

Why I Didn't Go to the Firehouse | SOPHFRONIA SCOTT

THE FIREHOUSE IS THE SANDY HOOK VOLUNTEER Fire and Rescue station and it serves my neighborhood here in Newtown, Connecticut. Yes, that Sandy Hook. And yes to the question that I tend to get next: my son Tain did go to school at Sandy Hook Elementary and he was present in his third grade classroom on the morning of December 14, 2012 when a gunman entered the school and took the lives of twenty-six adults and children including one of Tain's dearest friends, a first-grader named Ben.

The firehouse is just down the road, perhaps only a few hundred yards from the location of the school. Dickenson Drive is the name of the street and that's appropriate because it is more like a long driveway than a road, leading only to the small parking lot in front of the school. The firehouse is constructed of red brick and the doors of the bays housing the fire trucks are wide and white. Each year after Thanksgiving my family and I visit the firehouse and choose a tall, bushy evergreen from the inventory of Christmas trees the firemen sell as a fundraiser. We pay more than if we shopped elsewhere because we want to support this essential but all-volunteer service. The only other time I'd been in the firehouse was probably for a field trip when Tain was in preschool.

Not long after the news of the shootings broke the *New York Times* published a story that reported:

Survivors gathered at the Sandy Hook Volunteer Fire and Rescue station house, just down the street. Parents heard—on the radio, or on television, or via text messages or calls from an automated emergency service phone tree—and came running.

I didn't.

I didn't come running.

I could have. The school is not far from my home and that morning I was even closer, at a nearby auto repair shop. But instead of driving out of the shop's parking lot, turning right onto Berkshire Road and speeding my way to Tain's school I turned left and went home. Why? And I think "Why?" is the more polite question. I get asked about this a lot, from family, friends, strangers. They ask, "What did

you do when you found out?” I tell them I went home. Then there’s a look on the face in front of me—blank like a sheet of new paper—and when I see that look it seems to me the question they really want to ask is, “How could you do that?” Even if they don’t ask it outright, I know the question is there.

Different people handle things differently—we all know that, right? But when I see that look I know the person is running an emotional inventory that could place me somewhere from being a monk to a monster. The space within that range is broad but I think it’s the extremes that fascinate the most. On the one end, to not go racing to the firehouse might seem to them faithful and stoic—picture me meditating in front of the Buddha I keep in my office at home—or on the other end, the reaction could seem cold and unfeeling, more nihilistic or existential, I suppose. What kind of mother are you? In that realm I’m a few wire hangers shy of Joan Crawford in *Mommie Dearest*. But no matter where I fall in someone’s spectrum I can see why my response or non-reaction would be confusing, curious, challenging to my listener. Can I say it feels the same for me? It’s so hard to explain.

Tell me you would have gone. Tell me how if it had been your son in that school and you would have raced right over there like all those parents on television. I will nod and perhaps even mumble something like, “Yes, well . . .” and not finish the sentence. Because your saying that won’t get us any closer to the answer to your question. Or maybe that’s the point. It’s not really about what I did or didn’t do. It’s about you putting yourself in the picture. People constantly use that phrase, “I can’t imagine . . .” and yet I find they do a wonderful job of doing just that. Even if they don’t vocalize it I know they are playing out the possibilities.

But their calculations wouldn’t include the variable of time. Specifically I mean everything I thought and did in the days, months, and years leading up to that morning. My response after hearing the news wasn’t the reaction of a moment. The decisions I made in those early minutes were actually years in the making and informed by seemingly unconnected events. How do you talk about that in the course of a casual conversation?

The repetition of the question, however, tells me something or someone wants an answer. It may even be something deep within myself demanding accountability or acknowledgment. I won’t know until I begin so I will attempt a response but I’m wary—the words I lay out here may only be breadcrumbs that get devoured by greedy ravens—gone that quickly. Or they may stay and pave a path or even a bridge to something more. I have no idea what will happen but I sense this is

important and worth the risk. I will try. I'm going to revisit that morning as best I can, with a few prompts such as emails and texts aiding my memory but really, I'm not dependent on them. Such moments are as simple, fierce, and bracing as a cold clear winter day. There's not much you can do to smudge it up. There is only what is.

This essay is about a window of time, a space of approximately two hours, in which I didn't know if my son was safe.

