



A PROJECT OF THE DOMINION INSTITUTE

Night Keepness
Regina, SK
Ochapowace First Nation
28 yrs.

“Young, Aboriginal, Missing”

The city was teeming with wasps that year. The hum of their wings seemed to pulsate through the city, words of a different language, it seemed, none of us could hear. The beauty of the city seemed to wane when you heard the hum of approaching wasps. They gathered around garbage cans, attracted by the scent of sweet, discarded soda or enticed by the desire for wasted meat. When you sat down with a meal, outside, hoping to enjoy the short Saskatchewan summer, you could sense the nearby din of hungry wasps. Was this, in fact, a warning that the beginning of something terrible was about to ensue?

Downtown Regina, Saskatchewan prairies—the province itself is home to less than a million people, underbelly of the country—nothing as terrible as what happened could have possibly happened here. And, yet, as I was walking down 11th avenue on that hot summer day I heard the dreaded news. She’s missing. “What!” We have to pray for her, search for her, find her. The whole neighbourhood is sick with dread and, eventually, the entire city and country is overcome with grief. But that day we prayed and we hoped and we cried. We searched. She was reported missing 11:30 am the morning of July 6th 2004—she was only five years old. Her disappearance, possibly abduction or murder, sent shockwaves through the province. The media flashed her name—“Tamra Keepness”—across the television, the radios, the newspapers. Her face was duplicated thousands of times on childfind posters across the country. A \$25,000 reward was offered for information that would lead to finding Tamra. Hundreds of police and volunteers searched Regina and the surrounding areas for any sign of the little girl. Hearts were broken that summer, which were never mended.

I was twenty-three years old the year Tamra went missing. By July 2004 I was married for nearly a year and pregnant with my first child. My pregnant belly was barely bulging with my daughter and my spirits were high in anticipation for the arrival of my first baby. I remembered a few years earlier I had met Tamra’s mother and father in a small downtown church I attended. I also met her children—Tamra was a little one back then, with her twin sister by her side. I can barely remember anything about her except for her eyes, her beautiful brown eyes. I like to remember this family for what they were then—a family. The events of that summer seemed to send everyone on a long, dizzying trip into the depth of the darkness that existed beyond the surface of our city, seemingly, without anyone’s knowledge.

When I was told of her disappearance I became scared. Who could have possibly taken a little girl like this—walked right into her home and out with her—and nobody noticed a thing? There was something sinister about this situation and everyone knew it. Rumours slowly emerged about Tamra’s close family being involved in the crime in some way. *She was sold to pay off her drug debts. She was sold for drugs.* How could any of this be true? The police, eventually, it appeared, took the route of interviewing close family members but came out with nothing to show for it.

July 5th 2005—a walk is held to mark the one year “anniversary” of her disappearance. There is no sign of Tamra and I have a six month old daughter. In the back of my mind I am always thinking of Tamra and what could have happened to her. And, then, my thoughts drift back to my own daughter. How can I protect her from the same kind of situation? My husband and I know we have to protect her—protect her like a mother bear defending her cubs against predators. We know that there are these kinds of predators in the world, searching for vulnerable prey—children whom they can grab in a half second and gobble up just as fast, before they resume their search for more victims. We hate them, we are scared of them and we want them to be scared of us.

July 15th 2005 and Amber Redman, a young nineteen year old aboriginal woman, goes missing from Fort Qu’Appelle, Saskatchewan. The search for a beautiful young native woman, full of hope and promise for a rewarding future, is on. We learn of this young woman’s accomplishments—she is a dancer, a high school graduate and a popular friend. She has a mother and family who are desperately seeking her whereabouts and pleading for her safe return. They know this is unlike her. It is not in her nature to run away without a trace, to leave her family behind without warning. I am scared for her. I am scared for what this means for the future of my own daughter—barely even one year old, innocent and carefree, beautiful and aboriginal.

August 13th 2005 and a young Aboriginal woman goes missing in North Central Regina—Melanie Dawn Geddes, who is a twenty four year old mother of three children. Her picture is shown on the local news channels and newspaper—she looks happy. Although I never knew her I can imagine her laughing with her children, giving them kisses, snuggling with them on her warm bed, and reading them her bedtime stories. I imagine her rubbing her pregnant belly, in anticipation of her first child, her first baby—spirits high. I hear the great chasm of her groans as she gave birth to that child and the cry of relief and joy as that child was placed on her belly. And, then, the picture that I have in my mind crumbles away and I am left with an aching desire to reach out to her, hug her and tell her that it’s going to be okay. I cannot do that now—she is gone, stolen away into the depth of something we knew nothing about.

