For three decades, the murder of nine-year-old Christine Jessop was unsolved—until a tenacious Toronto cop cracked the case last year.

A story about miscarried justice, blinkered policing and how forensic genealogy is revolutionizing law enforcement

THE HUNT FOR A KILLER

By Malcolm Johnston
In 1984, Queensville, Ontario, was a handful of homes clustered around a general store, a church, a cemetery and a playground. It was the kind of idyllic rural outpost where most faces were familiar and most front doors were left unlocked. Parents shooed their kids out of the house to play with toys, dig in the dirt and plummet down slides, so long as they were back before the streetlights came on. Out in the country, far from noisy, crowded Toronto some 50 kilometres to the south, there was a sense that everything would work out just fine.

There was therefore no reason, on Wednesday, October 3, for Janet Jessop to rush home from a day trip into Toronto in time to greet her nine-year-old daughter when school let out. Christine, the little girl with the crooked front tooth, high socks and low pigtails, was an explorer, an independent and imaginative kid who would happily spend hours playing in the cemetery behind her house. She loved baseball, just like her brother, Kenny, five years her senior, and she cherished her dolls. Her deepest affection, however, was reserved for animals. Her dog, a Beagle named Freckles, was her constant companion. She kept a pet frog, Harold, in the moist, dirt-floor basement. She once slept outside beside baby chicks so they wouldn’t be alone overnight.

Christine got off the bus that autumn day with a fresh swirl of excitement: in music class, her teacher had handed out recorders, and she was eager to show hers off to her mom and Kenny. She knew her dad wouldn’t be home. Bob Jessop had swindled some elderly friends of the family and was in the Toronto East Detention Centre for an 18-month stay. But when Christine went inside the family’s two-storey farmhouse, she realized her mom and brother weren’t there either. Unfazed, she sorted through the change dish and located a nickel, then went to the corner store to buy a piece of gum. Christine had made plans that day to meet her friend Leslie Chipman around 4 p.m. at the park, just across the street from the store. As arranged, Leslie arrived at the park and waited for her friend to show. And then waited some more.

Janet arrived home with Kenny roughly 10 minutes later, at around 4:10. Oddly, Christine’s red bicycle was lying on its side in the shed, its kickstand damaged. They walked inside and noticed that Christine’s jacket was hanging on the hook higher than the little girl could reach. Her school bag was on the counter, and the mail and newspaper had been brought inside. Around 5 p.m., Christine still hadn’t returned home, so Janet went to the park to search. She walked through the cemetery calling out her daughter’s name. She phoned Christine’s friends, including Leslie Chipman, who explained that she went home when Christine didn’t show up for their park date.

Janet tried to suppress panic. She could be hard, with her sharp green eyes, pursed lips and salty vocabulary, but Christine brought out her tender side. The pair were close, did everything
together. And despite giving her kids the illusion of freedom, Janet almost always knew where they were. She had left Christine unsupervised for just 20 minutes—a nanosecond in the vast sweep of a child’s life—and suddenly every parent’s nightmare was coming true. Christine, her sweet, sensitive, feisty, adorable daughter, was missing.

After sunset, Janet called the York Regional Police. Missing children cases were common enough at the time, but they were usually solved within 48 hours. The most frequent explanation was parental abduction or child runaway, but in this case, neither scenario made sense. Both parents were accounted for, and Christine wasn’t the type to run away or even wander off. When she went to visit her grandparents for the weekend, she’d frequently phone home just to say hi.

The York force was small, with one officer for every 860 residents. They had no major crimes unit and had never dealt with a child abduction or a child murder. Almost immediately, their lack of experience showed. When a constable arrived on scene, he removed Christine’s coat from the hook for closer inspection. Detectives came in through the back and side doors. The plastic wrapping of the newspaper was thrown away without being dusted for fingerprints. Well-meaning neighbours passed in and out of the home, touching this and that. If Christine had been abducted, crucial evidence was now compromised.

Police set up a command post in the nearby fire hall and enlisted residents to help conduct a series of haphazard searches of the area. Still, day after day, not a trace. The disappearance defied explanation: in tiny, quaint Queensville, under the watchful eye of so many friends and neighbours, how could a little girl simply vanish? “We are full of anxiety and concern,” a volunteer named Marg Johnson told the Toronto Star. “There is a feeling of disbelief that something like this could happen here.”

Bob Jessop was released from jail on humanitarian grounds, and he and Janet issued desperate pleas to the public for their daughter’s return. Police knew that most abductions aren’t random; they’re usually perpetrated by someone with a pre-existing relationship. And so the Jessops supplied the names and numbers of anyone allowed to enter the home without a family member being present. One of those names was Calvin Hoover, a family friend who worked with Bob.

The day after the disappearance, Calvin’s wife, Heather Hoover, rushed to Queensville to console Janet and help where she could. Sergeant Raymond Bunce of the York police interviewed her. Heather explained that she had been at work on the day of Christine’s disappearance. She assumed her husband had been working too, and told Bunce as much. Eventually, after patiently answering a long series of questions, Heather told the officer that her husband was with their children and she had to hurry home. Calvin Hoover, the man who abducted Christine Jessop, was never interviewed. The conversation ended, and Bunce left it at that, unaware that he was as close to the culprit as he would ever be.

Calvin Hoover had dark hair, prominent front teeth and a thin face made to look even thinner by his oversized glasses. He was a 28-year-old tradesman from Scarborough who had a predilection for drinking, partying and gambling. He had a certain charisma that could envelop the room, but he was also profoundly selfish, concerned with his own fulfillment to the exclusion of just about everything else. While generally amiable to strangers and co-workers, he possessed a nasty, vindictive streak that he would often unleash on those who knew him best.

