

## Media Studies

In retrospect, the tip off should have been that it was Wednesday of School Shooter Preparedness Week. Every year, this was a total joke. Not the threat of school shootings—that shit was terrifying—but Preparedness Week.

Monday meant a school assembly with a surprise guest, who was always the sheriff. He would proceed to scare the living piss out of us for half an hour—get us thinking a Navy-SEAL-level-ninja-killer could basically drop from the sky and start shooting at any moment—and then end his lecture of terror by assuring that the simple act of locking classroom doors could save us. Um, noted.

On the Tuesday, some dude from student government would make the rounds and restock all the preparedness supplies, which just meant the painter's buckets that sat next to each teacher's desk, the ones filled with hockey pucks, ropes, and other BS, would get fresh bottles of water. I mean, that's fair. Hydration was definitely going to matter when we were all bleeding out.

Then, Wednesday, or sometimes Thursday, we would get to practice the elusive skill of door-locking in a \*random\* shooter drill. Even the teachers rolled their eyes at this.

And that was it. That was Preparedness Week. Total joke.

Junior year was different though. The assembly started with the principal giving an impassioned speech about how we didn't take this seriously. How we were complacent and didn't understand life was cruel.

“Jesus,” my friend Kevin whispered to me and our friend Eli mid-way through.

“Seriously,” I agreed.

“Pace yourself, Dr. Ranklin,” Eli said, “it’s only 8:30 in the morning.”

But Dr. Ranklin was on a rant. We all needed to be vigilant, he insisted. Look for loners who need help. Be that help. He said it like ten times. Be that help.

“That was intense,” Kevin said as we left the auditorium.

“He does realize that if there’s ever actually a shooter, we’re fucked, right?” Eli said.

“Sure,” I said, “but who’s really shooting up a school on the Peninsula?”

“Dude,” Kevin said, “that’s elitist.”

I shrugged. I mean, the Bay Area wasn’t really known for its gun culture.

Also, we were elitist.

I’m not saying I never worried. The whole age-of-the-school-shooter thing freaked me out as much as anyone else. The threat was real, but not *real-real*. Way more likely you’d get in a car accident or fall down the stairs or get cancer or something. Shootings happened to kids somewhere else, like in Kansas or wherever. Not here. Except, that’s probably what those kids thought too. I don’t know. It was something that had my attention but wasn’t in my day-to-day thoughts. I had homework and my parents and my grades and fencing practice and my stupid lost AirPods that my mom was going to make me pay for and the fact that Liya Abebe still didn’t see me that way.

Anyway, that was Monday. On Tuesday, banners appeared all over school, saying: *Be Vigilant* and *Reach Out* and *Say Something*.

“Wow,” Kevin said as we walked down the hall, “Dr. Ranklin’s on fire this year.”

“The man must be going through something,” Eli said, this is just weird.

And it was. The hall was spooky quiet. Like the banners had taken over everyone's minds. There was some laughter here and there, but it was all nerves, like nobody trusted what was funny.

We passed Jayden Baral at his locker. Not talking to anyone or on his phone or anything. Just standing with his back to his locker, staring at a drinking fountain across the way.

Jayden was the kind of dude you could look at and pretty well guess his story. In elementary school, he was the kid who always got hot lunch and actually ate it. Got all his school supplies directly from the teacher. *That* kid. His story came out over the years. Raised by his grandparents because his parents were addicts, and then bounced between family and foster care after his grandparents died. Rumor was his mom had stabbed a cop in the eye and that his dad was on death row. But then sometimes he lived with his dad, so who knew what was real. It was sad. But like, what could you do? By high school, he predictably wore hoodies with pot leaves on them and kept his hair in cornrows, which was kind of off—he was half Indian/half Jewish—but I wasn't going to be the genius to explain appropriation. Dude had half a foot and forty pounds on me, easy.

"Hey," I said to Kevin and Eli after we passed Jayden, "if we were going to have a school shooter, who do you think it would be?"

"What kind of fucked up question is that?" Eli asked.

I pointed at a banner that said *Be Vigilant*. "You think Jayden?"

"No way," Kevin said.

"I don't know," I said, "he's kind of textbook troubled-teen."

“Um,” Eli said kind of drawn out, “he’s more mom’s-boyfriend-punches-him-in-the-face-from-time-to-time troubled, not sort-of-autistic-plays-a-lot-of-video-games-in-the-dark troubled.”

“True,” I said. But I guess my voice didn’t sound convincing because Eli continued: “Also, not to be racist or whatever, but he’s Jewish. We don’t do that.”

“Yeah, no offense, man,” Kevin added, “Jayden’s not white enough to shoot up a school.”

