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# The girl in the window

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## Part One: The Feral Child

PLANT CITY — The family had lived in the rundown rental house for almost three years when someone first saw a child's face in the window.

A little girl, pale, with dark eyes, lifted a dirty blanket above the broken glass and peered out, one neighbor remembered.

Everyone knew a woman lived in the house with her boyfriend and two adult sons. But they had never seen a child there, had never noticed anyone playing in the overgrown yard.

The girl looked young, 5 or 6, and thin. Too thin. Her cheeks seemed sunken; her eyes were lost.

The child stared into the square of sunlight, then slipped away.

Months went by. The face never reappeared.

Just before noon on July 13, 2005, a Plant City police car pulled up outside that shattered window. Two officers went into the house — and one stumbled back out.

Clutching his stomach, the rookie retched in the weeds.

Plant City Detective Mark Holste had been on the force for 18 years when he and his young partner were sent to the house on Old Sydney Road to stand by during a child abuse investigation. Someone had finally called the police.

They found a car parked outside. The driver's door was open and a woman was slumped over in her seat, sobbing. She was an investigator for the Florida Department of Children and Families.

"Unbelievable," she told Holste. "The worst I've ever seen."

The police officers walked through the front door, into a cramped living room.

"I've been in rooms with bodies rotting there for a week and it never stunk that bad," Holste said later. "There's just no way to describe it. Urine and feces — dog, cat and human excrement — smeared on the walls, mashed into the carpet. Everything dank and rotting."

Tattered curtains, yellow with cigarette smoke, dangling from bent metal rods. Cardboard and old comforters stuffed into broken, grimy windows. Trash blanketing the stained couch, the sticky counters.

The floor, walls, even the ceiling seemed to sway beneath legions of scuttling roaches.

"It sounded like you were walking on eggshells. You couldn't take a step without crunching German cockroaches," the detective said. "They were in the lights, in the furniture. Even inside the freezer. The freezer!"

While Holste looked around, a stout woman in a faded housecoat demanded to know what was going on. Yes, she lived there. Yes, those were her two sons in the living room. Her daughter? Well, yes, she had a daughter . . .

The detective strode past her, down a narrow hall. He turned the handle on a door, which opened into a space the size of a walk-in

closet. He squinted in the dark.

At his feet, something stirred.

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First he saw the girl's eyes: dark and wide, unfocused, unblinking. She wasn't looking at him so much as through him.

She lay on a torn, moldy mattress on the floor. She was curled on her side, long legs tucked into her emaciated chest. Her ribs and collarbone jutted out; one skinny arm was slung over her face; her black hair was matted, crawling with lice. Insect bites, rashes and sores pocked her skin. Though she looked old enough to be in school, she was naked — except for a swollen diaper.

"The pile of dirty diapers in that room must have been 4 feet high," the detective said. "The glass in the window had been broken, and that child was just lying there, surrounded by her own excrement and bugs."

When he bent to lift her, she yelped like a lamb. "It felt like I was picking up a baby," Holste said. "I put her over my shoulder, and that diaper started leaking down my leg."

The girl didn't struggle. Holste asked, What's your name, honey? The girl didn't seem to hear.

He searched for clothes to dress her, but found only balled-up laundry, flecked with feces. He looked for a toy, a doll, a stuffed animal. "But the only ones I found were covered in maggots and roaches."

Choking back rage, he approached the mother. How could you let this happen?

"The mother's statement was: 'I'm doing the best I can,' " the detective said. "I told her, 'The best you can sucks!' "

He wanted to arrest the woman right then, but when he called his boss he was told to let DCF do its own investigation.

So the detective carried the girl down the dim hall, past her brothers, past her mother in the doorway, who was shrieking, "Don't take my baby!" He buckled the child into the state investigator's car. The investigator agreed: They had to get the girl out of there.

"Radio ahead to Tampa General," the detective remembers telling his partner. "If this child doesn't get to a hospital, she's not going to make it."

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Her name, her mother had said, was Danielle. She was almost 7 years old.

She weighed 46 pounds. She was malnourished and anemic. In the pediatric intensive care unit they tried to feed the girl, but she couldn't chew or swallow solid food. So they put her on an IV and let her drink from a bottle.

