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Shooter. Saying this word on a college campus feels like saying the word *bomb* in an airport. When it must be spoken, it is said with hesitation, tucked low beneath the breath. The word, you see, is different than other words. Once it gets in the head, it's impossible to remove. Because *shooter* implies a before and an after. Before, you teach your classes and grade your papers and believe your life is measured in teacher evaluations and publications and years of public service. After, you can't help but look over your shoulder. You wonder why any of it matters. In the world of the after, nothing is the same.

On the day I learn about the potential shooter, Stewart Schlessinger is waiting outside our shared classroom. Stewart and I co-teach a course on human conflict, and I can tell something is wrong. His skin is covered in a dewy sweat. He runs a hand through graying hair and looks through the window to our room, a lecture hall that sits over a hundred students. "Susan," he says. He searches for the words. "I don't know how to say this except to just say it. I've just heard that there's been threats of a shooter."

And there it is. The word. Though barely audible, it echoes around us and I scan the hallway, worried about an unintended audience. From some closed door, the dramatic backdrop of a documentary leaks into the hallway while from another room a teacher demands his class to quiet down. Stewart is still talking. He has been talking this whole time, but I can catch fragments of a story I feel I've heard before. A failed class. A kid snapping. An overheard conversation and the elaborate fantasy of what he'd do and when and to whom. And the kid's roommate said he went to Walmart and returned with a gun. The hallway goes silent.

Stewart is waiting for my response, and I understand what he's been trying to say all along: that he is a target. And if he is a target, because we share this classroom, I am a target, too. But sometimes you hear the facts and the facts make sense. You can put the facts together and string the ideas into sentences. You can think about Columbine and Sandy Hook and Virginia Tech, and you know you're supposed to feel afraid, to *be* afraid, yet there's a disconnect, something your brain understands, but your body cannot. Instead of panic or alarm, I feel nothing.

Stewart, on the other hand, wears his heart on his face, and I think of his fifteen-year-old daughter, and I wonder if it's fatherhood that taught him to worry or if we are built differently. Our synapses trained to fire at different rates. "How are you doing?" I ask. "Is there anything I can do?"

Stewart shakes his head. He peers through the classroom window, and several students crane their necks. Several lift their hands and wave. Stewart waves back, and I can't help but imagine how easy it would be for a man to stand where he is standing now, to peer through that same window and step through that door, a gun in hand.

"Do we tell them?" I ask.

Stewart doesn't answer. He doesn't need to. We know the way these things will go. He is a professor of psychology, and I of sociology. We have dedicated our lives to understanding human nature, and we understand what happens in the face of danger. How easily information can transform into panic.

"There's a meeting in a few minutes," he says. "I'll see what happens and let you know."

As I make my way to the front of the lecture hall, the students settle in their seats. A few smile but most sigh into open notebooks, and I know it's a cliché to feel like my students get younger every year, but it's true. The eighteen-year-olds before me look like prepubescent children dressed in sports apparel and skinny jeans. They carry pink and purple backpacks and stick cartoon characters to the fronts of newly purchased laptops.

"Where'd Stewart go?" someone asks.

"He had a last-minute meeting," I say. They are waiting for a longer explanation, but I have nothing to offer, and so I begin. Today, we are discussing the complexity of power structures, particularly in connection to patterns of authority. I move through the familiar slides as if on auto-pilot, glossing over Stewart's half as if it's less important. The students doodle into their notebooks. The kid in back who always falls asleep falls asleep. I feel as if my head is a balloon about to burst. I hear myself talking as if it's someone else.

At the end of class, I expect someone to ask if I'm okay, but no one does. The students file from the room. Several nod and smile, and when they smile, I smile, and when I smile, I feel better, and besides all that, why would they know anything is wrong, anyway? I teach my students to question their information, to evaluate their sources, but no one, as of yet, has ever thought to question me.

"Professor?" A young girl who looks like she's still in high school stands on the other side of the podium. It's clear she's tried to make herself look older: her hair has been bleached a white-hued blonde that looks strange against her brown skin. Her ears are studded with half a dozen silver hoops. "You were mentioning something about homework?" She gestures to the white board where I've written *For Wednesday* but hadn't filled in the rest.

