

Pathfinding

It took years for journalist Jody Porter to see that writing about other people's pain can be a way of hiding from your own.

Illustration by Nicole Xu

I was ten years old when my sister, Jennifer, was born, displacing me as the baby of the family and instilling in me a certain resentment for my assumed new position of built-in babysitter.

As Jen grew older, though, I imagined a more crucial role for myself. A few years after she'd been born, our father began making visits to my bedroom at night, slipping beneath the covers and touching me in ways that made me feel grown-up and sick and special and scared all at once.

By the time I was a teenager, I was imagining a future where I could kidnap my little sister and whisk her away to Toronto, the only big city I knew. We'd live in a shabby-chic apartment, eat cheese and crackers for supper every night, wear combat boots from the army surplus store and be safe from my father's wandering hands.

The soundtrack of this fantasy future, played loud on my Sony boombox, was always the Tragically Hip.

While I never made good on my plan to save my sister, I did establish myself as the gatekeeper of her music choices. This itself seemed like an important survival skill. In our extremely white, small town in central Ontario, music was the only kind of identity politics we acknowledged. It influenced your choice of friends, where you sat on the school bus, who'd consider asking you to the prom. If I couldn't get her out of our house, our town, I would at least ensure that Jen landed on the

right side of pop culture: No heavy metal for my little sister! No Top 40 trash! No hair bands! No New Kids on the Block crushes!!! I would cultivate in my sister more refined taste. She would know real rock music, solid Canadian rock.

For me, that was the Tragically Hip.

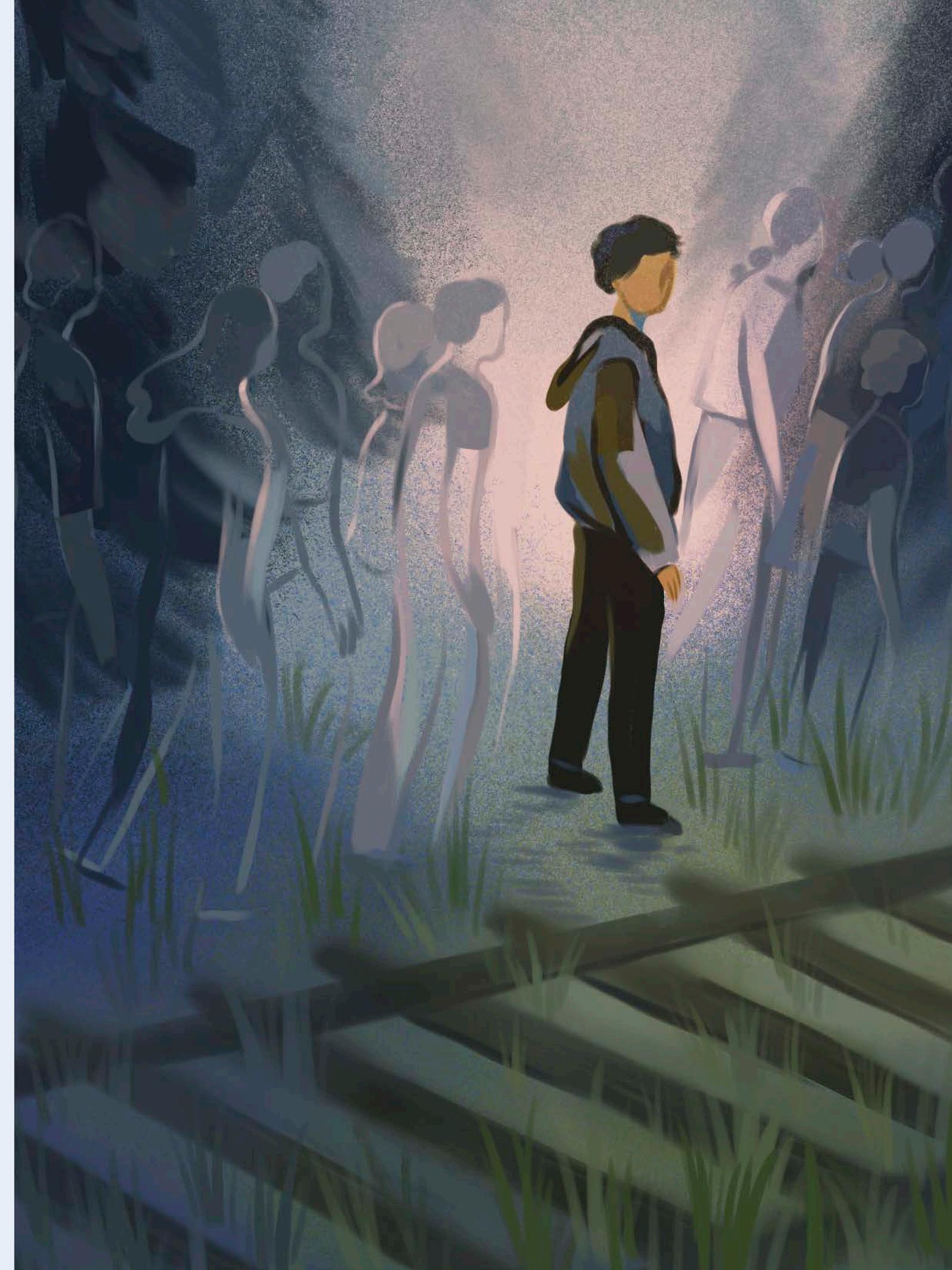
With Gord Downie as their poetic, frenetic frontman, the Hip had a way of making you feel like you were the only one who really got their music, even in a sea of people who obviously felt the same way. Sure, "Fifty-Mission Cap" was about the death of former Toronto Maple Leaf Bill Barilko, but it was also about the feeling you had when you wore your lucky hat to watch the Leafs play. Maybe, just maybe, in a country as small as Canada, you alone had the power to make myths, to change history, to be made in song.

