

EXCLUSIVE

# An American Girl

At 10, Caitlyne Gonzales survived Uvalde's school shooting. Then she became a voice for her slain friends.



By [John Woodrow Cox](#)

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*UVALDE, Tex.*

She had clipped a white bow into her hair and slipped on a yellow shirt embellished with a butterfly, and now, an hour before meeting her fifth-grade teachers for the first time, Caitlyne Gonzales sat cross-legged on her living room couch, watching YouTube videos about other school shooting survivors.

Caitlyne, who is 10, listened to a Marjory Stoneman Douglas High graduate describe witnessing the killing of two classmates in Parkland, Fla. She already knew the names of the victims, because she'd spent weeks on her phone poring over accounts of what had happened to [kids like her and her friends](#). She lingered on a video showing a map of Sandy Hook Elementary in Connecticut and skipped a story about the gunman, then tapped another segment on Parkland.

"He's now in a wheelchair," she said about a boy who was shot three times.

"She's a cheerleader," she said about a girl who had seen students dying in their own blood.

When she reached a video about the four teenagers gunned down at Oxford High in Michigan last year, she pointed at a picture of [one victim](#) smiling in a field of flowers: "She was 14. She was the youngest."

It had been 100 days since Caitlyne hid in a classroom, listening to a stranger slaughter 19 fourth-graders and two teachers across the hallway at Robb Elementary. Caitlyne knew them all.

In the shooting's aftermath, many of Uvalde's children were plagued by post-traumatic stress, but, to most people, Caitlyne wasn't one of them. By September, she had become Robb's most public survivor, a voice for her friends who were dead and for those who were alive but too daunted to say anything. She had spoken at rallies in Uvalde and Austin and to U.S. senators in Washington. She'd demanded that the people in charge of her school district fire the police officers who failed to save her classmates. She wrote her own speeches in neat block letters and stood alone before the microphones, sometimes on her tippy-toes.

The father of a child killed at Robb tweeted a photo of Caitlyne addressing the school board along with an image of the "Fearless Girl" statue facing down the charging bull in New York.

"#TeamCaitlyne," he added.

**Brett Cross**

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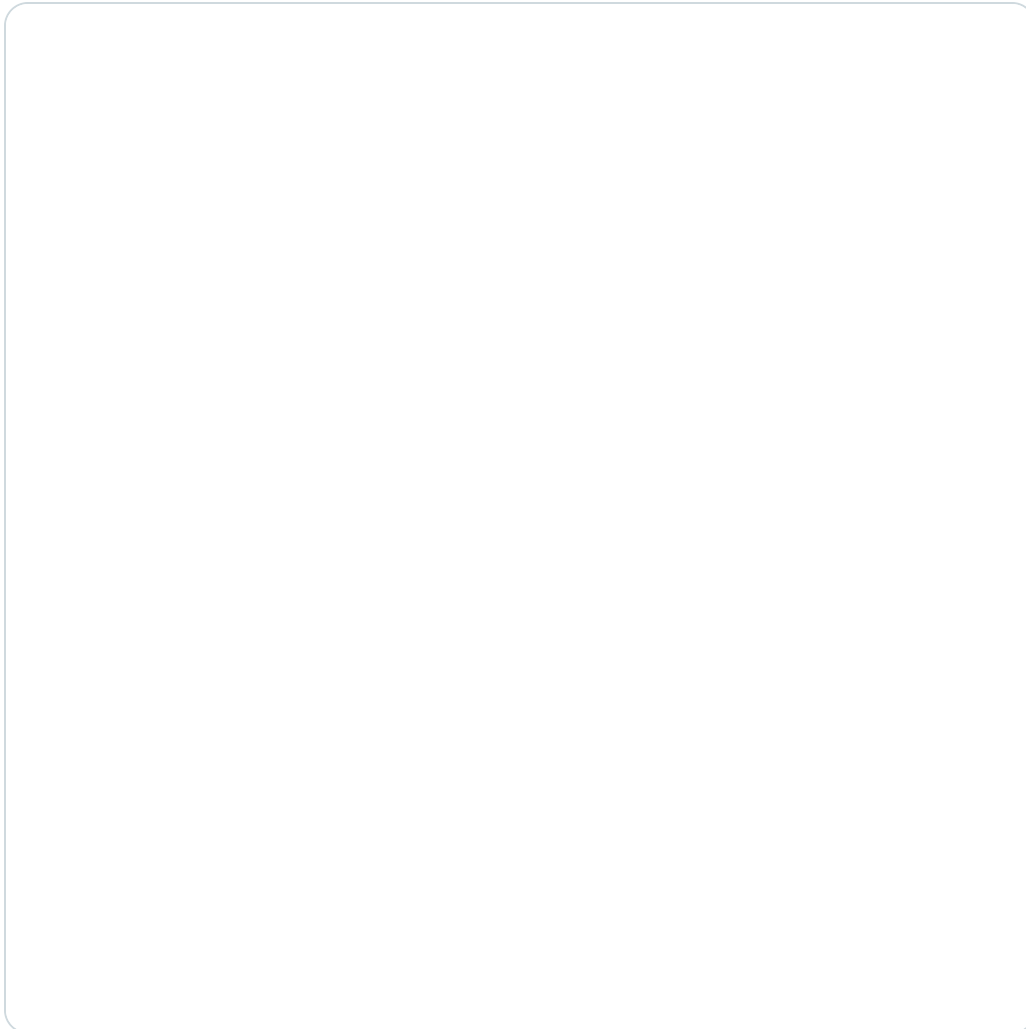


Can you spot the difference between the two? If Caitlyne can stand up to the bull that is the schoolboard and [@GregAbbott\\_TX](#), then I don't want to hear any excuses from any adult!

