

Thoughts and Prayers – Paul Blake

Officers Carl Jenkins and Richard Mullins entered the school building with their guns drawn. Jenkins crossed the familiar threshold of the main entrance. He had been here countless times: first with a backpack strapped to his back, then as a parent attending PTA meetings and basketball games. Mullins was ahead checking line of sights.

‘North corridor, clear,’ Mullins said, stopping at the junction with the east corridor.

‘Check.’ Jenkins overlapped him, staying outside his range of fire. He turned into the east corridor, his eyes searched for threats, near and far. ‘Clear,’ he said.

‘Check.’

They made their way along the corridor, checking in classrooms as they went. Any cowering teachers and children were directed to exit through the main entrance and stay at the gate for assistance from paramedics and officers when they arrived. The officers went into Jenkins’ old homeroom, where Mrs Miller was standing against the far wall away from the door and the windows. Fear had made her look completely different to the woman Jenkins had known for over twenty years. He only recognised her when she spoke. Her voice was so familiar to him that it was eerie to hear it come from a stranger’s face. Jenkins told her which way to take the half a dozen children hunkered in the corner of the room, and she stroked his face as she passed.

‘Thank you, Carl. Be safe.’ Her touch was cold, as though the fear had drained her of blood.

‘You too, Miss Miller,’ he said. *Even after all these years, I couldn’t bring myself to call her by her first name.*

His shoulder radio squawked for an update. As he answered it, he shoed Mrs Miller out of the room, gesturing for them to stay low.

‘Officer Mullens and I are clearing the east corridor, directing survivors out the main entrance. No shots heard. No contact with the shooter and no victims seen. Is there an update on backup?’

‘Backup is arriving on scene now; paramedics are on their way, in case,’ Margery, the dispatcher, said, her voice an octave higher from the stress of the situation. *I didn’t blame her; my heart was racing too.*

He heard a muffled crack of a shot. Both he and Mullins instinctively ducked at the sound. Jenkins informed dispatch, and they left the classroom. They headed further down the corridor past the rows of red lockers and locked classroom doors. Another shot sounded out. It echoed down the halls.

‘I think it’s coming from the cafeteria,’ Jenkins said.

‘It’s your home ground. You take the lead,’ Mullins said. His breathing was heavy and rapid.

‘Thanks,’ Jenkins attempted a smile of reassurance; but stopped as he realised it was more of a grimace. ‘Stay frosty, Rich,’ *I had brought the phrase to the partnership as a throwback to my high school football days. Even at the state final, I don’t think my heart was beating as fast as this, my mind kept wandering.* Jenkins could see some of the tension come out of his partner’s posture.

‘Ice cold, Carl, ice cold.’ Mullins finished the expression with a smile.

They used this as a way of lightening the mood and to keep each other focused and calm. *Focus*, Jenkins told himself. It didn’t work. *This was my school. I know, at least by sight, the entire faculty and many the students. My son, Spence, is a senior here.* At the thought of his name, Jenkins felt sick. He felt the same as when dispatch had said the name of the school over the radio, he had put the feelings away, locked them up, but now they had returned with a vengeance: A ball of ice in his stomach that froze his heart, and shrivelled his

balls. He momentarily closed his eyes to regain control. Images of Spence flashed before him. *In the hospital, in my arms, the first day of kindergarten, his refusal to let go of my hand, his first catch, fingers clawed on the ball.* His thoughts went back to the night before and the argument they had had. The last he had seen his only son. The last words they said to each other.

Spence had come through the back door with a scowl on his face, he closed the door with force and stomped straight through the kitchen without a word to Jenkins, sitting at the breakfast nook with a sandwich.

‘Hi, Spence!’ Jenkins called after him. Nothing, apart the sound of his bedroom door slamming. This was unusual behaviour for him, normally an outgoing child. Jenkins still thought of Spence as a child, but his son was already eighteen and taller than him. Spence was the star athlete at Newton High. *In far better physical shape than I’d ever been at school.* A thought flashed through his mind, *steroids*, but he quickly dismissed it. *Spence is fully aware of the dangers of those things. I made sure of it.* Jenkins went upstairs to see what the matter was. He knocked on the door, ‘Spence? Is everything alright?’

‘It’s fine Dad. Just give me some space, please.’

