

# Versions of the Murder

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When I think back to the time of the murder, it is the divisions and recriminations that come to mind.

Perhaps it was not possible to take in that a girl was dead. Melanie Briggs had been a family friend and she was killed: if that was hard to register, adult folly was more easily believed. Our parents seemed in a frenzy at the “appalling” reactions of almost everyone during the funeral and through the months of gossip which followed. They had been guardians of the appropriate even before Melanie’s death, but until that event their vigilance had largely been reserved for the manners of their three children, especially at table.

Matters were not discussed directly with us, but, between themselves and down the phone, Father’s explosions and Mother’s vehement indignation could frequently be overheard. We became practised in eavesdropping, but only received an excess of lectures on the “impossible” behaviour of others. We did manage to glean more detail as to what, exactly, happened in one drama at my younger sister’s school. Her teacher tried a class discussion using the press coverage which had been strenuously kept from many eyes at home, although, like others, my sister read every mention of Melanie in newspapers at the Public Library. Since the press recorded the post mortem finding of rape, or at least sexual intercourse with a minor (there being no proof of coercion, and Melanie unable to give evidence), the classroom of eleven year olds was silenced, and the teacher failed to stimulate any dialogue. She merely drew parental wrath. She was a young teacher, new to town, while Mother, as a School Governor, could make considerable fuss. Given that the family of the “victim” were our friends, the moral tone was high and my sister was

removed from school for two weeks. (I'm certain Mother would have preferred to remove all three of us from the world for several months.)

Parental agitation over those "others" was kept up well into the following year when the town divided as to whether or not a new road should be called "Melanie Briggs Close". Mother referred to it as a cul-de-sac but at school the disputed road was called "short lived before hitting a dead end." The Mayor was also a family friend of the Briggs and, as the streets of our town bear witness, while as Mayor you can get a street named after yourself, but not, it proved, after your god-daughter if she's been murdered and there has been no satisfactory explanation. The opposition became formidable. Local politics rarely excited such passion, but the residents of the close were adamant. Though it was a small development they were the wealthiest houses recently built. Besides, despite the efforts of my parents and the Mayor, something unsavoury had become attached to Melanie's death. She hadn't died in a crash, after winning the top scholarship in the country, as had the only dead boy to have a hall named in his memory. The Mayor seemed to be fighting for her good name, and lost.

There had, of course, been murders before, even in our small town; in living memory one girl had been stabbed by her half-brother. However nobody aspired to being like that family, with the father and another brother already in gaol. Melanie had been one of the respected; the rare murders usually occurred within families which, even if considered half respectable before, were revealed for what they truly were! Until her death, Melanie had never been illegitimate. She'd been a Pixi leader in the Brownies and had just gone up to the Girl Guides; she regularly won Sunday School prizes, and took a prominent place in the Ballet School's annual performance. The year before her death, when the town was fundraising for a Memorial Sports Hall, the Carnival Queen was attended by four princesses, of whom Melanie was one, in a soft, yellow, full length dress with sleeves puffed out and scallops at the hem and neck. We'd all been envious; the lemon colour suited her delicate complexion and dark hair.

The legal profession sponsored Dan Briggs' glamorous young secretary, Gillian Braceworth, who, as elected Carnival Queen, was dressed in white and gold. Gillian did not stay enthroned and unaccompanied for long. Her engagement was announced two months after her coronation, and she asked dainty Melanie Briggs to be one of three bridesmaids. Weeks ahead of the wedding, the elaborate bridesmaid's dress of pale pink net and lace was finished and tried on by the daughter of

Gillian Braceworth's employer. The next morning Melanie's body was found wrapped naked in a white cotton sheet outside the newly opened Sports Hall in the centre of our town.

