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Things I Can't Shake

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Author Bio

Katelyn (Katie) Oglesby is an English with a Writing Concentration and Political Science double major. She serves as News Editor for The Gettysburgian and 5k Treasurer for Alpha Phi Omega. Much of her free time is dedicated to reading and creative writing. She hopes one day to become a published fiction author.

Things I Can't Shake

KATELYN E. OGLESBY

We had prepared for a situation like this so many times—after Sandy Hook, after San Bernardino, after Pulse, after the countless others. We knew to curl under desks, close the blinds, be silent. We knew it could last for hours if it happened. We knew we'd wait until the police or administration knocked on the doors and told us we were safe to open back up. We knew, maybe unconsciously, that if it happened, we'd be just another school on a list of schools like us.

But when it happened, we weren't prepared, not really.

We knew that when the monotone loud speakers blared, "THIS IS A LOCKDOWN. THIS IS NOT A DRILL" over and over again that we were to follow years' worth of instructions.

I was in chemistry class, folded underneath a tall, black-top lab table, the underside of which, despite being nicer than the average Westview High School tan or grey table, was still covered in student's disregarded pieces of gum. It was a sunny day in March, as most San Diego days were, but my teacher closed all of the blinds so we couldn't see out (and no one else could see in).

From where I sat, at the table closest to the door, I could see a strip of light from the side of the blinds. No matter how I tried to reposition myself, I knew that someone standing outside the window would be able to see me if they were looking.

This only served to exacerbate my panic.

Nothing really prepared me for the gravity of the situation. I know my peers were laughing, treating it like a joke, but underneath it all, we really were terrified.

You know it could happen to you, we all do. There's not a high school student alive who doesn't wonder if it'll be them someday. But you never *really* think it'll be you until it is—or in our case, almost was.

I have dealt with anxiety my whole life, but usually I managed it well enough to avoid a panic attack. Folded under that desk, phone cradled in my hands, leg space crowded with my four table-mates, I had my second real panic attack. I didn't know what to do with myself except hyperventilate.

It's been three years, but I remember the fear as though I'm still under the desk, as though my heart rate is still ecstatic and I'm still

breathing fast and a girl, who I didn't really like that much despite this, was telling me it would be okay.

I texted my parents, my peers. None of us knew what was happening. We whispered to each other, tried to piece together the story from fractions of what everyone else knew and what vague news stories we could find.

Essentially, all we knew was someone saw a gun in the boy's restroom and the police had been called.

Amidst all of this, my mom, with anxiety that perhaps matched even mine, stood at her bedroom window and watched the police cars on the freeway behind our house head to my high school.

I texted her, of course, because when you're in a life-threatening situation (or one you perceive to be life-threatening), you text your parents so they know that for the time being you're safe and sound.

I'm sure my terror came across as well.

Administration sent out emails to teachers. *Don't let your students use their phones. Don't let them leave for the bathroom. Don't tell them anything.*

We were instructed to put our phones away as if any of us would actually tuck our lifelines into the pockets of our backpacks calmly.

Yes, thank you, I will give up my ability to make sure my friends are okay, yes, happily.

Yes, thank you, I will give up all communication to my parents who are currently trying to make me and themselves feel better, yes, happily.

We continued to cradle our phones in our hands. If the school wasn't going to tell us anything, we would remain in contact with those who could: our families, whatever news we found on Google (while every local news station was covering it, their coverage was meager at best, and in many instances, over-inflated our situation and worried us more), and our friends in other classrooms with other teachers and other implementation of rules.

My teacher let those of us who needed to use the bathroom slip into the hallway of the science building and use the special bathroom they had in there. It wasn't breaking the rules because it wasn't outside.

Two hours passed slowly, but I can't say that I was bored. I wasn't just sitting there twiddling my thumbs; I was checking the news, talking in hushed voices to the girls at my table, texting a boy across the classroom who checked in that me and our other friend were okay. I was in constant contact with everyone I knew, trying to ease each other's worries as much as we could. Sure, I wanted it over

with, but the most painful part was not the length of time with nothing to do but the length of time with so little information, so little feeling of absolute safety.

