

Active Shooter

Samantha

From down on the stiff carpet, the dead grass outside the window looks almost lovely. Several stray dandelions peek out from the dry roots. Nothing sways. The air is stagnant, as if holding its breath with the students barricaded inside their classrooms. There wasn't an alarm. No announcement over the loudspeaker. Just the racing of students past our window and a single message sent to every phone on campus.

"Active shooter."

My math teacher cradles her belly as she crouches behind her desk. I briefly wonder if the stress could induce an early delivery. The girl sitting behind me can't stop laughing. Tears run down her cheeks as a smile twists her lips. She's hysterical. A friend holds one hand over the girl's mouth, and squeezes her tightly with the other.

Toys and stuffed animals scatter around the floor, sparkly glass eyes staring up at me. There was going to be a toy drive. My fingers find the charm hanging from my necklace: a shooting star. My sister bought it for me for my birthday a few years ago. She has a matching one that she wears every single day. I usually forget to wear mine. I'm glad I didn't today. At least she'll see I was thinking of her in the end.

My gaze flickers towards the window at the sound of shuffling. Our buildings must have been designed before we learned to fear one another, because the doors open outwards. Desks and chairs pile in front of our door, but they open outwards. And our door's lock is broken.

The detail repeats in my mind as the tip of a gun slides across our window.

Emily

It sounded like popcorn. Like the sharp ring of a plastic bag popping open in the quad.

Over. And over. And over.

Then screams.

People rush past me in swarms, some into buildings, others towards the fence. I run to the science building, my hands shaking so badly that it takes me several tries to get the door open. The room is empty inside. My sneakers clap against the linoleum floor as I scramble in circles for a place to hide. It has gone terribly quiet outside. My eyes lock on the cabinet beneath the sink.

Grabbing a pair of purple scissors from the table, I open the cabinet and tuck myself inside. Sitting in the darkness, I think about my prom dress hanging in my closet. I wonder if I'll ever get to wear it.

I don't know how much time passes before my phone lights up the darkness with a call from my mom. I can feel her phantom fingers reaching through the screen, trying to make sure I'm okay. Trying to hold me. *"I love you."* I send the message before turning off my phone.

Liam

Someone slams against the door of the choir room. We all jump at the sound. The teacher looks at us and shakes her head, putting a finger to her wrinkled lips. Her hand is trembling. We stay quiet. The sound repeats, only this time it's accompanied by a desperate voice, *"Please! Please, help me! Please, please!"*

I feel sick to my stomach. I watch indecision war over the teacher's face. Slowly rising, the woman motions for us to stay put as she moves towards the door. She lifts an edge of the black construction paper taped to the window to look outside. She gives a jerky nod in our direction before pulling the lock free and opening the door.

A girl stumbles in, clutching her stomach. The teacher quickly shuts and locks the door before turning her attention to the student. Red covers her hands. *"I... I think I was shot."* Her voice sounds detached. The teacher half drags the girl towards our corner before helping her to the ground.

It's bad. The teacher removes her scarf and uses it to try and stop the flow of blood. Studying the girl's face, I realize that I know her from my AP European History class. She looks almost unrecognizable, her sweaty skin growing paler by the minute. It's hard to tourniquet a waist.

Kiara

I'm frozen—no longer in my own body. Smoke rises from the gun, now lying on the concrete. Sirens wail in the distance, getting closer. I haven't moved from my spot glued against the main building, just beyond the quad. There's three of them. Dead.

Have you ever seen a fourteen-year-old bleed to death? It happens slowly.

The police and firemen came, evacuating all of the students into the gym. They took me aside to get my statement. *"Yes, it was a student. Yes, that was his gun. Yes, that was him lying in*

the quad.” By the time I was escorted back across campus, white sheets were erected around the scene.

As we filed from the gym onto buses to reunite with our families, cameras snapped in our faces, reporters hurling questions at our backs. I watched the news coverage of the shooting that night and every day for the next few weeks. They didn’t get it right. The faces they flashed on TV and printed in the community letter only showed the before. Their smiling faces: whole, happy. We saw the after. We *lived* the after. They didn’t see how his father buried him with his favorite SpongeBob figurines so he wouldn’t be lonely. They didn’t read her last poem about how tomorrow was going to be a beautiful day. They didn’t hear the mother’s cry as she was the sole mourner of her son who caused so much pain.

They washed it clean.