Gillian Braceworth was one of the many to incur Mother's wrath – for “making such a fuss you'd imagine it was her fiancée dead – especially considering Dan Briggs only agreed to Melanie's being bridesmaid to be kind! Pretty Gillian may be, but she is clueless as to her own importance! It never occurred to her to ask Dan or Fiona Briggs before rushing to postpone her wedding. It's the last thing they wanted.”

With no explanation to close off enquiry, the Briggs family became a little shabbier week by week. Melanie, it seemed, had done something unwholesome in getting herself murdered. She and her family were left exposed. Decency requires appropriate covering.

Once it was clear this was not the work of a single maniac from out of town (preferably one escaped from gaol, or mental hospital, or over from New York) the taint began to spread. Many of the men had returned, like our father, from war where they'd seen hundreds dead, but this one death disturbed an order all relied on. There was a palpable nervousness. Father, who kept a supply of Playboy magazines under several boxes in his shed, was seen burning a pile of paper. My brother checked, the magazines were gone. Several friends reported something similar in their homes.

People who'd never been in a position to openly criticise the Briggs' before began passing judgement, as details of the inexplicable spread. Mother would return from the Briggs' house in a fury. It was galling to witness the likes of Mrs Emily Thompson feeling free to patronise, walking straight into the kitchen where she'd never been likely to have access before, bearing two tea towels as a gift with a look of concern on her meek face.

“Oh, Emily Thompson plays the genteel wife, all bland and soft behind that strident man of hers, but, at least, his ambition is obvious. There is tyranny in her sweetness. When it comes to it, she knows exactly what is good for every one of us,” Father spat out with anger, surprising even himself, we thought, and definitely upsetting Mother. Certainly she'd wanted sympathy for spending hours sounding polite to Mrs Thompson, but she had not expected an analysis: Mother rarely wanted that. I hankered to hear much, much more of what Father might have to say about the town's “good ladies” while, at the same time, like Mother, I was disconcerted.

It wasn't just Mrs Thompson, all kinds of people who'd never felt up to Mrs Briggs before were in a position to condescend now, and Mother was forced to be polite when women “whose food

you'd never want to eat" walked right into the Briggs' kitchen, bringing cheese scones and getting themselves in on drama.

Most of the town, however, was more preoccupied with explanation than with baking: had Melanie gone out that Saturday night or been abducted? What of those brothers who were supposed to have been baby sitting? And exactly what kind of party had kept the parents out so late and left them "seeing things", if, on return, they glanced into their children's bedrooms and thought all three present and asleep?

Death from an explosion of venom made some sense. Enough of us had sometimes yelled "I'll kill you," but this death, failing to fit a coffin box, grew like the evil genie, out of confinement and into the fantastic. One popular rumour was that the most promising, attractive girl was sacrificed as she came to puberty in some Satanic Rite. Many claimed that the Masons were behind all this. Briggs had dropped out of the local lodge as soon as he was fully established; recognised as the best in the courtroom, he no longer needed favours. With the lodge protecting itself, no one would ever untangle the conspiracy.

Father, over roast lamb, began a lecture about people with no power or responsibility resenting those who moved in circles and in ways they couldn't understand. No mention was made of the prevailing 'Mason theory' but Father himself was a Mason, if a lax one, and he was addressing other adversaries than ourselves as he talked grimly and failed to take the fresh mint sauce I'd made for him.

We lived with limited facts and no understanding of how this murder had happened in our midst. It was, after all, a safe town, with its children usually well protected. This time the adult world failed to hold. Melanie, in not having been kept safe, left a visible and gaping crack there for all to see, and grown-ups could hardly cover it over. My sister re-started wanting me to go to bed at the same time as her, though I'm three years older. It was infuriating that I was sent to read in bed, in our shared room, at Gail's earlier bedtime.

