For Dimarjio Jenkins, Driftwood was always home. The neighbourhood at Jane and Finch is dense, diverse and vibrant, and Jenkins spent his childhood going to community barbecues, running with his friends through low-slung townhouses, learning to play basketball on the community court and listening to the thrum of more than 100 languages. He lived with his parents and his sisters, Kim and Maya. He and Maya were only a year apart, and they shared a room for most of their childhood, huddling together to binge episodes of *Hannah Montana*. At Christmas, their parents spoiled the kids with toys, and as Jenkins grew older, his family would give him cash and Air Jordans—usually the only two things he wanted.

Jenkins’s maternal grandmother was a neighbourhood fixture. Everyone—even her family—called her Miss Blossom. She lived across the street from Jenkins’s parents, and he spent much of his childhood at her house. She regularly took...
of Houdini
in relatives and neighbours who were down on their luck. When her grandchildren’s friends got kicked out of their homes, she welcomed them into hers. One summer, she had 12 people in her three-bedroom house, jostling together in love and chaos. Miss Blossom worked as a chef at an Italian restaurant in Etobicoke, and she’d come home late every night to cook curry goat and fried chicken for whoever was staying at her house.

From childhood, Jenkins had big plans for his life. He was going to have lots of money, and he was going to be noticed. When he was nine, he told Miss Blossom he wanted to open a bank account. When they were in front of the teller, he did all the talking himself, emptying a shoebox full of cash. As a kid, he always figured out a way to get money, whether it was selling stuff he owned or hawking chocolate door-to-door. Every July, on his birthday, he’d go on a shopping spree, decking himself out in Burberry, True Religion or whatever else was in style. He’d wear the outfits, take a birthday photo and post it on social media. Then he’d sell the clothes, often turning a profit.

Jenkins was smart, determined and charismatic. He was the type of kid who didn’t study but still got As, particularly in math and science. But he didn’t want quiet academic success—he wanted to be a star. So instead of school, he focused his ambition on basketball. When he first started playing, he had yet to hit his growth spurt and was considerably shorter than most of the other players. It didn’t matter. He practised for hours every day, and soon his own trophies and medals joined the NBA posters that were plastered all over his room.

In Jenkins’s tween years, the life he knew started to crumble. First, his parents moved the family to Brampton, where they thought they could have a better life. Jenkins saw Brampton as terminally uncool, and quickly figured out the bus route back to Driftwood. He found comfort with his grandmother, staying with Miss Blossom on weekends and spending the entire summer with her when he was off school. Then, when Jenkins was in his early teens, his parents divorced. That same year, Miss Blossom had surgery to repair a torn tendon in her leg. Three weeks later, she died suddenly from a pulmonary embolism.

Jenkins’s once-strict mother descended into grief and depression. His sister Kim, then in her early 20s, became her siblings’ main caregiver. Jenkins’s life changed again in Grade 10, when he was cut from the basketball team at his high school in Brampton. Crushed, he began to spend less time at school and more time with friends in Driftwood.

By age 16, Jenkins was dabbling in petty crime, striving to become, as Kim puts it, “the star of the neighbourhood.” He skirted the line between mischief and real trouble, getting arrested several times for thefts and break-ins. Kim was usually the one who showed up to bail him out. But he planned to right his path by the time he was 18. There was no way he’d get caught up with the police as an adult. He’d find a better way.

And he did. By the time Jenkins was in his late teens, several of his friends from Driftwood were rising in Toronto’s underground rap scene, some of them already earning attention from big-name performers in the U.S. Jenkins started rapping with his friends, his style inspired by the music he grew up listening to—his mom and sister blasting Aaliyah and Sade, his father’s Jamaican reggae. For Jenkins, a rap career was synonymous with possibility. The possibility of wealth, the possibility of being seen, the possibility of fans and fame and influence. The possibility of avoiding all that “street shit,” as he called it.

