

[Home](#) » [Features](#) » [Drama In Real life](#) » [Without a Trace: The Mysterious Disappearance of Aju Iroaga](#)

## Without A Trace: The Mysterious Disappearance Of Aju Iroaga

In 2006, a troubled engineering student vanished into the woods following a dispute with co-workers while tree-planting in Ontario. What happened to him? To this day, his family is still searching for the answer.

By Andrew Mitrovica and Susan Bourette (Reader's Digest Canada, March 2008) Illustration: Maya Pankalla

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**May 15, 2006**

It was two days shy of his 26th birthday, but Aju Iroaga was in no mood to celebrate. The weather was damp as the engineering student stood at the roadside, dressed in a camouflage-coloured hoodie, jeans and leather runners, his head covered with a black tuque under a Tilley hat.

Aju was a long way from home: a 14-hour drive to his parents' apartment in east-end Toronto, and 70 kilometres down gravel roads and a paved highway to the nearest town in this part of northwestern Ontario, White River. He had come to the bush just off the northeast coast of Lake Superior to make money planting trees. It was back-breaking work, but Aju knew the drill. He had done the same job a year earlier, for the same company—A&M Reforestation, based in Sudbury. Perhaps that's why he had become so enraged that day when his supervisor told him he had done a poor job. She ordered him to replant the block of trees he had planted earlier that morning. He did. Not good enough, she said. He'd have to do it yet again.

Aju chafed at criticism at the best of times, but this was too much. Around midday, the tense situation with his supervisor had erupted into a shouting match, and he stormed off the work site. He was stranded: There was nothing in front of him but shrubs, balsam firs and Jack pines. He wanted to get to the company camp, which was about eight kilometres west of White River, most likely to pick up his belongings—his clothes, his Canadian and Nigerian passports, a weathered black wallet and his social insurance card—and head home to his family. But supervisors on the tree-planting team told him he'd have to wait until 6 p.m., when the day's work was done and the rest of the crew would return to camp on the company buses.

So he waited for nearly four hours, standing along a gravel road—mainly used by loggers, but which had not been heavily travelled of late—near the tree-planting site. A supervisor reported seeing him there at around 3:45 p.m. That, apparently, was the last time anyone saw Aju Iroaga. He had vanished. At 6 p.m., the buses left the work site without Aju, then headed back to camp.



**May 15, 2006: 6:15 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.**

Over the next few hours, A&M Reforestation supervisors searched the area where Aju was last seen. They honked their horns and called out for him. Two of them would spend the night in their vehicles at the spot where Aju was waiting earlier that afternoon. At around 9 p.m., the company phoned the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) in White River; officers arrived on the scene at about 11 p.m. It was too dark to scour the woods for Aju, but the officers took down the particulars of the day's events and notified the Emergency Response Team (ERT) so they could plan a search. This was now officially a Missing Persons case.

About 7,000 people are reported missing each year in OPP jurisdictions. Of these cases, typically the ERT becomes involved in about 200. Statistics gathered in the United States show that about 50 percent of the searches are resolved within three hours, 81 percent within 12 hours, and 93 percent within 24 hours. In other words, the overwhelming majority of Missing Persons cases are solved within just one day.



**May 16, 2006**

At daybreak, 18 ERT officers began their search, joined by seven volunteers from Sault Ste. Marie, Ont. The lead investigator, Const. Greg Lathem, brought in three OPP canine units from Sault Ste. Marie, Kirkland Lake and Sudbury to try to pick up Aju's trail. In addition, three helicopters were deployed—two OPP choppers that were brought in from Orillia, and a third that was piloted by a volunteer from Wawa—to fly over the thick brush in the area where Aju was last seen. The police searched all day until early evening, but neither the dogs nor the aerial surveillance produced any useful leads.

In addition to the site search, Lathem contacted the Toronto Police Service for assistance to obtain Aju's next-of-kin contact information.

**Next: Desperate for answers, the Iroagas turn to private investigators in hopes of turning up new evidence.**

May 17, 2006

At around 2 a.m. on Wednesday morning, the phone rang at the Iroaga family home. Aju's father, Nwab, picked it up. It was Lathem: Aju was missing.

