

# Thresholds of Violence

by Malcolm Gladwell

*How school shootings catch on.*



*In the years since Columbine, school shootings changed; they became ritualized.  
Illustration by Oliver Munday*

On the evening of April 29th last year, in the southern Minnesota town of Waseca, a woman was doing the dishes when she looked out her kitchen window and saw a young man walking through her back yard. He was wearing a backpack and carrying a fast-food bag and was headed in the direction of the MiniMax Storage facility next to her house. Something about him didn't seem right. Why was he going through her yard instead of using the sidewalk? He

walked through puddles, not around them. He fiddled with the lock of Unit 129 as if he were trying to break in. She called the police. A group of three officers arrived and rolled up the unit's door. The young man was standing in the center. He was slight of build, with short-cropped brown hair and pale skin. Scattered around his feet was an assortment of boxes and containers: motor oil, roof cement, several Styrofoam coolers, a can of ammunition, a camouflage bag, and

cardboard boxes labelled "red iron oxide," filled with a red powder. His name was John LaDue. He was seventeen years old.

One of the officers started to pat LaDue down. According to the police report, "LaDue immediately became defensive, stating that it is his storage unit and asked what I was doing and pulling away." The officers asked him to explain what he was up to. LaDue told them to guess. Another of the officers, Tim Schroeder, said he thought LaDue was making bombs. LaDue admitted that he was, but said that he didn't want to talk about it in the storage locker. The four went back to the Waseca police station, and LaDue and Schroeder sat down together with a tape recorder between them. "What's going on today, John?" Schroeder asked. LaDue replied, "It's going to be hard for me to talk about." The interview began at 7:49 P.M. It continued for almost three hours.

He was making Molotov cocktails, LaDue said, but a deadlier variant of the traditional kind, using motor oil and tar instead of gasoline. From there, he intended to move on to bigger and more elaborate pressure-cooker bombs, of the sort used by the Tsarnaev brothers at the Boston Marathon bombing. "There are far more things out in that unit than meet the eye," he told Schroeder, listing various kinds of explosive powder, thousands of ball bearings, pipes for pipe bombs, fifteen pounds of potassium perchlorate, nine pounds of aluminum powder, and "magnesium ribbon and rust which I use to make thermite, which burns at five thousand degrees Celsius."

Schroeder asked him what his intentions were.

"I have a notebook under my bed that explains it," LaDue replied.

Schroeder: "O.K. Can you talk to me about those intentions that are in the notebook?"

LaDue: "O.K. Sometime before the end of the school year, my plan was to steal a recycling bin from the school and take one of the pressure cookers I made and put it in the hallway and blow it up during passing period time. . . . I would detonate when people were fleeing, just like the Boston bombings, and blow them up too. Then my plans were to enter and throw Molotov cocktails and pipe bombs and destroy everyone and then when the *SWAT* comes I would destroy myself."

In his bedroom, he had an SKS assault rifle with sixty rounds of ammunition, a Beretta 9-mm. handgun, a gun safe with an additional firearm, and three ready-made explosive devices. On the day of the attack, he would start with a .22-calibre rifle and move on to a shotgun, in order to prove that high-capacity assault-style rifles were unnecessary for an effective school attack.

Schroeder: "Do you have brothers and sisters?"

LaDue: "Yes, I have a sister. She's one year older than me."

Schroeder: "O.K. She goes to school too?"

LaDue: "Yes."

Schroeder: "She's a senior?"

LaDue: "She is."

Schroeder: "O.K. So you would have done this stuff while she was at school as well?"

LaDue: "I forgot to mention a detail. Before that day, I was planning to dispose of my family too."

Schroeder: "Why would you dispose of your family? What, what have they done?"

LaDue: "They did nothing wrong. I just wanted as many victims as possible."

