



Laci: Inside the Laci Peterson Murder (St. Martin's True Crime Library)

By Michael Fleeman

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Scott Peterson's behavior had cast a mysterious shadow over the death of his pregnant wife: his alibi on the day of the disappearance was questionable; he admitted to an affair with another woman; and when he was finally charged with capital murder, he had altered his appearance. Almost immediately, the media condemned Scott, even though he maintains his innocence. Is Scott Peterson a victim of circumstantial evidence? Despite the state attorney general's claim of a "slam dunk", the case that has gripped the nation is much more complex, and is yielding even more questions, doubts, accusations, and shocking revelations.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Michael Fleeman is an associate bureau chief for *People* magazine in Los Angeles and a former reporter for The Associated Press. His books include the true crime stories *The Stranger in My Bed* and *Love You Madly*. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife and two children.

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CHAPTER 1

“Hi, Mom.”

It was Scott Peterson on the line.

Sharon Rocha was preparing Christmas Eve dinner for the family when her son-in-law called.

There was concern in his voice.

“Is Laci there?”

“No,” Sharon said.

She hadn’t spoken to her daughter since the night before.

“Well,” said Scott, “she’s missing.”

The wording was peculiar.

Laci was missing. Not gone. Not out.

Then a horrible feeling overcame her.

Sharon Rocha knew immediately that something was terribly wrong.

Scott called at least two more times on the evening of Tuesday, December 24, 2002, when a cold fog descended on Modesto.

The next time he phoned, he told his mother-in-law that he had called everybody he could think of and nobody knew where Laci was.

The third time Scott called his in-laws’ house, about 6:30 p.m., his mother-in-law told her husband, Ron Grantski, to phone the police.

When the officers arrived, it took very little to convince them of the urgency of the situation. Scott hadn’t seen Laci since that morning. When he got home in the late afternoon, her car was there, her purse was there, her cellular phone was there. But not Laci.

There was no note, no message on the answering machine, no word left with any family or friends. This wasn’t like her. She was outgoing and bubbly, but not impetuous or irresponsible. She was the Mini-Martha Stewart to her friends, the gracious but strict hostess who served dinner at eight, and don’t be late—and be sure to dress accordingly. She wrote notes for holidays and special occasions. Surely, she would have left a note if she were to leave before such an important evening.

She was the model of manners and comportment, of doing things right, of expecting the same of others.

She was also eight months pregnant—with their first child, a boy, whom they planned to name Conner.

Scott rounded up the neighbors. In the misty darkness, with temperatures dipping toward the 40s, they searched throughout his La Loma neighborhood. Scott looked distraught, scared.

Teary-eyed, he ran down Coven Avenue, past the END sign where the street dead-ended into a well-trod footpath. He went through the open gate and headed down the steep path into East La Loma Park.

She must be in the park. She had been getting ready to walk the dog.

Scott searched. The neighbors searched.

The police officers went into the park, probing the darkness with their Maglites, looking behind the bushes and rocks, walking up and down the banks of Dry Creek, searching under the footbridge. In the foggy skies,

a helicopter from the Stanislaus County Sheriff's Department strafed the grounds with its powerful searchlight.

The officers roamed the streets of the La Loma neighborhood, just northeast of downtown Modesto, looking for any traces of the pregnant woman, interviewing anybody they could find, to see if they'd seen or heard anything.

They found a neighbor, Karen Servas, who hadn't seen Laci that day, but had seen her dog. At about 10:30 that morning, Servas was pulling out of her driveway onto Covenia when she saw a golden retriever she recognized as McKenzie, scampering down the street, trailing a muddy leash.

She led the dog to its home at 523 Covenia, where the gate to the back yard was open. That must have been how the dog got out, Servas thought. She put the dog in the yard and closed the gate and thought nothing of it until the police showed up later that evening and asked her if she had seen anything unusual that day.

By midnight, a small group of friends gathered in front of the green house and wondered and worried: Where could she be?

The next morning, Christmas Day, Scott called his parents down in San Diego. They had always been fond of Laci. She had sent his mother a heartfelt note on the first Mother's Day after they were married and signed it with her name and a happy face. His mother knew it was her son calling because she recognized his voice. But she couldn't understand him. He was crying, blubbering, incomprehensible, save for a single word. "Laci."

The little green house at 523 Covenia sat a block and a half from where the tree-lined street hit a fence of gray weathered wood. The house had wood siding, a red brick chimney, a wide driveway and wood gate that opened to a newly installed swimming pool and patio, where there was an outdoor chess set with marble pieces shaped like frogs. There were young palm trees growing next to the front window, the curtains uncharacteristically closed—Laci had liked the morning light—and a garden of camellias, azaleas and geraniums tended by a careful and trained hand.

At the street's end, the fence had a gap where a heavy gate must have once swung. It was now only two thick posts, one blackened by fire. It opened to a footpath, the dirt worn down to a U-shaped trough a foot deep, leading down a steep embankment bordered by chain-link fencing topped by razor wire. The path leveled to a field of brush with green park benches and saplings braced by posts in fields of tall green grass. The field was intersected by an asphalt bike trail lined by tall street lamps. The trail wound through groves of mature oak trees. Across the bike trail and over the field, a wooden footbridge—the floor made of planks that would make a thump-thump-thump sound as the bicyclists rode over them by day—spanned a gorge cut by Dry Creek, which wasn't dry at all, but a slowly moving stream twenty feet wide in spots, waist-deep, flowing past reeds, trees, rocks and dead branches.

