

U.S. | THE GUNMAN

‘Always Agitated. Always Mad’: Omar Mateen, According to Those Who Knew Him

By DAN BARRY, SERGE F. KOVALESKI, ALAN BLINDER and MUJIB MASHAL JUNE 18, 2016

ORLANDO, Fla. — The brother of the bride arrived late for her reception. But soon enough he was mingling at the lakeside pavilion in West Palm Beach, where a diverse gathering of guests dined on chicken tikka masala and goat biryani while admiring the view of the Intracoastal Waterway just beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Then came the moment to join in a traditional Afghan dance called the attan, in which dancers form a circle and are led through a series of synchronized turns and moves. If well executed, the attan can create an almost trancelike sense of oneness.

But here was the bride’s brother — stocky, bespectacled Omar Mateen — dancing in the group and yet dancing apart. Clumsy, out of sync, his head mostly down, the man dressed in black was following his own rhythm.

Four months after this celebration of life in February, the awkward man in black caused wholesale death. Chuckling and declaring allegiance to the Islamic State, he opened fire at a gay and Latino nightclub here, leaving 49 people dead and wounding 53 others before he was killed by the police to end a protracted standoff.

The massacre at the Pulse nightclub early last Sunday stands as the deadliest mass shooting by one person in United States history.

Rising amid the international grief is the aching and obvious question of why. But the short life of Mr. Mateen, who was 29, provides no easy road map to motivation.

He had shown occasional flashes of interest in radical Islam, enough to be investigated twice by the F.B.I. in recent years for possible extremist ties.

But his professed embrace of the Islamic State and its call for disaffected Muslims to attack the West seem to have come suddenly, as if something snapped. And while some reports have suggested that he was gay, federal officials say they have found no evidence in his effects or online presence to back them up.

Instead, the recollections of those who knew or encountered him conjure a man who could be charming, even laid-back, yet who also seemed forever aggrieved, forever not at peace, forever out of step. A chubby kid making inappropriate jokes about 9/11 in the fresh wake of that catastrophe. A leering misogynist whose pursuits could rattle women. An off-putting employee who spoke casually of killing those who offended him. The security guard and wannabe cop whose scattershot anger made others feel unsafe.

“He was just agitated about everything,” Daniel Gilroy, a former co-worker in the security business, recalled. “Always shaken. Always agitated. Always mad.”

A Difficult Student

Omar Mateen was that chunky kid with glasses, remembered more for his scrapes with other classmates than for his academic performance. Early on, the same schoolboy who could wear a broad smile and a Power Rangers T-shirt in his school portrait could also engage in “much talk about violence & sex,” according to a school assessment.

A first-generation American, he was born in New York City's melting-pot borough of Queens in 1986, and moved about four years later with his Afghan parents to Port St. Lucie in Florida, where he was quickly enrolled in an English for Speakers of Other Languages program.

His father, Seddique Mateen, a refugee who became a naturalized American citizen, was a financial broker whose savvy investments allowed for a comfortable home appointed with tasteful furniture and expensive silk rugs. His wife, Shahla, stayed mostly in the background, while he set a tone of cultural conservatism, especially when it came to his three other children, all accomplished women. The son, though, enjoyed male privilege.

The family assimilated. But as the United States became mired in the protracted war in Afghanistan, the elder Mr. Mateen became torn between his native and adopted homes. Over the years, he would become more politically active to a point of apparent delusion, posting videos, for example, of himself in military uniform, pretending to be Afghanistan's president.

For his children, family friends say, this meant navigating a fractured world in which their Afghan roots and Muslim faith could lead to divisiveness and ostracism. Two friends say that the Mateen children feared any perceived link to Islamic extremism, and so began saying, simply, that they were Persian.

Omar Mateen was a disciplinary challenge in school, unafraid to push buttons. "Constantly moving, verbally abusive, rude, aggressive," that school assessment noted. In the third grade, his rendition of the school song at Mariposa Elementary replaced "Mariposa, Mariposa" with "marijuana, marijuana."

The boy was formally disciplined more than 30 times in elementary and middle schools as he pursued attention and occasional conflict rather than his studies. His father would later say that young Omar preferred drawing pictures in class to listening, which seems borne out by an assessment one of his teachers wrote at the time:

"Unfortunately, Omar had great difficulty focusing on his classwork since he often seeks the attention of his classmates through some sort of noise, disruption, or distraction."

So was Omar Mateen betraying his latent extremist sympathies — or was he just being tone-deaf — when, at 14, he shocked other students on his school bus by imitating an exploding plane so soon after the Sept. 11 attacks?

