

Portrait of a Deadly Bond

By Eric Pooley/Littleton Sunday, May 02, 1999

You're not going to believe who's turning out to be a nice guy at school," Brooks Brown told his parents one evening in mid-April. They were at the dinner table in their ranch-style house in Columbine Knolls, a modest subdivision in Littleton, Colo., and the tall, angular 18-year-old knew the comment would stir up some dust. His mother and father, Judy and Randy Brown, leaned forward and asked, "Who?"

"Eric Harris."

Randy almost choked on his fork. "I can't believe you're even talking to him after what he did." Judy put a hand to her heart. "You could say any other name at that high school and it would be O.K.," she said. "But not that one."

Last year, Eric Harris had thrown a chunk of ice at Brooks' car, cracking its windshield. Soon after, the Browns had discovered the spewings on Harris' website, geysers of hate like the one saying Harris longed to "blow up and shoot everything I can. Feel no remorse, no sense of shame...I don't care if I live or die in the shootout, all I want to do is kill and injure as many of you [expletive] as I can, especially a few people. Like Brooks Brown." Harris claimed to have the weaponry to carry out his threat against Brown.

His website offered bomb-building instructions and boasted that he and a friend, code-named "VoDka," had made four pipe bombs and detonated one ("Flipping thing was heart-pounding gut-wrenching brain-twitching ground-moving insanely cool!"). And if all that weren't enough, Brooks knew that "VoDka" was his old best friend, Dylan Klebold, who had become Harris' new best friend but had tipped Brooks to the hateful website. Terrified, the Browns searched their property for bombs and filed complaints with the sheriff's department and America Online, which was host of the site. They say they got no response from either. (The sheriff's department says it didn't pursue Harris because no crime had been committed and the Browns wished to remain anonymous.) But in April 1998, Harris took his site offline, and life in the neighborhood seemed to quiet down.

Now, a year later, Brown was sitting at dinner telling his mother and father that Harris was a good guy after all. Brown was taking philosophy and creative-writing classes with Harris and Klebold, and the three hung out together--bright, maladjusted kids united in their intelligence and disdain for the jock culture of Columbine High. "At dinner I made a big case for Eric," Brown told TIME last week. "I said he had grown up. He was a real scary kid last year; everyone was afraid of him. But six months ago we buried the hatchet, and I really thought he had changed. I thought he was a new Eric."

Brown says he realized how wrong he was five days later, when Harris and Klebold launched the Columbine massacre, murdering 13 and wounding 23 before killing themselves in circumstances

(Double suicide? Murder-suicide?) that the authorities have not yet clarified. Brown had been spending a good deal of time with these deadly friends, and he understands them as well as anyone now alive. But he insists he never had a clue to what they were up to. And though his association with Harris and Klebold has drawn suspicion--"I don't know what he is," says District Attorney Dave Thomas, "and we are not ruling anyone out"--the friendship may also have saved his life. Brown chanced upon Harris in the school parking lot just minutes before the shooting began. Harris was pulling a duffel bag of materiel from his car; Brown says he didn't know what was in it. He mentioned a philosophy test Harris had missed that morning. "Doesn't matter anymore," said Harris. Brown says he didn't know what that meant--nor what Harris was planning when he told Brown to get away from the school, saying, "Brooks, I like you. Now get out of here. Go home." Others who know Harris believe sentiment had nothing to do with Harris' decision to spare Brown. They think Brown was simply too far away from the cafeteria for Harris to kill, because doing so would have given those inside a chance to get away, spoiling his carefully polished game plan. Says Brown: "I hate what they did, but they were my friends. Not many people will say that about them. Not many people really know them."

Littleton buried its young last week, and the sky had the good sense to cry. When 5,000 gathered to celebrate the short life of Isaiah Shoels, a warm-hearted young man slain because he was African American, Columbine survivors walking in the rain to the Heritage Christian Center didn't bother to open their umbrellas; if they could feel the rain on their faces, they must be alive. Inside the vast modern sanctuary, the explanations tended to be straightforward: Satan had taken control of Harris and Klebold.

Throughout the week, police searched for accomplices (no arrests were made, but authorities at week's end said they still had 10 to 15 potential suspects) and responded to accusations that they failed to heed warning signs of the plot. Many students were searching for secular explanations as well. They got together in houses to talk and weep and speculate; sometimes the boys fantasized about what commando tactics they might have used to halt the killing spree--the next logical but sad step for a tragedy fueled from the start by violent, cartoonish fantasies. And like so many other people across the country, they groped for answers that would not come.

Though there's always something unknowable about the motives of these student mass murderers, Harris' role in the massacre was no surprise to some Columbine students: they assumed it was Harris as soon as they realized someone was shooting. The son of a retired Air Force officer and a caterer--decent, well-intentioned people who seem to have been wholly outmatched by their cold, manipulative son--Harris was not an unlikely candidate for suburban mayhem. In his childhood, moving with his family from Air Force bases in Ohio and Michigan and upstate New York, he was remembered fondly. "He was just a quiet boy trying to fit in," says Plattsburgh, N.Y., Little League coach Terry Condo. But at Columbine he preferred to stand apart from the crowd. Though the antidepressant Luvox was prescribed to keep his brain chemistry more or less in balance, he was capable of violent outbursts, slow-boil intimidation and murderous rage. He had just been rejected by both the Marine Corps and reportedly several colleges. His class was moving ahead, but despite his intelligence, he was not.

