

Readings

"The Incident"

BY LEE GUTKIND*

(CHAPTER 1)

When I drove up to the house, Daniel was walking toward me. I got out of the car and waited for him to approach. Even though he waved and flashed a quick smile, he seemed grim and befuddled. "What's wrong, Dan?"

He shrugged and shook his head as we walked up the steps toward the porch. "Nothing's wrong," he said, but his eyes were darting erratically from side to side.

Daniel had been working periodically that summer at a rental property I owned, cleaning out the basement, a filthy job that he savored. Nothing made Daniel happier than getting dirty, especially with a bunch of junk. A pack rat, Daniel had always rummaged through trash, rescuing an array of worthless mechanical objects—manual typewriters, speedometers, radios, lamps, rusty tools, old motors. Keys of any size, type, or condition were his special passion, and locks, whether or not they corresponded to the keys. Sometimes he managed to clean or fix a derelict item of junk and sell it at a Sunday flea market, but usually

*From Lee Gutkind, *Stuck in Time: The Tragedy of Childhood Mental Illness*, © 1993. Reprinted with permission of Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

Daniel was more interested in contemplating these items in the questionable safety of his room.

Daniel is short and broad, part muscle from his recent forays into weight lifting and part paunch from overeating. It was not unusual for him to devour an entire large pizza with mushrooms, sausage, and pepperoni—our traditional Saturday-afternoon snack—followed by a few hot sausage hoagies for dinner. Over the past three years, he had changed a good deal physically; when he was twelve, he weighed ninety pounds, a frail and exceedingly delicate feather of a boy; now, still very short, he could be more aptly described as a fireplug.

We stopped at the top of the steps, and I put my hands on his shoulders. Ruffling his curly hair with my hand, I joked about how dirty he was and made a crack about his ears, which are unusually small. I could almost always get him to laugh by invoking his ears or by pointing out that he was most handsome on Halloween, when he wore a mask. But this time he did not laugh, or protest; he was so somber that I pulled him down on the stoop and looked him straight in the eye. “C’mon, Dan. Something’s wrong. What’s going on?”

Although I could see it coming, I was surprised at the power of his emotions. A mask of fear suddenly exploded onto his face, and he began to whine, like a small, frightened child. “Oh, I’m so scared,” he said. “He’s going to kill me.”

His eyes darted crazily, and he tried to stand up and run, but I held on to him. “I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Tears were streaming down his face, which he buried in my chest. “A man molested me.” He reached down and began squeezing his buttocks. “Oh, it hurts,” he wailed. “It hurts so bad back there.”

Daniel poured out his story in the midst of choking sobs. He had worked in the basement for half an hour or so, dragging out a mess of discarded timber, empty paint cans, and old furniture, and then decided to take a five-minute walk to the local convenience store for a soda. There’s a bank of pay phones on the corner beside the store, and as he was passing, a phone was ringing. Daniel answered. A male voice at the other end said that he had been waiting for Daniel and would kill him if he didn’t do what he was told. “Yeah, sure,” Daniel had replied, hanging up the phone and going to the store.

But when Daniel walked past the telephones on his return, a car screeched to a halt at the curb. A man, unshaven, dressed in black trousers and shirt and black patent leather shoes and waving a knife, ordered Daniel inside. Instead of running, or screaming—or even laughing—Daniel complied. They drove around the corner, down a side street, and into an alley, whereupon the man led Daniel through a clump of bushes behind an abandoned building. Following orders, Daniel kissed the man on the lips, then under the threat of the knife, sank to his knees and performed oral sex. Finally, Daniel lay facedown on the ground. The man entered him. Daniel felt a sharp and intrusive pain. Now, at the end of the story, Daniel was nearly hysterical. “Oh, it hurts so bad. He said he’d kill me if I told anyone. What am I going to do?”

I could not answer his question, for I felt dumbfounded and conflicted. This incident had occurred in my neighborhood, an area in which I lived with my wife and infant son, and one considered the most urbane in the city. Not that crime never occurred here, but child molestation (or kidnapping) in the middle of a bright and busy Saturday afternoon was unlikely, to say the least.

