

# The Hunter And The Choirboy

By [NADYA LABI](#) Monday, Apr. 06, 1998

*I was like a child in front of a stage,  
Hating the curtain as if it were in the way...  
--Baudelaire, The Flowers of Evil*

Childhood should be a game of waiting in the wings, of playing at hearts, broken then mended, of rehearsing life, falling but protected. But the news out of Jonesboro, Ark., last week was a monstrous anomaly:

5 a boundary had been crossed that should not have been. It was a violation terrible enough to warrant waking the President of the U.S. at midnight on his visit to Africa, robbing him of sleep till daylight. It was news horrifying enough to cause parents all over

10 America to wonder if they were doing enough to wall away their children from the bad angels that can steal into young souls to stifle the knowledge of good and evil. The shooters in custody in Jonesboro for the murder of four very young girls and their teacher were two very young boys--one just 13, the other

15 only 11. And now they will be tormented by more memories than if they had lived a thousand years.

What do kids know about living? And how do they then turn to killing?

Mitchell Johnson, 13, found God at a youth revival meeting last September. "He made a profession of faith and decided to accept Jesus Christ as his savior," says Christopher Perry, the youth minister

20 at Central Baptist Church in Jonesboro. Mitchell was new to the area, barely two years in town, and looking to fit in. A classmate brought him to Central Baptist, and the church, for a while at least, seemed to provide a haven.

He became an upstanding member of the congregation, delighting many of the adults with his choirboy gentility. "Yes, sir" was the way he addressed the men, and he was wont to say "Ma'am"

25 when he held out a chair for a lady. He'd been raised right, most folks thought. Only two weeks ago, says Perry, Mitchell Johnson joined up with another youth group to sing and minister at a nursing home.

Jonesboro was supposed to be a refuge of sorts. Mitch was originally from Spring Valley, Minn. (pop. 2,460), and he was floundering by the time he and his mother and brother left, first for

30 Kentucky and then for Arkansas. The amiably goofy kid was upset by the 1994 divorce of his parents, Scott and Gretchen. Close friends and young relatives had watched his behavior deteriorate. "Since they split, he's gone downhill," says his cousin Mike Niemeyer, 17. "He'd get into fights, some physical, some verbal. He was easily p\_\_ed off." The fine manners that he shared with his brother Monte, 11, were still on display, but he would exhibit troubling, attention-

35 getting antics. Last summer, when he returned to Spring Valley to visit with relatives during vacation, he began obsessing over twin passions: girls and gangs. "He said he'd give anything to be in a gang," says Niemeyer. "He'd kill anyone to be in a gang." Schoolmates in Jonesboro say Mitch began wearing red to signal his membership in the Bloods, a ruse that they saw straight through. A wannabe, most of them concluded. The slightly paunchy boy also fancied himself a Romeo and,

40 with an intuitive sense of drama, vowed suicide when a Minnesota Juliet wanted nothing to do with him. "He was crying a lot," recalls his buddy Andrew O'Rourke, 13. "He showed me the gun and the rope he could use. I said there are other girls as good as her, but he said, 'No. She's one of a kind.'" After 45 minutes, though, O'Rourke convinced his friend to lay down his gun.

Among the debris discovered by authorities in the wake of last week's rampage was Mitchell

45 Johnson's hunter-education card. It was all part of fitting in. "Everybody at Westside knows how to shoot a gun," says seventh-grader Michelle Wagner. And of the gun lovers at school, few were as proficient and prominent as Andrew Golden. Despite his tender age, he had a reputation among his



classmates for being "mean-spirited." Even though he was only 11 years old, Drew seemed to embody a toughness that Mitchell was looking for. On Royale Drive, where Golden's parents live in a one-story stone bungalow, neighbors had reluctantly grown used to the sight of Drew biking in military fatigues. "He was always wearing camo clothing and talking about hunting and shooting targets," says neighbor Debbie Wilson. Hunting gear isn't uncommon in Jonesboro, but some parents were nevertheless wary of Drew, who was known to horse around with a hunting knife strapped to his side. "I didn't allow my Jenna to play with him," says neighbor Lloyd Brooks. "He was too rowdy."

