



LEFT: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS/AP

She keeps them in a tattered manila envelope that she stashes in a drawer in her bedroom—eight letters and an Easter card, each on plain lined paper and written in neat, tight cursive, from the man she sent to death row. Since last August, Richelle Nice, one of 12 jurors in the capital murder trial of Scott Peterson, has become a pen pal to the man she convicted. She writes and tells him about her kids and inquires why he killed his wife, Laci, 27, and their unborn son. He sends her letters back, insisting that he didn't murder his family, asking if she has any tips on how to pass the time in his cell at San Quentin.

"If someone had told me back during the trial that I'd be writing Scott Peterson, I would have said, 'Are you out of your mind?'" laughs the 36-year-old Nice, as she thumbs through her pile of letters in the laundry room of the four-bedroom house she shares with her mother and four sons, who range in age from 4 to 18. "But life is weird, and that trial consumed me, even when it was over."

In his letters—obtained exclusively by PEOPLE—Peterson says that he believes the police investigation into Laci's murder was not thorough; that he appreciates visits from family and friends; and that he spends much



» "I didn't want to get too friendly with him at first," says Nice (in the kitchen of her home in East Palo Alto, Calif., with one of the letters). "I'd ask him about what his life was like in prison, about how his life could have been different."

→ LETTERS FROM SCOTT

HAUNTED BY HER SEVEN MONTHS ON THE PETERSON JURY, RICHELLE NICE REACHED OUT TO THE CONVICTED KILLER. THE STORY OF A MOST UNUSUAL
» BY JOHNNY DODD CORRESPONDENCE



» In the letters (above), Peterson frequently mentions his wife, Laci (right), and insists he was looking forward to playing sports with their unborn son, Conner.

time reading. He asks about her experiences as a juror—what it was like, why she came to the decision that she did. As Nice tells it, the correspondence started as a way to help heal herself. When the trial ended in December 2004, she began to fall apart emotionally. Things had always been rough for her, but she felt that something about the ordeal of spending seven months on the jury had turned her world upside down. So one day the therapist she'd been seeing suggested that, as an exercise, she write Peterson a letter, telling him how his murder trial had begun to push her over the edge. The idea was that she would stick the letter in a mailbox—without an address. But at the last minute Nice decided to go all the way and put Peterson's name and address on the envelope. "I basically wrote and said, 'Hi, how are you? I sat on your jury and I have some questions I want to ask you,'" she says. "After I wrote that letter, I didn't think he'd write me back." Then one afternoon last September, her mother hollered out to her from the front room of their house in East



Palo Alto. A white envelope was lying facedown on a table. Picking up the letter, she saw the bright red letters stamped San Quentin State Prison. Then, when she read the name printed in the upper left corner, she felt nauseated. "I started shaking and crying and hyperventilating," she recalls. "I didn't know what to do. I wondered, 'Do I call the police? Do I even want to open it?'" She did, and was amazed at the tone

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of Peterson's letter. "There was such a feeling of disconnect," she says. "It was that same disconnect all of us saw in the trial—just this total sense of detachment. The only way I can explain it is that his letters sound exactly like he acted in the courtroom."

It is also true that in the letters, which generally run two to three pages, there are echoes of the seductive charm that Peterson used on Amber Frey. Unfailingly polite, he showers flattery on Nice at every opportunity. At one point, he compliments her on her choice of a breast cancer awareness stamp. He voices concern about her losing her health insurance and inquires how her classes in cosmetology are going. He mentions that other inmates take up hobbies, but so far he hasn't figured out one that appeals to him. "Do you have any insights into this kind of thing?" he asks. When she suggests he try crossword puzzles, he says no—he can only do them at a "third grade level."

Most of all, though, he wants to convince Nice that he did not kill Laci and Conner. Again and again, he insists that police did not chase down all the leads that would have cleared him. And yet he voices no bitterness, either toward Nice or any of the other jurors. "I am just not an angry person..." he writes on Nov. 3. "I am empathetic to



» After Peterson was sentenced to death in March '05, Nice and juror Michael Belmessieri addressed the media outside the courthouse in Redwood City, Calif. Nice has stayed in touch with many of her fellow jurors (left).

hell anywhere you are." And there is even a sliver of dread, as when he tells her he finds it "disturbing" when another inmate is executed.