[#TeamCaitlyne](#)

[#remembertheirnames](#)

[#jackiesbestfriend](#)



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She was a portrait of resilience, a 4-foot-8, 75-pound embodiment of the maroon “Uvalde Strong” flags flying all over Texas. To an admiring public, she was also living evidence that the hundreds of thousands of children in the United States who have survived school shootings can recover, becoming some version of who they used to be.

But the girl Caitlyne had been before “that day,” as she’d started calling the May 24 massacre, was gone. In her place was a uniquely American amalgam, a child who didn’t know how to ride a bike without training wheels but did know about ballistic windows and bulletproof backpacks and the movement to ban assault weapons. Who spent as much time following the Instagram pages of her favorite gun safety champions as she did Bad Bunny’s TikTok account. Who was 10, but seldom acted her age, speaking in public about fear and death with the eloquence of an adult, while in private, enduring flashbacks so vivid that she needed bedtime lullabies meant for toddlers to soothe her.

Now, on the way to her new school for “Meet the Teacher” night, the apprehension Caitlyne worked hard to conceal bubbled up.

“There’s going to be so much people,” she told her mother, Gladys Gonzalez, when they neared Flores Elementary. “I’m scared.”

She used to adore school, because that was the place she made new friends, and Caitlyne liked to think she could make a friend out of anyone. Now, whether she would be able to go back at all, Gladys didn’t know.

Caitlyne couldn’t stand to be apart from her mother for more than a few minutes. The night of the shooting, she asked Gladys to lie at the foot of her bed, down by her toes. Then, as the weeks passed, she insisted that her mom sleep beside her, then facing her, then so close that Caitlyne could feel Gladys’s breath on her face.

Outside Flores, Caitlyne stepped out of the car, silent as she and her mom walked in. The school’s floor was brown, the walls a weathered beige, and the overhead lights so dim that faces at the end of the hallway were obscured in shadows. They had visited Flores a month prior, and Caitlyne had been too unnerved by the darkness to go to the restroom by herself. Twice after that, she pleaded with the school board to install better lighting, but nothing had changed.

On their way to her new classroom, they rounded a corner, and Caitlyne noticed an armed police officer. She veered to the opposite side of the hallway, glancing at him with disdain. Dozens of sheriff’s deputies, state troopers, U.S. Border Patrol officers and local police had taken 77 minutes to confront the gunman at Robb, and, like many people in Uvalde, Caitlyne deeply resented them for it.

Inside Room 302, she met her homeroom teacher, a young woman with a warm smile who called her “honey.” She escorted Caitlyne next door, where her new classmates were gathering. Caitlyne barely knew most of them, in part because dozens of Robb students had decided to take virtual classes or withdraw from the district and go elsewhere.

Caitlyne avoided eye contact with a boy who used to have a crush on her and hugged a girl she did know well, relieved to have at least one old friend in her class. The teachers handed out “About Me” forms to all their new fifth-graders, and Caitlyne filled hers out in the back. Favorite hobby: TikTok. Favorite animal: dog. Favorite food: pizza rolls. Favorite color: blue.

None of the staff mentioned the kids who weren't there, but Caitlyne couldn't stop thinking about their absence. Back in the car after they left, she turned to her mom.

"Can we go to the cemetery?"

## 'Think Happy'

Gladys took a left onto a dirt road and Caitlyne peered ahead, because she knew where all her best friends were buried. She'd made pilgrimages to Uvalde's cemetery all summer, and each time she asked to go back, her mother hesitated. Gladys worried that these visits weren't healthy, but how could she say no? This was where Caitlyne felt closest to the kids who should have joined her that evening at Flores.

"Stop, stop, stop. This is Jacklyn," she told her mom, looking out the passenger window at the grave where her visits always began, because Jackie Cazares was her *best* best friend. They'd first met in pre-K, when Caitlyne asked if she wanted to play on the swings.

"They need to cut her grass," Caitlyne said, reaching down to brush the dirt off a doll that had been left amid the flowers.

She was standing in this same spot on June 10, the day Jackie would have turned 10, when her phone rang. Another fourth-grader, Mayah Zamora, was FaceTiming her from a hospital in San Antonio, where the girl was still recovering from her bullet wounds. When Caitlyne told her where she was, Mayah asked if she could sing "Happy Birthday" to Jackie, so Caitlyne held her phone out over the grave.

Now Caitlyne was checking each of her friends' plots, and at Jayce Luevanos's, she noticed a new painting of a dinosaur.

"He would always pretend to be one," she told Gladys. "He would be like, 'RAAAH!'... That kid is too much."

She took a photo of Ellie Garcia's to send to the girl's father, then pointed at a solitary grave on the far side of a mesquite tree. Makenna Elrod was buried there. She had given Caitlyne a chocolate doughnut a few hours before she died.

"I think that was a beautiful spot," she said, noting that beyond Makenna was Lexi Rubio, whose grave was decorated with sunflowers.

At Nevaeh Bravo's, she propped up a sign that had tipped over — "Think Happy," it read — and at Alithia Ramirez's, she stared at the purple cross. They'd gone trick-or-treating together last Halloween, Caitlyne as Selena, the Mexican American singer, and Alithia as a vampire. Caitlyne had painted fake blood on the corner of her lip.

A half-hour later, when she had finished her visits, they got back in the car.

