

VIRGINIA TECH MASSACRE

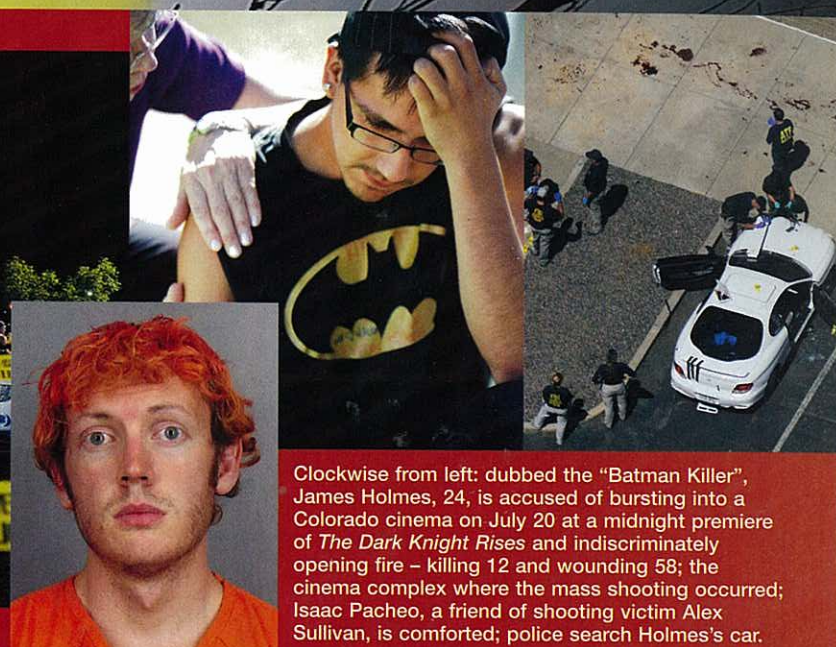
Seung-Hui Cho is responsible for the biggest mass killing in the US by a lone gunman. The Virginia Tech student went on a chilling shooting spree in 2007, which left 32 dead and 17 wounded. Cho then killed himself. Below: Lily Habtu, who was shot in the jaw by Cho, survived the deadly attack.

I SURVIVED A MASSACRE

As the US comes to grips with its latest mass shooting, Lily Habtu tells Ash Anand what it's like to look into the eyes of a gunman and live

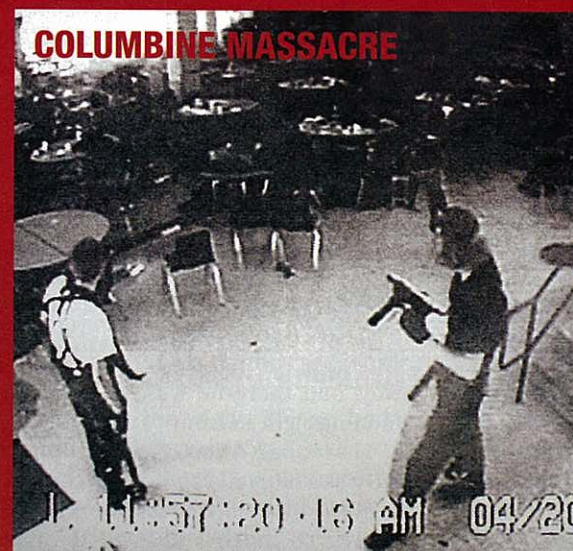


COLORADO MASSACRE



Clockwise from left: dubbed the "Batman Killer", James Holmes, 24, is accused of bursting into a Colorado cinema on July 20 at a midnight premiere of *The Dark Knight Rises* and indiscriminately opening fire – killing 12 and wounding 58; the cinema complex where the mass shooting occurred; Isaac Pacheco, a friend of shooting victim Alex Sullivan, is comforted; police search Holmes's car.