Santa gave Drew Golden a shotgun when he was six. The home video of Drew as a tot, rushing to the backyard shooting range, has been played again and again, serving as metaphor and explanation, the macho little-boy equivalent of the dolled-up kindergarten beauty queen. Frontiersboy Drew learned to bait hooks and scope out prey with his father and grandfather, developing a taste for the chili cooked up after a successful deer hunt. He had a keen eye, improving his marksmanship at a shooting range and his reflexes at the video consoles of Wal-Mart and the local bowling alley. "He played video games with guns," says his grandfather Doug Golden, standing off a dining room framed by deer antlers and a vast gun collection. "There's no limit to who can play those. You're shooting the enemy, or you're gonna get shot." Drew wasn't shy about defending himself: in third grade he pushed a girl who slapped him, and a year later took up karate for a time. He gave up the martial art when no other kids were interested in practicing with him.

His grandparents Doug and Jackie attest to a softer, kindlier side to Drew. He was a trumpet player in the school band. "He couldn't wait for concerts," says Doug. "He'd get a grin and look straight out to us and give a thumbs up." And many mornings Drew would get dropped off by his parents at their home to chat and sip hot chocolate while he waited for the bus. Just days before the incident at Westside Middle School, Jackie says he was on his best behavior, accompanying her to the hair salon and earning plaudits for his demeanor from the astonished stylists.

On Tuesday, March 24, Mitch and Drew skipped the school-bus ride and first period. Mitch had commandeered his stepfather's gray van, which contained food, camouflage netting, ammunition, hunting knives and survival gear. They drove to Andrew's parents' home and, unable to force his father's steel gun vault with a hammer and torch, stole a .38-cal. derringer, a .38-cal. snub-nose and a .357 Magnum that had been left unsecured. Then they drove to Andrew's grandfather's home and broke in through a basement door, using a crowbar. They took four handguns and three rifles, including Doug Golden's favorite, "deadly accurate" deer rifle.

About 100 yds. from the wall of Westside Middle School's gym is Cole Hill, an elevation surrounded by gravel and blacktop roads. It was near here that Mitch and Drew found a site to park the van. They had a clear view of the school's playground, enclosed by chain-link fence, a few hundred feet up the road. Three feet of sage grass, kudzu vines and an array of sapling oaks, sweet gums and acorn trees provided cover. For Mitch and Drew, the spot was perfect.

At 12:35 p.m., during fifth period, Alisha Golden, 12, heard the fire alarm sound. Alisha wondered, in passing, why her math teacher looked surprised and then heard someone say it was Drew Golden (who is no relation to Alisha) who pulled the alarm. Despite fleeting suspicions that it was a false alarm, the exercise proceeded, and Alisha kept moving, lining up at the side exits as prescribed by the drill. The kids, a little giddy at this momentary reprieve from math and English, poured out the side entrance into the midday sun--a steady stream of energy and youth, vulnerable flesh racing straight into a trap of precocious sophistication.

Pop-pop-pop. The sounds came in quick succession, and the kids laughed--mistaking the volley for firecrackers, a joke or maybe the drama students acting out a play. "When people started falling to the ground, I thought it was all made up," says Alisha. "I saw Natalie [Brooks] and Paige [Ann Herring] fall to the ground, and Natalie had blood coming out of her head, but the blood just didn't look real. When Paige fell, I thought she was just diving to the ground." Alisha wasn't the only one in denial. As Candace Porter, 11, collapsed against one of the cinder-block walls of the building, another student shouted, "Don't worry, don't worry, it's all fake!"--to which the bleeding Candace responded, "No it's not! I just got shot!" And then the undeniable masks of pain came over the faces of the fallen.

Whitney Coker ran for cover as one of her pals was hit. The girl's cries caused Whitney to retrace her steps, and she dragged the wounded student out of the line of fire. Brittheny Varner, 11, was hit as she tugged at the sweatshirt of her best friend, another girl named Whitney. The bullet passed  
105 through Brittheny's back, killing her, and wounded Whitney Irving in the abdomen. English teacher Shannon Wright, 32, stepped forward to shield one of her sixth-graders, saving the girl and losing her own life. "This guy was aiming at Emma [Pittman]," said Amber Vanoven, 11. "He was fixing to shoot her and Mrs. Wright moved in front of her. She got shot. She did. I watched her."

The shots continued, first methodical and then faster and faster even as survivors dialed the  
110 emergency dispatcher. "There's been blood loss," reported the first caller, breathless. "People with blood loss." Michael Barnes, 12, was looking elsewhere for help. There was no way to retreat into the school buildings; the doors had automatically locked as the finale of the fire drill. So, crawling to the shelter of the gymnasium, Barnes chanted Psalm 23 to himself: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

115 If students had turned their eyes to the hill, they would have seen the source of the evil. With apparent deliberation, the shooters were aiming high at their targets, at points where bodies are most fragile. The victims were apparently "selected because of their sex or who they were. It was not a random shooting, where you just shoot out there," Doug Golden told ABC's PrimeTime Live. "If that had been true, you would have shot as many boys as you did girls." (A music class of all  
120 girls did, however, file out first.) Of the 15 wounded, only one was male (Drew's cousin Tristan McGowan). In less than four minutes, the boys had fired 22 rounds of ammunition.

