

Part I:

Jared Povitsi:

My name is Jared Povitsi. You may not have heard of me, but I'm an undergrad, poli-sci major at a pretty well-known college in Connecticut. Before last week, you may or may not have heard of the Birdie family from Briley County, West Illihoma either. Up until recently, not even I had heard of them. They were pretty normal, upper-middle-class Americans. I mean normal to a point of being boring. Let's face it, Briley County is a pretty normal rural area. Farmland. A traffic light or two. A general store. I'm assuming. I've never been. Probably cows. According to their Wikipedia page, the county is either pretty average, or someone really needs to update its Wikipedia page. I mean, we're talking hicksville supreme here. In Briley County, there is only *one* major evangelical television station with nationally syndicated, 24-hour programming, and that station only has *one* preacher/ producer: Cletus Birdie.

(Cletus' theme)

Cletus is the image of a normal, plain, West Illihoman man. He lives on a modest salary collected from nationwide donations on a standard 40 acre estate. When I searched pictures of his mansion, the images really didn't look any different from my parents' Connecticut home. His staircases were carpeted in a standard Turkish runner, his furniture could be found in your average design catalogues. When he's not working, you might catch Cletus Birdie with many of the others in his community rehearsing for a play with the Briley County Buskers, a local theatre club.

(sound byte)

That was a clip from a recent rehearsal for *Light 'im Up: The Daniel Owens Story*, an original musical written by BCB's artistic director, Frank Dimley, which may have just become shockingly relevant to this sleepy little mountainside county. So relevant it might even seem planned to those of us with a nose for nuance. But we'll come back to that later. You see, about a week ago, something happened in this county that was not so normal. Not so boring. Something that would change the lives of the Birdie family and everyone in Briley County forever.

(Marie-Joelle's theme)

On December 18, 2018, Cletus Birdie's six year old daughter, Marie-Joelle Birdie competed in the Little Miss Briley Christmas Evergreen Pageant at the Briley County Palladium. After the pageant, Marie-Joelle and her mother went to celebrate at her beauty coach's annual Christmas party. This was an event none of the simple folk in the county would ever miss. It was widely advertised throughout the state on billboards and flyers starting sometimes as early as October. This was kinda like their version of a big deal. Like the Briley County Oscars. Except this event, didn't have any winners. And this year, it seemed like there was going to be one unlucky loser.

(sound byte, crowds murmur, glasses clinking)

This year's theme was "Mumbai under the Mistletoe: Merry Christmas from India". Everyone was there. According to Sheriff Dawkins, who was a guest at the party, he last saw Marie-Joelle and her mother, Edna-Mae at about 8 o'clock, when most of the children were being shuffled home so the adults could continue their celebration.

Edna-Mae: My sweet little girl. I put her to bed. Then I heard a thud coming from her room. I called out to her, but she didn't answer.

When Edna-Mae entered the little girl's bedroom, she found her daughter's mangled body lying on the floor, lifeless, a chord wrapped around the tender flesh of her neck, in places, breaking the skin. The window had been smashed. Glass shards littered the carpet.

No need to check for a pulse. This little girl was obviously dead. But this report left an avid crime buff a semester away from his poli-sci degree like me with one burning question: Who murdered Marie-Joelle?

(ominous theme music)

This recording is brought to you by Glasgow's Vegan Chili. Mmmmm. Meaty! But that's not meat. Trick your husband, it's beans! From our family's kitchen table to your's, it's Glasgow's Vegan Chili.

(recording of Marie-Joelle singing *Santa Baby*)

Like any avid crime buff on the fast-track to a poli-sci degree from a well-respected, accredited university, I started with the basic facts. A little girl comes in second place in a county pageant, goes to a party, and then is found murdered in her bedroom. That was a clip of Marie-Joelle singing in the talent portion of the Evergreen Christmas Pageant earlier that day.

Who could kill such a sweet little girl?

The jealous mother of a beauty pageant competitor? A frenzied admirer? Or is there more to Marie-Joelle's story than meets the eye? I decided to start with the police reports and track through everyone Marie-Joelle would have interacted with the night she died. Let's face it, something had happened here that wasn't quite ordinary.

On December 18, 2018, Marie-Joelle Birdie and her mother Edna-Mae arrived at the Briley County Palladium for the Little Miss Briley Christmas Evergreen Pageant at roughly 3 o'clock. Once there, she prepared for the 5 o'clock pageant with her beauty coach, Frank Dimley.

Remember Frank? He's a close friend of the Birdie family's as well as the artistic director for the Briley County Players. He has worked with Marie-Joelle as a beauty coach since she started participating in pageants in utero. By all accounts, their relationship was normal. Like insanely normal. Marie-Joelle messed up, Frank would get frustrated. Marie-Joelle would cry, Frank would cry. Kiss, kiss. Make up. Nothing out of the ordinary. Just regular pageant child/ beauty coach interactions.

The only other person Marie-Joelle reportedly interacted with before the pageant started was Veanne Crustacean, the longtime chair of the Little Miss Briley County pageants and host for that evening's ceremony. Veanne confirmed that she had checked in with Marie-Joelle, Edna-Mae, and Frank to ensure they were not planting any pyrotechnics on the stage after their dangerous fire code violation in the Little Miss Briley County Daisy Chain Pageant.

Veanne: We love little Marie-Joelle! She's a little bundle of joy-- or at least she was. We were devastated to hear what had happened to her. Poor thing.

That was Veanne Crustacean. I wanted to ask her if she could think of anyone who might have a motive to kill Marie-Joelle.

