

*HELLO KITTY

Elizabeth Trepanier fiction

He shot the little girl first, proving his point. She couldn't have been older than eight. The mother sat perfectly still, silent, with her feet sticking straight out. Her eyes were glazed, staring forward; her perfectly made-up face was a wasteland of shiny sweat and tears. Now, her daughter lay slumped over beside her as the robber prowled up and down the row of hostages again.

The sparkly Hello Kitty cartoon on the girl's shirt was hidden as she lay facing the blood-splattered wall. We couldn't see the gaping hole in her small, smooth forehead now, but it was burned into our brains just the same.

People say it's total bullshit, that life doesn't actually flash before your eyes in a near-death experience. I beg to differ.

Someone at the far end of the wall was shouting angrily. An older man, I think. A few others began yelling, too, adrenaline spiking harder than the fear. The robber pounded down the line of hostages as the silent ones cowered and ducked their heads out of range of his flailing gun. He stopped in front of the mother and daughter in the middle of the line.

If you all don't shut the fuck up right now, I'm gonna shoot

her first, he snarled through the latex mask.

He aimed at the child sobbing on the floor.

The angry man at the far end thought the robber was bluffing and he shouted again.

I swear, in the span of a single second, the laws of relativity gave way and we all held our breath as the robber's gun lifted toward the stricken face of that little girl. He fired without hesitation. Before the mother even had time to reach for her daughter, she was laid out, legs askew.

Life does flash before your eyes in near-death experiences. Her whole life flashed before mine. Birthday parties, bubble gum, and what could have been. That girl's entire life flashed before my eyes—before the violent sound even ricocheted through my body and my ears began to ring. Holding hands with her first boyfriend, graduating high school, laughing with friends, falling in love with herself and her life, her career and the person she'd choose to spend the rest of her life with... Her children and her children's children, laughing and racing around their backyard against the backdrop of pink- and orange-hued twilight.

The resounding crack hit us

all that day and I realized in the next moment that I had always thought old people were supposed to be the expendable ones in hostage situations. Some profound sense of ethical humanity was supposed to exist, right? The humanity that kept even the worst of criminals from hurting women and children. That should have kept the girl safe and taken the angry old man instead. He had been the one shouting, after all.

It was his fault she was dead.

I stared, gaping at him as we all did, as he gaped at the dead child as the screams rose up around us in a cacophony of demonic terror. Chaos imbued the room with the palpable taste of fear as the man's face fell white with regret.

He would be haunted by his own voice for the remainder of his life. Haunted by the anger that blinded him. Every breath he took, he and the masked man stole from her. Every smile he offered to his family would be a lie—they should have been hers!

Time pressed on and there was even more shouting, the banging of boots, and dark-suited officers poured in, carrying big shield deflectors. They put their bodies between us and him, the murderer. I think the gunman tried to kill himself, but an officer tackled him before he could pull the trigger. Another second, another life changed forever.

Where was the justice in it all?

We were taken outside the building for medical aid after the all clear. As I was escorted to an ambulance for triage, with the ringing

in my ears drowning everything else, I watched the robber cry.

I can't walk down the bright pink aisles of children's toys anymore. I wonder if any of us could.

**Content Warning: Graphic descriptions of murder*