

Caught in a Trap

The crime looked horrific: kidnapping, torture, and sexual assault. But nothing was as it seemed.

By Christopher Goffard

for The Los Angeles Times

He kept thinking there had been a mistake.

That was before the detective informed him of the charges and before the article in the *Ventura County Star*. "Man Held After Woman Found Raped and Tortured," read the headline, and there was his name, Louis Gonzalez III, along with a quote from a police officer: "In 19 years of police work, this has to go down as one of the most brutal attacks I have ever seen."

He had been standing on the sidewalk outside the Simi Valley Montessori School, having just flown in from Las Vegas, hoping to get a look at his five-year-old son's new



kindergarten—standing there, waiting to scoop the boy up in his arms and fly him to Nevada for the weekend. The sky was beautiful that afternoon. Gonzalez remembered it felt like spring.

The officer arrived on a motorcycle and headed straight for him. As he snapped on the handcuffs, Gonzalez noticed little faces pressed against the schoolhouse glass and asked if he could be moved just a bit so his son didn't have to see.

Soon, he'd surrendered all the items that tethered him reassuringly to the rational, workaday world. The BlackBerry he used a hundred times a day. His credit cards and photos of his son. His shoes and socks, his shirt and jacket, his belt and slacks and underwear. He stepped into a set of black-and-white-striped jail scrubs, the kind his son might wear on Halloween.

Minutes before Gonzalez's arrest around 2 p.m. on February 1, 2008, Tim Geiges placed a frantic 911 call. By the account he would give consistently in years to come, he'd just returned from work and found his wife, Tracy West, naked and bound in an upstairs bedroom of their Simi Valley home.

The dispatcher tried to calm him. "Sir, somebody beat your wife up?"

"Somebody tied her up, and I just got home—oh, my God ..." He was whimpering. "I just untied her head just now. She's crying. I need somebody, please!"

He managed to say that his wife's attacker would be at the Montessori School, a mile away.

"Who is this person?"

"Louis. Louis Gonzalez the Third."

Detective David Del Marto found West, 33, in the emergency room of Simi Valley Hospital. Her face was swollen, her lip gashed, her hair torn out in chunks. A cord, found tied around her neck with a slipknot, had left an angry red line, and there were burns on her stomach and ring finger.

West was unequivocal about who had attacked her. It was Gonzalez, she said. He was her ex-boyfriend, the father of her son.

Del Marto made his voice gentle. "I need to find out what happened, OK? You know he's in custody, right? You don't have to worry anymore about him for now."

In a small, fragile voice, West explained that she and Gonzalez, 30, had been fighting over custody since their son's birth. She and Geiges were raising the boy, along with their younger daughter.

She said Gonzalez had ambushed her in the garage, dragged her to an upstairs bedroom, hog-tied her with her clothes, singed her with matches, and assaulted her sexually with a wooden coat hanger. Then, she said, he forced a plastic bag over her head and held it tight, and she feigned unconsciousness until he left.

"He told me he was gonna kill me," she said. "He told me that. Seven or eight different times."



In the emergency room, Tracy West was unequivocal: She'd been attacked by her ex-boyfriend, Louis Gonzalez.



"Did he have anything with him in his hands?"

"He had a bag. Like a little mini-duffel bag."

During the attack, she said, she awoke from a blackout to find Gonzalez had placed mittens on her hands while he wore plastic gloves.

Del Marto thought this pointed to an uncommon level of sophistication—to a man who took extraordinary pains to avoid leaving fingerprints or traces of his DNA. In his report, the detective noted another detail she gave: Her attacker had worn overalls, as if to shield his clothes from evidence.

Del Marto thought West was lucky to be alive.

A few hours after the arrest, Del Marto pulled the accused out of his cell.

He studied Gonzalez. He saw no

scratches on his face or hands and thought, The mittens.

"What is the accusation?" Gonzalez asked.

"That you assaulted Tracy at her house."

"That I assaulted? At what time did this take place?"

Del Marto stopped him. He had to read him his Miranda rights, a delicate business he knew could end the interview fast. Gonzalez agreed to talk anyway.

Maybe he thinks he's smarter than me, Del Marto thought. The guy came off as a little arrogant. Gonzalez had

an impressive title: senior vice president for business banking at the Bank of Las Vegas.

This is about a custody fight, Gonzalez said. He insisted he'd never been to West's house. Didn't even know the address.

"You work for a financial institution," Del Marto replied. "It's not hard to get a property profile on somebody."

