



For Laci: A Mother's Story of Love, Loss, and Justice

By Sharon Rocha

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A search began which lasted an agonizing four months. Sadly, Laci Peterson and her son Conner were found dead on the shores of San Francisco Bay on April 18, 2003.

Her husband, Scott, was eventually arrested and charged with the murder of Laci and Connor. After a sensational, media-saturated trial, Peterson was found guilty of capital murder and was sentenced to death on March 16, 2005.

This book deals with the story in three separate sections: first, Sharon describes the ordinary, loving life her daughter led, including fond memories of her childhood and adolescence. Second, it covers her marriage, disappearance, the community's moving search for her, and her and Connor's eventual recovery from San Francisco Bay. Third, it tells the story of the trial in detail not before revealed. Sharon will also talk about victim's rights, a subject on which she now campaigns regularly.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

SHARON ROCHA is the mother of Laci Peterson. After the murder of her daughter and unborn grandson, she has campaigned for victim's rights, and helped launch Laci and Conner's Law, which makes it a crime to harm a fetus during an attack on a pregnant woman. The law, specifically the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, was signed into law by the President in April 2004. She lives in California.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Chapter One

It was spring 2005, and I heard a sound at home that had been absent for a long time—laughter.

Two of Laci's longtime girlfriends, Stacey Boyers and Lori Ellsworth, were at my dining room table. Both were in their late twenties, the same age Laci would have been. They were dressed casually, they looked nice, and they radiated a youthful glow. I marveled at how much life they had in them. I pictured them as little girls at that table doing homework, snacking on cookies, and giggling at which boys liked which girls. Now they were reminiscing about Laci.

I gave Lori a cold beer, put a glass of Chardonnay in front of Stacey, and took one myself. Soon they were telling Laci stories that made them laugh, especially the latest one. Stacey started to describe what they'd done at the cemetery but abruptly cut herself off.

Seeming alarmed, she looked at Lori and, while trying not to laugh, asked, "Should I tell her what we said today?"

"Oh my God," Lori said. "You can't."

I looked around the table. There were four chairs and three of us. If Laci were in that fourth chair, she'd be the one most eager to hear what was making them laugh. I said exactly what Laci would've said to Stacey: "Go ahead. Tell me."

Stacey—whom I've known since she was eight—didn't require much coaxing, and neither did Lori, once they got started.

"Lori and I went to visit Laci today," Stacey said. "We were standing there, talking to her, like we always do, catching her up with all the gossip.

"Then we were quiet for a minute and I said to Lori, 'I know what's going on with her. I can hear Laci now, knocking on her neighbors' caskets, saying, Hello! Anybody in there? Who's there? I need to talk to somebody.'"

As she said this, Lori was turning red from embarrassment. She was probably thinking, Oh my gosh, how's

Sharon going to take this? Here's what I did: I laughed. I couldn't help it. It had been so long since I heard the sound of laughter at home. At one time, it had been common. Laci had a terrific sense of humor. She laughed a lot. Listening to Lori and Stacey, I was reminded of all the times the girls had sat around the table, talking and laughing.

"You know she's down there talking nonstop," Lori said, laughing. "She's down there going, Hey, excuse me! Pardon me! We haven't met. I'm Laci . . ."

"I want to tell you about my little boy," Stacey said in a Laci-like voice. "I want to tell you what I'm cooking today . . ."

Lori pretended to be Laci's neighbors.

"Who put her here?" she said in a deep voice. "Can somebody please move her! She doesn't stop talking."

They were right. That was Laci.

And I missed it. I missed her so much.

Without her, a part of me was gone forever, too.

I grew up in Escalon, a small agricultural town of about 2,000 people adjacent to Modesto in central California. I remember Escalon as a picture-postcard of rural small-town life: cattle ranches, farms, dairies, and orchards. The Sierras rose in the distance.

I was the second of four children. My father, Cliff Anderson, was a foreman on a peach and almond ranch, and my mother, Elta, was a full-time homemaker. In high school, I was an A-student, a cheerleader, and Homecoming princess. I don't know where I got the nerve to be a cheerleader. Unlike Laci, I was always shy, self-conscious, and easily intimidated.

