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The Deadly Racism of Thunder Bay

A series of stalled police investigations reveals a city that's indifferent to Indigenous lives

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IF THINGS HAD gone differently this summer, you might be reading an article by Marlan Chookomolin right now. The twenty-five-year-old First Nations man from Thunder Bay, Ontario was due to begin his studies in communications at the local Confederation College in September. Ron Chookomolin, Marlan's father, describes his son's ambitions: "he will go into journalism," he says, still using the simple future tense before he

corrects himself. “He was excited. Marlan believed he was the only person who could communicate with Indigenous people under the bridges and in the bushes, because he knew how to talk to them.”

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Instead, on June 25, Marlan Chookomolin was discovered badly beaten on a trail in the north end of Thunder Bay. According to Ron, there was bruising around his son’s neck and evidence of blunt force trauma to the back of his head. His organs failing, Marlan was put on life support by the hospital to allow his mother to fly in to see him. Desperate for his son not to be forgotten, Ron invited the media into the room. They took a photo of Ron beside the deathbed, with Marlan connected to machines, unrecognizable. Marlan died the next day, surrounded by family. The scene brings to mind a photo from 1955 in which the parents of Emmett Till—a fourteen-year-old black boy lynched after a white woman in Mississippi said he whistled at her—pose over his mutilated body. The photo shook America (http://dujye7n3e5wjl.cloudfront.net/photographs/1080-tall/time-100-influential-photos-david-jackson-emmett-till-46.jpg) and made it impossible to deny the humanity of the lynching victims. “Let people see what I’ve seen,” explained Mamie Till Mobley, referring to her decision to have an open-casket funeral for her son.

Marlan Chookomolin's father, Ron, invited media into the room to see his son on his deathbed in hopes he would not be forgotten. Photo courtesy of Ron Chookomolin

As of this writing, the investigation into Marlan's death appears to have hit a dead end—an all-too-common trajectory for police investigations of First Nations deaths in Thunder Bay. No arrests have been made, no charges filed, and, five months later, no decision reached on what happened. It's this type of inaction that has sparked two unprecedented investigations into the Thunder Bay Police Service (TBPS). The first, launched in November 2016 and led by Ontario's Office of the Independent Police Review Director (OIPRD), is looking at allegations that systemic racism influenced investigations into the deaths of nearly forty people, most of whom were First Nations. These investigations have been described as rushed and haphazard by members of the Indigenous community, who point to numerous examples of police declaring deaths accidental without waiting for an autopsy, pursuing testimony, or reaching out to witnesses.

The second investigation is being led by Senator Murray Sinclair. Appointed in July by the Ontario Civilian Police Commission, the former Truth and Reconciliation chief commissioner is studying the effectiveness of TBPS's civilian oversight body. In a thirty-five-page interim report released in October—in which he wrote at length about pending recommendations intended to help officers tackle, within their organization, "discrimination against Indigenous people in the community"—Sinclair confirmed a long-held suspicion among First Nations that local police aren't taking Native deaths seriously.

Both these investigations are occurring in the face of evidence that First Nations lives are being lost at an alarming and disproportionate rate in Thunder Bay. While the city accounts for barely 5 percent of the Indigenous population in Ontario, it accounts for roughly 37 percent of the province's Indigenous murder victims. Thunder Bay has more than three times as many First Nations murder victims than the entire province of Quebec, which has more than twelve times as many Indigenous people. In raw numbers, more Native people are murdered in Thunder Bay than in any Canadian city, save Winnipeg. One of the most shocking killings started with an assault on January 29 of this year, when thirty-four-year-old Barbara Kentner, who was walking along the road with her sister, was struck by a trailer hitch thrown from a passing car. "I got one!" is what her sister remembers hearing someone shout.

Kentner died on July 4, the same day as Marlan's funeral. Eighteen-year old Brayden Bushby was charged with second-degree murder in early November, after Native leaders lobbied police for months to upgrade the original charge of aggravated assault. The frustration sparked an online petition that collected more than 40,000 signatures. "I'm signing because it is about time our Aboriginal population is treated as first class citizens," wrote one petitioner. "This was a hate crime and he needs to be charged with murder as that was his intent."

FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE seem to be in greater danger in Thunder Bay than anywhere else in Canada. In addition to being responsible for a third of Ontario's Indigenous murder victims, this city of 120,000 led the country in hate crimes against Natives in 2015. The hostility is so rampant that, earlier this year, people started using the hashtag #ThisIsThunderBay to share stories of verbal attacks, racial slurs, police abuse, and physical

assaults—some similar to the one that took Kentner's life. Around the same time, a frustrated city hall countered the bad press with a hashtag of its own: #IChooseTBay, which boosters were invited to use to drown out the "negativity."