Mitchell and Drew tried to beat a fast retreat, but construction workers who saw gunsmoke rising from the woods tipped off the police. Two officers chased the boys down as they were heading toward their getaway van. They offered only slight resistance, and the police easily disarmed them  
125 of nine guns (another gun was found on the ground). Said Officer Terry McNatt, "They didn't say anything." They stayed silent for the entire drive to the Craighead County sheriff's office.

And the next day, Drew remained silent throughout the preliminary hearing, even as he listened to the recitation of his and Mitchell's alleged crimes: five counts of capital murder, 10 counts of first-degree battery. Mitch wept and appeared remorseful. But a single night of jail found the boys  
130 outwardly changed. Upon waking, Mitchell requested a Bible, a minister and "some Scripture thought," according to Sheriff Dale Haas. Both boys asked for pizza for lunch. The request was denied, and Drew began to cry in his holding cell, begging for his mother. Said the sheriff: "He wants his Mama, and he wants to go home now."

Drew's mother Pat Golden, postmaster in a nearby town, was at work on the day of the shooting.  
135 That afternoon, she had her son on her mind, having just learned that there had been a shooting at the school. Pat withdrew quietly to a back room, where a friend heard her crying softly, worried for Drew's safety. Her husband Dennis called to say authorities didn't know the whereabouts of their son. "Then," recalls Joyce Prater, a friend and former colleague who had stopped by for stamps, "the phone rang again. Pat let out a terrible, terrible scream, as though someone had died. I will  
140 never forget it as long as I live. By the time I ran back to see her, another employee said, 'She's already gone.' She just tore out of there." Prater was especially worried about her friend making the 25-mile drive to Jonesboro alone because she was still slowly readjusting to cars: she had suffered a seizure last year and had only recently returned to driving.

Drew was the child of Pat's change of heart. "Pat was married before," explains Prater, "and after  
145 two children she had a tubal ligation." But her second husband Dennis Golden had never had children. Says Prater: "She had the operation reversed so that they could have Drew. That child is the center of their world." Pat and her husband worked long hours to provide for the boy. His grandfather Doug Golden insists that "Drew understood law and order." He believes his grandson wasn't close to Mitchell Johnson. "Did this kid threaten him or intimidate him," he wonders out  
150 loud, "like maybe he was victimized?" After all, he notes, "this kid had made threats at school and pulled a knife," referring to reports about Mitch. "The sad part is that no one listened." In a statement from the family, read by Val Price, the public defender who appointed himself Drew's lawyer, Pat and Dennis Golden said they "would like to explain the situation and make it clear for everyone and to take away the pain for everyone, but they simply cannot. They, too, cannot  
155 understand, and they, too, are asking why Andrew, their 11-year-old baby, is allegedly involved."

Mitch Johnson's parents, meanwhile, seemed to be collapsing under the weight of guilt. Mitchell's father Scott, a long-haul trucker, told CBS News, "As hard as it is for me to say that, my son is guilty." His ex-wife Gretchen spoke on ABC's 20/20 of the anguish in Jonesboro, saying, "There's just no words from any of us or anything anyone can do that will ever make that right again." She met with Perry, her son's spiritual adviser, for succor, telling him that she couldn't erase the images "of the children hurting, of the parents trying to find their babies, the fact that these mothers will never get to hold their children again." Scott Johnson, who was in Fort Worth, Texas, when he heard the news, also came to Perry's church, with his younger son Monte. On Wednesday night, recalls Perry, "they had come late. Toward the end of the evening, I asked everyone to pray, to turn their chairs around and kneel to pray for those who were wounded and who died. Kids told me the dad had fallen out of his chair and collapsed, breaking down and crying." As for Monte, "he said he was not going to live in a hole, not going to be denied the right to live his life." But, says Perry, Monte was afraid to go to school last Thursday, worried that he would be punished for the sins of his brother.

