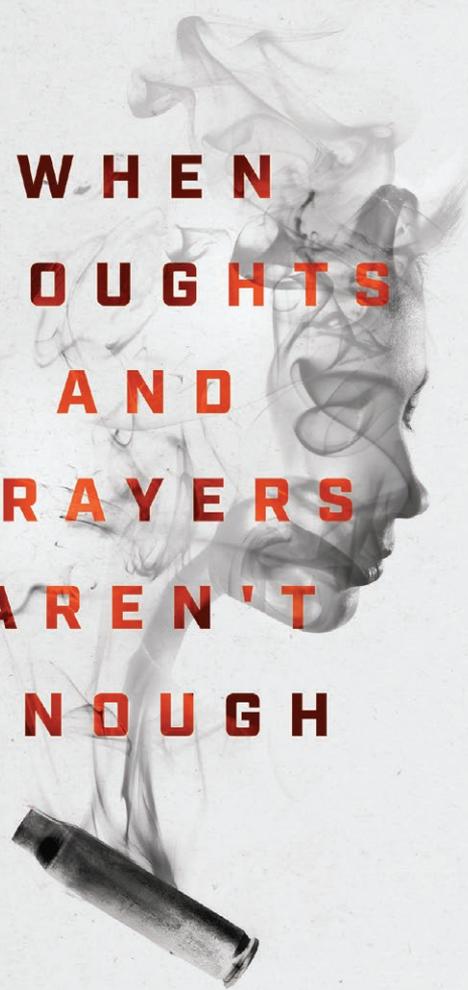


TAYLOR S. SCHUMANN



**WHEN
THOUGHTS
AND
PRAYERS
AREN'T
ENOUGH**

A SHOOTING SURVIVOR'S
JOURNEY INTO THE REALITIES
of GUN VIOLENCE



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SURVIVING



I STARED DOWN THE BARREL of a shotgun, two feet away from me, pointed at my head. I was going to die.

It was the most terrifying moment of my life—and yet all I could think was, “Doesn’t he know he can’t bring guns to school?”

My therapist later would explain to me that this was a natural reaction; my brain was quickly trying to make sense of what was happening, and “You are about to get shot” happens to be low on the list of likely possibilities. The thought briefly passed through my mind that maybe the boy just forgot this rule and I would tell him and he would take the gun back to his car.

That wouldn’t happen, of course.

I looked at him. He was young, a student probably, I thought. He was wearing a T-shirt and a zip-up sweatshirt. No trench coat or mask or battle gear to give away his intentions. He was calm, but he seemed unsure of himself. Maybe, I thought in a moment that seemed to last an eternity, he’ll give up, maybe he doesn’t really want to do this. But he did. I was looking evil directly in the eyes. He was going to shoot me. He wanted to kill me. And there was nothing I could do about it.

It started like any other day. I had my morning coffee and got ready for work with the news playing on the TV in the background. I half-listened to a report of a possible shooter on the campus of a university in North Carolina. The reports would ultimately be unfounded, but I paused to whisper a prayer and a version of “I can’t even imagine.”

April 12, 2013, was a Friday. For me, it was a particularly special Friday because my bridal shower was scheduled for the next day. My friends were coming into town to spend the weekend with me, and I was anxious to get through the day and get the festivities started. I even wrote a Facebook post that morning when I got to work: “Beyond excited to have so many of my dear friends together in one place this weekend—my heart is already so happy.”

My fiancé, Eric, and I were just a few weeks out from our May 25 wedding, and we couldn’t wait to get married. Eric and I met in the summer of 2010 when mutual friends introduced us at a birthday party. He immediately intrigued me. His hair fell just above his eyes, and he had a motorcycle, so he was obviously very cool—probably too cool for me. It was immediately apparent how smart he was. And so funny. We laughed the whole party. Thankfully, he was interested in me too, and we began dating a few months later. We dated for two years before Eric asked me to marry him in May 2012, the day before I graduated from college. I thought he was messing with me when he got down on one knee and opened the ring box, letting the sun reflect off the diamond band. I am grateful he was not, in fact, messing with me.

