

THE SPECIALS

Mark Purcell

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ISBN:
ISBN-13:

Content Warning: This novel addresses sensitive topics such as mental illness, gun violence, and trauma.

1

MAX

Peaceful Outrage

San Francisco, CA

Maxine Ruiz-Cohen has a bad habit of bigger-ing things. Like her tenth-grade wood shop project that grew too large to get out of the classroom. Or her mom's fortieth birthday cake—the year she got sick—stacked so high it flopped off the kitchen table. Max's life feels so small and insignificant most of the time. When she can, she bigger-ings things.

And this is big.

She holds the pistol in one thick gloved hand, welding torch in the other. Bob Marley's *Buffalo Soldier* blasts through her headphones...*dreadlocks Rasta. Born in Africa, brought to America.* When she's creating in her garage

workshop, it has to be Bob. The only light that penetrates the dark glass of the mask is the torch's blue flame. Inside her welder's helmet, Max is on her own private island, the annoying world outside on mute. She lays down beads of molten steel and clamps the gun into place.

When she lifts the tinted hood, a grin of devilish satisfaction plays on her lips. Her crunchy granola Social Justice teacher told them to "Make a statement. Be bold."

This is bold. Even a bit obnoxious.

The clock on her workbench reads 3:48 am.

When she's in the zone, hours go by as Max bends steel or dissects electronics. Her school counselor calls it hyper-focus—a rare perk of her ADHD. But her batteries die at school. She daydreams. She fidgets. Her knee bounces like a jackhammer, annoying snooty brats nearby.

Max untangles herself from the jumbled heap of twisted metal and wires. She goes to her garage door, turns the lights off, and taps play on the remote control.

The ten-foot-tall metallic sculpture glows to life: a massive

peace sign made from bent rebar and Christmas lights. Ten guns are welded to it, aimed at monitors. Each one frames a young face in black and white: victims of last year's shootings. Hundreds of faces flip past like shuffled cards, guns aimed at their stark expressions.

Max freezes the image when her best friend Hector stares back at her. Killed with "necessary force" by Patriot Guards during a protest. She looks at her metallic monstrosity and smiles with watery eyes. Hector would have been proud. He'd been like a brother to her, especially after Mom died. Now, he's gone too.

Max glances at the clock. 4:10. She has to finish. Make her statement. Fight the cause, just like Mom would have done. She swallows hard and pushes that cry down, down, down. Most people sink under the weight of grief; Max ignites. That aching energy mutates into raw liquid lightning coursing through her veins. In two weeks, Max has barely slept. She jolts awake after a few hours, mind racing, planning her project and plotting her revolution and...

Focus! Less than two hours to make her statement to the world.

Fiery rage smolders as she thinks of the digital billboard she drives past every morning. President Slade scowling, arms crossed, American flag flapping behind him. With scornful green eyes and grey streaks, he looks like a middle-aged superhero—or villain. His slogan scrolls beneath: *Keeping America Safe.*

Yeah, right. Safe for who?

Max checks the to-do lists scrawled in Sharpie on her jeans. Left thigh, *School*. Algebra: lesson 12; Lit: Catcher in the Rye—Holden's hysterical. *Focus*. Right thigh, *Project Peaceful Outrage*. Acetylene welding torch. *Check*. Heavy chains. *Check*. She hopes they hold. Duct tape. *Shit*. Almost forgot—most versatile tool ever. She grabs a roll, scanning the heap on the workbench for anything else she needs.

There's a whisper in the back of her mind. Her father's voice. "Think before you act, Max." He said she's so busy fighting the world, she has no clue *what*, or *who*, she truly

believes in. He held up his fists. “These can’t hold anyone’s hand.”

Max looks at her own hands, filthy with grime and grease. She doesn’t want to hold anyone’s hand. Getting close to people just hurts more when they’re gone.

She shakes off doubt, dismantles the sculpture, and loads everything into Bob—the vintage Ford pickup she rebuilt with her grandfather, Pops. He’ll get why she has to do this.

Max slides the seat up to reach the gas. A bruise-colored dawn appears over the San Francisco skyline as she rolls down the driveway and turns onto Mission Street.