Let's start with the morning or rather the glow of the morning—pale yellow December light, painted on by a well-worn brush. I had watched that glow develop from the early hours because at the time I was a substitute school bus driver, reporting for work often before 5:30 a.m. with Tain in tow. The dispatcher would hand me a route for a driver who'd called in sick and Tain would ride the bus with me, picking up and delivering first the high school and middle school students, then the intermediate school children. Then, if I wasn't driving a Sandy Hook route, I'd use my break to find a bus that was heading to his elementary school and put him on it before I went on to one of the other three K-5 schools in the Newtown district. I didn't drive to Sandy Hook that morning.

After 9 a.m. I was done, and I remember feeling that deep-breath kind of relaxation of work being done for the moment, of having my time be my own again for a little while. I left the bus terminal in my minivan, on my way to Tain's school. Why? I wanted to take a check into the office to refill Tain's lunch money card, which was how the children paid for their meals in the cafeteria. I could have mailed this in or done it online, but since my family was still new to Sandy Hook School (Tain had gone to a private school the previous three years) I liked taking such opportunities to visit in person—it was my way of getting more familiar with the principal, Dawn Hochsprung, and the rest of the office staff. I also wanted them to know me. Whenever I went in it seemed Dawn would come right out of her office to see who was there. She'd smile and ask about Tain. She was one of the reasons my husband Darryl and I agreed to make the switch to send Tain to Sandy Hook after Tain expressed an interest in going to school with his friends, including Ben and Nate, Ben's older brother. When we first visited the school I liked how she walked down the hall with Tain, listening carefully to his questions and making him feel as though it were already his school.

So I was on my way there when I remembered the cigarette lighter in the van wasn't working. Darryl had asked me to have it looked at because the next day he had to drive the van to some out-of-town event for the school where he

taught 7th and 8th grade band. He needed the GPS, which has to be plugged in to the cigarette lighter. I didn't know how long a fix would take and I was due back to the bus terminal in the afternoon, so I decided to stop at the auto repair shop before going to the school.

I think about that particular decision a lot. I still remember the way the thought seemed to float in and settle upon me like a warm blanket—that soft and that obvious. My daddy used to have a saying, “My mind came to me . . .” whenever he remembered a forgotten detail or a thought occurred to him. This felt like that. My mind came to me and told me to get the van fixed first. I know—and for a long time I didn't tell this to anyone—if I had gone to Tain's school first I would have been there when the shootings happened. Maybe a few minutes before, maybe a few minutes after. Maybe I would have been in the office or the parking lot walking to the door.

At the auto shop a woman I knew from my church, Sherry, was in the waiting room. I sat with her and chatted. I remember while she waited for her car she was writing thank-you notes to parishioners who had pledged during the church's recent stewardship campaign. How long were we sitting there? Not long, maybe ten or fifteen minutes. A woman walked in with a confused look clouding her face. She pointed outside to the air behind her and said she'd gone to the high school (located across the street from the shop) to pick up her daughter for a dentist appointment but couldn't get in. Not even onto the grounds.

Then we heard the sound of sirens slashing cleanly through the cold winter air. Police cars sped past the auto shop.

They weren't stopping at the high school.

All at once it seemed our cellphones were buzzing, Sherry's, mine, and the woman's, with automated emails, texts, and voicemail messages from the Newtown School District. It said all of the schools were in a lockdown position with no one allowed in or out of the buildings because of a shooting at one of the schools. The messages didn't say which school. I remember the first breaking news report flashed on the screen of the television in the waiting room. Reports of a teacher shot in the foot. I remember thinking how absurd the story sounded. Once upon a time I had been a journalist so I was too familiar with the ridiculous nature of breaking news—how reporters can spew unconfirmed facts to fill the airspace that had been wrestled away from regularly scheduled programming. Sherry grew pale and I wanted to turn off the television.

Instead, I called the school bus depot—I figured the radio system there had

access to the same emergency channels used by the police and ambulances. They would know something real. My supervisor answered the phone:

“Okay, Sophronia, stay calm,” he said. “The shooting is at Sandy Hook.”

I said okay, then thanked him and hung up.

