

Columbine: The Musical

On Wednesday morning, between math and PE, I learned that Robbie Fenstermaker, who was set to play Dylan Klebold in our school's production of *Columbine: The Musical*, had wrecked a driver's training car and fractured his collarbone. "Collarbone?" repeated Mr. Baxter, my PE teacher. He combed his fingers through his sparse, aluminum-toned hair. "We're talking a good two months' recovery. More if it was a nasty break. When's this play set to open anyhow?"

"In a week and a half," I told him.

"Better scratch him off the program. He's not doing any acting for some time."

Here was my problem: I was Robbie's understudy. I knew some of his lines. I'd even practiced them with my girlfriend, Susan, who got a little turned on when I imitated Robbie's stage voice, but I never thought I'd need to play this role in the actual production. I was a quiet kid. I'd only tried out because Susan was in the play. I stood there dumb-

founded, dressed in our school's PE uniform: blue shorts, gold jersey, my name, Greg Gorman, thickly inked across my chest. After the activity bell rang, Mr. Baxter sent us out for six laps while he settled into a beach chair and asked one of his female assistants to bring him a diet Coke.

With the other boys, I ran my laps around our school's new "safety" track—a quarter-mile circuit enclosed by a ten-foot fence topped with barbed wire. I generally did what I was told and believed this would be the key to my future success. I was good with directions, liked organization, never challenged the teachers or security officers at my school. For example, I was happy in my role as "Library Victim Number Four." I was good at feigning panic, good at singing the soft, low chorus of death we all sang lying on the floor while other students who played our parents walked through the library holding poster-sized reproductions of our dental records above their heads. I had no real ambition to be the star of anything, let alone our school play.

All morning long I told no one about Robbie's accident, not even Susan, who stood beside me in the lunch line. She was a tall girl with dark blond hair that fell in a straight line to her shoulders. On that day, she wore the Abercrombie leather necklace I'd bought for her as a three-month anniversary gift and a tank top that showed off her tan shoulders. Occasionally I wondered why she was going out with me at all—clearly football players were interested—but like me, her father had left her family when she was in junior high. I believed we shared something because of this, a certain hopefulness perhaps, though I can't say for sure what that was. When we got near the front of the line, she pushed through and ordered for us both. I had the same thing every day—a cheeseburger and Coke.

After Susan's father left, her mother had become an executive secretary for a law firm specializing in lucrative class-action suits filed by ex-smokers. My mother, on the other hand, experienced repeated ep-

isodes of road rage until she finally gave in to the beauty of a quasi-Eastern inner peace and enrolled at the community college to become a certified workplace counselor specializing in conflict management. Because of her, I'd found my own inner peace as well: I looked for the best in other people and had learned that the meaning of life was found in universal goodness. That is, I believed we were all basically good people just trying to get along, though sometimes because of our own flawed understanding of the world, we had trouble seeing how other people were trying their best to get along with us.

I spent the afternoon in history class, then in study hall, where I worked on my algebra homework, graphing parabolas that stretched toward infinity. After school, I stayed in the library long enough to miss the beginning of our daily rehearsal. As a rule I hated to be late for anything, but I hoped Mr. Sweeney would select someone else to take the role of Dylan Klebold if I wasn't there on time. Only when the library was about to close did I finally load my books into my mesh backpack—the type of backpack our vice principal had instructed all students to use at the beginning of the school year.

I arrived at the theater a good half hour late, my backpack slung over one shoulder, and sat on the outer steps next to a publicity poster for *Our Town*, the play Mr. Sweeney had directed the previous spring. Though he was interested in the “force of negative publicity,” he had yet to put up posters for *Columbine: The Musical* because he was tired of local reporters stopping in to see how we were doing. Already one of these stories had been picked up by the wire service, a short column accompanied by the headline: “Whatever Happened to Hamlet?”