On February 2, 1996, in Moses Lake, Washington, a fourteen-year-old named Barry Loukaitis walked into Frontier Middle School dressed in a black duster and carrying two handguns, seventy-eight rounds of ammunition, and a hunting rifle. He killed two students and wounded a third before shooting his algebra teacher in the back. In the next two years, there were six more major incidents, in quick succession: sixteen-year-old Evan Ramsey, in Bethel, Alaska; sixteen-year-old Luke Woodham, in Pearl, Mississippi; fourteen-year-old Michael Carneal, in West Paducah, Kentucky; thirteen-year-old Mitchell Johnson and eleven-year-old Andrew Golden, in Jonesboro, Arkansas; fourteen-year-old Andrew Wurst, in Edinboro, Pennsylvania; and fifteen-year-old Kip Kinkel, in Springfield, Oregon. In April of 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold launched their infamous attack on Columbine High, in Littleton, Colorado, and from there the slaughter has continued, through the thirty-two killed and seventeen wounded by Seung-Hui Cho at Virginia Tech, in 2007; the twenty-six killed by Adam Lanza at Sandy Hook Elementary School, in 2012; and the nine killed by Christopher Harper-Mercer earlier this month at Umpqua Community College, in Oregon. Since Sandy Hook, there have been

more than a hundred and forty school shootings in the United States.

School shootings are a modern phenomenon. There were scattered instances of gunmen or bombers attacking schools in the years before Barry Loukaitis, but they were lower profile. School shootings mostly involve young white men. And, not surprisingly, given the ready availability of firearms in the United States, the phenomenon is overwhelmingly American. But, beyond those facts, the great puzzle is how little school shooters fit any kind of pattern.

Evan Ramsey, who walked into his high school with a 12-gauge shotgun and killed two people, had a chaotic home life. His mother was an alcoholic who lived with a series of violent men. In one two-year stretch, he lived in ten foster homes and was both sexually and physically abused. When Evan was six, his father sent an ad to the local newspaper which it declined to publish, so he packed two guns, chained the door of the newspaper, set off smoke grenades, and held the publisher at gunpoint.

But Kip Kinkel, who shot his parents, then killed two others and wounded twenty-five at his high school, had not been traumatized. He had a loving family. He was the child of schoolteachers so beloved that seventeen hundred people came to their memorial service. Kinkel was psychotic: he thought the Chinese were preparing to attack the United States, that Disney had plans for world domination, and that the government had placed a computer chip inside his head.

Meanwhile, the architect of the Columbine killings, Eric Harris, was a classic psychopath. He was charming and manipulative. He was a habitual lawbreaker: he stole, vandalized, bought guns illegally, set

off homemade bombs, and at one point hacked into his school's computer system. He wrote "*Ich bin Gott*"—German for "I am God"—in his school planner. His journals were filled with fantasies about rape and mutilation: "I want to tear a throat out with my own teeth like a pop can. I want to gut someone with my hand, to tear a head off and rip out the heart and lungs from the neck, to stab someone in the gut, shove it up to their heart." A school shooter, it appears, could be someone who had been brutally abused by the world or someone who imagined that the world brutally abused him or someone who wanted to brutally abuse the world himself.

The LaDue case does not resolve this puzzle. LaDue doesn't hear voices. He isn't emotional or malicious or angry or vindictive. Schroeder asks him about violent games, and he says he hasn't been playing them much recently. Then they talk about violent music, and LaDue says he's been playing guitar for eight years and has little patience for the "retarded" music of "bands like Bullet for My Valentine or Asking Alexandria or some crap like that." He likes Metallica: solid, normal, old-school heavy metal. "I was not bullied at all," LaDue tells Schroeder. "I don't think I have ever been bullied in my life. . . . I have good parents. I live in a good town."

When the interview is concluded, the police drive over to see LaDue's parents. They live a few minutes away, in a tidy two-story stucco house on a corner lot. The LaDues are frantic. It is 10:30 P.M., and their son is never out past nine on a school night. His mother is trying to track him down on her laptop through his cell-phone account. They are calling all the people he has most recently texted, trying to find him. Then the police arrive with the news that their son has threatened to kill his family and blow up Waseca High School—and the LaDues are forced to account for a fact entirely outside their imagining. No, his son has never been diagnosed with

mental illness or depression, David LaDue, John's father, tells the police. He isn't taking any medication. He's never expressed a desire to hurt anyone. He spends a lot of time in front of his computer looking at YouTube videos. He likes to experiment with what his father calls his "interesting devices." He wears a lot of black. Isn't that what teen-agers do? David LaDue is desperate to come up with something—anything—to make sense of what he has just been told. "David told me that after his son had stayed with his brother for a couple of months at the beginning of last summer, he had returned proclaiming to be an atheist, stating that he no longer believed in religion," the police report says.