COLUMBINE MASSACRE



Right: mass killers Dylan Klebold (left) and Eric Harris, who gunned down classmates at Columbine High School in 1999. The teenagers' death toll reached 13, with a further 21 wounded – the pair then shot themselves. Left: surveillance footage of the armed pair. Below: terrified Columbine students sprint from the building.

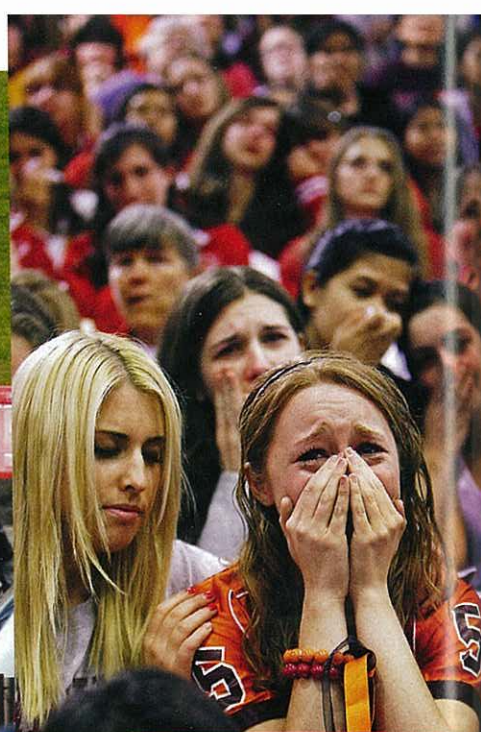


On July 20 the world woke to news of another mass shooting in the US. It was the stuff of nightmares: the alleged gunman – an apparently unremarkable and seemingly decent ex-college student named James Holmes – opened fire on men, women and children as they settled in to enjoy the midnight premiere of the new Batman film at a suburban cinema in Aurora, Colorado. At press time, the death toll stood at 12 with 58 more wounded. The tragedy stirred terrible memories of another Colorado mass killing that shook the nation, the 1999 Columbine High School massacre in which teenagers Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris killed 13 and wounded 21 others before turning their guns on themselves. This year also marks the fifth anniversary of the deadliest mass

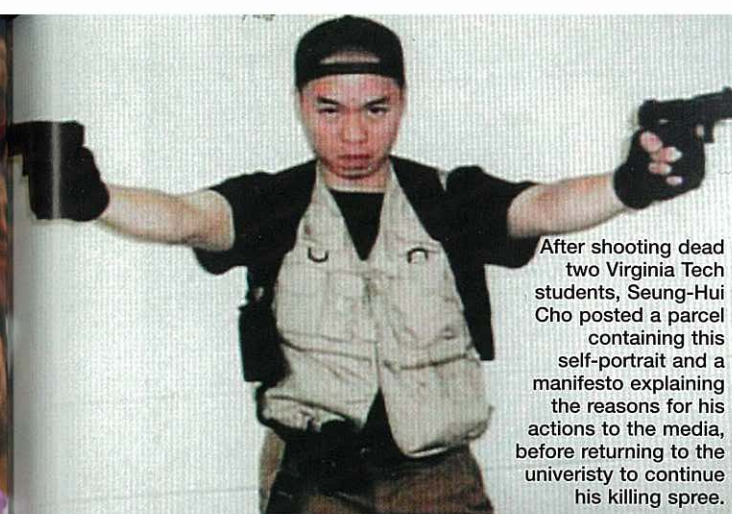
shooting by a sole gunman in US history. On April 16, 2007, student Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia. Another 17 people were wounded as Cho – who'd been suffering from a mental illness – moved from classroom to classroom in a bloody rampage, before killing himself. Student Lily Habtu was among the wounded. Here, she describes what it's like to live through a hail of bullets. ▶



Virginia Tech shooting survivor Lily Habtu, who became a staunch gun-control advocate after her ordeal, at the 10-year remembrance for victims of the Columbine High School killings in 2009.