When Jenkins dropped out of high school a few credits short of graduation to pursue rap, his family members were disappointed. His parents wanted him to be a lawyer; his dad even said he’d pay for him to go to university. But Jenkins asked his dad to put the money toward Maya’s education instead. Within a few months, he told everyone to call him “Houdini.” When asked later about the name in an interview, he quipped, “What does Harry Houdini do? He makes magic.” Within a few years, Houdini was poised to become one of Toronto’s biggest superstars. Then a brazen act of violence ended it all.
In 2018, Houdini moved to Vancouver, largely because it was closer to L.A., where he frequently travelled to network with American rappers and record labels. He spent hours in the recording studio, refining every track to perfection. Then he’d play different versions for friends and fellow rappers, asking which they liked better. Autotune or no autotune? Which words rhyme here? At restaurants, in bed and on plane trips, he jotted down lyrics on his phone’s notes app.

The first few times Houdini went to L.A., he was more tourist than talent. But he kept going back, working his connections, putting in the time, talking to people. Suddenly, Maya and Kim would see on social media that he was bowling with the rappers Young Thug and Gunna. Another time, Houdini sent Maya a video of himself at one of Meek Mill’s parties. When she asked how he got in, he casually mentioned that he knew Lil Uzi Vert, another rapper and Mill’s friend. Houdini even met Jay-Z in L.A., and planned to collaborate with fellow Toronto artists Pressa and Tory Lanez.

Houdini received several offers to meet with record labels in L.A. and New York, but he refused to sign with any of them—at least not right away. “When you’re signed, people expect way more from you,” Houdini said at the time. “Your numbers got to be up there, you have to make sure you maintain the way you look, maintain just your whole aura. Everything.” If a rapper takes a risk as an underground artist and his song flops, he can just put out another track. If he’s signed to a label and he bombs, the industry might decide he’s a fluke.

Houdini also wanted to prove he could achieve it all on his own—no managers, no marketers, no slick productions, nobody telling him what to change to make a hit. In the track “Myself,” from his 2019 debut mixtape Hou I Am, he raps, “I don’t need you, all I need is myself / I wasn’t asking nobody for help.” The song’s YouTube video, which has five million views, shows him dressed in a Dolce and Gabbana hoodie and sunglasses, walking through Driftwood and flipping through a stack of hundred-dollar bills. It’s a nod to his past and an announcement of his arrival. As he told Complex magazine: “I want to be that story where it’s like, ‘That kid, he was very, very hands-on and he stuck to his word and he manifested everything he believed in and got the job done.’ ”

Houdini eventually decided he didn’t need a label at all. Instead, he signed with Create Music Group, a large independent music company based in L.A. Create distributes its clients’ music to more than 100 streaming platforms and plans data-driven song releases. Dan Mody, head of A&R at Create, had high hopes for Houdini’s future. “He was at the forefront of Toronto rap artists who were going to break into America in the very near future,” he says. Mody and Houdini eventually became friends, but at first, Mody says, Houdini was an enigma. Even his Instagram feed didn’t divulge any behind-the-scenes glimpses into his life: in many photos, he obscures his face with sunglasses, his hair, a hat or a hoodie. He did this largely for the same reason he barely visited the city he rapped about so often. He did it because Toronto was dangerous.

By 2020, Houdini’s videos were racking up millions of views. His merch was selling out. And he’d made enough money to buy a diamond-encrusted Rolex

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By early 2020, Houdini had released two mixtapes and a five-track EP called underGROUND. The album cover shows the CN Tower buried in the desert sand. Next to it is a small astronaut with a flag emblazoned with an upside-down top hat—Houdini’s calling card. For Houdini, that apocalyptic cover represented his journey. At this point, his YouTube videos were routinely racking up hundreds of thousands of views. His Houligans merch was selling out online. He’d made enough money on Apple, Spotify and YouTube to buy the same Rolex as Tory Lanez, a custom-made diamond-encrusted Sky-Dweller that goes for upwards of $115,000 (U.S.). He posted an Instagram video of himself purchasing the watch with the caption: “I put a house on my wrist before a record deal.”