Through heavily tinted glass, I saw that the other students weren't rehearsing a scene, nor were they practicing the song “I Have a Gun, I Have an Arsenal” that Mr. Sweeney had rewritten over the weekend. Instead they were sitting on the bare stage in a circle, their hands joined, as Mr. Sweeney said how proud he was of them, his troupe of teenaged

actors. "Musical theater has a message," he reminded us, "and that message is, 'Wake up, America! Hear the song the youth of your country is singing.'"

As always, Susan was sitting beside her friend Rosemary, who played Cassie Bernal, the Christian girl who died a martyr. She looked so pretty there, Susan did, with her hair pulled back, dressed in the thin, striped sweater she wore as part of her costume, complete with tear-away patches on the stomach and sleeve where Mr. Sweeney would hide blood-packs on the night of the actual performance. I watched her eyes move around the room and wondered if she was looking at other guys, but eventually her gaze settled on me. Or rather it settled on the tinted window beyond which I sat, as if she knew I was out there, resting on the steps.

For ten minutes, Mr. Sweeney went on about how this play would expose real-life violence as the means of entertainment it had become. I watched him walk across the stage, his hair pulled back into a ponytail, his black turtleneck tight enough to reveal a slight paunch, his hands gesturing in a certain William Shatner way whenever he got excited. When he was almost finished lecturing, I left my spot on the stairwell, slipped into the theater and leaned against the sound booth.

Mr. Sweeney stood center stage, next to a rack of plastic guns designed to look like the real thing. His gaze shifted to me, his eyes so blue most kids thought he wore colored contacts. Surely he knew how content I was as "Library Victim Number Four," lying deathly still while the students who played my parents carried me to the steel autopsy tables located in the side aisles of our theater. I did not have the ambition to take the role of Dylan Klebold, hell-bound follower of Eric Harris. Clearly Mr. Sweeney saw my reluctance, but what choice did he have? "Every great play has its own reckoning," he said. "No doubt this will be ours."



After rehearsal Susan and I went to our lockers to get our books. Our lockers had new clear plastic doors so teachers could see what we kept inside them, though I kept nothing but notebooks and granola bars in mine. On our way out we nodded good-bye to our school detective, Officer Brubaker, who liked us so much he didn't make Susan walk through the metal detector again whenever something in her purse set it off.

Officially, Mr. Sweeney had told the school board he was producing a "musical to help students understand the effects of school violence," but we all believed this play would've been canned if our principal had not been on heavy chemo that semester. Even with this, Mr. Sweeney only got the green light once the SafeCampus Corporation agreed to sponsor the play, thereby giving our school a much-needed ten-percent discount on all the video cameras, see-through locker housings, and security fencing our vice principal had ordered that year.

In truth we all wanted something from this play. Susan wanted to get into an acting program at Rutgers. Mike Rogers, the boy who played Eric Harris, wanted to be a paid spokesperson for Youth Against Violence. Mr. Sweeney wanted critical attention so he could leave our school and direct revivals off-Broadway. As for me, I wanted to be with Susan as much as I could because we were both seniors. After graduating, I was planning to study business in college—Rutgers if possible—and after college, I wanted to manage a store at the mall. That is to say, I wanted to find a job like my father held before he fell in love with Loni the flight attendant and moved to Burma.

As we dumped our backpacks into the backseat of her car, Susan turned to me somewhat cautiously. Recently she had begun to treat me as though she were slightly older, more experienced. I never said anything about it. The best way to deal with trouble like this, I'd learned, was to push it away from you—to say to yourself, Self, I am not a perfect person either.

Once buckled in, she said, “You don’t want to be Dylan Klebold, do you?”

“I’m not a good actor.”

“Well don’t you have all the luck? You don’t even *want* a lead role and you end up being Dylan Klebold. I mean, *Dylan Klebold*. You get to carry around a gun. You shoot people. You look cool. Me? I get popped twice, then lie on the floor singing that stupid chorus of death for ten minutes.”

“I like lying on the floor and singing that chorus of death.”

“You like it because it’s easy. You know, pop-pop, down you go. Anyone could do that. But Dylan Klebold. He’s, like, super-wussie, patsy to the stars. It takes skill to play a role like that.” She started her car, the engine catching on the second try. “God, why couldn’t Rosemary run her car into a ditch?”

