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ADOPTION *as* EXPLOITATION

Were Aboriginal children targetted for sexual abuse?

LORNE BLOTNICK
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CASINO REALITY

Mike Harcourt's billion-dollar headache

Melody Spruit remembers sitting in a meeting room at The Maples adolescent treatment facility in Burnaby. It is

1983. She is 13 years old but passes as an adult in heavy make-up and fully developed body. The social workers in the room talk about Melody's future. The full realization of what is to come crashes down in a tidal wave of

emotion. Melody jumps on the lap of a social worker and punches her, flailing, again and again. Waves of anger and fear and futility pour over her and out of her and she punches and cries and punches some more.

She is going to jail. The man who robbed her of her childhood stays free, while 13-year-old Melody goes to jail. The man she called father admits he sexually abused the Native girl he adopted from the age of four. The cops and social workers and psychologists, everyone, knows Melody is a victim. And they are locking her up.

A decade later, she recalls lashing out at the social worker.

"I cried and cried and cried. I just thought it was not fair. I was being locked up. Not him. Me. And it just caused me to lose it."

Looking at Melody Spruit today, as she waits for a bus or works as a secretary at the UBC, you see a 24-year-old woman with features that might be part Portuguese, or some other non-descript non-British heritage. It wouldn't be until someone told you she is at least half native Indian, Cree, that you'd say "Oh yeah, I see that." You wouldn't know to look at her that she'd worked as perhaps Vancouver's youngest prostitute, with men paying her to perform the duties her father had taught

BY
RICK
OUSTON

SUZANNE
AHEARNE
PHOTO

her. You'd have no way of knowing she's one of the uncounted multitudes of aboriginal Canadians who only now are learning about their bloodlines and genetic heritage.

In the 1960s and '70s, thousands of native infants and toddlers were taken into custody, removed from homes by overzealous social workers, or given up by mothers who lacked any societal support to raise their children. Most of those babies and children were given to white families along with a sigh of relief by the social services agency - children cost a lot of money to raise, they're a drag on social services budgets and children who aren't white are harder to place.

