



**MUST THESE**

# CHILDREN LIVE WITHOUT LOVE?

They are the unwanted, the forsaken. But if more people deeply cared about these forgotten youngsters, they would have a chance to leave the ranks of the deserted / by Arlene Silberman

■ “And whose little sweetheart are *you*?” the department-store Santa asked the five-year-old girl who had just climbed into his ample lap. Most of his small customers were only too eager to tell him—and make sure he got the spelling straight. But this little girl stopped him in his tracks.

“I’m nobody’s nothin’,” she said quietly. Santa had come upon a child in foster care.

Her name was Dolores, and she hadn’t seen either parent in four years. Her alcoholic father had vanished, and her mother was in a mental hospital. Dolores had known two institutions and three foster homes in her short life, and at five she was already aware that nobody wanted her.

There are more than 280,000 “nobody’s nothin’s” in the United States today. Their plight forms one of the most difficult problems this nation faces—and one of the least discussed. These children are in foster care because their parents have been unable to cope with their own problems: marital discord, desertion, prolonged illness, lengthy

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## MUST THESE CHILDREN LIVE WITHOUT LOVE?

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periods of unemployment. Alone or with the help of social workers, some of the parents will eventually be able to work out those problems and reclaim their children. But more than 100,000 foster children will never return home. They will spend their childhood being tossed from foster homes to institutions and back again like so many rubber balls.

Ironically, less than three percent of these children are orphans. In most cases, both parents of the foster child are alive.

"These kids aren't orphans of the dead," said one discouraged social worker. "They're orphans of the living. And they already are candidates for tomorrow's prisons and mental hospitals." He paused. "If only more people understood—and cared—maybe we'd come up with some new ideas."

Ideas about how to solve this problem are needed; people with compassion are needed even more. The natural parents of children in foster care frequently withhold their love, yet eight out of ten refuse to release them for adoption. And of those children who are available for adoption, only fair-skinned, healthy infants (preferably with blond hair and blue eyes) are assured of permanent homes. The youngsters who don't fill these requirements, or who don't legally qualify for adoption, are likely to remain wayfarers.

### Too Old at Six

Take Tommy, a freckle-faced tow-head with a disobedient cowlick. Tommy was ten in May, and he'll doubtlessly remain in foster care until he is eighteen and on his own—unless he runs away first. He has been shunted from home to home ever since his sixth birthday, when, with his father in jail and his mother reported "missing," his grandmother had become too frail to take care of him.

Tommy was thereupon placed in an institution that housed several hundred homeless children. This kind of "orphans' home" is, fortunately, a vanishing relic today—a relic of an age when antiseptic cleanliness was the watchword and children were to be seen and not heard. Within months, a bright, friendly boy was transformed into a moody, passive youngster plagued by sleepwalking and nightmares.

The right adoptive parents could have rescued Tommy then, but couples willing to adopt a six-year-old boy are hard to come by. When that child also has emotional problems, his chances are almost nil. Meanwhile, Tommy needed a good foster family.

Finding one is no small task. Forty-one states report a desperate shortage, and the remaining states are only slightly less desperate. A child like Tommy needs exceptional parents, who can love him when he is least lovable and who can respond to his relentless demands.

