

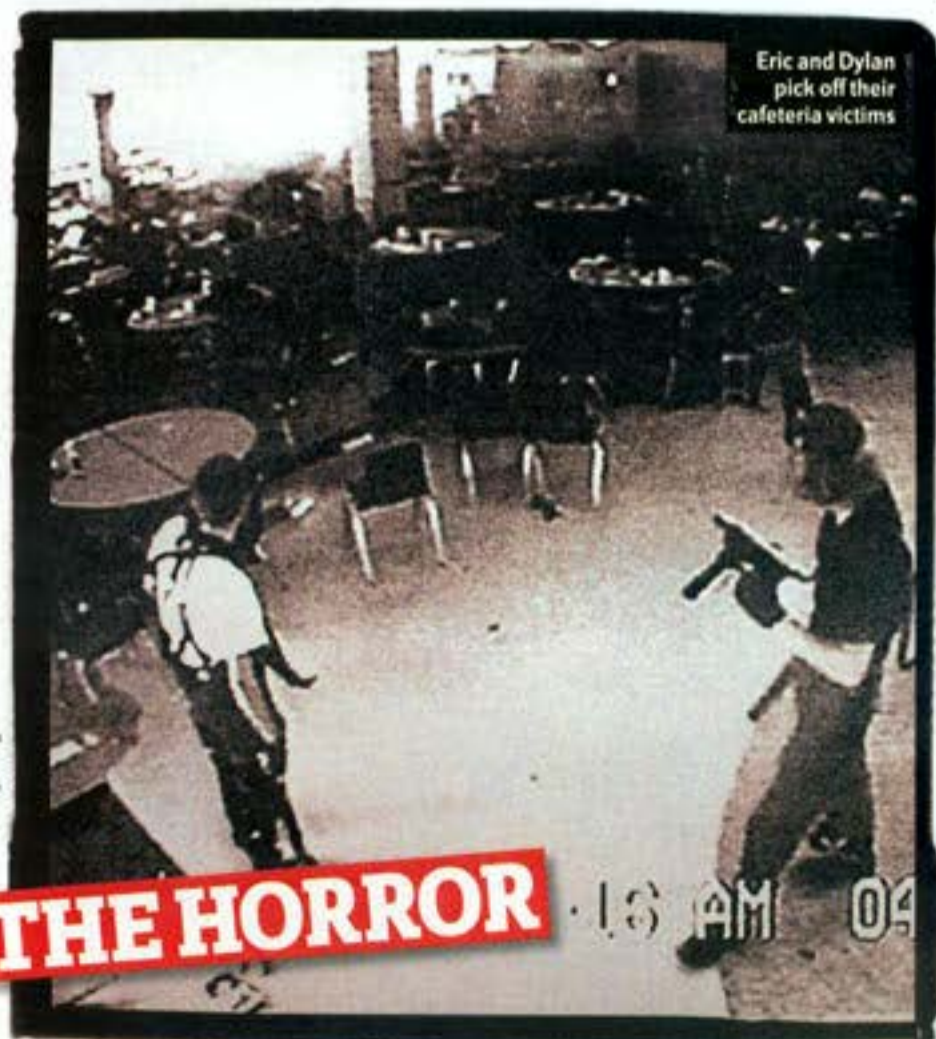


'THE COOL KILLERS MY LIFE'



Brooks Brown: survivor

Two teenagers, a stack of homemade bombs and lots of guns: five years on and the Columbine massacre is still one of the most shocking events in American history. But for former student Brooks Brown, the day the gunmen spared his life was just the beginning of his own unique hell...



Eric and Dylan pick off their cafeteria victims

Getty Images

THIS IS WHERE IT all began. This is where I sat listening to the gunfire and the screams and thought: 'Oh Jesus, somebody is shooting up my school.'

We are sitting in a bicycle underpass which runs beneath Pierce Street, three blocks from - and leading to - the most famous school in the world. Opposite us, reliving a truly horrific day, is 23-year-old Brooks Brown, the best friend of the two students who committed the Columbine massacre. And massacre it was. By the time 18-year-old Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold blew their brains out in the school library, they left behind them a trail of destruction that was to add up to one teacher and 12 students dead and 23 more seriously injured. It was an act of brutal slaughter so chilling in its planning and execution it was to send shockwaves around the world.

