

## Escape at Dannemora

Created and written by Brett Johnson and Michael Tolkin, directed and co-produced by Ben Stiller. Showtime Network. First aired November 18, 2018.

Showtime's seven-part mini-series, *Escape at Dannemora*, directed by Ben Stiller, is a dramatization of real events that took place in 2015 at a New York state prison in Dannemora, New York (Dannemora is much closer to Montreal than to Albany). The plot relies heavily on the 150-page investigation report from June 2016 by Inspector General Catherine Leahy Scott, State of New York Office of the Inspector General, regarding the June 5, 2015 escape of inmates David Sweat and Richard Matt from Clinton Correctional Facility.<sup>1</sup>

Numerous faults within Clinton Correctional Facility revealed in the report helped allow the escape of the two opportunistic and clever inmates convicted of murder, but their escape would not have been possible were it not for the myriad boundary violations that took place between the inmates and a civilian worker at the prison sewing shop, Joyce "Tilly" Mitchell (played by Patricia Arquette). A correctional officer's special relationship with the inmates (Richard Matt, played by Benicio del Toro, and David Sweat, played by Paul Dano) also crossed boundaries and enabled their escape, but the officer was not punished as severely as Ms. Mitchell.

The Swiss cheese model of accident causation is used in risk analysis and risk management, including in aviation safety and health care. Each slice of Swiss cheese can be likened to a layer of safety and defense against hazards and accidents. If there is a flaw in one layer, another layer can prevent disaster. But if all the layers are stacked such that the holes all line up, an accident or disaster can occur.<sup>2</sup> This was seen in Dannemora. The correctional officers picked favorites and did not do thorough cell searches, food and other contraband was smuggled in, certain prisoners evaded metal detectors, contractors left tools unattended, the catwalk and alleyways were not inspected often, and so on, ultimately allowing two determined and dangerous inmates to escape.

According to recent news articles, Ms. Mitchell has denied that there were sexual boundaries crossed

between her and the inmates David Sweat and Richard Matt. But there is overwhelming evidence in the Inspector General's report suggesting sexual encounters with the inmates occurred. Ms. Mitchell, although a civilian, was in a position of power over the inmates. If the roles were reversed (i.e., male sewing shop supervisor, female inmates), one wonders whether the male supervisor in Ms. Mitchell's position would have been charged with a sexual crime as well as with aiding and abetting the inmates' escape.

Cooke *et al.*<sup>3</sup> recently reviewed boundary violations that occur in correctional settings, comparing them to boundary concerns between therapists and their patients. The events depicted in *Escape at Dannemora* illustrate how far-reaching the effects of a boundary violation can be. Numerous seemingly innocent gestures or ostensibly minor rule violations that do not rise to the level of sexual encounters are shown aligning in the series, resulting in chaos for an entire prison.

Some of the numerous examples of these rule violations included: Mr. Sweat and Mr. Matt were housed in the Honor Block and were allowed to bypass metal detectors at just the right times to smuggle items necessary for escape. Talented artists who could paint from photographs, they were able to barter with officers for paint, canvas, and tools. They said that they needed lighted reading glasses to paint at night, however the lighted glasses were actually to see in the maze of tunnels under the prison. Often, they were given special food, which made it easy to hide cutting tools inside the food. They were warned of upcoming cell searches to help them hide the contraband paints they were using to paint a piece for an officer's girlfriend, simultaneously warning them to hide their escape tools and the large holes in the backs of their cells.

