

## PROLOGUE

YOU SEE, THE GIANT NANABIJOU MADE A DEAL.

The giant spent his days lumbering around Gichigami, the colossal body of water that looked like a sea. He stomped and he stomped and he stomped. His noisy footprints created massive valleys and rock faces, cut from the granite and the slate that surrounded the water.

But he never bothered the Ojibwe, who lived with him in the gorges and forests that he left standing. They had a close existence, full of happiness and peace. On the smooth rock walls near Gichigami's shores, the Ojibwe drew pictographs, telling the stories of their lives for later generations to see.

Nanabijou had a secret only the Ojibwe knew: embedded in the rock there was a shiny metal that twinkled like the starry sky. The giant didn't want anyone to take something of such beauty away from him. So he told the Ojibwe never to tell the white man where he had hidden

his silvery stash. If they kept his secret, Nanabijou promised to always protect them. If they did not, if they told the white man, who was beginning to settle in wooden houses near Gichigami, something catastrophic would happen and he would never be able to protect the Ojibwe again. The Ojibwe listened and they agreed to keep Nanabijou's secret safe.

For many moons, the giant and the Ojibwe lived in peace. Then one day, the Ojibwe found a Sioux man who said he was lost and in need of help. They took him in. But the Sioux man was a secret sneak. He had heard stories of the precious glittery metal and he wanted some to take back to his people. He befriended the Ojibwe and lived with them so he could gain their trust and find out where the silver was hidden.

The Sioux man waited patiently. Then one day he overheard the Ojibwe talking about where the silver could be found. Armed with this knowledge, he snuck away in search of the loot.

He slipped into a canoe and manoeuvred down the waters and into the crevice where the silver lay. When the Sioux man saw the treasure, he could not believe his eyes or his good fortune. He filled his pockets and stole away in the canoe.

The Sioux man was not as clever as he thought. As he made his escape down the river, he ran into travelling white men who captured him and took him prisoner. He tried to barter for his freedom with a piece of the stolen silver. But the greedy white men took his loot and asked for more. The Sioux man refused to tell them where he

had found it but the white men would not take no for an answer. They knew how they could get him talking. They sat by the fire and brought out the firewater. The firewater calmed his fears, made him feel happy, made his lips loose. When he was full of drink, the white men asked again where the silver was stashed and the Sioux man spilled out the secret.

A falcon flying overhead watched the whole scene unfold. When he heard the betrayal, he quickly flew to warn Nanabijou. But Nanabijou had known as soon as the Sioux man's words were spoken. Suddenly, he began to feel heavy, so heavy he could barely move. His limbs seized and all he could do was lie down.

He turned from warm flesh and blood to solid stone.

The Ojibwe were now on their own.

THUNDER BAY HAS ALWAYS been a city of two faces. The Port Arthur side is the white face and the Fort William side is the red face. Port Arthur lies on the north shore. It is built up on the gentle, sloping Canadian Shield. Two-storey brick houses line streets that run up and down the Shield, each with a beautiful view of Lake Superior as far as the Sibley Peninsula, where the stone-cold Sleeping Giant Nanabijou sleeps.

The red side is located down by the Kaministiquia (known locally as the Kam) River, on the Ojibwe's traditional lands near the base of Mount McKay in the flatlands known as Fort William. Except for one tiny enclave of grand homes near Vickers Park, built by the affluent of

another time, the residential streets of Fort William are staunchly working class, small bungalows or two-storey homes in various stages of repair, most with a pickup truck parked out front.

For more than ten thousand years, the Indigenous people built a thriving society along the banks of the Kam and of Gichigami, or Lake Superior, and points north and west. Gichigami is the stuff of legends. It is the largest fresh-water lake in the world. The sheer vastness of Superior controls the unpredictable weather in the bay, and all who live near her bow and bend to her moods — the jet streams, the unexpected gusts of wind, the torrential rain, and the brilliant sun. In an instant, bright, sunny skies can turn black and ominous, leaving those who are on the water wishing they were not. Hundreds of rivers and streams pour into her from all points north, including the Kaministiquia, the McIntyre, the Nipigon, the Pigeon, and the St. Louis. These rivers were the Indigenous thoroughfares of the past — families followed them either on foot or in their canoes, travelling all over the north. From time immemorial, the junctures of these rivers have provided meeting places for the Ojibwe and their Cree cousins.

Before the white face came to town, this area was where the action was. The rivers were the highways of the traders. It was the hub of the fur trade and the place where the French *coureurs de bois* and the Indigenous trappers and traders met. The Ojibwe called this place *Animikii*, or Thunder, the place where the sky rumbled and pounded with Superior's immense power. The French agreed and quickly called it *Baie de Tonnaire*, or Thunder Bay.