Back in Minnesota, Buster Johnson reruns his grandson's childhood in his head--rewinding again and again in search of an answer. "I've been trying to think and think, and I can't come up with anything that makes sense," he says. During Mitchell's visits, he often hung out with Buster at his Spring Valley-area meat-processing plant, displaying no untoward fascination with the instruments at hand. "I felt comfortable with him there," says Buster. "He would trim hamburger, but he was never reckless with knives." He does not believe that his son Scott's long-distance-driving job deprived Drew of fatherly guidance. Says Buster: "He spoke with the kids every week or more." Says Scott's friend Beverly Jacobson, the co-owner and manager of Meadow Mobile Home Park in Grand Meadow, Minn., "Some people thought he was over-generous with the kids because he felt bad that he wasn't around them enough." She says Scott and his fiance Cindy got his boys new bikes, lots of clothes, remote-control cars and other toys last year.

Was the bloodshed sparked by another broken heart? Candace Porter, one of the girls injured in the shooting, was supposedly the object of Mitchell's affection. But she is said to have told him that she did not want a boyfriend. Stephanie Engels, Candace's cousin, says Candace had sought out her teachers, telling them that Mitchell seemed upset and violent. "She was really worried," says Engels. "But I don't think the school took any notice of it." Principal Karen Curtner insists that neither she nor any teachers were informed of such reports. But, says sixth-grader Kara Tate, "he said he was definitely going to shoot Candace because she had broken up with him." Apparently furious that no one was taking his heartache seriously, Mitch at this point allegedly pulled a knife on a classmate. He also issued a more wide-ranging threat. On the day before the shooting, says Mitch's friend Melinda Henson, "he told us that tomorrow you will find out if you live or die."

A local minister has mentioned Satan, but explanations rarely come neatly packaged in one word. "These are cold-blooded, evil children, and I don't care how bad that sounds," says Golden neighbor Brooks, whose daughter Jenna was wounded in the attack. Still, deep in its soul, Jonesboro is Bible country, and the residents choose to see divine providence in all things. Of the potentially fatal bullet that hit her daughter Candace but was deflected by a rib, Kim Porter says, "God held her the right way." Jonesboro has always counted its blessings. Here folks aim to forgive, as improbable and unnatural as it may seem. "The healing cannot begin until we forgive," said Gary Cremeens, a minister at the funeral of Paige Ann Herring, the first of the girls to be buried. He intoned the story of Jesus and Lazarus from the Gospel: "He cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth.' And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes." A promise of resurrection--and an allusion to the deepest of sorrows. For it was over Lazarus that Jesus wept. In a more modern tribute to the girls, Celine Dion's My Heart Will Go On was played over and over at the funerals. It is the theme song of Titanic, a favorite movie of the children's, and their most poignant artifact of love after death.

Northeast Arkansas is very rural, with miles between some houses, but the word neighbor isn't circumscribed by geography here. Within 20 minutes of the first 911 call, a radio station began asking for blood donations. Quickly a second facility was set up. That evening, as a hundred would-be donors waited at both locations, the station had to ask people to stay home. All the banks opened accounts for donations pouring in for the victims. White has become the color of

210 Jonesboro's grief--and community. The entire town and virtually every citizen wears white ribbons,  
as if sins as red as blood could be washed as white as snow.

There are small, troubling notes, nevertheless, such as two 11-year-old boys who, speaking to a  
reporter in the wake of the tragedy, vied with each other for the title of Drew Golden's "best  
friend," telling tales of how their pal had talked about "taking over" the school. And, for all the  
215 goodwill and faith and forgiveness, there are some hearts that may never be comforted. Mitchell  
Wright lost his wife Shannon to the hail of bullets. His fading tan is a reminder of a happier time. It  
was just three weeks ago that he, Shannon and their son Zane, 3, returned from Disney World in  
Orlando, Fla. "Thank goodness we were able to do that," says Wright. The family had other  
dreams, he says, but "they have been shattered." The loss resounds with the question repeated by  
220 Zane: "Where's Mommy?"

Mitchell answers, "You know your mom's stomach was hurt," or "Mom went to sleep," or "You  
know where Jesus lives, don't you? Mama went to see Jesus."

But Zane continues to look under the bed for his mommy. "Mom's in heaven," Wright tries to  
explain.

225 "She'll fall out," Zane says. "When is she going to come home?"

Zane talks to his rocking horse, whom the family named Cactus. "Cactus, my mom can't come  
home."

And then at night, Zane tells his father, "I want to go to heaven too."

--Reported by Sylvester Monroe, Julie Grace and Jackson Baker/Jonesboro,  
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