

492:

Dr. Gilmer and Mr. Hyde

Transcript

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Prologue.

Ira Glass

Benjamin Gilmer was finishing his training to be a doctor, and he was applying for jobs. And there was this one job he was really excited about at a small rural clinic North Carolina, a place called Cane Creek, about 15 miles outside of Asheville. But there were two slightly strange things about this job. First, was that his predecessor at the position, who was the guy who started the clinic, had left the job after murdering his own father, strangling him and sawing off his fingers. And the other strange thing--

Benjamin Gilmer

At first I didn't make the connection that his name was the same as mine.

Ira Glass

This is Benjamin Gilmer.

Benjamin Gilmer

And then during my interview they reminded me, well, his name was actually Dr. Gilmer.

Ira Glass

That's right. The murderer was Dr. Vince Gilmer. He was Dr. Benjamin Gilmer. No relation at all.

Benjamin Gilmer

And there was concern from the board my presence out there might potentially even be harmful, because I shared the same name. Whether certain patients

would just elect not to come. There was confusion.

Robin Whiteside

People think it's strange. Just, it's very strange.

Ira Glass

This is Robin Whiteside who works at the clinic. Benjamin Gilmer must be a very qualified young man, because they did give him the job. And sure enough, it did cause confusion among the patients. Freaked a few out.

Terri Ippilito

A patient called. I said, I can schedule you with Dr. Gilmer.

Ira Glass

Terri Ippilito sits at the front desk at the clinic.

Terri Ippilito

And they said-- it was near Halloween, and they said, is this a Halloween joke?

Ira Glass

As if there is such a thing as a Halloween joke. Anyway, one patient, Benjamin was meeting her for the very first time, he walks into the exam room--

Benjamin Gilmer

And she literally was having a panic attack.

Ira Glass

Hyperventilating, heart palpitations. She thought maybe the other Dr. Gilmer, the murderer, was going to be seeing her.

But as Benjamin settled in at the clinic and people got to know him, something interesting happened. Many of Vince's former patients, who were now Benjamin's patients, started talking to him about Vince.

Benjamin Gilmer

Each one of them felt like they needed to say something to clear the air, I suppose. But they wanted me to know who he was. He was absolutely not what the papers were describing or just an axe murderer. Which was the thought that I had going into this job was that yeah, I'm following in the footsteps of an axe murderer. But that's not the story that increasingly was being described by his

patients.

Ira Glass

For instance, Ruth Tracy. When she first came to Vince for treatment she had just lost her job. Her husband wasn't working either, no insurance. And she told Vince, don't do tests. I can't afford it. Vince wouldn't hear of it.

Ruth Tracy

And he did not charge me for my appointments for almost six months. He gave me my medication out of samples. And he listened to me. I could cry on his shoulder. He would give me a hug. I mean, he always made me feel better. I'd say, how can you treat me like this and not collect money? And he said, we have to help each other out.

Ira Glass

Isn't that an exceptional story about Vince Gilmer? Lots of people would tell you what a great guy he was. Generous to a fault, he'd help you pay to get your car repaired, buy you a present for no reason. If you had no money, he would take a bushel of corn as payment.

He was a big, burly man. His nickname was Bear. He hugged everybody. He was a solid guy, a gentle guy. Gave free annual checkups to the local firefighters. He made house calls-- house calls-- didn't charge for them.

And when one of our producers, Sarah Koenig, went around asking about Vince, she heard that some people still had a hard time believing that Vince would be capable of cold-blooded murder, even though he's serving in prison for it. Like Jerol Davis, one of his former patients, he told Sarah, it made no sense.

Jerol Davis

And thinking back, see, his father had Alzheimer's. And I wondered if he didn't consider it a mercy killing to get his father out of his misery. That's the only answer I could think of.

Sarah Koenig

If it was a mercy killing, doesn't it seem strange that he would strangle him? Because if he's a doctor, he would have access to whatever drugs you would need to--

Jerol Davis

I didn't say he struggled him. I have no idea how he died.

Sarah Koenig

Oh, he strangled him.

Jerol Davis

Oh? I didn't know that.

Sarah Koenig

Oh, you didn't?

Jerol Davis

No. I didn't know how he killed him. I did not.

Sarah Koenig

Does that make you think differently about maybe why he did it, knowing that he strangled him?

Jerol Davis

Well, not necessarily.

Ira Glass

So Benjamin's doing this job and every few weeks somebody is telling him some glowing story about Vince.

Benjamin Gilmer

I don't know why I started identifying with him, but I could not help myself. I feel like I'm a continuation of him, which I didn't expect to experience at all.

Ira Glass

He and Vince Gilmer has the same specialty, same job, same clinic, same last name. They were even the same age. Vince Gilmer was 41 when he murdered his father, the same age as Benjamin when he came to work at the clinic.

And at some point-- and maybe you see where this is going-- Dr. Benjamin Gilmer started to get very curious about the murder that Dr. Vincent Gilmer committed. Began asking questions, poking around, talking to people. He developed his own theories, theories to explain the murder that had never come up at Vince's trial. He gets pulled in deeper and deeper. And by the end-- and I don't think this is a spoiler-- things looked very, very different from the way they

look here at the beginning of the story. It is an amazing story.

From WBEZ Chicago, it's *This American Life*, distributed by Public Radio International. I'm Ira Glass. And with that, I will pass things off to Sarah Koenig, who's the one who went to North Carolina and watched this all unfold. Here's Sarah.

Act One.

Sarah Koenig

When Benjamin first told me that he identified with Vince Gilmer, felt connected to him, I didn't really get it until I went there to the Cane Creek clinic and hung around and watched Benjamin with his patients. What I hadn't understood is that Benjamin is the same kind of doctor Vince was. I don't know how else to say this, but he cares about his patients, really cares. And they can tell, so they confess things.

The morning I spent there, a pregnant woman told him she did not want the baby's grandfather at the hospital when she gave birth, and so they crafted a plan for how to keep him at bay. A young mother of two said she'd just left her husband, which was better for everyone, even though she now had to work all the time and put her kids in daycare. You are doing good work with your children, Benjamin told her, and she almost started to cry. There was an older patient who came in anxious about a lump in her groin that Benjamin had already assured her was benign. He gives her a sonogram.