Her stomach clenches as the truck slips past a SCYTHER purring with electricity. The black buses with tinted windows are high-tech prisons on wheels. S.C.Y.T.H.E.—Social Cleansing, Translocation and High-occupancy Extraction. Another of President Slade’s twisted inspirations that steals people from Max’s neighborhood, and her life.

Bob Marley’s *Get Up, Stand Up* blasts through her headphones as Max drives towards her greatest

masterpiece. And her biggest fuck up.

An hour later, Max is sprawled on the gravel rooftop of Chavez Market, drenched in sweat. She hauled her steel sculpture—section by section—up the three-story fire escape like a manic monkey. Her breath comes in wet rasps through the bandana hiding her face. She looks up, shielding her eyes from the harsh brightness of the two-story digital billboard. President Slade’s face looms above. She remembers her *abuela’s* story about David and Goliath as they kneaded *papusas*. Slade is Max’s Goliath. He’s the puppet-master behind the Patriot Guards patrolling streets and SCYTHES circling neighborhoods like shiny sharks. Every foreign-born person of color knows they’re potential prey. Max shakes her fist at Slade’s colossal face and jumps to her feet.

She flings the heavy chain over her shoulder, hops off the roof onto the narrow catwalk beneath the billboard. The flimsy aluminum sways. Max stumbles and grips the

handrail. Far below, early-bird commuters zip past. She imagines falling and the splat, crash, thump, thump of Teslas running over her body.

The liquid lightning in her veins incinerates any fear. She's invincible. The catwalk bounces as Max runs to connect the chain. Climbing onto the handrail, she stretches from her tiptoes, refusing to look down. She hooks the chain to the giant sign, then runs to the opposite side and secures it through a pulley. Wiping away the sweat stinging her eyes, Max reconnects the segments of rebar. A hinge snaps—duct tape fixes it. She secures the peace sign to the chain like a massive amulet studded with handguns. After mounting the monitors, Max connects the battery.

She pauses. The sun is fully awake and glares down. After pulling her hoodie tight, she re-checks the Sharpie list. With a gasp, she reaches into her back pocket. The thumb drive is there—her finishing touch. Max pulls herself up behind the billboard, finds the digital banner console, and swaps drives. A giddy giggle slips out.

Time to display her bold statement. Standing on the handrail, Max grips the chain running through the pulley. She tugs—it won't budge. The steel sculpture is too heavy. She grips with both hands, puts her back into it, and pulls with every ounce of her five-two body. The metal groans, creaks, and clangs. The pulley spins. The chain tumbles—too fast. Max stumbles backwards onto air. She grabs the chain, kicking at clouds as she falls. The peace sign rises as she drops. With a jerk, both stop. The symbol hangs below Slade's chin like a gaudy medallion. Max dangles a hundred feet above traffic, clinging desperately to the heavy chain. Metal links dig into her palms. Every muscle is on fire. She can't pull herself up, and she can't hold on much longer.

The roof ledge is ten feet away. Max kicks off the catwalk and pumps her legs like on a playground swing. Ignoring the hum of cars below, she swings like an acrobat. The chain arches higher. When it carries her above the roof's edge, Max lets go. She floats, facing the sky. Panic seizes her. Is this her final fall? *Splat. Crash. Thump, thump.* Will Mom greet

her on the other side?

Max crashes onto the roof, tumbling across gravel, scraping knees, elbows, and hands. At the sight of blood on her palms, a maniacal cackle bursts from her. She's alive. With shaky, bloody hands, she gathers her tools and stumbles towards the fire escape. Her knees tremble as she scampers down the metal stairs. She scans the alley before jumping into Bob. With a cough of exhaust, they take off.

Five minutes later, the old Ford pickup merges into traffic. Max's pulse pounds as the freeway bends towards the billboard. There it is. Her metallic monstrosity: *Peaceful Outrage*. She did it. And got away. Her lip quivers, vision blurs. When she rubs her eye, salty tears sting her torn flesh. She hisses, sucking air through clenched teeth. A lump of dread lodges in the back of her throat, and mind—she nearly died. She swallows the fear.