Klebold was the bigger mystery. Shy and a little sad, with a where's-the-floor gaze and a sullen streak, he moved faster when he was in Harris' wake, drawing energy and confidence from him.

Yet he seemed to be looking forward to a future that didn't involve guns and bombs. He told people that Harris' pseudo-Nazisms bothered him. At the school prom he giggled and slow-danced with his date, and even held hands--a big move for a too-tall kid who had not yet had his first girlfriend. He and his father Tom, a geophysicist who had moved into the mortgage-services business, had just spent five days visiting the University of Arizona, where Dylan was to attend in the fall. His mother Sue, who worked in job placement for the disabled, was worried about him, but never glimpsed the scope of the problem. She thought getting him out of Columbine would do the trick, and Dylan seemed to agree. Just a few days before the shooting, Dylan told his friend Terra Oglesbee that he "couldn't wait to graduate." He was playing in his beloved fantasy baseball league until the night before the siege, making plans to trade players on the day he killed so many and then died. Was this a masterful cover, or did his mind fail to process what the killing spree would mean? Why would he follow Harris into hell on earth, laughing as they slaughtered or maimed people he knew, people he in some cases truly cared about?

People like Rachel Scott, a beatific presence at the high school who hoped to become a missionary. After she had been buried, some of Scott's classmates recalled a talent show last year in which she did a mime dance portraying Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus' cross along part of the Via Dolorosa. Midway through her performance the music cut out, leaving her stranded. The guy in the sound booth, who obviously liked her, scrambled to hook up a reserve tape deck in time to save her performance. The sound guy was Klebold. How does the same boy have fun carrying out the massacre that took her life?

"If Dylan can do this, who isn't capable of it?" asks Brooks Brown's father Randy, a longtime friend of Tom and Sue Klebold. "At some point Dylan cracked, and no one knew. His mom is rippin' herself up, trying to find out why. But Dylan's gone and there is no why." Klebold can't explain what came over him, but Brooks and some others can try. "Dylan was a follower, but he wouldn't follow just anyone," says Brooks. "He was as much of an individual as a follower can be."

It's almost two o'clock in the morning, and Brown, who shaved off all his hair and his beard last week because he needed a "fresh start," is stretched out on the carpet in his family's living room, trying to explain the inexplicable: What made Klebold latch on to Harris? "Eric was an incredible individualist," he begins slowly. "Charismatic, an eloquent speaker, well read, the kind of guy who could bulls___ for hours about anything and be witty and brilliant." There was no sign of this erudition on Harris' website, but maybe he was role playing in those days. It's clear that Brown still feels Eric's pull as well. He knows he'll miss sitting around in the afternoon with him, eating and talking about ideas like Ayn Rand's objectivism, which sees man as a "heroic being" whose happiness is the purpose of his life. He'll miss their disturbed fiction (in one creative-writing class, Brown read aloud Harris' violent memoir about leaping over logs and battling aliens in his backyard at age five; Dylan wrote something about Satan opening a day-care center in hell). And he'll miss the reverse-snob solidarity that develops among people who feel both shunned by and more intelligent than the majority.

What Harris and Klebold shared, says Terra Oglesbee, who was in their creative-writing class too, was a poetic sensibility, "dark and sad. Their poems were always about plants dying and the sun burning out. Whenever I heard them, I would just plug my ears because I can't stand stuff

like that." Dylan rarely read his work aloud, she says, but Eric "was very talkative. He was a really good writer. He would help me cheat sometimes, pass me answers in tests and stuff." Though she is African American, she never sensed the racism that spilled out against Isaiah Shoels during the massacre. Maybe that day they were role playing again.

Though Columbine students tagged Harris' group the Trench Coat Mafia, a name that suggests some level of organization when there was none, every high school has its intellectual outsiders. There are those who stand proudly (if at times longingly) apart from the pep rallies and the dating rituals of the cool kids, and those who are just hanging on until college delivers them from the tyranny of the good-looking and athletically gifted.

At Columbine, which has won 32 statewide sports championships in this decade, athletes and cheerleaders don't bother hiding that they are the elite. "It's the greatest school with the greatest kids," says golden-boy track and football star Scott Schulte. "We are perfect, and the atmosphere is perfect." Those who are imperfect tend to disagree. Columbine athletes, many of the non-athletes say, receive favorable treatment from school officials and often harass those on whom they look down. A number of Columbine students, who don't want to be named because they fear reprisals, described athletes routinely shoving, cursing and throwing rocks and bottles at Harris, Klebold and others. The school denies playing favorites, and jocks deny harassing anybody. The press, says Schulte, "believe anything these kids say. They tell you that the jocks picked on them, and you print it. It's ridiculous." Seven months ago, the sheriff's department warned the Jefferson County Board of Commissioners about growing violence in the Columbine area, including fighting by ganglike groups of athletes. School officials at the time called the report exaggerated.

