

Columbine Never Sleeps

Guns



BY
MICHAEL PATERNITI
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
BEN WATTS
April 11, 2004

Once upon a time, there was a town. In that town, there was a school. In that school, there were children. And five years ago this month, twelve of those children were murdered by two furious boys who entered Columbine high school and unleashed a hail of bullets. The media descended, myths were made, myths were torn down. And five years later, the people of Littleton, Colorado, are still looking for salvation

April again, and it's Time to Return. Come. This way. Everything is moving so quickly backward, can you feel it? The drain-suck of five years, as if it were yesterday. Or right this very moment.

Even now: It's happening again at this moment.

The ghosts return, muscle clasp bone, and become living, breathing bodies again. Round the lake at Clement Park to the school: Its green windows shatter and mend. Blood lifts off the carpet. Everything plays backward. The hordes of children who flee

from the entrance on this blindingly sunny spring day are now running in reverse, feet flailing in funny kicks, back into the school, then slowing to a walk, smiling as they pass the principal—Mr. D—who smiles, too, first the end of a smile and then its beginning. The students regather in class or the library, where their fingers lift pens and their heads bow like sunflowers over their work.

Elsewhere, the disgraced reverend, the one who was driven from town afterward, rewinds, too. He rises from a table at which he sits with an inmate from the Adams County Jail and is drawn out through a series of locked jailhouse doors, travels back through five years of lost peregrinations and soul-searching, past his own supposedly unforgivable sin committed in the aftermath of the coming tragedy, until he's the beloved pastor again of his thousand-strong congregation and he, too, can see the school, color of sandstone, out over the baseball fields on that blindingly sunny day.

And here is the wan, handsome mother of a boy named Patrick Ireland, who softly releases her hands from the head of her pale son. For months she's sat vigil with him in the hospital, trying to pray his brain back together, willing the torn neurons to reattach, hoping for a miracle that will allow him to speak again, forget, walk or run. Now she lifts her hands like wings, rises, removes her lips from his brow, and is gone, her car racing rear-fender-first back to the school as she turns younger by the mile, certain of finding her son there, whole again.

And what of the father of the boy named Danny Rohrbough? All the venomous words and blinding anger that have given him unknown stores of courage and scores of new enemies, all of it is dissipating, disappearing back somewhere inside him, all of the bile is being suctioned as he replaces the phone, and the brief amnesia of going backward leaves his mind blank of the bad news, filled with nothing but the day's work at his garage and the promise of Danny coming by after school, to help as he does most every day. He's again a shy but happy man. He wakes at 6 A.M. with the entire world in its proper place.

There are others, too, as they existed in another lifetime, those sixty months, 1,800 days, 2.6 million minutes ago. On that April 20 of 1999. Which just so happens to be now again. And there are two boys, in particular, who, when they reappear, throw the

strangest shadows, for they seem most at peace when everyone is panicked, most alive among the dead, and then, reeling back in time past their self-created moment of destruction, most distraught when the others in the high school are most happy.

Come here, by the side of this road that runs out of town. It's the night before, and you must understand: It has become urgent to tell this story one last time. Right now, as it happens again—and again. The foothills of the Rockies—the Hogbacks, as they're known here in Littleton, Colorado—rise spookily beneath a waxing moon. The stars shift and rearrange themselves. Jupiter and Venus clash. Tomorrow, the charts say, children will rule the world.

The road running between is what gaffs them. The hook is cold and silver.

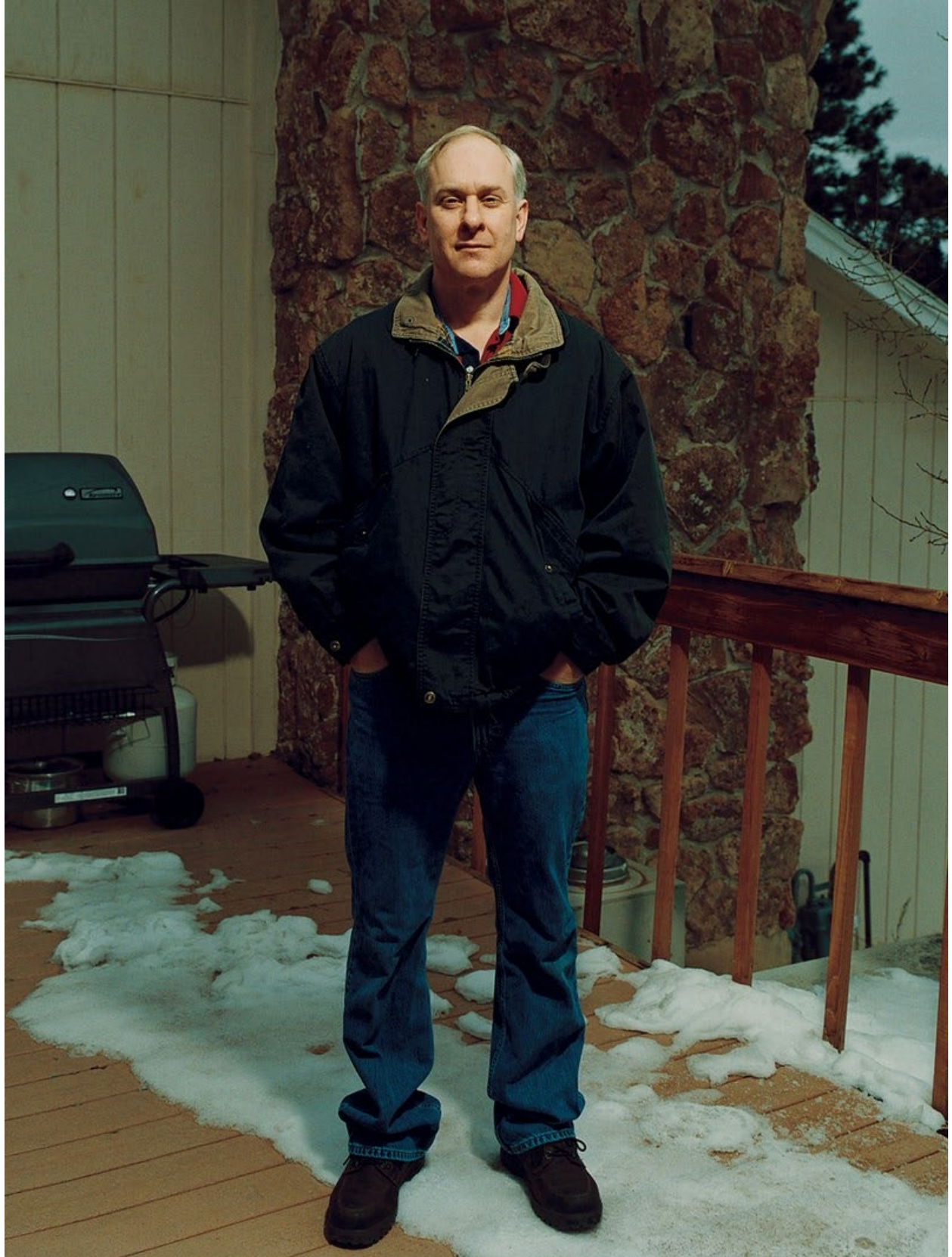
The short one, who goes by Rebel—or just Reb—drives from his cul-de-sac in town out to the house of the tall one, who goes by VoDKa—or just V—who lives down in the canyon, in his parents' chalet perched among red slickrock. Out Chatfield to Wadsworth, then right on Deer Creek, the falsity of strip malls falling away, the hollering churches of heaven-obsessed believers obliterated, and then the last of the instant-housing divisions, dematerialized. Denver becomes a shimmering apparition in the rearview. The last lights go on and off in living rooms, families gather before the big-screen. Their innocence is staggering. And will soon be remedied.