Aides bathed her, scrubbed the sores on her face, trimmed her torn fingernails. They had to cut her tangled hair before they could comb out the lice.

Her caseworker determined that she had never been to school, never seen a doctor. She didn't know how to hold a doll, didn't understand peek-a-boo. "Due to the severe neglect," a doctor would write, "the child will be disabled for the rest of her life."

Hunched in an oversized crib, Danielle curled in on herself like a potato bug, then writhed angrily, kicking and thrashing. To calm herself, she batted at her toes and sucked her fists. "Like an infant," one doctor wrote.

She wouldn't make eye contact. She didn't react to heat or cold — or pain. The insertion of an IV needle elicited no reaction. She never cried. With a nurse holding her hands, she could stand and walk sideways on her toes, like a crab. She couldn't talk, didn't know how to nod yes or no. Once in a while she grunted.

She couldn't tell anyone what had happened, what was wrong, what hurt.

Dr. Kathleen Armstrong, director of pediatric psychology at the University of South Florida medical school, was the first psychologist to examine Danielle. She said medical tests, brain scans, and vision, hearing and genetics checks found nothing wrong with the child. She wasn't deaf, wasn't autistic, had no physical ailments such as cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy.

The doctors and social workers had no way of knowing all that had happened to Danielle. But the scene at the house, along with Danielle's almost comatose condition, led them to believe she had never been cared for beyond basic sustenance. Hard as it was to imagine, they doubted she had ever been taken out in the sun, sung to sleep, even hugged or held. She was fragile and beautiful, but whatever makes a person human seemed somehow missing.

Armstrong called the girl's condition "environmental autism." Danielle had been deprived of interaction for so long, the doctor believed, that she had withdrawn into herself.

The most extraordinary thing about Danielle, Armstrong said, was her lack of engagement with people, with anything. "There was no light in her eye, no response or recognition. . . . We saw a little girl who didn't even respond to hugs or affection. Even a child with the most severe autism responds to those."

Danielle's was "the most outrageous case of neglect I've ever seen."

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The authorities had discovered the rarest and most pitiable of creatures: a feral child.

The term is not a diagnosis. It comes from historic accounts — some fictional, some true — of children raised by animals and therefore not exposed to human nurturing. Wolf boys and bird girls, Tarzan, Mowgli from *The Jungle Book*.

It's said that during the Holy Roman Empire, Frederick II gave a group of infants to some nuns. He told them to take care of the children but never to speak to them. He believed the babies would eventually reveal the true language of God. Instead, they died from the lack of interaction.

Then there was the Wild Boy of Aveyron, who wandered out of the woods near Paris in 1800, naked and grunting. He was about 12. A teacher took him in and named him Victor. He tried to socialize the child, teach him to talk. But after several years, he gave up on the teen and asked the housekeeper to care for him.

"In the first five years of life, 85 percent of the brain is developed," said Armstrong, the psychologist who examined Danielle. "Those early relationships, more than anything else, help wire the brain and provide children with the experience to trust, to develop language, to communicate. They need that system to relate to the world."

The importance of nurturing has been shown again and again. In the 1960s, psychologist Harry Harlow put groups of infant rhesus monkeys in a room with two artificial mothers. One, made of wire, dispensed food. The other, of terrycloth, extended cradled arms. Though they were starving, the baby monkeys all climbed into the warm cloth arms.

"Primates need comfort even more than they need food," Armstrong said.

The most recent case of a feral child was in 1970, in California. A girl whom therapists came to call Genie had been strapped to a potty chair until she was 13. Like the Wild Boy, Genie was studied in hospitals and laboratories. She was in her 20s when doctors realized she'd never talk, never be able to take care of herself. She ended up in foster care, closed off from the world, utterly dependent.

Danielle's case — which unfolded out of the public spotlight, without a word in the media — raised disturbing questions for everyone trying to help her. How could this have happened? What kind of mother would sit by year after year while her daughter languished in her own filth, starving and crawling with bugs?

And why hadn't someone intervened? The neighbors, the authorities — where had they been?