As two hours passed, we began to see news that no gun had been found. Whispers passed through the classroom of a rumor that the boy in our grade who liked guns was the one who had been seen. (While he may have liked guns, there's actually no proof that he was the one in the bathroom. Some people just like guns, I suppose.)

The police deemed the coast clear. We opened the blinds; we stood up with shaky legs. We breathed.

As if it hadn't been traumatic enough, my school decided we would still go to our fourth and final class. The lockdown had occurred during second period before lunch, so we were given a short break to eat, and then instructed to go to our fourth class, skipping our third, which had been eaten up by our time locked down.

When we were let out, I went to the bathroom first, joining the long line of girls that extended far past the door. I called my mom, told her I was okay, and out of the room now.

"Hug your friends a little tighter," she suggested.

And when I saw my best friend, that's exactly what I did. Hugging her, I felt a sense of understanding that I would never take for granted our safety or our friendship ever again. Like everything else in this world, we were fragile and ephemeral.

There were no casualties, and for that I am incredibly grateful, but I still struggle to come to terms with this experience.

In my fourth period AP European History class, maybe we were expected to do actual work, but instead, my teacher had us discuss what happened. Fragments of the story spilled out, filling in the gaps of the pieces and parts each of us had.

Another student, a boy I knew by name and face only, had entered the boy's bathroom during second period. He saw a student—but didn't see his face—reach into his backpack and pull out a gun. He saw the student put it back.

He went back to his classroom and told the substitute teacher, who didn't believe him.

Despite his constant class clownery, his peers believed him instantly.

"There was something in his face," I remember one of the girls in my class saying. "We could tell he was serious."

The substitute took awhile to come to an understanding that this was not just an uncouth joke. And then, it took her awhile to figure out how to report this as a substitute, having to bring in another teach-

er from a class down the hall.

In all the time that transpired, my classmates and I agreed this was enough time for the student to move the gun somewhere else and, if he did have bad intentions, to change his mind.

We never really concluded what happened that day. We didn't know if there was actually a viable threat and we still don't know that. We knew the police spent an unnecessary amount of time chasing down seniors driving their cars off-campus because my high school failed to tell them that school policy said students with cars could leave during a situation like this. We knew the police went to classrooms and checked sign-out lists for the bathroom and then checked everyone who was out's backpacks.

We knew that not all teachers had their students sign out to use the bathroom and that not all students signed out even if they were supposed to. We knew that while the police probably found a copious amount of marijuana, they didn't actually find a gun during this process, but that doesn't mean one wasn't there.

And we knew, maybe unconsciously, that we could have become another statistic that day.

Even if it was just written off as a false alarm, it didn't shake my fear whenever I heard the loudspeaker say "THIS IS A LOCKDOWN" even if it was followed by "THIS IS A DRILL." After Parkland, a year later, where the shooter pulled the school fire alarm and all of the students evacuated like they had been taught, whenever the fire alarm would go off, my heart would race, no matter if it was a drill we'd been warned about, a microwave that burnt popcorn, or junior year when the fire alarms were all faulty and went off twice a week for a month.

My junior year, I sat at home doing homework when I received an email from my high school that someone had threatened they would commit a mass shooting the next day. Some of my peers skipped, but I still went; although, our discussions each class period about the threat only served to remind me of the two hours I sat under the desk only one year before. Again, the threat never transpired into anything more than a threat, but I never really learned to feel safe at my school.

I thought coming to college that I would shake off the trauma with everything else I left behind from high school; like dandruff, I figured I could comb it out of the crevices of my brain. I was sitting in my dorm room when my friend played a video on her phone of a fire alarm going off. My heart raced as though my body had picked up a real threat, when I knew—I *knew*—that it wasn't real.

The thing is, no matter how many of my peers brushed off that experience like it was just another notch on the belt of high school in America, I still haven't accepted that it was normal. I still feel like a small

sophomore curled in a dress underneath a lab desk covered in gum with a table full of girls who had once tried to set toothpicks on fire during a lab. I still feel like a little girl who just had her childhood innocence and naivety stripped away from her; she no longer feels safe in a classroom, in a packed movie theater, in a Walmart, or at a party. She's still sitting under that table somewhere; she wants to leave the classroom, but doesn't know if it's safe.