Benjamin Gilmer

So see that black area?

Female Patient

Right here?

Benjamin Gilmer

That black area--

Female Patient

Uh-huh.

Benjamin Gilmer

--is fluid. It's not a solid mass. Masses, for example, like cancer, are solid and

become white. So that's black, which we call anechoic. So that means--

Sarah Koenig

She does not need the sonogram, and he will not charge her for the sonogram. But he knows it's the one thing that's going to make her feel better if she can just visualize this harmless thing. And it works. By the end of the appointment she's laughing.

This doctor-patient trust, it's so intimate in a little practice like this one. And now Benjamin Gilmer and Vince Gilmer know some of the same intimate things about the same people. And that's why Benjamin started to feel connected to Vince. And then one day last fall, one of Vince's former patients said something that rattled Benjamin. It was an older man.

Benjamin Gilmer

He just caught me in the hall and said, hey, you know that Dr. Gilmer knows you're here. He knows your practicing. You know that, don't you?

And at that moment, I really had never thought about that. That, of course, he knows exactly what my name was, where I live, and that I'm working in his home. This clinic was his baby. He built it. He dedicated his life to it. And my neurosis was that I had taken over his life in a way that felt very new and strange.

Sarah Koenig

The thought of being this close to a murderer, he said, was terrifying, and Benjamin started to cook up irrational fears. He couldn't help it. He worried Vince would get out of prison and come after him in some way. At one point, a patient mentioned that Vince was, in fact, out on parole. It turned out not to be true, but for weeks afterward Benjamin was on alert, scanning the outside of the building when he arrived.

Laura Lira Hernandez

I come in right after him, and he would be looking at the door, who's coming in, and stuff.

Sarah Koenig

This is Laura Lira Hernandez, medical assistant at the clinic.

Laura Lira Hernandez

And so for a week we're in panic mode, thinking that somebody, that he was going to show up here. Dr. Gilmer was telling me that he was having nightmares

and stuff.

Sarah Koenig

You were? You were having nightmares?

Benjamin Gilmer

For a few days after that came out.

Sarah Koenig

When I met Benjamin, this was where he stood, confused about the two versions of Vince Gilmer coexisting in his head, the murderer and the good doctor.

Benjamin Gilmer

I mean, he obviously was crazy when he did this act. It didn't sound like it was an intentional thing, that he-- it wasn't premeditated, as I understand it. I mean, this is the trouble. I'm still confused by whether he was good or not. It's kind of like living with a ghost in your house, and you tell your kids that it's a friendly ghost, but you never know where the ghost is coming from.

So I'm planning to spend my professional life in that building. It's not going to go away. And until I know more, I'm not going to be able to let it go.

Sarah Koenig

Benjamin needed to sort out this mystery of how a beloved family doctor with no criminal history suddenly ups and strangles his own dad. How a good man seems to turn into a bad man.

Terry Worley

So you've never seen a picture of him before?

Benjamin Gilmer

I've never seen a picture. The only thing I've heard from a couple patients is I kind of look like him.

Terry Worley

Well.

Sarah Koenig

He started with Terry Worley. She was office manager at the Cane Creek clinic and good friends with Vince and his wife, Karen, who was also a physician.

They'd started the clinic together and worked together. Vince and Karen didn't have kids of their own, but Vince would come to Terry's kids' basketball games. She said he was like part of their family.

Terry Worley

He's bald. There's a picture of him. That was our staff when everything happened.

Sarah Koenig

And that's him kneeling?

Terry Worley

That's him kneeling.

Sarah Koenig

Terry told us two interesting things about the year leading up to the murder. First, Vince had a bad car accident. He flipped his truck just off an exit ramp.

Terry Worley

He hit a light pole, and the light pole came down and went across his truck. They took him to the hospital. And I guess he had ID on him, is how they knew who he was, and they called Karen. But he told them at the hospital that he was Bobby Brown. He didn't know who he was.

He didn't know who Karen was when she got there. He didn't know he was married. And then that lasted for about 24 hours, and then they let him come home. And he was back to his self. But I think he had a pretty good bang to the head.

Sarah Koenig

Here's the strangest part. Terry said she thought Vince had maybe crashed his truck on purpose. He was scheduled to take his medical board exams at that time, and he was exceedingly anxious about them. He had always been a bad test taker. His mother told us he had attention deficit disorder as a kid. And Terry says it occurred to her that the accident was a way to avoid taking the boards.

Terry Worley

And I think it was his way of getting out of it. Which at the same time, he had wanted a new truck, too. And Karen had told him he couldn't have a new truck. She was the one that kept the handle on the money, and he had his eye on this Toyota Tundra truck, and a Toyota Tacoma. Anyway, he ended up with a new

truck after the fact. So it could have been one of the two, I'm just saying.

Sarah Koenig

But that's crazy, though. That's the riskiest behavior ever.

Terry Worley

It is crazy.

Sarah Koenig

Another friend, who didn't want to go on tape, also told us, unsolicited, that he thought Vince might have crashed his truck on purpose, possibly as a suicide attempt. Then not too long after the truck accident, Vince and Karen split up, which floored their friends. Terry says it came out of nowhere.

Terry Worley

Just out of the blue, he came in one day and said him and Karen were getting a divorce. Nobody had a clue that they were even having any problems. She says, I asked him to go to counseling and everything, and he's like, no, I've already got a place to live. He went and found a place to live and moved out that weekend.

Sarah Koenig

So you're saying everything seemed normal until that pronouncement. He comes in and says, Karen and I are splitting, and then things change from that moment, it feels like?

Terry Worley

Yeah. It was like a light switch that he just-- I thought it was a midlife crisis. Sometimes men go through a midlife crisis and they go out and buy a car, go out and have an affair or something. We figured it would just blow over, but-- and that's when he went out and started drinking, and we saw a side of him we had not seen before.

