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KIDS IN THE DARK



By David Breskin

AFTER THE DRUG-INSPIRED MURDER OF A TEENAGER AND THE SUICIDE OF ONE OF THE KILLERS, HOW DO YOU GET THEIR TERRIFIED FRIENDS TO BREAK THE SILENCE? ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

What does a dead body in the woods mean in 1984? Every story starts with a question, and that's the one I was asking myself on my first drive to Northport, Long Island. The story – the murder of a teenager named Gary Lauwers by two of his friends, one of whom, Ricky Kasso, subsequently hanged himself in prison – had already occupied front-page space in the Sunday *New York Times* and was on its way to setting some kind of continual screaming-headline record in the lurid *New York Post*. I didn't really care about the drug-induced Satanism that the newspaper reports

RS 435

NOVEMBER 22ND, 1984

PAST IS PROLOGUE

THE LAWYER WHO represented Gary in juvenile court told a reporter: "He wasn't really bad. He was just acting out." Gary's act had no room for role reversal.

MARK FISHER: Ricky was totally dusted out and went unconscious for a while at a party. Gary stole the dust from out of his jacket – ten little yellow envelopes with the words SUDDEN IMPACT on them. When Ricky confronted him with it, he gave him back five and went and worked and paid him back for the rest. Gary was scared of him, 'cause every time they'd get together, Ricky would chew him out or beat the shit out of him. He never let him live it down. 'Cause Ricky had the money, but he didn't have the vengeance.

TERRIE ALTO: I knew he was afraid of Kasso. He was scared shitless of Ricky.

PEACENIK GIRL: Jimmy Troiano had just gotten out of jail. It was, like, April. He and Ricky were going after Gary 'cause he'd ripped him off. And Albert Quinones made Ricky take off his ring, 'cause he didn't want him to really fuck Gary up. I saw Ricky walking up the street looking for him: happy, psyched and everything.

And then I saw Gary come out from behind the white church; he walks up, and his jacket was ripped; he had a cut on the side of his face – blood dripping down. Maybe his lip was bleeding. I think he hadn't paid him back the money yet.

MICHELLE DEVEAU: I fixed his wounds up for him once. His black eye. And he had a bloody nose, too. He told me Ricky was an asshole. He'd bought a knife for protection, but I don't think he carried it around. Gary told me Ricky told him he



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trumpeted, and as for the violence, it was run-of-the-mill by city standards — so what that it happened in the lily white suburbs? What interested me were not the sensations themselves — drugs, Satanism, violence — so much as what they were symptomatic of. And that kept leading me back to my question, which really asks not so much about how these kids died as about how these kids lived.

When I got to town, there were reporters in the trees. Literally. Minivans and minicams, the *London Times* and the *National Enquirer*, *Good Morning America*, the *Today* show and *The CBS Morning News* were swooping down to see what tasty bits the lion had left behind. I waited for the daily press to migrate to a different corpse and stayed for several weeks more once it did.

My local "office" became the phone booth by the harbor, where frogmen were diving for the murder weapon in the first few days. The fact that I looked younger than my twenty-six years, dressed in T-shirts and holey blue-jeans and sneakers, had grown up in a similar town and could more or less talk the kids' language gave me entree into their world. I blended in so well that I was occasionally mistaken for "one of them" by other reporters and asked silly questions. But my desire to hang out with them — and *not* ask questions for long stretches — also made the kids suspicious. In fact, I had to convince some of them that I was not a narc. What more perfect cover than a long-haired, sunglassed ROLLING STONE reporter?

The adults had their own suspicions. The police twice asked for my ID as I walked down the town's main drag, and I was later almost arrested for "contributing to the delinquency of a minor" when an officer found two of my sources drinking beer in my rental car late at night in a strip-mall parking lot. Did he expect me to be interviewing them in their kitchens with their parents listening in? The police chief later told me there had been some suspicion I was a drug dealer. What more perfect cover than a long-haired, sunglassed ROLLING STONE reporter?