After that I was feeling my way through an unknown forest. Already I sought markers, trail blazes, anything that seemed familiar. I asked the shop owner for my van and I went outside to wait for it. Sherry has small children of her own in one of the other elementary schools. Her last words to me before I left the garage: “I’m sorry.”

My phone was still in my hand and I stood in the parking lot looking down the road in the direction of the school. In my mind I was already halfway there. I’m supposed to be doing something. I’m supposed to be doing something. I wasn’t sure what that something was. I had the odd feeling that I was trying to remember something, like I was trying to push through a thicket of brambles to reach a clearing where I could see and think. But despite this I was clear on the one thing I couldn’t and could never seem to do in times of trial—I couldn’t pray. I remarked on this to my pastor once and she had said, “That’s when you have other people pray for you.”

I opened the contacts app on my phone and found Pastor Kathie’s number. The photo illustrating her file in my phone is of her, Tain and me on the day she baptized the both of us the year before. Tain is wearing a navy blue cardigan over his shirt and striped tie and he’s holding a gift from his Sunday school class: a cross decorated with seashells. I touched the “Call” symbol next to Pastor Kathie’s number. When I told her what was going on she asked in that calm, measured way of hers what I was going to do.

“I’m going over there,” I said.

She gently pointed out that I wouldn’t be able to do anything there. Her son Miles, an EMT first responder, was already on the scene; she reminded me of how small the roads are in that part of Sandy Hook, how they were most likely already congested, and we had to give the authorities the time and space to get a handle on whatever was going on. My stomach dropped. This could be worse than anyone expected.

“Okay.” I may have even said “You’re right,” but I’m not sure because at that moment it didn’t matter. I knew what I was going to do. She didn’t say directly “Don’t go,” but it was like she had called me back to my right mind and I remembered. I remembered what it was I was supposed to do and I acted, but not out

of what it may seem in this part of my account. I know this looks like an obvious answer for you: I didn't go to the firehouse because my pastor suggested against it. Seems simple enough. But her suggesting to me not to go and my listening to her is like saying I went skydiving and I jumped from the airplane because the guy strapped to my back said I had to—a choice but not really a choice.

To say this would discount the thought and preparation, conscious and unconscious, poured into the foundation that one hopes will hold when a moment of crisis arrives. I've never been skydiving but I know in the training you learn how to pull your own ripcord, monitor altitude, and how to position your body so the fall is stable. But all the training in the world wouldn't account for the "screw you" variable that can show itself at any time and obliterate all that has come before it. This variable feeds on drama, fear, excess energy. It rises in the heat of the moment and whether you're skydiving or being presented with any kind of unwanted option you could easily say, even if it's not in your personality to do so, "Screw this."

Screw that, I'm not jumping.

Screw you, my child is in there. I'm going.

It would have been easy to react that way. I felt the pull of emotion and I could have given in to its undertow and told Pastor Kathie in one moment I wouldn't go to the school while doing just that in the next. But as I said, Pastor Kathie called me back to my right mind. I began to act—not out of obedience or even common sense—I began to act intentionally out of a promise I'd made to Tain and myself in the months before he was born.

Right when I arrived home Darryl called. The principal of the middle school where he teaches, about twenty minutes away, had come into Darryl's classroom, told him the news and said he could go home. He was on his way. I called my oldest brother, Vassie. We said a prayer together and stayed in touch throughout the morning. I turned on the television and heard the reporters spewing casualty numbers than seemed to change every few minutes. I turned it off again. I sat at my computer and sent e-mails to three friends chosen specifically because I trust their spirituality—

There's been some sort of shooting at Tain's school. I'm calm but worried, scared. The place is surrounded by troopers and ambulance people. Roads are packed. Waiting here at home for news. Please, please send prayers. I know Tain must be fine and all will be well.

The words "worried" and "scared" weren't accurate but I think I included them

because it's what's expected. I wasn't in a state of worry or fear—I was in a void. No, it's more than that. It was like I was in a void and the void was in me. I was holding this space of waiting and the holding of this space was the fulfillment of my promise to Tain.

How can I explain this?

I will tell you another story of waiting on another December morning, nine years before this one. I was pregnant then and, to me, miraculously so. I'd had a miscarriage a couple of years earlier and when Darryl and I couldn't conceive again we went through tests and discovered my uterus was scarred shut, a result of the treatment following the miscarriage.

