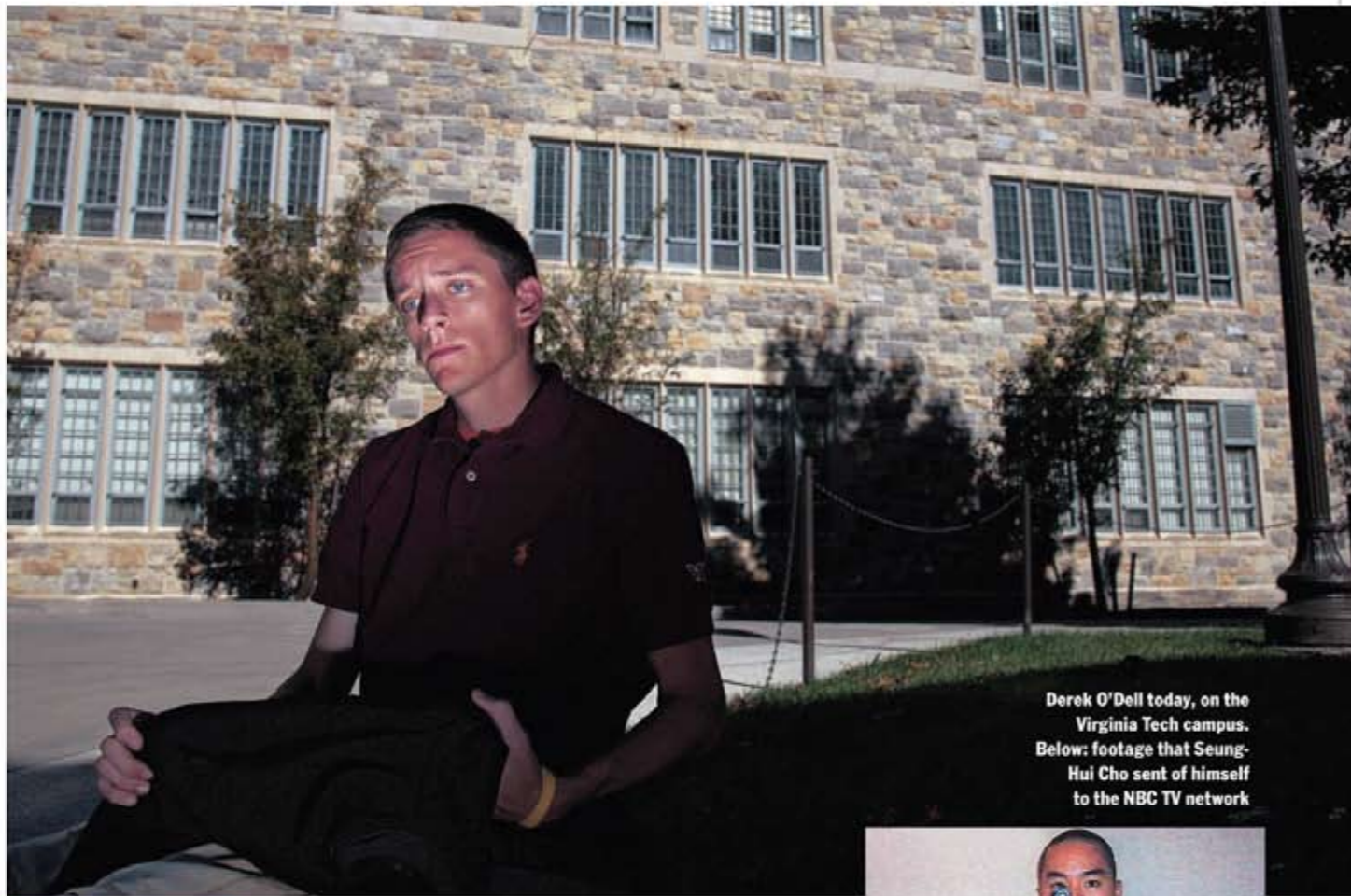


'In chess you analyse quickly what your opponent might do. I was analysing Cho a lot: his moves, what he might do next. Also my actions – if I were to jump out a window, how high was it?'

