

Dear March 22nd,

I suppose I should start with my story. I have to warn you, it's not a pleasant one.

It was just a normal day for me, as it was everyone else's. I thought it was a typical Monday, where I'd attend my morning classes, have the afternoon to have lunch with a longtime friend, get the first dose of the vaccine, go to work, then get myself ready for the next day. My vaccine was scheduled for 2:30pm. I was in the area after lunch and arrived fifteen minutes early. I figured I could just hang out until my scheduled time. Luckily, they took me early. I wandered around the store for that ten-minute monitoring period, bought a couple things, then waited outside for an Uber to pick me up to take me to work. Another employee was outside on her break.

The gunshots started.

I didn't know what they were at first. It sounded like a firework or a giant sheet of metal dropping. There was a second one. Then a third one. The employee and I looked at each other and knew it was real. We huddled next to each other and pushed ourselves as far into the wall as we could and hoped that it would serve as a suitable hiding spot. A man, who I strongly believe to be victim Kevin Mahoney, was killed not far from us. I can still remember it vividly.

Those were the longest few seconds of my life. Was I going to die like that poor stranger in the parking lot? Would it hurt? It sounded like it would. I didn't want to die. My family and friends all flashed in my mind. If the gunman turned around, that employee and I would have nowhere to go and we'd die. I am not a religious person but prayed that he would not turn around. The gunman then ran past us and into the store.

The employee told me we had to run. So, we did. Around the side, and to the back where other employees and shoppers were escaping out the loading dock and over the snow piled on the ground. There was a mixture of "Oh my God", and "Call the police" slipping from peoples' mouths. I think I slipped; my boots were not made for snow. I called out for the employee not to leave me and for someone to grab my bag. It was getting heavier by the minute, and I was terrified the shooter would emerge out the back and start shooting us sitting ducks on that snow pile. Someone grabbed my laptop bag; someone grabbed the phone I didn't even realize I dropped. I remembered the uber driver, who was only five minutes away from picking me up when the first gunshots started. I messaged him and told him not to come. We ran to the ice cream parlor near the store, where we all felt like we were a safe enough distance away. Everyone was on their phone, either calling their families, friends, or the police. I called my family.

The uber driver ended up finding me and took me back to my apartment. I called my boss and told him I wasn't going into work that day. My phone started flooding with texts from friends, warning us of an active shooter and a few complaints about the growing traffic. I ignored those.

I thanked and apologized to my uber driver the whole way home, and he kept telling me it was okay. He said it broke his heart to see so many people traumatized. When I walked through my apartment door, I finally broke. I cried and hugged my roommate for a good five minutes. She cried for me too.

I knew my life would never be the same.

Dear March 22nd,

It's been months and when I still think back on what happened, my emotions are one big, jumbled mess. Maybe it's because March was a blur and sometimes, I ask myself if it even was real. At the time, it was so surreal, I think I was in denial the whole time.

If I told my past self that one day, I would be a mass shooting survivor, I don't think I'd believe myself. It's something you can't even imagine happening to yourself. You hear them so much in the news, and there have been numerous in Colorado. I know a family who lost a son in Columbine, we have active shooter drills in schools, and gun violence is something you see on TV all the time. As hard as it is to say, we are desensitized to gun violence.

Dear Uber Driver,

I don't have the words to share how grateful I am. I messaged you, telling you to not come and pick me up since there was an active shooting. You could have turned around and left. I wouldn't have blamed you; I didn't want you to drive right into a mass shooting. You found me anyway. You put yourself into unknown danger and took me home.

I no longer remember your name, but you will forever be a hero in my eyes.

Dear March 22nd,

Things that Trigger Me and New Things I Do (as of April)

1. Loud Pops such as balloons
2. Being alone in public
3. Sitting or standing near/next to entrances
4. Not having a hiding spot or escape route
5. The grey coat I was wearing on that day
6. It's hard to associate trauma with myself
7. Being outside on a cold and cloudy day
8. King Soopers
9. Anything that resembles a gunshot when it comes from behind me
10. Seeing other mass shootings in the news

Dear March 22nd,

The week of the shooting was a big blur to me. It was the week of Boulder's second wellness Day, and most of my professors just gave us the week off. Some didn't. I don't remember what happened in those classes if I am being honest.

