

NOTES FROM A BLIND MAN

ARTHUR STREET RUNS EAST TO WEST IN A LONG, STRAIGHT ribbon through the downtown area of the Fort William region of Thunder Bay. Arthur Street is devoid of charm — it's a stretch of drive-thru restaurants, gas bars, and grocery stores, and cars in a hurry to get anywhere but here.

Turn off Arthur, north onto to Syndicate, and you'll find the Victoriaville Centre, a poorly planned shopping mall with a 1970s vibe. The mall is riddled with empty stores and stragglers having a cup of coffee before heading over to the courthouse across the street. Parts of the mall have been taken over by mental health clinics, an art gallery, and an Indigenous health centre. Upstairs is the main administration office of Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), a political organization representing forty-nine First Nations communities encompassing two-thirds of the province of Ontario, spanning 543,897.5 square kilometres.¹

There is one elevator and it behaves like an old man. It grumbles as the door shuts, and it shakes and heaves its way slowly upstairs. A sign posted near the buttons says, "When the elevator breaks down, call this number..." "When," not *if*.

This was where I found myself one grey day in April 2011. I was there to see Stan Beardy, NAN's grand chief.

The 2011 federal election was in full swing. The incumbent Conservative candidate, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, was largely loathed by the Indigenous community. During his five years as prime minister, he had stripped away environmental protections, built pipelines, and continually underfunded the 634 First Nations across Canada.² Harper was duking it out with Jack Layton, a former Toronto city councillor and leader of the left-leaning New Democratic Party. Layton was a guitar-playing socialist whose mandate was to tear down highways and build bike lanes and parks.

The receptionist ushered me into a large common meeting room to wait for Stan. Everything in the room was grey — the walls, the tubular plastic tables, the carpets. The only splash of colour was a white flag with a red oval in the middle. Inside the oval — a traditional symbol of life for Indigenous people — is the Great White Bear. The red background is symbolic of the Red Man. The bear is stretched out, arms and legs open wide. His feet are planted firmly on a line, which represents the Earth, while his head touches another line, which is symbolic of his relationship to the Great Spirit in the sky. The circles forming the bear's rib cage are the communities, and the

lines of the rib cage are Indigenous songs and legends, cultures and traditions that bind all the clans together.

Stan walked in and greeted me warmly. His brown eyes twinkled as he took a seat.

Stan is a quiet, pensive man. He said nothing as he wearily leaned back in his chair and waited for me to explain why exactly I had flown 920 kilometres north from Toronto to talk about the federal election.

I launched into an explanation of what I was writing about, trying not to sound like an interloper into his world, someone who kind of belongs here and kind of doesn't. This is the curse of my mixed blood: I'm the daughter of an Eastern European and Ojibwe mother who was raised in the bush about one hour's drive west of Thunder Bay, and a Polish father from Winnipeg.

I rattled off abysmal voting-pattern statistics among First Nations across Canada, while pointing out that in many ridings Indigenous people could act as a swing vote, hence influencing the trajectory of the election.

Stan stared at me impassively.

I started firing off some questions, but every time I tried to engage him, he talked about the disappearance of a fifteen-year-old Indigenous boy named Jordan Wabasse.

It was a frustrating exchange. We were speaking two different languages.

"Indigenous voters could influence fifty seats across the country if they got out and voted, but they don't," I said. "Why?"

"Why aren't you writing a story on Jordan Wabasse?" Stan replied.

"Stephen Harper has been no friend to Indigenous people, and if everyone voted they could swing the course of this election," I countered.

"Jordan has been gone for seventy-one days now," he said.

I tried to ask about Layton. Surely the policies of the left-leaning New Democratic Party would be more focused on Indigenous issues, I pressed.

But to this, Stan said, "They found a shoe down by the water. Police think it might have been Jordan's."

This standoff went on for a good fifteen minutes before I gave up and we sat in silence. I was annoyed. I knew a missing grade nine Indigenous student in Thunder Bay would not make news in urban Toronto.

Then I remembered my manners and where I was. I was sitting with the elected grand chief of 45,000 people, and he was clearly trying to tell me something.

"Jordan is the seventh student to go missing or die while at school," Stan said. Since 2000, Jethro Anderson, Curran Strang, Paul Panacheese, Robyn Harper, Reggie Bushie, and Kyle Morrisseau had died. Now Jordan Wabasse was missing.

Stan's message finally sank in. Seven students. Seven is a highly symbolic number in Indigenous culture. Every Anishinaabe person knows the prophecy of the seven fires. Each prophecy was referred to as a fire. Each fire represents a key time in the history of the people on Turtle Island, the continent of North America. The first three fires outline the story of what life was like before first contact with Europeans in 1492, of the peaceful existence along the Atlantic coast and the migration west to find food and water.

The fourth fire predicts the coming of the light-skinned race and what happens once they arrive. This prophecy warned that the Anishinaabe would be able to tell the future by reading the faces of the light-skinned race.³ There were two predictions based on this reading. In this first, if the face was one of happiness and brotherhood, a time of change would come for everyone on Turtle Island. Two nations would join as one, resulting in the growth of a mighty nation full of knowledge and understanding. This would be a time of harmony and peace.