“It never gets easier,” Gladys, 40, said with a sigh, pulling away.

Behind them, the sun slipped beneath the cemetery’s tree line, and as the horizon faded from orange to black, solar lights planted around each child’s plot switched on, flickering like distant constellations against a clear night sky.

It was nearing Caitlyne’s bedtime when they arrived home, so she put on shorts and made herself a cup of Swiss Miss hot cocoa. Beside her, Gladys prepped a bowl of banana bread mix.

Caitlyne wanted to watch a movie with her 7-year-old sister, Camila, who usually slept in the same room. She decided on “Zombies 3,” a high school musical on Disney Plus, and climbed into bed with her cup. She mouthed the words to the songs and held her blue “Stitch” Squishmallow, a plush toy investigators had retrieved from her classroom.

Caitlyne heard the front door open.

“I think my dad’s here,” she said, rushing out to hug Nef Gonzalez, a plumber for the school district.

Nef, 49, was technically her stepdad, but she’d never considered him that. He had helped raise her since she was a baby. He asked how the visit to Flores had gone, and she told him the entrance was still too dark, but she liked her teachers.

Then Caitlyne turned to Gladys.

“Mommy, are you coming?” she asked.

“I’m coming, baby,” she responded. “I’m getting a drink of water.”

Caitlyne returned to the bedroom and inspected her neatly organized rack of “fidgets,” a collection of toys and trinkets that helped her relax. She used them most often in the evenings, when the worst of her anxiety began to surface.

### **How this story was reported**

With the permission of Caitlyne and her parents, John Woodrow Cox spent all summer with the 10-year-old school shooting survivor, following her as she went to karate and guitar lessons, rallies in Texas and Washington, school board meetings and “Meet the Teacher” night. With Caitlyne’s knowledge, her mother and father agreed to let him put a baby monitor and GoPro in Caitlyne’s room one evening so he could witness her struggle to go to sleep.



Caitlyne opened a bucket of purple slime and pulled out a handful, kneading it atop her dresser until her dad stopped by for the nightly routine they’d started after the shooting.

“I love you to the moon and back,” they said in unison, mirroring hand gestures for each word.

When her mother came in, Caitlyne motioned to the bed: “I have a space for you.”

“Is this ‘Zombies’ 1 or 2?” Gladys asked, joining her daughters.

“Three,” Caitlyne said, and they watched for about 10 minutes before her eyes began to fade.

“I’m sleepy,” she said. She’d been awake since 4 a.m., when Gladys got up to use the bathroom and Caitlyne followed, as she always did.

Just then, Nef popped back in and asked Caitlyne if she wouldn’t mind Gladys watching a half-hour TV show with him in the living room.

“I guess,” she said, but when he stepped away, Caitlyne asked her mom if she could join them.

“No,” Gladys said, forcing herself to say the word. “You have to lay down.”

She and Nef had accepted that it could take months before Caitlyne could sleep on her own again, but they hoped that small doses of time without her mom would inch her closer. Gladys, who was attending graduate school to become a counselor, knew that for Caitlyne to go back to school, she would have to regain a measure of independence.

“It’s just 30 minutes, baby,” Gladys said, but by the time she left, her daughter had begun to weep. Caitlyne crumpled into the fetal position in front of her Barbie Dreamhouse.

“I don’t want to be alone,” she texted Gladys, who was on a couch 30 feet away. “I’m scared. It’s so dark.”

Her mom checked on her, promising to come to bed soon.

“I don’t want to be alone,” Caitlyne said, now only to herself, between heaving sobs.

“Mom and daddy are here,” Gladys texted along with a heart emoji, but Caitlyne had come undone. She messaged back:

“I’m not safe anywhere!!!!”

## ‘A helper’

The sun had yet to rise over Uvalde when her alarm rang on May 24. It was 5:05 a.m., the time Caitlyne woke up nearly every weekday to ensure she made it to Robb before any of her classmates. Each morning, she gathered the free breakfasts for Room 106, made coffee with cream for her teacher, Mercedes Salas, then joined her in the hallway to welcome other students as they arrived.

Caitlyne viewed friendship as her gift. As a toddler, she sought out children at day care to share her toys with, spurning declarations of “mine.” As a second-grader, after learning that another girl’s parents couldn’t afford to buy new shoes, she brought a pair of her own from home.

By fourth grade, she thought of herself as “a helper” and wanted to teach when she grew up. She wrote encouraging notes to kids who were having bad days and reported to Ms. Salas when anyone was sad or upset. During a school race, she was running fourth but waited for Mayah, who was slower, and settled for 10th.

In April, when she turned 10, Caitlyne postponed hosting her first-ever sleepover because it fell on the same day as Makenna’s birthday celebration, and she didn’t want to steal attention from her friend.

Caitlyne was thrilled when Jackie told her she was allowed to come to her slumber party. The girls, two of the smallest in the fourth grade, had grown especially close last year when they played Munchkins together in “The Wizard of Oz.”

At the sleepover, Caitlyne, Jackie, Mayah and three other girls made tie-dye shirts and played Twister, ate Little Caesars pizza and gorged on ice cream sundaes. They all piled into Caitlyne’s room, next to a pink “NO BOYS ALLOWED! Except Dad” sign, and watched “Finding Dory.”

Just after dark, Jackie misplaced her phone, and when the girls pulled its location up on a GPS tracking app, it appeared to be moving. Pandemonium ensued. Convinced that someone had stolen it, Jackie insisted the other girls block her on social media. A few minutes later, they found the phone behind Caitlyne’s dresser.