I said, “None taken,” but still I couldn’t think of anyone who needed help more than Jayden. Not that I had a lot of data points—it was a big school, and I only had one class with him—but he’d had a ghost-vibe lately, like *he* wasn’t even sure he was there. I remember having that exact thought and wondering if he could see how far from the path he was, how the rest of us were going to lap him before we even turned twenty.

Now, I wish I could press pause on that moment, go back and say to myself: Seriously, you’ve had like ten years to go say hi and see what’s up. Check yourself. Do you actually worry about him or do you just like staring at his pain? Because there’s a difference.

Also, finding a path and being placed on a path are two different things.

Totally different.

By Wednesday, life felt pretty ordinary.

First Period. Calc.

Second. AP Physics.

During the passing period before Third, Eli had a mini freak-out over the SATs that were coming up.

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Kevin got him to ramp down: “Breathe, man. Your mom’s a professor, and your dad’s an x-ray crystallographer. Do you really think you’re not going to college?”

Kevin was good like that. Super cool. Practical. I mean, he kind of had to be. Like a defense mechanism or something. His parents were uber Chinese. Total stereotype. In freshman year, Kevin got a 93 in first semester English. His parents flipped out and got him an English tutor. I would have lost my shit, but Kevin just dealt with it, defended them even: “What can I say? They didn’t move halfway around the world for a 93.”

I always tried to channel Kevin when I dealt with my parents. My mom had been on me about college since fifth grade. Seriously, elementary school.

“You’ll need a strategy,” she’d say, “especially coming from the Peninsula. It’s hard to stand out.”

So, I had to play the bassoon not trumpet because the bassoon was rare, and I had to drop soccer for fencing because too many kids played soccer. I used to complain all the time—like, why does no one care what I want? But Kevin once said to me: “Why fight? Worst case scenario, you get into a really good school. Why is that bad? Plus, if you do what your parents want, they leave you alone. Then you can do whatever.”

And he was totally right. Love that kid. Why not just let my parents walk me into a bougie life? I didn’t really know what I wanted anyway. Plus, I only had to get into UCLA to make my parents happy. Kevin had to, like, invent a new planet or something.

Third Period. AP History.

Then, Fourth. Media Studies.

Media Studies was an elective that we all had to take. Yup, exactly. Part of the Future of Technology curriculum the school board got a hard on for our Freshman year. The whole point

of the class was to read a bunch of social media posts and decide which were fake. Only an old person would come up with a class like this. Um—hello—they're all fake. Total waste of time.

Eli was already at his seat getting his articles out. All highlighted and everything. Classic Eli. Tried even in a class that didn't matter. I guess he was primed for it. School was in his blood. Destined for Stanford like his parents. Future academic. The hilarious part about this was that his mom was a psychology professor who studied the effect of homework and early school start times on teens. So, although the family knew for a science-fact that too much homework had a detrimental effect on creativity and self-esteem and sleep and, like, all good things, Eli was sure as shit expected to stay up doing his.

I sat down, nodded hey to Eli. Kevin walked in talking to Liya, who was laughing at something Kevin had just said. Jesus, she was beautiful when she laughed, and I should have gone over to her, right then, and told her so. Told her that I had loved her since the first time I saw her in kindergarten, the only girl with a Pokemon lunch box. That playing Last Airbender with her at recess was my favorite part of third grade—that shitty year my parents got divorced—me pretending to bend the water in the clouds while she bent the earth beneath us. How I would never forget that she was the only girl in sixth grade to talk to me like I was still a person even though I was so zitty then. I should have said all of this, told her she was the most awesome girl ever. That her smile was perfect in every way and lit me up like I was made of stars. I don't know. Maybe it wouldn't have mattered, but maybe it would have been a line in the sand, something to hold on to later. But I wish I had at least told her that when she looked at me, I was worth something, because after that day, I would never be able to hold her gaze again.

Jayden came in after them, head down. He'd been like that all week. Quiet. Something was definitely up.

Ms. Martinez started class like normal. I was getting my articles out when the alarm went off. Not the fire alarm. The blue one. Somebody said, Lord. Somebody else groaned. I mean, it was School Shooter Preparedness Week. This drill wasn't exactly a surprise. A couple of people started flipping desks like you're supposed to. The alarm was so loud that you couldn't really think about anything but the alarm and how you wished it would stop. I sat with my fingers in my ears. No reason to rush. Eli decided to be a good boy and flip his desk. Kevin had already popped the doorstop and was pulling the shade.

