“Mr. D”

He told them he loved them. Each and every one of them. He spoke without notes but chose his words carefully. Frank DeAngelis waited out the pom-pom routines, the academic awards, and the student-made videos. After an hour of revelry, the short, middle-aged man strode across the gleaming basketball court to address his student body. He took his time. He smiled as he passed the marching band, the cheerleaders, and the Rebels logo painted beneath flowing banners proclaiming recent sports victories. He faced two thousand hyped-up high school students in the wooden bleachers and they gave him their full attention. Then he told them how much they meant to him. How his heart would break to lose just one of them.

It was a peculiar sentiment for an administrator to express to an assembly of teenagers. But Frank DeAngelis had been a coach longer than a principal, and he earnestly believed in motivation by candor. He had coached football and baseball for sixteen years, but he looked like a wrestler: compact body with the bearing of a Marine, but without the bluster. He tried to play down his coaching past, but he exuded it.

You could hear the fear in his voice. He didn't try to hide it, and he didn't try to fight back the tears that welled up in his eyes. And he got away with it. Those kids could sniff out a phony with one whiff and convey displeasure with snickers and fumbling and an audible current of unrest. But they adored Mr. D. He could say almost anything to his students, precisely because he did. He didn't hold back, he didn't sugarcoat it, and he didn't dumb it down. On Friday morning, April 16, 1999, Principal Frank DeAngelis was an utterly transparent man.

Every student in the gymnasium understood Mr. D's message. There were fewer than thirty-six hours until the junior-senior prom, meaning lots of drinking and lots of driving. Lecturing the kids would just provoke eye rolling, so instead he copped to three tragedies in his own life. His buddy from college had been killed in a motorcycle accident. "I can remember being in the waiting room, looking at his blood," he said. "So don't tell me it can't happen." He described holding his teenage daughter in his arms after her friend died in a flaming wreck. The hardest had been gathering the Columbine baseball team to tell them one of their buddies had lost control of his car. He choked up again. "I do not want to attend another memorial service."

"Look to your left," he told them. "Look to your right." He instructed them to study the smiling faces and then close their eyes and imagine one of them gone. He told them to repeat after him: "I am a valued member of Columbine High School. And I'm not in this alone." That's when he told them he loved them, as he always did.

"Open your eyes," he said. "I want to see each and every one of your bright, smiling faces again Monday morning."
He paused. "When you're thinking about doing something that could get you in trouble, remember, I care about you," he said. "I love you, but remember, I want us all together. We are one large family, we are—"

He left the phrase dangling. That was the students' signal. They leapt to their feet and yelled: "COL-um-BINE!"

Ivory Moore, a dynamo of a teacher and a crowd rouser, ran out and yelled, "We are COL-um-BINE."

COL-um-BINE!

It was louder now, and their fists were pumping in the air.

"COL-um-BINE!"

"COL-um-BINE!"

"COL-um-BINE!"

"COL-um-BINE!" Louder, faster, harder, faster—he whipped them into a frenzy. Then he let them go.

They spilled into the hallways to wrap up one last day of classes. Just a few hours until the big weekend.

* * *

All two thousand students would return safely on Monday morning, after the prom. But the following afternoon, Tuesday, April 20, 1999, twenty-four of Mr. D's kids and faculty members would be loaded into ambulances and rushed to hospitals. Thirteen bodies would remain in the building and two more on the grounds. It would be the worst school shooting in American history—a characterization that would have appalled the boys just then finalizing their plans.
“Help Is on the Way”

This takes place on April 20, 1999, seven minutes after the shooting started.

Dave Sanders was just a few feet from safety when the first shot hit him. He saw the killers, spun around, and ran for the corner, trying to save a few more students on the way there. One bullet got him in the back. It tore through his rib cage and exited through his chest. The other bullet entered through the side of his neck and came out his mouth, lacerating his tongue and shattering several teeth. The neck wound opened up one of his carotid arteries, the major blood routes to the brain. The shot to his back clipped his subclavian vein, a major vessel back to the heart. There was a lot of blood.

Dave crashed into the lockers, then collapsed on the carpet. Fellow teacher Rich Long and most of the students dove for the floor. Now Dave was really desperate.

"He was on his elbows trying to direct kids," one senior said.

