

LABOUR OF LOVE

A personal history of
midwifery in Aotearoa
JOAN SKINNER



**LABOUR
OF
LOVE**

LABOUR OF LOVE

A personal history of
midwifery in Aotearoa

JOAN SKINNER



MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS



Prologue xx

**PART ONE
BECOMING**

- 1 | Nature and nurture | xx
- 2 | Midwife and mother | xx
- 3 | Claiming space | xx
- 4 | Being with women | xx

**PART TWO
LOVE AND FEAR**

- 5 | The life–death–life cycle | xx
- 6 | Being different and the same | xx
- 7 | It’s risky | xx

**PART THREE
EXPLORING**

- 8 | Connection and community | xx
- 9 | Battles of sorts | xx
- 10 | Going global for local | xx

**PART FOUR
TO THE EDGE**

- 11 | A space for birth | xx
- 12 | Can you tell me where you are? | xx
- 13 | There and back | xx

Epilogue xx
About the author xx
Acknowledgements xx

Prologue

I stood in the far corner of the bright room, holding my breath, trying to be neither seen nor heard. The woman opposite me was lying flat on her back on the high, narrow bed, her eyes squeezed shut, her right hand gripping her husband's. Crushing it, white-hot. Her other arm was strapped down, and a plastic tube emerged from the bandages, connected to a glass bottle suspended from a metal pole. Her legs were pulled far apart and hung in two straps, from two more poles, swaying. She tried to roll from side to side, agitated and in pain. The bottle clanged against the pole. An overhead light, a metre wide, was focused, full-beam, on her exposed perineum. Her bottom was at the very edge of the bed. It looked precarious and I worried about the baby landing on the floor.

'Give us a nice big push, love. We can nearly see the head.' The midwife's voice and movements were brisk and insensitive. She had spread sterile drapes along the woman's legs and across her stomach, seeming to separate the woman from her birth. The midwife wore a mask, and her hair was covered in a cap. A white gown, nearly to the ground, and sterile gloves completed her attire. She, too, seemed to have become removed from what was happening.

Yet here were two women, connected in their work.

The door burst open beside me and the doctor, also dressed in white, strode in. He was wearing a floor-length plastic apron and, for some reason, white gumboots, as if in an abattoir.

'Thank you, nurse,' he said to the midwife, who stepped aside, saying nothing.

'Now, Mrs Smith, give us another good push,' he said as he snapped on his gloves, not looking at her.

The woman's eyes snapped open as another wave of pain took over her body. 'No. I can't do it. Get it out, get it out.'

The doctor turned away, impassively, and sorted out his instruments. 'Just a couple more contractions, dear. You're nearly there.'

By now, the woman's vagina and then her anus were stretched to an extent that seemed impossible to me, and a sort of wrinkled, hairy flesh could be seen in the gap opening up.

The woman screamed, and the doctor ordered her to stop pushing.

He moved between the woman's legs to take control of the delivery of what was presumably the baby's head. But he had blocked my view. Some tense moments followed, with calls from both the doctor and the midwife to either stop or start pushing. Despite the doctor's bulk I had a glimpse of the blue, shiny baby as he put her roughly on the trolley, to cut her cord and check her over. The baby roared, every limb tense and taut. I was spellbound. It was the most incredible thing I had ever seen (or partly seen). There seemed something supernatural about the power of that woman to push a new human being out of her body. But no one else in the room seemed to be as awed by this as I was.

The midwife took the baby away to a cot on the other side of the room, and called me over to watch as she weighed and dressed her.

'This is how you wrap a baby so it doesn't get cold and can't wriggle about,' she said, proceeding to swaddle her tightly into a bundle, like some sort of Egyptian mummy. I could not imagine a time when I would ever feel competent enough to handle a baby like that. Then she left the baby alone in the cot at the edge of the room. All I could see was her pink squished-up face and her tiny eyes. She blinked in the too-bright light and looked worried. It was not until the doctor had finished stitching the large cut in her mother's perineum (a sight I could barely look at) that she was reconnected with her mother.

