

Michael
Paterniti,
wordy other
ways of dying

11:20

BEFORE IT WALKED THE PARKING LOT, its crippled feet scraping the silence of that seventy-in-April spring day, before it lurched, past the saplings bent once in the breeze, and before the sun flooded the wide, emerald windows of the library in a featureless building as featureless as the instant Colorado landscape in which it rose. Before the glass front doors were drawn back, reflecting nothing—no face, no figure—and the low, reassuring, underwater sound of voices, students at lunch or in choir or suiting up for gym, was met by the voice of something else, something pitiless and blank. Before Patrick Ireland, a real boy, was shot in the head and lay paralyzed on the right side of his body under a table in the library, playing dead though he half was. Before Lance Kirklín, a real boy, had his jaw blown off and had to communicate by squeezing hands, and before Daniel Rohrbough, a real boy, lay sprawled on the stone walk among the saplings as students leaped over him like cows fleeing from some medieval abattoir. Before the glass doors of that featureless building shattered and the pipes

11:20

297

burst and alarms sounded and the sprinkler system went haywire, before freaked students packed oxygenless closets or scurried up into ceilings or hid in lockers. Before all the shirtless, hairless boys were herded out of Columbine High School, hands over their heads, looking pale and stricken and, well, like little boys streaked with blood, their shirts having been used as wraps and tourniquets on the bodies left inside. Before all the stunned, gasping girls huddled in trembling circles, holding each other, well, like little girls suddenly with no mother left in the world.

Before night fell and the dead still lay inside that booby-trapped high school as a final affront, lay like the pinions of a star around the killers—and what could the scene of that terrible midnight have looked like?—before the media horde arrived with its Aggreko generators and deep-space satellite dishes. Before the blame and the signed caskets and the psychedelic mountains of flowers, and before the angry, indignant promises for gun control, for safer schools, for policing the Internet, for really caring about our kids, there was 11:20 on a Tuesday morning. Eleven-twenty in Columbine valley, what used to be farmland rising to the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains, in a place where the American Dream lives in strip malls and stucco-and-drywall housing developments. Eleven-twenty on a day when the season makes a turn: Columbine High School, its windows like microchips, its saplings showing first leaves. The wide baseball fields bursting green. A dog barking, a plane passing lazily overhead, leaving a contrail trace of its progress. And for one last time, at 11:20, everything in its place: goofy, pimply, smart, beautiful, heartbreaking, not-yet-grown kids writing papers on Thoreau.

Afterward the snow fell—for three days. It blew into the backstops like huge, broken moths. Two hundred investigators combed the high school sarcophagus while dozens of media cam-

eras like more guns were trained on a hugging boy and girl, the uncle of a dead girl in a leather coat and combed hair searching out any journalist he could find for an interview. "Death by mayhem," he kept repeating into microphones. Afterward, in a local diner, two older patrons argued about Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday—who the better gunfighter had been. At a convenience store, a boy in a green bib sat behind the counter, bawling.

I myself stood for a while at the memorial, stood before the stuffed animals and flowers and purple Magic Marked messages—all of them trying to call back 11:20—and walked the police line that surrounded Columbine High, walked out over the baseball fields, snow up to my shins, until I was a good peg from the front door. It was silent but for the whine of generators. The shattered emerald windows to the library had plywood sheets fixed over them. And hundreds of cars sat in the lot: pickup trucks and Acuras, a motorcycle and someone's mom's old Dodge.

Inside that building, everything was exactly as it had been just hours before: computers and lights still on, lunches half eaten, books turned to the last page read, the college application of a girl who was shot, its final check mark made, the pencil lying next to it. That's what's most hard to imagine: how, in midsentence, in the throes of some idea, in the beginning of some meaningful life, that girl was entered by some dark, crippled thing and became a memory.

It was sometime after eleven, and, standing there, gazing out over the parking lot and beyond the school to the new houses with their new cars and the new living rooms with their new rugs, you could have actually imagined this as any other school day. Everything seemingly in its place. A dog barked and a plane passed overhead, but this time it sounded like the roar of a monster.

MR. NOBODY

HE COULD HAVE BEEN ANYONE, STANDING in that Lisbon hotel lobby. He wore a black suit and black tie with black shoes. His hair was jet black. His eyes from a distance seemed black, too, but perhaps it was merely the reflection off the glossy grand piano near which he stood. He could have easily passed as a financier or a diplomat waiting to take an important meeting, to report back to a man in a glass office in one of the other European capitals, someone of equal breeding and power who might then direct this man here to enjoy a night in Lisbon and carry on in the morning to Brussels, Berlin, or Geneva, to the next high-level meeting for whatever concern they mutually held at stake.

Just by looking at him, you might have perceived the meticulous if anonymous tailorings of a person from whom a certain power flows. And that lobby—with its well-appointed sterility—flowed with others of the very same disposition. It was impossible to know his country of origin or who he might be. The nails were manicured; the tie held a perfect dimple. His image re-