If Melanie had not gone out of her own house after going to bed before 10 pm, who would have dared abduct her? After satisfying an appetite for virgin blood someone obliterated her. But who would do it? No one in town surely, and how, after such a monstrous deed, were they not conspicuous? Worse, might they want blood again? Gail was the same age as Melanie, and considered pretty enough. She was decreed too young for the funeral but my brother and I were to attend with our parents. A Sunday School teacher had the mistaken notion that providing

supervision for younger children, in the hall during the burial service, would be a good idea. It proved a farce, but it took care of Gail and we went to the funeral along with half the town. People thrust themselves forward, leaving insufficient front seats for the Briggs' friends and colleagues. Father exhorted churchwardens to exercise authority, but if polite requests were met with blankness or hostility, what could the wardens do? They could hardly insist on a system of reserved seats apart from the front pews but, as Mother muttered, fancy Mary Robinson whose husband had left town, and her, after one too many of her affairs, daring to sit herself in the fourth row, blocking entry from the central aisle! When asked to move along to let others in, she stepped out, letting them pass, but would not give up her prime site – “and just look at the height of her heels, for a funeral, I ask you!”

Since hundreds gathered outside the full church, a system was set up to relay the service. However there'd been no trial run; the amplified version proved too loud, and a crackling electrified echo came back into the church. The theatre in town had never been so packed. Women wept, including Mother, but Fiona Briggs was over-sedated to get through this public show and could barely stand.

I could not take in that Melanie was alone and inside that box. Would they truly burn her? The Vicar was no more ridiculous than usual, but even Mother was offended at his implying death was for the best. Though we mortals couldn't comprehend, the thing for us to do was sing Psalm 23. Usually the vicar relied on a joke to cheer anyone out of trouble, but he did seem to realise that chickens crossing the road would not do for this funeral. Unfortunately he wasn't up to the seriousness required. The inadequate arrangements were probably not his fault, yet he got blamed for those as well.

There seemed nowhere safe from the crush of human feet for the undertakers and florists to lay out flowers, so they put wreaths and bouquets over the floor of the church hall, leaving only the stage and side rooms for the children. The older boys, left to themselves on the stage, had to be stopped forcibly when they shoved their way to the church door as Melanie's coffin made its exit. Two ducked under the restraint to touch the flower-covered wooden box. Some excused it as a fond farewell, but others saw it differently, especially as the boys had not been at Melanie's school and not heard of her till she was dead. Father wanted the two boys beaten and insisted he'd ring their headmaster with whom he played tennis, but Mother pointed out half the town had pushed and gawked; considering they couldn't all be beaten into better manners, we should accept that those boys would do well in this world.

People even turned up at the 'men only' private cremation an hour's drive away. My father nearly smashed the camera of a photographer snapping Dan Briggs' arrival with his two sons. George Briggs, who was in my class at school, told me later that the otherwise useless Vicar caught the furious blow intended for the camera. Blood spurted from his nose. Those were the two things my friend George could recall of that day – the Vicar being struck, and the sight of a girl he liked in the congregation. In the blur of faces, as he walked out following his sister's coffin, only this one girl was perfectly clear to him. Despite his blank state he felt a brief flood of gratitude that she was there for him. Years later George was less sure her motives had been pure, but on that day her presence touched him. Little else was real.

While Father was at the cremation and Mother took Mrs Briggs home to bed, I was to look after my sister. But I had the first real headache of my life and also went to bed. As I tried to still the swirling in my head, my brother played with Gail.

I hadn't liked Melanie especially, she was three years younger than me, but on one family picnic she reproached me for treating Gail unfairly. She was right and, though I didn't thank her, after that day I did care she have a better opinion of me.

I could not accept she was being reduced to a handful of ashes. I lay wanting the giddiness to stop.

The police were also lost, we believed. It was impossible to disentangle evidence from gossip. It was a definite fact, at school, that the blood had been carefully wiped from Melanie's thigh and placed beside her on a clean, cotton handkerchief. Her death was not messy, even the press emphasised she had not been mutilated. As time went on, people began to say that if there were no signs of violence, she could not have struggled against the penetration, whether rape or a seduction. It was said she was smothered by a pillow after the sex. If my parents were to be believed, every report in the paper was a distortion and every rumour a lie, but something must have happened: they couldn't deny that the girl was dead.