Besides, there was Daniel’s history to consider, beginning with the abuse and neglect that had led authorities to permanently separate Daniel from his family when he was ten years old. The abuse during his early years had been documented, but recently, new and questionable incidents of violence and molestation had allegedly occurred. Only a couple of weeks ago, Daniel had come home with his face bruised and his books and wallet missing. He claimed to have been attacked by four black kids, wielding pipes, who stole his money and beat him up. Later, witnesses reported that he had actually gotten into a fight with a neighborhood kid, who was white—and lost.

Last year, Daniel had reported that a teenage female resident of his group home had accosted him in a darkened passageway and molested him. At about the same time, Daniel told a convoluted story about being followed by a mysterious bearded man who had forced him into his Cadillac and molested him. Daniel also claimed that a teacher at school was abusing him and encouraging him to run away and not attend classes.

Many of the past horrors in Daniel’s life had been confirmed, but his recent credibility was partially suspect because of his own malicious-

ness. Hadn't he, one Saturday afternoon, removed all the manhole covers from the sewer system on the periphery of his group home and covered the holes with twigs, grass, and weeds as "booby traps?" Hadn't he promised, after I had explained the danger, to immediately replace the manhole covers, and hadn't he reneged on that promise? Didn't he lie frequently about where he went and what he did, using his learning disabilities and side effects from antidepressant medication as justifications for forgetting and making mistakes?

Some of his excuses were plausible, especially those attributed to his learning disabilities. The intent of messages directed toward him sometimes did not register, but because Daniel was intuitive and responsive, he skillfully maintained eye contact with the person to whom he was speaking, able to sense when to shake his head, shrug, or nod, indicating understanding while completely in the dark. But there was an unpredictable side to Daniel, as well; he was a kid who tottered on the precarious edge of ambiguity.

The "booby trap" incident had been especially disturbing because it made me realize that Daniel's defensiveness could distort his sense of right and wrong. The caseworker at his group home observed that Daniel had been so brutally battered by his family and by the child welfare system that "rescued" him that it was impossible for him to feel compassion. The fact that someone could have been hurt—or killed—by his "booby traps" meant little to Daniel, who frequently declared, "I don't care about anyone else."

I don't believe that Daniel wants to hurt anyone, but because of his history, he possesses an irrational and uncontrollable fear of being taken advantage of, especially by someone unknown. This helps to explain his penchant for locks, keys, and burglar alarms, and suspicions toward strangers. Daniel could have seen this unshaven man dressed in black sitting in his car or making a telephone call and his imagination might have done the rest.

Daniel continued to whimper as I tried to decide how to proceed. At the very least, I had to get him away from this house and the fear that the mysterious man, whether real or imagined, was going to come back for him. I remembered a story he'd told me of another unshaven man who lived in the woods across from his home who would periodi-

cally sneak into the room he occupied with his sister—and molest them both. The power of his emotions and the horror of what might have happened to him confused and frightened me. Hurriedly, we gathered his possessions and climbed into my car.

I drove in the general direction of the convenience store until Daniel pointed to the street to which the man had taken him. Instinctively, I turned the corner. Daniel directed me into the alley he had described. For the first time, I began to believe that the incident could have happened. The alley was not dark or narrow, but it was clearly out of the way, as was the building to which he pointed, set off in a secluded corner of a vacant lot. The underbrush around the building was thick and concealing. If a molestation had occurred, it could have happened here.

I backed down the alley and once again headed for the store. A police van was sitting in the parking lot, its engines idling. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see two officers, both women, eating a take-out lunch and listening to their walkie-talkie. Daniel was staring straight ahead, whimpering and snuffling. He did not see the police van, but its presence provided a direction—right or wrong.

"Well, Dan, this is your chance," I said, pointing at the white van with its large blue-and-gold official seal. "We could approach those officers and tell them what happened."