In the mid-1990s, when Jen was still too young to drive, I took her to her first Tragically Hip concert at the old Molson Park in Barrie, Ontario.

The details of that day are fuzzier than the feelings. It might have been Canada Day for all the national pride on display. Not the hokey, hand-on-heart, flag-waving patriotism of the USA, but rather the more subtle, self-effacing devotion to a nation still "Looking for a Place to Happen."

Introducing Jen to the Hip, in concert, felt like I was fulfilling my role as big sister, showing her the kind of people we were, or could aspire to be. It was exhilarating.

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When the concert was over, we loaded up on Tim Hortons coffee and giddily ate our way through a box of Timbits during the two-hour drive back home, recapping our favourite moments from the show, trying to reconstruct the playlist from memory.

We still talk about how full we were that night when we got home...of sugar, mostly, and love, too, for each other. But we don't mention that. Talk of love in my family means someone is dying.

A couple of years before that concert, my daughter was born. Not long after it, I left my sister behind as I headed north to Sioux Lookout, my daughter strapped into her car seat, my music collection packed in the car. I'd been reading about Sioux Lookout, a small town halfway between Winnipeg and Thunder Bay, in Robertson Davies's novel *The Cunning Man* and had taken it as a sign, a calling of sorts, when I saw a help-wanted ad for an editor at the newspaper there.

At twenty-six years old, little else qualified me for the job, aside from the scant time I'd worked as a reporter in the Northwest Territories, an internship also inspired by a Canadian novel: Mordecai Richler's *Solomon Gursky Was Here*.

"I got a job, I explore," I smiled to myself, singing along with Downie on the cassette player during the two-day drive, the car laden with second-hand furniture and a fictitious version of my destination.

This was the not-so-long-ago time before the internet, before newspapers had online editions, before journalists became their own brands on Twitter, when so much could be left to the imagination.

The newspaper I'd be working at was part of the Wawatay Native Communications Society. The organization was created by Elders in the 1970s to preserve and promote the languages and cultures of the Cree, Ojibway and Oji-Cree communities in Northern Ontario. Soon after I arrived, I was invited to go on the Wawatay Radio Network and talk a bit about myself. I offered a fumbling introduction that was translated into Oji-Cree for the audience by the host of the show.

"Where are you from? Who are your people?" he asked.

I didn't have a story of my own. I didn't think I needed one. I was Canadian, a small-town girl if you wanted to be more specific. Go back a few generations and my family, I thought, was British. It had never mattered enough to me to look it up. I was a nobody, with a college diploma that I'd been taught was a ticket to telling stories about anybody I met. Surely that was what mattered.

