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
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 entry 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, sunglasses 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 stripmall 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, sunglasses ROLLING STONE reporter?

I talked to everybody I could find into 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 a 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-dramatization in their lives was pathetic and touching. The fact that every "adult" institution had failed them — family, school, church, work — led to 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 the 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
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 artsy, 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 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 — 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 para-
noid fashion, I split up the tapes and moved them to friends’ apartments around New York City. Certain key tapes were copied, labeled BLACK SAB-
BATH and put in a safe-deposit box.

ROLLING STONE’s lawyers diligently 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 pass-

going. Luckily, after much ado and a legal bill that probably dwarfed what the magazine hid to pay me to write the damny 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. He called it Say You Love Satan. The author had used as much of the article as he possibly could have — all without ac-

knowledging the source. Sue! I thought. Settle! said my agent, wisely, and we marched off to Bantam Books (the aug-
sut publisher) and entered into a con-

ference 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 Amend-

ment, we cursed, leaving the room and “Kids in the Dark” behind us.

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.

PRESIDENT GIL: 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 girlfriend 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
birthday party for Randy Guehler. 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."

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 mesca-line. They were all tripping. It bugs me out. I didn't want to, but finally I just said, "What 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 Aztarke, 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 took off his socks, put 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 tell 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 smashes ten bags of dust.

So they were just rolling on the ground and shit, and Gary got up to his feet after Jimmy had run 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 up, 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.

Ricky 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 "Ricky, 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 them, a thick pile of them on top of the leaves. I said, "Rich, 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 it he gets caught, I'm going to get involved. I don't tell anybody, but I couldn't escape it. It came up every two minutes.

**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."

Ricky Barton: We were hanging out in Axtlela, 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.

Michele DeVera: My dream is to get the hell out of here. I want to go somewhere there are no sicknesses 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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