Foster Care and After

BY LEANNE GREEN

On Easter Monday, 1946, a baby girl was born in a Salvation Army maternity ward. The father was a visitor to Canada, an English airman who chose to return to England on learning of the impending birth, thus denying any responsibility for the child. The mother was a naive 19 year-old Mohawk Indian.

The mother had been left with her sister in the care of her own father on the reserve when she was still quite young. Unable to find work on or near their reserve, her father had moved them to the Hamilton area, where he was hired to work in the tobacco fields. He could now provide for the family financially by working long hours, but this presented another problem... no one to care for the two children while he worked. The only solution was to reluctantly place the two sisters in the care of the Children's Aid Society indefinitely. Having virtually been abandoned now by mother and father, the young girl and her sister grew up in various non-Native homes.

When the handsome airman came along and was obviously enamoured with the young girl she had responded to the show of affection. Finally someone who really cared, or so she had thought. Now here she was, abandoned again, with her own child to take care of this time.

Burdened by a poor background in education, no job skills, no home and a child who bore the physical characteristics of its father, she chose to put the child up for adoption. Perhaps the child would fare better in the "white society."

At this same time, the young woman's father appeared and upon learning of his granddaughter's birth, encouraged his daughter to keep the child and return now with him to their reserve. The decision was made. There would be no adoption; they would go home. Shortly after their arrival, they learned the girls' mother had also returned, married and settled at the opposite end of the reserve.

The child was taken to visit the grandmother and, when she was six weeks old, it was decided that the child would remain with the grandmother. This would enable the young girl to seek employment and thus become self-sufficient.

Years passed, however, and the child still remained with grandmother and "daddy," as she'd begun to call the man of the family. The girl eventually came to the realization that this child was comfortable and happy with her 'grandparents' and since she herself had never really become self-sufficient, the child should remain where she was.

The child grew, felt loved and was happy. Infrequently she could go and stay with her grandfather and during these times they developed a very special bonding. He would tell her the old stories, let her mess up his kitchen in attempts to bake, speak of his days in the army during the First World War. She was privy to seeing his war wound and he even tried to teach her to play music on his 'fiddle.' When he died, his house was to be hers.

The child turned into a young girl and in her 12th year disaster struck. The Children's Aid Society (CAS) wanted to take her away. It had been reported to them that the girl lacked parental guidance, the grandmother and her husband were drinkers, the grandmother bootlegged to make money for their clothes and food: this was no atmosphere for a young girl.

They arrived one night, the CAS workers and the police, the Indian agent. It was in the middle of the night. The grandmother stood her ground; no-one was going to take the child. They would have to go through her first. She finally granted permission for the CAS workers to see the sleeping child. They commented on how clean and healthy she looked. Grandmother believed people might be poor with hand-me-down clothes, but there was never reason not to be clean.

Perhaps this was the saving grace for the child, for she remained in her home that night. A promise had been extracted from the grandmother that she would meet with the director of the CAS in the near future to talk about this matter.

After that meeting grandmother spoke to the girl one day. She told her she had to go away. Grandmother would take her to the city the next day and she would stay in a new home and go to school. She could come back home after she finished school. She was to behave and mind what people said.

The bus trip to the city was a sad one. The girl did not want to go away... why did she have to go away? That's just the way it was, grandmother said.

The first foster home turned out to be right on the edge of the reserve, but the girl was not permitted to visit or contact grandmother, or even grandfather who lived in the same village. She was lonely; she didn't feel she belonged. In this house the lady gave her orders, she obeyed. She went to school, she returned home, did her work and went to her room. The lady would often be asleep when the girl came home from school and would walk and talk different, but the child never questioned. That's just the

way it was.

One day she received a parcel in the mail from the United States. Her aunt had sent her some clothes, a blouse and the most beautiful skirt she had ever seen. It was a square dancing skirt, all hand embroidered and new. She hung it on the wall in her room where she could see it from all directions. It would be for dress-up only. She was happy. The skirt was so pretty and her aunt was thinking of her.

One morning when she awakened, her skirt was gone. She searched her room. It was gone. She asked the lady if she'd seen the skirt... she hadn't. The girl was broken hearted. How could she have lost that skirt? She hadn't even worn it yet and it was gone.

The girl came home from school one day to find the lady out. She did her work, went to her room and then thought about her skirt. She slipped down the hall and peeked into the lady's bedroom. She'd never seen the room before and she was nervous. On the far wall hung a skirt rack. She crept over, lifted some of the skirts and there, underneath, was her skirt. She ran back to her room and lay on her bed. She was afraid the lady might know she was in her room and she was mad that the lady took her skirt and lied to her.

What could she do about it? She turned the anger and fear inward and buried it. She would say nothing.

Whether the lady ever found out, the girl never knew, but shortly thereafter she was expected to do more work around the house. She had to wash her own clothes in a pail on the back step using cold water and then hang them on the clothes line. It didn't matter that it was winter time. Her hands would get so cold and hurt so terribly that she could barely move them. Grandmother had never made her do this but the lady said this was the way it was to be done and she believed.