Two days later, on Friday, May 19, Nwab headed for the airport and made his way to White River. "I wanted to see the place for myself," he says. The following day, his eldest son, Echere, joined him. The two men met with OPP officers, including Lathem. Later that day, they met with A&M Reforestation managers, who told them Aju had quit and walked out despite appeals that he wait for a ride into town.

"As Aju's father and I discussed," recalls Paul Thususka, co-owner of the tree-planting firm, "Aju was certainly strong enough—physically and of will—to take care of himself wherever he were to go."

Nwab and Echere departed White River a couple of days after arriving, and by the time they did so, Nwab was numb and depressed. "I was so confused. I couldn't even think properly to ask the right questions."

The ground search lasted a total of seven days, and was finally called off on May 22.

**In the weeks that followed, Nwab's shock gave way to unease and increasing frustration** about the police search for his son. The case went from being actively pursued to one that police call "open but inactive." If someone phoned in with a new lead, officers would follow up, but they were no longer looking for Aju or digging up new leads themselves.

Typically, in a Missing Persons case, police turn their attention to possibilities such as abduction or foul play only when they find evidence that criminal activity may have taken place. Apparently, in the week following Aju's disappearance, police came across no reason to look any further. Nothing from the interviews they conducted roused suspicion.



June 22, 2006

The Iroagas retained Toronto-based Integra Investigation Services to retrace the steps taken by the police, hoping to turn up new evidence. The private-investigation company's findings—given to the Iroagas on August 25—prompted more questions than answers.

First, Integra discounted the possibility that Aju had walked into the bush and died after encountering a bear. A&M's Thususka also dismisses the bear theory because, he says, the tree planters had experience in how to deal with and avoid the animals. "The idea that a bear got him is complete bunk," he says.

Several other details about the case—apparently, details that hadn't raised any flags with the OPP—troubled Nwab. For one, the shoelaces in Aju's workboots were missing, as was his shovel. (The workboots had remained at the tree-planting site after Aju had changed into a pair of running shoes, as planters typically do at the end of a shift.) But according to Thususka, Aju had no laces in his sneakers, so he had transferred his bootlaces to his sneakers after the argument with his supervisor.

Another troubling detail was that, according to police, Aju didn't even have his shovel with him as he waited by the road. Moreover, if he had later made it back to the camp, unnoticed, why hadn't Aju retrieved his wallet and passports? And why hasn't he since accessed his bank and email accounts?

**Next: Did Aju's explosive temper and his month in jail push him over the edge?**

Kwinter declined to meet, citing the need to avoid meddling in police investigations, but he did express sympathy for the family's plight. "It must be particularly difficult for you when your son's fate remains unknown," Kwinter wrote to the Iroagas in mid-June 2007. He insisted the OPP had conducted an "exhaustive and comprehensive search" for Aju. "I have every confidence that the OPP will investigate any new leads that are brought to its attention.

"That same month, Nwab began to exchange emails with Det. Sgt. Jeff Bangma, who worked in the crime prevention and investigation unit of the OPP's Sault Ste. Marie detachment. He told Nwab he was going to head a reopening of the case. Apparently, the police had decided to take a second look into the case in February 2007, but had not alerted the Iroaga family to this fact. And they didn't actually meet with the family until later that summer.



#### **August 14, 2007**

*Reader's Digest* first met Nwab and his wife, Nkechi, at their apartment in Toronto. Nwab, a 69-year-old, semi-retired psychology professor, sat at a large black dining table, a stack of grey file folders in front of him—the written record of dead ends, bad leads, hopes vanquished. Nkechi, a former teacher, pattered in bare feet across the hardwood floor and placed a bowl of nuts on the table. The Iroagas rarely have guests, but they'll open their door for a chance to tell their son's story—anything that might produce interest or a lead in the case.

Nkechi sat next to Nwab, and they took turns recounting the family's history. Nwab told of their early hardship; how, as a young man, he feared he might never see his Nkechi again. Nwab was the first to come to Canada, in 1968, enrolling in a psychology program at the University of Waterloo, hoping to bring over his wife and infant daughter from Nigeria soon after. But within weeks of his arrival, Nigeria descended into civil war, and Nwab lost contact with his family for almost a year before they were reunited in Canada.