My parents came up and took me back home in Denver for the week, where I'd spend the time processing what I had gone through. The whole week was a huge blur of get out of bed, watch the news with a sense of numbness and nothing really sinking in, go back to my room and look up more news stories on my phone, eat somewhere in there, go back downstairs and watch the news with my dad, see some friends and family who wished to see me, talk to friends on the phone and share my story if they asked, dinner, more news, school work, then taking sleeping meds because I couldn't go to sleep on my own.

Some days were better than others, but most of the time, I just watched the world go on, stuck in that one day. But, as absurd as it felt, time moves on, and I had to head back up to Boulder to continue with classes.

To: Professors

Subject: A Little Update

Hello.

I am writing this email to inform you of something I wish I never had to.

Unfortunately, on Monday, 22nd, I was at the King Soopers, just outside the store when the first gunshots went off. I was with an employee, and we hid the best we could, watched as a man was gunned down in the parking lot, and ran past us to enter the store. We were both very, very lucky he did not turn around and spot us. I was able to escape, but not without repercussions.

I am seeking therapy, Victim Advocate Assistance, and working with the BPD to give them my witness testimony and eventually heal. During this time, I find myself having trouble concentrating and keeping myself grounded enough to focus for long periods of time. Therefore, I find myself having trouble getting work efficiently done and throwing myself back to "normalcy". I kind of go on and off from doing relatively better, and not okay.

I am willing to work with you to figure out some sort of plan in the event I am unable to get work done on time. I talked to my therapist about this, and we are trying to focus on taking care of myself for the time being. I do want to finish off the semester, and I will try to get my work done within reasonable timeframes, but I would love to talk with you and work/talk about potential leniency in the event I stumble along the way.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Dear March 22nd,

I didn't attend any of the vigils or funerals. I didn't tell my story to the mass media, nor did I visit the memorials until a week later.

I haven't shed a single tear since March 22nd. Maybe I got it all out when I cried in my roommate's arms. Or maybe I'm not ready yet.

Recovery has a way of doing things at its own pace.

To the Employee who was with Me:

Thank you.

I know you said you didn't save me, but you did. I really don't know what I would have done if you weren't there. Honestly, I don't feel like I did anything, you were the one to help me on my feet and offer your house as shelter.

But I guess it goes both ways. I'm sure no one feels like they saved anyone in that situation when we probably mean more to someone else than we will ever know.

In a way, we saved each other. Just by being there.

Dear March 22nd,

Ahamad Al Aliwi Alissa is charged with 115 charges, more than thirty of those are charges of attempted murder.

one of those is mine.

Dear March 22nd,

The fourth was different this year. We still went to a couple cookouts with friends or family, and that was fun. But as it started to get dark, I felt like I had to walk on eggshells in a sense. Friday, we had dinner with Mom's cousin who lives in the neighborhood. I arrived late because I was tutoring. Dinner was nice and I enjoyed seeing family, but 8:50 rolled around, and I decided to drive back home before the fireworks started in earnest. I was saying my goodbyes on their back porch when, lo and behold, a firework went off. Real close to the house. I drove home as soon as I could, but it took about an hour for me to calm down or at least to come back to reality.

Saturday, we had another dinner with our good family friends. Usually this is the day we have dinner with them, then head over to a firework show at a nearby park. There were a couple times where some fireworks went off in the neighborhood, and I had to check out and put my earbuds in to block out noise. At least my friends and sister didn't question and supported me on protecting myself. But it was weird too not to go to fireworks. I missed it and there were several times where I wanted to go, but I knew with my reaction to a firework the previous night, I would probably pass out.

Sunday, we celebrated my sister's birthday since her birthday was Tuesday, and she had to be back in Fort Collins for summer classes. That night, I went to a good friend's neighborhood block party. That was fun, and we spent most of the time talking in her house since the kids were playing games that involved popping balloons and were throwing around little party poppers. When eight thirty rolled around, we hunkered down in her basement. Her mom called, warning us they were gonna be setting off a couple fireworks. What fun. My friend helped me get my earbuds connected in time and I ended up blasting Hamilton for a couple hours. She was totally understanding of me not being able to hear anything and even taught me a couple words in sign language, some of which I would never repeat out loud.