Fight the power.

As traffic slows to a crawl, the caravan of commuters becomes Max's captive audience. She reaches for the

remote control on the passenger seat. Bob's *Jamming* lyrics embolden her: *No bullet can stop us now; we neither beg nor will we bow*. She aims the remote at President Slade's overbearing image and taps play.

2

JEREMY

The Girl with S-mad Eyes

Baltimore, Maryland

Jeremy wriggles and writhes in his new Star Wars, Andor T-shirt, reaching for the tag. "Get it off." It's like ants crawling down his neck.

"Stand still," says his mother, Jasmine, from a step stool with scissors. "Never thought I'd need a ladder to remove tags from my little boy's T-shirts."

Jeremy hates being tall. Six-three. Tallest kid in the tenth grade. Everyone says, "Wow, you must be great at basketball." Dad says it's because he's Black. But that never made sense. Back in eighth grade, when he already towered over teachers, Jeremy tried playing at recess. Tried to be cool. Missed the entire backboard. All the kids laughed.

Jeremy's father, Dr. Gordon Wilson, sits at the breakfast table with his laptop, sipping coffee. He smacks the table and laughs. "Someone in California made this elaborate prank. A protest against our brilliant president and *FUPA*."

"I thought you said the president was a dumb ass," Jeremy says. "Not brilliant."

"I'm being sarcastic."

Sarcasm is when people say the opposite of what they mean, which makes no sense. "*FUPA*," says Jeremy, "stands for the Freedom Under Protection Act. F-U-P-A. That's an acronym."

"Yes, it is, son. But this little firecracker had a slightly different interpretation." He spins the laptop.

President Slade's face is on a huge billboard with cars lined up beneath. Something dangles from chains: a metallic, blinking peace sign with guns and monitors attached. Like the president is wearing an ugly necklace.

Jeremy taps play, and the necklace blinks as pictures of kids flash on screens. A message scrolls: *Keeping America*

Safe... Freedom Under Protection Act. Then the words change to *One gun at a time...Fucked Up Paranoid Americans.*

When Jeremy scrolls down, there's a picture of a girl: *Teen Speaks Out Against President and Gun Violence.* She has golden skin, pretty hazel eyes, and hair that looks like it was pulled from a shower drain. She wears a prison-orange jumpsuit. Her lips are pressed in a straight line with eyebrows slanted downward. That equals sad, maybe mad. *S-mad.* And why did Dad call her a firecracker? Is she about to explode?

"Good for her," says his mom. "But that little girl is probably in a boatload of trouble."

She makes lunches while Dad fixes his tie in the mirror. This leaves Jeremy to stare at the girl with the s-mad, hazel eyes. He reads about the trouble she's in and wonders how to put it into a boat.

Jeremy speaks at his mother. "Remember, no crusts. Nothing sticky. And a snack. It's Friday. But nothing yellow."

"Please?" she asks.

"Thank you," Jeremy mutters.

She shakes her head and smiles. "Don't forget, you're going to Cole's after school today for a play date."

"No, I'm not." Jeremy's chest tightens. "No one my age calls them 'play dates.' And they don't have their moms arrange them."

"Come...on, Jeremy," pleads Mom. "We already planned it. Heather said Cole's looking forward to it."

That's a lie. Last time Cole came over, he spent the whole time on his phone. When Jeremy asked if he wanted to play Minecraft, Cole said, "Are you in fucking Middle School?" They spent the torturous hour in silence, protected by screens. Jeremy pretended Cole wasn't there and read about particle accelerators on Wikipedia. Both were relieved when Mom knocked on the door, and it was over.

"Give it a chance, Champ," says Dad. "Your friends can't just be faceless screen names you play video games with."

They're better friends than the IRL assholes Jeremy deals

with at school. Faceless is safer. If anyone becomes hostile, he can disappear. Besides, he'd rather join friends online, blowing up interstellar cyborgs, than sit around a crummy Boba Shop trying to figure out what to talk about.

"No, thanks," says Jeremy, locked to the screen.

His mother huffs and loudly chops off crusts.

An email pops up on Dad's laptop: *Re: Treatment for my son*. He glances over his shoulder. Dad is still putting on his shoes.