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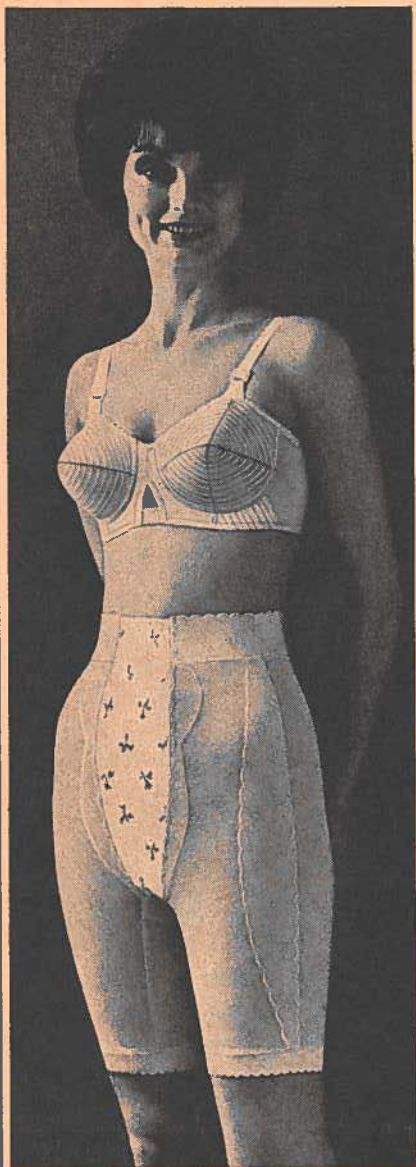
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"Today's foster kids are a troubled lot," says Joseph H. Reid, executive director of the Child Welfare League of America. "They're products of illegitimacy, broken homes, alcoholism and mental illness. They're not always nice; they can be downright 'un-nice.' Well-meaning but untrained foster parents often find these kids absolutely baffling."

Tommy's first foster family soon washed their hands of him; so did his second and third families. These foster parents were looking for companionship for their own children, and Tommy was "a bad influence." He was moody, his schoolwork was failing, and he awakened the entire household with his troubled sleep.

Fortunately, a fourth foster family was found that could offer Tommy the special understanding he required. As month followed month, his bright, friendly personality began to re-emerge. His nightmares stopped and his schoolwork picked up. Tommy had found a home.

Abruptly and unexpectedly he lost it. His foster father was transferred by his employer to another state. Either he went, or he forfeited a position attained only after years of hard work. He went—but reluctantly, for the law compelled him to leave Tommy behind. Tommy felt betrayed and deserted.

Too shattered for a good adjustment to his next foster home, he gouged the dining-room table with a knife and tried to run away. There followed a series of placements, all unsuccessful. Tommy now lives in a large institution and attends a nearby school, where, despite his high I.Q., he is failing in all his subjects. (Ninety percent of all foster children are retarded in school, yet 85 percent have normal intelligence or better.) He might have been rescued along the way; he almost was, when fate—and a restrictive law—intervened. Now it is probably too late. He is truly an orphan of the living.

#### *The "Wrong" Color*

Laurie entered foster care the day she was born. Her father was an invalid and her mother's small salary could not support a family that was already too large. Reluctantly, Laurie was left for adoption.

But no one adopted her. She spent the first year of her life in a hospital, not because she was sick, but because she had no place else to go. Next she was transferred to a Department of Welfare Shelter for "temporary" care. But not until she was already seventeen months old could Laurie be placed with foster parents.

Behind this simple chronology lies the tragedy of New York City's 13,000 Negro foster children. If Laurie had been white, ten families probably would have scrambled for the privilege of adopting her. But twenty Negro children compete for every available adoptive family.

Finding Negro foster families also presents problems. Nearly half of all Negro married women work, and the wife whose salary helps pay the rent can't give up her job to mind a baby—

unless, as Joseph Reid proposes, she were paid to do so. (Present foster-care allowances cover only the cost of maintaining the child.) Reid insists that thousands of Negro babies could be redeemed from institutions if many of the Negro women now working in offices, stores, factories and homes were hired—and specially trained—to become foster mothers. He also proposes subsidizing selected Negro couples who want to adopt a child but who can't afford to—yet. If the young couple's education has been good, he reasons, their earning potential is also good and they will soon manage without subsidy.

Joseph Reid is one of the few people who has suggested major ways to tackle a major problem—the fact that a backlog of 2,000 children await placement every month in New York City alone—either in hospitals, like Laurie, or in city shelters, where the care is even more impersonal and the surroundings are worse. And the problem is almost as acute in other big cities.