Houdini’s meteoric success sparked jealousy among his peers. If Toronto’s independent rap scene is dynamic, collaborative and creative, it’s also rife with resentment, posturing and clout-chasing. In Toronto, decades of neighbourhood rivalries and turf wars can underpin conflict between rappers, and the same social media that helps an artist like Houdini earn a following can also stoke jealousy and violence. As Houdini himself rapped: “I ain’t tryna get too famous / Heard it’s kinda dangerous.

Much of the recent violence in Toronto’s rap community can be traced back to two altercations, the first of which was the 2017 shooting of Liban Randall, an early breakout star from Driftwood who raps under the name Robin Banks. One of his most famous songs was a collaboration with Houdini’s friend Pressa, called “Wass Gang,” in which Robin rapped about “pullin’ triggers” on people who dissed his friends. His work caught the attention of Meek Mill, and he was reportedly in talks to sign with Mill’s label, Dream Chasers.

One night in April of 2017, Banks went out to celebrate his success at Cameo Lounge, a hookah bar in Vaughan. Suddenly, two men opened fire, riddling Banks’s body with bullets, at least one of which grazed his skull. Miraculously, he survived, but he was left paralyzed. People from rival neighbourhoods took to social media to gloat over the attacks. One made a meme of Banks in his wheelchair, pasting a bandaged head emoji in the corner, captioning it, “Robin how that hot shit feel tho?!?!?!”

Banks’s shooting—and the attention that swirled around it—put other artists in danger. Suddenly, killing a rapper from a rival neighbourhood was like earning a trophy. The violence escalated in June of 2018, when Abdulkadir Handule, a Driftwood rapper who performed as 21 Neat, allegedly shot and killed a 21-year-old Regent Park rapper named Jahvante Smart, a.k.a. Smoke Dawg, outside Cube, a nightclub on Queen West. (Ernest Modekwe, a brand manager for the hip-hop collective Prime, was also killed in the attack.)

Smoke Dawg was a rising star, on the cusp of crossing over to the U.S. He’d previously toured with Drake, who mourned his death on Instagram: “All these gifts and blessed souls and inner lights being extinguished lately is devastating,” Drake wrote. “I wish peace would wash over our city.” The call went unheeded. While Regent Park and Driftwood had little historic conflict, Smoke Dawg’s death quickly sparked a deadly feud, as people began posting gruesome videos of Smoke Dawg’s body on the street.

In the coming months, rappers from both neighbourhoods became targets, whether they were involved in the conflict or not. In late 2019 and early 2020, several more up-and-coming Toronto rappers were shot and killed. Many of the young men had collaborated with Houdini, or with each other, on songs and videos under the independent, Driftwood-founded UpTop Movement label. Eighteen-year-old Keeshawn Brown, a Driftwood rapper known as Why-S, was murdered in Surrey, B.C., a couple of days before Christmas of 2019. Some fans believe his assailant to be Farah Handule, 21 Neat’s brother, who had recorded songs under the moniker 22 Neat; a few days later, Farah Handule was found dead in the middle of a Calgary road. Meanwhile, Jahquar Stewart, a rapper known as Bvlly, was killed in Oshawa in the early-morning hours of Christmas Eve.

In the absence of answers surrounding the murders, arguments have proliferated in the comment threads of Reddit and YouTube, where fans and haters take credit, cheer the so-called victors and mock the victims. These debates can help raise profiles and sell songs. For fans, safe at home, it’s idle, voyeuristic chatter; for others, it can be a death sentence.

It’s common for people from feuding areas in the city to use social media to instigate and escalate conflict, posting Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok clips of themselves in enemy territory, goading their rivals. For instance, the Driftwood rapper Why G filmed an Instagram video in a location later labelled as Regent Park. He rolls up in his car, panning the camera down to his heavy chains. He gets out of the car, raps a few bars in the street, then the clip ends. On YouTube, it’s been viewed tens of thousands of times. Sometimes, the videos are emblazoned with opposing rappers’ online handles, often accompanied by

Houdini rarely visited Toronto because it was dangerous. When he did come home, he disguised himself with hoodies, sunglasses and scarves.
the acronym WYA—“where you at?” In other videos, rappers will diss artists from enemy turf more explicitly. A recent video shot in Regent Park features Why G and J Neat saying, “This is my fucking block, we run this bitch, man.”

