

## Fourteen People

by [redacted]

Today is the day fourteen people will die for the simple fact that they must. That’s the thought that sticks in my head when I open my eyes and I’m so excited I’m already shaking. Fifteen if you count me. I lay in the bed letting the warm breeze work its way through and thinking about the cold steel grip of the AR-15 beneath me, its firm kick-back, the neat three-point star that pops out when I press the trigger, brighter than day. What a rush!

I get up and reach down in the space beneath my bed frame and pull it out. It’s there in the black plastic case with the foam lining, looking just as good as the day I bought it, save for the scratch on the barrel from when it slipped from my hands that first time at the range. God, that pissed people off. You don’t just come in here with a weapon like that and start shooting, Mark W. told me, launching into one of his long-winded lectures on gun safety and protocol, like he wrote the damn book. Well, no Mark W. or anyone would be talking to me like that now. Six straight weeks of practice, five days a week. I could blow the head off a chicken from fifty yards if I wanted to. I could.

I pull the gun from the case and switch the TV on and start gathering up everything else. I have, in addition to the rifle, a Bushmaster AR with a seven-inch barrel and 30-round magazine, a 9mm SD9 Smith & Wesson pistol, as well as a five-round double-action .38 and enough ammunition to last me, depending on contingencies, several days. I also have a five-inch carbon steel tactical knife for hand-to-hand combat, an ultra-lite modular body vest, and several cans of high-performance pepper spray. I arrange it all neatly over my mattress and check my

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ammunition and load up my clips. It’s a gorgeous sight, seeing it all sitting there. On the TV, the morning news anchors are blabbering about last night’s high school soccer scores, and I’m smiling as I stuff everything into my duffel bag and zip it up.

What a beautiful day. The sky is cobalt and cloudless above me, and I wave to my neighbor watering her lawn while I haul all my equipment out to my truck. It’s damn heavy altogether, but my adrenaline is flowing and I’m in a great mood and I don’t really mind. I switch the radio on loud as it can go, check my mirrors and reverse down my driveway, and start on the ten-minute drive to work.

Picking my target was a crucial decision. I had considered and even reconnoitered a number of different establishments — schools, movie theaters, public parks, malls, libraries, the local theme park, a skating rink, nursing homes, various restaurants, a church — but they were all either too obvious or offered too many means of escape. Work was perfect. One floor, an open office plan, a single entry point. Best of all was that no one would be expecting it or even able to understand it after I was through. People there say I’m a friendly guy. I get on pretty well with everyone. I even have a little flirtation going on with one of the new girls there, I think.

I pull into the McDonald’s across the street from the office and order a Diet Coke and a large fries from the drive-thru, then wait there in the parking lot to bide some time. From my vantage point, I can see the double glass doors of my building and can watch as my coworkers wander in. It’s a boring building, one office park among many, its walls plastered and paper-thin. What we do there is design presentations and big slide shows other companies use to make announcements and sell new products. It’s not the sort of place I figure most people will miss.

The morning disc jockeys are arguing about celebrity boob jobs over a soundtrack of soft rock. It's almost nine. A wood-paneled minivan pulls into the office parking lot, and I watch the ambling figure of the floor receptionist slowly emerge and make her way inside. I really can't wait any longer at this point and decide now is as good as time as ever and so I start assembling my gear. I slip my vest on and holster my pistol and sheath my knife. I decide one can of pepper spray is probably more than enough, and stuff the rest of my pockets full of as much extra ammunition as I can. Then I reach back and lift up the AR-15, quickly checking the clip and the safety and assessing its aim. I place it carefully on the passenger seat beside me, take one more sip of my Diet Coke and rattle the ice around, then drive across the street.

It's funny all the last-minute choices you have to make after you've spent so long thinking about something. Like, for all my planning, I never really thought about where would be the best place I should park my truck while I'm shooting. Or, for that matter, whether I should just walk in with my rifle held high or whip it out like hell at the last second for a big reveal. I decide to leave my truck running on the curb right at the entrance and to use my duffel bag to hide my weapon. I put the .38 in the glove box and stow the Bushmaster under my seat, then empty out the rest of my spare ammunition and wrap the AR-15 up inside. I open my door and the fresh air is like a shot of nicotine. I take a nice long gulp of it and wipe the fry grease from my fingers and I walk inside.