It was here, in East La Loma Park, on this cold dark foggy night—Christmas Eve—that Scott Peterson, his neighbors and police searched.

He had come home, he would tell police, to an empty house and a missing wife. Her Land Rover was parked in the driveway. Her purse and phone were inside. He had last seen her at 9:30 that morning. She was working in the newly remodeled, Spanish-tiled kitchen, her sanctuary, with the TV on, the channel turned to one of her favorite shows, Martha Stewart Living.

She was wearing a white blouse, oversized to accommodate her pregnant belly, and dark pants. She was getting ready to walk the dog, he said, probably on the usual route, down Covenia Avenue. The morning was cold and dreary, temperatures in the 50s, but feeling much colder, the fog lifting off the ponds and lakes and streams and canals and irrigated fields, shrouding the heartland of California.

Scott would tell police that he had gone outside, retrieved a couple of patio umbrellas from the back yard and put them in his new 2002 Ford F-150 pickup. Rain was in the forecast from a series of storms from the Northwest and he wanted to protect the umbrellas from the elements. He drove to a storage unit where he kept supplies from his job—he was a sales representative for California and Arizona for Tradecorp, a Madrid-based manufacturer of specialty fertilizers—and where he also kept his 14-foot Sears Gamefisher aluminum boat with the 15-horsepower outboard motor. It was a 1991 model, eleven years old—but for him

it was new. He'd bought it fifteen days before from a man with his same last name, but not related. The deal was sealed on a weekend and he had returned the following Monday with the cash when the bank had opened. Scott said he'd put the umbrellas in the storage facility and took the boat out, hitching it to the pickup, then driving out of town, out of Modesto.

Scott's destination was the San Francisco Bay, eighty miles to the northwest, and if he took the most direct route, his drive would have taken him down arrow-straight Highway 132 past vineyards, fields of fragrant alfalfa, groves of almonds, dairy farms smelling of cow manure. He would have gone past Mapes Ranch, which brags on a roadside sign to be the "Home of ton bulls" and says "Breed the best and forget the rest." He would have gone over the San Joaquin River, then onto the freeway, Interstate 580, which crosses the Delta Mendota Canal and the water lifeline to Los Angeles, the California Aqueduct, before heading over the 1,009-foot-elevation Altamont Pass, where the hills are covered in power-generating windmills that look like huge propellers mounted on towers. The highway drops into the San Francisco suburbs of Livermore and Dublin before reaching the bay cities of San Leandro, Piedmont and, finally, Berkeley. At the bottom of University Avenue, down the hill from the University of California, Berkeley, is the Berkeley Marina. There would have been little to no traffic this holiday Tuesday and the drive wouldn't have taken much more than an hour and a half.

At the north end of the marina, next to Cesar Chavez Park, and just off Spinnaker Way, is a parking lot and boat ramp. The administrative offices at the harbor were closed this Christmas Eve morning, but there was a skeleton crew on duty: two maintenance workers, a groundskeeper. A couple of them would remember seeing the Ford F-150 truck and Sears boat near the boat ramp.

He wouldn't need anybody on duty to pay the five-dollar launch fee. The fee system was automated. Five one-dollar bills placed into a yellow machine generate a business-card-sized slip of glossy paper with blue stripes down the sides informing the user: "This side up on dash." The ticket says, "Welcome to the Berkeley Marina" and provides the time and date the ticket was purchased and the time and date it expires.

The concrete ramps have floating docks on either side, and a third dock in the middle. Once in the marina, his little aluminum boat would have cruised the still waters past sailboats in their slips, then to the mouth of the harbor, where the water on this dreary morning would have been as gray as the sky and where, in all likelihood, the Golden Gate Bridge to the west, the Bay Bridge and San Francisco skyline to the south, and the Point Isabel Regional Shoreline to the north, all would have been invisible through the fog and clouds. Leaving the harbor, just off the left bow of the little aluminum boat, would have been an eerie bay landmark, the crumbling shell of the Berkeley Pier, jutting three miles into the bay.

He would later say that this trip to the bay was for the purposes of fishing for sturgeon, which he had been told were running. He had long been a fisherman—his earliest memories were of fishing in San Diego while his family played golf on a riverside course. His first date with his wife was on an ocean fishing boat. He was a golfer, too, and could well have hit the links at the Del Rio Country Club north of Modesto rather than go to the bay. But the plan was what it was, and he would say that he spent the better part of Christmas Eve day bobbing in San Francisco Bay in his aluminum boat trying his luck.

By late afternoon, he would tell police, he was back ashore, driving the truck, the boat behind him, making the return trip to Modesto. He placed calls on his cell phone, at least one to his wife, but he never reached her, and another to a friend named Greg Reed, who would remember hearing a voice that sounded "great." Scott wanted to make sure everybody was still on for a New Year's Eve gathering that he was looking forward to.

He returned home, he would later say, to the green house at 523 Coven Avenue in the late afternoon or early evening, just hours before he and his wife would go to her mother and stepfather's house nearby for Christmas Eve dinner. As he pulled up to the house, he saw his wife's car—the 1996 Land Rover—parked in the driveway. The house was empty.

There was a message from his father-in-law on the answering machine reminding them to bring whipping cream to the dinner. There was no message from Laci.

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