The Kaministiquia, an Ojibwe word meaning “river with islands,” is the largest river in Thunder Bay. Beginning at Dog Lake, it gains its mighty strength over the rugged rocks of Kakabeka Falls, a raging wonder of nature standing forty-seven metres in height. Powered by Kakabeka's flow, the Kam snakes into Fort William and commands its way around Mount McKay, where the descendants of Nanabijou's people, the Ojibwe of Fort William First Nation, still live.

Today, the Kam is dotted with industry. The white faces have tried to capture and use its speed and force. There are two generating stations on the Kam owned by Ontario Power Generation, which is owned by the provincial government. Resolute Forest Products mill, formerly AbitibiBowater, sits on the fir-lined banks. Logging trucks flow in and out of the mill all day long. A massive Bombardier assembly plant that builds sleek streetcars for southern cities is also on the Kam's banks.

The colonials have marked their territory here on the red side by constructing their important buildings of power and governance. In 2009, a new 3,995-square-metre City Hall opened at the corner of May and Donald Streets, a modern building made of shiny glass and smooth concrete. More than one hundred people can gather in the first-floor lobby and hundreds more can mingle outside on the landscaped front entranceway, complete with waterfalls and plenty of seating areas. Its wide-open spaces have also made it a popular transit hub. The streets in front of City Hall are populated by stops for buses that can take you around the city.' Just down the street from City Hall, the

architecturally revered Thunder Bay Courthouse, which opened in 2014, occupies nearly an entire city block. The 18,580-square-metre building is six storeys high, with fifteen courtrooms, an open atrium, signs posted in English, French, and Ojibwe, and security provided by the Thunder Bay Police.

The Kam still draws people to its shores. Teens come down to the river's gummy banks to take cover under bridges or in bushes to drink and party. Here they have privacy, a space of their own, beside the giant pulp and paper mill that spews smelly, yellow, funnel-shaped clouds into the air. Here they are close to nature. They sit on the rocks and listen to the rush of the water, and they are reminded of home.

Beside the mill's entrance, there is a green provincial road sign that says *Chippewa Road*. Some bureaucrat must have had a sense of humour because this is the entrance to Fort William First Nation, one of the 133 Indigenous reservations located in the province of Ontario. Chippewa Road is now the only way onto the rez. There used to be another entrance, the James Street swing bridge, but somebody set fire to it in 2013. The CN-owned bridge connected the reserve to the city. There was always something special about crossing the old, rickety bridge into Fort William. Cars were forced to slow down, tires creeping over every bump. Always at the back of your mind was the subtle fear that maybe, just maybe, this time you'd fall right through. Now, the blackened burned-out wood-and-steel shell sits there, unrepaired, as the Kam River moves swiftly underneath. Three levels of government — the city, the province,

and the federal government — can't decide on who should pay for the repairs. The reserve won't pay and neither will the railway company. The finger of blame points in all directions so nothing gets done.

OLD MONEY FROM VICTORIAN times built Port Arthur. The white face is the face of business and commerce and the rule of law. It wears button-down shirts, eats at the Keg, and lives in a cookie-cutter house in a brand-new subdivision with a Kia parked in the driveway. The people who live there are the doctors, the lawyers, and the proprietors of the twin city. On Saturdays they zip around in their cars to the big-box stores on the way to their cottages, or "camps," so they can play with their powerboats and Jet Skis.

In 1870, the British Army's Colonel Garnet Wolseley named the settlement Port Arthur to honour one of Queen Victoria's sons. Wolseley had been passing through the area with 1,200 men under orders to replace Métis leader Louis Riel's provisional government in what is now the province of Manitoba. It was from here, the north shore of Superior, where the nation building of Canada began. Railways and roads were plotted from this point west. The grand old Prince Arthur Hotel was conceived and constructed by rail barons, who needed a comfortable place to stay and dine while they expanded their growing business in the north. Deals were spun to acquire land from the Ojibwe and the Hudson's Bay Company so the young country of Canada could grow.<sup>2</sup>

The prospectors, labourers, and immigrants with

dreams of owning their own farmland followed the railway, which in turn brought the movement of goods and grains from the fast-growing west. A series of tall grain elevators — massive concrete silos standing sentry — were built on the red side, including the Western Grain elevator, down by the Kaministiquia River, on the Ojibwe's traditional lands near the base of Mount McKay. This port still has the largest grain-storage capacity in North America with eight functioning terminals along the river.<sup>3</sup>

As Port Arthur prospered, settlers arrived, bringing their families, their churches, and their own creed. Victorian ladies set up church societies and school boards, and Finnish labourers settled by the hundreds. Hospitals were constructed. The Church, in its infinite wisdom, sent harbingers of faith to administer the word of God to the masses of half-breed sons and daughters of French *coueurs de bois*, and to educate and convert the pagans and savages coming in from the bush.