In the mid-1970s, Calvin met Heather, who had travelled west from her native Newfoundland and landed in the Toronto area. After they married, he adopted Heather’s two boys, and they would soon have two more together. The family rented a small home in a housing development just west of the Toronto Zoo. Both Calvin and Heather worked at Eastern Independent Telecom, a small communications outfit in Markham that provided telephone wiring for businesses across the area. Heather was a dispatcher and Calvin did installations. Bob, Christine’s father, was the lead installer. The itinerant nature of the work gave Calvin cover to come and go from home when he wanted, and he took advantage. He would occasionally leave for hours at a time, day and night, speeding off without explanation.

At work, he developed a friendship with Bob, and the two families—Hoovers, Jessops—gathered for barbecues and birthdays. The moms became particularly close. Janet jokingly called Heather “the Goofy Newfie.” Heather sometimes babysat
Christine, who referred to her as “Auntie Heather.” Though they lived more than 50 kilometres apart, Janet and Heather would meet often to share a pot of tea and watch the kids play.

One such visit happened two days before Christine went missing. On the evening of October 1, 1984, Janet loaded Christine and Kenny into the car to visit the Hoovers. With her husband in jail and two rambunctious kids to manage, Janet was no doubt exhausted and in need of moral support. While she was there, Janet mentioned that she would be going to visit Bob in jail in two days and that Christine was too young to be in such a grim environment. It’s possible—even probable—that Calvin overheard that comment and knew the little girl would be home alone. Or perhaps Heather innocently relayed the information to her husband later on. For Calvin, it would have been a tantalizing revelation. The opportunity, however, would prove to be dangerously brief. There would be only minutes between when Christine stepped off the school bus and when Janet and Kenny returned home.

Two days later, Calvin put his plan into action. Since Christine knew Calvin as a family friend, she might have hopped into his car without much convincing. Perhaps he told her he was taking her to see her father in jail, which would have delighted her. Or maybe he used force: she was wiry and rail thin, at only 40 pounds. However it happened, by 4:10 p.m., little Christine was in Calvin’s car, speeding toward the unknown.

In the days after Christine disappeared, suspicion swirled in Queensville. The Jessops prayed for the safe return of their daughter, but the longer she was missing, the more inevitable tragedy felt. At the Jessop house, Christmas passed with no tree, and only a few presents for Kenny. No one felt much like celebrating.

By December 31, 90 excruciating days had passed without progress. While residents across the province prepared to ring in the new year, in the hamlet of Sunderland, 56 kilometres east of Queensville, a man named Fred Patterson and his two daughters went looking for their dog on the large, wooded property next to their home. Just off the bend of a trail, Patterson spotted something unusual—what looked like a pile of garbage next to a half-dug pit.

He walked closer and realized with horror what it was: a corpse, badly decomposed. There were multiple stab wounds to the chest, some deep enough to penetrate the vertebrae—these were later deemed the official cause of death. The body was dressed in a beige turtleneck sweater with a blue pullover, and a blouse with buttons missing. Next to the right foot was a pair of little girl’s underwear. In the tall grass lay a recorder with “Christine Jessop” written on it.

When the Jessops heard the news, they were shattered. The torturous waiting and wondering were over, but now a lifetime of mourning lay ahead. They drew the blinds and hunkered inside.

Because the body was found in Durham Region, the case shifted from the York police to the Durham Regional Police and into the care of Inspector Robert Brown. Public pressure to find Christine had been intense. The scrutiny of a homicide investigation would be overwhelming, unlike anything he or his officers had dealt with before.

Among the many puzzling elements of the case was the location of the body: Why Sunderland? It was all country roads, farmland and forests, not exactly far from Queensville but not close either. What they didn’t know was Calvin Hoover had a school friend who lived just a few kilometres away. They would meet often to go kayaking and backcountry camping. Because of his familiarity with the area, Calvin would have known that a few metres into the dense forest off just about any back road, he would be uninterrupted and unseen by passing motorists.

Inspector Brown needed to move fast. He divided his detectives into two teams. Whichever produced the most compelling suspect would take over the career-defining case. Comprising one team were two veterans named Bernie Fitzpatrick and John Shephard, who went by Fitz and Shep. The original investigating force, the York Regional Police, had accumulated boxes of notes containing leads from their investigation, including, in one notebook, the name and address of Calvin Hoover. But, as Fitz would later testify, he and Shep largely disregarded their work, deeming it amateurish and a waste of time. (Today, Fitzpatrick asserts that he in fact spent considerable time examining the notes.) They pursued other leads, like the family friend who had uttered bizarre, dark sayings; the neighbourhood kid who carried a knife; and even Janet Jessop. None, however, panned out. And Calvin Hoover’s name never came up.
On February 14, 1985, Fitz and Shep visited the grieving Jessops and asked anew for a list of suspects. The Jessops couldn’t name anyone with any kind of confidence. The detectives pressed harder, prompting them for anyone who stood out. Next door, just over the fence, lived the Morins, a close-knit family. Their younger boy, 25-year-old Guy Paul, was kind and respectful. He had no criminal record. He didn’t drink or smoke. His only infractions were a couple of speeding tickets. But, Janet recalled, Guy Paul hadn’t participated in the search for Christine when just about everyone else in Queensville had pitched in. She also happened to mention that Guy Paul played the clarinet and kept honeybees. Fitz scribbled in his notepad words that would destroy a life: “Clarinet player. Weird-type guy.”

The detectives asked about his whereabouts on the day Christine went missing. Morin knew he had been at work, a furniture manufacturing facility at Steeles and Weston, 57 kilometres to the south. Fitz and Shep would later discover that he had punched out—literally, with a card—at 3:32 p.m. That meant he could have returned home no earlier than 4:14 p.m., too late to abduct Christine before Janet and Kenny got home at 4:10.