Donald swore he overheard a conversation on the golf course, between Mr Briggs' legal partner and our father, and threatened me with dire consequences if I breathed a word. Apparently, at the time of the murder, Dan Briggs, in wishing to protect his wife, used all his influence with the police and coroner so the statement for the press read that Melanie had not been disfigured and there were no signs of excessive violence. However, after a time, when no explanation for the murder arose, this often repeated statement began to rebound on Melanie.

One popular version of events had to be nonsense: that Melanie's two brothers, George aged 14 and Rupert aged 17, left to baby-sit, had sex with their sister and she complied. It was only afterwards, it was said, that Melanie panicked, threatening to tell and crying for her mother. To shut her up the boys pushed a pillow down and next thing they realised she had stopped breathing. Both boys went out, making sure they were seen, leaving their sister dead in her bed. The parents returned and saw all three children 'asleep', then the brothers wrapped Melanie in her stained sheet and carried her half a mile to the main square. Some believed the father had to be in on it, since neither of the boys could drive; perhaps his sons told Dan Briggs the truth when he got home and he put his daughter in the car to take her into town.

This account was a widespread certainty by the time the Briggs left, eighteen months after the murder. I knew it was not true; I'd seen George that evening. He'd shown no sign of agitation as he played cards and won, he couldn't have just raped and killed his sister. I knew George – it was not possible – but Melanie's death also seemed inconceivable.

My brother brought back detail. His friends were set on getting to the bottom of it and considered themselves sleuths. Some crept round the Briggs' garden till the police took notice. Though somehow the Briggs had forfeited the usual rights to privacy. The unspoken rules for protection in a small town, where so much is visible, no longer held for them.

Unlike Donald's friends, mine were less hooked into explanations, more into how scared they were to sleep at night, and fancy Melanie being the one to be seen so hideously: "just imagine being in public without even knickers."

It was not possible to know what to believe, though the facts of the discovery of the body seemed certain. The man who found her was walking his dog, Botcher, at 5.45 am, a little earlier than usual, that Sunday. Since he worked in the haberdashery store, he was able to recognise that Melanie was wrapped in a fairly new single sheet of the brand that had been the local best-seller over recent years. I had the same cotton sheets on my bed but too many of us did for that to be a claim to fame. The haberdashery did a good trade for some weeks, then the man who found Melanie went home to find his dog lying dead. He had a 'breakdown', we were told, and protested Botcher had been cursed for finding that girl's body. He wrote to the press that Botcher had been poisoned by those Briggs brothers. But the vet said otherwise: Botcher had lived to over thirteen. His owner never returned to the shop, where he'd worked for twenty-nine years. Perhaps he left town.

The Briggs family also left, eighteen months after Melanie's death, but kept in touch with us.

Although the rest of the family found it a relief to be in the city, George stayed preoccupied with our town and Melanie.

It's hard to remember what came to light at the time of the murder and what I learned when I went to Wellington to university. By the time I arrived Rupert Briggs, who hoped to become a surgeon, was halfway through studying medicine. "I can't be like Rupert. He hopes to slice into life to get to truth," George said.

Mr Briggs had a large legal practice and a pretty, flirtatious secretary.

Mrs Briggs was more glamorous than ever, her red fingernails immaculate to set off the diamond rings.

Only George was a bit odd. He'd started university a year ahead of me. He began with law but, to his father's distress (and my parents' indignation – "doesn't he realise his parents have had enough?") – George changed after a term, saying he could not follow his father. He took up philosophy which was said to have "over-heated his brain."

I saw him regularly over three years. He'd turn up at my hostel at all hours, obsessed with some particular question. He was ferocious with any reluctance on my part, "surely we must at least seek understanding", and so I would be hijacked into whatever he was questioning. Sometimes it was Melanie's death, and sometimes the town we grew up in, but, just as often, a matter of logic which I didn't understand. George could be a social liability even if he was the most interesting person I knew.