To: GWilson@HopkinsMed.com
From: TTakahashi@UCSF.com
Subject: RE: Treatment for my son

Dear Gordon,

Thanks for asking about the status of our clinical trials. As you know, our Clarity Treatment has shown promising results in our lab. Our pilot study in *Nature* showed significant reduction in mental health symptoms. Especially those with a genetic basis like your son's autism. Mice in our study showed increased eye contact and prosocial behaviors. We're in negotiations with big pharma to begin drug development.

But you know the snail's pace at which clinical trials move through the FDA. We just got the green light to start animal studies. It'll be years before human clinical trials commence. I'm afraid your son will probably graduate college before we can provide direct clinical treatment. But I have him at the top of the waiting list. Fingers crossed.

Warm Regards,

Akira

Akira Takahashi, MD, PhD

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As Dad reaches for his sports coat, Jeremy slams the laptop shut. He takes a deep breath and tries to name his intense feelings, as his counselor taught him. He's confused. Mad. And...hopeful? *Con-mopeful*. Why's Dad trying to cure him? His parents always said there was nothing *wrong* with him. But he's never really felt like he belongs. How can he be someone different than who he is? He thinks of a Chinese proverb he saved from a fortune cookie: *You can't ask a fish to describe the nature of water*. This is Jeremy's water. It's all he knows. But what if...

"Come on, champ. We have to hurry." Dad takes the laptop and slips it into his briefcase. "Big faculty meeting at nine-thirty."

Mom hands Jeremy his lunch and backpack. "Even when you drive me nuts, I still love you."

Jeremy's eyes roam the ceiling. "Okay." He turns to leave, but Mom stops him. She gently cups his chin and guides his face to hers. "Eyes, Sweetheart."

Keeping his eyes on hers is like fighting a tractor beam, but he tries. "See you later," he says, pulling away. He throws his backpack on, double-strapped, and heads for the door.

Jeremy pauses without turning. "I want another pet."

"Really?" Mom says.

"Yeah. An autistic mouse." He wonders if he could pet it. Do they also hate getting sticky? Do they have mouse friends, or do they like to be left alone?

Mom starts to laugh, then catches herself. "Better be careful. Stephen Hawking might eat it."

At the sound of his name, the calico cat sleeping on the back of the couch perks up his ears, turns, and stretches lazily. Jeremy's parents thought he named his cat Stephen Hawking because he loves outer space—he chose Cosmos over cartoons as a kid. But there was another reason Jeremy gave his cat that name. Stephen Hawking was one of the greatest scientists of all time, and he was all knotted up in a wheelchair. He even spoke through a computer. If Stephen Hawking could discover all the amazing things he did, then

Jeremy could too. Even with his autism.

“I forgot. Cats eat mice.” Jeremy opens the door. “But I still think they’d be friends—maybe pet frenemies.”

As he walks out of his Baltimore home, Jeremy’s head spins with dreams of outer space autistic mice, the girl in the orange jumpsuit with pretty, s-mad eyes, and what life could be like on the outside of the bubble separating him from everyone else.

3

HUNTER

Man Up

Laredo, Texas

Hunter parks his Ford Bronco beside the rows of pickups tailgating the Bulldogs' Homecoming game. The bouquet of daisies waits on the passenger seat like a promise, or a dare.

He looks at the blank screen of his phone where the snap from Lacey Cunningham appeared...then faded away. *Hey Hunter, it's Lacey from bio lab. Wanna tailgate before the game. Meet at Blake's truck. BTW I love cowboys and daisies.*

Was it daisies or daffodils? He knows it started with a 'D.' Words get jumbled for him, and stupid Snapchat won't let him double-check.

Hunter's had a crush on Lacey forever. He didn't even think she knew his name until they were lab partners. She

was nice and didn't tease him like others. But to ask him to homecoming? Not in a million years. The empty screen fills him with doubt. Maybe he read it wrong. He feels the flutter in the back of his throat. The one that makes words get stuck. He hears his speech therapist, *Breathe...Let the words flow like water over a waterfall.*

Maybe he should forget it. Go home to the man cave and Call of Duty. Then he slaps the dashboard. It's now or never. Hunter puts on his black cowboy hat, grabs the flowers, and steps out of the Bronco to go find his girl.