Sarah Koenig

Vince's friends said he was drinking three or four nights a week, mostly at a bar in downtown Asheville called Jack of the Wood. But Terry says he still seemed fine at work. And that he was fine the Monday they closed the clinic early, June 28, 2004, so that Vince could go pick up his father, Dalton Gilmer. Dalton was at a psychiatric hospital, it's called Broughton Hospital.

It's not clear what exactly was wrong with Dalton, but according to court records,

he was taking anti-psychotic medication. And he needed help taking care of himself-- dressing, bathing, even eating sometimes. And he could barely walk. He needed a wheelchair or a walker. He was 60 years old.

Vince had made arrangements to transfer his father from Broughton to a nursing home very close to the Cane Creek clinic. So that Monday afternoon he drove up to Broughton and collected his father. I had every intention of taking him to the nursing home, Vince said at trial. But Vince says he promised to first take his dad to a favorite lake several hours out of the way. He did have a big green kayak in the back of his truck. But remember, his dad can't walk, and Vince has no walker in the truck. Plus it's getting late, so this plan didn't make much sense.

The heart of Vince's story about the crime is probably something that, if you're listening with little kids right now, you might not want them to hear. Vince says his father sexually abused him and his younger sister from the time they were six and three years old, respectively. The abuse he describes is maybe the most horrific I've ever heard of. Vince's sister apparently corroborated the abuse, but she disappeared just before the trial in 2005, and her family has not seen or heard from her since. Vince's mother claims she never knew about the sexual abuse, not until after the murder. She said her husband was a Vietnam vet who came back from the war a changed and sporadically violent man.

Vince says his father was apt to make inappropriate sexual remarks and gropes, and that's what happened in the truck that day. He kept saying filthy, filthy things, Vince said at trial, and that's when he lost it, he says. Vince said a voice in his head, like a compulsion, was telling him to kill his father. "I reach over with the rope, and I place the rope around his neck, and pull on it and pull on it and pull on it."

Then Vince says he drove around for hours, panicked, trying to figure out what to do with the body, which he'd moved to the bed of the pick up. Eventually he carried it onto the side of Good Hope Road near the Virginia-Tennessee border, and he performed what the Virginia medical examiner would later describe as "traumatic amputations of all 10 fingers." He cut off his father's fingers and thumbs. Vince says he used a little saw he had in the back of his truck for trees around the house. Vince said he did this to prevent the body from being identified.

And then Vince went home. The body was quickly found, still warm, and quickly identified. In the pocket of his tan shorts and the inside collar of his polo shirt, stamped in black ink, D Gilmer. Name tags that Vince says he himself had

arranged for.

After learning this much Benjamin started conjuring a hypothesis about Vince. Benjamin did his master's thesis on traumatic brain injuries prior to med school. To him, the truck accident was key to the whole thing. Maybe Vince had some lurking hereditary craziness that was unmasked by a big bonk to the head, or in Benjamin's words, latent neurologic sequelae triggered by brain trauma.

Benjamin Gilmer

He was unconscious and didn't recognize his own wife afterwards. And then after that period, there was a demarcation between this strange behavior that started happening. I think he had to be going crazy. I think the craziness started a year before the murder. Leaving a wife who loved him after so many years, and assuming that she would stay in the practice and work side by side with him. That's not rational thinking.

Sarah Koenig

If Vince snapped, as he claimed, then it's hard to square his behavior immediately following the crime, because from the sound of it, he told a cascade of lies coolly, no bead of sweat running down his temple. On Tuesday, the day after the murder, Vince told his office manager, Terry Worley, and everyone else that he brought his father home, and that sometime during the night his father had wandered off. He said he had people out looking, he filled out a police report, didn't cancel any appointments. In fact, the very first patient he saw was Terry's son for asthma.

Terry Worley

It was totally normal. He was totally normal the whole time. He never broke down, seemed overly anxious because his dad was missing, nothing.

Sarah Koenig

Vince kept seeing patients all week. Then on Friday, Vince invited the staff out to lunch at a favorite restaurant, called Iannucci's. While they were there, he got a phone call from a detective telling him they had found a body in Virginia. Again, Terry Worley.

Terry Worley

And he just-- all color-- he lost complete color. He was in shock. He literally about passed out. He had to lay down on the bench at Iannucci's, and the woman got him a cold compress for his head. I don't know what was going through his head, if he was thinking, oh crap, I'm caught, or now I've got to cover my tracks. I don't know what he thought. And as he was handing me the phone, he says, you

have to talk to my office manager, and shoved the phone to me.

Sarah Koenig

Benjamin and I talked to this detective. His name is Mike Martin. Benjamin was on speaker phone.

Benjamin Gilmer

Does this case stand out to you in your professional life?

Mike Martin

It is a unique case as in he was able to kill his father and show no remorse.

Sarah Koenig

Detective Martin says when he showed up at Vince's door, Vince was cordial and composed.

Mike Martin

During the interview at Mr. Gilmer's home, he told me that he had brought his father to North Carolina to stay with him. And that upon their arrival, that Daddy was so delighted to be there that he had went out into the yard and played with the dog, throwing a Frisbee. I already knew that could not be true, because the people at Broughton Hospital told me that Mr. Gilmer senior could not have walked on his own at any time.

And he said, you don't believe what I'm telling you. I said, no sir, not at all. Not in the least. I do not believe you. I said, the very questions that any person would be asking in reference to his parent's death, you have not asked, which is an excellent indicator that you already know.

He wasn't scared. He wasn't agitated. He told me, he said, look. He said, you do not know who you are messing with. He said, I am a doctor of medicine. I am well-respected in the state of North Carolina, and I will have your damned job.

I said, sir, it is my job to do the investigation, and based on what I know, I will consult with the commonwealth attorney, and I will ask for a warrant for your arrest for murder. When we left, we said, sir, thank you for your time. And he closed the door and never said a word.

Sarah Koenig

Before Detective Martin could get back to Cane Creek with a warrant, Vince ran.

Took some camping equipment and hid out. The cops finally caught up with him in the woods near the Lowe's hardware store at the Asheville Mall.

