Saratoga Library English Conversation Club
Rescue at In-N-Out
October 8, 2026

Last week we read about a "bike wedding" that happened in San Francisco. This week we return to the topic of mental health with a story about a young man who encountered a woman experiencing a mental health crisis. The whole incident started as a strange late-night standoff behind the counter of a fast-food joint. (A joint is an informal word for an inexpensive or casual place for food and drinks.) First, review the vocabulary and dialogs.

Vocabulary Preview: Read these words and match them to their meanings.

1) **to bob** (bob)	A. a piece of equipment or feature that is fixed securely in place
2) **to confront** (kuhn-FRUHNT)	B. financial support given by a person or company to an event, team, or project in exchange for advertising
3) cradle (noun; KRAY-duhl)	C. to put skills, staff, or resources into action to achieve a goal
4) **decoy** (DEE-koy)	D. lacking inspiration and warmth; plain; completely clean unable to produce children or crops
5) **to deploy** (dee-PLOY)	E. to face a problem, challenge, or person directly and boldly
6) **drive-through** (DRYV-throo)	F. a fake person, animal, or object used to trick or distract someone
7) **fixture** (FIKS-cher)	G. a very bright, glowing color used in lit signs
8) **in utero** (in YOO-tuh-roh)	H. a restaurant or business window where you can get service while staying in your car
9) **neon** (NEE-on)	I. to move up and down quickly or repeatedly
10) **spatula** (SPACH-yoo-luh)	J. the place where a civilization or new idea first begins and grows
11) **sponsorship** (SPON-ser-ship)	K. a kitchen tool with a broad, flat blade used for mixing, spreading, or lifting food
12) **to squint** (skwint)	L. a Latin phrase meaning inside the womb, before birth
13) **sterile** (STEHR-uhl)	M. to move by twisting, turning, or shifting back and forth from side to side to avoid obstacles.
14) **to weave** (weev)	N. to partly close your eyes to see more clearly or because of bright light

Answers: 1-I; 2-E, 3-J; 4-F; 5- C; 6- H; 7-A; 8 - L; 9 –G; 10 –K; 11 -B; 12 - N; 13-D; 14 - M

Dialog 1
Leo: Look at that new **neon** sign flashing above the **drive-through** lane of the burger eatery.
Maya: It's so bright that it makes me **squint** just trying to read the menu board.
Sam: They must have gotten a huge company **sponsorship** to afford a fancy lighting **fixture** like that.
Leo: Let's grab our food and head over to the stadium before the big game starts.
Maya: Good idea; security is about to **deploy** the extra barricades to manage the crowd.
Sam: They need to ensure the team bus can get through safely to protect the star players.

Dialog 2
Leo: Our team needs to **confront** the other team's defense in order to score a goal.
Maya: Do you see that player **bob** up and down on his toe? He's getting ready to attack the ball.
Sam: He passed the ball to a teammate. He is **weaving** back and forth through those defenders.
Leo: But it looks like he is a **decoy.** He's passing the ball to another player who is not guarded!
Maya: You're right! He scored! They fooled everyone.
Sam: Yes, the coach is brilliant. I heard he was born in the city that is the **cradle** of American football.

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The Viral In-N-Out Spatula Hero
This reading is based on an article by Thomas Fuller
The New York Times, Sept. 25, 2026

It was a little before 1 a.m. and Luca Opperman was in his car in the In-N-Out Burger **drive-through** with his girlfriend, Haley. This was in a city outside Los Angeles, in an area called the Inland Empire. Everything seemed normal. Until it wasn't.

Inside the restaurant, something weird was happening. A woman was in there screaming and bashing the counter with a tree branch. Luca, 20, didn't know what set her off or whether she or the workers were OK, but they were running away to hide from her.

"Don't do it," Haley warned Luca. She knew what he was thinking. "Don't!" But then he was out of the car, and up through the narrow drive-through window. "Whoa!" said Pamela, the woman behind them in the drive-through. She couldn't believe that someone could shoot through a window that fast.

She immediately thought of a scene in the Jackie Chan movie "Rush Hour," where Chan slides through the impossibly small slot that bank tellers use to hand their customers cash. Haley and Pamela **squinted** to see what Luca had grabbed off the counter to **confront** the woman.

It was a **spatula**.

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When she was pregnant with Luca two decades ago, his mother, Lize Willers, sensed that this would be an unusually active child. There were the kung fu moves that her son seemed to practice**, in utero**, against her belly. "You see these feet come out. You see these little elbows."

