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NEWS CANADA

U.S. woman might be child who disappeared from Montreal 38 years ago, mother says

Jesse Feith, Montreal Gazette
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Liliane Cyr, mother of Yohanna Cyr, who went missing as a baby in 1978, poses for photograph outside her home in Montreal on Monday, August 15, 2016. After 38 years, Cyr was contacted through Facebook by a woman in the United States who claimed she may be her daughter. (Dario Ayala / Montreal Gazette)

MONTREAL - Liliane Cyr has spent close to four decades hoping someone would contact her with news of her daughter Yohanna, who disappeared from her St-Laurent apartment when she was only 18 months old.

But she has also watched as promising leads have turned to bitter disappointments through the years and, in the hardest moments, wondered if it was best to give up and stop thinking about what happened.

So when she received a private message two weeks ago through a Facebook page set up to keep Yohanna's case alive, Cyr, 59, took a deep breath and reminded herself not to get her hopes too high, regardless of what it said.

The message, received Aug. 5, came from a woman living in the United States. She said she didn't want to bother Cyr or cause her any pain, but asked how she could get in touch with the investigators in charge of Yohanna's case.

Cyr, curious but trying to keep calm, asked her what she knew about her daughter. The woman answered with a question of her own: Did Yohanna have a Y-shaped birthmark on her index finger?

Cyr confirmed that she did, and froze at what came next.

"I'm not 100 per cent sure," the woman told her. "But I think I might be your daughter."

Yohanna Cyr disappeared from her mother's St-Laurent apartment exactly 38 years ago on Monday.

Cyr had left her daughter in the care of her then-boyfriend, a man named Aaron Lewis, while she went to work outside of the city.

When Lewis went to join Cyr a few days later, he told her Yohanna was being babysat by his parents in Boston. But after Cyr headed to Boston to pick her up, Lewis's story changed: Yohanna had drowned in the bathtub, Cyr says he told her, and he had no choice but to bury her.

Lewis was arrested and charged with child abduction, but was acquitted and released because of a lack of evidence.

Cyr has since spent a lifetime trying to keep her daughter's case alive in hopes that if Yohanna was out there somewhere, she might start looking for her mother one day.

Then came the Facebook message two weeks ago.

According to Cyr, the woman told her she started wondering about her past when she turned 18 and, while trying to get her driver's licence, found out that her birth certificate was a fake. She pushed her parents for details, but they never provided clear answers.

She told Cyr she knows of no existing photos from when she was a little girl, and that she occasionally has flashbacks: blurry memories that come to mind of her being loaded onto an airplane as a small child.

She's sent Cyr photos, and she not only looks like Yohanna, Cyr said, but her daughters do as well.

"In my heart, I hope it's her," Cyr said on Monday. "There can't be 50,000 people with that mark on their finger, can there?"

Cyr said local police are communicating with American authorities so the woman can have DNA tests performed to know if she really is Yohanna. Results could take weeks, if not months, and Cyr says she knows not to be too optimistic until then.

Ten years ago, another woman had approached her thinking she was Yohanna, and after seeing her in person, Cyr says she was convinced she was, too. But DNA tests proved otherwise, and the experience took a toll on her. She had stopped everything while counting down the days until the results, and became distraught when they weren't what she hoped for.

The next break came two years ago, when police acted on an old tip: a woman had claimed that on the day Yohanna disappeared, she saw Cyr's then-boyfriend leaving the apartment building with a large metal breadbox.

The apartment was near a wooded area that's now a parking lot, and radar searches appeared to show large metal objects below the surface. Cyr watched impatiently as police dug up the area in 2014, but nothing was found, and it was another painful blow.

"Families are living on a roller-coaster, where the highs are filled with so much hope and the lows are the lowest of lows," said Pina Arcamone, director of the Missing Children's Network, which has worked closely with Cyr since the late 1980s. "They have to take it one day at a time and stay grounded. Because the disappointments are just devastating."

Cyr says she knows what it could mean for the woman's family if the tests do reveal that she is in fact Yohanna. She's also aware of the long investigation that would then need to follow to find out exactly what happened in 1978, and all the complications that could come with it.

But she says she's cautiously hoping for the best.

Dining at a Chinese restaurant last week, she grabbed a fortune cookie and cracked it open. She has kept the strip of paper from inside it, and plans on framing it if the DNA results are what she's hoping for.

"Good news will soon reveal your destiny," the message said.

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