

## The Gilgo Beach Victims Were Always More Than Escorts

From the beginning, the women who were found murdered were reduced to being prostitutes. More than a decade after they went missing, that seems to have changed.

By Robert Kolker

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Twelve years ago, on the Monday after Easter in 2011, on a gray afternoon in New London, Conn., Melissa Cann sat at a picnic table on a pier, talking about her big sister, Maureen Brainard-Barnes, who disappeared on a trip to Manhattan four years earlier. While Ms. Cann described herself as a homebody, she said that her older sister was a free spirit, artistic, daring and often clashing with their mother. Maureen had worked as a blackjack dealer, as a clerk at a ShopRite and, in the six months or so before she vanished, as an escort.

Ms. Cann spoke in a broken voice about the police who brushed off any claim that her sister was actually missing; the fruitless trips Ms. Cann's husband and brother took to New York to search for her; the difficulty, because she was an escort, of even getting Ms. Brainard-Barnes's name onto an official list of missing persons. She talked about the children her sister left behind — an 11-year-old girl and a 5-year-old boy — and she admitted that she was surprised by her sister's escort work. She was afraid to question her sister's choices, but she also regretted that she couldn't protect her.

For three years, Ms. Cann did practically nothing but think about Maureen.

Then, in December 2010, everything changed: Maureen's remains were found along Gilgo Beach on Long Island. The remains of three other women were close by. Melissa Barthelemy disappeared from her apartment in the Bronx in 2009. Megan Waterman vanished in May 2010, and was last seen leaving a hotel on Long Island. Amber Costello had left her home in the town of Babylon, N.Y., that September, never to be seen again. All four women were petite, and all four came from out of town to work as escorts.

Now that there was a crime attached, the police were interested, but these women were soon reduced to a single dimension. Their profession turned them into plot devices in an established true-crime story line. Who they were mattered less than the mystery surrounding their deaths.



Relatives of those found at Gilgo Beach, including Mari Gilbert, mother of Shannan Gilbert; Melissa Cann, sister of Maureen Brainard-Barnes; and Lorraine Ela, mother of Megan Waterman, at a 2011 vigil. Uli Seit for The New York Times

As the police scoured the beach for more bodies in the spring of 2010 (and found several), Ms. Cann and the family members of the other women were caught in a peculiar bind. On one hand, they were energized. Now that they were part of a serial-killer case, the world was beating a path to their doors; perhaps there might even be a break in the case. Then came the horrible hangover of seeing their daughters and sisters in the news, constantly being referred to as prostitutes. The point Ms. Cann made to me on that pier was similar to what all the family members eventually said to me: These women were more than this.

“I don’t like how they’re talking about her,” Ms. Cann told me. “I understand they only know what she was down there doing, and that’s what they look at her as. But it doesn’t matter what she did. She was still a mother. She still meant the world to her daughter, she meant the world to me.”

The police seemed to resist taking the case seriously at first, and in reality, they had not even been looking for these women. They were found by happenstance, after a fifth woman, Shannan Gilbert, disappeared in 2010 during an escort appointment in Oak Beach, three miles from where the first four women were discovered.

At a public-safety hearing on Long Island in May 2011, while teams of rescue workers and police officers were still searching the bramble of Gilgo Beach, Dominick Varrone, the chief of detectives of the Suffolk County Police Department, suggested that the public could be at ease because the killer was selecting only a certain sort of victim. The subtext was clear: If the victims had been successful and well-educated, like the victims of David Berkowitz, the serial killer known as Son of Sam, all of Long Island might need to be in a panic. But everyone could relax. Sex workers didn’t seem to deserve the same consideration.



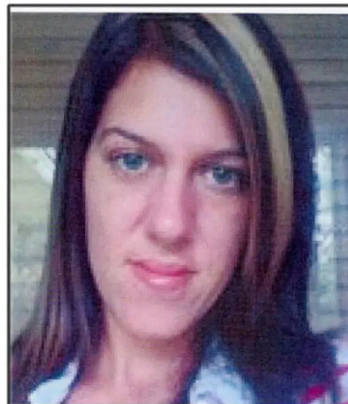
MAUREEN BRAINARD - BARNES



MELISSA BARTHELEMY



MEGAN WATERMAN



AMBER LYNN COSTELLO

Handouts from the Suffolk County Police Department Suffolk County Police Department/Reuters

Flash forward a decade, to July 14, 2023. Ms. Cann was on Long Island, standing with her husband at a news conference and announcing an arrest in the case that had haunted her for 16 years. Next to them were the relatives of two other victims: Ms. Barthelemy’s sister, Amanda, and Ms. Waterman’s daughter, Lili.

Raymond A. Tierney, the district attorney, said that while the man in custody for the murders represented the worst of humanity, the families of the victims seemed to him to embody the best of all of us. The police commissioner, Rodney Harrison, gave Ms. Cann and each of the family members a long hug. It’s a big difference, 12 years: The victims seem to matter.



To Ms. Cann's point, the news media does not frequently identify victims as prostitutes anymore, but as people who earn money with sex work. Earlier that morning, Gov. Kathy Hochul led an impromptu moment of silence in honor of the victims. It was a far cry from what Shannan Gilbert's mother, Mari, once said: "I think they look at them like they're throwaway. They don't care."



Relatives of the Gilgo Beach victims at the news conference announcing the arrest of Rex Heuermann yesterday. Johnny Milano for The New York Times

Just as there is no single form of poverty, there also is no distinct set of family patterns or life circumstances that leads to the choices these women made. No formula exists to explain what brought them to Gilgo Beach. Human trafficking was a factor for one of them, addiction for another.

But if they shared something, it was that they never fell off the grid or lived on the streets the way the TV procedural stereotype dictates. They all remained close to their families. They all came from towns with narrowing options and were seeking a way out. That's one way of looking at "Lost Girls," the title of my book about this case, later adapted into a movie: They were only "lost" insofar as we — the police, the media, the social safety net — elected to lose them, by deciding they were worth discarding.

Serial killers understand this, of course. Jack the Ripper targeted the women he did for presumably the same reason that the Green River Killer and Joel Rifkin said they did: These were women they believed no one would ever go looking for. And more often than not, sadly, they were right.

Now, 16 years after Ms. Brainard-Barnes went missing, we have an arrest, a suspect: Rex Heuermann was, it seems, living in plain sight, in a Long Island town a short drive from where the bodies were found. He has a spouse and children, and a job with a relatively high profile. In a place as densely populated as New York, he stands accused of a double life that seems hard to contemplate.

His advantage, it would seem, was that no one was looking for him, either. In cases involving escort work, the men who are customers often seem like footnotes, at least to the public. The police locked in on Mr. Heuermann only last year, more than a decade after the four bodies were found on Gilgo Beach.

For Ms. Cann and the other family members, that's an eternity of wondering and waiting, and feeling every bit as discarded as the loved ones they lost.

Robert Kolker is the author of "Lost Girls: An Unsolved American Mystery," the best-selling nonfiction account of the Gilgo Beach murders.