

CRIME

Swarm

Why did a group of teenage girls kill a man in a downtown Toronto parkette?

BY INORI ROY

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEXANDRA NEWBOULD

UNDER THE GAZE of a security camera in the northeastern corner of Yorkdale Shopping Centre, a woman and a teenage girl are caught in a confrontation. It is the evening of December 17, 2022, just a week before Christmas—the first holiday season in two years with no pandemic lockdown restrictions—and in the soundless CCTV footage, shoppers at the sprawling mall in a northern Toronto neighbourhood are in constant motion. For a moment, the girl and the woman break the current. They gesticulate, each throwing her hands up at the other, before parting ways.

On its own, the brief flash of anger would have been unremarkable. Against the backdrop of everything that followed that night—drunken belligerence, assault, death—it suggested that even early in the evening, the girl, one of a handful loitering in the mall concourse, had been in a fighting mood. In a group chat that would later be reported to have included as many as thirty people, several teenagers had agreed to meet at Yorkdale before going to a party in

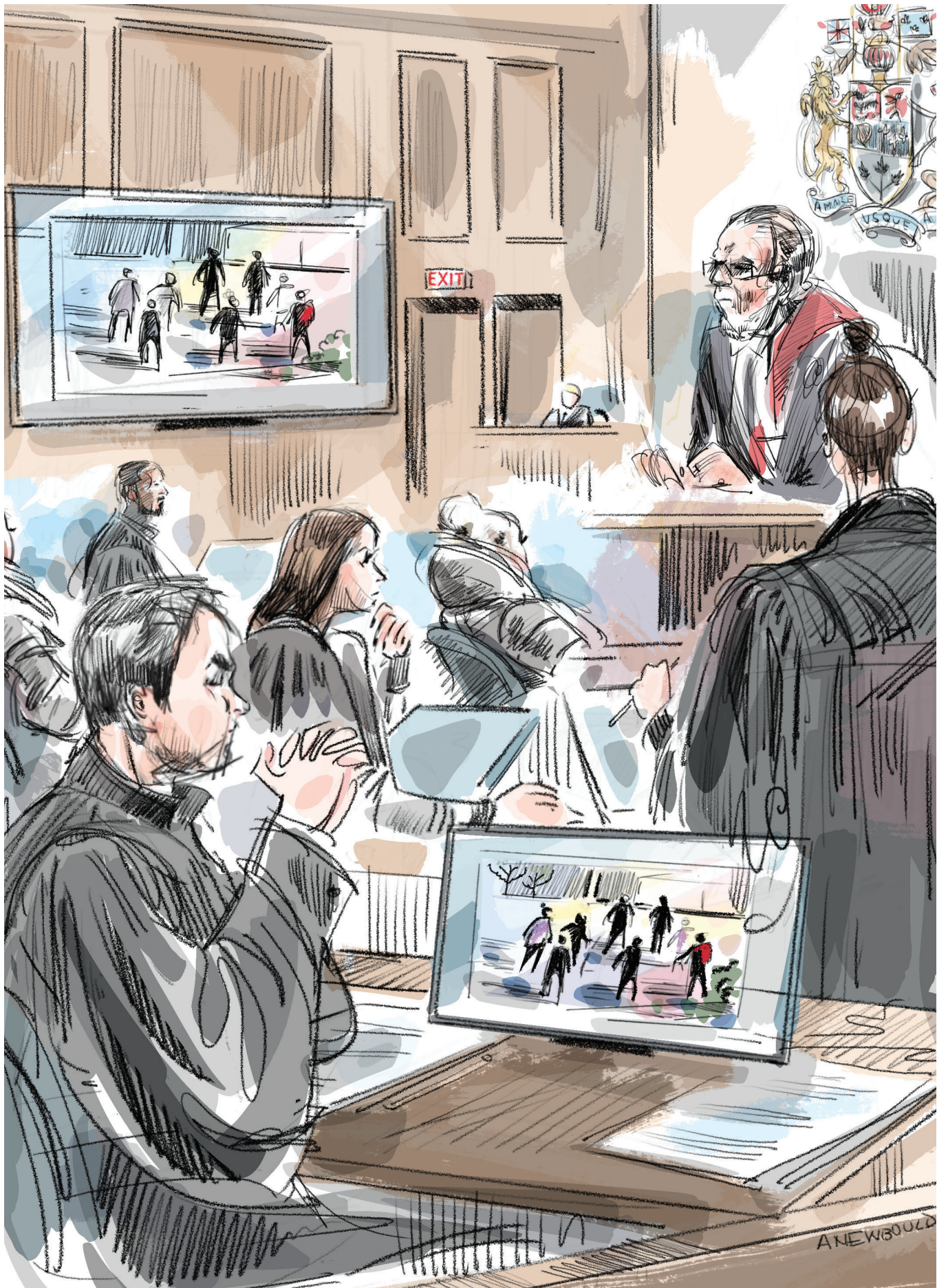
Markham, deeper north into the suburbs. Some of the girls in the chat had known each other for years, considered each other best friends. Others were newly acquainted. They were unsupervised and strikingly young, between the ages of thirteen and sixteen; they were also all Black, a detail that would rarely be mentioned in subsequent coverage of the night's events. Tucked into her jacket, one of them carried a bubblegum-pink pepper spray and taser set and a wrench-like tool called Vise-Grip. The girls also had a small blue-handled knife.