"Oh," I say. "*Panopticon*. I'll send out an email to the class..."

"Jesse," she says.

"Yes," I say. "Sorry. I knew that."

She shrugs her backpack onto bony shoulders. "It's okay, Professor," she says. "There's an awful lot of us."

"See you Wednesday, Jesse."

"Yes," she says. "See you then." She follows her peers out of the room and into the hall and back onto the campus. I want to call her inside, to call them all back. I want to barricade the door. Instead, I cap the pen and gather my things.

That afternoon, I attend the first of five sessions in faculty mediation training. I'd signed up because a colleague told me it helped her navigate department politics, and I thought it would look good when it came time for my tenure review, but now I regret the commitment. I want to go home and process what has happened, but this morning, my department chair told me

how happy she was I'd enrolled, and two days ago, an email warned of limited space – let us know if your availability changes, it said. Apparently, the class was in high demand, and I feel obligated. Even in the midst of crisis, I cannot break a commitment.

The facilitator is a retired communications professor with big brown hair and a bigger smile. She is taller than most men I know and has a habit of nodding while she talks, as if years of being a trained listener have trained her to acknowledge even herself. Her name is Gemma. She was raised in New Jersey, and despite a lifetime in the desert, her movements are brush and fixed. Her eyes scan the room with an East Coast edge. She feels too fast-paced for the Southwest, and when someone says something she doesn't agree with, she says, "Hmm," and moves on.

It takes the first hour for most of us to realize that this mediation thing isn't what we thought it would be. It was advertised as a communication training—a way to hold better meetings and navigate disagreements—but it's a real training. By the time the week ends, we'll be actual mediators, able to work the district courts and called upon to mediate disputes among faculty peers. The training comes with a certificate and everything.

The woman across from me raises an eyebrow. From her nametag, I know her name is Joy and that she works in the dance department. "Holy shit," she mouths after Gemma's welcome speech, and I whisper, "No kidding," beneath my breath.

During introductions, we are supposed to come up with one fact about ourselves that will help the room remember who we are. Joy tells us she plays the saxophone, and I'm not surprised. Her voice is deep and low, and she has the demeanor of an ex-athlete, all cool and collected like the girls I used to envy in high school. When it's my turn, I tell them my wife is out of town. Her mother is on her deathbed, I say, which is mostly true, though Elle's mother has been on her deathbed for years. I say this not because I want them to pity me, but because this is the only thing I can think to say that doesn't involve Stewart and the shooter. Plus, I want them to know I have a wife—that's pretty damn memorable, I think—though no sooner are the words out of my mouth when I wish I'd said something else, something about me.

When the introductions are over, Gemma tells us we're going to do something strange. "I'm giving you fair warning," she says. Joy and I exchange looks.

"Stand up," Gemma says, and twenty professionals across the various disciplines do as we're told. "Take up with the person across from you. Stand in a dance position." She demonstrates with a Latina girl who looks like she has yet to reach puberty. Joy and I and every other pair around us do the same—Pediatrics is paired with Nursing, Chemistry with Library Sciences. I can't help but feel like I, above everyone else, have gotten the short end of this stick. My partner is the only one in the room who dances professionally, and I can feel her strength in the way she holds her frame. In her confident arms, I am a fish.

"Now, dance," Gemma commands. "Dance the most awkward dance you've ever danced."

"No problem," I say, and my arms are electric wires waving in the wind. I feel the tension of this motion bundle itself in my shoulders. I grimace at Joy, who looks like this exercise is an affront to her person. Before Gemma tells us to stop, we drop hands and stand with our arms at our sides while the people around us continue with the exercise. Every single one of them is

laughing. Gemma smiles a knowing smile. “Tell me how this feels,” she says, and the dancing stops.

“Awful,” I say.

“Hmm,” says Gemma.

“Uncomfortable,” someone adds.

“Bulky.”

“Yes,” Gemma says. “Uncomfortable. Bulky. More?”

