





MENHAZ ZAMAN was the perfect child: obedient, respectful and studious.

Then, one night last summer, he confessed to slaughtering his entire family with a crowbar

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## A Family Massacre

BY  
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LIKE SO MANY NEW Canadians, Moniruz Zaman, a serious young man from Bangladesh, immigrated to this country seeking a better life for himself and his future children. It was the late 1980s, and his parents arranged his marriage to Momotaz Begum, a Bangladeshi woman, who followed him to Canada. Together they had two kids: their son, Menhaz, was born in 1996, and two years later they had a daughter they named Malesa, a Bengali twist on Melissa. Their ethos was simple: a good education would lead to a good job, and a good job would lead to a good life.

Momotaz was a nurturer. A diminutive woman, she had long dark eyebrows and a quick, generous smile. When she and her friends went out for meals, she often picked up the cheque. She offered rides to friends who needed them, driving them to the doctor or the Gerrard Street Little India strip. Once, a neighbour told her that her food reminded him of his mother's back home. After that, she'd regularly spend hours preparing curries for him, then carry them down the street to his house. She was a stylish woman who wore magenta or lime salwar kameezes on special occasions, with gold earrings chiming around her shoulders. Her husband, by contrast, was an introvert—humble, industrious and deeply devoted to his Muslim faith. He liked to wear traditional panjabis, and when Momotaz went out shopping with her girlfriends, she would buy him armloads in shades of orange and yellow and bring them home to him.

Moniruz worked as a taxi driver for Beck, where several times he was recognized as one of the company's outstanding drivers of the month. He earned enough money to buy a house in Scarborough on McCowan Road and a couple of income properties: a condo in Scarborough and another home on the Danforth, which the family rented out. Momotaz managed the rental properties. Her mother, Firoza, soon emigrated from Bangladesh too, caring for the children while their parents worked long hours.

Momotaz's outgoing nature helped the couple integrate comfortably into Scarborough's growing Bangladeshi expat community. There was a world of high expectations, and the Zamans worked hard to cultivate a reputation for deeply rooted family values and a tireless work ethic. Weekends were spent with friends and family, at picnics or movies or shopping the bazaars. The Zamans set clear goals for their children, and Momotaz regaled her friends with stories about their successes.

"In our community, you have to be a doctor or an engineer," says Arif Sohel, a close family friend. Moniruz wanted Menhaz to be an engineer, and Malesa dreamed of being a neurosurgeon. By 2006, the family had purchased a large four-bedroom home with a turret on Castlemore Avenue in Markham and rented out the basement suite to tenants.

Menhaz was a dutiful kid, with a boyish, bespectacled face. He was his parents' favourite, and his mother doted on him. According to friends, he was almost always at home: his mother picked him up every day for lunch, and she would often leave social gatherings early if she knew he was home and thought he might be hungry. When he wasn't bringing his mother's groceries in from the car or shovelling the driveway or going to mosque on Fridays with his father, he was tucked away in his bedroom on his laptop.

Around strangers, Menhaz was desperately shy; when he spoke it was softly, stuttering, eyes cast toward his shoes. At school, he kept to himself. He was a decent student, enrolled in the physics, chemistry and math classes that would get him into an engineering program, like his father wanted. "It wasn't clear

if he liked school," said one classmate who worked on an assignment with him in Grade 11 physics. "But he always came to class, and he always paid attention." He didn't initiate conversations or raise his hand. He didn't date or go to parties. He kept his inner life hidden away, not a flicker of sadness or anger detectable in his steadfast life. "He was just an average Markham kid," one of his high school friends told me. "He did well in school, went home and played video games. I know hundreds of kids in Markham who are just like that." When Menhaz was accepted to York University's mechanical engineering program, his parents were thrilled. "He always seemed like the family's golden child," one neighbour said.

Malesa, on the other hand, was a rebel, reckoning with the conflict between her family's traditional values and the everyday business of being a teenager. In high school, while carrying a 92 per cent average, she got suspended for flipping off a teacher in class. She smoked weed and drank Grey Goose with her friends, and dated secretly. And yet despite her defiance, Malesa was devoted to her family and to Islam. By Grade 10, she'd memorized most of the Quran. "Allah is so forgiving, he knows everything and yet he looks past everything," she wrote on her Ask.fm social media page.