The attack could have taken as little as 15 or 20 minutes, he said, and it was just two or three minutes from West's house to the school where he was arrested.

What about evidence at the house? Gonzalez asked.

Del Marto thought of the gloves. "Somebody probably watches CSI quite a lot."

"I didn't do this," Gonzalez said. "I know you think I did it, but I didn't do it."

"Yeah, I think you did it. I do," the detective replied.

Gonzalez and West had met in a study group at the University of Nevada in summer 2001. He was a high school dropout from the Bronx who had become a career-minded student; he wore pin-striped suits to class. She was smart, with brown hair and pretty hazel eyes, a vegetarian in flowered dresses who spoke softly.

Their relationship was brief. They had been apart for months when she called during a sonogram appoint-

ment. Suddenly he was listening to the heartbeat of their son.

In her fourth month of pregnancy, West met Gonzalez at a Denny's in Vegas. According to a police report, she said he became upset because she wouldn't go back to him. She said he slapped her and punched her stomach.

Gonzalez's version: They had gotten back together and argued because she was seeing another man and lying about it. He admitted to breaking her windshield, but only after she "went nuts hitting him," the police report said. He was arrested on suspicion of misdemeanor domestic violence. The charge was dropped.

The family-court battle began before the boy's first birthday.

Gonzalez's custody attorney, Denise Placencio, said West had tried relentlessly to curtail his time with his son, accusing Gonzalez of domestic abuse. The campaign continued, Placencio said, after West married Geiges and moved to California with the boy.

The courts allowed Gonzalez two weekends a month with his son. He would pick him up from the Vegas airport on Friday and take him back on Sunday, a knife twisting in his stomach as he watched his five-year-old loping down the Jetway, a gangly little guy with reddish hair, glancing back uncertainly.

In January 2008, Gonzalez sent an e-mail to West explaining that he wanted to see the boy's new Montessori school in Simi Valley. He would pick him up there on February 1 and

fly him to Nevada for the weekend.

West pressed for specifics. "What time are you planning on being here? Are you going to drive or fly?"

He would arrive by plane around noon, he wrote, and expected to get to the school around 2 p.m.

The e-mail exchange soon descended into acrimony. All these trips to Vegas were taking a toll on their son, West wrote. "Having to tell him that he has to go despite his obvious distress is not what I want."

miliate her as much as humanly possible before killing her" and fleeing with their son, Deputy District Attorney Andrea Tischler wrote in court papers.

The judge ruled: no bail.

When she met Gonzalez, lead defense attorney Debra S. White was struck by his eyes. He looked distraught and tired and angry.

This is about the boy, Gonzalez insisted. She wants me out of his life.

"This is about the boy,"

Gonzalez insisted: "Nail down my alibi and get me out."

Gonzalez answered that he hadn't seen these signs of distress—his son seemed happy to see him. "My focus right now is to make the best of what little time I have with him," he wrote.

West replied by writing that he had "proven time and time again" that he did not put their son's needs above his own whims.

It was hardly the nastiest exchange Gonzalez could remember. But he found himself thinking about it as he awaited arraignment. His hope of a quick release now seemed remote, considering the charges. If convicted of all counts, he faced five back-to-back life sentences.

"His goal was to degrade and hu-

Nail down my alibi and get me out. He recited a detailed list, compiled over hours in his cell, of everybody who might have seen him around the time West said the attack occurred.

White called her sister, Leigh-Anne Salinas, her investigator on big cases. Salinas related to Gonzalez's businesslike, hard-edged manner but didn't think a jury would like him much. She was pessimistic about human nature and suspected Gonzalez might be guilty. She thought, Wow, this guy really thought this out.

Her task: verify Gonzalez's whereabouts in the hours preceding his arrest. West had accused Gonzalez of attacking her between 12:30 and



Detective David Del Marto drove the route Gonzalez had taken that day. The timing didn't add up.

12:45 p.m. She knew the time, she told police, because she was about to leave to pick up her younger daughter early from school.

Salinas began retracing Gonzalez's movements, starting with his arrival at the airport in Burbank around noon. She walked into Enterprise Rent-a-Car on Hollywood Way, where employees remembered Gonzalez. He was the guy who needed a child's car seat. His receipt said 12:09 p.m.

Next, Gonzalez would have driven northwest to Simi Valley, a 28-mile trip. Salinas verified that Gonzalez was on his cell phone with another Nevada banker during the drive. Phone records confirmed this call lasted from 12:43 to 12:48 p.m.

At the Montessori School, Salinas's job proved tougher. School employees knew West, and Salinas sensed their

reluctance to help the man accused of brutalizing her.