Adjectives are thrown about the room, and each time Gemma repeats the words back. “Good,” Gemma says. “Good.” She brings the conversation around to where we all know the conversation is going: “When people come to mediation, they are in this kind of a state. Uncomfortable. Bulky. Unable to dance.” People nod, and I nod with them.

“Now, try it again,” Gemma says. “This time, make eye contact. Go slower.” She demonstrates and the room is quicker to follow. Joy takes the lead, her firm hand gripping mine with renewed purpose. Against her purple blazer, her eyes are the softest brown I’ve ever seen. “See,” Gemma says. “Slowing down. Eye contact. See how much your consciousness makes the dance better.”

This, Gemma informs, is our task as mediators: to facilitate the dance. To get people to slow down and look each other in the eye. To allow them to adjust their movements in accordance and awareness of the other. It is the first of many metaphors; Gemma has a literal bag of them, and whenever the class starts to feel stale, she’ll dip a ringed hand into the paper sack and emerge with a metaphor about rubber bands or telescopes or hiking trails that follow set paths. I settle into the training. After a decade of standing in front of a classroom, it’s good to be seated.

We finish the afternoon with a series of worksheets. What kind of team player are you? How do you mediate conversations in your daily life? By the end of the session, I’ve learned I have a tendency towards “Withdrawing/Avoiding” and “Smoothing/Accommodating”, and that my “Collaboration” and “Compromising” skills are strengths to be retained. All in all, I’m doing pretty well. In a world of gray areas, I like when the numbers tell me what I have trouble knowing on my own: that I am okay, that I am well adjusted, that I am liked. I leave the session feeling proud, and for the last three hours, I’ve forgotten about the shooter, forgotten about Stewart. But then the training ends.

On the phone, Elle is frustrated. I listen to her tell me about her day as I walk about the apartment, bringing the socks to the hamper, the stray dishes to the sink. Her mother’s stroke has affected her speech and she’s having trouble eating but she seems to be in good spirits, though you wouldn’t know it by the edge in Elle’s voice.

My wife has been in Seattle for less than forty-eight hours, but already she’s reverted to the person she is when she’s home: every stray comment is a slight, every question a hidden accusation. I run my hand over the dust on a bookshelf and wipe my palms on my shirtfront. Elle and her mother have never been close, and the complaints are ones I’ve heard before—her

mother doesn't know how to take care of herself, her siblings never do enough. There is always some prescription that wasn't filled or a form misplaced, and Elle doesn't understand why the weight of her familial world has to rest on her shoulders.

I want to tell her she isn't Atlas. That Atlas had no choice in the matter, but that she does. I want to tell her to open both eyes—I've been to her mother's house, and I know Elle's frustrations are often of her own making, but I don't say any of this. To say anything would only cause another fight, and I'm still reeling from the one we had before she left.

"But overall, she's okay?" I ask.

"Not okay enough," Elle says. I imagine her standing in her mother's living room, staring at the dark waters of the Seattle Bay. She sighs, and for a moment, Elle is Elle again, and I know that I love her. I know her frustration is a form of her love. That her dedication to her mother is a microcosm of her dedication to her life, and I wish she were here. Without her around to leave her bags on the dining room table and her socks in the living room, the apartment feels empty. "But enough about that," she says. "How was your day?"

Usually, I have nothing new to say, and I know the question is a formality. I tell her about mediation training because that's an easy place to start, but then I stop. "Let me ask you something," I say. "Pretend there's something going on. Something we can't control. Would you want to know? Even if you can't do anything about it?"

Elle is silent so long I worry she wasn't listening. "What aren't you telling me?" she says.

I don't want to go on. Stewart's email told me that they were taking precautions, speaking with the police department and his parents about getting him in contact with a psychiatrist. Stewart ended the email by telling me he was feeling better. I have faith, he said, Try not to worry, and I've done my best, but worry is a beast of its own. Elle is waiting for me to continue, and so I do. I tell her about Stewart and his former student. I tell her Stewart was talking about a psychotic break, and Elle is quicker to make the connections than I was. I haven't even said the word *shooter* when she starts to cry.