Malesa was also exploring her sexuality, causing tension at home with her mother. Once, when Malesa was 15, Momotaz threatened to cancel her birthday party because she didn't approve of the dress her daughter wanted to wear. "I don't care, the party is more for you anyway," Malesa told her mother, who called her selfish and ungrateful. Her father was even harder on her. Moniruz would hit Malesa if she came home too late, and their altercations occasionally grew so vicious that neighbours would call the police. Some nights, when she broke curfew, he'd lock her out of the house; her mother would leave the basement suite's back door unlocked, with a pile of blankets and a pillow, so Malesa would have somewhere safe to sleep. Occasionally, when Malesa and Momotaz fought, Menhaz would intervene, trying to get his mother to back off. When his father was home, though, he'd slip on his headphones to drown out the yelling and escape into his online worlds, playing video games for hours in his room.

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MENHAZ HAD DISCOVERED Perfect World, a 3-D multiplayer role-playing game. Its players are fiendishly committed, and Menhaz made friends on Perfect World Void, a private gaming server where users from Israel, Belgium and Tunisia gathered to play, banter and trade jokes. Menhaz was grateful, he told a fellow player once, that he had made friends on the forum he could talk to.

*Menhaz Zaman lied to his family about attending university before allegedly killing them last summer. The victims were his father, Moniruz; his sister, Malesa; his mother, Momotaz; and his grandmother Firoza*



than the one he had with his parents. He was spending so much time on Perfect World that some friends say he'd be playing when they logged off to go to sleep at night and still there when they logged back on the next morning.

During his first year at York, he started missing classes. He told his parents he had a full scholarship and that he earned excellent grades, when really he was failing his courses and signing up to repeat them in the second semester. Eventually, he dropped out of school entirely.

Instead of telling his parents the truth and confronting their disappointment, Menhaz constructed an elaborate deception. Every morning for months, he slipped his laptop into his backpack, left his parents' home and walked down Castlemore to the bus stop on 16th Avenue. Crowds of York students from the neighbourhood waited there every day, many of them his former high school classmates. He'd climb onto the 7 a.m. GO bus, arrive on campus, then wander the school grounds for hours. In the afternoons, he'd work out at a gym near his house before heading home.

At home, he went through the motions, performing his new routine as smoothly as he had the old one. If his parents ever suspected something was amiss, they never let on. As the months passed, Menhaz still left the house at the same time every day, but stopped taking the bus all the way to York. Instead, he'd get off at Markham's Markville mall. Every Monday to Thursday, he walked around the mall, eventually finding a seat in the food court or on a bench. He'd open up his laptop and log on to the Void.

The Zamans' home life continued to deteriorate. In 2017, Moniruz was arrested for shoplifting from a Canadian Tire in Markham; the charges were dropped in exchange for community service. Malesa temporarily moved out of the house to live with a boyfriend, much to her parents' dismay. And Menhaz was growing ever more withdrawn, though he was still the pride of his family. The weight of their expectations fell firmly on his shoulders. To her friends, Momotaz always talked about how well her son was doing. Menhaz was excelling in his mechanical engineering program at York, she told them, and still going to mosque with his father.

Unbeknownst to his family, Menhaz was adrift. He was growing disillusioned with Islam and identifying himself online as an atheist. He'd started dating a girl, he confided to friends online, and privately he yearned for a more independent life

In his online world, Menhaz wasn't a failure. His character in Perfect World was an elf cleric, responsible for healing others, and he was known to be a decent player. In the forums, he was just an avatar in angel wings, free to cast his opinions into the abyss. He attributed his social difficulties to autism—a diagnosis most friends doubt he ever had—and called himself the most famous "autist" in the game. Once, Menhaz logged on to Discord, an app gamers use to chat, and struck up a conversation with a friend. Menhaz talked about leaving the game. When his friend asked where he'd go instead, he replied, "Perfect world jail. Gonna kill my parents and go to jail yo." His friend shrugged it off. On the forums, people were always making dark jokes. And Menhaz was an especially gleeful troll, freely slinging homophobic slurs and disparaging religion in general and Islam in particular. "Their values don't reflect modern-day morality whatsoever,"

*Menhaz Zaman was obsessed with the video game Perfect World, in which his avatar, shown below, was an elf cleric. He confessed to the murder of his family in real time online*



he wrote. A few months later, he was suspended from Discord for a couple of weeks for making offensive comments.

Menhaz knew he'd never be able to tell his parents he'd dropped out of school. They'd never forgive him. He'd need to find another way to get out of his mess. Soon, he was fantasizing about killing his parents. He spent three years planning how to do it.