One morning the lady awakened the girl. She was angry with her and demanded to know what was going on between the girl and her husband. The girl was speechless. She didn't know what the lady was talking about. The lady told her there was no use denying anything because she had proof and the very next day she was going to phone the CAS to have her taken away and she would be put in a training school.

Training school! She'd heard of that terrible place. It was for really bad girls. She was bad? Had she not minded the lady, had she not behaved? Grandmother would be so disappointed with her for disobeying. She was so sorry she'd done whatever it was she had done.

The next night the social worker was there when she got home from school. Fear gripped the girl's heart. It was really going to happen; she was going to be sent to the training school.

The social worker said she wanted to talk to her in the car. The worker talked, the girl listened, unable to speak for if she did she would cry, and she mustn't cry. She'd done something wrong so she must pay.

After a long time of nodding or shaking her head in response to questions, the girl was able to ask if she really had to go to that training school or, if she was good, could she just go somewhere else? The worker showed surprise on her face and wanted to know why she thought she was going to a training school. The lady had told her that's where she was going to be sent. No, she would be going to a group home. This revelation almost made the girl happy; at least it took away some of the fear that had been gripping her.

The move to the group home was traumatic. Here was a whole bunch of kids, none of them Indian, and a house mother and father with their children and a cook. She was advised of the rules and regulations, received some new clothes and was enrolled in a very large school. This seemed totally foreign to the girl; she was used to small schools, Native children and few restrictions within the home.

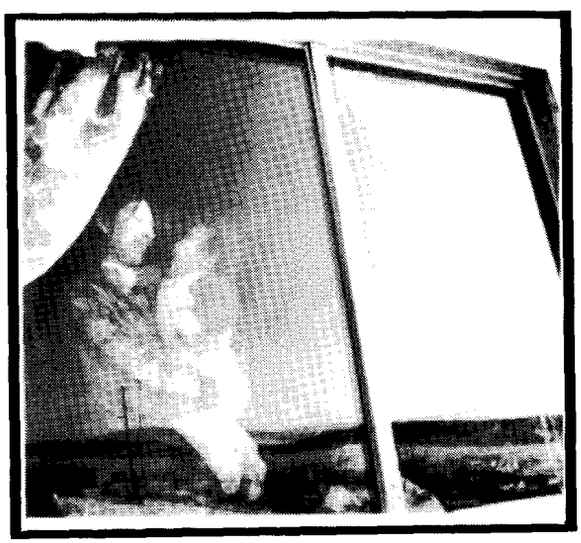
The girl had no friends here and did not know how to make friends. She was very shy and therefore very quiet. If a teacher asked her a question, her heart would do a flop, her face would get red, her knees weakened and she would feel like crying or even dying. It wasn't right to cry though, and of course she wouldn't die for she had to take her punishment and if she died she wouldn't get to go home.

She spent most of her free time at the group home in the kitchen with the cook. Here was someone who would talk to her and for some reason the girl felt comfortable with her. On cook's day off the girl would read, study and write letters to grandmother, for she'd finally been given permission to do so. In one of the letters she told of having learned about religion, for the children at the home had to attend services every Sunday and this being new to her, her curiosity was aroused. Shortly thereafter, a White Bible came in the mail from grandmother and daddy.

The social worker came one day with some news. She knew of a family that would like to meet the girl. She could go to visit that weekend and if they liked her she could go back every weekend until school was out and then could move right in with them.

That first trip was scary; the long drive, further away from the reserve yet, and then pulling into the driveway. There were kids playing on the step and the man and woman in the doorway. The short sidewalk seemed a mile long. The girl walked it in typical Native fashion, head down and so afraid. Introductions were made.

This family turned out to be different. The parents were warm and loving, the children were fun. The girl decided she could be comfortable with this family and thus a new era began in her life.



In the spring of the next year the young girl underwent another emotional upheaval. The obituary column announced the death of grandfather. The ache in her heart was almost unbearable and she fled to a back field to be alone with her grief. She discovered she could not cry. Her emotions had been suppressed for so long and now even this ordeal failed to allow them to resurface. Permission to attend the funeral only was granted. Seeing the casket placed in the ground did bring about a sense of finality. Grandfather was no more.

Years passed, the family moved

photograph DOROTHY CHOCOLATE

many times and each move was further away from the reserve. At the request of the foster parents, the CAS had granted them "permanent wardship" of the girl. Adoption couldn't be considered because of regulations stating the adoptive parents were required to be a specified number of years older than the prospective adoptee, and these parents did not qualify.

Education to these parents was a priority. At the end of each school year, the only decision to be made was what subjects would be taken the next year. The girl went onto enrol in a school of nursing. Finally, at the age of nineteen, she went home to visit grandmother. The reunion was a happy one, but now the girl couldn't stay. From there she went to Montreal to find her real mother, became acquainted with her, and returned to nursing school and went on to become a registered nurse.

