

OHPIKIIHAAKAN-OHPIHMEH

RAISED SOMEWHERE ELSE

A 60s Scoop Adoptee's Story of Coming Home

Colleen Cardinal

Foreword by Raven Sinclair



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Kiskisonaw kahkiiyaw ka-saakihaayaakik

We Remember All Our Loved Ones

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED to all our Indigenous relations. It is for those who are missing or murdered, homeless, incarcerated, living and struggling with addiction, chronic pain, disease, poverty, and mental illness. It is for those experiencing and surviving systemic racism through media and policies meant to dehumanize, eradicate and erase our identity, our sovereignty and our ceremonies that connect us to the land our ancestors have lived on since time immemorial.

I honour my blood relatives, all of whom have been impacted by violent colonial policies created by the Canadian government, which separated, destroyed and traumatized our family and which still wreak havoc upon Indigenous children and families.

I dedicate this book to my late eldest sister, Eugenia (Gina) Charmaine Desa; my late mother Dolly Esther Cardinal née Cryer; my late *kokum* Maggie Cryer; my maternal aunties June Cryer, Cecelia Cryer, Helen Cryer, Roseanne Cryer and Albertine Cryer; my maternal uncle Marvin Cryer; my paternal uncles Dennis, Bruce and Fred; my Aunt Yvonne; my late *kokum* Helen Jackson-Brettron; my nephew Stephen Allen Sawyer; and lastly my sister-in-law Lynn Minia Jackson, paternal aunt to my sons.



Gina, Dakota, Colleen

Foreword

by Raven Sinclair

THE SIXTIES SCOOP is a term that refers to the Indigenous child removal system in Canada that spans the late 1950s to the present day. Thousands of Indigenous children were adopted into white settler Canadian families, with most of those adoptions taking place in the 1960s and 1970s. Children were apprehended in large numbers. Some First Nations communities lost virtually all their children in certain age groups. Children were adopted and fostered into families of all sorts, and according to Justice Edwin Kimelman and Bridget Moran, a British Columbia social worker in the 1960s, homes were often not adequately assessed for suitability or safety. Some children were fortunate to find loving families, while many thousands of others suffered all forms of abuse and neglect as well as racism from within their adoptive family units. Bridget Moran (1992) stated that the “BC child welfare system was the biggest contributor to child abuse in the province.”

Colleen’s story is one among tens of thousands. What makes her story unique is that she has found the inner strength to write it down and share it with others. Her honesty in telling about the abuses and obstacles that confronted her at almost every step of her journey is evident on every page. Her story will draw you in immediately and you may find it difficult to put the book down because you begin to wonder what can possibly

happen next. Her story does not sensationalize her experiences, even the horrific ones. She writes in a matter-of-fact way and the reader becomes a witness on the journey of her life to the present. The ride is occasionally frightening and sad, which makes the funny moments a welcome relief. As a witness, we get to understand how strength and courage can result from trauma, and we breathe a sigh of relief with Colleen as she emerges from some very dark times. We also get to see, with some awe, that she has become a shining light in her own right: a social justice advocate, community organizer extraordinaire, and a compassionate and loving mom and loyal friend.

While none of this justifies what Colleen had to go through, it does inspire us to re-evaluate the Indigenous child removal system in Canada. It also inspires our admiration for Colleen and the many others with similar experiences who not only survived but thrived in ways that show the incredible resilience and tenacity of the human spirit.

Tapeyihdamiwin

Reckoning

THE ONLY THING I'VE known about myself for the past twenty-eight years is that I am completely and utterly devoted to my children. I believe they saved my life. They kept me going when I so often wanted to give up. I would drag myself out of bed on countless mornings and have hope that things would change and get better one day. Everything I have done up until this point was to provide a better life for my children: my sobriety, leaving abusive relationships and going back to school so I could escape poverty and get off Ontario Works. I began having children when I was sixteen years old and still a child myself. I did not plan on having children but I am grateful for them every single day because their spirits chose me to be their mother.

This is my story of how I came to know who I am as *nēhiyēw iskew*, adopted and raised in a non-Indigenous household thousands of kilometres away from my territory. When I started to unravel my past and find out where I came from, it led to critical life changes and eventually to healing, but most importantly, it has led to peace and understanding.

I am not perfect by any means and have hurt and been violent to other people in my past. I have also been hurt and had extreme physical, sexual and emotional violence committed against me throughout my life. I have yelled, raged, screamed

at the top of my lungs, thrown things, sworn at people, made racist and homophobic slurs, hated and wished horrible things for people who have hurt me. I have been jealous, irrational, emotional, selfish and even vain. I have also loved deeply, tenderly held my newborn babies, cried when my grandbabies were born, forgiven those who hurt me and inflicted abuse on me, cried and wept until my belly went into muscle spasms from the pain of grief. I have reconciled my pain with most of my abusers, walked away from toxic relationships, learned to love and respect myself, and finally, to extend the tenderness my children needed from me so badly.