"It's mind-boggling that in the 21st century we can still have a child who's just left in a room like a gerbil," said Tracy Sheehan,

Danielle's guardian in the legal system and now a circuit court judge. "No food. No one talking to her or reading her a story. She can't even use her hands. How could this child be so invisible?"

But the most pressing questions were about her future.

When Danielle was discovered, she was younger by six years than the Wild Boy or Genie, giving hope that she might yet be teachable. Many of her caregivers had high hopes they could make her whole.

Danielle had probably missed the chance to learn speech, but maybe she could come to understand language, to communicate in other ways.

Still, doctors had only the most modest ambitions for her.

"My hope was that she would be able to sleep through the night, to be out of diapers and to feed herself," Armstrong said. If things went really well, she said, Danielle would end up "in a nice nursing home."

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Danielle spent six weeks at Tampa General before she was well enough to leave. But where could she go? Not home; Judge Martha Cook, who oversaw her dependency hearing, ordered that Danielle be placed in foster care and that her mother not be allowed to call or visit her. The mother was being investigated on criminal child abuse charges.

"That child, she broke my heart," Cook said later. "We were so distraught over her condition, we agonized over what to do."

Eventually, Danielle was placed in a group home in Land O'Lakes. She had a bed with sheets and a pillow, clothes and food, and someone at least to change her diapers.

In October 2005, a couple of weeks after she turned 7, Danielle started school for the first time. She was placed in a special ed class at Sanders Elementary.

"Her behavior was different than any child I'd ever seen," said Kevin O'Keefe, Danielle's first teacher. "If you put food anywhere near her, she'd grab it" and mouth it like a baby, he said. "She had a lot of episodes of great agitation, yelling, flailing her arms, rolling into a fetal position. She'd curl up in a closet, just to be away from everyone. She didn't know how to climb a slide or swing on a swing. She didn't want to be touched."

It took her a year just to become consolable, he said.

By Thanksgiving 2006 — a year and a half after Danielle had gone into foster care — her caseworker was thinking about finding her a permanent home.

A nursing home, group home or medical foster care facility could take care of Danielle. But she needed more.

"In my entire career with the child welfare system, I don't ever remember a child like Danielle," said Luanne Panacek, executive director of the Children's Board of Hillsborough County. "It makes you think about what does quality of life mean? What's the best we can hope for her? After all she's been through, is it just being safe?"

That fall, Panacek decided to include Danielle in the Heart Gallery — a set of portraits depicting children available for adoption. The Children's Board displays the pictures in malls and on the Internet in hopes that people will fall in love with the children and take them home.

In Hillsborough alone, 600 kids are available for adoption. Who, Panacek wondered, would choose an 8-year-old who was still in diapers, who didn't know her own name and might not ever speak or let you hug her?

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The day Danielle was supposed to have her picture taken for the Heart Gallery, she showed up with red Kool-Aid dribbled down her

new blouse. She hadn't yet mastered a sippy cup.

Garet White, Danielle's care manager, scrubbed the girl's shirt and washed her face. She brushed Danielle's bangs from her forehead and begged the photographer to please be patient.

White stepped behind the photographer and waved at Danielle. She put her thumbs in her ears and wiggled her hands, stuck out her tongue and rolled her eyes. Danielle didn't even blink.

White was about to give up when she heard a sound she'd never heard from Danielle. The child's eyes were still dull, apparently unseeing. But her mouth was open. She looked like she was trying to laugh.

Click.

## **Part Two: Becoming Dani**

Teenagers tore through the arcade, firing fake rifles. Sweaty boys hunched over air hockey tables. Girls squealed as they stomped on blinking squares.

Bernie and Diane Lierow remember standing silently inside GameWorks in Tampa, overwhelmed. They had driven three hours from their home in Fort Myers Beach, hoping to meet a child at this foster care event.

But all these kids seemed too wild, too big and, well, too worldly.

Bernie, 48, remodels houses. Diane, 45, cleans homes. They have four grown sons from previous marriages and one together. Diane couldn't have any more children, and Bernie had always wanted a daughter. So last year, when William was 9, they decided to adopt.

