

INCIDENT AT WILLOW CREEK

A play by

Benjamin Vaughan Marshall

INCIDENT AT WILLOW CREEK

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CHARACTERS

VERITÉ JACKSON --- African American woman, late 30's - 40's, vital, articulate, a little caustic and introspective.

MAXWELL ADAMS --- A student, mid 20's, A little immature. White. The actor also plays the Police Officer, and the *Passerby.

SOPHIE CAPELLA--- Verite's contemporary, flippant, White. The actor also plays the Cashier, and the Nurse. (*And possibly the Passerby, depending on the production needs.)

RAY COPELAND --- the newly hired Security Administrator. 40's authoritarian, Black. The actor also plays the brother and the Second Cop.

PLACE

Primarily, a small community college in New Jersey. A mall in Ohio, television and radio interviews, and the places in our hearts where words and reactions intersect. A large portion of the play consists of interviews on various media. The scenery should be fluid and light, with easily removable props. The play is meant to be performed without intermission.

TIME

The present, before the pandemic. A few weeks in the fall semester

Note: Willow Creek Mall is a name created by the playwright. Some of the events in the play are suggested by actual news events. The play borrows from the style of documentary theatre. However, any relationship between characters in the play and real-life persons is coincidental.

Winner Bauer - Boucher Award 2017

Winner Stanley Drama Award 2018

Received 2018 NJ Fellowship for Playwriting.

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SCENE 1

VERITÉ faces the audience and speaks directly to us intimately, casually and with sarcasm, as if we were her best girlfriend or hairdresser.

VERITÉ. *(To us)* Right. So, I am teaching this class, and it's First Year Composition, and nobody likes First Year Composition because everybody must take First Year Composition. And no one wants to do the thing they have to do. You see, if you go to a large university, the comp course is taught by a teaching assistant who is just a few years older than you. And you either want to flirt with the instructor to get a good grade, or you think "What the hell does this ignoramus know? He's only a few years older than I am, and I'm wasting my tuition." But if you go to a small school, say a community college, such as where I teach, the course is usually taught by someone the same age as your parents, someone that you think is a loser. *MAXWELL, a young man in his early 20's enters abruptly, like a gunshot.*

MAXWELL. *(Shouting to the world in general)* Loser. Losers! *Maxwell exits just as quickly. Verité reacts as if to say, "Do you see what I mean?"*

VERITÉ. *(She doesn't lose her cool at all.)* Lord have mercy. We're not losers, baby. But you think of us as losers. You think that we don't know anything because if we really knew something, we would be teaching at a better school. You would be attending a better school. You would be a better you. Loser.

MAXWELL. *(Offstage)* Loser!

VERITÉ. That's what this student said. Not to me, but still. He was taller than me. Younger than me. Simmering with a belligerence that was just below his privileged surface. *Maxwell*

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reenters.

MAXWELL. Still a loser.

VERITÉ. *(To us, as she prepares for his meeting)* His name is Maxwell. You can't dismiss someone so easily if you know his name. Maxwell. I knew him better when it came time to assign research papers.

MAXWELL. *(To Verité)* I'm doing gun control. I'm against it. *(He sits.)*

VERITÉ. *(To both student and us, cynical.)* Why am I not surprised. *(She sits opposite him. Her office.)*

MAXWELL. *(Defiant)* You said we can write about anything we want.

VERITÉ. Show both sides of the issue. And do your research. Do your research, young man.

MAXWELL. Does personal experience count? You said that it could. You said it could count.

VERITÉ. In the field. Yes. I'll allow it.

MAXWELL. Well -- like, I go hunting. I went hunting early this morning. Got up at 5.

VERITÉ. *(To us)* Just so you know: This is not some rural forest or field of grassy meadows. We're forty-five minutes away from Manhattan. An hour and fifteen from Philadelphia. And this dude is cracking the dawn to hunt what? Rabbits Gophers?

MAXWELL. Squirrels, mostly. Deer season lasts only three weeks, but you need a bow and arrow for deer. I prefer a good gun. Like a Browning Maxus. It's great for hunting ducks and geese.

VERITÉ. *(To us with self - deprecating humor)* Just so you know: I have read and seen every single one of August Wilson's plays in his ten - play cycle on African American life. That's how prepared I am for this conversation!

MAXWELL. Anyway, me and my friend --

VERITÉ. *(Correcting)* My friend and I. "I" comes last.

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MAXWELL. Why?

VERITÉ. Because it's best to put the other person first. It's like holding the door for someone.

MAXWELL. I wouldn't hold the door for anybody.

VERITÉ. Your mother raised you well.

MAXWELL. I mean, why should I let somebody get ahead of me?

VERITÉ. *(Dryly)* No reason in the world. Manners are all antiquated nonsense and useless, wasted actions. Especially in this sad age of business and politics.

MAXWELL. *(Reluctantly complying)* Anyway, my friend and I are going out to buy a gun this weekend. At a gun show.

VERITÉ. And?

MAXWELL. I was wondering if I can use that experience in my paper.

VERITÉ. As long as you have other research, other sources --

MAXWELL. I do.

VERITÉ. Then, have at it. Note the details carefully. So you can write them down carefully.

MAXWELL. Why?

VERITÉ. Because memory by itself is poison. It saps the strength right out of you. And to write this paper, you're going to need all the help you can get. *(Maxwell exits. To us, serious.)* That weekend a story bolted across the airwaves. A father and a gun. In the mall. The mall is called Willow Creek. It's in a state that's far away from me, so I don't really know what to add anything except that I heard the voice of a cashier on N.P.R. *(The CASHIER, a wholesome, chatty Midwestern woman enters in her own light on stage. She speaks directly to us.)*

CASHIER. *(To us, as if being interviewed.)* It wasn't what I expected.

VERITÉ. *(To us and Cashier)* It's never what you expect. If we expected the unexpected, no one would get out of bed in the morning. And we'd be cowering in our basements waiting for the doom.