Eric and Dylan were both firing. They were lobbing pipe bombs down the length of the hall.

"Dave, you've got to get up!" Rich yelled. "We've got to get out of here."

Dave pulled himself up, staggered a few feet round the corner. Rich hurried over. As soon as he was out of the line of fire, he ducked his shoulder under Dave's arm. Another teacher got Dave from the other side, and they dragged him to the science wing, just a dozen feet away.

They moved past the first and second classrooms, then entered Science Room 3. The room was full of students. Dave collapsed again, face-first, in the front of the room. "He left a couple of teeth where he landed," a freshman girl said.

They got Dave into a chair. "Rich, I'm not doing so well," he said.

Kent Friesen, another teacher with Dave, went for immediate assistance. He ran into a nearby lab, where more students were huddled. "Who knows first aid?" he asked.

Aaron Hancey, a junior and an Eagle Scout, stepped up.

"Come with me," Friesen said. Then all hell seemed to break loose out in the hallway.

"I could feel it through the walls," Aaron said. "With each [blast], I could feel the walls move." He was scared to go out there. But Friesen checked for shooters, bolted
down the corridor, and Aaron followed.

Aaron ran through a rapid inspection of Dave’s condition: breathing steady, airway clear, skin warm, shoulder broken, gaping wounds, heavy blood loss. Aaron stripped off his own white Adidas T-shirt to stanch the flow. Other boys volunteered their shirts. He tore several into bandage strips, and improvised a few tourniquets. He bundled others together into a pillow.

"I've got to go, I've got to go," Dave said. He tried to stand, but failed.

Teachers attended to the students. They flipped over tables to barricade the door. They opened a partition in back to an adjoining science lab, and several kids rushed to the center, furthest from either door. The gunfire and explosions continued. A fire erupted in a nearby room and a teacher grabbed a fire extinguisher to put it out. Screams filtered down the hall from the library. It was nothing like screams Marjorie Lindholm had heard before—screams like "when people are being tortured," she said.

"It was like they were carrying out executions," another boy in the room said. "You would hear a shot. Then there would be quiet. Then another shot. Bam. Bam. Bam."

The screaming and gunfire both stopped. Silence, then more explosions. On and off and on again. The fire alarm began blaring. It was earsplitting pitch designed to force people out of the building through sheer pain. The teachers and students could barely hear anything over the alarm’s shriek, but could just make out the steady flap of helicopters outside.

Someone turned on the giant TV suspended from the ceiling. They kept the volume off but the subtitles on. It was their school, from the outside. Much of the class was transfixed at first, but attention waned quickly. Nobody seemed to know anything.

Aaron called his father, who used another line to call 911, so that paramedics could ask questions and relay instructions. Several other students and teachers called the cops. The science room group remained linked to authorities via multiple channels throughout the afternoon.

Sophomore Kevin Starkey, also an Eagle Scout, assisted Aaron. "You're doing all right," the boys whispered to Dave. "They're coming. Just hold on. You can do it." They took turns applying pressure, digging their palms into his wounds.

"I need help," Dave said. "I've got to get out of here."

"Help is on the way," Aaron assured him.

Aaron believed it was. Law enforcement was first alerted to Dave’s predicament around 11:45. Dispatchers began responding that help was "on the way" and would
arrive "in about 10 minutes." The assurances were repeated for more than three hours, along with orders that no one leave the room under any circumstances. The 911 operator instructed the group to open the door briefly: They were to tie a red shirt around the doorknob in the hallway. The SWAT team would look for it to identify the room. There was a lot of dissent about that directive in Science Room 3. Wouldn’t a red flag also attract the killers? And who was going to step out into that hallway? They decided to obey. Someone volunteered to tie the shirt to the doorknob. Around noon, teacher Doug Johnson wrote "1 BLEEDING TO DEATH" on the white board and moved it to the window, just to be sure.

Each time Aaron and Kevin switched positions, they felt Dave’s skin grow a little colder. He was losing color, taking on a bluish cast. Where are the paramedics? they wondered. When would the 10 minutes be up? Dave’s breathing began to slow. He drifted in and out. Aaron and Kevin rolled him gently on the tile floor to keep him conscious and to keep his airway clear. He couldn’t remain on his back for very long, or he would choke on his own blood.