Some artists take aim through their lyrics: they may gloat about their toughness, their familiarity with guns, their superiority over their rivals. In “Auntie,” a supremely catchy collaboration between Why G and Houdini, Why G makes a trigger gesture and raps, “I put a Dubz in my backy”—presumably a reference to the 2017 murder of Rexdale rapper Yung Dubz. In some instances, a rapper might go on Instagram Live, and a competing artist might jump on their stream, trading insults about whose designer clothes and shoes cost more, who has the bigger chains, who’s just playing at success.

Houdini’s achievements were tangible, and he proudly put them on display. He filled his Instagram with screenshots of his trending albums, of cash stacks and slick cars, of expensive outfits and gold chains. As his sister Kim puts it: “Coming from where we come from, you’re expected to be nothing.” And in Toronto’s indie-rap community, defying those expectations often stokes a perverse envy. In Houdini’s case, the success and fame he always wanted put a bull’s eye on his back.

In September of 2019, Houdini was at a recording session in Brampton with his friend Lil D, an 18-year-old aspiring rapper. That night, Lil D left the studio in the early-morning hours. As he drove down Highway 410 near Sandalwood Parkway East, a group of gunmen opened fire, killing Lil D. According to family and online chatter, the assailants believed they were tailing Houdini.

The beef against Houdini was mostly one-sided: he put little energy into taunting other artists on social media, and though he rapped about his life in Driftwood and violence in the neighbourhood, he rarely used his lyrics to antagonize anyone. He was more concerned with showing off his style and wealth than he was with violence or guns. He had friends who were affiliated with criminal activity, but his success pushed him further away from that life, not closer to it. Besides, he was hardly ever in Toronto. And yet whenever he did come home, he was incredibly cautious. Fans had started to recognize him when he was out in public. Once, a teen shly followed him around the Square One mall in Mississauga, from store to store, before asking for a photo. Another fan, a clerk at Saks, always gave him the employee discount. While getting gas, he was often recognized by people who’d been blasting his songs in their cars.

Whenever Houdini was in Toronto, he tried to disguise himself and hide his whereabouts. His mysterious look—hoodies, scarves, sunglasses—was as much about safety as it was about style. In cars, he’d lean back, obscuring his face from the window. Even when he went to the movies with his family, he’d make Maya exit the car first, scoping the area, making sure the theatre was empty. Then Houdini would go in, jacket over his head, scarf concealing his face. He’d make sure not to post his location on social media whenever he was home; sometimes he wouldn’t even say he was back in Toronto. As he said in one Instagram post, he moved like a ghost, slipping through the city. And yet he didn’t want to look soft or live his life in fear. There was only so much he could control, he reasoned, only so many times he could look over his shoulder.

“I take my chances because I’m blessed,” he told one friend. “God’s got me.”

Houdini planned to return to Toronto in April of 2020, soon after the pandemic began. He’d been gone for several months and he missed his family. Both Kim and Maya were concerned for his safety. When he told Kim he was coming back, she tried to dissuade him, telling him about Toronto’s high Covid case count and warning him about the potential spread in airports. She wanted to see her baby brother, but she wanted to protect him even more. It didn’t work. He was home by Easter.
At first, the visit was perfect. The family gathered at Kim's house for Easter dinner. Houdini loved being the star, letting everyone try on his diamond watch and modelling his $3,000 Goyard cross-body bag. They all played his music, and his dad joked that his son could buy Maya a car for her 20th birthday. Houdini announced his plans to purchase houses for both his parents. There was a lot of laughter, infectious and incessant. Kim kept warning everybody not to post that Houdini was back in Toronto. But he was too happy and couldn’t resist: that night, he put up a video on Snapchat of the family around the dinner table. It was the last time they were all together.