CASHIER. *(Talking to mask her anxiety)* It's never what you expect, I guess. I'm at my station, hating these fluorescent lights. I stayed up late last night with Darcy, trying to get some chicken soup down her throat,

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and these fluorescent lights make me look like Dracula's mother. I never think of Dracula having a mother, do you? He must have. Funny thing. You always think that some people have mothers and others don't. Silly thoughts in idle time, I guess. I'm wondering about other creatures' mothers when the police rush in -- The police rush in. And I'm not ready to die. I am not ready to die. I'm almost through the last chapter of the Bible and the last season of *Game of Thrones* and I finally finished the last corner of the quilt, I am making for -- for -- I can't finish--

VERITÉ. *(To us)* The radio goes silent. I'm listening, waiting. She's a recorded voice hundreds of miles away. And I'm listening to silence. That dark space of dead air seeps into my life. And then her anguish pierces through the dark.

CASHIER. I heard the gun shot. First one. I wasn't sure if it was what it was. Then all of them came one after another -- crack crack crack crack crack. I thought: this is the last time I am ever going to put myself through this.

VERITÉ. *(To herself)* Put herself through what?

CASHIER. That absolute fear. That absolute deep well of fear. *(To Verité)* You ever live through gun fire? Have you?

VERITÉ. Yes. But . . . I was -- it was such extreme circumstances. I was young. My family. It was a civil disturbance. I was a child. I pushed it to the back of my mind. Where it belongs.

CASHIER. *(To Verité, then us)* I'm out here exposed, counting change, bagging hand tools and baby clothes. Wearing this little apron that says, "I'm here for you". I am here for you. Ha. *(Continued)* I can handle the rude people, the coughing in your face with mouths wide open, the snotty brats who get shoved and smacked. And the just plain ugly people you see. I can be pleasant when it is so hard to be pleasant. I want that apron to be bullet proof. If they're going to make me work near the front door, I want protection. I'm gonna make that manager --- *(Verité turns off radio. Cashier abruptly exits.)*

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SCENE 2

VERITÉ. *(To us)* I turned off the radio. I stopped following the news that weekend. It's the usual media onslaught. Like confetti on New Year's Eve, so much contradiction gets thrown in your face. And I had another weekend of grading. I just wanted to get through my work. I sometimes wonder if things like internal documentation or a Lucille Clifton poem mean anything in the true scheme of things. I was still weighing these things on Monday morning in blissful ignorance when my first class began. *(Maxwell re-enters.)*

MAXWELL. Professor--

VERITÉ. He broke me out of my reverie --

MAXWELL. I have to tell you. Me and my -- My friend and I-- We went to that gun show. And . . .

VERITÉ. Go on and tell me how wrong I am to distrust guns.

MAXWELL. I mean they sold him a gun. Right then and there.

VERITÉ. Isn't that why you went to the gun show?

MAXWELL. But my friend. He's a convicted felon. They didn't do a background check. So, he's got a sweet AR 15 now.

VERITÉ. I thought they were called AK 15s.

MAXWELL. *(Scoffing at her ignorance)* AK's? Those are the Russian made. I'm talking about the American models. AR15s.

VERITÉ. *(To us, her usual sarcasm)* Just so you know: I can name every Rodgers and Hammerstein musical in order of composition, including film and TV. Therefore, I am really well prepared for the intricacies of white people's fascination with firearms. *(To Maxwell)* Your friend bought this gun, and he wasn't supposed to?

MAXWELL. The gun has a great heft. It looked like it was hardly used at all. It's like buying a used car with less than 100 miles on it.

VERITÉ. Is this friend really you?

MAXWELL. I'm nobody's felon. I served on jury duty. And I'm in the reserves.

VERITÉ. I'm sorry. Not about your serving on jury duty. But I apologize for asking --

MAXWELL. It was my friend. He was the felon.

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VERITÉ...I meant I shouldn't have asked. It's none of my business.

MAXWELL. It wasn't me. Yeah, okay. But I gotta tell you about my friend.

VERITÉ. *(To us)* I can hardly wait. Please.

MAXWELL. Like it's not real. Like. . . Like . . . This is not the way it's supposed to happen. My friend, he just went right up to the salesman and bought himself an AR 15. A little used. So, they didn't do a background check or nothing. He got the gun just like that.

VERITÉ. All right. But I don't understand why that's a big deal. People buy guns all the time, apparently.

MAXWELL. *(First, with a shrug, then angry)* It's nothing. Nothing. He's my friend. And I'm happy for him. But it just pisses me off! I had to go through a bunch of hoops just to get into the reserves. I suited up. I volunteered. I did the basic training. I know how to take apart a weapon and put it back together. I know how to do what I'm supposed to do. How all the parts are supposed to fit. I had to show I had the mental stability to understand how to use a weapon. And here he is getting away with bullshit! He didn't have to go through all the things I went through.

VERITÉ. You sound a little jealous.

MAXWELL. Jealous? No. Hell no.

VERITÉ. Then why so angry?

MAXWELL. He doesn't know how to freaking shoot the gun! After he got the damn thing, we went to a friend's house, okay? Out in the country. With a lot of good acreage. So fuc---freaking green, it kind of shimmers.

VERITÉ. Sounds pretty.

MAXWELL. It is. It is. So, my friend wants to try out his new weapon. And this guy's place, he has lots of weapons and ammunition. And there's a place on the edge of the forest to practice shooting. My friend took a couple of rounds of ammo and just went wild. He said he wanted to kill Muslims and Black people and Obama and Mexicans and--

VERITÉ. *(Interrupting)* He said what?

MAXWELL. I didn't say it. My friend did.

VERITÉ. Is this friend you?

MAXWELL. Hunh?

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VERITÉ. Is this friend you? Are you the one who --

MAXWELL. It's not me. I told you. I was just there.

VERITÉ. Okay.

MAXWELL. IT'S NOT!

VERITÉ. OKAY. You don't have to yell. I believe you.

MAXWELL. You didn't before.

VERITÉ. Now, I do. I do. Okay? You're quite convincing.

MAXWELL. Oh.