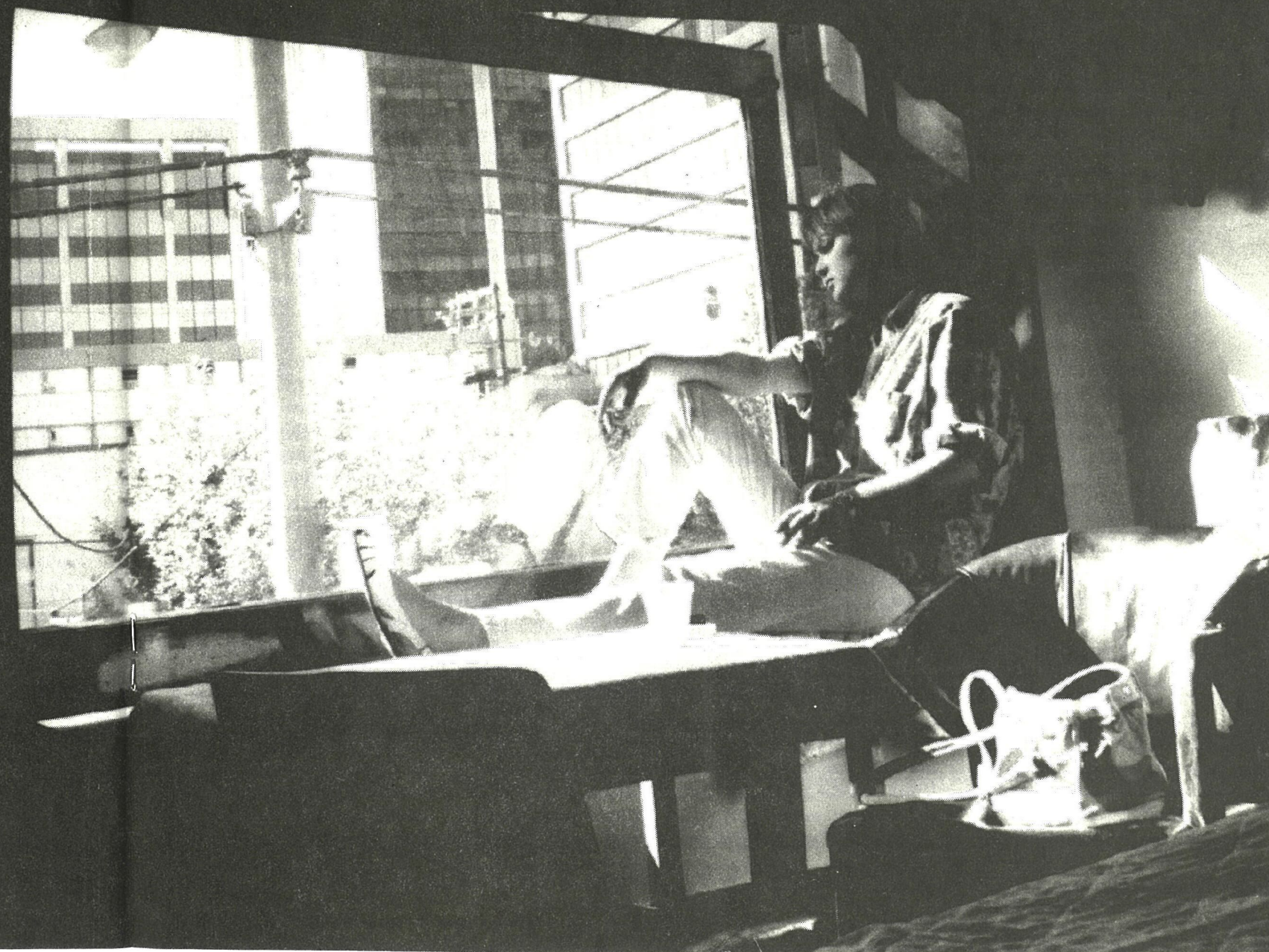
It is difficult to contest that Canada's native Indian children were magnets for pedophiles. Church workers and teachers flocked to Canada's residential schools to feast on easy prey, as sickening numbers of recent criminal convictions attest. How many like-minded individuals used the adoption process to legally acquire their own victim is unknown. Those children only now are grown to adults. Many are coming home to reclaim their heritage.

Melody Spruit is one of them. She wants more than her biological background. She wants revenge. And justice. Melody's world encompasses two of the most press-

Adoption as exploitation

How many Aboriginal children like Melody Spruit found that adoption meant a life of sexual abuse?

Melody Spruit visits the skid row hotel she lived in as a teenage prostitute



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HSA urges all British Columbians to write their MP and MLA in support of legislation to extend coverage under public health insurance plans to community-based services. We believe this step is necessary to safeguard Medicare, our most cherished social program.

ing social services issues being studied in B.C. today: the protection of children and the future of native adoptions. The new Child, Family and Community Service Act is expected to come into effect at the end of the year, and the provincial government will study a new report on aboriginal adoption this summer. Both issues will be the subjects of lengthy debate in the legislature. Melody Spruit wants to add her voice to that debate.

Adoptions in Canada are shrouded in secrecy. Once the legalities of adoptions are completed, adopted children become "as if born to" the adopting parent. Any moral rights that adopted individuals may have to learn about their pasts and biological parents are superseded by the law.

But in Melody Spruit's case, a fat file of background papers was generated by her native Indian status and her capture by social services agencies. A few months ago Melody Spruit obtained her file, and got a look at her life as others saw it. Some of the information in the files has been whited out by anonymous bureaucrats, but enough remains to provide a horrifying picture.

April 23, 1970, at 2:53 a.m. in Regina, Saskatchewan, the baby who became Melody Lisa Spruit entered the world weighing 6 pounds 10 ounces and measuring 21 inches. She was taken home to the Okanese reserve at Fort Qu'Appelle a few kilometers east of Regina, raised by her maternal grandmother, and spent some time in a foster home. Melody's mother vanished for a period, then returned when her baby was about two years old to take her to Ottawa where she'd settled. In the terse words of the social worker who wrote the report about Melody's early days, the mother "was without resources to care for her." The infant Melody was placed in the care of Ontario's Children's Aid Society and sent to a foster home.