"I was one of the survivors that day," says Brooks lighting a cigarette, his hands visibly shaking. "But it wasn't long before my life would be totally destroyed."

DIE ANOTHER DAY

April 20, 1999, had started like any other high-school day for Brooks Brown. With less than a month until graduation, his mind was on securing good grades and then getting the hell out of a school where - he claims - bullying was rife and teachers turned a blind eye. "It was a beautiful sunny day," he says, gazing at the ceiling of the underpass. "I was having a cigarette in the parking lot when Eric pulled up in his grey Honda Civic. I asked him why he'd just missed our philosophy lesson. He laughed and told me it didn't matter any more. Then he fetched a gym bag off his back seat and looked me straight in the eyes. 'Brooks,' he said, 'I like you now. Get out of here, go home.'"

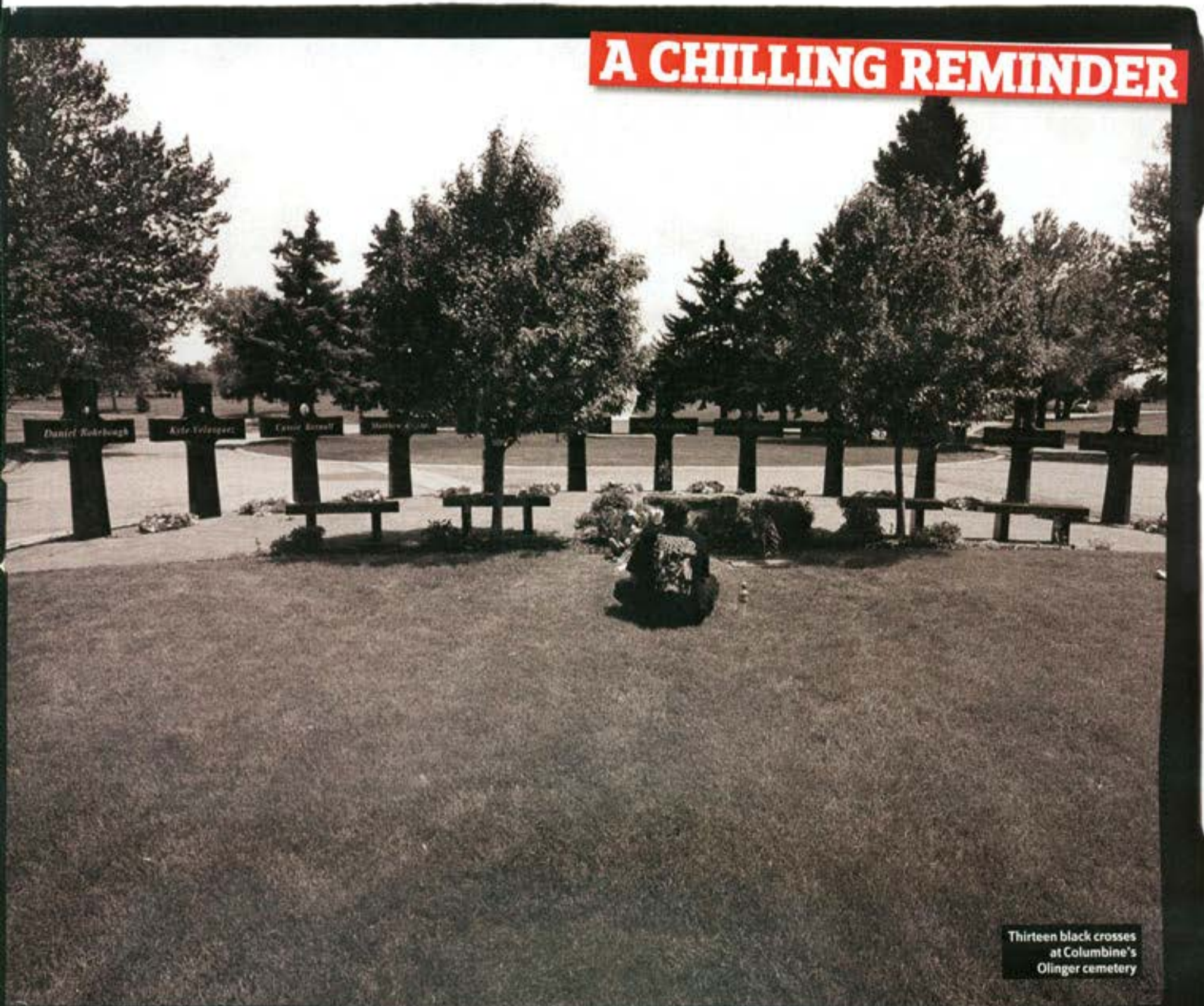
Confused, Brooks wandered out of the school onto Pierce Street and then heard a loud crack in the distance. "I thought it was a nail gun from a nearby construction site, then I heard something much louder and I knew instantly something horrible was happening." Gripped by fear and panic, he ran for his life, the sounds of gunfire, explosions and screaming filling the air behind him. ▷