VERITÉ. Tell me more about this friend.

MAXWELL. Well, it was like this. We were going. . . *He continues talking silently.*

VERITÉ. *(To us while Maxwell continues.)* And he talks. And I want to be open minded. After all, I'm only correcting grammar, spelling, and MLA style of documentation. Say what you want to say, believe what you want to believe. I don't give a hoot because I've been through enough, I've seen it enough and I've graded enough. So. This young man loves his guns. That's fine, totally fine. I have other students who believe that all guns should be totally banned forever and ever, Amen. *(She stands and goes to the audience.)* It's nuts. There's no consensus of opinion. Not at all. On Anything! For example, for every simpering little twit who believes that every abortion clinic in the western hemisphere should be shut down for good, there is an equal and opposite little simpering twit who believes abortions should be free and on demand up until the 12th month of pregnancy. Yes. Really. 12 months! They actually believe that! The "Christians" hate the atheists. The atheists over-react to a "God bless you" when they sneeze. Opinions fly fast and freely like bats at midnight with their sonar all askew, and way, way, way above the ground of research, facts and simple common sense. We're surrounded by battalions of simpering twits, and we're ricocheting like clueless pinballs, bouncing off the plastic flippers of imbecility! *(She turns back to Maxwell.)*

MAXWELL. The reason I know this is because --

VERITÉ. Stop that locution. Just say "I know this."

MAXWELL. I know this. I know this. I know this because my sister was killed with the same kind of gun.

VERITÉ. Excuse me. You said your sister was killed --?

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MAXWELL. Yes. My father --

VERITÉ. Oh, Dear Lord.

MAXWELL. It happened a long time ago. I barely remember it. It was an accident. He was cleaning his gun. The trigger was faulty. It didn't catch properly. My sister was in the hallway and the gun went off. My father didn't know a bullet struck her. He just thought she was still playing.

VERITÉ. You've never written about that situation.

MAXWELL. Why should I write about it? It's none of your business.

VERITÉ. I didn't mean to say that it was.

MAXWELL. It happened a long time ago.

VERITÉ. I understand.

MAXWELL. What's it to you anyway? I'm over it.

VERITÉ. *(Taking offense)* You don't talk to me like that.

MAXWELL. But you can talk to me like that.

VERITÉ. I'm trying to do my job.

MAXWELL. Who asked you to?

VERITÉ. Me. Okay? This school. Okay? And if you don't want to be here, don't be here. I mean if school is not for you --

MAXWELL. I just don't see why I have to re-live every single bad thing that ever happened to me. I am more than a bunch of tragic accidents. I don't see why I have to put it down on paper just so you can get your jollies.

VERITÉ. That wasn't the point. Sometimes . . . Sometimes. *(To us, angry)* Sometimes I think I need a gun just to shut this asshole up. Yes. I want the god damn gun. Just do what you're supposed to do, kid. Write the damn paper. Get the marginally passing grade! Graduate. Get a job that will make you moderately secure. Knock up some stupid girl, get married, birth the kid, and then lose it in the same kind of shooting accident that offed your ugly, dead sister! God, if she had your nose, she probably would be better off dead. ---- But I don't say that. Instead, I turn to him and say: *(To Maxwell, calmly)* Sometimes, you learn more about yourself, just by writing things down. You learn more about how you feel about things. And it helps to clarify your view of the world. Your place in it. Your beliefs.

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MAXWELL. She looked like me, my sister did. You can see it in all the pictures my mom still has on the walls. She looks at them almost every day. She sometimes has lunch near the one wall in the kitchen where there's a picture of my sister. We have to wipe off the grease from the glass because it's so close to the stove. My dad does it. He tells me about gauges and calibers, which are the best places online to buy bullets. But he hasn't picked up a gun since it happened.

VERITÉ. Do you remember much about your sister?

MAXWELL. Not really. My dad tells me about her, sometimes.

VERITÉ. What does he say?

MAXWELL. Usual stuff.

VERITÉ. I'm not a father, so I don't know what the usual stuff is. Some things that you take for granted, that you take as everyday things, those things can be extraordinary, exceptional for someone else.

MAXWELL. *(With a little hostility)* So you expect me to talk about my father? And that's supposed to get you off? That's supposed to ----

VERITÉ. No. It doesn't "get me off." To tell the truth, the whole thing rather annoys me. Your friend, the felon, managed to buy a gun that he wasn't supposed to get, merely by going to Pennsylvania. It's a great anecdote. Illuminating. Use it for the assignment.

MAXWELL. I'm going to.

VERITÉ. Good. Make sure you quote properly. Make sure you check your sources. And no Wikipedia. The school has databases: Academic Search Premier, Lexus Nexus, Pro -Quest. Use them. I'll see you next week.

MAXWELL. How many sources?

VERITÉ. You know how many. It's written on the instruction sheet. Do you need another one?

MAXWELL. No.

VERITÉ. Then why ask me? Why ask me things that you already know?

MAXWELL. *(Pause)* Did you hear about the shooting at that mall?

VERITÉ. The shooting at the mall. *(To us)* And the minute he said that I flashed again upon the voice of the cashier, the cashier at the shooting at that mall. *(The Cashier reenters. As if Verité and Maxwell recall this interview.)*

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CASHIER. *(To us, as if being interviewed)* There was a line of pellet guns that we used to sell. BBs mostly. Almost every year in school you'd hear about some stupid kid who got shot in the head with a BB gun. I felt such a wide wave of grief when I first heard that story. Then, I stopped paying attention when I realized they were often talking about the same kid. I thought it must have been one really stupid kid to get hit every year with a BB gun. And then I realized that it wasn't one stupid kid getting shot every year. It was one story getting repeated every year. The same stupid story of one unlucky kid.

MAXWELL. *(To Verité)* When I heard that, I kind of thought she was talking about me.

CASHIER. This one, this story that I'm living through right now. This one will get repeated. It will get distorted. It will live like some kind of parasite swelling itself into your mind. *(To Verité)* It will live inside you a long time. *(Cashier exits.)*

MAXWELL. *(To Verité)* Everybody goes to malls. Don't you?