Stand here by the side of this road leading out of town in the early months of 1999. Snow begins to fall. The road turns cold and silver. A muted silence descends, broken only by the two passing cars—a gray Honda (Reb's) and a black BMW (V's)—blasting loud music.

The machinations of their plot complicate even as their days seem like the same humdrum: school, work at Blackjack Pizza, computer games and those long stretches where Reb and V are left to their own devices. They've known each other since seventh grade, and now they're seniors. V is six feet four, shy and awkward, formerly in a program for gifted kids, with a mane of red corkscrew hair shot with a small shock of white, a birthmark of sorts that kinks from the back of his head. Reb is five feet six,

moody, shares his buddy's passion for computer games. He has a concave chest, can't get laid and takes antidepressants.

In increments, they've come to occupy the lowest social rank of their high school. Among students of mostly white sameness, these two dress differently: in goth black, wearing combat boots and long dusters. They attach themselves to a group called the Trenchcoat Mafia, but not even among the misfits are they fully accepted. They listen to fringe punk music and begin to act out. They shout "Heil Hitler" in bowling class when they roll strikes. In the cafeteria, sitting down to eat, they suddenly find themselves caught in a downpour, drops sharply stinging their heads, clattering on the table, a fusillade of Skittles fired by the jocks who call them "fags" and "homos." The greater their humiliation, the greater their defiance, until they've built their own country—half real and half imagined—over which they've anointed themselves absolute rulers.



Brian Rohrbough | Father of Dan Rohrbough, Deceased / Crusader | "All this bogus talk about how bad they were treated by the jocks and all? They didn't go to the gym and kill jocks. They went to the library. Isn't it ironic that these so-called jocks they killed were kind people, courteous people? They weren't the bullies of the school. They were in the library studying, because maybe football or basketball or volleyball wasn't the most important sport. They were killed as a matter of chance, but not because they were athletes. So there's been a lot of bogus stories about this. I think that school's a wicked place."

And what is their big idea? When they light on it and finally commit to it, when the guns are secured and the bombs are being built, they spend a month as happy as they've ever been. "What fun is life without a little death?" V writes in his notebook. "It's interesting, when I'm in my human form, knowing I'm going to die. Everything has a touch of triviality to it." But they go on living, too—V commits to the University of Arizona and attends the prom; Reb, who unsuccessfully asks three girls, meets up with everyone at the afterparties, then dutifully shows up for work at Blackjack Pizza the next night, betraying nothing.

Meanwhile, Reb's room contains an arsenal, most of it bought at gun shows: a double-barrel twelve-gauge shotgun, a pump-action shotgun, a nine-millimeter carbine, 250 nine-millimeter rounds, fifteen twelve-gauge slugs, forty shotgun shells, four knives and four ten-round clips for the carbine. V has a TEC-DC9 handgun. They have thirty-nine "crickets" and twenty-four pipe bombs. In Reb's basement, they make videotapes. They joke and boast about their fame to come, guess at what director will make the movie of their lives, claim that they will incite mass revolution. Before the camera, where they show off their weapons, they become equal-opportunity bigots. "We hate niggers, spics...and let's not forget you white pieces of shit also. We hate you," says Reb. They pick the date: April 20, Hitler's birthday. Zero Day. The end of time—and the beginning too. If all goes well, they'll bag 250, maybe 500. But even on the tapes, there are strange cracks and disconnections, flashes of two kids trying to talk themselves into something. V admits that the date is problematic because it falls near Passover and his uncle will not be pleased.

"Dude, you're Jewish?" asks Reb, stupefied.

"Half," says V sheepishly.

Reb pauses, then after a time says, "I'm sorry. I really am."

And yet all they have is each other, and this talent they share: an ability to dupe nearly everyone. It's the one thing that separates them—and, to their mind, sets them above everyone else at Columbine High School. It's what protects their secret and draws them more deeply together. One face they wear goes to their parents, one face goes to their friends, one face goes to their school, but who they are, deep down, in the damaged turbines of their being, they save for each other.

The more they get away with, the bolder they become, seeing each new triumph of deceit as proof of their brilliance. In V's English class, he submits a story that depicts a stranger shooting up a town, emerging godlike from the shadows of obscurity. After reading it, his teacher contacts V's parents. When confronted, V merely shrugs, pushes a corkscrew of hair from his eyes. "It's just a story," he says.

Even on the day before the rampage, when the dupe is no longer a game, V imagines the impending scene at school as a kind of ultimate video game. In his notebook, he writes, "When first bombs go off, attack. *Have fun!*"

The week leading up to the massacre is celebratory, as it always seems to be at this time of year. The days are bright and warming, the wildflowers bloom in the foothills. The end of school fast approaches: Seniors are choosing their colleges, beginning the complicated process of saying good-bye. The prom is Saturday, one of those rites of passage you're supposed to remember forever. The students are giddily nervous about it. Who knows what will happen?

Now sit here in the back row of the auditorium on Friday afternoon. The principal, Frank DeAngelis, has called an impromptu assembly. A man unafraid of emotion—he's quick to cry at certain movies or graduation ceremonies—he always refers to the students at Columbine High as "my kids." He tells the students that he wants to talk to

them about making good choices, that he wants to share a couple of stories from his own life about people he knew who are no longer here. It's a principal's job to say the right thing at the right time. And he does. He tells them about a baseball player he once coached who died in a car accident. And at the end, he says, "I want to see each and every one of you back here on Monday morning. Because I love you." Only Mr. D can get away with those words. He releases them, his kids, hopeful that they will return.

