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Lighthouse

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LIGHTHOUSE

Cameron Vazquez



Headlines for the impending apocalypse dominated every major newspaper headline in the United States—“The Mayan Calendar Ends. Does That Mean The World Does Too?” According to the Mayans, the world began approximately 5,125 years ago, on August 11, 3114 BC. The calendar of this ancient civilization worked in rotations. It was discovered through the incredibly rough translations of a single, damaged stone tablet, that if the calendar

made a full cycle it would reset as opposed to continuing on. After doing some calculations, researchers found out that the date after one full revolution would be December 21, 2012, the day the world was supposed to reset, or as the global populous interpreted it, the day the world was supposed to end. A final smiting from the Mayan gods. The end of our lives as we know them.

However, for some people, that end came a little sooner. That day was May 30, 2012,

for 5 people when a man went on a shooting spree in Café Racer in Seattle, Washington. It was also on July 20, 2012, for 12 people when an armed man opened fire at a movie theater during a midnight premiere of *The Dark Knight Rises* in Aurora, Colorado. And again on August 5, 2012, for 6 people when a gunman opened fire in a Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. That day was also October 21, 2012, for 3 people when a man wielded his gun in Azana Spa in Brookfield, Wisconsin. That day was one week before the so-called end of the world, on December 14, 2012, the day of the nation’s second largest mass school shooting that happened in a town called Newtown, Connecticut. 26 dead. In my town.

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From a mathematical standpoint, the number 26 is a relatively average number. It’s even. Its multiples are 1, 2, 13, and 26. The sum of its digits equals 8. Its properties are unremarkable. However, where I come from, that number holds a much deeper meaning. 26 will forever haunt us. It’s an inescapable reminder to say “I love you” more to the ones I care about, for parents to hug their children just a little more tightly, to tell our teachers to have a good day. It’s a slap in the face, a flutter in the heart, a pounding in the brain. For us, we don’t care about its mathematical properties. We care about what it means to us, the people in a small town in Connecticut.



26 stars were drilled into the roof of the firehouse in front of the school.

26 bells ring out during the moments of silence.

26 names overtook the local news segments.

26 bodies were found splayed throughout an elementary school.

26 angels escaped the perils of Earth and soared upwards into the sky.

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It’s the beginning of a bad joke. Two nuns walk into a school. Except the punchline isn’t actually funny. THIS JUST IN: Two guys dressed as nuns walk into an elementary school, semi-automatic weapons concealed in their hateful habits. We all chuckled at the idea of the nuns; a ridiculous news story that some journalists somewhere managed to conjure up through the chaos of reports. It’s okay to laugh, right? Wrong. BREAKING NEWS. SCHOOL SHOOTING IN NEWTON. NEWINGTON. NEWTOWN. Right down the road, if the reports are accurate. Nuns? No. The name of the suspect—yes one, not two—litters headlines. Correction. Not him. His brother. We stop laughing.

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The real story. There was one man. He was 20-years-old. This man was disturbed or just confused or sad or lonely or unsatisfied or lost. This man, for some reason on the seemingly random day of December 14, 2012, decided to go out with his semiautomatic rifle and pistols. This man walked into an elementary school down the road from

where he lived. He was let in because the principal recognized him. He was a familiar face since his mother had once worked at the school. The guns belonged to his mother.

He must have taken aim. Or, maybe he didn't. He could have just shot the gun wherever he wanted without a specific target in mind. With a semiautomatic, did he really need good aim? He was bound to hit something. Either way, he managed to align himself with 26 targets—6 teachers, the principal included. The other 20 were children, ages 5 to 10.