“You might regret saying that,” I told her.

“Seriously, if I got to play Cassie, I’d be in Rutgers like you wouldn’t believe. I’d be on scholarship. I’d be doing commercials on cable within three years. Mark my words, made-for-TV movies would be in my future.”

We left the parking lot slowly since the street was heavily patrolled. We both checked for cops before passing a billboard our school boosters owned. “Remember, Kids,” it said, “Stay Off Drugs!”

We spent the evening at Susan’s house, just like we always did. She helped me practice the role of Dylan Klebold. Truthfully, the role wasn’t as big as those of Cassie, or Eric Harris, or even Sheriff John Stone, but we both felt it was important in its own way, especially with its “Manhattan Monologue.” In it, Klebold talks about his fantasy of hijacking a passenger jet and crashing it into Manhattan. On stage, while Robbie Fenstermaker—or rather while I—read this monologue, Mr. Sweeney planned to project slides from Klebold’s and Harris’s actual diaries onto

a screen that dropped from the orchestra shell. At the same time, the students who played the eventual victims were to line up behind me and hum the soft, low chorus of future dread.

Without much prodding, Susan sensed my frustration. I was still speaking in my “Library Victim Number Four” voice. I couldn’t seem to get beyond it, not even when I described the passenger jet as a “burning comet of hate” I would commandeer into Park Avenue. She pretended not to think poorly of me, but eventually clicked on the Playboy Channel. She told me, “Watching nude women will help you take hold of this role.” We watched a segment called “Totally Naked Women Smoking Cigars” and part of a game show called “You Bet Your Clothes.”

As usual, we ended up in her mother’s four-poster bed with its faux-satin sheets. Since meeting Susan, I’d become much better at sex than I would’ve thought possible a year ago. On our second date she’d told me I was exceptionally well endowed, and on subsequent dates she began to teach me how to move in such a way as to better please her. By the time her mother got home, we were dressed again. Around her mother, I liked to pretend we weren’t having sex, but Susan said her mother didn’t really care about things like that, as long as she stayed on the pill.

I spent the rest of the night at home reading my lines out loud. I was doing my best to get words like “mother fucker” to sound right when I said them. I stood in front of my mirror and repeated the line, “All you asshole jocks must die!” but no matter how I said it, the lines lacked a certain youthful power and conviction I knew they required. I was good at enunciating all the syllables, but couldn’t get my voice to project the right emotion, even when I took myself back, moment by moment, to the day my father left for Burma. He’d left a note on my dresser—a small piece of paper, folded in half. “Catch you later, Greg,” it said. “P.S. Don’t be a stranger.”



The next morning I woke at 5:30. I liked waking early because it gave me extra time to contemplate my life. Often I visualized my father, dressed in a red Hawaiian shirt, sitting beside me on my bed. Usually he said little words of encouragement, like, "I'm really proud of your algebra homework" or "Way to go on that Latin test, Greg!" I can't tell you how much these affirmations helped me get through a hard day of school. But on this particular morning, he sat silently, dressed in his red Hawaiian shirt, his hands folded into his lap. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't visualize him saying anything. Eventually he removed an imaginary pack of smokes from his shirt pocket and lit one.

By 6:30 I was dressed in my gym clothes, ready to head off to school. "Something's different about you," my mother said. She was wearing one of her periwinkle blue suits. Periwinkle was one of the three recommended colors for certified workplace counselors specializing in conflict management.

"I have a new role in the school play."

She fixed me with her trained gray eyes. "You're going to knock them dead. I just know it."

As I jogged to school, I noticed the first advertisements for the play on telephone poles and in shop windows. They featured the title in an elegant copperplate script along with a small publicity photo of Mr. Sweeney wearing a black dinner jacket and bow tie. In the bottom margin was the SafeCampus logo, along with their slogan: "Because You Don't Really Know Who Lives Down the Street." By the time I reached school, I felt a certain dread settle into my stomach, a feeling I didn't know how to push aside, but after Officer Brubaker gave me the thumbs-up, I felt I owed it to myself to go about my morning just as I would any other.