Salinas was polite and persistent. School workers remembered Gonzalez arriving between 12:45 and 12:50 p.m. He greeted his son and briefly toured the school. One lady joked that she felt underdressed alongside his suit and tie. They told him to return in about an hour to pick up his boy.

Gonzalez said he walked to a bagel shop at a nearby strip mall. The manager, Jung Soon Shin, recalled Gonzalez coming in around 1 p.m. to order a tuna sandwich on a sesame bagel.

When Shin explained that she didn't take credit cards, Gonzalez had patted his pockets—no cash—and promised to be back.

At the Wells Fargo a few blocks away, Salinas discovered, an assistant manager named Mercedes Saunders remembered Gonzalez coming in to make a withdrawal. They'd chatted, and she found him calm and pleasant. Surveillance cameras confirmed

he was there from 1:14 to 1:38 p.m., a bored-looking man in a dark suit.

Back at the bagel shop, Shin saw him return sometime before 2 p.m. with cash to buy his sandwich. She remembered him because he wasn't a regular and because after he left, she had to fish his reusable red sandwich basket out of the trash.

Salinas called her sister. West's story didn't hold up, she said.

"Wow," White said. "He actually may be innocent."

Del Marto wanted to find the duffel bag that West said Gonzalez had been carrying. Had all the items Del Marto couldn't find—the mittens, the gloves, the overalls—been stuffed in there and discarded?

He'd looked in storm drains and sewers. He'd searched roofs and freeway shoulders. He'd even inquired at Simi Valley mailbox companies, in case Gonzalez had been calculating enough to mail it to himself. No sign of the bag.

With doubts beginning to gnaw at him, he climbed into his car to time the route between the airport and West's house. He picked a Friday just after noon for his experiment, to replicate the conditions Gonzalez would have faced. He pushed his car to 80 mph. His partner held a stopwatch.

Even if Gonzalez had raced up the freeway, the detective discovered, he could not have arrived at West's house earlier than 12:42 p.m. And witnesses confirmed he was at the

Montessori School right around then.

Did Gonzalez commit the attack after he left the school and before he was seen at a nearby bank? Or perhaps after he left the bank and before he was seen buying a bagel?

The detective concluded that each scenario would have given Gonzalez a narrow window of opportunity at West's house: six minutes.

Was that enough time?

Enough time for Gonzalez to find her in her garage, knock her out, drag her up the stairs, put gloves on his hands and mittens on hers, and slip on protective overalls so that his suit would remain immaculate?

Enough time to strip her, tie her up, burn her with matches, sexually assault her with a coat hanger, and try to suffocate her with a plastic bag?

Enough time to dispose of all this evidence, along with a duffel bag?

Why did no one, before or after, notice that Gonzalez was nervous or out of breath?

He remembered how West looked that day, bruised and traumatized. But the medical records seemed at odds with the sexual assault she described: They showed no internal tears or bleeding.

Maybe, Del Marto thought, the gloves, mittens, and overalls didn't exist. Maybe they were props in a story.

He withheld judgment until he could see the footage captured by the security cameras at McCarran Airport in Las Vegas.

Getting it required weeks of calls to the Transportation Security Ad-

ministration. Finally, Del Marto and his partner were led to a private room in the bowels of Los Angeles International Airport and handed a disc.

Del Marto slid it into his laptop. He watched bodies shuffle through the security line in Vegas, taking off shoes, placing luggage on the conveyor belt. The detective trained his eyes on the screen for one thing in particular: the duffel bag. The airline said he hadn't checked bags. Had he carried it on board?

Ventura County prosecutors were not deterred. They intended to put West on the stand to tell her story. There she would face a defense team that had lined up ten alibi witnesses and was preparing to portray her as a pathological liar.

On April 21, 2008, the day before the hearing was to begin, prosecutors learned that West was in the hospital. They had obtained a note in what appeared to be West's handwriting.

"The DA asking me to relive my

The detective froze the video and leaned forward. "I don't know how he could have done it," he said.

Three cameras captured Gonzalez walking through the metal detector. Del Marto froze the frame and leaned forward. Gonzalez's hands were empty.

Del Marto turned to his partner. "I don't know how he could have done this," he said.