Her crying bothers me. It feels so unnecessary, this crying, so centered on Elle, when what I want is for the conversation to center on me. "I shouldn't have told you," I say.

"Why would you say that?" Elle says. "Of course you should tell me. I'm your wife."

The word is, at once, a binding contract and an accusation, and I want to get off the phone. We've been married for six years, together for twice that long, but lately, we've drifted into mutual loneliness. We eat our breakfasts and go our separate ways and I come home to an empty house while Elle works late at the office. She comes in smelling of spreadsheets and printer ink and the cigarettes she swore she's given up. She is my wife, but we've become less conscious of each other.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"How could I be okay?" she says. "How can you be okay?"

"I don't know," I say, and when she hangs up, I'm okay no longer. I walk the empty apartment and check the locks. The dust has made handprints on my blouse, and I do my best to wipe it away.

The next day, I don't have a class to teach so I waste the morning doing yoga in the living room. I am not a flexible person, but Elle insists that yoga is important to one's wellbeing, and now that forty isn't far away, I've become conscious of my hips, my lower back, the tension around my shoulders. Elle says I spend too much time at a desk, which is true, and I wonder if it'll make her feel better or worse to know that I do the things she tells me to only when she's gone.

That afternoon, in mediation training, Joy takes her seat beside me. "Think we'll dance again?" she asks.

"I hope not," I say with a wry smile. Joy leans back in her chair and puts her hands behind her head. A purple sweater has replaced her blazer. "You like the purple," I say.

She glances down in surprise. "Guess I do," she says, and she looks so relaxed sitting there that I find myself doing something I rarely do. I start a conversation. I ask after the saxophone and the dance department and somehow our focus on the miscellany shifts towards the personal. Joy asks after Elle, and I tell her I miss her. She smiles and says it's always hard when the woman is away. It's clear by the way she says "the woman" that Joy wants me to know that *she* knows what having a woman is like, away or otherwise.

It's been a long time since I've made friends, and it's nice to have someone to talk to, someone who is not Elle, and I want to tell Joy about yesterday. I want to talk about Elle's reaction on the phone. I need to talk about this with someone who isn't going to burst into tears, and Joy's arms were so steady, her eyes so warm. But now the conversation has shifted, and Joy is talking about moving to New Mexico after her sister was diagnosed with cancer. "I never meant to end up here," she says. She doesn't say her sister died, but I see it in her face. "The husband couldn't handle it," she adds. "He picked up and left. That was ten years ago. My niece is now a freshman."

"It's good you've been here for her," I say.

"She's been here for me, too," Joy says. "She's like a daughter to me."

"Does she go here?" I ask, and Joy nods.

"She is taking a sociology course, I think. One of those learning community courses. She says she likes it quite a bit."

I swear I hear water rushing into my ears. Joy is still talking, but her words sound groggy and slow. I see the girl shrug the backpack onto her shoulders. I want to change the subject, but Joy has already pulled out her phone. I want to run, but she taps her screen until she finds the photograph she's looking for, and sure enough, there is my student standing at the top of the Sandia Mountains, as skinny up there as she was down here. Her hair hasn't yet been bleached, and it has the same brown hue of her aunt's.

"You do know her," Joy says.

I clear my throat. "Jesse, right?" And Joy smiles wide. "She's in my morning class," I say, and I think of the man who may or may not be a shooter. I hear the squeak of chairs as the students gather their things, remember the way they turned their collective heads. In the front of the room, Gemma loads the projector and shuts off the lights.

"Welcome," Gemma says. "I'm glad to see you've all come back. Today, we'll be focusing

on the art of listening. We'll start with the skill of acknowledgement and move into skills of clarification." She tells us that acknowledging is the first and most important step. I pull out my notebook so I don't have to look Joy in the face.