Eric had recently been accepted into pharmacy school in spring 2013, and in between wedding and honeymoon details, we were planning our move to a town in Tennessee eight hours away from where we currently lived in Virginia for him to attend school. Life wasn’t perfect, of course. I mean, is it ever? But things were falling into place for us. We were happy and hopeful, and life felt like it was just beginning.

I arrived at New River Community College’s mall campus in Christiansburg, Virginia, at 10 a.m. with my coffee in hand. I greeted my coworkers Debbie and Carrie. Debbie and I had the same job title,

administrative specialist, and we were both in our early twenties, so we became good friends in the months we'd been working together. Our boss, Carrie, was an older woman who exuded a warm, comforting presence. I was always happy when she decided to spend some time with us at our desk instead of working in her office.

Since I worked at the front desk, I was the first person a visitor encountered when they entered the school. The desk was in a big L shape, with a gate to enter into the administrative area. A small closet bordered it where we kept office supplies, the copy machine, and testing materials. I'd been working at the community college for about three months, and I enjoyed the collegial atmosphere and working with students. That day, I spent my morning answering phone calls and emails, and filing tests for the distance education program. Not many classes were scheduled for Friday mornings, so things were slow and quiet.

A couple of hours into work, Debbie asked if we could switch our lunch breaks. "Do you mind if I take the first one? I have a few calls I need to make." I agreed; I was in the middle of responding to some emails and was happy to wait until 2:15.

Debbie got up to take her break around the same time our IT specialist, Brian, arrived. He had come to take a look at my computer monitor, which had been acting up. Wanting to continue working, I decided to log in on Debbie's computer, the one closest to the front door.

Focused on the task at hand, I wasn't paying much attention to the rest of the office until, just before 2:00, I heard Carrie stand up. Glancing up from my desk, I saw Carrie slowly moving backward from her chair as she faced toward the door. Her face turned to a shade of white I can only describe as ghostly. Her voice was shaky and panicked as she pointed at something over my shoulder and started saying, "No. No. No." Something was terribly wrong. I don't know what I expected to see when I turned around, but I do know probably last on my list was a man about two feet away with a shotgun pointed at my face.



Everything felt urgent, yet moving in slow motion at the same time. When the reality of the situation sunk in, and I realized that this wasn't a student who'd forgotten to leave his gun in his car but someone who intended to harm us—a realization that took seconds but felt like much longer—and I ducked underneath my desk. I knew this wasn't the best location to hide, but I didn't know where to go or what to do. I was panicking and really regretting mindlessly clicking through the active-shooter training I had taken months earlier.

Carrie and the IT tech, Brian, ran out from behind the gate, sprinting to find an escape. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the shooter follow after them. This was my chance. It felt like my body was on autopilot; even while I was still trying to decide what to do, I was already running into the supply closet a few feet behind my desk. I don't remember deciding to do it. It felt like God just picked me up and moved me.

I ran in and slammed the closet door shut, just as I heard the gun go off. I made it. I slowly looked down and noticed blood dripping onto the floor. Whose blood is that?

And then I realized that it was mine. I didn't yet know where I was shot, and I was too scared to look. This cannot be real.

I didn't feel anything yet. That thing where people say they don't realize they've been shot at first? I didn't believe it until it happened to me. But my body did what it was supposed to do: it protected me from the initial shock and gave me a second to try and figure out what was happening before the pain overtook me.

I looked down at my left hand and could hardly believe what I was seeing. I wish I could describe it with more delicacy, but gunshot wounds are graphic. It looked like my hand had exploded. It looked ripped apart. The swelling was happening right before my eyes and I couldn't figure out where the bullet had gone in or out, but I knew it was bad. In a moment of clarity, I winced in pain as I slipped off my engagement ring from my swelling finger and put it into my pocket.