First thing I see is that fat receptionist. She looks up and smiles and I give her a second to comprehend my figure with the vest and the bag slung over my shoulder and the pistol and the knife tied around my waist. And it must be beyond her current levels of apprehension because she just keeps sitting there smiling even as I pull out the AR-15 and that white-hot star flashes

and she does a little dance in her seat before settling down to look at the little holes blooming cherry red all over her blouse. In the air is a satisfying smell like burnt marshmallows. That’s one, I think. I look beyond her now and brace the gun against my chest while I sweep the room, trying to keep track of my count. I empty that clip and reload another then empty that one too. White threads of smoke are moving like snails around me. I can see that I’m already up to five. For a little variety, I unholster my pistol and direct it at a man trying to interpret a thin line of blood leaking out from his arm. He looks at me, not scared or angry but merely startled it seems, and I fire a full round and send him sprawling backwards several feet, spinning halfway around on the tiny wheels of his chair.

I stalk through the rows of plastic desks, taking pot shots at the bodies lying prone around me, shoving computers and stacks of paper and cups of still steaming coffee onto the floor. I’m really starting to have some fun with this. I take aim at a woman exiting the bathroom and replace her with a small round stain on the wall. I hear a phone ringing and spin around and empty a third clip out on a table and a pair of filing cabinets and a fresh corpse’s unfortunate leg. My count now is nine. Then, through a large window at the back of the office, I see a group gathered around a conference table, nodding away and taking notes like they are unaware of the reckoning I am handing out just a few feet from them, which sends an angry shudder running down the length of my spine. I position myself in front of the window and tap at it several times with the blunt end of my pistol until the heads in the room turn. I let them all get a good look at me before I take a step back and lift my weapons and watch the glass between us shatter into dust and triangles as I discharge my rounds. The sounds inside are loud and pure.

By the time the sprinkler system goes off I can feel the rifle cutting a deep bruise into my chest and shoulder and I'm grateful to put it down. The water is streaming over everything and turning to vapor as it glances the barrels of my guns. I holster the pistol and wrap the AR-15 back in the duffel bag and walk past the receptionist and out the front doors. Traffic is moving steadily along the road and the clouds are nowhere. It is still a beautiful day. I climb into my truck, making note that my clock has ticked forward only six minutes, then pull out of the parking lot and toward the highway, all the while listening for the sounds of the sirens that are inevitable and that will soon mean the coming of my death.

I am heading southbound and reaching ninety before I realize it and slow down. My heart is wild and racing, though there is nothing in the rear-view mirror but other cars like my own. To calm myself I turn the radio up loud as it can go and start singing along with the soft-rock station. On both sides of the highway, the land opens and businesses become sparse.

Forty miles later I can't stand it and turn the knob over to the news station. For several minutes I listen to a report on the local school-board election, then move lower on the dial where all I can find are descriptions of the weather for the next week. On the AM channels, the national shows are discussing foreign affairs and playing loud commercials. One is broadcasting other listeners as they call in and talk angrily about something, but I can't figure out what. I change the station again, noticing only at the last moment a patrolman appear behind me then speed up. I keep my lane, but put one hand on the Bushmaster while he pulls beside me. I can see from the corner of my eye that there is no one else in his car. I nudge the gas and move the Bushmaster

closer so that it's touching my leg. For a moment we remain steady, but then his lights flash and he shoots forward and disappears over the next hill.

I exit the highway to reassess my situation. It has been nearly an hour since I left the office. By now I figure the few who I left there have long ago contacted the police, who have gone on to bring in still more police and other authorities, all of whom are right now radioing each other and spreading outwards searching for me. If there is no news yet I reason it means they are not far behind. I briefly consider turning around and greeting them with a smile, but instead take the road into a little town just off the highway and start looking for a motel.