For a little over an hour, the girls roamed through the mall, darting in and out of stores, drinking in the food court, smoking weed outside. In a shaky video later retrieved by police from one of the girls' cellphones, there was talk of fighting someone. In another video, a girl mentions mall security, who did eventually approach the group, though it's unclear what was said. The teens congregated in a tucked-away staircase, where they smoked more weed and drank more alcohol. Within about an hour, rowdy and disruptive, they boarded a Toronto bus. They managed to acquire

still more alcohol at an LCBO and then got on the subway, inciting a series of escalating incidents of harassment and assault against fellow passengers as they made their way south, to downtown Toronto. Just after midnight, in a small, unremarkable parkette minutes away from the most frequented train station in the country, a teenage girl would stab a man in the heart.

IN THE EARLY hours of December 18, eight girls were arrested and charged with the murder of fifty-nine-year-old Kenneth Lee, an unhoused man who had once lived at a shelter hotel just steps from the parkette where he was stabbed. The girls had swarmed Lee during a fight that began over a bottle of alcohol, kicking and hitting him as a group until he was kneeling on the pavement, winded and bleeding. When they fled the scene, he was still alive, later dying in the hospital.

When news of the killing became public on December 20, the unusual details of the crime sent a ripple of shock through the city. They were girls. There were eight of them. And they were so



A NEWBOOLD

young. The more than 800 comments left under a breaking news tweet by a *Toronto Star* reporter explored every possible explanation for the crime. It was the parents' fault. It was a sign that society had lost its way. Maybe it was self-defence? It was atheism. It was, somehow, because of Justin Trudeau. The girls' crime grew from a singular tragedy to a political Rorschach test.

In the two years prior, Toronto had seen a series of random, violent, highly visible assaults take place in public spaces, particularly on transit. A woman set on fire and killed, two women stabbed by a man on the subway at random, an elderly woman killed after being pushed to the ground in broad daylight. Paranoia and fear gripped the city, along with the notion that unhoused and mentally ill people were a danger to society. In truth, crime was not markedly worse than it had been before the pandemic. Where it seemed to be worsening was toward vulnerable communities: women, minorities, and unhoused people.

In the wake of an especially shocking or unusual crime, people tend to grasp for sense-making stories. "Could downtown Toronto murder be a case of girls gone wilding?" read a *Toronto Sun* column by crime writer Joe Warmington a few days after Lee was killed. He had learned the term from a former Toronto police officer. It first entered popular lexicon nearly thirty years ago, in the aftermath of the 1989 rape and beating of a twenty-eight-year-old woman in New York City. The crime was initially pinned on a group of Black and Hispanic teen boys, the "Central Park Five," who were exonerated thirteen years later.

Vague enough to be politically expedient—defined as a random, violent incident, or a series of them, committed by a group of young people—"wilding" conjures images of roving gangs of racialized hoodlums. The concept eventually fell out of fashion, criticized as implying a kind of animal nature; when Warmington and other media commentators resurrected it, they seemed to gesture toward the same inhumanity. It didn't help that, in the early days, Toronto police said the girls had met through social media, an

idea that made them appear even more frightening to the public. The murky threat of the internet, of its perceived potential to lure in teens and instill in them a hunger for violence, coloured public discourse.