My gynecologist referred us to an infertility specialist, Dr. K., on the west side of Manhattan. He performed surgery to remove the scar tissue. After a few weeks of healing I was supposed to start taking hormones and undergo more infertility treatment, scheduled to begin after I'd had a period. Only my period never came. We discovered I was already pregnant.

I loved that time of walking newly pregnant through New York City as the days were getting colder. I liked knowing I harbored my own bit of heat, a tiny ball of sunshine growing within me and waiting to warm its own universe. I lived in a realm of possibility and I remember being acutely conscious of it, of soaking up life and magic all around me—savoring the sugar of a Krispy Kreme donut melting in my mouth, my steps touching down on pavement that seemed gentle beneath my feet. I walked down Columbus Avenue and I saw a dual face, my own mingled with some aura of my unborn child, reflected to me in the smiling faces of strangers who couldn't possibly know I was pregnant. But in that strange law of nature, life attracts life, recognizes itself and feeds there. Every face seemed like a harbinger of grace, of the potential held by the being growing inside me. I felt a strong sense of the whole experience being a gift and I was grateful. I loved being in that golden bubble. It felt like where I was supposed to be. It felt like home.

Then suddenly—blood.

A Saturday morning, early December, with the first snowstorm of the season whipping a bitter wind past the windows of our sixth-floor apartment. I'd gone to the bathroom and found my underwear wet and heavy with thick red clots. The world shrank—shrank so fast the speed burned my eyes. What was so open and available to me the day before became in an instant only the four walls of that space and the bathroom door closed behind me.

I couldn't figure out what would come next. I didn't dare stand for fear of what

I might see in the water underneath me. Yet I wanted to get out of the stained underwear already dripping on the black and white tiles. At some point I know I reached for a towel hanging from the bar across from me. At some point I called out for Darryl to help me. But for the longest time I did nothing. The four walls were shrinking further into a hard dark knot and there was no room in there for Darryl, no room for me to even stand and take a step into the moment where I had to accept something was wrong and I had to move into the murkiness of what that meant and what I had to do.

I remember standing in the kitchen calling Dr. K with Darryl sitting on a stool and staring at a cold cup of coffee on the counter in front of him.

“What did the discharge look like?” the doctor asked.

The question made me recall gradations of color—pinks and magentas—apart from the stark red that initially shocked my eyes.

“Is it still happening?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be in the office tomorrow morning. We’ll do an ultrasound and we’ll have a look.”

Tomorrow?

Why didn’t I argue with him? Why didn’t I insist he see me that day? Because I knew Dr. K. I knew him well enough to know he didn’t humor you or give false hope. He was more likely to say, “This is what we’ll do” or “I want to have a look first and we’ll see.” His poker-faced way didn’t make for a warm bedside manner but I never minded before. In fact I had pitied him because it seemed to me he needed to be that way from years of experience with frenzied, baby-yearning Manhattan women. But as I listened to him on the phone I realized his demeanor was for mornings just like this one. If he thought something could be done he would have told me to go to the hospital. I was losing the pregnancy and probably had to wait for the miscarriage to finish.

And then—darkness. There’s the phrase from Psalm 23 about walking through the valley of the shadow of death but that morning it felt more like a tube—a dark but translucent tube. I could see the world going on around me and the tube was close enough that someone could walk next to me without realizing I was in it. But I knew I was in it, a tight place of sadness, unable to see to the other end. Inside the tube I tried to maintain the form and potential of a child I wouldn’t get to know. I wanted this because I wanted something more to mourn than the flow draining from between my legs and because the sense of joy I’d had was once so tangible.

Outside the tube the rest of the world moved on. Darryl and I were supposed to attend a wedding that day. I'd been looking forward to it because when my friend Katherine had first introduced Mike to us I somehow sensed he would be the guy she married. I was thrilled when they got engaged and excited for the wedding. But that morning I felt heavy with grief, like all my cells were filled with it, bursting with it. I sat on the couch and hoped for a phone call saying the weather had forced Katherine and Mike to postpone. However, it wasn't the shut-down-the-city kind of snowstorm. The slushy streets were clogged with slow-moving traffic but you could still walk around, and the trains were running. When it became obvious there'd be no cancellation and Darryl asked if we were still going, I didn't have it in me to say no.