During my freshman year, I started dating Dennis Rocha, the son of a dairyman whose Portuguese family had deep roots in Escalon. Dennis was already attending Modesto Junior College when a mutual friend introduced us at a dance in Turlock. We became serious very quickly. After I graduated from high school in 1969, Dennis and I married in a traditional ceremony at St. Patrick's Church attended by four hundred people, most of them Dennis's relatives, or so it seemed. We moved into a new three-bedroom home on the north end of his family's 365-acre ranch.

I started Modesto Junior College but left by the end of the year, feeling pressure to be a wife, not a student. My first child, Brent, arrived in 1971. As much as he became the center of my world, I sensed that I had married and left school too young. I couldn't articulate it then, but I felt I might have cheated myself from life experiences.

So much was going on in the world, so much was happening up the highway in the hippie-populated San Francisco, and I was curious about life beyond the small California town I knew way too well. I was just nineteen, a child myself, and I had barely started to live my own life. I wondered what opportunities I might be missing.

But I kept those thoughts to myself. Besides, my life wasn't terrible.

Nearly four years later, I got pregnant again, this time with Laci. I wish I could remember more about carrying her for those nine months, but I'm afraid the pregnancy was uneventful other than the time I got sick eating a bowl of banana-nut ice cream, which, in reality, I didn't even like. I also craved hot fudge sundaes and See's candy, and ate my fair share.

"No wonder I'm chubby," Laci said when she was twelve years old and I told her about the significant amounts of chocolate I'd consumed while pregnant with her. "I didn't stand a chance because of all the chocolate you ate while you carried me."

True to form, Laci arrived right on time, on her due date of May 4, 1975, and she was in a hurry. It felt as if I had just checked into Doctors Medical Center when I complained to the nurse, "I think the baby's coming."

"The doctor's not here," the nurse snapped. "That baby can't come yet."

I said, "Oh yes it can," and we went back and forth like that for what seemed to me a cruel number of hours.

In reality, I was at the hospital only two hours before I gave birth. When the doctor said I had a baby girl, I was ecstatic. Then, as I've always joked, I saw her. Laci was wrinkly, with a mess of dark hair, and my first impression was that she looked like my grandmother on my father's side, not exactly the personification of beauty. But as time passed, Laci got much cuter. She was all smiles and spunk. And no one ever thought of my grandma when they saw her.

I named Laci after a pretty girl I had met when I was in high school. I'd done the same with Brent, his namesake being one of Dennis's college buddies who I thought was very handsome.

Having felt so good through my pregnancy, I sensed Laci was going to be an easy baby, and I was right. It took just two weeks until she slept through the night, and she almost always woke up in the best mood. On most mornings, I found her sitting in her green spindle crib with a smile on her face, staring at the yellow-and-orange elephant quilt on the wall. She amused herself and smiled all the time. I hate to boast, but she was so cute. I still look at those pictures and want to squeeze her.

Just after Laci turned one, I split from Dennis—proof that I spoke from experience when I later declared to Scott that divorce is always an option, not murder! At the time we split, I thought the reasons were complicated, but I now know that I was simply facing what I felt in my gut. I'd married too young. Except for my children, nearly everything in my life was left over from high school, and it didn't feel right. I was still in my early twenties, and I craved more.

I've read that Dennis is the one who left, but I'm the one who moved out, and it wasn't easy or pleasant. I wrote him a letter, explaining my thoughts and feelings as best I could, and then we talked about it. He wasn't happy about getting a divorce, and as often happens when feelings are raw and unclear, we had a hard time for a while.

I took Brent and Laci and moved in with a friend in Escalon, then we rented a house in Modesto. Around Christmastime, Dennis and I got back together. The holidays were hard on both of us. But the reconciliation lasted only a few weeks, and this time when we split, it was permanent (though today we have a good relationship).

In early 1977, I moved to San Jose, thinking that was the change I needed, and got a job at an insurance company dealing with workmen's comp. But San Jose turned out to be too big a city for me. The nightly

news was filled with reports of crime and violence, and I thought, Who needs this when I can have the quiet, comfort, and relative safety of a small town?

Within six months, I moved back to Modesto and rented a small two- bedroom duplex. The woman next door, Susan, had a son the same age as Laci, and we became friends. I also met her sister, Roxie, who had kids the same ages as mine. I appreciated being back home and woke up mornings feeling as if the sun was shining on me again.