VERITÉ. I don't make a habit of it. I hate the commercial homogenizing of taste. But sometimes, you just want a new pair of shoes.

MAXWELL. I'm not sure what you mean.

VERITÉ. It's when everything is smoothed over, all the jagged edges, all the sharp tastes, everything ----

MAXWELL. *(Interrupting)* Do you know how to shoot a gun?

VERITÉ. *(Stopped dead in her tracks)* Why on earth would I want to shoot a gun?

MAXWELL. I don't know. Because.

VERITÉ. *(Making a joke)* Is that the only way I can get you students to do your work? Threaten you with a gun?

MAXWELL. Not me. I do my work.

VERITÉ. And you just told me about your sister. -- I'm sorry.

MAXWELL. No problem.

VERITÉ. Okay then. *(Neither one knows what to say next.)*

MAXWELL. You don't know how to shoot a gun? That's weird.

VERITÉ. It's not something that comes up in your average poetry seminar.

MAXWELL. You should know how.

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VERITÉ. *(Correcting)* Let's have none of these half phrases. You're an adult. You can use more than four words at a time. Complete the thought.

MAXWELL. You should know how to shoot. . . a gun.

VERITÉ. Good. That was better. So, next week --

MAXWELL. I could show you how. I'm real good at it. I get 95% on all my shooting tests in the reserves. Aren't you going to thank me for my service.

VERITÉ. You should thank me for mine. Sometimes teaching you students is like being in a war zone.

MAXWELL. I guess.

VERITÉ. You want to show me how to shoot?

MAXWELL. Yes.

VERITÉ. With a gun?

MAXWELL. No. With a popsicle. Of course, with a gun. *(She laughs. He laughs. A thaw.)*

VERITÉ. That was funny. That was genuinely funny. Thank you. You can make a joke after all.

MAXWELL. I make jokes.

VERITÉ. You're serious all the time.

MAXWELL. So are you.

VERITÉ. They pay me to be serious. Any adult who's constantly cheerful is either an athlete with a multi - million-dollar contract, or someone on great prescription drugs. Or both.

MAXWELL. *(Not comprehending)* Yeah.

VERITÉ. Look, an adult has her mind attuned to life. So, if I seem too serious, it's because I am aware of all the darkness that daylight can bring.

MAXWELL. *(Still doesn't understand)* Okay.

VERITÉ. *(Assuming he does.)* Okay.

MAXWELL. So, you want to learn. . . to shoot a gun?

VERITÉ. *(Her refusal.)* Everyone has some gaps in her knowledge. We learn to live with them. I never really considered dealing with guns. I appreciate the offer --

MAXWELL. It doesn't have anything to do with my grade --

VERITÉ. I know that. And I'm glad that you know that.

MAXWELL. So why not? Why not learn how to shoot a gun? I can

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show you.

VERITÉ. *(To him.)* I think for a while it would be best if we kept a professional distance. I really do appreciate the offer. You would probably be a good instructor.

MAXWELL. You think so?

VERITÉ. Yes. Of course. With a limited vocabulary. Lately with the news, I've been curious about the words "creek" and "brook". It's a word - nerd thing. Do you know that a creek and a brook are really the same thing? It's all a matter of geographical locution.

MAXWELL. Locution again?

VERITÉ. In the North it's called a brook. Branch Brook Park, and it has more flowering cherry trees than the ones in Washington D.C. Really. Cherry Trees. In Newark, of all places. Branch Brook Park. I had a cousin who was killed there.

MAXWELL. Killed in the park?

VERITÉ. Yes. He was coming from the north end. And some people thought he was in the wrong neighborhood. They attacked him. Chased him into dark. That was back -- *(She gets out of that moment.)* In the South, a brook is called a creek. "Lord willing and the creek don't rise," our country cousins would say. Another cousin was killed near a creek in Georgia, during the freedom rides. *(She gets out of that moment, again.)* I hear that name "Willow Creek" and it makes me think of sweet pastorals and green meadows near riverbanks.

MAXWELL. *(Not a clue.)* It wasn't a river. It's a mall. Willow Creek Mall. People buy stuff there.

VERITÉ. *(Realizing that she's let her guard down.)* Right. Go work on that paper. *(Maxwell exits.)*

VERITÉ. *(To us)* Yes. The deaths were true. I don't dwell on them. My parents never told me all the details. Their "Hush nows" and "Never minds" and "Nothing -you - need- to - know's" were as thick as leaves on a summer oak tree. After Superstorm Sandy, it seemed like all the stately old trees toppled over. Their balls of roots like tentacles were now up in the air, looming above the clapboard houses they almost crushed. All our roots are upturned and uncovered. Raw. In some ways, it seemed quite normal to me. As if everything before Sandy was a façade. As if the world

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that seemed right side up before was now, finally, the way it really is. Upside down, with the naked, ugly roots exposed. That's the way things are now. (*Lights.*)

SCENE 3

The Brother enters in his own light.

BROTHER. (*To us as if being interviewed*) He was my only brother.

VERITÉ. (*To us*) Like a low - grade migraine, comes the voice. On the radio. A voice from that mall shooting.

BROTHER. All they saw was a black man with a gun and they shot him.

VERITÉ. I heard the man on the radio. I scanned the TV channels to see if they carried the same story. He wasn't even on CNN or PBS. I'm surprised about PBS, they're usually not that inattentive. I'm going to have to cancel my membership.

BROTHER. He was -- he was-- Damn, I got a call and said come down to Willow Creek Mall. Get to the sporting goods. And I'm thinking my brother wants me to pick up something. Cause it's my nephew's birthday. And there's probably a credit card issue or maybe he needs some ready cash. Or maybe there's just something he doesn't want to tell me. I mean I got enough on my plate as it is, and I'm not sure if I can make it to my nephew's birthday party and this is really taking time. When I get there--

VERITÉ. (*Anticipating what he'll say.*) --There's police tape and blood on the site --

BROTHER. There's police tape and blood.