Veanne: I don't think there's a reason on God's green earth that anyone would want to harm that little girl. Poor thing. But as I say, I never know why people do some things they do. Take Eve for example, the lady in the Bible. Why'd she do it? We will never know. Or-- and not to get too political here, but-- take Danny Owens. What would possess a man to burn down an orphanage? With all those puppies inside too? Poor things.

A little context on that Danny Owens comment:

News anchor: According to reports from the Briley County police department, Daniel Owens is officially the first man since 1983 to be sentenced to death in West Illihoma. His crime? Arson. Specifically? Burning down the Briley County orphanage, killing many of the young children inside in addition to a litter of puppies who had been brought from the county shelter for the day. Owens' case marks the first time since 1983 that anyone in Briley County has been sentenced to death, and many residents hold that, had the puppies survived, the jury may have landed differently. Back to you, Archie.

Does this story ring a bell? Well it should. Try and keep track of the clues. Remember that little musical the Briley County Buskers were working on?

(sound byte)

Frank: It was horrible! Just awful! I couldn't believe it. It's been a long time since something so terrible has hit Briley County. None of them were off-book. Half the leads hadn't even looked over my most recent rewrites. And of course the canine performers were aging out of their roles faster than they could be shipped in! Oh... you meant the murder? Yeah. Oh! That too. Terrible, terrible tragedy.

That was Frank Dimley. I found his email on the Briley County Busker's website and reached out to him, claiming to be an arts reporter seeking information about his new work.

Frank: It's called *Light 'im Up: The Daniel Owens Story* and I'm really happy to be engaging creatively with this subject matter. I think now, more than ever this county needs musical theatre. Okay. Quote that in your thing. This county needs musical theatre now more than ever. I mean I knew Daniel Owens. Oh yeah... went to school with him. Sick freak. I'd say 'light him up' even if he didn't, y'know, burn down an orphanage and kill a bunch of puppies.

So you wrote the show and you're directing it?

Frank: Yes. You see there's a delicacy to this text that I really want to make sure is handled as humanly as possible. Know what I mean? See, a bad director might not be able to unearth all of the nuance I've written here. Like in the end of scene three, there's this whole exchange where... let's see, how to explain it... yayayaya... edit that out please! Okay use that beginning part then splice to: Daniel Owens is in high school (in the play) and he sees a homeless lady by

the side of the road. And the lady goes, “Oy! Spare a coin for a poor woman.” and our protagonist he just kinda stops. He just stops. Just stops. And he looks out to the audience and he goes: (*singing tunelessly*) “Shall I help her? This poor soul? None have sheltered her in this cruel world! None have acknowledged her... none have cared! So why should I be the one?” In a way, that is the moment. Nope. Wait. A close analysis might reveal that at that early age, young Daniel knew he was gonna burn an orphanage down. Mhm. Yup. And I know. Went to school with him. That’s the kinda nuance stuff we’ve got going on here. Delicate.

So I’m sure that fire really affected the county. Would you be willing to talk a little about the recent murder?

Frank: I—-

You were her beauty coach, correct? With her the day she died?

Frank: Now who’ve you been—-

I’m looking to see who murdered Marie-Joelle.

Frank: You call here again and you’ll find yourself in a boatload of trouble.

(he hangs up the phone)

Woah. That took an unexpected turn. But I count myself lucky. I’ve already been able to contact two of the people who saw Marie-Joelle the last time she was alive. If they had noticed something strange about her that day, would they have said anything? Let’s look at the timeline more closely:

At 3 o’clock, Marie-Joelle and her mother arrive at the Palladium to prepare for the pageant. The county’s palladium is about 10 miles from the Birdie’s home.

By 4 o’clock, Marie-Joelle’s hair and makeup are done and she is putting finishing touches on her talent portion with Frank Dimley. Although she was alone with Frank during this time, it doesn’t seem like anything out of the ordinary could have happened.

At roughly 4:30, Veanne Crustacean interrupts their rehearsal to check and remind Frank and Edna-Mae about the county fire marshall’s ruling on the use of unlicensed pyrotechnics for child beauty pageants.

At 5 o’clock, the pageant begins. Marie-Joelle does her beauty, talent, and Q+A portion without event.

By 6 o’clock, Marie-Joelle has been given her second place trophy and seen Michaelyn Saint Saens crowned Little Miss Christmas Evergreen of Briley County, 2018.

6:30. Marie-Joelle and Edna-Mae search for Cletus in the crowd. Once they’ve found him, they exit the palladium to leave in two separate cars: Edna-Mae and Marie-Joelle in a blue Honda Acura and Cletus in a silver Honda Civic, but before leaving, Cletus says that he was recognized by a fan and asked to chat and take a photo in the parking lot.

By 6:50, all three members of the Birdie family have arrived at Frank Dimley's house for his Christmas party. Reportedly, the theme was "Mumbai under the Mistletoe: Merry Christmas from India". Dimley lives approximately 6 miles from the palladium. Many of the other contestants from the pageant and their families were also guests at the party as well as prominent figures from the county including Veanne Crustacean and Sheriff Dawkins.

By all reports, nothing unusual happened at the party. Marie-Joelle was gifted a pink teddy bear in a showgirl's dress by Frank Dimley.

At about 8 o'clock, Marie-Joelle and Edna-Mae got back in the blue Honda Acura and drove home. Sheriff Dawkins remembered that time specifically because he had parked his off-duty vehicle behind Edna-Mae and needed to let her back out of the driveway. After letting her leave, he returned to the party. Cletus also stayed at the party, expecting that his wife would rejoin him.

I did a little bit of sleuthing online. There is a straight, 4 mile stretch of road between Frank Dimley's home and the Birdie's estate. If Edna-Mae left at 8 o'clock and averaged 35 miles per hour on her drive home, she should have been able to arrive in just under 7 minutes. Since Edna-Mae is the last person to have seen Marie-Joelle alive, any microscopic window of time in which she could have killed her daughter is a huge red flag.