He would have entered if it wasn’t for the pleading nature of the ‘please’. *Give him space; he’ll talk to me later once he’s calmed down.* They had a close relationship, made even closer since the death of Marie, four years ago. Cancer. It had been quick, *thank God.* Jenkins didn’t think he could have coped with a long drawn out decline, watching the woman he loved wither and decay. They found out in April, just after Easter and she was gone before Independence Day. He stayed strong for Spence. He only let go one weekend and allowed himself to grieve. It was four months after Marie had passed. His brother, Jerry, took Spence hunting and Jenkins stayed home with a couple of bottles of Jack Daniels for company and

drank the pain away. He wasn't much for hunting anyway. He liked the outdoors, the quietness and the clear air. But the guns he could do without. Unusually for the area, he didn't keep guns at home, save for his service revolver which was kept locked away. *I've seen what they can do to people.* Jerry was the opposite: a complete gun nut, a card-carrying NRA member, with bumper stickers on his car.

He left Spence in his room and went downstairs. Later, Jenkins heard him come down and cornered him by the fridge.

'Is everything alright, Spence?'

'Yeah, Dad. Just leave it, ok.'

'You sure? Coach treating you ok? I know he thinks he's a badass.'

'Yeah, it's nothing.'

'Have you decided on college yet? The deadline for acceptance is coming up.' Spence had been accepted to every college he had applied for. Recruiters had been making the trek up here all year offering sports scholarships and the occasional illegal kickback.

'God Dad, just leave me alone. Everything is fine.'

'Is it to do with Adrienne?' Adrienne Kirkland was Spence's girlfriend; they had been together since they were sophomores.

'Leave. Me. Alone.' Each word was said with a fist slammed to the countertop, making the stacked crockery jump, then pushed past and stormed upstairs. Jenkins took a step to follow him, but something held him back. Maybe, it was the look in his son's eyes. A look of pain, hurt, and anger that Jenkins had not seen in him before. Maybe it was the sudden violence. *I don't know. I wish now I had gone to him and held him. I may never see him alive again.*

Another shot, then a second woke him from his thoughts, he opened his eyes.

‘Come on Rich. Let’s get this guy.’ He left the classroom with purpose and headed down the corridor in the direction of the gunfire.

As they got closer to the cafeteria, Jenkins saw children lying on the ground, some were moving, too many were not. The air was heavy with a smell of cordite and blood. Mullins called into his radio for backup and paramedics. They quietly told the children to move down the corridor to the main entrance. *Thankfully I don’t recognise any of them. Not one of them is Spence. I’m not sure what I’ll do if...* He shook his head at the thought. *Enough of that. You have children to save. That is your duty. They need your protection.*

Another shot. Jenkins heard screaming coming from the cafeteria. It was a horrible sound. Children’s screams that climb in the ear and gnaw at the brain. It made thinking hard, and adrenaline kicks in. The urge to protect, the impulse to rush in, was too strong. Jenkins felt his body moving. Mullins placed his hand on Jenkins' chest, stopping him. Mullins knew what Jenkins was thinking. He bent to his ear.

‘We do this by the book. Cover and back each other up. It’s for our safety and the safety of the kids in there.’

Jenkins nodded his agreement and took point. He pushed the heavy door of the cafeteria open with care and entered, his heart beating fast, a tremor in his hands. The cafeteria was large and L-shaped, sunlight streamed in through the large windows at the far end of the hall. Jenkins took immediate cover behind a wide pillar to his left. Mullins took the one to the right. Jenkins noticed blood on the floor, drips, splatters and occasional pools. He looked around the pillar and saw the rows of tables and benches. They stretched out in three straight lines the length of the hall. There were children slumped over at random intervals, their heads in their trays blood pooling underneath. Children were laying in the aisles between the tables. He looked to the centre of the hall where the popular kids would be. Where everyone could see them, and where Spence would be. He felt sick; there were bodies

around there, more there than anywhere else in the hall. Letterman jackets, school books, and pompoms lay abandoned on the table, and on the floor.

Another shot and screaming. Jenkins gestured for Mullins to move up along his side of the cafeteria. Jenkins stalked the other. The bend of the 'L' was to the right of the hall, where the kitchens and food serving stations were. The officers used the tables for cover, their shoes slipping in the blood. Jenkins came alongside the popular table and looked for Spence. He couldn't see him. Instead, he saw Brad Nicholson, the massive linebacker, face down, head in his food tray, blood dripping into the pudding cup. He'd been accepted to Cal Tech. Next to him, Leshawn Johnson, the fastest running back in the school's history, would have been going to Penn State. Now a ragged line of bullet holes across his chest. Spence's friends. *Where are Spence and Adie?* He moved past the table and saw her. Laid out on the floor, a dark red stain on the cream cheerleading outfit, shot through the heart, shot in the face, her arms and legs at strange angles like an abandoned marionette. *Oh, God.* He retched, feeling the bile burn his throat. Tears came to his eyes. *She is like a daughter. I know her parents Mitch and Tammy, I go drinking with Mitch each week. How can I face them if Spence lives and their beautiful daughter has been slaughtered?*