Ms. Martinez checked her phone. The office always sent a text verifying it was a drill. Teachers never told you. But their faces said it. We all knew. Still had to do all the stuff—lock the door, make the barricade of desks for us all to hide behind—but knowing it was a drill made it just another thing you had to do. But this time, Ms. Martinez just frowned and put the bucket of hockey pucks on her desk. Then, she checked her phone a second time and squinted at the classroom door. Everyone else was doing the thing, but I was just watching Ms. Martinez's face, so I guess I was the only one to see her when she checked her phone one last time and said, *Shit*.

But that was nothing because a second later—not even a second—a shot came from down the hall. A single shot. Not too near, but way too close. Maybe not in our hall. Maybe the next? Like that kind of close. Eli and I locked eyes a sec. A jolt shivered through me like I just drank all the Red Bull in the world. Some kids were still dragging desks for the barricade, but now most everybody was pushing to get to the back corner, crying and yelling and stuff.

I needed to move, needed to get behind the barricade with everyone else but I was stuck, frozen at my desk like a dumbass. Ms. Martinez started calling my name over and over. *Hunter. Hunter. Hunter.* She called until I stood, but I swear, I don't remember standing. My body was not mine right then. All I could feel were my fingers. Thick and dangly. Like I was some kind of

spirit and these finger-like meat tubes were sewn on the end of my arms to make me look real. I must have started moving though, because by the time I started to feel my body again, I was planted next to Eli behind the barricade, my torso shaking and the front of my jeans warm and wet.

A voice behind me started whisper-singing: *Shooter, shooter bar the door.*

It was Liya. She was right behind me, and I hadn't even noticed.

*Turn the lights off, speak no more.*

She was singing to herself, the song they taught us in elementary school, the one that goes to Twinkle, Twinkle.

*Run behind the desk and hide.*

I turned to look at her. Her eyes super-wide and fixed on the door, looking past me like I was already gone.

*Stay until it's safe outside.*

Her legs to her chest, she was rocking.

*Lockdown, lockdown, when it's done.*

She was crying, and I wanted to hold her so bad—right in that moment, I thought it—I wanted to be the guy to tell her that no one was going to touch her. I wanted to be that guy so fucking bad. But I had nothing.

*Then we'll play and have some fun.*

Fucking nothing.

Footsteps sounded in the hall, crisp as a drum. A silhouette appeared in the window of the classroom door. The shooter. Not *a* shooter—*the* shooter. The actual shooter who had come for us. The shooter who would end us. The shooter who carried a real gun with real bullets.



Eli balled himself up and tucked down earthquake-style. I pushed right up to the back of a desk like it was made of magic, like it could make me invisible or something. From my spot, I could see through a crack between two desks. Small, but I had a full view of the window. I probably should have ducked down further, but I had to look. The window was the only thing left in the world, and I had to see it.

The silhouette didn't move for a minute or a year or forever. I don't know. Time was not a thing anymore. Maybe the shooter was calculating. Maybe he was toying with us. Maybe it was all a dream, or maybe the universe had never existed until that moment. I would have believed anything. My senses were on hyper-alert—I swear, I could hear dust move—and I remember thinking my heart was going to straight-up explode in my ears.

But then, just like nothing, the silhouette disappeared. Steps echoed down the hallway toward the next classroom. I became aware of my breathing again, started to lower my shoulders until I remembered that our room was next to last at the end of the hall. There was nowhere else to go. The shooter would have to come back around.

The footsteps stopped. I imagined the shooter looming in the window of the room next door. If we were going to try to escape out a window or something, this was the moment. But we just sat there, like loyal pets. All that homework, the tutors, the extra lessons. We didn't know a thing. We just sat there, waiting.

I mean, what were we supposed to do? He was all-powerful, and we were lumps of shit.

And I was thinking this—I specifically remember thinking this—when Jayden jumped up, straight to his feet. Ms. Martinez hissed at him to get down, but he didn't listen. He just walked to her desk and eyed the bucket of hockey pucks and random crap that were supposed to save us, then turned and started surveying the room.

And it was insane what he was doing—standing up like that—but it was completely badass. His hands didn't even shake. He was so solid standing there, sizing up the situation. Like he was true, and everything else in the world was a lie.

Ms. Martinez told him to sit down again. Jayden shook his head and said, "I'm so fucking sick of this shit," as he made his way to the door and grabbed the fire extinguisher that hung next to it. He hefted the thing like he was getting a sense of it and then positioned himself with his back pressed against the wall next to the door.

The footsteps started again, were getting louder. The shooter was coming back around. This was it. All the drills and the anti-shooter supplies and the pep talks and the you-can-do-anything pamphlets. It was all shit. We had Jayden, and who the hell knew what made him ready for this. Maybe life had pressed on him too long. Maybe he figured he had nothing else to lose. I don't know. But the reality was we were scared little kids, and he was a man standing.