Nkechi spoke proudly of her five children and their accomplishments, and when she did so, the mood in the room lifted for a moment, until talk turned to Aju. Then she lowered her voice and eyes, speaking softly as she recalled how her son's life seemed to drift ominously off course; and how her youngest child struggled to find happiness and direction.

But to the family, Aju had seemed to be finally taking charge of his life when he went north to plant trees. Maybe that's why Aju's disappearance prompted not only such sadness but also recriminations. Could the family have done more to help him? Were they too critical of him? There were too many things left unsaid. "We seldom discuss it with each other," Nwab said. "It just creates more misery. Sometimes, I blame myself."

"For me, I am always, every time of the day, praying to God," Nkechi said, her voice trembling. "This situation is a mystery. I can't handle it anymore."

August 23, 2007

Early in the morning, Nwab, Nkechi, daughter Uchenwa and son Echere met with Bangma and Det. Const. Shelley Pastorek, the two OPP officers who were assigned to re-examine Aju's case, at the family's apartment. The Iroagas invited *Reader's Digest*, and the OPP didn't object.

Bangma told the family not to lose hope, that police had conducted two searches of the area where Aju was last seen and that they had placed Aju's picture and information about the case on an OPP website called "The RESOLVE Initiative," devoted to scores of missing persons. Bangma assured the Iroagas that, while the new investigation had yielded no "earth-shattering" information, the case was a "priority," and that he and his partner intended to "bring some sort of finality" to this mystery. "I don't think the focus right now is on speed. It's on doing the investigation right," Bangma said. "That's where we are right now."

The Iroagas listened intently and took detailed notes as Bangma spoke. Then Nwab asked the officer what, precisely, had triggered the OPP's renewed interest in his son's case. Bangma conceded that the family's letters and petitions likely had prompted the force to "look at the case again."

Bangma went on to say that the central and still-unresolved question was: What happened to Aju between 3:45 p.m. and 6 p.m. on May 15, 2006? The police's original theory was that, after he quit in a huff and waited for hours for a ride back to camp, Aju decided at about 3:45 p.m. to walk or run 70 kilometres through the wilderness, at the cusp of darkness, to the White River base camp.

The Iroagas repeatedly challenged that version of events. Nwab and other family members acknowledged that Aju was impulsive, but they unanimously dismissed the walk-away theory. "He is not a stupid person to wait four hours, then...take off," Nwab told the officers, his voice rising uncharacteristically. "If he did take off, why didn't the people look for him? They didn't do that, because he didn't walk."

**Next: Things get tense when Aju's parents meet up with the investigating police.**

Bangma stated that, at first, police "very well may have" had blinders on by viewing Aju's disappearance exclusively as a Missing Persons case. Based on this "assumption," Bangma told the family, the police had conducted only a search for Aju and had done little more by way of a follow-up investigation after the search turned up nothing. But this approach, he quickly added, was understandable, given the information officers culled from a few witness statements taken at the time.

Now, Bangma told the Iroagas, the police's view had changed: He and Pastorek were exploring several conceivable explanations for Aju's disappearance –including foul play. "The possibilities are that somebody did him some harm; or that Aju got mad at the world and wandered away, and that he is in the bush or he is not; or that he got a ride with somebody that we don't know about," Bangma said.

But the senior officer cautioned the family that the investigation did not yet constitute a criminal probe. Yet he did say, later in the same meeting, "I want to find out what happened by six o'clock that day, and whether or not somebody did something criminally wrong in the time leading up to that. That is my main focus."

During the meeting, Bangma made several remarks that served only to confuse the family. Early on, he assured the Iroagas that he planned to "continue identifying and interviewing people that were present" the day Aju vanished. This included the 15 or more tree planters in Aju's crew who were working in the area and who may have witnessed his confrontation with his supervisor, and a still-murky confrontation with another bus passenger earlier that morning. "Rest assured," Bangma said, "we will track these people down."

But Bangma also said he and Pastorek were trying to locate and interview only five to seven "main" witnesses. Of these, only two had been interviewed to date. (In fact, the officers did not interview the site supervisor—who was the other party in the angry confrontation with Aju that apparently triggered Aju's abrupt resignation—until October 2007.) As for the other interviews, Bangma said he still had not yet obtained the list of planters on Aju's crew, despite requesting it from A&M Reforestation.