One boy who's going to the prom is a junior named Patrick Ireland. He's a stringy kid whose metabolism has just begun to catch up with his growth spurt. He's six feet and weighs 150 pounds, though he seems to gain five more with each passing week. And it shows on the basketball court: The last time he played—he's on a club team with his friends—he had his all-time dream game. He ran the court fluidly, without feeling winded, rebounded hard, scored twenty-four points and sank the game winner at the buzzer. There's a lot to smile about in his life: He's a competitive water-skier, an avid member of the math club, a candidate for next year's valedictorian, with a 4.0 grade point average. He seems to accomplish everything he sets his mind to.

Other boys and girls hover, in these chrysalis days, on the verge of new lives: There's a freshman named Danny Rohrbough who has already made a radical, seemingly grown-up decision that his future lies not in going to college but in working beside his father, in the garage at his father's successful company, installing car stereos and home entertainment centers. Danny's parents split when he was 5, and though his mother and father have remained good friends, there was, as there is in every divorce, a period of adjustment, of wondering about the hows and whys of the conjugal relationship that brought you into the world but has become untenable. Was he somehow the cause of their split? Working next to his dad answers that question: The grown-up world that floats above is complicated, but his father's love is not. Theirs is a partnership, a daily act of creativity.

And what of this boy here, Brooks Brown, a senior so preternaturally smart and distractible he's bored at school? He's friends with different people, in different cliques—athletes, brains, computer nerds—and yet regards himself, with somewhat

melancholy pride, as a geek loser. In the halls of Columbine, he feels isolated and alone. The difference between him and Reb and V, both of whom he knows well, is that he doesn't feel violence toward his school or himself. But he will. Soon after his life is ruined by Reb and V, he will.

So return and stand here for one last moment, out near the baseball fields, as the kids exit on this Friday afternoon, a euphoric, flowing river of humanity. From the outside, gazing upon this scene, Columbine High School is a happy place. Out front, the kids are horsing around, singing and yelling their good-byes until they see one another again at the prom. People linger, delightedly on the cusp of adulthood. About to cross over. From a spot in the senior parking lot, two cars back out: a gray Honda belonging to a boy named Eric Harris and, adjacently, a black BMW belonging to Dylan Klebold. Reb and V go their way, unnoticed.

Tonight belongs to the innocent.

Everything after belongs to them.

Stand here on zero day, on the grassy hill by the side of the parking lot. Eleven A.M. on the Tuesday after the prom, and Reb and V pull back into the parking lot, their cars riding closer to the ground now, lurching under some great weight. For perhaps the first time all year, they don't park next to each other.

It's about to begin.

Reb is the first one out, wearing a T-shirt that reads NATURAL SELECTION. He removes a heavy duffel from his Honda, lugs it into the cafeteria, past the chaos of hundreds eating, and leaves it in the kitchen. Inside the bag is a twenty-pound propane tank with nails taped to the exterior, set with an igniter and a bell clock. Then he scuffs back to the parking lot.

It has taken them a year to plot this, to get the guns and ammo and propane, to figure out how to build the bombs and homemade Molotov cocktails—and test it all. After the first explosion in the cafeteria, they plan to open fire on anyone trying to escape from

the school. After that, they will hunt their avowed enemies, the ones whose names are compiled on a hit list headed by Brooks Brown. Finally, Reb and V have rigged their cars to explode, killing anyone lucky enough to make it out alive.

In the parking lot at Columbine, the boys keep waiting for the cafeteria explosion that never comes. And as they wait, Brooks Brown appears, cutting choir, heading out for a smoke. The timing of this meeting is full of cosmic irony and will be questioned long after the fact. Only last year, Eric Harris posted death threats against Brooks on the Internet, threats that the Browns then took to the police, who filed a report and forgot about it.

Brooks just assumed that Eric Harris was threatened by his friendship with Dylan Klebold, whom Brooks had known since they were in the same Cub Scout troop at the age of 7. So Brooks tried to make peace with Eric recently, as a matter of high school survival. And somewhere in his planning for this judgment, Reb checked his list, and, checking it twice, crossed out Brooks's name. In the margin, he scrawled the words, *Let live*.

Now, Reb turns to Brooks. "I like you," he says. "Get out of here."



Patrick Ireland | Survivor / The Boy in the Window | "I was finishing my statistics homework at the library table when it all started. I heard some little pops outside and was not quite sure what it was. It started to get closer. Then a teacher comes running in saying, 'There's two kids with guns. Everybody get under the table.' There were three of us under the table, plus this other girl who ran over and ended up with us. The gunshots were getting louder, and they were throwing pipe bombs in the hallways. And then it just started getting louder, and the ground was shaking, and stuff was falling from the ceiling tiles. And then they came in and started shooting."

Reb straps on a black vest loaded with ammo. V, in combat boots and a T-shirt that reads WRATH, turns his baseball cap backward, picks up his TEC-DC9. The two boys cross the parking lot, and no one stops them. It's not clear who lofts the first pipe bomb up on the school roof, where an air-conditioner repairman, believing war has come to Columbine, takes cover. They seem to move now as one organism. At the side door of the cafeteria, Reb peers in—yup, 500 students dumbly eating lunch like bovine. This is the golden moment, exactly what they've been waiting for. "You've given us shit for years," V says in a Jack Daniel's-fueled rant during one of the videotapes. "You're fucking going to pay for all that shit. We don't give a shit because we're going to die doing it." But do they hate enough? Are there sudden misgivings? Instead of entering for the slaughter, Reb pulls back, and he and V move past the cafeteria and toward the grassy hill that runs up the side of the school. Some kids are eating lunch in seventy-degree weather or just taking a little air. A finger pulls a trigger, and then the two of them are unleashing bullets like Skittles.

The first down is a girl named Rachel Scott. Reb pierces her temple as she eats, killing her instantly. Meanwhile, the boy named Danny Rohrbough has slipped out of school for a cigarette with two of his buddies when the bullets find them standing there, not yet having lit up. Two shots rip through Danny's torso, and he falls dead, curled facedown on the cement. Of his friends, one is shot in the spine, instantly paralyzed; the other, who is shot in the face, will live.

Is this enough hate?

The killers now start up an outside stairwell, twenty-five steps in all. Inside, some students believe a senior prank has begun. But teachers are screaming for everyone to get down. In the cafeteria, hundreds hide under tables; in the library, upstairs, thirty or so huddle in small groups beneath more tables. Reb and V swing open the outside door on the main floor, about fifty feet from the library, going from dazzling sunlight to the shadowed insides of the school.

Underneath a table in the library, Patrick Ireland hears popping noises, coming closer and closer, until the two killers enter, V wielding the TEC-DC9, Reb with a shotgun. They go from table to table, peering under, pulling people up, humiliating them. "What do we have here?" says Reb just before he shoots a student in the chest. "A nigger." Reb asks one girl if she believes in God, and when she answers in the affirmative, blasts her with his shotgun. Another student remains crouched in a ball while those on either side of him are murdered. He ends up alive, covered in their blood.