Why, the detectives asked, hadn’t he helped with the search for Christine on the night she went missing? Morin said that had the Jessops asked him, of course he would have pitched in. But he and his father were installing weeping tile around the home’s foundation, and it seemed like the entire town was already involved. One more person wouldn’t add much. To a man whose north star was rationality, his explanation made all the sense in the world. To Fitz and Shep, it smacked of guilt. The detectives playfully engaged the young man in more small talk. They asked him what he thought of Christine, and Morin described her as “sweet and innocent.” Morin, who had a habit of filling anticipated lulls with whatever thought was in his head, fatefully added: “But they sometimes grow up to be corrupt.” Today, Morin doesn’t deny having said that, but he says he meant it in a general sense: as girls become adults, they lose their childlike innocence, which is hardly a controversial statement. To the detectives, it was tantamount to motive: this weird-type neighbour had sought retribution for the inevitable, intoxicating promiscuity of women. Morin left the car that day as unencumbered as he had entered it. He returned home and, he assumed, to the rest of his benignly unorthodox, pleasant life.

The Crown relied on flawed hair and fibre analysis to convince a jury that Morin killed Christine Jessop.
Unlike Morin, Calvin Hoover had the good sense to keep his mouth shut in the days and weeks after the murder. He also possessed both the gall and the guile to show up not just for the funeral, but the wake, too, crowding in among the solemn masses, extending his condolences to the family. At both, police officers were in attendance, easily recognized by their stiff postures and austere faces intensely scanning the crowd, some of them even brazenly snapping photos of attendees. What must Hoover have thought to be there, steps from his pursuers?

In many ways, Hoover was a detective’s worst nightmare. He had no criminal record and exhibited no signs of depravity. He wasn’t loud or boastful. And it appeared he’d been careful enough not to be seen picking up Christine after school. Yet at the same time, Hoover had committed his crime so hastily that he’d left a trail of leads. His semen was on Christine’s underwear, and a single dark hair was trapped in her necklace. Police rushed that strand to the Centre of Forensic Sciences, a bland government building in downtown Toronto. Juries, the detectives knew, were hard to convince. But science was irrefutable. A hair match could change everything.

A few weeks later, Morin arrived at his jazz group and learned that the bandleader’s daughter, accompanied by her friend and classmate—who happened to be an undercover police officer—was doing a cosmetics class project on hair analysis. She asked the group whether they would mind if she plucked a few strands of everyone’s hair. Morin didn’t mind at all. Besides, he thought she had beautiful eyes. After she left, the officer discarded all the hair samples but Morin’s, which she handed over to her colleagues Fitz and Shep, who took it to the Centre of Forensic Sciences and, tragically, into the care of a forensic scientist named Stephanie Nyznyk.

Hair analysis was fashionable at the time, and often used in criminal proceedings, yet its usefulness was limited: it was a reliable way to exclude suspects—for example, if a blond hair was found but the suspect had brown hair. It was unreliable, though, for including suspects: that is, proving a definitive match. That’s because characteristics of hairs from one person’s head vary from hair to hair, and even the characteristics of a single hair may differ from tip to bulb.

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“The consistent” was the word the detectives wanted to hear. They now had their man. When they presented their bosses with the evidence, the departmental competition was over: the case was theirs. Next, Fitz and Shep hired an FBI profiler who delivered a sketch of the killer: a high-school-educated white male between 19 and 26 who wears sloppy clothes and lives in Queensville. The full profile was much more extensive (acne, a physical handicap, a history of arson and voyeurism, macho affect, and more). In a press release, the cops omitted the characteristics they didn’t like, which Fitz and Shep later claimed was a ploy to unnerve Morin. At home, Alphonse was watching the nightly news, and he joked to his son: “My god, that sounds like you. You’re the grubby one around here.”

Guy Paul Morin was on his way to band practice on the evening of April 22, 1985, when he saw flashing lights in his rear-view mirror. He assumed a passing police cruiser had noticed he wasn’t wearing his seatbelt. He pulled over, feeling sheepish. He had no idea that 14 other officers had sealed off the area. He watched as two cops approached the car, surprised to recognize the friendly detectives he’d spoken to weeks earlier. “What’s up guys?” he said. Fitz and Shep told him they were arresting him for the murder of Christine Jessop. “What? You’re joking,” said Morin. They brought him to their headquarters, where, on his way to the interrogation room, Morin noticed a face that broke his heart: the woman who had plucked his hair at band practice. Until that moment, he’d assumed it had all been an honest mistake. Now, the reality of his situation was stark: he was about to take the fall for a crime he didn’t commit.

The killer, Calvin Hoover, had both the gall and the guile to show up for the funeral and the wake, crowding in among the solemn masses

What must Calvin Hoover have thought when he picked up the newspaper two days later? “Musician who lived next door charged with Christine’s murder,” blared the headline. Who was this poor soul, Guy Paul Morin? Somewhere in Hoover’s dark mind, he had known the risks of his actions. The police would feverishly search for the killer, and any knock at the door might be the one that would send him to jail, label him a rapist and murderer. By some perverted calculation, the risk was worth the reward. And now, to see some kid who happened to like bees and jazz take the fall—it must have seemed miraculous.

Calvin’s wife, Heather, kept a photo of Christine that the little girl had given her, as a daily reminder of her beautiful, abbreviated life, and she visited the gravesite often. Through it all, Calvin assumed the posture of sympathy, doling out words of comfort as she mourned.

Calvin’s friends, Bob and Janet, were stunned by the news that the killer had been next door the whole time. “Last summer, they came over and gave us honey from their bees,” Janet told the media. “They were so good to us. That’s why it’s such a shock.”

