

By Prathamesh Kabra

Stanford's Memorial Church is a masterpiece of stained glass and quiet reverence, nestled in the heart of campus. On most nights, it closes without incident. But in the early hours of October 13, 1974, something unimaginable happened behind those heavy wooden doors.

Nineteen-year-old Arlis Perry walked in to pray. By morning, she had passed away in what would become one of California's most haunting and bizarre unsolved cases—until DNA gave the story a name.

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## **Who Was Arlis Perry?**

Arlis grew up in Bismarck, North Dakota, a place where Sunday service and small-town safety went hand in hand. She married Bruce Perry, her high school sweetheart, and moved with him to Palo Alto, California. Bruce had just started as a pre-med student at Stanford. Arlis had taken a clerical job nearby. They were newlyweds—barely two months in.

Everyone described Arlis as devout, soft-spoken, and gentle. She didn't drink. She didn't smoke. Her idea of a night out was a quiet walk or a trip to church. She was the kind of person who believed in doing the right thing, even if no one was watching.

And that's exactly what she was doing the night she walked alone into Memorial Church—talking to God.



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### **The Last Walk**

On the night of October 12, Arlis and Bruce had a small disagreement. She wanted to pray. He didn't think it was

necessary. They parted ways around midnight. Arlis headed to the church. Bruce stayed behind.

When she didn't return, he waited. Hours passed. At around 3 a.m., he phoned campus security to report her missing.

The church, he was told, had been locked. No one had seen her. That wasn't true.



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## **Discovery at the Altar**

At 5:45 a.m., campus security guard Stephen Crawford called in a report. He said he'd found the front doors of the church ajar. That was odd—he claimed to have locked them just a few hours earlier.

Inside, near the altar, he discovered Arlis's body.

She had passed away in a position investigators would later describe as "staged." She was lying on her back, arms outstretched as if in the shape of a cross. Her jeans had been removed and carefully placed over her legs. Her blouse was open.

Two church candles were positioned in ways that made detectives' stomachs turn—one laid across her chest, the other inserted into her body. Her skull had been punctured by an ice pick still embedded above her ear.

A Bible lay open nearby.

The scene didn't look spontaneous. It looked intentional.

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## **Was This a Ritual Killing?**

Detectives didn't know what to make of it.

On one hand, there were obvious signs of a violent, personal crime. But the symbolism—religious overtones, candle placement, crucifix-like pose—made them wonder whether something more sinister was at play.

They quietly explored theories of a ritualistic killing. Was Arlis targeted for her faith? Was there a cult operating near campus? The media got wind of the weirdness, and within weeks, wild speculation took over. Journalists hinted at Satanic connections. Some even tried to tie the case to other unsolved murders across the country.

But the investigation had no real leads. Forensic technology in 1974 was limited. No usable fingerprints. No way to analyze DNA. The best they could do was collect the evidence and wait for science to catch up.

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## **The Wrong Suspects**

Naturally, Bruce Perry—her husband—was questioned. He had reported her missing. He'd been the last person to see her. He took and passed a polygraph test.

Still, suspicion lingered. The young widower moved on with his life but never escaped the shadow of what happened that night. Then there was Stephen Crawford—the security guard who found her.

His story had gaps. He said he locked the church. But somehow, it was open again in the morning. He'd told police no one was inside when he closed up, yet Arlis was clearly there. He'd walked in and discovered the scene, but didn't call it in right away. Investigators wondered: was Crawford buying time? But with no hard evidence tying him to the crime, he was never arrested.

Crawford kept his job for a while. Eventually, he left Stanford and faded from public view. No one asked too many questions. And the case went cold.

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## **The Obsession of Maury Terry**

In the 1980s, an investigative journalist named Maury Terry became obsessed with Arlis's murder.

He believed her killing wasn't random—and wasn't isolated. In his book *The Ultimate Evil*, Terry argued that Arlis had unknowingly become the target of a Satanic cult. He linked her death to the "Son of Sam" killings in New York, arguing that both were orchestrated by a network of ritualistic murderers.

Terry's theories were compelling—and controversial.

He pointed out eerie similarities: religious staging, candle placement, the use of unusual weapons. He even found supposed links between Arlis and cult literature circulating at the time.

But police never found evidence supporting his claims. Many dismissed his work as conspiratorial. Still, the theory stuck in public memory. People didn't forget about Arlis.

They just couldn't figure out what had really happened.

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## **DNA Changes Everything**

Decades passed. The case remained open but inactive.

Then in 2018, cold case detectives reexamined the evidence.

They had preserved hair samples, biological material, and items collected at the scene. New DNA analysis tools allowed them to run comparisons that had never been possible before.

A match came back.

Stephen Crawford.

The security guard. The man who said he found her. The one who locked the doors and then somehow found them unlocked. The one who never quite explained his timeline.

On June 28, 2018, police prepared to arrest him.

When they knocked on his door with a warrant, he was waiting. Before they could enter, Crawford ended his life with a firearm. He was 72.



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### **What Did He Hide for 44 Years?**

The answer may never be fully known. What drove him? Was it anger? Sadism? Did he plan it, or was it a crime of opportunity? Crawford had worked at Stanford for years. He had access. He knew the church. He knew the schedules. And he knew that a young woman alone at midnight might be vulnerable.



Investigators believe he assaulted her, staged the scene to confuse the narrative, and returned hours later to “find” the body. He inserted himself into the investigation, a move not uncommon among perpetrators seeking to control the story. In the end, science gave the answer. But it came far too late for justice.

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### **Did the Satanic Panic Distract Everyone?**

The late 1970s and early '80s were full of paranoia about Satanic cults. Allegations popped up in schools, churches, even daycare centers. Much of it was later debunked.

In Arlis's case, the symbolic nature of the crime scene—candles, staging, the Bible—invited people to interpret it as religious or occult.

But what if that symbolism was meant to throw everyone off? What if it was all part of the performance—one meant to confuse, mislead, and distract?

It worked. For 44 years, people chased shadows while the man who committed the murder lived freely.

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### **The Tragic Legacy of Arlis Perry**

Arlis wasn't just a victim. She was a young woman who believed in faith, love, and starting fresh. She followed her husband across the country to support his dream, took a humble job to

help them get by, and made time for prayer even when she was upset.

She didn't deserve what happened.

And for decades, her story was buried under speculation and silence. It took modern forensics to cut through the theories and deliver an answer. It also exposed the failure of the original investigation—not because police didn't care, but because they lacked tools, and perhaps, imagination.

Sometimes the truth isn't far-fetched. It's horrifyingly close.

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## **Why This Case Still Haunts California**

Few cases have such a disturbing blend of innocence and malice.

A peaceful church. A young bride. A trusted guard. And a body posed like a twisted message.

It's not just that Arlis passed away—it's how she was left.

The tragedy didn't just destroy a life. It warped the perception of a place meant for comfort. Even now, students who pass by Memorial Church don't realize what happened inside. But for those who know, it's impossible to forget.

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