VERITÉ. (*Directly to Brother*) What do you hear?

BROTHER. (*First to Verité then to us.*) I didn't hear gunshots if that's what you want to know. I didn't hear anyone tell me one kind thing. I don't know why I would suspect that I would. I heard a policeman yell at me to stand back. And I tried to get closer, and the police man pulled out his nightstick and raised it up like he was going to strike me, and I said "My brother's in there" Y'all told me to get down here. My brother's in there! Did you kill him? You gonna kill me just for asking about him!?! Another cop rushed up. Pulled his arm away. Like a branch on a tree that's been shifted in the wind. And they -- and they -- arrested me.

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VERITÉ. Of course, they did!

BROTHER. Put the handcuffs on me and threw me to the ground. I just want my brother. Somebody said that I had the right to remain silent. All I could say is where's my brother? Where's my brother?

VERITÉ. His brother was the one who was shot in the mall. They have him on camera now, right after he was released from custody. Nobody looks good right after they get released. Why do they go out of their way to make him look like a nasty stinking fool ---

BROTHER. They put me in jail to keep me from finding my brother. They locked me up, too. *(She turns off the TV.)*

VERITÉ. I turned off the TV, but that doesn't keep it out of my mind.

BROTHER. *(To Verité)* Is this what you want?

VERITÉ. What? Is that what I want?

BROTHER. Is this what you want, America? You want to lock all of us away?

VERITÉ. No. No. Not at all. Don't blame me. I'm on your side. You shouldn't be in jail -- What did they do to you in jail?

BROTHER. You don't want to know.

VERITÉ. Yes. I do. You must have done something.

BROTHER. No, you don't get to blame me.

VERITÉ. Now stop it. Stop it right now.

BROTHER. Can't. The thoughts are out. Faster than breakneck bullets. If you're not careful, you'll never know when they'll hit. *(Brother exits.)*

VERITÉ. *(To us)* Okay. I'm not an emotional person. I've been criticized for that. For being in control. For being the only adult in the room. Sometimes I feel like I'm the only adult in the room. And that damn room is the size of three football fields and filled with the most irascible and spoiled babies. Do you ever feel like that, too? And when that happens, lately, sometimes I think I just want to go into a different room. A different perspective. Knock wood. I've been lucky. I have my own money. I have that rarest of things: Job security. And I know it's luck. Not just hard work and tenacity. Luck. Having the right combination of genes and the right parenting to give me the right demeanor that appealed to the people who hired me and yes, yes, yes. I have been happy in love if not in love right now. No tornadoes, forest

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fires or hurricanes have wiped out my home. No ravaging diseases have struck me, forcing me to depend on charity. I am so fortunate. And now one of my young male students wants to teach me how to shoot a gun. And all I think of is the man's brother was shot and they arrest him. They arrest him. Because . . . Because. . . *(Interrupting her, the COP enters. He is played by the same actor who plays Maxwell.)*

COP. *(As if being interviewed)* We got a call to rush down to the Willow Creek Mall.

VERITÉ. Now, they're interviewing the arresting officer.

COP. We heard there was a suspicious man walking around waving a gun.

VERITÉ. A suspicious man?

COP. That's right. A black man walking around waving around a gun and threatening customers.

VERITÉ. My mistake. It's not the officer who arrested that poor man. It's the one who shot his brother. Okay. "Allegedly" shot. I know how this is going to go. I have to turn this TV off. I can't look at this anymore. I need my sanity. *(She turns it off. The policeman exits. She reaches for a book. Silence. Then after a few moments, she sheepishly puts down the book and turns on the TV again.)*

VERITÉ. *(To us)* Sometimes, it's the only thing that keeps me together. *(She addresses the TV and therefore the Cop, as if she is the interviewer.)* How did he threaten people?

COP. He was threatening. Menacing the customers.

VERITÉ. How did he threaten? Did he take aim?

COP. They told me he was threatening people. He was waving the gun around. He didn't care who was around him.

VERITÉ. Did he put them in his sights? That's what it's called, isn't it? The sights?

COP. That's all I got. He didn't care.

VERITÉ. But did he take aim?

COP. I don't know, ma'am. It's the dispatch. I don't have x - ray vision. I'm just telling you what the dispatch says. He was taking aim. He didn't seem to care.

VERITÉ. The dispatch?

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COP. I got the call from the dispatch, okay? They said he was aiming--
VERITÉ. Then, you didn't really see. How would they know if they didn't see?

COP. You go to the academy. You get the training. You're always aware of the criminal element.

VERITÉ. The criminal element?

COP. IT'S GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH COLOR! Nothing. Nothing. All I had to do was to get control of the situation.

VERITÉ. *(Shouting to the TV.)* You're never in control of the situation if all you obsess over is controlling the situation! *(To herself.)* Oh, that's just ducky, Verité. Shouting at the TV.

COP. Look. I have to protect those people. That's my job. That's what I'm sworn to do.

VERITÉ. Shooting someone is protecting him?

COP. *(Adversarial)* You never know what to expect. It's what they tell us to do. Now. They tell us to shoot first. The perpetrator is more than likely going to shoot people before you can control the situation. Therefore, if you shoot him first, you control the situation. Since the dispatch told me, he was brandishing that gun --

VERITÉ. Brandishing? Waving it around? Like an assassin?

COP. It wasn't a matter about him getting his gun first. It was a matter of controlling the situation and protecting other people from potential danger. You can't risk other people getting shot because you're doing a footsie dance with one damned fool with a gun. I'm doing my job.

VERITÉ. And I need to get back to mine.

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SCENE 4

Lights change. The Cop changes into Maxwell. Maxwell goes to Verité. Her office.

MAXWELL. I'm having trouble with this paper.

VERITÉ. Considering the times, I'm not surprised.

MAXWELL. It's not what you think.

VERITÉ. I don't think much of anything these days. I just . . .react. And then try to adjust accordingly. Now what is the trouble? Sources?