I went immediately to our new "full-security" gym. By spring I hoped to have pecs and abs so developed that Susan wouldn't be embarrassed to be seen with me at the pool. After my first set of sit-ups, how-

ever, I couldn't concentrate. I kept thinking of my impending failure as Dylan Klebold, boy murderer. How would I ever fit my body into his? Twice I forgot how many reps I'd done on the bench press, and while racking dumbbells, I dropped one on my foot, a good fifteen pounds right across my toes. I was so upset and mad I had to sit on the floor and hold my injured foot in both hands. Only after my toes stopped throbbing did I glance into the two-way workout mirrors that lined the opposite wall. I almost didn't recognize my own face. My eyes were slits, my lips an angry line drawn above my chin. For the first time, I isolated a piece of the actual pain that Dylan Klebold must have felt, the first grain from which he formed his murderous beach.

"Mother Fucker," I said. I listened to my voice. It sounded good—as good as Robbie Fenstermaker's had sounded when he stood onstage holding a replica of a TEC-DC9 handgun with detachable metal clip. "*Mother Fucker,*" I said again. "*All you asshole jocks must die!*"

A boy straddling a free-weight bench turned to me. "Hey theater geek," he said, "shut your fat mouth."



All morning I focused on this pain, the crunch of the dumbbell landing against my toes, how I crumpled on to the neoprene mats that padded the floor and held my foot. For a few moments I forgot about myself entirely. I forgot about the other people using the new "full-security" gym, I forgot about the cameras mounted to the four corners of the room. I was simply mad and hurt. To be honest, for one split second, I felt like hitting someone, but then I realized the power of this insight. I was given this moment of pain so I could *be* Dylan Klebold in our school's play.

Between classes, I practiced my new persona. I spoke with more force, issuing my desires as statements rather than as simple questions. "Please let me through to my locker," I said to a group of freshmen con-

versing in the breezeway. To our school's librarian, seated at her desk, I said, "I'm ready to check this book out." At lunch, with Susan, I held my own place in the cafeteria line and even pushed toward the window I felt would serve us the fastest.

We sat on the far edge of the lawn, Susan and I, just inside the ten-foot fence, amongst other kids involved with theater arts. She kept staring at me, her eyes narrowed, searching for the origins of my change, but I wanted to keep the exact cause of my transformation a secret. Its power came in part from its mystery. Eventually she sat next to me and touched her shoulder to mine. "You know what would be great," she said. "It'd be great to have some place to go for lunch. Like a friend's apartment. Someplace with a bed. I have all this stress from my morning classes, and I just want to let it out."

I focused again on the pain I'd felt that morning, that white-hot flash of irrational anger. I let my voice slide into the lower register so it sounded just like Robbie Fenstermaker's. "Let's ram this burning comet of hate into Park Avenue," I said.

She turned to me, her eyes swimming in desire. "Don't do that to me now," she said. "I'm horny enough as it is."



That afternoon I asked my study hall monitor, Mrs. Glass, if I could practice my lines outside. I explained that I was now Dylan Klebold in our school's play, an important role, and that I only had a few days to memorize the lines. "Whatever," she said. "Just don't sit by the cameras. I don't need any more heat about kids ditching my class."

I sat outside the woodshop building, one of our school's camera-free zones—also a big druggie hangout. Under a maple tree I ran through those lines I didn't know by heart. I even began to stylize them in a way I thought appropriate to my character. I didn't just say, "Locked

and loaded,” like I would if I were “Library Victim Number Four.” Instead I said, “Locked,” then waited a moment before I came through with the expected close.

At rehearsal I was nervous again. I was aware how much more talented the other leads were compared to me. In the far corner, by the piano, Rosemary and Susan practiced their duet, “Calling Me Home.” On stage, Ms. Jacobs, our choreographer, walked the students who played the victims’ parents through the dance steps for the number, “When Hitler’s Birthday Comes to a Small Town Like Ours.”