It is all feed stores and lots full of John Deere farming equipment, but I find a one-storey Best Western with an empty parking lot and a good view of the street. I take the time to pack my weapons and ammunition back in the duffel bag, then lock my truck and walk up and shove open the front door. A bell jingles and an ugly woman at the lobby desk looks up from a small TV. A line of horrible little black moles spreads down from her left cheek, and she just sits there staring until I realize I'm still wearing my body vest and have my knife and pepper spray still strapped to my belt. I ask about a room. She looks at me a little longer then nods slowly and disappears into the back. I wait and watch the TV, which is just playing a soap opera, until she emerges again with a piece of paper and a pen. I sign my name and she reads it over, then she shows me a rotten smile, points me in the right direction, and hands me a key.

I barely notice the room but for the sharp acrid smell of mold creeping through the walls and a large dark stain on the carpet someone had made a mediocre attempt to cover with the bed. The police could be here at any second and so I set to work. I draw the blinds and tip the desk over, then lean it against the door. I move the little wooden chair up to the window and place the

duffel bag at my feet. Carefully, quickly, I check the clips on the Bushmaster and AR-15 and reload them, then do the same for the Smith & Wesson and .38. I move the duffel bag onto a three-legged nightstand right beside me so I barely even have to reach over to reload. Even without the guns it is still heavy. I have enough ammunition for days.

I take two fingers and open a crack in the blinds and look out. The parking lot outside is scattered with Styrofoam remnants of fast food containers blowing in tight circles in the wind. Beyond that, a two-lane road creeps by, empty, and beyond that, a fenced-off field grown over with thick and sinister weeds. They could already be there, I think. I sit and open my eyes as wide as I can and watch until I start seeing spots of light in the corners of my vision. Men in masks and camouflaged suits are crawling through the grass, pausing occasionally to stare through the scopes of long rifles and take careful aim, but when I look they are not there. A breeze flutters across the top of the field like a breath. A van turns into the parking lot, idles briefly, then continues along the road in the opposite direction. I wait, listening to the air conditioning hum calmly above me. I can feel the shadows around me grow.

By nightfall, three other cars besides my own occupy the parking lot, each of them driven by weary, single men. There is no moon and the only light is the soft yellow fuzz of the streetlamp above the motel sign. Darkness obscures the field.

I have not eaten anything for hours and can think of nothing better than sitting down with a warm burger and a cold beer and a loud TV. I pinch the blinds open again and look out but there is just the empty blackness staring back. The sentries are hidden and waiting, I think, and if I walk outside now one will shoot me and I will die and that will be it of me. Or worse, they will

take me alive, then lock me away so that I will disappear and be forgotten about forever, which I refuse.

But there is little else to do now than to just wait with them, so I get up and turn on the TV. Besides the Spanish station, there are only six channels. I keep the volume low while I cycle through them, listening for the muffled sounds of voices and rubber boot steps outside. I pass a football game and some sitcoms and a movie before I find the news. Strangely, it’s the same two anchors from this morning, except now they are discussing the latest roundup of drunk driving incidents, solemnly reciting grim statistics while carnival-bright graphics flash on the screen. The camera pans from the big-breasted anchor to the middle-aged man, who shuffles some papers and transitions into a story about vandalism at a local mall. I switch over and find another news broadcast, but there, too, there is no mention of me. I turn to a nature documentary and briefly watch as a group of men saw the horn off the bloated corpse of a rhino before shutting it off. I remain seated on the edge of the bed, engulfed in the silence of the world around me. Then I stand and rip open the blinds and scream.

It is now nearly ten. I strap the duffel bag around me and kick the desk over and burst outside, where the night air is warm and still. I expect everything to happen all at once — the screech of tires, the sirens, the dazzling burst of spinning red and blue lights, then the appearance of the invisible men, dozens of them, all rushing toward me with harm in their eyes — but nothing does. I walk very casually over to my truck and unlock it and place my bag inside. Everything is just as I left it, although there is a streak of dark blood on the dashboard that I do not remember from before. I reach over to wipe it away, but it’s already dry, so I turn the ignition and am soon moving sixty miles per hour on the highway in the direction of my home.



