

## The Village of the Forgotten Ones – Attawapiskat 91 A

*There are no roads leading to the small village of Attawapiskat. As a result, many of the villagers have resorted to desperate measures in order to get away from this place.*

From the window of a small propeller plane you can only see snow and trees for miles and miles. It was somewhere down there that the police discovered Sheridan Hookimaw in the early winter of 2015, hanged. The 13-year-old girl, who still had the face of a small child, had committed suicide.

The winter in Sheridan's home village was grim following her death. Altogether a hundred villagers tried to take their own lives over the following months. On just one April evening, 11 people attempted to end their lives.

The name of the village is Attawapiskat, more specifically Indian Reserve Attawapiskat 91A. A small plot of land, where a community of aboriginal Canadians, called the Cree, still live. The wave of suicides did not surge out of nowhere in this village of a couple of thousand people. Its roots were planted a lot deeper.

Standing on the doorstep of a grayish brown wooden house stands Jacintha Hookimaw, 26. She puts on her mirrored sunglasses, takes a cigarette and lights it. Gray clouds cover the sun, but the whiteness of the snow is still blinding.

It is daytime, but it is so quiet that the click of a lighter resonates in your ears. The cigarette smoke lingers in the still, frosty air.

"I don't like to live here. I just want to get away, you know."

Sheridan, who committed suicide earlier in the fall, was Jacintha's family member - her second cousin. Family ties here are strong, and that's why the idea of immediate family includes extended family members.

The Hookimaw family has had more than its share of grief.

Jacintha's cousin, who was in his twenties, killed himself seven years ago. And a couple of years ago, Jacintha's goddaughter - still a toddler - was hit by a car.

Jacintha waves at passersby, but doesn't say anything. Her arms, neck and chest are decorated with tattoos. Jacintha strokes her sleeve-covered arm – she is going to get a picture of her deceased goddaughter tattooed on her arm.

Jacintha first left Attawapiskat nine years ago. And she is not back here to stay.

"I'm just visiting until everything's okay, you know," Jacintha says, and turns to look at me through her mirrored sunglasses.

On the massive Canadian scale, the Attawapiskat Indian reserve is quite close to Toronto, the capital of Ontario. It is about 1,000 kilometers away. It is almost as far as the Finnish capital of

Helsinki is from the country's northern city of Kittilä. The closest proper city is Timmins, located about 500 kilometers away. That is where Jacintha wants to return to as soon as possible.

There is just one problem: you can't just get in a car and drive out of Attawapiskat. There is no highway leading to the village.

The village, surrounded by great swathes of thick forest, is closed off for most of the year. The only way out is to fly, and that is not cheap. A one-way ticket on a small Air Creebec or Thunder Air operated plane can easily cost up to 600 Canadian dollars, which is about 450 euros.

If the urgency of the situation in Attawapiskat could be measured using a thermometer, it would have already cracked on Saturday, April 9th, 2016. That was the evening when 11 people tried to take their lives.

That same evening, the village council had declared a state of emergency in Attawapiskat. This was done in order to try to raise the alarm all the way in the capital of Ottawa. "By now, it is clear that a temporary band aid is not going to help," the joint council of several of the reserves in the region said in its statement.

The crisis had been a long time coming: there had been over a hundred suicide attempts in Attawapiskat in the course of just over six months. In March of 2016 alone, 28 people tried to commit suicide.

Sheridan, who hanged herself earlier in the fall, was 13, but her age does not make her an exception among those who had either attempted or succeeded in killing themselves. Many of the suicide attempts had been done by children, the youngest being only 11.

The sense of emergency and desperation did not only grip the young that winter. The oldest person to attempt suicide had already turned 70.

A heatwave hits you in the face as the door opens from the entryway into the living room. It is nearly minus twenty degrees Celsius outside, but inside the thin-looking walls the temperature has to always be maintained at plus 20 degrees. Dressed in my thick down jacket, I get hot in minutes.

The first sound I hear is giggling. This is where 26-year-old Jacintha Hookimaw now lives with her three-year-old twin daughters Nora and Reba. The arrangement is only temporary, though – the house with one bedroom, a living room and a kitchenette is really Jacintha's mother's.

From the outside, the house looks very ordinary. However, by Attawapiskat standards, there are a few things that make this family stand out from the rest.