A drunk George once presented at the police station, accusing himself of cowardice and expecting to be charged with that as a crime. The police eventually took him to his parents' home. Once there, George began insisting the police come in to investigate "this great cover up. Somewhere, if you look, a death is hidden," George ranted while his mother wept. Her wounds were just beginning to cover over, she said, and he wanted them stripped raw again: "five years is enough," she cried at him. "Time itself does not heal," he said, "if you are still in confusion."

George's probing could be uncomfortable and curt. "You will need training," he said, "we have work to do and detail is important. Forget the drama." He often came to take me walking. Once time he pointed, asking fiercely if I would say the band of red on the horizon appeared to be two feet wide. "Now turn away," he said. "In ten minutes it will be changed. When we look again, will you remember how it was? Fly towards that horizon and it will be different again. On one sheet we will keep only what appears the same from all angles."

For a fact, he said, Melanie had a local post mortem. “It is a further fact, without insulting your uncle,” – the town pathologist – “that the forensic expertise was unsophisticated. She could have been taken to the city, she was taken there for burning, but not earlier to get the best evidence possible. There is another fact. My father partnered the coroner at golf for more years than Melanie had been alive.”

The sky was duller when we turned back. “That red looks as if its substance has been sucked away,” I said.

“If I accept the cover up, I, too, am drained of vitality and might as well be finished,” he replied.

“My parents want peace and they are welcome to it, but they want to keep me in a living death they choose, while I need the trouble of struggling for myself.

Another time, he continued. “Rupert knows we didn’t do it; if my father was absolutely certain we were not implicated, would he have left town? They brought us up in a small place, believing it safer for children, though city life suits them better.”

“The time of death was calculated as midnight, probably not before 11. I never saw Melanie again after I walked out on Monopoly, just before 9 pm. I didn’t look at her then. Every alternate Saturday we were supposed to baby sit, so Rupert and I made arrangements. We were allowed out on Friday, Saturday was our parents’ night. It wasn’t quite like that and plenty of people knew, including our parents, I suspect. It was my turn to go out, but Rupert had a party, a pressing engagement with some girl, and he had more power. I’d half agreed to concede, in exchange for his beer, but when I went to jail for the third time and lost Park Lane, I walked out, fed up with Monopoly, saying I’d be back by 10, when Melanie had to be in bed and Rupert was due out.

“I was playing cards with you when Rupert arrived to send me home. Melanie, he said, was already in bed.

Another fact. I lied and said I went straight home at 10, letting myself in at the front door and, assuming Melanie safely asleep, went to bed to read.

I told a further lie to the police; I said I heard not a sound all night. It was not true. I still have no idea why that lie came so quickly to mind.

It never occurred to me to check on Melanie when I did get home. Of course, it’s possible she’d already gone out to look for me or Rupert. Or a number of people could have known Melanie was on her own, and persuaded her to go with them. We’ll never know if someone crept to her window or went to the front door.

Melanie’s bed had been well made the previous day, she was a tidy girl. She had obviously been in it. No sheet was missing, but the one she was found in was the same as those on her bed. No

discarded clothes were ever found, so there was no clue as to whether she'd been in her pyjamas or whether she'd got dressed. There was no indication of any struggle, nor a sign of forced entry to the house. Either she let the murderer in willingly, or went out of her own accord or, as the town assumed, our family was implicated.

Mother was convinced Melanie was abducted in her pyjamas, as these seemed to be missing, but other clothes had gone as well. It was two months after her death that the clothes and pyjamas thought to be lost turned up at our beach house. We all left some clothes there. It's possible the clothes were there all along but she must have been wearing something. She'd never have left the house naked unless she was already dead.