She and Jackie laughed about that night each time they remembered it. The girls FaceTimed almost every day, sharing silly stories about crushes that made them giggle and scary, made-up ones that made them shriek.

By then, they had already started imagining a future at Flores, where Uvalde’s fifth- and sixth-graders go. They would walk to classes together and, maybe, get their own lockers, just like teenagers. They would sign up for the new play, “Beauty and the Beast,” and practice cheerleading, because high school was just a few years away.

Since pre-K, they’d never had the same teacher, and they hoped that would change at Flores. But the girls knew they would always find each other, just as they did when dozens of fourth-graders and their parents gathered in the Robb auditorium to mark the school year’s end with an awards ceremony. Caitlyne got certificates for science, reading and making the honor roll. Because of a mix-up, Jackie didn’t get any, and she was embarrassed.

“Jackie’s crying,” Caitlyne told her mom when she realized what had happened. “I’m going to take a picture with her.”

In the image, they’re standing before a stage decorated with red and white balloons and a cascade of string lights. Caitlyne is behind Jackie, arms wrapped around her friend’s shoulders. Both girls are smiling.

Thirty-five minutes later, a man with a semiautomatic rifle barged into Robb.



Caitlyne and 15 of her classmates were huddled behind a desk with Ms. Salas. At least one round burst through the wall, clouding the air with the smell of gunpowder. A friend laid her head on Caitlyne's lap and cried, and Caitlyne covered the mouth of another, because the girl wouldn't calm down.

Then, from across the hall, Caitlyne heard a scream that she recognized, because she'd heard it many times before.

It was Jackie.

## 'I should feel safe'

The worst memories returned when she was alone, in the quiet, so Caitlyne did all she could to stay busy. The kids who'd left Robb alive needed help, and that gave Caitlyne, a helper, something to do right away. For two days, she and a classmate packed "grief boxes" with donated crayons, coloring books, slime, snacks and Capri Suns. When the kids stopped by to pick up their boxes, she gave them hugs.

Soon, Caitlyne came up with other ways to honor the friends who were gone.

Four of the girls had played softball, so she got a glove and a bat from Walmart and started meeting with one of her old teacher's aides, who also coached softball, at a field near her house. Caitlyne learned to snap her wrist when she threw and to catch without flinching and to whack the yellow balls off a tee, though her favorite part seemed to be racing her coach at the end of their practices. Caitlyne usually won.

She also started taking guitar lessons, because many of the kids had liked country music, and she wanted to play beside their graves. Once a week, she sat on a stool, listening to a tutor and balancing a guitar on her leg that looked as big as she was. To a Cody Johnson song, she practiced strumming ("down-down-up-up-down") and bounced her fingers between C and F major ("the not-so-fun chord"), giggling at the clanky sounds the strings made when she didn't get the timing quite right.

Her favorite new activity was karate, which she practiced at the same studio Jackie had attended. Caitlyne excelled, kicking and punching with such ferocity that some of the boys tried to avoid her on sparring days. Even there, though, Caitlyne couldn't escape the shooting. As an exercise for new students, her instructors would suddenly turn off the lights. The lesson was simple: Always be ready to defend yourself. But for Caitlyne, nothing was simple anymore, and though one of her coaches warned her on the day it was coming, her chest pounded when the room went dark. Willing herself not to unravel, she dug her fingers into her legs.

Then, in midsummer, came an invitation from Jackie's parents, Gloria and Javier, to do something else for her friends: speak on their behalf at a rally. She didn't know what a rally was, but it sounded important.

Now it was July 10, and she and her family were standing outside Robb in a crowd of at least 200 people, more than she'd expected. Caitlyne chewed on her fingernails, a nervous habit she'd picked up over the summer.

Even nearing 6 p.m., the dry Texas air lingered above 100 degrees.

“Not one more child!” the marchers chanted, and as Caitlyne made out what they were saying, she joined in.

“No justice, no peace!” “Uvalde — Strong!”

A mile later, when they’d reached the shade of the town square, Caitlyne’s face was red and slicked with sweat, but she was yelling every word.

For an hour, she listened to families of the dead plead for gun reform, and when it was nearly her turn, she opened a green notebook and reviewed her speech, neatly handwritten across four pages. She had worked on it for a week but kept the words private, even from her mom.

Just before she went up to the mic, Jackie’s mother asked if she wanted Nef to stand with her.

“I’m good,” Caitlyne said.

“Are you sure?” Gloria asked.

Caitlyne nodded.

“A school is a place where a teacher and child should feel safe, but it isn’t,” she told the crowd. “I should feel safe. My friends should feel safe. But we don’t. ... I can’t imagine the pain my friends and teachers felt in their last moments.” Her voice quavered. “Jackie and the rest of the classmates and teachers died because law enforcement did not protect us like they should have. I am so mad. So many lives could have been saved. I’m here today to be their voice, since we can no longer hear their voice.”

Behind the stage, Gloria wrapped Caitlyne in her arms.

“Thank you, baby girl,” she said. “Jackie would be proud.”

Caitlyne walked around to the front as Beto O’Rourke, the former Democratic congressman and presidential contender, took the stage next.

“Beto! Beto! Beto!” the audience chanted, and Caitlyne, puzzled, looked at her mom.

“Who is Beto?” she asked.

“He’s running for governor,” Gladys explained.

By then, Caitlyne had tired of listening to speeches. She’d heard that a group in the park was giving out Squishmallows.

“Come on. Let’s go,” she whispered to her mom and Camila, and when they got there, she picked out a duck, a frog and a giraffe.