This was my first birth. I had been so overwhelmed and astonished at watching a baby being born that I was unable to critique either the processes or the context of the work of these two women, let alone the power of the doctor and all that he represented. I look back at my naivety with some sense of forgiveness. I was young, a 19-year-old student nurse. There would be time enough to understand what had been going on here.



My daughter Kena had been labouring all day and most of the night, and despite decades of midwifery I became sick with worry, and I wanted to escape. I should've known better, but I'd never felt like this at a birth before. She was managing so well, much better than I ever did in labour. I was in awe. She rested between contractions in the pool of water. It was the middle of the night, and her lounge room was warm, dark and quiet. The student midwife wiped Kena's face with a cool cloth between the pains and looked amazed at what she was being part of. I made tea constantly and fetched endless glasses of iced water. I sometimes relieved her partner, Tavis, by taking over the massage and the quiet affirmations he had been murmuring in her ear. It took a mammoth effort to stay calm and I felt drained of energy. It surprised me. At long last, she started to grunt and push. The midwife, close by but almost invisible, whispered, 'You catch the baby, Joan.'

I moved closer, summoning some energy from somewhere unknown.

'Just a few more gentle pushes, sweetheart. Your baby is nearly here.'

She squeezed both her partner's hands. The flock of birds tattooed across her shoulder seemed to fly as she breathed and grunted her baby boy out into the warm water. I leant down to lift him to the surface. Fresh-born, a gasp and a cough, eyes wide open. My whole body relaxed. Kena reached out, and I scooped his slippery, wriggly body into her arms. Kahurangi stayed connected to her for hours, through the exit from the pool, the delivery of the placenta, the cutting of the cord, the glass of Moët, and his long first breastfeed. Eventually we needed to get Kena up for her to empty her bladder to prevent bleeding, so Tavis held Kahurangi on his chest, skin on skin. While he lay there, contentedly, the midwife gently checked the baby over. Then it was time for her to leave. She would be back in the morning. Kena and Tavis dressed Kahu warmly, and Kena fed him some more. Three years later he still loves eating. Especially chocolate.



The four decades between that first and last birth crossed over into a new millennium. Nothing in the world seems the same now as it was then. The shape of my work has changed, too. I have watched and wondered,

faulted and fought, learnt and unlearnt, and then learnt some more. As my understanding has deepened, I have come to recognise that midwifery is not just a skill to make birth safe; it is also a countercultural force capable of modelling connection with each other and with the natural world. I became steadfast in protecting it. I have taught, managed, studied, advised, critiqued; I've been a consultant, an activist and a researcher. Now I am a writer. The stories in this book talk about the life of this midwife. Along the way there is some herstory for context and some reflections on what I think was happening.

This is also the story of my work: from that young 19-year-old, overwhelmed by what she was seeing, through the challenges of becoming a wife and mother myself, to the satisfaction of becoming skilled and confident. The space between work and home has never existed for me. Midwifery has been my life. It has been uncertain, thrilling, terrifying and exhausting, sometimes all at the same time.

I stretched my understanding of birth and midwifery when working as a consultant in the Asia/Pacific region for the World Health Organization and the United Nations. Midwifery became understood globally as a focal point from which high rates of maternal death should be tackled, and I was lucky to be able to support midwifery education and practice in low-income countries. I struggled to make sense of the complex mess of colonisation, inequity, misogyny, development, science, and technology; I'm not sure I came to any stable position. My stories illustrate the tussle.

The social and cultural forms in which midwifery exists have shifted. This is reflected in the language used through the book. For example, in the beginning of my working life, the woman giving birth, the people we 'midwifed', were called patients. Then we progressed to the terms client, consumer, service user, mother, partner and birthing woman. More recently, some have promoted using the gender-neutral terms pregnant person or parent. Current modifications to Aotearoa New Zealand's official Midwifery Scope of Practice have recommended that the whānau should be the focus of the kaiwhakawhānau midwife's care, not the individual woman. The word 'woman' is absent.

We used to talk about delivering women (of their babies), but we struggled with the passivity of this term. So, we began to talk about catching babies, birthing women, or supporting and assisting women to birth. Two words have not changed, though. They are *birth* and *midwife*.