So now, if the mother and daughter arrived home by 8:07, we have a short, 36 minute window before Edna-Mae's cell phone record shows she called the police at 8:43. But here's the thing. Edna-Mae didn't call 9-1-1. She called Sheriff Dawkins' personal cell number, because, she says, he is a family friend. Dawkins arrived at the site and placed a call to the station by 8:45, meaning his drive to the Birdie's estate averaged over 100 miles per hour. Understandable given the circumstances.

Between the moment Edna-Mae arrived home and Sheriff Dawkins placed a call to the station, a few key things happened.

News anchor: I'm standing here by the ultra-secure gate that guards the estate of Cletus Birdie. It will only open for vehicles pre-programmed into the security system, or manually, by holding a button from inside the locked garage. Cletus Birdie's wife, Edna-Mae reports that, after putting daughter, Marie-Joelle to bed, she saw headlights in the driveway. Looking outside, she realized it was her husband's silver Honda Civic. Surprised he was home early, but not thinking too much of it, she resumed her business. What business that is, seems to be uncertain. Could she have been murdering her own daughter? Would she have a motive? If not, what was she doing that she wouldn't hear a window pane smash above her? Residents are asking these questions and more. We'll bring you more as this story updates. Back to you, Archie.

But here's the thing, Cletus' report states that, upon getting a call from the police at 9:03 and attempting to leave Dimley's house, he noticed that his car keys were missing and, heading out to look for his car, it was gone too. He says he went to find Frank Dimley to ask for a ride, but unable to locate his host, ended up catching a ride with a helpful caterer's assistant, ironically also named Cletus. Not a very common name, so Birdie notes the coincidence. He says he has never met this other Cletus before, yet something about him seems vaguely familiar. So Cletus

and Cletus drive the four miles to the Birdie's estate. But when he arrives there, his silver Honda Civic is nowhere to be found.

So who was driving that car that night? Could that be the killer? Was it still parked in the driveway when Sheriff Dawkins arrived? Where is it now?

Neighbors report hearing a gun shot come from somewhere on the Birdie's estate at some time between 8 and 9. But Marie-Joelle had not been shot. So who was shooting a gun? Who, or what, were they shooting at?

As an avid crime buff who is currently in his senior year at one of the most well-respected colleges in the nation, these are the things I hope to find out. So I've booked an Air BnB just up the road from the Birdie's home and can't wait to leave Connecticut and put my poli-sci degree to work for the benefit of the people of Briley County and the justice of the Birdie family. Ever since first hearing about this case, I've been engrossed, wanting to know who murdered Marie-Joelle, wanting to do my part to seek justice in this national tragedy. It is always a negative when someone dies, but, to me at least, there is something extra sad when the innocence of childhood is lost. I've never made a podcast before, but I really think I'm gonna have a knack for this. I mean I go to a pretty well-respected school in Connecticut... (it's Yale), so I'm pretty sure I'll be... haha.

My car is all packed up with my newly-acquired recording equipment and I'm ready to go when I get a call from my buddy, Dylan.

Dylan: Hey dude. You should turn on the news. Know how you were going down south to find the car for that dead pageant girl? Uh... yeah. They found it. And they're already swabbing it for DNA.

(ominous theme music)

Part II:

Jared Povitsi: On Decemeber 18, 2018, 6 year old pageant queen, Marie-Joelle Birdie competed in the Little Miss Briley County Christmas Evergreen pageant. Little did she know, that second place win would be the last crowning she would attend. Later that night, her mother, Edna-Mae Morgan-Birdie found her murdered in her bedroom. The police department of Briley County is doing all they can to bring the Birdie family to justice, but sometimes it might take a little help from an avid crime buff like me to crack the case.

Welcome back to *Who Murdered Marie-Joelle?*

(theme music plays)

So a lot has happened since last week's episode. The biggest development in the case is that I piled all my essentials—- my pajamas, my toothbrush, and my air fryer—- into the back of my Jeep and drove from Connecticut all the way to West Illihoma to stay in a homestead just down the road from the Birdie family. The moment I arrived in Briley County, I could tell that something

was in the air. The sun beat down like hammer strikes on an anvil from the moment I arrived, even though it was early January. Perhaps doom had entangled itself in the densely hanging Spanish moss or woven itself in between the cracks in the cobblestone verandas. But the whole town seemed— for lack of a better word— murder-y. I felt like I had entered the town that the hotel is in that the psycho guy works at in the movie, *Psycho*.

Seriously. There were reporters everywhere. The residents wandered around in hushed clumps, glaring at newcomers, reluctant to allow the outside world to know of the darkness within their county's limits. It seemed like everyone I could touch base with was secretive and reserved. I reached back out to Veanne Crustacean, the woman who runs the Little Miss Briley Pageants to see if she would be willing to meet with me and help me figure out where I should go next. After my third text message, she responded with just one word: "fine." (with a period after it).

What could this coded message mean? Was she hiding something? Or was the killer sitting out in plain sight. In sight so plain that anyone, avid crime buff or not, could see it? Why would anyone send such an abrupt text but still take the time to punctuate it? These were the questions I needed to answer if I wanted to get closer to finding the killer and securing justice for Marie-Joelle's family.

Fine.

Veanne: Well now, come on in. Poor thing. I sure hope you found the place okay.

I did. Thanks.

Veanne: Now let's just... get settled here. Alright. Did you want anything to drink? Poor thing you must feel overwhelmed by this heat. Who ever would've thought... in January! It's the heat of God's righteous wrath... if you ask me. First Danny Owens... now... well, you know.