COLUMBINE SAVED

WORDS: PIERS HERNU

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANTHONY CULLEN

A CHILLING REMINDER



Thirteen black crosses
at Columbine's
Olinger cemetery



"This is where I came to try and get my head together - as I sat where I am now, it hit me... Eric! No, no, no! Jesus, Eric - what the hell are you doing?"

Brooks points at a row of houses 200 yards away. "See that house on the left? I ran there, borrowed a phone and told my dad that I thought Eric was shooting up Columbine - I still had no idea that Dylan, my best friend, was helping him do it. And then I suddenly thought, 'My brother - he's still in the school!'"

THE AMERICAN DREAM

Within minutes, Brooks' dad arrived. When the pair eventually got home, Brooks was relieved to find his brother already there. "That was the coolest feeling ever," Brooks recalls, breaking into a grin, "when my brother ran outside to greet us. I threw my arms around him and cried."

Brooks savours the moment for a few seconds before composing himself. "Right," he says, "let's get the hell out of here."

Being something of a local "celebrity" - though not a universally popular one - Brooks is keen not to be spotted anywhere near his old school. As we pull away in his battered old Merc, he lets out a big sigh of relief: "Wow!" he says, clearly shaken. "I haven't been back there since it happened. And I never want to go back again."

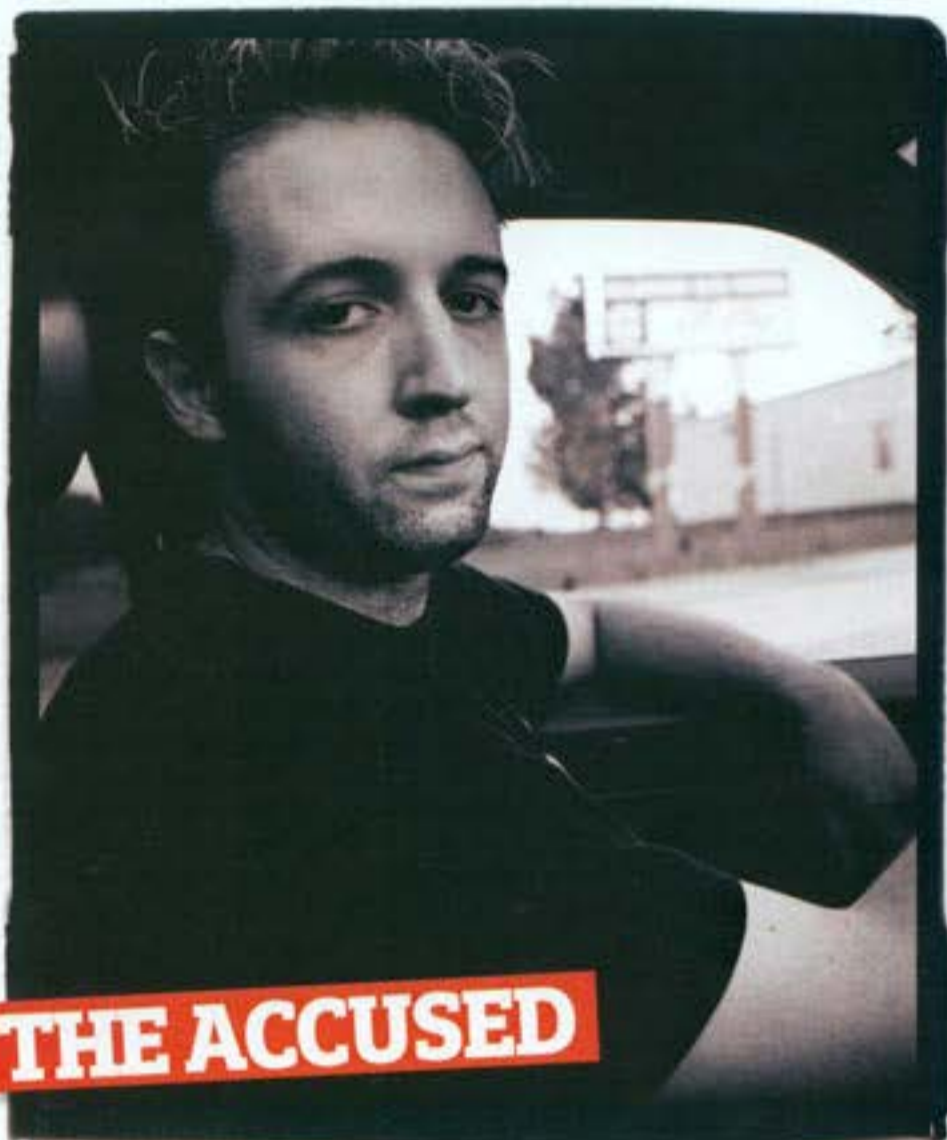
Little does he know that the very next day we'll persuade him to drive up to the front doors of Columbine High School itself.