Their new daughter would have to be younger than William, they told foster workers. But she would have to be potty-trained and able to feed herself. They didn't want a child who might hurt their son, or who was profoundly disabled and unable to take care of herself.

On the Internet they had found a girl in Texas, another in Georgia. Each time they were told, "That one is dangerous. She can't be with other children."

That's why they were at this Heart Gallery gathering, scanning the crowd.

Bernie's head ached from all the jangling games; Diane's stomach hurt, seeing all the abandoned kids; and William was tired of shooting aliens.

Diane stepped out of the chaos, into an alcove beneath the stairs. That was when she saw it. A little girl's face on a flier, pale with sunken cheeks and dark hair chopped too short. Her brown eyes seemed to be searching for something.

Diane called Bernie over. He saw the same thing she did. "She just looked like she needed us."

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Bernie and Diane are humble, unpretentious people who would rather picnic on their deck than eat out. They go to work, go to church, visit with their neighbors, walk their dogs. They don't travel or pursue exotic interests; a vacation for them is hanging out at home with the family. Shy and soft-spoken, they're both slow to anger and, they say, seldom argue.

They had everything they ever wanted, they said. Except for a daughter.

But the more they asked about Danielle, the more they didn't want to know.

She was 8, but functioned as a 2-year-old. She had been left alone in a dank room, ignored for most of her life.

No, she wasn't there at the video arcade; she was in a group home. She wore diapers, couldn't feed herself, couldn't talk. After more than a year in school, she still wouldn't make eye contact or play with other kids.

No one knew, really, what was wrong with her, or what she might be capable of.

"She was everything we didn't want," Bernie said.

But they couldn't forget those aching eyes.

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When they met Danielle at her school, she was drooling. Her tongue hung from her mouth. Her head, which seemed too big for her thin neck, lolled side to side.

She looked at them for an instant, then loped away across the special ed classroom. She rolled onto her back, rocked for a while, then batted at her toes.

Diane walked over and spoke to her softly. Danielle didn't seem to notice. But when Bernie bent down, Danielle turned toward him and her eyes seemed to focus.

He held out his hand. She let him pull her to her feet. Danielle's teacher, Kevin O'Keefe, was amazed; he hadn't seen her warm up to anyone so quickly.

Bernie led Danielle to the playground, she pulling sideways and prancing on her tiptoes. She squinted in the sunlight but let him push her gently on the swing. When it was time for them to part, Bernie swore he saw Danielle wave.

That night, he had a dream. Two giant hands slid through his bedroom ceiling, the fingers laced together. Danielle was swinging on those hands, her dark eyes wide, thin arms reaching for him.

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Everyone told them not to do it, neighbors, co-workers, friends. Everyone said they didn't know what they were getting into.

So what if Danielle is not everything we hoped for? Bernie and Diane answered. You can't pre-order your own kids. You take what God gives you.

They brought her home on Easter weekend 2007. It was supposed to be a rebirth, of sorts — a baptism into their family.

"It was a disaster," Bernie said.

They gave her a doll; she bit off its hands. They took her to the beach; she screamed and wouldn't put her feet in the sand. Back at her new home, she tore from room to room, her swim diaper spewing streams across the carpet.

She couldn't peel the wrapper from a chocolate egg, so she ate the shiny paper too. She couldn't sit still to watch TV or look at a book. She couldn't hold a crayon. When they tried to brush her teeth or comb her hair, she kicked and thrashed. She wouldn't lie in a bed, wouldn't go to sleep, just rolled on her back, side to side, for hours.

All night she kept popping up, creeping sideways on her toes into the kitchen. She would pull out the frozen food drawer and stand on the bags of vegetables so she could see into the refrigerator.

"She wouldn't take anything," Bernie said. "I guess she wanted to make sure the food was still there."

When Bernie tried to guide her back to bed, Danielle railed against him and bit her own hands.

In time, Danielle's new family learned what worked and what didn't. Her foster family had been giving her anti-psychotic drugs to mitigate her temper tantrums and help her sleep. When Bernie and Diane weaned her off the medication, she stopped drooling and started holding up her head. She let Bernie brush her teeth.