But the second prediction said that if the light-skinned race wore a face of darkness, the Anishinaabe must be very careful. This face would bring extreme suffering and death. This face might be hard to see in the beginning. It might resemble the first face, but in fact behind the second face the hearts of the light-skinned race are dark and want nothing more than to take for themselves what the land has to offer. This face would bring forth destruction, filling the rivers and waters with poisons and causing the animals to begin to die.

By the fifth fire, war and suffering would grip the people. There would be promises of salvation by one who would assure them that there would be joy if the Indigenous people accepted his teachings. But if the people listened to this prophet, they would be lost for generations. They would forget the ways of the past and have no direction for the future.

By the sixth fire, the light-skinned face would wear the mask of death. The people would have been deceived. Sickness of the spirit and body would overwhelm the

people and the children would be taken away. The teachings of the Elders and the past would be forgotten, and families would be torn apart and stripped bare. The people would be gutted, their purpose in life forgotten — and the “cup of life will almost become the cup of grief.”⁴

By the time of the seventh fire, young people would rise up and begin to follow the trails of the past, seeking help from the Elders, but many of the Elders would have fallen asleep or be otherwise unable to help. The young would have to find their own way, and if they were successful there would be a rebirth of the Anishinaabe nation. But if they were to fail, all would fail.

Stan told me the seven students were from communities and families hundreds of kilometres away in the remote regions of Northern Ontario, where there are very few high schools. All of them were forced to leave their reserves to pursue their education.

More than seventy-five northern First Nations from NAN territory and from Grand Council Treaty #3 near the Manitoba border are isolated reservations spread across a vast area of forests full of birch trees, sweet-smelling cedars, and the rock of the Canadian Shield. Indigenous people move to Thunder Bay out of necessity to complete their high school education, to find a job, to access health care, and to escape the poverty of the rez.

About 108,000 people live in the city, and according to Statistics Canada more than 10,000 are Indigenous.⁵ But that number is only going up. Near 2030, 15 percent of the City of Thunder Bay’s estimated population is expected to be Indigenous.⁶

The city couldn’t be any more different from the communities they have left. Back home, there are no traffic lights or crosswalks. No McDonald’s or Loblaws. Most communities have only one shop — the Northern Store, a catch-all selling everything from high-priced groceries to batteries and rubber boots. These goods are all flown in via charter airplane, making the prices prohibitive — often three or four times the price of food in southern cities.

Food insecurity in the north isn’t just about prices. Vegetables, fruit, and fresh meat are often so expensive that people rely on cheaper food items such as bread, pop, and processed meat to fuel their diet. Poverty forces these choices and a host of food-related problems plague Indigenous people as a result. Diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and dental problems are all consequences of diets high in carbohydrates and sugar. There is a strong push to return to traditional foods — such as moose, rabbit, fish, partridge, and goose — to reduce dependence on pricey, flown-in groceries and to learn the ways of the ancestors.

The communities are surrounded by the largest concentration of freshwater lakes in the world, but the First Nations often have no access to clean running water and sewage systems. If power goes down, water can’t be filtered. Access to strong, sustainable power is a constant issue in the north — many communities rely on carbon-spewing diesel generators to supply them with electricity. Lines can freeze in the winter. Nearly half of Ontario’s Indigenous communities have a boil water advisory at any given time. People can’t drink what comes

out of the taps, and parents can't bathe their children in water that isn't laden with bacteria. Sometimes what water they do have is stolen by bigger southern cities. For nearly a century, the Manitoba city of Winnipeg has used an aqueduct to suck away water from the Northwestern Ontario Indigenous community of Shoal Lake 40 to provide the city of nearly 700,000 people with drinking water. Meanwhile, the water left for the residents of Shoal Lake 40 is laced with bacteria and a boil water advisory has been in place for nearly twenty years.⁷

The communities have virtually no hospitals — there is one in Moose Factory — no professional fire departments, and very few functional schools. Almost all of the schools located in fly-in reserves end at grade eight, with only a handful going to grade twelve. If students want to go to high school, they have to move to an urban centre such as Timmins, Sioux Lookout, or Thunder Bay.

The last residential school in Canada was shut down in the 1990s. The federal government, through Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), was then supposed to fund and maintain schools for Indigenous children. But across Canada, this promise has never been properly fulfilled. The quality of teaching standards and equipment at reserve schools varies widely from coast to coast. Fundamentals that other school jurisdictions take for granted, such as libraries, gymnasiums, and science labs, are routinely absent.

"Going to high school is the right of every Canadian child," Stan said. But these children have been treated differently, their needs forgotten in a country that prides itself

on having one of the best education systems in the world.

He looked at me. "Let me take you on a drive."

We left the NAN office and climbed into his beat-up old pickup truck. He popped a CD of gospel music into the player. Listening to gospel music soothed Stan's soul. He felt closer to his son when he thought about God.

Daniel Beardy was nineteen years old when he was found beaten and unconscious at a house party on Fort William First Nation. He was just finishing up at Dennis Franklin Cromarty (DFC) High School in Thunder Bay, the school for Indigenous students run by the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC). Most of the kids who attend Dennis Franklin come from reserves several hundred kilometres away from Thunder Bay. The students have to live in boarding houses and the boarding parents are paid by the school to look after the kids. Six of the seven students in this book went to DFC.

The Beardys are from Muskrat Dam First Nation, an isolated community of about three hundred people, deep in Ontario's north, accessible only by air. But because Stan, Daniel's father, was the grand chief, he had to move to Thunder Bay. His wife, Nellie, joined him and so did Daniel, who lived with his parents while he was attending high school.