The Fourth used to be a holiday I looked forward to. It was a time I could see friends I haven't seen in a long time, have good food, and then watch a firework show, pointing out which ones are our favorites. I always liked the ones that exploded in a sphere shape and changed from the color gold to blue. Now, I can't. I'd like to eventually, but fireworks sound too much like gunshots for my liking. I feared that if I had to sit through a firework show, I'd have a panic attack.

Dear Friends and Family of Kevin Mahoney,

I would first like to say that I am sorry for your loss.

I remember seeing your wonderful remembrance of Mahoney in the news, seeing a picture, and realizing that he is the man who was in the parking lot. That man who was not even ten feet away from me and an employee.

I'd never known what gunshots sounded like, and it wasn't until I saw Mr. Mahoney running, did the situation really dawn on me. If I hadn't seen him, I wouldn't have hidden, and stood out in the open where I could have been shot.

It's not fair that he was taken from you, it's tragic, horrible, and brings unimaginable pain. I'm not here to say that I'm grateful that Mr. Mahoney was there. No one ever deserves to be in a mass shooting. I wanted to let you know that Mr. Mahoney is a hero in my eyes. That day, whether he knew it or not, Kevin Mahoney saved my life.

Dear March 22nd,

Recovery for mass shootings feels so isolating. It's not something you can reach out and ask "Hey, I was at the Boulder Supermarket Shooting, how about you?" as an icebreaker. It kind of brings down the mood. I know Boulder offered group therapies in person and online, but when those were open, I wasn't in a place to open up, nor did I have time since I was struggling to balance school with my recovery.

Sometime in May or June, I was ready for group therapy, or at least a group I could talk to where they could relate to me. There were no more in Boulder. They all stopped around April.

I don't mean to say I don't appreciate the services that were offered to me. When I was offered help through various programs, I wasn't ready to reach out. I had my own therapist at the time, and I wasn't ready to share anything with anyone yet. I was a broken vase, and I was trying to figure out where all my pieces went. I looked everywhere, and it was nearly impossible to find anything for long term help.

I say nearly impossible. I found a group later on. A group comprised of other mass shooting survivors from all over the country. They are another family. A family we never wish for you to join but will welcome you with open arms.

Dear March 22,

I heard some people think that the Boulder shooting was a hoax because the victims on the news didn't respond to trauma in a convincing way. Among other things.

Some stories on TV, you see people sobbing and shaking and sometimes other people can keep a straight face. I'm one of the latter.

I'm pretty muted with my reactions, and I don't outwardly express any heavy emotions. Even in panic attacks. My heart could be pounding a mile a minute and I could feel like I am having trouble breathing, but outwardly, I try to keep my cool and act like everything is okay.

I think there is an unconscious stigma on how you are supposed to act in mass trauma situations. A rulebook stating you have to be emotional and cry, and hyperventilate, and tremble like a leaf. And there are survivors I know who do all of the above when reliving their trauma.

Me? I get stuck in my own mind. I put on a smile, I try to get along with my day like nothing is on my mind, when my brain seems to be carrying a heavy burden. I laugh, I joke, I interact with people like nothing is wrong. I like to think I'm good at hiding when something is wrong, but I am sure some friends and family can see right through me.

Any reaction to mass shooting trauma is valid. Whether people are good at hiding it, if they are overemotional, or if they are muted in their responses. Just because I can smile and laugh like everyone else doesn't mean I'm not traumatized.

Dear March 22nd,

I'm the type of person where music resonates with me, sometimes on a personal level. I have songs that I attribute to some of my friends because it reminds me of them, and sometimes I have songs I sing if I am angry.

To quote Lin-Manuel Miranda's lyrics from the hit musical, *Hamilton*,

"There are moments that the words won't reach

There is suffering too powerful to name

You hold your child as tight as you can

And push away the unimaginable"

If I had died, would my parents be like the Hamilton's in the musical? Going through life all numb, doing things they have never done before. What about my sister? What would she do without someone to tease or talk to? What about my friends? What would my roommate have done if I hadn't come home that night?