Sarah Koenig

Did you come away thinking this was a premeditated-- he planned this murder in advance and then executed it?

Mike Martin

That is exactly what I think.

Sarah Koenig

Really?

Mike Martin

Yes, ma'am.

Sarah Koenig

That it wasn't a spur of the moment, he lost control and years of abuse and anger welled up and overpowered him?

Mike Martin

Spur of the moment didn't buy the gloves. It didn't buy the rope, and it didn't put the pruning shears in the pickup truck.

Sarah Koenig

Other things Benjamin and I learned from Terry Worley. Vince was his father's guardian. He was supposed to be paying his father's bills out of his father's money, but he didn't. By the time he killed his father, he owed the psychiatric hospital where his father had been staying more than \$270,000. The motive, maybe.

Also, Vince had planned a two week vacation to Alaska that coincided with his father's killing. Terry says the investigators questioned her about it.

Terry Worley

They asked me if I knew it was a one-way ticket. I said, no, I helped him book it. And they showed me where it had been changed to a one-way flight. So he wasn't planning on coming back. He thought he was going to get gone.

Sarah Koenig

By the time we finished talking to Terry, Benjamin was deflated. Vince was sounding more and more like this cold-blooded killer. We debriefed.

Sarah Koenig

It just seems like he's lying. It just seems to me like he's lying.

Benjamin Gilmer

You really believe that?

Sarah Koenig

I think he's lying about this having snapped. I do. I think I do. I mean, it just doesn't make sense with all of the things that Terry said. This is a guy who had made a plan, no?

Benjamin Gilmer

It seems that way now, doesn't it?

Sarah Koenig

To me it does.

Benjamin Gilmer

That's a total game changer. That's not crazy. That is rational planning with a motive. I was kind of hoping not to hear that.

Sarah Koenig

Soon after Vince Gilmer was caught by the police, he confessed to strangling his father. His defense boiled down to one word-- serotonin. That was his excuse, his disease, his all-purpose defect. Serotonin, or rather, lack of serotonin in his brain.

Serotonin is a hormone, a neurotransmitter. If you don't have the right level of it in your brain, it can affect your mood, which is why many antidepressants increase your serotonin level. These drugs are called SSRIs, Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors. If you stop taking them abruptly you can have suicidal thoughts, severe agitation, even psychosis.

What you believe about Vince's crime depends on whether you believe he was out of his mind at the time of the killing. Whether you believe that missing his SSRI pills could transform him from a loving doctor into a psycho. Here's Vince's explanation for what happened.

He had been struggling with anxiety for years. And after he and Karen split up, in the months leading up to the murder, he'd been taking Lexapro, an SSRI. He says a day or two before he went to pick up his dad, he stopped the Lexapro. Didn't taper it off like you're supposed to. He just stopped. And he reacted very badly. He became extraordinarily irritable, heard voices. His brain didn't work right, he said. He felt, quote, "mentally retarded."

In a letter to a doctor he wrote from jail, this is how he describes the voices he heard when he was off the Lexapro. "These are not voices that make a suggestion. This is a compulsion. The compulsion is trying to take over my consciousness. I fight the compulsion in the front part of my head. It is a hyper-anxious state. Pacing becomes mandatory, trying to walk off the pressure. The battle hurts badly."

Matt Lakin

One of phrases he kept using over and over was, my brain wasn't working right. My head wasn't working right.

Sarah Koenig

This is reporter Matt Lakin. Back in 2004 he was covering crime for the *Bristol Herald Courier*. He spoke to Vince soon after the murder, both on the phone and in person. And Matt says Vince seemed like an intelligent guy, a nice guy, pleasant to talk to. Not obviously crazy. Maybe just eccentric and a little manipulative.

Matt Lakin

He would go into these bizarre-- he would make these strange gestures where he would bob his head up and down and just shake. It was just almost-- I almost had a sense that he was hamming it up sometimes.

Sarah Koenig

Doing it for your benefit?

Matt Lakin

Right. I mean, whenever I would point out a flaw in his story, for example, you would suddenly get emotional and start to cry. So either he was having tremendous mood swings, or he was trying to avoid the question. Which one do you think it was?

Sarah Koenig

This question lurked throughout Vince's initial incarceration and court

appearances. Was he crazy, or was he crazy like a fox? We asked Mike Martin, the Virginia detective in charge of the murder investigation, whether he ever saw evidence of mental illness in Vince. Whether he ever questioned if the cops had gotten it wrong.

Mike Martin

I can tell you what we done for Mr. Gilmer. We got to watching him, and each time police officers would come around him, he would--

Sarah Koenig

Detective Martin said he and his fellow officers had noticed Vince shaking his arm and his head, and that he only seemed to do it around them, not around the other inmates. They were suspicious.

Mike Martin

So we set up a camera on the rec yard and invited the inmates out on the rec yard to play, and they played basketball. Mr. Gilmer participated in playing basketball, as the rest did. He participated in the walks around the yards, as the rest did. And then we purposely sent the officer, James Blevins, who was assisting me in this case. When Mr. Gilmer seen the officer, he automatically started to shake the hand and arm. And he did that until such time that Detective Blevins left the rec yard. Mr. Gilmer is not somebody that's being controlled by some demon. He is very self-controlled.

Sarah Koenig

A clinical psychologist named Jeffrey Feix came to a similar conclusion. Feix evaluated Vince to find out if he was sane at the time of the crime. He reported that Vince was agitated, quote, "spoke in a halting fashion, fidgeted while sitting, stood with a stooped posture, occasionally paced, and gesticulated broadly with his hands while talking. This presentation was very dramatic and not consistent with known anxiety or psychotic disorders." Feix went on, "it appeared that the patient was exaggerating his symptoms for the benefit of the evaluator and treatment team. It is respectfully recommended that Dr. Gilmer be considered legally sane at the time of the offense."

Later that fall another psychiatrist found Vince to be quote, "evasive, dramatic, and manipulative." And by mid-2006 the prison doctors had settled on a two-pronged diagnosis-- atypical depression and malingering. In other words, lying.