The first thing is Jacintha's mother. She has worked as a nurse for many years and is close to retiring. This is quite extraordinary in a place where the unemployment rate is 80 percent. Another exception is this: in Attawapiskat, it is rare for just four people to live in a house this size.

This is one of the underlying reasons for the sense of hopelessness and desperation: in some cases, as many as twenty people are crammed into one small house. Here it is not uncommon for as many as four generations of the same family live under the same roof.

There are altogether about 300 houses in Attawapiskat, so on average, every third house could be home to a person who was part of the suicide wave of 2016.

The houses are for the most part in very poor, if not dismal, condition. Like most other houses, Jacintha's home has also been contaminated by mold. The unheated entryway smells of a dirt floor basement and a dark streak of mold runs along the wooden walls.

Some of the houses have running water, but you can't drink it or stay too long in the shower. The water is pumped from a nearby shallow lake and has been found to contain potentially cancer-causing toxins like bromochloromethane. That is why it is recommended that babies be bathed using the drinking water the villagers collect from a public water tap.

The cries for help have emanated from Attawapiskat many times.

Even before the suicide crisis there was a housing and a water crisis. Over the past decade, a state of emergency has been declared in the village five times. Whether or not the calls for help have been answered is a whole other matter.

"Nothing," a woman mutters and sighs. In her opinion, nothing has been done to help the situation in Attawapiskat after the suicide wave a year earlier.

The woman standing in the light pouring in from the window is Jackie Hookimaw, Jacintha's aunt. She has been the face and voice of Attawapiskat since journalists started to visit the area following the suicides. Many others have stayed silent.

Jackie has told the story of the reserve and of Sheridan's death over and over countless times.

She makes it a point to emphasize that Sheridan was not killed by alcohol, pills or drugs, but by despair. According to Jackie, the teenage girl was bullied because of her health issues – she had asthma and diabetes, among others. In her last message to her family, she said she was tired.

Now Jackie is standing between the rows of pews in a Catholic church and recounts the events.

Although the headlines of the crisis sent a shockwave across Canada, it did not come as a surprise to many that some of the villagers would try to relieve their suffering by trying to take their own lives. Not even to Jackie.

Jackie heard of the first suicide attempts already in the early fall of 2015. Several young girls tried to kill themselves by taking an overdose and had to be flown out of Attawapiskat.

"Oh my God, this is becoming a trend," Jackie recalls thinking then.

What made things even more concerning was that some of the young girls tried to commit suicide in a group. A fear of what was coming weighed on Jackie, and in order to calm herself down she often wandered here, to the church built by the river.

Then came October.

Funny and sensitive. Liked children and painting. That's what Sheridan was like. Even though Jackie does not cry as she speaks of her lost relative it is clear that the pain is still there.

Suicides are quite common in many of Canada's Indian reserves. In fact, it ranks among the top causes of death of indigenous people. According to statistics from Canada's health authorities, the suicide rate of young members of indigenous peoples is as much as seven times higher as that of other young people in the country. There are many reasons for the malaise.

"Drug abuse, hopelessness, cramped living conditions, stress, sexual abuse. Every community has its own story," Jackie concludes.

And the crisis in the reserves shows no sign of abating.

In January, two 12-year-old girls killed themselves within a week of each other in a reserve in Ontario. The same tragedy happened again in February at another reserve, when an 11-year-old girl took her own life.

Facing the church by the river there is a low building. The flags of Canada and Attawapiskat flow on its roof. Next to the flags, a sign with a large block letter "H" indicates that the building is a hospital.

Many of the suicide attempt survivors were treated here. Or were treated as much as possible. As there is no fulltime doctor working at the hospital, the villagers have to travel hundreds of kilometers to the village of Moosonee or the city of Timmins to give birth, and sometimes to die.

There is an inside joke in Attawapiskat, that if you just get sick enough, you will be flown away from the village. But not too sick, so that you'll get to come home.

It's been a year since the state of emergency was declared, and little has improved. A constantly changing staff of mental health workers does now offer services to the villagers in Attawapiskat, but this is hardly the type of support a young child or teenager needs in their time of struggle. The attempts to find a fulltime worker have not succeeded.

This is very representative of the type of assistance given to the people of Attawapiskat. Nothing happens in a timely manner. Sometimes, it can even take a decade for help to arrive.