Time has ended. Pencils lie atop papers with half-finished sentences. There are, at this moment, fourteen dead, twenty-two injured and one teacher hovering somewhere between.

And then they come to Patrick Ireland's table. What's happening here? Patrick is holding the hand of his friend Mikai Hall, who's praying, repeating God's name. Patrick prays along with him until the pops become deafening. Suddenly, Patrick sees dark red liquid running from Mikai's knee and soaking his pants, and he instinctively reaches out to clamp his hand over the wound, and the top of his head slides out from under the table. V takes aim and shoots, buckshot passing directly into Patrick's brain, which is how the boy disappears in a black wave.

After sixteen minutes and twelve murders, the killers go on. The principal, Frank DeAngelis, has been told of gunshots and, in disbelief, bolts from his office out into a long hallway that runs from the front to the back of the school, only to see a shadow at the far end, maybe eighty yards away, firing a gun in his direction. When the plate-glass windows shatter behind him, he's certain he's going to die.

At this point, children are flooding from the school in shocked droves, running hard, feet flailing, some of them bloodied, all of them now intensely aware that this was never meant to be a prank at all but somehow, impossibly, a massacre. Students identify the killers to police as Harris and Klebold; others report that there may be three, four, five gunmen. Rumors circulate that the killers have left the building, and children flee through the neighborhoods. Literally take off running. A group of thirty lie quietly in the darkened basement of a friend's house nearby, for hours. The police secure the perimeter of the building but don't make a concerted effort to enter it for what will be several hours.

Inside, Reb shoots at a short man who has just emerged from the principal's office, misses, and then is distracted by a teacher coming up a nearby set of stairs. He turns and fires on Dave Sanders, one bullet passing through his neck, another through his chest. Then he and V head downstairs to the cafeteria, where surveillance cameras catch them drinking from water bottles left on tables and shooting at the propane-tank bomb they've left, hoping to ignite it—but to no avail. They light a small bomb that sends several students scurrying. And yet, in the next twenty minutes, the killers don't fire on another soul. With hundreds still hidden in lockers and behind classroom doors, Reb and V wander quietly, almost as if in a postcoital trance. A streamlet of blood drips down Reb's face, his nose having been broken by the recoil of his shotgun. V sticks his head up into a ceiling crawl space and comes face-to-face with a friend of his with whom he was, just last night, playing fantasy baseball—but does nothing. They're already receding—or perhaps have lost heart. Later, some will call this the Quiet Time.

Tired of roaming, they return to the cafeteria, drink again from left-behind water bottles. Then they climb the stairs back to the library. There are twelve bodies left for dead here. They take their place among them, and Reb takes a shotgun, puts it in his mouth and fires, blowing off the top of his head. V raises his TEC-DC9 and shoots himself in the temple. Their feet nearly touch as they lie in the shadow of a bookstack.

At 12:08 P.M. on Zero Day, the fire alarms make a deafening sound, the sprinkler system is watering the cafeteria, but the children remain silent and unmoving. Time has ended. Pencils lie atop papers with half-finished sentences. There are, at this moment, fourteen dead, twenty-two injured and one teacher hovering somewhere between. The whir of news copters can be heard outside, as well as sirens. Hundreds of law-enforcement officers and the sheriff's deputies stand at the ready, paralyzed by orders not to enter.

The sun moves into a new quadrant of sky. The stars, unseen in the glare of midday, shift back into view. The children are dead.

Time has stopped: Let the terrible glare of time begin again.



Frank DeAngelis | Principal / Columbine High "I remember walking out of my office and my secretary stating there had been gunfire. I said, 'What are you talking about?' and she said, 'Gunshots have been fired downstairs.' The next thing I realize is there's a gun coming through the door. I saw glass breaking behind me and I just thought I was gonna die. I walked out, and I saw a guy with a cap, saw a shotgun

coming out, and the next thing is just this popping sound like firecrackers going off. And so I just said, what's it gonna feel like to have those bullets penetrate your body?"

Let the terrible glare of time begin again. But never forget what has happened here, nor the names of the dead: Cassie, Steven, Corey, Kelly, Matthew, Daniel, Dan, Rachel, Isaiah, John, Lauren and Kyle. Inside Columbine High School, after three hours with no rescue, the teacher, Dave Sanders, dies gazing on wallet-size pictures of his children, wrapped in the T-shirt tourniquets of his students, one of whom is a boy who stays with him until the end. And hard as it is to look on the body of that well-loved teacher, it's harder to look on the face of that boy looking at Mr. Sanders, the basketball star who couldn't save him.

Time has entered the library as fourteen bodies lie motionless on the floor. One of the bodies belongs to Patrick Ireland, who's been shot in the head. A moment ago, he was a 4.0 student doing his homework with friends, and then a bullet passed through his frontal lobe and lodges in the back of his brain, tearing neurons, deleting memory. But he's not dead yet. His eyelids flutter as he tries to climb back up through levels of consciousness—and then his eyelids open. There's a patch of ceiling above and gauzy light emanating from somewhere behind.

Is this heaven?

What he remembers almost immediately are the killers, and although he's bleeding out all over this carpet, some deep-seated survival instinct urges him to move before they return to finish him off. He knows he's in the library, and he knows the light is coming from a window and that if he can reach that light there may be a way out. But when he goes to get up, when his mind says *get up*, his body, trying to move all at once, can't move at all.

So it becomes a question of what's possible. It's not possible to roll to his stomach and make forward progress, nor, it seems, is it possible to move his entire right side. However, the left side works, and the left foot—used to anchor and then push, anchor and then push him along on his back—moves his body by inches. After a few feet, he

slips into unconsciousness again. Then he wakes, filled with metallic fear that the killers are near and pushes forward a few more inches, straining for the source of light. He zigs and zags and blacks out. He wriggles past dead bodies, brushes right up against them and through warm puddles of blood. He has no awareness but for the light, the killers and the passage of time.

After nearly three hours in that library, Patrick Ireland wedges himself against the wall, near a chair, and using both wall and chair as leverage, pushes himself up into one of the shattered green windows. He feels a warm breeze pouring through, hears the whir of helicopter rotors and from a distance a faint "Hang on, kid. Just stay there and we'll come and get you!"

The boy in the window opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. He tries to raise his right hand, but it won't move. He raises his left hand to say: Yes, I hear you. A SWAT team moves in on the back of an armored vehicle, and when they're in position and yell up for him, Patrick Ireland lets go, dropping like a sack from the window. Days—and then weeks—pass before he has another clear memory.