They pulled out wool safety blankets from a first-aid closet and wrapped him up to keep him warm. They asked him about coaching, teaching, anything to keep him engaged and stave off shock. They slipped out his wallet out and began showing him pictures.

"Is this your wife?"

"Yes."

"What’s your wife’s name?"

"Linda."

He had lots of pictures and they used them all. They talked about his daughters and grandchildren. "These people love you," the boys said. "This is why you need to live."

Aaron and Kevin grew desperate. The treatment had exceeded scouting instruction. "You’re trained to deal with broken arms, broken limbs, cuts and scrapes—stuff you get on a camping trip," Aaron said. "You never train for gunshot wounds."

Eventually, Aaron and Kevin lost the struggle to keep Dave conscious. "I’m not going to make it," Dave said. "Tell my girls I love them."
Just before the Halloween of his senior year, Eric Harris began assembling his arsenal. He sat down in his room with a stack of fireworks, split each one down the side, and tapped the shiny black powder into a coffee can. Once he had a sufficient volume, he tipped the can and guided a fine little trickle into a carbon dioxide cartridge. He measured it out carefully, almost to the rim. Then he applied a wick, sealed it off and set it aside. One cricket, ready for detonation. He was pleased with his work. He assembled nine more.

The pipe bombs required a lot more gunpowder, and a PVC pipe to house each one. Eric assembled four of those that day. The first three he designated the Alpha batch. Not bad, but he could do better. He set them aside and tried a different approach. He built just one bomb for the Beta batch. Better. Still room for improvement. That was enough for one day.

Eric drew up a chart to record his production data. He set up columns to log each batch by name, size, quantity, shrapnel content, and power load. Then he rated his work. Six of his eight batches would earn an "excellent" assessment. His worst performance was "O.K."

The next day, Eric got right back to it, producing six more pipe bombs—the rest of the Beta batch. Later, he would create Charlie, Delta, Echo and Foxtrot, using military lingo for all of the batches, except that soldiers use Bravo, not Beta.

Eric penned nearly a dozen new journal entries in the next two months. "I have a goal to destroy as much as possible," he wrote, "so I must not be sidetracked by my feelings of sympathy, mercy, or any of that."

It was a mark of Eric's ruthlessness that he comprehended the pain and consciously fought the urge to spare it. "I will force myself to believe that everyone is just another monster from Doom," he wrote. "I have to turn off my feelings."

Keep one thing in mind, he said: he wanted to burn the world. That would be hard. He had begun producing the explosives, and it was a lot of work. Ten pipe bombs and ten puny crickets after two days' effort. Those would not destroy much. "God I want to torch and level everything in this whole f---ing area," he said, "but bombs of that size are hard to make."

Eric took a few moments to enjoy the dream. He envisioned half of Denver on fire: napalm streams eating the skin off skyscrapers, explosive gas tanks ripping through
residential garages. Napalm recipes were available online. The ingredients were readily attainable. But he had to be realistic. "It will be very tricky getting all of our supplies, explosives, weaponry, ammo, and then hiding it all and then actually planting it all," he said. A lot could go wrong in the next six months, and if they did get busted, "we start killing then and there. I aint going out without a fight."

Eric repeated that last line almost verbatim in an English essay. The assignment was to react to a quote from literature, and Eric had chosen this line from Euripides' tragedy Medea: "no, like some yellow-eyed beast that has killed its hunters let me lie down on the hounds' bodies and the broken spears." Medea was declaring that she would die fighting, Eric wrote. They would never take her without a struggle. He repeated that sentiment seven times in a page and a quarter. He described Medea as brave and courageous, tough and strong and hard as stone. It is one of the most impassioned public essays Eric left behind.

Eric dreamed big, but settled for reality. Humans meant nothing; Eric was superior and determined to prove it. Watching us suffer would be enjoyable. Every week he devised colorful new scenarios: crashing planes into buildings, igniting blocks of skyscrapers, ejecting people into outer space. But the objective never wavered: kill as many as possible, as dramatically as imaginable.

In a perfect world, Eric would extinguish the species. Eric was a practical kid, though. The planet was beyond him; even a block of Denver high-rises was out of reach. But he could pull off a high school.