Daniel was Stan and Nellie's only son, their pride and joy, a gregarious teen who loved life, his friends, and hockey. The Beardys' son fell in love with the game when he was five years old and later ranked second as a goalie in the Ontario Junior A League. The move to Thunder Bay meant he could play for more professional teams that were

once home to NHL greats like the Staal brothers, Patrick Sharp, and goalie Matt Murray.

Daniel's NHL dream was beaten out of him on a late July night. After spending thirty hours in intensive care, he succumbed to his wounds on August 1, 2004.

Stan cannot let Daniel go. And he would not let the seven go. When Stan talked about losing his son, the pain of the lost seven was closely tied to him. The loss of Daniel and the loss of the seven represented the loss of hope, the failure of one generation to take care of the next. Their disappearances and deaths signified everything wrong in the relationship between Canada and the Indigenous people.

Stan was telling me that Jordan, the boy who was missing, was a goaltender like Daniel, when he stopped the car.

I looked around and saw the James Street swing bridge that crossed the Kaministiquia River. He parked near the shore, behind a couple of buildings that looked like they were abandoned.

"What are we doing here?" I asked as I stepped out of the truck.

A feeling of dread rose within me.

Before us was the Kam's just-thawing, rushing brown water. On the other side of its swollen spring banks loomed Animikii-wajiw, Ojibwe for Thunder Mountain, or what the colonials call Mount McKay, a tourist destination that offers a panoramic view of the city and of the sleeping Nanabijou. Animikii-wajiw, towering three hundred metres over the city, is not just a scenic outlook. It is the spiritual centre for the Ojibwe of Fort William First Nation.

My heart beat fast. Sickness brewed in the pit of my stomach. I knew this place well. This was my grandmother's reserve, where my children have run through the long grass under the glare of the summer sun and have been chastised by patrolling rez police officers for trying to climb the crumbling shale rocks on the side of the mountain.

Stan nodded and then said, "We think Jordan was chased into the river."

Searchers found one of his running shoes right here. Indigenous hunters, experts in tracking animals through the bush, found footprints leading up to the water. It looked like there had been a chase.

The bodies of four boys had already been discovered in the waters and floodways that feed into Lake Superior.

One month later, Jordan would be the fifth.

THESE ARE THE NOTES from a blind man.

The blind man is an Elder.

He had a vision.

So he told Lillian Suganaqueb. Lillian was in charge of the Webequie First Nation community search for Jordan Wabasse, who went missing on February 7, 2011. She had set up a command centre on the Fort William side of the city, in the old Canadian Red Cross office.

When Jordan disappeared, members of the Webequie First Nation community travelled nearly 540 kilometres south to Thunder Bay to search for him. Dozens of them, young and old, relatives, friends, and strangers, because

this is what you do when one of your own has gone missing.

Some of the searchers were expert trackers, known for their prowess in the bush. They travelled the winter roads and came with their trucks and their snowmobiles.

Among them was the blind man.

Lillian talked to the blind man. She sat down with him at a table, and with a ballpoint pen she drew out his vision on six sheets of white paper. The drawing starts with a river, running in a squiggle down the centre of the page. This river is the Kam. Beside the river there is a fence and two buildings, side by side, with a note that says they are about a foot apart.

The Elder says that he sees train tracks on the north side of the water. On the south side he sees Mount McKay. He sees a bridge. The blind man sees the pulp mill. He sees buildings, grain elevators. He sees an industrial warehouse, storage. The place is not fenced. It is along the rail tracks. Lillian draws it all.

He tells Lillian that two people met Jordan on the night he vanished. They are young, like him. There is an altercation. A scuffle.

They are "definitely trying to hide," says the blind man.

The blind man sees the spirit of Jordan's body lying down on the ground. The snow is not very deep. Jordan's spirit sits either on top of the water or on the shore.

The blind man sees Jordan's face. His face faces north. His feet face south.

The blind man says the turtle spirit is near. So is the night bird. He says the bear travels at night.

Then he says, "The more you search, the more he vanishes."

IN SEPTEMBER 2010, Jordan Titus Lawrence Wabasse flew down to Thunder Bay where he was enrolled in the Matawa Learning Centre, a brand-new school located in the two-storey brown building that houses the Matawa Tribal Council. The school has no green space or fields for athletics, no track or anything else that might give the appearance of a high school. It is a dated, low-rise office tower that faces a major thoroughfare and a parking lot.

The Matawa Tribal Council represents nine Cree and Ojibwe northern First Nations, including Jordan's home of Webequie. The council chose the name because in both Ojibwe and Cree *Matawa* means "the meeting of the rivers." Matawa's nine communities share a common geographical boundary in the north — they are all connected by major river systems. It is not uncommon for Indigenous tribal councils to come together and form an alliance to offer a variety of services for those from home who find themselves in the city. The councils can help with job training, housing, and even education.

Matawa runs elementary schools in all nine of its First Nations. The council is also keenly aware of and upfront about its failings. In their own 2007 educational report, they note that despite major improvements over the past ten years, Matawa's education system remains "subpar" in comparison with those of other municipalities and falls below provincial standards. The system struggles with low

student achievement and “significant grade gaps against provincial standards.” There is a lack of classroom facilities, teaching resources, and specialty teachers who can educate children with cognitive, physical, and special needs.⁸

Only thirty students were enrolled at the Matawa Learning Centre. It offers an alternative education program where kids are given an individualized learning plan — students aren’t accepted at the school unless they prove they are responsible and able to handle the program. Jordan was both.