Meanwhile, parents arrive at a nearby elementary school, a makeshift gathering point, searching for their children, checking posted lists for the names of those who've been confirmed safe. Standing there, Patrick Ireland's parents have no idea that their son's just been taken from a window, as others have no idea that their children lie silently in the library now. By nightfall, the list still doesn't include nearly forty dead or injured kids. Where are they?

One of those left wondering is Brian Rohrbough, the father of Danny. He had gotten a call around lunch at his shop from his ex-wife, Sue, who said, "I think you'd better turn on the TV." He immediately drives to a grade school near Columbine, where he meets up with Sue and some others. The afternoon passes in stark, bright colors, human bodies futilely moving this way and that, sirens screaming and a wall of callous police blocking the school but not entering.

He goes late to his house—and his ex-wife to hers—without any word about Danny. He wakes the next morning to a call from a friend. "I think you'd better see the paper," he says. "There's a picture."

And it's him. Brian Rohrbough confirms the death of his son by a picture in a Denver newspaper, his boy lying in near fetal position on a slab of cement sidewalk, at the base of the stairs leading up the outside of Columbine High School to the library. He gets in his car and drives to the school to demand his son's body. The police tell him the boy may be booby-trapped. But how long does it take to check for a bomb? Twenty-eight hours pass before they remove Danny Rohrbough from the sidewalk.

And in that time something cracks and shifts inside the father. The inhumanity of leaving Danny out like that, through a cold night, exposed, strikes him now as one of many little crimes that will be committed after the massacre. Soon a law-enforcement officer, a friend of the family, comes by to offer his condolences and then admits that he has some questions about whether Danny was accidentally shot by another law-enforcement officer. For Brian Rohrbough, this is the beginning, in Danny's name, of a quest for the truth. To undo that day and play it back in all of its terrible clarity.

The killers' bodies are taken from the school. There's nothing left now but aftermath. The snow begins to fall as they're hauled away. Big, locust flakes, blown by an east wind, banishing the earth, unbelievable except for the fact that they're real and cling to everyone—the camera crews jockeying for tears, the governor's entourage, which has just arrived to inspect the decimated building, and the kids, wearing tranquilized masks, who gather to mourn at makeshift memorials, held up by one another, their hair covered in veils of white.

On the night of the massacre, the minister, Don Marxhausen, calls an impromptu service at his church. "The body of Christ," he murmurs again and again, and near the end of Communion a female parishioner approaches, answering not with "Amen" but "Klebold."

"The body of Christ," he says again, confused, but again the answer: "Klebold."

"Don't forget them in their hour of need," she says.

Shortly after, Reverend Don gets a phone call from Tom Klebold, the father of Dylan.

"I need your help," he says, "but it has to be confidential."

People in Littleton no longer want to talk about the shootings—and they marginalize those who still do. They want Zero Day to disappear, to become a story that becomes a rumor that time forgets.

Reverend Don doesn't shy from complicated spiritual transactions. He goes where he's most needed, reaches out to those who most need lifting. He carries his 240 pounds as if he could still do a little damage in hell if he had to. Among the conservative evangelicals who dominate this place, he's a liberal misfit. If you can't laugh, even in the worst times, he says, if you can't find some smiling note in the dirge—or, at least, forgiveness—then you may as well forget about salvation. So he agrees to do the memorial service for Dylan Klebold because the boy is a misfit, too, and still one of God's children.

When he arrives for the service, Sue Klebold, the mother, embraces him. He can feel her trembling, and she leads him to an open casket in which her son Dylan—the killer formerly known as V—has been laid to rest. The image of him sleeping here, coiffed for good-bye, is startling: He's surrounded by Beanie Babies, a ring of them that runs from one ear to the other.

How does one commend this sweet boy, a mass murderer, to heaven? Reverend Don doesn't even try. "Do you mind if we just talk for a while," he says, "and then we'll worship." And so they do. One couple says that the Klebolds are great parents. And another couple agrees and chimes in, "He was like our son!"

Then Tom Klebold speaks: We don't believe in guns. We've never had any in our house.

And Sue: I don't understand the anti-Semitism. I'm his mother, and I'm Jewish.

It goes like this for forty-five minutes—this confusion and disbelief suffusing everything, though they really try to remember him for the funny, sensitive kid he was. Only Dylan's older brother remains silent. Nothing negative is said, though the enormity of what has brought them here crushes down on everything. How do you

reach these parents who have not only lost a son but whose son set out, it seems, to kill an entire town?

Reverend Don tells a story about how, in the Bible, David, the king of Israel, once had a son named Absalom, a beautiful boy who was a fierce rabble-rouser, inciting civil war against his father. In the end, David's loyal general, Joab, was forced to kill Absalom in order to restore the kingdom, and yet David, when confronted by his son's body, was so overcome by grief, he broke down. "Would God I had died for thee," he wailed, "O Absalom, my son, my son!"

It is the perfect parable about the purity and endlessness of a father's love, no matter what the situation. And the Klebolds cling to it. After a few blessings, they're done. Dylan is later cremated—for fear that a grave site would be defiled—and when the minister asks one of the Klebolds' legal representatives what to do in case the media come calling, Reverend Don is mildly surprised when the man says, "Just tell them what you've seen here tonight."

And so he does. He agrees to two nationally televised interviews. To America, he describes the Klebolds as a family in deep, unimaginable pain. About the service, he says he saw two innocent parents "questioning where their son came from." He stays in touch with Tom and Sue, visits occasionally. Tom, a former geophysicist, rarely leaves his house. The driveway has two gates on it, and he sits up in his office, cloistered from the world. Sue has a position with a local college, working with the disabled. She pens letters to the victims' families, expressing her grief. She has so many questions now about her son. She invites a small group over to watch the prom-night video they took of Dylan. He wore a tux and went with a friend, Robyn, a girl who also secretly bought guns for Reb and V. But in the video, they're merely high school seniors, pinning each other with corsages, giggling embarrassedly, then getting into the limo on one of the biggest nights of their young lives. Sue Klebold scours the television screen for clues. There are no clues.

As for Reverend Don, when he twice defends the killer's family on national television, when word leaks out that he led Dylan's memorial service, well, something turns and

hooks in his parish, and they begin to hate. There are forty-six families here who had kids inside Columbine High School that day, and suddenly he's Absalom.

On the first-year anniversary of the massacre, even as the reverend addresses thousands in Clement Park, his church council unanimously votes for his firing. Within three months, he sells his house, packs and is banished from Littleton, Colorado, for good.



Don Marxhausen | Reverend / Pariah | "Afterwards, at the funerals for the victims, people kept saying, 'Is it not beautiful? They're with Jesus now.' Bullshit, they're dead. We had parents, we had brothers and sisters, who were suffering. To say everything was okay at these funerals was insane."

