

## The Plague Ground

*This is a god-forsaken empty place. Ancient iron playground equipment clangs in the wind, snagging fast-food wrappers as they migrate across the old park. The grass has dried in spikey clumps and the soil of the old ball field is strewn with broken glass. City dogs pass through here, marking the territory and the occasional street preachers stop here to screech scripture to nobody in particular.*

### I

Tim and Jesse spent nearly every minute together after dropping out of school mid-way through tenth grade. They had shared histories: neither of them were successful as students, and they had played on the same little league teams in elementary school. After the little league stage they just hung out at the playground their neighborhoods shared.

Jesse was more outgoing than Tim. He was better-looking, too. Jesse had joined the drama club in eighth grade, and had a girlfriend for a couple of months in the summer between ninth and tenth grade. Tim said girls made fun of the way he looked, he wished he'd had braces when he was younger. Somehow he never seemed to be able to keep his skin clear or his hair combed. At school, he enjoyed music class, but lost interest after the music and arts curriculum got slashed from the school budget.

Jesse was one year older, having repeated first grade. The two of them had always known each other, but it was in tenth grade that their friendship really bloomed. Tim looked up to Jesse, and Jesse liked being worshipped.

Both boys came from broken homes. Tim's mother remarried when Tim was six. Ron, the stepfather—though he never formally adopted Tim—never gained Tim's trust. Tim said he didn't like the way Ron acted when he drank beer. Ron said "tough shit;" he just kept it up and got meaner over the years. There were times when Tim and his mom had to vacate—like when Ron was drunk. Tim couldn't understand why his mother felt sorry for the pathetic bastard: Ron couldn't handle anything. He certainly couldn't handle Tim, and when Tim was 14, Ron just left. Although Tim's mom was glad he wasn't around to hit her and swear at her anymore, she missed the income. She said, "Tim, you shoulda cut him some slack and been a better son to Ron." But like most of his mother's comments, it lacked conviction.

Jesse's mother married Curt when Jesse was four, but the man was not interested in being a father to Jesse. Jesse's mom thought that would change, but it never did, and Curt stayed away more and more. One day, they realized he hadn't been around for almost a week. They never saw him again, which didn't bother Jesse. Jesse's mom self-medicated to treat her despair. For a year or so she was out of work. She finally found a job, and seemed to do better, even dating on occasion. She was out of the house a lot either working or on dates, so Jesse was on his own after school, even in first grade. Jesse's mom said, "A boy as nice-looking as Jesse can wrap teachers around his little finger, he doesn't need my help to get by in school. The sooner he learns to make it on his own, the better!"

Both mothers had hoped for their sons to graduate, but with all the discipline problems and bad grades, they figured the boys would

be better off working at jobs. Plus, they'd be bringing in some money. Sure enough, jobs were not hard to find. Since Jesse had the right look, and could drive, so "Truck-on Inn," the local trucker's motel, hired him as the night desk clerk. Tim couldn't drive yet, so he worked the midnight shift at "Burgerburg." Wealth was thrilling.

Jesse was ambitious. He found new opportunities at his job and shared them with Tim. He learned that truckers were a resource. He became clever at conducting drug deals, enjoying a thriving trade in amphetamines with over-the-road truckers and whoever else was interested. He was pretty happy with his situation and proud of his business skills. He felt clever and important. Tim was happy too, because Jesse was a generous spirit, a real friend. Each afternoon they would get together at Tim's house (because Tim was supposed to watch his 7 year old niece after school ) to get high. They liked smoking grass, rolling their own joints, experimenting with flavored papers and adding different spikes. Sometimes they went out to the park or drove around, but mostly they stayed in Tim's room listening to heavy metal music.

Since Tim was the music expert, and Jesse wanted to support Tim's growing self-confidence, they listened to the tapes Tim played. They both shared the same favorite group, "I-cy Lines," because they believed in the group's message. "I-cy Lines" was more than a hard metal rock group, it was religion—the nucleus of a growing cult. Their lyrics described daily life as gruesome, empty, or pointless. The group claimed certain knowledge of the existence of heaven and recommended self-fulfillment through suicide. Other songs focused on violent themes including self-mutilation. Tim and Jesse were

obsessed with their favorite song, "After Life." After awhile "Truck-on Inn" and "Burgerburg" became unnecessary to the two boys.