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Bernie and Diane already thought of Danielle as their daughter, but legally she wasn't. Danielle's birth mother did not want to give her up even though she had been charged with child abuse and faced 20 years in prison. So prosecutors offered a deal: If she waived her parental rights, they wouldn't send her to jail.

She took the plea. She was given two years of house arrest, plus probation. And 100 hours of community service.

In October 2007, Bernie and Diane officially adopted Danielle. They call her Dani.

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"Okay, let's put your shoes on. Do you need to go potty again?" Diane asks.

It's an overcast Monday morning in spring 2008 and Dani is late for school. Again. She keeps flitting around the living room, ducking behind chairs and sofas, pulling at her shorts.

After a year with her new family, Dani scarcely resembles the girl in the Heart Gallery photo. She has grown a foot and her weight has doubled.

All those years she was kept inside, her hair was as dark as the dirty room she lived in. But since she started going to the beach and swimming in their backyard pool, Dani's shoulder-length hair has turned a golden blond. She still shrieks when anyone tries to brush it.

The changes in her behavior are subtle, but Bernie and Diane see progress. They give an example: When Dani feels overwhelmed she retreats to her room, rolls onto her back, pulls one sock toward the end of her toes and bats it. For hours. Bernie and Diane tell her to stop.

Now, when Dani hears them coming, she peels off her sock and throws it into the closet to hide it.

She's learning right from wrong, they say. And she seems upset when she knows she has disappointed them. As if she cares how they feel.

Bernie and Diane were told to put Dani in school with profoundly disabled children, but they insisted on different classes because they believe she can do more. They take her to occupational and physical therapy, to church and the mall and the grocery store. They have her in speech classes and horseback riding lessons.

Once, when Dani was trying to climb onto her horse, the mother of a boy in the therapeutic class turned to Diane.

"You're so lucky," Diane remembers the woman saying.

"Lucky?" Diane asked.

The woman nodded. "I know my son will never stand on his own, will never be able to climb onto a horse. You have no idea what your daughter might be able to do."

Diane finds hope in that idea. She counts small steps to convince herself things are slowly improving. So what if Dani steals food off other people's trays at McDonald's? At least she can feed herself chicken nuggets now. So what if she already has been to the bathroom four times this morning? She's finally out of diapers.

It took months, but they taught her to hold a stuffed teddy on the toilet so she wouldn't be scared to be alone in the bathroom. They bribed her with M&M's.

"Dani, sit down and try to use the potty," Diane coaxes. "Pull down your shorts. That's a good girl."

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Every weekday, for half an hour, speech therapist Leslie Goldenberg tries to teach Dani to talk. She sits her in front of a mirror at a

Bonita Springs elementary school and shows her how to purse her lips to make puffing sounds.

"Puh-puh-puh," says the teacher. "Here, feel my mouth." She brings Dani's fingers to her lips, so she can feel the air.

Dani nods. She knows how to nod now. Goldenberg puffs again.

Leaning close to the mirror, Dani purses her lips, opens and closes them. No sound comes out. She can imitate the movement, but doesn't know she has to blow out air to make the noise.

She bends closer, scowls at her reflection. Her lips open and close again, then she leaps up and runs across the room. She grabs a Koosh ball and bounces it rapidly.

She's lost inside herself. Again.

But in many ways, Dani already has surpassed the teacher's expectations, and not just in terms of speech. She seems to be learning to listen, and she understands simple commands. She pulls at her pants to show she needs to go to the bathroom, taps a juice box when she wants more. She can sit at a table for five-minute stretches, and she's starting to scoop applesauce with a spoon. She's down to just a few temper tantrums a month. She is learning to push buttons on a speaking board, to use symbols to show when she wants a book or when she's angry. She's learning it's okay to be angry: You can deal with those feelings without biting your own hands.

"I'd like her to at least be able to master a sound board, so she can communicate her choices even if she never finds her voice," Goldenberg says. "I think she understands most of what we say. It's just that she doesn't always know how to — or want to — react."

Dani's teacher and family have heard her say only a few words, and all of them seemed accidental. Once she blurted "baaa," startling Goldenberg to tears. It was the first letter sound she had ever made.