**T** IN THE SUMMER OF 2019, the mood at the Castlemore house seemed jubilant: Menhaz was expected to graduate from university, and Momotaz and Moniruz were celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary. There would be two anniversary parties. The first was on June 28, with 40 friends gathered in the Zamans' backyard, where yawning pink lilies and bright clusters of geraniums cascaded from their pots. Under a white canopy tent, Menhaz hung back in a corner with his younger cousin and a family friend. His cousin would be starting at York University in the fall. "We'll be there at the same time," Menhaz told him. "I'm going back in September to do my master's." By then, he hadn't been to class in three years. "Congratulations, man," his friend said. Menhaz looked down at his feet with a soft smile, the line between fantasy and reality growing increasingly porous.

The second party, the next day, seemed more like a wedding than an anniversary. It was held at the Markham Convention Centre, with 100 guests, a lavish meal, rainbows of saris and flowers, and a performance by a Bangladeshi singer. Moniruz wore an embroidered kurta the colour of sunshine; Momotaz held a red rose. Menhaz stood up and gave a speech, telling revellers how lucky he was to have parents as kind and generous as his were, and everyone clapped. Friends joked that Momotaz looked as much the blushing bride as she had 25 years earlier.

Publicly, the family seemed perfect. Privately, Menhaz was more isolated than ever. He ate alone in his room while his family and their friends gathered in the kitchen downstairs. "What's wrong with him?" one friend asked. His grandmother Firoza just shook her head. Menhaz changed his online handle in Perfect World to "sub-human" and "don't deserve life." He spoke to his friends online about killing himself, always framing his comments as jokes. His fellow gamers were never sure whether or not to take him seriously.

Menhaz had told his parents he was going to graduate with a mechanical engineering degree on July 28. For weeks, they had been anticipating the ceremony, telling their friends how proud and happy they would be to watch their son cross the stage, diploma in hand. On July 27, the day before his supposed graduation, he woke up with a searing pain in his stomach. His insides ached as he tried to eat. They ached as his father left for an afternoon and evening shift in the cab, and they ached as Malesa, by then studying science at York, left to work at her part-time job, as a cashier at the nearby Food Basics.

Police have declined to comment on the case, and Menhaz

refused interview requests through his lawyer, but a family friend who later visited the house was able to piece together what seems to have taken place. Momotaz's mother, Firoza, who had her own apartment in Toronto, was visiting the family that weekend. The two of them fell asleep together in the master bedroom. At some point, Menhaz walked into his parents' room, a crowbar in his hand. He allegedly looked down at his mother, raised the crowbar over his head and brought it down on hers. Then, the source says, he turned to his grandmother and attacked her. When he believed they were both dead, he left them lying side by side on the pink carpet, then returned to his laptop.

"I killed mom and granny so far, waiting for sister in 5 minutes and dad in 1 hour," he typed into a chat window on Discord. A few minutes later, Malesa walked through the front door, and Menhaz allegedly struck her over the head with the crowbar, leaving her to bleed out on the floor. She was still wearing her nametag, pinned to her kelly-green grocery store polo shirt.

Once more, Menhaz returned to his laptop, chatting with friends on Discord. Around midnight, he saw the headlights of his father's taxi swing into the driveway and heard the garage groan open. He stepped away from his computer and confronted his father in the garage, allegedly bludgeoning him with the same crowbar he'd used to attack his other family members. At some point, it is believed he slit all four of his family members' throats with a kitchen knife, possibly to ensure they were dead.

Then he returned to his computer. "I've just slaughtered my entire family," he wrote to his friends. At first, they thought he was joking. His posts seemed familiar, gallows humour from a well-known forum troll. It was only when he started sending them photos of the bodies that they realized he was serious.

**T** IF CONVICTED, MENHAZ ZAMAN will fall into a specific subset of mass murderers known as family annihilators. Most often, family annihilators are white men in their late 20s or early 30s.

Sometimes they're husbands and fathers who want to escape the shackles of domestic life; other times they're coping with financial hardship and convince themselves their families are better off dead than ruined. Parricide, the murder of a parent, is far more often committed by a son, and it usually happens at home.

