

The first time we climbed up onto the roof of the abandoned building I was so nervous. It was really hot that day and our parents were freaking out about Covid 19. It seemed like our lookout was the only place we could catch a breeze and spy down on all the commuters coming out of the Subway. Of course, there were way less people than usual because almost everyone was working from home. Most of our parents were holed up in some quiet room trying to zoom with their bosses. Although we promised to just hang out with our brothers and sisters, as soon as we were out in the lane the gang got together. Most of us would be going to the local high school in the fall. If the schools ever opened, that is. As the summer dragged on we roamed further and further away from our street, riding our bikes mostly without helmets because that would be a give-away to our parents.

I remember the first time we crossed the big boulevard to get to the park. It's one of the biggest parks in Montreal. Did you know, once there was a murder and a guy's head was tossed into one of the lakes in that park? Sick! I always think about that when we go there. Still, it was great to be out on a hot day with the wind cooling us off and us tooling around the paths on our bikes. There's a whole wild section and we got off to lie down in the grass and drink water. It was Marc Andre who thought of going to look at the old building. He said his sister, who's in University now, used to go to activities there when it was a community centre, but the city cut the budget and it's just a derelict building now.

We headed over there and locked our bikes all together with two of Marc Andre's long spiral bike locks. His dad's a cop so he's always really particular about safety – and not losing an expensive bike. His little brother Jules was with us, the youngest one. He's the only one in that family who's sort of puny. Not like Marc Andre and his older cousin, Frederick, the hulk! Jules has some sort of disease, I'm not sure what but he's had a few operations on his back. He's the only one in that family who's skinny and short but man, he's very daring! He's always in trouble. He's the one who noticed the metal ladder that led up to the roof and started climbing without even saying a word to anyone. When we noticed, we yelled at Jules to stop but it was no use. He managed to get to the top even though he was really out of breath and had to lie down on the roof right away. He is awful at sports and has absolutely no stamina. He poked his curly head over the edge and taunted us.

“Chickens! Come on up if you're not scared. I'm staying here all afternoon. You can see the people coming out of the Metro station. You can see everything from up here. Not scared, are you?”

I let Marc Andre go up before me. I wanted to be sure the ladder would carry his weight. It was really solid though even though it was a bit rusty. I was the first girl up, after him and then my BFF Iris came up and the two other boys – my younger brother Samir and the little kid from next door, Sau Lee. (He gets so mad when we call him Lousy) He's a bit of a pain but every time he sees us hanging together he wants to join in. What can you say?

We stayed up there a long time. There was shade from a tree overhanging the roof. That was a good thing because the roof was burning hot under the direct sun. We dragged Jules into the shade. He's so pale and skinny we were afraid he'd get sunstroke. We loved it up there and we made a pact to come back every afternoon to hang out.

When we got home my mother snapped at me, "Where have you been so long, Miriam?"

I blurted out, "at the park" so Samir, would know what he had to say.

Well, it was true in a way. We had been at the park. Of course we went the next afternoon and every day we could get away from home after that. The rules with Covid changed all the time so our parents all got a bit lax. Iris' parents had both lost their jobs so they were on the computer all day looking for some sort of part-time work. They were so worried they were glad to see her go out. After all, we're all gonna be teens this year. Well, except Samir and Lousy, of course. We can look after ourselves.

We took snacks and plenty of water. Jules brought his graphic books and Marc Andre took his sister's old phone and we watched bloopers on You Tube, laughing our asses off. On the Tuesday of the second week, Samir didn't come up the ladder right away. He went around the back of the building where there was a big tangle of bushes and, as he told us later, he found a broken window and went inside. Yes, I know I should have been keeping an eye on him but really, he's so annoying.

I thought he had gone to fool around at the lake with some other friends. How was I supposed to know? He came clambering up the ladder, crying and blood dripping all over his clothes. The first thing I thought was how the hell am I going to hide this from Mum? Imagine, me washing Samir's clothes in secret! Damn kid. He had managed to get in through the broken window with no problem but I guess he got a bit careless and he cut his arm on the way out. There was quite a lot of blood so we washed it off with some Orange Crush and tied it up with Lousy's t-shirt. Then he started to cry because he said his mother would hit him if he came home without his top but I told him it was so hot he could just say he took it off at the park and forgot it. We told him if he wanted to come with us again he would have to think of something to tell his mom or sneak in and put on another t-shirt. What a pest!