There's something about the synchronicity of the last forty-eight hours that puts me into a panic. That night, I lay in bed and try to slow the rhythm of my breath, breathing in for five counts and out for seven the way Elle taught me to do, but I can't help but play and replay the hypotheticals in my mind. The shooter coming into the classroom, looking for Stewart. Joy's niece sitting in the front row. The barrel of the gun and that terrifying silence before that first shot, and later the news team connecting the dots. This was the kind of coincidence that would make primetime television. I see Diane Sawyer sitting me down, saying, "You knew in that moment her niece was in danger, yet you didn't do anything. How could you do that to a person?" I stare into the crowd and see Joy glaring at me from the front row, her arms crossed over her chest, her eyes red and glistening. The audience shakes its head. Diane Sawyer says, "You knew she was the only family Joy had left."

The sound of the phone might wake her mother, but I call Elle anyway. I listen to it ring half a dozen times and am relieved when she picks up. "It's two in the morning," she says as if I didn't know.

"I'm freaking out," I say. The room feels too small, and I crawl out of bed and crack a window. The night is surprisingly cold for how warm the day had been, but it feels better to breathe the crisp air, and I wish Elle were here so I could crawl into her lap and lay my head against her chest the way I used to do when we were newer and more in love.

"What's going on?" she says. I don't know how to explain any of it.

"The shooter," I say. I realize this is the first time I've said that word out loud, and I worry that by saying it, I've somehow conjured the man from an idea into something real.

"You were so calm yesterday," Elle says.

"I had time to think," I say.

When she yawns, I hear the wet maw of her mouth. "Oh, Susan," she says. "Everything is okay. Nothing bad is going to happen."

There is no way she could know this, of course, but something about how sure she is, how confident and knowing she sounds as she says this calms me. She is my wife. My rock. We might not be the couple we used to be, but we are Susan and Elle, and Susan and Elle are a fixture, a formula for happiness, a symbol of progression and hope. She said that all would be well, and Elle is always right. I feel better, and I say so.

"Get some sleep," she says, and not long after we hang up, I do.

Stewart, for his part, looks calmer on Wednesday. He tells me things are looking up. The former student seems to be responding well to treatment. "Those anti-psychotic drugs are surprisingly effective," he says. He tells me he's no longer worried and that he's starting to feel like this whole thing has been blown out of proportion. Still, he'll forward me the photograph of the

man if I want him to, which I do.

The class session begins. From the front row, Jesse catches my eye and smiles, and I see the shape of Joy around her eyes and in her heart-shaped face, and when the hour is over, she lugs her backpack onto one shoulder, and I think of poles bending and dandelions sending seeds into the wind. I think of a man with a gun stepping into the hallway and a bullet ripping through her throat, and I think of the possibility of buck shot, and the access to a gun, and I try to imagine taking a firearm apart in my head the way I've seen them do on television, releasing the top half, then the bottom, each piece falling into my lap until I'm holding little more than an empty barrel, a worn handle, the unusable piece with a trigger. I imagine dropping the pieces all over the city, leaving a part at the top of Sandia Crest, another in the West Mesa, a third buried beneath a lavender bush on Los Poblanos Farm.

In mediation training, Gemma tells us that there's nothing more to be learned from workbooks, and we shift in our seats as she explains how the practice sessions will go. Two people will be assigned the role of co-mediators. Two others will act as disputants. The disputants are given a slip of paper that explains each side of their respective stories, and they head into the hallway to mull over their fabricated grievances. I am assigned the role of mediator, and after we decide where people will sit and how we'll begin, we greet the faculty members and introduce them to the mediation process. "This is a safe space," I promise. "It's completely confidential. You should be proud about the fact that you are here – your presence is an important step towards reaching a resolution."

In this particular scenario, "It Isn't Easy Being Chair," two faculty members are battling over the best interests of the department. One has recently been promoted, and the other has turned disrespectful during meetings. They lament the friendship they once shared, and I try to remember what I've learned. Acknowledge feelings. Clarify issues. Reframe inflammatory statements and be sure to point out commonalities. "So it sounds like you've started to really hate each other," I say, and Gemma clasps her hands over her mouth. She is our coach and is supposed to observe silently, but her actions scream that everything I say is wrong. An hour and a half passes and our disputants are no closer to a resolution than they'd been at the onset. When it ends, everyone is frustrated, and I'm trying not to cry.

