

## The Boy Who Saved Jesus

Did someone leave the stove on? That's always my first thought after noticing a giant mushroom cloud of smoke. First thought is oh shit is that my house, but as I get closer on my way home from school, I'm stoked that it's coming from a couple blocks away from my house, past the Taco Bell where me and my bandmates hold meetings and abuse the shit out of the free refills policy.

It looks like it's coming from Steve's house. Steve, who has the basement where we have band practice. The basement where I keep my equipment. Shit! Literally all of my shit is in that basement! And my notebook. All those lyric sheets. Shit!

This fucking crowd and police line stops me dead in my tracks after booking it over, fast as I could kick off. Past all the gawkers, firetrucks are putting out the last of the flames that just obliterated the house next to Steve's. Not Steve's house. It was Jules's house. Well, Jules's dad's house. I guess I should say Steve's mom's house too.

I leap off my skateboard before I run into any rubbernecks and stand in the nosebleeds of the whole thing, jumping up and down trying to see something, anything, but

I was too late to the party. After shouting "Jules!" a bunch as loud as I could, Steve grabbed me to stop my jumping up and down and whispered, "Dude, calm down, dude! Chill out, fuck."

"Where's Jules?" I ask Steve, not ready for the answer.

"He's not in there. I just texted him, he's at the comic book store."

Although Jules was alive, it still didn't solve his house being on fire. I didn't have time to think about it before Steve continued, "I think Tony's dead."

Tony is Jules's Dad. Was.

"I saw an ambulance. But it didn't speed off, you know... like if they needed to save him."

Weed would help. Ask Steve if he has any, but I know now is not the time or place. Gotta start having appropriate emotional responses to this like an adult would and not make jokes like teenagers because there is a very real possibility that Jules's dad is dead.

He was.

"He fell asleep while smoking a cigarette in his bed," is what Jules tells me while we're playing GoldenEye a few days after Tony was indeed declared dead. After it was over, and the flames had gone out and what was left of the body was prepared for cremation and Jules's mom was contacted and everything was sort of settled for a minute, I figured inviting him over to play N64 was the only thing I could do. Something normal. Something comfortable.

"You still have that thing?" Jules asks pointing to the hokey plastic Jesus statue sitting on top of my CD shelf.

I laugh because I can. "Yeah, and Satan's over there." I point to my VHS shelf, which was adorned with a Todd McFarlane-esque plastic devil.

"That was a good show," Jules says before taking me out with a well-aimed head-shot.

"Fuck you, you distracted me, asshole!" I shout to Jules, but it looks like he's more distracted by the plastic Jesus than I am. And he still took me out three times in a row. Fuck this game I say but don't mean because I love playing GoldenEye with Jules.

The show he was talking about was Steve and my band's little gig at the church's community center last year.

Jules never played an instrument, and never seemed interested in learning, but he was always around and we liked hanging out with him. He helped load our equipment and always got the mosh pit going so eventually he just became our fifth Beatle. Our friends called him The Roadie. He was always around. At the Church show he was talking about, we thought it would be hilarious to duct tape plastic statues of Jesus and Satan to our amps flanking the drums. It didn't get the response we wanted. Instead, the vibrations from the amps caused the plastic Jesus to topple off the amp, and bounce into the wet, smoky crowd of our lusty, angry fans. Jules literally dived after the icon and returned to the stage, duct taping it back to the amp. This got a bigger applause than our most popular song.

"Sure was," I reply after the match restarts and we keep button mashing. "Best of seven?" We don't talk about his Dad again. Our eyes stay glued to the jittery polygons on the screen as our stoned bodies sink deeper into the already sunken couch. I glance over as often as I can, trying to see Jules as someone who's Dad was burned alive. He didn't look any different. Same blue eyes, blonde hair, cheeks still covered in zits. I wanted him to look different, but he didn't.

We play GoldenEye for hours and the only words we exchange were either about the game or trivial nonsense about cartoons or comic books. No asking him how he's doing, where he's going to live, if his mom's going to take him back in, how they're going to pay for his Dad's funeral. Those questions just don't exist.

Although he doesn't bring it up again, he keeps looking at the plastic Jesus. Longingly? I can't tell.

At band practice, Steve tells me that Jules is staying with his Mom now. We never met his Mom. She didn't exist to us, but she had to now. Jules's dad used to sell crystal meth and his mom was a regular customer and sometimes she couldn't pay and that's how Jules was born. Tony, Jules's dad had money and his mom didn't and Tony wanted a son and that's how Jules ended up with him and we ended up with Jules.

"I feel like we should write a song about him or something..." I say half-assedly. This seems like something I should say. I don't want to say it. I want to just play shitty punk songs with Steve and play GoldenEye with Jules, but I have to say serious things like this now.

Honestly, the hardest part is not being able to ask Jules if he's relieved. We never talked about it when his

Dad was alive and we could hear Jules screaming, Dad please don't, I'm sorry from next door as his Dad beat the living shit out of him with a belt or a wooden spoon or a maybe even a baseball bat from the thick whumpy sounds that clapped across the alley between his and Steve's houses. We never talked about it when we could clearly see bruises on his arms as we sat around listening to NOFX records in Steve's basement smoking shitty weed. We never talked about it when the whites of his eyes flickered when he saw he was getting a text from his dad and said he had to go home. Why should we talk about it now?