When they got fired from their jobs, they were free to spend even more time drinking, smoking dope, and listening to music. They experimented with body piercing, tattoos, and ways they could be more like the guys in "I-cy Lines." Except for play ground rendezvous with Jesse's remaining customers, they lived almost entirely in their own world, never even reading the job ads. They looked spaced out and rarely bothered to speak to their families. The mothers complained but nothing changed. The two boys seemed to be completely removed from reality. Lyrics planned their future.

## II

To decide who would actually pull the trigger, they drew straws and Jesse drew the longer. Tim admitted he was relieved. They made a plan and wrote dramatic notes to their mothers saying good-bye and not to worry, that they would be happy where they were going...when their mothers saw it, they would think it had been copied out of a book. ("That's the best writing they ever did," their mothers would sob.)

The problem was to figure out how Jesse could hold a shotgun and pull the trigger, aiming at his own head. First, of course, he would shoot Tim and then they figured he could just brace the butt of the shotgun against the leg of the playground slide and angle it so that Jesse could reach the trigger, keeping the barrel aimed at his forehead. They tried it against the leg of the bed and decided what the best angle would be. The critical details worked out, they shook hands and agreed to meet at 10:00 am at Tim's so they could see

Tim' sister on her way to work (they owed her because she was their part time beer runner).

The day was fine for suicide. They had decided to stay sober, to just smoke a little weed, ceremonially. They wanted to look respectable, so they put on long-sleeved shirts to hide the tattoos, combed their hair, wore clean jeans, and took out their earrings. Then they listened to "After Life" one more time. When everyone was out of the house they carried the gun over to the park with the note wrapped in plastic taped neatly on the butt of the gun. Carefully they practiced bracing the gun, finding the right body-to-gun alignment for Jesse's arm length. When they were satisfied that it would be fine, they smiled at each other and hugged. No need for lengthy good-byes, so they just said "see ya..." Then Jesse hoisted the gun to his shoulder and aimed at Tim waiting calmly on a piece of playground equipment.

Jesse aimed and shot off the top of Tim's head. Tim fell back and the playground carousel floated in a slow circle. Next, Jesse braced the gun against the legs of the slide, placed his body at the correct angle with the open nostril of the gun barrel at his face. He reached down and pulled the trigger, but only blew off a piece of his head. Maybe Tim's blood had splashed on the trigger, or Jesse just lost his balance, but the blast didn't hit squarely, and Jesse didn't die.

### III

Jesse stayed in intensive care for a long time, and was doing okay after the months and months of surgeries and therapy. He was even reading the Bible in Braille. There was one candy striper who

dedicated herself to bringing Jesus to Jesse and to other patients. Jesse's mom credited the candy striper for Jesse's recovery.

Jesse's mom stopped visiting regularly after Jesse's new nose was made. The plastic surgeon took a piece of skull with skin and shaped it into a new nose. After it was grafted onto Jesse's face, the candy striper had to shave it every day, as it had active hair follicles in it. Jesse's mother was working two jobs and meeting with lawyers almost daily, so she was unable to participate in the regimen. After the nose "took," they worked on tooth and jaw reconstruction. One side of his face had less damage than the other. He was making pretty steady progress.

Then the progress stopped. Maybe he was worried about the upcoming murder trial: he would be required to testify. Jesse was agitated. He talked about Jesus a lot now and didn't seem to need the candy striper. She questioned his need for her, and they quarreled. She stopped coming to see him altogether, which threw Jesse into despair. He talked about suicide again, saying that Tim was lonesome without him; that he had broken his promise to Tim. His depression became dementia, and he was moved to the psychiatric ward. The doctors felt that they would try a course of mood elevators, but if that didn't work they would try shock treatments. For a while it looked like the medication was working, but Jesse still contemplated suicide and murmured constantly about Tim.

Characteristically, nobody is sure exactly what went wrong, but Jesse died of an overdose of prescribed medication. His mother is suing the hospital and she's also filing a joint suit with Tim's mother against "I-cy Lines" and the record company that published the

influential song, "After Life." Experts say that there are subliminal auditory messages coming through on "After Life." Sound technicians have isolated the phrase, "end it now, end it now," on the tape. Played at reduced speeds, the phrase is audible without technical enhancement. According to Tim and Jesse's legal team, they have collected evidence linking other suicides to the group, but they were unable to specify. The case is being underwritten by "Counselors for Family Values," a non-profit legal aide organization connected with the Christian Coalition. They expect to settle out of court.