Columbine is a small, scenic district in the area of Littleton, a wealthy suburb of Denver in Colorado, a state pretty much slap bang in the middle of the USA. A mile above sea level and next to the purple, snow-topped Rockies, it's difficult to imagine a more comfortable bed in which to dream the American dream.

Strange, then, that this should be home to one of America's most vivid nightmares. "Columbine is a God-fearing, bible-thumping type of community," explains Brooks as we pass yet another church. "I don't like churches or anything to do with them. Having said that, I might well take you to a cemetery this afternoon."

Let's wind back the clock to a time when that cemetery was less full than it is now. It's 11.16am on the cloudless morning of April 20, 1999 - a day that has been carefully chosen for its significance: Hitler's birthday.

“Eric and Dylan did what they did because of hopelessness, bullied to the point of despair”



Despite the heat, two of Columbine's students are wearing trenchcoats. They are standing side-by-side at the top of the steps outside their school, waiting. Eric Harris or Reb (short for Rebel) is wearing a T-shirt that says "Natural Selection". Beneath his coat, he is clutching a pump-action 12-bore and a 9mm carbine rifle, along with knives and homemade bombs. Dylan Klebold - or Vodka, as he is known - is



Dylan Klebold



Eric Harris

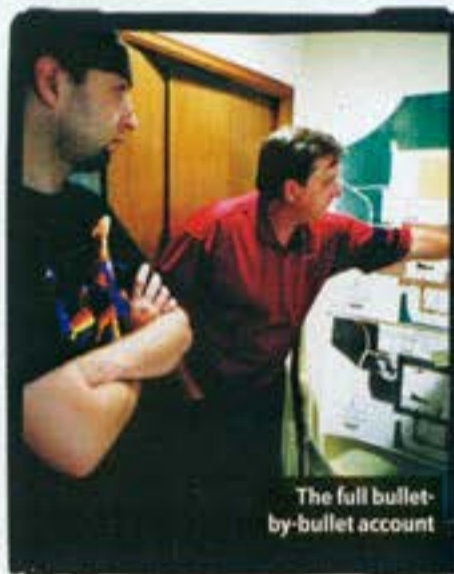
wearing a black T-shirt with the word "Wrath" on his chest. His coat hides a TEC-9 semi-automatic machine pistol and a sawn-off, double-barrelled shotgun. They are waiting because they've just planted two propane bombs in the packed cafeteria, timed to explode at 11.17. The plan - or "NBK" as they have christened it (Natural Born Killers) - was hatched a year ago, a year in which they've worked hard together in the nearby Blackjack Pizza store to save up and buy the necessary guns, ammunition and bomb-making materials. The plan is as simple as it is brutal: the bombs will go off, killing probably 300 students, and as the survivors stumble out, Harris and Klebold will cut them down with swathes of relentless gunfire. Silently, the pair watch the clock.

NATURE/ NURTURE

Chance, divine intervention - call it what you will. For some reason, both bombs fail to detonate. Instead, for 40 minutes, the two best friends embark on a bestial tour of vengeance.