I put on a tan suit—pants and a long jacket to camouflage my bloated waistline—and I went. There are photos of me from that day and looking at them now I can see I was pale. My smile was a game one. I was managing, just hanging on, but faking it all the same. All I wanted to do was go home and go to bed. The wedding and reception took place at a facility in Chelsea right on the Hudson River. If I didn't have the pictures to remind me I was there I might not have remembered much else. I remember the wall of windows showcasing the snow swirling outside on the pier. I remember the bride's broad smile. I remember how the whole space, vibrant with music and voices, was too loud for me to think about how to let go of all the promise my baby-to-be had contained.

The next day at the doctor's office I lay there in the dark, Darryl next to me while Dr. K moved the sensor around within me. I tried to make sense of the fuzzy, wavy lines, but then I saw it: an amazing, pulsating drop of light, insistent and strong.

"There's your baby," the doctor said. "Normal, six-week growth; heart beating and everything."

Darryl asked some questions and Dr. K. answered them—I think he used the words "implantation bleeding" and "normal" but I wasn't listening. I just kept staring at the image on the screen. I was talking to it, saying to it in my heart where only he and I could hear,

I will never give up on you again.

I had walked through that darkness when I didn't have to; and even worse, I'd unwittingly taken my child with me when I did it. The notion damn near overwhelmed me. I'd chosen to believe in death instead of life, had allowed fear to hijack my hope. I focused on the image of my unborn child and promised him I

wouldn't do it again. I realized in that moment I must always believe in this little being's life. I had to believe it for both of us. And I still do. That doesn't mean I exist with a Pollyanna kind of hope, acting like Tain, now gloriously present in the world, will never know illness or will never die—because this will happen to all of us. But I do choose to make a simple choice to believe in the greater possibility of life over death, to believe first that life will find a way. It means that as long as Tain's life is a fact, I will live and breathe the joy of it until I know for certain that it's time for me to do otherwise. I hope I will never know such a time, as the grieving Sandy Hook mothers whose children didn't come home now do. However I will not, through fear and worrying, walk myself through the dark valley before I come to it.

So I live out this promise. On any given day it might look like a constant letting go, of watching my son leap from the nest in ways large and small and believing only in his growing ability to fly. My friend Cornelia recently told me it's like I am holding a space for Tain, a space of infinite possibility made all the more powerful because it is his mother who holds it for him. That sounds right to me.

Your question now may be: couldn't I have done that, hold such a space, while waiting at the firehouse with the other parents? Group energy is a powerful thing. History has shown us that being in the presence of a crowd can make people act out of character. They fold into the groupthink mentality. If I had gone to the firehouse and walked into that highly emotional brew I probably would have, out of instinct and compassion, mirrored back the concern in the faces of the people around me. And there would be no way to do that without eventually feeling the fear and concern myself. I know how easy it would have been, surrounded by sirens and cameras and weeping, to fret that Tain was injured or dead. I could have lived his death a thousand times in the span of those few hours.

I didn't.

At 11:05 a.m., I received the text from my friend Fran.

Tain is OK.

I typed back fast, while at the same time wanting to collapse to my knees.

How do you know??

I just saw him with his class.

Thank you!!!! And Nate and Ben?

I can't find Ben.

Within a few minutes another friend was calling with Tain on the phone.

"Hey bud!" I said. "How are you doing?" I wanted to send him light through

my voice, light that would warm him and help him feel a touch of normal in the maelstrom surrounding him.

“Good!”

He said it like he always does, so that the word is almost two syllables with the second syllable toning up like a bounced ball.

I listened for signs of tremors or tears in his voice but I heard none. The one word “good” sounded so like him that I didn’t question him about what was happening. I remember I told him Papa was on his way to bring him home.

That night I would have to tell Tain his friend Ben had died. That night and in the weeks and months to come I would have to hold the space for him. I continue to hold it so Tain can see there is room, always room, even when death has entered, for life—for what comes next, for what we need to do to comfort Fran, a mother who can no longer hold such a space for her lost son.

Think of the wingspan required to hold such a space. Think of how the space must be as broad and deep as the path you hope is open to any child of the world. Think of what such a task asks of your body and being and what it means to hold onto a promise that was never spoken aloud. Now you have your answer and so do I. All this is why I didn’t go to the firehouse.