#### **WHINE AND DINE**

I yearn to serve the simple ways  
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For such as this I sit and pine,  
But guests of mine don't fall in line  
To baste or taste or grill or skew it;  
They always wait for me to do it.

—Frances Craze

Yet some adoption agencies still turn away would-be adoptive parents because they cannot guarantee a child his own bedroom! (At the shelter Laurie was lucky to have her own bed.) Some agencies turn away would-be mothers in their early forties as "too old." (At the shelter Laurie shared a fifty-two-year-old attendant with fifteen other children.) And some agencies have totally unrealistic income requirements that rule out thousands of couples who are able to provide better meals than Laurie ever received in the shelter.

The more venturesome agencies, however, are more flexible. Some will even accept working mothers, provided adequate arrangements can be made for care of the child during working hours. And the most venturesome are placing Negro children in white families—in Oregon, Washington, Minnesota, as well as in New York. There are problems arising out of such adoptions, of course. But when Florence G. Brown, executive director of the Louise Wise Services, is asked, "Is it fair to the Negro child to be placed in a white home?" she answers with another question: "Is it fair to keep a Negro child out of a white home if the alternative is for him to have no home at all?"

Ironically, religion sometimes compounds the problem of youngsters who have "no home at all." New York City regulations, for example, prohibit fam-

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ilies from rearing children who are of a faith different from their own. Most of the many Negro children who need homes are Protestants. When Laurie was a year old, a Catholic couple offered to raise her, in her own faith, but were rejected as the law requires. Four months passed before another foster family could be found.

But this time Laurie finally got a break—thanks to a new idea pioneered by the Spence-Chapin Adoption Service. Spence-Chapin claims that there are more potential foster parents than most agencies realize. But it takes a great many social workers to ferret them out, and there are some 10,000 social-work vacancies in the United States today. Spence-Chapin ingeniously gets around this shortage by recruiting 23 students from schools of social work in the New York area. These students spend four days a week receiving on-the-job training. Each trainee makes the required monthly checkups on 22 foster children the agency has already placed, thus freeing staff social workers to devote themselves to finding new foster families.

For Laurie, Spence-Chapin found what they call a "permanent" foster family—one in which the husband has a stable job, usually in civil service, and the foster child can be cared for indefinitely. Some permanent foster parents adopt their charges—47 of the first 384 children placed under this system have already been adopted. The Larsons hope to adopt Laurie some day, but right now they need the \$2.81 a day Spence-Chapin provides to pay for Laurie's food, and the supplementary payments for her clothing and medical expenses. These are bargain rates, however, compared to the \$30 a day it had cost the city to maintain her in the hospital.

*The Unanswered SOS*

Better social work might have prevented the tragedy of James Savage's life. James recently made newspaper headlines when he kidnaped a three-year-old boy and took him "home" to be his brother. For James, home was a New Jersey rooming house—no gloomier, surely, than the *twenty-five* foster homes he has lived in during his seventeen years. It took a criminal act to alert authorities finally to the fact that James Savage urgently requires psychiatric treatment.

James had been sending out SOS signals for years. He had run away from several of his "homes," most recently from a school for mentally retarded teenagers. His escapades have taken him from coast to coast, searching for what he could not find: someone to love him. James speaks with an impediment and cannot read at all. How much of his difficulty is true retardation and how much is emotional disturbance is unclear. At the time of the kidnaping, he was holding down a job as a dishwasher—a feat which, considering his harrowing childhood, is a credit to him. As Manuel Kaufman, first Deputy Commissioner of the Philadelphia Welfare Department, said recently, "It's unrealistic to keep a

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child in limbo for years and then expect him to become a good citizen."

James explained why he kidnaped the child. "He looked lost and cold," he said. Then he added, "I've been lost and cold myself." James took the coat off his back to wrap around the child. He fed him cereal and milk and gave him a warm bath and a piece of candy before tucking him into bed. In short, he gave the kidnaped boy the care he himself had always yearned for.

