

Melanie Carpenter was born on April 22, 1971. She grew up in the Vancouver suburb of Surrey, and lived there all her life.

At age three, she rode her tricycle down a flight of stairs in her family's house. At ten, she was Lower Mainland gymnastics champion at the Junior B-level in two events: vault and beam. "She liked Fruit Loops, vanilla ice cream, and books about animals."¹

"She was not a real scholastic kid," said her father. "If the subject didn't interest her, she was the kind of kid who would look out the window and watch the birds making a nest."²

Melanie loved animals. She rode horses. "She had a cat named Kitty Ball and a rabbit named Gizmo, named after a character in the Gremlins."³ "Her favorite outings were to the Vancouver Game Farm and to Como Park to feed the ducks."⁴ Melanie attended Frank Hurt Secondary school where she played softball and volleyball. She was a popular student. Her friends called her Mel. She was a gentle and caring person, and everyone who knew her loved her.

Melanie was also an enthusiastic cook. Her specialties were chili and chicken teriyaki, and she often prepared meals for the whole family. Her favorite TV shows were *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Melrose Place*, which she always taped if she had to miss an episode. Her favourite song was "Fire and Rain" by James Taylor.

When she met her fiancé, Aaron Bastien, it was love at first sight. They were together for six years. "Her aspiration was to be a housewife," Aaron related. "She always said that she wanted to stay home. We talked about how we wanted to have children. That's what made her happy."

In January of 1995, I was preparing applications for art school. I had irregular jobs landscaping and looking after the daughters of my neighbours. My home was in a converted school bus on Saltspring, one of B.C.'s Gulf Islands. It was parked beside a lake, under a large weeping willow tree whose branches slapped my windows on windy days. I often spent afternoons reading, or looking out and worrying about the future. It was usually too misty to see the hills on the opposite shore. Under a metal roof, rain sounds heavier than it actually is.

I had a wood stove for heat, a propane stove for cooking, and a battery-powered radio for news. On lucky, clear nights, some Seattle stations would come through, but otherwise I listened to CBC, which was like a friend; often left on the dial for days at a time. Yeltsin's army was bombing Grozny. There was a major earthquake in Japan. A heroic dog in Florida rescued her nine puppies after they had been buried alive by her owner. "Sheba" broke free of her chain and unearthed the pups while a neighbour watched. The local humane society was flooded with adoption offers. In British Columbia, five members of a medivac crew were killed when their helicopter crashed on its way to the Queen Charlotte Islands. They were attempting to evacuate a pregnant woman having a difficult labour. The woman and her baby were okay. Another story, however, dominated the national and local news reports that month: the disappearance of Melanie Carpenter.

Early on the morning of Friday, January 6, 1995, Melanie dropped off Aaron Bastien at the Scott Road SkyTrain Station. Aaron worked in downtown Vancouver at Revenue Canada. He was saving to buy her an engagement ring and for a down payment on a condominium. It would have still been dark when they kissed goodbye, and when Melanie returned home to get ready for work.

It had been raining all week, but January 6 turned into a sunny day. Melanie's morning was uneventful. She was working at Island Tan Tanning Studios in the Evergreen strip mall in Surrey, not far from where she lived. A few regular clients came in for appointments, but she was alone when she received an unusual call shortly after lunch. A man said that he represented a group of Japanese businessmen who were interested in buying a franchise from Island Tan. He claimed that the group wanted the salon to themselves so they could inspect the tanning beds. Melanie called her boss, Gary Marshall, who was working at a nearby location, and Gary told Melanie that he was on his way to assist her.

Sandy Carpenter later said she worried about her daughter working alone in the salon. She said Melanie was always getting "hit on" by the guys who ate pizza next door.

"Aaron told her that if she suspected anything to call him and he'd be there," she said, fighting back tears.

According to her father, Steve Carpenter, Melanie was afraid of the attentions of men. He said he had advised her not to put up a struggle if ever attacked, that it was better not to resist and to stay alive.

"I wish," he later said, "that I had told her to fight with everything she's got."

Gary Marshall arrived at the store 15 minutes later. When the phone rang again, Melanie handed him the receiver.

“He was very soft spoken—a good command of the English language,” said Gary.

During the conversation, the mysterious man cancelled his appointment, saying that a member of his group had become ill over lunch. He agreed to call again to discuss rescheduling the meeting, but five minutes later he telephoned, for the last time, and asked if it was possible to supply hors d’oeuvres.

“When I look back on it now, it’s clear he was trying to get me to leave the store,” Gary later reflected. “But at the time we both thought it was a joke. Melanie herself kind of laughed it off.”