Perhaps it mattered less that they were a group and more that they were *girls* in a group. Female offenders in Canada commit just a fraction of the reported crimes male offenders do—one in every four in 2017. Rarely are those crimes violent. When they are, it is often in the context of familial or intimate partner violence. Perhaps the only other prominent case of violence by a group of young women in modern Canadian history was in 1997, when seven teenage girls and one teenage boy were charged in relation to the killing of fourteen-year-old Reena Virk in a suburb of Victoria, British Columbia. The group hit and kicked at her, put a cigarette out on her forehead, and ultimately drowned her in shallow water nearby. The crime "led Canadians to believe that something had gone terribly wrong with teenage girls," scholars from Simon Fraser University wrote seven years later.

But this parallel proved unsatisfactory. Virk's killers had known her. Lee was a complete stranger to his killers. There was no straightforward way to make sense of what had happened that December night. In public forums, the overwhelming response to the crime was to demand an explanation, justice, in some cases retribution. Who were these girls? What exactly had they done? And why? But even when the details of that night began to come to light, all they seemed to reveal was a pervasive sense of unknowability—and senselessness.

MY FIRST GLIMPSE of the girls was during a brief preliminary hearing in April 2024. It was one of the rare occasions during which they were all in court together, all of them smaller and younger-looking than I'd imagined. There was no disputing the fact that they'd attacked Lee: the swarming itself and their aggressive behaviour on transit in the hours before had been captured by security cameras

in the mall, the subway, and the high-rise commercial building in front of which the attack took place.

The girls faced charges commensurate with how significant a role the prosecution and defence attorneys believed each one had played in the crime. (Each teen was represented by her own legal team.) They hadn't all attacked in equal measure, and only one, a fourteen-year-old, was accused of administering the killing blow. In May and June 2024, four of the eight girls pleaded guilty: three to manslaughter and one to assault causing bodily harm and assault with a weapon. The four remaining girls were set to go to trial, one for manslaughter and three for second-degree murder (killing deliberately but with no premeditation).

The trial of the girl accused of stabbing Lee and one other girl accused of second-degree murder began this past February, at a courthouse on University Avenue, in downtown Toronto. (The two remaining girls were scheduled to go to trial in May.) There were only a handful of witnesses, and much time was spent in court piecing together the events of that night from hours of CCTV footage and short cellphone clips pulled from the girls' phones, watched on repeat.

On day one, we saw pictures of the empty parkette crime scene—dozens of images of itemized litter and specks of blood on the concrete—and footage from the minutes the girls assaulted Lee. The girls had seen this video before and now watched it back impassively.

The Crown hoped the footage would determine whether the girl accused of stabbing Lee had been in possession of a knife. This was one of the two big questions of the case: What was the murder weapon, and who had been carrying it? In a video taken during a TTC bus ride early in the night, someone mentioned a knife, and later, in blurry, distant CCTV footage, something fell out of the pocket of the girl accused of stabbing Lee. The Crown and defence lawyers argued over whether this object was a knife or a Sharpie. They played the videos again. And again.

Under the Youth Criminal Justice Act, I am required to protect the identities of

the girls, as young offenders. It's strange to tell a story in which eight people are described largely as an anonymous horde, but in the ways they dressed and for the most part behaved, there wasn't all that much setting the girls apart from one another. On the night of the murder, in some grim cinematic coincidence, the girl accused of stabbing Lee was the only one who stood out, wearing a bright-coloured hoodie under her jacket. But the truth is that identifying the girls individually isn't essential to telling their story. So much of what they did on December 17 and 18 was as part of a group, in reaction to one another. It is difficult to tell if the version of the girls seen in the footage from that night—frenetic, obnoxious, careless—even exists outside of the moments captured on grainy security cameras.

I ran this question past Beverly-Jean Daniel, associate professor at the School of Child and Youth Care at Toronto Metropolitan University. She specializes in racial dynamics, identity formation, and equity in urban environments, including schools. Daniel talked about something called “social facilitation,” the tendency that people have to behave differently in group settings than they would on their own. One person could have reacted to Lee in that moment, she tells me, and influenced everyone else's behaviour. And it's impossible to understand the girls' behaviour that night without understanding what preceded it, she says. Had they learned violence from seeing others enact it, from experiencing it themselves? Did they think their behaviour was appropriate because they'd been inundated with negative messages and stereotypes about their identities?

