

CHAPTER 1

Sunday, March 24, 1991

Call the police—I can't find my son.

—Bruce Dunahee, approximately 1:00 p.m. 24.3.91

The day started like any ordinary Sunday in the Dunahee household. Crystal Dunahee woke early to take care of her six-month-old daughter Caitlin and prepare breakfast for husband Bruce and son Michael in their two-bedroom unit in the Pioneer Co-Operative Housing Complex in Victoria West. Crystal was thinking about the exciting possibility of soon moving into a larger unit in the housing complex. Now with two children they needed a third bedroom, and their name was high on the list for a move that could be imminent.

The Dunahees were working class people. At that time, Crystal worked for the Guardian Insurance Company and Bruce worked hard at any and all jobs such as gutter installation and roofing and at the Esquimalt shipyards whenever he could get hired on there.

Just over a week earlier, on March 10, baby Caitlin had been christened at Our Lady Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Esquimalt, and Crystal particularly treasured the photograph taken at the ceremony of her two children: Michael, wearing his striped, blue shirt and little red bow tie, proudly holding his baby sister. It was also the last time they were able to have a family portrait taken of the four of them together.

That particular Sunday was to be the first game of the spring season for the women's touch football team (the Hellcats) on which

Crystal played, but her game was not due to start until one o'clock so it would be a leisurely morning for the family.

After breakfast of his favourite cereal, Michael asked if he could play with his best friend, Ben Alexa, who lived in a neighbouring unit in the complex. He and Ben were a year apart in age and were inseparable. They loved to play together whenever they could. Crystal agreed, little knowing it would be the last time the two boys would ever play together.

Shortly after noon, the family loaded the car and set off for the Blanshard Elementary School playing field on Blanshard and King Streets, a rougher neighbourhood of Victoria. En route they made a slight detour to pick up Crystal's friend, Donna, a teammate on the touch football team. Michael was dressed in his favourite psychedelic-coloured rugby pants that Crystal had made for him, and was wearing his Mutant Ninja Turtle t-shirt under his blue hooded parka with red lining and elastic wrist bands.

Throughout her life, Crystal occasionally had "bad feelings" about things for no apparent reason; not exactly a premonition that something might happen, but simply uneasiness. Often, after one of these feelings, something unpleasant happened. She later recalled that as they drove to the field that morning, she felt a bit anxious, but she dismissed it as nothing.

En route Michael asked if he might play at the playground when they got there. A play area with swings and slides was situated alongside the car park area and within 100 meters of the school playing field. Crystal did not immediately give her permission, but as they neared the parking area she agreed that he could play on the swings—but only if he stayed within sight. Both his parents told him that on no account must he wander away from the play area. Michael was an obedient little boy who listened to instructions and would not have defied his parents. He felt proud and important to be allowed this new independence of playing on his own for the first time.

The family pulled into the car park at approximately 12:35 p.m. and began unloading their car. It was a windy morning and Crystal pulled up Michael's hood to protect her son from the cold. Bruce and Crystal then began unloading her sporting equipment. Crystal bent down to put on her cleats and then placed Caitlin in her buggy in readiness for Bruce to walk her over to the playing field to watch Crystal's game. Two other games were already in progress on the field.

Michael had run off happily towards the playground area. Crystal remembers noticing two other children already playing there on the swings. They looked about Michael's age or perhaps a year or two older.

Between the time this was happening and when Bruce stood up on the rocky outcropping alongside the field to look back and check on Michael, approximately one minute elapsed—and Michael had disappeared from sight.

Bruce called out to him but there was no reply. Leaving the buggy with Crystal, he ran across the car park area to the playground where Michael should be, but there was no sign of him. He called again even louder.

“Michael! Michael! Where are you?”

No reply. Bruce began to feel panic, mixed first with annoyance that his son had perhaps disobeyed and wandered away. However, he knew that Michael was not a child who would have done that. Within seconds he was racing everywhere shouting Michael's name, attracting the attention of everyone in the vicinity. The games already in progress on the field stopped play and people began to run across to Crystal wondering what the commotion was all about. Within seconds, about twenty to thirty people were assisting in the search, running in all directions calling Michael's name—but all to no avail.

A man in a nearby house was cutting his grass, probably for the first time that year. Bruce called out to him.

“Call the police!” he shouted. “I can't find my son.” This, of course, was long before the era of the cell phone.