Gary left the salon at 1:30 p.m. and returned to Island Tan’s Newton Village location, but when a confused customer called him from the Evergreen mall an hour later to say that the place was vacant, he raced back. Melanie was gone. The salon’s rear door was unlocked, and \$250 was missing from the cash register. Gary called the police.

Surrey RCMP reported from the site that there were strong indications of a kidnapping, but would not elaborate.

“It’s fast and furious right now. Until we find out otherwise, we’re treating this as an abduction. . . . There are so many questions. It was broad daylight—how did he get her out of here without being noticed?”

The police appealed to other business owners who had been contacted by a suspicious individual claiming to represent Japanese investors, and to the public for information. Steve Carpenter appealed to his daughter’s kidnapper:

“Let her go, please. We’ll give you anything you want. We don’t care. We just want her safe.”

The next day, CBC Radio announced that a man had been photographed by an InstaBank security camera making a \$300 withdrawal with Melanie’s bank card only minutes after she disappeared. The computer-enhanced photographs were shown on TV and published in newspapers, but the radio could only offer descriptions. The man was balding. He had a moustache and appeared somewhat disheveled. He was about 5’ 9” and was probably in his early to mid-forties. He was thought to be driving a red Hyundai hatchback.

Steve Carpenter immediately offered a \$20,000 reward for his daughter’s safe return. Reporters covering the story described him helplessly holding up \$100 bills.

“I thought \$20,000 would look like a lot more money than this,” he said.

Calls were pouring in to police. The Bring-Melanie-Home Campaign was overwhelmed with volunteers and media attention. Within a few days it outgrew the Carpenter home and was relocated to donated space in the Surrey Inn. People from all over Greater Vancouver volunteered to search nearby areas or answer phones on the tip line. People wore yellow ribbons for Melanie.

Sitting in my bus, I considered the facts. A 23-year-old girl had been abducted from her place of work. She had long blonde hair and—as reports emphasized hourly, and with a contagious urgency—she was extraordinarily pretty. She had blue eyes, long fingernails, and an attractive figure. Based on the descriptions, it seemed unlikely that the man in the security photographs was the type to seek the services of the salon. He must have been a stranger; perhaps a stalker or secret admirer. I was thinking about Melanie Carpenter with increasing frequency and dread.

A week passed before the man in the surveillance photographs was identified. Fernand Auger was a convicted sex offender who worked as a waiter in Alberta. He had recently been granted a statutory release after serving two-thirds of an armed robbery sentence in the Bowden Institution, near Calgary.

Four psychics told police that Melanie was being held captive somewhere in the Vancouver area. Steve Carpenter raised the reward to \$50,000, offering Auger a direct deal.

“Fernand, you’ve got my daughter. I’ve got something you want. I want my daughter back alive. You tell me how to proceed from here.”

Steve Carpenter’s comments were broadcast on almost every news update. He was a no-nonsense man with a deep voice.

“I know my daughter is alive. The bond I have with all my kids is very deep. If one of them died, I’d have an empty feeling. It would be like a shiver, like something running through me suddenly. I would feel it and I would know it right then. I haven’t felt this and I know she’s still alive.”

Soon after his identity had been revealed, news reports were offering details about Fernand Auger’s past. His sister, Pauline, said that he grew up in foster homes and was abused by a priest as a child. She and the rest of his brothers and sisters believed in him.

“In our hearts, we don’t think he did it.”

A prison psychologist described him as having a “fairly advanced anti-social personality disorder.”

A bartender related that Fernand Auger had once been a regular customer, and that he would arrive during happy hour and drink a dozen glasses of cold draft before heading out with a polite good-bye.

“He was quiet. He was never rude. I talked to him quite a few times because he always sat at the bar,” she related. “He never really talked about anything specific.”

Auger’s boss in Calgary said he was the best waiter he’d ever had. “He called in sick on New Year’s Day, and I never saw him again.”

On January 1, shortly after making this call, Fernand Auger used a friend’s credit card number to rent a Hyundai Exel from Rent-A-Wreck

Automobile Rentals in South Calgary. The manager of the firm said he did not seem unusual.

“He was a very fast talker, rambled on fairly quickly. I’ve heard he had anti-social tendencies, but you couldn’t tell.”

Days passed. The territory of the search grew in scope, and included many outlying woods. There were no new InstaBank transactions. There were no reported sightings. Fernand Auger and Melanie Carpenter had vanished. The Carpenters had calls and letters of support from all over the country.