The sociologist Neil Websdale, director of the Family Violence Institute at Northern Arizona University and an expert on family annihilators, divides these kinds of criminals into two camps. In the first, killers are motivated by revenge; in the other, they're spurred by a deluded form of altruism, a twisted sense that to kill one's family is to save them from some unthinkable grief. "Often, they're squeaky clean, repressed, and there's a lot of family pressure," Websdale says. "The shame of not doing what one is supposed to do leads to an explosion of violence. There's an element of misguided care."

The night of the Zaman family murders, Menhaz's online friends tried to keep him talking, terrified he planned to hurt more people. They asked him why he did it, why he didn't confide in anyone, why he felt like murder was the only way out. "It's been my plan for 3 years. Literally told my parents my uni graduation was July 28th. I couldn't have delayed it any longer," he wrote in response. "I did this because I don't want my parents to feel the shame of having a son like me." He continued: "I'm a pathetic coward and a subhuman. Since I'm an atheist, I believe there's no afterlife. So I was scared to die. And I wanted them to die so that they didn't suffer knowing how much of a pathetic subhuman I was. It's all very selfish. I'm just pathetic."

One gamer, who lives in Tunisia, was sure the pictures were a sick prank, and scoured gore sites looking for any indication that they were duplicates. But when he saw a selfie showing Menhaz holding a bloody knife, he called Crime Stoppers International. By that point, Menhaz was offering to send his friends money by PayPal to thank them for being there for him. "I won't need it where I'm going," he typed, explaining that he intended to turn himself in. When one player asked him for his address in a private chat, he typed back: "Not yet."

The gamers panicked. They had no idea where he lived; all they knew was that he was Canadian. They created a separate Discord chat group devoted to tracking down his IP address and alerting the police. "What will you do with the rest of your time now?" another friend asked. "Eat junk food, visit my ex-girlfriend, drink, smoke," Menhaz replied. "I've never drank alcohol. Or a cigarette." A Toronto gamer named Bianca eventually connected Menhaz's PayPal account to his home address. She phoned it in to York Regional Police in the early hours of the morning. Nearly 12 hours later, at around 3 p.m., police officers knocked on the front door to do a wellness check on the family. "The police are here. Goodbye,"

Menhaz wrote to his friends on Discord before signing off one last time.

That night, news outlets broke the story that four people had been found dead in a house on Castlemore Avenue. As pictures of the house flashed across television screens, the Zamans' extended network of family and friends tried frantically to call Moniruz and Momotaz. Their cellphones just kept ringing. Family and friends drove in from Niagara-on-the-Lake, Mississauga and Pickering, gathering on the pavement outside as police taped off the property and searched for evidence. Menhaz has been charged with four counts of first-degree murder and is being held in police custody. None of the allegations against him has been proven in court, and he has yet to enter a plea.

The murders sent a current of fear through the Zamans' community about the clash between traditional expectations and the

realities of growing up Generation Z in North America. Many of the family's friends had thought of Menhaz as an ideal child. "I used to go home to my wife and say, 'Why can't our kids be more like theirs?'" one family friend told me. "They were so polite." A couple of weeks later, their friends came together in Taylor Creek Park for a picnic, the way they had so often with Moniruz and Momotaz before, to mourn the family. They gathered together to pray. The parents were scared. Was Menhaz clinically depressed? For how long? Could anything have been done to prevent his crimes? Where, as parents, were they failing? Were they overlooking signs of distress in their own children? No one knew.

Two months after the murders, 30 of the Zamans' friends and neighbours attended a seminar held by the Vision Infinite Foundation. The organization is meant to help the Bangladeshi-Canadian community with health- and career-related issues; it's run by Shahid Khandker, who lives around the corner from the Zamans' former home. "We

always think the family ties are closer in families that come from that part of the world," Khandker says. Prompted by the killings, the seminar was designed to address the communication gap between kids and parents, with a psychiatrist and psychologist on hand to answer questions. The conversation returned again and again to the same unanswerable question: how well, the parents wondered, can you really know your own child? How well can you really know anyone?

Since the murders, Khandker has been looking back on how he raised his own son, Nafis, who'd grown up playing pickup basketball with Menhaz in the park down the street. Both boys were soft-spoken; each had studied engineering. Were there things his own son felt he couldn't say?

Every night, Khandker leaves Vision's office, driving home to his wife and son. He walks up the steps to his front porch and pauses. In the distance, he can see the Zamans' home on Castlemore, where Momotaz's carefully tended flowers once thrived on the balcony. They're still there, now wizened and brown, the best of intentions gone dry. ■

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