MAXWELL. I want to change my topic.

VERITÉ. It's a little late to do that.

MAXWELL. I don't think we should have open carry anymore. I don't think we should let anybody buy a gun. We shouldn't just let anybody -- they should know what they're doing.

VERITÉ. That's not really changing your topic. It's changing your opinion. That's what happens. You read. You take notes. You think. If you do all that, you're liable to come up with a different conclusion.

MAXWELL. They killed that guy. In the mall.

VERITÉ. Are you as upset about it as I am?

MAXWELL. All he was doing was buying a gun. A BB gun. For his kid.

VERITÉ. What?

MAXWELL. He was buying a BB gun for his kid's birthday. Now the kid doesn't have a dad. Some birthday present.

VERITÉ. Right. The unexpected. That's what happened to your sister? . . . When your father --?

MAXWELL. No. Not the same thing. That was just an accident. And my dad was on drugs.

VERITÉ. Your father was on drugs. And I made that stupid comment about fabulous prescription drugs. So sorry.

MAXWELL. They weren't prescription drugs.

VERITÉ. But that's how he shot your sister?

MAXWELL. But that's on him. Prescriptions had nothing to do with it. He was cleaning the gun. A small .38 and I could tell he was on something even though he was cleaning it. He always got obsessed about

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something when he was like that. And he was trying to say something, and I couldn't understand. Then he called me stupid, and I walked out of the room. He was such an asshole, that I had to get away. About a minute later the gun went off. *(Beat)* Can I change my topic?

VERITÉ. You mean your opinion?

MAXWELL. Yeah. Whatever it is.

VERITÉ. Some people think it's flip-flopping. I think it's a sign of enlightenment. You can change your opinion.

MAXWELL. Thanks. My dad says he's proud of me for going into the reserves.

VERITÉ. I'm sure he is. I hope you are proud of yourself, too. It's. . .

MAXWELL. Gotta go.

VERITÉ. Excuse me. About that story--

MAXWELL. I don't want to talk about my family anymore.

VERITÉ. I meant that story on the news. You said a BB gun? The man at the mall was buying a BB gun? BB's? Those little pellets that farm kids use to shoot at tin cans?

MAXWELL. Yeah. A Black dude with a BB gun. *(With a lot of sarcasm.)* A whole lotta danger there. *(Maxwell exits. Lights.)*

SCENE 5

Four monologues. The SECOND COP, an African American male, about 40, enters. He speaks as if being interviewed.

SECOND COP. They never tell me all the things. There's talk like a fog that's always around my head but whenever I enter the locker room, that fog disappears. I go through in silence. This is the call that got me. No one said what it was. They just told me to jump in the car with the officer. He responded to the dispatch. He didn't tell me much. He just said there was a perpetrator brandishing a gun at the mall. When I got there, I saw why they wanted me to be on this case. It was a Black man with the gun. The other officer didn't say the N word, if that's what you're thinking. You don't have to use certain words to convey your meaning. And they didn't want another situation of a white cop shooting at a brother. With me

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along, that makes it legit. Like I said. The fog clears. (*Responding to an interview question*) Did I shoot at the suspect? Let me just say that I know how to do my job. And I know how to keep my job. (*The Second Cop exits. The PASSERBY enters.*)

PASSERBY. (*On cell phone*) Hey, is this the police? Yes, it's an emergency. There's a black guy waving around a gun. I'm at the Mall. Willow Creek Mall. The big one. . . He's waving it around. Not the store, a gun. Looks like an Uzi. . . I said an Uzi. No, I don't know. What an Uzi looks like. Maybe it's an AR 15. I don't know. I do know what a long gun looks like, and I know what a mad man looks like too. He's brandishing a gun. He's waving it around at different people. Scaring them to death. . . How can I tell they're scared!?! Because they're running away. People are running away from this crazy Black man with a gun. He enters the aisle and women scatter in all different directions. There are kids here. This could be another New Town. You never know when that thing is going to go off. And then there will be blood everywhere. . . . Okay, suppose I do sound hysterical. Suppose you don't come, and that bastard shoots some kid without rhyme or reason. Suppose he shoots some senior who can't move fast enough to dodge a bullet. . . I know . . . I know, but you have to trust me to see what I see. And it's going to be a mess. You'll have their blood on your hands. (*Passerby exits. The BROTHER enters.*)

BROTHER. (*To us as if being interviewed*) I don't even know what to say anymore. Nobody knew where I was. I didn't get my phone call because I was just in a holding cell. That was for people who weren't yet arrested, just people who were being held. So, I was held for 72 hours. Nobody knew where I was. My family called different police stations, when they called the one, I was at, they were told I wouldn't be released without bail. I didn't even see a judge, and here they are trying to make money off of me. After they released me, after I got out of the prison, I had to get back home by myself. My cell phone was broke. I had to walk back over to the mall to try to get my car, but my car was impounded 'cause it was left in the parking lot overnight. I wanted to sit right down in the parking lot and cry, but I couldn't. I couldn't cry. Since I ain't had a shower in three days, I already looked like I was homeless. I didn't want to look crazy, too. (*Brother exits. The NURSE enters. The Nurse is played*)

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by the same actor as the Cashier.)

NURSE. *(To us, as if giving an interview.)* It was one of the worst things I've gone through. I mean at work. I'm on my toes all the time. On my day off. I don't expect . . . I don't expect. . . I don't expect to give triage in a parking lot at the mall. Mostly cuts and scrapes from people panicking. I don't expect to mop up blood with someone's newly purchased bath towels. There I am making tourniquets out of terry cloth. Instant comfort on the cold, hard asphalt. You do what you can. You have to.

SCENE 6

The Nurse changes into SOPHIE. Sophie is Verité's colleague, someone with a similar style, with more wisecracking. They're having lunch. On another part of the stage, COPELAND enters and speaks to us directly. He is instructing at a seminar.

COPELAND. *(To us)* As the new head of security, I want to welcome you to what may be the most important meeting of your life. In case of the unlikely event of a school shooting and lock down. ---

SOPHIE. *(To Verité, perky)* It's the way things come at you so quickly. Up the Twitter feed so fast.