At last I read through the “Manhattan Monologue,” doing my best to become Dylan Klebold. “Let people throw rocks at me,” I said. “Let them call me a wimp. We will all go down together. Then they will know how I felt—outcast, loser, a boy looking for someone to be his friend.” I stood there silently, center stage, as a hoop of tangerine light dropped down around me; then Mike Rogers, who played Eric Harris, walked onstage. We gave each other our usual greeting, “Sieg heil,” slapped hands and walked off together.

After rehearsal, I could tell Mr. Sweeney was impressed. He took me into his office—a small room at the back of the theater, furnished with two couches from the Goodwill and a desk. He patted me on the back and motioned for me to take a seat on the sofa opposite him. He held his hands before him, much in the classic manner of William Shatner, indicating he was about to say something important. “Earlier today I was worried,” he confessed. “I thought I’d need to find someone else to play Klebold. I don’t believe much in method acting. Typecasting is the practical way to go. But this afternoon—*this afternoon*, that changed. I figure if we just trim back your lines, cut one of your musical numbers, we’ll be ready to open on schedule.”

“Thanks, Mr. Sweeney,” I said. “You can count on me.”



For the next few days my life fell into a routine organized around my role as Dylan Klebold. I woke early, went through my visualization exercises, only to find my father sitting silently on the bed beside me. Not even when I showed him my algebra homework, parabolas meticulously drawn across graph paper, could I persuade him to say anything. I had breakfast with my mother, who commented on the changes she saw in me. "I'm learning to use pain," I told her, "on account of the play."

After school I went to our dress rehearsals and worked especially hard on my monologue, even though Mr. Sweeney had cut it down to just seven lines. "You'll remember it better this way," he told me. I also worked with the choir director on my big number, "Making Pipe Bombs in Eric's Garage," until I could project my pain into the notes themselves—deep, heavy sounds, the music of distress. On stage, I felt I was becoming Klebold. I resented the students who played the victims for treating me so poorly. I disliked the students who played my teachers for not taking me aside, giving me a little pep talk and trying to point me in the right direction. I began to feel significant longing as well as a deep-seated resentment for Mike Rogers, who, as my only friend, Eric Harris, was clearly manipulating me into becoming his sidekick in the school shooting.

Everyone was impressed, even Robbie Fenstermaker, my predecessor, who occasionally attended rehearsals in a partial upper-body cast. Very carefully, he laid his good arm across my shoulders. "You're okay," he said. "You're not as much of a puss as I thought."

After the long weekend rehearsals, I felt the spirit of Klebold follow me outside the theater and into my regular life as a student. I intentionally spilled coffee on one page of my algebra homework. I showed up late to Social Studies two days in a row. In the gym, I mimicked noises of impatience when larger boys monopolized workout stations I wanted to use. On Wednesday, between classes, while focusing again on the incident with the dumbbells, I felt a regret open inside of me, a dark,

soulful longing for a missing piece of my childhood. In that moment, I understood that this was how the rest of the world felt about their existence, this longing, this sorrow I had learned to manage through creative visualization techniques my mother learned about at the community college.

After rehearsal I always went home with Susan, who turned out to be my biggest fan. Virtually every afternoon, she asked me to recite my lines, to strut around like I was Klebold himself ready to storm into the school cafeteria. If I was feeling especially randy, I'd run through a piece of the "Manhattan Monologue" or list off two or three household items you could use to make a pipe bomb. As my reward, she'd strip off her clothes, garment by garment, until we were naked inside her mother's bed, having sex, then watching the Playboy Channel. By now I had a fair knowledge of the Playboy Channel. My favorite segments involved Mandy and Sandy, the Reinholt twins, demonstrating advanced Tai Chi movements in the nude.

On the night before our play opened, my mother confronted me about my behavior. "You've been walking around here like you own this place," she said. She crossed her arms, then uncrossed them. She was dressed in one of her shell pink suits. Shell pink was another recommended color for women in her field. "Your entire attitude has changed. I sense an anger coming from you, an anger I don't believe you're entirely in control of."