I got an office job in the shipping-receiving warehouse for Standard Brands, which, after mergers and acquisitions, became Nabisco and then RJR. A few months later, my cousin Gwen called me at work and said she wanted me to meet a guy.

Even though it was a Friday night in November and I didn't have plans I said no. I wasn't in the mood for any kind of romantic stuff.

"Sharon, his name is Ron Grantski, and he's a nice guy," she said.

"No, thanks," I said and hung up the phone.

She called back three or four times and persisted until she wore me down.

Still, I didn't want to go by myself, so I brought a girlfriend from work. We met Gwen and her husband, Harvey Kemple, at a local hangout. At the time, Ron worked for Harvey in construction. Initially, Ron mistook my girlfriend for me. Wishful thinking, I imagine; she was very pretty. Nevertheless, he and I hit it off that first night. We talked and laughed for hours. I told my friends that he had made me feel comfortable, which wasn't easy given my thick reserve.

But I hadn't met anyone with Ron's qualities. I liked that he was at ease with himself and very confident. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, he lived in Nebraska and Oregon before his family settled in Sacramento, California. At nineteen, he joined the Navy. After boot camp, he married his high school sweetheart and they moved to Hawaii and had a son. At the time we met, he was divorced and in Modesto working construction. He was ambitious, solid, funny, and he made me feel good about myself.

A year and a half after Gwen introduced us, Ron and I moved into a three-bedroom home with Brent, then eight, and Laci, four. Why didn't we ever marry? Well, we planned to. In 1981, we were actually in the midst of making arrangements when my father was killed in an automobile accident. It was an awful ordeal and obviously everything was canceled. Then the next time we talked about getting married, Ron's father passed away. We got the message. Since both of us wanted to keep our mothers around, we agreed the only aisle we would walk down together would be one at the grocery store.

No one objected, including our children. Their thoughts were our top priority, and they were fine with our arrangement. Our family life was typical of two parents raising two little children. It was never dull or quiet. One Christmas, when Laci was around four years old, we were driving the kids around to look at the lights. As we passed a house with an elaborate display, Laci said, "Ooooh, pretty," and Brent took exception to the way she said that. It annoyed him, he said. So what happened? For the next few years, every time we passed that house, Laci would say, "Ooooh, pretty."

Laci liked teasing her big brother. I once took them to get ice cream sundaes and Brent asked Laci for her cherry. Even though she didn't like cherries, she said no. No matter how much he pleaded, she refused. I was

almost as frustrated by her as Brent was, and so I made her eat it. And the next time Brent asked for the cherry, he got it.

Then there was the party at their grandparents' house when Brent dared Laci to take off her bathing suit. There were twenty-five to thirty people around the backyard pool. Laci, who was probably four years old, didn't hesitate. All of a sudden she was scampering around completely naked and laughing. She wasn't laughing nearly as hard as Brent, though. He was even more entertained when their grandma went over to Laci and said, "Honey, you're not supposed to be taking off your bathing suit."

It was around that same time that Laci made her debut in the kitchen. I was baking for the family and she wanted to help. She stood at the counter with all the confidence of Julia Child. I wrapped her in an apron, put a bowl in front of her, and let her cook. She put together a concoction that included milk, banana, a raw egg, and a few other things I can't recall. But I remember it was pretty gross, and when she asked me to try it, I said, "Why don't we let Ron taste it."

She took it to where Ron was watching TV in the living room. Grinning, she offered the glass to him. He took it from her appreciatively and made a nice show of being excited to try her first culinary invention; then he actually drank the whole thing down, pronouncing it delicious. I can still hear him say, "That was really good, Laci." She came back into the kitchen beaming with pride. Later the day I told Ron what had actually been in the glass and he gagged. "You let me drink that?"

Brent loved spending time with his father on his ranch, and at age nine he went to live there full-time (Dennis had remarried and had another daughter, Amy). My mom and dad also lived on a ranch, and Brent and Laci adored visiting them, too. We had big family gatherings there, and they were just like when I was a kid. Brent and Laci followed their cousins, Jeanette, Karen, Rene, and Rachel, out on the dirt road behind the house and listened to them tell stories about wolves and monsters coming out of the orchards, until finally the younger ones ran screaming to their grandma.

Users Review

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