The duelling hashtags highlight how official reactions often miss the scale of the crisis. While racism dominates local consciousness—eight out of ten residents worry about it, according to a 2015 survey—the city's normalization of anti-Indigenous prejudice has created a picture of a town that doesn't believe it has a duty to solve the problem of violence against Natives. In writing this story, I interviewed city councillors, community volunteers, school-board members, leaders of the city's anti-racism and diversity groups—many on the front lines helping the city's neediest citizens. On record, we discussed Indigenous mistrust of city institutions and how to overcome that obstacle. Off mic, I was given a very different narrative. Thunder Bay, they told me, doesn't have a First Nations problem—First Nations people do. The real crisis, I was made to understand, is Native-on-Native crime. First Nations advocates were belittled as aggressive and pushy, and their work dismissed as counterproductive.

The irony is impossible to miss: in a city trying to welcome a growing community of immigrants and refugees with considerable civic outreach, First Nations people are treated as outsiders, as a separate class of federal citizens, not real residents. "The arrival of growing numbers of Aboriginal people in the city has resulted in a double-edged culture shock that is taxing the ability of public and social agencies to respond," argued a recent editorial in the *Chronicle Journal*, the local daily. The editorial sympathizes with the city's "traditional population" who end up feeling "inundated." By "traditional" the paper is, of course, referring to the white population, in contrast to the Indigenous population that has occupied the region for at least 9,000 years.

Pro-police bias pervades local reporting. In October 2016, the *Chronicle Journal* gave space to an officer who, angry at being called a "systemic racist," wrote an open letter in which he not only accused a prominent First Nations leader of spreading "half-truths" about his "police family" but served up a number of his own racist tropes. "When will you look at changing a flawed system where band administrators receive money, and none gets to the grassroots level where it belongs?" The following summer,

the *Chronicle Journal* took things a step further with an editorial that defended Thunder Bay police and rejected the characterization of their unsolved investigations as mishandled. "While there is clearly something very wrong in connection with the river deaths," the editors argued, "neither seasoned police investigators nor Ontario's coroner have so far found criminality. The investigations of police and their board come as a result of complaints which have not been substantiated."

But while the paper urges readers to soften their criticism of the scandal-ridden police force, they are less careful around Indigenous deaths. National news organizations will often place the discovery of an Indigenous body in the context of Thunder Bay's tensions with its Native population. Local media, however, have instead used such deaths as an opportunity to pathologize the community, treating it as troublesome, even dangerous. When the *Chronicle Journal* sent a reporter to cover the evening when Marlan was taken off life support, the article was largely given over to an interview with a manager from Landmark Inn, a hotel near where Marlan's body was found. After claiming that Marlan was "known" to staff, the manager complained about constantly chasing "transients" from the area. "The unfortunate [people] with alcohol and drug abuse [problems] that are frequenting this area need social services," he said. "We are a business trying to thrive here in Thunder Bay."

On social media, the pathologizing of First Nations people exhibits an anger that can be virulent and shockingly candid. One example is the Facebook page belonging to Thunder Bay Courthouse-Inside Edition, part of a handful of sites that populate an active online ecosystem of anti-First Nations feeling. Followed by more than 15,000 people, the Inside Edition page ostensibly reports on court proceedings and publishes court dockets. Comments on the page, however, scapegoat and dehumanize First Nations people. The dead youth found in the city's waterways have been mocked, death threats are made against Natives featured on the page, and followers post anti-Indigenous memes. They even cheered Kentner's death: "Give the boy a medal," one commentator wrote about the killer. "Ding ding drunk bitch gone," wrote another.

Marlan's death didn't escape notice. The site administrator linked him to the Native Syndicate, one of Canada's largest Native gangs. Marlan's cousin Joyce Hunter replied to the administrator, writing: "you're hurting their

family, their immediate family, their parents some of the comments you're making are potentially libelous and defamatory." Hunter didn't receive a reply, but her comment was deleted and she was blocked from posting on the page.

MY AIRBNB HOST offers me a ride across town. Without prompting, she talks about how her views of First Nations people contrast with her daughter's views. Her daughter, she says, wants to "give the Natives everything," but "this is Canada, we should all be equal. They shouldn't be given so much free stuff. They should have to work like the rest of us." As a First Nations writer, I'm used to seeing this sentiment in comment threads or in anonymous tweets directed at me. Very rarely is it said to my face.

