

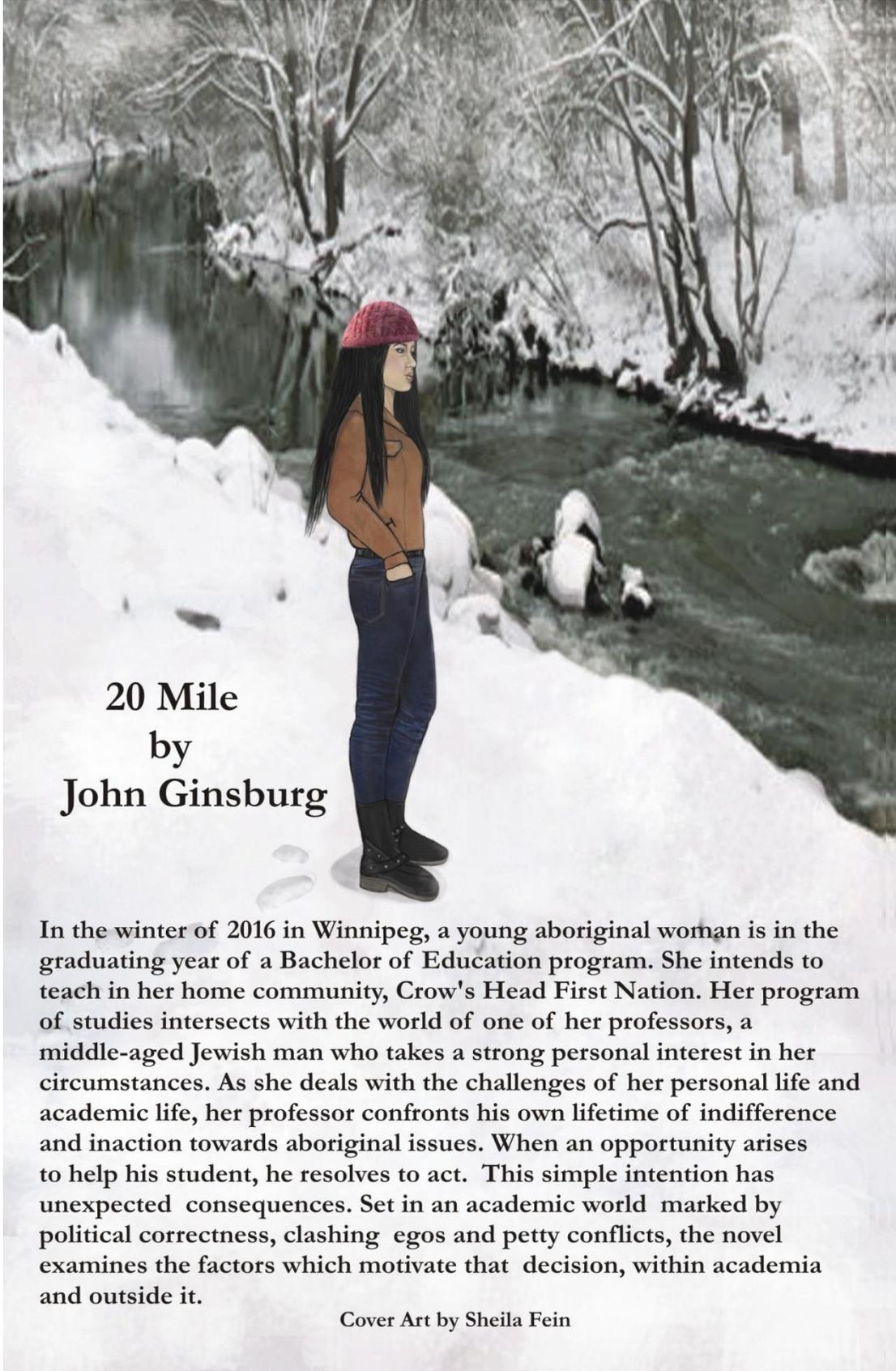
20 Mile

a novel

John Ginsburg



Illustrated by
Sheila Fein



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In the winter of 2016 in Winnipeg, a young aboriginal woman is in the graduating year of a Bachelor of Education program. She intends to teach in her home community, Crow's Head First Nation. Her program of studies intersects with the world of one of her professors, a middle-aged Jewish man who takes a strong personal interest in her circumstances. As she deals with the challenges of her personal life and academic life, her professor confronts his own lifetime of indifference and inaction towards aboriginal issues. When an opportunity arises to help his student, he resolves to act. This simple intention has unexpected consequences. Set in an academic world marked by political correctness, clashing egos and petty conflicts, the novel examines the factors which motivate that decision, within academia and outside it.

Cover Art by Sheila Fein

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This is a work of fiction. With obvious exceptions, the people and events depicted are purely fictional. A number of the places and locations referred to, including Crow's Head First Nation and Skoolie's Bar, do not exist. Any resemblance they may have to actual places is unintentional.

Also by John Ginsburg

Fine Times (2011)

The Case For Barbara (2012)

How I Almost Married A Russian (2013)

The Last Straw (2014)

PHiDelity (2015)

Appearances (2017)

Loretta and The Drones (2018)

Foreword

Anyone wanting to express anything at all, relating to Canada's indigenous people, must confront the same inescapable need: a word. Which should it be: native; first nation; aboriginal; indigenous; or some other? Which choice is deemed acceptable, in text and in conversation, as being respectful, sensitive and reasoned? And what are the criteria for that acceptability? Which people, or what percentages of which groups of people, must be happy with that choice? (or, perhaps, choices) Who gets to decide the percentages and the groups? And who gets to inform everyone else in representing those groups? It is not my intention to put forward answers to these questions here. But something should be said in connection with my own choice and my characters' choices. In this novel, the word 'aboriginal' is used many times, mostly describing people and communities in northern Manitoba. It would be a very