



RACHEL MUMMEY

Michaela's Shadow

More than three decades ago, Sharon Murch's nine-year-old daughter disappeared. Now, a suspect has been charged in the case, and justice may be near, but a mother's grieving never ends.

BY KATYA CENGEL | SEP 15, 2021

In the beginning, Sharon Murch would stand at her door waiting for her nine-year-old daughter, Michaela. Waiting for Michaela to call. Waiting for Michaela to return from the Rainbow Market, where she had gone to buy candy with her best friend, Trina, on November 19, 1988. Waiting for Michaela to walk up the street. Waiting for Michaela to appear in the back seat of a police cruiser. Waiting for Michaela to come home.

Days turned to months, months to years, years to decades. The Gulf War came and went. The Iraq War ended. Heavy metal bands were replaced by grunge bands and then performers like Bruno Mars. But still Michaela Garecht remained missing.

Murch stopped looking out the window and started looking online.

Emails poured in. A man from Russia had seen Michaela in the United Arab Emirates. Someone in Iran had spotted her just after she was kidnapped. A woman in Washington State also believed Michaela was in the Middle East. Good-hearted people and those with less altruistic motives scoured Facebook and escort sites. Some sent Murch photos of half-naked young women, insisting they had found Michaela.

Murch knew none of them were Michaela. It wasn't that the young women didn't look like her daughter. They did. But Michaela wouldn't be young anymore; she would be middle-aged. Yet when Murch pictures her oldest daughter, she sees a towheaded little girl with a confident smile, the image that appeared on milk cartons in the late 1980s. Murch isn't sure she would recognize Michaela if she saw her today.

As far as hope goes, for Murch, hoping—that Michaela was alive, that she would see her again—had been one of the heaviest burdens there is to carry.

That burden was lifted in December 2020 when the Hayward, California, police department announced that Alameda County district attorney Nancy

O'Malley was charging David Misch with Michaela's murder. Murch was not present when the announcement was made but expressed her thoughts in a statement. She had come to accept that Michaela was no longer living but pictured her sitting on a cloud or soaring among stars, she wrote. "What I did not envision was my daughter as a dead child. It was only when I heard this news, that this vision of reality appeared, and I have honestly not figured out what to do with it."

In the 32 years since Michaela was grabbed while trying to retrieve a scooter from outside the Rainbow Market, a lifetime has passed for her best friend, her mother, and her sister.

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MICHAELA BEGGED: “PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE, CAN I GO?”

Murch has terminal breast cancer. She is dying. Michaela's friend Trina (Katrina Hogue) moved away and moved into middle age. Little sister Libby got married. (Her last name is not used to protect her privacy.) Libby does not list her marriage, birthday, or high school graduation under "life events" on Facebook. All that appears is Michaela's kidnapping. Like Murch and Trina, Libby has lived her life largely in Michaela's shadow. As the case against Michaela's accused killer unfolds, the women she left behind remain haunted by her memory.

They all know now that Michaela isn't coming back. Fingerprints left on the scooter were reexamined and matched to Misch. In addition to Michaela's murder, Misch is awaiting trial for a double murder and serving time for a third. He hasn't confessed to killing Michaela, which leaves Murch, Trina, and Libby wondering what happened to her, just as they have been since that Saturday before Thanksgiving in 1988.



The image is a missing person poster for Michaela Joy Garecht. It features the official seal of the Federal Bureau of Investigation at the top left. To the right of the seal, the word "KIDNAPPING" is written in large, bold, white capital letters on a red background. Below this, the victim's name, "MICHAELA JOY GARECHT", is displayed in large, bold, red capital letters. Underneath the name, the date "November 19, 1988" and location "Hayward, California" are given in smaller red text. Below these details are four photographs of Michaela at different stages of her life: a young girl, a pre-teen, a young woman, and a police sketch of the suspect. The word "DESCRIPTION" is centered below the photographs. At the bottom right, there is a small line of text: "FBI/FREMONT POLICE DEPARTMENT" followed by a sentence about the poster being a missing person poster for Michaela Garecht from the time of her disappearance showing a police sketch of the suspect at far right.

The girls got up early that day, eager to practice their roles in a Christmas pageant. They lived across the street from each other. Murch remembers them going back and forth between houses, fixing their hair and outfits. Michaela asked Murch if they could go to the Rainbow Market. It was just a few blocks away, and Michaela had gone there with some of the older girls in the neighborhood before. Going with Trina, though, was different. Michaela and Trina were only in fourth grade.

Michaela begged: "Please, please, please, can I go?"

Murch mapped the route out in her mind, trying to visualize potential dangers. The girls were going to ride scooters, which meant they could get away quickly. Murch decided to let them go. As Michaela was leaving, she turned around.