Finally, on January 15, there was a break. A real estate agent discovered a red car in the garage of a vacant country home near High River, Alberta, 50 kilometers south of Calgary. A green garden hose led from the car’s exhaust pipe to the driver’s window, and a man’s tracksuit was stuffed into the window opening. Although the windshield glass was caked with ice, a figure inside was visible.

“He looked like he was asleep,” police later commented. “His head was lying back and his face looked peaceful and chalky white.”

A suicide note was found on the vehicle’s rental inspection report. In the spaces between diagrams of the car and maintenance checklists were written these words:

This vehicle was obtained fraudulently by me Fern Auger (F.A.) do not hold the credit card holder liable. Jan 9/95 (F.A.) My death was chosen my way my choice my place and time. To my family and ex-wife I love you. But it is better this way. (F.A.)

Fingerprint tests confirmed the body was Fernand Auger. Two blonde hairs found in the car were determined not to belong to Melanie. The area around the garage was searched. There was no trace of her.

“I cannot believe that he would not mention where Melanie was, or something. You know, he mentions his own family. It’s the death of a son of a bitch, as far as I am concerned,” Steve Carpenter anguished.

A vigil was held in the playground of Frank Hurt Secondary—Melanie’s old school—and hundreds of children, teens, adults and police officers attended. They lit candles in a silent gesture of hope that Melanie was somehow still alive.

I tried to imagine a person abducting another person. I pictured Fernand Auger renting a car in Calgary then driving a thousand kilometers through three mountain ranges in search of a suitable abductee. I visualized his journey as a dotted line against an aerial view of the forests and snow-capped peaks of Western Canada. I imagined what Melanie Carpenter might have been thinking while she was waiting in the car for Auger to

withdraw her money. What happened that day? Was there any hope for Melanie now? I counted the days. Fernand Auger died three days after Melanie's abduction. Two weeks had passed since then. Could she have survived alone, in some secret place, all this time? Could she possibly be aware of her fame? I thought of her love of animals. I listened every hour, waiting for updates, anticipating the declarations of Melanie's beauty. Her face was constantly in my thoughts—but indistinct and otherworldly—like an image I remembered or dreamed. Had I possibly seen her before? She and I were almost the same age. If I had a television or a newspaper subscription, I would have known exactly what Melanie looked like. I began to believe that I should. I remember feeling slightly ashamed. This was not something to discuss.

My bus was parked several kilometers from the town of Ganges—too far to walk. It was a cute town on a picturesque inlet with a harbour for small and medium-sized pleasure boats. It had a grocery store, a hardware store, a post office, restaurants, hotels, two pubs, two bookstores, several new age gift shops and yoga studios, but no river. I only went in when I had a particular need to pick up mail or to get supplies.

I needed to find a picture of Melanie. Any newspaper would have a photograph of her. I decided to hitchhike to town. It was late in the afternoon when I arrived at the grocery store that day, and the papers had all been sold. I walked to the magazine stand, but the newspaper racks were empty.

The next day, I left earlier. At the grocery store I found a copy of *The Vancouver Sun*, but there was no picture of Melanie. The featured photograph was instead of two rain-gear-clad figures in a foggy forest. The story it accompanied was about the search:

NO NEW CLUES IN HUNT FOR SURREY WOMAN

About 53 search-and-rescue volunteers from around the Lower Mainland and Washington State combed Tynehead Regional Park on Sunday. They found some unrelated items, but nothing linked to the Carpenter case, said Rob Young, search manager with Surrey search and rescue. Melanie's father Steve Carpenter said another small group of 12 to 15 volunteers searched the Hope-Princeton Highway area between the Hope Slide and Manning Park, following up on three unconfirmed sightings of Melanie inside Auger's car. They, too, found nothing. Steve Carpenter said he has been overwhelmed by the public's desire to help. "It just fortifies my faith in human nature and people in general," he said. "My own emotions, I've put them away because I have to think of Melanie and how she's feeling right now." "We're just average people. We're taken out of our everyday normal lives by this guy, by the luck of the draw," he said. "Some people in

government had better be shaking in their boots, because I tell you things are going to change.”

Increasingly, it seemed like I wasn't meant to see Melanie Carpenter.

A few days later, I set out early in the morning. A man with a load of salvaged lumber in the back of his truck gave me a ride, informing me of the risks of hitchhiking as we drove. I agreed, and then thanked him when he let me out near the fish shack at the top of the hill. It was cold and raining, but from the fish shack, the walk to the grocery store wasn't long. I was thinking about Steve Carpenter, and what it must be like to wake up each morning into the same worst nightmare.

