

Dawn and Mary by Brian Doyle

Early one morning several teachers and staffers at a Connecticut grade school were in a meeting. The meeting had been underway for about five minutes when they heard a chilling sound in the hallway. (*We heard pop-pop-pop*, said one of the staffers later.)

Most of them dove under the table. That is the reasonable thing to do, what they were trained to do, and that is what they did.

But two of the staffers *jumped*, or *leapt*, or *lunged* out of their chairs and ran toward the sound of bullets. Which word you use depends on which news account of that morning you read, but the words all point in the same direction — toward the bullets.

One of the staffers was the principal. Her name was Dawn. She had two daughters. Her husband had proposed to her five times before she'd finally said yes, and they had been married for ten years. They had a vacation house on a lake. She liked to get down on her knees to paint with the littlest kids in her school.

The other staffer was a school psychologist named Mary. She had two daughters. She was a football fan. She had been married for more than thirty years. She and her husband had a cabin on a lake. She loved to go to the theater. She was due to retire in one year. She liked to get down on her knees to work in her garden.

Dawn the principal told the teachers and the staffers to lock the door behind them, and the teachers and the staffers did so after Dawn and Mary ran out into the hall.

You and I have been in that hallway. We spent seven years of our childhood in that hallway. It's friendly and echoing, and when someone opens the doors at the end, a wind comes and flutters all the paintings and posters on the walls.

Dawn and Mary jumped, or leapt, or lunged toward the sound of bullets. Every fiber of their bodies — bodies descended from millions of years of bodies that had leapt

away from danger — must have wanted to dive under the table. That's what they'd been trained to do. That's how you live to see another day. That's how you stay alive to paint with the littlest kids and work in the garden and hug your daughters and drive off laughing to your cabin on the lake.

But they leapt for the door, and Dawn said, *Lock the door after us*, and they lunged right at the boy with the rifle.

The next time someone says the word *hero* to you, you say this: There once were two women. One was named Dawn, and the other was named Mary. They both had two daughters. They both loved to kneel down to care for small beings. They leapt from their chairs and ran right at the boy with the rifle, and if we ever forget their names, if we ever forget the wind in that hallway, if we ever forget what they did, if we ever forget that there is something in us beyond sense and reason that snarls at death and runs roaring at it to defend children, if we ever forget that all children are our children, then we are fools who have allowed memory to be murdered too, and what good are we then? *What good are we then?*