

Full Circle



How a Veteran Cop was Sentenced to Life for Crimes That Never Happened

by

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*Some fears are universal. Death. Disease. The loss of a child.
Going to prison for something you didn't do.*

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The Beginning ... The End

Wisconsin winters are long. They arrive in November and sometimes stay well into May. Temperatures dip below zero during the Christmas holidays and stay there. Remnants of snow missed by plow blades become packed ice on the roadways, defying even the grip of 4-wheel drive vehicles. Children wait for buses or walk to school wrapped like mummies against the bitter winds. Shoppers leave their cars running while they pick up groceries and at night connect them to engine heaters so they will start in the morning. The state hunches its shoulders and waits for the January thaw, the brief respite when ice becomes slush, travel becomes safer and jackets can be left unzipped.

In 1998 the January thaw began on the 26th. Temperatures settled into a narrow but comfortable range, with highs around 34° F. and lows around 32° F. Winter attempted a comeback on February 2nd, but the continued warm temperatures turned snow into soaking rain. Fog shrouded nights followed cloudy days, yet the thaw persisted.

Temperatures still hovered just above freezing on the morning of Wednesday, February 11th, with rain predicted by evening, as Lola Cator set out from Madison for Green Bay. The continued thaw made the 135-mile trip a little easier and a little safer.

But the weather wasn't on Lola's mind. She was worried about keeping her 40-year-old daughter, Sandy Maloney, alive.

If you believe the ads you see on television, you would expect that at the age of 67, Lola would be enjoying her retirement years. Her late husband had left her enough to live comfortably. Instead, she was trapped between generations, living with her mother and endlessly shuttling between Madison and Green Bay to take care of Sandy.

From Lola's point of view, it began almost exactly four years earlier when Sandy had a seizure so frightening that her husband John called the rescue squad. Sandy had been seeing a psychiatrist for two years at that point. He said she had a chemical imbalance that caused depression, anxiety and panic disorder, and he prescribed Klonopin.

Lola didn't know if it happened quickly or gradually, but at some point Sandy became addicted to Klonopin. The seizures began when Sandy tried to quit taking the drug. The psychiatrist switched Sandy to Prozac and Buspar. Sandy switched herself to alcohol—specifically, vodka—to help her over the rough spots when she couldn't get Klonopin. There was a tiger behind both doors. Sandy ended up an alcoholic drug addict.

It seemed to Lola all along that Sandy's husband John should be more supportive of his wife. He was a Green Bay cop. Instead of worrying what Sandy's illness might do to his career, he should have been concerned about taking care of his family.

John was terrible with money. His paychecks seemed to get frittered away in no time, and the bills piled up. Lola came to their rescue over and over. Their credit was so bad that they couldn't get loans from conventional sources.

Taking care of the boys—Matt, Sean and Aaron—was more than Sandy could handle. Sean should have been her last baby, but John insisted on trying for a girl, and he only reluctantly got a vasectomy after Aaron was born.

And fight! John and Sandy started out fighting with the neighbors, and after they had alienated almost everyone on the block, they turned against each another. Lola thought John was more to blame than Sandy, because he wasn't suffering from a chemical imbalance. The arguing and name-calling upset Lola terribly. It got to the point where she hated to go there, but felt she had no choice because Sandy needed her.

As bad as it was, it only got worse in April of 1997. John had just been promoted to detective and was at an arson school in Stevens Point when he called Lola, literally in the middle of the night. Sandy had been in an accident. She had been driving drunk and had totaled their van. John wanted Lola to come to Green Bay and help his sister Ginny take care of the kids, so that he could go back and finish the arson school.

She did, of course. Sandy spent thirteen days in the psychiatric unit at Bellin Hospital, followed by ten days at the Jackie Nitchke Center for alcohol and drug abuse.

And then John left her. After nineteen years and three children, after all that Sandy had been through with him and for him, he left her.

Once again it fell to Lola to step into the breach and take care of the family. Initially, it was a matter of putting food on the table and catching up utility bills so service wouldn't be cut off. Lola worried about being repaid all the money John and Sandy had borrowed.

Although Sandy struggled to keep it together, after she was served with divorce papers in June, she cried and told Lola, "I just can't take it anymore."

She was tall and had always been thin, but now she began to waste away. Sandy took up smoking and stopped eating. Her weight fell below 100 pounds, and she looked emaciated.

