

WIJ ZIJN MAAR WIJ ZIJN NIET GESCHIFT, Chapter 1

(We are but we aren't psycho)

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This book began in April 2007. A psychotic student, Seung-Hui Cho, then killed thirty-two people at a university in America and committed suicide; in a video message he said he was a martyr and compared himself to the two perpetrators of Columbine.

Ah yes, *Columbine* - how was that again? Hadn't that been almost ten years ago, a shooting by students at their high school in an affluent suburb of Denver, in Colorado? I had once spent a day in Denver, and what I remembered best was the fresh, pure air (it's a mile above sea level there) where something dark like that did not fit. Those boys had killed less people than Cho but still, shockingly many: between ten and twenty, if I wasn't mistaken. They too, had killed themselves. And hadn't they asked a few students whether they believed in God, and killed the ones who said Yes?

One of those boys had had an unusual name, which I even remembered: Dylan Klebold. I also remembered a thought I'd had, and now had again: that this 'Dylan' made his parents even more tragic - you choose a name like that hoping your child will some day create something of value. Hadn't he been dragged into it by the other boy? That one had a common name, which I did not remember. And hadn't they been part of a group of outcasts who wore long black trenchcoats, and who had announced the shooting on their website? The Trenchcoat Mafia - I even remembered that.

Later, when I saw *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore's anti-gun documentary, I had learned the most bizarre detail of the shooting. Before going to school for their massacre, the boys had gone bowling. What on earth was I supposed to think of that? Did they love bowling so much they had wanted to play one final time? Had it been a way to muster courage, a ritual? Had they really played; had they cared who won?

Their suicide was unsettling because it was a double suicide - after the insanity of shooting all those children, there had been a moment of calm consideration: now is the moment.

I couldn't remember anything about a motive. I assumed they had been bullied and had taken out their anger on random targets, like Cho. But Cho was crazy, he felt despised by everyone and everything, and had retreated into an unbreakable silence. What stood out about Columbine, was that those boys had been normal, as far as you can be normal when you do something like that. The fact alone that they were a pair: there had to have been a reasoning they both thought made sense.

I decided to get some information about Columbine.

The boy with the common name was Eric Harris. He had just turned eighteen; Dylan Klebold was seventeen and a half. The shooting, which they had prepared for a year, was on Tuesday 20 April 1999, at Columbine High School in Littleton, a suburb of Denver. They started shooting outside during lunch; killed two students there; went inside; killed a teacher in a hallway; went to the library and killed ten students. They laughed and hooted. This happened in a quarter of an hour; beside

the thirteen dead, there were twenty-one injured. In the next half hour, they roamed the school, shooting and throwing bombs, but without hurting anyone, even if some two hundred students and staff were not very well hidden in classrooms and other rooms. In the end, they went back to the library, and killed themselves. With fifteen dead, Columbine was the worst school shooting ever, in the USA or anywhere.

In that first piece I read, the Wikipedia-article, there were a few surprises. Eric and Dylan had not gone bowling that morning; they had asked one girl whether she believed in God, but had not killed her when she said Yes; the shooting had not been announced on the internet; the Trenchcoat Mafia did exist, but had not been involved directly. And most of all: what they did was not what they had planned - to blow up the school and kill hundreds. But their time-bombs failed, and they had to settle for what should have been secondary: shooting.

America was dumbfounded. President Clinton spoke on tv; Vice President Gore and Attorney General Reno visited Littleton; the funeral of Rachel Scott, the first victim, was broadcast nationally. The country was horrified by the enormity, the incomprehensibility, the absurdity of the shooting, right in the middle of Pleasantville, by two intelligent boys from intact, loving, upper middle class families.

And now Columbine belongs, with Pearl Harbor, the Kennedy assassination, Oklahoma City and 9/11, to the great insults America has had to endure. With the difference that the other perpetrators came from outside or could be seen as un-American: Japanese, a shady communist, government-haters, Arabs. Columbine struck at the American Dream from within that Dream itself.

Not realising it right away, I had chosen a good moment to become interested in Columbine. A lot had already been written about it, and many documents had already been released, but only in July 2006 had that happened to the writings of Eric and Dylan themselves: school papers, planners, internet chats, mails and letters, web pages and most importantly: their diaries. They had both kept a diary right up to the shooting - Dylan for two years, Eric for one. In the last month, they had also filmed a joint video diary, about their preparations and insights, but as of January 2012 when I concluded this book, these had not yet been released - there are a few incomplete transcriptions.

The more I delved into Columbine, the more I discovered that was stranger than the bowling myth - and the more I realised there was no straightforward explanation why they did it. They rant about anger and revenge, natural selection, the non-existence of Good and Evil, the wish to be united in death with a girl, the brainless robots and zombies of our society who do not deserve to live - but it all seems a rationalization of a drive they do not really understand themselves.

Half a year before the shooting, which he already envisions clearly, Eric imagines the stupefaction there will be. 'Someone's bound to say "what were they thinking?" he writes in his diary. But he does not answer the question, and immediately changes the subject, continuing about his goal ('to destroy as much as possible') and how he thinks he will be able to kill: he will force himself to see the victims as monsters from *Doom* - the violent videogame Dylan and he played passionately.

Columbine was not the first absurd massacre, or the first school shooting, but it has become the template for this kind of thing. It lives on in books, films, songs, plays, games, on internet and tv, in new laws, religious movements, an anti-gun lobby - and in new shootings. The wish to be like Eric and Dylan has cost over a hundred high school and university students their lives, in America and elsewhere. After 1999, there has hardly been a school shooting (or a thwarted plan for one) where the killers, or else the media, did not mention Columbine. And the media perpetuate the myths. After a shooting in the Netherlands on 9 April 2011 (six killed) by a 24-year old who called Eric and Dylan his heroes, every Dutch newspaper mentioned the girl who had said Yes and had been killed for that. That the day of the shooting would have been Eric Harris's thirtieth birthday went unnoticed.

On the internet, discussion boards and worshipping sites about Eric and Dylan are thriving even after thirteen years; the stream of fiction and non-fiction continues and is international. In 2004 there was a Dutch young adults' novel; in 2006 an Indonesian film; in 2007 a French documentary and an Estonian film; in 2009 a book and a radio documentary in Germany, a Polish film, and two books in America, both titled *Columbine*, by Jeff Kass and Dave Cullen, and both meant to be comprehensive overviews.

Why would I add anything to all that? Because the writer writes about what fascinates him, even if others have already done so. But also because the book *Columbine* deserves, hadn't been written yet - a book in which the whole case is told and analyzed truthfully and painstakingly, without an agenda.

That is the book I wrote - based on, mainly, the primary sources available on the internet; 26000-plus pages of the official police documents, the writings of the two, the videos they made for school, their 'Diversion' reports (a little over a year before the shooting they had been caught when they broke into a van), articles in the local press, reports by commissions.

I was surprised at how many misconceptions (in the general public, books, and even the police report) I was able to point out, how many new things I discovered, and how close I came to understanding Columbine.