Above: hundreds of students gather at a memorial service for victims of the Virginia Tech massacre in 2007. Above left: wounded student Kevin Sterne is carried from the university. Left centre: police at the scene of the school shootings. Below left: an injured person is rushed out of Virginia Tech.



After shooting dead two Virginia Tech students, Seung-Hui Cho posted a parcel containing this self-portrait and a manifesto explaining the reasons for his actions to the media, before returning to the university to continue his killing spree.



Australia's biggest mass killer, Martin Bryant, who shot dead 35 people at Port Arthur in Tasmania in 1996. Left: he received 35 life terms for his murderous rampage.

A HOMEGROWN HORROR

Australia's worst massacre left 35 dead and saw gun laws change almost overnight

Lunchtime business was booming at the Broad Arrow Cafe, an eatery popular with tourists visiting Tasmania's historic former penal settlement, Port Arthur, on Sunday April 28, 1996. Martin Bryant, 28, a loner from Hobart, finished his meal on the deck outside before walking back into the cafe and pulling a high-powered rifle from a sports bag. Within two minutes, 20 people were dead, 12 lay injured and the sleepy township was about to make global headlines for all the wrong reasons.

By the end of Bryant's rampage, 35 people – men, women and children – were dead, 21 more were wounded and, as then Governor-General Sir William Deane noted, Australia had become a "nation united in its grief".

Bryant was arrested the next morning after laying siege to police at a nearby guesthouse. Its owners, David and Sally Martin, had been his first victims. Although Bryant pleaded guilty (he's serving 35 life sentences, plus an extra 1035 years), little is known about his motive for the worst mass murder in Australian history. There's speculation he was angered by a perceived property dispute with the Martins and it's been said he drew inspiration from the killing of 16 schoolchildren and a teacher in Dunblane, Scotland, six weeks earlier.

Whatever his reasons, Bryant's actions had huge consequences for gun laws in Australia. The newly elected Liberal government banned semiautomatic rifles and semiautomatic and pump-action shotguns, introduced strict conditions on ownership and oversaw the destruction of more than 640,000 firearms under a gun buyback scheme. "America should follow Australia's lead in relation to gun laws," reflected Liberal MP Peter Lindsay before his retirement in 2010.

It was 9am when I arrived for my German class. I'd been sitting in the front row frantically scribbling notes when I heard the first bang. It came from somewhere in the school building and I assumed it was just maintenance work. It wasn't until the bangs became louder and felt closer that I began to worry. I glanced at the classmate sitting beside me and mouthed: "What's going on?"

Our tutor, Christopher Bishop, stepped into the hall to see what was happening, but he returned a few seconds later with a shrug of the shoulders and shake of the head. I felt relieved and I relaxed a little, but the banging continued, like hammers striking a wall, and it was getting louder. Not for a moment did I think it might be gunfire; it didn't sound anything like you hear in the movies.

The bangs grew louder until it felt like they were on top of us. The classroom door flew open and a man I didn't recognise burst in. He was expressionless and, without saying a word, he raised a gun and sprayed bullets into the classroom. Then, calmly, he began to move, walking towards the front of the room and shooting anyone in front of him. The air inside the room was a cacophony of gunfire and screaming as students hid under their desks or fell to the floor, shot and covered in blood.

I couldn't believe it was real, and instead of screaming, or diving for cover,

the hollow sound of spent bullet shells hitting the floor.

Too scared to open my eyes, I prayed for it all to be over. I began to feel a tingling sensation on my face. It didn't hurt, but my whole body was paralysed. Then I felt liquid trickling down the side of my cheek and realised I'd been shot. Instinctively, I opened my eyes, only to realise the desk I'd been

crouching under had been pushed away, and there he was, the gunman, standing right in front of me.