I felt a burning sensation and touched my other hand to my chest. When I pulled my hand away, it was bloodied. I also realized I couldn't see out of my left eye. I looked at the door behind me: there was a hole the size of a baseball where the bullet went through, sending shards of wood into my eye, face, and chest.

Then I remembered: the door doesn't lock from the inside and my key is in my desk. I was trapped in a room with a door that I couldn't lock, and a man with a gun stood on the other side. I slid down to the floor with my back against the door as I tried to keep it shut. The burning smell of gunpowder drifted into the room. I had no idea where the shooter had gone, but I could hear the sound every time the gun fired.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Some people think the sound of a gun is "bang," but in my experience it's more of a "boom." It was loud and deafening, and the sound carried throughout the whole building. Boom. And then another boom. And another. My mind reeled as I imagined who was on the other end of each of those shots. How many of us were going to be killed? How many injured?

I looked down at my hand again. The blood was pouring out but I couldn't tell the full extent of the injury at that point. I didn't want to look at it anymore. It was so mangled and I was worried the bullet cut through the artery at my wrist. If it had, then I wouldn't have much time. This cannot be happening to me. I cannot die here. I cannot die this way. I didn't want to be there anymore. I wanted it to be over, but there was no way out. I was trapped in that room, alone, waiting to die.

I thought about my fiancé, Eric, who was working just a few minutes up the road. He was so close, and it hurt me to think that he had no idea what was happening to me, how his life was about to change. I thought about the wedding and the life we would never get to have. I wondered if he would be okay without me. He needs me. I thought about my parents and my sister. Would they ever recover from the death of their daughter and sister? I thought about our dogs and our

cat. It was too much for me. Too heavy. I can't do this. That's when the tears came, along with my first coherent prayer.

God, I can't sit here and wait to die. If you're going to take me, please just take me quickly. Please. Please. Please.

It is a surreal experience, praying to die quickly.

In that moment, I heard the Lord speak to me clearer than I ever had in my life. I knew he was telling me: "Today is not your day. There is more for you to do."

Sitting there in that closet with my back against the door, I didn't know what to pray. I was terrified. The tears were streaming down my face faster than I could wipe them away. My body was fighting against rapidly intensifying pain and my mind was still struggling to grasp the reality of the situation. This was too much.

Just when I thought my mind and body were failing, I felt the Spirit of God interceding on my behalf, and I remembered the words of Romans 8:26: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (ESV). I knew that I was experiencing this. I knew these words and had read them many times before. But now I knew what it meant. I can still feel it deep in my soul even today what it was like to remember that I didn't need the right words, or any words. He was with me. And he was working.

So I decided to live. Well, I decided to do my best to try and live. Pull it together, Taylor. I knew if I was going to survive, I needed to stop the bleeding. By this point, just a couple of minutes later, the shock had worn off and I very much knew I was wounded. Grabbing my left hand with my right, I had to stop myself from screaming out in pain. I lifted my hands above my head. That's about as much first aid as I remembered, but thankfully it was enough.

As I lifted my arms up, I heard another gun shot. Boom. My body jerked forward away from the door. I looked back and saw another hole in the door where my right arm had been. He was coming back for me, I realized, to make sure I was dead.

I slid myself across the floor as quietly as I could. I didn't want him to hear me or see me through the holes in the door. What was I supposed to do? Casting my eyes frantically around the small space, I saw the copy machine. I could push it over to block the door, but would that make too much noise? Was my best chance to play dead instead? Or was that a mistake too? I recalled hearing that sometimes shooters would shoot people in the head to make sure they were dead. I preferred to not be shot in the head. Every option terrified me. So I hid in the corner of the room, paralyzed. Waiting.