# THE DAY DEREK O'DELL DECIDED **NOT** TO DIE

Six months ago a homicidal student walked into a classroom with guns blazing. Thirty-two people were killed that day. This boy was hit three times. Ariel Leve meets the survivors. Photographs: Nina Berman





Derek O'Dell today, on the Virginia Tech campus. Below: footage that Seung-Hui Cho sent of himself to the NBC TV network



Derek has a gentle manner. He is soft-spoken, but there is an understated confidence that he says is new, acquired as a result of the events of April 16

**M**

Monday, April 16.

Derek O'Dell woke up thinking about the snow. Three days earlier he had turned 20 and, having grown up in Virginia, this was the first time he'd ever seen snow fall around his birthday. He lay in bed and thought it was weird.

He had breakfast on the Virginia Tech campus and proceeded to his 905 Elementary German class in room 207, on the second floor of Norris Hall. Thirteen people were in class that day: 12 students and their professor, Jamie Bishop.

They heard popping sounds. Nobody knew what it was. Maybe loud construction. It sounded like hammering. They were still trying to figure it out when the door swung open and Seung-Hui Cho entered the room with a gun in each hand. He was wearing a maroon baseball cap. Without a word, and with no expression on his face, he calmly began shooting.

Professor Bishop was the first one hit. Shot in the head. Derek's mind raced. Columbine was a reference point that gave the situation a surreal familiarity. Was this really happening?

As soon as he saw the first bullet-casing pop out of the gun, he slid beneath his desk and

crawled along the floor to the back of the room. This would be the day one bullet drilled into his arm and two more through his jacket: the day Derek O'Dell decided not to die.

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The commuter plane that flies between New York and Roanoke, Virginia, is full. It is late on a Thursday night six months later, in mid-October, and the middle-aged man sitting next to me makes this trip every week. He is wearing a maroon windbreaker bearing the logo "VT" in orange. Over the next few days I will find an entire community bathed in orange and maroon, and learn that these colours have become more than a statement of allegiance to Virginia Tech. But, for now, they are a way into a conversation.

At first, he's not interested in talking, especially not about what happened at Virginia Tech. It was the deadliest shooting in American history by a single gunman: 32 people were killed – 27 students and five faculty members. Twenty-five more were wounded, and a university known for its college football team became irrevocably linked to violence and tragedy.

But he opens up. He is a Virginian, a 49-year-old father-of-two who lives outside Blacksburg, where the campus is located. Everyone, he asserts, has a connection, and is protective. I reassure him that I'm not critical, just curious.

He paints a picture of a tight-knit, primarily Christian community, where most are still grieving, navigating the etiquette between moving on and not forgetting. He looks out of

the window for a few minutes and when he turns back he has tears in his eyes. He tells a story about his friend who works in law enforcement, an officer who was sent into Norris Hall after the shootings had ended. He entered one of the classrooms on the second floor, where many of the bodies remained. It was eerily quiet – except for the sound of mobile phones ringing. Friends and family, alerted by the news flashes, were trying to reach their loved ones to make sure that they were okay.

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A red Manchester United No 7 shirt hangs on the wall of the apartment Derek O'Dell shares with three roommates a few miles off →

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Above: Tom Brown, dean of students, still takes calls daily from anxious parents. Right: students cross the Drillfield, with its new memorial

campus. He is a fan of Cristiano Ronaldo. He is glad to be back at school, though August 20 – the first day of the new term – was emotional.

Derek is a good student and his grades haven't suffered. Every now and then, when he's reading at home by himself, he'll get scared. He'll hear a loud noise and become distracted. Then his mind will flash back to what happened and he'll try to stop the thought, but, unable to, he'll endure it until he can focus again.

Playing chess helps. He is president of the chess club and has played for 15 years – sometimes speed chess – so he's grown used to calculating a few steps ahead. On April 16, this automatic thought process probably saved him.

"In chess you analyse pretty quickly what your opponent might do. I was analysing Cho a lot: his moves, where he might be, what he might do next. Also my actions – if I were to jump out a window, how high was it? If there's a place to land, would I grab onto a tree?"

He has a gentle manner, which for most of his life has been seen as shyness. He is soft-spoken, but there is an understated confidence that he says is new, acquired as a result of April 16. Yet his placid nature, pale complexion and lanky frame make him appear ghostlike and fragile.

Thirty of the 32 dead were killed in Norris Hall. It took less than nine minutes, and 174 rounds were fired. At 7:15am, Cho killed two students in West Ambler Johnston Hall, a freshman dorm. At 9:40am he entered Norris Hall and chained the three doors shut. Of the 13 people in Derek's class, five died: four students and the professor. Eight students survived, of whom six were shot. Derek was one of them.