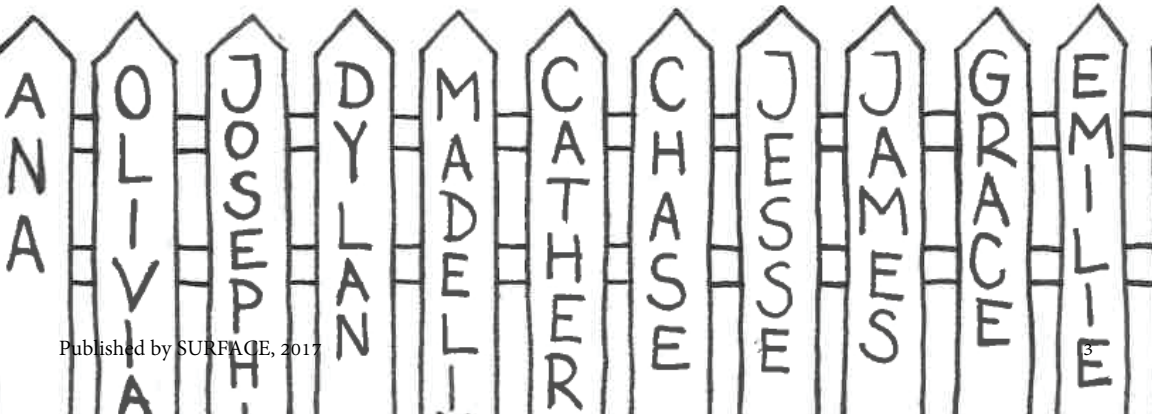
He killed himself. The news doesn't call him a victim. It turns out he had killed his mother beforehand, too, probably to get the guns. She barely makes it into the news. Probably because she wasn't in the school. She was in her house. He killed 26 others. No one knows why. He just did.

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We are hiding for hours, left in the dark, no idea what's going on in the outside world. The lights remain off. Luckily it is the middle of the day so the beaming yellow rays of the sun pour into the room. The light is cheerful; however, I can't say the same for our moods. We're anxious. *This is not a drill.* Those were the words bellowing out of the loudspeaker earlier today. *I repeat: This is*

not a drill. My heart in my throat, pounding away, threatening to burst through. *Not. A. Drill.* My stomach lurches trying to escape, but now's not the time. It's time to hide. We all scramble up from our desks. So far, no one is truly freaking out. Composure is key here. We maneuver our way around the tan tops of desks and through the maze of metal bars that hold them at the seams. We position ourselves in formation on the cold, unfriendly tile. It's just like the drills. Only it's not. No phones. They are taken hostage in the mounds of backpacks scattered about the room, an accessory to each desk. There's no connection to the outside world. No way of knowing what's happening. Nothing. We sit. We wait. We shuffle. We stifle coughs and sneezes. We make faces at each other. We stare at the floor. We think. Inhale. Exhale. Twitch. Wonder. Listen. The school sounds abandoned. It's unnatural for a school to be this quiet. It's a heavy silence, weighing down the air, making it harder to breathe through the panic swarming inside.

Thundering helicopters rip through the silence an hour or so later, straight down the middle, tearing it to shreds with the rotation of their blades. My teacher, Mrs. Meyer, gives up and breaks protocol. By now she knows that our parents have seen something



on the news and just need to know that we're okay. We retrieve our phones. Mrs. Meyer goes from being my tall, inviting teacher with billowing skirts and glasses that match her medium brown, chin-length hair with side swept bangs into someone else. A protector. A concerned parent. Suddenly, we're all on the same level as we crouch in the corner of a classroom-turned-shelter, the labels of teacher and students dissipating into oblivion. Here we're just people, people who are scared. How can I ever look at those whiteboards that span the entirety of the front of the room the same? Or the rows upon rows of desks that supported our pencils, pens, papers, textbooks, elbows, heads, feet? This is no longer a school. It's a war zone.

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Following the words proclaiming that this is *not a drill*, everyone proceeds, almost robotically, into formation. But while everyone else follows the school's procedure, I follow my own. I let everyone sit before me so they are furthest out of view of the window by the door. I sit on the outer ring of students. After waiting for hours, I see a figure walk down the hall. I alert my teacher. She tells me to keep watch. I scoot closer out of safety to keep vigilant and scan the hallway.