Then:

David LaDue also spoke of an incident when Austin Walters and John LaDue had gone deer hunting. John had reportedly shot a deer that had not died right away and had to be "finished off." David LaDue stated that he heard that Austin's cell phone was used to make a video of the deer that he felt was inappropriate, although he had never seen the video. David LaDue showed me a photo on his laptop of John LaDue leering, holding a semi-automatic rifle next to a deer that had been killed. David LaDue pointed to the picture stating that "this" was the facial expression he was talking about that he thought was concerning.

It is the best he can do.

It was the best anyone could do that night. Waseca is a community of some ten thousand people amid the cornfields of southern Minnesota: one high school, a Walmart, a beautiful lake just outside town. Minneapolis is well over an hour away. There was simply no room, in anyone's cultural understanding, for the acts John LaDue

was describing. By the end, a kind of fatigue seemed to set in, and the normal codes of Midwestern civility reasserted themselves. All that the interrogation or confession or conversation—whatever it was—between Schroeder and LaDue seems to have established is that we need a new way to make sense of the school-shooting phenomenon.

Schroeder: "Until we can figure out, ah, what exactly is where we are all at, we're just going to take you up and, um, put you in a cell, or holding cell for the time being, until we can get it figured out."

LaDue: "O.K."

Schroeder: "O.K."

LaDue: "Hmm, hmm."

Schroeder: "I'll let you put your shoes on. Yah, I'll hold on to your phone for now. . . . All right. Before we, I'll let you put your shoes on."

LaDue: "I'm wearing contacts by the way. What should I do with them?"

Schroeder: "You can keep them in."

LaDue: "O.K. . . . Are you going to handcuff me?"

Schroeder: "I am going to cuff ya."

LaDue: [inaudible]

Schroeder: "I'm going to double pat you down again."

Then, almost apologetically, he adds, "I know I already did once."

In a famous essay published four decades ago, the Stanford sociologist Mark Granovetter set out to explain a paradox: "situations where outcomes do not seem intuitively consistent with the underlying individual preferences." What explains a person or a group of people doing things that seem at odds with who they are or what they think is right? Granovetter took riots as one of his main examples, because a riot is a case of destructive violence that involves a great number of otherwise quite normal people who would not usually be disposed to violence.

Most previous explanations had focussed on explaining how someone's beliefs might be altered in the moment. An early theory was that a crowd cast a kind of intoxicating spell over its participants. Then the argument shifted to the idea that rioters might be rational actors: maybe at the moment a riot was beginning people changed their beliefs. They saw what was at stake and recalculated their estimations of the costs and benefits of taking part.

But Granovetter thought it was a mistake to focus on the decision-making processes of each rioter in isolation. In his view, a riot was not a collection of individuals, each of whom arrived independently at the decision to break windows. A riot was a social process, in which people did things in reaction to and in combination with those around them. Social processes are driven by our *thresholds*—which he defined as the number of people who need to be doing some activity before we agree to join them. In the elegant theoretical model Granovetter proposed, riots were started by

people with a threshold of zero—instigators willing to throw a rock through a window at the slightest provocation. Then comes the person who will throw a rock if someone else goes first. He has a threshold of one. Next in is the person with the threshold of two. His qualms are overcome when he sees the instigator and the instigator's accomplice. Next to him is someone with a threshold of three, who would never break windows and loot stores unless there were three people right in front of him who were already doing that—and so on up to the hundredth person, a righteous upstanding citizen who nonetheless could set his beliefs aside and grab a camera from the broken window of the electronics store if *everyone* around him was grabbing cameras from the electronics store.

Granovetter was most taken by the situations in which people did things for social reasons that went against everything they believed as individuals. "Most did not think it 'right' to commit illegal acts or even particularly want to do so," he wrote, about the findings of a study of delinquent boys. "But group interaction was such that none could admit this without loss of status; in our terms, their threshold for stealing cars is low because daring masculine acts bring status, and reluctance to join, once others have, carries the high cost of being labeled a sissy." You can't just look at an individual's norms and motives. You need to look at the *group*.