“These are all the ones I wanted,” she told Gladys. “And they’re free!”

Marley Arellano, also 10, sprinted over. She had attended the birthday sleepover, and when she passed out before 10 p.m., Caitlyne squirted her with water. A month later, they hid side by side in the corner of Room 106, holding hands.

“I need to show you something *really* special,” Caitlyne told her, because she had seen a boy Marley liked in the park. She resisted, but Caitlyne took off to tell him Marley was there anyway.

“I did my job,” she declared afterward.

Marley, who’d lost two cousins in the shooting, had seen Caitlyne’s speech and said she was proud of her. But Caitlyne told her she wasn’t finished. Her family had been invited to attend another, more important rally. Caitlyne was going to tell new people about what had happened to them, this time even the president.

“I’m going to Washington, D.C.,” she announced. “I’m gonna go meet Joe Byron.”

## ‘A different country’

Everything, it seemed to Caitlyne, was the biggest or fanciest she had ever seen. There was the Washington Monument, which she had gawked at the night before on the way into the city from the airport. There was the towering chandelier in her hotel, the Grand Hyatt. There were the people in suits, everywhere, all on cellphones and in a hurry. There were the Tiffany and Tesla and Lululemon stores, the teenagers on electric scooters, the train station that resembled a palace.

“It looks like we’re in a different country,” she said, photographing all of it from a bus taking her family and three dozen other activists to Capitol Hill.

March Fourth, an Illinois nonprofit group formed after the July 4 mass shooting in Highland Park, had brought them to D.C. to campaign for an assault weapons ban. To get there, Caitlyne had left Texas for the first time and flown on her first plane.

By then, she’d heard that they wouldn’t meet the president — Joe *Biden*, she now knew — but Caitlyne had also learned that the people they would meet were important. She showed Sen. Amy Klobuchar, a Minnesota Democrat, photos of six of the girls who died, and she told Sen. Richard Blumenthal, a Connecticut Democrat, that gun violence needed to end now, not in a week or two. She also marched into the offices of Republican lawmakers, from her state, and their staffs listened to the families’ demands but offered no solutions.

It was mid-July, and Caitlyne hadn't started researching school shootings yet, but the trip to Washington was teaching her something new: Children were being shot every day, in cities all over America, and the people in charge had done little to stop it.

The event's organizers had arranged for the families to take breaks in a high-ceilinged conference room inside the Hart Senate Office Building, and that's where Caitlyne was when she started organizing an impromptu dance contest.

She walked over to Jaydien Canizales, a rambunctious fourth-grader from Robb she used to play with in an after-school program. During the shooting, he hid under a table in the classroom next to Jackie's, watching through a black cloth as the gunman executed eight classmates and two teachers.

"Who's going first?" Caitlyne asked him.

"Not it!" he said.

"Not it!" she said.

"You're it," Jaydien concluded, pointing at Callum McGlinchey, an 11-year-old who had lived through the Highland Park shooting.

Watching off to the side was Noah Orona, who'd been in the same classroom as Jaydien. Noah was shot in the back, the bullet carving a 10-inch gash across his skin. Sprawled on the floor, he listened to a girl next to him drowning in her own blood. He heard another girl call 911, begging for help that didn't come.

It seemed like anything could give him a panic attack now, from a slammed door to a whiff of barbecue that reminded him of gunpowder. He decided to skip the dancing.

Caitlyne and Jaydien looked at Callum, who, like them, struggled to sleep at night, unable to shake the carnage he'd witnessed on Independence Day.

"All right. All right," Callum relented, breaking into a would-be moonwalk.

"Go, Jaydien," Caitlyne commanded, but the boy didn't need any prompting. Back home, Jaydien had been prescribed pills to help him manage his anger and anxiety. When strangers knocked on their apartment door, he'd started hiding under the kitchen table.

Now, though, he flopped and writhed and spun on the carpet, attempting to breakdance before popping up with a grin.

Then it was Caitlyne's turn. She took off a lanyard that held the photos of her dead classmates and put her hands up, stepping into a cartwheel and a round-off. The parents and activists applauded the children, who tried a few more moves before the dance contest petered out.

Caitlyne put the lanyard back on, her mind again on the kids at home. She found a quiet corner and sat on the floor to make a video call.

Mayah, still recovering in a San Antonio hospital, appeared on the screen. Caitlyne explained where she was.

“What kids from Robb are there?” asked Mayah, who suffered wounds to her hands, arms, chest and back and endured more than a dozen surgeries.

Caitlyne told her that she, Noah and Jaydien had come.

“Why?” Mayah replied.

“They’re here to, like, end gun violence.”

“Those are the only three people that wanted to?”

“There’s a lot of adults,” Caitlyne said. “I’ll send you pictures.”

On the screen, Caitlyne kept adding cartoon images around her face: a microphone, a piano, a guitar and now another she knew Mayah would like.

“Rainboooooow,” the girl said.

They tried to play an online game together, but Mayah’s hospital room WiFi wasn’t working well enough for her to join.

“Ugh,” she said. “I am going to literally scream.”

“Mayah, if you scream, you’re literally going to scare me all the way here in Washington,” Caitlyne joked.

“I’m sick of this hospital,” said Mayah, who had spent the last 49 days inside one.

“I would have been, too,” Caitlyne assured her.

They switched games, but nothing worked. Caitlyne checked the time. She knew she had to leave.

“Mayah, I’ll call you later, because I’m going to go to another meeting, okay?”

“Okay,” Mayah replied, disappointed.

