

## Yellow Sneakers, A Memoir

1989 – Massacre at Ecole Polytechnique, Montreal – fourteen students murdered;  
fourteen students wounded.

1992 – Massacre at Concordia University, Montreal – four professors murdered;  
one professor wounded.

2006 – Massacre at Dawson College, Montreal – one student murdered;  
nineteen students wounded.

2022 – Massacre at Robb Elementary School, Uvalde, Texas –  
nineteen children and two teachers murdered.

If you search the web for school shootings in the United States, you will find a list of hundreds, the worst of which took place recently in Uvalde, Texas.

If you search the web for school shootings in Canada, there are seven – three of which took place within walking distance from the college where I taught for over forty years.

It was 2009. A week into the fall semester. My class was scheduled to start at 4:30. I walked up and down the aisles of my classroom, taking attendance. I pride myself on learning my students' names. It means a lot to them, so taking attendance needs extra time during the first few weeks of each semester.

The classroom felt more crowded than usual. I did not recognize a young man who was seated near the middle of the room. He looked out of place – a bit older than the other students. He was wearing a tight sleeveless tank top – a *wife beater* shirt.

“Are you a student at the college?” I asked.

“I’m just visiting,” he said and smirked.

*Liar*, I thought.

He mumbled something else which I did not catch. He insisted that he was at the college for a visit, *student for a day*. Every year the college invites high school seniors to visit and get a feeling for the college experience. There was no way this guy was in high school. And, high school visits weren't scheduled to start for another month.

*Liar*, I thought again.

I asked his name. He waved an ID card at me, too fast for me to read.

I started to back away and noticed another guy I did not recognize. *When did he come in?* I was sandwiched between two strangers who did not belong in the room.

I looked back at the first intruder. He had a coat draped across his lap. His right hand was hidden under it. There was a stiff protrusion in the centre of the coat. It kept rising and falling. He was leering at me. Was he stroking a gun? Was he masturbating? Either way, I knew he was trouble. I felt trapped and terrified.

Three school massacres – Ecole Polytechnique, Concordia, and Dawson College. All walking distance from where I stood, in a room with thirty-six students and two intruders.

I grabbed my phone and moved to the doorway – one foot in the classroom, one foot in the hall.

I called reception. “I need help. There are intruders in my room. Get security. Fast.”

“Why don’t you leave the room and call for help yourself,” the receptionist said.

*Are you kidding me?*

“I won’t leave my students. Call security. Now!”

A few minutes later, I saw a guard in the corridor. He was strolling, taking his time, peeking into classrooms. With hands flailing, I signaled for him to hurry. One of the intruders raced out of the room and flew down the stairs before the guard reached us. The other brushed up against me, his face close to mine. He said something lewd and fled.

Nothing was done. Neither boy was caught. Nobody called the police.

Somehow, I was able to get the class back in order. I looked at my students. I suspected that one girl in particular had a connection with those boys. I wondered if others in the class knew them. Nobody said a word for the rest of the class. I finished the lecture, dismissed the group early, gathered my things and left the college.

On my way out I stopped at the reception desk. I glared at the receptionist. She was not much older than my students. Was she oblivious to school shootings?

The next morning, I arrived at the college early, second only to the Director General. He was not surprised to see me at his office door. There had been a cursory report filed by the guard. I read it. The word *security* was included in the report.

“There was *no* security. My students and I were all at risk and nothing was done to help us.”

I was furious.

“Check the video,” I demanded.

When the Administration reviewed the closed-circuit TV, they saw that I was right, about the timing, about the inept guard, and - they saw something else – one of the perpetrators was wearing yellow sneakers.

By lunchtime, they had identified him. He *was* a student at the college – and he was wearing the yellow sneakers. He was called to Administration and given a warning. He was told to stay far away from me.

The next day, when I was about to leave the art studio, I saw someone blocking the doorway. I looked down at his feet. Yellow sneakers.

“Get out!” I shouted over and over. He wouldn’t budge. I kept yelling until he left.

The girl I suspected to be connected to him was in this course, too. She disappeared with him and never returned to either class.

Within days, a new security team was hired. Equipment was updated and the emergency protocol was revamped. Faculty members could take the training as often as they wanted. I took the review session every semester.

For many years after, I declined to be part of the high school visits program, too afraid to have strangers in my classroom.

For many more years, I tried to forget the incident. I never could.

Ten years later, early in the semester, I did not recognize two boys sitting in the front row of my class. Both boys had their hands folded on top of brand-new textbooks. Both were grinning at me. Both insisted that they were registered in my class. I knew they were not. I glanced at their sneakers. White.

I punched the distress code on the security phone. Within seconds, a team of security guards arrived. The boys made a run for it. Both were caught. Both were recent graduates of an elite private school nearby.

I suspected that a student in my class, a graduate of that same school, was behind the prank. He was rude in class – mocking others openly, and mocking me under his breath. He was chummy with the girl who sat beside him. I dreaded seeing that student – never trusting him. Half way through the term he stopped coming to class and failed the course. His female friend never missed my class and did well, but I never trusted her, either.

Although I loved almost every day of my teaching career, I always said that when I didn't love my job any longer, when I only liked it, I would retire. I took this as a sign and was ready to go.

The recent mass murders in schools have tortured me. They bring back frightening memories – of what happened – and what might have happened. The lockdowns, the threats, and the danger terrify me.

I think about all the loss in classrooms – the students, the teachers.

I think about the proposal of some Republicans to arm teachers.

I think about my son's kindergarten students - five years old - already skilled in lockdown procedures.

And I think about the colour yellow – a colour I used to love – and the pain that boy with the yellow sneakers caused me.