simple matter to 'find and replace' and, in an instant, everyone would instead be saying 'indigenous'. As an immediate corollary, the author would appear - perhaps - in the right light, swimming with the latest politically correct current. However, the original choices have stubbornly held. Whatever uncertainty I had on the subject was sufficiently dispelled by something I recently read. A prominent member of one of those very communities was asked the very same question: which word would *he* prefer was used? He answered that it was really all the same to him; that, in fact, he much more identified with his particular First Nation than anything else. And that it was mainly a problem for white people to deal with. His was only one voice on the matter, of course. But it seemed enough for me. Such is the nature of language.

JG October 30, 2016

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Glossary

1 Delivery Man

Time has no beginning and no end. Time has a beginning but no end. Time has an end but no beginning. Time has a beginning and an end.

Time. Existence. The universe. Do you remember when the big questions first occurred to you? As a young person, did they seem almost within your grasp, ideas flashing in and out of your mind tantalizingly? In my case, back in high school, if such thoughts persisted at all, they faced a losing battle against much more immediate and consuming issues. Like sex and drugs and rock and roll and more sex and drugs and rock and roll. Still, I had a vague impression that someday, when I had grown up, I would pay proper attention to the truly important questions. But in the meantime, my dim little brain wasn't too troubled. Wisdom would come. Somewhere. Sometime. Somehow. Probably at university. There was certainly no hurry.

University... Ah, the sweet, wide-eyed innocence of youth. Like anyone, a young scholar is beset by life's many diversions and distractions. But something else awaits him. What begins as a world brimming with ideas and earnest inquiry soon shows its sober, less dramatic side. Before long, he must join the rest as they trudge along, numbed by the staid and conservative traditions, hounded by rules and regulations. The creaky gates of knowledge open into a world of plodding and posturing. Political correctness and room-sized egos eclipse much of the light. And soon enough, moving into blurry focus, comes the future, a drab array of unlikely and uninspiring prospects.