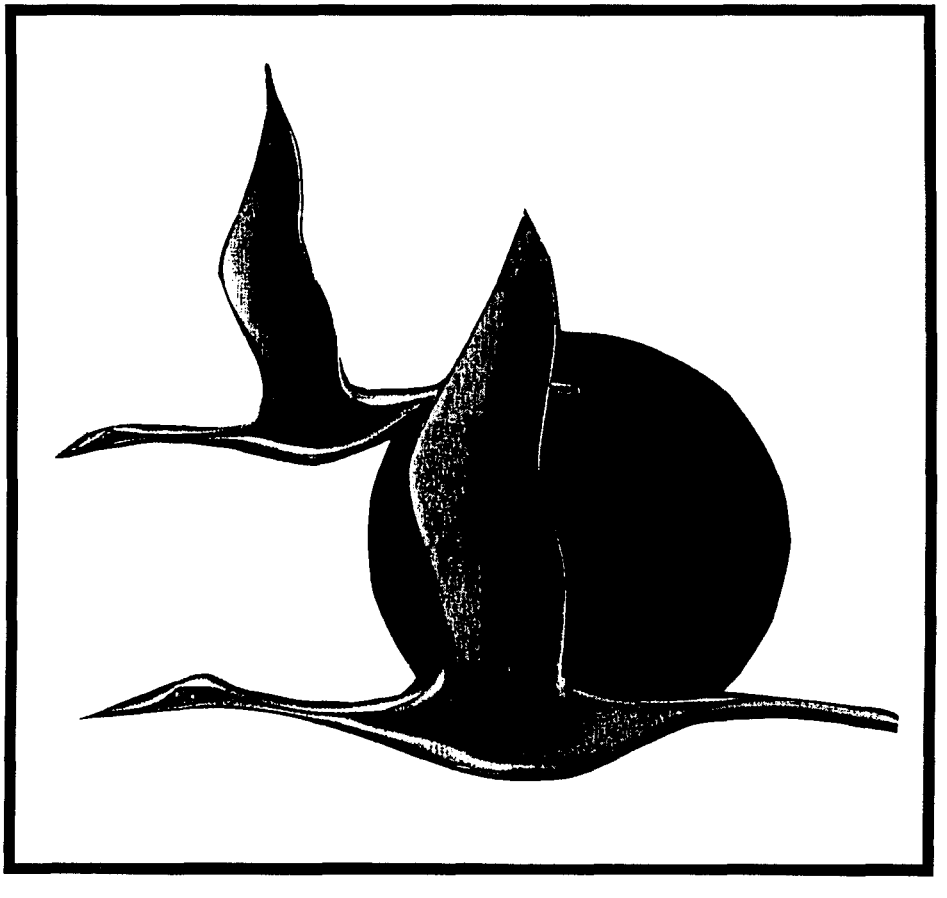
Years later, following the breakup of her marriage and because ill health was now plaguing grandmother, the girl, now a woman, returned to the reserve with her children. The journey had been finally completed.

The child, girl and woman in this story is me. I've chosen this manner to relate my story, for even today some of the memories continue to pain me.

We remained on the reserve until grandmother died. My children were very close to her and although we all felt a great loss when she died, we are comforted in knowing how much she loved us and the fact than we could share her final years with her. Because I'd been away so long, I felt I no longer belonged. The years when I should have been learning about my heritage were taken from me.

Thanks to my foster parents, the education they encouraged me towards is paying off. Today I work as a nurse in the penitentiary service, where I encounter Natives on a daily basis. My background helps me better relate to them.

My plea to all young Natives:
Set high standards and goals for yourself. It may be necessary to leave home to achieve your goals, but in doing so, never lose sight of your heritage. Do these things not only for yourself, but for your people. Your gains in life will reflect your people.



KAREN KEESHIG-TOBIAS

Losing Them

I start in my mommy's room.
It's dark and cold.
Addin I call softly.

It's dark and cold.

Next stop — my
oldest sister's room.
Keitha I call.

It's dark and cold.

Last stop — Polly's room.
Polly. Polly.

It's dark and cold.

My bare feet —
Pitter patter, pitter
patter, pitter, patter —
in and out of the dark cold rooms.

Where are you?
Where are you?

No one hears me
except my mommy.
She holds me in her
strong, strong arms.

They will come back.
They will come back.
She whispers in my ear and
cradles me in her strong arms.

They will come back.
They will come back.
She whispers.

Karen Keeshig-Tobias (Ojibway-Delaware, Turtle Clan) is thirteen years old. She has published one short story, "Hearing Aids in Space," and acted in a number of films. Karen lives in Toronto with her mother and David, and her older sisters, Keitha and Polly, and her new sister, Emma. This poem is about when her first family broke up.