COPELAND. *(To Us.)* You need to be prepared to save your life and the lives of those around you. *(He stands at attention.)*

VERITÉ. *(To Sophie)* I'm not in the mood for this seminar.

SOPHIE. *(Attempting levity)* Relax. They just need our bodies present at these workshops, not our attention. Like some of our students. Besides, it'll give you a chance to get your grade book in order, or to delete old emails.

VERITÉ. Girl, don't you pay attention to the news?

SOPHIE. *(Attempting to be casual.)* It's too depressing. And let's be honest, there have been so many incidents of Black people getting -

VERITÉ. *(Sullen)* --There have been so many.

SOPHIE. *(Flippant)* --They all seem to blend together.

VERITÉ. *(Seriously)* They all seem to blend together.

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SOPHIE. And you can't joke about it.

VERITÉ. *(More sharply than intended)* No, you can't.

SOPHIE. So, let's not talk about it.

VERITÉ. Everywhere I turn, Willow Creek seems to follow me.

SOPHIE. *(Rattling them off quickly)* Willow Creek? Is that the one where the 14-year-old girl was pulled out of the swimming pool? Or is it the man who said "I can't breathe?" No. Is it the boy in the hoodie? The young woman with the bad attitude in her own car who died mysteriously in jail. The man in the police van with the broken neck. Or just the common, ordinary driving while Black? See, I keep up. Those are the ones on the top of my head, and I'm not even trying hard.

VERITÉ. *(Sharply)* Stop playing around.

SOPHIE. You can't let these things get to you.

VERITÉ. This was the BB gun. Sophie. At the Mall.

SOPHIE. Okay. Okay. The BB gun at the mall. Shoot. I forgot about that one. *(Realizing the pun.)* Shoot. Oh. Yeah, shoot. I forgot about that one. Shoot. *(Waits for a reaction that doesn't come.)* Sorry about the pun.

VERITÉ. I don't know how I missed that detail about the BB gun. I completely missed that the first time. I mean. I was watching intently. TV. Internet. The radio.

SOPHIE. *(Teasing)* You were watching the radio?

VERITÉ. *(Scolding)* Sophie . . .

SOPHIE. *(To change the subject)* I hear that the new Security Officer is Black, divorced and straight.

VERITÉ. --That makes the whole thing so much worse.

SOPHIE. *(The matchmaker)* On the contrary, I think it would make the seminar more interesting for you.

VERITÉ. It's something that gnaws at my consciousness. . . My soul.

SOPHIE. You're paying too much attention to the news, Verité. Far too much. The shooting was in a mall, in another state, for Pete's sake. It's not like it happened here.

VERITÉ. Sometimes the news lodges inside me like shrapnel. And it's never dug out.

SOPHIE. Lady, you need to use your remote more often. Change the

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channels. Get something to distract you.

VERITÉ. Willow Creek is another example of how we're treated. How I'm treated. You don't see that, do you?

SOPHIE. Nobody you know was hurt, right? And you're not physically hurt, right? Therefore, you don't have any real skin in the game. So to speak.

VERITÉ. I don't have skin in the game? Do you think it's all about skin? Not human dignity?

SOPHIE. Figure of speech, Verité. Lighten up.

VERITÉ. Right. Okay. (*Small pause.*)

SOPHIE. (*To change the subject*) Did you hear what I said about the Security Officer? They say he's very masculine. And you haven't been getting out much. And this workshop will give you the chance to check him out. At least you won't feel like the one drop of black paint in a gallon of optic white.

VERITÉ. You're lucky I know that Ralph Ellison reference. Do you want my pickle? (*Sophie takes the peace offering. To change the subject.*) I think I've had enough of all the current events. I'm going to try out a new lesson. A new topic for an essay. It's something I've been thinking about. Rites of passage.

SOPHIE. I know what you mean. I want to give our little darlings things that are worthwhile. I do. I want to tap into the zeitgeist and bring in current topics to discuss in class. Inspiring them to engage in their on writing. But lately, it's like tapping into a nuclear core and getting the surprise meltdown. Like your student and her thing about the 12-month abortion. Look at what people believe nowadays. Just look. I just don't want to deal with incendiary topics anymore. Let me just bore them to death with *Beowulf*.

VERITÉ. So, I'm incendiary? Is that what you mean?

SOPHIE. Oh no. Not you. Never you.

VERITÉ. Why not me?

SOPHIE. Don't be so touchy. You're just not that political. You don't have any concerns for politics. Not like other people.

VERITÉ. I have concerns. I'm political.

SOPHIE. As political as my tuna salad.

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VERITÉ. I just never thought about guns and weapons that much before.

SOPHIE. You know who's going to carry those weapons, don't you? It's not the jocks or the wonder kids. No, It's all the losers. The ugly, misfit losers. All those dudes who join Isis or those Incels or neo -Nazi groups just can't get laid. And, geeze, have you seen those guys? Skanky beards and funky faces. Forced marriages are probably the only way they could get laid.

VERITÉ. I think you're getting off the subject--

SOPHIE. *(Going for the humor)* -- The violence is just a substitute for sex. Okay, maybe I am quoting Bill Maher, but it's the truth. I bet we could solve the problem of mass shootings if a lot more mature women had pity sex with ugly, clumsy 19-year-olds.

VERITÉ. *(Laughing despite herself.)* Girl, you ain't right in the head.

SOPHIE. I'm serious. Screwing some 19-year-old loser would probably do the world a whole lot of good. And women our age are in our sexual prime. We'd be preventing a whole lot of terrorism and mass shootings.

VERITÉ. *(Still chuckling.)* That's not right. Please stop.

SOPHIE. And you know that all this gun violence really has to do with the penis. Mine is bigger than yours.

VERITÉ. Sophie!

