

# Death in August—brutality and despair in Toronto

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A week in the life of a city, a week with three tragedies—a man is beaten to death by police, a mother clutching her baby throws herself in front of a subway train, a student working in a nightclub is shot to death. None of these people knew each other, their social backgrounds are worlds apart, but there is more than coincidence tying their deaths together. Their fates disclose an image of a city and of a society, and that image is a murderous one.

*Wednesday, August 9, 1 a.m., outside a 7-Eleven at College and Lansdowne in a run-down neighborhood in Toronto's west end. Otto Vass, a 55-year-old father of five, lies dead in a pool of blood in the parking lot.*

Everybody in the neighborhood knew Vass: his dilapidated junk shop was something of a local landmark, but it was only a sideline to his real estate dealings and he also dabbled in dispensing legal advice. He had a history of psychiatric problems and was on medication for manic depression. His mother had died recently. He was having a late night barbecue and had gone to the 7-Eleven for some more sauce. A friend would later say of him: "He stood up for his rights." That may well have cost him his life.

There are two versions of what happened to him. The police version is that they responded to a call about a disturbance at the store and arrived to find Vass badly injured because of a fight with three men who had fled the scene. They tried to assist Vass but when he tried to punch one of them they did their best to subdue him. The injuries he had sustained in the initial altercation were so serious, however, that he died shortly afterwards.

The second version comes from two immigrant workers from Pakistan whose apartment window gave them a direct view of the store parking lot. They never saw Vass punch the police. What they did see was the police shove Vass to the ground and then savagely punch him and beat him with their nightsticks. "They were beating him worse than an animal. He wasn't fighting back at all." One officer held Vass down and punched him in the face while the other hit him on the legs with a nightstick. Then the first officer stood up and began kicking Vass while the second continued clubbing him with the stick. Two more officers arrived, they held Vass down while the original pair continued the beating. "He was just screaming due to the pain. He never hit an officer—they never gave him a chance, and he never tried to." The beating lasted from five to ten minutes. Paramedics were called but Vass was pronounced dead at the scene. One of the immigrant workers told the media: "I'm kind of afraid of the police. In civilized countries we don't do that."

A week later new information emerges. Videotape from the store shows that Vass had an argument with one man, not three, there was no physical altercation and Vass was unharmed when the police arrived. And the autopsy report shows that Vass died from numerous blows to the head, arms and legs, all consistent with police nightsticks. Thus the police version of events is shown to be an outright lie. The police department goes into damage control: through one of their media mouthpieces they let it be known that the officers involved were inexperienced, some still even

serving their 12-month probationary period. This is meant to be seen as an extenuating circumstance—they were rookies who overreacted. But there is another way of looking at this: being rookies, their reactions are probably a good reflection of the kind of training they've received and the attitudes they've been inculcated with. Murderous attitudes.

*Friday, August 11, 6:30 a.m., St. Clair West subway station. Suzanne Killinger-Johnson is standing on the northbound platform holding her six-month-old baby Cuyler. When the train pulls in, she jumps. The baby is killed instantly, the mother dies eight days later, never regaining consciousness.*

Killinger-Johnson was a 37-year-old medical doctor with a psychotherapy practice. She lived with her husband, a computer executive, in Forest Hill, which is about a 20-minute drive from where Otto Vass died but light years away in social terms—a posh upper-middle-class neighborhood of tree-lined streets and mock Tudor and limestone houses where "neighbors welcome new residents with garden parties," as one report put it. Her medical practice was a success, her husband had just received a promotion, her baby was happy and thriving. There was no history of mental problems. A "picture-perfect life," according to all the media accounts.

At about 10:30 on the night before she jumped, transit staff noticed Killinger-Johnson with her baby at the Lawrence Avenue subway station. She was acting strangely and so police were called. She gave them a false name and then got on a train and left the station. Later she was found at the Eglinton Avenue station, again acting strangely. This time police escorted her home and left her in the care of her husband. It was 1:30 in the morning. Five hours later, she slipped out of the house with the infant, got into her Mercedes-Benz sports utility vehicle and drove to St. Clair West.

The story was a sensation. It moved many people but also perplexed them. "What made her do it?" was the question that kept being asked. "She just didn't fit the murder-suicide stereotype," wrote one columnist, "with which we've become all too familiar: The recent immigrant unable to cope; the unemployed father worried about money; the psychiatric patient off his medication." The casual brutality of these remarks is worth noting: clearly, had Killinger-Johnson fit the stereotype, had she been from Parkdale instead of Forest Hill for instance, her story wouldn't have gotten anywhere near the same amount of media attention. In any case, the only plausible explanation offered for her action was that she was suffering from a severe case of postpartum depression. Still this seemed particularly ironic since she herself was a psychotherapist who treated depression in others, and her mother Barbara Killinger is a prominent clinical psychologist and author of numerous self-help books on subjects such as "workaholicism" and "living balanced lifestyles." To round out the picture, for the week that Killinger-Johnson was in hospital in a coma, the police were considering charging her with the murder of her child should she have regained consciousness. The *Toronto Sun*, the local tabloid, ran a column that week that began: "I hope she dies."

*Sunday, August 13, 2 a.m., The Guvernment, a popular dance club on the waterfront. Alrick Gairy, 24, working a summer job as a bouncer, was shot three times and pronounced dead shortly after arriving at St. Michael's Hospital.*

Gairy was a football player. He'd been an all-star athlete in high school and in a week he was scheduled to leave for Michigan Tech University on the second year of a football scholarship where he was slated to play fullback on the school team. He was big—6 feet, 300 pounds—but quiet and had a tiny voice. One report mentions a two-year-old son. He'd been working as a bouncer for six months.