Daniel did not hesitate. "Yes," he said, with conviction. Daniel has always possessed an irrepressible penchant for law enforcement officers, which is what he wanted to become. The order and control that police may establish appeals to kids who have lacked the order and control which might have made their lives happier and safer. As Daniel had grown older, the idea of being a policeman had faded, although their uniforms and authority were still quite seductive.

We got out of the car, walked across the parking lot, and knocked on the window of the van. "I was molested by a man dressed in black," Daniel said. He quickly highlighted the gruesome details.

Almost instantly, the officer on the driver's side activated her walkie-talkie. Announcing the specific location, I heard her summarize Daniel's story to her sergeant, using the word that both Daniel and I had studiously avoided: "A reported rape . . ."

Within five minutes, the entire parking lot was ringed with police

vehicles. Daniel was asked to tell his story twice more, once by a sergeant and then by a medic, and with each telling Daniel became more distraught. He buried his face in my chest and began sobbing uncontrollably, especially when the medic attempted to take him in the ambulance to the hospital for the long and intense physical examination required.

"Lee, you have to come with me; I don't want to be alone."

"You go in the ambulance, Dan. I'll be along in my own car. Don't worry, I won't leave you."

When I arrived at the emergency room a few minutes later, the police would not permit me to join him in the examination room. Daniel remained alone with the doctors, nurses, and policemen for the next six hours. As directed, I went home and sat by the telephone, waiting for the police to contact me. I did not know what to believe—or even what I wanted to believe. Did I want the police to determine that Daniel was telling the truth—that he had really been raped? Or would it be preferable to learn that Daniel had been lying or hallucinating? Either way, Daniel was the ultimate victim—of society, his family, his biology, and of himself.

Late that autumn afternoon, I led two police officers back to the scene of the alleged molestation—the place to which Daniel had initially directed me. Daniel had told the police that the man had dragged him through the thick underbrush surrounding the abandoned building and molested him behind it. But the weeds and bushes revealed no sign of being trampled or disturbed, and later, the tests conducted by the hospital doctor were inconclusive. There were definite traces of semen on Daniel's shirt, but there was no evidence of penetration. Daniel could not explain to the doctor, the nurses, or the police investigators why he answered the telephone while walking toward the convenience store—or why he entered the man's car when he could have run in any direction, screaming for help.

During the following few weeks, the more people doubted and questioned the details and the logic of his experience, the more Daniel proclaimed its accuracy. "You may not believe me, and my mother may not believe, and the police may not believe me," he told me, "but I know what happened. I don't care what anybody says. The man molested me. You don't know anything about it."

Daniel was right. I didn't know anything about it, and I guess the truth of the matter is that I really didn't want to. The situation was too perplexing and too painful to dwell upon. Whether the rape had actually occurred or whether the entire incident was a creation of his own imagination, I have come to believe that it was a signal from Daniel—a cry for attention, help, and understanding to anyone who might listen. He felt himself slipping. Emotionally, he was circling the drain.

Rape constituted the loudest symbolic scream he could yell. And he had been partially successful. He had attracted the attention of the police, with whom he most desired contact, his mother, his big brother, his caseworker—all of the people in his life. We had all stopped dead in our tracks to look and to listen and to respond to Daniel, to be there for him during a brief time of need. But when the immediate crisis was over, the investigation completed and the new work week started, everyone had returned to his or her own personal preoccupations. Daniel was still screaming for help, but we no longer had the time or the patience to listen. He was screaming into his future, which was as empty as his past.

"Teeth"

BY LEE GUTKIND*

After breakfast, her husband looked up from across the table and announced that he was taking her into town to have all her teeth pulled out. It took a while for the meaning of his words to penetrate. Even when he said he was getting her a new set of teeth, she stared at him blankly. The memory of that morning nearly six months ago, pained her even now.

"My teeth ain't perfect, but they never give me or my husband no trouble," she said, rolling her eyes and shaking her head back and forth

From Lee Gutkind, *The People of Penns Woods West*, © 1984. Reprinted by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.