Jenkins shook his head and continued. *I must find the shooter and stop him.* He reached the point of the cafeteria where he could start to see the rest of the 'L'. He would be more exposed to the shooter here. He ducked down lower using the tables as cover. Along the far wall he saw a line of children sat against the wall, he looked for Spence. He wasn't there. The children, aged between fourteen and eighteen, sat there in tears or with their faces held in their shaking hands. The cafeteria doors opened, and Jenkins looked back, seeing that backup had arrived, *finally*. He looked at Mullins and mouthed 'cover me' to him. He popped up from behind the tables and ran to the column in front of him. It was in full view from the

kitchens. Shots sounded out, and Jenkins felt the passage of the bullets behind him as he ran. He reached the pillar and shrunk behind it, minimising his profile.

‘Can you see him?’ Mullins called out.

Jenkins risked a glance, prayed the shooter wouldn’t fire. He saw bodies in front of the man, seven, eight, maybe ten. He saw a young girl knelt in front of the shooter, crying and pleading for him to let her go. He saw the AR-15 assault rifle, black and sleek in the shooter’s hands. He saw the man’s black jeans, maroon Newtown High sweatshirt. He saw tears running down the face he seen every day for the past eighteen years, changing from a baby into the young man he was now. It was Spence. He couldn’t tear his eyes away.

Spencer? No, no, no. This can’t be true. My baby.

‘Dad?’ he heard him say.

‘Mullins, it’s Spence. My God. It’s Spence.’

He heard Mullins ask him to repeat. He was unable to answer him. Unable to process. *How could my boy be capable of such a thing?* His radio crackled, and it woke him from his stupor.

‘Spence,’ he called out, ‘put your gun down, and we’ll talk. It’s not too late to sort this out.’

‘Oh Dad,’ his voice broke as he spoke. ‘I killed her. She cheated on me, so I killed her. I was so angry. She cheated on me with Brad last summer while I was at camp. Everyone knew; they were laughing at me.’

‘Put the gun down, let the children go. We can talk about this.’ Mullins called out.

‘Uncle Richard?’ Spence had called Mullins ‘uncle’ since Jenkins, and he had become partners eight years ago.

‘Spence?’ Mullins said, there was a touch of incredulity in his voice. ‘Come on let’s talk about this. Put the gun down.’

‘No, I can’t. The SWAT team will kill me if I do.’

‘There is no SWAT, it’s just your Dad and me.’ Jenkins could see Mullins waving to the officers making their way down the hall. Telling them to hold up.

‘Spence, where did you get the gun?’ Jenkins asked.

‘Uncle Jerry.’

‘He gave you the gun?’

‘No, I asked him, and he refused. He said he was going to tell you. I stopped him before he could. I’m so sorry Dad.’

My brother? His lopsided grin and stupid face flashed before Jenkins’ eyes in the blink of an eye. Jenkins felt rage building inside him, twenty-thirty-forty voices, one of them his brother’s, screaming for vengeance. He saw his child holding a baseball bat - he saw his child holding a rifle. The image kept switching between the two. He stepped out from the pillar, his gun aimed at Spence.

Mullins stepped out too. ‘Let them go, Spence. Drop the rifle. It’s over.’ His gun was also aimed at Spence.

Jenkins moved closer, and he saw the rifle in his son’s arms lower, its muzzle pointed to the ground, away from the girl in front of him, and away from the children against the wall.

‘Drop it, Spence,’ Mullins repeated.

Jenkins heard the clatter of the rifle on the tiled floor of the cafeteria. He saw Mullins spring forward and kick the rifle away. He heard Mullins tell the children to go. Jenkins was focused on Spence. Peripherally he watched the children stream past him to safety, a blur running to freedom, His son the constant. Standing in front of the kitchen with his hands up, palms bloody, like a surgeon. Jenkins saw he was still aiming the gun at Spence. He saw his brother, Adie, her parents, Spence’s friends, and classmates. He saw his wife, Marie. She

serenely nodded to him, the slightest movement. His hand began to shake. He brought his free hand up to support his hold on the gun, to steady his aim. *I love you Spence, but I cannot bear to see you live, not after this, may God have mercy on me.* Jenkins pulled the trigger, once, twice. He then collapsed in a ball on the ground, mirroring his child, not hearing Mullins calling to him, or his radio screaming for updates.