Asked why she decided to release these seemingly private letters to PEOPLE, Nice says she was "scared they'd be leaked out" somehow. "I would rather tell my story than have someone else do it," she says. It is doubtful that the letters will have much, if any, impact on Peterson's appeal, which is expected to drag on for years. "I don't see how there could be new evidence coming out if a juror were writing letters," says Birgit Fladager, one of the prosecutors during the trial, who was asked hypothetically about any possible fallout. "If that happens, it's generally because the juror wants to share his or her thoughts or is trying to get an explanation for something or wants to somehow stay connected, wants to save that person." (Lawrence Gibbs,

what you went through." More than once, he talks about how hard the trial must have been for Nice. "He talked a lot about those autopsy photos and how hard that must have been for the jurors to see those," she says.

As for his life behind bars, Peterson tries to be matter-of-fact, saying he doesn't go out in the exercise yard much because there is nothing to do.

And indeed there is a palpable loneliness in his letters. He contends that he gets far less mail than has been reported and that he doesn't talk much to anyone else in the prison. At times, he appears to play for sympathy, maintaining that the loss of his family was such a crushing blow that his current discomfort hardly registers. "What do you have to live for?" he writes. "It is

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: RIGHT: LOU DEBATTI/AP; (2) MODESTO BEET/ANMA

one of the lawyers handling Peterson's appeal, said he had no knowledge of his client corresponding with a juror.)

In total, Nice fired off 17 letters—most of them about four pages in length. She laughs at the notion that she is writing Peterson because she has fallen in love with him. “I don’t really talk about the letters to too many people,” she says. “But from the people who do know, I get a mixed reaction. After that first letter, some said, ‘Do not continue. Do not write him again.’ It’s definitely not something I walk around and brag about. I know a lot of people are not going to understand.”

She insists that, more than anything else, she’s writing in the hopes that he’ll eventually confess to the murder of his wife. She knows it sounds crazy, but she feels that the only way this tragedy will ever be put to rest is if the man who set everything into motion would admit his role in the crime that left both Laci and her unborn son, Conner, dead. “If he comes clean, I don’t think things will change, but it will put a lot of people’s minds at ease and at rest,” she says. “This has to eat at him. It has to. I don’t know if it will make things better, but it will put his mind at ease. His parents seem like they’re

»Now studying cosmetology, Nice (with wigs she uses for practice) hopes to land a job doing hair and makeup.



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doing everything they can to make things more difficult for Laci’s parents. In one of my letters I wrote, ‘You know, your parents should really let Sharon have her daughter’s belongings.’ [The families once had once battled over the contents of Scott and Laci’s house.] But he won’t respond to that.”

Nice admits that her letters to Peterson are also partly an attempt to find

answers to questions about herself. She has never been married. Her four sons were fathered by two different men with whom she had long-term relationships. Over the years she has worked jobs ranging from a nursing assistant to a bank clerk. Last August Nice enrolled in cosmetology school at the College of San Mateo, hoping to eventually start a career as a hair and makeup artist. But in December, after years of mental health issues, she suffered a major breakdown and was admitted into San Mateo Medical Center’s psychiatric ward. She’s currently on a battery of medications for her psychiatric problems. “All my life has been a struggle,” she says.

Through her travails, she couldn’t help but begin to compare her tumult to Peterson’s life of privilege. “I remember thinking, ‘Dude, you had all the resources in the world, and you can’t hold it together any better than that, when the chips are down?’” she says. “When life begins to get a little uncomfortable for you, what do you do? You commit murder? What a sorry cop-out.” ●

HIS LIFE IN SAN QUENTIN

A year into his stay on San Quentin’s death row, Scott Peterson hasn’t shed his image as the dutiful son. “He is not a management problem at all,” says Lt. Eric Messick, the prison’s public information officer. “He’s just doing his time and staying out of trouble.” Like many other condemned inmates, Peterson, 33, cuts his own hair in the exercise yard. (The prison-issue clippers are carefully inventoried.) Peterson boasts 20 people on his visitation list, a relatively high number that includes family, friends and legal advisers. Because he has behaved himself, attaining grade-A status in the prison, he is allowed limited physical contact with his visitors, as well as liberal phone access. The volume of mail he receives “has dropped off considerably,” says Messick. But soon he may have a roommate: San Quentin is building a new facility for its death-row inmates, due for completion in 2008, that will allow for double cells.

Peterson (after his sentencing in March 2005) may someday get to have a prison job.

