

I'M NOT OKAY

By Bradley Walton

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ISBN 1-60003-583-3

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AT RISE: On a bare stage, JACKIE, a female in her early 20's, stands dressed for a class reunion. The character may also be a male named JACK.

It's a cold night. Too cold for May. My coat is still in the restaurant's basement lounge, along with close to two hundred people who graduated from high school with me. I should go back down. And I should stay this time. I need to be with them. But the cold outside is easier to bear.

Coward.

I hear the restaurant door open and close behind me. Footsteps. My coat offered in an outstretched hand.

"I thought you might need this."

His name is Charlie Ellis. He used to be a football player. A good one. He sat two seats behind and one row to the left of me in government class our senior year. He walks with a limp now. The day that he got the limp... I wasn't in school that day.

When I look at Charlie to say thanks, there's warmth in his eyes. I turn away and sit down on the cold concrete step.

"You okay, Jackie?" Charlie's voice is concerned, and I feel ashamed. If he knew the truth, he would hate me. I don't want to be here. Why did I come to my five-year high school reunion? Because it was the least I could do. Because I'll never be able to say I'm sorry. Because the best I can do is stick the metaphorical knife in the metaphorical wound and give it the metaphorical twist. Because I don't have the guts to tell anyone what I did.

No. That's not right. What I *didn't* do.

I deserve to feel shame at the kindness Charlie is showing. I deserve the guilt that rakes across my insides. I relish it. And then I loathe myself even more. For wallowing in it. For patting myself on the back over my own emotional self-flagellation. Like that somehow makes things better.

On the other side of the door, downstairs in the warm restaurant, the mood is somber. Not like a reunion is supposed to be. I can't help but wonder if the turnout would have been as big if... if nine of our classmates hadn't been gunned down in school three weeks before graduation... along with four juniors, a sophomore, two freshmen, and three teachers. This isn't a reunion. Not really. It's a memorial. A wake.

And it's because of me. Not entirely. Maybe not even mostly. But I could've stopped it. I could've told someone. Only I didn't. I just kept to myself, and I let it happen.

I let two kids named Robert and Kate carry guns into the school and open fire during a class change.

Robert and Kate were pretty much your classic introverted social misfits, the same as I was. I wasn't really friends with them, so much as we were all targets together. Spitballs. Having our books knocked out of our hands, or our lunch trays tipped onto our clothes. Names. Insults. The things kids do to other kids. There was sort of an unspoken solidarity between them and me, even though I wasn't a part of... whatever their relationship was. Robert and Kate were tight. Everyone kind of assumed they were a couple, but no one ever really knew for sure. They were always together, but nobody ever saw them kissing or holding hands or anything. I just sort of hovered around them sometimes, and they let me. They let me hear them talking. About how they were tired of being the victims. About how they wanted to teach everyone a lesson. About how Robert's uncle had a gun collection. About how May 25 was going to be the day. They never spoke directly to me about it. But they knew that I knew. And to this day, I'm not sure why. Did they want me to join them? Was the offer there, if I'd spoken up and said that I wanted to accept it? Did they trust me that deeply to not tell anyone? To not betray them? Or did they think that if someone knew and didn't tell... if someone gave unspoken permission by letting it happen... that it was okay?

I don't know why I didn't tell. Part of me didn't think they'd really go through with it. But that's no excuse, because there was another part of me that took them seriously enough that I pretended to be sick and stayed home from school on May 25. In the end, I think I kept my silence simply because I didn't know what to do, and doing nothing required less effort than doing something. I allowed myself to become complicit in Robert and Kate's plans. And I can't lie. There was part of me that wanted them to do it. To strike back. To teach everyone a lesson.

Only... what was the lesson? If the people they taught it to were dead, then what was the point? No... of course there'd be survivors. And the survivors would know. They'd know that they'd done something to cause this. Even while they tried to pin the blame someplace else. On Robert and Kate. On violent movies and video games. The survivors would still know that they'd played a part. That they'd provoked us. That they'd failed us. That they'd failed themselves as human beings. *(Pause.)* Just as surely as we'd failed them. Just as surely as we'd failed ourselves.

The sad part is that I can't help but notice how much *nicer* everyone is now, years later. How much more grown up. But then I wonder... did Robert and Kate do that... or would it have happened on its own anyway? The thought makes me feel sick.

When I heard that Kate and Robert had done it—that they'd actually gone through with it—I got scared. Scared they'd be caught and questioned. Asked if they had accomplices. Asked who else knew. I shouldn't have worried.

When the police came, Kate committed suicide, just like they'd planned. By that time, she'd killed eight people and wounded eleven others. She put a bullet in Charlie Ellis's leg. There was this girl—one of the mentally handicapped kids—who didn't understand what was happening when the shooting started, and just stood there. Charlie Ellis threw her to the ground and shielded her with his own body. He shouldn't have bothered. If anything, he put her in more danger because Kate couldn't see the girl's face. You see, Robert and Kate had decided not to shoot at the mentally handicapped kids. They'd never done anything to hurt us.

Robert was fatally wounded and disarmed by the police before he could put his gun to his head. And while he was lying there, bleeding, dying... someone asked if him if anyone else was with them. If anyone else knew. He said no. I wonder sometimes what was going through his head. He probably thought he was returning my favor. That he wouldn't rat on me because I didn't rat on them. But I also wonder, in his final moments, did Robert understand the horror of what he'd done? Did he hate me for letting them go through with it? Did he know that by not giving them my name he was forcing me to live with this? With myself? Was it his way of punishing me?

I'll probably never understand how Robert and Kate could find it in themselves to do what they did. I mean, my situation at school was

pretty much the same as theirs, but it never seriously crossed my mind to use a gun. I could never have pulled the trigger and killed someone. I think they knew that. I think that's why they never flat-out asked me to join them. But I have this nagging fear... it is possible that they were able to do what they did... because they knew that I couldn't, so they did it for me? Did I have more to do with what happened on May 25 than simply keeping my mouth shut?

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