She drops me off at a shopping mall a few hundred feet away from the Neebing-McIntyre Floodway. It's in this floodway that the bodies of Dylan Moonias (who was twenty-one) and Josiah Begg (fourteen) were recovered earlier this year. And it's on its banks that I'm set to meet the Bear Clan Patrol, a First Nations-led initiative founded in Winnipeg in 1992. It expanded to Thunder Bay last winter in response to seven First Nations students who, between 2000 and 2011, died after being forced to attend school in Thunder Bay because of underfunding in their remote, Northern communities. Each Friday and Saturday night, volunteers comb areas of the city where people might risk injury or death—along rivers and train tracks, under bridges, and in parks. On many outings, they find young people drinking near water and coax them somewhere safer. Other times, they find passed-out kids and call first responders.

More than twenty people are here this October night. The group is mixed, primarily First Nations, but with some non-Native participants too. I spot city staff, including a city councillor. We break into groups of five or six and fan out for the next three hours. People honk, shout at us from cars—all supportive. Our group walks past Newfie's Pub downtown. Smokers surround us, asking about our orange vests. A waitress opens a door to shout, "You guys do an awesome job!" (Soon after, the organization put out a message on their Facebook page, saying: "98% of the time that we have been out patrolling, it's been peaceful and have had a few ppl stop and say thank you, but the last few times, ppl yell out negative comments…I

certainly am not ignorant to think that we're accepted by 100%, which is fine, but I still fear for the safety of our volunteers, especially our Indigenous females.")

I talk with Tina, a young Anishinaabe woman who has been with the Bear Clan Patrol since they arrived in Thunder Bay. "It got really bad," she says, "with all the bodies being found in the water. I know so many people who talk about changing things, but they don't do anything. I want to make it safer for my niece." A non-Native volunteer falls in with us. He pesters Tina with questions, among them: "Everybody should be equal. There shouldn't be special privileges given to Aboriginal people. How does that makes you feel?" Tina's happy tone changes as she replies to him, and eventually, she goes silent. Watching this exchange gives me an idea of what it must be like to be First Nations in this town. Hearing racist stereotypes from people trying to hurt you is one thing. But hearing the same stereotypes from "good" people is something else entirely. In both situations, you're treated like a walking racial grievance rather than a person.

As we cross the city, we find a few examples of public drunkenness and no examples of people in distress. But we do run into three First Nations youths who appear to be in their early twenties. They're dressed in jeans and T-shirts on this unseasonably warm night. The young man doing most of the talking is funny and charming until the subject turns to Indigenous deaths. "I think it's cops doing this shit," he says, grimly. The TBPS is the subject of numerous online rumours. Some allege that the serial killer many fear is stalking the Native community is actually a cop. Others claim that the police are covering up something sinister and that, as one online commenter writes, "the mask may drop real soon." There is no proof of any of this, but taken together, the chatter points to a profoundly broken relationship between First Nations and the TBPS.

"THERE'S A TRUST crisis," Chris Adams admits. He's the director of communications and technology for the TBPS and is the one of the few non-Natives I met in Thunder Bay who acknowledges the city's problem of anti-Indigenous racism and describes the efforts that the force is making to bridge the distrust. The OIPRD's most important focus will be to reinvestigate the way the police investigated—or didn't investigate—the deaths of thirty-nine people, most of them Indigenous, with cases going

back to the 1990s. TBPS has said that 183 deaths have been investigated in Thunder Bay since January 2017. Based on my reading of press releases and news reports, I concluded that thirteen people have died in suspicious circumstances in Thunder Bay, most of them Indigenous. The police have only ruled seven of them as homicides. Marlan's is one of the six cases that remain in limbo.

The protracted investigation into Marlan's death has traumatized the Chookomolin family. It's been made worse by a lack of communication. On July 21, Ron went to go to the press to pressure the police to return his calls. "We haven't received any follow-ups or reports from Thunder Bay police," he said, speaking to the TBNewsWatch site. Ron is generally supportive of TBPS, but he is frustrated. "So where are we at right now with this investigation? Is it a dead end? I believe they're not pressing hard enough."