Double standards and badgering, a number of Harris and Klebold friends say, helped drive them to bombs and bullets. No one is suggesting that getting picked on is an excuse for committing mass murder, but they call it the context for Harris and Klebold's rage. "Did they snap? I think they snapped a bunch of times," says Brooks Brown. "Every time someone slammed them against a locker and threw a bottle at them, I think they'd go back to Eric or Dylan's house and plot a little more--at first as a goof, but more and more seriously over time. It's a theory, but it makes sense to everyone who knew them."

The plotting seems to have begun in April 1998, but no one has yet been able to pinpoint what set it off. It was a tense time at Columbine, with fights brewing between jocks and skateboarders, jocks and Goths, and nearly everyone picking on the guys in the trench coats. Whatever the catalyst, the spring of that year marked a last turning point for Harris. The rage he had displayed on his website didn't abate, but it did go underground, as he honed his ability to fool authority figures, especially parents. "I'd say his parents were in denial, but the truth is, this kid was good," says Randy Brown. "He had a strong, manipulative personality. He could convince his dad of anything." After Harris cracked Brooks' car windshield with that ice ball last winter, for instance, Harris told his father that he thought he was throwing a harmless snowball. His dad believed him, but Judy Brown didn't. "You can pull the wool over your father's eyes," she told Eric, "but you can't pull it over mine." He pretended to be offended. "You calling me a liar?" he demanded. "Yes, I suppose I am," she said. Harris stomped away.

In March, according to Harris' website, he and Klebold were busy making their first pipe bombs. But they gave few clues to the people around them. Appearing before Jefferson County magistrate John DeVita on March 25, after being arrested for breaking into a car and stealing electronics equipment, Harris and Klebold made like latter-day Eddie Haskell: "Yes, Your Honor...No, Your Honor." That persuaded DeVita (who knew nothing of Harris' website) to agree to put them in a juvenile diversion program, and charges were dropped in return for their performing community service and enrolling in "anger management" classes.

A week after Harris yanked his venomous website offline, he had replaced it with an equally venomous secret diary--the one in which, authorities say, he plotted his campaign to take out Columbine High. The diary hasn't been made public. But in the months of late 1998 and early 1999, there were many preparations: guns to acquire, bombs to make, locations to scout, timing to perfect. In the fall of 1998, Klebold and Harris made a video for a class project--a video in which they dress in trench coats, carry guns and blow away jocks, a murderous fantasy stoking a murderous reality. For Klebold, the planning and prep may have taken on an abstract quality: something he and Harris talked about only to each other, something that fueled their relationship, something they would plan forever but that would never actually happen. Until it did happen.

When Harris was turned down by the Marines on April 15, it was because of his antidepressants. A day before, Brandi Tinklenberg had turned down his invitation to the prom. Did these failures set him off? It's impossible to say. But five days later, he and Klebold started shooting. Fittingly, they had already computer-modeled their crime. The Simon Wiesenthal Center, which tracks Internet hate groups, discovered last week in its archives a copy of Harris' website with a version of the bloody shoot-'em-up video game Doom he had customized. In Harris' version there are two shooters, each with extra weapons and unlimited ammunition, and the people they encounter can't fight back. When Harris and Klebold went into Columbine on April 20, says an Internet investigator associated with the Wiesenthal Center, "they were playing out their game in God mode."

Brooks Brown makes much the same point. "What they did wasn't about anger or hate," he says. "It was about them living in the moment, like they were inside a video game." As long as they were rolling with the plan, Brown argues, the slaughter didn't seem real to them. But that explanation absolves the killers too easily: Is it really possible that the flesh and blood of the maimed and dying was no more real to them than pixels on a video monitor? Brown thinks so. "Then they can't get out of the library, and they have a moment of overwhelming remorse," he surmises. "Or maybe one does, while the other is still lost inside the game."

Harris' customized Doom game was programmed so that the shooter who runs out of ammunition dies first. Inside Columbine, that was never an issue. But maybe one of them ran out of fantasy first. "I think Dylan would have snapped out of it, while Eric was still in the moment," says Brown. "Maybe that's when they get into their own gunfight." Rumors are swirling among the students that the end did not come with a double suicide. "I keep hearing that Eric's bullets were found in Dylan's body," says Terra Oglesbee. Another version has Harris and Klebold counting to three, then executing each other; some law-enforcement sources say it could even be true. Though ballistics results have not been released, District Attorney Dave Thomas told TIME that the forensics suggest double suicide. But given the location of one wound and the fact that

the bullet that passed through Klebold's head has not been recovered, he doesn't dismiss the possibility of a murder-suicide. Says Thomas: "We may never know." Game Over.