

US

SUICIDE

What Happens When a Staged Suicide Is Missed?

How serial killer Dellen Millard got away with it and how he got caught.

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Reviewed by Vanessa Lancaster



KEY POINTS

- First responders often struggle to balance gathering information while minimizing further pain to a family. That may limit an investigation.
- Murderers who stage a murder as a suicide typically "discover" the victim in their home.
- Money is a common motive, as is a history of exaggerating a victim's mental illness or falsely claiming they have one.



Source: Maxim Hopman/Unsplash

By all accounts, Dellen Millard was a smooth talker. He expected good things to happen to him and believed he could charm his way out of any trouble. He'd been doing it all his life. Born into privi-

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With his usual bravado, Millard had decided to represent himself at the March 17 appeal hearing for his conviction for his father's murder. But on April 5, 2023, his powers of persuasion failed him. Ontario's highest court soundly rejected his argument that his conviction was unreasonable, the trial was unfair, and the evidence was lacking.

Setting the Stage

Here's an example of how persuasive Dellen was. On November 29, 2012, Dellen called Canadian Mounties to report that his father, 71-year-old airport executive Wayne Millard, had committed suicide. Dellen said he had walked into the bedroom of the home they were sharing and discovered his dead father lying in his bed, his head resting on a blood-soaked pillow. A gun was still in Wayne Millard's soot-smearred left hand.

Dellen told investigators that living with his dad had not been easy. His father had been depressed for months but, despite Dellen's urging, had refused to get help."He carried some great sadness with him throughout life that I never knew—he never wanted to share that with me," Dellen Millard said in the interview with police the following day.

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Dellen said his father was also stressed due to a new, financially risky aviation business. And had he mentioned his father's drinking? "I don't like to say the word alcoholic, but it fits. He was a regular drinker, like every night," Dellen Millard said.

Detectives noticed that, for a son who'd just lost a father to suicide, Dellen was surprisingly calm. Dellen told them he was devastated by his father's actions in light of recent events but not surprised. And part of his stoic demeanor simply reflected the kind of person he was. After all, he had been flying a plane solo by age fourteen. That takes nerves of steel.

And that was pretty much it. The coroner noted one odd thing about Wayne Millard's death; the bullet had traveled through his left eye, which the coroner later said he'd never seen in any other suicide. Due to the unusual wound pattern, detectives contacted homicide, who declined to come to the scene. Based on his conversation with Dellen and the gun's position, the coroner ruled the death a suicide.

Case closed. No one tested the gun found at the scene or investigated who owned it. No one talked to other family and friends to corroborate Wayne's alleged depression and drinking. No one investigated the relationship between Dellen and Wayne or checked out what alibi (or lack thereof Dellen might have). At least until Dellen Millard slaughtered two more peo-

Hindsight and Lessons Learned

When Dellen Millard was arrested for murdering his father, he had already been convicted of the first-degree murders of thirty-year-old Tim Bosma and twenty-three-year-old Laura Babcock. By then, investigators realized Dellen Millard was willing to kill for various reasons – to rid himself of one corner of a love triangle in the case of Laura Babcock and relieve boredom in Tim Bosma's case. Prosecutors believed Millard killed his father to protect the fourteen-million-dollar inheritance he thought his father was jeopardizing with his new business.

THE BASICS

Suicide Risk Factors and Signs

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There is a common adage in homicide investigations that says every unexpected death should be investigated as a murder until proven otherwise. That's easier said than done when the shadow of suicide creeps on; given the stigma and sensitivity that so often clouds this topic, who wants to traumatize further a grief-stricken family who has already suffered one of the most devastating life events imaginable?