I do. Thanks. I was wondering if you could tell me where I should start looking for information about the murder. I checked the town hall for property records and stuff. Found out about the official delineation of the Birdie's estate, got Edna-Mae's maiden name...

Veanne: What?

It's Morgan.

Veanne: No. I mean what are you looking up that information for? Poor thing.

Well, see I have what's called a podcast. True crime. I'm throwing my hat in the ring to really get to the bottom of this Marie-Joelle thing. So I wanted to know—

Veanne: Son, I'm gonna ask you to close the window. Right there, behind you. Yup... you push... no lift first then— there. There you got it poor thing. Alright now, you're not recording for your little podcast are you?

No.

(I was)

Veanne: (drops all facade of sweetness) Good. Boy, are you stupid or something?

I-- what?

Veanne: You drove your ass all the way down here when they already arrested Frank Dimley for killing that little girl?

Woah. This morning?

Veanne: Three days ago. It's been on television, it's been all over Facebook, hell it's even probably in the paper.

Do you have a headline I could look at?

Veanne: Boy, what year is this? You think I get a paper delivered here. Get on your phone. They found Cletus Birdie's car and swabbed it for DNA. Apparently the backseat was crawling with Frank Dimley's "bodily fluids". You know what I mean by that... "bodily fluids?" Cuz, if I meant blood, I'd say blood. And if I meant piss, I'd say piss. Only one thing left that ever comes out without too much work. They said the backseat of the car was damn near crawling with Frank's stuff. Too much for any one shipment. Meaning whatever he was doing, this was not the first time doing it. But, some of it was from that night. He was in the car. It was stolen. It was found. No alibi. Bing. Bang. Boom. Talk about swift justice.

So now what? I'm... I...

Veanne: Now you go home.

Can I still ask you any questions that are still relevant? Just cuz I already wrote some down...

Veanne: Fine.

Um... okay. Awesome! Great! Let me see... who do you.... um... nope... was there anything... um... Is there anyone who would want to hurt the Birdie family? For any reason.

Veanne: Apparently Frank Dimley.

Besides him. Anyone.

Veanne: Listen. There are lots of people. Cletus Birdie is an evangelical preacher. He's on the extreme side of whatever issue he cares about and he has a whole television station letting the world know what he thinks 24 hours a day 363 days of the year.

Which days does he take off?

Veanne: That's your next question? Nothing else?

Um... yes.

Veanne: Listen. If I was doing a podcast, before this information about Frank came out, there are a lot of people in this world who I think would have had it in for Cletus Birdie. **Activist people. Pipe bomb activist types. I'd be looking at them. Who was in the county at that time. Who wasn't anywhere else. Seems to me that little girl was a 4 foot 3 ransom waiting to happen. And I'm sorry it did. Happen. Frank was always really hard on his clients. Wanted nothing but the best. But if second place earns the death sentence from him, he really must've snapped.**

hm... So you think she was kidnapped?

Veanne: I think she was killed by Frank Dimley because he's the one sitting in a cell in the county prison right now for murdering that little girl.

Interesting.

Veanne: Anything else?

What do you do? For work? Besides the pageants.

Veanne: *(sigh)* I'm a county rep for the Wish-Granters-Foundation. We take the wishes of sick kids and make them come true for one last spinny-teacup-ride before they meet their maker.

Oh. So like if they wanna go to Disney World.

Veanne: Yes. Much like that. Or Paris or... well one kid recently wished for a seance. Wants us to help him communicate with the ghost of John Wayne Gacy so he can ask him what it's like to kill someone. You know what, that's the first time I'm saying it out loud. I'm gonna have to write to this kid. See if there's anything else he'd like... a private screening of Clockwork Orange or a shrunken head or something... are we done now? *(under her breath)* Little sicko.

Well, I didn't get too much from Veanne this time either. But at least now I knew where I needed to go next.

The county prison was about a fifteen minute drive down a long, winding road. And visitors' hours were almost over. I hopped in my Jeep and drove all the way to the massive structure. It was exactly how you'd expect a county prison in West Illihoma to look. Big. Gray. Rectangular. Surrounded by a fence lined with barbed wire. Spooky. I still had questions about this case. According to a report online, authorities identified five different sets of DNA in the Birdie's car. The first three belonged to Edna-Mae Morgan-Birdie, Cletus Birdie, and Marie-Joelle Birdie. The fourth belonged to Frank Dimley. His bodily fluids. The fifth was a follicle of hair that belonged to a woman. It came back as a negative match for any of the others who would have been in the car. Perhaps it had belonged to a guest at Frank Dimley's party and had lingered on Marie-Joelle's fleece jacket. But perhaps it had lingered somewhere more sinister. An avid crime buff like me cannot let a simple follicle of hair go.

Because of the county's laws, I was not allowed to bring my phone or any other recording devices with me inside the prison. But I can tell you about what I experienced there.

As I approached, I could make out the letters on the signs of a crowd of protesters. Z.A.P.D. I chatted with the group's leader, Annaleigh Carlos to see what the protest was about. Annaleigh is a 30-something white lady who looks like maybe she's not a white lady, or maybe she thinks she isn't. As I approached her, she oozed of good intentions and smelled of hair products not intended for her demographic. Zoroastrians Against Penalty of Death. ZAPD.

As a longtime critic of the death penalty, a recent trip to India opened Annaleigh's mind to Zoroastrianism, the world's oldest religion. Their overarching belief in a universal, ethical dualism in Truth versus Lie, she says, resonated with her strong beliefs about government sanctioned executions of criminals. After her return, she founded ZAPD and has been working to get Daniel Owens' sentence, (who is currently sitting on death row in Briley County for burning down an orphanage and killing a bunch of puppies), commuted. I wonder why she feels so strongly about saving the life of a man who is clearly guilty for the suffering of so many others in the county.