Jordan had begged his mom, Bernice, to let him go to Thunder Bay to continue his education. He was a good student, strong in English and in math.

Bernice was hesitant. She wanted her son to stay in Webequie and attend the local high school. She knew it wasn’t the best school — the school was made up of portables and had limited choices in courses — but Thunder Bay was so far away and she wouldn’t be able to go with him because she had to stay to take care of Jordan’s younger siblings.

Jordan had big dreams. He desperately wanted to play hockey in a real house league and eventually play for the Maple Leafs or another NHL team. He knew that would never happen if he stayed in Webequie. The community didn’t even have an indoor arena. There was only an outdoor rink, which wasn’t always maintained even in the winter, and there were not enough kids for a proper league. Bernice knew what she needed to do — send her son to the city, where he could get a high school education and play for a real league.

Bernice had to let Jordan go. She couldn’t stand in the way of him wanting to better himself. What mother could? It tore her up inside, but she had to smile, fill him with confidence, and ignore the dull ache of worry that gathered inside her.

In Thunder Bay, Jordan would have to board with his distant cousin Clifford Wabasse and his wife, Jessica, in their two-storey townhouse on a crescent near the airport in Fort William. Boarding parents were given \$500 a student, every month, to cover living expenses such as the roof over their head, snacks, and dinner. The “parents” were under no obligation to supervise the kids at night, eat meals with them, help them with their homework, or take them to any after-school activities. Clifford’s house was small so Jordan shared a room with another student, Shane Troutlake. Clifford liked Jordan right off the bat. He was a quiet, polite kid who kept to himself. Jordan stood a strapping six foot one, and at two hundred pounds he could easily be mistaken for a man. But he wasn’t a man. He was a fifteen-year-old kid who had not yet grown into his adult body.

To get to school, Jordan and Shane had to take public transit. A stop was just a short walk away on Mary Street. On Monday, February 7, 2011, Clifford saw Jordan leave for Matawa at 8:20 a.m. as usual.

It was cold that morning. Northern, freeze-your-ears-off cold, the temperature fluctuating between minus seventeen degrees Celsius during the day and minus thirty-two at night. Like most teenage boys, Jordan wasn’t dressed for the weather. He wore white Adidas running

shoes, a Maple Leafs baseball cap, a purple Hurley hoodie under a lined, dark-blue denim jacket, a white T-shirt that said *Blink If You Want Me*, and black plastic wind pants.

Jordan met his buddy Desmond Jacob, a fellow student from Webequie, on the bus that morning, and Shane saw Jordan in the hall at Matawa later that afternoon. At any given time, there were about a dozen kids from Webequie at the high school. For many, this was the first time they had ever been to a city—the first time they saw traffic lights or a shopping mall. Thunder Bay was nothing like home.

Webequie is perched up high in the James Bay Lowlands, accessible only by flight or by frozen winter ice roads. From the air, the lowlands look like giant green tiger stripes ripped across the landscape. Pea-green muskeg runs beside long, thin rivers and brown, mushy earth. Underneath the mush lie vast, untouched resources, everything from diamonds and nickel to copper and chromite, the material used to make stainless steel appliances. This area of the north is called the Ring of Fire, named by a prospector with a Johnny Cash fetish.

The people of Webequie try to live traditionally. They hunt, they fish, they skin their animals and use the hides for clothes or as a base for beautifully beaded mitts, moccasins, and other goods. Jordan grew up learning the traditional ways of his people and he was at home in the bush. He was a great help to his family when the seasons were changing and it was time to hunt so they could fill the freezer with fish and meat before the cold set in.

Jordan knew about responsibility. If he needed to be somewhere because he was relied upon for help, he'd be

there. So when Jordan didn't show up for supper that night in Thunder Bay, and when he didn't call to say he was going to be late, Jessica found it strange. Jordan had hockey that night. He always came home to eat before practice at 8:45 p.m. Jordan was the goalie for the Current River Comets, a Midget B team. Considering he had not played in any house league growing up, this was a remarkable feat and it showed his blossoming talent. The coaches told him that he should have been placed in the AA League, but he had missed the draft date. They told him to keep playing and that he'd make it the following year.

Jordan had also planned to be home that night because he had promised his girlfriend, Myda O'Keese, that he'd call her at 11:00 p.m. Myda was from Eabametoong (Fort Hope) First Nation, a northern community nearly 350 kilometres north of Thunder Bay. She used to live in Thunder Bay with her aunt while she attended Hammarskjold High School. The two had met a couple of summers before at Webequie's community powwow. They were inseparable, seeing each other after school, with Jordan usually visiting Myda at her aunt's house. She was also a permanent spectator at his hockey games. But in January, Myda's aunt had wanted to return to their community, and Myda had no choice but to go with her because there was no one else to care for her in Thunder Bay. The two had been dating for two years and Jordan was missing her deeply. They had made plans for him to visit her at Fort Hope during the upcoming March Break.

Just after midnight, Myda called Jordan's boarding house. The phone rang and rang but no one answered. The

only way to reach Jordan was on the land line or through his computer. Jordan had lost his cell phone the month before.