"On first coming into care it is

It is difficult to contest that Canada's native Indian children were magnets for pedophiles, who flocked to Canada's residential schools to feast on easy prey, as recent criminal convictions attest.

noted that Melody showed some withdrawal reactions and fear of rejection," the report states. But soon she became "quite secure ... Melody seldom required any type of discipline other than firm expectations and consistency." At the age of 26 months, "when she first arrived in the home she seemed to feel she had to eat everything offered, whether she liked it or not, and would make herself gag."

She played with toy cars and Barbie dolls and a new puppy, was proud of not wetting the bed and enjoyed a camping trip with her foster family. Melody remembers none of it. She has no memory of being adopted at the age of three by Dutch national Robbie and his wife. The Spruits already had a one-year-old son of their own.

Melody Spruit's earliest memory isn't until she is four. Take a moment to think about your first memory. Now, hear Melody's: "I'd had a nightmare about witches and goblins. He (Robbie) came into the room wearing his robe and sat down on the bed to my left. I was sitting there to his right. He had his arm around me, soothing me and hugging me. His robe opened and he exposed himself. He manoeuvred my head down, having my head forced down on him. I hated that feeling. Even when he was driving, he would make me perform oral sex on him. I hated the taste of sperm, which he would make me swallow, and I would gag every time."

A jumble of later memories, of a house, of sharing an attic bedroom with a baby brother. She had no concept of abuse. The infant Melody had

nothing to measure her father's actions against. Robbie would later talk openly about what he did to his daughter, to the police, to psychologists and social workers. For now, for all anyone knew, they were a family, two parents, two kids, an upstanding father who worked as a professional engineer specializing in computers for the European Southern Observatory project, a joint venture of several European countries, white-collar academics scanning the heavens to discern patterns in the stars.

The family moved to France in 1975, then later to Hawaii, the big Island. In Hawaii, "I was grounded a lot. Controlled. If I wanted to go to the beach, then Robbie would take me, in the car. And he'd make me perform oral sex on him when he was driving."

It was in Hawaii that she realized she was adopted, and Indian. She can't remember if someone told her, or if they had always told her and she only now understood. It was also in Hawaii that she first began mutilating herself, digging her fingernails into her arms, "again and again, deeper and deeper. I don't know why I did that."

In 1981, the family moved to Victoria, but Robbie and his wife's relationship was rocky and Robbie spent a lot of time away. One day he showed up back in Victoria, unexpectedly went to Melody's school and drove her to the airport where they began a series of flights which took them to Chile. Robbie had set up house with a new girlfriend.

"In Chile, that was the first time I tried to commit suicide. It was very hot. I took all the blankets and folded them in two, piled them up, got underneath them, and just lay there, waiting to pass out. My dad

came into the room, I guess he knew what I was doing, and he took me outside into the fresh air."

A few months later, Robbie and his new family were back in B.C., living at the Seaview Resort Motel in Victoria, with Robbie in and out of town. By then, Melody had made friends, visited the homes of other families, attended school.

"One morning Robbie and I had an argument and I got especially mad. It was like I had just reached the limit. Something about I wouldn't give him a kiss goodbye. The curtains were drawn. I remember looking at the motel from the outside, standing outside. It was the first time in my life I had ever sworn. I called him a fuckin' asshole. I was feeling a deep, deep, deep anger. I got on my bike and went to school, and I knew I was on a mission. I knew I was going to tell someone."

After school, she went to the home of a friend and told her what her father did. In the phone book, under the big display ad for 911, they found the Zenith Help Line for Children: "dial 0 ask for Zenith 1234."

"It was the hardest thing I've ever done," says the woman who would later become a teenage prostitute close to death from drugs and venereal disease. A social services worker took the call, and Melody said: "My father, he touches me in places." She laughed, a little nervous laugh, a quirk that continues into her adulthood. The voice on the other end of the line heard the laughter and asked: "Is this some sort of a prank?"

"I thought: No! They're not going to believe me!"

