AOW #1

The Cleveland High School Shooting: Portrait of the Suspect as Teenager

By Christopher Johnston / Cleveland

In hindsight, the poem on T.J. Lane's Facebook page was an apparent omen. But before this week, it had all the originality of every adolescent's angry angst. A touch of goth. A dollop of rebellion. An obsession with mortality. It ends with these lines: "Feel death, not just mocking you. Not just stalking you but inside of you. Wriggle and writhe. Feel smaller beneath my might. Seizure in the Pestilence that is my scythe. Die, all of you."

The teen morbidity became all too manifest in blood at 7:38 a.m. on Monday, Feb. 27, when Thomas "T.J." Lane, 17, walked into the cafeteria at Chardon High School in Ohio and allegedly fired 10 rounds from a Ruger .22 caliber pistol, fatally wounding three students and injuring two others. Authorities believe the weapon may have been taken from a family member, perhaps Lane's grandfather.

In hindsight, it is also easy to see how violence was part of his family. During his infancy, his parents Thomas Lane Jr. and Sara Nolan were reportedly each charged with domestic abuse against each other. Later arrest charges for Thomas Lane Jr. include assaulting a police officer, domestic abuse against another woman who fathered his children and attempted murder. The attempted-murder charge was dropped, but in 2002-03 he served eight months of a four-year sentence for strangling a woman until she lost consciousness, holding her face under running water and bashing her head against a wall.

By the time T.J. Lane was in elementary school, he was living with his maternal grandparents, Jack and Carol Nolan, who had also taken in his older brother Adam Nolan and a sister. But violence followed him there too. Records indicate that police arrested Adam, 19, multiple times for disorderly conduct, theft and other crimes related to his abuse of prescription drugs and heroin, including several overdoses. (Adam apparently was released into the custody of his grandparents who reportedly said they would try to get him treatment.) On Dec. 9, 2009, during his parents' divorce proceedings, Lane and Nolan, then 15 and 16, were arrested for assault, after getting into a fight with an uncle who had gone to the house.

But this is also the young man whose Facebook page featured a picture of himself behind a giant teddy bear with a heart that says, "Be Mine." Heather Sethman, 18, a junior at Chardon High School, was a friend of his on the site. Standing near the gazebo in Chardon Town Square that has become a memorial site for the slain and injured students, she recalls interacting with Lane. "He was fun to talk to on Facebook," she tells TIME. "We also played games like Farmville." "I'm surprised he didn't come to me on Facebook and tell me what was going on," Sethman says. "I just wish he had."

That Lane's reality involved two conflicting dimensions continues to surprise, just as the teddy-bear photo contrasts with another Facebook shot in which he poses bare chested and glaring at the camera. Several neighbors described him as "normal" and "a fine person," who would build snow mounds with his sister, skateboard, ride his bike or swim in the Nolans' in-ground pool.

One longtime neighbor, Russ Miller of Chardon, told a local news station that the Nolans had done an admirable job raising their grandchildren and that they were "good people" with "good Christian values." He also found Lane to be "an easygoing boy, always had a half smile on his face." Last summer, the teen spent hours helping him cut up a pine tree that had fallen on his property and then refused to take any money. "He was never a problem," Miller said.

Lane told Sethman that he loved camping and hunting. But there were things the young man did not care for. Sethman recalls that he did not share her love of reading, especially the Twilight series of books. He didn't care much for organized athletics, either. On the morning of the shooting, Lane was supposed to catch a bus for the Lake Academy Alternative School in Willoughby, Ohio, a suburb northwest of Chardon, which is approximately 30 miles east of Cleveland. Lake Academy officials declined to comment about Lane, citing privacy. However, the school's mission, according to its website, is to provide students with "positive academic and social life skills." The website also says that students are considered "reluctant learners" and may be struggling with a variety of individual problems, including substance abuse or chemical dependency, anger issues, truancy, difficulties with attention or organization, and mental-health issues.

According to Miller in his televised interview, Lane was attending the technical school because he had had problems with his grades at Chardon High School. Recently, however, he had turned things around. "I understand he is an A or B student, and he was going to graduate early," Miller said. Instead, he may now be tried an adult for the alleged crimes — a decision likely to be made on March 19. So far, Lane has been charged with three juvenile counts of aggravated murder, two juvenile counts of attempted murder and one juvenile count of felonious assault. His initial court appearance is planned for March 6.