I talked to everybody I could count on talking to me: friends and enemies of the killers and the killed, schoolteachers, drug counselors and dealers, lawyers, waitresses (they always know a lot), cops, parents, doctors, psychologists, prison wardens. The key, as always with sources for whom there is a natural reluctance to talk, is in convincing them you are seeing the story through their

eyes and will tell it from their point of view. I kept a separate outfit in my car trunk — jacket, tie, button-down shirt, dress shoes — to wear whenever I needed to look respectable for the adults. (Unfortunately, my phone booth was not of the closed Superman variety, and changing on the fly was a constant problem.) I took material on the record, I took material on a "not for attribution" basis, and I took a great deal off the record. I ended up with forty-four hours of taped interviews.

Many of the kids I talked to were scared and angry and hurt: There'd been a murder, a suicide, there'd been widespread complicity in keeping quiet (which was the trigger for my interest), and now there was the anticipation of a trial for the remaining defendant. The feeling of alienation and desperate self-



TONY JEROME

After his arrest, Ricky Kasso hanged himself in prison.

dramatization in their lives was pathetic and touching. The fact that every "adult" institution had failed them — family, school, church, work — led me to abandon all my interviews with the adults, the authority figures, and to focus exclusively on the kids' point of view. It was painful to let go of half my research, but I felt that even by their absence, perhaps *especially* by their absence, the world of the adults would be felt in the story.

To tell it, I wanted to push the limits of traditional journalism. As the Eighties wore on, I was becoming frustrated with the limitations of magazines — stories were becoming shorter and more formulaic. ROLLING STONE was one of the few places where you could subvert those formulas and maybe create some of your own. For this story, I used a

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formula that borrows from poetry – the poetry of the “found” voice. I wanted the entire story to be told through the voices of the kids. No introduction, no transitions, no conclusion. I wanted the readers to go swimming in the kids’ world and to draw their own conclusions. My only “take” on the story would be the way I selected and edited my raw material, much like the way Frederick Wiseman makes documentary films. I shaped the piece into thirteen sections and titled it “Thirteen Ways of

Troiano, subpoenaed all my notes and tapes. Of course, we would not give up the material; it would set a horrible precedent. Besides, my word – and the trust of all those kids whom I’d talked to – was on the line. I didn’t feel the need to do the defense’s work for it. In paranoid fashion, I split up the tapes and moved them to friends’ apartments around New York City. Certain key tapes were copied, labeled BLACK SABBATH and put in a safe-deposit box.

ROLLING STONE’s lawyers diligently

Yes, I said, if I could do it with him. A year and a half later, *Kids in the Dark* – the headline was now a title – had a successful run in Chicago. It was a one-act, with the murder coming in the first five minutes, and the rest of the play attempting to unwind it. What about film rights? asked everyone. Well, with perfect timing, the movie *River’s Edge* opened just as the play closed, and the stories were, shall we say, very similar.

The third thing happened a bit later. A sleazoid book about the crime ap-

was gonna kill him. Supposedly. He said, “Last time Ricky beat me up, he says next time he’s coming back for more and it’s not gonna be just a black eye.”

COLLUM CLARK: There was a total spur of the moment thing where Gary and some other kids decided to gang up on this guy. They were beating him up, and then Gary took out a pipe and was lighting it up. And he gave him maybe ten bowl burns, circles with the rim of the bowl, a tattoo, sort of. Very severe, and they hurt. It was sick, it was torture. They were trying to get me to do it, ‘cause I really had an awful lot against this kid – more than Gary. I said to myself, “No, you’ll get in trouble.” Gary just had a severe dislike for him.

PREPSTER GIRL: Gary pulled a BB gun on two little kids up at the school, to scare ‘em. After that, he comes up to a group of my friends, and I guess because now that he broke through his faggot, and he’s into his little dirt-bag group that he’s so proud of, he calls me a faggot! And I said, “Oh, yeah, you’re so cool you can pull a gun on someone.” And he got all mad and started chasing me and getting his girlfriends after me and saying he was gonna kill me. But not kill me kill me, just kill me.

THAT NIGHT

IN COW HARBOR PARK, kids were reeling from the year’s first punch of summer. Eventually, most everyone headed to a

SOME OF the kids thought I was a narc. What better cover than a ‘Rolling Stone’ reporter? ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Looking at a Black Spot in the Woods,” after the Wallace Stevens poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.”