After more agonizing indecision, I concluded that if he came in the room, I would try to fight. Maybe I was going to die, but I wasn't going to let him kill me that easily. I got into some sort of fighting stance—what I imaged a boxing stance looked like, I suppose. It would almost be laughable, if it wasn't so terribly serious: me, crouched like a boxer, trying to muster up my courage to take down a man with a gun who wanted to kill me. I don't think of myself as a tenacious person usually. I'm an entry-level pacifist with limited athleticism and low self-confidence when it comes to matters of self-defense. But when it counted, I decided I could at least try to take this person down. In the worst moment of my life, when it all felt hopeless, I stood ready, with resolve.

I realized everything had gone quiet. I'm not sure how long the silence lasted, but eventually I heard voices. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but the sound of voices instead of gunshots seemed like a good change. I edged closer to the door. That's when I heard it, the words that took my breath away.

"It's okay! You can come out! Is anyone hurt?"

It was over. I made it. Even as I began shaking with relief, I pulled up short: Didn't shooters sometimes say things like this to try to get people to come out of hiding and then kill them? This is the kind of information you retain when you grow up in the world after Columbine. I couldn't take a chance. Crouching, I peered through the hole in the door. I saw an older man who I didn't recognize standing in the lobby looking around. He didn't have a gun, and I knew he

wasn't the shooter. I also saw a student with a book bag standing with him, terror and relief mingled on his face. This wasn't a trick.

I slowly opened the door and stuck my wounded hand out so that they would know I was there, and injured, and not another shooter. I fell to the floor. It's over, I survived. I repeated these words over and over in my head in disbelief. It felt like I was stuck in that closet for hours, and was absolutely shocked to find out it had only been five minutes.

But now I was safe. I was overwhelmed again, but this time by relief and the whiplash of surviving something just after resigning myself to death. I would get to see Eric again. I would be able to get married. I would see my family again. I would get to live the rest of the life that just seconds earlier I felt slipping through my hands.

The man who had called out approached the closet. This man, who I later found out was named Jim, had a calmness and a kindness about him I felt immediately. He was an older man, with white hair and a mustache, and even in my state of shock I found myself thinking he looked a bit like Santa Claus. (Imagine my delight when I found out later that he often volunteered to play Santa at local community events.) Jim picked me up and helped me get to my feet. I was shaking, and he put his arm around me and held me up as we walked out through the front doors of the school. I suddenly felt scared to leave the building, a feeling that came as a surprise to me. All I had wanted just moments earlier was to be able to leave that place. Now though, as I looked at the same parking lot I parked in every day fill with emergency vehicles, life was undeniably different. In a matter of minutes, the world became a more dangerous place, and I wanted desperately to go back to 1:54 p.m., before any of this had happened.

I blinked in the sunlight. Looking around, I could see police officers running around and the flashing red and blue lights of their cars. I could hear the ambulance sirens getting closer. People were frantic, cellphones held to their ears as they tried to relay the situation to loved ones. I had watched this same scene unfold on the news many times following other school shootings. Students gathered in a line,

hands above their heads. People consoling one another as tears streamed down their faces. It was all familiar, except now it was happening to me, to my school.

The pain began to overwhelm me, and Jim helped me lie down on the sidewalk as the EMTs rushed over to help. They were calm but acted with swift urgency.

“Were you shot anywhere else?” one asked.

“I don’t know. But I can’t see out of my eye,” I said.

“Okay. We need to cut off your shirt so we can make sure you don’t have any other injuries.”

I lay on the sidewalk, exposed to the world, as they cut off my clothes. I hadn’t even thought to be embarrassed until I saw someone take photos with their cellphone. Even today, I’m not sure what happened to those pictures of me on the sidewalk; I suppose they’re out there somewhere. Lying there in shock, the main thought running through my mind was that I wore my sister’s black cardigan to work that day without asking her permission. But I was confident she would understand why I would be unable to return it to her.