The Guvernment is a large building with two floors and three dance rooms. That night there were about two thousand people inside. Gairy was working in the Orange Room, which plays hip-hop music. It isn't clear whether he was interceding in a fight or trying to quiet down someone who was behaving rowdily. In any case, a gun was pulled and Gairy was shot in the chest three times. The person charged in the crime, Quentin Danvers, is 19 years old.

As Gairy lay dying in the Orange Room, the partying continued in the other rooms. Management refused to close the club down. This so infuriated other employees that about 20 of them walked out in protest. One said: "It's the most disgusting thing I've ever seen in my life. It's complete disrespect." A customer coming out of the club at 3 a.m. told reporters: "People said there were gunshots but they didn't even turn the music down. That says a lot." A cousin of the murdered man would later say: "It's really a travesty they kept it open."

Four lives destroyed in the space of a week. Is there any connection here? Can these stories tell us anything about the kind of society we live in? The mainstream media, for all its sensationalist coverage of crime, never asks these kinds of questions. Every story like this is dealt with as if it were an isolated incident, and once it drops out of the headlines, it's simply forgotten. We live in an age of saturation news coverage and social amnesia.

"In civilized countries we don't do that." It's worth reflecting on this remark of the immigrant worker who witnessed the police beating of Otto Vass. In one sense he's wrong because it would be hard to think of a country today where police brutality isn't a feature of everyday life. But in another sense there is a deeper truth here: in a civilized society things like this *shouldn't* happen, but the fact that they are happening suggests that this society is becoming increasingly *uncivilized*, that is to say, increasingly brutalized. Think of the ferocity of the beating Otto Vass sustained—"worse than an animal." Think of the brutal indifference shown to Alrick Gairy—his life wasn't worth closing the club over or even turning the music down. Or the bloody-mindedness that would have prosecuted a woman in Suzanne Killinger-Johnson's condition.

A society where the social divide between haves and have-nots has become a chasm is a society that breeds violence and brutality. Where those at the top have everything, those at the bottom *are* nothing, are less than human. The policies of a regime like the Harris government in Ontario embody that inhumanity: life is cheap, not worth the price of safe drinking water in Walkerton or of low-cost housing in Toronto. And the modus operandi of a regime like this increasingly resembles the actions of a gang of thugs—browbeating their opponents and resorting to the naked fist of police violence to quell any show of opposition. Everyday life becomes brutalized: greed is worshipped as the highest virtue, even the most intimate relationships are seen in terms of profit and loss and scenes of destitution that would have been a scandal a decade ago today elicit for the most part only resignation or callous indifference. These are conditions that give rise to a murderous social climate.

The bearing this has on the deaths of Vass and Gairy, or on the many other cases like theirs, isn't hard to see. Killinger-Johnson's tragedy, however, is the result of a psychological condition that seems to have little to do with the prevailing social climate. Looked at in a narrow way, this is

certainly true: it would be silly to try to draw a direct link between the policies of the Harris government and the terrible despair that drove this woman to do what she did. But clearly this story does have a larger social significance. The public's reaction isn't merely the result of media sensationalism: the image of a mother throwing herself and her baby in front of a subway train is deeply disturbing and touches us at the very core of our humanity. And all the more disturbing because, by all accounts, Killinger-Johnson was an utterly ordinary middle class person.

"Suzy Killinger is someone almost everybody knows" is the way one feature story about her put it. The only discernable pattern in her life is the familiar one of following in parents' footsteps: she went to the same university as they did, became a medical doctor like her father, a psychotherapist like her mother and even tried to take after her mother in writing self-help books. She married a boyfriend from university and pursued her career. One might say that this is a person who spent her whole life doing what was expected of her, except at the end.

Birth is as traumatic an event for a mother as it is for a child. There are huge hormonal and physical changes, and huge psychological ones as well—a woman goes from being "full" to being "empty." Hence the condition known as postpartum depression. The statistics on it are striking: 50 to 70 percent of new mothers experience some form of "baby blues" within the first two weeks of delivery. For most, it's a quickly passing phase, but for 10 to 15 percent of new mothers the condition can lead to serious depression and even suicidal thoughts. Finally, in one to two cases out of a thousand, the depression can become psychotic, with the mother losing touch with reality.

That some women should feel a "let-down" after childbirth is understandable, though that more than half of all new mothers feel this way suggests that there are exacerbating factors at work here. But what is most disturbing is that one out of every seven or eight new mothers should suffer serious depression—can this really be due to nothing more than biology? Here is how a psychiatry professor describes the symptoms of serious postpartum depression: "They [i.e., the mothers] often have feelings that they are bad mothers, that they made a mistake, they shouldn't have had this baby because they can't cope." They can't cope—a telling phrase. And far from this being some kind of delusion, isn't it actually true to the experience of millions of new mothers' lives? In the weeks prior to her suicide, Killinger-Johnson drafted a petition to the Ontario Medical Association complaining about the inadequacy of maternity benefits for physicians. Clearly, coping was very much on her mind.

For most of its existence the human race has raised children collectively. Mothers gave birth surrounded by their own mothers and other relatives, and child-rearing was the responsibility of the entire extended family. No doubt it was still possible in this context for a new mother to feel let down or depressed, but that feeling would have been greatly mitigated because a mother would never have had to worry about coping on her own with a new baby. In effect, her "empty" feeling after delivering her child would be filled by the close ties of her family and friends. Capitalism destroyed most of those ties and reduced the family to the minimum unit necessary for functioning in a market economy—the nuclear family. But that family structure imposes a terrible—really an inhuman—burden on the mother, a burden that many women simply cannot bear. Alone with her child—despite the expensive home, the fancy car, the tasteful garden parties—completely, hopelessly alone. In that respect Suzanne Killinger-Johnson, like Otto Vass and Alrick Gairy, was a victim of an inhuman society.



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