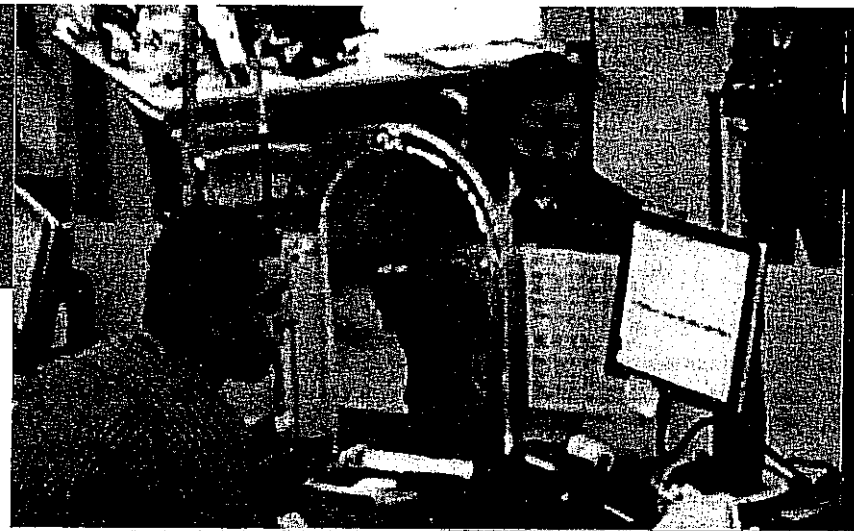
The preliminary hearing in *State v. Gonzalez*, to determine whether he should face trial, was weeks away, and Del Marto was expected to testify on West's behalf. The detective did something rare in his 23-year career. He called the prosecutor to say that he was uncomfortable testifying in his own case.

horror of Louis Gonzalez attack is more than I can bear. For them it is a case. For me it is my life shattered," read the note. "I died of Rx overdose—suicide."

Later, in family court, West would say she didn't remember writing the note and blamed the hospitalization on drugs her psychiatrist had prescribed.

At 5:26 p.m. on April 22, prosecutor Andrea Tischler sent defense attorneys a brief e-mail: With West unavailable to testify, they were dropping the case. For now.

Jay Leiderman, one of Gonzalez's defense attorneys, hurried to the jail. Gonzalez was accustomed to odd-hours visits from the lawyer, but this



time, Leiderman was smiling. "You're going home tomorrow," he said.

Gonzalez's father was there to greet him. So were Gonzalez's mother, brother, sister, and aunts, sweeping him up in a crush of family. After 83 days in a solitary cell, things felt wrong. All these people in one place, all this open air, made him dizzy.

He had his freedom. Now he wanted a sandwich. Then he wanted to get as far away from Ventura County as possible and start figuring out how to reclaim everything else he'd lost: his son, his job, his name.

The job turned out to be the easiest—the Bank of Las Vegas valued his abilities.

Lou, hey, welcome back ... So ...

He got used to telling the story. It was all about the custody case, he said. She wanted me gone.

No one came out and said anything directly, but he sensed people were

A bank security tape proved to be powerful evidence for Gonzalez's innocence.

wary. As if people figured that he hired a crack legal team and bought his way out of trouble. He knew certain things reinforced this perception: His accuser was walking free, after all, and retained custody of his son.

How come your ex isn't in jail? People kept asking.

He didn't have a good answer.

Getting to see his son proved tougher. He missed his sixth birthday. A custody judge withheld visitation, concerned Gonzalez might still face criminal charges.

He was finally allowed to see his son—eight months after his arrest. It was a brief visit at the office of a family reunification specialist.

Soon after, on his day off, Del Marto gave a deposition to the family law

attorney whom Gonzalez had enlisted to fight for full custody. All the physical evidence had been processed, the detective said, and none of it implicated Gonzalez.

"Based on my investigation, I see no reason why he should not be able to see his son."

Winning back his name was hardest of all. Stories persist on the Internet. Once, a date told him she had Googled him, and he had to explain.

holes in West's story and the numerous alibi witnesses.

Prosecutors did not want Gonzalez declared innocent. They knew a jury wouldn't convict him but said they couldn't be positive of his innocence.

In January 2009, nearly a year after Gonzalez's arrest, Leiderman called him excitedly: The judge had sided with them. Gonzalez was soon holding a certified copy of the judge's order declaring him factually innocent.

He drove to the bank and put it in a

What if he'd grabbed breakfast

Leiderman thought it was not enough that the government dropped charges. There is such a thing as a declaration of factual innocence, he explained to Gonzalez. A judge can grant it. It is exceedingly rare—so rare that many lawyers go a career without seeing one. It means not just that prosecutors couldn't make a case against you but that you didn't do the crime.

