



# W H Y

## SO MANY MEN KILL THEIR WIVES

THE SUDDEN RASH OF BRIDE-BUTCHERY IS ENOUGH TO MAKE A PEACEFUL MAN WONDER IF HE'LL SNAP TOO.

MAKEUP BY MIKE MARINO. RING BY HARRY WINSTON.



■ WAS MINDING MY OWN BUSINESS—SWEATS, DO-RAG, EATING TAKEOUT ON A RAINY SUNDAY—when the bloody brides marched across my TV screen. The biggest one wore a bullet-shredded wedding gown. About 30 others scowled behind veils, speckled with red ink. They carried hand-lettered signs on sticks and chanted at the cameras. They were angry. They wanted revenge. ¶ It had been a rough year for married women. Every night, the local news hauled out some wild-eyed nutcase accused of shooting his wife in the face in front of the kids, stabbing her on a city sidewalk, bludgeoning her with a blender, ending her life because she danced with another dude. Now the brides were on the streets of New York, circling, demanding justice. ¶ I turned uneasily to look at my girlfriend, who had shifted on the couch. She eyed me with suspicion. *Men. Always dogs by association.* Suddenly, we were all latent hit men. Chewing on a black grudge as we washed dishes. Going over the secret bank accounts in our heads. Looking, as we cut the grass, for that neat stretch of lawn for a midnight burial. Fantasizing about how much better life will be with the mistress finally installed at the dinner table, all black stilettos and patent-leather China Girl waist-cincher corset . . . ¶ “What are you thinking about?” my girlfriend asked. ¶ “Nothing.” ¶ Till death do us part. That little warning label, affixed to marriage like the UNDER PENALTY OF LAW tag on a mattress, once meant the golden fade: Florida golf carts, leg veins the size and color of fishing lures, molars fizzing in Pepsodent. But thanks to screwups like Robert Blake, Scott Peterson, Mark Hacking (the Utah crybaby who allegedly cracked after tossing his wife in the trash), and, of course, O.J., every man in America now fits the profile: Devious. Smiling. Banal. Lethal. ¶ At times, America looks like a nation of wife killers, countless husbands waiting to release their inner O.J. We tune in to *Dateline* and *20/20* for the soap-opera details of



Passenger side of Defendant Blake's 1991 Dodge Stealth, photographed on the night of the murder

**THE GREAT TRIGGERS TO MURDER, SAYS ONE EX-PROSECUTOR, ARE DIVORCE AND FATHERHOOD: "IT'S THIS ACUTE STRESS. IT NEVER GOES FROM 'YOU BURNED THE PIZZA' TO KILLING HER."**

Laci Peterson's autopsy. We still snatch up any magazine that mentions O.J. on the cover. At lunch, we tell one another over bloody burgers exactly how the latest sicko chopped up his bride. Privately, we ask what it takes for a guy to gun down the woman he loved, the mother of his kids. We look at our wives and wonder: Could I?

Pull back a bit and the entire world looks splattered with the blood of dead wives. Claus von Bulow kicked off the modern media coverage in 1982, when he was charged with attempting to kill his wife, Sunny, with an insulin injection. But let's get literary. Othello smothers Desdemona because he thinks she cheated on him; Hercules kills his wife in a fit of madness (the gods made him do it); and in *The Arabian Nights*, the Great Sultan, believing all women are wicked, marries a fresh wife each night and has her strangled the following morning. Less poetically, a London man recently videotaped himself killing his wife as he hissed, "You are the Weakest Link. Good-bye."

Men and women have always lived in what filmmaker Neil LaBute likes to call "an uneasy alliance." We know women can core our souls by screwing our best friend. They know—in a twitchy sort of way—who the term *bitch slap* was made for.

"We're attached to each other, we even choose to live together, but there's always a point where things can get ugly," says LaBute, who has made a career mining the creepy universe of male deceit through works like *In the Company of Men*, a film about two guys who plot to bed a deaf woman as a sadistic joke. "For women, however, ugly can mean violent."

With so many ways for men to let off steam (Lindsay Lohan being two of them), why do so many guys snap? The shameless, untold fact is that plenty of these killers are mama's boys. Too timid to bond with their fellow knuckle-draggers, they turn their wives into the lone confidantes of their gutted egos, protectors of their hidden fears and neurotic needs. "We all look to women to soothe us, heal our wounds, carry the pain when we can't," says Aaron Kipnis, author of *Angry Young Men*, a book on male aggression. "But for some of these guys who kill, especially these loners, they feel frustrated, hurt, and angry when their needs aren't met."