As the Iroaga family questioned the officer, Bangma said police had no proof Aju had wandered away: "As far as we know," he said, "nobody saw Aju walk off. Nobody knows what direction he went in." Bangma and Pastorek were also unable to explain why Aju's shovel was missing or to tell the family whether or not police dogs used during the seven-day search had been able to "get a track" on Aju.

The family and *Reader's Digest's* continued probing during the meeting upset Bangma. "You know what?" he snapped. "I'm going to stop this right here, because I think we are starting to discuss evidence."

But one big question remained to be asked and answered: Who decided not to investigate Aju's disappearance after searchers failed to find the young student in May 2006? Pressed for a response, Bangma paused, let out a sigh and said, "It may have been me. I don't really know."

Bangma explained that, as the area crime supervisor, he oversaw investigations for a large swath of north-central Ontario, including White River, and that he likely had made the decision based on information he received from lower-ranking officers that he originally dispatched to the scene. "You know, I guess what I did was trusted the people that were up there when they told me, 'We've got a missing person; he walked off. We've talked to everybody.' But I wasn't up there doing the investigation."

Then Bangma said, "I don't have an active recollection of saying the investigation is over and done with." Finally exasperated, he said, "I'm not comfortable with this line of questioning. I'm not inclined to answer much more."

Still, the officer added: "It may have been my decision, it may not have been. I don't know. But if it was, I will stand by it. Right or wrong, I will take responsibility for the decisions I made."

Bangma's responses further eroded any faith the Iroagas had in him. As if to hammer home the point, Nwab angrily demanded the two officers abandon the notion that his son had walked out of the bush. "I want that corrected," he said. "My son didn't walk. My son is still up there in the woods."

The detectives politely shook hands with each of the family members as they readied to leave. But the strain of the discussion was still palpable as they made their way out the door.

After waiting nearly eight months for this meeting, the Iroagas were no further ahead. They had no clear sense of what the police had investigated, nor did they know where the case was headed. As Nkechi said, "I was expecting too much. My opinion is almost that we're where we were before."

**Next: They can only imagine how cold Aju was, alone in the woods the night he disappeared.**

August 24, 2007

The next day, Nwab, sounding anxious, called *Reader's Digest* to say he needed to discuss information about Aju that wasn't raised at the meeting with the police. "He can be very short-tempered," he said of his son. "He will throw a punch." Nwab said he feared that if there had been a dispute between Aju and someone else, it may have flared out of control, with disastrous consequences.



September 4, 2007

Bangma and Pastorek wanted to talk to *Reader's Digest* again, too. Bangma said there was no evidence of any connection between Aju's history of violence and his disappearance.

But more importantly, Bangma said he wanted to clear up one matter in particular. After reviewing the case file and talking to the officers involved in the original search-and-rescue operation, Bangma said he didn't want to leave the impression that police hadn't considered all possible scenarios when Aju went missing. He insisted this wasn't an example of the police looking at the case with "blinders on" or with "tunnel vision." Besides, he added, it was the Iroaga family who told police it would be futile to continue investigating when Aju first had gone missing.

"Actually, when Mr. Iroaga and his son arrived on the scene, they said they kind of thought we were wasting our time because there was no doubt in their minds that Aju had walked out to the highway and was either at home or on his way home, and would probably stay very low profile for a while, simply because he'd be embarrassed the police were making this big fuss."

The Iroagas say Bangma's description of this exchange is at odds with their version. Adds eldest son, Echere: "They are the experts. And for them to say that now...they're trying to cover up the decision they made."



Mid-December 2007

The Iroagas are offering a \$50,000 reward for information that leads to finding Aju or his remains. And, angered by the pace of the new police investigation, a group of prominent Nigerian-Canadians have set up an organization called Justice For Aju Iroaga, to keep up the pressure on the OPP.

While the Iroagas welcome the intervention, they have no illusions—they don't imagine that a pressure group or reward of any sum will return their son to them or that they'll be able to celebrate any more birthdays with him. Like the families of others who go missing, they yearn for answers, but they will settle for a lead, a clue—anything that might help fill in the details of what they presume was the last day of Aju's life.

The Iroagas are down to their last resorts and no longer have much confidence police will provide any answers.

They can only imagine how cold Aju was, alone in the woods the night he disappeared. But as cold as he might have been, the case of Aju Iroaga's disappearance is colder still.