Jayden bent his knees and bounced a little, like he was timing something. The steps were close. Jayden started counting: One. Two. Three. He kicked the doorstop away and opened the door and started spraying. I saw the whole thing, and it was incredible. Like you can't even write a movie that good. It was one elegant motion: doorstop—door—spray.

He was in the hall now, out of view, and there should have been gun shots, but there weren't any. The sounds were more like a thud and then a whack and then a big thwack, which had to be a body hitting the floor. And then it started. Whack. Whack. Whack. Slow, but it was a rhythm. And Jayden's voice coming over top: *Fuck you. Fuck you.* It was like that over and over again. *Fuck you.*

One by one, we started popping up, and Kevin got the stones to go out and look.

“Holy shit,” was all he said, and I took that as the all-clear. I rushed over, and—holy shit—Jayden was beating the ever-living crap out of the shooter who had dropped his gun and was now full-fetal trying to survive Jayden’s blows. Jayden did not ease up. He just pounded like a machine.

Our whole class was in the hallway now, and other classes were starting to come out too. No one tried to stop Jayden, not even the teachers, although the shooter was taking a total beating and not really moving anymore. No one said a thing, but you could basically hear us collectively thinking—Get him, Jayden. Fuck that guy.

The school safety officer and the school secretary appeared, yelling at us all to disperse. They pulled Jayden off the shooter. The safety officer radioed for a medic, and the secretary pulled the shooter’s mask off. Every single one of us gasped at the same time. It was Dr. Ranklin. Jayden saw him and started yelling—“What the fuck?”—as the safety officer dragged him down the hallway.

Some girl said--“So, it was fake?”--the words of her question all long and drawn out like she’d just invented speaking. But she was right, and we all just stood there with our mouths open like, what the actual fuck?

School was chaos for the rest of that semester. We had like a week of half days so we could process. No homework for a long time. Parents created exactly the shitstorm you would expect. There were lawyers and PTSD counselors and reporters. So many reporters. News trucks, the whole thing. All the local news, obviously. The NYT did a whole thing. We were a feature story in The Atlantic. A million researchers descended. We were going to get studied for, like, forever.

The story that came out was wild: Dr. Ranklin had told the police there would be a routine simulation—so they wouldn't come if called—but only Dr. Ranklin and the safety officer actually knew the whole plan. The shot we'd heard was a recording. Dr. Ranklin's gun was real, but it had no bullets in it. He'd just meant to scare us into being serious. I mean, what? No one could believe it, and none of the other details that came out added much light either. Dr. Ranklin was in the middle of a divorce. He was drinking. He was burnt out. Um, ok. . . Dr. Ranklin and the safety officer were fired, obviously, but the school board waited until Dr. Ranklin was out of the ICU to do it, which seemed like a weird curtesy, but whatever. The whole thing was so messed up.

But Jayden, though. Jayden was all anybody talked about. A real-life hero.

Except, he never came back to school, which was the most fucked up thing of all of it. He was on his last chance, apparently. And *although the circumstances were highly unusual*, the school board decided it was bad precedent to let a student back to school who'd beaten a principal unconscious.

Everyone was outraged. Would they have done that to a white kid? It was bullshit. We marched out of school one day, the whole school, like we were starting a war.

It was my idea actually, the walk-out. My therapist thought leading something would help me get my sense of agency back. We talked about it in session. Did a visualization thing. I was amped. I would stand up at lunch time and make a big announcement that this was total shit, that we needed to stand up for Jayden the way he stood up for us.

I worked the whole thing out—exactly what I would say, how I'd do it ten minutes before lunch ended when most people were still eating. But when the time came, I didn't have it. And it wasn't that I was afraid. It was something else. Moment after moment after moment passed until

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I turned and said my thing to Eli instead. He was like, fuck yeah, and then he stood up on the table and shouted my words. The cafeteria was electric. Everybody standing and banging on tables. Grabbing backpacks and starting to leave. Kevin and Eli were one of the first ones out. Liya came up to me and said “Walk out!” like we were in this together. And I just kind of shrugged and looked down and then toward the crowd of people headed for the door. Then, she shrugged and went on without me.

I just stood there, the last one left.

I don't know. The whole thing didn't seem real. In my head, this moment was supposed to feel daring or brave or important. Something. But now, it kind of felt lame. Sort of selfish almost. Jayden was already gone. So who was this really about? I kept picturing him that day, in the hallway after. How he just kept punching. How I wanted him to never stop.