We reconvene in the original classroom, and Joy looks as defeated as I do. She'd been assigned a mediator role as well. "That was terrible," she whispers.

In the previous lessons, Gemma had made the mediation process sound easy, like a plug and chug flow chart that would lead people towards common ground, but it has proven to be anything but that. When the disputants argue, it's hard not to interject, hard not to judge, hard not to guide the disputants towards resolutions that feel so obvious, and harder still to watch them flounder as they fail to work it out. When class lets out, Joy and I linger outside the building while the other members of the class climb into their cars and wave goodbye.

The sun is setting in the West, and in the East, the mountains display the origins of their names—they glimmer with a watermelon pink. Joy squints into the evening light.

“Sky has pulled out all the stops today, hasn’t it?” she says. Her skin, like the mountains, burn crimson, and I force myself to look away.

That night, before bed, I get another email from Stewart. He has kept his promise, and I find myself face to face with his former student. He is not the man I’ve been imagining, but a kid named Bryce Thurman. In the image he wears a t-shirt and an uncomfortable smile. His face is pockmarked and he wears wire-rimmed glasses. In another context, I might have found his smile charming, but now, I see his insecurity. It is a smile that knows that somewhere down the line, no matter what he did or how he acted, he was going to screw up. When I go to bed, I see him standing in the middle of my living room, asking me as he steps towards couches and closets and cupboards if he’s getting warmer. “Where’s Stewart?” he wants to know. “Is he here? Here?” “No,” I say. “He’s nowhere.” But he and I both know I’m lying.

The next time I see Stewart, he has a lot to say about vigilance. “I’m confident now that this is a situation that got out of hand,” he says. “But even still, I’m going to stay alert.” He says that when he thinks about Bryce now, he feels only sadness. How will the kid recover from this? He’s permanently banned from campus. There will be no graduation, no future classes, not now, nor ever—and I’m astonished with how quickly his worry has turned to empathy and understanding. The passing days have given him perspective, but for me, it’s only caused more panic. I worry that everyone can tell, and when I stand in front of the classroom, I feel Jesse’s eyes watching me, and I remember the way her aunt and I stood in the parking lot staring at our feet, and how right before we left, I almost asked if she wanted to grab a drink. But then we said goodbye, and Joy said, “I’ve really enjoyed getting to know you, Susan,” and my name had emerged like a question she did not know she was going to ask. I carried the sound of her voice with me as I drove away, listened for it in Elle’s voice as she talked to me about her day. Already, she, too, seemed to have forgotten that there was any reason to be afraid.

It is now the last day of mediation training, and I’m placed in a group with Joy. We are both assigned the role of disputants. Joy is an administrative assistant to the chair of our department. I am a new faculty member. Joy’s character is passive aggressive. She doesn’t like my attitude. She intentionally forgets to make my copies. She doesn’t answer my emails. Her pretend name is Ali. My character carries with her all the insecurities of someone who is new and looking to prove herself. She’s some big-wig who was recruited from a more reputable university and her office is covered with signs that she is better: a bigger workspace with a new computer, a small course load and an inflated salary. She is pompous and arrogant, and I’ve named her Priscilla so I can remember to be prissy.

I find it strangely satisfying to ditch Susan in honor of Priscilla. Gemma had told us that the more deeply we feel our roles, the better it is for the mediators to practice, and I fully embrace this other self. I begin to hate this woman across from me, who looks like Joy but wears a nametag and the smug expression of Ali. You are a staff member, Priscilla says. A gatekeeper, a cog. I am an award-winning wheel, mother of the machine. You stop the machine, you stop

progress. You try to hold power in an email, but you are nothing. You hold nothing.

“The world does not revolve around you,” Ali says, and I give her a look that says she knows nothing about how and if the world turns, and the pretend mediators say, “You know, I think this might be a good time to take a break. We might make better progress if we can touch base with each of you one on one.” It’s called a caucus, and Gemma told us to try calling one to see what it felt like. I know this is all part of the training, but I storm into the hallway, anyway.