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

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But the voice took down the information provided by Melody. The Ministry of Human Resources Intake Form is signed by worker Kay Cox, dated 04-11-82. Robbie's name and his relationship to Melody has been whited out in the copy given to his daughter. The worker has written that the caller "wanted to know if [blank] would 'get into trouble' if he was doing things to [blank]. Melody is an adopted child and her adoptive parents are in the process of separating and [blank] has been touching Melody ever since she was four years old. He has tried 'to make love to her.' She doesn't like it and wants this to stop. She has run away from home, does not want to go back." The call was logged in and referred to duty worker Bruce Holland at 5:45 p.m. Holland talked with Robbie and his girlfriend at their motel and it was decided that Melody would spend the night at her friends and speak with a social worker in the morning.

Social worker Carol Toal inherited the case. Her notes of Nov. 5, 1982, recount her first contact.

"In response to my questions, Melody willingly told me that she has realized that [Robbie] has been 'using' her. Questioned further, she said that since she was four years old until 11 years, he had been touching her and having her touch him. Asked where he touched her, she said 'my vagina.' Asked where she touched him, she said 'his penis.' Then she said that he had her lick him (his penis), and he licked her (her vagina). She said it had happened many times during the years. She also told him (sic) that that he would have her rub his penis until the sperm came. She said the last time it happened was in January 1982 when he had her put a condom on him and 'rub' him to show her that the sperm wouldn't come through. She said that he tried to have intercourse with her twice, but that it hurt and she cried and he stopped." The report goes on to say that: "In describing these incidents, she made it

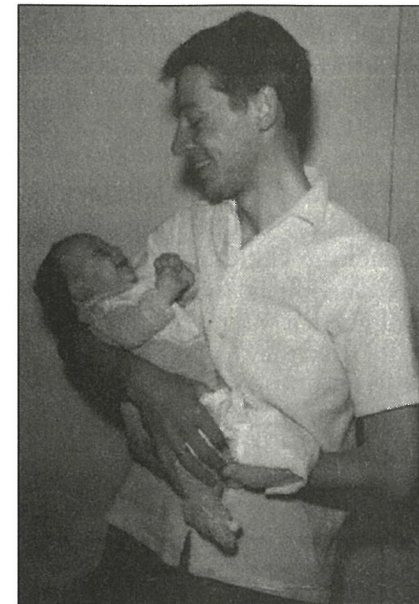
"It was the first time I had ever swore. I called him a fuckin' asshole. I was feeling a deep, deep, deep anger. I got on my bike and I went to school, and I knew I was going to tell someone."

sound as if he initiated all of them. However, she said that it got so that when he came into her room, she knew what he wanted, and she would just start doing it without him having to ask."

That same day, social worker Toal recorded that Robbie "confirmed that a sexual relationship had developed between himself and [blank] Melody, over the years." However, Spruit maintained that his daughter provoked the relationship. "His story went something like this: She was a very cute and cuddly child. [blank] the cuddling between him and Melody turned into fondling. She would climb into bed with him and explore his body. The contact turned into masturbating."

The notes went on to say that Robbie "told me that only once did he go against her wishes, and that he had attempted intercourse with her twice, but when she resisted, he stopped. In response to my questions, he said that he was aware that she wanted to stop the sexual activity when she told him she wanted to be like ordinary kids. But he said that he didn't stop. He said that she seemed to encourage it, and he did not discourage it."

Melody was taken to a foster home the same day. The Saanich police department was informed and opened file 382-20255. According to notes from a later social worker, the Saanich police interviewed Robbie. Officers from that detachment would later tell a Vancouver police officer that "the reason they did not pursue charging Robbie is that he only confessed to sexual involvement in Chile and pos-



Robbie Spruit poses with his son for this 1970 photo.

sibly Hawaii so that he couldn't be charged out of those jurisdictions. He did not confess to sexual involvement in Saanich; just said he could not remember."

It is apparent that the Vancouver Island force could have chosen to contact their Big Island counterparts and perhaps have Spruit extradited to stand trial in Hawaii. There is no indication that route was ever considered.

Social worker Toal's notes say that on December 15, 1982, Melody was made a temporary ward of the province for six months. "Her father decided not to contest this action, although he was not convinced that it was in Melody's best interests to come into care."