My idea is that if they cannot find me then I will just have to find them. I park next to a mailbox adorned with a crinkled gold ribbon, then take my knife and shoulder my rifle and start on my way. I am two blocks from my house. Little rectangles of light glow from the homes on either side as people watch late-night talk shows and sports games and settle in. I walk quickly, staying off the sidewalk and away from the streetlamps, remaining in the shadows of the manicured lawns. The trees shudder soundlessly with the wind above me. I realize I am sweating all over and, for the first time, afraid.

I turn a block early and locate the house behind mine. There is a car in the driveway and a bicycle left out in front, but all the windows are dark. I crouch down behind the car and watch the house for a while, twenty minutes maybe, and try listening for voices coming out of it, but the only thing I hear is the howling of some lonesome dog far away. I look up into the night sky, occupied by neither moon nor stars, just the dim glow of the city around me, while my heart ticks in my chest. Then I get up and run to the side gate of the house and try the latch, cursing at it before I even touch it, and breathe relief when it opens without a sound.

In the backyard is an oblong pool lined with rocks and lit by a low blue light. I step around it, avoiding the rubber chairs and foam pool floats discarded randomly in the grass, trying to make my way to the trees lining the far fence that borders my home. Halfway there, a light clicks on. I fall to the ground behind a low bush and turn to look. I can feel the presence of people all around me, hundreds of them, but I can see no one there. The rooms inside the house remain black and vacant, and soon the light, affixed to a motion detector high up on an outside wall, turns off. Slowly, I crawl the remaining distance to the trees, then grab the branches and hoist myself up.

Over the fence and across the empty patch of dirt and weeds that I call my lawn, I can see my house. Like I always do I left my living room light on, and I watch the shadows cast by the ceiling fan as it spins and rocks on its axis while I look for some sign of movement inside. I know that you are there, I think. I take a step to climb higher and gain a better vantage, but the tree shakes and the light behind me flashes on again and I freeze. I turn my head carefully, as much as I can, and see the yellow of a lamp switch on in a second-floor window, then the slender silhouette of a man. He does not move, and for a moment neither do I, and the terribleness of this stretches out into infinity, the figure and me both bathed in the shared knowledge of my failure, simultaneously astonished by the suddenness of it, and then he disappears.

I waste no time and grab the edge of the fence and hurl myself over, falling on my back onto the hard dirt while I cradle my rifle so it does not go off. There is nowhere I can hide so I get up immediately and run until I am flush against the brick beside my house’s rear door. I glance quickly back across my yard to my neighbor’s window, where the light remains. Fine, I think, fumbling in my pocket for my key and slipping it discreetly into the door handle, then waiting inside another stretch of time that expands and contracts like a man gasping for breath. This is what I must do. I turn the key and burst in.

The cops arrive early in the next morning, a little after eight a.m. I have been up the entire night. I have swept each room of my house and taken inventory. I have checked the perimeter and the crawl spaces and secured the garage. Afterwards, I resumed my waiting, angry and relieved and afraid all at the same time, but also certain. It’s just a matter of time.

I see the squad car pull up and park on the curb, and two blue-clad officers climb out. Awareness descends upon me like a drug. I move from the window where previously I had been fighting the urge to nod off and position myself several feet behind my front door. I wish desperately I had not left my ammunition and other weapons in my truck, but am happy to at least have my AR-15. I grip the handle and raise the muzzle so that it is pointing at the direct center of the door. The gun is hard and heavy, and my finger is light on its trigger, and in a moment I will press it and the world and everyone in it will once again disappear.

The two cops walk up to my door and stand there a moment, and then I hear three loud knocks. I hold my rifle steady and do not move. From the other side of the door are the sounds of them shuffling in place as their radios chatter and cut in and out. They knock again, slightly louder, inserting more space between each one. I touch the curved steel of the trigger and very briefly imagine a scenario in which none of this is happening, where it is just a little past eight a.m. on a weekday morning and I am having my breakfast and am watching the television undisturbed. And within this scenario, somewhere shadowed and concealed and now irretrievable beneath the weight of the present situation, I realize is the decision I made for that to never happen again. I hear a burst of radio static and a scraping sound, and I raise my rifle higher and spread my legs. As I do though, one cop says something unintelligible, then the other replies, and both their voices begin trailing off. Two doors slam moments later, and I watch from out my front window as the squad car slowly drives away.