That is not to say that academia is without its considerable charms. And its considerable rewards. I speak as a loyal, first-hand beneficiary. Thirty-eight years after I began my university studies, I'm still there. Long-term survival and reasonable contentment are indeed possible. A person has only to find a place where he can mostly be ignored.

Does time have a beginning or an end? On that question, I still have no real progress to report. However, regarding the story I'm about to tell, I can speak with absolute certainty. Not only does this story have a beginning and an end, it has a middle. And I intend to plunge you directly into the middle of it. It concerns a recent student of mine named Judy Star. Our entrance to the story is an ordinary scholarly gesture on my part: the delivery of a final examination into the hands of Ms. Star. What could be more scholarly than that?

Judy Star lives on Crow's Head First Nation in Manitoba, about forty miles northeast of Winnipeg. In the winter term of 2015-2016, she was a student in my third-year U of W course Graph Theory and Networks. On the night that concerns us here - April 15, 2016 - I drove out to Crow's Head First Nation, north on Highway 59, intending to hand-deliver a copy of the final exam to Judy.

What should have been an entirely mundane and predictable act, turned out to be anything but. As to the associated circumstances, the people involved and the genesis of the principal events, a complete and chronological description will follow. For now, here is a brief snapshot of the handover that night, and the moments immediately following.

It was the middle of April. The entire landscape was still in winter's steely grip; from the hard, snow-covered ground to the cutting north wind, to the cold gray dusk. I'd set off that night alone, a little after seven o'clock, having waited for my friend Isaac Feller for more than half an hour.

Isaac was supposed to have picked me up at home at six-thirty and accompanied me on my little mission.

In the city, streets were still quite icy, especially the side-streets. But on Highway 59, the pavement was mostly bare and well-lit. It was cold; minus 5 or so, but there was no snow falling and visibility was quite good. The hour drive was uneventful, the highway flanked by patient stands of spruce, dotted with spindly, bare tamarack and birch. When I reached the junction of 59 with Provincial Road 288, it was dark. According to my GPS, 288 was a straight, paved road leading directly into Crow's Head, nine miles away.

My destination was the Twenty Mile Café, which was on First Nations land, but not actually in the town of Crow's Head. The café was a mile from the highway, accessed from 288. Until I'd learned that Judy worked there, I never even knew the place existed. In the daylight, it was completely hidden from the highway by spruce trees. At night, its meagre light was difficult to spot, even if you knew where to look. After turning onto 288, I almost missed the sign indicating the gravel road to the café. It required a very sharp turn, leading around what looked like old warehouse buildings. I had to slow down when my car started to slide. After another half mile, I could see the cafe and I pulled into the parking area, where four other vehicles sat.

When I turned off my headlights and got out of my car, the parking lot was almost completely dark. What little light there was came from a single bulb over the door to the café. Above the door was a faded wooden sign bearing the name of the establishment. It was a small building, plain and stucco-covered, with no windows on the entrance side. A concrete slab served as the step up to the door. Not having been to the place before, I felt a little tentative in just walking in. But it would probably have seemed ridiculous to have knocked, so I marched straight in, with the exam in a brown envelope under my arm. I threw open the unfamiliar door with a little too much vigour, banging it against a wall along the entranceway. And with that undignified introduction, I presented myself to the staff and clientele.

Three steps in from the doorway, I was able to take in the whole place with a single glance. It was close and dimly lit, with plywood flooring and virtually no decor. Directly ahead of me was a low arborite lunch counter, where three men sat drinking coffee in their winter coats. To the right were a number of small tables, three of which were occupied, with three or four men seated around each. Naturally everyone looked up at the door-banging interloper. Behind the lunch counter stood Judy Star, looking a lot bigger than when I'd seen her last, a month earlier. She must have been eight months pregnant by then. I assumed she was expecting me, as I'd left a message for her there the week before. As our eyes suddenly made contact, an initial look of surprise and confusion changed instantly into a warm smile.