He sleeps all day and stays up all night, like the vampire they want him to be. He falls into a deep depression, never leaves the house. For the first couple of months, his

parents believe he's suicidal. They fill with fury: at the Jefferson County sheriff, at the principal, Frank DeAngelis. For casting a patina of guilt over their boy, who's innocent.

By the second week, the police arrive to question Brooks Brown, and a few days later the sheriff, John Stone, announces on national television that Brooks is a suspect, a potential collaborator despite having been the first name on Reb and V's hit list. There are others whom Eric and Dylan knew—like Robyn Anderson or Phil Duran at Blackjack Pizza or Phil's friend Mark Manes, who unwittingly aided Reb and V by either selling or brokering guns for them—but it's Brooks who becomes public enemy number one.

He's not permitted to attend the remainder of his classes at Chatfield High, where all of the Columbine students have been moved to finish the year on a staggered schedule. A member of the chorus, Brooks sings at a memorial and is threatened by someone in the choir standing behind him on the risers. People hiss and murmur and sometimes scream when they see him: Murderer! This hate becomes dangerous, and the Browns try to stanch it. They give interviews, fight back against the school and the police, whom they're sure are trying to sacrifice their son. The sheriff's office denies that the Browns ever contacted them about the Internet death threats from Eric Harris, and yet, in the immediate aftermath of the shootings, they used that very same police report as evidence when asking a judge for a search warrant for the Harrises' house. Six months later, when Brooks moves out of his house to live with his girlfriend, the family converts his old bedroom into a Columbine war room: Black binders of evidence fill bookshelves; diagrams of the school hang on the wall, marked with color-coded dots for each of the 350 bullets fired that day, as many as a hundred of which can't be explained.

When Judy sits at the kitchen table, wringing her hands over it all—and she does this nightly—she wonders where this is leading, reliving Zero Day from every angle, reviewing crime-scene photographs, listening to an enhanced 911 tape that broadcasts the killers' voices and the thud of shots fired into human bodies. People in Littleton no longer want to talk about the shootings—and they marginalize those who still do. They want Zero Day to disappear, to become a story that becomes a rumor that time forgets.

So what is this about? Even as the Browns come to be seen by the community as pariahs, this is about saving Brooks. Brooks, who's grown his hair out and dyed it purple. Brooks, who listens obsessively to the Insane Clown Posse and considers himself one of the band's followers, known as Juggalos, whom he defines as "hurt and angry hippy-geeks." Brooks, who molds in the unfinished basement of his house in a Denver-area subdivision, behind three plywood tables set with computers, with two of his buddies, one of whom delivers Domino's Pizza, and plays video games until dawn on the big-screen. "Yeah, some of the games may seem violent," says Brooks, "but it's pretty tongue-in-cheek violence."

So come in. He's down here right now, stuck on Zero Day because what Zero Day did to Brooks was erase an essential part of the hard drive that stores human faith and trust. Even today, years later, a balloon pops and many Columbine kids still hit the deck. A siren sounds and they burst into tears. Others, rather than living with more tolerance, mistrust all misfits, freaks and loners. Brooks just mistrusts himself. How could he have had a friendship with Dylan and not seen what was coming? How could he have prevented it?

At odd times, he remembers Dylan—the kid, not the killer. He remembers being in an economics class with him when the teacher put a bunch of fake money on the counter and told the students to split into teams and take \$5,000 each, mock-invest it and see what kind of profit they could turn. The idea was that they would be rewarded with more fake money, depending on their gains. And while everyone sat there, obsessing over their gains and losses, Brooks and Dylan stole to the front of the room, scooped up a pile of money, and won the game. Not exactly the stuff that gets you into Harvard—though both of them had the IQ for it—but just funny shit.

When Brooks remembers this, he can't stop laughing. He seems absolutely lost in that long-ago moment, almost talking to himself. Right now he's 23 and has no college education, no regular job. He plays video games until the early hours, then sleeps late. The Insane Clown Posse sings out: *Watch your step to hell.... It's a long fall!* And Brooks Brown is remembering.

"Dylan and I, man...with all the money.... It was...just so...so fucking funny."

That he laughs, that he chooses to remember, that he was friends with a boy who morphed into a monster and doesn't pretend otherwise—does this make him guilty or innocent?

Her hands go to his head; her prayers go to his brain. The mother of the boy named Patrick Ireland tries to will her son back together. The buckshot has penetrated the frontal lobe and damaged the seat of speech. He can't make words, and when they give him a chalkboard and tell him to write his answers to their questions, he draws something corkscrewed that looks nothing like a word. Every day now brings her to tears.

For all of his friends who visit and all the celebrities too—Terrell Davis, Shania Twain, Aerosmith—he remains pale, almost gaunt, but something is working inside him. His brain finds ways to refasten itself, to accommodate the buckshot, to focus as if on a math equation. He undergoes physical therapy and speech therapy and makes astounding strides. He becomes a poster boy for a community's recovery. He receives donations, over \$200,000—and thousands of letters. The Boy in the Window. A nation seems to believe they know him from one iconic video clip capturing the most horrifying, intimate, unscripted moment of a life. It has made him a folk hero—for just having lived through it.

Others injured in the shootings will never be Patrick Ireland. They become bitter, fixated on the killers. Some argue over donated money; some turn to drugs; some face more tragedy. One day, not long after the shooting, the mother of one girl who has been left as a paraplegic goes to a pawnshop, asks to see a gun, then, while the clerk is distracted, loads it with bullets from her pocket and shoots herself in the head.

Patrick Ireland tries to give up his anger, even urges his mother to forgive the killers whom she refers to as "creatures." He narrows his world to what's necessary, and by the end of summer he's able to walk for short periods of time—and to write. On a symbolic day in August, he becomes the first student to reenter Columbine High School, on crutches. He tape-records his classes and plays them over and over again until he's grasped their meanings. He's named Homecoming King. By late autumn, he

no longer needs his speech therapist, though he still struggles to locate words, sometimes seems to disappear for a split second down some back staircase in his mind. And yet, impossibly, by spring, having maintained his 4.0 grade-point average, he's valedictorian. Four years later, he can water-ski again and is ready to graduate college. If he exhibits occasional self-absorption—if he pushes for a happy, heroic ending—he's entitled. When asked what he wants to do with his life, he smiles and says, "Make a lot of money."

So here he is, an American success story. But as able as he is to focus his mind, there's still a tunnel with a bullet at its end that leads to Zero Day. It's there every time he shakes with his partially crippled right hand, every time he loses track of the right word, every time he dreams of playing basketball again, which he'll never do.

Very early on, not long after the shootings, Patrick Ireland has the desire to return to the library before it's gutted and relocated, while everything is still in its exact place, the carpet splattered with red bursts for each body shot that day, including the killers who died ten feet from his table. It seems morbid but necessary. When he goes back, when he studies the blood-smear track of his own progress, one question recurs in his mind: *I did* that?