For Fitz and Shep, the easy part—finding a suspect—was done. The difficult part was making the evidence line up. The most problematic issue was Morin’s rock-solid alibi. He couldn’t have travelled the 57 kilometres from work to home in time to abduct Christine before Janet and Kenny arrived home at 4:10 p.m. Fitz and Shep retraced Janet and Kenny’s route on the day of the abduction and suggested that Janet must have remembered it all wrong. She replied that she’d made no such mistake. She knew she had to make an important call to her husband’s lawyer at 4:50 p.m., and she remembered looking at the clock on the wall
when she got home. Perhaps, suggested Fitz, the clock was running slow? Janet allowed that it was conceivable. Gradually, over the months that followed, their steady pressure eroded her confidence, and she eventually revised her timing. It was, she decided, closer to 4:20 p.m.—perhaps even as late as 4:35 p.m.—that she’d returned home.

At trial, flimsy evidence was brazenly torqued to present Morin as the sadistic killer the Crown needed him to be. A cigarette butt found at the scene was collected as evidence, until police realized Morin wasn’t a smoker—at which point the cigarette butt was conveniently lost. (The presiding officer at the crime scene, it turned out, kept a second notebook, rewriting his notes to better suit the evidence. He was later charged with perjury and obstructing justice.) Mysterious red fibres found on Christine’s body and in Morin’s car were presented to the court as evidence that the little girl had been inside the car. But an anonymous letter later claimed that the technician testing the fibres had worn a red sweater and no lab coat, facts that Nyznyk’s boss investigated and ultimately kept to himself. And as for the Morins’ story that their son hadn’t arrived home on the day of the disappearance until 5:30 p.m. (he had stopped for groceries and gas after work): a psychologist who interviewed the Morins testified that they were a part of a secretive, protective, pathological family system.

And as if the purported evidence wasn’t already damning enough, the police planted an undercover police sergeant named Gordon Hobbs in Morin’s cell. He emerged days later with quite a story to tell. Morin, he said, had made stabbing motions toward his own chest, demonstrating the way he’d committed the crime. Hobbs also explained that Morin had confessed by saying that he would “redrum the innocent.” The story, according to Morin, had been horrifically mangled. Hobbs had asked him about his favourite movies. Morin had seen the 1980 horror film The Shining, wherein the little boy repeatedly croaks “redrum”—murder backwards—in the film’s scariest scene. Morin couldn’t remember the title so referenced “redrum” instead.

When that sensational little nugget got into the papers, Morin’s fate seemed sealed. Even his lawyer, Clayton Ruby, the high-profile, fast-talking master of persuasion, was worried they would lose. There were too many enigmatic utterances, too much strange behaviour, and police hadn’t turned up any better candidates.

Morin had read about a British geneticist named Alec Jeffreys who developed techniques for genetic fingerprinting and DNA profiling, and he hoped the burgeoning field might exonerate him. Unfortunately, Ruby told him, DNA coding was still a nugget got into the papers, Morin wasn’t a smoker—at which point the cigarette butt was conveniently lost. (The presiding officer at the crime scene, it turned out, kept a second notebook, rewriting his notes to better suit the evidence. He was later charged with perjury and obstructing justice.) Mysterious red fibres found on Christine’s body and in Morin’s car were presented to the court as evidence that the little girl had been inside the car. But an anonymous letter later claimed that the technician testing the fibres had worn a red sweater and no lab coat, facts that Nyznyk’s boss investigated and ultimately kept to himself. And as for the Morins’ story that their son hadn’t arrived home on the day of the disappearance until 5:30 p.m. (he had stopped for groceries and gas after work): a psychologist who interviewed the Morins testified that they were a part of a secretive, protective, pathological family system.

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A FRESH FEAR PERVADED QUEENSVILLE after the verdict. The spectre of a mystery killer was almost too much to bear. “I take my children everywhere. I don’t leave them alone for a minute,” a Queensville resident and mother of two named Pat Noone told the Star. Many people believed Morin was guilty and had simply gotten lucky. Media thronged outside the Morins’ humble one-and-a-half-storey home. The family found menacing notes in their mailbox. One night, someone threw a beer bottle through a window.

In the wake of the acquittal, the police and the Crown were embarrassed, their failings on full display. But there were no suspects they liked any better than Morin. So in May of 1990, a new trial commenced on a technicality related to instructions the original judge had given to the jury regarding the meaning of reasonable doubt. This time, little had changed. The evidence was still paper thin. In fact, much of the original evidence had gone missing from the Centre of Forensic Sciences, including two of Christine’s bones, many of Nyznyk’s work notes, and some 150 to 200 hair and fibre slides that had not been made exhibits at the original trial.

This time, the Crown’s theory was even more absurd: Morin, they argued, must have seen Christine holding her new recorder and, like some sadistic pied piper, lured her with the sound of his own woodwind into his car. As he had done in the first trial, Morin mounted the stand and proclaimed his innocence. He added, “It’s a travesty of justice what’s happened today…I’m appealing.”

He was handcuffed and brought to the Elgin-Middlesex Detention Centre in London, where he would reside until his jailers brought him to federal prison. When guards placed Morin in a cell and closed the heavy door, he was so overcome by panic that he lay flat on the floor, trying to suck fresh air from the slit beneath the door. Barring a miracle, a jail cell would be his entire world for the rest of his life.

Toronto police detective Steve Smith was a teenager when Christine Jessop went missing in 1984. Even after he grew up and entered the force, he never forgot the case.

I MAGINE THE RELIEF FOR CALVIN HOOVER when he heard the news of Guy Paul Morin’s conviction. He probably followed the details of the case closely, silently cheering on the prosecution with every small win. With Morin behind bars, Hoover could carry on with his life without fear.

