letter written from a Dr specialist saying I had epilepsy and would remain "a problem child ". I was only 18 months when they said that.

I will have a break of an hour or so before I think about it again, so quickly writing this in reply before I 'escape' in my mind elsewhere ..

My daughter said I did it but also 'disassociated' often to cope in the past & I have complex PTSD from trauma experienced as a kid.

My autism may have meant that I was more vulnerable, but also my foster mother made me feel guilty and ashamed and unworthy

(in 'Hunt for the Wider people '

" no one else wants you Ricki Baker “)

Or Oliver

Or Annie

Harry Potter (Mrs Dursley Etc ..)

My daughter is so helpful as I'm not great at articulating what I want to say given the emotional/ psychological/ traumatic content (which incidentally may not be as awful as a lot of other people's

experience, however it did affect my self-worth, self-esteem and even had suicidal thoughts for feeling like I was not wanted or anyone cared ..)

It's an ongoing feeling at times which I have managed to recover from and know how to cope and know that some people care now ..

A lot of issues because of my Autism / ADHD and learning difficulties (above average IQ though) but I have fine motor & swallowing difficulties etc (not even my Dr knows that) ...I'm having a CT scan & MRI soon. Plus other tests ..

I'm now 52 and although I had a full time job, \$10,000 in the bank before marriage ...

I have no extra money apart from a disabilities pension..

I have achieved a lot despite hurdles,

Diagnosed by [a NZ medical doctor friend living in Australia] in 2010 so not a formal diagnosis, but psychologist now backs that up after knowing me for 10 years.

I have nearly 2 degrees, but now have Fibromyalgia/ Chronic fatigue Diagnosed this year ..

Do you think the Royal Commission should make

recommendations specifically for those with neurodiversity who are placed in foster care? If so what?

Social Welfare did not come back for me.

My records seem to end at age 10 and I had no more visits from them but I was still in the system until 17 yrs old ..

In 'Hunt for the Wilder people' The social welfare woman said " No one left behind " ..

Well .. I was left behind..

I feel there's a bigger story so that social welfare (or whatever it's called now) amend or consider their

policies and the structure etc of children in care or before care.

And especially with disabilities. Sometimes it's an executive functioning issue and inter-generational.

I was even called a "loser" by my best friend's ex-husband.

He didn't know the back story which is my ex-husband ripped me off from a divorce settlement because of my poor legal advice and without money and support and needing to educate myself.. and many issues to work on ..etc and illness and trauma and relative poverty & no family etc.. [Janet mentions

she spent time in a psych ward after the stress of the marriage break up]

And now I have to catch up and find my own way ...

I believe the government systems of welfare etc should be a 'safety net', not 'hammock' but for some people with disabilities the safety net needs to be more supportive, and some people need to be in it for longer without feeling they are a burden or no one cares for them.

Comments from Zoom discussion following these emails

Mental health, healthcare, disabilities/ Autism, housing, education, crime

They are all interconnected.

Janet mentions how hurtful that she is excluded from many aspects of the wider birth family because of the hostility of one family member in particular who has turned other family members against her. That family member claims that her father had no children, when there is her brother and herself. That family member told her to get her own identity. But identity is something that she has been seeking for many decades.

From about 7 years old she had her own opinions as well as looking and feeling different from her foster family, but she was turned against her birth family, so identity is still problematic. There is a distinct stigma of her father in family tradition and written records as a difficult man. She resents that she was turned against him.

But relations on her mother's side have welcomed her into that family.

She is proud of her autism diagnosis, but sometimes feels it is like having a 'butterfly brain', or ADHD and wonders if her father did too. She gets

extra time for academic assignments.

She advocates that children in care should know about and know their parents. Care should consider not just parents of a child, but the child's needs.

Janet was always kept clean and tidy by her foster mother, but was told she was spoilt and not good looking and didn't feel that she belonged.

Watched friends play – observed but didn't join.

Social Welfare could be overbearing and foster carer strict (Janet mentions the angry school teacher lady in Mathilda or Mrs Dursley in Harry Potter as comparisons).

Janet has some of her Social Welfare records but they appear incomplete.

Janet found out that she had an older sister who died of cot death in foster care, then her brother was born who didn't go into foster care, then Janet. Her mother apparently had two other children who died. Janet also has a younger half-sister (same mother, different father) who was adopted but is not close to her as 'our genes are the only thing we have in common'.