The question asked that day by the survivors, the grieving families, the police, the paramedics picking through the carnage and the rest of the world was: "How did it come to this?" How did two bright kids born into loving families, stealthily morph into hate-filled, merciless killers?

Most people have been quick to write off Harris and Klebold as two aberrant adolescents raised on a



diet of bloodthirsty video games, aggressive lyrics and movies glorifying violence. But a few, like Brooks Brown and fatty activist Michael Moore, dared to suggest a less comfortable explanation - that the problem comes not from without but from within, that Eric and Dylan became what they were because two of the very foundations upon which the American way of life is built - the schools system and the police force - are rotten to the core.

"I don't do publicity any more," says Brooks, "but I like *FHM* and I'm keen to get my message across to a different audience." In the years since the massacre, Brooks has written a book, *No Easy Answers - The Truth Behind Death At Columbine*, worked with Michael Moore on the Oscar-winning film *Bowling For Columbine* and spread his message on virtually every US news and chat show. We ask him what that message is.

"Eric and Dylan did what they did because of hopelessness. They didn't fit in at school and they were relentlessly bullied to the point of despair by the school jocks - the kids on the football team. Most of the teachers were coaches, so they turned a blind eye to it. In the end, Eric and Dylan withdrew into their own world, fed on each other's delusions and emerged as monsters. My message is intended for any kid being bullied at school: 'You are not alone; there are others just like you; do not lose' ▷



hope.”

For Brooks, the notion of not losing hope was to be tested to the limit in the months after the massacre. “At first, I wandered round in a daze,” he says. “When I wasn’t numb, I was curled up in a ball, sobbing.” Then, when his grief, anger and confusion - compounded by a lack of sleep and appetite - were almost too much to bear, things got worse.

“I knew something was wrong at Rachel Scott’s funeral,” says Brooks, shaking his head. “There were dirty looks and whispers and some so-called friends made it clear they didn’t want me there.” Brooks grabs his car keys, “Come on,” he beckons, “I want to show you something.”

THE OUTSIDER

Ten minutes later, we pull into a shopping mall and buy the biggest bunch of flowers they have. Then, we take a left into the Olinger Memorial Cemetery, a vast, rolling, green field dotted with flowers and headstones.

“I really miss her,” says Brooks, as we lay the flowers at Rachel Scott’s

“A year before the killing, I filed a police report detailing how Eric was building pipe bombs”

grave. Eric and Dylan’s first victim, she and Brooks had met through the school’s debating club where, despite her being a devout Christian, they had formed an unlikely friendship. Behind Rachel’s grave is an arc of 13 black marble crosses, each bearing the photograph of one of the victims: The Columbine Memorial. Brooks walks us round.

“Rachel was a good friend. Dave Sanders was my teacher for three classes. Kelly Fleming I knew because my friend dated her little sister...” For every cross there is a connection. “So I knew ‘em a lot,” he laughs nervously. The silence is broken only by the eerie tinkling of windchimes placed by mourners in the 13 memorial trees behind us.

It is a place of impossible sadness.

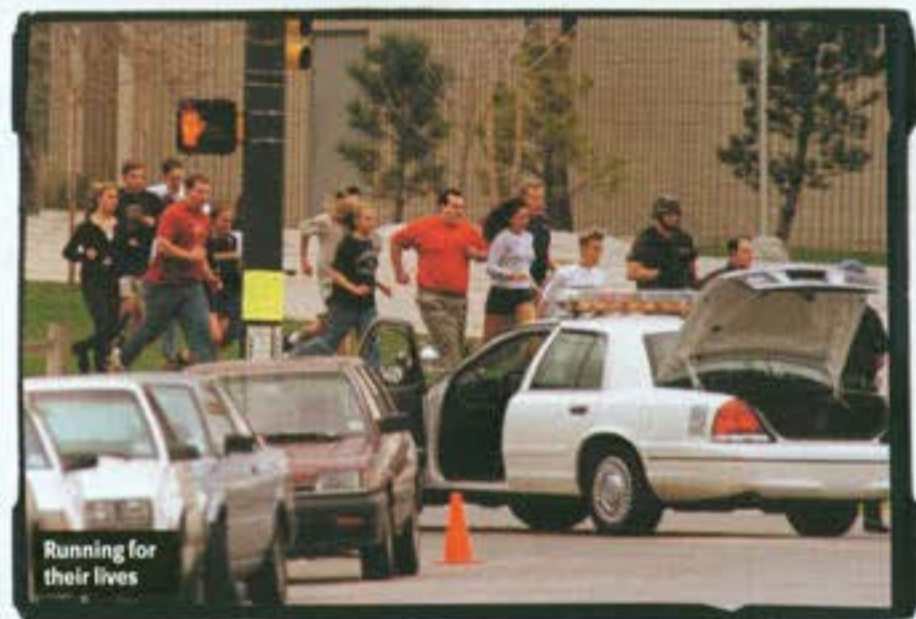
As we leave to head across town to Brooks’ parents’ house, he explains what happened at a memorial service held shortly after Rachel’s funeral. “I went to sit with my friends on