Of course, we all wanted to see what was inside now that Samir had gone in so we decided that the next day, when it was supposed to rain anyway, we would tell our parents we were going to the mall and come to the deserted building so we could all go in. Marc Andre said he would bring a flashlight.

The next day at the park we were a bit less enthusiastic about going inside. It was drizzling and grey and the old building looked gloomy and sad. Going inside the smelly building wasn't so much fun. It was sort of damp and there were dead leaves from years past, and there was a sour smell like a baby's diaper. It was gross.

Once inside, the boys wanted to go down some steps. Was there a basement there? No way I was going down! Iris and Samir didn't want to either. Marc Andre had forgotten to bring the flashlight so that settled it. The space was divided into rooms and we just poked around here and there. There were a lot of spider webs. The noise of the traffic and the Metro parking lot was muffled. It was much more boring than being up on the roof and now that our curiosity was satisfied we decided we would send Lousy home and go to the mall after all.

Marc Andre suddenly called us from one of the rooms. We trooped in and he pointed to an old mattress in the corner and some shoes and a bundle of gross clothes next to it.

“Somebody’s living in here!” he whispered. “We’d better get out before he comes back.”

“Are you kidding,” I said. “Who would sleep on that mouldy old thing? No one’s living here. It’s probably been here for ages.”

“I don’t know,” piped up Jules. “Before we come back next time we should prepare some weapons just in case there’s a crazy guy living here.”

“What weapons? Are you malade? What a dummy! Where would we get weapons?” Marc Andre loved to put his little brother in his place.

“There’s plenty of old sticks around. We could sharpen them into spears. We don’t have to really use them. Just scare whoever it is.”

Me and Iris rolled our eyes and edged to the broken window. Guys! So dramatic!

We soon got out and we did go to the mall. There were so many rules about which way to walk with big arrows pointing this way and that. Only two of us had masks and people gave us dirty looks so we went home. That evening after supper me and Marc Andre and Iris met up in the back lane. We were careful to sit far apart in case any adults saw us. Marc Andre was whittling a long stick with one of his mother’s kitchen knives. We sat on a neighbor’s wall in the sun that had just come out. The sun shining just in time for sunset.

“Oh, for God’s sake! Don’t tell me you’re doing what Jules said! Are you making a spear or something?” Iris really knows how to make somebody feel small but, surprisingly, Marc Andre defended himself.

“Look, it’s true what the kid said. You never know who you might run into in that building. After all, homeless people have to sleep somewhere even if it’s hot now. How would you like to sleep outside in the dark park.”

“Right, I’d rather put my head ...on a stinky bed,” Iris mocked and we all laughed like crazy people. It gave me a funny feeling to see the long pointy stick. I wondered if I could ever stick it into anyone.

“Would that actually go through someone’s clothes and into their body, d’you think?” I asked, catching Marc Andre’s eye as the long curls of wood unfurled down between our feet.

“Why not? Anyway, it’s just to scare them. Who wants to actually stick it into anyone?”

I noticed he had three or four other sticks. “Where did you get all those?”

“My grandfather was trimming his lilac tree so I took them. This way all us older ones can have a weapon.”

Iris looked a bit doubtful but she grabbed the first spear just as Marc Andre finished with it and started on the next one. She pretended to test it out and then started swinging it around like a majorette's baton.

"Hey, take it easy. That's a sharp point. You almost stuck it in Miriam. If you don't want it just give it back. I'll give it to Jules. He takes it seriously, at least."

She was pissed off. She threw the spear down and turned to go home without even saying goodbye.

"She's such a snob," mumbled Marc Andre. "How come she's your friend? You're nothing like her."

OMG I never thought he'd say something nice like that! I really like him but well, you know how guys are. You never can tell with them.

"Well, if she doesn't want it, I'd like to have it." I couldn't look at him but I was glad when he picked it up and put it into my hand. His hand was very warm but not sweaty and gross like Samir's gets sometimes.

We sat there for a while not talking and him just whittling steadily away until the other three spears were made.