"It's not me, Mom. I'm practicing for the school play. I'm Dylan Klebold now. It's a big role. He carries a gun."

We walked to the living room couch and sat down. In recent years, I'd learned a great deal about life from her: how to handle anger, loss, a shrinking sense of yourself in the new world order. The trick to happiness, she'd once told me, was to realize you were no more important than anyone else. Our big mission in life was to get along peacefully with people different than us. In the tradition of these earlier lessons,

that afternoon she told me, “You need to keep your emotions in check. We live in an age where we must put aside our own troubles so that everyone feels comfortable and safe.” She placed her hand on my shoulder, a kind, disarming gesture I imagined was very effective with her clients at work. “You’ve been brooding around this house for over a week.”

“I just want to be good in the school play,” I said. “As good as Robbie Fenstermaker.”

“You shouldn’t hold yourself up to the standards set by others.”

“But I do. I don’t want everyone to think I’m a wuss.”

“No one thinks you’re a wuss. And if they do, you can tell yourself, Self, I’m not a wuss no matter what people think. That was your father’s problem. He cared too much what other people thought and didn’t know how to find the peace that was inside him all along.”

That night I felt a strong discontent settle into my heart, the sense that I was living in a very small box—a comfortable box, furnished with a nice bed, nice bookshelves, a faux-antique lacquered desk where I did my homework, but a *small* box nonetheless. In my dream, I walked along a corridor lined with security cameras until I came to a white sand beach where I saw my father in his red Hawaiian shirt drinking a piña colada from a plastic cup. The sun slanted down onto my face, and in the distance, small waves curved ashore. “Don’t be such an asshole,” my father said to me. “Clearly Burma is the way to go.” He was trying to hand a piña colada to me when I slipped away from the beach and into the darkness that marked the general landscape of my dreams.

In the morning, as I imagined my father sitting next to me on the bed, he was silent again, not the chummy, free-speaking individual I’d seen the night before. He didn’t even look at me. When I walked in front of him, he offered me an expression of wide-eyed condolence before he patted his pockets in hopes of finding a new pack of smokes. In the shower, I practiced my two songs for the play, and when I returned, I found not only my father but the transparent image of Dylan Klebold

sitting beside him on my bed. Klebold wore a black coat and sweater and had two bandoliers of ammo draped across his chest. He leveled me with his eyes, one of them discolored with a bruise. I could tell he was about to leave by the way his form kept growing lighter, but I asked him to stay, to tell me what I needed to know to be him on stage.

“Be me?” he laughed. “You have no idea how to be me. You drop a dumbbell on your foot. You think that’s insight. You think that’s pain. Ha. I wanted just one good friend. A friend to sit with me through the long, dark hours of the night. And when I find him, he turns out be a psycho-Nazi, intent on dragging my sorry ass down to the seventh level of hell. Go shove that in your school’s piano and sing about it.”

With that he was gone. My father gave me that sorrowful look once more before his body dissolved into the early morning light as well. I sat on the floor stunned. I felt empty, much like my mother must have felt when my father left, like someone had scraped my insides out with a stick.

In the gym, I waited for two football players to finish with the bench press. After five minutes I made my usual noises of impatience, but they pretended I wasn’t there. One said, “You hear something?” The other responded, “Cut the comedy and throw on another ten pounds.” In the breezeway I told a group of freshman to move away from my locker, only to have one respond, “Oh, bite me.” In the cafeteria, I tried to push toward the fast window, only to have some girl elbow me in the spleen so hard I nearly doubled over.

Clearly I’d lost my connection to Klebold, that gossamer string that had tied our two hearts together for the past week. He’d appeared in my room just long enough to claim whatever part of him I’d found, then leave again. While sitting on the lawn with Susan, I did my absolute best to call up my Kleboldian self, to drag it up from the seventh level of hell and return it to its rightful place inside my chest. I recalled the exact details of the dumbbell falling on my foot, how I crumpled on

to the neoprene mat so angry I could hit someone. I imagined the correct sound of Klebold's voice, the repressed edge of anger evident in it. When I was so focused I could almost hear it, I said, "Mother Fucker, this cheeseburger is a little cold."