the stage and that was the first time I heard, ‘Brooks is a murderer’. I couldn’t take it, so in full view of everyone I got up and left.”

A week after that, with a reserve school set up so that students could finish their year, Brooks’ parents came home to a call from the Columbine school counsellor. “We believe it would be in Brooks’ best interest not to return to the school,” said the phone message.

If the school didn’t want to know him, the media certainly did. “I was doing three or four interviews a day,” Brooks explains, “from Fox News



to the *Today* show. I wanted people to know that Columbine High was a nightmare place for bullying and that the massacre could have been prevented.”

How?

“Well, a year before the killing, I filed a police report detailing how Eric was building pipe bombs, vandalising the neighbourhood and threatening to kill me on his website.”

It is an interesting twist to the story that until Brooks made up with him, Eric wanted Brooks dead, explaining his words “I like you now,” to Brooks, moments before he started shooting.

“Not only did the police not follow my report up,” Brooks continues, “for two years after the killings they denied I ever made it.”

With the police being criticised for their cack-handed response to the massacre and Brooks pointing out that they should have stopped it from ever happening, things turned dirty.

In an interview on NBC, Jefferson County’s Sheriff John Stone said: “I’m convinced there are more people involved. Brooks Brown could be a possible suspect. Why did Harris warn Mr Brown to leave the school? Is this a smokescreen?” >

THIRTY-SIX MINUTES OF MURDER

The Columbine massacre as it unfolded...

Death zone: Eric and Dylan’s killing spree centred on the two floors near the West Entrance



11.30am Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold arrive in separate cars and pull into the car park at Columbine High school. Eric speaks to Brooks Brown and tells him to “Go home”.

11.34am The boys carry two propane bombs (built using internet instructions from *The Anarchist’s Cookbook* and with

timers set for 11.17am) into the crowded cafeteria in duffel bags and leave them under tables. They return to their cars to wait for the explosion.

11.39am Two pipe bombs planted in an open field several blocks away explode. They are timed to distract police officers away from the school.



It looked like a concerted attempt to discredit Brooks - and it worked.

"That was my lowest point," Brooks says as we pull into his parents' drive. "I became depressed as hell - they were trying to push me to the point of suicide. Afterwards, I was walking through a parking lot when a girl leaned out of her car and screamed 'You f_king murderer'."

Brooks' name was dragged through the mud and he was shunned all over town. He took a lie-detector test to prove his innocence and passed. Still, the police weren't satisfied: two months later they visited his parents.

Having turned up one of their son's old notebooks, the cops thought Brooks was about to slaughter his own family.

WANTED MAN

"The police read a poem I had clearly dedicated to Robert Craig," explains Brooks. "He was a Columbine student I knew who, a few months before the massacre, shot dead his dad before killing himself. It was a pretty dark poem, but the police took it to mean I was plotting against my parents. My dad basically told them to get lost."

Brooks' mum and dad come out to greet us and it's soon obvious how close they all are. It's not long before Randy, Brooks' dad, ushers us into what used to be Brooks' bedroom, which he now jokingly calls "The Columbine War Room".

Packed from floor to ceiling with files, newspapers, video tapes, reports, scribbled notes, maps and diagrams, it is an awesome testament to how Randy and Judy Brown have fought tooth and nail to clear their son's name.

"No journalists have been in here," says Brooks' father as *FHM* surveys the room, mouth agape. "For the last five years, I've sat in here until sometimes four in the morning, drinking Red Bull and analysing everything."