They are universal words, translatable into any language.

Everything in this book did happen, but some of the stories are reconfigured for effect or to protect anonymity. I was unable to contact all the women I wrote about, and although pseudonyms have been used, I did not want any reader to recognise their birth without prior knowledge of it being here. Where I have been able to contact women, stories are more complete. Some have wanted their own names used.

I have written this story, my story of birth and midwifery, to honour these women and all the women who trusted me and showed me how to 'be with' them.

PART ONE
BECOMING

1

—

Nature and nurture

There is steam belching from a window of the maternity hospital. I roll the car window down and hear hissing and clanging as a nurse opens a steriliser lid and drops bedpans from long metal forceps onto the bench behind her. I am riveted to the views and sounds behind the sash windows, all half-open despite the winter morning. I can hear talking, although not the words, and I can hear a baby crying. Maybe I might see one.

I am in the back of a Zephyr with my little brother, Mark. Dad has parked in a hurry in the doctors' parking space. He leapt out of the car with a backwards warning for us to 'stay in the car, you two' and disappeared into the hospital's grey walls. The car is right up beside the building, and in the shade.

My eyes follow a different nurse, this time one with a crisp white veil. She strides from window to window. When she gets to the fourth one, my father appears, now in his white coat. They pause briefly to talk, looking worried. Then they turn and walk away together. Dad doesn't look at us. Mark and I wait and wait, but despite being used to it when we go with Dad on his calls, this wait seems too long. Maybe something is going wrong with a baby. I watch the windows intensely for a glimpse of Dad. Then, relief. He appears, striding towards us, smiling. 'How about we get a milkshake on the way home?' I decide to have a lime one. As we drive away, the car fills with his cigarette smoke, all worries for babies gone. I am ten, so Mark must be seven. It's 1964.

Mark and I were the miracle babies of our family. Our mother, Ro, singing for the recovering troops and the off-duty staff at this same hospital twenty years earlier, had entranced Pat, a young house surgeon. She was, my Auntie Jo used to tell me, a sexy performer with a beautiful

voice and a flair for an audience. Her singing teacher said she was destined for Covent Garden. Dad told us he held his breath watching her. Despite being tone-deaf, the young doctor was thought to be a catch, and would eventually be welcomed into Ro's outrageous and musical Irish family. They married in war and in sepia. Their wedding photo shows a smiling couple, Dad in his pinstriped suit, looking very young, and Mum in a dark dress with her hat right at the back of her head, at a jaunty angle, a corsage of flowers on her lapel. Rosary beads in her hand. They borrowed an old Ford and headed north on honeymoon. Mum returned pregnant and her life's direction veered. Her singing lessons stopped.

She went on to have three babies in three years, Catherine, Lewis, and Christopher, while Dad worked every day and every night, setting up his medical practice in Thorndon. Mum's life wound tighter around these three. She would see Dad only briefly each morning and for dinner. Then he would leave again to do his evening calls or to deliver a baby. She talked of having three in nappies, and of draping wet, handwashed naps over every free space in the lounge of their rented house. The small coal fire made some pathetic attempt to dry them. 'This place looks like a Chinese laundry' became a family meme. Such were the 1940s.

In the next four years, Ro birthed Patricia, Phillip, Carmel and Rita. None survived. Patricia was stillborn. She was full-term and perfectly formed, but swollen and yellow. It was a terrible shock, made worse by the fact that the baby had not been baptised so was destined for eternal Limbo, never allowed into Heaven. It seemed to me later that this caused Mum more pain than the death itself. On the rare occasions when we talked about her babies, she always mentioned it. It has stuck in my mind, too. Despite being told by the local Irish cleric, 'For sure now Ro, Jesus would never do that to wee babies', I don't think she ever believed him. Limbo was a Catholic truth.