His argument has a second implication. We misleadingly use the word "copycat" to describe contagious behavior—implying that new participants in an epidemic act in a manner identical to the source of their infection. But rioters are not homogeneous. If a riot evolves as it spreads, starting with the hotheaded rock thrower and ending with the upstanding citizen, then rioters are a profoundly heterogeneous group.

Finally, Granovetter's model suggests that riots are sometimes more than spontaneous outbursts. If they evolve, it means they have depth and length and a history. Granovetter thought that the threshold hypothesis could be used to describe everything from elections to strikes, and even matters as prosaic as how people decide it's time to leave a party. He was writing in 1978, long before teen-age boys made a habit of wandering through their high schools with assault rifles. But what if the way to explain the school-shooting epidemic is to go back and use the Granovetterian model—to think of it as a slow-motion, ever-evolving riot, in which each new participant's action makes sense in reaction to and in combination with those who came before?

The first seven major shooting cases—Loukaitis, Ramsey, Woodham, Carneal, Johnson and Golden, Wurst, and Kinkel—were disconnected and idiosyncratic. Loukaitis was obsessed with Stephen King's novel "Rage" (written under King's pseudonym Richard Bachman), about a high-school student who kills his algebra teacher with a handgun. Kip Kinkel, on the morning of his attack, played Wagner's "Liebestod" aria over and over. Evan Ramsey's father thought his son was under the influence of the video game Doom. The parents of several of Michael Carneal's victims sued the makers and distributors of the movie "The Basketball Diaries."

Then came Columbine. The sociologist Ralph Larkin argues that Harris and Klebold laid down the "cultural script" for the next generation of shooters. They had a Web site. They made home movies starring themselves as hit men. They wrote lengthy manifestos. They recorded their "basement tapes." Their motivations were spelled out with grandiose specificity: Harris said he wanted to "kick-start a revolution." Larkin looked at the twelve

major school shootings in the United States in the eight years after Columbine, and he found that in eight of those subsequent cases the shooters made explicit reference to Harris and Klebold. Of the eleven school shootings outside the United States between 1999 and 2007, Larkin says six were plainly versions of Columbine; of the eleven cases of thwarted shootings in the same period, Larkin says all were Columbine-inspired.

Along the same lines, the sociologist Nathalie E. Paton has analyzed the online videos created by post-Columbine shooters and found a recurring set of stylized images: a moment where the killer points his gun at the camera, then at his own temple, and then spreads his arms wide with a gun in each hand; the closeup; the wave goodbye at the end. "School shooters explicitly name or represent each other," she writes. She mentions one who "refers to Cho as a brother-in-arms"; another who "points out that his cultural tastes are like those of 'Eric and Dylan' "; a third who "uses images from the Columbine shooting surveillance camera and devotes several videos to the Columbine killers." And she notes, "This aspect underlines the fact that the boys actively take part in associating themselves to a group."

Larkin and Paton are describing the dynamics of Granovetter's threshold model of group behavior. Luke Woodham, the third in this progression, details in his journal how he and a friend tortured his dog, Sparkle: "I will never forget the howl she made. It sounded almost human. We laughed and hit her hard." A low-threshold participant like Woodham didn't need anyone to model his act of violence for him: his imagination was more than up to the task.

But compare him to a post-Columbine shooter like Darion Aguilar, the nineteen-year-old who last year killed two people in a skate

shop in a Maryland shopping mall before killing himself. Aguilar wanted to be a chef. He had a passion for plant biology. He was quiet, but not marginalized or bullied. “He was a good person. He always believe[d] in inner peace,” a friend of his told the *Washington Post*. “He was just a really funny guy.” In the months before the shooting, he went to a doctor, complaining of hearing voices—but his voices were, according to police, “non-specific, non-violent and really not directing him to do anything.” The kid who wants to be a chef and hears “non-specific, non-violent” voices requires a finely elaborated script in order to carry out his attack. That’s what Paton and Larkin mean: the effect of Harris and Klebold’s example was to make it possible for people with far higher thresholds—boys who would ordinarily never think of firing a weapon at their classmates—to join in the riot. Aguilar dressed up like Eric Harris. He used the same weapons as Harris. He wore a backpack like Harris’s. He hid in the changing room of the store until 11:14 *a.m.*—the precise time when the Columbine incident began—and then came out shooting. A few months later, Aaron Ybarra walked onto the campus of Seattle Pacific University and shot three people, one fatally. Afterward, he told police that he could never have done it without “the guidance of, of Eric Harris and Seung-Hui Cho in my head. . . .Especially, Eric Harris, he was a, oh, man he was a master of all shooters.”