From jury selection forward, the trial was a disaster for Vince. His performance, his explanations, they appeared to move no one. I talked to a man named Robert

Hughes who was called to serve on the jury, though eventually excused. When he would talk to us, Mr. Hughes said of Vince, he would act like he was nuts. Then when he'd turn around to talk to his lawyers, he was as cool as anything.

Nicole Price

We argued at trial that he was planning his defense, essentially, prior to committing the crime in the first place.

Sarah Koenig

Nicole Price was one of the prosecutors. When she lists all the evidence, the state's case sounds pretty straightforward. Vince had made careful plans to pick his father up. He had all the materials he needed to carry out the crime right there in his truck. He mutilated the body to hide the identity, and then dumped it in Virginia, far from where he himself lived.

Nicole Price

And the other evidence that we had were conversations, recorded conversations that he had with friends. And in those conversations, he talks about playing the good doctor card as hard as we can. He talks about that he would prefer to be tried in Tennessee, because he felt that his sentence would be less. And so at different times, he advised law enforcement that the murder occurred in North Carolina, that it occurred in Virginia, and that it occurred in Tennessee. And that was calculated to let him determine where this trial would be had. So I think the evidence from his own mouth is that he was manipulating in the hopes that he would convince a jury that he was not responsible for his criminal actions because of some type of-- I don't know. That he was insane.

Sarah Koenig

And what is the craziest thing a man accused of first degree murder can do? The craziest, most stark raving lunatic thing a man facing life in prison can do? The answer is dismiss his lawyers and choose to represent himself. And so yes, that is what Vince Gilmer did.

I used to be a court reporter, and so I've read a lot of court transcripts, but none as farcical as this one. It makes you wonder if maybe he really was crazy, because any casual watcher of *Law & Order* could have built a better case for himself than Vince Gilmer. His witnesses are beside the point. His own testimony favors the nonsensical. Vince can barely string together a sentence before a prosecutor objects.

At one point, Vince called his ex-girlfriend, Susan [? Garran ?] to the stand. He

asks her, to the best of your knowledge, have I hurt anyone or killed anyone? Just if I hurt or killed anyone that you know of? Susan-- your father. Vince-- OK that. Have I-- besides what happened with my dad? Susan-- can you repeat the question, please? His court-appointed attorney, who was there only to answer Vince's questions about court procedure, said it was agonizing to watch, like someone trying to commit suicide with a butter knife.

Toward the end of the trial, Vince Gilmer says, your honor, I'd like to call Vince Gilmer. He talks and he talks and he talks for nearly two hours, and by the end, he loses his thread. The prison docs have stopped his SSRI meds, he said. "So when I came in here, I'm confused. I had trouble-- I've had trouble with the confusion all the way through this. I know you're the jury, and I know he's the judge, so that makes me in Virginia-- you're capable to-- I'm able to say I'm competent to be here. This hasn't been the brightest of ideas, being my own lawyer."

A little later, prosecutor Nicole Price interjects, isn't it true that you've been found competent to represent yourself? I am, says Vince. Are you fine right now, Ms. Price asks? No, says Vince.

The jury took about an hour to convict Vince Gilmer of first degree murder. The judge, the Honorable C. Randall Lowe, concurred. Quote, "it was clear that it was malingering and faking," he said at a post-trial hearing. "The defendant would go into an act. He would look up and see if the jury was buying it. And when the jury wasn't buying it, he would go back to normal. It was clear." Judge Lowe sentenced Vince to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

So that's where it ended. The entire law enforcement, medical, and legal community declared Vince a liar. He went to a maximum security prison called Wallens Ridge, in the mountains of far Western Virginia.

Ira Glass

Coming up, Benjamin does not take premeditated for an answer. A hunch, a blood test, and DNA evidence-- and not the kind you're thinking of-- that is in a minute, from Chicago Public Radio and Public Radio International when our program continues.

Act Two.

Ira Glass

It's *This American Life*. I'm Ira Glass. Today on our program, Dr. Gilmer and Mr.

Hyde. If you've just tuned in, Dr. Benjamin Gilmer is looking into a murder committed by Dr. Vince Gilmer, no relation. Where we left off before the break. Vince Gilmer was claiming that his brain was not functioning properly at the time of the murder. Two psychiatrists and a psychologist thought he was faking his supposed symptoms of mental disturbance. A jury thought he was faking. A judge thought he was faking. Our reporter on the case, Sarah Koenig, was inclined to think that all these people cannot probably be wrong. And the one person, the one person who still thinks that maybe Vince Gilmer might not be faking is Benjamin Gilmer.

Sarah Koenig

He's still unconvinced. He's begun researching SSRI withdrawal, and found dozens and dozens of reports of people who've become violent or homicidal while either on or off their medication. He's also gathered more reports of personality changes following a traumatic brain injury. And he's dug up Vince's brain scan from back when he had the truck accident and gone over it with not one but two radiologists. When Benjamin calls me to talk about what he's found, he sounds to me like he's grasping for a diagnosis.

Benjamin wrote to Vince in prison, and several weeks later he got a letter back. Vince included many pages of information about SSRI withdrawal and had written messages on the back in a madman's scrawl, barely comprehensible.

Benjamin Gilmer

Six years into this, he's exhibiting the same kind of behavior.

Sarah Koenig

Right. You'd figure if he were faking, he'd let it go. What's the point now?

Benjamin Gilmer

Yeah. Just believing that he's just a pathologic sociopathic killer who did it in cold blood. That he is just that. That, I do not believe anymore. He was a mess.

Sarah Koenig

Yeah. I don't know. I don't think you're going to get to the bottom of this, Benjamin.

Benjamin Gilmer

You don't think it's ever going to be--

Sarah Koenig

I don't think it's ever going to be clear. I mean, I think you can end up telling yourself something about it, but I don't know that it's going to be true.

Benjamin Gilmer

I'm not trying to make him a martyr, or anything.

Sarah Koenig

I know, I know. I'm just saying, you want to know the truth about it, though.

Benjamin Gilmer

Yeah. Here we are.