"I love you, Mom."

"I love you too, Michaela."

Those are the last words Murch remembers.

Afterward—the police having been called, the suspect described, a search begun—all Trina wanted to do was go to Michaela's house. She was worried Murch would be mad at her. Instead, Murch gave her a hug. Later—weeks, months, Trina can no longer remember—they would go running together early in the morning, before the sun came up. In the years that followed, Trina sometimes babysat Michaela's younger siblings. Only once did Murch ever come close to wishing it had been Trina that day and not Michaela. It was the year both girls would have graduated from high school. When Murch pictured Trina onstage, she resented the fact that Michaela would not be there.

It could have been Trina.

It should have been Trina.

That was Trina's first thought. Michaela was a fighter. She would have made things difficult for the kidnapper and been killed. Trina would have been submissive—and survived. And it wasn't just her personality. She had been the target. When they went inside to buy candy, the kidnapper moved the scooter Trina had been using from near the store door to beside his parked car. Not Michaela's. Trina's.

"Those things don't escape you," says Trina, now a middle-aged woman. It was Michaela who noticed that the scooter was not where Trina had left it. When she tried to pick it up, she was grabbed and thrown into a car. Trina heard Michaela scream and saw the driver as he pulled away, a clean-shaven man in a butterscotch-colored car. That isn't the description the police originally used, says Murch. Another witness described a man with a mustache driving a burgundy-colored car. Trina says the police didn't ask her for an initial description because she was too upset.

According to the Hayward Police Department, witnesses placed Misch in the area at the time of the kidnapping. In 1988, Misch would have been in his 20s, young, like the suspect. His slim build and light eyes and hair also match the suspect's.

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"I OFTEN WONDER WHAT LIFE WOULD BE LIKE IF MICHAELA HAD NEVER BEEN TAKEN."

Six years younger than Michaela, Libby knows her sister's absence, not her presence. The missing person posters were age-progressed over the years until the girl in the image became a woman who eerily looks like Libby. Even in baby pictures, Murch has trouble telling the two apart. The same blond hair, the same small teeth. There is another sister, Johnna, born in 1993, five years after Michaela's kidnapping and the same year another missing Bay Area girl, Polly Klaas, was found murdered. As Johnna came into the world, images of other missing children flashed across the television. Murch remembers looking at the screen just as Johnna was being born, "and there was Michaela smiling back."

Michaela hadn't wanted to come into this world. It took five years and fertility pills. The other children came faster. Murch wonders if that was a sign.

"Maybe she knew what would await her in life," she says. "Or God knew what would await me in life."

She was always there. A photo on the wall of a girl who remained forever in fourth grade, a closet full of presents that never got opened. Michaela was the reason Libby, Alex, Robbie, Johnna, and a stepsister, Ariel, weren't allowed to play hide-and-seek outside as children. She was the reason Murch called their cell phones over and over again when they were teenagers. Michaela is why Murch later used a cell phone tracking app so she would always be able to find them.

Libby remembers, as a child, seeing Murch cry over Michaela and asking whether she would cry as much if Libby had been kidnapped. Seated at her mother's kitchen table in San Leandro in 2016, an image of her older sister looking down on her from a missing person photo on the refrigerator, Libby talked to me about the kidnapping.

"I often wonder what life would be like if Michaela had never been taken and what our lives would be like," she says. "I have no idea."

Murch started a blog. First *Dear Michaela*, later *Seeker's Road*. Murch kept it going so Michaela could find her—and she did. She was living in Los Angeles and had been in an accident. She had some amnesia but believed she was Michaela Garecht and wanted to visit. Murch wanted proof. They messaged back and forth on Facebook. It took a long time to find out. She wasn't Murch's Michaela. The messages continued. Murch blocked *this* Michaela.

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THERE IS NO BODY IN MICHAELA'S CASE. BUT THERE IS A WITNESS—TRINA.

After Misch was charged with Michaela's murder, Murch took to lying in bed. Instead of 5,000 leads there was one. Search dogs. Psychics. Buried bones. Richard Helwig, Timothy Bindner, the Speed Freak Killers. None of it was relevant. When Murch was invited to take part in calls with the district attorney, she gave them Libby's phone number.

Fox eyes. That is how Murch remembers Trina describing the kidnapper's eyes. She also remembers Trina seeing him and his car everywhere: at a baseball game, at a restaurant. Trina wanted to be helpful—and tough. When her older brother was too scared to take out the trash, Trina took it out for him. She sat through weekly meetings with a counselor, developing headaches so bad that she felt like she was going to throw up.

Trina's mother worried the kidnapper would return for Trina. She worried about the publicity. They moved to Missouri. By eighth grade, Trina was back in Hayward. A year later, she ran into Libby, "so grown-up and so beautiful." Trina started babysitting for Murch.

