

that's
NOT
what
happened

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I wake up every morning with death on my mind.

Most of the time it's this steady, existential hum, easy to drown out with a little bit of effort and daily medication. Until the end of February that is, when the hum starts to build, growing louder and sharper and impossible to ignore, leading up to The Anniversary. On that day, it's a thudding bass, a violently crashing crescendo pounding through my skull.

This year, the third anniversary of the shooting, was no different. I didn't get up until a little after eleven, and even then, I was exhausted from a night of awful dreams. There was already a chain of text messages on my phone.

Beware the Ides of March. Is everyone okay this morning? This was from Ashley Chambers, who is always the first to check in.

There were six of us who witnessed the shooting directly and survived. Before that day, we'd barely known each other. I mean, some of us had classes together. We knew each other's names. Virgil County is tiny and rural, after all. But we'd hardly

interacted before that day. Since the shooting, though, we've all kept in touch.

Well, five of us have.

Eden Martinez and Denny Lucas had already replied. I'm all right. I hope everyone else is okay today and Okay over here. Take care today.

I typed out my own response, Still here. Glad to have you guys, before scrolling to the top of the chain and looking at the names of the recipients. I knew the ones I'd see there—and the one I wouldn't—but its absence still made my stomach twist with guilt.

I put the phone aside and pulled on a hoodie and some jeans. I couldn't eat anything. Not that day. I knew if I did, it'd just come back up. I'd learned that the hard way on the first anniversary. And then again on the second. So I went ahead and brushed my teeth and washed my face. When I was done, I walked into the living room and, through the front window, saw a boy sitting on my porch steps.

He was hunched over, his back to me. Dark auburn curls poked out from under his black beanie. I opened the front door, but he didn't turn to look at me.

"Hey, creeper," I said. "How long have you been waiting?"

Miles Mason looked up at me then, with his half-closed hazel eyes that always make him look sleepy. "Only a few minutes," he said. Or mumbled. Miles almost always mumbles. You probably saw the one and only TV interview he did after the shooting,

where the reporter had to keep asking him to speak up. “Just texting everyone back. We’re picking up Denny, right?”

I nodded and he stood up, following me down the steps to my truck.

Despite only doing one interview, everyone who followed the shooting remembers Miles. His story got a lot of attention after. He was “the unlikely hero.” Seriously. That’s the wording several articles used.

As the stories told it, he’d thrown himself on top of another student who’d already been injured, shielding her from any more bullets. The media made a big deal out of the fact that, prior to that day, Miles was on the verge of being expelled.

In the words of his grandmother, he was “a bit of a troublemaker.”

In the words of one national publication, he was “the sort of young man you might expect to be pulling the trigger, not protecting his peers.”

I’m not even kidding. That’s a direct quote from some journalist who thought it was an okay thing to say, only two days after this fifteen-year-old had survived a nightmare.

Miles has never liked talking about any of that, though. Not even with me.

I unlocked the truck and we both climbed in. We didn’t turn on the radio. We just listened to the white noise of the engine as we rolled down the empty streets of our neighborhood. It was midday. Everyone was either at work or school. Normally I

would have been a fidgety, nervous wreck about skipping classes. I would have been paranoid about someone seeing my truck and telling my mom. Unlike Miles, I've never been much of a rule breaker.

But no one expected me, Miles, or Denny to go to school that day. No one would punish us or even mention the fact that we'd skipped. Everyone knew it was impossible for us to step foot in that school on the fifteenth of March.

It took us about ten minutes to get to Denny's house. He was waiting outside, sitting on the porch swing, with his yellow Labrador guide dog, Glitter, lying at his feet. He stood when he heard us pull into the driveway, and once I'd parked, Glitter led him right to the passenger side of the truck, where Miles already had the door open.

"It's tight quarters," I said as Denny began to pull himself into the truck. "We're gonna have to snuggle."

"Why does Miles always get to be in the middle when we snuggle?" Denny asked with mock outrage. "Not fair."

Miles slid across the bench seat, positioning himself so he had one leg on either side of the gearshift. The whole left side of his body was pressed against me. I shifted nervously, trying not to worry about what he might be thinking about us sitting so close. Instead, I looked past him as Denny hoisted himself into the truck and allowed Glitter to hop up onto the floorboard, where she sat between his knees.

"You know, Lee," Denny said, yanking the door shut, "if you're going to chauffeur me around, you're gonna need a

bigger vehicle. I'd like to request a limo. One of those stretch Hummers."

"Yeah, I'll get on that," I said. "As soon as you can pay for it."

Denny grinned, and for the first time that morning, I felt this fleeting moment of calm.

Of the survivors, Denny was probably the most photographed and interviewed. He's a cute, slightly chubby black kid who's been blind his whole life. After being shot in the arm, he had to go through a lot of physical therapy to relearn how to use a cane. The media made a big deal out of this, emphasizing his blindness over and over. As if that was his defining characteristic.

The truck took off and we headed straight for the county line. We were getting as far from this town as possible.