The parking lot of the grocery store was dotted with shallow puddles. The rain was cold, and it was almost freezing. The store seemed empty as I approached. Immediately after I pushed through the glass doors, my glasses steamed up, and I had to stop by the shopping carts to wipe them. I recognized a Mariah Carey song on the p.a.: “I had a vision of love, and it was all that you've given to me.” She has a five-octave range, I recalled. When I put my glasses on, everything in the store seemed crisp and precise, and Mariah was singing the high part. I glanced out the windows at the inclement weather, then back towards the tabloids by the checkouts.

In the same instant that I saw the tiny face, I knew it was Melanie's. It was on a newspaper, across from the customer service desk. I was trying to catch my breath as I passed by the carts and the bottle returns, and my heart was beating fast. Her face became clearer as I approached. She was by a Christmas tree, wearing a shade of red appropriate for the season, smiling. She was looking straight out. She was a girl. She had blonde hair and straight teeth. Her expression was happy. She was specific, lovely and hauntingly unremarkable. I stood there, staring back.

“Melanie's body found near Yale,” it said above her hair.

I'm not sure how much time passed before I became embarrassed. Someone said “Excuse me” in an accusatory tone. I had been blocking the checkout. I went to the dairy refrigerator at the back of the store, but I had no clear thoughts. I turned and slowly moved back through the cereals, but all I could think to do was to leave, to walk home.

As I was climbing the hill out of town, the sun came out. Cars passed. I was looking down, not forward. Water seeped into one of my runners, making an unpleasant sound every second step. I went a long distance without pausing, breathing in time with the sound of my shoe.

Finally, I stopped to look at a memorial by the lake. I had passed by it before, and was vaguely aware it had been there for some time. There had been an accident—a car had gone into the lake, or maybe a pedestrian had

been hit. It was a beautiful spot beside a curve in the road. Three store-bought chrysanthemum plants in plastic pots were leaning against a tree. The dead flowers were once mauve. There were also partially burned candles of every colour—homemade ones—in mud splattered jars filled with rain. Lingering seemed improper. I picked up a flowerpot, brushed the brown tops, and hid it under my jacket. At home I placed the plant by my door and turned on the radio.

On the night of Thursday, January 26, the Bring-Melanie-Home-Hotline received a fateful call. The body of a woman with golden hair had been found near the town of Yale, about 160 kilometers northeast of Vancouver. A few meters above the Fraser River, the canyon site was described as a place of spectacular and desolate beauty.

Steve Carpenter slept only about two hours that night, but for the first time since Melanie's disappearance he dreamed about his daughter. He said it felt more like her coming to him than him dreaming about her. He especially remembered her eyes and her smile.

"It was a happy, happy dream," he said, "She just stopped off to say goodbye to her dad."

The next morning, three weeks to the day after Melanie disappeared, and eight weeks before her twenty-fourth birthday, police were able to confirm to Steve Carpenter that his daughter was dead. Watching the televised press conference from the Bring-Melanie-Home Headquarters in the Surrey Inn, Melanie's family and friends listened as police described how her body was found with several knife wounds and her hands tied behind her back. They said they believed she had been killed within hours of being abducted. Sobs and wounded cries rose from the crowd gathered around the television set.

Autopsy results later confirmed that Melanie had been sexually assaulted.

The day after Melanie Carpenter's funeral, a massive service was held in Vancouver's Pacific Coliseum. Never in Canada had a private memorial service been staged in such a large venue. More than 4,000 grievors gathered in the darkened hockey arena. The service was broadcast live on TV and radio. Melanie was eulogized by her grandmother, her fiancée, and by her father.

For 23 years Melanie had been his daughter and God's daughter, he said, but in death she had become something more:

"Today I pass her on to be Canada's daughter."

In hushed tones, the announcer described a stage covered with framed pictures of Melanie and massive bouquets. Steve Carpenter was wearing jeans and a Vancouver Canucks parka.

"This service is actually for you people and for Melanie," Steve Carpenter

continued, “For the way everyone has taken her into their hearts and all the support you’ve shown through the search.”

He then told how Melanie’s young brother had asked him if Melanie’s eyes were open or closed inside the coffin:

“I said, ‘They’re closed.’ And he said, ‘Oh, just like Snow White.’”

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Notes

- 1 Bob Stall, *Vancouver Province*, February 5, 1995, page A10.
- 2 Robin Anjello, "The Prime Suspect," *MacLean's* 108: 5 (January 30, 1995), page 21.
- 3 Anjello, page 21.
- 4 Stall, page A10.
- 5 *The Vancouver Sun*, January 24, 1995, page A2.