

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

25th Meditation on Columbine

Cole Huling · Monday, April 22nd, 2024

I recently wrote the sentence:

We all had friends in the shooting.

The way those words slice a papercut right through my heart, 25 years simultaneously collapse into a gasp and stretch to three lifetimes.

Because I'm an American, it was neither the first nor the last time gun violence would rattle my world. It wasn't even the last mass shooting that would impact my loved ones.

My best friend was in the shooting.

We all had friends in the shooting.

25 years on, we know the lifelong repercussions this day would have on our community. We know the stats. We know the hidden lives lost in the decades that followed. But that day, it was all confusion, fear and pain.

Early, in the first moments of chaos, the news erroneously reported that it happened at Littleton High School, my school, and friends and family started calling.

Later, I remember being home alone with my brother, silently watching the news on the big TV in our living room.

The thing that strikes me now, again, freshly—how young we were. How young we all were.

We were 15. We couldn't even drive yet.

Have you seen a 15-year-old lately? The way their teeth are still settling into their smile, their face still morphing into a full teenage mask of sass and exuberance? The way their limbs don't yet know how to move together gracefully?

My god. It takes your breath away.

I had kissed maybe 3 boys.

We all had friends in the shooting.

I still don't understand the weight of those words. What this truth did to us. Did it make us better humans, more likely to reach out? I remember I used to force my company on loners in the cafeteria, possibly out of kindness. Maybe self-preservation.

My best friend survived. She continued to survive and survive and survive.

Eventually, against all odds, she started to thrive. There are two of her in my mind. Before Anna and After Anna. The second, forever, irreparably changed. Impossibly strong. A strength that should have been unnecessary.

The night after the shooting, or maybe it was that same night, a group of us kids went to IHOP, just to look at each other's faces, to be together in community. To eat pancakes piled with fake butter and syrup. A sense of normalcy, that we were going to survive this. The waitress brought a pitcher of coffee, and her eyes welled up. "I'm so glad you're safe," she said and told us coffee was on the house.

We all had friends in the shooting.

A fact we carry to this day. A quarter century. A weight we will always carry.

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