This strategy proved too arty, and perhaps too arch, for my editor, Carolyn White, who retitled the piece “Kids in the Dark” and insisted I write both an introduction and brief background notes to begin each section. I wrote the intro in a purple tone: My goal was to write something that Tom Waits could talk-sing. That kind of feeling.

Three things happened after the story was published that gave it a longer shelf life than most. First, the attorney for the surviving attacker, Jimmy

defended my right to this material, and I sought out other writers who would publicize the matter if it looked as if I were going directly to jail without passing go. Luckily, after much ado and a legal bill that probably dwarfed what the magazine had to pay me to write the damn story in the first place, we won the day in court, and my mother stopped worrying about how to smuggle in a nail file in a bowl of chicken soup.

The second thing was that a young playwright in Chicago named Rick Cleveland was so moved by the story that he contacted me and asked if I would let him concoct a play out of it.

peared, *Say You Love Satan*. The author had used as much of the article as he possibly could have – all without acknowledging the source. Sue! I thought. Settle! said my agent, wisely, and we marched off to Bantam Books (the august publisher) and entered into a conference with – guess who? – the same lawyer who had a few years earlier kept me out of jail and had recently become in-house counsel at Bantam. Everything this writer did was legal, she said; it might not be nice, but it was legal. Sue us! she said. Long live the First Amendment, we cursed, leaving the room and “Kids in the Dark” behind us. □

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birthday party for Randy Guethler. But not Ricky, Jimmy, Gary or Albert.

MIKE "LION" MENTON: Everybody was fucked up that night. It was one of the first nights school ended, so everybody was out. It was a festive night. You could feel it. People were tripping, people were stoned. Gary went into the park and came back and said, "I saw cats, man!" I said, sure, maybe he saw a cat in the park, and he said, "No, man, there are cats all over the place." He was flipping out. One of the last things he said to me, "Well, I guess it's safe for me to come down here now. I'm all paid off, I'm in good, it's safe." Then he said goodbye: "I'm going to get some beers and get fucked up."

of mesc and bought him jelly doughnuts at Dunkin' Donuts. First Gary didn't want to go, but then Ricky said, "We'll buy jelly doughnuts!" So he was like "Yeah!"

MARK FISHER: Ricky had twenty-five hits of mesc in a little stash bottle down at the park. I was gonna go get beers, and I gave them my box, had my tape in it, Black Sabbath, *We Sold Our Soul for Rock 'n' Roll*. I came back, and they had left. Aw, shit! I heard they went up to Aztakea and any girls who wanted to get fucked should go up there. That was the word. So I went up to Aztakea, but I didn't quite make it, 'cause it was so dark, I was bumping into trees and falling down. I heard noises as I was getting closer, but I couldn't tell which way to go, and so I finally gave up.

A TRIP

ALBERT QUINONES appears to be the only person who saw what happened and will be the government's star witness. Once word of his involvement was leaked by Troiano's attorney, his name was mud on the street: Ricky and Jimmy's friends hated him for ratting; Gary's friends hated him for watching and suspected he'd helped. After this interview, his mother sent him out of state to be with a priest.

ALBERT QUINONES: Gary already paid him his money back. Everyone was his friend. I mean, Ricky and Gary were both talking a lot, shit like that. The thing that bugs me out, man, is all of them were pushing me, especially Gary and Ricky, to take a hit of mescaline. They were all tripping. It bugs me out. I didn't want to, but finally I just said, "What



Accused killer Jimmy Troiano at the scene of the crime

DOROTHY AT WAKE: That night, Gary said, "Mom" — he calls me Mom — "I'm going back to school. I got my act together: I paid my debts, and I got a lot of friends, and I really care about myself and I don't need drugs anymore. I'm gonna start over."

RICH BARTON: I was down at the park three hours earlier, with Rick and Jim. We tried to make a fire, but we couldn't. It was wet. And then we tried to get out of the woods, but we couldn't. There was no moon and there's a lot of paths up there, and we had the tunes cranking — Sabbath, Ozzy, Judas Priest. When we got out of the woods, I said, "I'm going home, trip out by myself."

PEACENIK GIRL: That night Jimmy and Albert and Ricky came up to me, wanted me to buy mesc. They were really happy and everything. They were dehydrated, so they asked me where the nearest swimming pool was. They asked me to go to the deli to get orange juice. I got them the biggest orange juice I could find, and they were so happy. All three of them chugged it down. They were all dosed. They were happy.