After Cho shot the professor, he spun around. Derek was in the second row in the second column from the door, 6ft from where the shooter entered the room. He was shot at three times as he slid underneath the desk, and one bullet penetrated his arm.

He shows me the jacket that he was wearing. He has kept it as a reminder of how fortunate he was. The navy-blue zip-up fleece has three holes made by 9mm hollow-point bullets – one in the sleeve, two near the pockets on the side.



The aisles were clogged with students who had fallen. Blood was everywhere. There was also a cloud of gunshot powder. The smell was awful. The taste was palpable

Cho moved around to the far side of the classroom. He was pointing the gun at people's heads, as close as he could get, and pulling the trigger. Derek crawled along the floor to put as much distance between them as possible. Cho fired about 10 shots the first time, then reloaded. It took one or two seconds before he started firing again. Once he had reloaded, he went to the other side of the room. He was shooting randomly. Whoever he could get close to.

"When he left the classroom," Derek says, sitting down on the couch, "everyone was motionless. People were moaning on and off, but it seemed like everybody was unconscious."

Derek was the first to get up. He could hear more gunshots down the hall, and figured he had enough time to get to the front of the classroom before the gunman could come back. The aisles between desks were clogged with students who had fallen. There was blood everywhere. There was also a cloud of gunshot powder and residue. The smell was awful. The taste was palpable.

When Derek and two others reached the door, they put their feet against it to prevent Cho from coming in. Derek tied his belt as a tourniquet around his arm. His arm was numb, so it hadn't really registered that he'd been shot until he realised his jacket was soaked with blood.

The door was made of thick wood. He called 911 – the emergency services – from his mobile. They were all trying to stay quiet, hoping Cho

would think they were dead, and not return. Derek stayed at the door, deciding that was the best chance any of them had of surviving. He looked around the room. One of his friends had been shot in the side of the face. "I saw him sitting at his desk. He was unconscious at that point. I didn't have a clue what to do for him." He pauses, looking as helpless now as he felt then.

About two minutes later, Cho returned. He pushed on the door, trying to muscle his way in. The door opened 6in or so. The three students pressed back against it. The gunman took a few steps back and started firing through the door.

They held it closed with their feet, wedged between the door and the ground, leaning down to stay out of the line of fire. They didn't know if the bullets were coming through or not because they were afraid to look. Fragments of wood flew through the air, but after that, nobody was hit.

Cho turned away and went down the hall. But about two minutes later he came back and tried to get in again. He fired another two bullets into the door, then gave up and went to other classrooms, where he shot more people before turning the gun on himself.

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There are two salient features of the Virginia Tech campus that never came across on TV. The first is the scope of the campus. It is vast, like a small village. There are over 26,000 students and it covers 2,600 acres of land. One immediately understands how difficult it would have been to have a campus-wide lockdown and intercept Cho after the initial shooting that morning. When the state review panel issued its final report in August, they agreed with police that it would not have been possible. However, the report also concluded that delaying campus-wide notification of the first shootings and not immediately suspending classes were →

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crucial decisions that had been mismanaged. The other striking aspect is visual. Framed by the Blue Ridge Mountains, the campus sits comfortably in the landscape. The school operates its own quarry and many of the buildings are made from a distinctive and elegant limestone, referred to as Hokie stone.

Since April 16, new security measures have been put into place: residential buildings are now locked 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and only accessible with a key card (Hokie passport). Doors can no longer be chained shut, 51 safety phones were installed throughout the campus and local community – all connected to emergency operators. But this is ancillary, the equivalent of confiscating lighters when boarding an aircraft. On a Saturday afternoon, I am able to drift around the campus, in and out of the student centre, without challenge.

What happened has galvanised the student body and the community, drawing them together. The word Hokie comes up over and over again, like a badge of courage and pride. Taken from a football cheer, the word itself means nothing. It was originally "Hoki, Hoki, Hoki, Hy!" but an "e" was subsequently added. In a candlelight vigil attended by President Bush a day after the shootings, the English professor and poet Nikki Giovanni (who had refused to teach Cho in her class) delivered an inspirational speech with a rallying cry. "We are Virginia Tech," she said. "We will prevail." It took on an identification all of its own and fostered a bond: this came to be known as the Hokie spirit.