Sarah Koenig

It seemed the only way to judge Vince for ourselves was to see him for ourselves. So in January, Benjamin and I drove to Wallens Ridge State Prison to meet Vince.

Sarah Koenig

How are you feeling?

Benjamin Gilmer

Feeling nervous, to be honest. Never done this before.

Sarah Koenig

Benjamin was so nervous he had to sit down when we were signing in at the front desk. He told me later he was imagining being face to face with a guy capable of tearing someone apart. That's the way one of the jail guards back in North Carolina had described Vince to Benjamin.

Now, at Wallens Ridge, they led us to the visiting room. Several other inmates were already there. And after a while, they brought in an old man. At least, he looked like an old man, bent and shuffling. And of course, that was Vince. He's only 50, but he looks awful. We spent four hours talking to him, asking him every question we had, and continually fetching him food from the vending machines--two pizza burgers with pepperoni, one cheddar cheeseburger, two Cokes, and six of those pink Hostess snowballs coated with coconut shavings.

Ever since Vince went to jail in 2004, he has been agitating, and all this time, he has never let up. It's dizzying, the amount of paperwork he's filed, protesting

what he says is inhumane treatment. Inmate request forms and civil lawsuits and motions for emergency hearings. Vincent says he has SSRI withdrawal syndrome, an extreme reaction to changes in his SSRI meds that can cause intolerable mood changes. If only they'd give him 60 or 80 or 100 milligrams of Celexa, uncrushed, he'd be better.

A fellow inmate who tried to help Vince wrote to me. At Wallens Ridge they call Vince "Doc." The inmate wrote, quote, "when the prison doctors would not order the treatment Doc wanted based on his self-diagnosis, he would become hostile, threatening, throw tantrums, refuse to comply with orders, and just yell that all of this was caused by his serotonin-deprived brain. Needless to say, none of that plays well in prison. Sadly, Doc has been his own worst enemy." Unquote.

We weren't allowed record or take written notes when we met with Vince, but the following day we were allowed to record a phone call. The sound quality is not good.

Vince Gilmer

Hello? Hello?

Sarah Koenig

Hi.

Vince Gilmer

Hello?

Sarah Koenig

Hi.

Vince Gilmer

Are you there?

Sarah Koenig

Yes, is that Vince?

Vince Gilmer

Yes, miss. I can hear you.

Sarah Koenig

Oh, great.

Benjamin Gilmer

Good morning.

Vince Gilmer

Good morning.

Sarah Koenig

Vince is hard to take in, because he presents so many contradictory characteristics all at once. You can see he was once a handsome guy, and at times his speech and thoughts and affect seem completely normal. He looks you straight in the eyes. And some of his answers sound utterly reasonable, too.

For instance, no, he did not simply dump his wife and walk away from a happy marriage. They were having troubles, like many couples do, and they couldn't work out those troubles, so they split up, he said. End of story. We later confirmed this with Karen.

But then in a flash he'll lose his focus, lose simple words, become weepy. His face will grimace strangely in a way that's unconnected to what he's saying. Or he's putting his index finger on his chin or forehead and looking at the ceiling like a child. His hands are working constantly, especially his left hand, rubbing his thumb endlessly over his closed fingers. You can see the skin is red and raw from it. He's holding his arms close to his chest. He's talking and talking, and then he'll stop and say, what was the question?

Vince is missing many teeth. He says that's because his serotonin-deprived brain makes him aggressive, and so he lashes out at other inmates and then gets beaten down by prison guards. I ran this by a Virginia DOC official, who said the DOC does not respond publicly to inmate allegations.

Benjamin spent a lot of the conversation trying to suss out Vince's medical history.

Benjamin Gilmer

So what is the difference between a serotonin-deprived brain and depression? I'm just trying to figure out--

Vince Gilmer

OK-- instead of being-- OK. When unbelievable levels of anxiety are-- like I said, the ungodly anxiety-- the electric jellyfish stings that comes and goes.

Sarah Koenig

That was a little hard to hear. He's saying, electric jellyfish stings. He says that's what it feels like in his brain, an electric shock.

Vince Gilmer

Umm, what was your question?

Sarah Koenig

Then he says, there's the intermittent psychomotor agitation, meaning the uncontrolled movements in his arms and face that come and go. He knows it looks fake, he says, but it's real. And indeed, the symptoms he talks about are listed in the teeny tiny print on the back of the Lexapro insert.

I asked him about what Detective Martin told us, about putting cameras in the jail rec yard, and how Vince seemed to act weird only when staff came around.

Vince Gilmer

That's exactly. That is intermittent psychomotor agitation. Exactly. And the same thing happens when I try to talk to medical people. The same type of thing happens. Or if something stresses me out, it gets worse and worse.

Sarah Koenig

So basically, what Detective Martin saw as evidence of you faking it, you're saying it's evidence of a real syndrome?

Vince Gilmer

Absolutely. Again, that's a documented part.

Sarah Koenig

No one has believed you. They don't believe your symptoms are real. Why is that?

Vince Gilmer

I don't know. I don't understand.

Sarah Koenig

Vince told us he did not plan to kill his father. He's adamant about that. He says he did not want his father dead. He'd taken care of his father on many occasions, sometimes for long stretches. The plane ticket to Alaska that Terry told us about, Vince couldn't remember it, and it never came up as evidence in court. As for the debt Vince owed to Broughton Hospital, he says he just wasn't that worried about it. Plus, it's not like the debt would have gone away if his father died. But he couldn't explain why he had let it accrue like that, why he never paid for his father's care like he was supposed to. Also, he couldn't really explain his behavior right after the killing.

Vince Gilmer

I just can't really come up with a good answer for it. Sorry.

Sarah Koenig

Because I am curious about that week, because it seems like you were very controlled, in fact, in that week.

Vince Gilmer

By that time, it was back on that medicine for a short term.

Sarah Koenig

So are you saying that as soon as you took the Lexapro again, your mind calmed down and you were able to go about your life in a more or less normal way?

Vince Gilmer

Absolutely.