Between Columbine and Aaron Ybarra, the riot changed: it became more and more self-referential, more ritualized, more and more about identification with the school-shooting tradition. Eric Harris wanted to start a revolution. Aguilar and Ybarra wanted to join one. Harris saw himself as a hero. Aguilar and Ybarra were hero-worshippers.

Now imagine that the riot takes a big step further along the progression—to someone with an even higher threshold, for whom the group identification and immersion in the culture of school shooting are even more dominant considerations. That’s John LaDue. “There is one that you probably never heard of like back in 1927 and his name was Andrew Kehoe,” LaDue tells Schroeder. “He killed like forty-five with, like, dynamite and stuff.” Ybarra was a student of Virginia Tech and Columbine. LaDue is a scholar of the genre, who speaks of his influences the way a budding filmmaker might talk about Fellini or Bergman. “The other one was Charles Whitman. I don’t know if you knew who that was. He was who they called the sniper at the Austin Texas University. He was an ex-marine. He got like sixteen, quite impressive.”

LaDue had opinions. He didn’t like the “cowards” who would shoot themselves as soon as the police showed up. He disapproved of Adam Lanza, because he shot kindergartners at Sandy Hook instead of people his own age: “That’s just pathetic. Have some dignity, damn it.” He didn’t like some “shaking schizophrenic dude you’d look at in class and move away from.” He preferred a certain subtlety, “someone you’d say, I never knew he would do something like that. Someone you would not suspect.” One person fit the bill: “My number one idol is Eric Harris. . . . I think I just see myself in him. Like he would be the kind of guy I’d want to be with. Like, if I knew him, I just thought he was cool.”

John LaDue was charged with four counts of attempted murder, two counts of damage to property, and six counts of possession of explosives. It did not take long, however, for the case to run into difficulty. The first problem was that under Minnesota law telling a police officer of your plans to kill someone does not rise to the level

of attempted murder, and the most serious of the charges against LaDue were dismissed.

The second problem was more complicated. The prosecution saw someone who wanted to be Eric Harris and plainly assumed that meant he must be like Eric Harris, that there must be a dark heart below LaDue's benign exterior. But the lesson of the Granovetterian progression, of course, is that this isn't necessarily true: the longer a riot goes on, the less the people who join it resemble the people who started it. As Granovetter writes, it is a mistake to assume "that if most members of a group make the same behavior decision—to join a riot, for example—we can infer from this that most ended up sharing the same norm or belief about the situation, whether or not they did at the beginning." And this June, at a hearing where the results of LaDue's psychiatric evaluation were presented, it became clear just how heterogeneous the riot had become.

The day's testimony began with the forensic psychologist Katheryn Cranbrook. She had interviewed LaDue for two and a half hours. She said she had examined many juveniles implicated in serious crimes, and they often had an escalating history of aggression, theft, fighting at school, and other antisocial behaviors. LaDue did not. He had, furthermore, been given the full battery of tests for someone in his position—the Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (*SAVRY*), the youth version of the Psychopathy Checklists (*PCL*), and the Risk Sophistication Treatment Inventory (*R.S.T.I.*)—and the results didn't raise any red flags. He wasn't violent or mentally ill. His problem was something far more benign. He was simply a little *off*. "He has rather odd usage, somewhat overly formal language," Cranbrook said. "He appears to lack typical relational capacity for family members. . . . He indicates that he would have completed the actions, but he doesn't demonstrate any concern or empathy for the

impact that that could have had on others." The conclusion of all three of the psychologists who spoke at the hearing was that LaDue had a mild-to-moderate case of autism: he had an autism-spectrum disorder (A.S.D.), or what used to be called Asperger's syndrome.