And ever after—though he realizes that he's permanently disabled—he falls under a spell of self-delusion that sustains him: If I did that, he repeats to himself, I can do anything.

Something cracks and falls away. Forgiveness, mercy, silence. They took his boy on a blindingly bright spring day, and his body was left for twenty-eight hours, facedown on a cement walkway, alone. The cops strung DO NOT CROSS signs around the high school and tackled anyone who tried. According to whose law is it that once a child dies, his parents suddenly cease to have any parental rights? Why can't a father kiss his son good-bye, or cover him one last time with a coat, on the spot he fell?

Something cracks and falls away—and something rises. America grieves over Columbine but with a fruit fly's attention span, and immediately seeks closure. An out-

of-stater appears with fifteen wooden crosses and plants them on Rebel Hill to memorialize everyone who lost their lives at the school. Kids scrawl messages on them, even those of the killers. *We love you, Dylan*. After a few days, Brian Rohrbough climbs the hill with two signs that say MURDERER, BURN IN HELL, and attaches them to Dylan and Eric's crosses, where they're quickly removed by a local cop. So now speech isn't free when it's the truth?

The next day at dusk, Brian Rohrbough and some friends return before the grieving masses and march up the hill with a CNN camera crew tagging along. He stands before the killers' crosses, regards the messages of love scribbled there, and they rip one—and then the other—from the ground and drag them back down the hill.

Soon a local church decides to plant fifteen trees, and again Danny's father lodges a protest: In the Bible, as he reads it, God will never forgive the killers because the killers never asked for forgiveness. But the church goes ahead anyway, plants fifteen poplars in a horseshoe, surrounding a bench that looks out past the subdivisions to the Hogbacks. Danny's father appears on a Sunday as parishioners arrive to worship and protests the planting. He informs the church that they can make it right, or he will. When the minister ignores him, he walks out with his ex-wife, her husband and some friends, and they cut down two of the trees, laying placards on the stumps bearing the names of the killers.

Is this enough hate?

What rises in an otherwise quiet man is anger: Brian Rohrbough becomes a one-man vigilante squad. There are little crimes everywhere, and wherever he sees them, he rabble-rouses for rectification. The sheriff's department won't turn over his son's clothing from the day of the shooting; he won't rest until he has his green T-shirt and jeans, and when he does, he sends them out for forensic tests. He decides the United Way is mispending national donations for the victims of Columbine, and he sues them—not because he needs money, but on principle. The sheriff's department tries to withhold the ballistics report that may explain who killed his son, and he prepares another lawsuit. The Klebolds and the Harrises refuse to answer his questions, hiding

behind lawyers; he sues them for the sole purpose of confronting them in a deposition. Which he does.

Yes, Brian Rohrbough, the father, is filled with uncontrollable rage—and sudden strength. Once he ducked a local television reporter who was doing a puff piece on the success of his business; now he sits on nationally televised roundtables, debating the finest minutiae of the Columbine shootings, pressing the point that a cover-up has occurred. He can speak in graphic detail about how his son died if it will somehow reveal the truth. But of course nothing lessens his son's absence. Not even that very slab of cement on which he once lay. When Columbine High School is remodeled after the shooting, a friend removes the slab and transports it to the house of Brian's ex-wife, Sue. They set it up under a swing, and it becomes sacred ground.

In Littleton, Brian Rohrbough is considered an angry man who should just forget, like everyone else. And forgive. But how can he? On Mother's Day and Father's Day, he and Sue have gotten into the habit of exchanging gifts, things made by Danny over the years. Recently, Sue gave him a wooden cabin Brian made when he was 10. What's hard to communicate to those who would rather forget is that he has a house with a living room with a table with a wooden cabin that was made by the son he no longer has. His is a world full of these mementos, these reminders.

See, until there are answers, it's Danny who gives him the courage to speak, and it's Danny who deserves his courage. His anger is more pure than their amnesia. Their crime is forgetting, and he won't let them.

Behind the sameness of facades, there are hundreds of haunted houses in Littleton, Colorado.

The young basketball star who watched Dave Sanders die commits suicide, hanging himself in his parents' garage. He, too, becomes a casualty of Zero Day.

Within a year of the shootings, two Columbine students are murdered, execution-style, at a Subway sandwich shop two blocks from the high school. The police never find any suspects.

That same month, the body of an 11-year-old boy is left for dead in a Dumpster behind the Bed Bath & Beyond, which sits across the street from Columbine High.

In January 2002, three young locals are killed in a shooting at a nearby bowling alley, and rumors persist that one of the killers is a Columbine student.

But there's nothing more haunted than the high school itself. At first even the principal is frightened by it. Days after the shooting, Frank DeAngelis stands in a snowstorm at 5 A.M., looking from Clement Park to the school, waiting for an early-morning television feed to New York. Strung out on grief and disbelief, running through a litany of self-recriminations, he looks up at the school, lights ablaze from inside while investigators crawl through the wreckage. In that thick snow, a chill runs up his spine. How will he ever enter that sarcophagus again?

But he does. That first Saturday, he's allowed back in. He wanders the halls, backpacks strewn everywhere. He visits the cafeteria. He stands on the spot where he was shot at. He retraces the movements of Dave Sanders, the teacher who had been his best friend. Mr. D is absolutely convinced that Dave diverted one of the murderers from killing him, and for his efforts here, all that's left behind are his bloody knuckle marks smudged on the floor.



Brooks Brown | Friend of Dylan Klebold's / Scapegoat | "There was a page from Eric Harris's journal," Brooks Brown's mother, Judy, says, "Where Eric writes, 'I'm gonna go to the Brown's house before I go to Columbine, and I'm gonna kill the Browns. And then I'm gonna tie up Brooks and Aaron and I'm gonna piss on 'em and torture them.' The police have that page in their possession the entire goddamn time they're saying Brooks in an accomplice. I'll tell you, the sheriff's department did what they could to get Brooks to commit suicide. I believe that."

Once back in his school, Mr. D never leaves. He works seventy-, eighty-hour weeks. He refuses media interviews and pours himself into the kids, into rebuilding, into recovery. He takes endless abuse for the perception that Columbine was run by white-capped jocks who terrorized others, especially the pariahs in black dusters. The proof is fifteen dead. He's raw and hurt, and when he addresses the students for the first time since before the prom, he sobs uncontrollably, his whole body rocking. "I can only say what I said last Friday," he says. "That I love each and every one of you."

And now everyone clings to him: the teachers, the students, the parents. They need to be carried and hugged and reassured. His redemption, he realizes, can only occur if he gives every last particle of himself to this school, as Dave Sanders did. When he returns home at the end of the day, he's unable to speak to his wife and children. He can't hug—or be hugged. He's empty. He can't read or sleep. He sits alone, processing, questioning, as the phone rings and rings. His parents, his siblings, his friends—no one understands: Why won't Frank come to the phone?