He looked directly at me, but his face was a blur; all I could focus on were his eyes – his cold, impassive eyes. I was shaking so much and even though I was crouched on the floor, I lost my balance and toppled to the side in shock, thinking: "He shot me! He shot me." Then I was overcome by fear. Real fear. The fear that I would die in that classroom so young, not having accomplished anything, and murdered in such a brutal way. But as I lay there, silent with my eyes shut, he walked away. He must've thought I was dead.

As he left, I found myself desperately trying to hold on – afraid to succumb to sleep and thinking that if I did, I'd sleep forever. At the same time, I welcomed the warmth I felt surging through my body.

As quickly as he'd come in, the gunman was gone. I was still lying on the

floor when one of my classmates, Katelyn Carney, ran to the door and stood against it to stop him coming back in. He must have heard her and realised people were still alive in our classroom because he returned straightaway. I remember staring at Katelyn's face as she pushed her body hard against it, crying and shrieking for help. Three more classmates – Derek O'Dell, Trey Perkins and Erin Sheehan – went to help her. I'll never forget the look of complete and utter terror on Katelyn's face as she realised the gunman was shooting through the door. I was so weak at this point I couldn't speak, let alone help the others. All I could do was focus on the door, mentally willing Katelyn and the others to keep the gunman at bay. Somehow it worked; he got frustrated, stopped trying to kick the door down and left to cause carnage in another classroom.

All around me, injured students were moaning in pain; others were

sirens, but it took them 30 minutes to work out that there wasn't a second shooter, secure the building, and work through who was seriously injured and who needed to leave immediately. We all cried with relief when police finally rushed in to help. Up until that point, none of us knew whether it was really over.

They carried us out, one by one. It required several policemen to hold each student because they couldn't get stretchers up the stairs fast enough. In the ambulance I was asked my name and my parents' phone number, but by then they were already on their way, expecting to bring their daughter's body home with them.

In hospital, doctors told me I'd been very lucky: the wrist injury hadn't damaged any tendons, and the bullet in my jaw hadn't ruptured any veins. Even so, they felt it was too dangerous to remove

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weeping at the sight of the bodies around us. Everything was in disarray, turned upside down, and with so much blood on the floor, it looked like a war zone. I lay still, bewildered but too mentally and physically drained to make a sound or movement. By now, police had surrounded the building and Erin called out to them through the window that we were on the second floor and that students had been shot.

Blood poured across my arm and I realised I'd been shot in my wrist and my jaw. A feeling of exhaustion was taking over and I couldn't stop crying. They threw me his jumper to try to stem the blood gushing out of my jaw. But there was so much blood; on my clothes, on the floor, everywhere...

The blood loss left me weak and incredibly tired. All I wanted to do was sleep and it took all my effort to stay alive. I could hear the wail of the police

the bullet lodged in my head and so it remains a part of me – just 1mm from my brain stem. For the next two weeks I couldn't talk and had to communicate by nodding or shaking my head, and writing on my computer. I'd type messages to my parents and friends who'd come to visit, telling them I loved them and how grateful I was they were there. At the time I couldn't even breathe on my own and had to have a special tube fitted. I'll never forget the look on my parents' faces when they came rushing into my hospital ward. Their faces crumbled in pain and I can only imagine what it must have been like for them.

It was at the hospital that I finally found out what had happened that day in school. The gunman, Seung-Hui Cho, was a student at Virginia Tech; a loner who had killed 32 people on campus, before turning the gun on himself. At first I was angry at Cho, thinking how



MURDER ON A MASS SCALE

Extremist Anders Breivik is proud to have carried out one of the worst massacres in modern times

Anders Behring Breivik, an ultra-right wing extremist from Norway, had been plotting mass murder for years, and on July 22, 2011, his meticulously laid plans became a shared, horrific reality. First, the then 32 year old detonated a powerful car bomb outside government offices in the capital, Oslo, killing eight and injuring more than 209. Two hours later, heavily armed and disguised as a policeman, Breivik arrived at a summer camp for members of the youth division of Norwegian Labour Party on Utøya Island, 40km away. He asked people to gather around him and when they did, he shot them. Breivik then started stalking youths around the island or shot them as they tried to swim away. "His forehead looked angry, but his mouth was smiling," recalled survivor Glenn Waldenstrøm, now 20.

