

First-Person Shooter

Please God let today be like any other day. That's what I say everyday before I get out of bed. That's what I've been saying everyday for the past six years.

After I brush my teeth, I start my console, wear the headset, and log into a multiplayer. When Mom hears my clatter in the bathroom, she starts cooking. She's a really good cook. She's the only one in the family who gets me, understands why I've become what I've become.

In the multiplayer, I lie in the fuselage of a downed aircraft. My character, Sergeant James "Cobra" Caulfielder, groans. Outside, a soldier waves me forth, but before I can move, he's engulfed in a bulb of flame before he can even scream. My fellow soldiers shout "Move" repeatedly above a hail of weapon fire. The mission objectives crawl across the top of the screen. Enter the Fortress. Find and eliminate President. This is a particularly chaotic level of *End Times* 2, a very confusing map. I've tried it a few times and died.

Dying in a game is what I imagine dying in real life is like. The screen goes dark before you wake up again. Only in real dying, I hope you wake as someone else.

I go downstairs and eat with Mom in the kitchen. She's made chicken adobo. She pats me on the head, and I can tell she's not sure what to say next.

"What are you going to do today?" she says finally.

I shrug. She knows. Same thing I do everyday.

"Maybe you should play some basketball in the backyard?"

"I don't like sports."

"I'm going to go to the mall with Aunt Theresa later—"

"No, thanks."

"You can buy a new game."

“I can order them online.”

Mom lets out a quick breath through her nose. She waddles slowly to the sink, plate in hand.

She’s not happy with me. And that hurts. Nobody is happy with me. Mom and Dad and my older brother Steve say a lot of time has passed, and people don’t blame me anymore. Steve even tries to set me up with friends and girls and jobs.

They don’t know what it’s like. Nobody has ever blamed them. After that morning on campus with Eugene and after everyone found out that I was his only friend, I couldn’t go outside without people and cameras staring at me, blaming me. That morning was so bright, the sky too clear. It was December. Where was the snow?

The parents of the victims called me a murderer—just because I was Eugene’s roommate. Once, on my way to class, one of the dead girl’s dads stepped in front of me out of nowhere and, out of shock, I turned and ran. I got no more than a few steps before he grabbed my backpack and threw me to the ground. I stared up at him, into the bright, cold sky. He shook me, and the world reeled, looked fake like a video game. It was a new school year. Things were supposed to be better. The dad had tears in his eyes. Why? He kept asking. Why did Eugene kill his girl? He spat on me, as he wept. He called me a few names about my race, but I don’t want to make it about that. I don’t blame him.

The parents of the kids who weren’t shot that day were the worst. They tried to get me arrested as an accessory. They held signs outside our house and shouted at us. I remember my dad sitting at the dining table wearing his U.S. Navy hat, just staring off into space, as the chants went on for hours. He told me to go upstairs and stay there. I was watching television so I didn’t

want to move. My dad slammed a fist on the table and called me dumb and useless in Tagalog. I don't want to make it about what he called me. I don't blame him either.

I live in a big house. When I'm not gaming, I work out in our home gym and watch the 70-inch high-def. I like older sitcoms best because they're usually filmed indoors. *Two and a Half Men*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Friends*. I don't like reality shows, procedurals, or crime dramas—any show filmed outside. Sunlight makes people look too real.

I do lots of pull-ups, calisthenics, and butt exercises because I sit so much when I game. After lunch, I'm on the treadmill, watching Neil Patrick Harris talk about how awesome he is for the ten-thousandth time. Mom walks in, holding the cordless.

"It's Steve," she says.

I stop the treadmill. "Aw, come on."

Mom continues to shake the phone at me. I take it.

"Hey, buddy," Steve says.

I hate it when he calls me buddy.

"Mom and I are thinking about taking you out to dinner tonight."

He says this like it's normal. Steve works at this company that does studies—the ones cited on the radio when there's not much news. Like that recent study that found that married working couples clean house less. Or the one that showed that people don't trust their neighbors.

I flip through channels, until I find TV Land. *All in the Family* is on. It's the episode Archie gets put in lockup with commies and hippies. One of my favorites. I love how in sitcoms, the prisons always feel clean and comfortable, like even the set designers want to reassure us that they'll be out of jail in thirty minutes.

"Marcus?"

“Yeah?”

“Are you up for it?” Steve says.

I turn off the television and pull the shades down in the room. Mom is still standing there waiting to take the phone back. I shoo her away.

“What the fuck do you think?”

“Hey, Language!” Steve says. “Do it for Mom. She deserves a break.”

I want to give Mom a break. I don’t want Mom to take care of me forever. She’s getting old. I don’t want to be a burden. I want to change. I just don’t want to change *today*. Please God let today be like any other day.