Jessica would lie awake until 2:00 a.m., wondering where Jordan could be.

THE LAST TIME JORDAN was seen alive, he was getting off a white-and-blue Thunder Bay Transit bus, not more than one block away from his boarding house.

He had been at the Intercity Shopping Centre, a popular hangout for teenagers. The Intercity is in the no man's land of Thunder Bay, that nondescript middle part of the city down by the Kam and the railway tracks that links Fort William to Port Arthur. Some call this area the "demilitarized zone" or the DMZ.

Everybody went to the Intercity. It was the largest and only modern mall in all of Northwestern Ontario, with a food court and trendy, brand-name clothing stores. For northern teens who grow up in communities without any stores or restaurants, the mall is an exotic indoor experience full of hamburgers, doughnuts, and pop, with plenty of free seating. After school, you can run into everybody at the mall.

Jordan later met up with more friends, Jared Sugarhead and Michael Semple, and they decided to do a bit of drinking. Besides hanging out at the mall, indiscriminate drinking was a common way to pass the time for some of the teens from the north, who suddenly found themselves unsupervised and in the playland of the city. Drinking

was the great social equalizer for lonely kids lacking self-confidence or friends or who just wanted to fit in with the crowd. Where the alcohol came from that night or what it was Jordan was drinking is anyone's guess.

After a while, Jordan split from Jared, tipsy but coherent. His image was captured at 8:15 p.m.; he was walking alone through the mall hallways near the bathrooms, his Maple Leafs baseball cap sitting backwards on his head, a Subway cup in his hands. At that point he would have had to bolt home if he wanted to pick up his equipment and make it back out again in time for his 8:45 p.m. hockey practice.

To make his way home, he had to get from the Intercity to City Hall, where all the buses converge and veer off to other, far-flung parts of the city. City Hall was a central meeting spot for teens who were on their way home to their boarding houses after school. It was also a meeting point for all sorts of travellers trying to keep warm while they waited for buses.

High school students Julie Mequanawap, Victoria Moonias, and Ashley Keeskitay remember seeing Jordan on the 1 Mainline. It was then around 9:30 p.m. and they rode the bus together for nearly half an hour. Jordan was sitting alone near the centre doors, holding a clear bottle in his left hand. The girls were laughing in their cluster, but they knew Jordan and Myda so they decided to get out their smart phones and make a funny video, and in it Jordan told Myda he missed her.⁹

Ashley could tell Jordan had been drinking. She watched him get off at his stop on Mary Street and walk toward his boarding home on Holt Place and she sent

the video off to Myda, who she would speak to later that night. The last image of Jordan was caught by Thunder Bay Transit video footage at 10:00 p.m.

The blind man told Lillian about the girls on the bus.

He said the taller one's spirit knew more than she was saying.

JORDAN'S BOARDING PARENT, CLIFFORD, called the Thunder Bay Police on February 8, the day after he last saw Jordan, to report him missing. He told the police that Jordan had left the house at 8:20 the morning before and that he never came home. That night, at 10:00 p.m., Detective Constable Robert Main went to the house and did a thorough check for Jordan. Based on the missing persons report he had received, Main thought that Jordan had gone missing that evening, when in fact it had already been a full twenty-four hours.¹⁰ The detective asked for a photo of Jordan, and Jessica showed the detective an image of him on her desktop computer.¹¹ Jordan's last post on his Facebook page had been on February 5. Like many northern kids, he was a heavy Facebook user, with 4,300 messages on his page.¹² Over the next forty-eight hours, Main was made aware of, but did not immediately interview, Matawa students who had information about Jordan's last whereabouts.¹³

On February 11, the first article on Jordan's disappearance appeared in the *Chronicle-Journal*. It was a news brief, no longer than four sentences, stating that Thunder Bay Police were asking for the public's help to locate a

missing fifteen-year-old: "Jordan Wabasse is Native Canadian and was last heard from on Monday. He is six-foot-one and weighs 200 pounds. Police said he may be in the Victoriaville area and he has been known to frequent the south core area."

That same day, the Thunder Bay Emergency Task Unit conducted its first ground search for Jordan. They had waited three days to search for a fifteen-year-old boy. No Amber Alert was issued—contrary to common practice by Canadian law enforcement when a child goes missing or is believed to have been abducted and police feel the child is in grave danger and can be found. No K-9 unit was sent out; nor was a forensic identification unit dispatched. Police did a search on foot, knocking on the doors of the mostly Second World War-era homes, just kilometres away from Mount McKay and the railway tracks. They started at the bus stop on Mary Street West, where Jordan was last seen, and fanned out, travelling east to Holt Place, then west to Neebing Avenue, and then to the most easterly portion of Georgina Bay. Then they went south back to Mary Street West and north to a bike path. They showed Jordan's picture to every household, every person they encountered, and they came up with nothing. No one had seen him.

The next day, police made up missing persons posters of Jordan and distributed them to every uniformed officer on patrol. Jordan's image was entered into the computer system and widely circulated. The Emergency Task Unit headed out again, expanding the search geographically. On foot, the officers began a grid search, canvassing every

single residence and combing through everyone's yard. A plea went out in the newspaper for residents of the area to check their garages and sheds.

Again, there was nothing.

