

11 A serial murderer lived down our street

A typical street



*A typical-looking street in the outer suburbs of Sydney, New South Wales.
My house is marked by a very large lemon-scented gum tree on the street corner.
I had planted it as a waist-high sapling in 1993 after we moved in.*

An untypical resident

A few doors up the street from my place is "The House".

In this house was apprehended in May 1994, a serial murderer who killed at least seven backpackers between 1989 and 1993.

The victims were three German, two British and two Australian travellers.

The "Backpacker Murderer" ("IM") as he was named, lived at "The House" with his sister ("SM") after his heinous crimes. He was supposedly living at his family home (with his mother) in a different suburb when the murders took place. It is thought but not proven, that IM committed other murders which remain unsolved, and that SM had knowledge of some of the crimes.

Encounters with IM and SM

The first time I noticed IM was one day when he was riding a small road roller while applying bitumen to his driveway (you can see that same driveway in the pics above and below; IM was a worker for the NSW roads department for many years). What came to my notice was that IM was screaming away at SM for something or other. I thought, "What a angry/violent

man" he must be.

My second memory of IM was another day when I noticed very loud noise coming from the roadside because someone was driving an unmuffled go-kart up and down the street in front of my house. It turned out to be IM on that go-kart. I remember wanting very much to go outside to tell IM off if the riding had continued. Lucky for me it stopped not long after! I recall SM walking by my front garden one late afternoon while I was gardening and she had commented on how lovely the border flowers were. I remember thinking that she looked "odd" (heavily and noticeably made up) but that she was friendly enough. My opposite neighbour Art (whose wife ran over my mother with their car while backing out their driveway later in 2006) had IM and SM over for dinner a few times. And Art had several daughters. Imagine what it must have felt when they later realised who IM was.

One evening before IM's arrest, an intern student of mine from Germany (MF) proceeded to find my house for a welcome BBQ dinner. He and his companion could not quite find my place because my address says one street but the front door actually faces another street. He went around knocking on a few houses to try and find my place (which he did in the end). But imagine the coincidence that might have been had he knocked on IM and SM's house nearby because one of the first things I had briefed him on upon his arrival to start work with me was NOT to hitch hike in Sydney because there was a serial murderer of backpackers on the loose! During dinner, he revealed that one of his father's colleagues at work (they were teachers back in Germany) lost a daughter to the backpacker murderer. Sad, and makes you believe very much in the "six degrees of separation" (first explained by Frigyes Karinthy in his 1929 short story).

The arrest



The House on the day of the arrest

thought was that there must be a celebrity event happening (like a wedding) because there were TV news crews up the street. When I noticed a police cordon tape around the house, I knew something more sinister had happened and I was worried that perhaps

On the early dawn on the day of the arrest, some 50 police surrounded the House and called for IM to come out.

In our house we awoke to a commotion outside the house which was unusual for a Sunday. We had a look outside and my initial



IM being taken away from the House by two detectives on the day of the arrest

a serious crime (like a murder) had taken place there (my worry was compounded by the fact that I was due to leave for an overseas conference⁹ later that same day - that evening I followed the events on BBC World TV after landing in Kuala Lumpur; I could see my house in the background in some of the news footage).

After the arrest, Ron my neighbour on the other side told me that he knew IM's house was under police surveillance because one day some weeks before the arrest, he had noticed an unmarked car with two people parked outside his house all day (which means by the side of my house where the view of the street is restricted by our boundary fence). He then rang up the local police station. A police sergeant turned up later at his house to explain, "not to worry, it is a police operation". Ron deduced that they were watching IM and SM's house.

DB

Sadly, IM is not the first serial murderer I am unfortunate enough to have degrees separation from. In the mid-1980s, I used to board game with several friends in Perth, Western Australia. I would turn up at a house in a suburb close by to the University of Western Australia where they were renting a house. "DB" and her boyfriend were one of the couples sharing the house with my board gamer friend "T". Soon after returning to Perth in 1986 after some months away, I looked at the front page of the "West Australian" newspaper one bright morning and saw a face which I recognised. It was DB. She was reported as one of four murder victims of serial killer couple "DJB" and "KB". I could not and still cannot believe that this was what happened to her. She did not deserve the fate which befell her. This has shown me that life is but fleeting and there are many important things to attend to which may prove to be too late when the "moment" arrives. It taught me yet again that whatever is thrown at me by life and people is nothing compared to the worse which can happen. R.I.P. DB.

Afterwards

SM sold the house a year after the arrest. She died in 2003.
IM died of cancer in prison in 2019.

⁹ In another six degrees of separation moment, during this conference, I got talking to an American during a tea break and it turned out that he was Steve Cowper, Governor of the US state of Alaska during the Exxon Valdez oil spill disaster in 1989 which made world headlines that many people, myself included, followed.