I waited on the sidewalk for what felt like forever as the EMTs looked me over and examined my injuries. There was shrapnel from the door embedded in my eye, which was why I couldn’t see. It was in my chest too, which explained why it felt like my chest was on fire. Finally they loaded me into the ambulance, and I heard them say over the radio: “En route. GSW to the hand.”

GSW. Gunshot wound. That was me. I felt the awful, defining weight of those words. This happened to me. And I could never go back to life before it did.

The EMT in the ambulance with me tried to keep me calm as we drove to the hospital. We were students at Virginia Tech at the same time, we learned. He asked me about my job and my plans for the future. He kept me talking as I patiently asked for something for the pain. His eyes were glossy from trying to hold back tears. I finally felt like I wasn’t alone; someone else was carrying this pain with me. I wish he hadn’t needed to.

We arrived at Montgomery Regional Hospital in Blacksburg, Virginia, just a five-minute drive from the college. They wheeled my stretcher into the trauma room, and I looked around. There were nurses and doctors everywhere. There must be dozens of us coming, I thought to myself.

“How many of us are there?” I asked the nurse.

“It’s just you,” she said.

She went on to tell me there was one more victim, a student named Kristina, who was taken to a different hospital. Everyone else was safe, at least physically. In that moment I never felt so relieved and so lonely at the same time.



My memories after arriving at the hospital are fuzzy. In my mind, things happened in a different order than I would later learn they actually did. Even after talking to people who were there who told me how things unfolded, my brain remembers it differently. I’ve learned this is normal after a traumatic event. But I do remember the kindness of the nurses who took care of me. I asked if they could get my engagement ring out of my pants pocket for me. I asked if they could pull my hair up for me to get it out of my face. No one had a hair tie but one of the nurses gently pulled back my thick blonde hair and tied it up with a rubber band they found in the room.

At some point, Eric arrived. I will never forget the image as long as I live: Eric walking in, tears streaming down his face, as two people held him up by his arms. He rushed over to my hospital bed and touched his forehead to mine. I don’t remember what we said to each other. I just remember sobbing uncontrollably and not wanting to let him leave my side. I told him I was okay and tried to find the words to tell him what happened, but they weren’t coming. People were rushing around on all sides of me trying to take care of my wounds and discern next steps.

After x-rays were done, it was quickly determined that I needed immediate surgery with an orthopedic surgeon. The doctors decided to transfer me to a larger hospital about forty-five minutes away that was better equipped to deal with my injuries. Being wheeled out of my hospital room to the ambulance, I was shocked to see dozens of my friends and loved ones who had made their way to the hospital to be with me. They lined the hallway, standing vigil. As I passed by, they broke into tears and hesitant smiles when they saw I was alive. I could see the fear in their faces though, and wanted to assure them that I was okay. Even then, I was realizing how hard it was going to be to help people understand the gravity of what happened to me.



My parents and sister met me at the larger hospital since it was near where we lived. Seeing my family for the first time was incredibly emotional for all of us. They enveloped me in hugs as my sister cried, looking terrified. “I’m going to be okay,” I insisted.

My mom did what I needed my mom to do and began to comfort me, fluffing my pillows and pushing the hair out of my face. My dad did what I needed my dad to do; he took charge, as he often does, by asking the nurses to make sure I was getting proper pain medicine and asking who my surgeon would be and ensuring he was qualified to take care of his daughter.

We waited. At some point, I was taken into a trauma room in the emergency department to meet with a forensic nurse from the police department. I had never heard of a forensic nurse before. She explained to me that it was her job to care for victims of assault, abuse, neglect, and violent crimes while collecting evidence to help the police and even provide expert testimony in a court case. She was going to ask me questions about the crime and try to get as many details as possible for the police.

I didn't want to do it. I was so tired and in so much pain. Seeing the police in the corner of every room I was taken to and speaking to this nurse really made me realize none of this would be over anytime soon, and it felt like too much. But she explained to me that the earlier they do it, the more accurate the information would be. It went on and on until I couldn't answer any more questions.