Hungry to be a part of a community that was so united, people were drawn in by the Hokie spirit. Whereas post-9/11, residents fled from Manhattan, in Blacksburg, people were defiant. Of the 25 students who were wounded, 19 went back to classes. And enrolment went up.

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Tom Brown, the dean of students, is apologetic. When I arrive at his office at 8am on a Friday morning, he tells me he has just received a memo from legal counsel and won't be able to talk. He is an affable man with kind eyes and grey hair, who looks desperately in need of some time off.

Shortly after the shootings, memos were e-mailed to the administration and faculty. The world press had descended on Blacksburg, and probing questions were being asked. At first, nobody could speak openly because of the police investigation. Then it was the panel of inquiry. The mission of the Virginia Tech Review Panel was to provide an objective examination of what happened. Panel members were appointed by Tim Kaine, the governor of Virginia, and ranged from psychiatrists to Tom Ridge, the former US secretary of homeland security.

Now there are the possible lawsuits. A lawyer is representing the families of 20 people killed or injured. The focus is mainly on how the university handled those crucial two hours between the first and second shootings.

We sit in Brown's wood-panelled office, and over his shoulder on the shelf, a stuffed



As a one-to-one tutor to Cho, Lucinda Roy was unsettled by his intense anger and upset, as reported in the press (below). Bottom: President Bush attended a candlelight vigil for those who died

## 'I went to police about gunman and told them that I was worried'

Hokiebird is grinning. The school's mascot resembles a giant turkey in costume. Brown's office functions as a type of triage centre, helping to make all sorts of connections that involve student wellbeing on campus. His department has always responded to student deaths, which average about 10 a year. There was no procedure to deal with 27 in one day.

Parents still call every day, he says, often needing reassurance, although what they're needing and worrying about now isn't very different from before. Some parents phone to ask if he will remind their child to return their call. His office also acknowledged the gifts. The

**Lucinda Roy of the creative-writing programme did not know that in 1999, while in high school, Cho had written a paper indicating that he wanted to repeat Columbine**



influx of banners and quilts was so huge that the Library of Congress has volunteered to help archive it. People would stop by constantly with trays of biscuits, urging people in his office to take a break. This community is close-knit partly because of its size (40,000 in Blacksburg, over half from the university), and he believes it is now even stronger. But he is pensive when asked about his own feelings. "I still have a hard time finding my words to describe what all this has been like. I haven't processed it yet."

This past September, Tom Brown went to Minnesota for a wedding. He ended up changing tables at the reception. "It was the topic of the dinner table. They were kind people and their questions were considerate – but I was at a wedding, where I wanted to enjoy myself and do something different, so I literally removed myself from that. Because I didn't want to talk about it."

On a sunny Saturday afternoon, I walk around the outside of Norris Hall several times, crunching dead leaves underfoot. Despite its central location on campus, there is a stillness. After the shootings, it was thought Norris Hall would be shut down or turned into a memorial. But it was decided that the building would be kept open and used instead for offices and laboratories. Eventually it will be renovated so that it no longer contains classrooms.

The memorial is in a more public place. On the Drillfield, a sprawling playing field in front of an administration building, there are 32 pieces of Hokie stone placed in a half-circle. On each stone, resembling a small tombstone, is engraved a victim's name. In the middle a plaque reads: "We Will Prevail. We Are Virginia Tech". The memorial is simple and symbolic. It attracts a constant flow of visitors, many with maroon and orange memorial ribbons pinned to their chests.

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A few months before April 16, Lucinda Roy, the British novelist and poet, returned with her husband from a trip to Sierra Leone. She used to teach there, and had gone back to catch up with some of her students. We're in the → 55

**Embodying the Hokie spirit, a memorial plaque reads: 'We Will Prevail. We Are Virginia Tech'**

sitting room of her contemporary cedar home, which is filled with art and overlooks the mountains. Born in Battersea, south London, Roy has the title of Alumni Distinguished Professor of English and, at the time of the shootings, was a co-director of the creative-writing programme. She had always planned to give that up, and currently teaches the graduate creative-writing fiction class.

When Nikki Giovanni said she didn't feel comfortable having Cho in her writing class, Lucinda Roy knew why. Serious problems were evident from his writing. "He seemed to be very upset and angry," she says. "It was worrying to me." Roy has a sensitive manner. She sent Cho an e-mail saying she needed to speak to him. After this one-on-one interview, she did not feel reassured. "I sent a note to the administration."