SIX DAYS AFTER JORDAN was last seen, a community search team from Webequie found a baseball cap and footprints in the river snow, running toward the James Street swing bridge.¹⁴ The cap wasn't in the water or half-frozen in ice or buried in the snow. It was lying on top of the ice, near a wooden lean-to that had been constructed right below the bridge, on the east side of the Kam River. To the south was Mount McKay. To the north were the train tracks, and in the distance the two grain elevators that had been in the blind man's visions. The distance from the closest bus stop on Mary Street to the swing bridge was 2.2 kilometres. It was like someone had set the cap down, for just a moment.

The hat looked brand new. It was dark blue with a white Maple Leafs logo. It still had the gold sticker on the brim that indicated the size and authenticated it as official National Hockey League merchandise. The cap was sent to the Centre of Forensic Sciences in Toronto for tests, and the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) sent up an aerial drone to take photos of the area. Police said they weren't ruling out foul play.

As soon as the Webequie searchers found the hat and the footprints, they contacted the Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service (NAPS), an Indigenous police force, as well as Jordan's parents, Bernice and Derek Jacob.

Bernice and Derek had flown to Thunder Bay on a small charter flight as soon as they heard their son was missing. They rented a block of rooms at the Airline Hotel on Arthur Street, just across from the airport, for searchers coming in from Webequie and surrounding communities.

Police visited Bernice at the hotel and asked her for a DNA sample.

Then they called in the dive team.

Ontario Provincial Police divers conducted extensive underwater searches in the openings of the ice where the hat had been sitting. The divers scoured the area for nearly two days, working in frigid conditions, deep under solid, thick ice.

But they found nothing.

Calls were flooding in to the police by people who thought they had seen Jordan, at the mall or a Mac's Convenience Store or near a bank or a grocery store, begging for change. By February 18, the police had followed up on nearly twenty different possible sightings of Jordan but had come up empty every single time. They also paid a visit to the security guards at the Intercity mall. One of the guards had torn down a missing persons poster of Jordan that was posted in the mall and thrown it into the trash.¹⁵

HERE'S THE THING ABOUT the north: Everybody knows everyone else. If you ask Jennifer Wabano, who lives in Attawapiskat First Nation on the coast of James Bay, if she knows Sam Hunter in Weenusk First Nation near Hudson

Bay, she'll most likely say, "Of course I know Sam. He's my cousin."

The north may stretch out over a huge, underpopulated geological land mass of boreal forest, but the people who live there are all connected. They are connected through the land and the rivers and each other. Traditionally hunters and gatherers, Indigenous people travelled vast distances by foot or on water, tracking animals to hunt them or to trap them, then bring them home.

So when a child goes missing from an isolated community like Webequie, Cat Lake responds. So does Marten Falls, and Sioux Lookout, and a whole lot of communities in between. And if the band councils fall short of money to help pay for the search effort — lodging, food, time off work — the Anish start fundraising. They hold bingo nights, community events, and walks to raise funds. In March 2011, one month after Jordan went missing, Peggy and Danny Sakakeep started a five-hundred-kilometre walk from Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nation in Ontario's northwestern corner, along winter roads made of rock-solid frozen lakes and snow, to Webequie, to raise awareness and money. If a community is in need, the northern Anish organize and they hit the road.¹⁶

It was a team from Cat Lake First Nation that found Jordan's right Adidas running shoe on March 20, 2011, the first day of their search. Cat Lake is inside the Treaty No. 9 territory, about one hundred and seventy-five kilometres north of Pickle Lake and about three hundred kilometres away from Webequie. The day before, thirteen members of the community arrived in Thunder Bay to help look for

Jordan, who had now been missing for one month. They came in a convoy of vans and checked into the brand-new Holiday Inn. Cat Lake searchers have a reputation for being among the best in the north. Once, they found someone after he had been missing for forty-five days.¹⁷

Besides searchers, they brought with them loads of food — moose and fresh fish — to feed everyone coming and going from the search headquarters.

The Cat Lake search team put together a mission statement, which they printed out on a piece of paper and handed to everyone:

We will start our search with a prayer and end with one as well.

We will all work as one team, mind, body and spirit.

We will search together as a team on one and only one location at a time.

We will absolutely not have any use of alcohol or drugs during our time in Thunder Bay.

We will not stray from the team.

We will focus only and solely on our mission of locating Jordan. This means our personal endeavours will be placed aside; we will use the daylight given to us by the Creator to search the grounds of Thunder Bay.

We will not leave a member behind and will always know the whereabouts of each person.

We will rest when others get tired.

If any member in our team locates Jordan, we will not touch but only confirm and block off the area with ribbons.

Take pride of your strength and courage in offering yourself to help another.

The Cat Lake searchers went to the shores of the Kam River, guided by the map of the blind man's visions. They brought hooks, ropes, and bars to poke through the ice at the shoreline. Four members — Tom, Maggie, Paddy, and Daisy — found Jordan's shoe. It was a new white Adidas running shoe, size 10.5. The laces were tied behind the tongue of the shoe. They picked the shoe up with a stick, put it in a box, and brought it to the search centre. The searchers also recognized something else near the shoe — drag marks in the snow. They notified the police, who dismissed the marks as "probably kids sliding."⁸

At the searchers' headquarters, which was located in a former Canadian Red Cross office, Bernice took one look at the right shoe and knew it was her son's. Jordan tied his laces behind the tongue. The Thunder Bay Police were called in. They took the shoe as evidence, then went with Tom and Lillian to where it had been found. Tom explained its exact location, which way it had been facing.