SOPHIE. Verité! We're in the Olympics of pissing contests. The bigger the gun and the more bullets you can spray. *(Sophie plays at 'spraying' her bullets, mimicking shooting a multi round gun. Verité laughs out loud.)*

SOPHIE. Take that, you Mothers! Take all my bullets! Let me spew my pellets out all over youse! *(Maxwell enters causing Sophie and Verité to settle down quickly embarrassed.)*

MAXWELL. Professor Jackson?

VERITÉ. *(Regaining composure)* Hello Maxwell. How's the paper coming along?

MAXWELL. Yeah. Yeah.

VERITÉ. Good. *(Introducing Sophie)* And this is [Professor Capella] -

MAXWELL. I know who she is. I had her for English last term.

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SOPHIE. *(Not her favorite student)* Hello Maxwell.

MAXWELL. *(To Verité)* Do we need an outline for the paper?

VERITÉ. Of course. It's on the instructions. Do you need another set of instructions?

MAXWELL. No. I was wondering. Do we really need to find a book?

VERITÉ. Maxwell. --

MAXWELL. I'm asking for somebody else.

VERITÉ. Okay then. Tell that person, he really needs a book.

Preferably one related to the subject he's writing about.

SOPHIE. *(To Maxwell with sarcasm)* Right. There's this place called a library. Tell your friend he might find a book there.

MAXWELL. Are you going back to your office now?

VERITÉ. We have to go to a seminar. I won't be back in my (office until later.)

MAXWELL. *(Interrupting)* Okay. *(Maxwell quickly leaves.)*

SOPHIE. I have never liked that kid. One day, he just stormed out of my class, calling me a loser.

VERITÉ. *(Interrupting)* Sophie ---

SOPHIE. *(Continuing)* --But I think he's got a crush on you. He's one of those guys, you know.

VERITÉ. Sophie. You were talking about those mass shootings --

SOPHIE. It's been a while since you had some. He's young, but if he needs to boost his grade --

VERITÉ. *(A bit tense)* I was talking about all those incidents where Black men, Black people. Those mass shootings, violent as they are, they're not the incidents with Black people.

SOPHIE. Honestly, Verité. Don't be so serious all the time.

VERITÉ. *(More forcefully)* They're not.

SOPHIE. It's not like I'm blaming you or all Black people. ---

VERITÉ. --Blaming? --

SOPHIE. --- But sometimes you just have to wonder why do only Black people get pulled over and killed. It doesn't happen with white people. It just doesn't.

VERITÉ. *(I refuse to go there.)* I just remembered that I have to check something in my car. I'll meet you at the seminar. *(Polite while seething*

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underneath). Would you like my fruit cup? Here. Take it. It's fresh.
(*Sophie takes the fruit cup, plays with it for a moment. Verité picks up her things in order to leave.*) (*Sophie doesn't hear Verité's aside.*)

VERITÉ. (*To us*) Just so you know, I'm not really surprised by the comment. I'm not really shocked either. I'm just stunned by the timing.
(*Sophie continues playing with the fruit cup, then she speaks.*)

SOPHIE. (*A pause, then very serious*) Have you noticed how angry and scared everyone is? Not like a walking zombie movie scared. But a real fear. That weary fear that you have to take with you every day. You got to pack it like a lunch. Keep it tight in clear, plastic wrap. Got to see the inside. Got to pretend it is fresh. Make sure it doesn't get stale. Infuse it with the blood of cheeriness- (*Verité stops what she is doing, listens.*)

VERITÉ. I get the point. Fear. It's deep inside us.

SOPHIE. It's worse than fear. Something's wrong. Now. Really wrong. Facts don't mean truth; They mean ammunition. Opinions are onions. They're cut just to make you cry. Trust is the stuff you want, without earning it. Sometimes abusing it.

VERITÉ. Life was supposed to be better than this.

SOPHIE. I think I get it, how much that Willow Creek incident must weigh on you. Sometimes, it's the one occurrence that clarifies life on this planet, in this body for you.

VERITÉ. I suppose I could check my car later. (*Verité takes her seat again. A moment.*)

SOPHIE. This new guy, Copeland, who's leading this security seminar, he can also give the faculty firearms training. We could sign up together. It could be fun.

VERITÉ. I don't need to know how to shoot a gun just to teach poetry.

SOPHIE. (*With insinuation*). Maybe he'd have to show you how to hold a gun. You know, put his arms around you. Show you the perfect spot to aim. Get you some practice hitting the right target.

VERITÉ. Maybe you'd want him to put his arms around you.

SOPHIE. He sounds more like your type than mine. You know these seminars are just for show. Something produced by the administration to prove they're on top of things.

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VERITÉ. Funny thing. Maxwell, offered to teach me how to shoot a gun

SOPHIE. That's one way to pass the course.

VERITÉ. I don't want to learn. It's just not me.

SOPHIE. If anything, I would think that you would want to learn. After what you've told me about your past and your cousins. But I think I will learn.

VERITE. *(Disbelieving)* Really?

SOPHIE. You never know when one of our precious, little cherubs turns into some neo-Nazi nut job. We could take the lessons together.

VERITE. I'm not sure.

SOPHIE. Come on. It would be fun. Actually, I wish there were more guns.

VERITÉ. You do?

SOPHIE. I would feel safer with more guns.

VERITE. I didn't know you thought like that. I thought you thought exactly like me.

SOPHIE. Don't I? *(She packs up lunch to leave.)* Let's take those lessons together, Verité. Not with Maxwell, but with the new Security officer. Who knows? You might like shooting a gun after all. *(Sophie exits as Copeland speaks.)*

COPELAND. *(Continuing to us)* You might be thinking that this is about as threatening as a disgruntled student pulling the fire alarm on the day of the final exam. It's not. I've been in law enforcement for over 20 years and now is the time to prepare yourselves for the longest hours of your life. Just so you know, we're installing better phone communications, and we're changing the locks on all the classroom doors. You can lock yourselves on the inside now. And once you're locked in, you don't open the doors for anybody. Even if you see someone you know, a student, a colleague, a friend, you keep that door locked. *(If an intermission occurs, it should be here.)*

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