They recommended counselling. Although she understood their position, she was frustrated. Even though he had taken photos of students on his mobile phone from underneath his desk without their knowledge, school policy stated that you couldn't just pull a student out of a class, but had to find an equivalent alternative. She tutored Cho privately and became, arguably, the person who knew him best at school.

"I knew that he was very angry. I also knew I was putting myself at some risk because I wanted to be alone with him. My assistant sat in the office next to mine with the door slightly open."

The meetings were tense because he was so distressed. Each tutoring lasted 60-90 minutes. She used much of that time to plead with him to go to counselling. Cho was an extraordinarily uncommunicative person. At the time, Lucinda Roy did not know that in 1999, while in high school, he had written a paper in his English class indicating that he wanted to repeat Columbine. Or that he had been diagnosed with "selective mutism", an anxiety disorder characterised by a failure to speak. This was later revealed in the panel report, where 30 pages were devoted to his mental-health history. The psychiatric diagnosis had not been noted in his medical records. But in their meetings he opened up to her about his loneliness, and she felt it was genuine. They wrote a poem together.

On the morning of April 16, Lucinda Roy was at home writing. When she heard about the first shooting, she started calling the English department, telling people she knew not to go outside. CNN was on, broadcasting reports of people being hurt. Initially, her response was professional. "I was in that gear you go into as administrator – where are the graduate assistants? what should I be telling people to do? Which teachers do we have over at Norris?" When it was confirmed that 20 people had died, her response became emotional. Yet it didn't occur to her that Cho could be the gunman.



**Hungry to be part of a community that was so united, people were drawn in by the Hokie spirit. Of the 25 students wounded, 19 went back to classes. Enrolment went up**

## OTHER SCHOOL SHOOTINGS



**COLUMBINE SCHOOL**  
In April 1999 two racist, anti-Christian high-school students, Eric Harris, 17, and Dylan

Klebold, 18, strode into their school in Littleton, Colorado, hiding semiautomatic weapons and home-made bombs under their black trench coats. Having plotted for months to kill as many people as possible, they rampaged around the cafeteria, corridors and library; 12 pupils and a teacher died before they took their own lives.

### AMISH SCHOOL

Five girls aged 7-13 died after they were shot in October 2006 at their one-room Amish school in Paradise, Pennsylvania, by a heavily armed truck driver. Charles Roberts, 32, was not Amish, and his motive was unclear. He told his wife he was planning revenge for an event 20 years earlier.



**FINNISH SCHOOL**  
Pekka-Eric Auvinen, 18, a self-styled "social Darwinist", posted a video on YouTube entitled Jokela High School Massacre weeks before he carried out a shooting spree at his school in southern Finland. In November 2007 he shot five boys, two girls and the principal – then himself.

Later that afternoon The New York Times called and asked her to write an opinion column. "This was a good thing because it focused my energy." It ran on the 17th, when Cho's name was announced. "And I suddenly realised I was the person who worked most closely to the shooter." The phone didn't stop ringing for four days. She has been in countries, Sierra Leone, for instance, where there are more guns than dogs. But it has taken her a long time to get used to the guns in America. "In rural areas I understand it. But it's become ludicrous. People have arsenals."

Her friends in Britain reacted differently. "My friends, and people I hadn't heard from in years, contacted me with a kind of sensitivity that I found remarkable. I realised how much I had become used to this kind of violence. They were so horrified by it. I was pleased, because I wanted people to be horrified that he could have gotten those guns. That this was an intense violation. That's why it's so difficult for many of us to talk about it. It really is like having been gang-raped."

Suddenly she seems unsettled. She tells me she doesn't want to suggest that people in America are desensitised, and makes sure to point out they were horrified too. "But for the average person on the street, it's hard to sustain that kind of horror if the next week something happens that echoes that. It dilutes the horror."

Now she is still finding out how this has changed her. She has always been very outspoken, but says it has made her value honesty even more. "One thing we saw really quickly here is that it was difficult to ask probing questions on the campus because it could be seen as a kind of betrayal of the Hokie spirit. In my mind, the opposite is true. Because if we really value the Hokie spirit – and I'm such a Hokie in so many ways because I really love this place – we have to do our best to make it better. And the only way to do that is to be as honest as possible and communicate with each other."

