

JAMILAH AT THE END OF THE WORLD

MARY-LOU ZEITOUN



When electricity over-consumption during a summer heat wave causes a city-wide blackout, Jamilah's eco-anxiety kicks in to high gear. After years of doomscrolling and being inundated by warnings of a looming climate change catastrophe, she knows this is it — the end for the planet and life as she knows it. So why is no one in her family taking her plans to save them by converting the garage into a bunker, stockpiling LÄRABARS or using her university fund to buy a generator seriously? Is it really up to Jamilah to save the world on her own?

MARY-LOU ZEITOUN is a Palestinian-Canadian author, essayist, arts journalist and activist. Her novel *I3* was the YA winner of the 2008 New England Book Festival award and she has had fiction published in *Taddle Creek* magazine and *Canadian Notes and Queries*. She divides her time between Toronto and Ottawa, Ontario.

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For my Teta Jamileh Zeitoun.



Survival Tip #1

How to Build a Shelter

If you are outside, find a place that is dry, flat, not next to a body of water and has a good place for a fire. Tie a tarp between two trees, or tie a cord between two trees and drape a tarp over it. Weigh it down with rocks on either side. Or grab a bunch of tall sticks and make a teepee.

(I tried in the backyard — mine didn't work. The sticks kept falling over everything.)

A long-term solution for safety is a bunker. A bunker is a defensive military fortification designed to protect people and valued materials from falling bombs or other attacks. Bunkers are mostly underground, in contrast to blockhouses, which are mostly above ground.

(Every kid loves forts. But maybe I liked them a little too much. I draped blankets and sheets over the couch and end tables in the living room. I liked how the fort walls almost touched me and how the light inside became the colour of the fabric walls. Unfortunately, my mom and dad did not appreciate how I emptied the linen closet. And I am a klutz, so a lot of innocent lamps died in the process.)

CHAPTER 1

There Is No Planet B

My name is Jamilah Mansour and I need to do something, because CLIMATE CHANGE. I'm seventeen. My dad is a Palestinian immigrant from, like, thirty years ago and my mom is old-timey Anglo Canadian. He's a pharmacist and Mom's a naturopath. We live in Toronto, Canada. So that's like a normal background here, really. It's me, Mom and Dad, my fifteen-year-old sister Noor, my twelve-year-old brother George and Teta (pronounced "Tayta") in the granny suite downstairs.

To be honest, my bunker obsession had been going on for a while. I think it started when I was little and saw a Totally Awful American Hurricane on TV — the desperate people stuck in gridlocks on highways and trapped in sports stadiums. The worst thing in the TV coverage was the families waiting to be rescued on roofs. There was a dog they had to leave behind because it couldn't fit into the helicopter rescue basket. When the camera pulled back you could see the animals left behind, the cats were miserable and terrified smudges in the corners because cats hate open spaces and loud noises. That's what got me. I think I have PTSD from seeing the people on the roofs and the pets dying.

So I just needed to build a safe place, to prepare and protect my family in case of a climate disaster. Sure, people like my sister, Noor, go to protests and marches all the time. But what's the point

of marches? People have been marching since the eighties and the climate's, like, worse now. In fact, I don't even see the point of going to university. I'd rather spend my time doing something useful. By the time I got my basic, general BA (because my math scores were so bad, even though I love science, I couldn't go into science), the world would have imploded into anarchic city states run by militia. Because — hello — *climate change*. I figured I could use the time to convert the garage into an off-the-grid tiny house. A bunker, really. In case you didn't know, a bunker is a doom room, a safe space, a place where you store food, water and even weapons. I was also going to find a way to get a generator.

We were in a terrible heat wave when I first inspected the garage for bunker possibilities. I went out back and pulled on its side door. It stuck at first, then popped open. A waft of mildewy air hit my face as I looked around. I saw an elliptical machine and a recumbent exercise bike, which were moved out of the basement when Teta got here. Leaning against a full-length cracked mirror was a half-rolled carpet. In the middle was a big, green painted dresser with a black garbage bag squatting on top of it, half open and spilling baby clothes. I opened a dresser drawer. It was empty except for a scattering of mice poop. The space was about ten by fourteen feet. The cinder-block element was good. You could do a lot with cinder blocks. They're good for insulation, are fireproof and are easy to paint.