In 1989 I reconnected with my biological family in Edmonton, Alberta. It was a bittersweet experience. I lived through a lot of physical and sexual violence in my life and it was only after I moved back to Sault Ste. Marie in 1998 that I began my healing journey, rediscovering my culture through prayer, sweat lodges and ceremonies. I write and tell my story from my point of view, but also to honour my sisters' stories and to validate the experiences of hundreds of other Indigenous adoptees and foster care survivors of the 60s Scoop. You are not alone, sisters and brothers.

For years I believed I did not have the right to speak out, to complain or to acknowledge that my childhood was traumatic. My adulthood is a murky mess from all the dysfunction I've experienced. Not knowing where you belong in society or having a group or family to identify with is very lonely.

This story is about growing up in an adoptive home with a non-Indigenous brother and parents. It is about the rules set out in the household that segregated my sisters and me and ensured we were treated far differently from their biological son. My sisters and I suffered tremendous abuse — physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual abuse — and it impacted our lives as young adults and now as adults with children.

It has only been in the last five years that I have realized the degree of damage caused by the 60s Scoop of Indigenous children across Canada. I knew that my sisters and I had been through something traumatizing that changed our lives, but I see now that it had lasting effects that my remaining sister and I cope with today.¹

The 60s Scoop was an aggressive tool for assimilation and cultural genocide through the Canadian child welfare system. Now, I have had people say to me, “Your life turned out better because you were raised in an adoptive home by white people,” but I beg to differ. Sure, I had opportunities like sports and travel, but by and large I was robbed of a life that I will never get back. My biological parents were both fluent Cree speakers, and I had a very large extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins all over Saddle Lake/Goodfish Lake and the surrounding area that I cannot re-integrate into. I lost the protection, familiarity and socialization opportunities of knowing my own people, and by “people” I mean Nehiyawak (Plains Cree) within my own territory. That *cannot* be replaced. I grew up feeling homesick and unsettled in the adoptive household, ready to run away at any sign of danger.

Recently, I watched a program called *The 8th Fire* on CBC, where, in a discussion of the 60s Scoop, a woman who had been adopted spoke of being picked from a catalogue of Indigenous children. I was shocked to hear this because my mother told me that my sisters and I had been picked out of a catalogue. In my mind I keep wondering how this came about; who did the gathering and collecting of photos and files of Indigenous children? The federal government was harvesting Indigenous children to be farmed out to good “white” homes in a way very similar

1. There are a lot of resources available but one that I found useful is “Implications of the Sixties Scoop” <<http://www1.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/the-sixties-scoop-implications-for-social-workers-and-social-work-education>>.

Memorandum of agreement respecting
welfare programs for Indians
between the Government of Canada
and the Government of the Province of Ontario

1966

Memorandum of Agreement between Ontario and Canada

to the Residential Schools initiative to “take the Indian out of the child.” Many Canadians to this day have no idea about it. Indigenous children were systematically and deliberately put into white, European homes to be assimilated.

In 2009, I heard about a few class action lawsuits being launched against the Canadian government for contributing to cultural genocide of thousands of First Nations children. The Brown and Commanda legal proceeding against the government is one that I applied to. A friend of mine sent me a link to the website and a contact email, suggesting that I take part as a class member. Jeffrey Wilson of Wilson Christen law firm had released a document regarding Indigenous adoptees interested in a class action lawsuit. The claim refers to a Canada–Ontario Welfare Agreement that allowed for the removal and placement of Indigenous children into non-Indigenous families, thus systematically denying their inherent right to language, culture and First Nations identity.

These were the guidelines stipulated in the documents for the plaintiffs to qualify:

This is a case about loss of culture of First Nations persons, status and non-status Indigenous persons in the sense that claimants were denied or had taken from them knowledge of their biological parents, siblings, extended family, their birth names, their spiritual connections, their language, their customs, and their genealogy. The plaintiffs

are claiming “breach of fiduciary duty” and “negligence” on the part of the defendant, the Federal Government of Canada.

Claimants in the lawsuit are limited to:

- (A) People who are First Nations (including status, non-status, Metis,
 - (B) Those who were placed in a non-First Nations environment
 - (C) Those who experienced their loss/denial in Ontario
 - (D) Those who experienced their loss/denial between January 1, 1965 and December 31, 1984.
- <<http://www.sixtiesscoopclaim.ca/>>

Given that my adoption had been finalized in Ontario and my loss and denial had taken place in Ontario, I applied to be a part of the Brown and Commanda lawsuit.