Beside Judy stood a man she subsequently introduced as the chief cook and bottle washer, Darrel Roe. He was the man I'd left the message with. Directly behind the two were a cast iron grill and cook stove, apparently idle when I walked in. A refrigerator and small freezer stood to Darrel's left. After I politely exchanged a few words with Judy, and she introduced me to Darrel, I explained the purpose of my visit and presented her with the envelope. The next thing I knew I was being herded out the door by four scary, aggressive men. The men had abruptly gotten up from their seats at the tables. I didn't know what was going on and I was terrified.

'You better go out to your car' the rough-looking leader of the four had said, insistently. He was a few inches taller than me and was wearing an old baseball cap. 'You left your lights on.' The men had approached me from behind so suddenly, as I stood there talking to Judy, that I had no time to process what was going on. If I had, I would have been even more scared. After all, how could they have known I'd left my lights on? Surprised and scared, I reflexively followed the guy

in the baseball cap, unquestioning, as he proceeded toward the door. The other three followed right behind me and as we reached the door, they were so close I could feel their breath on the back of my neck.

When we got outside, as expected, my lights were not on. By that point, my predicament was abundantly clear. I was feeling very threatened and very scared, and for an instant, I thought I might run. But the three guys behind me were so close on my heels that I decided otherwise. Anyway, where, exactly, would I have run to? They were all such big, menacing men. My heart was pounding and I felt paralyzed by fear. What were they going to do to me? When the leader of the group reached my car, he opened the driver's door, which I had left unlocked, and turned to face me. I stopped in my tracks. 'We don't want you here' he said, in a low, harsh voice. 'Just get in your car and leave.' Saying nothing in response, my only thought was *I certainly will*. The air was almost bursting with tension, but it looked like I had a way out, in one piece. The three guys behind me were still only inches away. None of them said a word.

Before I could take a step toward my car, the door to the café opened. Three other men stepped outside, pushing and jabbering. The light was quite dim, but as I glanced back, I could see Judy standing just inside the door. Then someone walked between her and the door and the door closed again. In my own state of panic, even though the three men were no more than thirty feet away from me, I couldn't make out what they were saying. But it seemed like they had come out to join the party. As they approached us, the one in front, who had a crewcut, yelled out to the men at the car with me. 'Leave him alone. You've got nothing against him. He's Judy's friend.' He kept walking toward us, with the other two right behind him. The next thing I knew, one of the other two men was brandishing a baseball bat, yelling at the guy with the crewcut. 'Mind your own fuckin' business', he said to the man who had tried to help me, waving the club in the air. Just as he was about to bring the club down on the man's head, I was pushed and forcibly turned around by one of the two men beside me. I stumbled and fell to the ground, face-first. As I fell I could hear the sickening, dull thud as the club came down on the man's flesh. The victim cried out in pain. All I could think was *I'm next*.

I could have sent that exam by courier.

2 The Bee of the Eye-Holder

I first met Judy Star on Friday, December 11, 2015. From my office on the sixth floor, I was staring blankly down on the sobering vista of Ellice Avenue, nearly deserted in mid-afternoon. It was a cold day, but the sky was crystal-clear and the sun was streaming in through my window. First term classes were over and I was in the midst of my pre-exam office hours for the day. My office door was left open for students to come and go randomly, five hearty souls having made the pilgrimage so far that day. With my two finals scheduled for the following week, conversations centred predictably on one category of inquiry. Across the trampled beige industrial carpet they marched, with one thing and only one thing on their minds: What will be on the exam?