"He got on, walked up the first couple of steps, held his arms out and made sounds like a motor and then made an explosion sound — and slipped into his seat," Robert Zirkle, another student on the bus, remembered. "He did this three or four times, and was clearly not in the mood or the same state of mind that we were in. He seemed excited."

His unsettling pantomimes ended when others told him there would be problems if he continued.

Omar cycled through three high schools, collecting a string of suspensions — for fighting and other infractions — along the way. (In one case, a charge of battery was adjudicated and a charge of disturbing school function was dropped, he later wrote to a potential employer. "This was an experience of me growing up and I learned a big lesson from it.")

Martin Bielicki, a former dean of students at Martin County High School, remembered in an email that this student "had issues with other students, in particular," and "always would argue back and even defend himself."

"I remember Omar as a 14-year-old boy," Mr. Bielicki wrote. "I look at that yearbook picture of him and it brings back memories of an innocent and likable young man."

Omar matured with time. He took up soccer and skateboarding, became infatuated with weight lifting, and shed the flabbiness that had become a source of ridicule.

He became so muscular that a friend, Sean Chagani, once asked him whether he was taking steroids. Recalled Mr. Chagani: "He kind of smirked and asked, 'Can you tell?'"

The Mateen boy was more awkward than most teenagers, he recalled, but the two managed to find common

ground. They played basketball, competed in video games and swam in the Chagani family's pool.

"I had plenty of friends growing up that I would consider kind of odd, and he was one of them," Mr. Chagani said. "But certainly not aggressive, violent, homophobic, etc."

Career Goals

Omar secured after-school jobs here and there, including at a Publix grocery store, and improved so strikingly in the classroom that he graduated from Stuart Adult Community High School in April 2003 in the top half of his class — at the age of 16.

He moved from one low-level job to the next: a cashier and cook at a Chick-fil-A, a cashier at a Walgreens, a cashier at a Nutrition World, a floor watcher at a Gold's Gym, a sales clerk at a GNC vitamin and supplement store. All the while, though, he was attending a community college, working toward an associate degree in criminal justice technology.

His passion, it seems, was in law enforcement: Omar Mateen saw himself in uniform, buff and armed.

In May 2005, the 18-year-old requested to go on a ride-along with a St. Lucie County deputy sheriff. But the ride that took place after he passed a background check now seems enveloped in an air of foreboding. The deputy sheriff's car crashed, and the teenager was taken to a hospital to be checked out.

After earning his degree, Mr. Mateen applied for an officer's job with the Florida Department of Corrections, bolstering his application with an impressive letter of recommendation from Officer Steven J. Brown of the Port St. Lucie Police. "I would sleep soundly at night knowing that a person like Omar is protecting us."

The young man's dream was conditionally realized when he was sworn in as a Corrections Department employee and assigned as a trainee to the Martin Correctional Institution in Indiantown, not far from where he grew up. Four months in, he seemed on his way to a career in law enforcement, having received an evaluation of meeting expectations — of having the makings of one day becoming a "good correctional officer."

But six months in, Mr. Mateen was fired. The unsettling reasons were revealed in documents released by the Department of Corrections on Friday.

An officer reported in a memorandum that during training Mr. Mateen had laughingly asked him "if he was to bring a gun to school would I tell anybody." He posed his question on April 14, 2007, two days before a student named Seung-Hui Cho shot and killed 32 people and wounded 17 others on the campus of Virginia Tech.

Mr. Mateen's joke, if that is what it was, coupled with his penchant for sleeping in class and being absent without permission, prompted the warden, Powell H. Skipper, to recommend his termination.

"In light of recent tragic events at Virginia Tech, Officer Mateen's inquiry about bringing a weapon to class is at best extremely disturbing," Mr. Skipper wrote at the time.

Denied the right to wear one uniform, Mr. Mateen soon dressed in another — that of a security guard. He completed a training course, passed a background check, and began working for a security firm called G4S. At one point, perhaps as part of a G4S contract, he was working as an intake officer at a Florida juvenile assessment center. At another point, he was providing security after the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010, during which an undercover documentarian recorded a few of his cynical observations.

"No one gives a shit here, like everyone is just out to get paid," he is recorded as saying. "They're like hoping for more oil to come out and more people to complain so they'll have the jobs. Because once people get laid off here, it's going to suck for them. They want more disaster to happen because that's where their moneymaking is."

Hints of a Darker Side

Life continued. He had connected online with a young woman named Sitara Yusufi, an immigrant from

Uzbekistan, who initially found him to be a nice, funny man who treated his family well and had aspirations of becoming a police officer. He was religious — he made at least two Islamic pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia — but he never expressed sympathy for radical Islamists or terrorists, she said. And, yes, he could be homophobic.

