



## **Sheila Nabigon-Howlett**

### **The Rabbit Fur Blanket**

G. A.'s story will be all too familiar to those Canadian Aboriginal people who have been on the self-destructive roller-coaster ride. It started, "back in the day", in grounded security in their traditional community, went through the sickening traumatization of the Indian Residential School and its legacy of unfulfilled promises, and ends up in their present struggle to find wholeness through healing and forgiveness.

G. A. was born in the 1950's in northwestern Ontario. Life was hard living on the trapline but his parents and brothers and sisters had the support of extended family when that was needed. He felt secure and loved.

At age six he was sent to Pelican Residential School where he stayed till age 12. As a young adult, and for many years thereafter, G. A. struggled alone and in secret with the emotional burden from the sexual abuse he suffered at the school.

One winter night, when he was 20 years old, drunk and recklessly driving a snowmobile through heavy snow towards his community of Lac Seul, he got lost in minus 40 degree temperature in the bush. He almost died, but in his delirious state he felt the presence of his mother who said to him, "Here, I have come to cover you with this rabbit-blanket so you don't get cold. This blanket will keep you warm." It was one of the turning points in his life.

It took G. A. many years, and many conversations, tentative at first, with other residential school survivors, to come to the point of telling friends, family and the authorities what had happened at the school. The perpetrator was eventually convicted of sexually abusing 19 boys and was jailed for four years.

G. A. now works with the T.R.C. and the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. His years of working through his own pain and the steps he has taken towards healing and forgiveness are helping him to help others. In his own words, he says:

*The residential school policy was just one aspect of the broader assimilation policy. The overall impact of colonization and assimilation is the disempowerment of people. That is why, today, we are still plagued by issues of poverty, racism, missing women and other horrifying impacts of that broader policy. The Commission, in some ways, can begin to turn around, so that people are empowered.*

And what is my part in this story? This story is so archetypal; it reflects the story of so many other Aboriginal lives, including the life of my ex-husband, that I felt it spoke to me at gut level at every point in G. A.'s life journey. The TRC has a healing job to do, for us all, native and non-native alike.