For example, it took 14 years before the village got a much-needed new school building to replace the mold-infested barracks that had been used as classrooms until then. In 2014, the school was finally opened, but last winter it was closed for over a month due to a burst pipe. During that time, the teachers sent homework to the students' homes, but only a few ever returned their assignments.

Although the school is now open, not all students see any point in sitting in class all day. And why would they when the teachers change constantly and opportunities for secondary education are minimal.

Jacintha also dropped out of school. Now she regrets it.

"There is nothing to do here. After school, I just mostly used to sit at home. That's it."

The situation has not change. There is no library of youth cafe in Attawapiskat, not to even mention many other forms of pastime.

However, there is one thing that the residents of Attawapiskat seem to agree on: If the same thing was happening in the southern part of the country, remedial action would be taken immediately.

Why is then the situation in Attawapiskat being ignored? The answer depends on who you ask.

Those who support the right of the indigenous peoples to live on land where they originally settled accuse the Canadian government of neglecting villages such as Attawapiskat and forgetting about all the children living in the reserves.

The same people think that the indigenous peoples are largely left to their own devices in order to persuade them to move closer to road infrastructures and services. Then there are the critics who think that remote Indian reserves such as Attawapiskat are already taking up too much money. They feel that the money allocated to their upkeep is not a wise investment.

Black eyes twinkle from beneath dark bangs and ponytails bounce as the twin girls run around their great-aunt Jackie like headless chickens.

Underneath her oversize T-shirt Reba still wears a diaper and, like any other toddler, won't hold still long enough for Jackie to put pants on her. Jacintha watches the episode from a distance and shakes her head.

Most of her old friends have stayed in Attawapiskat. Some of them are doing alright. One of them is even married, which Jacintha makes sound like a merit.

Some of them are drug addicts. That is one more reason why Jacintha wants to get away. She herself has not had a problem with drugs, her only vice is the cigarette smoking between her fingers.

"That's it," Jacintha says tersely.

For Jacintha, it is self-evident that she wants her girls to have more than she has. That includes a better education and moving to a big city like Timmins.

And even if their mother and auntie Jackie were not there for the girls, Timmins would still offer them a lot more. The environment in the city is much more beautiful and cleaner than in Attawapiskat. Timmins might also be a safer place to live.

"Here, we don't even have sidewalks."

Jacintha's four-year-old goddaughter got run over by a car in sidewalk-deprived Attawapiskat. There is a photo collage of the dark-eyed toddler hanging over the TV. One of the pictures will be turned into a tattoo on Jacintha's arm.

Money is tight, especially when the twins' father skips alimony payments. Still Jacintha manages to regularly set money aside for the girls.

Now that Jacintha doesn't have a job, saving up money is difficult. She keeps hoping that any day now, she will get a phone call and a job offer from her former employer, the De Beers Mining Company. According to Jacintha, the call would come from the company's HR department.

"I'm waiting for a call," she says.

The indigenous communities of northern Ontario surrendered their absolute land rights to the Crown in a treaty signed at the beginning of the 1900's. Attawapiskat entered into the treaty later, in 1930.

This old treaty is beneficial for companies such as De Beers. It mines diamonds about 100 km from Attawapiskat, in an area where the Cree have traditionally hunted caribou and wild geese.

The wealth created by the mining activity is definitely not visible in Attawapiskat.

About a hundred villagers work at the mine, but only a part of them fulltime. It was De Beers that employed Jacintha, too, earlier, but as a single parent, it was impossible for her to balance work and family life.

The mining company is paying 1 to 2 million dollars every year to support the people of Attawapiskat. However, debate is hot over how the money should be used.

Instead of prosperity, the mine has brought something else into Attawapiskat. Here, and in other Indian reserves, there is much talk about how the mine brought hard drugs into the village.

"Someone working at the mine was selling drugs, and the baggage on planes going to the mine was not checked properly," Jacintha's aunt Jackie says.

Jacintha concurs with her aunt. When she was a teenager, young people only drank alcohol and smoked pot at parties. Cocaine, speed and uppers only made their way into Attawapiskat many years later.

"Most people don't drink anymore. They just want to take disgusting drugs. Children are exposed to the stuff every day," Jacintha says.