I don't know why I decided to take up this

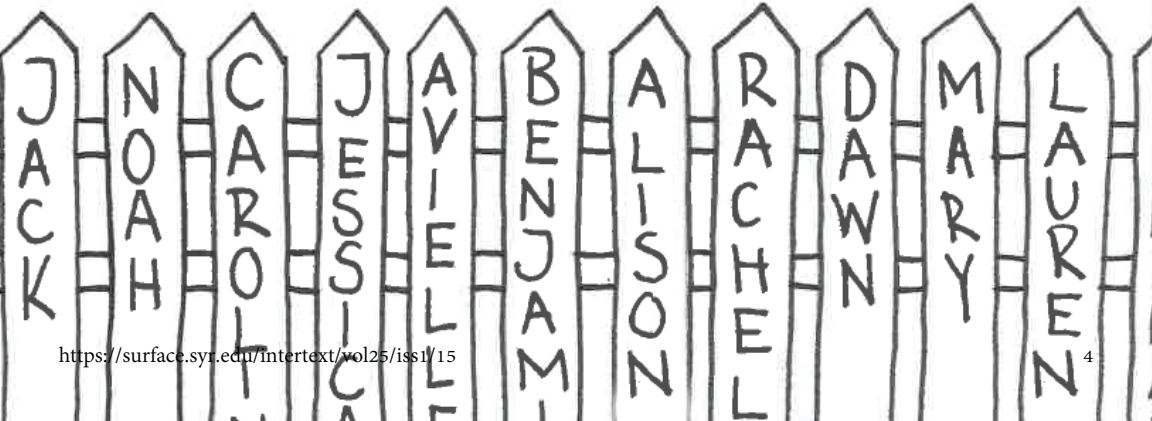
role, but I did. That day, I made a choice to protect. So did the faculty members at Sandy Hook. Only, their sacrifice was greater. I tried to protect my classmates and lived. They tried to protect their students and died.

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Once, I was at my friend's house for a sleepover. We had some mutual friends, but some of the people she invited I wasn't very close with. There was this one girl who I didn't know, but once we started talking, I ended up really liking her by the end of the night. We kind of formed a bond after she confided in me about the problems she was having with her family. No one listened to her. Her siblings—a younger sister and even younger brother—were annoying. She wasn't getting any attention. I understood. She needed to vent. I listened and supported her. A few years later, Sandy Hook happened and she lost her little brother. I wonder if she remembers our conversation. Does it haunt her the way it haunts me?

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Some of my teachers, who have been teaching at Newtown High School longer than most, had him as a student. They exchange whispers about him. *I taught him. I remember him. He used to sit right there. He was a quiet kid. Didn't talk much. Didn't have many*



friends. Definitely more awkward than most. But he wasn't a bad kid. He was weird, but not bad. How could this happen? How could I not have seen it? Their eyes were full of fear, astonishment, shock, pain, guilt. How could this be? How could we not have known? How could he have done this?

If only we knew.

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During the weeks after the shooting, the town was in a period of healing. The times of sitting in traffic as the mourners packed the streets around the funeral home was over. A strange closure enveloped the town as the last body was laid to rest. 25 preceded the last. The town was festooned with green and white, a method of remembrance. It was a vow to never forget. Bracelets, shirts, scarves, prayer shawls, earrings. The news focused on exposing the truth, letting the public hear the phone calls made to local police, discussing the credibility of conspiracies thought up by some loon in a basement somewhere. We ignored it. No one watched TV for a while. We needed to focus on love, commemoration, and resilience instead.

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Lighthouses. So many lighthouses. Not near the sea though. Here, in a church, forty minutes away from the ocean. Figurines sit majestically on shelves; drawings, inside the lines and out, coat the walls end to end. Ben would have liked this. I didn't know him, but I knew he would have. The place is packed as people weave in and out of the pews in remembrance of the little boy who loved lighthouses. A victim. One of 26. I wonder how many times I passed by him unknowingly when I occasionally attended services with my friends. Did I ever actually see him in person, or is his familiarity just a result of

seeing his picture mounted everywhere? I gaze at the lighthouses embellishing the inside of the church one last time, then resume my position outside. Underneath a white canopy lies a cheap, gray table with a bumpy surface, bordered by church-budget folding chairs, situated on an awkward slant of pavement. The set up looks awfully pathetic next to the majesty of the looming stone church next to it, a building that I have become strangely attached to in my limited time as a youth group participant.