Once the police left, the Cat Lake searchers finished for the day. They went to Walmart to unwind and then grabbed something to eat at McDonald's. By the time they got back to the hotel, it was late, but Tom, Daisy, Paddy, and a searcher named Delia Oombash couldn't sleep. At 1:30 a.m., in the freezing March night, they grabbed some tobacco and food and made their way down to the loading docks by the Kam River to make an offering for Jordan's spirit.

The next day, another Cat Lake searcher found blood in the snow. He scooped it up and put it in a ziplock bag. They called Thunder Bay Police, who took the blood away. Later that day, the searchers found two teeth. They got another ziplock bag, put the teeth in it, and called the police again.

They would wait weeks to find out that the blood wasn't human and the teeth weren't Jordan's. But there was a positive match between Bernice Jacob's DNA and a sample of genetic material taken from Jordan's goalie mask and the cap that was found sitting on the ice. The possibility that someone else had the same genetic profile was eleven trillion to one.

THE BLIND MAN WASN'T the only one to have had a vision about Jordan. So did Meredith Anderson from Kasabonika First Nation. Meredith didn't really know Jordan, but she dreamed of him. She told her friend Rose, who took notes on foolscap.

I had another dream of Jordan, the note begins in Rose's loopy letters.

"Really?" Rose asked.

"He was standing," said Meredith.

"Where was he standing?"

"By the fence by the shore," Meredith said.

"On the bridge side?"

"Where we heard a voice before. Just down by the river where the stumps stick out from the lake. He was standing there," Meredith said.

"Left or right?" Rose asked.

"I'm not sure, but I know he was standing somewhere there so he's got to be there somewhere," Meredith insisted.

"Who were you with when you heard the voice?"

"Anita, she heard it too."

"Is it near the grain elevator? That area?" Rose asked.

"Yeah," said Meredith. "Just by the fence where the stumps are. Do you know where I am talking about?"

Meredith had seen Jordan in the exact same area as the blind man had, by the swing bridge and the grain elevators.

SOMETIMES THE SEARCH FELT endless. Every day a community member would post the number of days Jordan had been missing on a white piece of bristol board by the entranceway of the upstairs search headquarters. The tally was a dismal reminder — every single day added was a day of hope lost. Day after day, after the cap was found, there was nothing. But the searchers did not give up. They stood outside by the James Street swing bridge wearing placards with Jordan's face, asking people in cars driving by to donate to the Find Jordan fund. And every day, as the searchers carefully walked along the Kam riverbanks and organized searches of the streets, rumours began to fill the void of information.

Two stood out.

First, somebody told Lillian that a guy named Darren Oliver Beaver had heard that a man named Jordan Waboose, originally from Fort Hope, owed a drug dealer \$8,000. Beaver believed that Jordan Wabasse might have

been mistakenly kidnapped by Native Syndicate street gang members who believed him to be Waboose. The Syndicate, based out of Manitoba, expanded into Thunder Bay at least two decades ago. The gang has a strong foothold in the city's drug trade, supplying teens with their fix and then sending them home with drugs to sell on the northern reserves.

Second, Sharon Angeconeb, the vice-principal of Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, called police to say that one of her students, Angela Rae, had spoken to another student, a boy who talked tough. He told Angela that he and his friends had chased Jordan from Mary Street, and that Jordan tried to get away by running across the ice on the river and fell through. Angela said she was with her friends Glen Kwandibens and Amber Angeconeb when she heard the story. The police questioned Glen and Amber, who claimed they didn't know what Angela was talking about. They said she was lying.¹⁹ There is no indication Thunder Bay Police continued to follow up on this lead.

Police also called Liz Waboose, Jordan Waboose's mother, who told them her son was afraid of the Native Syndicate; she feared members of the gang had killed Jordan Wabasse, believing him to be her son.

On March 18, Bernice Jacob gave police a copy of a Facebook chat between Jordan Waboose in Fort Hope and his friend Lawrence Mekanak in Webequie, which had taken place earlier that same day.

WABOOSE: Rumours saying I am the reason Jordan Wabasse is missing.

MEKANAK: I haven't heard anything like that.

WABOOSE: Oh. K. Kool. Because I have.

WABOOSE: Who are the boys parents?

Mekanak responded that it was Bernice Jacob and Derek.

WABOOSE: Oh. K. I think I have information on that shit.

MEKANAK: Yea, should get that info to some1 soon. Parents getting tired and its lots of money too for Webequie costing. They just want to find their boy.

Waboose said he knew and that he was waiting for someone to come and talk to him.

Thunder Bay Police called the Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service in Fort Hope and told them they were looking for Jordan Waboose, who was wanted for questioning in Thunder Bay. But NAPS told Thunder Bay Police that the OPP had already spoken to Waboose and given all the information they had to a Thunder Bay detective.²⁰

IN EARLY MAY, THE Kam River started to show signs of spring. The ice and snow were beginning to melt. Breaks could be seen in the frozen surface, where the water rushed underneath.

Three boaters called police after they thought they saw a body floating in the river by the Western Grain

terminal, in the area of the swing bridge. Thunder Bay Police arrived at 7:05 p.m. and spoke to the three fishermen. Then the fire and rescue trucks arrived. The police called the coroner. About twenty searchers were in the area and had arrived at the scene. They "smoked cigarettes, talked on cellphones, and comforted each other while waiting to hear from police," wrote one reporter in the *Chronicle-Journal*.²¹ The search had run for ninety-two days.