Phillip, Carmel and Rita were born alive, a year apart, critically ill. All had that same swollen, yellow look. Dad made sure he was there to baptise them as they died, sprinkling a drop of water and making the sign of the cross on their still-wet foreheads. This action was apparently enough to open the gates of Heaven for them. (I've decided to go and keep Patricia company in Limbo). Mum, of course, was not allowed to hold or see any of these babies, lest she get upset. The wisdom of the day. But she did hold Rita, after demanding to. She seemed proud of herself when she told us



Above: Mum and Dad on their wedding day in 1945, both 25 years old.
Below: Mum and me in 1954. I was a precious live baby after the four that had died.

this. Apparently, the doctor, a friend of Mum and Dad's, came in for his visit and was horrified. 'What on earth are you doing that for, Ro?'

In those days, women had to stay in hospital for two weeks and were not allowed out of bed for days. Dad arranged for Mum to have a bed at Calvary Hospital where she had some space to retreat into her grief away from the sound of crying babies, and where the nuns could care for her. When we asked her how she coped with all this sadness, she talked of turning away from her grief to focus on the 'three left at home'. Once home she would soldier on, seeing Dad off again and again, day and night, to deliver healthy babies to other men's wives.

The cause of the babies' deaths was unclear, although a blood reaction was suspected. Dad told the story of flipping through the ever-present pile of medical journals by his bed and reading an article describing a disorder called neonatal Rhesus disease. Doctors had discovered that antibodies produced in a mother sensitised by cells from a previous baby were able to cross the placenta and attack subsequent babies' red blood cells.

Going back to the research today, I discovered that this disease had been first identified 10 years earlier and a potential treatment had been found as far back as 1945, five years before our babies started dying. To Dad's horror, the article also said (wrongly, as it turned out) that babies were increasingly affected. At some stage he would have told Mum this. I wonder how he did it; I never asked him.

This was the age of modernity, a time when science tried to outwit religion. In 1954, just as my mother was about to give birth to her eighth baby, the treatment at last reached New Zealand. A pathologist arrived from England with a fine plastic tube, small enough to put in a baby's vein to replace the failing blood cells. But by then my mother had accepted that she would never have another live baby. Being forbidden contraception by the Catholic Church, she had resigned herself, with an inner fury but an outer stoicism, to more babies and more deaths. She dared not hope. Labouring hard to give birth to this baby, she yelled at the pathologist who was pacing at the end of her bed, waiting to seize me, 'Get out, get out!'

It was the only bit of my birth story she remembered. Twilight sleep, a potent mix of narcotic and amnesic given to all birthing women, erased the memory of my birth for her.

'They put me out before you were born.'

She slept, but with no dreams, as I was born, jaundiced and anaemic. They whisked me away to cut me open, to find a vein big enough to exchange my bad blood for good. Meanwhile, so I was told, my mother still dared not hope, again turning to her three at home, now all big enough to know something of death.

The Catholic Church had rallied, too. The local parish priest came to the hospital to await my birth, bringing triple sacraments: baptism, confirmation and extreme unction. There would be no Limbo for me. Every priest and nun, most of whom seemed to be Dad's patients, put me on their prayer list. Masses were said daily throughout New Zealand for my rescue. Saint Pius X, newly canonised, was asked to intercede on my behalf. And thus, the job was done: science and religion, joint winners on the day.

Joan Pius Marion Skinner, forever the miracle baby, was taken home by an overwhelmed and unprepared mother to excited and joyful siblings. My mother's attachment to me became as deep and as layered as her grief. My father's joy was unsurpassed. Not long before his death, as an old man, he got down on his hands and knees to lay a kiss on my ankle where my transfusion scar had grown with me.

And then there was Mark. In the three years since my birth, the techniques of exchange transfusion had improved. His birth in 1957 was joyful and less fraught than mine. He was a bonny armful of baby, always full of life. He soon needed an egg added to his bottle to satisfy his appetite.

There was just one more baby. Anastasia, born in 1958, did not survive her exchange transfusion, despite being born less affected than Mark or I was. Dad was there and overheard the paediatrician saying, 'I'm not sure this blood is fresh enough.' Guilt and grief returned for us all.

At 38 years old and after 10 full-term pregnancies, my mother's periods stopped. She did not conceive again.