By then, family members were being counseled by psychologist Alison Schwartztruber, working out of Children's Mental Health Services in Victoria. Toal noted that there were two reasons for taking

Melody into care:

- Robbie "had freely admitted to having an ongoing sexual relationship with Melody;" and
- "Without the Ministry taking guardianship of Melody through wardship, there was no guarantee that the family counseling would ever be continued. This possibility was even more likely, as Robbie tends to minimize the impact of his sexual contact on Melody."

According to a Social Worker Transfer Summary marked "Confidential," Melody informed her father during a family therapy session home that "she was pressing charges against him... During this meeting (Robbie) admitted sexually abusing her. When Melody asked him why he did it, (Robbie) replied 'you didn't get close to your mom, so I became everything to you ... we were so close that I started to have sexual feelings for you. [Blank] he couldn't understand why Melody couldn't put it in the past."

By spring, Robbie and his girlfriend had married and moved to the Kitsilano area of Vancouver. Spruit was working on the UBC campus. Social worker Toal favoured returning Melody to the man who had sexually abused her from the time she was four. "We believe that while having established the need for continued wardship, the best place for Melody is at her own home," she wrote in a report dated May 13, 1983. "Our reasoning is based on the fact that Melody has probably already been adversely influenced by her association with other kids in care. (Records indicate she had taken up smoking and swearing.) Secondly, removing her from home allows her to continue to avoid working on improving other aspects of her relation-

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A task force will suggest changes in the way Native adoptions are handled. "We don't want outside adoptions to take place ever again."

to me. I can only wonder how many other cases there are out there." Melody also suggests that a home should be opened for aboriginal kids who have nowhere else to go. Spend a little money now, she reasons, instead of a lot of money jailing people who become street-hardened. "All the people I was at the Maples with, they're either dead, in jail or on the streets," she says.

Liz Hall sees the aftermath of native adoptions that go wrong. She heads the Family Reunification Project for the United Native Nations and is a member of a task force for the provincial government to suggest changes in the way First Nations adoptions are handled. For years, she says, "indigenous people (have been) getting their children virtually stolen. We don't want outside adoptions to take place ever again."

Hall's final report is expected by August and will set the stage for later debate in the legislature. Hall has spent years finding the roots of natives who come knocking on her door, knowing they are Indian, but not knowing what kind. It's her experience that when a non-native adopts a native, there's a higher than normal chance of the adoption breaking down. Usually, the voices of the adoptee are not heard. They're in jail or on the street, some suffering substance abuse, marginalized and minimized by white society.

For the last few years, she's pushed for open records to make it easier for bands to reunite their lost children with their extended families. It would be one more step toward self-government.

The B.C. legislature will be asked

to make adoption records available and perhaps actively assist adoptees to return to their extended biological families. "You need a system that's ready to assist and absorb the people who need that help," she says. The legislature will need to determine whether birth information will be made available to minors, with or without permission of adoptive parents. The report will also suggest improvements to foster care on reserves - for now, First Nations foster parents are paid less than their white counterparts. Actively tracing members of the native Diaspora would entail costly searches through jails and foreign countries and would embarrass bureaucrats who operated the adoption system.

As for Robbie Spruit, Melody hadn't heard from him in years. "I guess he just wanted me to die on the street."

This writer found him living in a town in Belgium called Niveze-Spa. On the phone, he was indignant when asked if he'd adopted any more kids. "You're phoning for Melody? Well, if she wants to speak to me, she can phone me." Then he hung up. It is not known if Robbie Spruit travels on a Canadian passport. If he does, the Canadian authorities could choose to revoke that privilege the next time he applies for a passport renewal and force his return to Canada to stand trial or extradition, given his admissions of guilt. The Ontario government might wish to pursue criminal charges in that province.

Or all could choose to ignore Melody's story and the stories of people like her.

RICK OUSTON is a Vancouver writer and broadcaster. His latest book is *Finding Family*.

that "Melody's relationship with her father was in general warm and loving ... The sexual abuse did not involve violence or threats; rather, there appeared to be a role confusion in which the same father who would tell Melody that she must do her homework or her chores would now ask her to participate in sexual activity with him as if she were a consenting adult. Mr. Spruit did not realize the extent of the abuse of power involved in this change of roles; he assumed that because his intent was not coercive, there was no coercion involved. This was a major issue on which we worked in therapy."