“Bye, My,” Caitlyne said.

She closed her phone and hurried back, ready to tell more of the people in charge what had happened to her friends.

## Rage and regret

The captivating kid she'd been in D.C. was who Caitlyne wanted to be all the time, but knew that she wasn't. Beyond the fear and grief, she felt a rage that surfaced in ways she didn't expect and couldn't control. It had been that way since the evening of the shooting, when Gladys wished her "good night" and Caitlyne exploded. Those were the words the gunman had said as he was pulling the trigger.

A few days later, she and Camila were bickering in the car, and as they got home, a furious Caitlyne shoved open the front door with such force that it punched a hole in the living room wall. Mortified, Caitlyne apologized, swearing that she didn't mean to do it.

The tension between the sisters grew. They argued over who got to sit in the front seat and who was served dinner first. After Caitlyne yelled at Camila for messing up her fidget toys, she felt ashamed and gave a few to her sister, along with a note: "I'm sorry — these are some fidgets & more!!"

Camila, who'd just finished first grade, couldn't help but resent all the attention Caitlyne got, especially from their mother. Over and over, Gladys told her that even though Caitlyne would need more from her for a while, she loved them both the same. But it didn't always feel that way to Camila. The girls often fought over who got to sleep next to their mom, and Caitlyne always won.

"But I'm her baby, too," Camila told her.

Caitlyne spent much of the summer at the day care where Gladys was working and started acting out there as well, defying her mother in ways she'd never done before. One morning, Gladys told her she needed to stop playing and eat breakfast. She refused, disrespecting her mom in front of the other kids and another caregiver. Caitlyne said she was sorry that night.

It hurt Gladys, though she understood what caused the tantrums.

As the summer waned, Caitlyne's nightmares worsened, shaking her body with such intensity that they woke her mom up. She refused to tell Gladys about the dream, which was always the same. In it, the man with the gun came into Caitlyne's classroom, then shot her.

"People don't know what it's feels like to have trama that i have in me right now," she wrote in her diary. "It is so scary i don't want to make new firends cause i'm afraid to lose them."

Her parents worried about what it would all mean for the coming school year, as did Ms. Salas, her former teacher.

She reminded Caitlyne of a lesson she'd taught in class. Friends, she told her, are like parts of a tree. Some, like leaves, stay for a season, and some are like branches and remain longer. Others are like roots, and those last a lifetime. When Caitlyne told her that so many of the children who died were "root friends," Ms. Salas showed her a photo of a sapling growing from the core of a stump. Even after loss, Ms. Salas said, new life, and new friends, could be found.

Gladys, a former mental health caseworker, believed that what her daughter needed most was intensive therapy, but it had been a struggle to find. Through a grant, Caitlyne was receiving free treatment, but only every other week and sometimes for as little as 15 minutes.

Her mom had searched for other therapists, even in San Antonio, an hour and a half away. One, whom Caitlyne liked, didn't take Nef's insurance and charged \$250 a visit, more than they could afford. Another told Gladys that their daughter was fine.

Millions of dollars were raised after the shooting, but some families who'd lost a child opposed money going to the ones who didn't. Those divisions were widening at the same time that parents all over town began to worry that, as the national spotlight faded, the state's promised assistance would, too.

The week after the shooting, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, announced the opening of the Uvalde Together Resiliency Center, a site created to provide the community with long-term mental health services. Before one of Caitlyne's appointments in San Antonio, Gladys stopped by the center midmorning to ask for gas vouchers, but none of the staff was there when she arrived.

"It's so frustrating. Like, I know how this system works. And as an educated person, I see how they're trying to take advantage of all these families," Gladys said, breaking down in her living room that afternoon. "I knew it was gonna happen. Resources here are so limited. They were limited prior to this. And it was obvious to me this morning that there was no one that could help when we needed it."

Adding to Gladys's dismay was the increasing strain in her marriage. She and Nef had slept apart for months, stopped going on dates, seldom spent more than a few minutes alone together. They fought more, sometimes in front of the girls, which they tried never to do.

"A lot of couples here, they're not gonna make it," Nef said late one night, alone on the couch while his wife lay in bed with their daughter.

He and Gladys were determined not to be one of those couples. They talked about joining a lawsuit against the police or the school district or the gun manufacturer, which could eventually provide the money Caitlyne needed for therapy. They also began to wonder if their family's best chance to heal was to leave and debated moving to a community with more resources and better schools. But when they raised it with Caitlyne, she panicked.

The idea of another loss, any kind of loss, was more than she could bear.

## ‘Turn in your badge’

The news reporters spotted Caitlyne as soon as she walked through the door. All of them recognized her. It was Aug. 24, the shooting’s three-month anniversary, and journalists from across the country had descended on Uvalde for the school board’s vote on whether to fire Pete Arredondo, the district police chief. Though 376 officers from 23 different agencies had been involved in law enforcement’s disastrous response to the massacre, Arredondo had become the face of it, just as Caitlyne had become the face of the children they failed.

“PROTECT AND SERVE .... WHO YOURSELF,” her poster read.

Jackie’s parents and older sister were waiting for Caitlyne, with gifts. They handed her a heart-shaped locket, inscribed with “Forever My Friend,” and two small bags of Jackie’s hair bows.

“I know you’ll use them,” Gloria said, and Caitlyne beamed.

Inside the auditorium, the board members appeared, flanked by state troopers. Caitlyne used to admire the police. Her uncle was a cop, and her Girl Scout Daisy troop donated cookies to the Border Patrol. Now Caitlyne glared at the men in uniform.

