

I still wake up happy. My mind completely consumed by three thoughts in the following order. 1. Won't that damn alarm clock shut up. 2. I should open my eyes. 3. It's too bright in here. Every morning, those three thoughts come into my head. After they pass, however, is when reality hits. I remember holding Cherry's hand. I remember the bullets. I remember the blood.

October 11th. Wednesday. I remember nearly every detail. I woke up to my alarm. I snoozed it. After 10 more minutes, I hit "dismiss." I stood up, stretched, and walked to my dresser. I put on a pair of old jeans, a t-shirt, and a hoodie. I put my hair in a ponytail, brushed my teeth, and put some eyeshadow and lipstick on.

I went to the kitchen, and grabbed a banana. I sat down at the kitchen table with my dad and my little brothers. "Good morning, sweetheart," my dad said. "What do you have going on after school today?" My dad can't remember anything to save his life.

"I'm in the play, dad. I have rehearsal until 5. Just like I've had for the past month." He rolled his eyes. My brothers snickered. I'm the oldest. I've always had to watch them after school while my dad was working. He worked two jobs. Since I was in the play, they went over to the neighbors after school until I got home. Then I was expected to feed them, entertain them, put them to sleep, and get my homework done. I always managed.

I stood up, walked around the table, gave kisses, and said goodbye. I didn't say "I love you." I figured they knew it. I got in my car, and drove to my best friend Cherry's house. I picked her up, grabbed coffee at Caribou, and drove to school. Cherry and I stopped at our lockers, said hi to all the friends we saw, and went to our first hour class, AP biology. We had 3

out of 5 classes together. The bell rang at 7:30, and we started learning about DNA, RNA, and transcription.

At 7:38, we heard loud popping noises next door, followed by screams. There wasn't time to react. Within seconds of hearing the shots, our door flew open. We were all sitting in our desks, and all of a sudden, there were bullets flying. Everyone talks about traumatic experiences happening in slow motion, but it was over in a second. One second of loud pops, screams, blood, and thuds. She was gone as quickly as she came.

I felt the pain before I saw anything. I realized my eyes were closed. I don't remember closing them. When I opened them, the first thing I saw was Mrs. Stevens on the floor. I was sitting in the front row, less than five feet away from her. Her eyes were open. Then I looked down. My t-shirt was white when I left the house, but it was red when I looked down. At first, my back hurt very badly, but then it didn't hurt at all. I was in shock, both mentally and physically.

I heard popping noises for the next few minutes on and off as the shooter walked into classrooms, ending, ruining, and changing lives. The first thing anyone said in our classroom was "Help." It was a whisper, right next to me, from Cherry. Her real name was Sheryl, but she hated it almost as much as she hated her mom for naming her Sheryl. She was the star of the school play, and shined on and off stage. She always made everyone around her laugh. She always lit up a room just by being there. She was crying, which in all of our 7 years of friendship, I had only seen her do four times. When her dad died, when she got her first A-, when she broke her leg, and when she got shot. She always had on a tough outer shell, even around me. She hated feeling like an inconvenience.

Nathan stood up along with 7 other kids who I had assumed hadn't been shot. Three were crying. Nathan walked over to Cherry, and started talking to her. He had always been quiet and shy. He put pressure on her shoulder where the bullet was, and told her that everything was gonna be ok. I tried to stand up, but I couldn't. I couldn't do anything, or say anything, except reach down and hold her hand. She was crying until she wasn't. She was breathing until she wasn't. I felt her grip tighten, and then loosen as her muscles were adjusting. Then she let go. I was sobbing.

Jamie, a girl who hadn't been shot, took my sweatshirt off of my waist, and wrapped it around my abdomen more tightly. I remember seeing the blood through the black hoodie. I asked her how many people were dead. "I'm not sure. 12 are injured but still talking, and 8 are not injured. Some who are unresponsive could be alive." There were originally 29 people in our classroom including the teacher. Jamie was always calm. She had a cool tone about her, but a warm heart. She was more popular than me, but we always got along well. She was not crying. I knew she was being honest with me.

An announcement went off saying we were in a lockdown. Shortly thereafter, the popping stopped. Then there was one more, final pop. I couldn't move at all. "What time is it?" I asked. I was no longer crying. Every sob made the bleeding worse. "7:43" I remember seeing the clock before the shooter came in say 7:38. It didn't make sense. All that in five minutes. So many lives gone. Ruined. Changed.

Amanda took attendance. I never got to know her well. We were all curious. 10 people didn't respond. One of whom was Austin, my neighbor since I was born. He always caused drama, but at the end of the day, he was fun to be around. He was nearly everything you could

want in a friend. At 7:50, a police team came into our room, and demanded our arms in the air. They had 5 gurneys for our room, but 11 injured people. 3 could walk, but I couldn't. They triaged me with an orange tag, meaning I was responsive, but badly injured. The black tag on Cherry still haunts me. I got the first round of gurneys. They lifted me onto it, and Jamie stayed by my side until she couldn't.