Her articulate, thoughtful perspective was not received well by everyone. She has had death threats. It took a while to persuade her to agree to this interview because she has become more guarded. She and her husband have spent an extra \$1,000 on security for their house. "But then I never felt completely safe," she laughs. "I was raised in London. Of course I lock my doors."

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Virginia Tech has co-ordinated events for students who survived the shootings. There was a Dave Matthews concert – Derek O'Dell got to meet him and his band. Sometimes the survivors meet for dinner and talk about their different views of what happened. But mostly, Derek says, they talk about school life now and other things.

What surprises him most about that day is his complex thought processes. "How I was able to make split-second decisions to save my life – calling 911, making a tourniquet, barricading the door. Thinking back on it, it would seem more logical just to have jumped out the window."

His anxiety varies from one day to the next. Physically, he has healed. Mentally, he → 57

**VIRGINIA TECH: continued**

doesn't know what the long-term damage will be. Over the summer he went to counselling. He still goes occasionally. And he wears a cross. "I try to be scientific and not just religious. If someone has gotten to where there is no differentiation between right and wrong, and can kill people and not feel anything, there's no hope left. I don't think there's an answer to it."

The one subject that elicits a twinge of frustration is financial compensation. The Hokie Spirit Memorial Fund, which covers grief counselling and other expenses for victims and their families, received donations in excess of \$7m; \$3.2m of that has been used to create 32 endowment funds for lives lost in the shootings.

Derek says the money students received was calculated according to days spent in the hospital. "I voluntarily gave up my hospital bed because they were having to turn people away. I was out the same day, in about four or five hours."

He says that the university gave everyone who was on the second floor either free tuition or \$10,000, and he chose tuition because the cost was \$14,000. "It just seems like if they were truly supportive of us, there wouldn't even have been a question as far as tuition goes," he says. "How hard is it to cancel the tuition fees for 17 people?"

When the university's president went to Roanoke and met with him and his family, Derek asked him about tuition. "He said there would be more than enough to pay for it." Yet Derek has paid his own tuition for the current term, while waiting for the issue to be resolved. "I'm not angry, just disappointed."

His aim is not to benefit financially. And perhaps what he is looking for is acknowledgment from the university that he and his fellow survivors demonstrated the Hokie spirit without looking for scapegoats to blame or questioning the degree of culpability. While the money is useful, it is also, more importantly, a symbolic nod of gratitude and appreciation.

In June, Derek O'Dell had a nightmare. He was walking across campus, but it was a different school. He heard shots fired and saw people running. He could taste the gunpowder. It was the middle of the night when he woke up. It was difficult to differentiate

between reality and dream. He hid under his bed for about 20 minutes until he realised it wasn't real. After that, he was afraid of going to sleep. The following night, he went to bed before his parents, because that made him feel safe. "But it's gotten better," he says. "There aren't too many flashbacks." He smiles. "I sleep with a night-light now."

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Six months on, people are still in shock, not sure how to process what happened. For some, it helps to focus on who is to blame. The university, for not doing enough? The privacy laws that prevented Cho's history of mental illness from being disclosed? The relaxed gun laws that made it possible for him to purchase a Glock on a credit card? For those who choose forgiveness, some believe what happened is an act of pure evil; the work of the devil. Or an isolated rampage by a sick individual. But the one thing they all have in common is they choose to look at it as an unexplainable act visited on them. Keeping it at this distance removes the need to look within.

Because if they do, that would mean facing up to the uncertainty and powerlessness of what happened, and this is too much to take in. It is too personal. Everyone can relate to having been in a classroom, and every parent relates to having sent a child off to school. To comprehend the enormity of it is to confront the truth: violence is ubiquitous and safety is an illusion.

There will always be questions. Could it have been prevented? What caused Seung-Hui Cho, a 23-year-old born in Seoul, South Korea, to snap? A suicide note found in his room referred to "rich kids" and "deceitful charlatans", but offered little clue as to a motive.

A few days after the shootings, an 1,800-word manifesto and video arrived at NBC News. The images shown were of him brandishing guns, comparing himself to Jesus Christ, and there was a note that said: "You had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today." A great deal of controversy surrounded the release of the images and broadcasting of his words. Many felt it glorified his rampage. But also, it conveyed the unreserved character he aspired to be: expressive and fearless. Which is not at all who he was ■



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