“I’m not like you, Steve. I’m not like you.” My voice is rising. I’m shaking all over.

“Okay, pal, okay,” Steve says. “Calm down. Shhh.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and force a few hard breaths. My teeth are clenched, and I can feel my pulse in my throat.

“Hey, did you know that studies show that toddlers bond with robots?” Steve says.

“Huh?”

“Nothing,” Steve says. “Do you mind if Lily comes over tonight?”

“Oh, Lord.”

“Don’t argue,” Steve says. “Studies show that people who argue tend to get mad more often.”

“Asshole.”

“Language!” Steve barks. “You don’t get everything you want in life, okay? Lily’s part of the family too. We’re all sick and tired of walking on eggshells around you. Everyone knows what happened. So the hell what?”

Steve rarely gets angry. I feel like I might cry so I swallow and pinch away the feeling.

“Look what you made me do,” Steve says. He hangs up.

I go downstairs to give Mom the phone and see that her car is gone. She’s gone to Aunt Theresa’s.

I return to the gym and continue my work out, lifting weights, doing pull-ups. The reason I don’t like Steve’s girlfriend Lily is that she’s got the sensitivity of a brick. She always sends me job listings and offers to put me in touch with her “network,” when we all know she’s just an admin. She brings up my problem whenever she comes over. She often asks about what happened on that bright, crisp December morning six years ago like it was yesterday, like she’s police. Yes, Eugene and I played a lot of video games. Yes, we’d been friends since we were six. Yes, we liked first-person shooters. Yes, I knew he had guns. Yes, I even filmed several of those famous videos where he’s holding his guns and saying that he’s going to kill the rich kids in school. I thought he was kidding around. Yes, when we walked to campus together that morning, I noticed his backpack was fuller than normal. No, I never thought he would do what he did. No, I’m not a murderer, but you can call me one anyway. I won’t get mad. I’m used to it.

I see myself walking to class with Eugene. I told him about the first *Halo*, about how I thought the game was a cautionary tale about the separation of church and state. He nodded and smiled, but he wasn’t really listening. We were crossing the quad. Students were going to class. The campus shuttles dropped off a large group. We passed a big oak tree, and Eugene pushed me behind it and said to get down, stay down and stay there. He was protecting me, like someone was attacking us. He slung his backpack over his chest and ran toward the one of the buildings. Entered the fortress. Soon, the screams, the gunshots.

I fall off the pull-up bar and land on my hands and knees. My arms are fried. I've been doing pull-ups for ten minutes. I shower, go to my room, lock the door, and start up my console. I enter another multiplayer on *End Times 2*. It's a map of the planet Gurkanus. The objective is to rescue a prisoner from a home nestled in a crowded interplanetary version of a favela called an Argento. Lots of blind alleys and mosquito-like aliens. Of course, we're in the middle of a war as well, and the Argento is getting bombed. We have to listen for the air growl, the scene to shudder, the sign to take cover. Chaos.

Sometimes I imagine one of the other players on my side is Eugene. People didn't believe me when I said that Eugene was a good guy. Back when we were in high school, he'd help his parents out at the dry cleaners every day after school. When we played fighting games, he'd let me win. We were ten when we filmed a short movie on a camcorder. He played a black-hood-and-caped superhero named Obsidian Man and I played a white-masked bad guy named Chalk. While we filmed a fight scene, he accidentally split my lip with a punch and was so upset about it, he started crying.

I was the one who introduced him to gaming in the first place. I got him into military shooters. *Call of Duty*. *Battlefield*. *Metal Gear Solid*. I can't play those games anymore. Can't do real guns.

Neither of us liked college. I think he had a crush on this white girl Brittany who was way out of his league. She's an actress now on one of those shitty USA Network shows.

People used to tease us. They called us Gay Nerds. Eugene had a bad stutter that made him put F sounds on everything. I used to be thin and gangly, and I wore really thick glasses. Eugene and I weren't good at much of anything really, other than sitting in front of a screen and pressing buttons on a piece of silly plastic.

“Did you know you can order one of those online?” Eugene said one night while we were playing *Call of Duty*.

“One of what?”

“The assault rifle, the M4A1,” he said. “Full auto-fire. You can even get one with a sight.”

In *End Times 2*, I’ve found the prisoner, hiding beneath a sewer grate. He’s a dark-haired fellow. Emaciated and gangly like me in real life. He holds some secret about President. At the other end of this Argento is our escapecraft. I’ve got to blast aliens to protect him. I ask the other players to cover me. We get to the escapecraft. Off into the atmosphere we go. The planet grows visible through the window. Fade out. The players exchange congratulations over headsets. We’re all strangers, but I imagine that this is what the congratulations would have felt like had I been a hero that December morning, instead of just another dumb coward hiding behind a tree. Once I realized what was happening, I should have gone after Eugene. I’d like to believe that he wouldn’t have been able to look me, his best friend, in the eye and kill me.

