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OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF “CASSEROLES” *textes qui bougent au rythme du carré rouge*

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A revolution on the corner of St-Hubert and Marie-Anne

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The first manif des casseroles to take place at the corner of St-Hubert and Marie-Anne, just a stone's throw from my home in the tony Plateau district of Montreal, occurred on Sunday, May 20. Several of us had heard – via Facebook, and also by talking on the street – about casseroles being used elsewhere around town over the past couple nights. Now that the National Assembly had voted Bill 78 into existence, we were galvanized into action. At 8pm, we were told, and we told others, get outside with a pot and a spoon and make noise for 15 minutes. That first night, we were about ten people. A few kids, a couple neighbours I have seen on the street from time to time, and a few others I had never met or seen before. I don't think anyone was even wearing a carré rouge that evening. As pot-bangers, we were a bit sheepish that first night. We made noise, and a few others came out to join us. By about 8:12, some people were already checking their watches and by 8:15, it was promptly over. A few awkward smiles were exchanged as people headed back home. Someone said, “see you tomorrow,” and we all chuckled.

The next evening, we were out again, and our numbers had doubled. And the night after that, it had doubled again. By the weekend, we were about a hundred people, and by that point, we had found our groove. One older gentleman started bringing his plastic vuvezela. Many of us had gone through all our wooden spoons, and had moved on to metal ones, making our drumming much louder. There were a few times when we really had a rhythm going. The kids (aged from about 3 to 12) have been the real leaders. They dance, jump, and hammer away at everything in sight. No-one noticed any longer when our 15 minutes was up; the noise continued until about 8:30 or 8:45, when the littlest ones started getting yanked off the street for bed-time. Now we were regulars. Unknown neighbours became new allies in a common cause. We started exchanging rumours, off-the-cuff political analysis, jokes, and a shared sense of outrage. Some passing cars tooted their horns in sympathy, making our drumming go wild for a moment. Others gave us the finger. We laughed and kept banging. Occasionally a police car sailed by; the first time we saw the police, I recalled, a moment of anxiety swept over the crowd, and the banging was much less enthusiastic. Clearly, we were more than 50 people, and directly in contravention of the new law. But we were greeted by smiles from the cop car, and on we went. On subsequent days, the police seemed even to be bouncing to our beat. And on we went. The weekend of May 26-27, we were at our peak, and the atmosphere became truly carnivalesque. Monday, the numbers had dropped dramatically, and we had developed a more business-like routine: 15-20 minutes of pounding, and then we bade our farewells till the next evening. It might have seemed that we had lost some



momentum. But we were hardly gone. And today – a Friday evening, in the wake of a collapse of talks and no signs of a way forward from this impasse, let alone a retreat on Bill 78 – I expect we will be much louder and visible.

St-Hubert and Marie-Anne is hardly a main artery of the city, and ours has hardly been a major site of the unfolding protest. Elsewhere around town, the casserole movement has been much bigger and louder. Some corners, such as Jarry and St-Denis, have become widely known as places to see some real action. One evening, I biked up there, and joined a crowd that within minutes after the 8:00 PM signal had swelled to several hundred, and then probably a couple thousand, at which point we began marching down St-Denis, one of the main thoroughfares in the east side of the city. And of course, I have not even mentioned the student marches, which usually begin (or begin to be noticed) later on in the evenings, starting at around 9pm or so. Marching with the students is joining an entirely different world than the one I describe around the corner from where I live. With over one hundred days of protest under their belts, the student marchers have a much more disciplined rhythm. Their beats are polyphonic and seamlessly move from one refrain to the next, punctuated only by eruptions of cacophonous pot-clanging when someone from a balcony or a window leans out to join our noise-making. Pots and pans, pie plates, cookie sheets, and metal bowls form an orchestra that on some nights has numbered in the many thousands, echoing far and wide. Sometimes a police helicopter swings overhead, and the crowd begins jeering and waving. Even on the nights of bad weather, the student-led marches have been large and loud, as just about every media outlet around the world has already noticed. And indeed, the casseroles represent only the most recent phase of a remarkably inventive and energetic movement that students have led over the past four months in this city, from spontaneous public art-making to marches in underpants (on a rather chilly day, no less), to say nothing of all the music, comedy, and political commentary that has been circulating via social media.

But on my little corner, we are still producing our own modest version of the protest. And I keep showing up because it's MY street-corner. Many of the "revolutionaries" on St-Hubert and Marie-Anne are otherwise mild-mannered folk. Among us are advertising executives, municipal employees, artists, parents, senior citizens, and others who seem to have found themselves on the street to their own surprise. A few of them admitted early on that, until Bill 78, they had not even supported the student position on tuition fee hikes. I am not sure who among us even remembers that earlier ambivalence. All the talk now is about our outrage at the Charest government's intransigence, unwillingness to negotiate, and callous disregard for civil liberties. I can't possibly imagine how even the most conservative or apolitical of my pot-banging neighbours will be able to back down from the positions we have shared over the past ten days. This is not to say that I have no reason to worry about the future of the movement, or the "end result" of our miniature revolution. All signs now point to a protracted summer of protest. How long will we be prepared to forsake our comfort, our nice summer evenings, our holiday plans, our festival-going, for the

sake of this 8pm nightly ritual? It's hard to say what will happen to us. But there is one promising sign, at least. Hardly an evening has gone by without mention of the next election, and the need to organize for that. This government has got to go, we keep telling each other. We won't let another election defeat us. And for the time being, we still have our pots.