By the time Morin was put away for life, Calvin, Heather and their four boys lived in a two-storey suburban home in Oshawa on a pleasant tree-lined street. By all appearances, they were living a blessed existence, but the truth was the Hoovers were slowly drowning in debt. In 1991, Hoover had declared bankruptcy, owing $28,000 against assets of just $11,000. He battled various afflictions, including undiagnosed bipolar disorder, depression and periods of anxiety. Alcohol and drugs offered momentary relief but ultimately only papered over the roiling turmoil inside.
Guy Paul Morin was exonerated in 1995, after DNA ruled him out as Christine Jessop’s killer

T he Kingston Pen was a modern-day dungeon, a neoclassical hellscape hewn from stone and iron. It was home to the country’s vilest humans, yet to many of them, Morin, a convicted child rapist and murderer, was the most despicable creature among them. Morin learned that many inmates wanted to mete out justice of their own. Thankfully, the most feared inmate on Morin’s range had followed his story and decided he was innocent. He put out the word that Morin wasn’t to be touched. Still, threats were around every corner. Morin couldn’t go anywhere without his protectors close by.

In his downtime—and there was a lot of it—Morin searched for beauty amid the horror. He would examine the stonework, massive four-foot blocks laid by hand, and follow them, inch by inch, upward to the soaring arches above. He would read books and try to lose himself in prose. Geography was best because he could transport himself to some far-flung part of the world, imagining the sand between his toes or the rainforest canopy above his head.

Outside the prison, enough people knew that something was wrong—the facts just didn’t line up—that a citizens’ group had formed to protest Morin’s conviction. A public opinion poll conducted in 1993 showed that 53 per cent of Ontario residents felt he should be freed on bail. These facts gave Morin some cause for optimism. He hired a new lawyer, James Lockyer, the brilliant British attorney with the KISS hair, and his equally brilliant co-counsel, Joanne McLean. In February of 1993, they successfully filed for appeal, and Morin was granted bail. By that point, he’d lived through nearly a decade of hell. He’d spent two and a half years in courtrooms and nearly 18 months locked away in six different facilities. His parents had mortgaged their house and over to keep up with his legal bills, which amounted to roughly half a million dollars.

Morin’s appeal was scheduled to begin in January of 1995. Already the saga was the longest and most expensive legal ordeal in Canadian history. Another round would cost taxpayers millions more, and the ministry of the attorney general was ready to redepoly its vast army of lawyers, investigators, assistants and scientists. By this point, there was more on the line than a verdict: the case had become a microcosm of the entire justice system—the cops, scientists, prosecutors and even judges.

As Lockyer and his team pored over the previous trials’ twists and turns, they became aware of significant breakthroughs in DNA typing which allowed testing on samples that were previously too deteriorated to be reliable. The risk, of course, was that the DNA evidence would prove that Morin was the killer. Morin practically begged his team to proceed. Days before the trial was set to begin, there was news, and it was seismic: the semen on Christine’s underwear was not Guy Paul Morin’s. Three days later, he was free. All charges were dropped, his record wiped. The moment was a decade in the making, yet he knew better than to celebrate too joyously: in the public eye, suspicion would follow him until Christine’s real killer was found.

C alvin Hoover was always a drinker, but when he heard the news that Morin had been exonerated, he became a constant presence at local pubs, usually telling Heather and the kids that he was headed out to work. It was alarming enough for Hoover that Morin had been exonerated, but the fact that it was achieved through DNA testing must have terrified him. He had been so careless at the body site, and he must have regretted not going back to bury Christine before she was found. Now the police, armed with the weapons of science, were surely inching closer by the day. It would only be a matter of time before that knock at the door.

By 1996, the Hoovers had downsized to a low-rent housing complex in Ajax, their marriage on the edge of collapse. They had lost touch with Bob and Janet Jessop, who had divorced. Hoover continued to gamble and do various drugs—whatever would alleviate his suffering. One night, he got drunk and crashed his truck. The police charged him with a DUI and confiscated his licence for a year. Finally, Heather had had enough with this nasty, selfish mess of a man. They soon divorced.

Hoover hopped around the region, chasing work and women. He had been seeing a co-worker from Burlington named Joanne Rocca for some time. The relationship was strong, their connection genuine. They shared a fondness for gambling, and in 2003, they married in Las Vegas.

The happiness wouldn’t last. Joanne died of natural causes in 2009, never knowing what kind of monster lay beside her at night. “I love you for being a special friend who shared such warmth and care,” Calvin wrote on her condolences page. “I love you for being everything that meant the most to me.”

Finally, it was his turn to grieve, but his pain was negligible in the face of the vast torment he had created. In the span of a few hours, he had destroyed Christine’s family, devastated a small town, shattered an innocent man’s life, and set in motion events that would envelope two ambitious, misguided detectives in a case that would bring them disgrace and ultimately terrify parents and kids across the province and country. In the years after he killed Christine Jessop, Hoover was haunted by so many demons that at least some kind of cosmic retribution was spoiled out in a life riddled with sleepless nights, tortured thoughts, depressive episodes and panic attacks. In 2014, he attempted what the police deemed “suicide by motor vehicle.”

T oronto Police Detective Steve Smith was a 13-year-old kid in 1984. He grew up in Hamilton, playing sports and riding bikes with his best friends, unsupervised and unburdened. Then the news came out about nine-year-old Christine Jessop, the girl who was left alone for a few minutes
Steve Smith, a detective with the Toronto police, took a seminar on forensic genealogy in 2019. A few months later, he applied the new methodology to the Christine Jessop case, which had been cold for more than 30 years.

and vanished. Smith remembers the way his parents’ worries changed. “It used to be, Go out, play, be back for dinner,” says Smith. “Christine went out on her own and she never came back. That’s when everything changed.” Smith’s life carried on—university, marriage, kids—but he never forgot the case.

Smith joined the Toronto police in 1996 and embarked on a low-profile career dotted with impressive achievements. In 2015, he helped solve the Vaulter Bandit case by tracking the famously agile bank robber through Europe. In 2017, Smith was part of the team that caught a serial bank robber named Zak Bayfield by gathering the police from various jurisdictions across Ontario, comparing notes, then triangulating the culprit’s hometown: Whitby.