I reached forward and turned on the radio, trying to drown out the Death Drum in my head, but even blasting one of my mom's old Nirvana CDs couldn't overpower the intrusive thoughts.

I should be clear: It's not that I *want* to die. Those aren't the kind of thoughts I have to fight. The opposite, actually. Even on a good day, there's this quiet anxiety, bubbling just under the surface, reminding me that with every second that passes, I inch closer to the end of my own existence. Reminding me that I have no control over when or where or how I will die.

On bad days, like every anniversary, that bubbling boils over.

Every turn I made, I imagined another vehicle speeding toward us in the wrong lane. Every bridge we crossed, I

imagined collapsing and plunging the three of us to our watery graves. When we stopped at a gas station to fill the tank, I found myself repeatedly checking over my shoulder, convinced someone would approach me or the cashier inside with a weapon. And when some guy pulled up in a Chevy and slammed his car door, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

I saw death *everywhere*.

So we drove out to the middle of nowhere. Down a dirt road and back into some woods about an hour outside of Virgil County. It was a place we'd found two years ago with Eden. That first year, we'd all piled into her mom's van and driven until we found a spot where no one would look for us. We'd been back every year since, with a few scattered visits here and there when things got too rough. Ashley had come with us a few times, too—before her daughter, Miriam, was born. Now she had a family, and Eden was off at college. It was just Miles, Denny, and me.

I drove slowly. The road is so rarely used that it's nearly grown over, and that day, it was scattered with branches that had fallen during the last big storm. The truck bounced over thick roots until, finally, we reached our spot, deep in the trees. I knew we were in the right place because on our first trip here Miles had carved a large "6" into one of the tree trunks.

Though only five have ever been to this place.

I cut the engine and we climbed out. The air was chilly. A typical midwestern March. You could see the promise of spring beginning to bloom, but the biting breeze wasn't quite ready to let

us go. Still, we piled into the bed of the truck, sitting on the tailgate.

Denny took off Glitter's harness. "Let me know if she goes off too far, okay?" he said as the dog started walking around in the grass, her nose pressed to the ground.

"Sure," I said.

For a while, we didn't say anything. Just sat there, listening to the sounds of the woods, watching the yellow dog roam through the trees, on the trail of some mystery scent. We've all learned how to sit in silence with one another. The quiet, at least when we are together, is safe. Even when we did start to speak, we kept our voices soft.

"Three years." Denny let the words out with a sigh.

"Yep," Miles said.

I was thinking about our text messages from earlier. About that missing name. I thought about it a lot. About how we should've been six instead of five.

About Kellie Gaynor.

I guarantee you don't recognize her name. It hardly ever got mentioned outside of Virgil County. But she was the other girl in the bathroom with Sarah and me. I hadn't seen her in years.

Every time I wanted to say something about her, the questions got lodged somewhere in my chest, pushed down by the weight of guilt. I wanted to ask then. To find out if Miles or Denny had heard from her. If they ever thought about her or if it was just me.

I even managed to open my mouth, to suck in a breath. It was a quiet sound, but Miles heard it. Or maybe he could just feel it. Sometimes it seems like he can sense things about me. Like he's aware of my every move, breath, blink, and he knows what each of them means. Honestly, it's both comforting and startling. And the way he looked at me then, like he was ready to hang on to my every word, made my heart stop for a second. His sleepy eyes made me forget what I was going to say.

Denny, who was sitting on my other side, hadn't noticed.

"You know," he said, readjusting the dark sunglasses he wore. "No one will remember the shooting once we graduate."

"What?" I asked, glad to look away from Miles for a second. Though I could still feel him watching me. "Of course they will. Everyone remembers."

"No, I mean . . . No one who was actually there, who remembers what happened, will be there after we're gone. We're the last class. The last survivors. Once we're gone, everyone at VCHS will only know what they heard or saw on TV. It'll just be a story to them."

I sat there for a minute, letting this sink in. I'm not sure why, but it had never crossed my mind before. He was right, though. In a couple months, the three of us would graduate. We'd been in the freshman class when it happened and soon we'd be gone, and the only students at Virgil County High would be the ones who had heard stories, the ones told over and over in our town, on the news, at church. Students who know just as much about the massacre as . . .

Well, as you.

And there is so much that you—and they—don't know. So many stories that had gotten mixed up, confused, or misrepresented. Even I didn't know how much at the time.

"Huh," Miles said. "I can't decide if that's a good thing or bad thing."

"Me neither," Denny agreed.

But *I* knew. Because the thought of us leaving that school and our stories leaving with us, of really and truly letting those halls be filled with the twisted versions of what happened that day, it made me feel sick.

Miles put a hand on my shoulder. "Lee, you okay? You look a little . . . You all right?"

I nodded, because I didn't trust that I could open my mouth without throwing up.

"It's just today," Denny said. "Today is always bad."

"Yeah," Miles agreed. "Always."

They were right. That day was always painful. And I'm sure it always will be. But sitting there, all I could think was that it was probably even worse for Kellie Gaynor, wherever she was.

And that was my fault.