A few weeks later, in May of 2020, Houdini was staying with his friends at an Airbnb in the Entertainment District. He had a lot to celebrate. His newest EP, underGROUND, was a hit, and he was expecting a baby. On May 26, he left his place around 4 p.m., dressed in a grey hoodie. He was with three people, including a 15-year-old boy. Security footage from that day shows them crossing the street near the Bisha Hotel at King West and Blue Jays Way, walking close to a rented blue Volkswagen Tiguan. The car had been waiting, like a lion in the grass, for about 40 minutes. Houdini casually walks near the Tiguan, briefly letting down his guard, before the driver pulls a sharp U-turn. An unidentified shooter, dressed all in black and wearing a blue face mask, emerges from the vehicle and begins shooting. The group bolt, running south on Blue Jays Way. The 15-year-old fires a handgun. It’s chaos—bystanders scatter, a woman is struck by a bullet, and a six-year-old boy runs for cover in the doorway of the hotel’s lobby. Houdini’s young companion is shot, but he survives. The six-year-old’s mother grabs her son and yanks him inside her car. Houdini runs into a nearby alley. The entire episode unfolds in one minute and 36 seconds. At the end of it, Houdini is dead, his rise to fame cut tragically short.

The next day, numerous shell casings and two handguns were recovered from the street, and the Tiguan was found torched in York Region. Police summoned Kim and Maya to watch the surveillance video. Hollowed out with grief, they couldn’t even tell which man was their brother, let alone offer any clues about the identity of his murderer. After viewing the video once, they never watched it again, even as it went viral across the same social media platforms that made their brother famous. Within three days, the sisters arrived to clean out their brother’s Airbnb, their hearts breaking for the hundredth, thousandth time. He and his friends had ordered takeout before they left, and it still sat there uneaten. There were bottles of alcohol. Houdini’s grooming products sat on the counter, and his clothes were in the washing machine. His whole life was there, waiting for him to return. When the sisters left, they saw tributes to their brother in the alley where he died. They placed two signs of their own near the pyramids of flowers and candles. One read “Houligans 4L. We Love You.” The other, “Forever Houdini.”

The Departed
In the last five years, these Toronto rappers were all gunned down in the streets

**Sizzlac**
The 29-year-old Rexdale rapper, born Mustafa Omar, was shot and killed in Mississauga in 2016, days after releasing a diss track.

**Robin Banks**
Driftwood’s Banks—a.k.a. Liban Randall—was 22 when he was shot at Cameo Lounge, a Vaughan hookah bar, in 2017. He survived the attack but remains paralyzed.

**Yung Dubz**
Yung Dubz, from Rexdale, was shot and killed in Brampton in 2017.

**Smoke Dawg**
The 21-year-old rapper, whose real name was Jahvantie Smart, was shot outside Cube Nightclub on Queen West in 2018. He and another man were both killed in the attack.

**Lil D**
This 18-year-old friend of Houdini’s was killed after leaving a recording studio in Brampton. He was gunned down on Highway 410 near Sandalwood Parkway East.

**Stenno**
Stenno, born Joel Stennett, was an 18-year-old rapper from Brampton. He was murdered in November of 2019.

**Why-S**
This rapper from Driftwood—real name Keeshawn Brown—was 18 years old when he was shot and killed inside a home in Surrey, B.C., a few days before Christmas in 2019.

**Bvily**
The 24-year-old rapper, whose real name was Jahquar Stewart, came from Malvern and was killed in Oshawa just before Christmas in 2019.

**22 Neat**
Farah Handule, who rapped as 22 Neat, was 23 and came from Driftwood. He was found shot to death on a street in Calgary in December of 2019.

**Fourty4double0**
Born Tyrone Noseworthy, he was one half of the Driftwood duo the Tallup Twinz. He died in a shooting at an Airbnb near Bathurst and Fort York Boulevard in January of 2020.
In the minutes, hours and days after Houdini’s death, online tributes flooded Twitter and Instagram under the hashtags #RIPHoudini and #ForeverHOU. Tory Lanez published a series of grieving Instagram posts, including one that read, “I’m trying, and I can’t fight the tears from falling.” Meek Mill wrote, “RIP! Prayers to his side.” Killy, another Canadian rapper, posted “This one hit real close. Greatness breeds jealousy.” The president of Warner Music Canada, Steve Kane, announced that the studio had been working with Houdini on an upcoming album showcasing Toronto’s rising stars. He released a statement, saying, “Houdini had unlimited potential as an artist and we are incredibly saddened that his life was cut short.”