This is our family story. It was told to me without drama, coming up naturally, though not often, in conversation. And then it was let go. Nothing was expected of me. It held enough death and fear to make it seem a fairy tale, with me as the happy ending. As I got older it was my aunts who filled in some of the gaps, providing gentle glimpses of



Mark and I visiting the sisters at the convent on one of Dad's calls.
They loved seeing the 'miracle babies'.

the grief. As an adult, the details became clearer to me. My mother was more able to share, but not too deeply, and Dad let me see through a small gap into his grief and shame. But the birthdays-deathdays were not remembered, and although we would sometimes make visits to our grandparents' graves, the babies' burial site was never even mentioned.

As an adult, dealing with her own psychological aftermath of the births, my sister Catherine looked for their burial place. She searched through the sexton's old records and found it. Miraculously, all five were buried in the same piece of land, land shared with other stillborn babies of the time. She hunted for the spot and found it in a triangle of shrubbery where two paths met. It was ground that wasn't good enough for a real grave.

Unbeknownst to Mum, and to us, Dad had kept an old scrap of paper in his top drawer with the coordinates of this burial place. He never told Mum. She, in turn, unbeknownst to Dad, thought that the babies' bodies had been put into the coffins of whoever the undertaker was burying at the time. Apparently, that used to happen.

Before Dad died, he had a plaque made. Much later, we took Mum to visit. She was silent and showed no emotion as she bent down to read the names.

With age, all of us remaining siblings have had the time and distance to gain some understanding of the impact of that time on our parents, our family life and our own lives. We have all had various amounts and types of therapy, for the usual vagaries and traumas of being human. Around the dinner table, we've laughed at the reactions of therapists to our story, a touch of sympathetic glee on their faces. So much material to work with. Despite being funny, the 'here-we-go-again' sort of funny, it can be distracting and take up more sessions than we've been prepared to pay for. Depending on the type of therapy we've chosen, we've been variously diagnosed with intergenerational trauma, attachment deficit disorder, familial dysphoria, addictive personality, Asperger's, depression, anxiety and denial. As many families have at some point. But despite that, we have our own take on the experience of being a Skinner: we all remember being loved, being happy and being safe. As much as they could, Mum and Dad protected us and maybe themselves, too, from the horror of their story.

When we tell the story to other people, it shocks. So much so that I've sometimes found myself comforting the person who's just heard it.



Above: Fifty years after the births of her five babies who had died, Mum visits the plaque which marks where they are buried.

Below: The Skinner family setting off for Mass.

‘No, it’s okay now. We’re all fine. We had a very happy family.’ (Are we? Did we?)

‘Really? But how did your mother manage?’

‘I have no idea.’



Hints of Mum can be found in the layers of her backstory. Her Irish side of the family contained generations of loss and trauma: seven centuries of colonisation by the English. The Irish were disenfranchised, evicted from their land, starved and forced into emigration; their whakapapa erased in a single boat trip. In New Zealand, right up to the mid-twentieth century they were still subject to racist oppression and explicit exclusion from many jobs. ‘No Irish need apply’. My family holds this story. There were no tales of their Irish ancestors, except that two or three generations back some might have come via Australia. I’ve wondered whether it might have been via a penal institution. They would never have considered that, out loud at least.

Once in New Zealand, they focused on the present and hoped for the future, eventually identifying with their English oppressors, not with Māori, their co-colonised. When I later visited Ireland, there was no romantic search through ancient baptismal records for me, no relatives to be found, no link with that land. Just a couple of overgrown headstones, possibly related to us, in Toomevara, a bleak village in County Tipperary.

The next layer of her story was her Catholicism, a medieval faith based on guilt and fear. It created a particularly Irish brand of stoicism. ‘Offer it up!’ Then there was misogyny, of course. It was the deep undercurrent for women, whose dreams were lost somewhere between the bedroom and the kitchen.

Mum’s voice was her dream. All of us children, and some of her grandchildren, have powerful memories of her glorious voice as she sang along to arias and operas on the radio, over the kitchen sink. Her identity became built on being Dr Skinner’s wife, a role she embraced with a complex mix of enthusiasm and resentment. Yet even that role was fraught. She told us of the time she overheard some doctors’ wives, the non-Catholic ones, saying: ‘Oh God, she’s pregnant again. Why doesn’t he leave her alone?’