There should not be any drugs or even alcohol available in a place like Attawapiskat, which is so-called "dry." There is no bar in the village, and no beer is sold in the stores. According to the regulations, it is forbidden to bring alcohol here, but in practice that doesn't mean much – of course. Beer and cider cans litter the roadsides especially on the outskirts of the village.

To an outsider, the drug problem manifests itself most clearly at the local grocery store. A group of young men with glazed eyes is hanging around the entrance, their emaciated bodies setting them apart from the other, stockier looking, villagers.

"I'm a former addict myself," a man says and looks me straight in the eyes.

Judging by the tone of his voice, we might as well be talking about the local hockey teams' performance at the ongoing tournament.

Two little girls, with mittens decorated with Elsa from Frozen, stand next to one skinny man. Dark brown braids cascade from underneath the girls' woolly hats and onto their shoulders.

The young father does not want to give his name. There have been more than enough journalists snooping around the village. Nevertheless, the skinny man is still not rude.

It is a known fact that there is a drug problem in the village - even children talk about it. But it is still quite surprising to hear someone speak of their own substance abuse in such a direct way.

"Drugs were being sold right in front of children," the man says from behind his sunglasses.

During the winter, a temporary road opens up, offering the locals a way out of the village. For about 40 weeks out of 52, Attawapiskat is closed off from the rest of the world, but when the river flowing past the village freezes over, it can be used as a road.

In the future, the rest of the world may be open to the villagers year-round. Plans to build a highway have already been laid, as the mining company would also benefit from a road that was open all year. Jackie Hookimaw also supports the plans, but not at any price.

"The highway needs to be built with respect to the environment. It has to be designed so that it doesn't damage the natural water resources, the fish, or the caribou. We are dependent on them. We still live off the land, like in the old times."

A highway might also bring some other welcome benefits. At present, the food that has to be flown in by plane is much more expensive than in many other places in Canada. A three-liter jug of juice can cost as much as twenty euros and a liter of milk six euros. It would also make it possible to bring construction materials to the village around the year.

Although the people of Attawapiskat now live in a small reserve, their ancestors have hunted on this land, fished in the local rivers and lakes, and engaged in fur trade along the shores of James Bay for well over 150 years.

"I think that prime minister Justin Trudeau means well," village chief Ignace Gull says.

"When he was elected, he made a lot of promises. But we don't see it here."

Out of Canada's 36 million inhabitants, 1.4 million are indigenous people. They include the Inuit Eskimos, the Métis, and the so-called First Nations people of Canada, which include the Cree living in Attawapiskat.

The reserves such as Attawapiskat 91A are designated areas for Canada's First Nations people. All of the buildings there are owned by the state, and according to reports, nearly half of them are in need of repair.

When Carolyn Bennett, the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs, visited Attawapiskat last spring, following the escalation of the suicide crisis, one youngster asked her why the First Nations people in Canada lived in third world conditions. This was April, and Bennett pledged to establish a youth center in the village and to allocate more money for mental health services.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has made similar promises, but on a larger scale. He said more money would be put into First Nation education and mental health care. But the youth of Attawapiskat are still waiting for their youth center. The people of Attawapiskat are used to waiting, and to being disappointed.

What would the lives of now three-year-old twins Nora and Reba be if they grew up here? In ten years' time, at the same age their second cousin Sheridan was when she killed herself, they would have completed middle school in the new building and moved on to high school.

They might be involved in the local nature education youth program or perhaps play in a broomball team.

Great aunt Jackie might have taught the girls how to ski. The girls would wander on the snowy streets like teenagers in any other town, without hats or scarves, with their jackets undone. They would listen to music and argue. They would also do homework, and dream of enjoying a cup of coffee at a Tim Hortons, a fast food restaurant loved by Canadians.

Although the living conditions in Attawapiskat are akin to a third world country, the internet brings a world of possibilities to its people's fingertips. Great aunt Jackie thinks the situation is complicated.

"Young people are trying to navigate in two worlds. Now they have started to feel proud about their roots." As for Jacintha, her wishes for her girls are clear.

They include a school that would be open every day of the semester, a home with clean tap water, and a hometown that would offer them places to hang out after school like a library or a youth center when they're older. And sidewalks that would be safe to walk on without fear of getting hit by a car.

Then she would not need to worry about whether the twins would feel as hopeless about the future as their cousin Sheridan did.

"I just want them to be happy."