"Here, this little short one is for Jules. He'll like that – custom made!"

I wondered about that. I had the feeling he would have liked the very biggest one! Mr. Macho.

The following week it was back to scorching temperatures and sometimes we went to the pool and sometimes we climbed up on the roof again.

Somebody has gone inside, I'm sure of it! Somebody has touched my clothes, moved my stuff. I come back around sunset at the end of a sweltering day and just want to lie down and try to sleep. You don't know how tiring it is wandering around the city, trying to find a quiet place where no one bothers you or looks at you funny. I don't want to talk to any old drunk or chat up some whore down on her luck. People just don't get it. I want to be alone. I want to get food for the day and maybe a good coffee if I'm lucky. That's all I ask. And I don't want anyone to go into my place.

If people hassle me I start to get mixed up and hear voices. I shaved my head once and made a terrible job of it too. You try shaving your head with someone else's old razor and cold water. I had to though. My hair had got quite long and one hair had grown all the way to Russia. On the other side of my head one hair had grown down to Washington. I kept getting radio signals from those crazy long hairs – contradicting each other, yelling at me, sometimes in the early morning waking me up and sometimes in

my best sleep at night. I couldn't stand it so I shaved my whole head and had peace. Nobody believes or understands when I tell them things like that. So I stay by myself.

For years I slept in the subway. It's hard to get comfortable on the Metro seats. They design them like that so we can't sleep in peace. At first the noise of the trains wakes you up too. The worst is at the end of service when the drunks get off the train and bother you. Why do you want to torment me? What did I ever do to you? One time a guy tried to throw me down on the track but I bit his ear and he soon took off. Of course, the security picked me up and I spent the night in jail but I'm glad I did it. I just want people to leave me alone and if they don't, well, it's their fault if I get mad at them.

So, yeah, I am pissed off and worried that somebody has been poking around with my stuff, that somebody, yet again, has found my place. Soon there will be trouble. I know there's a gang of kids spending time up on the roof, but could it be them? I doubt it. Kids would stay up there, surely. What do they want in my little dark place? They have nice homes, or well, maybe not so nice around here. But somebody must care and wonder where they are.

I usually don't spend much time around the building during the day. I don't want any park employee or Metro people to know I sleep there. I only come around sunset and most of the time, by then, the kids are leaving. Some days, this summer it was so hot that I stayed in the park and I saw them. Four boys and two girls, friends like I used to have in school. It's only after I got sick that I lost my friends. I'm a bit jealous of the kids, I admit, joking and feeling like big shots, dare-devils for climbing the ladder to the roof. Poor kids, they'll soon learn!

It's hard to sleep with the idea that somebody touched my stuff. Maybe the kids come back and go on the roof at night. They must have got in by the broken window. Could it be somebody else? This is a sweet spot, quiet, dark, private. Why should I have to share it?

All this Covid summer, nature has crept out and got bolder. There's a pair of falcons in the park and I see them watching for squirrels. As the days get shorter, the squirrels panic about gathering food for winter and they let down their guard, running out in the open with acorns to bury. Then the falcons swoop down and catch them. They carry them up into the trees or to the tops of lampposts and tear them to pieces. Bits of grey fur come drifting down. I'm glad. I like the falcons better than the squirrels. Through my dirty little window I can see golden leaves flying off the trees. The trees are trying to run away but they are held fast by their roots so they send the leaves off like letters.

I don't see the kids for a long time and I forget about being mad about the intruder. Did school start? I watch the electronic bill boards in the metro and it seems sometimes the kids go to school, sometimes not. They give me a black mask in the Metro and I like wearing it.

The weather is so changeable. One day it's brilliantly sunny and then sudden showers come. I watch for rainbows but I only ever saw one. The sky is sometimes black on one side and brilliant blue with huge white clouds on the other. The wind comes and the golden leaves fall without stopping. They soon

become brown and messy and trodden underfoot. They're only beautiful for a few hours once they leave their branches and come down to us. There are more security guards now in the subway to check that everyone is wearing a mask. It's harder to get in without a ticket. I hang around in the park more.

