

Tears For Those You Never Got To Meet

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As a young child, you don't know much. You know a world of innocence, kindness and passion. You know love and you know to trust that the people around you only know good. You play house and Barbies, dress up and cars. You love Disney movies, especially the ones with princesses. You play catch with your dad when the sun is hot and when it snows you build snowmen. You play veterinarian, putting sticker bandages on your stuffed animals. You have your own classroom and pretend that you're a teacher, taking after your parents. You build forts out of kitchen chairs and old blankets, begging your mom to let you eat dinner inside. She lets you. The days feel long and you wish for them to continue on; no time for sleep in your young mind. You're up before the dew dries on the grass, you come home with dirty feet, angry that your mom makes you wash them in the bathtub before you can watch nighttime tv. You know nothing more than this. This small world, filled with happiness and heroes.

You always knew your dad loved to hunt. You knew that deer heads were mounted to your basement walls, decorating what would otherwise be bare white. You knew your mother wouldn't allow these treasures upstairs in your actual living room, as she felt that these items were more suited for a cabin in the woods than a family home. Your favorite was the deer skin that draped itself over the small loveseat in the corner. You often pretended that the skin was a horse on your imaginary farm. You'd cram a stick-horse into the crack of the couch and straddle the deer skin-coated couch and you'd pretend. You'd pretend you were on a farm, or in the old west. You'd fight off danger and travel around the world without ever leaving that couch. You knew that all of these items were in your basement, mounted to your walls, but you didn't know *why*.

You were told that if he didn't do it, the deer would be overpopulated. The world wasn't a fairytale and in nature, things had to die. You were sad. You remember thinking about families; did these animals love each other like I love my mom, dad, and sister? Would they feel the gaping hole in their family just as humans would? You were told they wouldn't, but you didn't believe it. You felt uneasy, knowing that a missing family member was hanging on your wall as a prize. Your dad told you that he never killed does, he didn't want to leave a family without a mother. He thought this would ease your young mind. You now wish you told him that someone's world could also be shattered by the loss of their father. You felt guilty. You didn't know at the time how to separate your father from a killer, because on paper he ended lives but they were animals so you were told it didn't matter. You still struggle. You remember that deer skin from the basement couch, and you remember the hole in the bottom right side of the skin. You now know where it came from.

As a kid, December is the best month of the whole year. Your excitement for Christmas outweighs the dreary weather, the constant cold and gray skies. You wake up every morning to the glow of the Christmas tree downstairs, searching for your Elf on the Shelf before you eat two bowls of Cocoa Pebbles and head out the door for school. At school, you do crafts. In music class you rehearse for your winter concert, singing songs about Santa Claus. You go to science class and it'll be your turn to feed the class pet. At the end of the day, you and your friends will load onto the yellow school bus and go home, where you'll play until dinner. Then it's bath, bed and repeat.

You remember the day that your focus shifted. You remember the Friday evening when you were seven years old. You remember putting your shoes and coat on in your grandma's dark

living room as you overheard your mom and grandma talk about a small school in Connecticut. You didn't understand. You went home with treats from Grandma and lots of questions. What could they have possibly done? Kids. Kids who woke up just like you, ate their breakfast, kissed their moms goodbye. Kids who look forward to recess and the note that their mom left in their lunchbox at school. You knew of death. You knew how it was supposed to work: getting old, getting sick, eventually you knew we'd all die. But you didn't know of death, *in this way*. You had never known violence targeted at someone your own age. This was the day that you realized guns could hurt people too.

It was your best friend's eighteenth birthday. You drove yourself to school, walking in two minutes late, as always. It was a Tuesday, your least favorite day of the week. Your mind was preoccupied, AP English test in fourth hour, dance class that evening. Your day concluded with whispers of a school two towns over from yours. These whispered rumors turned to fact in the timeline of one hour. When the final bell rang, you rushed to your car like normal to beat the after school traffic. You got home and you texted your parents in a group chat, "Did you hear about Oxford?" Your dad was at football practice, your mom's school day hadn't ended yet, leaving you in an empty house all alone to digest this. You knew what was coming. You'd see their names, see their killer, see their stories. The news would talk about the tragedy as it continued to unfold. Politicians would send their half hearted condolences and then use the incident as fuel for political debate. Nothing would get done. Lives would still be lost, families broken forever.

The following week would be filled with helplessness. At school, you'd walk around aimlessly. You'd go visit your dad in his classroom multiple times a day because no one knew

what else to do. None of you saw the point in being there, overwhelmed with grief for children you never met. Your teachers rerun through safety precautions with you; how to loop a power cord underneath the door creating the ultimate lock. You reviewed where the bucket was in the corner of every classroom that contained survival equipment in case of an emergency. You helped make a banner that read *Oxford Strong* for students to sign. You still don't know what that accomplished. It was your senior year of high school, and you still felt the shadow of gun violence creeping over you. In a way, it was growing up *with* you. School would be canceled that Friday due to copycat threats. You'd spend the weekend crying with your family about the sheer pain and fear that you all felt. You'd watch CNN and see the victim's faces. You'd see their families and the candle light vigils in their honor.

You had the same *deja vu* feeling you had when you were seven, when you realized you could die at school and so could your mom and so could your dad and so could your sister. In a matter of minutes, your family could be gone, and there was nothing you could do about it. For months that followed, you learned more, horrific details about the pain these students endured. How the students that survived, got through it. You marveled at their strength. At their ability to overcome and go back to the same building in which they watched their friends die. You didn't think you'd be able to do that, but then again, if an event like that occurred at your school, maybe you wouldn't get to.