Attending the legal proceedings, I had expected the girls to show some sign of remorse or devastation for what they'd done. For the most part, from my point of view, they didn't. When they appeared in court, whether during the preliminary hearing, while pleading guilty, or while being sentenced, I was struck by the informality of their comportment. They were frequently dressed in athleisure, at best a rumpled white collared shirt tucked into black tights,

perhaps because they didn't have access to better options. During the February trial, the two accused appeared in black puffer jackets, which neither took off throughout several days of proceedings. Both had their hair slicked back in high buns, with their edges laid; when one slouched down in her chair, the top of her bun was the only part of her visible above her jacket.

There was no jury. These two girls had opted to be tried before a judge alone: Justice R. Philip Campbell, a kindly older man, bespectacled and bearded, with a soft speaking voice. In this, I thought they

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had a stroke of good fortune. Preliminary hearings and sentencing for those who pleaded guilty had taken place before Justice David Rose, who seemed to more sharply favour court decorum. On one occasion, Rose sternly asked a girl to remove the innocuous headband she had wrapped around her braided hair, reminding her lawyer that only religious head coverings were permitted in court.

I began to wonder how much remorse I could reasonably expect to see from the girls. The legal proceedings were repetitive, dull, and had drawn out for years (in part, a reflection of the state of the country's backlogged justice system). By the time the trial began in February, the girls had already been involved in two years of bail and pre-trial hearings, of which most appearances were mired in legal jargon and bureaucratic process, mind numbing to most adults, let alone teenagers. Had the process inured them

to the realities of their actions? Were they grieving privately? Or were they just bored?

They had also suffered: during their time in youth detention facilities in the months after the crime, awaiting bail, all of the girls had been strip-searched repeatedly by facility staff. I questioned how much this had compromised any sense of trust, or investment, the girls had in the judicial process. Throughout the proceedings, they rarely spoke for themselves, save for when entering their guilty or not-guilty pleas. During the February trial, neither girl took the witness stand. Instead, they gazed at the courtroom televisions playing slow-motion footage of themselves from the night of the swarming.

A LITTLE AFTER 9 P.M. on December 17, 2022, at Yorkdale station, the girls were solidifying into the group of eight that would eventually find itself in the parkette with Kenneth Lee. Some of the teens from the mall had trickled off to go to the house party. A few remained, including a boy some of the girls knew; they hit and chased each other up and down the platform, play-fighting, one of them even falling to the floor for a moment. Dozens of people walked past them; a few looked visibly alarmed.

Then, one of the girls pulled out the small blue-handled knife. She was one of the youngest—baby faced with big glasses and a puffer coat that rounded out her silhouette. The knife changed hands. The girls also had in their possession two bottles of Crown Royal. This image would serve as evidence in answering the second important question of the trial: Were the girls too drunk to understand the harm they were capable of causing?

About half an hour into their loitering on the platform, the girls were approached by a TTC employee. It's not clear what he said to them. They boarded the southbound subway at half past nine.

Six stops south, in a tiny snippet of video taken on the platform at Spadina station, a man sits on the floor eating pizza. “He wants to fight you,” a teen girl

tells the man from behind the camera, pointing toward a boy who was with the group at the time. “He called you [an] ugly, homeless bitch.” It’s hard to tell if she thought she was being funny. Another girl yells, nothing is heard from the man, and the video ends.

At St. George station, the next stop on the line, the subway stalled as the girls caused chaos on the platform and in the subway car, prying at the doors, kicking the train, and fighting with each other and with the increasingly agitated passengers. (In court, the Crown would inform the judge that the girls’ behaviour led to several subway delays over the course of the night.) Eventually, someone triggered the emergency alarm. TTC special constables arrived to investigate, eventually ushering the girls out of the station, but not before verbally cautioning them for their open bottle of whisky. In the CCTV footage, the girls seemed tiny standing next to the constables. They were undeterred. They re-entered the station some time later, shoving and fighting with a young man in his twenties. The teenage boy travelling with the girls grabbed the man and told him to run.