I keep walking through life—taking care of my beautiful daughter, watching her grow and cherishing the moments which I am given to be with her. She is now three years old and she has a one year old baby sister; it is May 2008. Suddenly, everyone is talking about it—they found Amber Redman’s remains on the Little Blackbear First Nation. She was murdered, violently, and they had arrested two suspects in her murder—Aboriginal men with questionable histories. At least, they had the suspects here—Melanie’s case (her remains were found burned in a field near Southey on December 20th 2005) is left unsolved. Everyone is angry and saddened by this news. There was reason to believe that certain people on the reserve knew what happened to Amber, even knew where her body might have been, and, yet, nobody came forward with the relevant information. Yes, there was reason to be angry and even more reason to be sad. The search for Amber was over but, in reality, it may have been just beginning.

December 12th 2008—I am at home with my daughters. They are watching cartoons, playing with toys, laughing with each other. My husband is busy at work while I am busy at home. I like it this way (being a stay-at-home mom)—I get to watch my children grow up. I smile to myself as I remember each of my daughters first steps—that first careful and oh so precise reaching out into independence. I remember the feel of their bodies snuggled up inside of mine—warm and bumpy, little feet kicking out, elbows and knees in all directions, hiccups tickling my insides. Now, with Christmas steadfastly approaching, I mourn the fast flowing

nature of time and try, as best I can, to make this moment last. I watch them from the kitchen, ever mindful of the sound of their voices mingled with the background noises of various high pitched cartoon characters, slapstick sound effects and catchy music themes. It is their voices that matter—I want to turn the television off but cannot, for they are intent on watching their favourite cartoon, so I am content to watch them, for the time being.

That day another young Aboriginal woman goes missing—Tara-Lyn Poorman, seventeen years old, beautiful and young, so young. We learn that she is a good student who volunteers a large amount of her time helping disadvantaged children at the Rainbow Youth Center in North Central Regina. She had hopes for a future—a promising and prospective future. She could have been anything she wanted to be. She could have been my own daughter, at seventeen years of age—a beautiful, young, *aboriginal woman*. Something is wrong this picture—something serious is happening in Regina, in Saskatchewan, in Canada. What is happening to our people, to our nation, to our hopes? Our young aboriginal women seem to be suffering from the consequences of something sinister and dark and unbecoming.

There is little mention of these young aboriginal women in the media. I have heard somebody say this specifically—they compared the cases of three young, missing aboriginal women to the strikingly similar cases of three young, missing white women. It was Wanda O'Brien who published the article that found that instances of “print media articles” covering the disappearance of the three young white women heavily outweighed the coverage of three young aboriginal women by 968 to 172. I am hurt and angry that there is so little mention of these three aboriginal women who have gone missing—Daleen Bosse, Amber Redman and Melanie Geddes. It later turns out that all three aboriginal women were murdered. It almost seems like mainstream society does not place enough value on their lives to give them the amount of coverage they deserve.

Christmas is finally here, December 25th 2008. I am out with my family on the Muscowpetung First Nation, just a forty five minutes drive from Regina. The scene is beautiful—my father-in-law's house is cradled in the crook of a voluptuous valley, just overlooking the houses of his family and neighbours below. A small herd of cattle and horses call the valley home. Piles of hay accentuate the weather-beaten barn and the crisp, sweet smell of the fresh winter frost wisps through the air and into the home. The noise of the Chihuahuas short, sharp barks fill the pauses in our conversation. Turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy and stuffing are piled on plates on a table in the living room. My daughters are laughing and playing, anxiously awaiting the opening of Christmas gifts—my one year old has already poked some holes and made some tears in a few unopened gifts. I shoo her away from the presents and hold her in my lap. I am mesmerized by this moment—the love of this family for each other, the love of my children for their kokum, mosom, aunts and uncle. I never had the benefit of a father when I was a child, teenager or young woman. When I see my children sitting on their own father's lap, their daddy, a big smile on his face and a sparkle in his eyes that only comes when he is playing with his daughters, and my girls, laughing with their voice and with their eyes, all at once—I am captivated. When I see my father-in-law and mother-in-law interacting with their grandchildren, *my children*, my heart fills with pride. This moment could last forever.

It is finally 2009, January. Tara-Lyn is still missing—she did not return home, her gifts remain unopened. Melanie's children will never hear another bedtime story from their mother. Amber's mother will never see her special girl again. Tamra's mother, sister, father, it seems, will never again hold her hand. I glance at my daughters every now and then as they play and watch cartoons. How will we protect them when they are five, seventeen, nineteen, twenty-four

years of age—young, beautiful, aboriginal women, full of promise and future? I realize that the change has to start with them—with my children, with Melanie's children, with Amber's nieces and nephews, with the children whom Tara-Lyn worked with at the Rainbow Youth Center and with Tamra's brothers and sisters. We have to protect them with our prayers now, not later, when it might not help them. We have to search for them now, when they are with us, not later, after they have gone missing. We have to cry for them now, not later, when we cannot hold them in our arms in comfort. Summer is approaching and, with it, the dreaded hum and pulsating message of the wasps. Will the search for our children begin now—or will it begin, later, when it is too late?