It would be years before I would hear the word *settler*, or *colonizer*... or *privilege*. It would be years before I understood the privilege—the damage—inherent in being a nobody, in assuming that my presence, my existence, was neutral, incidental, without consequence to the stories I reported.

Nothing in what I said on the radio that day warranted the welcome I received then, or in the years that followed, when I visited First Nations and got the education I was so sorely lacking. I began to cover stories from those communities: about homes with no drinking water, overcrowded houses full of illness and mold and grief. About reserves with no proper schools. About the residential schools, the last of which had only recently closed. My First Nations colleagues witnessed my distress, offered emotional support.

The First Nations people I met during my time in Sioux Lookout—people from the Anishinaabe, Nishnawbe and Inninuwig nations—rarely spoke of the schools directly. This was before the term "survivor" was in common use, before the class-actions suits

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that prompted the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, before a courageous few created the space for so many others to open up about the ever-present past. I quietly came across the news clippings detailing how my boss, Garnet Angeconeb, had pressed criminal charges against the former priest who abused him at Pelican Lake Residential School. In 1996, Leonard Hands was convicted of nineteen counts of indecent assault and sentenced to four years in prison.

I remember the first time I heard a survivor's story in detail. An Elder recounted the horrifying day when a float plane landed in his remote community and a curious group of kids ran down to the dock to get a glimpse of the mechanical beast up close.

Too quickly, a man clutched at their sleeves and collars, their hands and hair, gathering them up, packing them into the belly of the plane. There was a sickening feeling as it built up speed and took to the air, out of reach of their parents. Gone.

I didn't register how very young this Elder had been when he'd been taken away until later that evening, at home, bathing my daughter, my baby, whose hair I was gently washing, careful not to get suds in her eyes, whose every bit of skin I knew, whose tiny body could so easily be lifted up out of the tub and wrapped snugly, disappearing in a single towel in my arms.

"Why are you squeezing so tight, Momma?" she'd asked.

"Because you're five," I said.

I had no words to explain the meanness of people like us, not so long ago.

I never talked about any of it with Jen. The distance growing between us was more than geography could explain. There'd be no joy in sharing this version of Canada with her, no pop-culture trivia to help her impress the in-crowd, no bonus marks for challenging her history teacher about topics not in the textbook.

Twelve-year-old Chanie Wenjack left his favourite sweater behind the last time he was sent away to residential school, in the fall of 1966. He left his beloved dogs as well, for his little sister Pearl to care for.

Less than two months later, Chanie died of exposure while trying to walk back home, more than six hundred kilometres away. After that, his story became Pearl's too.

An inquest was held after Chanie's body was found on the side of the railway tracks. His family wasn't notified and so could not attend the proceedings to share their version of Chanie—the playful boy who loved to dance—with the all-white jury.

“So this then is the story of how a little boy met a terrible and lonely death, of the handful of people who became involved and of a town that hardly noticed,” Ian Adams would write of the incident. His article, “The Lonely Death of Charlie Wenjack,” was published in Maclean's magazine in 1967. (Chanie Wenjack was called “Charlie” at his inquest and subsequent tellings of his story until the last few years; it was what he was called at residential school. “Chanie” was what his family called him.)

A generation later, in 2012, I happened to be in Ogoki Post, also known as Marten Falls First Nation, where Pearl Achneepineskum, Chanie's sister, lived. I was on assignment for the CBC—by then I had landed my dream job, reporting nationally about Indigenous affairs. Pearl graciously agreed to meet with me.

We escaped the rain and ravenous mosquitoes and settled onto an aging couch, elbow-to-elbow in the dark corner of the nursing station, where Pearl worked.

I was unprepared for the raw quality of her grief, a wound kept open with the salt of unanswered questions. Nearly fifty years later, Pearl was still looking for clues as to why Chanie had run away. She and her other siblings, who also spent time at residential school, had endured homesickness and brutality there. What had pushed Chanie out into the cold in his desperate attempt to make it home? Pearl still wanted to know.

She also wanted a proper school built in her community. Kids from Ogoki Post and other First Nations like it still had to travel hundreds of kilometres away from home for an education. And, like Chanie, some kids, too many kids, so many kids, still returned from that journey in a coffin.

“I met Gord Downie once,” I sometimes say at dinner parties, stretching the truth only a little, keeping things light.