Tens of thousands of children in foster care are emotionally disturbed, like James. According to Dr. Leon Eisenberg, Professor of Child Psychology at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, foster children enter psychiatric treatment ten times more frequently than other children do. And countless other foster children who need help don't receive it. Most go undetected; some are on interminable waiting lists.

Few welfare agencies can afford to provide emotionally disturbed foster children with the ideal placement: residence in small, cottage-style institutions with psychiatrically-trained staffs. A year's care can run as high as \$10,000 per child. But for children too psychologically scarred to live in family settings, there is no wiser treatment than short-term care in such an institution.

For babies and young children, however, institutions—even small ones—are considered highly undesirable. Babies need parents. As Dr. Spock says, "Every time you pick your baby up . . . every time you change him, feed him, smile at him, he's getting a feeling that he belongs to you and that you belong to him. Nobody else, no matter how skillful, can give that to him."

Clearly, however, not every foster child can have his own parents. A new and promising idea is the "group home," which comes close to approximating a real family. A man and wife are employed as full-time parents for four to eight youngsters. Each such "family" lives in its own large apartment or house, leased by the welfare agency. Twenty-five cities are now experimenting with this kind of placement. It costs more than most other plans, but it will be cheaper in the end if it can bring a James Savage out of the dark and the cold.

### The One-Day-a-Year Mother

Ten-month-old Priscilla bears tragic testimony to the damage that can be done when parents are permitted to abandon their children 364 days a year. Priscilla was born out of wedlock and promptly placed in a large institution already bulging with unwanted babies. Her father disappeared; her alcoholic mother contributes nothing to her child's support. She also refuses to visit her baby, yet she will not release her for adoption. And no one can compel her to do otherwise, as long as she spends an hour or so with her daughter at least once a year—legal "proof" that she hasn't abandoned her child. (In some states a visit every two years will suffice, and until 1964 South Carolina didn't require any visits at all.)

Priscilla lives in a crib caged in with

nets. Since no one has time to watch her, she is also strapped to the railings for added protection. Her bottles are propped up on pillows; no one has time to feed her. She is even fed fruits and vegetables from bottles.

Priscilla's mother will not permit her to be placed with foster parents. "I don't want her getting attached to any other mother," she says candidly, reflecting an anxiety many natural parents feel. Most, however, can be persuaded that institution living is damaging their child. Priscilla's mother remains unimpressed by the sad reports the social worker brings her each month.

"So what if she's stopped cooing?" she said when told that Priscilla was becoming unnaturally silent. "Gentlemen like a girl who knows how to listen. She'll be a Southern belle."

"Lots of babies cry; it's good for their lungs," was her reaction on another occasion. And when the social worker warned her that her baby no longer responded to people, she retorted with scorn, "Why should she be happy to see you? I hate your visits and my baby does, too."

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The social worker sees what is happening with painful clarity, but no court in the land will force the mother to face up to her responsibilities.

Some progress has been made, in recent years, in solving the problem of the foster child. Today, child-welfare workers are aware of the importance of family life, even when it is less than ideal, and they try to keep families intact. Sometimes, instead of placing a child in foster care, they will work to rehabilitate his parents. Or they will send a trained housekeeper into the home during a mother's prolonged absence or illness. When the child must be removed from the home, the most progressive agencies are experimenting with ways to prevent his young life from being stunted by incarceration in an institution or by multiple foster placements.

But the ugly fact remains that thousands of "nobody's nothin's" will rot away their childhood unless national concern and compassion for their plight can be aroused. We must re-examine the laws that work against the foster child's best interests; we must fill the social-work vacancies and provide the psychiatric help that is needed; we must keep searching for new ideas to help solve this increasingly serious problem. The penalty for not doing so is exorbitant, not only in terms of money but in terms of wasted lives. ♦