I logoff and drift through the silent and empty house. Mom’s been gone for an hour, and I already miss her. In the backyard, the sky makes our lawn look plastic. There’s a deck, a patio, and a grill that’s layered with dust. I slide open the glass door and touch the fly screen. How easy would it be to pull the screen aside and step out into the real world again! I look beyond our fences, and even though I know no one would be watching me, I feel eyes peering through the cracks, judging me, and my guts clench. I hurry to the kitchen and brace myself against the sink, against the nausea. Once the feelings pass, I down a glass of water.

The garage door groans open. Mom’s back. I shut the sliding glass door, close the vertical blinds. I feel whole again. She’s moving slowly, carrying four full paper shopping bags. I take

them all from her. I start emptying the groceries, putting proteins in the fridge, canned foods in the pantry. Mom isn't saying anything, and she isn't looking at me. Is she still upset?

I ask her if she's okay.

Her glance doesn't linger. She's ashamed. She mops her brow. "Just tired," she says.

Then she asks if I'm hungry. I tell her I am.

I wait in the living room while Mom makes me a snack. I find an old episode of *Facts of Life*. I'm not a good person. I'm a burden. I should be doing more with my life. Eugene and I were computer science majors. We never finished.

Soon, the smells rise from my mother's wok. Fried soy sauce noodles with bok choy—that's my guess. My stomach growls. The mouth moistens. It occurs to me that I've never offered to help Mom cook.

"Dad called," she says.

Mom rarely mentions Dad. He spends most of the time over at the apartment building he manages. He's given up on me. I can't remember the last time he asked how I was doing.

"He wants to go out to dinner tonight."

"What am I going to do?"

Mom didn't look at me. "He wants you to come."

"What?"

She plates my snack and sticks in front of me like bad papers she wants me to sign.

"Marcus, it's time."

I tell her no again, grab my plate, and storm upstairs.

"Dad will be at the restaurant!" Mom shouts. "He'll be waiting! We will be waiting!"

The shrillness of Mom's voice makes me nauseous. I can't remember the last time she raised her voice. I lock myself in my room and eat in front of my television. The noodles are tasteless. Mom's cooking is usually so good. This dish is slopped together. Barely any soy sauce at all, and the bok choy are wrinkled. The steps creak. She's making her way upstairs. I start up the console.

I hear Mom talking on the phone. She's speaking Tagalog in a high-strung, plaintive tone, which means she's talking to Dad. "I told you we should have sent him to someone," says Mom. My dad didn't think I shouldn't go to a doctor because I was healthy and young.

The screen comes up, but everything goes out of focus. I put my forehead to the ground and cover my ears. My eyes are squeezed shut, and I'm rocking back and forth and screaming silently until I can't hear Mom's voice anymore. I'm beyond hope. Twenty-six years old and my life is over. I think Eugene spared me because I was supposed to live the life he wished he had the courage to lead. But what have I done with his favor? I know how men my age are supposed to be. I'm supposed to be like Steve. I'm supposed to have goals and responsibilities. I'm not supposed to have Mom practically wipe my butt for me. I'm supposed to make Dad proud of my accomplishments. But even if the shooting hadn't happened, I feel like I'd be like this. I know I'm not normal. We'd have a normal family except for me. Eugene should have killed me too. Then I could wake up and be someone else.

I haven't heard a sound in the house for some time. I go downstairs, back upstairs, then downstairs. Mom's gone again. I see the note on the whiteboard.

"Walking to Olive Garden," Mom's written. "Meet you there at 5:30."

We live in the suburbs. Olive Garden is probably two hours away by foot, underneath freeway overpasses and over train tracks. Mom is 61 and overweight, and she takes medication for hypertension and high cholesterol.

The phone rings. I pick up.

“What did you do?” Steve says.

“What?”

“Mom’s walking to Olive Garden.”

“I know!”

“Is she insane?”

“You’ve got to get her.”

“I’ve got to work,” Steve says. “I know you’re unfamiliar with the concept, but I can’t just up and walk out. You have to get her.”

“Where’s Dad?”

“How am I supposed to know? Maybe he’s walking to Olive Garden too.”

“I haven’t driven in six years.”

“It’s like a bicycle,” Steve says.

“Fuck you.”

“Studies show that you can put a key in an automobile, put the joystick in reverse, and find your mother,” Steve says. “Call me back when you find her.”

He hangs up, and I shout expletives. I grab the car keys and open the door that leads to the garage. I dry-heave, feel dizzy as the daylight washes over the car, stinging my eyes. More expletives. Some whimpering. Lots of sweating. I step out into the garage like I’m going over a

cliff. My feet hit the concrete and squishes a little, and I put my hands out and brace myself against the hood of Mom's minivan. Why is she doing this to me?