Sarah Koenig

So why, at that point, if you're on it, why not just immediately go to the police and say, I've done this horrible thing--

Vince Gilmer

[INAUDIBLE]

Sarah Koenig

--and I was out of my mind and I need to-- we have to deal with it. Do you know what I mean? Why run? Why lie? Why try to cover it up then?

Vince Gilmer

I just didn't-- I sit here-- I guess that's what I should have done.

Sarah Koenig

Prison staff at Wallens Ridge all told us the same thing. Vince is really like this. He wasn't putting it on for us. Also, he's gotten a lot worse in the last few years and months. When we saw him in prison, he spent the last 10 or 15 minutes of our meeting tearfully asking us, especially Benjamin, for help. He'd helped so many people as a doctor, he said. Didn't he deserve the same now? I'm begging you, he said.

Back in the car, a little shaky after the interview, Benjamin had come to a decision.

Benjamin Gilmer

From our observations today, he is mentally ill. And I was trying to be discerning. I was trying to be somewhat skeptical. But I just don't think anyone can pull off what he pulled off today.

Sarah Koenig

If they weren't genuinely sick?

Benjamin Gilmer

Yeah.

Sarah Koenig

Yeah. So we no longer think it was premeditated?

Benjamin Gilmer

I don't think so.

Sarah Koenig

So we don't-- so we believe-- OK, so we're saying we believe his story, that he snapped in the moment?

Benjamin Gilmer

That's what feels right to me. Do you feel that way, too? Because before, you were premeditation all the way.

Sarah Koenig

I know. I guess I do feel like that, but if that's true, then he was wrongly

convicted.

Benjamin Gilmer

Yep. That's right.

Sarah Koenig

All over again, Benjamin turned over the possible explanations for Vince's illness.

Benjamin Gilmer

I mean, I've reviewed a bunch of cases with very uncanny similarities to this one, all related to SSRIs. He does have-- there's evidence to suggest that what he's saying could possibly really be true.

Sarah Koenig

And so what do you do with that information?

Benjamin Gilmer

I don't know. So I've wondered, obviously, what is my purpose with this? Is it my duty to do something?

Sarah Koenig

He directly asked you, not a half hour ago, help me. You can help me. Help me.

Benjamin Gilmer

So now I'm left with what to do with this. I don't know what I'm going to do with this.

Sarah Koenig

Three weeks later, Benjamin was back at Wallens Ridge. This time, he brought along his friend Steve Buie, a psychiatrist. They talked to Vince for an hour, but when they were done, Dr. Buie wasn't sold on Benjamin's favorite hypothesis. Dr. Buie has seen a lot of people go through SSRI withdrawal, he said, but whatever was going on with Vince, it didn't seem like that. And ditto traumatic brain injury. Those don't usually cause the kind of deterioration Vince was experiencing.

Then as they were leaving the visitors room, walking between the series of locked metal doors and barb wire fencing, Dr. Buie stopped in his tracks.

Doctor Steve Buie

I turned to Benjamin and just raised the question, I said, could this be Huntington's? And he looked at me with a surprised expression and nodded his head, that yeah, it might be.

Sarah Koenig

Huntington's disease is a horrible condition, one of the worst. Like a cruel trifecta of Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and Lou Gehrig's disease rolled into one. It causes severe emotional and physical symptoms. It's progressive, it's painful, and highly inheritable. If your parent has it, you've got a 50/50 chance of getting it.

According to descriptions of Vince's father's mental and physical state, it's conceivable that's what Dalton Gilmer had. Typically, it starts to affect a person between the ages of 35 and 45. Vince's behavior began to change when we was about 40.

And it's fatal. Once you have symptoms, the brain and body dwindle away. You usually die after about 20 years from a complication like pneumonia or choking. Dr. Buie and Benjamin went down a checklist of symptoms.

Benjamin Gilmer

Behavioral disturbances.

Doctor Steve Buie

Yeah, he murdered his father.

Benjamin Gilmer

Hallucinations.

Doctor Steve Buie

He's hearing voices in his head.

Benjamin Gilmer

Irritability.

Doctor Steve Buie

He's continuing to attack other inmates in spite of the consequences of being beat up afterwards.

Benjamin Gilmer

Moodiness.

Sarah Koenig

Moodiness, check. Restlessness or fidgeting, check. Paranoia, psychosis, abnormal and unusual movements, including facial movements, grimacing, quick sudden jerking movements, unsteady gait, disorientation or confusion, loss of judgment, loss of memory, personality changes, speech changes, anxiety, and stress. Check, check, check, check, all the way down the list.

Of course, the best way to tell is a genetic test, but none of us is a lawyer, we're not related to Vince, we have no standing with the Virginia Department of Corrections. So we weren't sure how to go about getting a test done. Then three weeks later, on March 11, I found out from the DOC, just by accident, that Vince had been moved from Wallens Ridge to a psychiatric hospital within the prison system called Marion Correctional Treatment Center. A few calls later, I was speaking to a social worker there who eventually told me Vince has threatened suicide. They'd found a couple of razor blades in his room.

The social worker asked me what Benjamin and I thought of Vince's condition. I told her Benjamin actually had an idea-- Huntington's. Oh, she said. Interesting. We can test for that. The next day, a psychiatrist at Marion met with Vince, a psychiatrist called Benjamin, and within a week they'd drawn blood for the Huntington's test and sent it off to a lab in Utah.

Benjamin Gilmer

It is the 28th of March, and it's 7:30 in the morning. I just got to the clinic.

Sarah Koenig

Benjamin recorded this on his own

Benjamin Gilmer

And I opened the email and the first line was Vince Gilmer is positive for Huntington's. Allele number 1, 43 repeat CAGs, which means strongly positive. So we found it. We found an answer. I'm really excited and very sad at the same time. This is a terrifying diagnosis for Vince. I'm not sure what's worse, life in prison or dying prematurely and painfully from this disease. But we will see. I cannot believe it.

Sarah Koenig

Benjamin got this news from Vince's new psychiatrist, Dr. Colin Angliker. He's medical director and chief psychiatrist at the Marion Correctional Treatment

Center. He's been a prison doctor for 25 years, which you'd think would make him a company man, but he's just the opposite, meaning he is the perfect doctor for Vince. He's one of those guys who enjoys proving the system wrong.

