

Gunshot

You remember the dead in a school shooting. Every year, every anniversary, you think about their families and their nonexistent futures. Nobody remembers the survivors. Those who can't stand to be in crowds now, who spend every day in a mindless haze trying to forget.

It was the third week of school, in a neighborhood where lockdowns happen at least twice a month. 1657 students came into the school.

Only 1589 made it out.

Logically, I know what I'm feeling is survivor's guilt. That the shame flowing through my veins is no fault of mine. I'm lucky, and fortunate to be alive. My mother hugs me tighter every day, the media proclaims me to be a hero, my classmates talk about my bravery.

I wasn't the brave one. I never wanted to be a hero.

The silence is deafening. There's a body on the ground and I look at it. Memorizing the look of shock on his face and the hole looming out of his forehead. "You did it," Maya whispers. "You've saved us." I feel the urge to pull the trigger with the gun pointed at my forehead.

I flip through the pages of my yearbook from freshman year. There were around 400 of us freshmen, but I still appear in a few pictures with my friends. There's one of me and Anika when we had the face paint at the pep rally. There's one of me and my best friend doing the heart dissection together, her holding the actual heart and me standing there doing jazz hands with scalpels. I look at my face in the picture, and turning my head sharply, force myself to look at Leila's. Leila Khan, my best friend. I can feel my heart skip a beat, my breath stop for a second, the blood rush to my head.

The last time I saw her, she was dead.

Leila's body lies on the floor, her beautiful hair filled with blood like she used the color of war as a dye. There is a hole in the middle of her forehead, where there should be nothing but skin but now is crimson blood and torn flesh.

My phone buzzes a few times, distracting me from the memories. Some people have sent me messages telling me I'm brave. I should be proud of what I've done. These I ignore. Some people sent pictures of the memorial last night. I've looked through a few, and while they're hauntingly beautiful, they're all terrible. They're filled with the ghosts of the dead, with the posters covered in names and pictures, with the candles burning on the ground, with the crowd filled with sorrow and guilt and a destructive urge to make someone pay.

I had said a few prayers at Leila's poster, asking God to let her be at peace. I had spoken to Maya and Anika and we talked about the weather and Mrs. Lind's new spray tan, making normal, normal small talk, until Maya threw up and left early. She texted me later that she was sorry, but she couldn't stand to think about that night and the people we had lost.

I understood that.

I can hear my parents entering the house, my dad with his loud footsteps like he's in a hurry and my mom with her quieter ones like she's in deep thought. I'm sure that if I go downstairs, they'll hug me and say they love me and talk about how they ran into one of Papa's coworkers.

They've become delicate around me, treating me like I'm going to break.

I wonder if Edward Newton's parents were delicate with him. If they tip-toed around them or were direct and loud.

I hear Edward walk down the hallway. With every room he enters comes a new barrage of gunfire, screaming, and death. He's only one person, and yet he's taking everything away from everyone.

The yearbook gets heavy on my lap, so I close it and open my texts. I see a few from Maya, talking about how she's going to see a therapist. Anika sends me a "hope everything's okay! If you want, I'm here to talk!" message. I respond as normal, telling Maya "that's good!" and Anika "yeah everything's great, haven't done my laundry in a few weeks lol." It's easy to act like I'm okay. To put this façade over my face and smile and go through all the motions Preeti Mehta would normally do. She would go on BuzzFeed. She would watch one episode of Netflix per day. She would finish her books within three-four days but take weeks on her homework.

I have always been good with pretending, but every new day of this is dragging me down.

Mama calls me for some family time, so I close my phone and go downstairs. Her and Papa are sitting next to each other, sharing a blanket. Anu sits on the side, scrunching her face at something on the TV. "Didi, pass me the remote," she says to me. Didi means older sister in Hindi, so that's what she calls me. I haven't heard her say my actual name in years.

I give her the remote and she tells me how we're watching some documentary about turtles and how endangered they are, and I nod and make mhm noises in all the right places.

We start watching, and after ten minutes we're all engrossed into the life of tiny Chuck, a leatherback turtle who's swimming away from poachers. Poachers who carry a gun. Poachers who lift their gun and shoot it.

I have heard so many gun shots on television, but this one hits me in my stomach, and makes me fall back into a sophomore math class next to a girl with brown hair and brown eyes.

“Is the door locked?” Leila whispers to me, hunched beneath the desk. “Yeah,” I whisper back, holding my knees to my chest. The door was locked, but so were all the other doors Edward Newton had broken into.

We hear his feet squelch down the hall.

We hear Mrs. Clayton’s classroom get shot up.

We hear the doorknob jiggle on our classroom door.

I’ve texted my parents and my sister how much I love them. How I am so sorry that I can’t tell them in person. How much they mean to me.

The doorknob stops jiggling, but then I hear a key in the door. Edward Newton has a master key to the school.

And he’s using it to shoot it up.

Anu immediately pauses the documentary, looking at me with guilt and an “I’m so sorry” ready on her lips. I wave off her apologies and tell her to continue playing it.

I’m so sick of apologies.

I’m so sick of gunshots.