Now Trina lives in Texas. She is 41, married with three children. She has a new last name but uses her old one. After Misch was charged, she went silent. She was done talking. When she eventually spoke, she was distant, defensive. Years earlier, she had said she was scared to meet Michaela again. "There would be a lot of guilt." Guilt because she returned from the store and Michaela and the others didn't.

Others. Two of them. Also best friends. Also returning from an East Bay convenience store. Women, not girls, but just barely. Michelle Xavier was 18; Jennifer Duey, 20. Their bodies were found naked and covered in blood on the side of a Fremont road in 1986. After DNA evidence identified Misch as the main suspect, he was charged with their murders in 2018. Murch says he will be tried for all three murders together. There is no body in Michaela's case. But there is a witness—Trina.

Months before Misch was charged, detectives flew to Texas. Trina knew they had a suspect, but she didn't know his name. Now she sees similarities between Misch's face and that of the suspect in the 1988 police sketch. She is aware of the parallels between the cases. She won't say more. "I honestly feel like my brain cannot go down these paths right now."

When Trina was 13, two inmates claimed they knew where Michaela was. They didn't. When Trina was a senior in high school, Murch asked her to go on the Maury Povich television talk show. Murch had a new husband and a new baby. Trina had photos of Michaela in face paint acting goofy.

When Trina was in her 20s, she was subpoenaed to testify in another case. She no longer recalls the name of the child victim.

"I remember wanting so badly to please everybody but trying my best and feeling like I was failing in all ways," she says.

Everything she said was challenged. She worries, "If I ever [testify at] trial for Michaela how much worse is this going to be?"

"If" has become "when."



In 2020, a fingerprint examiner matched the area of a latent print left on Trina's scooter to Misch, who had been included in a list of potential suspects. An officer described the identification process as "old fashioned police work." The Alameda County District Attorney's Office won't comment on an open case but said in a statement that the ability to compare prints "has been significantly advanced through software, technology and science." The truth lies somewhere in between.

While the practice of examining latent prints—unintentional reproductions of friction ridge areas of skin—is more than a century old, there have been technological developments. Once the prints are illuminated using a chemical or light source and are captured, they are compared with either known prints that have been submitted or prints generated by an automated database. The Federal Bureau of Investigation started using its first automated database in 1999 and a newer version in 2013, says Melissa Gische, a latent print technical leader at the FBI Laboratory. Whether or not the database is used, it is the examiner who makes the comparisons, using three main characteristics—ending ridges, dividing ridges, and dots—and the different configurations they make.

According to Gische, the most frequently referenced large-scale study to assess the accuracy of examiners was published in 2011 by the FBI and Noblis, a nonprofit science and technology organization that contracts with the federal government. "I would say that the .1 percent false positive rate [found in the study] shows that we are highly accurate when reaching identification decisions," says Gische.

Misch's lawyer, Ernie Castillo, says there are issues with the credibility of the analysis, the reliability of the prints, and their preservation. He has received most of the reports and is investigating every potential lead to demonstrate that someone else could have been involved.

Misch, who is now 60, is currently at the Santa Rita Jail, in Alameda County. His trial is scheduled for November. Murch did not attend his preliminary hearings.

"He has nothing to say I want to hear," she said at the time.

She moved to rural Iowa a year and a half ago, around the time her breast cancer returned. Metastatic. Stage IV. Incurable. She has chemotherapy appointments on Wednesdays, the same day the calls about the trial sometimes take place. She hasn't participated. She has heard that Misch stabbed his victims. She has been told that Michaela was killed quickly.

The details? She isn't sure she wants to know those.

As for the remains, she says, "Michaela is not in her remains. Michaela is in the life to come."

In a victim impact statement, she plans to tell Misch that Michaela wasn't just some random body; she was a human, a child, a beautiful soul. Maybe she will tell him about the anger. How she used to yell at drivers and smash dishes in an alleyway. How tortured she felt not knowing whether Michaela was alive and suffering. How she kept writing blogs and talking to reporters because she thought Michaela might need her.

Now she can say: No. To the reporters, the amateur sleuths, the possibilities. The impossibilities.

"In all that time that I was waiting for Michaela to come home, and praying for Michaela to come home...she'd already gone home," says Murch.

Home. Hayward. Childhood. Something Trina doesn't talk about. That's how she copes. She doesn't look back. There is something, though. A Carole King tape. A new tape deck. "I Feel the Earth Move" playing in her bedroom. Michaela and Trina jumping around and dancing, and dancing. •

BY KATYA CENGEL

Katya Cengel's [From Chernobyl with Love: Reporting from the Ruins of the Soviet Union](#) received an Independent Publisher Book Award and a Foreword Indies award in 2020.

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