He started zooming around on scooters when he was 3. By the time he was 11, Luca had already picked up **sponsorship** for the scooter tricks he had mastered. His parents let him run wild. Some mornings, when he was a boy, Luca would greet his mother in her second-floor bedroom by running past her bed and jumping off the balcony, into the air, then landing on the lawn one story below.

He managed to do these jumps without breaking bones. His friends called him marshmallow because he was so elastic. But also — OK, mostly — because he was pretty chubby. He also excelled at a sport called *parkour* which originated in France.

This sport involves using perfectly ordinary urban **fixtures** like benches, staircase railings and rooftops and perilously flipping one's body across them instead of walking down the sidewalk in the normal way. He **deployed** his skills at all hours and in unusual places.

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Back at the In-N-Out kitchen:

The kitchen was completely empty except for Luca and the lady. They circled each other like wrestlers in a ring. Each time the woman smashed the countertops it sounded like cymbals smashing.

So why did Luca grab the spatula? He wasn't sure. Too late. He was in too deep. An angry woman swinging a tree branch was headed right for him. So, the spatula it was.
The In-N-Out cooking staff had bolted so fast that there were burgers still sizzling on the griddle.

Luca confronting a woman threatening the staff at an In-N-Out burger eatery.

To understand the moment better, it might be useful to point out that the Inland Empire is the **cradle** of American fast food. The original McDonald's is only an hour's drive away. And these **sterile, neon-lit** places are accustomed to a certain level of chaos.

So while there was no way of knowing in that moment what might have prompted the woman to begin smashing up an In-N-Out after midnight on a weekday … it happens. When they had arrived at the drive-through, Luca had ordered two burgers with grilled onions, spread and pickles, and animal-style fries, no cheese.

Haley had ordered a cheeseburger with chopped chilies and a side of fries. They had also asked for a cup of pickles as a sort of appetizer. The pickles were the only part of the order that had been delivered before the commotion. So while her boyfriend was **bobbing** and **weaving** and waving the spatula, Haley was watching from the car, eating pickles.

The lady was still swinging the stick. Luca didn't know what had set her off. It also wasn't clear where she got the branch — the trees outside the In-N-Out there are all palms. Haley was getting worried that her boyfriend was going to get smacked. Also she was running out of pickles.

Luca was still wielding his **spatula**, grease glinting on the edges of his meat-flecked, makeshift sword. Then the woman turned around and started yelling at a couple of customers watching the standoff. Luca saw that distraction as his opportunity to strike.

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He took a tilted stance like a defensive player right before a football play starts and then bolted toward her. Lowering his shoulder, he rammed into her midsection. She fell to the ground and dropped the branch.

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A shoulder check, Luca called it. He said it was inspired by his days playing rugby. Pamela, in the car behind them, was relieved to see that the woman was not hurt, just disarmed. The spatula had been a **decoy**.

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Not long after, deputies from the Riverside County Sheriff's Office arrived. They arrested the woman and cited her for felony vandalism and brandishing a weapon, booked her into the county jail and then released her. What was she so angry about? the deputies asked the In-N-Out staff. Luca heard one employee answering, "Her burger was cold."

They had called her order number repeatedly, but she didn't come to get it. She had asked them to make a new one, Luca heard the employee say, but they declined. Next thing you know, she was back with the branch.

Few details have emerged about the woman, who public records indicate was 53, and neighbors say is a mother — part of a friendly family.

To the public, she's one-dimensional — the lady who lost it at the In-N-Out. But of course it is more complicated than just a cold burger. A relative reached by phone said the family wants to maintain privacy, but that she is finally getting the help they wished she had received weeks earlier.

After the deputies left, the staff cooked up a fresh order of burgers and fries for Luca and Haley. They got back in the beat-up Toyota, unaware that Pamela in the car behind them had filmed the confrontation and that the video would soon go viral.

The internet loved it. The grumpy voices that fill social media came together in praise. His friends, of course, would tease him mercilessly over the spatula thing. The flipper with a flipper. Marshmallow's greatest trick.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever encountered an incident when someone was experiencing a mental breakdown? If so, describe what happened and how you reacted.
2. Do you think Luca's reaction was too risky? Why do some people seem to take more risks than others?
3. How do you think you would react if you saw what Luca and his girlfriend Haley saw?
4. Have you ever had to call 9-1-1? If so, what did you call them for?
5. What kind of help can the woman experiencing a mental crisis get?
6. Is there a stigma in getting help for one's mental health? (A stigma is a strong feeling of social disapproval or an unfair, negative belief about something.)
7. On a scale of 1 to 10, how risk prone are you? That is, how likely are you to do something risky? Give an example that explains your answer.

References

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