Country music blares, and the scent of BBQ fills his nostrils. Teenagers dance, stumble, and hoot. Hunter finds Blake's pickup. There's Lacey in her cut-offs and checkered shirt, laughing with a friend. Hunter loves that smile. He can do this. His snakeskin boots click on the asphalt as he approaches.

Leaning against the truck is Teddy Jenkins. He grins like a prowling fox. "Hey, cowboy. What do we have here?"

When Lacey turns to face Hunter, a bewildered expression

clouds her face.

Hunter extends the daisies that wilt from the heat and his sweaty palms. When he opens his mouth, moths flutter in the back of his throat. "I...b-b-b-rought.....th-th-these.....for y-y-you."

Stifled giggles roar in Hunter's ears. He takes a deep breath. *Waterfalls. Cool and calm.*

Lacey's eyes dart uncomfortably. "Well, thanks Hunter, but why?"

Sweat beads his forehead. "You asked....me...." He shakes his cell phone at her. "To...ha-ha-ha-home...coming..."

"Ooo Lacey," says Teddy, grinning. "Grant is going to burn up when he finds out you're cheating on him with Ha-Ha-Hunter." The boys surrounding him burst into laughter.

"Hunter, I don't know what you're talking about. Hon, you must be confused." Lacey turns to Teddy and snaps, "And you, shut the hell up."

The five boys laugh even harder, making kissing sounds at Lacey.

Then Teddy throws his arms out like he's introducing celebrities. "Announcing the King and Queen of Ha-ha-ha-Home Coming."

The crowd cackles hysterically.

Hunter gives one last pleading look at Lacey, then throws the daisies into the dirt and stomps away.

The white Bronco tears out of the parking lot in a cloud of dust. Angry tears scorch Hunter's cheeks as he pounds the steering wheel. "I'm sick of it. Sick of it all."

Sick of assholes like Teddy who think they're hot shit. And "friends" who ghost him. Sick of wishing he were dead every morning he has to face that high school hellhole. And Mom's perky cluelessness while Dad tells him to "Man up." Sick of pretending he doesn't care as he blows shit up in video game worlds he wishes were real. He's sick of it all.

Hunter snarls at himself in the rearview mirror. "Where's your stutter now?" He pounds his palm against his temple.

Why did he bother to try? "Stupid. You're so fucking stupid."

The Bronco skids to a stop in Hunter's driveway. As he storms through the front door, his phone vibrates. He freezes. Maybe it's Lacey.

It's an Instagram notification: "Ha-Ha-Homecoming King & Queen." He feels sick. Hunter taps the link and watches himself painfully stutter, holding limp daisies out to a confused Lacey. The views keep rising, 907...998...1003. Humiliation floods him. The room spins.

Then, a calm resolve settles over Hunter. A numb, silent rage. He descends the basement stairs into Dad's man cave. The Bud sign glows above the bar. He marches past Dallas Cowboys pennants and pictures of Dad with his football team and Marine buddies.

"Semper Fi, Oorah!" Hunter pumps a fist, then raises his middle finger.

He reaches the locked steel cabinet. The combo is his birth date. Dad's words echo in his head. "If I'm not here, it's your job to protect this family. Don't let me down."

The lock clicks, and Hunter opens the cabinet.

Time to man up.

4

FATIMA

It's Not Real

Buffalo, NY

Fatima scratches her forearm until her olive skin turns raw pink. She's convinced a microscopic transmitter buried beneath her flesh is sending information about her to *them*.

A whisper like distant thunder warns, *They're coming*.

She scans the living room, peeks down the hall, and out the window. Fatima imagines her father, Baba, shoved inside a SCYTHE. *Disappeared*, like so many other Muslim men from her mosque.

When her mother, Zahra, enters the living room, Fatima jams her arm under the tattered blanket. The couch has become Fatima's headquarters. Thick books, *The Faces of God* and *The Poetry of Rumi*, are stacked at her feet. Pages

of notepad paper—covered with scribbles and diagrams—crinkle as she sits up.