SOFTHEARTED GIRL: Ricky gave Gary hits

the hell," so I took a hit. Ricky treated us to doughnuts at Dunkin' Donuts. To me, Gary was being cool and shit. And then we went up to Aztakea, because they wanted to go to a good tripping area, and they've got a little field where you can trip out.

See, Ricky was getting pissed off, because he couldn't start a fire, so Gary just takes off his socks, puts them in there. After Gary made a fire with his socks, he didn't want to make it bigger. And Ricky comes out with a remark, "Why don't you just burn your whole jacket?" The guy's like "How 'bout I just cut the sleeves off and use my sleeves?" It was fucked, man. So he took off his jacket and gave it to Ricky, and Gary just chopped off the sleeves. I guess he was going to make it into a vest.

All of a sudden Gary goes, "I have funny vibes that you're going to kill me." And Ricky was saying: "I'm not going to kill you. Are you crazy?" and shit like that. I was just tripping out, man. I was peaking. I was peaking out, tripping out. And they were just fighting, punching each other and shit, and I didn't think anything was going to happen. I mean, I

could see Ricky's point, too, which is that he was friends with Gary, and he just turns around and steals ten bags of dust.

So they were just rolling on the ground and shit, and Gary got up to his feet after Jimmy had ran up to him and kicked him in the ribs and shit, and Gary had gotten up to his feet, and Ricky just bit him in the neck, bit him in the ear, and then he just stabbed him.

It was a trip, man, I'll tell you, man, it was a trip. I mean, you sit there and stare out, and you look at the trees, and it looks like they're bending down and shit. That was a trip. I thought it was a nightmare. I couldn't move, man. My whole body, all of a sudden, it just wouldn't move, it wouldn't function. It was like in shock. I was going crazy, man. I just stood there in my place, like all bugged out.

After Ricky stabbed him, Gary took off, ran, and Ricky got him, just like that. Jimmy picked up the knife after Ricky had dropped it, and he gave it to Ricky. And Ricky made Gary get on his knees and say, "I love Satan." Then Ricky just started hacking away from him, man. He just kept stabbing him and shit, and then Gary was just screaming, "Ahhh, I love my mother." It was really fucked, man. And they grabbed him by the legs and dragged him in the woods, Ricky and Jimmy, dragged him in the woods. They came running out of the woods after they just threw leaves on him and shit. They told me that he started stabbing Gary in the face and shit...

I wasn't going to rat them out, because what's, like, another body? Man, it's no big

deal. I mean, you see them kill once, you just don't think, like, they're not going to kill you.

THE SILENT CIRCLE

THE ONLY INSTITUTION that mattered was friendship. The idea was to pretend you weren't involved, to hang out and hope it went away.

RICH BARTON: I think it was two days after. I saw Ricky down in the roundhouse. He was up that night. He was like "Rich, come here, I gotta tell you something. I killed Gary." I went: "Bullshit! Get out of here." He's like "Come on, I'll show you the body." I thought he was kidding. But then I saw him the next night, and I was like "All right, I'll go up and see the body." 'Cause I didn't think it was true.

And so we go up there, it smelled like shit. I'm like "Rick, what the hell did you kill, a fucking cat?" And all of a sudden he's like "There it is." And there's like a pile of leaves, and I'm like "Holy shit, man." I see all these maggots on him, a thick pile of them on top of the leaves. I said, "Rick, I'm getting the hell out here. I'll meet you back downtown." I just fucking booked out of there.

I met Ricky back in the park. He was calm, and he's like "See, I told you." I said: "I think you're crazy, man. You're gonna get caught. Why'd you do this, man?" He said, "For kicks," something like that. It's like now if he gets caught, I'm going to get involved. I didn't tell anybody, but I couldn't escape it. It came up every two minutes.



Breskin, often mistaken for "one of them"

THEY HAD DREAMS

TWO MONTHS AFTER the murder, Rich Barton was still sleeping on the living-room sofa, afraid to sleep in the bedroom where Ricky had crashed so many nights. His mother says, "These kids are going to need a hundred years of therapy."