Mum and Dad's social life was centred on family. I have childhood memories of raucous parties with Mum's four siblings and any local clergy who wanted a night out (one of Mum's brothers was a priest). The singing around the piano, in at least three-part harmony, used to keep Mark and me awake. On our regular trips of complaint down to the front room we were firmly told to 'Get back to bed, you two'. I could see they were having fun, but it was a bit scary. My aunts and uncles would all have a tumbler of whiskey or brandy on the go. Some added milk, in a vain attempt to protect their stomach linings.

Our generation of cousins never had the stamina to replicate these nights. All Mum's siblings, including her at the end, either became alcoholics or married one. There is something unique about this Irish ability to put the fun into dysfunctional while retaining an undercurrent of melancholy. Mum's family perfected this, living at the edge of wickedness, disrespect and self-deprecation. Nothing was taken too seriously — even, strangely, the church itself. Paradox made sense. Life was to be enjoyed, yet life was to be mourned. Even the most challenging things were to be relished. Mum would remind us kids of this anytime we had to do something hard. For anything from a School Certificate English exam to a job interview, we would be encouraged to 'summon your mad McGrath and have fun'. I say this to my own children, and now to my grandchildren.

My memory of Dad at these parties is of him not drinking so much and never singing. But he loved them. He could be seen smiling, humming along (badly), and making sure everyone's glasses were full. It may have been because he was always on call, or possibly his Scottish background along his father's side, which was dour in comparison.

Dad worked very hard, often having evening calls to make or paperwork to do at the surgery. And then there were the thousands of babies being born at every hour of the day and night. He always had to stay close to a phone. If he was out on calls, Mum had to have all the phone numbers of the patients he was visiting at hand so she could track him down.

'Bethany is trying to get hold of you, Pat. Mrs Bloom is in labour, and they think she won't be long.'

We knew the telephone was important. Long conversations with our friends could result in a midwife somewhere getting stressed about being unable to contact Dr Skinner. One night the local Thorndon policeman, probably also one of Dad's patients, knocked at the door to let him know

he was needed at Ward 21. In that instance it was another doctor needing his help to provide an anaesthetic for a difficult forceps delivery. In the 1960s, not only was he managing a busy general practice and hundreds of deliveries a year, but he was also providing obstetric anaesthetics. I can't remember who the telephone culprit was that time. Certainly not me.

One evening when Mum was out, and we were still little, Dad called the police to come and look after Mark and me so he could go to a delivery. I remember being terrified when two young policemen arrived. I headed straight to bed, not sleeping till I heard his car returning and the slam of the garage door.

He could never escape work. Even at Mass he would sometimes get a tap on the shoulder. Some midwife or doctor, knowing where the Skinner family could be found every Sunday morning, would have rung the Presbytery looking for him. The priests' housekeeper would come up to the third pew on the left, where we always resided. I was usually unsettled by these happenings. All eyes of the congregation would follow Dad as he walked out of Mass; even the eyes of Jesus himself, hanging just in front of us on a giant cross, blood pouring from his hands and feet.

Was a baby being born or was someone dying? When would he be back?

Everyone in the church knew him, as most were his patients and he'd delivered all their babies. Eventually he developed the habit of leaving Mass before the final blessing, waiting for us in the car. It was his attempt to avoid the inevitable consultations at the church door. People used to queue up for 'just one quick question, Doctor'.

The front four rows on the other side of the church were for the nuns. They would parade down Guildford Terrace from the convent in pairs, just as Mass was about to start. They were all his patients, as were all the priests. By the mid-1960s, in an attempt to modernise Catholicism, the Vatican had issued edicts requiring priests to say Mass facing us and to use English instead of Latin. And then one Sunday morning, there was no parade of nuns. Instead, they arrived as if part of the ordinary congregation, alarmingly spreading themselves through the church, their new modern veils revealing their hair. We also began to be offered a sip of the blood of Christ from a shared cup. The altar boy would wipe the rim of the chalice with a starched white cloth between each person's sip. Dad would never take it. He said he knew all the diseases that the parishioners had, and wasn't going to risk it. I never did, either.