ZAPD has ramped up its protests recently because Owens' execution date is fast approaching. The charge is lead by Annaleigh alongside her adult son, McGregor. Both of them have been commuting regularly from their home in Kansas to West Illioma for meetings and protests.

Once inside the prison, in a waiting area for visitors, I met another fascinating character. Belinda Praline, Daniel Owens' grandmother. With no other living relatives, Belinda raised Daniel just up the road from the prison he now calls home. She still lives in the same little blue house and visits him every day that she can. Although, she says, she has not been allowed to bring him any baked goods or treats, the prison has made a special concession. She is here to chat with him about what he wants for his final meal, which she, rather than the prison's cook, will be allowed to prepare. She has a hunch it will be fried chicken, mashed potatoes, collared greens, something called 'jiffy' and chocolate cake. Before I had even been served she was ushered into a cubicle to chat with her grandson.

Why do I choose to tell you about these two women? Because they were the only people at the prison polite enough to answer any of my questions and I don't want the excursion to be an entire waste. I wasn't even allowed in to chat with Frank Dimley.

So I dropped by the county defense attorney, Isabelle Beauregard's office. She and her firm, Gunther, Gunther, and Beauregard were defending Frank Dimley. Because of confidentiality I knew she wouldn't let me record, so I hid my phone in my pocket.

(muffled sounds)

When I arrived at the small, yellow-shingled office with white trim, I was struck by how innocuous it was. Searingly simple. A rectangle shape with a triangle on top. The windows were rectangles made up of groupings of small squares. There was even a little patch of asphalt next to the building where I, or anyone who works there, could park our cars. Let's face it, this little office was as normal as normal gets.

Hi. I'm here to meet with Attorney Isabelle Beauregard.

(unintelligible response)

No, I didn't. Was I supposed to?

(unintelligible response)

I just wanted to ask a few questions about a recent case she has taken on.

(unintelligible response)

That was the receptionist in the waiting room. She wears a striped blouse which makes her seem casual yet officious. Her feathery hair shows signs of her middle age and her—

(unintelligible response)

Sorry. Just talking to myself.

(the faint sound of a car alarm)

That's not mine. I think it must be yours. Or...

(unintelligible response)

(a door opens and closes)

Okay. Now I'm alone.

(a telephone begins to ring. Jared makes flustered sounds, unsure of what to do. When the phone starts ringing again, he picks it up)

Hello—

Frank: Isabelle. Thank God you picked up. I've been trying to reach you all day. I only have enough left for a minute here. But I need you to come back before the pretrial. I need to tell you something more. I was afraid to tell you before, but I'm afraid he's gonna push for the death penalty. Use his platform. Look, I know where Cletus Birdie was when this was going on. And he didn't tell the truth in his statement. And I know something about he and Edna-Mae that I shouldn't know. Something that would ruin him. His reputation. I think they're gonna push to have me killed. I don't know what to do!

Shoot! I almost forgot to— This recording is brought to you by Glasgow's Vegan Chili. Mmmmm. Meaty! But that's not meat. Trick your husband, it's beans! From our family's kitchen table to your's, it's Glasgow's Vegan Chili.

(simultaneously with above) Frank: What? Wait. Who is this? That ain't Isabelle. Come on. Whoever you are, tell Isabelle I need to see her again. Soon. Please. Tell her.

(theme music)

Part III:

Jared Povitsi: On Decemeber 18, 2018, 6 year old pageant queen, Marie-Joelle Birdie competed in the Little Miss Briley County Christmas Evergreen pageant. Little did she know, that second place win would be the last crowning she would attend. Later that night, her mother, Edna-Mae Morgan-Birdie found her murdered in her bedroom. The police department of Briley County is doing all they can to bring the Birdie family to justice, but sometimes it might take a little help from an avid crime buff like me to crack the case.

Welcome back to *Who Murdered Marie-Joelle?*

(theme music plays)

(sound of a car driving by)

I've been staying in Briley County, West Illihoma for about a week now. In just this short period of time, Frank Dimley has been arrested for the murder of his former client, Marie-Joelle Birdie. But something about this story just doesn't add up. Frank may have been tough on her, but was coming in second place really worth murder? If not, what was his motive? Because I was unable to visit Frank in prison, I sent him a letter explaining who I am and where he can reach me if he wants to talk any further.

Unfortunately, I had been spending too much time hanging around the Briley County Police Station. So yesterday, Sheriff Dawkins followed me to the Air BnB in his off-duty pickup truck. Dawkins is a tall, slender man who looks like he used to be fat. He must have lost weight very quickly— maybe Crossfit or something— because none of his clothes seem to fit him. As he walks, he seems to grab at his belt constantly to keep his pants from falling down.

(unintelligible sounds)

I'm sorry. I was just trying to ask a few questions for my podcast.

(unintelligible sounds)

Okay.

(unintelligible sounds)

Okay, Sir. Hey. Wait a minute. Is that the only vehicle you drive other than your patrol cars?

(unintelligible sounds)

Sheriff Dawkin's personal vehicle is a beat up, 1993 Chevy pick up. That thing's engine can be heard screaming for oil about a mile down the road. If you recall, in episode one, I did the math out and there is no way Sheriff Dawkins arrived at the murder scene to make his call to the station unless he was averaging over 100 miles per hour. I can't imagine that rusty, old truck making it to 100 miles per hour. Which means that Dawkins was either not coming from Frank Dimley's party like his report said, or he didn't actually make the call to the station from the murder scene, as he also claimed. But either way, why would he lie about where he was coming from? Certainly as a cop, he should know that lying about even something trivial raises

suspicious. But he was gone now, his oversized pants drooping behind him as he walked away from my door.