Around 10:40 p.m., at St. Andrew station, the girls attacked a pair of women in a subway car and later another pair of women in the station. They spat, kicked, and pulled hair, unprovoked, then left after a TTC attendant appeared to call for help. They made their way to Union Station, where some of them were once again escorted out by security. The interstices between incidents were becoming smaller, and the girls more aggressive.

IN THE MINUTES before midnight, security cameras captured the girls clustered in a circle at the southern end of the parkette just off the intersection of York and Front Streets, near Union Station. Lee walked past them with Erika Tong, a woman some have described as his girlfriend and others as his friend. The two put down their bags, and Tong lit a cigarette while Lee walked off camera.

Quickly, some of the girls circled Tong, who turned and tried to walk away from

them. One of the girls approached her and snatched a bottle of alcohol from her. Tong grabbed it back and took a drink from it. All eight girls were now paying attention to the situation. They were almost like magnetic poles in pairing with Tong—she’d approach them and they’d turn away and regroup, then they’d go up to her again and she’d walk away. There was no sound in the footage we saw in court. The girls aggressively grouped around Tong just after Lee reappeared, and one of them threw a plastic bag filled with ice at him. Lee made a quick motion as if to hit back.

They formed a line, shoulder to shoulder, gesturing and seemingly screaming at him before they descended upon him again.

Reading about the case, the term “swarm” sometimes struck me as melodramatic. Then I saw the footage of the attack. The aggression from the girls—all but one, who walked away from the fight—in response to Lee’s gesture was so uniform that it was as if they all started moving as one. They thrashed their limbs at him, kicking, punching, and hitting him; he backed into a raised concrete planter bordering the parkette, and they climbed up to continue attacking him, one of the girls violently jumping on him. Lee got to his feet and faced the girls. This seemed to only anger them further. They formed a line, shoulder to shoulder, gesturing and seemingly screaming at him before they descended upon him again.

The second and third frenzies were somehow worse. One of the girls began to hit Lee so feverishly with both hands that she became a blur in the footage,

her curly hair whipping around. Another lifted a plastic pylon to strike him; a third hit him with the Vise-Grips she’d brought with her from home. One of the girls used a pair of cosmetic scissors, likely shoplifted earlier that night, to stab Lee, though not fatally. Then, someone stabbed him again. The blade pierced the tiny sliver of space between Lee’s fifth and sixth rib and went through his lung and into his heart.

If there is a hero in this tragic story, it’s Melissa Alexander, come too late. Alexander is a round-faced, middle-aged woman who worked at the Strathcona, a hotel right across the street from the parkette that was repurposed as a shelter for unhoused people during the pandemic. She had just finished her shift when she heard the commotion in the parkette. She didn’t realize there was anyone on the ground until she pushed the girls off Lee. She recognized him as a shelter resident—in her testimony, she called him “Kenny”—who was no longer staying at the hotel. Looking at the girls, she later told the court, it was like they were “in the wild, in the jungle.”

The girls scattered, making their way into the nearby glass vestibule which leads to the underground pathway to Union Station. Alexander followed them. They swore at her, calling her a bitch. She swore back, asking them why they would do something like that.

In the aftermath of the fight, the girl who had walked away from the parkette before the assault came back. Lee had blood running down his face, but he was still conscious and talking. Crouched on the ground, he clutched the hem of Alexander’s coat as she told the girl who had returned to flag down an ambulance that happened to be at the street corner. Nearby, Tong stood crying. It was clear from the footage that no one in the parkette—not the bystanders who’d stopped to rubberneck, not Alexander, not the paramedics attending the scene, and likely not even Lee himself—could tell he had been stabbed.

“We could only assess what we could see,” paramedic Jennifer Ellis told the court. No one at the scene had known the girls to be in possession of a weapon,

so there was no immediate instinct to look for stab wounds, especially not with the blood running down Lee's face. The paramedics examined Lee's injuries, taking off his coat. Watching the video in court, I kept wanting to shout: *Move faster!*

Lee collapsed a few minutes later, struggling to get up and onto the stretcher, and his condition deteriorated rapidly. The paramedics took him to St. Michael's Hospital, just over a kilometre away. He died on the operating table. The autopsy report revealed that Lee had at least two stab wounds and nineteen blunt-force injuries: to his head, neck, cheekbone and eyebrows, the bridge of his nose, his forehead, and his mouth.