Dad was a gentle, self-effacing man, prone to sadness and very occasional bouts of short temper, usually directed at himself. He had a non-dogmatic and compassionate approach to life, having become wise, not bitter. He had perfected the now-lost skill of saying ‘I don’t know’, but was always interested in finding out if he could and accepting uncertainty if he couldn’t. His patients loved him. He was a very good doctor. He had been the doctor for the prime minister, the governor-general, the chief justice and the cardinal. The State, the Realm, the Law, and the Church were all covered. He worked so hard. Mum liked to tell the legendary story of when he had been up every night for over a month delivering babies or administering anaesthetics. She found him in the morning asleep on the landing, halfway up the stairs.

One afternoon he took Mark and me to the movies, a very unusual event. Halfway through, text appeared, moving slowly across the bottom of the screen: ‘Would Dr Skinner please come to the front desk.’ His being called away was our norm.

Catholicism worried him. He saw the distorted, lonely lives that priests and nuns were forced to lead, and the damage done to vulnerable parishioners wracked with fear and guilt, his wife included. He struggled with the laws of the Church in relation to contraception and did eventually prescribe the pill. Abortion saddened him. During that period when Mum was in the middle of having her babies that died, he arranged, as many Catholic doctors did, for unmarried mothers whose babies were up for adoption to come and live with us. They would arrive, quiet and sad, small bags in hand, when their swollen tummies had become obvious. It was such an horrendous cruelty, but at the time it was seen as some act of charity. ‘They can always have another one later.’ I even heard my mother say this. I don’t know what sort of relationship Mum had with these young women — both of them about to lose their babies.

Dad told me once about the time when he went into the waiting area to greet his next patient, a woman with a six-week-old adopted baby come for his first health check. Sitting across from her was the baby’s young mother, who had come in for her own six-week postnatal check. She was oblivious that her baby, unseen and unheld, was within arm’s reach. He was horrified.



Because of the eight years during which our babies died, our family ended up being in two batches. By the mid-1960s, the big three had all left home. Catherine went nursing, eventually becoming a midwife. Lew went to the seminary, much to Dad's horror, and Chris went to Massey University in Palmerston North. By then our family had become economically secure. Dad had a well-established general medical practice and was a respected and very busy GP obstetrician. What was most important, though, was that he was able to have some time off. His practice had grown enough to take on a partner, and two other doctors, Diana Mason and Heydon Gray, were able to relieve each other for their maternity cases.

Mark and I were the second batch of kids. He was my childhood companion, my best friend. We spent endless hours together exploring Thorndon on our scooters. We used to visit people who were Dad's patients, though only the ones with lollies or cakes. Our favourite was the McCreadys' pub, in the Railway Hotel at the bottom of Pipitea Street. In the huge kitchen, which smelled so different from ours, we could be sure of the twin delights of fresh baking and chats with the cockatoo. Sometimes it would swear. Then there were the ancient and bent-over Ritners next door, who were refugees from Poland. They had a lolly jar. The scariest place, though, was the witch's house on the corner of Hill Street and Tinakori Road. We would dare each other to knock on the door and then run and hide, revelling in that delicious feeling of terror and excitement. She caught us one day. 'You're Dr Skinner's children. I'm going to tell him about you.' More terror than excitement then.

Days would pass at Thorndon pool as we endeavoured to swim more and more lengths and competed to see who could stay underwater for longer. We would head home, red-eyed and hungry, bare feet burnt from the hot pavement. We would go straight to the tins in the pantry to finish off any baking that might have survived. Only then would we tell Mum of our exploits and our latest underwater record. At the peak of her singing ability, when her diaphragm was strong and controlled, she used to be able to do a whole length of the pool underwater. That was our aim.

Mum would be in the kitchen, the mixer on, beating up a batch of some buttery, sugary thing. Goo cake was the best. She fed us and fed us. She was an adventurous cook, using garlic and cream long before anyone

else did, except maybe Rosaleen Desmond, another Catholic doctor's wife from up the road in Murphy Street. They shared recipes. Dad had delivered her babies, too.