In 2019, Smith was assigned to the homicide squad to work on an archiving project, but it quickly became clear to his boss, Hank Idsinga—the man who caught the serial killer landscaper Bruce McArthur—that Smith’s analytical mind and strong work ethic made him perfect for an active investigative unit. To Idsinga’s surprise, Smith told him he wanted to work cold cases instead. “These families have waited so long for answers,” Smith told me. “The chance to solve years-old cases intrigued me, and still captivates me to this day.”

Since the Durham police had flubbed the Jessop case so remarkably, the file was moved to Toronto police. Over the ensuing years, they issued news releases on the case in the hope that the reminder might dredge up some key memory from someone, somewhere. Each time, they were reminded that the saga was still as fresh for the public as it was for the police.

“A lot of cases, you put it out there and it might generate one or two tips,” says Smith. “But when we put the Jessop case out there, hundreds of tips would come in.” Officers would investigate each one, either cross-referencing the name against the list of 300 people they’d already eliminated via DNA testing, or pursuing the lead further. By the time Smith joined the cold case unit, they had brought on an extra staff member to sort through Jessop leads. It wasn’t working: they were stumbling around the dark, investigating without context.

In May of 2019, Smith heard about a two-week seminar at the Ontario Police College featuring a session on forensic genealogy. He knew little about it other than the fact that it had been successfully deployed a year earlier by detectives in the case of the Golden State Killer, when a retired police officer named Joseph James DeAngelo Jr. was identified as the culprit. This would be the first time the techniques were taught in Canada. The idea was to use existing crime-scene DNA, run it through public databases to find relatives, then apply old-school family tree building to identify the killer. It was painstaking work, but it had succeeded once before. Smith signed up, intrigued by the potential for his cold cases.

So many law enforcement officials and instructors from the police college registered that the organizers had to move the session from a boardroom to a small auditorium. Over two weeks, Smith learned about single nucleotide polymorphisms, degraded DNA, autosomal DNA, phenotyping, and much more jargon that would soon become a second language.

A few months later, someone from Othram Inc., a Texas-based genetic testing start-up, got in touch. The company had heard about Smith and knew he was interested in the process. The fee of $1,800 (U.S.) seemed reasonable. Before long, Smith had received authorization from Toronto police brass to try out genetic testing on a cold case. Which one? There wasn’t much debate. And yet the Jessop case also presented a risk: forensic genealogy had never been tested in Canada, so it could be precedent-setting. If it didn’t work, the tortured Jessop saga would have a new chapter.

Smith submitted the DNA from Christine’s underwear to Othram, which generated a profile and uploaded it to a database called GEDmatch. Smith waited patiently, hoping for what he termed “the golden goose”—a parent, sibling or child of the unknown killer. The results would be expressed in terms of centimorgans, the unit by which familial proximity is measured. A sibling, for instance, might share 1,200 centimorgans. From there, it would be a quick one-two to find the culprit.

By December of 2020, the results were back, and they were disastrous. There were only two matches, and they bore 50 centimorgans each, which meant probably third cousins at best. The connection between those cousins and the killer was so distant that building the common family tree would involve roughly 33,000 names. It would take years and cost a small fortune.

Smith refused to give up. He received authorization to run the DNA through a second database containing different genetic profiles, called Family Tree, which returned an additional three matches, but again, nothing closer than a distant cousin. If there was a glimmer of good fortune, it was that two of the matches were on the killer’s maternal side, and three were on the paternal. It was hardly a breakthrough, but it was enough progress that they could shrink the family tree to about 400 names.

Next, Smith turned to his secret weapon, an in-house genealogist named James. A 33-year veteran of the Toronto police, he is a low-key kind of cop (dedicated bookworm, no TV, multiple degrees). His cold-case work can put him in vulnerable, sometimes dangerous situations, and he likes to stay incognito so he can continue his work without the hindrances that come with renown. For that reason, I agreed to leave his surname out of this article. A lover of biology, mathematics, history and languages, James became interested in his own ancestry six years ago, so for his 60th birthday, he bought himself an Ancestry subscription and began excavating his past.
When the Christine Jessop case came across his desk, he was of course familiar with it. He enlisted two volunteers as research assistants. Both retired, they were as exacting and tireless as he was, and eager to lend their skills to a noble cause. Using burial records, birth records, town registers, social media and more, the team—plus an in-house genealogist from Othram—got to work.

James gathered his team’s findings in a pedigree-building chart on Ancestry, plus a complex Excel spreadsheet and a program called Lucidchart. Smith and his team had kept James out of the investigative side of things to maintain neutrality. They didn’t want him to develop a theory about who had committed the crime and then, subconsciously or not, let the genealogy work guide them toward a suspect.

James and Othram’s genealogist traded research and leads, helping each other turn a family maze into a family tree, but the going was slow. Over the course of eight months, James and his team meticulously fleshed out a tree all the way up to a man named Henry Hoover Jr. He had been born in 1804 in Lennox, Ontario, near Belleville, to a United Empire Loyalist family. The discovery was a major milestone, but a daunting amount of work remained to populate the tree back down to determine which of Henry Hoover’s great-great-grandsons had killed Christine Jessop.

Eventually, Othram’s team identified the possible mother of the mysterious culprit. James and his team found a set of grandparents and, thanks to James’s Toronto Public Library card and some help from the Toronto Star archives, linked the two lines. Soon, they had arrived at two possible families. Smith and his team investigated members of both surreptitiously. Eventually, they narrowed their scope to a single person: Calvin Hoover.