We volunteers are armed with our vibrant green shirts that read "Ben's Lighthouse" in white lettering, eagerly awaiting the arrival of kids seeking to have their cheeks embellished with butterflies or puppies. As I wait, I start to notice that the canopy cannot protect me from the relentless summer sun; it is the cause of half of my sweat. The other half is caused by nerves. I'm worried. I'm not an artist. What if they aren't satisfied with my painting abilities? What if I make a kid unhappy at an already somber event? There was already one incident of a little girl crying at the sounds of sirens, a sound that must have triggered some violent memories. I cannot handle any more tears. Well now is the moment of truth. My first customer.

Later, I will not remember what exactly I drew, but I do remember taking shallow breaths to steady my shaky hand and how the brush felt smooth as I swirled it around. Surprisingly, my work is a hit. My customer takes one look in the mirror, smiles, and goes on their merry way. Suddenly, swarms of small children mob the table, eyebrows furrowed as they decide which designs they should get. I get more creative, looking up easy-to-draw designs on my phone and prac-

ting them on my bare legs. I expand my list from butterflies and smiley faces to elephants, dinosaurs, Captain America shields, the bat symbol, and more. The most popular choices are the anchors and lighthouses. I don't know if the children requesting these hearts, lighthouses, and superhero logos understand their significance, that their faces are being painted in remembrance of a fallen classmate, but it's a nice gesture anyway.

The hordes of eager children eventually start dwindling down—the paints are running low, the brushes are sitting in murky water, my hands are cramping from my steely grip and tense muscles. As I'm cleaning off a brush, an adorable little girl, pig-tails and all, waddles her way up to the face painting stand, requesting a lighthouse. Good choice. I gladly take her, patting the seat next to me. As I begin painting, the young girl strikes up a conversation with me. Most kids remain silent so this is new to me. I play along and follow her cues until she says, *So did you know Ben?* I pull back and stare at her. I maintain eye contact, but can see through my peripherals the widening eyes of my fellow face painters, their mouths threatening to fall open into dark abysses. Still, I don't take my eyes off the girl.

I am stunned. She is so direct, in a way that only a child is capable of. She doesn't tiptoe around it. There are no cavities from the sugarcoating that adults pile on. She looks at me, awaiting an answer. I give her a small, sad smile and a quick shake of my head. *No, no I didn't.* She looks up at me with these big, round, curious eyes. She tells me how she did. That they were friends, that they would play together sometimes. That she misses him. She continues to tell me about their adventures together until I put

the final touches on her lighthouse. We say our goodbyes, and she walks away with a wave and a smile, hand-in-hand with her father. I watch her go. This is the first time I have heard someone actually talk about Ben since I have gotten here. After the little girl leaves, I am commended for my composure. Everyone keeps saying that they don't know how they would have reacted, or if they could have kept their cool like I did.

To this day I can't believe I was able to hold it together. Amongst the whispers and awkward avoidances as adults try not to think of the complicated reality of it, there stood a young girl who only sees the simplicity of it: she lost a friend. In that instant, I looked up to her. She said what was on her mind. She said what everyone else was terrified to talk about. I wish we all didn't hide. We should all take away something from this young girl. People die. We focus too much on the how and why. She deserved to be able to talk about her friend in the open, to speak freely, acknowledge that he is gone. We all deserve that because like my principal said on that rueful day: *this is not a drill.* Death is not a drill. But that doesn't mean we have to shroud ourselves in darkness in its wake. In this case, I think we all could benefit from Ben and his lighthouses. Lighthouses are guides. They're a symbol of safety and home and hope. Ben was on to something. We all need a lighthouse. And on that day, the little girl, whose name I never learned, was mine. She still is.