Susan deadpanned me, her eyes entirely absent of lust. "Hey," she said, "are you coming down with something? You sound like you are. Maybe we shouldn't screw around today. I need to sound good tonight. I'm sending the video off with my Rutgers application." She scooped the remains of her lunch into a bag and slid away from me.

That afternoon at our final rehearsal we walked through each scene, practicing our lines and dance numbers, but saving our singing voices for the actual performance. I could tell Mr. Sweeney was disappointed in me because my voice wasn't right; neither were my gestures. I knew all my lines, but when I said them I sounded like "Library Victim Number Four," not Dylan Klebold. Mr. Sweeney didn't say anything, though. He kept glancing toward the theater seats, all of which were empty except for two. Reporters from the local *Sun-Times* sat quietly in the second row, yellow legal pads in their laps, expressions of guarded disbelief mapped across their faces. Mr. Sweeney couldn't have been more delighted. Between acts, while standing in the wings, I heard him tell Robbie, "You get attention any way you can."

At the intermission, he stepped to center stage and said what he usually did about our play, that it was a cautionary tale designed to expose real-world violence as the unacknowledged form of entertainment it had become. He was joined by Mr. Dickerson, vice president of the SafeCampus Corporation, who said how proud he was to sponsor a play with such vision, such enthusiasm for the high-tech, fully monitored world of the future. He told the reporters about the security retrofitting his company had already completed at our school. "With cameras like these in virtually every hallway, no crazed mutant is going to mow these kids down in an ambush. Ain't that right, kids?" We all said, "Yeah," as

we'd been directed to do. He smiled while one of the reporters took his picture, the eight library victims arranged in a semicircle behind him.

All through my "Manhattan Monologue" I was nervous. I said my lines as best I could, while Mr. Sweeney projected his slides onto the white screen above me and the students who played the victims formed a row and pretended to hum the chorus of future dread, a number that had been significantly shortened so as to match the new length of my speech. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Susan. She wore her striped sweater, her hands clasped behind her back. Like the other victims she pressed her lips together, though did not actually hum. How I wanted to impress her, to let her know we could find something in this play, some memory we could hold on to, a piece of our lives stitched together, but after rehearsal I didn't find her outside the girls' dressing room. Nor did I find her in Mr. Sweeney's office thumbing through those acting magazines she so liked to read.

I knew why she'd left. Of course I did. Because I wasn't the actor she'd hoped I'd be. During our one-hour evening break, I walked aimlessly around our school, past Officer Brubaker's security substation, past my clear plastic locker, past the half-completed kennel where our school planned to house a watchdog. I sat in the Humanities Courtyard beside a maple tree and asked Dylan Klebold to return to me. *I will be your friend*, I told him. *I will listen to you through the long, dark hours of the night.*

Across the courtyard, beneath a hand-painted banner the pep squad had posted for our football team, he appeared, translucent and fading, dressed in his black coat and sweater, his eye socket still bruised, his arms crossed. I walked slowly toward him, transfixed by the see-through iridescence of his face. He regarded me differently this time, his eyes wide, reconsidering. I saw he was a little like me, somewhat cautious, perhaps lonely, yet without anyone like Susan to help get him through those especially tough days.

I stopped a good ten feet from him because his form was growing dimmer. “What do you want?” he asked.

“To do a good job in the school play,” I said, but he could tell I wanted other things as well.

“Experience doesn’t come cheap.”

“I know,” I said. “I realize that.” I started toward him again, his brown eyes fixed on me, an expression of pity falling across his face. He stood very still, arms at his side, not angry anymore, but sad for some reason. He vanished before I could reach him, leaving me alone with the security cameras and trash cans, early lines of moonlight washing the ground at my feet.