After your school year ended on May 18, 2022, it occurred again. You were about to graduate high school and yet, nineteen kids and two teachers were shot dead at a small school in Uvalde Texas. Seventeen more were injured. You knew how this felt, how it stings. How it could've been your mom this time. You knew that in her classroom, she would always put

students first. She expressed that she didn't know where she would have them hide in the case that this was our school. She knew that if this happened to her, she would probably not make it out. Six days after the shooting, your aunt, uncle, cousins, and grandparents came over for a Memorial Day dinner. As always, your dad smoked ribs for dinner, your mom prepared side dishes in the kitchen. You sat on your deck in your favorite cushioned chair, shaded under the canopy from the harsh sun overhead. Across from you sat your uncle, whose navy blue hat read "Protected by the Second Amendment" with two AK 47's detailed into the side.

You held your tongue in front of the family, but that night you cried for those that lost their lives, caught in the middle of a senseless debate. You cried for those children who did not get to enjoy dinner with their families, for those who did not get to go to school tomorrow. You came downstairs, fresh air from the open living room windows hitting your sopping wet, freshly cleaned hair. Your dad, who owns guns legally and safely, tells you that there's nothing we can really do to stop it. He tells you that it's up to those in power to change something, to prevent this from happening again. You sat on the couch and cried, taking your frustration out on him. You knew that what he was saying was true. Just days ago, you sat in this same spot and watched tears escape his silent eyes for those kids in Texas. You know that he is not part of the problem but in that moment, you unloaded on him. After hot tears fell from your eyes, your father concluded by saying, "Mackenzie look. You know that if it could save just one kid I would give away every gun I own." With no solution, you trudged up the stairs to your bedroom. You got yourself ready for bed, packing your school bag for the Tuesday morning ahead. You laid awake that night thinking about what your dad said. It really was impossible for you to do anything. You were seventeen years old, and yet you were a pawn in a game you never signed up to play.

Right before Valentine's Day your freshman year of college, it occurred once more. Now in your college dorm, not surrounded by the people you grew up with all your life, this one felt different. Only some of you were affected firsthand by this one, although all of you felt it. You remember that night, not being at home with your parents. You remember crying in your lofted dorm bed as you texted all of your friends that attended Michigan State University. You listened to police scanners and remained locked in your room. You called your mom and cried with her, telling her that you wished you were home and in her arms. You wanted her to rock you in her rocking chair and tell you that everything was okay. That the bad guys wouldn't get you because they weren't real. But you knew they were real. You knew that even your brave, strong mother couldn't stop them from getting you.

Every summer, you work at a daycare. You play with the children, feed them lunch, put them down for a nap, and play with them more when they wake up. At nap time, after you tuck the kids in on their cots, with their Paw Patrol blankets and their stuffed tigers, you pat their backs until they drift off to sleep. After all of the children are asleep, you walk quietly back to the teacher's table where you wait for them to wake up. You think about the babies that are under your care. You know what to do in case it happens here, but you don't know how you and two others would be able to wake fifteen toddlers and get them to follow you out the window of the classroom. You know that if it happens here, you have to put their lives before your own. That scares you. Not in a selfish way, because you would in a heartbeat, but it scares you because it could really happen to you. It could happen to anyone, and that's what scares you the most.

You watch the children as they sleep and you wonder what they're dreaming about. Sometimes they have nightmares and you wonder what such innocent beings could be so afraid

of. You realize that you're now an adult. You're no longer that seven year old girl who got to live in a world where none of this exists. The knowing is what frightens you most. The anticipating and the tiptoeing around, praying that you're not next.

Today, you wrote a story about guns. About their effect on your life. Today you pinpointed a few of the memories that come to your head when you hear words like "bullet" or "shoot", immediately accompanied with the word, "death". You churned with the weight of these words. Today you walked through your college campus. You thought about where you'd run to if someone came out of Lake Michigan Hall with an AK-47. You figured you'd run into the woods if you could do so in time. If you didn't make it, you wonder what people would write about you. What people would say about you. What picture your mom would choose for the news headline, for the Instagram post. Would it be one of your high school senior photos? Probably the one of you at sunset in the white dress, ankle-deep in Lake Huron water. Who would repost your face all over the internet? Just as you had done countless times before, you assumed your death would elicit thousands of people to click a button to share your face to their feed. They would remember your name for 24 hours before their Insta Story expired, sending you to the archive. Maybe in a year they'd get a memory of your death, maybe they'd be reminded of what happened to you. All of these hypotheticals swirled around your brain but one thing was fact: your death wouldn't change anything. Guns would kill people before you and they would kill people after you. No one would care that you were your mother's world and she would be lost without you. No one would think about the fact that you never got to go to Greece or live in New York as you always dreamed. They've heard it all before. They would still put on their backpacks and pray that they entered the right room at the right time. Gun violence was born even before

you, it chased you in circles for years. You were able to dodge it for a long time, but eventually it caught up to you. It engulfed you, leaving you to rot in a pile of bullet-infested flesh. It could happen to you, it could happen to someone you love, it could happen to a stranger. The fear will remain. All you're left to do is keep weeping tears for those you never got to meet.