

NATIONAL

Sins of the son

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There was a strangling darkness in the heart of Sef Gonzales. In poetry penned as a boy, he begged God to free him. "Just what is it in me? Sometimes I don't know," he implored. "Though you're in me now/I fail and hurt you still ... you have forgiven me/too many times it seems. Take me out of the dark Lord/'cause I don't want to be alone."

Written in a year 8 class, it is a glimpse into the mind of a then 14-year-old. To his teachers, the poem was a worthy example of writing, but to Gonzales it was part of a deception.

He had plagiarised it from a sacred Catholic song from the Philippines. It presaged another time, in July 2001, when he chose it as a hymn for the grieving congregation to sing over the caskets of his father, Teddy, mother, Mary Loiva, and sister, Clodine, after he had killed them.

During his murder trial, which ended with three guilty verdicts yesterday, 23-year-old Gonzales emerged as a paradox. Angelic, smooth, sweet, small, ambitious, a charming friend and an easily smitten lover. And at the same time fierce, physically strong, scheming, full of guile, jealous and ridden with sexual guilt. Central to his tragedy were the hidden tensions within his family.

Teddy Gonzales believed the name he gave his first child had never been bestowed on any other. Sef lamented at the funeral that his father had promised to reveal its

true meaning once he turned 21. Now, he said, he would never know its origins.

It is possible the devout Catholic father took the name Sef from the book of Genesis, slightly altering the spelling of the third son of Adam and Eve, Seth. According to the Bible story it was Seth who continued the human race after his elder brother, Cain, murdered Abel.

But Sef owed his father so much more than his name. A prosperous childhood surrounded by extended family in Baguio City, 250 kilometres north of Manila, was shaken by a violent earthquake. The family-built hotel was demolished and Sef, trapped by his leg in the darkness, screamed: "Papa, Papa, Papa." Hearing the cries, Teddy ran back into the collapsing building, freed his son and pulled him to safety. Sef owed his father his life.

There were thunder claps in North Ryde the wintry night in July that Teddy Gonzales was driving home from work. The home phone went unanswered when he tried ringing. The family's dream home - decorated by his wife and complete with an altar at the top of the stairs where the family prayed to Our Lady Queen of Peace - sat opposite the home of the children's grandmother, Amelita Claridades.

Teddy arrived at 4.30pm. Sef stood in the wings of the doorway, wearing his father's shoes and a fresh tracksuit to hide the blood of his mother and sister. He had been waiting for 2 hours. The moment his father walked through the door, Sef stabbed him in the back, severing his spinal cord. He fell to the floor in partial paralysis, his white business shirt soaking with blood. Sef then stabbed his father's heart, again and again. He had slashed the throat of his mother, who had struggled, and bashed and strangled and stabbed his 18-year-old sister. The family's six dogs were either locked in the laundry or upstairs or chained up outside.

After the murders, Sef changed his clothes and continued with his plans. He sprayed the racist slur "F--- OFF ASIANS. KKK" on the living room wall. This, he hoped, would tip off visitors, entering in through a door he left open, something terrible had happened and throw police off his track. However, he left a trace of the paint on his jumper, crucially the only piece of evidence to definitely place him at the scene.

Just before 7pm, a neighbour, John Caulfield, heard a noise across the aluminium sheeting kept between the two houses. Police believe that it might have been Sef leaving the scene, taking away three bloodied tracksuits, two kitchen knives, his father's shoes and a pair of gardening gloves. They believe he cleaned himself up at a nearby primary school. The murder weapons are still missing.

As arranged, Sef arrived at 8pm at the house of a mate, Sam Dacillo, a few blocks away, ready to go out to dinner. It was during their drive to the city, before the bodies had been found, that he advanced his false alibi, telling Sam he had spent the afternoon driving around Blacktown looking for a friend's place.

But unknown to him, a client of his father's had dropped documents in the letterbox between 4.10pm and 4.30pm and saw a green Ford Festiva in the carport with the number plate SEF80G. His aunt, Emily Luna, also saw the car when she arrived after picking her son up from after-school care at 6pm. As she rang the doorbell he had stood to the side of the door.

Police believe he had never wanted to be the one to "discover" the bodies of his family. When he returned home at 11.45pm there was no movement and he knew he would have to begin the act.