By the time I returned to the drama wing, Susan was already in the girls’ dressing room being fitted with blood packs. Outside the theater parents lined up, as did a few reviewers, most of them milling around an information booth staffed by representatives of the SafeCampus Corporation. I went to the boys’ dressing room, where Mr. Sweeney handed me a black sweater very close in design to the one Klebold had worn in the Humanities Courtyard earlier that evening. He reminded me where my two weapons were kept, the TEC-DC9 and a shotgun with the stock and barrel sawed off, then handed me a clear plastic bag filled with carpenter’s nails and another filled with bits of colored plastic made to look like broken glass. I was supposed to carry these props into “Eric’s Garage” when I walked on stage for the first time.

Clearly he must have sensed how nervous I was, reviewing my lines, looking for Susan when I could. From behind the curtains, I saw my mother in the third row, her hands clasping a congratulatory Hallmark card she had most likely signed earlier that day. Seeing her there, all pretty, waiting for my big performance, I felt bad all of a sudden because my father hadn’t said a word to me all week, not even some-

thing as casual as “Break a leg, Kid,” which was the type of thing he liked to say.

As the houselights dimmed, Mr. Dickerson took center stage. He introduced the play, repeating a number of things Mr. Sweeney had said that afternoon about violence and the role of musical theater, but concluded by saying, “Tonight’s play has reminded me of the important service SafeCampus can offer to schools like yours all across the country.”

As the curtains swung open, I can’t tell you how nervous I was. I stood in the wings and watched the first act, the students who played the victims’ parents sing “When Hitler’s Birthday Comes to a Small Town Like Ours.” Backstage, I looked for Susan. Twice I took small sips of water from our drinking fountain, even though Mr. Sweeney had warned us against this. Again I asked Klebold to return to me, to be with me tonight so I wouldn’t be nervous, so I could say my lines as I had the week before.

While I waited for him to appear among the pulleys and ropes, I felt a hand on my shoulder—Mr. Sweeney’s hand. How glad I was he was there with me, among the props constructed for “The Library” scene. He put his arm around me, just like I visualized my own father doing on those mornings when I had a big test or a student presentation. “You’re getting nervous,” he said, “aren’t you?”

“A little,” I confessed. “But I want to do a good job.”

“I know you do.” He guided me out of the shadows and toward the sound booth. From the music, I knew the time had almost arrived for me to step on stage, to claim the role as best I could. “Sometimes when I’m nervous,” he said, “I picture something that motivates me. Like my name on an off-Broadway marquee. Nothing fancy, just small letters nicely fixed above the box office.” He pulled me to his side, a very warm gesture, but as he did I saw Susan down the hall. We were at the exact right angle to see into the makeup room. She was examining herself in the mirror, her hair pulled into a ponytail, her face dusted with powder.

Beside her was Robbie Fenstermaker, his partial upper-body cast holding more student signatures than all three of my high school yearbooks combined. Then he did something odd, Robbie did; he slipped his good arm around Susan's waist very gently, so that she turned to him, her eyes wide and happy, just like they were in her mother's bedroom when she looked at me.

"Clearly," Mr. Sweeney continued, "you were the best choice for an understudy. I'm very glad you decided to take this role." He moved me toward the stage, but I kept glancing at the makeup room, my eyes darting around the other students in hopes that I might glimpse Susan again. As we waited in the wings, listening to Mike Rogers sing the song of teenaged hate, a feeling of rejection rushed into my heart, a feeling so strong I couldn't push it away no matter how hard I tried. In the audience, parents watched the stage intently. Around me students glanced my way with a certain callousness I'd never noticed before.

When the song changed keys, Mr. Sweeney handed me my bags of carpenter's nails and colored plastic. "You're the man," he said and gave me a little push. With the spotlight on me I walked across the stage, doing my best to move with determination and purpose; then I sat on a bench and pretended to empty Fourth of July fireworks into cylinders made of steel. When I started singing, my voice was louder than I expected, filled with a heartache so large Mike Rogers looked somewhat surprised to find this sound coming from me. I let this feeling swoop down around me, an arsenal of notes falling from my lips. I didn't care who heard: my mother, Susan, even Mr. Sweeney. I was doing my best, trying to remember what to say, where to stand, but in my mind, I was already at home, hoping Klebold would return so he could tell me what these feelings meant, where I should go from here.