IN THE MONTHS before Lee was killed, he had experienced homelessness. His sister Helen Shum wrote a victim impact statement for the evidentiary hearing for one of the girls, the baby-faced one, who had pleaded guilty to manslaughter. "Being the only son to a Chinese family, he was always over-protected and over-supported by his family. Perhaps due to this, he did not always make the best decisions for himself or his personal relationships," her statement read.

Lee had wanted to learn to be on his own. It was an act of "enormous courage," Shum's statement said, for her brother to leave his familial safety net behind. "He knew that his family would always be behind him. . . . We were all looking forward to the day that he would come back home to us." A week before his death, Lee had told his mother he planned to come home around Christmas. Shum described the devastation her family had faced following Lee's killing: her son's depression, the emptiness in her mother's eyes. Her husband, Eric Shum, would later attend court to read his own victim impact statement, clearing his throat and taking long pauses as he struggled through the letter. He spoke of a family that had fallen apart in the wake of Lee's death.

As Helen Shum's words were read into the record, the baby-faced teenager stared down at the table before her. Then,

she turned around and scanned the room, as if to see whether anyone was looking at her. When her gaze met mine, I thought I saw tears in her eyes.

AFTER LEAVING LEE bleeding in the parkette, the girls continued to loiter in and around Union Station. They filmed themselves dancing, TikTok style. The girl accused of stabbing Lee pushed another fourteen-year-old out of her way to take up more space in the video.

Seeing this footage in court, I wonder how much of the girls' behaviour that

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night was a plea for attention. Social worker Donna Alexander, whose expertise is in addiction, mental health, and race, told me that especially in a community as marginalized as adolescent Black women, the dual effects of external and internalized racism can mean that "after a while, you start to act out in [the] ways that people expect you to act." Like all the experts I speak to, she can only theorize on what may have shaped the girls' lives before that night. But she says: "Sometimes kids need the attention, and sometimes even negative attention is attention."

The only moment in which the girls seemed to understand the harm they were capable of came at the end of the night. The teenage boy from earlier—the one who'd intervened when the girls set upon the young man at St. George station, telling him to run—had once again joined the girls, and as they fought, still playfully, in a pedestrian walkway at Union Station,

one of the girls accidentally cut the boy's wrist (the court never learned how or with what). The girls suddenly snapped back to reality. Where they had previously seemed off-kilter and visibly drunk, they were now moving with a sense of urgency. In the silent footage shown in court, the girls rushed into Union Station, finding security staff and police to attend to the boy's bleeding arm.

Paramedics took the boy to the Hospital for Sick Children, and the girls followed. There, police pieced together two seemingly disparate events: a man swarmed near Union Station by eight teenage girls, and a boy injured while roughhousing with a group of girls. At around 4 a.m., the girls were arrested for Lee's murder at SickKids.

VERY LITTLE TIME was spent, in court, on the background details of the girls' lives. One was described as having an "aggressive streak," fighting with her parents and classmates, throwing temper tantrums when she got upset. She has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and a learning disability and has struggled in school. Another was said to have anxiety, depression, conduct disorder, and an eating disorder. At least two of the girls in the group had been habitual drug and alcohol users from a very young age and had, for a period, consumed cannabis daily; and one had attempted suicide by alcohol poisoning. One girl, in what is a rather tragic coincidence, had a mental health assessment scheduled at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health on December 19.

"Most of them seem to come from hard-working parents, there's no doubt about that, but who had gone through a lot of difficulties," Leo Adler, a veteran lawyer representing one of the girls, tells me. "I think most of these girls were on their own and became involved in smoking pot way too young, drinking, and ended up lacking in discipline."

"They were really struggling with the social isolation caused by the COVID lockdowns," adds another lawyer, Jordana Goldlist, whose client pleaded guilty to manslaughter.

In the end, a murder weapon and the

intent to kill could not be placed in any one girl's hands during the attack, and so no one was convicted of murder. The girls who pleaded guilty to manslaughter (three of them) and assault with a weapon and causing bodily harm (one of them) were respectively sentenced to fifteen, twenty-one, twenty-four, and twelve months of probation, as well as mandatory counselling for young offenders. Of the two girls who went to trial in February, one pleaded guilty to the lesser charge of manslaughter in the final days of the court proceedings and was sentenced to fifteen months of probation.