The revelation turned the case upside down. The fact that LaDue confessed to Schroeder so readily made him sound cold-blooded. But it turns out that this is typical of people on the autism spectrum in their encounters with police: their literal-mindedness leads them to answer questions directly. LaDue was fascinated—as many teenage boys are—by guns and explosions. But he didn't know the acceptable way to express those obsessions. "John has a tendency to say sort of jarring things without much ability to gauge their impact on people," Mary Kenning, another of the psychologists who examined him, said at the hearing. He spoke without empathy when he discussed killing his family, which made him sound like a psychopath. But the empathy deficits of the people on the autism spectrum—which leaves them socially isolated and vulnerable to predation—are worlds apart from those of the psychopath, whose deficits are put to use in the cause of manipulation and exploitation.

Much of what is so disturbing about LaDue's exchanges with Schroeder, in fact, is simply his version of the quintessential A.S.D. symptom of "restricted range of interests." He's obsessive. He insists on applying logic and analysis to things that most of us know we aren't supposed to be logical and analytical about. What should he wear? The standard uniform for school shooters is a duster. But it didn't make sense to wear a duster to school, LaDue explained, "because that's a bit suspicious." He'd store it in his locker. Where should the bombs go? Harris and Klebold had chosen the cafeteria. But LaDue felt that was too obvious—and, logistically, placing them in the hallway by the water fountains made more sense. When



should he attack? April made the best sense, “because that’s the month that all the really bad tragedies happened like . . . Titanic, Columbine, Oklahoma City bombing, Boston bombing.” And what went wrong at Columbine, anyway? It was supposed to be a bomb attack. So why didn’t the devices planted by Harris and Klebold explode? “They were trying to create a circuit which would ignite some gasoline to hit the propane and cause a *BLEVE*—which is a boiling liquid expanding vapor explosion . . . which is basically the same thing as say a pipe bomb except with, like, gases,” LaDue patiently explained to Schroeder, before launching into a long technical digression on the relative merits of hydrazine, ammonium perchlorate, Cheddite, nitroglycerin, and flash powder. He was even more scathing about the Boston bombers’ use of pressure-cooker bombs. He thought they made a “crappy design of it.” They used nails and black powder from fireworks. It would have made far more sense to use flash powder and ball bearings, LaDue thought, because “spherical shrapnel” are “superior to nails in damage.” LaDue tells Schroeder that he has two YouTube channels devoted to his work. But anyone who watches the assembled videos expecting to see something macabre will be disappointed. They are home movies of LaDue testing whether tiny fuses will ignite when placed inside a plastic water bottle, or whether he can successfully blow a quarter-size hole in the side of a plastic playground slide. In the world before Columbine, people like LaDue played with chemistry sets in their basements and dreamed of being astronauts.

The idea that people with autism-spectrum disorders can stumble into patterns of serious criminality has a name: counterfeit deviance. It has long been an issue in cases involving A.S.D. teenagers and child pornography. “They are intellectually intact people, with good computer skills but extraordinary brain-based naïveté, acting in social isolation, compulsively pursuing interests which

often unknowingly take them into forbidden territory,” the lawyer Mark J. Mahoney writes in a recent paper. They come upon an online image that appeals to their immature sexuality and don’t understand its social and legal implications. The image might be “marked” for the rest of us, because the child is in some kind of distress. But those kinds of emotional signals are precisely what A.S.D. teen-agers struggle to understand. They start to obsessively collect similar images, not out of some twisted sexual urge but simply because that’s the way their curiosity is configured. What gets these young adults into trouble with the law “is not abnormal sexual desires,” Mahoney writes, “but their tendency to express or pursue normal interests in a manner outside social conventions.”

Was John LaDue’s deviance counterfeit? He told Cranbrook that he would have gone ahead with his plan had he not been stopped, and she believed him. The second of the psychologists to examine him, James Gilbertson, also felt that LaDue’s threat was real: his obsessive preparation had created a powerful momentum toward action. But at every turn his reluctance and ambivalence was apparent: he was the ninety-ninth person in, warily eyeing the rock. At one point, Schroeder asked him why, if April—as the month of Titanic, Waco, Oklahoma City, and Columbine—was so critical symbolically, he hadn’t attacked the school already. It was April 29th, after all. LaDue, who had been a model of lucidity throughout, was suddenly flustered. “Um, I wanted to do it around April, but I decided not to do it April 19th because I think, no, April 19th wouldn’t work, because that was a Saturday, I think April 14th was it, because, um, I figured I didn’t want to do it April 18th because I figured, because 4/20 was coming up”—4/20 being national marijuana day—“and I figured maybe they would have some dogs there, and find the stuff I had planted in the hallway. . . . But that’s

not the case now, cause now it's May and I just wanted to get it done before school was out."