As many parents and family members end up doing, Ron has started his own investigation, one centred around the testimony of Kory Campbell, an ex-girlfriend of Marlan's. "About five o'clock on Monday, the 26 of June," Ron says, referring to the day after Marlan's body was found, "she comes crying to my daughter. 'I know who did it, I know who did it.'" Ron claims that Campbell told him the name of the young man who she believed was the killer, saying that she heard another witness talking about the crime while drinking. Ron took Campbell's statement to the lead detective on the case but says it was quickly dismissed. "He comes back on June 28," Ron tells me, "saying people are just talking when they're drinking." Two days after the conversation with the detective, Campbell's body was found in a home on the north side of the city. Two people were arrested for her murder, but the chance for police to gather her full testimony on Marlan's killer is lost forever.

Back at the TBPS, I ask about Marlan. Adams is sympathetic but unhelpful. "We reach points in some investigations where it's not a question of probabilities, it's more a question of what you can absolutely prove going forward. That's why some of these things really slow down. It doesn't mean the case is closed, but we're just reaching points where the information needed for that final conclusion becomes tougher to get."

Adams's reply suggests that the Chookomolin family's fears are true: the case has gone cold. The experience of seeing an apathetic police force investigate a loved one's death has been repeated again and again in Thunder Bay, almost all with First Nations families. It happened with Stacy DeBungee, a forty-one-year-old man who was found dead in the McIntyre River in 2015. Police quickly deemed his death accidental, claiming he passed out and rolled into the water. But a CBC investigation in 2016 showed that the TBPS neglected to interview two key witnesses who admitted to reporters that they were with DeBungee the night he drowned and used his debit card after his death. It also happened with seventeen-year-old Tammy Keeash. Within five days of her body being found near the floodway on May 7, Thunder Bay police said the death was "consistent with drowning" and ruled out foul play. However, new revelations by Aboriginal Peoples Television Network—witnesses say Keeash was found face down, with her pants around her ankles—throw this conclusion into doubt. By June, the Ontario Chief Coroner handed over the Keeash investigation to the York Regional Police Force and Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service.

As concerned as Adams hopes to appear about the problems facing the TBPS, it's impossible to look past the agony of families who have been left waiting for answers, as well as the disquieting hints coming out the ongoing OIPRD investigation. Speaking to CBC, OIPRD director Gerry McNeilly was reluctant to give many details about what they had learned about the thirty-nine cases his organization is looking into, but he did say this: "We're seeing some patterns that obviously concern me." The patterns he refers are likely the same ones on display in Marlan's case: a seeming lack of urgency in reaching any conclusion, overlooked evidence, dismissed witnesses. Ultimately, justice for the victims, and for their families, is denied.

WHILE THE SCALE of the problems in Thunder Bay—endemic racism, a soaring murder rate, police indifference to First Nations murder victims—seem insurmountable, some are working to improve things. There are the First Nations volunteers who help students relocate to Thunder Bay, coordinate community watch projects such as the Bear Clan Patrol, and run youth groups, many of which operate with little to no financial support from the city. The school board has also recognized its role in acclimatizing First Nations students from remote communities to the

radically different, urban environment. These supports include culturally relevant programming, such as Indigenous language courses, and graduation coaches who provide individualized help. The school board also sends representatives to remote reserves to show parents how they can be included in their children's education, even at a distance.

The biggest responsibility, however, remains with police. During my visit, the force introduced its new diversity initiative to hire more First Nations people. "We reached a tipping point where we really had to look at what we were doing from a diversity training standpoint," says Adams, who describes the efforts the force is putting in place, which include mentoring prospective officers and implementing additional training to meet any skills gaps. But the TBPS's poor recruitment record with Native candidates underscores the scale of the challenges. Twice a year, the force issues press releases introducing newly sworn officers. Reviewing these releases back to 2014, shows no recruits appearing to self-identify as First Nations.

The police force, however, is making progress on other fronts. It has a cordial relationship with the Bear Clan Patrol and provides patrol members with training. And for each story we hear of an officer who abuses or harasses a First Nations person, there is one of an officer who risks their life to help them. At least four times since September, the TBPS has sent out press releases about officers jumping into the waterways to rescue Indigenous people.

Still, as Adams admits, these are baby steps. "There's been a division for many years," he says. "It's come to a head in the past year—we're talking about it more, and I think we're facing it more." Many others in Thunder Bay echo this view. The problems aren't new, they say. What has changed is that, for the first time—with access to social media and First Nations–centred media—Native people can speak up and tell the country what's happening to them. That, after all, was Marlan's dream: to report on the the most overlooked people in Thunder Bay. As an aspiring journalist and a young First Nations man living inside his city's crisis, how would he have told this story? We'll never know.