That lost child call came into the Victoria police headquarters at approximately six minutes past one o'clock and Car 22 (officer on watch four) was dispatched to the scene. Back-up cars were also dispatched. In less than five minutes the police were on the scene and taking statements from Bruce and Crystal. They offered all the information they could, giving a clear description of their son and what he was wearing.

“Yes, he was dressed in his blue parka and brightly coloured rugby pants. Yes, he has blond hair and blue eyes. Yes, he is approximately three feet tall and weighs fifty-one pounds. He is beginning to show freckles on his nose.

Please just find him! Please...” the Dunahees begged.

Other officers searched between parked cars, outside nearby

houses and gardens, and continued door-to-door. Less than an hour had elapsed since the Dunahees first arrived at the car park, but to Bruce and Crystal it seemed like an eternity. Their son had simply vanished into thin air and no one had seen it happen. How could such a thing have occurred without anyone having witnessed it?

Between 1:37 and 1:42 p.m., three radio stations in Victoria (CFAX, CKDA and CJVI) were all notified about a “lost child,” and the local CHEK TV station was given a picture of Michael for their 5:30 p.m. news cast.

Had Michael in fact ever reached the playground? Had his disappearance occurred in one split second as he ran between the three rows of parked cars towards the play area? Had someone already been waiting in a parked vehicle planning to grab him? No one knew. The police explored every possibility as they continued their door-to-door investigation in the neighbourhood, assuming initially that Michael might simply have wandered away and become lost.

The school portable classrooms between the playground and the road were all searched, inside and out. Every car in the car park was noted. Someone vaguely remembered seeing a brown van parked there earlier, but this could not be positively confirmed and no one had thought to take a licence plate number. One witness (a ten-year-old child) thought she had seen a small boy of Michael’s description getting into such a vehicle.

It soon became apparent that Michael had not simply wandered away. Someone had most probably taken him. The search, however, continued all afternoon, spreading further afield around the city and beyond with the assistance of numerous volunteers. A small boy was missing, possibly abducted by person or persons unknown, but nothing was known for sure. He was a good little walker, so if he had indeed wandered away, it was thought he might even have made his way back towards the Esquimalt area where his grandmother, Barbara Dunahee, lived.

Within hours, British Columbia Ferries was alerted to Michael’s disappearance, and a picture of him was faxed to ferries’ staff the morning of March 25. Flyers were soon being handed out to ferry passengers on the Swartz Bay to Tsawwassen route to the mainland. The media was buzzing with the news.

At approximately six o’clock that evening, a “Michael Dunahee Command Centre” was set up at the Blanshard Community Police

Station across from the school, and that was where Bruce and Crystal anxiously waited for news. Other members of their family soon joined them.

The Dunahees were convinced that Michael would be found soon. He must have just wandered away and become lost; they were certain this was the case. They refused to believe someone had taken him. Who could possibly be so evil as to steal a little boy? Even if that were the case, they were positive that the police would quickly apprehend the perpetrator of this crime and Michael would be safely brought back to them. How could it be otherwise? This was Victoria, a safe city where evil, malicious things simply did not happen.

Eventually Crystal was persuaded to go home with Caitlin and wait there. Neighbours and friends informed her that her telephone was ringing off the hook, so maybe there was news from someone who knew what had happened to Michael. In an overwhelming daze, she arrived home to find that most of the calls were either from the media or from concerned friends who had heard the news being aired on the radio and on television.

She remembered little of the rest of the day. Her head was spinning with questions. Michael had never before been allowed to go off on his own, but on that particular day they had given him that privilege as a step toward maturity. Now Crystal asked herself why on earth they had let him to do so on that particular day. Why hadn't she insisted he stay beside his dad? Why? Why? Her mind was full of "whys" and "what ifs." She experienced all the normal feelings of guilt; most of all, she wondered, why hadn't she trusted her gut feeling of uneasiness that morning?

At some point she supposed that she must have fallen into a fitful sleep, praying she would wake up the next morning to find it had all been some horrible dream and they would find Michael in his bed in the room he shared with his baby sister.

But the next day the shocking truth was still there. There was no good news. The reality was unchanged—Michael had gone. Their ordinary Sunday had turned into a ghastly nightmare—and this was just the beginning.

Life for the Dunahees would never again be the same.