One group capitalizing on the swarm of press coming to the county right now is the Briley County Buskers. Their new musical, *Light 'im Up: The Daniel Owens Story* was slated to open next week.

(song from *Light 'im Up*)

But the arrest of their playwright/ director and artistic director has certainly put a roadblock in their way. However, just yesterday the pastor of the First Evangelical Church of Briley County announced that he would gladly foot the bill to host and even televise the production contingent upon a few plot changes, as dictated by the pastor himself. That pastor? None other than Cletus Birdie.

Now of course, if most men had their daughters murdered, it would raise suspicions to immediately begin profiting off the sensationalism of the crime under the guise of musical theatre, but the First Evangelical Church of Briley County released the following video statement from Cletus on their Facebook page.

Cletus: The FECBC is proud to house this Briley Community-driven initiative in the face of darkest times. We believe it is in God's plan that we embrace the dialogue surrounding the issues of our world so that we may face them in unity as a county rather than whisper about them in shadows. Were Marie-Joelle alive, she would want to make sure anyone who loved her bought their tickets to see this show, now retitled *Light Them Up: The Daniel Owens and Frank Dimley Stories, or How God's Chosen County Fell to Carnality but Arose Stronger Than Ever Upon Wiping the Blights of their Community From this World*. 25% of profits from every ticket sold will be donated to the Wish-Granters-Foundation to help the wishes of terminally ill children come true. In these unprecedented times, we certainly hope you will consider supporting this timely, relevant work.

I wondered what it meant that a church was promoting and presenting a musical that seemingly glorified the death penalty. I had no clue what the implications of that might be, but I thought I knew someone who might. Annaleigh Carlos, the founder of ZAPD.

It wasn't hard to find Annaleigh on Facebook once I guessed the spelling of her name right. A-N-N-A-L-E-I-G-H. Her profile was pretty heavily guarded, and the content I could see was pretty standard. Surprisingly standard. A picture of her adult son, McGregor. A tourist pic from India. Nothing really attention-grabbing. She didn't really seem to be stirring the pot-- at least not publicly. So I followed a link she had to ZAPD's official website. I apply the word 'website' very generously here, as I was redirected to a black blog page with multicolored text and interspersed photos with crudely-animated globes spinning at the top. I read the mission statement. Read about some upcoming gatherings (most of which had already passed). Saw their summary of the case in favor of commuting Daniel Owen's sentence. And then I stumbled upon a picture that was posted December 18, mere hours before Marie-Joelle was killed. I'll have my buddy back home, Dylan read you the caption. Take it away, Dylan.

Dylan: McGregor and I met this afternoon with one of the prime enemies of our cause. The man standing here grinning with my son has leveraged his community influence, wealth, and political

power to ensure Daniel Owens is executed in a hateful campaign to purge the so-called filth from his precious county. We met evil today and posed for a picture with him. But a reliable source has shared some information with us that might bring us to a stalemate. Let's see how the county responds when they find out this man is wrapped up in a scandal of the ages, with photographic evidence. Death will only sow further deaths.

Death will only sow further deaths? The photo in question shows McGregor standing in the parking lot of the Briley County Palladium, grinning, with one arm draped around Cletus Birdie.

(ominous music)

It checks out. Cletus reported that he was delayed arriving at Frank Dimley's Christmas party because he had been stopped by a fan for chat and a photograph in the parking lot of the Palladium. Turns out that fan wasn't such a fan. And it turns out Annaleigh and McGregor were in Briley County in the afternoon on the day of the murder. What was the scandal she mentioned? Who was this inside source? And if these two were in Briley on the 18th, do they have any connection to the murder? Or could someone else have information on this scandal?

I didn't have much time to dwell on what I had uncovered. Because I got a phone call from an unsaved number.

Frank: Is this Jared? Listen up, you little punk. I don't know what you're doing listening to confidential phone calls for my lawyer but I need you to forget what you heard. Actually, you know what. Screw it. It's all on record now anyways. Listen. And put this in your little show. Cause this is the truth, so help me God. The reports are all phony. Because, see, Cletus and Edna-Mae have a little arrangement. Arrangement for a little lovin' on the side. Cletus and I have been engaging in intercourse in the backseat of his little sports car for about 4 years now. Started just after Marie-Joelle was born. Betcha didn't see that one coming.

Is this the information you aren't supposed to know? Why Cletus would want you dead?

Frank: Course he doesn't want me telling everyone he's in the middle of a gay affair. Married man? Minister? It'd be all too convenient for him if I went away. But that's not all I know. See, there was a caterer there that night. Woman I'd hired for the party. Carol something. Alliterative name. There were a bunch of local options but she actually sought me out, said she'd heard of my parties. Cletus and I were just about to sneak off when she tapped him on the shoulder. Had a photo she wanted to show him. Said it was something he'd wanna see. So they stepped out on the porch to chat. I have no clue what the photo was, but I heard him getting really rough with her. Saw him place a hand on her. He was looking violent. Like he was desperate. It turned me on. The caterer ran off and he and I rage-humped in the back of his car. That's where my bodily fluids came from. That's why my DNA's in that car. But I didn't drive that car anywhere. And I didn't go near that little girl.

So this is what you know? Why you think Cletus is going to advocate to have you killed?