Fans vacillated between grief and anger, with tweets like, “When do we say enough is enough?! Why can’t we just allow the talented artists in our city to rise?” and “This gotta stop. When will it stop.” Meanwhile, news media in the city speculated that Houdini and his “associates” were part of a gang war. The front page of the Toronto Sun turned Houdini’s death into a pun: “Who made Houdini vanish?” A petition followed to boycott the paper. For Houdini’s family, the man portrayed on TV and in print often bore little resemblance to the person they knew.

Jenkins’s mother, Sophia, was immobilized with grief. Kim and Maya, meanwhile, kept busy planning the funeral, which was complicated by Covid restrictions. They hadn’t even seen their brother’s body; Kim had to identify him by his Rolex. They focused their energy on creating a show-stopping tribute that would have made their brother proud. First, they covered his casket with blue and white flowers, with HOU DINI spelled out in roses as blue as a spring sky. The day of the funeral, they drove his casket around Driftwood in a Cadillac. The family rode in two rented Rolls-Royces. The procession wove through the streets where the siblings grew up, the streets their brother loved. Cars followed, stretching too far back for the sisters to count. At one point, they stopped and had a moment. People came out of their houses to join the family on the street. Together, they chanted, “Long Live Houdini.” “We went out with a bang,” says Kim. “We didn’t do it quietly.” They wanted to show people who the king of Driftwood really was.

Soon after Houdini’s murder, a vigil was held at Blaxx Restaurant and Dive Bar, a Caribbean spot in Downsview. As mourners gathered, a sedan pulled up alongside the venue’s parking lot. Its passengers exited and began firing on the crowd. Some people in the crowd began shooting back, including, police say, Houdini’s friends Traequan Mahoney, who raps as Burna Bandz, and Gaddiel Ledinek, who raps as GD. Though the vehicle was only there for four seconds, police later found more than 60 shell casings. They arrested and charged Mahoney and Ledinek.

In the past year, many Driftwood allies have vowed to avenge Houdini’s death. Notably, Rowan Atkins, who raps as Rolexx Homi, released a video for his song “AvengersK” that kicks off with “R.I.P. Houdini.” Police say that in August of 2020, he encouraged his Instagram followers to “shoot everyone in Regent Park.” Atkins was apprehended in 2021 and charged with 30 offences, including attempted murder. Yung Lava, meanwhile, released a diss track aimed at Houdini called “Quitter,” which features artwork depicting a top hat with a gunshot wound, blood pooling underneath.

More than a year after the murder, Houdini’s killer is still unknown. The only person charged so far in connection with Houdini’s death is 27-year-old Cjay Hobbs. He’s suspected to be the getaway driver, and is linked to two other murders.

For now, Houdini’s friends and family are relying on his music to get them through. In July of 2020, just two months after his friend’s death, Pressa released a collaboration he’d been working on with Houdini called “Mansion.” The YouTube video has more than 2.6 million views and the song is now certified gold in Canada. In April of 2021, Houdini’s family released a music video he’d been working on for the song “Part of Me,” in which he raps, “I’m from the hood, it’s so toxic, and laments the deaths of his friends, as well as the jealousy and neighbourhood politics that caused them.

Houdini left behind a slew of unreleased songs, which Kim and Maya found while excavating his digital life. They’re piecing together an album, trying to figure out which tracks he felt good about, and in which order they should run. They’re grateful to have so much of him left, but the process is bittersweet. It took Maya a full year to play his music again. Kim will often listen, then let his voice go silent for weeks, months, when it becomes too heavy to bear the reality of his loss. Listening to his music is confronting his robbed dreams and unwritten future. It’s the realization that they can hear him but can’t talk to him. Most of all, it’s knowing that if he hadn’t achieved everything he’d wanted, he’d still be alive.