I don't know that it's the last time I'll see Jules when we walk to our favorite spot in the park to smoke a joint. No GoldenEye this time. After two drags he said, "I wanna learn to play an instrument."

"You should," is all I can say. "It's not hard. I mean, if fucking Steve and I can do it."

"Yeah, I always wanted to play in your band, but Dad always said I'd never be any good. He had a couple of guitars in the house, but whenever I picked one up and he heard me playing he'd just laugh so I stopped," he said before taking another drag.

See? Like right here would be the perfect time to ask about the abuse. Ask how he really felt about his father's death. This is where I prod and pry and he rants about how he's glad that the obese, smelly, white-trash, abusive piece of shit is dead and he's finally free. And what's better is he died from the utmost poetic justice of burning in hell after his drunk-ass fell asleep with a cigarette in his mouth. His shitty habit finally killing him. I fail to see the irony as I hold out my hand, waiting for Jules to pass the blunt. Instead, drag. Inhale. Hold. Exhale. And then, "Your Dad had guitars?"

"Yeah, he used to play. He really loved Fleetwood Mac, so we're gonna play a bunch of Fleetwood Mac at his funeral. He said Lindsey Buckingham was the greatest guitarist of all time."

I didn't think so. Seems like a joke should happen here but instead another drag.

The detectives knocked on my door the next day and wanted to speak to me. My Mom asked if I'd done anything wrong which I hadn't. They wanted to ask about Jules. He was okay. He was alive. So what did they want to know?

"How would you describe Jules? Like his personality?" the fat one with the greasy moustache asked me.

The fuck is this? They had badges and I'm still going through puberty so I just answered everything they asked me, quickly and with a stutter. They asked if I ever saw any abuse from Tony towards Jules and since I technically never saw his Dad hit Jules, I said no.

"Did you hear what happened?" Steve asked before I even set foot in his basement for band practice.

I roll my eyes, "Funny, Steve."

"Dude, come inside," Steve steps out of the way so I can get in the basement as he shut the door. We both hopped down the stone steps in the musty practice space and flopped down on the shitty couch. Steve handed me a cigarette before I could even ask.

"What's going on?" I asked as I fumbled in my pocket for the bic I swore was in there.

"Jules is in jail."

"What?!"

"This is just the rumor going around, but they found three bullets. One in the chest and two in the head."

I knew his Dad had guns. Like lots of them. Still.



Finally found the fucking bic. I take a long drag and tried to think of the correct thing to ask. "How do they know it was Jules and not like a burglar or a break-in..."

"He confessed - like - almost immediately after they brought him in for questioning," Steve lights his own cigarette and we both just sit on the shitty couch for a while, not sure what to do next. Would it be weird if we did band practice as normal?

When you get a call from prison, they ask you if you'll accept the charges. My mom pays for my bill cause it's like a family plan or something, so I don't know what I'm making her pay, but she hasn't complained yet. When Jules talks to me it's always about comic books and cartoons. He asks what music I listen to and is sad he can't play an instrument now. Tony isn't mentioned once. Not once. All he says is his Mom is sad she can't have her son back but he doesn't care too much before asking if I read at all. Asks me to send like adult books if I can, cause the library at juvy is all young-adult bullshit.

"I got a better idea!" I say. "Can you give me the address? Or like instructions? Like how do I send you stuff?"

Postage for a big enough box to fit the plastic Jesus wasn't too bad. Hopefully the newspaper would keep it in place so it didn't get too scuffed. This is the first time I've ever mailed anything to anyone. It is the first time I bought a newspaper. This week is full of firsts. First fire. First person I know who died, wait got killed. First murderer. First, first, first. Too many firsts. This will be the first like nice thing I do? I don't know. Cause it's like a joke, like remember the time you saved Jesus, well he's yours now, but maybe it'll make it better since we can't talk about it. We can't even pretend it happened. What does it mean when you've killed someone before you lost your virginity?

A week later the same package comes back with a return-to-sender stamp. Jules hadn't called the entire week either. He usually calls once a week. Since I'm not a parent or guardian, I can't even request a visit and when I ask for information they just hang up. Steve doesn't know anything either. And neither of us know his Mom's number.

"Did you hear what happened to Jules? He fucking..."

I hang up the phone on Steve. It was rude and I'll apologize to him later but I didn't want to hear it. No more firsts.

His old house, what's left of his old house, what's left of his Dad's old house, is now fenced off with barbed wire. There's nothing left. Just rubble, ash, a charred skeleton that kinda suggests the shape of the house. I stand outside the fence for some time and think about hopping it, but chicken out. Instead I take the plastic Jesus out of my pocket and look at it. That was a good show. Then I chuck the worthless icon over the fence and watch it disappear into the charred rubble. It doesn't make much noise.