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A School Crisis

Dan Abella

Hellen Wood lifted her head from the cold, artificial surface of her school desk to listen to the voice on the crackling intercom. The morning announcements at St. Giovanni High School, God's noble attempt at gentrifying the surrounding poor neighborhood, rarely warranted anyone's attention and surely never inspired the young girl to lift her apathetic face. This morning, however, she noted an uneasiness in Principal Sullivan's voice, who, during the four years of Hellen's attendance, had never once adjusted his monotonous pitch.

"Attention, everyone, attention. We have received word from the local police that there has been a shooting by a single male two blocks away from the school. In accordance with our safety procedures we shall proceed to lock-down all class activities until the authorities inform us that it is again safe. Pray that God will protect us from all danger. Thank you."

St. Giovanni was a school that featured spacious paths that seamlessly flowed from stifling school corridor to secular asphalt and sidewalk. Most classrooms teased students by being so close to the outside world. Some of Hellen's peers swore that a car drifting two or three feet off the road could, like the Second Coming, barrel through the window and in an instant take a room full of innocent teenagers to Heaven. It seemed that collection of buildings was just another part of the city born primordially and spontaneously from the crossing streets and hanging streetlights, an edifice ignorant of the marks of distinction heaped upon it: the garish school seal, the uniformity of color (drab green and yellow), the ghostly echoes of outdoor pep rallies, and, finally, the ivory statue of Christ at the entrance of the school, whose outstretched arms and permanent visage of pity commanded respect. Little wonder that a God-defying man could and would desecrate hallowed ground.

Mrs. Harvey, Hellen's teacher, snapped her fingers with authority, directing her students wordlessly to shut off the lights, close the blinds of the windows, and tape thick construction paper over the rectangular windows of the room's two doors. Each classroom was made to look empty, to disguise the presence of innocent humanity within its walls. Mrs. Harvey, still silent, herded all the students to one side of the classroom away from the windows and doors with expressive swipes of

her right index finger, and then, lining the palms of her hands parallel to the ground and lowering them slowly, she bade all her students sit.

Hellen was the last to move from her desk and sit down with legs crossed. She hadn't stood up to help with locking down the classroom, and it was only by the power of Mrs. Harvey's finger that she reluctantly took her place near the corner of the room. By God how she hated Mrs. Harvey and that fucking finger she waved like a conducting baton. She had on numerous occasions wanted to break it or bite it off. Mrs. Harvey's act of raising it sickened Hellen. Maybe, if Hellen were fortunate enough, that gunman would blow that finger right down to the knuckle.

The young girl stretched out her left leg in the darkness and felt a sharp pain surge up her leg. Another girl, standing up blindly to relocate herself by her friends, buried the tip of her toes into Hellen's calf and fell on her hands. The other girl—Hellen could not tell which of her peers it was—muttered under her breath, but Hellen caught the hoarse words *stupid bitch* as the other girl picked herself from the ground and dusted her knees. Though thoroughly acquainted with such insults, Hellen returned it only half-heartedly, subsequently receiving an exasperated sigh from the girl and a dismissive grunt from Mrs. Harvey. She shuffled farther away from everyone.

Bitch is such an ugly word. The unstressed vowel threatened by two rough and domineering consonant sounds mimicked perfectly how the word functions as a slur. The *B*'s and *Tch*'s of society, ubiquitous and invincible, have since the inception of language preyed upon the equally plenty *I*'s of the world, scurrying in fear, struggling to break their near silence. To use the word sustained its meaning. To rearrange the letters would paradoxically change nothing. Hellen cursed again to herself, retracting and crossing her legs underneath her supple buttocks.

"This is really kinda stupid, right?" a boyish voice said. She felt the owner of this voice moving closer to her. There was in this statement the same uneasy treble Hellen noticed in the principal's speech.

"What's stupid?" Hellen responded, uninterested.

"Stupid that we have to hide in a classroom while a potentially dangerous guy could easily break through a window or something. We should be out there hunting him down before he hunts us."

Unlike the girl before, Hellen could assign a name to this voice.

It was Wade Dalton, fellow senior, whose history with Hellen consisted of little more than askance smiles, similarly dropping faces, and mutual acknowledgment of the other's position on the infallible social ladder. He was, in other words, another *I*.

"Yeah, I guess so." She was not yielding to his conversation.

"Why do you think this guy is running around with a gun?"

"I don't know. Why does anyone run round with one?"

"Money, greed really, is the most common of motivations," Wade so cleverly deduced, "but there are also other drives: jealousy, depression, anger ..." His mind kneaded those words carefully, smoothing and rolling and flattening them as he listened to his own voice.

"You're forgetting one other motivation," Hellen responded.

"The intoxicating seat of power. I can only imagine what it feels like to hold one in your hand, to balance the ball of your finger on the trigger, to stare down the barrel and witness in a moment the sum of the world's terror born on a single person's face. It must be nice to have your own dignity reaffirmed on the commanding side of a gun." Hellen brought her knees up and propped her chin on them.