The case remained on the docket of Ventura County Superior Court judge Patricia Murphy, who had earlier ordered Gonzalez held without bail. Leiderman petitioned the judge, trying not to get his client's hopes up. He laid out the case, pointing out the

safe-deposit box. He figured he would need it if he wanted to continue in banking, where the blot on his record would otherwise scare off future employers. It would help in his fight to win custody of his son. But it hardly made him whole.

Asked why West hadn't been charged with filing a false police report, James Ellison, Ventura County's chief assistant district attorney, gave this explanation: "We could not say with 100 percent certainty that Tracy West was lying."

Leiderman said he thinks the district attorney's office is embarrassed and wants the case to disappear. "No

one wanted to believe a woman would make something like this up," he said.

Del Marto can't say for sure what happened in that upstairs bedroom. He ruled out the possibility that West's husband, Tim Geiges, inflicted the wounds on her; his cell phone records proved he was elsewhere as she lay tied up.

Now and then, he found himself thinking of something he discovered on West's computer. It was a link to a sexual-bondage website that West had recently visited, Del Marto said. When he asked about it, she replied that a friend had sent it as a joke.

The site featured men and women in elaborate restraints and a depiction of a double-loop slipknot with a little eyelet on one end. To Del Marto, it resembled the knotted cord a nurse had removed from West's bruised neck on February 1, 2008.

The detective tried to imagine West hating her son's father enough to injure herself in such a methodical way. Tying the cord around her own neck, cutting off clumps of her hair, battering her own face ... and the other things. He'd seen people

give themselves a scratch or bruise to impersonate victims, but nothing like this. "My God," he said, "to this extent?"

Del Marto said prosecutors asked him whether a case could be made against her. His reply: not without her confession. His supervisor praised his detective work, but Del Marto found the outcome unsatisfying. No one punished was a bad way to leave it.

As the custody battle staggered on, hearing by hearing, Las Vegas family court judge Bill Henderson wrestled aloud with the implications of the criminal case. He didn't believe Gonzalez had attacked West. Must he conclude, he asked, that she made it up? Perhaps someone else attacked her?

No, testified John Paglini, the court-appointed psychologist who had interviewed West four times: Either Gonzalez attacked her, or she lied.

West's voice was soft, at times barely above a whisper, when she took the stand last June. Her dark hair fell to her shoulders. She held her hands

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

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demurely in her lap, a still presence with an air of vulnerability.

She deserved her son, she said. She talked about how close he was to his little sister, how they belonged together in California; her voice broke.

Her lawyer asked her about February 1, 2008. She steadfastly insisted Gonzalez attacked her.

"Did you do it to yourself?"

"Absolutely not."

In her closing argument, Gonzalez's custody attorney, Denise Placencio, said West had been trying to divide father and son for years.

"The last resort was to frame Mr. Gonzalez and put him in jail for life," she said.

The judge concluded that West's insistence on Gonzalez's guilt "with no rational basis" was an attempt to remove the boy from his father's life.

"She continues to maintain that he's guilty of this heinous crime, and he's not," the judge said. She appeared to be a good mother otherwise, he said, and it was with "a heavy heart" that he awarded custody to the father.

The judge was not, however, prepared to accept the psychologist's either-or view of the case—that if Gonzalez didn't do it, West had made it up. What West believed about February 1, 2008, "remains unclear," and the possibility that she suffered a "delusion" had not been ruled out, the judge said.

West would stay in her son's life. She moved back to Nevada.

On Fridays and Sundays, Gonzalez and West exchange custody at a McDonald's or Starbucks. If possible, he waits in the car and sends his mother in to do it.

Sometimes Gonzalez wonders how much worse things might have turned out. What if he had grabbed breakfast in Las Vegas before boarding his flight? He wouldn't have needed that bagel in Simi Valley, so he wouldn't have gone to the bank for cash and wouldn't have been caught on security cameras.

His alibi evaporates, and he's in prison for life.

At the end of the day, his mind automatically replays his movements, hour by hour because it was his ability to do that that saved him. After his release, he developed the habit of meticulously documenting his whereabouts, eliminating time gaps that might leave him vulnerable.

If he's in an airport or at a 7-Eleven, he makes sure the surveillance cameras get a good look at his face. Anytime he can swipe his credit card and sign his name, even to buy a pack of gum, he does it. He fills his wallet with receipts and the world with a conspicuous trail.

He feels most vulnerable when he is asleep, when, for six or eight hours a night, no cameras are watching, no witnesses are marking his presence, and no one but Louis Gonzalez III can say with certainty where he is. ■