Yes, this would make an excellent bunker. I slowly turned. One wall was lined with rickety shelves full of plastic bins. Our leaking fibreglass canoe hung from the ceiling (I'd have to save that in case of a flood). Past the jumble of busted bikes by the door was an entire shelf filled with broken coffee makers, lamps and even ashtrays from when Mom used to smoke. I could work with this. No one was using the garage anyway. Mom and Dad never parked

the car in it because the alley leading up to it was too narrow. So the garage was always used as, let's face it, a dumping ground. Mom had painted the wall that faced the backyard bright blue with a fake window, complete with a flower box, which looked totally pathetic and not cheerful.

I approached Mom and Dad at breakfast. CBC Radio was muttering in the background as always. Mom was having her protein shake with organic blueberries, organic whey protein and flaxseed oil. She was all about clean eating and crystals. And she bleached her hair. I'm just saying. Even though she was a vegetarian naturopath she put purple streaks in her hair that, I liked to remind her, required a highly toxic bleaching process first.

Dad was eating za'atar, dipping pieces of pita into the dried herbal mixture of thyme, sumac and sesame seeds. He was very picky about his za'atar, buying only Palestinian brands and even scoffing at the Lebanese and Syrian formulas. Dad's a pretty mild guy. But if you want to make him mad, show him an Israeli fusion restaurant menu that lists za'atar, or any Palestinian food, as Israeli cuisine. Whew! He'll, like, yell at the manager.

Otherwise, we are not very political. We are Christian Arabs, which is really annoying because nobody thinks that's a thing (it's Jesus of *Nazareth*, not *Dublin* — jeez). Uncle Gabrielle always says, "The angry mob isn't going to stop to ask this difference," when we come up against Islamophobia. Aunt Lily, who writes a lifestyle blog for the *Globe and Mail*, agrees. She gets a lot of snooty readers who are surprised she is so sophisticated *and* Palestinian. The most we ever do Palestinian-wise is go to folk dances at the Arab Centre, eat Arabic food and, lately, translate for and volunteer with the Syrian refugees. Okay, we go to the Toronto Palestinian Film Festival every fall, too. It's true, sometimes my grandmother, who lives downstairs, cries because she remembers things from the old country.

Anyway, I am not political that way. My best friend, Vivian, and I never talk about it, and she's Jewish. I mean, she has birthright and goes to Israel every year. So when she goes for vacation, we always give her things to give to my great aunts in Haifa.

I sauntered over to Dad and tore a piece of bread to dip into the olive oil and then the za'atar. "Can I clean out the garage?" I asked, chewing.

"I would love for you to clean out the garage," said Mom. "I would even pay you for the job!"

"Thank you!" I headed back to the garage. "It will make an excellent bunker."

"No, then we'll use it to park the car!" she called after me.

I came back. "Mom, we need to have a safe space off the grid in case of a natural disaster or power outage. Don't you understand?" I asked.

"Why do you worry about these things?" asked Dad. "Put your energy into university."

I hadn't told them I wasn't going yet.

"Did you have your calm tea today?" asked Mom. "I made a batch for you. It's in the fridge."

"You know what would make me calm?" I asked. "Knowing we had a safe house when the power grid goes down."

"This is not the end of the world," said Dad. "In Gaza they just take the power away all the time. It comes back."

"You know what?" I said. "What if it doesn't come back? Like, because there isn't any? 'Cause your generation used it all up!"

"It's that Desmond with his conspiracy theories that's making you like this!" said Mom.

Oh, here we go. Desmond is my childhood buddy and he's a touchy subject. Mom thought he needed a diagnosis. He is smart and funny, but he had smoked so much pot since like, age eleven,

that all he did was hang in his parents' basement, play video games and sext stupid basics.

I didn't even know how they could type, these girls were so basic. "I'm so hot for you," they typed, probably crippled as much by their fake nails as their feeble brains. They probably got more confused figuring out the logistics of their reflection selfies than a cat looking in the mirror for the first time.

It's true that Desmond followed conspiracy theories. I mean, he was still on the 9/11 conspiracy. He is mixed Black, so I kept telling him that he didn't even *need* a theory to be paranoid, that the culture is actually, openly against him. It's right out there. He and I used to go to the games store and skateboard and roam the city on the subway together. But when he started smoking more, we just ended up hanging out on his couch and watching Lord of the Rings-type movies. He was very into those old-timey medieval sagas. Put an actor in armour and give him an English accent and Desmond was down.