Rupert was dropped off before 2 am. He'd left his bedroom window open to climb in, assuming our parents would be back before him. They, however, did not return till nearer 2.30 when they looked into our rooms, they said. If they always looked, they must have known Rupert was often not in.

It was not true that I heard nothing; I said it without thinking, but I had woken to noise. It was soon after I'd fallen asleep, probably before midnight, but I did not check the time. I woke to voices and did not go and look. If I know anything, one was my father's voice. He was in the house that night with two or three other men.

Why did I deny hearing anything?

And why did he deny it? He implied I was in shock when I asked him about it later. His companions lied as well. You know how much gets seen in that small town, yet no one saw or heard anyone leave or arrive at our house that night.

Guilt immobilised me then. Now it's time to see clearly."

"As for my parents' long Saturday nights, you know of those?" he asked some months later.

There had, of course, been gossip but also adamant denials from Mother, insisting such rumours were malicious. Once the Briggs family forfeited the discretion usually extended to the respectable, they were accused of more than could possibly be true, but George seemed determined I believe the worst. His parents belonged to a set which gambled for each others' wives. "That night, for a fact, my mother found herself with her least favourite man. Father, as he often did, won his blonde. I have this from a participant, now deceased, who over-ate and drank a lot and died last year. He was a Mason, and on that score would not help me. Loyalty was all, and without a family he relied on the Masons to bury him. They did."

George had become impervious to much that had once bothered him; he didn't care if he was considered odd, cared little for his appearance, and seemed not to bother that he might be shattering my illusions. Even if my parents had not been involved in the wife swapping, they must have known and lied to us.

George pointed out that you could lose your soul in preserving illusion.

"It is too easy to join conspiracies you haven't recognised," he said. "Then how do you find your way out? I do not believe Rupert killed Melanie and I do not believe my father did. But we three were guilty enough to choke in foetid air."

"It wasn't a horrible life, George," I said. "As long as you were one of the respectable, it was OK, only what happened to Melanie was the really terrible."

"You said that your parents protecting you from truth made it unreal."

"What is the 'full truth'?" I demanded. "For all your vengeance against minor deceptions you haven't solved things. Self-righteousness blinkers you."

"Covering over, for someone else's good, soon has fresh breath extinguished bit by bit."

"But Melanie's loss is different. Unlike the rest of us, she isn't walking round less than fully alive: Melanie is dead."

"That is one fact I still work towards. I cannot, yet, just accept it," he said.

I am not sure he did come to accept it. Perhaps he never will. He became waylaid in conspiracy theories, which grew huge. Before his final exams George stole a farmer's shotgun and swore he'd blow his own useless brains out if he could not come up with clarity by dawn.

Instead, he was locked up in a psychiatric establishment.

By the time my own exams were over and I visited, George was shaking. He seemed to be willingly drugged out of his mind. "Now you see my lack of courage," he said. "We failed in our quest. It required more strength of character than I had. I'm finished. Don't come back." And he turned his back on me.

As I was leaving he called out "At least they have one man under lock and key for negligence towards Melanie. It is a start."

A few months later I left our small town for good and went abroad to study social science.

### **Afterword**

Psychotherapy and counselling are often assumed to be the excavation of an individual's mind, using neutral tools. Whereas the tool we have to use is the understanding and language of our time and place.

And the whole context of the person's life is relevant.

"Versions of the Murder" illustrates a central argument of RD Laing, that we may see in therapy the individual who is gradually being driven mad if they are unable to go along with the structure of understanding shared by other family members.

The problem is seen as belonging to the individual who makes something of the disturbed situation visible. One member, who cannot go along with a need to obscure what is happening, gets attacked if the family is sufficiently threatened.

And the confused individual becomes seen as the sole focus for concern. Once the problem is medicalised the possibility of making sense of the wider issue is usually lost.

Laing argued for a therapy which held out the hope that most of what was attributed to 'mental illness' became understandable if you found a way to connect with the person's suffering and attended to their family history.