I cannot sit down. I cannot focus. I cannot turn Priscilla off. While they talk with Ali, Priscilla paces the floor, thinking about this stupid woman and her lack of respect, and when it’s my turn to meet with the mediators, I can hardly look at Ali when she skulks out of the room. I sit in my chair. I feel how hard my jaw is, how fixed the glare upon my face.

The two mediators observe me silently. One is a librarian, but he looks like a body builder. His shoulders are as square as his jaw. The other mediator is a campus administrator. Her bottle-cap glasses magnify watery eyes. “You look upset,” the librarian says.

“I am upset,” I respond. “There are things that need to be said, but she won’t let me say them.”

“When you say things,” he prompts, “what kinds of things are you referring to?”

I stare at my hands, which are Priscilla’s hands, which are pressed flat on the surface of the table. I curl them into fists and set them into my lap.

Now it’s the other mediator’s turn to step in. “What is it you want to say?” she prods. “It’s okay. You can talk to us.”

I look at the empty desks in this empty conference room. “This is confidential, right?” I say. “What I say in this room doesn’t leave this room?”

The two nod. They sit straighter in their chairs. All three of us lean forward while our mediation coach watches from his fly-like space against the wall. “We’ve all signed the confidentiality clause,” the man says, even though we hadn’t, even though Gemma told us the confidentiality clause is an unofficial agreement. In real life, the clause is meant as a vote of confidence. Plus, this isn’t real. This is pretend. But that’s Susan who knows this, and I’m Priscilla, and Priscilla believes them when they tell her it will not be shared, not with Ali, not with anyone.

“This is a safe place,” the woman says, and even the coach nods his head, and I find myself saying the words I’ve been trying to say all along. I tell them about the shooter and my student. I tell them I don’t know what to do.

The two mediators look to each other and then to the coach who looks at his notes. This isn’t in the scenario. He’s re-reading my character’s role to see if he somehow missed this detail.

“Wait,” the woman says, “can we pause?” The coach looks up. “What do we do in a situation like this? I mean confidentiality works until safety is involved, so do we keep going?”

Even the coach seems baffled, and I know I’m supposed to take it back. I’m supposed to rewind our hypothetical talk and stick to my assigned role, but I want to know as much as they do – what do you do?

Gemma says that as mediators our role is not to fix. It is not to offer solutions. It is not

to guide. It is to untangle, to expand, to get the two to look each other in the eye and dance. She says we are the guardians of the process, but at times like this, I'm not sure what there is to guard. What is there to mediate? There is a shooter. This is a fact. People could die, and it will be, even without my knowing, my responsibility. It might have nothing to do with Priscilla or Ali, but it affects them both anyway.

"Let's just continue," the coach says, and the man looks at me, the muscles in his neck pulse when he swallows, and I know that when the session is done, we'll debrief and the coach will ask me why I said what I said, and they'll tell me how I surprised them, how they were glad I brought that strangeness to the table, and I can already hear Gemma talking about when to stop a session and when to keep a session going, and everyone will have something to say, some input, some insight. They will pretend they can think rationally in the face of events like these.

Afterwards, I will pack up my belongings and hurry off to my car. I'll see Joy waving at me as I pull out of the parking lot, and I'll pretend not to notice. I'll go home to my wife, who has just arrived from Seattle wearing the weary smile of a traveler relieved to be in her own space. She'll ask me how my day has been, and I will not tell her about the mediation training, and I will not tell her about Jesse or Joy. I will, however, tell her about Stewart's newfound confidence that everything will be all right, and we'll spend the evening wondering about the way fear can so quickly turn to understanding and pity, and I can tell by the time we wash the dishes and ready ourselves for bed, that she, too, has already moved past this.

That night, Elle will wrap her arms around me, and we will make love for the first time in months, her hands on my hips, in my hair, between my thighs. I will bury my face into the pillow even though the windows are shut and the adobe walls are thick, even though, no matter how loud I cry, the neighbors will not hear.

But this will all happen later. For now, I sit at my side of the table, my hands pressed into my lap. Ali waits to be let back into the room. Neither mediator knows how they are supposed to continue. They look to our coach who looks to me, but I don't help them move forward. I don't let them off the hook.