Doctor Colin Angliker

Whenever I hear some of these very much of a malingerer, I think, uh-uh, he ain't malingering. There's something else going on.

Sarah Koenig

Benjamin and I went to meet Dr. Angliker in Virginia last week, and he described what happened when Vince got the news.

Doctor Colin Angliker

I was nervous, because it's more or less like a death sentence that you're telling somebody. But much to my surprise and personal relief, he so far has taken it very well.

Sarah Koenig

Why do you think that is?

Doctor Colin Angliker

Well, I think he had been trying to prove a point for some considerable time, that there was something wrong with him, and nobody was paying any attention. They thought that oh, it's all fake and he's putting it on, and that wasn't the case-- isn't the case.

Sarah Koenig

Dr. Angliker says that since he put Vince on medication he's feeling much better. He's walking better, talking better. He's less anxious. What medication, you ask? 80 milligrams of Celexa, uncrushed-- what Vince has been asking for all along. Because it turns out Huntington's kills off brain cells, neurons, which decrease production of neurotransmitters. So all this time, it's possible Vince did have a serotonin-deprived brain. It's possible he was right.

All this makes you wonder, to be blunt, what the hell? Benjamin asked Dr. Angliker as respectfully as he could, why did this take so long?

Benjamin Gilmer

To me, what's been so difficult to understand is that for nine years-- I'm a doctor, I'm not a psychiatrist-- but after two visits with him it was clear that he had a

neurologic illness. There's obviously something going on. So it's very hard for me to appreciate that that could have been missed, after numerous, numerous evaluations.

Doctor Colin Angliker

Well, we're supposed to listen, and I have found so often that people don't listen to what patients are saying. They don't. They have a preconceived idea as to what's going on, and that's it. They are as inflexible sometimes as the system in which they find work. They have a stereotype of what an inmate is, and they won't budge beyond that.

Sarah Koenig

Do you think that's what happened in Vince's case?

Doctor Colin Angliker

I'm afraid so. It was really horrendous. It just blows my mind how things went for him, and it's really sad.

Sarah Koenig

From what Dr. Angliker can tell, Vince was having psychiatric symptoms from Huntington's at the time of the killing. In other words, he was not himself when he strangled his father, and he never should have been allowed to represent himself in court.

Doctor Colin Angliker

To me it was a travesty. He should never be in a prison, but that's me.

Sarah Koenig

Of course, Dr. Angliker isn't a lawyer, so we asked one, Richard Bonnie, a professor at the University of Virginia School of Law and director of the Institute of Law, Psychiatry, and Public Policy. He says Vince's best shot might be for a lawyer to argue, probably in federal court, that Vince wasn't competent to represent himself at his trial, that he shouldn't have been allowed to do so. But really, Vince might be better off bypassing the courts and just trying to get what they call compassionate release. That is, if someone can pull the right strings in government.

We hadn't spoken to Vince since January. He'd been in solitary on suicide watch at the Marion hospital until last week. Finally, on Monday we were able to arrange a phone call, our first contact with him since the diagnosis. It was

shocking.

Vince Gilmer

Hello, B.

Benjamin Gilmer

How are you?

Vince Gilmer

I am ridiculously doing so much better, it's not even funny.

Benjamin Gilmer

You sound so different.

Vince Gilmer

I really and truly-- I mean, right now, I am so close to being back to normal, it's just--

Benjamin Gilmer

I'm so glad to hear that.

Vince Gilmer

It's just my brain is getting better.

Sarah Koenig

Vince was the laughing. When we met him back at the prison three months earlier, that Vince, it didn't even occur to me that he could laugh.

Vince Gilmer

After all these years of hell, and yeah, having the DNA diagnosis that can't be argued with, and the fact that this treatment is working so well, it's just a miracle all the way around, and it's going to work out for the best.

Benjamin Gilmer

I know the diagnosis is terrifying.

Vince Gilmer

For me, I'm not terrified about it. To me, it was so relieving.

Sarah Koenig

After about a half hour of hearing how happy he was, how hopeful, it dawned on us-- Vince doesn't know anything about Huntington's. We weren't prepared for that, since Vince is a doctor. But he doesn't know what's going to happen to him, and maybe to his sister, and to her two kids, and to her three grandkids, because they're all at risk for Huntington's now. So Benjamin did the hardest thing in the world-- he told him. Vince's response was pragmatic.

Vince Gilmer

I mean, right now-- what is the treatment now?

Benjamin Gilmer

Just symptomatic treatment. There's nothing, at this point, that can reverse the process, unfortunately.

Vince Gilmer

Right.

Sarah Koenig

They talked for an hour, and Vince didn't seem defeated at all by this terrible news. For now, he's just so glad to be getting the Celexa, surrounded by people who believe what he says to them.

By the end, Benjamin and Vince were just two doctors talking about the Cane Creek Clinic. Benjamin told him how his patients and friends were taking the news. Vince remembered working there, hanging out with the staff. How if they got paid in corn, they'd heat it in the microwave and dip it in butter. And how he missed working with the patients.

Vince Gilmer

It was such a-- what's the word for-- a blessing, to be able to actually be there and share those people's lives.

Benjamin Gilmer

I'm sorry if you feel like the medical community turned their back on you.

Vince Gilmer

You didn't turn your back on me. You did not. You came all the way across the mountains and came to see me in the prison, because all those patients, patients that you take care of, they kept telling you, no, that's not him. And you're right,

that's not who I am. And I'm becoming who I am again. And I thank you.

Sarah Koenig

Benjamin started out as Vince's freaked out replacement, but over the course of seven months he'd become Vince's detective and then his physician, the physician Vince never had. Now Benjamin wants to become his lawyer. He wants to get Vince out.

Ira Glass

Sarah Koenig is one of the producers of our show.

Credits.

Benjamin Gilmer

Yeah, I'm following the footsteps of an axe murderer.

Ira Glass

I'm Ira Glass. Back next week with more stories of *This American Life*.

Announcer

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