Mum and I were close. My childhood happened right at her side — in the kitchen helping her cook, in the laundry tentatively feeding the wet clothes through the wringer or helping with the housework. There were plenty of directions: to use a light hand rubbing the butter into the flour for scones, how to dust between the rungs of the Oregon pine banisters, how to make cheese, pineapple and onion on cocktail sticks when we were having people over for a party. She did not send me to kindergarten, she told me, as she didn't want to let me out of her sight.

I was a good girl. My cousins used to call me Saint Joan, and not in a good way. As I moved into adolescence, I became dreamy and quiet, apparently worrying my mother. But I was just biding my time. School didn't faze me, and I easily passed all my exams, except for French. I had lovely friendships. I was secure, loved and free of trauma.

The world into which I was to emerge as a young adult, though, was almost unrecognisable from that in which I had been a child. By 1971, in my last year of college, my quiet adolescence had begun its stretch towards adulthood. I turned 17. From the shelter of St Mary's, the local Catholic girls' secondary school, my friends and I started to look outwards, and watched the world both expand and come closer. By then, Catholicism for us was about social justice. Literal interpretations of doctrine seemed irrelevant and the days of praying to the Virgin Mary to save the Far East from communism were long forgotten. It was our job to 'make the world a better place' and, naive as it might seem now, we were sure we could. We sang 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' with passion. We were horrified at the photos of starving children in Ethiopia and were reprimanded by Sister Phillipa for wearing Youth Against Hunger badges on our school uniforms. We tentatively joined a Vietnam War protest, calling 'One, two, three, four, we don't want your bloody war' all the way down Lambton Quay. It was exhilarating. We had our first glimpses into our privilege and the responsibility that came with it. We protested, we critiqued the way we lived, and we believed in ourselves and in humanity. Well, that's how I remember it feeling.

So much happened in that decade, shaping my perspectives and foreshadowing the future. American soldiers did eventually walk away from the war in Vietnam, leaving the people behind to their own devices.

Next door in Laos, a country which was suffering immensely from both civil war and the Vietnam War (now calling it the American War), communism also became established. And in Cambodia, which was also decimated in that same war, civil unrest and the post-colonial gap was filled by the brutal regime of the Khmer Rouge. In North Korea, which was still reeling from the distortions of colonisation and the utter destruction of the war, Kim Il-sung emerged to create *Juche*, an extreme nationalist and isolationist ideology, taking the country into the most repressive regime on the planet. Further west, Bangladesh won its bitter war of liberation from Pakistan, both nations having been colonial constructs. And Russia, in an attempt to maintain a buffer state between it and Western democracies, invaded Afghanistan.

Forty years later I would work in all these countries. War, it would appear, is a toxic companion for birth, long into the future.

Still further west, technology developed apace, impacting every bit of life and promising a solution to all our problems. Western faith shifted further from God towards the miracles we created ourselves: the pocket calculator, the Sony Walkman, a computer at home, the orbit of Mars. Ultrasound and CAT scan technologies revealed the inside of the human body. We could see lumps inside a woman's breasts and watch babies, still wrapped in their mothers' bodies, blink at us. The first test-tube baby was born.

It feels to me now that it was in this decade that New Zealand's interest in social justice began to encompass notions of diversity. Ngā Tamatoa (The Young Warriors) emerged, disrupting our assumptions. We watched them on the news and worried. Colonisation and racism became issues of the present moment, not just of history. Whina Cooper led a land march to Parliament and the protestors camped there, peacefully, for six weeks. By the middle of that decade, the Treaty of Waitangi Tribunal had been established.

We began to look at our environment differently, too, protesting nuclear testing in the Pacific and the raising of Lake Manapouri. The first Earth Day was held, and at school Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* was in our curriculum. It scared us.

The social and cultural shifts of that decade were enormous. Modern iterations of the gay and feminist movements further altered our understanding of what it was to be human. The second wave of feminism reached New Zealand. At its core was equal opportunity for women. We