Frank: That's not all. It's not just him. See, Cletus is not really Marie-Joelle's father. I found out but I wasn't supposed to know. It's Dawkins. The Sheriff. He was there already when she was killed. He left the party and followed Edna-Mae home. That was part of it. The arrangement they

had. I think that's what the caterer knew. Please--- are you listening? Hello--- (the phone cuts out)

(simultaneously with above)
(alarm sound)

Oh thank goodness. I keep almost forgetting to do this thing.
This recording is brought to you by Glasgow's Vegan Chili. Mmmmm. Meaty! But that's not meat. Trick your husband, it's beans! From our family's kitchen table to your's, it's Glasgow's Vegan Chili.

Slowly but surely, I'm beginning to get a more complete picture here. If I could only touch base with any of the caterers from that evening's Christmas party, I could see if any of them could potentially have knowledge of Cletus' secret life to confirm Frank's claims that they were involved in an affair.

The theme of the party was "Mumbai under the Mistletoe: Merry Christmas from India". So I started where any avid crime buff might begin, by locating and calling all the Indian restaurants whose websites listed catering options within a 20 mile radius of Briley County. There were four. Maybe it wasn't a perfect plan, but I didn't know who to contact to ask who had catered the party, so it was at least a place to start.

Delhi Palace, Bombay Indian Grill, Taste of India, and Muhabarata's Cafe.

The first three places all answered and casually responded to my questions about catering and if they recognized the name Frank Dimley. Two of them hung up when they realized I wasn't placing an order and the third asked me to call back when it wasn't the lunch rush.

By the time I was dialing Muhabarata's Cafe, I was dreading what might very well be another dead-end (no pun intended) in this case. I got an answering machine. Here was the message.

Man's voice: Hello. Thank you for calling Muhabarata's Cafe. We will be closing the business for a brief recess as my mother and I journey back to India for a few months. In May, we look forward to reopening and continuing to serve Southern West Illihome authentic Indian cuisine through deliveries and high-end catering. In the meantime, feel free to check our website for our complete menu options, or email my mother at MrsCarolCogger@mc.org for any questions regarding our services. Thanks, and we look forward to doing business with you.

Nothing. So another pathway seems closed to us. Who was the caterer Frank talked about? What did she know? What was she willing to do with that knowledge? What was Cletus Birdie willing to do to protect his reputation? With Frank limited in his time talking with me, a resistance from the county's police department, and little to no viable interactions with the residents, I packed up my stuff in my Jeep--- air fryer and all--- and headed back home to Connecticut. Winter break was almost over and besides, I had a podcast to edit.

What did I learn overall? What did I gain from this experience? I think my big takeaway was the fact that, maybe not every mystery is worthy of a podcast. Even with my expertise and recording equipment, the people of Briley County surprised me. They were ready to deal with this case without any fancy bells and whistles. Perhaps we could all take a little lesson from the simple

folk of this county and their secretive ways. Maybe we college-educated folk sometimes forget to see the forest for the trees. Maybe we city folk could afford to spend a little more time just existing, getting away from the hustle and bustle and sauntering down a road chewing on a wad of straw or whatever. Maybe some of life's greatest mysteries will solve themselves if we just take life day by day as it comes to us. Much to think about.

Epilogue:

After posting my first podcast episode, I got a huge outpouring of support from the folks at the First Evangelical Church of Briley County. They really appreciated my assistance in securing justice for Marie-Joelle by making sure her story was told. Over the past few months, as the podcast grew in popularity, I've been floored with the public's outpouring of support for the people of Briley County through me. I wanted to share a little of what has happened in the county since.

The Briley County Buskers' musical was a huge success. The production's original run sold out immediately and they were able to market a soundtrack and DVD release which I will make available through links on our Instagram page. According to the FECBC website, they are planning to stage the production annually for the next 6 years— one time for each year of Marie-Joelle's life.

Frank Dimley was found guilty on one count of first degree murder. Turns out, there was enough concrete evidence to convict him but only some hearsay with which he could defend himself. He was sentenced to death, but the good news for Briley County doesn't stop there.

Remember the little boy Veanne Crustacean was trying to grant a wish for? The one who wanted to ask what it was like to kill someone? The state of West Illihoma made a special concession to let his wish come true not once, but twice. What could be better than a seance with John Wayne Gacy's ghost? Perhaps flipping the switch for the chair on two of the most notorious criminals in West Illihoman history. On April 30, 2019 (a record turnaround for a criminal trial with death penalty on the line), little Brashlyn was able to help the state electrocute Daniel Owens and Frank Dimley. The event was highly televised, and that little hero's work was celebrated by the whole country. The story was made even more bittersweet when we got word that little Brashlyn went home to Jesus just 4 days later.

Brashlyn: *(reading slowly and uneasily)* I've always wanted to know what it would be like to take another human's life. Especially the life of a bad guy. I am so thankful to the Wish-Granters-Foundation for helping my wish come true. I hope that anyone who might hurt people sees this on TV and thinks about how they can be better. If I am going to die, but I have done nothing wrong, why shouldn't bad people also die?

(soprano voice singing)

Requiem aeternam (Eternal rest)

Et inflammatus Daniel Owens (and enflame Daniel Owens)

Et in terra pax hominibus (and on earth peace/good will toward men)

Et salvi redemptor orphanage (Redeemer, salvation for orphanage)

Er resurrexit puppy dog (And the puppy dog lives again)

Alleluia

That was a clip from the nationally-televised event. It was broadcast on repeat for 24 hours on the Briley County's Evangelical Network in honor of Marie-Joelle. It would be difficult to think of a tribute that could make a little girl happier than seeing her mommy and daddy brought the justice they deserve.

Curiously enough, there was a noted lack of ZAPD representation at the event. Normally, it seems like the group would jump at the opportunity for such national attention. Other human rights groups were there, but ZAPD remained silent. That was my first clue that something might be off.