The meeting commenced, and after a 21-second moment of silence, she sat, waiting to speak, her legs too short to reach the floor. When her time came, she opened her phone and walked to the lectern.

“If a law enforcement job is to protect and serve, why didn’t they protect my friends and teachers on May 24? I have messages for Pete Arredondo and all the law enforcement that were there that day,” she said, her voice rising to a shout. “Turn in your badge and step down — you don’t deserve to wear one!”

The parents behind her stood to applaud, and she rushed back to her mother, tears streaking her cheeks. Caitlyne fled to the restroom and dried her eyes. She hated when people saw her cry.

By the time she returned, the board had left to discuss Arredondo’s fate in secret. Mayah messaged her to say she’d watched the speech online, and Jaydien tapped her on the shoulder to tell her she’d done a good job.

Gilbert Mata, who’d been shot in the leg, was there, too. Gilbert and Caitlyne had grown close over the summer, spending nearly every weekday together at the day care. He had shown her the bullet fragment lodged in his calf and confided what he heard the shooter say: “You’re all gonna die.” The sounds of sirens or wailing babies gave them both flashbacks, but many of Gilbert’s were so severe that Caitlyne had to ask Gladys to come help.

Caitlyne was glad he saw her speech.

An hour later, the board emerged and voted to fire Arredondo, eliciting applause from around the room and a brief cheer from Caitlyne.



Outside, she and her mother hurried past the media, toward the parking lot. In the car, Caitlyne replaced her bow with a light-green one that had belonged to Jackie. She asked if they could again tour the murals being painted around town of each victim.

“Just a quick drive through,” her mom said.

They headed to a side street, where eight of the children had been memorialized on the side of one building. Caitlyne got out and walked over to a huge painting of Eliahna Torres.

She and Caitlyne had given each other nicknames. Eliahna was “Big Mac,” because she was tall, and Caitlyne was “Fries,” because she was skinny. Caitlyne had already done TikTok videos in front of most of the murals, and she wanted one with Eliahna, too. She handed Gladys her phone.

“You want me to start?” her mom asked. Caitlyne gave her the signal, and for 15 seconds, she waved her hands between kicks and shuffles to a pop song, “Amazing.”

*“Who’s gonna save me now? I hope it’s you.”*

Afterward, she walked beside the building, narrating her memories. Uziyah Garcia was the fastest kid in fourth grade. Jayce Luevanos liked to quote SpongeBob SquarePants. Xavier Lopez and Annabell Rodriguez had been painted next to each other, because they were sweethearts.

She wondered how many of them would be alive if the police hadn’t waited more than an hour in the hallway.

## ‘A whole carload’

They were a mile from home when Caitlyne noticed her dad glancing up at the rearview mirror. Red and blue police lights flashed behind them.

“I knew it,” Nef said.

Three black SUVs, driven by Texas state troopers, had been following their Ford Fusion through Uvalde for the last few minutes. Nef pulled into an empty parking lot. Caitlyne, sitting in the back seat between Gladys and Camila, clenched her teeth and crossed her arms.

“Oh my God,” Camila said.

“*Shush*,” Caitlyne instructed, elbowing her sister.

“It’s okay,” Gladys told them.

It was a sunny Saturday afternoon, three days before the start of school. Her parents had offered to take her to SeaWorld in San Antonio, but Caitlyne had, instead, begged them to go to Eagle Pass, an hour away. She'd seen on Instagram that Beto O'Rourke, an outspoken advocate for new gun restrictions, was giving a speech there, and Caitlyne desperately wanted to meet him.

"I am so glad you came. ... It means the world to me," O'Rourke had told Caitlyne, before the family posed for a photo with him and got free campaign shirts from his staff.

"That was *so* cool," Caitlyne gushed later. They stopped to visit her grandfather, who lives in Eagle Pass, and picked up her favorite fried chicken. On the ride home, she napped against her mother's shoulder.

It had been the best day she'd had in weeks, maybe all summer. And now here she was, trying not to panic, as the state troopers blocked her family's car.

"I knew it," Nef said again, because immigrants who shared his skin color and crossed the border illegally often traveled from Eagle Pass to Uvalde.

"Oh, we got a whole carload, huh?" the trooper asked.

"Yep," Nef replied.

"The reason your vehicle's being stopped is you were going a little fast in the 30," he said, though Nef hadn't been driving more than five miles an hour over the speed limit.

"Your kids? Your children?" the trooper asked, pointing to the back seat.

"Well, yeah. She's one of the victims, and she's afraid of —" Nef said, stopping before the word "police" tumbled out. "Robb victim, so she's a little bit nervous."

The man smiled at the girls and waved. Caitlyne didn't wave back.

"I don't want to make her nervous," the trooper said, returning to his SUV to run Nef's driver's license.

Another trooper remained on the passenger side, asking Gladys questions: Had they just gone to Eagle Pass for the day? Were they from Uvalde originally? How old were the girls?

"They have us posted at the schools," he said, and Caitlyne silently gnawed on her fingernails.

The first trooper walked back, handed Nef a warning and told them they could leave. The trio of SUVs pulled away.

"Three of them — for a *speeding ticket*," Nef said afterward, incredulous and frustrated that the U.S. Army tag denoting his military service hadn't dissuaded them.

On their way home, the family spotted one of the SUVs. “K-9,” it read on the back.

“Oh my God,” Caitlyne said.

“They were profiling,” Nef said of the troopers, who both appeared to be White. “That’s it.”