I'm not sure what to do at this point and just stand there until my arms ache and I have to put the gun down. I feel myself suffocating in the stale air from my A/C unit and so I open my door and walk outside, where the morning is busy unfolding itself into another bright and

beautiful day. Immediately, I notice the piece of paper, secured to the door with a length of brown tape, and I rip it off. It’s from the police, informing me that a neighbor had called them about a break-in and to dial the number below if I wish to report anything stolen. It’s signed at the bottom with a large and illegible name. I read it again, then crumple it into a tight ball and toss it on the ground.

The heat of the day is rising and forming into terrible shapes. I decide to take a shower to clear my head. I go back inside and remove all of my clothing one by one until I am in front of my mirror wearing only my body vest and the shirt beneath. Spots of dry blood decorate my chest and shoulders like flecks of paint. I turn the water on and climb naked into the tub and stand beneath the cold stream feeling relief, but when I look down more blood is pooling around me, running down my arms and legs in slow rivulets, staining the tile a dark crimson purple that is almost black. I watch this with amazement and confusion, then bend over and vomit until I cannot see anything and pass out. When I wake up, curled on the floor of my shower, water still streaming around me but everything else drained away, the decision to go back is very clear.

The two blocks to my truck are long and oppressive and filled with the ripe stench of death. I start the engine and drive cautiously in the direction of the office. Faint voices rise up whispering, but I cannot make out what. It is a little after ten o’clock in the morning. I touch the knob on the radio and turn it to the oldies station, which is playing gleeful renditions of the songs of yesteryear, all of them on the subject of love. I have killed fourteen people for no reason at all, I hear the voices saying. I am late for work.

The first time I drive right on past the office and can barely look but I do and there is nothing strange at all. I turn the volume on the radio up to try to drown the voices out while I circle the block. Songs of spurned lovers surround me as I drive.

The second time I approach from a different direction, slower, and again see nothing strange. There are no police cars or ambulances or yellow police tape. Neither are there any news vans or crowds of spectators passing idly by. It is just a building and a parking lot in a morning calm as any other day.

I find a spot in the back and pull my truck in, then sit there looking at the glass doors of the front entrance and the silver blue sky they reflect. I adjust the volume on the radio until I reach its limit but I can no longer hear a thing. The doors remain shut, and I understand that whatever is left of me will soon vanish. I exit the truck.

The silence outside is sudden and spectacular and more painful than the voices moments before. I stumble through the parking lot, my head throbbing with a dangerous spell of dizziness and my brain aching against its own skull. The twin glass doors are a mile away and then they're right in front of me. I push the handle and walk in.

The receptionist greets me at the front desk with an uncomfortable expression. Her face is pale and her mouth is open and her limbs are stiff and curled inward with the signs of recent death. The documents scattered around her are all colored red. Beyond this scene are more bodies frozen in time and space and stuck in postures unnatural and unreal. One man is lying on his back on a large dark stain on the carpet, his eyes white circles and both arms outstretched as if for a hug. Another is sitting against a wall, leaning his head on his hands, bits of brain tissue caught in between. There is no way to comprehend all this at once.

Fourteen people. But there are more all around. The living in the office are still there mercilessly living, freshly showered and dressed in sharp suits and skirts while they take calls and step over rotten corpses or sit alongside them and stare at screens. The day is busy and nothing has changed. I make my way to my desk, looking on with horror at my coworkers, none of whom looks at me or acknowledges me for what I have done. Fourteen people, the voices tell me, for no reason at all.

I sit down and immediately my phone rings. The person on the other end is talking loudly and rapidly, but I am looking at the thin line of blood, like a thread, that has fallen on the surface of my desk, and I cannot understand a word. I hang up and follow the blood over the side to the floor where it touches the index finger of a young woman with long auburn hair. Like the others, her eyes are wide open and rolled back deep into her sockets and are filled with a web of blue veins. I look at her, and because no one is doing anything, and because I feel like I have to do something, I close her eyes and I say her name.