I’m braced for more gunshots, but none come, and I pass the rest of the evening with my feet on Anu’s lap, eating popcorn from Papa’s bowl. It’s a quiet evening, filled with small chuckles and for a few hours it becomes easier to smile and breathe.

And then I go back upstairs and get ready for bed, trying to put away my yearbook only for it to fall open and land on a freshman page. The page with Leila.

Leila's gripping my arm so hard she'll leave bruises. "I don't want to die," she chokes out, looking at me with her eyes filled with worry. I try to tell her we'll be fine, but my mouth is too dry for me to do anything but look at her.

We hear the doorknob suddenly click, and I look up to see a pair of shoes enter the room.

Edward Newton's shoes.

Oh Leila. How I miss you.

I go to bed, aimlessly drifting in my dreams. Once I think I see Leila, and she smiles at me and then leans closer, and then I see her teeth are canines and she's going to eat me.

I wake up the next day, feeling exhausted. I don't feel like going to school, so I tell Mama I don't feel good, and she looks at me with a knowing look in her eyes but simply says for me to rest.

I don't rest. I go to my room and tear it apart. I pull the curtains off the wall, and scratch at the walls until they're bleeding red and then light it all on fire.

I wake up a few hours later and aimlessly scroll on my phone. There are a few more memorial posts and some texts from the Students Demand Action club, but I don't feel like responding. They want me to go public with my story and my point of view.

If anything, I'm the antithesis of what they stand for. I'm a student, who used a gun and pulled the trigger on someone.

And I think of Edward Newton and wish he were alive so that I could scream at him and tear his face off because he has done this.

He has destroyed so many kids and their families and he never ever suffered the consequences.

It isn't fair.

The day passes slowly but I spend it calling friends. Quite a few people have dropped out from school, so we video call each other and talk and memorize everyone's faces to reassure ourselves that we're all still here.

Edward doesn't hesitate. The moment he steps into the classroom, we hear his gun go off. It hits Miley, whose boyfriend of three years just became cancer-free. We watch in stunned silence as she falls back with a look of shock on her face. Her body hits the ground with a finalizing thud.

I eat a lunch of Mama's rotis served with dal and we cuddle up on the sofa, watching Jodhaa Akbar for the millionth time. Halfway through the movie, she looks at me and quietly asks what's wrong, wiping away tears that I didn't know were falling. I tell her, "I don't even know," and snuggle closer to her. She strokes my hair.

But I do know why I'm crying. I'm crying because I've lost everything.

There is a quick second of pure silence after Miley falls, and then I look up and see Edward's gun pointed at Leila's head. I scream, but I can only watch as the bullet leaves the muzzle and impales itself into her forehead. Suddenly there's blood rushing out and torn flesh flying and she's dead.

And I can't help but think about me and her eating lunch together and me stealing bites of her rice, us talking to each other in AP Psychology when we were supposed to be doing a worksheet, us doing dissections in biology and

my heart stops.

Leila Khan is dead.

I go to shower and soak in the water until my fingers look like grapes.

I go on a walk and run until it hurts to breathe and there are stitches in my sides and then I take pictures of pretty flowers and do anything and everything to get my thoughts out of my head because they fill my head and they make it hurt.

If you kill a murderer, the number of murderers in the world stays the same.

I go home and see that Anu's home and hug her a little tighter. I play piano for a bit, practicing "Sweet Sorrow" until my fingers hurt and then play a few rounds of cards with my grandparents. I help Mama cut up lettuce for dinner and she reminds me that I forgot to sweep the floor again and I tell her, "I'll do it tomorrow," but then grab a broom and sweep all the dust away.

The classroom explodes into pandemonium. We already tried opening the windows, but we're on the second floor and they've been designed to only open halfway. Kids sprint at Edward, trying to make a break for freedom, or dash beneath their desks and hope that the next death won't be them. I see Marcus, one of the football players, try to tackle Edward. He gets shot once twice thrice but manages to knock Edward off balance. It's all I need.

We eat tostadas and watch an episode of Avatar the Last Airbender that we found on some sketchy website, and I pretend to swoon over Prince Zuko while Anu gags. Mama sits on the side, studying the stock market on her phone and Papa asks questions about the plot because he missed the last episode.

It's nice and peaceful and before we go to bed, I tell them I love them each and wish them a good night. Then I go upstairs and take out the cards I've made for all of them. There's one for Anu and Mama and Papa and my grandparents and Maya and Anika and I wrote one for Leila too.

I wrote one for Edward Newton, but it only contains one line:

I hate you and I'm sorry.

I lunge forward, hooking my foot around Edward's ankle and push him. It's a perfect sweep that's become muscle memory from my eight years of karate. He falls on the ground and I hear the breath leave his lungs. I punch him once twice in the ribs and then in the face. I keep punching him in the face until there is red blood all over my hands.

Civil blood makes civil hands unclean.

I grab Edward's gun lying by his side.

I take out the gun I've kept in my nightstand drawer.

I lift the gun.

I lift the gun.

I point it at his head.

I point it at my head.

I pull the trigger.

I pull the trigger.