She seems to talk most often when William is tickling her, as if something from her subconscious seeps out when she's too distracted to shut it off. Her brother has heard her say, "Stop!" and "No!" He thought he even heard her say his name.

Having a brother just one year older is invaluable for Dani's development, her teacher says. She has someone to practice language with, someone who will listen. "Even deaf infants will coo," Goldenberg said. "But if no one responds, they stop."

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William says Dani frightened him at first. "She did weird things." But he always wanted someone to play with. He doesn't care that she can't ride bikes with him or play Monopoly. "I drive her around in my Jeep and she honks the horn," he says. "She's learning to match up cards and stuff."

He couldn't believe she had never walked a dog or licked an ice cream cone. He taught her how to play peek-a-boo, helped her squish Play-Doh through her fingers. He showed her it was safe to walk on sand and fun to blow bubbles and okay to cry; when you hurt, someone comes. He taught her how to open a present. How to pick up tater tots and dunk them into a mountain of ketchup.

William was used to living like an only child, but since Dani has moved in, she gets most of their parents' attention. "She needs them more than me," he says simply.

He gave her his old toys, his "kid movies," his board books. He even moved out of his bedroom so she could sleep upstairs. His parents painted his old walls pink and filled the closet with cotton-candy dresses.

They moved a daybed into the laundry room for William, squeezed it between the washing machine and Dani's rocking horse. Each night, the 10-year-old boy cuddles up with a walkie-talkie because "it's scary down here, all alone."

After a few minutes, while his parents are trying to get Dani to bed, William always sneaks into the living room and folds himself into the love seat.

He trades his walkie-talkie for a small stuffed Dalmatian and calls down the hall, "Good night, Mom and Dad. Good night, Dani."



Some day, he's sure, she will answer.

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Even now, Dani won't sleep in a bed.

Bernie bought her a new trundle so she can slide out the bottom bunk and be at floor level. Diane found pink Hello Kitty sheets and a stuffed glow worm so Dani will never again be alone in the dark.

"You got your wormie? You ready to go to sleep?" Bernie asks, bending to pick up his daughter. She's turning slow circles beneath the window, holding her worm by his tail. Bernie lifts her to the glass and shows her the sun, slipping behind the neighbor's house.

He hopes, one day, she might be able to call him "Daddy," to get married or at least live on her own. But if that doesn't happen, he says, "That's okay too. For me, it's all about getting the kisses and the hugs."

For now, Bernie and Diane are content to give Dani what she never had before: comfort and stability, attention and affection. A trundle, a glow worm.

Now Bernie tips Dani into bed, smooths her golden hair across the pillow. "Night-night," he says, kissing her forehead.

"Good night, honey," Diane calls from the doorway.

Bernie lowers the shade. As he walks past Dani, she reaches out and grabs his ankles.

### **Part Three: The Mother**

She's out there somewhere, looming over Danielle's story like a ghost. To Bernie and Diane, Danielle's birth mother is a cipher, almost never spoken of. The less said, the better. As far as they are concerned Danielle was born the day they found her. And yet this unimaginable woman is out there somewhere, most likely still on probation, permanently unburdened of her daughter, and thinking — what? What can she possibly say? Nothing. Not a thing. But none of this makes any sense without her.

Michelle Crockett lives in a mobile home in Plant City with her two 20-something sons, three cats and a closet full of kittens. The trailer is just down the road from the little house where she lived with Danielle.

On a steamy afternoon a few weeks ago, Michelle opens the door wearing a long T-shirt. When she sees two strangers, she ducks inside and pulls on a housecoat. She's tall and stout, with broad shoulders and the sallow skin of a smoker. She looks tired, older than her 51 years.

"My daughter?" she asks. "You want to talk about my daughter?" Her voice catches. Tears pool in her glasses.

The inside of the trailer is modest but clean: dishes drying on the counter, silk flowers on the table. Sitting in her kitchen, chain-smoking 305s, she starts at the end: the day the detective took Danielle.

"Part of me died that day," she says.