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Clever murderers capitalize on this. He painted a picture of his father as a reclusive, alcoholic man who struggled with chronic back pain and was seriously depressed. The coroner later acknowledged that Dellen's words influenced how he interpreted the scene. I'm sure it was a major factor in deciding not to investigate further. If homicide detectives had, this is what they would have soon discovered:

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- Not a single person other than Dellen said Wayne Millard was reclusive or depressed.
- Wayne Millard's employees knew of the increasing tension and financial disputes between father and son.
- Dellen's lover had disappeared three months earlier, shortly after he told his girlfriend he would make her disappear.
- Dellen owned the gun that killed his father and had possessed it for months before the murder.
- The gun had Dellen's DNA on it, not his father's.
- Dellen's alibi (that he hadn't seen his father for more than

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I've studied over fifty staged suicides. There are recurrent themes. Money is a common motive. The murderer is almost always a family member (usually the intimate partner or spouse). In most cases, the perpetrator is the one who "finds" the victim, almost always in the home. It's also not unusual for the killer to set up the staged suicide by describing the soon-to-be-victim as depressed, suicidal, or emotionally unstable weeks before the murder, which is in direct contrast to the observations and interactions of other friends and family members.

Sadly, this isn't the only situation where it took an additional murder to raise suspicion to an investigative level; check out Stephen Port, Robert Spangler, or Jack Reeves.

The Bottom Line

Here's what a homicide commander does in the book, *Murder 101: Homicide and Its Investigation*.

While the number of staged suicides is quite small, interestingly, as a homicide commander, I find that I receive many more complaints each year about my detectives' handling of suicide cases than I do about murder cases. Family members of suicide victims often call or come into my office complaining that while their loved one's death may have looked like a suicide, as one of my detective's determined, it was actually a murder. Often in these cases, the victim has left behind a signed suicide note, has at-

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cide. The problem rests in the fact that if a death is ruled a suicide, then family members and friends feel a sense of guilt for not having stopped the individual . . .

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I, too, have had bereaved families reach out when a psychological autopsy clearly pointed to suicide. But most survivors of suicide loss *don't* second-guess homicide detectives. And sometimes what looks like a suicide is a murder.

If you or someone you love is contemplating suicide, seek help immediately. For help 24/7, dial 988 for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, or reach out to the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741. To find a therapist, visit the [Psychology Today Therapy Directory](#).



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About the Author



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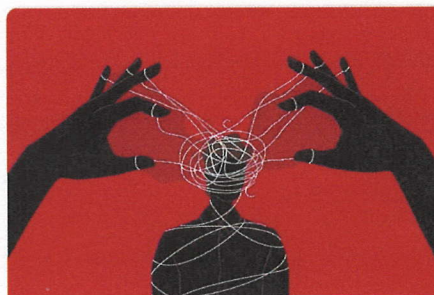
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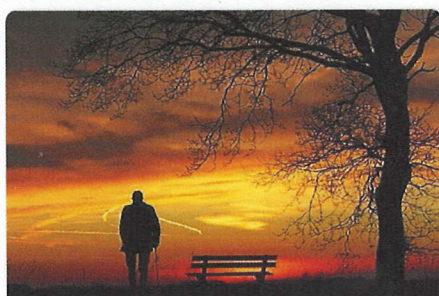
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More from Psychology Today

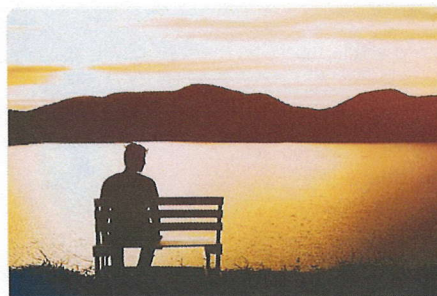


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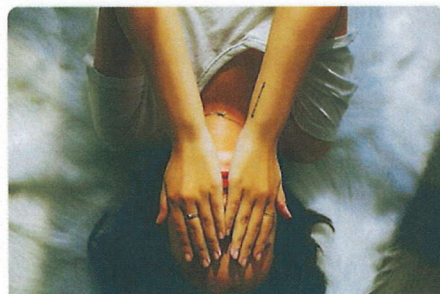


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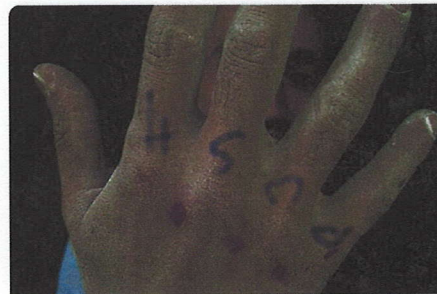


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