It's the 1st of October and the gang of kids is back. There's another bigger kid with them. I don't like that kid from the first minute I see him – a real pain in the ass. He yells with a loud voice and pretends he's going to smash the rungs of the ladder where they're rusty. A loudmouth. A bastard kid who will grow up to be like those bullies who come off the last train and bother me.

They're up on the roof such a long time. It's almost dark and I was counting on them going home so I can get into my space. The girls are screaming and acting up. It's that new kid's fault, I bet. Shit, I'm tired! I want to lie down.

Finally, they're coming down the ladder. The little skinny boy is last. Oh, he jumps the three bottom steps. He falls and another bigger kid (his brother maybe) comes over to help him. The little kid gets mad, "Leave me alone. I'm fine. Leave me alone and mind your business! You're not my boss!"

Why is the little kid rushing to the back of the building? Oh, shit, he went in through the broken window! He's got a stick. Damn! How long must I stay hiding here? That's my place. I want to go in and settle down for the night. The other kids yell for him to come out and the new kid, the biggest kid even tries to go in too, but he doesn't fit through the broken window. He screams, "Jules, you fucking pest. Come out of there. We have to go home. It's night already!"

The kid comes out waving one of my shirts on his stick. My favorite t-shirt! My sister gave me that t-shirt a long time ago! I can't stand it. I want my space! All summer they were up on the roof and I never bothered them. Who is this pig, this big kid who spoiled everything? I can't help it! I'm so mad! I rush over and grab the stick and they all look scared. Good! Let them be scared! They should have gone home!

I had to tell them how it was in the hospital. I told the nurse it was like another person ran across and grabbed the stick and I couldn't help it. That loudmouth bastard!

I stuck it in him! I stuck it in him! I never meant to. I didn't even know until I grabbed it that it had a point and then I wanted to stab him, to make them all run away. There was all red on his clothes and he was yelling and some people came running from the Metro and there was a lot of shouting and I just couldn't stop. Into his leg, into his thigh, I kept stabbing the stick.

One of the girls was screaming and she ran away but the other girl just stood there and she looked right at me like I was a real person. She looked right into my eyes. Everything was mixed up but I'll always remember that. She looked at me and then the older-brother boy pulled her away and the kids all took off except for the bastard kid. He was screaming and rolling around on the ground and the security guard from the Metro grabbed me. A lot of shit happened after that. I never even got to go inside and get my stuff. I'll never get it now.

We ran across the boulevard as fast as we could. The security guard yelled at us to stop but no way! We had to be sure Jules could keep up with us and Samir too. Thank God little Lousy wasn't with us. He had whined to come but Marc Andre's cousin, Frederick had said no, he was a baby. That was the only good thing he did that day! Frederick was rolling around on the ground, screaming. After a few minutes we heard the ambulance coming down the boulevard. Because of him we all got in deep shit. For that half an hour before the cops called Marc Andre's parents we were just a scared gang of kids standing in the alley behind our houses, crying and trying to be brave. My mother came out on the balcony. I swear she has radar!

"You kids, you all have school tomorrow. It's dark. What are you doing out so late and all together too? You'll catch the Covid!"

"Mme. Yasmina," answered Marc Andre in his "be nice to parents" voice, "we're all together in school all day. It's not because it's night that we'll catch the Covid."

I was so happy he spoke and somehow made things look normal to my mother. After all, he had to go home with Jules who was favoring his leg because of the fall, and without that idiot Frederick. He would have to face the music worse than us.

It was a complete shit show later that night. Marc Andre's parents came over to our house and got on the phone to Iris's family. Me and Marc Andre got it the worst because we're older and all the adults said we had no business going to that building. They were scared.

"That man could have killed you. Poor little Jules!" (Yeah, right!) "Wait until your father comes home." She actually said that. My father works nights in the hospital so I wouldn't get it from him until the day after. My mother was ashamed of me in front of Marc Andre's parents I could tell. They were police officers after all. She didn't seem to get that it was their son and their nephew that had triggered the whole thing.

My mother got us out of the way by saying we had school the next day and that we were traumatized enough. Samir and I went upstairs and did our teeth and our prayers without talking much. I was wide awake and I kept thinking about the homeless guy. He had a scary face but a scared face too. I wondered if he was sleeping on that cruddy mattress or if the cops had him. I wondered what his name was.