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Michelle says she was a student at the University of Tampa when she met a man named Bernie at a bar. It was 1976. He was a Vietnam vet, 10 years her senior. They got married and moved to Las Vegas, where he drove a taxi.

Right away they had two sons, Bernard and Grant. The younger boy wasn't potty-trained until he was 4, didn't talk until he was 5. "He was sort of slow," Michelle says. In school, they put him in special ed.

Her sons were teenagers when her husband got sick. Agent Orange, the doctors said. When he died in August 1997, Michelle filed for bankruptcy.

Six months later, she met a man in a casino. He was in Vegas on business. She went back to his hotel room with him.

"His name was Ron," she says. She shakes her head. "No, it was Bob. I think it was Bob."

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For hours Michelle Crockett spins out her story, tapping ashes into a plastic ashtray. Everything she says sounds like a plea, but for what? Understanding? Sympathy? She doesn't apologize. Far from it. She feels wronged.

Danielle, she says, was born in a hospital in Las Vegas, a healthy baby who weighed 7 pounds, 6 ounces. Her Apgar score measuring her health was a 9, nearly perfect.

"She screamed a lot," Michelle says. "I just thought she was spoiled."

When Danielle was 18 months old, Michelle's mobile home burned down, so she loaded her two sons and baby daughter onto a Greyhound bus and headed to Florida, to bunk with a cousin.

They lost their suitcases along the way, she says. The cousin couldn't take the kids. After a week, Michelle moved into a Brandon apartment with no furniture, no clothes, no dishes. She got hired as a cashier at Publix. But it was okay: "The boys were with her," she says. She says she has the paperwork to prove it.

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She goes to the boys' bathroom, returns with a box full of documents and hands it over.

The earliest documents are from Feb. 11, 2002. That was when someone called the child abuse hotline on her. The caller reported that a child, about 3, was "left unattended for days with a retarded older brother, never seen wearing anything but a diaper."

This is Michelle's proof that her sons were watching Danielle.

The caller continued:

"The home is filthy. There are clothes everywhere. There are feces on the child's seat and the counter is covered with trash."

It's not clear what investigators found at the house, but they left Danielle with her mother that day.

Nine months later, another call to authorities. A person who knew Michelle from the Moose Lodge said she was always there playing bingo with her new boyfriend, leaving her children alone overnight.

"Not fit to be a mother," the caller said.

The hotline operator took these notes: The 4-year-old girl "is still wearing a diaper and drinking from a baby bottle. On-going situation, worse since last August. Mom leaves Grant and Danielle at home for several days in a row while she goes to work and spends the night with a new paramour. Danielle . . . is never seen outside the home."

Again the child abuse investigators went out. They offered Michelle free day care for Danielle. She refused. And they left Danielle there.

Why? Didn't they worry about two separate calls to the hotline, months apart, citing the same concerns?

"It's not automatic that because the home is dirty we'd remove the child," said Nick Cox, regional director of the Florida Department of Children and Families. "And what they found in 2002 was not like the scene they walked into in 2005."

The aim, he said, is to keep the child with the parent, and try to help the parent get whatever services he or she might need. But Michelle refused help. And investigators might have felt they didn't have enough evidence to take Danielle, Cox said.

"I'm concerned, though, that no effort was made to interview the child," he said.

“If you have a 4-year-old who is unable to speak, that would raise a red flag to me. “I’m not going to tell you this was okay. I don’t know how it could have happened.”

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Michelle insists Danielle was fine.

“I tried to potty-train her, she wouldn’t train. I tried to get her into schools, no one would take her,” she says in the kitchen of her trailer. The only thing she ever noticed was wrong, she says, “was that she didn’t speak much. She talked in a soft tone. She’d say, ‘Let’s go eat.’ But no one could hear her except me.”

She says she took Danielle to the library and the park. “I took her out for pizza. Once.” But she can’t remember which library, which park or where they went for pizza.

“She liked this song I’d sing her,” Michelle says. “Miss Polly had a dolly, she was sick, sick, sick . . .”

Michelle’s older son, Bernard, told a judge that he once asked his mom why she never took Danielle to the doctor. Something’s wrong with her, he remembered telling her. He said she answered, “If they see her, they might take her away.”