Over the next hour or so, Breivik killed 69 people and wounded another 66 before surrendering to police. The final death toll of 77 left Norway in a collective state of shock. "Never since the Second World War has our country been hit on this scale," said Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg.

Before the Oslo bombing, Breivik emailed a 1500-page compendium entitled *2083: A European Declaration Of Independence* to 1000 addresses. In it, he revealed his hatred for Islam, multiculturalism and immigration. At his trial, Breivik took responsibility for his actions, but pleaded not guilty, insisting he was acting in the best interests of Norway. "I have carried out the most sophisticated and spectacular political attack committed in Europe since the Second World War," he said. "Yes, I would have done it again." The court is set to deliver its verdict on August 24.



Anders Behring Breivik is escorted from an Oslo court in a police car last July. Left: the bloody aftermath of his shooting spree, which left 69 people dead.

cold-hearted he must have been, but when I learnt he was mentally ill, I had to calm that anger. He was failed by the health

system and by Virginia Tech. He was never given the medical help he needed and the university could've prevented the scale of the killings if they'd only warned everyone that a gunman was on campus. It took them two hours to send out an alert after the first murder. If they'd have acted sooner, many more lives might have been saved.

As I recovered, I was shocked at how exhausted I felt. I couldn't even walk a few steps without needing to sit down and rest. I returned to the university just a month later, for my graduation. I was still in physical rehab, but didn't want to miss out on my special day. All my best friends were there and when I went up to collect my certificate, my friends and the whole psychology department stood up and clapped. I had

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an overwhelming feeling of love and felt so proud that I'd actually graduated.

When I think about the attack now, it sends a shiver down my spine, but at the same time I'm thankful. At least I made it. I was in hospital for a month before I was allowed to go home. I couldn't cope with going to any of my classmates' funerals, but I went back to Virginia Tech for a memorial service for those who'd lost their lives. A lot of the families of the deceased were there, which I found very hard to handle: it was very emotional and I suffered survivors' guilt. I grew very depressed, I wouldn't leave the house and I barely spoke to anyone. There were lots of victims in the massacre and you can't compare one person's pain to another's. People feel and deal with things very differently. Even so, we were able to reach out to one another over email or by phoning each other. It helped me come to terms with what had happened.

I suffered post-traumatic stress disorder. I was jumpy, couldn't handle loud



Police walk on a bloodstained path at Virginia Tech after the 2007 shooting rampage.

noises and every time I entered a room, I'd have to figure out all the exits – just in case. It's a habit I haven't broken out of, even now. Of course, I needed counselling and even though it happened in 2007, not a day goes by when I don't speak of the massacre. Some survivors want to pretend it never happened, but I want to confront it – it's what helps make me feel stronger every day.

I always think about the students and teachers whose wonderful, bright lives were stolen in the most brutal way. Physically, I'm also reminded of that day. I've had numerous facial

reconstruction surgeries, chewing is still a problem and I still have trouble with my right arm – but they're all a small price to pay for being alive.

For the first two years after the attack, I found a real sense of purpose in speaking out about gun violence and for tighter gun-control laws. I worked closely with families and friends of some of the murdered Virginia Tech victims on anti-gun lobbying initiatives.

Unfortunately, we weren't able to change any laws. In fact, in 2010, a bill was passed that allows people to keep a gun behind a bar now in America. A bar where people are drinking!

Despite all that's happened, I feel stronger for what I've experienced. My priorities have changed; I've realised how important family is and how precious it is to have people in your life who love you. I've also learnt not to bear petty grudges or argue with people unnecessarily – some things just don't matter when you've dealt with the pain that I've gone through. ■