Do you know what kind of gun it was?

No.

Do you remember what he looked like?

Yes.

Do you remember what he was wearing?

Yes.

Do you know who he is?

No.

Did he say anything to you?

No.

Do you know why he did this?

No.

How many times did he fire his weapon?

A lot.

Finally, I met my surgeon, Dr. Cay Mierisch. He was a tall, thin German man with hair to his shoulders that was slicked back on his head. He was matter of fact, as surgeons often are, but I could tell he cared about what happened to me, and I never doubted that I was in capable hands. "We're ready to take you back in to surgery," he told me.

I asked to see my x-rays. When Dr. Mierisch put them up on the screen, though, I had no idea what I was even looking at. It didn't look like a hand. What was left of it looked like gravel. My fingers were there, but my thumb was internally severed, and everything else looked like a bomb went off inside my hand.

Dr. Mierisch explained to me that they were going to try to repair everything as best they could but weren't sure what the outcome would be. Everyone who spoke to me did so with a deep sympathy and

caution: “We’re going to do our best to fix your hand, and we are so sorry this happened to you.” They weren’t positive I would ever be able to use my hand again. It was a strange feeling to go into surgery with no idea what the end result would be. Worst-case scenario was that I would lose my hand. The best-case scenario seemed to be keeping my hand, but only for decorative purposes.

I was in too much pain to decide which was preferred. I just wanted it to be over.



When I woke up from surgery, I was alone in a recovery room. I couldn’t feel my hand or even my arm. They had to cut it off, I thought to myself. I immediately started coming to terms with the idea that I would no longer have a hand. I can do it. Lots of people live their lives with only one hand. It’s fine. I’m alive.

Finally, the anesthesiologist came in the room. He was soft spoken and gentle as he sat next to me and put his hand on my right hand. “How are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m okay,” I said, my voice scratchy. I swallowed. “Where is my hand?”

He laughed a little and pointed above my head. “It’s right here.” He explained that they put a nerve block in at my shoulder to help with the pain level, which was why I couldn’t feel anything. They’d elevated it above my head to help with the swelling and blood flow.

I had never been so relieved. I still have my hand. The doctor stayed with me and talked for a little while. I will never forget the concern he showed for not only my physical well-being but my mental and emotional well-being as well. He held back tears as he asked me how I was doing and apologized for what happened to me. He asked if he could send the hospital chaplain to see me during my hospital stay, and I told him I would love that. Up until that point, everyone’s focus was on my physical needs, and understandably so. And yet in the midst of this trauma I knew I needed to process all of this with

someone who could guide me spiritually as well. The idea of being able to talk with someone I could be honest and open with brought me comfort.

Eric was waiting for me when they finally moved me from the recovery area to my own room. I was extremely sick from the anesthesia, and he was by my side as the nurses took care of me. After I was able to get settled, my family came to check on me and see how the surgery went. My mom told me about all the people who came to the hospital when they heard the news and were praying for me in the waiting room.

“I’m sure they’d love to see you. Are you up for visitors?” she asked.

I nodded without hesitation. “Yes.”

Looking back, I don’t know why I decided to have visitors. I was tired and in pretty bad shape. But only hours before, I had imagined never seeing any of my loved ones ever again, and now I was getting to see all these people who I loved so dearly. I didn’t even ask who all was there; I just wanted to see their faces.

They came into the room one by one, I’m sure. But what I remember is looking up and seeing a sea of people in my hospital room all at once. These were people who I loved deeply and who came to support my family and me in our time of desperate need. They sat with Eric and our families, praying and comforting them. They offered to get drinks and meals and bring things to the hospital. This was the body of Christ at work, being his hands and feet. *I can do this*, I thought as I viewed this vast network of love and support. *I will survive this*.

I’m glad I had that moment of resolve and peace on the night of April 12 because the next days, weeks, and years would often feel like absolute hell.

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