From Facebook Messenger Janet provides more information about her mother.

Yesremember her ...I met her officially again when I was 19 the day of my father's funeral My grandfather, her father had been injured in the war and was in a hospital in France. One of my friends said " [birth mother's name] " was a strange name ... but I like it now I understand her better now than I did when I was a young mum at 21 and 25 when she died from diabetes. They said she had schizophrenia, but knowing what I now know, I think she was probably just on the spectrum. My grandparents were about 40 yrs old when they had her I think. Not old today, but back in the day it would have been.

My grandmother was a midwife & Granddad a baker. But now I have books on both sides where I can find my family tree. A cousin on my father's side told me " get your own identity " which was mean to an orphan.

My mother's maternal parents are the Jewish ones whose cousin was a solicitor and Privy councillor. (I know you don't need my genealogy, but as part of my identity it was great to know that I had aristocratic, maybe even royalty in my family. At least members of the Peerage. I felt smart and of good breeding rather than the orphan that was taken in who "no-one else

would want you" "after all I've done for you " that " Nanna " said to me all the years growing up.)

I'm single now ..I've lived a life of feeling unworthy, unwanted but am hopeful my orphan story will have a happy ending. One day my story will be told .. If I have to write the happy ending into it by creating one. My unique life upsets me & continues to upset me.

Someone I met through twitter who I thought was my friend said to another person that I was an "unusual person " She barely knows anything about me and I'm far less 'unusual' than her but my

circumstances are quite unusual.

I actually felt for a long time during my life that I was a mistake and unwanted.

But my biological aunt always made me feel wanted and part of the family since I was about 5 yrs old or earlier, but it wasn't until about 19 yrs old that I really wanted to know more & my foster mother wrote her a nasty letter saying that she wasn't real family. Why did she have to be two faced ? "

Some of my pain would be less if my connection to my family was still there and unconditional love etc ..

I've never had that until I had my daughter, my first born.

As an aspie person, although in law moots I'm eloquent and articulate, I find it hard to express my feelings sometimes or make people understand what some deep emotional feelings are like for me having to navigate the world sometimes.

I seem so very normal outwardly.

Even the psychologist did not believe my diagnosis at first because I seem so capable and although I'm good under pressure at times, there's also times where I'm not and need to lock myself away for a few days away from people.

I also have body dysmorphia and complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

I'm saddened that a person like Nanna could influence my life so much, but I'm glad that despite any challenges in life and my "nurturing" that there were some kind and lovely people in my life and "nature" won out in the end.

Financially is the hardest part because I didn't have a divorce settlement and my ex-husband took advantage of me plus I was treated like a fifties house wife & perhaps because of my autism I didn't realise that a lot earlier..

I have had to catch up on a lot of social and popular culture things that Nana stopped me from knowing, raising me as if I was someone from the 1900's ..(weird) we still had a wringer washing machine at home growing up when my peers had front loaders and dryers.

My ex didn't let me have a dryer etc

Maybe not relevant to autism, but increased my workload while having to work as a wife or go to school as a child.

I was chastised for doing my homework or running out of paper at school. Nanna would say "got your nose in a damn book again "

Or " I already bought you paper at the start of the year "

I didn't think to buy any if I had any spare money coz that would be the only time I got money for the canteen for a bought lunch and maybe a cream bun instead of my many sandwiches and a drink.

Nanna was told by the Dr when I was a baby I needed extra care but why did she not continue that care?

I don't have a Plunket book but would like my birth records from Christchurch from the Salvation Army home where I was born.

When I was in hospital an old lady gave me a bottle of perfume and I liked her coz

she was kind. When my foster mother came to take me home I didn't want to go coz I liked hospital better.. I was 8 yrs old ..she said "don't be so silly [foster] dad is in the car waiting .. When I was about 10 yrs old I had an elderly friend who I used to bike to see and spend a few hours with. She was kind to me and took me to the carnival that visited that year and wrote me a poem. Most of the families from the church I went to I stayed with in weekends or spent time with. I never remember doing one thing with my foster mother but

spent lots of time with my foster father. My foster mother said that my foster father never wanted to take me as a baby but I think that is a lie or if it's true it's because they were past 45 at least and poor health. My foster mother spent time as a Scout leader until she left after 16 yrs or so. My foster father died when I was 16 but my teachers thought it was my real father who had passed. So my school must have known my real name even though I went under the name of Janet [foster family's family name].