I made a documentary in 2012 with Pearl Achneepineskum and Ian Adams, revisiting Chanie's story. It caught the attention of Mike Downie, Gord's brother, when he heard it on CBC Radio. At the time, Mike's son was around the same age Chanie had been when he died. As I once had, Mike considered the horror of residential school from a parent's perspective. He told his brother Gord about Chanie's story, and the two vowed to do something.

They dug up Ian's old piece in Maclean's. Gord wrote the poems about Chanie that would become the album and a graphic novel: *Secret Path*. Gord Downie's friend, the novelist Joseph Boyden, whose claims that he was

Indigenous had not yet been publicly questioned back then, had written a novella about Chanie. They created a marketing plan: they would release the books and music near the fiftieth anniversary of Chanie's death, for maximum impact.

As the *Secret Path* project neared completion, a month before its release, the Downies visited Pearl and her family, in Ogoki Post, to show them the work.

Gord hadn't been sick when they started the project, but by then he was. His terminal cancer diagnosis had been national news for months. The Tragically Hip had already finished their farewell tour. The *Secret Path* had taken on new meaning for him.

“Chanie haunts me,” Downie said in a news release issued while he was in Ogoki Post. “His story is Canada's story ... We are not the country we thought we were. History will be re-written.”

I was thrilled to break the news of the Downies' visit with Chanie's family, of Gord's legacy project with its link to my reporting.

And I was too starstruck to question Downie's claim to Chanie's story on behalf of a country that failed to notice the many other times it had been told.

I'd first heard Chanie's story as a song by Mi'kmaw folksinger Willie Dunn. Back in the early 1970s he sang about Charlie Wenjack as a freedom fighter, a rebel warrior, a little boy who saw the wrongness of residential schools and chose, at all costs, to resist, to head home to his family.

In 1976, after asking Dunn for permission to reinvent his song in story, Sto:lo writer Lee Maracle wrote Charlie back to life again as an insightful boy, full of spirit and cynical about residential schools, making wisecracks quietly to himself in class.

In 2016, however, the *Secret Path* struck a much different note, one Canadians seemed more willing to hear.

I'd spent hours stalking the Ottawa hotel where Gord Downie was rumoured to be staying. I was on assignment from the CBC, hoping to make contact with Gord, for a news story I was doing on the *Secret Path* and its debut concert.

But Gord was late. Eventually, my producer sent the camera operator home for the night. Still, I waited, pacing the small lobby. This was a surprise assignment for me, my first for The National, the CBC's nightly TV newscast. I was full of adrenaline, out to prove myself worthy.

I introduced myself to Stuart Coxe, who was making a documentary about the event. He assured me that I'd be able to get close enough to shoot some video of Downie's arrival on my iPhone.

A bus finally pulled up in front of the hotel. A buzz went through the lobby, and a small crowd assembled outside on the darkened sidewalk.

A long pause. Then the door to the bus opened. Out stepped Gord in his now-familiar fedora and jean jacket, the uniform that dressed up his failing body and mind.

I rushed toward him, heart pounding, elbows up, planting my feet, using my body as a tripod, like I'd recently been taught, trying to look like a pro rather than a fanatic.

But something was wrong. The screen of my iPhone had suddenly gone dark.

I looked up to discover a very large man standing between me and Downie, my phone at his chest level, his black T-shirt the only thing I could see.

“I’m Jody, from the CBC,” I said frantically, hopping from foot to foot attempting to dodge around him, while shouting, what I thought were magic words. “Stuart said! Stuart told me I could shoot some video. Stuart Coxe said it would be okay.”

“Who the fuck is Stuart?” said the man, sweeping me aside.

Jen was twelve years old when my parents split up in 1995.

A decade after that, when I had a stable job and a supportive partner, I took my dad to court for sexually assaulting me when I was a child. He was convicted, which is why I can write this story without risk of him suing me for libel. Even so, after the conviction, I had to go back to court to lift the publication ban on my name. This was the era before #MeToo and the movements leading up to it, when the courts automatically ordered victims to remain silent and ashamed.

I’d asked Jen, back then, if anything had happened to her, if she should be part of the court case. She said no. Case closed. We never talked about it again.

Music, though, remained a shared interest for Jen and me, a safe topic, a way to conjure our childhood attachment. We clung to it. She told me when she got tickets to the Hip’s final concerts in Toronto and regaled me with the highlights after she attended two shows back to back.