It's not just the sullen geek in the cube next to you who might explode. It's also the office alpha dog. This twinkly-eyed golden boy, says Richard

Rhodes, author of the criminology study *Why They Kill*, is a second type of wife slayer: smug, arrogant, scheming.

“Violence is an immensely empowering experience,” says Rhodes. “Power is at the center of their motives. They have a sense of entitlement. But their superiority is usually what gets these guys caught. Look at Scott Peterson. It’s pretty obvious he just adores himself. Even from jail, he’s writing to his girlfriend about how great life is gonna be for them when he gets out.”

The most common triggers for both of these murderous types are the same: divorce and fatherhood. Neither guy can stand to be abandoned. And the future wife killer may view pregnancy not with fatherly affection but as a threat to his special place in the cosmos. “In a lot of middle-class cases, like

like an epidemic. But for most of us, it’s just damn good entertainment. “With the Peterson case, it’s the lurid quality, the affair, the erratic behavior, the pregnant wife who disappears on Christmas,” says LaBute. “It makes us sit up and watch.”

If most of us regard these true-crime stories as a poignant spectator sport to fill in those lonely gaps between *American Chopper* episodes, others use them as a podium for advancing political, or overtly personal, goals: family-rights advocates seeking harsher penalties for domestic violence, prosecutors and defense lawyers looking to boost careers, reporters and others who know that fear sells. Gloria Allred, attorney for Scott Peterson’s lover, secret phone-call-taper Amber Frey, has made a PR killing stoking the paranoia. “Women around the country are saying, Oh, my God, am I sleeping with

## IF THE CRIME IS RIFE WITH STAB WOUNDS, ADULTERY, AND MANHUNTS, IT GETS SO MUCH PLAY THAT WIFE-KILLING CAN SEEM LIKE AN EPIDEMIC. BUT FOR MOST OF US, IT’S JUST DAMN GOOD ENTERTAINMENT.

with Laci Peterson, those are the two greatest times of risk for a woman,” says Linda Fairstein, the former domestic-violence crusader in the Manhattan district attorney’s office, who now writes crime novels that often feature killer husbands. “It’s this acute stress. It never goes from ‘You burned the pizza’ to killing her.”

Women, for their part, have done their best to even the score. Clara Harris, a Texas dentist, got 20 years in prison last February for killing her husband by running him over—three times—with a Mercedes. Jean Harris shot her boyfriend, Scarsdale Diet doc Herman Tarnower. More recently, and more exotically, a Cambodian woman squeezed her husband’s nuts until he fainted, then strangled him.

In fact, experts say women attack men roughly as often as men attack women (kitchen knives are a favored implement). Fortunately for men, women don’t have the upper-body strength to carry out many of their most murderous impulses. “Women are more likely to throw hard objects when arguing,” Kipnis says. “But when they mix it up, of course, women are the ones who get damaged and killed at a much higher rate.”

When the woman is attractive (Laci Peterson, Nicole Simpson) and the tale of her demise is rife with stab wounds, adultery, and manhunts, the crime gets so much play that wife-killing can seem

the enemy?” she says. “They’re asking, Could this happen in my life?”

In fact, wife murders are not on the rise, as those warnings might make you think. Actually, they have dropped—dramatically. Since 1976, around the time when no-fault-divorce laws swept the nation, allowing us all to trade old lives for new, the number of women killed by their husbands has plunged by more than 40 percent. These murders hit a record low in 2002, the last year for which figures are available. Some cultural shifts in attitudes about women are clearly at work here: Before 1974, a Texas man could legally kill his wife—as long as his six-shooter was smoking while she was horizontal with another man. Other changes, which have given women greater power at home and in the workplace, may have benefited society overall, but they have also placed an added strain on our would-be wife slayer, leaving him feeling angry, threatened, and sometimes willing to take action.

“Men are challenged more by women at work and at home, and they’re losing it,” says celebrity divorce lawyer Raoul Felder, co-author of *Getting Away with Murder*, a 1996 study of domestic violence. “Most murders take place in the kitchen, and the second-most murders take place in the bedroom. It gives you some idea of the priorities in this country.” ■