I'm in a car at the Thunder Bay airport speaking to Joyce Hunter as the clock ticks down for my flight out of the city. She speaks rapidly, in a staccato. "We watched his carotid artery on his neck," she says. "And it was

beating fast and regular and strong at first, but then, over half an hour, we watched it slow and slow and slow until it stopped. They announced his official time of death at 10:17 p.m. and everybody started to cry. And then we all touched him, and it was really amazing that his body was already growing cold."

An adapted version of this article appeared in the March 2018 issue of The Walrus*, under the same headline.*

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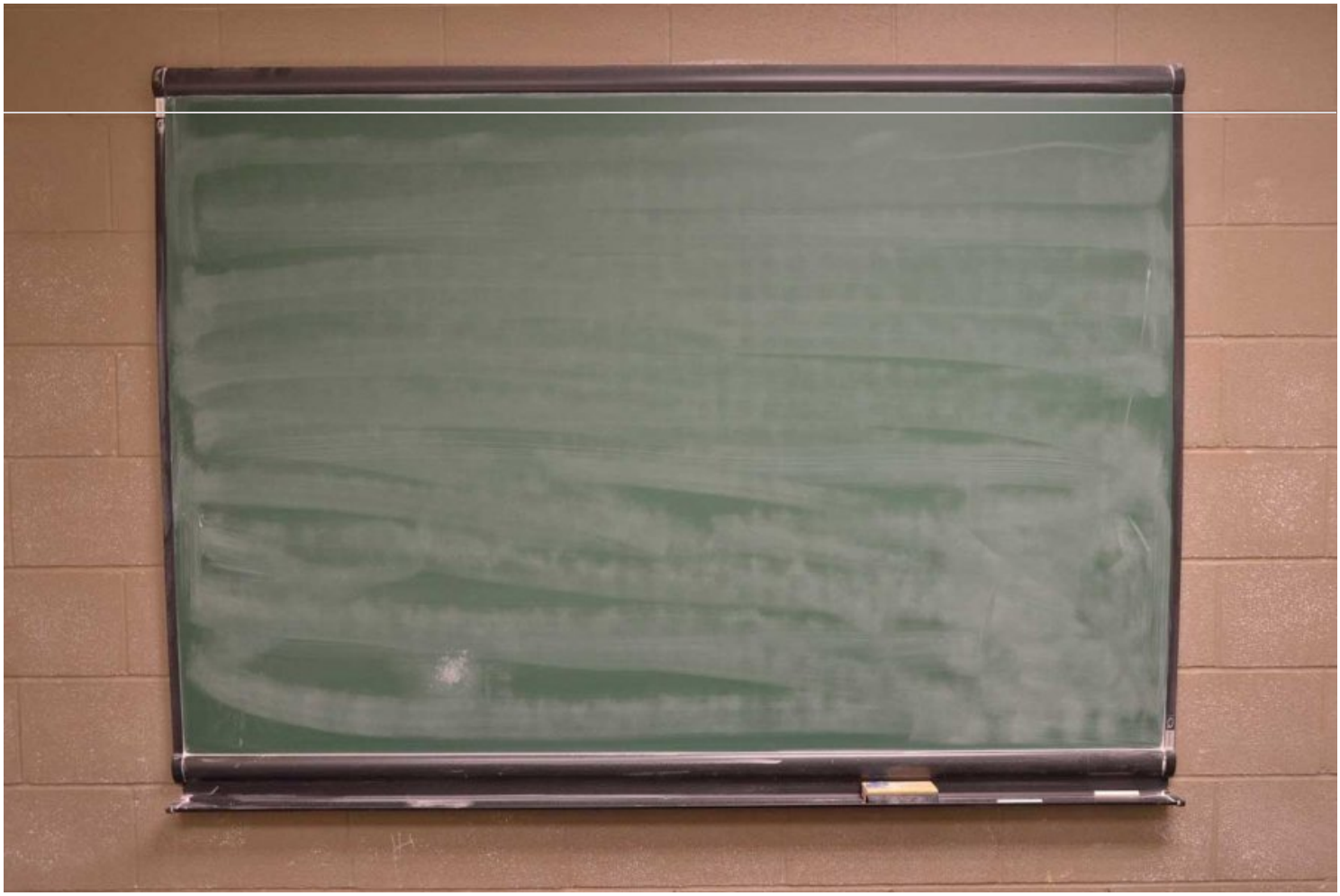

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