Mother pets Fatima's slick, black hair and gently asks, "Maybe a shower today?" She places a plastic cup of pills on the end table.

Fatima imagines tiny robotic ants hatching from the yellow pills. They'll scurry through her veins and burrow lairs deep inside her spongy brain.

Mother's impatient tap on the table snaps her back.

With a gulp of water, she swallows the pills, hoping to wash away the metallic ants.

What would Dr. Claus say about the bugs and transmitters buried beneath her skin? "That's a paranoid delusion. Belief in things that are not real." She forgot his real name during her hazy hospital stay, but Dr. Claus looked like Santa in a lab coat...just less jolly.

And what about Santa? A fat guy in a red suit riding a sleigh pulled by magic flying deer who breaks into your home, through the chimney, to hide toys under indoor trees.

Why isn't that delusional? Because a million American kids believe it. You're only delusional when no one else shares your belief. When they do, it's called a holiday tradition.

Six months ago, Fatima was studying for her SAT's and lead in Othello. Then, reality's mirror cracked, shattering into a thousand razor-sharp shards. Now, she's a lump who lives on the couch, betrayed by her own mind. Dr. Claus told her that the meds work like super glue, holding the pieces together. They also make her exhausted and hungry as a wolf. All she fits into now are sweats. On darker days, Gravelly Voice penetrates her drugged haze, and haunting images emerge from the fog. But she keeps that to herself. If *they* knew, her dosage would be boosted until she turned full zombie.

She watches her mother pull the vacuum out of the closet, stooping under the invisible weight of the last six months. Fatima's parents desperately clung to their denial before finally surrendering to her diagnosis: *schizoaffective disorder, early onset, severe*. Mother said it was just

hormones. Baba blamed it on social media. But Fatima knew better.

She scoured the dictionary, searching for a word to describe her experience. The closest she got was *hypnogogic*, that slippery state between waking and sleep. When everything is *real*, but bits and pieces from someplace else slip in and blur surreal. Sometimes, Allah's brilliance peeks through the veil. Other times, faceless demons chase her across scorched earth. But these visions aren't authored by her own imagination. Someone—or *something*—outside her mind gives birth to them.

Now, one of those apocalyptic visions appears on her TV screen. Fatima startles into a seated position, drawn into the daymare. There's no sound, so she discreetly watches the screams of terror while Mother vacuums across the room. Fatima doesn't want to give any sign that she's *seeing things* again.

From the cobwebbed corner of her mind, Gravelly Voice whispers, *It has begun...*

On the screen, a football player grapples with his helmet as a blossom of wet crimson spreads across the front of his powder blue uniform. The helmet drops. A soundless wail pours from his mouth. He falls to his knees. Bright blood squirts between fingers clasped over the number forty-seven.

Fatima's entire body shivers. *It's happening again.* If it gets as bad as last time, she'll be locked up in that horrible hospital again. She squeezes her eyes shut and prays to Allah that the screen will return to black silence when she opens them again.

Instead, bodies scramble in every direction. The video jostles as the person filming ducks for cover. Yellow quotes flash beneath the shaky images. *"That was a gunshot. Holy Sh—t. They shot someone on the field."*

Make it stop, begs Fatima silently. *Get out of my head. Please. Please.*

Your family is next.

Inside Fatima's head, Dr. Claus reminds her, "Those are

hallucinations. Seeing and hearing things no one else experiences...It's not real."

But it feels so real to her.

Teenagers trample and climb over each other, trying to escape the stadium. Fatima recalls the time the Taliban bombed her village in Afghanistan. She was only ten, getting fruit at the market. When the explosions came, she froze. People screamed and stumbled in every direction, dodging chunks of earth that rained down all around them. The frantic terror she's watching now transports her back to that day. A blonde girl in a checkered shirt jerks twice, then slumps over the railing. An older woman is knocked to the ground by the stampede of teens pouring out of the bleachers. A boy's cap twirls in the air as he collapses onto a bench.

