Americans Against Gun Violence
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2026 National High School Essay Contest Third Place Winner

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I Keep Thinking About You, Sophie

The lights are off. The door is locked. Somewhere to the right, someone laughs. Not nervously. Just laughs. Miss Maudie shoots them a look that means “Stop.” We know the drill.

I'm sitting with my knees pulled up to my chest, back against the wall under the window. And for some reason, I keep thinking about you, Sophie.

You don't know me. You never got the chance to know anyone past the age of five. But I know about you. I know about the morning in March 1996 when a man walked into your school in Dunblane, Scotland, and your father's world just stopped. I know that what happened to you changed things. That because of you, because of what your father refused to let go, British kids don't do what I'm doing right now.

They just go to school.

The drill lasts eleven minutes. I know because I've started counting. This is the eighth time this year, the ninety-eighth time in my life, and at some point, it stopped feeling like fear and started feeling like a fire drill. That's the part your father would find hardest to believe, I think. Not that we do this. But that we've gotten used to it. That a room full of kids can sit in the dark. Not making a sound. Practicing being invisible. And then just walk to third period.

Because it is nothing. It's just another ordinary day.

Your father said the thought of armed guards and lockdown drills never even crossed

his mind.[1] Sophie, it has never left mine. I've been doing this since kindergarten. It just follows me. Everywhere. We even have a word for it now: normal. I think that's what gets me most. Not the drills themselves. Just that word.

Your father didn't accept it. He stood up at a podium in Sacramento, thirty years after he lost you, and told a room full of Americans that his country loved its children more than its guns.[2] He said it quietly. He didn't even have to say it loudly. The numbers did that. Twenty-five-gun homicides in all of Great Britain in a year, while the United States of America just keeps counting.[3]

The lights come back on. Everyone starts talking. Miss Maudie says, “Good job, everyone.” We open our iPads.

I want to tell you we're going to fix this. But I don't know if I believe that. All I know is I'm still thinking about you right now, while someone next to me is asking what the homework is, and I don't know, because eleven minutes ago we were hiding.

I don't want to forget that this isn’t how it’s supposed to be.

And honestly? I'm scared the rest of us already have.

References

[1] Michael North, “Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States,” Americans Against Gun Violence Annual Meeting, Sacramento, California, October 21, 2023, 9, https://aagunv.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Dr.-Norths-Keynote-Address-w-Bills-intro.pdf.
[2] North, “Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States,” 11.
[3] North, “Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States,” 7.