At the time I realized I had barely scraped the surface of the pain, anger and suffering I had refused to allow myself to feel all these years. I could never put my finger on exactly what it was that was missing from my life but I knew something very wrong had happened to my sisters and me. Finding out hundreds or possibly thousands of other children had been through the same experience validated me. I remember reading the document for the first time, trying to read it to my kids who hadn't a clue what I was referring to. I couldn't sleep, eat or sit still; learning that there were other people just like me had exhilarated and motivated me to find out more. That high lasted a few days before reality set in and memories flowed back. The announcement of this class action lawsuit set me off into crisis mode once again.

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Rarely have I felt stable and at peace emotionally but at this

- (1) In this agreement, unless otherwise specified,
- (a) "Aggregate Ontario Welfare Program" means the aggregate of all provincial welfare programs available to the general population of the province;
- (b) "Indian" means a person who, pursuant to the Indian Act, is registered as an Indian, or is entitled to be registered as an Indian;
- (c) "Indians with Reserve Status" means (except where otherwise designated by Canada and Ontario by agreement) Indians who are
- (i) resident on an Indian Reserve;
  - (ii) resident on Crown land, or in territory without municipal organization in the Province, or
  - (iii) designated as such by the Minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources;
- (d) "the Province" means the Province of Ontario;
- (e) "Provincial Welfare Program" means a welfare program (whether privately, municipally or provincially operated) to which public money of the Province is or may be contributed, applicable or available generally to residents of the Province and, without restricting the generality of the

Agreement

point in my life, I feel alive. I am no longer just surviving. There are no more crisis modes or triggers that make me want to run. I guess it is that time in my life when I am at a crossroads, trying to understand who I am, what events have shaped me into the person I am today, and perhaps trying to find some peace from writing my story and sharing it with others who may have been through similar experiences. My children may read this one day; if so, I hope they can understand and forgive me for being

the overbearing, emotional mess of a mother I was. I want them to know that I did my best and what I thought was right. My overprotectiveness may have seemed unfair to them, but in all honesty I only wanted the best for them and to protect them from the hurts I experienced as a child.

Like a familiar piece of luggage, I have dragged my abuse right along with me, and in many ways have taken it out on my children. I believe the physical, emotional and sexual abuse I experienced manifests itself physically and sits in my stomach, where the fat overhangs my jeans and pushes against the buttons that leave their imprint on my midsection. I believe the abuse leaks out of my pores and onto my skin as psoriasis so everyone can see my damaged soul and how my body has betrayed me. The Bell's Palsy is a reminder of my vanity and how the ugliness of it was reflected in my soul. It is a constant reminder of how I treated people based on their looks, and it tells me I have to do better every single day.

My immune system has been pushed to the edge by constant anxiety and hyper-vigilance, by trying to control each and every situation, scanning for danger, watching for warning signs and any potential threats to my children and me.

It is exhausting to live on the edge, waiting for the worst thing to happen, and my greatest fear was of not being prepared when it did. I know now that I am ready to share: all the shame, guilt, trauma, pain, and also my joys, successes, happiness and inspiration.

I used to get bored as a child. Even now as an adult, I get bored if I am not constantly stimulated, which sometimes leads to trouble. I used to complain about being bored and my adoptive mother used to say, "You can't have fun all the time, Colleen." I despised this comment and remember saying, "Why not? Why can't I have fun all the time?" Even as an adult I felt like I should be having fun all the time and took nothing

seriously. I shrugged off everything or detached from life. My goal was to have unrestricted fun at any cost and deal with the consequences later. The problem was, I never did deal with the consequences later; they just piled up. The fun started to run out when the memories came back, and everything came to a head when my past caught up with me. I cannot run anymore. There is nowhere left to go. I've been making the same old mistakes because my past haunts me, it holds on like a jagged nail caught on my sweater. It grates on my nerves, irritates me, and turns to acid in my stomach. Squeezing my eyes shut to block out memory isn't as effective as it once was. I cannot stop the memories and sequester them or let my body absorb them any more. What do I do? It's time to confront it all.

This book has taken over five years to write. When the first draft was done, I wanted to burn it. I never intended to publish it but I mentioned it to Raven and she insisted upon reading it. She said she couldn't put it down and then pestered me (in a good way) to publish it. She said every adoptee has a story to tell and it is time to get our stories out there. Me, I just wanted to get the memories onto paper and out of my head. When it was done, I felt like I had vomited a lifetime into these pages. At first, writing about the abuse and all the bad things came out easy; it was harder to write about the good stuff and the healing journey. That piece took longer to develop, years in fact.

Writing has been healing for me even though it required painstaking emotional accounts of terrible shame, sadness, hurt, humiliation, loneliness, grief and anger. It has been like the waves of the Atlantic Ocean crashing on me, shocking me with icy cold awareness and then painfully dragging my raw body across the sand, ripping my skin and tearing at my soul. My story is a million tiny tears being shed so you can see the anguish, the survival and the love.