Subsequently, the two girls who were initially expected to have a separate, second trial in May pleaded guilty to manslaughter and assault and received twelve and nine months' probation respectively. The sentence for the latter was particularly low because she had walked away during the assault itself and had later returned to help hail an ambulance. When that final plea was entered, the fate of the small blue-handled knife

was revealed by one of the girls' lawyers: the girl had thrown it onto the subway tracks at Yorkdale station, "because she didn't want anything dangerous to happen." (The Crown could not confirm or deny this detail.)

Before being granted bail and ultimately being sentenced, the girls had each spent between forty-one and 345 days in custody, which was then credited as time served on their final sentences. While in custody, all of the girls were strip-searched repeatedly — two of them seven times, another six — and unsparingly made to strip completely nude, with a male guard on occasion being just outside the room. One girl reported that the experience made her intensely insecure and led to disordered eating; another was found by a mental health practitioner to be experiencing "a clear traumatic response to the strip searches." In response, their lawyers mounted a constitutional challenge to the strip searches, which Justice Campbell found to be a violation of their Charter of Rights and Freedoms protection

against unreasonable searches. In recompense, the girls had their sentences reduced. If it hadn't been for the strip searches, Goldlist says, it's likely at least one of the girls would have been sentenced to jail time.

The girl accused of stabbing Lee was not proven beyond a reasonable doubt to have made the fatal blow. What Justice Campbell could piece together with certainty was that she had stabbed Lee once, non-lethally, with the cosmetic scissors. Campbell surmised that it was probable, but not certain, that the girl had then stabbed Lee a second time, fatally, with the same weapon. But she hadn't intended to kill. "The attack was a vicious one, driven by what seems to be irrational and inexplicable malice," he wrote in his judgment. "Still, nothing about what is in evidence offers a reason for [the girl] to want to end the life of Mr. Lee rather than cause him pain and humiliation." The girl was found not guilty of second-degree murder but guilty of manslaughter — the charge she had originally pleaded guilty to, though the plea

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had not been accepted by the Crown, triggering the February proceedings.

She was sentenced to sixteen months of probation, up to a year of which would be spent in an intense support program for young offenders. Ahead of being sentenced, this girl broke down in tears while reading a letter to the court. “I want to say that I’m sorry to Mr. Lee’s family, especially Ms. Tong, who was present that evening.... I’m sorry Ms. Tong and everyone who loved him were hurt,” she said. “If I had the opportunity to apologize to Mr. Lee, I would.” It was the most the girl had expressed herself the whole trial, the tears springing forth just moments after she began speaking. For the hour prior, the Crown had commended her for showing regret and a commitment to redemption, and for being responsive to the therapeutic interventions begun during her time in pre-trial custody and that would continue through her parole. In a small corner of my mind, I felt relief—this was the remorse I’d been searching for in her face since the trial began.

THE SWARM WAS the first in a series of ostensibly random crimes committed by minors in or near Toronto in the past three years that have sparked fears about violence among young teens. A thirteen-year-old boy was charged with the first-degree murder of a homeless man; a group of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds swarmed the owner of a Pizza Pizza; fourteen-year-old boys allegedly stabbed elderly women, unprovoked, in two separate instances. A twelve-year-old was charged with second-degree murder alongside a twenty-year-old after the two allegedly committed a series of “extremely violent” attacks that led to the death of an unhoused man downtown. Gun violence among youth has risen, and the number of young people charged with homicide spiked in 2022. Not enough time has passed to know if this is a pattern or just a hyper-visible anomaly that gets at our deepest fears about children today.

The day the judgment for the girl accused of stabbing Lee was delivered,

the courtroom was hot and crowded with what seemed to be a group of high school students on a field trip, plexiglass separating them from the girl accused of murder. Campbell read excerpts from his forty-seven-page decision, pausing for a recess after delivering his decision: not guilty of second-degree murder, guilty of manslaughter. Outside, I heard an elderly woman talking to a man, lamenting the lesser judgment. “Well, they need to do something about the Youth Criminal Justice Act,” she said in hushed, reproachful tones.

I watched the girl, the accused stabber, step out of the courtroom and was struck by how different she seemed after the judge’s decision. The stony, unfeeling look she’d worn throughout the trial—perhaps as a defence, perhaps as true feeling—had melted away. Without the pall of a potential murder verdict, she looked like any one of the students who’d come to observe her judgment. ◀

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