The situation got even worse in July, when Lola called John at his sister Ginny's house to come get the boys because Sandy was in such a state of agitation. Lola's well-intended call led to a confrontation, with the police intervening and sending the boys home with John.

Sandy never really got her kids back after that. John paid her \$450 a month for child support but the kids stayed with him, and he sought custody of them in the divorce. He moved in with a girlfriend who was rumored to be half his age, someone both Lola and Sandy were convinced he must have been involved with long before he left.

A week ago, on February 4th, John notified Sandy that she could only have *supervised* visitation with the children. Lola feared that losing the boys would put Sandy over the edge.

Lola tried to keep tabs on Sandy by phone, but their conversations left her confused. Two nights earlier, Sandy's friend Jody called and asked Lola to come to Green Bay. Jody said that Sandy was suicidal. She needed to go back to the psychiatric unit and Jody could no longer be responsible for her. Lola said she thought Sandy just needed a good night's sleep.

The next day—yesterday—Sandy called a little before nine in the morning to say she would be doing wallpapering with her friend Sarah in the afternoon. Sandy called again around three, making no mention of the wallpapering she was supposed to be doing, but sounding better. John would be bringing the kids over to see her around six, she said. She told Lola how much she loved her, and how sorry she was for all that she had done.

Their last conversation was a little after six. John didn't bring the kids, and Sandy said she was giving up fighting for them. She sounded very depressed. Lola believed that Sandy would drink herself to death before the week was out. Her mother's promise to come to Green Bay the next day seemed to help.

Lola pulled into the driveway at 368 Huth Street at about quarter to eleven. The drapes were closed across every window in the modest, single-story house. She tried the side door along the driveway first but the storm door was locked, so Lola went around to the front. The front storm door, which didn't lock, was held shut from the inside with a shoe string. Lola rang the bell, but there was no response.

This wasn't the first time she had been locked out like this. The same thing had happened six weeks earlier in December. She had to cut the string to get in, and found Sandy sleeping—some might have said she was passed out—on the living room couch. Today she was better prepared. Lola reached into her purse for a pair of scissors and cut the shoe string, then used her key to open the door.

The interior was filled with thick, choking soot. Lola blinked repeatedly, trying to get her eyes to adjust to the dark. She could barely breathe, yet she called out frantically for Sandy. Lola went through the living room, into the kitchen and to the back door, opening both the wooden and storm doors to get some air into the house. Fighting for breath, Lola went down the hallway toward the bedrooms, again shouting her daughter's name, still getting no response.

Her eyes had begun to adjust to the dim light by the time Lola returned to the living room. She found Sandy, on what was left of the sofa, burned so badly that at first her body appeared to be a part of the incinerated furniture.

"Oh, Sandy," Lola said, "you're all burned up."

Stunned and choking, Lola made her way back to her car and used her cell phone to call for help. Dialing 911 connected her to the Brown County Sheriff's Department, which in turn patched her through to the 911 Communications Center for the City of Green Bay.

CATOR: There's...Well I know because there's no fire, but everything is burned in the inside of the house and my daughter is all burned up.

MALE: Your daughter is what ma'am?

CATOR: She's burned up.

MALE: At 368 Huth Street.

CATOR: 368 Huth.

MALE: Did you open the house and found, it was burned inside ma'am?

CATOR: Yes, yes.

MALE: What's your cell phone number please.

CATOR: Oh, I don't even know.

MALE: Are you outside of 368 Huth?

CATOR: I'm outside. I'm outside.

MALE: Okay, we will be there in a minute. What's your name ma'am?

CATOR: Lola Cator, I'm her mo..I'm Sandy Maloney's mother.

MALE: And Sandy was inside?

CATOR: Yes, she's burned up.

MALE: Okay, we will be there shortly ma'am.

CATOR: Thank you.

Both the Green Bay Police Department and the Green Bay Fire Department responded to Lola's call. The police arrived first, stationing an officer at the front door to inform arriving firefighters that there was a body inside and the house was being treated as a crime scene.

At first Lola stood with the officer, too shaken to do anything else. One of the firefighters asked her to sit in the ambulance so she could calm down, but Lola decided she would rather sit in her car. He helped her to her car, where Lola sat and watched firefighters cordon the yard with yellow fire-scene tape.

When Lola's car had to be moved from the driveway to make room for emergency vehicles, the same firefighter convinced her to sit inside the rescue vehicle. As he checked her pulse and respiration rates, Lola repeatedly told him, "I knew he was going to do this. I hope he's happy now."