I texted her after I got the surprise assignment to cover the *Secret Path* concert in Ottawa, with the tantalizing prospect of meeting Gord, just a few weeks later.

But on the night of the show, I was a reporter, not a fan. I was filled with a sense of foreboding as I surveyed the crowd. It was an unlikely mash-up of residential school survivors, Ottawa bureaucrats scrambling to be on the right side of history now that it was the Hip thing to do, and Tragically Hip devotees, mostly hosers, who saw the show as another chance to say farewell to their bro, Gord.

That the music was about the death of Chanie Wenjack was no surprise to some in the audience. Many others didn’t have a clue who Chanie was.

When the lights went down, the darkness felt overwhelming.

It was a show in which a dying man acted out the dying moments of a child who froze to death, alone.

Animation on the screen above the band showed Chanie’s terrifying experience at residential school, his fateful decision to run away (as imagined by Downie), his thin body racked by hunger, his wide eyes filled with loneliness and fear on cartoon railroad tracks. The tragedy was drawn up for maximum effect on the big screen. Sadness hit me with the force of the train: Chanie’s story told in this way, without ceremony, devastated me.

I wasn’t the only one who felt such pain. The next day, Hayden King, an Anishinaabe academic who’d also been at the concert, reached out to me to talk over how it felt. King later published a critique called “The Secret Path: Reconciliation and Not Reconciliation.” It was a relief to read it.

At the end of the concert, Chanie’s sister Pearl had been called up on stage at the National Arts Centre with the Downie family. King recalls this moment in his paper, and what Pearl told the crowd: “My father died not knowing why Chanie died. My mother still does not know why.’ After a silence,” King writes, “someone in the middle of the theatre, perhaps inspired by the reconciliatory theme of the postscript shouted, ‘to bring us together!’”

“In that moment,” he recalls, “I could not imagine a more grotesque thing to say, shocking and predictable at the same time. Because I suspect that individual would not, for one second, sacrifice their son or daughter for our unity.”

I went back home to Thunder Bay, where my boss asked me how I felt about my first big TV assignment. “I feel like I got sent to the Olympics and came in sixty-fourth,” I said.

I’d been given such a big platform for such a big story and I’d failed. I’d bent my story to an old familiar tune.

My news story about that night—a jumble of names and dates and emotion I had yet to process—culminated in shots of Gord on stage. In a voiceover, I say, “Grief needs to be shared for the healing to begin.”

I was talking about Chanie, but the screen was filled by Gord.

In the months after the *Secret Path* release, I doubled down on my reporting on Indigenous issues, documenting tragedy after tragedy, injustice after injustice. It was the kind of work I’d always done, but now that Gord Downie had told Canadians to pay attention, there seemed to be a growing appetite for it. I didn’t stop to consider whether that appetite was healthy.

Winter came and suicides among young people spiked in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, as often happens around Christmastime. I did a story about each preventable death, week after week after week, trying to paint a picture of the children who’d died, to honour their lives, to pose the questions their parents wanted answered. And still kids kept dying in homes without running water, in communities without mental health services, or far away from their families in unsafe foster homes.

Around this time, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was getting underway, so I reached out to family members and attempted to translate their grief into government action.

The soundproofing of the radio studio provided cover when I began to cry, regularly, at work. I plowed my emotions over one death into the story of another, and another and another. I couldn’t see that I was blazing my own secret path, creating pity porn for a hungry audience. I ate up the clicks and likes and retweets from First Nations people I respected, mistaking my social media feed for something more nourishing.

I didn’t stop until the day my body made me, until the night I drove myself to the emergency room, puking in the hospital parking lot from the pain in my belly, the pain that I’d been ignoring for months.

Driving home from the appointment with the oncologist, surging with rage, I pounded the dash. The pain in my belly was a tumour the size of a cantaloupe. Cancer. The odds of survival were against me.

“But I’ve been so good!” I screamed. “I’ve been so good!”

I didn’t know until the words flew out of my mouth

In focusing so much on the hurt in other people's lives, I'd missed the lessons they offered about healing. I failed to imagine the possibility of writing stories with this kind of headline: Residential school survivor helps aging rock star confront death.

that I believed in a god who rewarded good deeds, in a universe with a scorecard.