It was a name Smith had never heard, and it had never come up in the thousands of tips that had flooded in since 1984. Today, the Toronto police use a file management server called Power Case that allows them to electronically search all files from a major case. The Jessop paperwork filled four skids, accumulated from the York, Durham and Toronto police. Smith punched in Hoover’s various addresses over the years into the system. To his surprise, he got a hit. Hoover’s former Scarborough address, the townhouse by the Toronto Zoo, was in one of the notebooks. Hoover, Smith learned, was a Jessop family friend who’d been listed as a close contact at the time of the abduction. He’d had regular access to the Jessop home and, as Heather Hoover’s interview notes suggested, was probably aware that Christine would be alone on October 3, 1984. Finally, Smith had his man. He typed Hoover’s name into two separate police databases called CPIC and Versadex to figure out where he lived and whether he had a criminal record. The end was tantalizingly close.

The police relied on burial records, birth announcements, town registers, social media and more to build out a family tree that would lead them to the mystery killer.

When Smith learned Hoover had been dead for years, he was heartbroken. It meant Hoover would never face the consequences for what he’d done. It also meant that police couldn’t obtain his DNA to compare it to the sample from Christine’s underwear without exhuming Hoover’s body.

On a whim, Smith and the team decided to try the coroner’s office. In most cases of sudden death, they perform an autopsy. It was unlikely that they’d still have DNA all these years later—the coroner is required to keep it only for a few years—but Smith asked anyway. After such a long saga riddled with obstacles, incompetence and misfortune, Smith felt they must be due for a break. And in September of 2020 it came. The coroner’s office said they had retained two vials of Hoover’s blood.

The next hurdle was a high one: Smith needed signoff from a judge to seize that blood for the purposes of genetic testing, something that had never been done in Ontario before. Smith worked the keyboard, trying to weave an explanation that was sufficiently technical to convince a judge that the science was solid, but also with enough plainspeak not to confuse or overwhelm. Ultimately, he was successful: the judge allowed the testing. At the Centre of Forensic Sciences, now a shining, modern structure in North York, a biologist delivered the vials from toxicology to biology and into the care of a team led by Kelly Bowie, a forensic scientist from Brampton. The Jessop case was as famous at the centre as it was among the Toronto police. Nyznyk’s testimony had brought the centre decades of shame, and the lessons from her missteps had coloured the way science was conducted there ever since. (Nyznyk, meanwhile, had left the centre, which afterwards implemented a vast overhaul of their operations, based largely on the fallout from the Morin trials.)

Once again, Smith could do nothing but wait. “I was anxious and excited, but I wasn’t obsessing about it,” says Smith, a master of understated cop-speak. “I’ve been doing this for 25 years, so I can compartmentalize, but I kept my phone at my side.” He devoted his off hours to his three girls, who were 13, nine and seven, but it didn’t take much for the Jessop case to come to mind. “My kids play hockey, so I’m around teams of young girls all the time,” he says. “You look at these girls, and they’re so young and so innocent. You just can’t imagine what Christine went through in the last hours of her life.”
Usualy, it takes six to eight weeks for results to come back from the Centre of Forensic Sciences. Smith knew that Bowie would prioritize this case, but he had no idea when she would hear from her. Less than two weeks after Bowie began her work, Smith’s phone rang. He was in his office at police headquarters on College Street. His screensaver was a picture of Christine Jessop, smiling into the sun. He looked at the caller ID—“Centre of Forensic Sciences”—and his chest began hammering so hard he thought he was having a heart attack.

Forensic scientists don’t use the word “match.” It can be a problematic term. Instead, they speak in terms of “exclusion.” Smith knew that if Bowie said Hoover had been excluded, the investigation would have been a failure.

He picked up the phone. Bowie got straight to the point: “Hoover cannot be excluded,” she said. Smith exhaled. This was good news, but only part of what Smith needed to hear. When a candidate cannot be excluded, it means one of two things: either the person in question is the source of the DNA profile, or they are not the source and the profile originates from someone else who just happens to have the same DNA profile. She told him it was more likely that the first scenario was correct and Hoover was the killer. How many times more likely? Three trillion. It was incontrovertible: the murder of Christine Jessop had been effectively solved, 36 years after the fact, aided by science, time, persistence and a little luck.

Smith hung up. The world would soon know the truth, but for just a moment, the knowledge was his to hold. “Wheat Kings” by the Tragically Hip was playing on his small office radio. He turned it up and sat there, staring at the photo on his screen, exhilarated, sad and happy all at once.

Heather Hoover, now in her early 60s, wasn’t home when the police knocked on her door in October of 2020. Her son was there, and together they called Heather, who was back east visiting family. The officers delivered unthinkable words: the man she had loved, lived with, the father to her boys, had raped and killed Christine. Today, Heather is still dealing with the trauma of it all, turning over insignificant moments in her head for some sign of the depravity her ex-husband possessed.

Smith delivered the news personally to Janet Jessop at her residence in the Niagara region. They ordered in some food and watched the press conference as interim police chief James Ramer gave the update. Janet couldn’t quite place Calvin Hoover, but she remembered he was a colleague of Bob’s and that they might have gotten together for barbecues back in the day. She remembered Heather as a good friend and a “funny duck.” More than anything, she was eager to turn the page: “You get on with life now,” she told the press. Bob, who remarried years ago, had been tortured by the thought that he would die never knowing who killed his little girl. He remembered Calvin Hoover vaguely as a work contact from long ago. “If I could, I would line him up and blow his brains out,” he told the Toronto Sun. Never, in all the years that had passed, had Bob or Janet ever suspected Hoover. Like everyone who knew the man, they are left with more questions than answers.

Among those is one that haunts Smith: How likely is it that Hoover raped and murdered a little girl and never did it again? Because Hoover travelled so widely, often alone, the list of potential victims is large. Police don’t know, but they’re looking. His DNA has been cross-referenced with databases in Canada, the U.S. and the U.K., but so far there have been no matches. The search, as ever, continues.