When May rolled around, I decided to call back to Muhabarata's Cafe. I don't know what I was looking to ask or looking to find, but I just felt like there was something I still wanted to know. Questions that still needed answers even beyond the justice of this murder. This was the last open lead I had, so I had high hopes for the phone call.

Automated voice: I'm sorry. The number you are trying to reach is no longer in service. Please dial a new number and try again. (beep)

I was confused. If this mother and son were supposed to return to open their restaurant in May, why would they change their number? Checking online, I found absolutely no trace of an Indian catering company called Muhabarata's Cafe. Before, it had come up with a few anonymous reviews and a Facebook page with minimal information. Now there was nothing. I listened to the message again.

Man's voice: Hello. Thank you for calling Muhabarata's Cafe. We will be closing the business for a brief recess as my mother and I journey back to India for a few months. In May, we look forward to reopening and continuing to serve Southern West Illihome authentic Indian cuisine through deliveries and high-end catering. In the meantime, feel free to check our website for our complete menu options, or email my mother at MrsCarolCogger@mc.org for any questions regarding our services. Thanks, and we look forward to doing business with you.

I emailed Mrs. Carol Cogger. No response. The name Carol Cogger brought up no Facebook results. No Google results. Nothing about her anywhere. Perhaps it was the avid crime buff in me, but my nose started itching around that email address. mc.org as a domain could stand for Muhabarata's Cafe, but it could also conveniently stand for any number of things if you needed to quickly establish a front for a business that could get you close to Cletus Birdie.

I even punched Carol Cogger into an anagram site just to see. Racer Clog Go. Cola Rec Grog. Nothing helpful. Have you ever stared at a word for so long that it stops being a word and starts being a jumble of letters? I kept that email address, MrsCarolCogger@mc.org written on a sticky note at my desk for months. Maybe this had nothing to do with the murder at all. But one night as I lay in bed something hit me. MC. McGregor Carlos.

Mrs. Carol Cogger is a perfect anagram of McGregor Carlos. But if that is the answer, why would he leave something behind like that? No. A coincidence. I have no doubt in my mind that justice has been served in this case and Frank Dimley has paid the ultimate price for murdering his young client.

But let's just say that this were a mystery novel or a fictional crime podcast— false crime, if you will. Could Annaleigh Carlos and her adult son McGregor have gotten away with murder?

October. The billboards go up for Frank Dimley's annual Christmas party. Mumbai under the Mistletoe. Anyone keeping a close eye on Cletus Birdie's actions would know he will be in attendance. And Annaleigh and McGregor were certainly keeping a close eye on Cletus Birdie. Whenever they could, that is. If only they could get past that pesky gate.

Create the bare bones of an Indian catering company and offer your services to Frank Dimley.

December. Arrive in Briley County. Closely follow Cletus Birdie's every move. Where does he go? What does he do? Who does he visit? Tail him and get some salacious photos of unfavorable behavior to smear him to the public.

You've kept a low profile for weeks and gotten the goods. Hoping to get more, you get cocky. Bam! Cletus sees you following him in a parking lot. Ask for a picture. Claim to be fans. Post said picture online so your followers are prepared for the attack of his character.

Cater Frank Dimley's Christmas party. You'll be fine. You've been to India. When the time is right, take Cletus Birdie aside and show him the pictures. Tell him to use his power to pressure the county into commuting Daniel Owen's sentence or you'll leak to the press proof that he is in the midst of an extended gay affair while his wife sleeps with the county sheriff.

But wait. Here's where things get tricky. You expect Cletus to bow out to your demands. Not threaten you. He gets violent. Says that he will have you killed if you ruin him. You panic but never take your eyes off him. He makes love in the back of his car and, in his haste not to be seen, leaves the keys in the ignition. 8 o'clock. Edna-Mae and Marie-Joelle leave the party. Sheriff Dawkins follows quietly behind.

You text McGregor that you are going to the Birdie's house. In his car, you will be able to get past the gate. You drive behind the Sheriff.

Once you are sure Edna-Mae and Sheriff Dawkins are inside and occupied, you drive down the forbidden driveway. You have never been this close to the house before. Where do you begin? You go around the back. Do you have a plan? No. But you are still reeling from the fact that this month of work has not convinced Cletus Birdie to change his stance on Daniel Owens' sentence. You need more leverage than the pictures give you.

You smash through the first window you see. Darkness. What can you find of value to take? An heirloom? Money? A painting? Nothing of value in sight, except— a daughter. Kidnapping? Is this what you've sunken to? No time to think. Grab her and run.

A gun shot. Sheriff Dawkins' has accidentally let his pants slip down and the gun holstered to his belt has fired. You do not know this. You panic again. Grab the chord from the blinds. They cannot shoot you if they think you will kill the child. But now she is waking up. You see in her eyes. She is about to scream. Do not let her. Do the unthinkable instead. Her mother calls her name. Take a child's life to save your own. But also, to save Daniel Owens. Who will save him if you are in prison for attempting to kidnap?

Back to the car. Drive as fast as you can. Text McGregor. Abort. Get to the Birdie's house now. He runs into Cletus Birdie, looking desperately for a ride home. He lies about his name using the first name he can think of, Cletus. Drops Birdie at home and meets you in the woods. Leave the car by the side of the road. Leave a quick cover for your closed Indian catering company. Flee the country the next day.

(finale ballad from Light 'im Up)

It just might have worked. All the clues add up. But even the most avid of crime buffs must believe in coincidences and trust that our system will always dish justice appropriately. With true crime, there must come true punishment and I, for one, believe that Frank Dimley's death, in Zoroastrian terms, set the universe at peace again.