Had the life I'd been trying to save, with all of my reporting, been my own?

Is *that* what Gord had been up to?

Slowly, I began to realize the truth: For years I'd been neatly ordering the world along racial lines. Indigenous and non-Indigenous, the two sides to nearly every story I told. Through this clouded lens, I bore witness to the suffering of others and concocted a narrative in which I—in my whiteness, my nobody-ness, my invisible presence behind the microphone—became, if not immortal, then definitely immune to the kind of suffering I reported on.

I thought my years of engaging on Indigenous *issues* had protected me from the white saviour complex. (I'd been so good!) Instead, I was blindly galloping around on my white horse, not seeing the wholeness of Indigenous lives and experience. Not seeing my own brokenness. In focusing so much on the hurt in other people's lives, I'd missed the lessons they offered about healing. I failed to imagine the possibility of writing stories with this kind of headline: *Residential school survivor helps aging rock star confront death*—and failed to consider how such a story might help me.

I was shattered.

I stopped working, removed myself from social media, practiced the invisibility that death would inevitably bring. I asked my boss to assure me there'd be no mention of my illness, no on-air acknowledgment of my absence.

Almost more than death, I feared becoming the object of pity. I desperately did not want anyone to do to me what I was just realizing I had done to so many others. I did not want to be cast as a victim. I did not want someone else to tell my story as though it was a tragedy.

I did not want someone else to tell my story so *they* could feel better.

By the time Pearl came up on stage at the *Secret Path* concert, the show most people had come to see was over. They knew that Chanie was dead and Gord was clearly dying.

Facing out into an audience larger than the entire population of her own community, Pearl began to sing in Anishinaabemowin, the language she wasn't allowed to speak at residential school. Her sweet, strong voice filled the vast space, her presence a stick in the spokes of Canada's ongoing genocide. Her singing, the secret for how to go on.

Pearl said she was glad the *Secret Path* got made. But she was under no illusion about what happened behind the scenes. "Gord Downie

is a man," she told the hosts of *As It Happens* on CBC. "I knew he was sick and I appreciated what he was doing to make life meaningful. Maybe he thought, 'I'm not having it so bad.'"

The project "would not have been possible if it wasn't for the Creator," Pearl told the Anishinabek News in 2019. "He knew I wanted to tell the story right after Chanie passed, but in his wisdom, he held on to it until fifty years later. I still don't really understand why, but I think it was because that was when people would grasp the idea."

So this, then, is really the story of a sister whose love for her brother shone so brightly that the world came to know him, fifty years after he died.

Secret Path is just one chapter of that. A chapter where another sibling—Downie's—used that story to help his own brother create a legacy to staunch their grief.

And then, there's my sister and me.

The summer after I didn't die of cancer, I made the three-day road trip to visit my sister for the first time in years. It felt important to reconnect.

On Jen's fridge, I spotted a Tragically Hip magnet just like the one that holds up my grocery list. Mine was a Christmas gift from her. Small connections made precious in a relationship drawn thin, like Canada itself, by the hundreds of kilometres between our homes.

At the top of the stairs at Jen's house, in pride of place, is a picture of Gord Downie.

It's from an image in *Secret Path*, the graphic novel that accompanied Gord's album. In the book, it's Chanie standing on the railway tracks. After Gord died, though, prints were made that replaced Chanie with Gord on the tracks, rewriting history.

This remnant of the *Secret Path* at my sister's house unsettles me.

I wonder if I have a role in the story Jen tells her friends about this picture of Gord, the rock god of our childhoods.

If or when I die of cancer, will she look at this same picture and catch a glimpse of me along with Gord, in the cold and lonely place where Chanie died?

I choke up at the thought of it. It stops me from denouncing Downie outright for his pantomime of Chanie's pain, for his Hail Mary attempt at mass reconciliation on behalf of Canadians, so that he could feel better.

The tight ball of emotion in my throat keeps me from saying that no one—not our most cherished cultural icons, our most charismatic leaders, our most talented journalists—can make Canada into something it is not, can erase the pain and trauma of past abuses.

It also shows me that every attempt at telling someone else's story adds another layer of grief when it fails.

"I met Gord Downie once," I sometimes say at dinner parties. And once, a long time ago, I took my little sister to a concert in the hope that I could give her—that I could give both of us—something, someone, to believe in. 🍌