He had planned every aspect of the attack meticulously, except for the part where he actually launches the attack. He was uncomfortable. When Schroeder pressed him further, he came up with more excuses. "I had a cooker to buy," he said, meaning he had yet to purchase the central component of his bombs. And then: "I had to steal a shotgun too." He had been stalling, prolonging the planning, delaying the act. Then the two of them started talking about ammunition, and LaDue came up with a third excuse: he had bought twenty clips, but "they didn't fit on the bolt because they were too wide and they had a feeding problem going in there."

The low-threshold shooters were in the grip of powerful grievances. But LaDue doesn't seem to have any real grievances. In his notebooks, instead, he seems to spend a good deal of effort trying to manufacture them from scratch. School-shooter protocol called for him to kill his parents. But he *likes* his parents. "He sees them as good people, loving him, caring about him," Gilbertson said. "But he has to take their life, according to [his] manifesto, to prove that he's up to the task, to prove he has no human feelings anymore, that he's scrubbed out." After he set off a minor explosion at a local playground, he wrote a letter to the police. "I guess you guys never found it," he said of the letter. "Did you? I put it in someone's mailbox and told them to give it to you guys, but they never did." He seems well aware that his obsession has put him on a dangerous course. "O.K, um, first, I'd like a check from a psychiatrist or something," he says at one point. And then again: "I just want to find out what's wrong with me actually"; "I more just want a psychiatric test and that's really it, though"; "I wanted to ask [for a psychologist] many times, but, obviously, I didn't want my parents

knowing about it, because I wanted to keep it under the radar." When the three policemen showed up at his storage locker, it must have been a relief. "I figured you guys would be looking for me," he later told police.

The John LaDue case took a final turn last month. The hearing was at the Waseca County Courthouse, a forbidding Gothic building on the main downtown strip. LaDue, dressed in an orange jumpsuit with "Waseca County Prison" stencilled on the back, was led by two marshals. He had spent the previous seventeen months in a few different juvenile facilities before being transferred, in July, to the local prison. His hair was longer. He wore thick black-framed glasses. He didn't look at any of the spectators who had come to the hearing. The prosecutor and LaDue's attorney announced that they had reached a new plea agreement. LaDue would plead guilty to explosives charges in exchange for an extended course of psychiatric treatment and five to ten years of probation. The judge walked him through the particulars of the plea deal, and he answered every question in a deep, oddly adult voice. He was respectful and polite, except when the prosecutor asked him if he understood the difference between an incendiary device and an explosive device. An explosive device, she added, as if she were talking to a child, was something that could "go boom." When he answered ("Yep"), a brief flare of irritation entered his voice: *Are you kidding me?*

After the hearing, David LaDue stood on the sidewalk in front of the courthouse and answered questions. He is shorter and stockier than his son, forceful and direct. He said that in order to meet with John the previous evening—and discuss the plea deal—he had to work two sixteen-hour shifts in succession. He was exhausted. He was there, he said, "because I love him, I can't let go and walk away

and forget about it and put it out of my mind.” He wanted to remind the world that his son was human. “He had love,” LaDue said. “He liked affection like anybody else. I saw the expression on his face when he talked to his sister. I saw things in him that he would, certainly at that time, would have denied.” He talked about how difficult it was for men—and for teen-age boys in particular—to admit to vulnerability. “You know, he graduated at the top from Prairie Lake,” he continued, proudly, referring to the juvenile-detention facility where his son had finished his final year of high school. “He got an A in calculus. We were mailed his diploma. . . . There’s no way I could have done that.”

In the day of Eric Harris, we could try to console ourselves with the thought that there was nothing we could do, that no law or intervention or restrictions on guns could make a difference in the face of someone so evil. But the riot has now engulfed the boys who were once content to play with chemistry sets in the basement. The problem is not that there is an endless supply of deeply disturbed young men who are willing to contemplate horrific acts. It’s worse. It’s that young men no longer need to be deeply disturbed to contemplate horrific acts. ♦

An earlier version of this article erroneously stated that Evan Ramsey killed his mother. It also misstated Kehoe’s first name.