Late last summer, I pulled up at the Morin residence, just past the main Queensville intersection. The corner store is still there, and so is the park where Leslie Chipman waited for the friend who never showed. Guy Paul’s mom, Ida, is now 99, and she still lives at the family home. Alphonse died years ago, and Ida remains deeply hurt by the callousness of what they went through together—the presumptuous cops, the imperious Crown attorneys, the jackal-like press corps, the gossipy neighbours who turned on them. Her life was taken away, and yet she endures. Guy Paul stops by regularly to check on her. Next door, the original Jessop home is now a Montessori school, full of joy and laughter, a fitting coda for a place that hosted so many of Christine’s Christmas mornings and birthday parties. Through the cedars at the back of the property is the cemetery where Christine used to play, and where her body now rests.

I walked around back of the Morin home to find Guy Paul and his wife, Allison. He was unrecognizable for an instant, with a short salt-and-pepper beard and a full head of white hair. But the bold features remained, the strong brow, the neat part. He’s stayed in shape all these years, still working away with his hands, fixing this, tinkering with that. He looks after his mom’s property, and his own, too, which is not too far away, with the help of his two sons.

The years haven’t been easy. Back in 1997, Guy Paul accepted a settlement from the province of just $1.2 million, $500,000 of which was earmarked for his parents. He would have been entitled to much more if he had pursued a trial, but he’d been in enough courtrooms and knew how slowly the system grinds away. It would have taken years to receive a settlement, and Guy Paul, ever the dutiful son, knew his father’s health was failing fast.

Exonerated killers don’t exactly have their pick of jobs. Guy Paul worked in baggage handling at Pearson—task oriented, away from front-line customer service—for a while. Later, he and Allison enrolled their eldest in kindergarten at Thor College near Barrie, hopeful that after everything they’d been through, they could find a community and a sense of belonging. But when parents there heard the news, they became outraged. The school told Guy Paul that his son—by which they meant him, really—was no longer welcome. Guy Paul had been exonerated, but, well, you never know.

The Morins moved to the country, bought a few acres of land, and Guy Paul took a course in piano technology and found work that suited him perfectly: repairing pianos, some
of them priceless. He tunes each string by ear, a task that requires the touch of a true artist, someone who knows music intimately and has the patience and focus to tighten each string just so. After being in the glare of the media for more than 10 years, his good name destroyed, a job where he can be alone suits him just fine.

He remains distrustful of the police. On the rainy day last fall when he opened his front door to find two officers standing there bearing the name of Christine's real killer, his first reaction was fear. Are these uniformed men still not done with me? He was relieved by the news, but baffled too. He had never heard the name Calvin Hoover.

The name was unfamiliar to Bernie Fitzpatrick, too. The retired Durham detective was at home in Newfoundland when he heard the news of Calvin Hoover. Fitz called up his old partner. Shep, also retired, was living in Ontario. He was just as baffled. Calvin Hoover? The name had never come up, not once.

The case has stayed with both of them, hanging heavy through the years. Fitz has periodic flashbacks to the frenzy of the trial and the traumatic day he arrived at the crime scene. “You try to put it aside, but you never lose it,” he says.

Fitz is aware that history has turned him into a villain, but at the start of all this, he was just a humble cop trying to do his best to reassure a terrified community. He remembers how a lawyer called him the spawn of Satan. “I said to my mom one time, ‘I didn’t know you had an affair with the devil,’ ” he says. “If people want to believe that, they can go ahead.”

He says that he and Shep used the tools available to them at the time, pursued all available leads. Mistakes were made, he says, but they didn’t do anything wrong. He doesn’t blame Nyznyk, but says the hair and fibre evidence ultimately convinced him that Morin was their man.

Today, his life is quiet and pleasant. Back in 1993, Fitz retired with a pension, and he keeps busy by driving a school bus. I asked if he had ever apologized to the Morin family for what they endured. He said no, and he doesn’t intend to. “I feel bad about it, but look, the cops pick up the rocks. It’s the Crown attorneys who break the windows.”

Today, Guy Paul is understandably outraged that now, despite the killer being found, he’s still linked to the murder. He urged me to google “Who killed Christine Jessop?” on my phone. I did, and the auto-generated answer, spat out in large, bold type, was “Guy Paul Morin.” (It now, by the mercy of some updated algorithm, says “Calvin Hoover.”)

As we sat there in the shade in his mom’s backyard, the days when Christine was a little kid and Guy Paul was a young man full of promise and ambition didn’t feel so distant. When he described Christine running around chasing Freckles, you could almost make out the outline of the little girl prancing through the yard, yelping with joy. Those memories, the time before, are painful for him, and he doesn’t like to go there, mentally, much.

Guy Paul had never visited Christine’s grave, through the cedars at the back of his mom’s backyard. We walked in, the birds quietly chirping, the passing cars barely audible. I knocked on the door of the small office building to ask where we might find her plot, and when the employee came out, Guy Paul stepped back and to the left and lowered his gaze. It made sense: he’d never done a single thing wrong, yet he lives in constant fear, afraid that around any corner he might meet someone who still believes he’s guilty and got away with it. The staff member calmly sized up Guy Paul and me, smiled, told us where to find the grave, then went back inside. We walked down the dirt road, Guy Paul talking fast, as he does, then took a left at the sapling. Before we realized it, her headstone lay before us, and we both fell silent. Etched in pink stone, just above an engraving of Freckles, was a short tribute: “In loving memory of Christine Marion, dear daughter of Robert and Janet Jessop, sister of Kenneth.”

What was there to say? In the public consciousness, the names Guy Paul Morin and Christine Jessop are forever linked. According to the many lies people believed over the years, his was the last face she ever saw. But the truth is he barely knew her. And here they were, two names bound in infamy, together at last. The birds chirped. Finally, Guy Paul piped up, as courteous and kind as the day Shep and Fitz knocked on his door. “Rest in peace there, little girl,” he said, and we left.