Into my reverie walked a young woman, looking to be in her mid-twenties, who introduced herself as Judy Star. I had never seen her before. She was an aboriginal woman, soft-spoken and exceedingly polite in her manner. She wore no make-up and had such a naturalness about her, a genuineness. Especially in the way she spoke; at once modest and direct. And she was incredibly, stunningly, amazingly beautiful. She had long black hair, parted to the side, and very dark brown eyes, which were totally disarming; soft and sad. Thin and of medium height, she was wearing a beaded suede coat and carrying a pair of black leather gloves in one hand. With full, rosy lips, high cheekbones and a perfect, straight nose, she was the very picture of beauty.

Despite the circumstances, I was so struck by her beauty that, at first, all I could do was look at her, speechless; look directly at her and seek out her eyes. Of course she immediately noticed the considerable effect she'd had on me; it would have been impossible not to. She smiled and was the first to speak, in a soft, lilting accent that sounded to me like a Cree accent.

'Hi. Sorry to bother you, Professor Arenberg. My name is Judy Star. I'm thinking of registering for your winter course. I wonder if I could ask you a few questions. Do you have a few minutes?'

Snapping out of my daze, I returned to a semi-normal state. 'Absolutely' I said, sheepishly. 'It's nice to meet you, Judy. Please call me Ben. What's on your mind?' I motioned for her to have a seat across the desk from me.

A pre-emptive word or two is necessary here. As a reader hearing this account for the first time, you may have already assessed the circumstances - and my character - neatly and categorically. And you may have jumped directly to a rather uncomplimentary conclusion. Predatory male in a position of power and influence... Innocent vulnerable female... What a disgusting litch! How long has he been getting away with it? Men are pigs...

Since no one else is likely to speak up for me, I must do so myself. Of course, you will have to believe me. I have never, not before meeting Judy nor since, had an affair with a student. I have never taken advantage of any kind of power or authority or influence to benefit myself, not sexually or in any other way. I have never fantasized about doing so or secretly plotted to. I will gladly match my moral and ethical credentials beside anybody's.

As a normal, heterosexual man - I *do* consider myself normal - I am *often* struck by women's beauty. I always have been. Colleagues, students, neighbours, friends, passers-by, women sitting across from me in airports, singers, movie stars, television personalities, perfect strangers... My wife; my ex-wife... Female beauty is a wonderful thing. What man would not instinctively notice a woman for her beauty? I certainly would. That does not mean I have ever harboured any kind

of disgusting, salacious intentions. I never have. Nor does it imply that I don't appreciate, respect and admire a woman for everything she is; for *all* of her qualities. I do.

My record, if I could lay it bare and complete before you, would show a good and decent husband, father, friend, son and professor. I did cheat on my first wife, but that marriage was rapidly circling the drain at the time. My current wife Riva - the second marriage for both of us - was also cheating on her husband at the time. That's how Riva and I got together. Soon after, we left our marriages and moved in together. So if you want to indict me for infidelity, go ahead. But don't indict my gender; women are equally culpable.

Anyway, what I mostly intended to convey was a simple acknowledgment: it is a fact that I have often been struck by a woman's beauty.

But I have never been so instantaneously paralyzed, like I was that day, by Judy when she walked through that door. Especially by her soft and sad eyes, and her sweet smile.

Of course, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as my uncle Moishe used to say. It was one of his favourite lines. He was my dad's older brother, a lifelong bachelor. In the summers when he came to visit, in the early sixties, he would always give money to me and my brothers; usually quarters, but sometimes dollar bills. And he always had a funny story or a line that would crack us up. My dad was like that too, but when Uncle Moishe was visiting, he always had the floor. Another of his memorable sayings was 'everything comes from somewhere', which he would always say in Yiddish first and then repeat in translation. That one I particularly remember, because my grandmother - my dad and Moishe's mother - also used the same expression. It's such a wonderful, universally-applicable expression. When I was older, I traced its etymology. The earliest known version is from pre-biblical times: 'All things have a beginning'.

With regard to things coming from other things, let's get back to the afternoon of December 11. The recent days had been a little rough between Riva and me around then, but that had nothing to do with my reaction to Judy. And it had absolutely nothing to do with my being a professor and Judy being a student. It was simply the dazzling effect she had on me; her beauty. It was a moment in time.