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A few months after the second abuse call, Michelle and her kids moved in with her boyfriend in the rundown rental house in Plant City. The day the cops came, Michelle says, she didn’t know what was wrong.

The detective found Danielle in the back, sleeping. The only window in the small space was broken. Michelle had tacked a blanket across the shattered glass, but flies and beetles and roaches had crept in anyway.

“My house was a mess,” she says. “I’d been sick and it got away from me. But I never knew a dirty house was against the law.”

The cop walked past her, carrying Danielle.

“He said she was starving. I told him me and my sisters were all skinny till we were 13.

“I begged him, ‘Please, don’t take my baby! Please!’ ”

She says she put socks on her daughter before he took her to the car, but couldn’t find any shoes.

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A judge ordered Michelle to have a psychological evaluation. That’s among the documents, too.

Danielle’s IQ, the report says, is below 50, indicating “severe mental retardation.” Michelle’s is 77, “borderline range of intellectual ability.”

“She tended to blame her difficulties on circumstances while rationalizing her own actions,” wrote psychologist Richard Enrico Spana. She “is more concerned with herself than most other adults, and this could lead her to neglect paying adequate attention to people around her.”

She wanted to fight for her daughter, she says, but didn’t want to go to jail and didn’t have enough money for a lawyer.

“I tried to get people to help me,” Michelle says. “They say I made her autistic. But how do you make a kid autistic? They say I didn’t put clothes on her — but she just tore them off.”

After Danielle was taken away, Michelle says, she tripped over a box at Wal-Mart and got in a car accident and couldn’t work anymore. In February, she went back to court and a judge waived her community service hours.

She’s on probation until 2012.

She spends her days with her sons, doing crossword puzzles and watching movies. Sometimes they talk about Danielle.

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When Danielle was in the hospital, Michelle says, she and her sons sneaked in to see her. Michelle took a picture from the file: Danielle, drowning in a hospital gown, slumped in a bed that folded into a wheelchair.

“That’s the last picture I have of her,” Michelle says. In her kitchen, she snubs out her cigarette. She crosses to the living room, where Danielle’s image looks down from the wall.

She reaches up and, with her finger, traces her daughter’s face. “When I moved here,” she says, “that was the first thing I hung.”

She says she misses Danielle.

“Have you seen her?” Michelle asks. “Is she okay?”

• • •

Is she okay?

Danielle is better than anyone dared hope. She has learned to look at people and let herself be held. She can chew ham. She can swim. She’s tall and blond and has a little belly. She knows her name is Dani.

In her new room, she has a window she can look out of. When she wants to see outside, all she has to do is raise her arms and her dad is right behind her, waiting to pick her up.

### **Help a child**

- If you think a child is being neglected or abused, call the anonymous toll-free hotline: 1-800-962-2873.
- If you need help taking care of your child, call the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay: (813) 234-1234.
- For information on adoption in Hillsborough County: (813) 229-2884; [www.HeartGalleryTampaBay.org](http://www.HeartGalleryTampaBay.org).
- In Pinellas/Pasco: (727) 456-0637; [www.HeartGalleryKids.org](http://www.HeartGalleryKids.org).
- If you can't adopt, but want to help foster children in Pinellas or Pasco: (727) 824-0863; [www.projectpatchwork.org](http://www.projectpatchwork.org).
- In Hillsborough: (813) 651-3150; [sylviathomascenter.org](http://sylviathomascenter.org).

### **About this story**

*St. Petersburg Times* reporter Lane DeGregory and *Times* photographer Melissa Lyttle met Danielle and her new family at their home in February. All of the scenes at their house and in speech therapy were witnessed by the journalists.

The opening scene and others were reconstructed from interviews with neighbors, the detective, Danielle's care manager, psychologist, teacher, legal guardian and the judge on her case. Additional information came from hundreds of pages of police reports, medical records and court documents.

Michelle Crockett was interviewed at home in Plant City.

In June, Danielle's new parents sold their Florida home and moved out of state. Bernie built Dani a treehouse. Last week, she began

summer school.

Times researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this report.

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