In the name of all that is pure and Victorian, Port Arthur society began to flourish. But by the turn of the twentieth century, the fur trade had all but dried up and disappeared, leaving many Indigenous people destitute yet dependent on the goods and the lifestyle they had become used to being able to afford thanks to sales of beaver pelts. As the fur trade waned, many Indigenous families lived on the outskirts of town, in ramshackle cabins or houses, most with no heating or plumbing. They were not schooled in Western culture or education and did not fit into what was fast becoming the dominant British society in Port Arthur.

So if the "Indians" were to become proper English-speaking Canadians loyal to the Crown, they needed to be assimilated. Already in 1870, the Sisters of St. Joseph had opened a Catholic orphanage on the Fort William side. As soon as the orphanage became operational, complete with a school, it swelled with little Indigenous girls. The nuns, desperate to care for more souls, began to admit boys. They also appealed to the federal government's Department of Indian Affairs for money to help them expand. And the money came. The more children they had, the more funding they got. The Sisters of St. Joseph would eventually morph into the St. Joseph's Indian Residential School (also known as the Fort William Indian Residential School).

The school, which in 1907 moved to a new building on Franklin Street, took in thousands of Indigenous children who were either abandoned or dropped off by their poverty-stricken parents, who bought into the idea that if their kids were given an English education, they could adapt to this emerging colonial society. Others were rounded up from reserves and communities by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and delivered to the sisters. The red-coated police were sent in to apprehend children by Indian Agents or agents of the Crown whose job it was to make sure all the Indians were kept in line.

Not every child went willingly to residential school. There are reports of runaways in different numbers and frequencies scattered throughout historical archives. Also catalogued are reports from parents who did not want to send their kids away because they had been told by their children and others what was going on at the schools.

Children who did not return to school were duly noted and local Indian Agents would send the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to fetch them. For instance, the family of a boy named Joseph Piska, living in Savanne, west of Thunder Bay, tried to keep their boy at home. The RCMP was dispatched by Indian Agent James Burk to bring Joseph back to school. RCMP constable D. K. Andersen kept meticulous notes of his attempt to apprehend Joseph on October 25, 1930. He left the Fort William train station at 7:20 a.m. with orders to retrieve Piska and to see if any other children were hiding. But when Andersen arrived at Savanne, he found that he could not cross the water due to the unpredictable late-fall weather.

"I found that the lake was frozen over to the extent of 2 inches in depth, and all navigation stopped. As the only way of reaching the reserve is by water, there being no overland trail, and the ice not yet being safe, I wired Sgt. Mann for instructions and he wired that I return by the next train," Andersen later wrote in a report to his superiors. He was forced to abandon his search for Piska and the other children possibly hiding in Savanne.<sup>4</sup> But others would not be as lucky as Piska was on that day.

In 1966, St. Joseph's Indian Residential School was finally demolished. At least six students lost their lives at St. Joseph's and another sixteen are unaccounted for. One of the school's famous residents was the acclaimed Ojibwe painter Norval Morrisseau. His grandson Kyle Morrisseau is one of the seven students who are the subject of this book. Sitting on the site of the former residential school now is a Catholic elementary school, Pope John

Paul II. No special plaque or monument was mounted to remember Thunder Bay's complicity in this dark chapter in Canada's history, until June 19, 2017, when a mural was unveiled, depicting the old school and its students. Now every September 30, Indigenous people in Thunder Bay and across Canada commemorate all residential school survivors on Orange Shirt Day, the national day of remembrance. Folks first congregate at City Hall and then walk together to the site of the old school. When they get there, they perform a ceremony at Pope John Paul II.

To understand the stories of the seven lost students who are the subjects of this book, the seven "fallen feathers," you must understand Thunder Bay's past, how the seeds of division, of acrimony and distaste, of a lack of cultural awareness and understanding, were planted in those early days, and how they were watered and nourished with misunderstanding and ambivalence. And you must understand how the government of Canada has historically underfunded education and health services for Indigenous children, providing consistently lower levels of support than for non-Indigenous kids, and how it continues to do so to this day. The white face of prosperity built its own society as the red face powerlessly stood and watched.

All this happened as Nanabijou slept.