Quotes in bold yellow scroll beneath the shaky images. *"It's coming from over there. The water tower...He's shooting into the bleachers."*

Gravelly Voice is so close his hot breath tickles Fatima's

ear. *You're next...little girl.*

The nightmare cuts to a large blue water tower with "Laredo Bulldogs" written across it. On the top catwalk, paces a hulking boy in a black cowboy hat. Around the base of the tower swarm the red and blue lights of police cars. He raises his empty hands. Then his body jerks and twitches—riddled with silent bullets. He tilts forward like a child's Teddy Bear and topples over the railing. Fatima's stomach drops as he floats down in slow motion, disappearing into the tall grass below.

Then, the horrific vision turns to black.

Fatima blinks, startled out of her hallucination. The blank TV screen stares back at her. She scans the living room. Her father, Baba, stands in the doorway in his white *taqiyah* cap, prayer rug tucked under one arm. In his other hand, he holds the TV remote.

"Don't watch such senseless violence. It rots your brain." His lips move in silent prayer beneath his salt-and-pepper beard.

"You mean all that was *real*?" says Fatima, aiming a shaky finger at the black screen.

Mother nods. She presses the back of her hand to Fatima's cheek like she's checking her temperature. "I turned on the TV while I cleaned. But I muted it, so it didn't disturb you."

Fatima is definitely disturbed, but also relieved. Those images weren't projected from her broken brain; they came from this broken world.

She pulls her left arm out from under the dingy blanket. "And this?" She turns her forearm up to show the spot she rubbed raw. "Did *they*...put something...*inside me*?"

Mother nods solemnly. She points at a small incision on her own forearm. "Both of us, too. Their government calls us threats." Her lips purse and her brow furrows in her closest expression to anger. "Welcome to America. The land of the free."

5

#POST ONE

#200 Days to Election: President Slade Holds Strong Lead@US Polls

President Slade's Popularity slips 8%. Maintains strong lead over Dem Candidate, Marcia Ortiz.

Slade: 62%. Ortiz: 34%

#Mass Shooting at Laredo High School@Montgomery Jones/CNN

[Images: Police cars and ambulances in front of High School. Tearful students huddle with teachers and parents]

Mass shooting at Laredo High, TX. Twelve students confirmed dead, several injured. Suspected shooter killed with "Necessary Force"

Note: This story is still developing

#My Heart Bleeds for Laredo@Real Pres Slade

This senseless violence will not go unpunished. NOT ON MY WATCH! Keep America Safe. Vote 4 Slade

#Laredo is 100th Mass Shooting this Year. What Would SF Rebel Say?@SF Guardian

Maxine Ruiz-Cohen [aka SF Rebel] creates public art protest against gun violence. Less than a week later, US has 100th

mass shooting this year. When will it stop?

#Treason?@ Real Pres Slade

Lucky SF Rebel lives in the U.S. B/C if she lived anywhere else, she'd be HUNG FOR TREASON. God Bless US. Keep America Safe. Vote 4 Slade.

#Anti-gun Protests Around US@ New York Times [NYT]

[Protestors hold up signs: Stop the Violence; Less Guns, More Hugs]

In response to mass shootings, protestors in major cities demand gun control.

#Don't Let Them Take Away Your Right to Bear Arms@National Rifle Association [NRA]

Don't give an inch, Patriots. They want to strip away your second amendment right to protect yourself.

#More Walls and Guns@Proud2BMerican

Keep our borders safe. More walls, dogs, and guns. Woke, liberal extremists are why Terrorists Attack. If you don't like it...Leave. Take SF Rebel Bitch with you.

#God Bless R Patriots@Real Pres Slade

Our freedom is protected by patriots like you Proud2BMerican. U.S. rated safest country in the world!!! No one wants to mess with us. Keep America Safe. God Bless US. Vote 4 Slade.

#SF Rebel: Traitor or Hero? Cast UR Vote@Washington Post [WP]

[Image: Maxine Ruiz Cohen in orange jumpsuit next to Peaceful Outrage hanging from Slade Billboard].

Mark Purcell

Some call her a hero for Peace. Others a Traitor. What do you Believe? Cast UR Vote Here: [SF Rebel Poll@WP](#)