At home, Caitlyne slumped onto a couch, staring at her phone until she snapped at Camila for moving her “Beto” bumper sticker, her face contorted into a scowl. Her parents reminded her what a special time they’d had, but now, none of that mattered to her.

## ‘Breathe’

It was just past 5 on the first morning of fifth grade, and Caitlyne had already put on white Nikes, stylishly tattered blue jeans and a maroon T-shirt that featured a “21” inside a heart. She’d packed her book bag days earlier, clipping an Eiffel Tower keychain to the back, because Jackie had dreamed of visiting Paris.

Flores didn’t open for another two hours, but Caitlyne was ready, or at least she hoped she was. All through Labor Day weekend, she had teetered between the excitement she’d always felt before a new school year and the dread she carried because of how the last one ended. Gladys still didn’t know whether her daughter could walk into Flores alone, and neither did Caitlyne.

The previous afternoon,ayah, who’d finally been released from the hospital, had visited town and invited Caitlyne to dinner. When they met on the sidewalk, Caitlyne squeezed her friend in a hug, butayah’s hands were still too damaged for her to squeeze back.

“I missed you,”ayah said.

“I missed you, too,” she replied, handing over a sack of her favorite fidgets.

Inside the diner, they ate cheeseburgers and talked about the year ahead.ayah said a teacher would give her private lessons. She asked how Caitlyne felt about going back, and the girl said she was eager, but she mentioned nothing about earlier in the day, when she told Gladys she didn’t want to go at all.

Now, with her bag on her shoulders and her peanut butter and jelly sandwich wrapped, she sat next to Camila in the living room, where a Spanish-language news station played on the TV. Caitlyne looked up, realizing it was showing clips of the shooting. She closed her eyes, and when Camila noticed, she reached over to cover her sister’s eyes, too.

Caitlyne was too antsy to stay at home after that, so the girls kissed their dad goodbye and headed out into the darkness with Gladys, driving to the courthouse to take photos in the glare of the car’s headlights.

“Smile,” their mom said, and they did.

Afterward, they parked up the street from Flores, in view of the media trucks across from the entrance. Gladys took out her phone and scrolled through Facebook.

“All the victims’ families are posting photos,” she said, clearing her throat, “of their kids, last year.”

“Let me see?” Caitlyne asked. She zoomed in on one, showing a group of children in a classroom, and began to count, touching each face with her thumb.

“One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight,” she said. “Eight people in this photo that passed away.”

The minutes ticked by, and as 7 a.m. drew closer, Caitlyne worried that no one she knew would arrive before Flores opened.

“Where is everybodyyyy?” she whined.

“You need to calm down,” Gladys said. “Breathe.”

“No!” Caitlyne snapped.

“Do you want me to walk you to the door?” Gladys asked.

“Nooooo, Mom,” she said, nearly as afraid of standing out as she was of going in alone.

The principal stopped by, asking Gladys to pull up closer to the entrance, and as she did, Caitlyne realized they were the first ones in line. She slipped her arms through her backpack, picked up her pink lunchbox.

At 6:59 a.m., the principal told them he was ready to walk her in.

“Oh my goodness,” Caitlyne said, hesitating.

“Hey — you’re okay. Come here,” Gladys said, pressing her hand against her daughter’s cheek. “You’re fine. I love you.”

“I’m scared,” she told her mom, before opening the door and stepping out into the dawn.

With cameras pointed at her, she walked beside the principal, heading up the sidewalk and toward a white sign with a red slash through the image of a pistol. “GUN FREE SCHOOL ZONE,” it read.

Caitlyne passed through the entrance. She didn’t look back.

Gladys dropped Camila off next and drove home. For an hour, she sat at her kitchen table with a cup of coffee, overwhelmed with the feeling that sending Caitlyne back had been a mistake.

Then came a text at 10:35 a.m.: “Gilbert is in my class.”

“Oh wow! That’s awesome my love,” Gladys responded. “How are you doing.”

“Good my teachers are Nice,” she wrote back.

Relief washed over Gladys, who couldn’t resist wondering if this meant Caitlyne could find her way back to the girl she’d once been. Maybe she would shed her fears and school would again become a place she longed to go. Maybe she would make new friends.

Gladys remained buoyant that afternoon, waving when her daughter emerged from Flores. Caitlyne passed a pair of state troopers in cowboy hats and hurried to the car.

“Hi, my love,” Gladys said.

“Hi,” Caitlyne said.

“Did you like all your teachers?” she asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“What was your favorite part of the day?”

“Mmm. I don’t know,” Caitlyne said. “There’s too much boys in the class. That’s annoying.”

“Did you make any new friends?” Gladys asked.

“Uh, no.”

Gladys had braced for her daughter to unleash a hail of details about the day, but they never came. Caitlyne reached into her bag and pulled out a handwritten letter from a teen who’d survived the shooting at Oxford High in Michigan.

“You are so loved,” it read. “Keep going every day.”

At Camila’s campus, they joined a pickup line that stretched a half-mile from the entrance. Caitlyne told her mom she was hungry and had a headache.

“Set me a therapy appointment this week,” she said.

When they finally got home, Caitlyne dropped her bag on the floor and collapsed, face first, onto her bed. After she came out, she sat at the kitchen table, watching TikTok videos until Gladys told her to get dressed for karate class.

She was quiet in the car, scrolling through Instagram. She paused at a series of photos of Jackie, each taken on the first day of school in summers past. One was from pre-K, the year the girls met. Caitlyne lingered on the image of her best friend, then she clicked a button on the side of her phone, and the screen went black.

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