Dale Smith stood on the Kam's banks with his wife, Martina. The two had been searching for Jordan since he was first reported missing.

"If it is Jordan," Dale said, "it will put the family at ease, because it could have been the other way around. They might not have found him. If he'd gone on to Lake Superior... Lake Superior doesn't give up its dead."²²

It was the fire crews that pulled the bloated body from the river. The body was badly decomposed, but the physical description, along with the blue jacket, hoodie, and the white Adidas running shoe on the left foot, matched the description of Jordan.

Waiting funeral home workers, who were standing sentry at the shore, took the body to the morgue.

Bernice had returned home briefly to Webequie in early May. She had been in Thunder Bay for long stretches of time and wanted to see her young sons. On May 10, she flew back to the city, arriving in the early evening. She was met at the airport by a group of volunteer searchers. They told her a body had been found in the river. They drove Bernice down to the water and she met with police, who

told her they were not sure it was her son. She went back to her hotel to wait.²³

At 9:00 p.m., Thunder Bay Police sergeant Don Lewis went to the hotel to speak with Lillian and Bernice about what they had found.²⁴

The post-mortem would be conducted the next morning. But the dental records would tell them what they already knew. It was a match. They had found Jordan.

THREE DAYS AFTER HIS body was found, police received a call from a staff member of the Churchill Group Home, a coed residence for teens run by Children's Aid. One of their residents, Josee Charbonneau, said she had heard from someone that a man named Steven Cole and another man had pushed Jordan off the James Street swing bridge. But Josee didn't want to talk to the police or anyone else about it. She fled the group home and told no one where she was going.

Eight days after Jordan's body was discovered, police tracked down an acquaintance of Charbonneau's, Brittany Kakegamic. Brittany said she was speaking to Josee at the Thunder Bay courthouse and that she knew something about Jordan. Josee had said Steven Cole was bragging that he and another, unknown, man were walking to Fort William when Cole pushed Jordan off the James Street swing bridge. Cole had been on his way to Fort William First Nation to buy cigarettes. Jordan tried to fight him.

Police found Josee at the courthouse. She confessed that her friend Arianna Rollin had told her that Steven Cole

and a man named Austin Millar, who was also known as Bubbles, saw Jordan and that he was drunk. She said Jordan tried to pick a fight with them and that's when Steven pushed him into the river.

Police tracked down Austin and Steven, who both denied ever having anything to do with Jordan, or even seeing him that night. But five years later, a friend of Cole's, Riley Freeman, admitted in a courtroom that Steven Cole had told him that he did it. Freeman was only thirteen at the time. He said he believed Cole because he was so shaken up.²⁵

Freeman knew his friend had a history of being violent and stealing drugs from people. Yet police had not questioned any of Jordan's friends, such as Jared Sugarhead, who saw him that night, to confirm whether Jordan had a bag of pot on him that night and if possibly he was rolled for it.²⁶

On June 23, 2011, Thunder Bay Police interviewed Steven Cole. He told them that the last time he saw Jordan was before Christmas. He admitted he knew him but not well; they "hung around with people in the same circle." He said the last he heard anything about Jordan was when his mother told him Jordan's body was found in the river.²⁷

Thunder Bay Police also found Jordan Waboose, who was now living in Thunder Bay. He told the police that he had no drug debts, and that if he did he would not be living in Thunder Bay because he would be the target of angry gang members looking for their money. He also said he might have been "high" when he was interviewed by police.

Waboose added that he did not know how the rumour of mistaken identity surfaced on Facebook or where it came from, but speculated it might have been started by another young man named Kenny Wabasse. Then he told the officers his mother probably started the rumour because she was always trying to get him in trouble.

To this day, Jordan's death has no explanation. Police have no idea how Jordan, who had been a stone's throw away from his boarding house on an unforgivingly cold February night, wound up miles away in the frozen river.

The working theory seems to be this: Jordan got off the bus, quite close to his front door, but instead of going home so he could call Myda like he was supposed to, he stumbled 1.2 kilometres down Mary Street, took a 90-degree turn right, and then stumbled another 1.8 kilometres to the bridge. This would have required him to pass all the homes on Mary Street, walk down James Street past an open Robin's Donuts and an open Mac's Convenience Store, continue on past a credit union, and then walk down to an unlit underpass and up to the other side, before taking a sharp turn left to head up to the bridge to Fort William First Nation for a completely unknown reason.

Jordan didn't know anyone at Fort William. Not only that, once he got to the bridge he would have to have walked on massive concrete blocks and industrial garbage discarded by construction crews, down the steep embankment and snow, and then fallen into the water.

The file on Jordan's death was marked "Accidental" by Thunder Bay Police. A final autopsy report on his death was stamped on August 24, 2011, by regional supervising

coroner Dr. Michael Wilson. He concluded that Jordan's death was caused by "cold water drowning."²⁸

During the inquest into the deaths of the seven Indigenous students, lawyer Chantelle Bryson represented the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, the official provincial voice for children in care and those who are on the margins of society.

"I've driven that route a number of times. I've climbed over the rocks to the river," she said. "I don't buy it. Not for one minute."