Maybe I didn't like the Insta girls because I couldn't be like that. Insta was thirsty and embarrassing, yes, but I honestly didn't have the confidence to post. I'm a thicker girl. Even though that's almost cool now, skinny girls still rule. They are like another species to me. My interactions with boys had been limited to a little kissing at parties and having crushes on actors. In the interest of having a life the year before, I hooked up with Marley a few times at his house. Marley had brown sweeping eyebrows and a square jaw and those carved square thumbs boys have (there's a reason why I was with him). But I felt like Marley forgot I was there when he was touching me. Apparently, you are supposed to be so attracted you don't care about that stuff.

Desmond was tall with broad shoulders and he would have been cute if he didn't always look like he'd been hit by a tranquilizer gun.

And if he didn't smell funky. Honestly, he was barely human anymore, let alone male. I also think the chicks he was texting were getting skankier and skankier because he had no sex drive left. Vivian, who is in her second year of psychology at university (she's incredibly smart and went early), says if you become an incredibly creative masturbator or get too into porn, then you can't have regular sex anymore. Desmond was not going to university either. He actually hadn't gone to school last year for even one day. *One day*. His parents didn't even realize it.

"No, Mom," I said to my mom's suggestion. "It's not Desmond. Even Toronto Hydro says so! Look!" I ran to the jumble of mail on the kitchen counter and grabbed the hydro bill.

I had started reading and rereading the brochures that came with the hydro bills, searching for clues that they were warning us the power grid was going to fail. Even the way the hydro bill was designed was getting alarming.

"Summer storm a-brewing? Don't be caught off guard. Update your 72-hour emergency kit so you're set all summer. Add in extra bottled water, rain gear and sunscreen. Don't forget to check batteries and to make sure the kit is waterproof."

Mom looked at the scary, cheerful brochure. The winter one had said, "Be Prepared" next to stick figures of a mom, a dad and a kid. Under the stick figures was a snow cloud with lightning coming out of it. The stick family had blank circle faces and didn't seem at all upset about the weather. "Winter is Coming" said the brochure (like hydro had never heard of that cosplay fantasy show or, like, worse, there was some dank nerd in the copy department who got away with it). Then it listed ways to protect yourself. *Most scary*: fill your vehicle with gas.

"We don't even have a seventy-two-hour emergency kit!" I looked at my dad. He was totally chill and still eating his za'atar.

“Dad, I think we at least need to store water,” I said. “Can we buy more water bottles? The big kind?”

“This is expensive. We will fill what we have with the tap water.” Dad was of the opinion that Toronto tap water was the best in the world. Whenever we came home from Montreal or the US to visit our cousins, he’d get a glass of water from the sink and go, “Ahhh, delicious Toronto tap water.”

“Okay, but the tap water is filled with estrogen and mercury,” I said.

He shrugged.

Dad didn’t argue the need for hoarding water, because hoarding water was normal in the old country. He just didn’t want to waste money. We were so in debt for our shabby west-end Victorian brownstone it wasn’t funny. Our house was basically rotting. It had a great front porch, but the floorboards creaked and sagged, and the railing was wobbly. Our roof was dotted with little cages, supposed to prevent and capture any squirrels trying to sneak in. The bricks were crumbling and the backyard lawn was mostly weeds, with a BBQ and plastic chairs on concrete pavers. Noor had made a few little fairy gardens in some corners and under bushes, which was kinda cute.

Noor is a genius and super condescending. She hates that I am so emotional and messy, and is always calling me needy. (Noor ironically means “light” and yes, she does think she is Queen Noor of Jordan.) Noor gets away with everything, including being queer, which my mom loves and Dad ignores. I, as the oldest girl, got away with *nothing* while Dad was trying to figure out what was cool for girls in Canada. Of course, then George the total prince comes along and he gets whatever he wants. Downside for George — they are already grooming him to be a doctor. I keep failing math, so they expect me to be, like, a teacher.

The only thing Noor and I agree on is global warming, but we have different approaches. She's all activist and makes signs and does school strikes and marches. She marches for everything: BLM, LGBTQ rights, Indigenous sovereignty. She is Miss Intersectional. I had gone to a few school strikes and marches with her, but got terrible anxiety when I was suddenly crushed by people and couldn't move in front of Queen's Park. At one point I had to pee really bad, so I tried to squeeze through one of those metal guardrails. It toppled over and I fell with it, scraping my knee. A cop helped me up and led me out of the crowd. I just took the subway home alone with that bleeding knee, clutching my sign that said "There is No Planet B" upside down. So yeah, I am not into protests.