I'm making noises I've never heard from myself as I approach the driver's seat. I hear the screaming of the students on campus that day. They sound like locusts in my memory now. My whole body shakes as I pop the door open and slide into the seat. I feel like I'm squeezing myself into a baby's chair. I can hardly move. My thighs are indented by the steering wheel. I try to find the button to move the seat back, but I end up moving the mirrors, the windshield wipers, the time—everything but the seat. Then I find the bar below the chair. It's manual, old, like my parents. I put the key in the ignition. I'm a mess. I'm drooling a little, snarling, crying. I turn the key though. The minivan roars. I put the gearshift in reverse, shut my eyes and lower the right foot. Scream. Scream so I can't hear the neighbors calling me names.

The van shoots into the street, screeching as I hit the brakes. I almost hit a neighbor's mailbox. I take a breath and am surprised I still feel okay. Tell myself this is just like a video game. Then I proceed slowly. When I start a new video game, I usually go all out right away, charging into traps. If I die in a game, I just start over. Learn. Get better. Why can't I do that in real life?

I'm moving about fifteen miles per hour on our empty street. I eye the sidewalks. No Mom. I try to remember the way to Olive Garden. It's a right, then a left on the expressway, and you go like ten miles. Mom can't be far. I jerk the car to the left, and it overturns, so I jerk the car back to the right, and I'm swerving as I get to the stoplight, which turns green so I have to go. My foot drops on the pedal too hard, and I'm off into the intersection, plowing onto a four-lane boulevard. I'm sweating through my shirt. I scan for Mom's round figure, her specific waddle. She should stand out against the concrete nothingness that Eugene railed against in his video.

“I just want to feel something good in this wasteland,” he hissed, pointing those guns at the camera. “The world is ugly like me.”

I stop at a light. I feel unbalanced, like I’m sitting in a boat. I’ve never actually been in a real boat. Once many years ago in a WWII shooter, I rowed a boat onto the shores of Normandy. I see myself running across the quad again, after the gunshots stopped. Four or five students gaped at the ground, screaming ohmyGods and crying. I’m tall so I could see over them. A girl lay there. A brunette, but we can’t recognize her. She’d been shot in the face.

I hear a horn. I’ve been sitting in front of the green light for too long. My move. The horns sound again. I dry-heave. Cars swerve around me. I hit the hazard lights. Hazard is I. They said I was a hazard to the community.

Then I see Mom. Looking so alone on the sidewalk. The overpass and freeway on-ramp in the distance. I pull up beside her and roll down the passenger side window. Though she’s red-eyed from crying, she looks at me like I’m someone new.

It’s 5:30. We park in front of Olive Garden, and I step out of the car. The first couple of steps are a little mushy, like the asphalt has turned to rain-softened soil. The next steps are steadier, and I begin to think I’m getting better. I can breathe. No one is looking at me and thinking about what happened that December day years ago. Mom takes the crook of my elbow, and we’re walking together in the night, outside, like this happens all the time, like we’re normal. I feel a rush of happiness and think that as long as she’s with me, I’ll be okay.

Inside the restaurant, Dad is seated at the head of the table. He is wearing his U.S. Navy hat with the flat brim as usual. He adjusts his tinted glasses. He’s probably thinking I’m a

mirage. He's surprised I've made it, like he was surprised I made it after he heard news of the shooting on the radio. He always expects the worst, so he can avoid disappointment. Mom kisses him on the cheek, and she whispers something to him. Dad continues to stare at me, his lips parted by amazement. I sit next to him, across from Mom. I'm still in wet gym clothes. A mess. I've been through chaos, but I'm here.

"I'm proud of you," Dad says. "You've always been so smart. I remember teaching taught you long division when you were three. You got it right away."

His chin trembles, and he's fighting back tears, so I'm fighting back tears. Dad has spoken more to me in the last five minutes than he has in five months. Mom takes Dad's cell phone and calls Steve to tell him and Lily to come. She has to repeat herself three times.

Today is the seventh anniversary of the shooting. Eugene shot 34 students, then himself. People used to tease us. They called us Gay Nerds. Eugene had a bad stutter that made him put F sounds on everything. I used to be thin and gangly, and I wore really thick glasses. Eugene and I weren't good at much of anything really, other than first-person shooters. This is what I tell Jessica, my therapist, as we walk around Dailybrook, the place I go twice a week to practice my coping mechanisms.

"Mom and Dad are on a cruise," I tell her.

Jessica puts her hand on my shoulder. A line appears between Jessica's brows and vanishes. "Do you feel deserted?"

We are standing in the quad of Dailybrook, under a large tree, like the one at the college. I think of Eugene.

“Not by them,” I say.