Warm and loving. Chose. Protect. Not violent. Homework.

This writer attempted to contact psychologist Alison Schwartztruber PhD to discuss her findings. She is not registered with the College of Psychologists or Physicians and Surgeons in B.C. and no longer appears to be working with sexually abused children.

In hindsight, says Melody Spruit now, she needed to be locked up for her own protection, to tame the terror she felt within. In The Maples and later in foster homes, Melody learned to respect others and herself. She weaned herself off drugs and booze after finding and meeting her birth mother. Melody was not impressed. Mother is an alcoholic, unkempt, without pride and Melody did not want to follow her example. In May she became a secretary at UBC's faculty of medicine. Her first real job, a member of the union, designation Clerk I.

In August, 1993, the Criminal Injury Section of the Workers' Compensation Board awarded Melody \$2,800 for pain, suffering and emotional trauma for her experience with her father. She wants more and has retained a lawyer.

"I want to be compensated. I lost my childhood to my dad, and I lost my adolescence to them (the ministry). I wouldn't settle out of court. I want people to know it happened. It happened to others, if it happened

into homes, slashes her wrists and is slammed into a psych ward and AWOL again when she realizes that, at 13 years of age, running is futile.

"I'd have to keep on running until I was 19. I remember thinking that. It would have been six years of running. Six years. And for what? It was him. I hadn't done anything. It was him." She turns herself in again and this time she's headed for The Maples where they lock you down and the motto is "Never live, laugh or cry. Fuck the Maples and let me die."

That's where she pounds on a social worker, pounds on herself, threatens to kill Robbie.

"I was violent. I was violently angry. I guess it was toward the ministry, for what they had done, for what they hadn't done," she says now. "I got treated more like a criminal than he did. And that infuriated me. I couldn't perceive anything else but that 'They were doing this to me.' And that's how I perceived it. To me. How about to him?"

Months in The Maples and she decides to press charges against Robbie. A Vancouver sex crimes cop named Detective Barnard takes the case. As in Saanich a year earlier, it's decided that the city police can only deal with crimes that occurred in their jurisdiction, so a case is prepared against Robbie Spruit for his abuse of Melody the night she was returned to his care. But Melody is self-admittedly a lousy witness for herself. She's angry, in crummy condition from drugs and street life, and on November 14, 1984, charges against Robbie Spruit are dismissed for lack of evidence.

Psychologist Schwartztruber prepared a report for that court case noting Robbie "had little or no knowledge of child development, and tended to assume that Melody's interest, like his, was sexual rather than just childish curiosity and affection." The psychologist, who said she had a PhD from UBC, concluded

ship with her father and step-mother."

As an observer, reading these reports 10 years later, it's difficult to accept that smoking and swearing were seen as more serious problems than being sexually abused. But psychologist Schwartztruber concurred that Melody should return to live with her adoptive father. In a hearing June 9 before a family court judge referred to as Judge Hubbard, Melody was returned to her father's home.

"That night he came into my room," recalls Melody. "His robe fell open." She rolls her eyes heavenwards, recounting the scene. "Here we go again," she thought. "Three nights later I just packed a bag and left."

July 1983. It is Melody's 13th summer. She has nowhere to go, no one to trust. She's tried the government; the government gave her back. Now, she's on her own. Neighbourhood kids gather at the local 7-Eleven, head to parties. She hangs around, crashing where she can. A boy's father hears her story and suggests she turn herself in to the Emergency Services department of the Ministry of Human Resources. She does, is sent to a foster home, meets a girl named Debbie.

"She showed me the ropes. We were talking about making money. She says you should do what I do. Stand on the corner and wait for someone to stop and pick you up and ask them what he wants and usually it's a blow job and you go park in a lane somewhere and you do it." Prostitution pays for the MDA, MDA makes the pain go away, prostitution buys more pain and buys more MDA and one morning she wakes up after banging DA for seven straight days and there's these gonorrhoea sores oozing yellow stuff from her mouth and her throat is swollen, constricted, and at the hospital they tell her if she'd waited a few days she would have been dead.

She's sent to more foster homes, goes AWOL, is raped by a trick, back