I'll never forget the sights I saw while going down the hallway. The same hallway I had gone down a thousand times before. There was so much blood. People crying, holding each other, and calling home. I was reminded that I should call my dad. I reached down, and grabbed my cell. There were three missed calls from him, so I knew he had heard. He picked up on the first ring. "Sweetheart are you okay? Why didn't you answer? What's happening?"

By this point, the EMT was loading me into the ambulance. I told my dad I was going to the hospital. "Why are you going to the hospital? What happened? Which Hospital?"

I had to ask the EMT which hospital. "I'm ok. Everything's gonna be ok. There was a shooter. She came into my classroom. All I know right now is that I was shot. We're going to Creekwood. Can you meet us there?"

"Yea, We're on our way. I love you so much. Hang in there. Sam and Avery send their love." It had just occurred to me that the boys were on their way to school. It happened so fast, they weren't even there yet.

I met my dad and the boys at the hospital. Within the next two hours, I was interviewed, examined, and prepped for surgery. The surgery went well. I got back the blood I lost. One of the most devastating parts of the whole ordeal was when they told me I was paralyzed from the waist down. I felt selfish for being concerned about the fact I would never be considered for a

major role in a musical again. I would never dance again. I kept having to remind myself that at least I was alive. I am now able to be thankful for my life, but it was very hard to hear at the time

All through the next week, I watched national headlines describe “New Details in the 8th Avenue High School Shooting. 53 dead, and 74 injured.” 5 of the dead were teachers, including my favorite, Mrs. Stevens. She always stayed after school if I needed help, and was there for me when I had any questions, even ones that weren’t about school. I gave statements to three different news sources. They asked me really stupid questions, like “How are you?” “Oh yea, 54 people who were laughing and joking with me a week ago can’t do that anymore. Things are going great.” I stopped talking to them pretty quickly.

There was also lots of information about the shooter. Emma Ovanna. News headlines made her into a monster. Anyone who can do the things she did obviously is not an upstanding citizen. But she had a family. A mother, and 5 siblings who loved her. I had known her. She went to my elementary, and middle school, along with my high school. In elementary school, she and I were friends. We weren’t popular, but we weren’t freaks either. In fifth grade, Cherry moved to our school. The three of us were friends, until we got to middle school.

In sixth grade, me and Cherry grew closer, while me and Emma grew apart. I always said hi when I saw her in the hall. We talked casually if we had a class together. I never saw her with another friend though. Many kids pointed, whispered, and laughed when she walked by. She was ostracized by her classmates, and past 9th grade, I never saw her smile. She always wore black, and had a hood covering her face. Other than the fact that she was a female, she fit the profile of a school shooter perfectly. There had never been a mass shooting on a high school

campus of more than three people carried out by a female before her. She changed that statistic drastically. She killed herself before the police even got there.

The first time I left the hospital was to go to Cherry's funeral. I was treated so strangely by all of the kids I had known since kindergarten. Kids who never talked to me or Cherry were asking how I was. I don't know what they were expecting me to say. I still don't know how to put the emotions I was feeling that day into words. I gave a eulogy. I bawled through the whole thing, but I tried to be strong for her mom. She didn't deserve this. Cherry was one of the coolest people I will ever know.

It's been 6 months since the shooting. I had to learn how to move in my wheelchair. We had to move into a smaller, one story, accessible house. That was the only house I had ever lived in, so that was an adjustment. My dad had to quit one of his jobs temporarily to take care of me. He's going back to it next week though. I begged him to. I know my bills were costly, and I can still take care of the boys by myself. They actually listen to me now, so that's good.

I go to school online, so I have the house to myself during the day. It's currently April, but when school starts in August, I'm gonna go back to the school. They did a full remodel, paid for by guilty people all across the country. I don't know how to feel about it. It's definitely not how I imagined my senior year of high school would go. It'll bring up a lot of emotions to go back there. Especially without some of the faces I've known since kindergarten. Once a week, Jamie comes over to play cards and work on homework. We have the same online classes, and we've gotten a lot closer since the shooting. Trauma really does bring people together.

My life was not ruined by the shooting, nor was it ended. But it was changed. I had to relearn almost everything when I got my chair, and I still wake up from nightmares. My mind

almost never shuts off. Even when I'm asleep, my dreams scare me. It takes me hours to fall asleep. There's only one time when my brain is not racing. When I wake up. I wake up with mundane thoughts of how annoying the alarm is, and how bright the light is. I have at least 1 second before I remember holding Cherry's hand. Before I remember the bullets. Before I remember the blood.