Why is it no surprise that his marriage soon disintegrates? Or that he has heart problems? Or that he's given to panic attacks at the oddest moments? He walks the same halls, inadvertently retreads the path of the killers and on occasion finds himself gazing off, out the window at the mountains, standing on the spot where someone once lay dead. There are days when it feels as if this school is trying to kill him, too.

But then the first anniversary passes—and the second and the third. The freshmen who were at Columbine on the day of the shooting graduate. Teachers leave, and soon there are only a few people who were here that day, those moons ago. At one point, he

promised that he'd stay only until the class of 2002 moved on, but now that they're gone, where's he supposed to go?

So stand here in the hall as he passes—again and again, perhaps years from now. He's a short man in a bulky gray suit with a kind face and an easy word for any student who makes eye contact or wants to talk. Usually, he walks purposefully, but today he meanders, tracing the same path down the hallway as he did the day the killers destroyed everything—and then finding the spot where Dave Sanders was shot and left his bloody knuckle prints. Once there, the man so quick to show emotion shows none.

When he walks through the science wing, kids are lying on top of big pieces of construction paper, tracing one another's bodies with black markers. Some lie there giggling; some lie perfectly still, as if bodies at a crime scene. In this moment, the principal smiles uneasily at his kids and steps briskly, wordlessly past, thrown forward into the business of his day, pressing his lips tightly as if holding five years back.

We die many times, says Reverend Don, and experience many different forms of grief. We endure the hatred of others in order to listen, to reach out, to hear the truth, to change one life.

Jail is where Reverend Don now spends his days, working with the inmates at the Adams County Detention Center for \$20 an hour. Stand here in his windowless office and there may be room for only one other person. How did he go from a congregation of 1,000 people and a compensation package worth \$90,000 a year to this?

Reverend Don isn't shy about telling the story: He got fired, sold his house, slid into a depression, suffering from the aftereffects of Columbine, in an endless loop over Columbine. He moved to Chicago for two years to lead a congregation beset by ills. He's ashamed to say now that he didn't answer a spiritual calling on that occasion; he did it for the money. And then, in Denver, his son had a baby. Reverend Don became a grandfather, and he and his wife decided: Job or no, they were moving back.

Here at the jail, there are 1,200 inmates, some of them the worst of the worst: accused bank robbers and killers and pedophiles. But there's an unusual honesty here, too. You

can't really lie about who you are when you're wearing prison pinnies. And if you mean to redeem yourself—both spiritually and personally—well, then, eventually you're going to get around to seeing Reverend Don.

On this day, nearly five years after laying Dylan Klebold to rest, he offers counsel, meets with a handful of inmates to discuss the Bible, conveys information to inmates about sick relatives—and then delivers bad news. Just as he prepares to brave the rush-hour traffic to go home, he's handed a slip of paper. An inmate's aunt has passed away, and it's Reverend Don's charge to break the news.

Reverend Don takes his prisoner, a thin man in on a petty offense, to a private room. He tells him that his aunt is dead, and the man breathes in, once sharply, and then starts hyperventilating. "No, no, no," he keeps repeating. "She was my mother's favorite." The minister asks if his mother's still alive, and the man answers in the negative.

"So you're going to be mourning her death again, aren't you?" he says.

"Yes, I am," the man says, in a small voice. "My mother."

"How many days you got left?"

"Eight."

"Shit. That's bad luck," says Reverend Don. "That's rotten. You won't make the funeral."

"That's right," says the man. And now he seems to dissolve, his eyes welling, his lips moving but making no sound. Reverend Don reaches out and clasps the prisoner's arm gently but with purpose. It's an act of intimacy in a place where knives end up in people for less.

"Hey," he says, "can you look at me?" The prisoner looks up. "I don't know what landed you in prison," says Reverend Don, "but I'm here for you...to talk. Okay? We can talk about anything—your aunt, your mother, the Bible. We can talk about anything."

Reverend Don is gazing upon the man, perhaps even as he did the killers' parents, and only sees his suffering. "You're not alone," he says.

So it's time to return. Come. One last time. Everything is moving so quickly backward, can you feel it? Armies drive in reverse through orange sandstorms half a world away, fallen soldiers take their feet again, the injured suddenly are given back limbs—and all of them are placed on transport planes, flying backward, for home. Upon their return, there's an interlude of national mourning, jingoistic rage and confusion, and then, on the southern tip of Manhattan, two jets are miraculously belched whole from inside skyscrapers and rematerialize at 30,000 feet. On the streets, no one bothers to look up. Soon the passengers are walking backward down the gangplanks in Boston, returning home to their families. The skyscrapers empty of people, too, who then return to their families. The public consciousness turns to money, the millions made with every upward burble of the market. And it just keeps going up.

As complicated as this country is, America, on the morning of April 20, 1999—on Zero Day—is a much simpler place than the one it will become that afternoon. There's a girl on the lawn eating her lunch in front of Columbine High School. There's a boy stepping outside with his buddies for a cigarette. And there's another, up in the library, finishing his statistics homework, smiling at the memory of his last-ever basketball game, the fluid up-and-downs on the court, the shot at the buzzer.

Can you feel where this is taking us? Time keeps moving backward. The teenagers are becoming children again, as they've always been. A boy named Brooks poses in a picture with his friend Dylan, dressed in Cub Scout uniforms. Now they're running backward out the doors of the elementary school, their feet in funny kicks, to their mothers in waiting station wagons. The children pull apples from their mouths, place them whole on the table and shed their clothes for warm pajamas. Even as their mothers wake them, they fall back to sleep. Long, unbroken hours of sleep during which their hands grow smaller.

Only someone like God could tell us what they dream now, sleeping as they do. But sometime during this night, God temporarily goes missing. A primal force moves the

stars. Snowflakes fall like locusts, banishing the earth. Somewhere, in this night, an errant seed lights down. A silver hook fastens. These are not supernatural acts. This is real.

Now let the terrible glare of time begin forward again. It's dizzying, this speed. Can you feel it? The babies become teenagers. The guns are bought and hidden in the closet, waiting. The road is cold and silver, swerving all these years later to Columbine High School, where, in blinding sun on a seventy-in-April day, with laughter floating from the cafeteria, two boys cross the parking lot.

Two boys are crossing the parking lot now—crossing again...and again. And for the last time: These killers are crossing the parking lot again. No one stops them. No one even sees them. What comes next is irreversible: We are eating lunch on the lawn, going for a smoke, finishing our homework.

Listen: There's innocent laughter—and then, in a second, there's none at all.