"I think needing a weapon for any reason like that makes you weak."

A silence yawned between them. Hellen clenched her right hand into a fist. Then, extending her index finger and thumb, waved her biological gun in front of Wade, who would have not seen it in the near darkness. The tip of her finger found Wade's forehead and tapped it roughly. He recoiled.

"I'd like to have a gun. No one would mess with me," she said, smiling.

Less audible and more striking, soft moans wafted toward Hellen's ears. Wade had broken down into tears he tried to suppress.

"You would, wouldn't you? Well, here then." Hellen felt a cold steel object trust clumsily against her neck. It was, unmistakably, the barrel of a small pistol. It shook in Wade's hands and sucked the air from Hellen's desperate lungs. If not by a bullet, then by suffocation would she meet her end. She looked around in the dark room, begging with her eyes for someone to help her. Wade had killed all thirty of them already, she thought. Yes, the thumping sound in the room came from their collapsing bodies. And now, as the room illuminated, she could now make out faint images of her peers. Gallons of blood poured from

dozens of holes that riddled lifeless bodies sprawled across the floor and desks. Still warm and flowing, the blood collected under bodies and staining crisp, ironed uniforms. Some had their eyes and mouths fully open, looking as if a voyeuristic photographer had captured their faces in the climactic moment of private, uninhibited pleasure.

“How does it feel? That *seat of power* you spoke about,” his voice was nearly a whisper, and he had adjusted himself so he could speak directly in Hellen’s ear, “isn’t so great when you’re under it. I brought this to school, I’m not sure why. God, I hate this place. I wasn’t going to kill anyone. I don’t even know how to check if this thing from my dad’s drawer has any bullets in it. I was just going to ... assert myself. To end it all.”

Hellen realized no one could hear them. She had never once prayed in her life, but found herself asking something to bless her with grace and courage. “To end what?”

“To end me. The old Wade Dalton. How else can you change the world but through violence, or at least the threat of it?”

“Please, for God’s sake, don’t do this, Wade.” Hellen was quietly sobbing, fearing that too loud a sound would force Wade to pull the trigger.

Wade pulled the gun away from her neck and rested it between his legs, still holding it uneasily. With his free hand, he wiped away his tears. “You don’t know what it’s like to be me. Like being on one of those loud rides at the carnival that goes around fast in circles. You start to feel sick and nauseous, and you yell, beg the operator to stop the ride, and it’s completely within his power, but he refuses, and the force of the spinning ride is crushing your lungs. You close your eyes trying to forget where you are, and when you open your eyes there’s vomit all over your lap. Surrounded by the unyielding operator, the blurred faces, and pulsating music, all you have is that rancid vomit.”

Outside the room someone was speaking. The students, oblivious to Hellen and Wade, crowded to the room’s windows and split the closed verticals; no amount of intense finger swiping could keep them looking outside. Hellen and Wade also stood up to look at what was happening. A man dressed in black was walking in the opposite hallway, blabbering to himself like a lost, defenseless child. He waved his gun in loose circles. At the other end of the hallway, two armored officers crept behind the man. Their cemetery-like silence—Hellen, seeing the

trio, had thought of her dead mother for some reason—could not fool those instinctual chills that surge up the spine when we touch the edge of mortality. He turned quickly on his heels.

Hellen shut her eyes when she heard the two shots, so she did not see the gunman fall down, though she heard the thud of his body and the clank of the gun hitting the floor. When she opened them again she saw the two officers walking slowly toward the corpse. One of them kept his firearm pointed to the body while the other kicked away the man's pistol. After a moment of intently scrutinizing the situation, both relaxed, and one patted the other on the shoulder jovially.

She turned to Wade, who had the same face as her imagined dead peers. Life seemed to have left his eyes, and the morning sunlight bounced off his pale, white teeth. He looked at Hellen and gave a tragic nod, then his gaze fell to the floor as he walked away from the window. The gun he held was nowhere in sight. Wondering whether she should inform Mrs. Harvey, Hellen looked up to the intercom that now broadcast Principal Sullivan's relieved voice, informing the students that the remainder of the day's classes would be canceled, that no one was to leave until the authorities had given them permission, and that we should thank God for His holy guidance and pray for the forgiveness of the recently departed.

Hellen averted her eyes from the now silent intercom and looked around for Wade. He was gone. The girl poked Mrs. Harvey with a finger of her own and asked where he was. "Wade? Who? Oh! Wade! I'm not sure, Hellen." Her face was red with an embarrassed concern. Hellen opened the door and peered out and caught sight of a young man silhouetted against the ever shining sun. He walked uneasily but not without dignity, stamping each cold heel onto the ground. Though Hellen called, he did not look back. Now the figure broke into a run, running toward the city, past the statue and past the school fences, running perhaps forever, where the booming alarm of the ambulance, the rumble of the streets, and the murmur of a million people would drown her meek beckoning.