RICH BARTON: We were hanging out in Azteka, getting wasted. I was standing closest to the grave. And all of a sudden someone pops up, grabs me and drags me into the woods. It was Gary, and his face was all mangled and stuff. Then I woke up. I just stayed up and watched *Benny Hill*, movies and stuff.

I had another one: I was sleeping down in

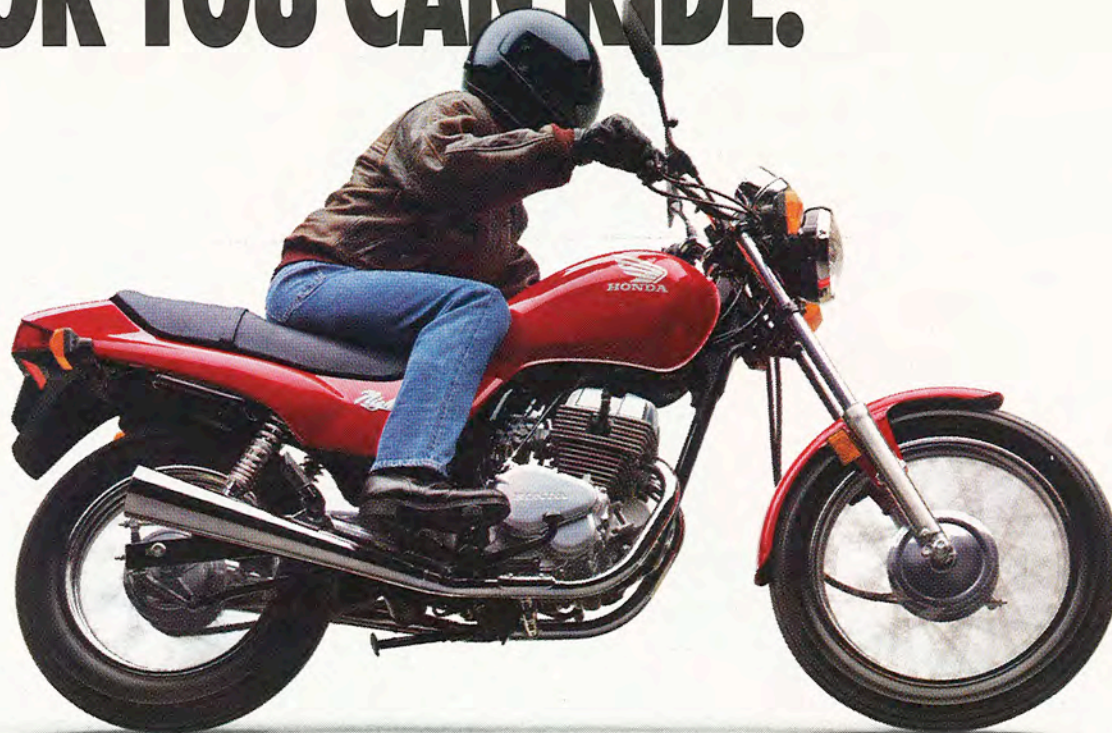
my room, and all of a sudden Gary came through my door and killed me with a knife. I was sitting there with my mouth wide-open, saying, "Holy shit!" He just comes in and stabs. Doesn't say nothing. I died right away.

ALBERT QUINONES: I was trying to forget about it, man, and I couldn't. It was like, every time it would hit after twelve, I'd start bugging out. I'd get scared to go in my room, because Ricky used to stay there. I had nightmares that I killed him. It was weird. And I had a dream that I killed another guy. I just started stabbing him in the back of the head. And then a cop came in and scooped him up with this little pick or something and threw him in the garbage. It scared the hell out of me.

MICHELLE DEVEAU: My dream is to get the hell out of here. I want to go somewhere there are no sickos and you don't get hurt by people. I think my generation is a bunch of lowlifes. No ideals. Most of us just bumming around getting stoned. People hate each other for stupid reasons. People have no morals. I'm gonna be a peace freak. I'm more like a hippie-type person than anything else. I'd like to be back in Woodstock.

SOFTHEARTED GIRL: The first night I found out, I had a dream, a dream that Gary talked to me. I apologized to him for something. It was so real. And he said it was okay. And I said, "Can we hang out again?" And he was like "There's only one problem." And I'm like "What?" And he said, "I'm dead." I woke up with tears on my face.

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