Quite frankly, it's unimaginable.

There are times my mind wanders, and I think of what would have happened if I did things a little differently that day. What would have happened if my Uber driver arrived a few minutes early? What if I stayed in the store? What if I was checking out at the time? So many "what ifs" and so many of them end in my death. But, at the same time, it's hard to imagine. Because all those scenarios in my head are not how it played out. That day happened as that day did. And I'm alive. Other survivors I've spoken to have done the same thing.

It really is unimaginable.

To the Person who Thought It was a Good Idea to Set off Something That Resembled a Gunshot at 1:30am,

why?

I was having a very nice sleep before I was startled awake by two very loud popping sounds. I don't know if they were fireworks or what, but you woke me in the same way characters on TV wake up from nightmares. Now, I am having trouble going back to sleep because my heart will not stop pounding out of pure fear that it will happen again.

I'm sure it's fun, setting off whatever you set off. But there are people who now live with post traumatic stress symptoms towards anything that resembles a gunshot. And some of those people are not army vets. They are mass shooting survivors.

I saw a man die. I was terrified for my life. I will forever be terrified of sounds that are similar to guns. And every time you set off whatever you set off; I am terrified all over again that I am going to die.

Why do you think it's appropriate to do this? I am sick and tired of you doing this. You've been doing this almost every night since the week before the Fourth, but sporadic enough where I don't know when it's going to happen. I hate going to bed with nervous anticipation, wondering if I'll have another sleepless night having to calm myself down from a panic attack.

Before you set off the next loud bang because it's fun, please take a moment to step back and think. Consider if there is someone in this residential area, anyone in these houses or apartments who has been affected by gun violence. Maybe you'll think twice and be the better person.

Dear March 22nd,

Things that Trigger Me (As of August)

1. Loud pops like fireworks if I'm sleeping. If I know where it is coming from or what it is, I can usually shrug it off. It depends on the circumstance
2. Guns or gunfights on TV. This includes movies, TV shows, and video games
3. Any horror game where I am running for my life or there is something chasing me to kill me.
4. Standing near entrances for too long.

Dear March 22nd,

Recently, I fell into the hole of combing through news reports and articles of the shooting. My therapist says it could be a good sign, as I'm now ready to remember and face what happened. And it's not like I don't want to read through all the news, but rather I want to see everything the media says.

Maybe it's because I was so numb the week of March 22nd, maybe it's because I'm looking for some secret answer, I don't really know.

or maybe it's because I don't think it's fair that the world moved on. one week. The news coverage lasted for about one week, before it moved on, leaving me in the dust. There are some days where I can't believe that the 2021 fall semester is starting, thinking it's still spring.

I guess, I sometimes feel like life is moving on too fast and I want it to stop and slow down with me.

To The People who Have Told Me to Get over It,

I will never get over it.

I will forever be forced to carry it and make space for it in my life. I'm learning to live with it and use it to make things that trigger me more bearable.

Just because I act like a normal human being, doesn't mean I have "gotten over" it.

Dear March 22nd,

I don't enjoy being traumatized by any means. It's a difficult road that I am walking, one that may take months, or years. I've had my share of ups and downs in my recovery, I've had times where I had to put my recovery aside for other things. And there are times where I'd put myself first because I know I needed it. I've gone through so much in a short amount of time, and still have more to go.

I'm a different person than the woman who walked into that store without a care in the world. But I've learned who I am now, learning to deal with what I have and taken things day by day. If I just erased that from my life, I would lose every tear, every struggle, everything that makes me who I am today. I wouldn't be me anymore.

The new me is a person who carries a heavy weight but is learning to live with it. I wish this on no one. I'm someone who broke, picked up the pieces, and made something new. My family has accepted the new me, my friends have accepted the new me, and most importantly, I have accepted the new me. Accepted that I have changed and will continue to change as my recovery progresses. I still have things I need to work through, but I have come far since the broken me in March. If I lost what I gained, I wouldn't be able to tell my story. A story I hope gives a little insider of what someone like me can deal with. One story out of many who experienced trauma like me. This story.

A story of a survivor.