Anyway, never fear. Nothing untoward or uncomfortable happened that day. In a mere second or two, I was released from the magical spell and fully returned to my ordinary, clear-minded, mundane self. And in no time, Judy was patiently explaining the purpose of her visit and I was providing some basic information.

'I'm in Education. It's been a few years now...' she began, directly and quietly, her accent landing rhythmically near the ends of her words and sentences. 'I'm hoping to teach math in high school; back home, ay. When I finish my degree. I need one more course. It has to be a math course.'

Which mathematics courses to take... how to minimize the pain... these were familiar questions from Education students, as they - along with faculty - tried to navigate their way through a thick and befuddling compendium of degree requirements. Reflexively I reached for my copy of the current calendar, tattered and close at hand. 'Do you need the course as a basic education credit, or for math as a teachable?'

As I flipped through the pages, she simplified the matter significantly. 'Both' she said. 'I only need one more course if I take the right one.'

'I'm mortally wounded' I said, in mock indignation. 'Doesn't everyone want to take *as many* math courses as they can?' Then, in case my attempt at humour had missed the mark, I quickly added, in a matter-of-fact tone: 'I understand. That'll give you nine hours of math credits and also count for your teachable.'

'Yes.'

'Sounds good. So how can I help you?'

'I think your course is the only course that would work. So I wanted to find out about it. I'm okay at math but I'm not really a math person.'

'You're talking about Graph Theory? Next term?'

'Yes. The course number is 3901. I took Calculus a few years ago. And Linear Algebra.'

Like others before her in recent years, Judy had discovered the one and only course our department offered, beyond the second year level, which required only those two first-year courses. It was an anomaly that would disappear after the current academic year. The course would cease to exist. In its place, we were introducing a new fourth-year course, having two higher-level requirements beyond first year.

'Looks like you're finishing up at the right time' I said. 'This time next year, the course will no longer exist. All of our third-year courses will have at least one 2000-level pre-requisite.'

'I guess it's my lucky day' said Judy, with a quick laugh.

We talked about what she thought of the other two courses she'd taken and how well she'd done in them. She'd received a C+ in Calculus and a B in Linear Algebra.

'I like math, but I'm not crazy about proofs' she said.

Among occasional math students - non-majors - that was an extremely common sentiment: if only they didn't have to learn the proofs... 'I think you'll find Graph Theory a lot different' I answered. 'It's a very practical subject. Very simple concepts and lots of pictures and diagrams. There's proofs too, but there's a lot more emphasis on problems and methods for solving problems. You should have no trouble doing well in it. And it's a great course for high school math teaching. I wish my teachers had introduced it.'

As she stood to leave, I offered her a copy of the course outline. While I retrieved it from a folder on my gaudy grey metal shelf, she glanced around the room. As I handed her the outline, she said 'I see you listen to Dylan, ay'. Her eyes had come to rest on an old CD of mine, *Freewheelin*, gathering dust at the distal end of the same shelf.

'Not so much these days' I answered, somewhat surprised by the question. 'Once in a while though.'

'I'm a total Dylan freak' she said. 'His newer stuff, ay. A few years ago, my boyfriend and I followed him across Canada on his tour.'

'Wow. That must have been fun.'

'Thanks a lot' she said, taking the course outline.

A few hours later, as I was driving home, labouring along Portage Avenue through the endless roadwork, I realized just how much of an impression Judy Star had made. She was so striking in so many ways, not the least being that she was aboriginal. In my thirty-odd years as a professor, I'd had a grand total of three aboriginal students in my courses, and none beyond the first-year level. Until that moment, I'd never really thought about it before. Why not? Why hadn't I thought about it in any serious way? It was a difficult thing to admit to myself, a gaping lapse in awareness. Having been born and raised in northern Manitoba, this really hit home.