All of the individuals involved knew some of these things were going on, but most seemed to believe that little broken rules meant nothing. But when the rules are bent and special privileges are offered, over time these small rule violations can have huge effects as New York state ultimately paid \$23 million in law enforcement overtime for the capture of the two escapees.<sup>1</sup>

Special relationships developing in the context of corrections have been referred to as "getting got" or "downing a duck."<sup>3</sup> Inmates target a vulnerable staff member and use conning, grooming, and manipulation to get their way. Giving an officer a gift (such as the paintings) so the officer feels an obligation to return the favor (such as by overlooking rule viola-

tions) is common. Female staff (as in this case) have a higher chance of engaging in sexual violations with prisoners than male staff do.<sup>3</sup>

The initial slow pace of *Escape at Dannemora* puts the viewer in the prison. It evokes the chronic boredom of the staff as well as the prisoners. The fast sex in Tailor Shop 9 is the only thing that seems to move quickly. The last episode of the series is a cinematic 90 minutes long and some of it feels like it occurs in real time.

Interestingly, the majority of the mini-series is told from the two inmates' point of view. The first several episodes make the viewer feel empathy for the inmates as they are clearly talented, smart, and likable in the prison setting, where they are facing life sentences. The viewer might even (secretly and increasingly) root for the success of their escape plan. Then comes the historical episode 6, which shows the horrific murders for which they were incarcerated. Suddenly the heroes and villains are reversed and it is quite jarring, but this can be likened to reviewing records in a forensic psychiatric case where something initially appears one way and then, with more data, an alternative motive is revealed.

Ms. Mitchell maintains her innocence as long as she can until she is presented with an overwhelming amount of evidence demonstrating her involvement in the escape. At one point, Ms. Mitchell freely offers confessional information to an investigator at the grocery store. (He stops her and lets her know he has to read her *Miranda* rights first.)

*Escape at Dannemora* has parallels with *Mrs. Soffel*, the 1984 film based on a true story from turn-of-the-century Pittsburgh, starring Mel Gibson and Diane Keaton. Mrs. Soffel, the religious wife of the prison warden, helps the Biddle brothers (who are death row inmates) escape after falling in love with one of them. She brought them a couple of small saws and planned to escape to Canada with them. Mrs. Soffel was eventually punished and shamed for helping the inmates escape, much like Ms. Mitchell is.

Overall, *Escape at Dannemora* is an interesting portrayal of prison dynamics and the cascade of events that can occur when a few rules are broken. The characters are multifaceted because they are based on real people and events, and the intricate narrative would be of interest to many forensic psychiatrists because of the setting (prison system), the complex characterizations, and the boundary and

ethics violations that are well illustrated throughout the series.

## References

1. Scott CL: Investigation of the June 5, 2015 Escape of Inmates David Sweat and Richard Matt from Clinton Correctional Facility. Albany: State of New York Office of the Inspector General, 2016
2. Mokkenstorm JK, Kerkhof AJ, Smit JH, Beekman ATF: Is it rational to pursue zero suicides among patients in health care? *Suicide Life Threat Behav* 48:745–54, 2018
3. Cooke BK, Hall RCW, Friedman SH, *et al*: Professional boundaries in corrections. *J Am Acad Psychiatry Law* 47:91–8, 2019

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## ***Dying To Be Ill: True Stories of Medical Deception***

By Marc D. Feldman and Gregory P. Yates. New York: Routledge. 298 pp. \$33.00.

*Dying To Be Ill* is a collaborative effort written by Dr. Marc D. Feldman and Gregory Yates about factitious disorder. Over the course of the text, the authors discuss how people afflicted with this condition “fabricate disease and illness to reap the rewards of the sick role” (p 8), which, by their definition, included support from others, exemption from social obligations, and special allowances. In the introduction of the book, the authors note that they hope *Dying To Be Ill* will do for factitious disorder what *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* by Oliver Sacks did for neurologic conditions. They hope to convey the “lived experiences” of the people with this condition and others who are affected by it, whether a spouse, child, friend, religious leader, or caregiver. The book primarily relates information through discussion of multiple case studies, many of which are written by the people involved (e.g., the individual with the disorder, the grown childhood victim of Munchausen by proxy, the family member initially unaware of the deception). The strength of this style of presentation is that one can learn about the condition from the voices of those who experience it.