On the wall is a police map of the school, plotting the location of every bullet and shell fired by Eric, Dylan and the police. The detail is extraordinary, right down to a fragment of tooth from slain teacher Dave Sanders and the contorted body outlines of the dead.

Around the dinner table, Brooks' parents give us a frightening account of the "negligence, corruption, insensitivity, buck-passing, bullying and deceit" displayed by the school and police force before and after

the massacre. Through dogged persistence and a stubborn refusal to lie down, they have lifted the lid on a frightening can of worms that goes right to the heart of American society. "It's shaken my belief in everything we know," shrugs Randy, with a sad smile. "I used to believe our police and schools did a good job, but that's just bullshit. Our society is seriously screwed up."

As if more evidence were needed, he

“Eric and Dylan created this tragedy, but Columbine created them”

puts on a video Eric and Dylan made some months before the massacre. It shows them, faces contorted with anger, cursing the bullies who had tormented them and the teachers who allowed it to happen. "More rage, more rage! Keep building it on!" spits Eric, eyes burning through the television screen. "You've been giving us shit for years. I'm going to kill you all!"

For us, it's a harrowing end to a long, overwhelming day.

SHELL SHOCK

The next morning, with Brooks busy editing a documentary he is making, *FHM* heads off to the Green Mountain Guns store, where Eric and Dylan brought their ammunition. Numerous rifles and shotguns line the walls and we are allowed to pick up whatever we wanted to pose for photos. If we'd bought any ammo with us, we could easily have had a loaded gun in our

hand - just like the mother of one of Columbine's injured students did six months after the massacre, when she walked into a pawn shop, asked to see a pistol, slipped a bullet in the chamber and blew her brains out.

For lunch, we head to Blackjack Pizza and get talking to chef Dan Lab, who was in the cafeteria when Eric and Dylan began shooting. "Me and a friend found a room in the kitchens," he recalls. "We barricaded ourselves

in with 50lb sacks of flour until the SWAT team rescued us."

It's a short drive to a menacing sandstone building. According to Brooks' girlfriend, Columbine High was designed by an architect who built jails.

We'd phoned hoping to secure an interview with Principal Frank DeAngelis - still in charge of the school five years after the killings. We were told to stay well away.

Undeterred, *FHM* saunters onto the school fields. Wandering unchecked past students jogging and having passed the new Columbine Memorial Library, we're soon standing at the top of the stairs at the West Entrance thinking: "This is where it all began".

Later, long after most students have gone, Brooks agrees to drive up to the front entrance of Columbine for "a very quick photo". He is visibly nervous as he pulls up by the school sign, which - incredibly - depicts an American revolutionary soldier with a gun next to the words, "Rebel Pride".

The irony is not lost on Brooks. As the school recedes in his rear-view mirror, he concludes: "Eric and Dylan created this tragedy, but it was Columbine that created Eric and Dylan." *FHM*



11.20am Realising that their propane bombs have malfunctioned, Harris and Klebold enter the school and fire their first shots from the top of the stairs at the west entrance, aimed at students outside the cafeteria. Seventeen-year-old Rachel Scott is killed and Richard Castaldo paralysed. As they walk, they throw small bombs all around them. Three

students are gunned down as they leave the cafeteria. Five more are sprayed with bullets as they eat lunch on the grass. The gunmen then return to the cafeteria entrance to have another go at the injured.

11.25am Harris and Klebold enter the school shooting and laughing as they walk down the north hallway. Teacher Dave Sanders is shot as he

tries to flee. Bombs and bullets cause carnage everywhere.

11.29am They enter the library, killing Kyle Velasquez, who is still sitting at a computer desk rather than hiding underneath it. One of them yells, "Yahoo!" as they shoot out of the windows at policemen and escaping students. Klebold shoots three schoolmates under a table.

Harris bangs on top of a table and says, "Peek-a-boof" before killing Cassie Bernall underneath. The kick from his shotgun blast breaks his nose. Nine more students are killed under their desks.

11.37am They leave the library and search classrooms, eyeballing students but not firing.

11.44am Harris and Klebold return

to the cafeteria where they fire and throw bombs at an unexploded propane bomb. It fails to detonate.

12.00pm They head back to the library and fire at policemen and paramedics through the windows.

12.06pm Harris and Klebold withdraw to the south side of the library, where each boy shoots himself in the head.