Soon after their marriage in April 2009, Ms. Yusufiy said, he began beating her and isolating her in their Florida home. With the help of her parents in New Jersey, she fled within the year.

The next year, he was married again, to a woman he met online, this time to Noor Salman, in Rodeo, Calif., though he cultivated the persona of a man with a wandering eye.

Mr. Mateen used a dating website to seek a relationship with a woman in Fort Pierce. He churned through usernames — “makeitlovelylo” among them — and lied about his age, according to the woman, who requested anonymity but who provided photos that she had saved from his dating profile.

At one point, she said, Mr. Mateen’s pursuit veered toward stalking. He began messaging her to say he was nearby. He knew the color of her car and the general location of her place of employment.

Other hints of a disturbed mind continued to emerge. In 2013, G4S removed Mr. Mateen from his security post at the St. Lucie County Courthouse after he had made “inflammatory comments” about being involved somehow in terrorism. Though far-fetched and even contradictory — he claimed connections to Al Qaeda, the Sunni extremist group, and ties to its near opposite, the Shiite Hezbollah — his comments were troubling enough for the county sheriff’s office to notify the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The bureau’s subsequent inquiry was inconclusive.

The next year, Mr. Mateen again attracted federal scrutiny, after an acquaintance from his mosque, the Islamic Center of Fort Pierce, carried out a suicide bombing in Syria. According to F.B.I. Director James B. Comey, federal investigators concluded that Mr. Mateen knew the bomber only casually.

The mosque’s imam, Syed Shafeeq Rahman, insisted that Mr. Mateen had never heard teachings at the mosque that would have radicalized him. “There is nothing that he is hearing from me to do killing, to do bloodshed, to do anything, because we never talk like that,” the imam said.

By the end of 2014, Mr. Mateen — the bodybuilder who had once imagined a respected future in law enforcement — was working the guard’s booth at the entrance to PGA Village, a golf resort community in Port St. Lucie. But even in this low-pressure position, he managed to unnerve and upset, especially when he seemed to think that he had been disrespected.

‘Straight-Up Predator’

Heath Holtzclaw, who worked security at PGA Village a few years ago, has not forgotten how enraged Mr. Mateen became when he thought someone had given him an attitude. “You could tell he wanted to say something to whoever he felt had slighted him, but he never did,” Mr. Holtzclaw said. “He just slammed things around.”

Mr. Mateen would make people wait at the gate, sometimes causing delays, if he felt he had been disrespected, or if it was time for him to do his prayers.

Jasmine Kalenuik, a frequent visitor to PGA Village, came to dread encountering the guard at the gate — who, she said, “acted like a straight-up predator.”

“When I would go to grab my ID from his hand, he would cling to it and try to pull it back,” Ms. Kalenuik, 31, recalled. “He would hover over my car window and lean way in while breathing heavy on me with his teeth so clenched that you could see his jaw muscles sticking out.”

Ms. Kalenuik’s husband, Jerry, recently confronted the security guard, nearly nose to nose. But Mr. Mateen betrayed no emotion during the angry encounter.

“It was like I was staring into the eyes of Ted Bundy,” Mr. Kalenuik, 27, said. “I was irate but he seemed completely detached.”

After that, he said, Mr. Mateen would grant him and his wife a curt nod as they passed through the checkpoint, but never looked them in the eye.

Finally, it seems, rage consumed the man. Over what — infidels, gays, society’s failure to grant him proper deference, all of it — remains unclear.

His father has suggested that Mr. Mateen was incensed by the sight of two men kissing in front of his young son, whose bedroom was chock-full with all things Disney, all things America: a Spider-Man helmet and bicycle, a Star Wars backpack, Star Wars drapes, a chair in the likeness of Tow Mater from “Cars,” and not one but three Mickey Mouses.

Earlier this month, legally and with little wait, the man rejected by law enforcement purchased a Glock 9mm handgun and a SIG Sauer MCX military-style rifle.

Then, early last Sunday morning, he carried his recent purchases into the Pulse nightclub, where hundreds of people were drinking and dancing and celebrating life, the way families do at weddings. And, following his own rhythm, he began to shoot.

Dan Barry reported from Orlando, and Serge F. Kovalski, Alan Blinder and Mujib Mashal from Fort Pierce, Fla. Reporting was contributed by Frances Robles from Orlando; Daniel Ruetenik and Deborah Acosta from Fort Pierce; Kitty Bennett from St. Petersburg, Fla.; Richard A. Oppel Jr., Susan Campbell Beachy, Jack Begg, Robin Stein and Alain Delaquerière from New York; and Eric Lichtblau from Washington.

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