He called triple-0 three minutes later, wailing "My family's been killed."

When ambulance officers arrived minutes after midnight Sef had told neighbours how he hugged the bodies and tried to resuscitate them and prevent the flow of gushing blood from Clodine's side. But there was barely any blood on him, save for the soles of his shoes and small spots on his pants. He says perhaps it washed off in the drizzling rain or when he sat down in shock, placing his hands on the frosty grass.

Sef has not talked about how he felt on that night. He has described finding the bodies but seems incapable of feeling. In court and at the funeral, despite his crumpling face, no tears came. During points of intense cross-examination, he could not articulate any feelings past panic.

When he sat up late in the night telling friends what he saw that evening, he spoke softly about each thing he saw, but never about how he felt.

This was the same young man who was able to stand in front of the coffins of his family, deliver a eulogy for his father and sing, eyes closed, with no accompaniment, the Mariah Carey/Boyz II Men duet *One Sweet Day*.

Sorry I never told you/All I wanted to say

Now it's too late to hold you/'cause you've flown away, so far away

Never had I imagined living without your smile ...

And I know you're shining down on me from Heaven/like so many friends we've lost along the way.

And I know eventually we'll be together/One Sweet Day.

A feeling of intense strangeness rippled through the church that day; it seemed to confirm what police knew. It jarred in the minds of friends. "He seemed sad, but so calm at the funeral," said one. "There were the three caskets in front of him holding the mutilated bodies of his family and he started to sing . . . it was really strange."

From as early as the night of the killings, when Sef gave his first statement to Gladesville police, relatives started distancing themselves from him but didn't question him until they had got through the funeral. Friends and relatives turned away after the funeral and as police approached each one, it became more apparent that Gonzales's conversations were complete fabrications. Some said they felt petrified of him; others later revealed they were afraid for their lives.

Emily Luna had an awful feeling. When she visited the house on the night of the murders she had seen a flash across the frosted glass which she thought was a coat stand. But after being shown by police where everything was placed, she realised the fleeting shadow had been a person.

In a secretly recorded conversation after the killings with his godfather and uncle, Edmund Claridades, Sef spoke of the weeks leading up to the deaths and, perhaps unknowingly, revealed a motive. Sef said: "Basically, my life went upside down. I

feel I'm trapped and don't know what to do; feel like I'm getting deeper and deeper as if I could not stop this momentum."

His life was spiralling out of his control for two reasons that culminated in his family threatening to disown him and cut off his inheritance. The first was his abysmal university marks. His mother had also told him four days before the killings he would not be welcome in the family if he continued to see his girlfriend, of whom she disapproved. Clodine, too, had been threatened with such a thing after she began seeing a boy her mother did not approve of because he was not steadily employed. She was sent to Melbourne to complete her schooling.

On top of this he believed he deserved to claim his inheritance early and cut his sister, who was due to return to Melbourne the next day, out of the deal. Somehow he believed he was entitled to a privileged existence.

Sef was facing expulsion at his second attempt at a university degree, devastating to Teddy and Mary Loiva Gonzales, who would talk often about how they planned for him to become a heart surgeon and later about how he would take over the family law firm.

Whichever child had performed well at school would always be the centre of discussion at extended family functions. The other would be relegated. It was always a contest and thus a constant and desperate need for approval grew inside Sef from when he was young.

For Sef the pressure about his grades and his mother's disapproval of his girlfriends had become a game of avoidance and alibi.

In the months before the deaths he had provided a flurry of medical certificates to lecturers complaining of upper respiratory infections, attempting to sit supplementary exams to do anything to change the four fails he knew would be arriving in the mail on July 20 - the day his family was buried.

In the meantime, he began to attempt to create a fake academic transcript to show his parents and offered to do the same for Clodine, but she refused, revealing his forgery to their mother. His parents threatened to take away his privileges, his generous allowance and the use of his Ford Festiva. Before the

murders they limited his car use so significantly that Sef had to take the bus to university, which he hated.

He had also broken up with a girl he adored, managing to woo her away from her boyfriend for two weeks before she went back, leaving Sef distraught. So strong were his feelings he had given her a promise of engagement: a necklace engraved with the letter G, and had introduced her to his mother. But, as she had often done before, his mother disapproved. This time it was because she said the woman, four years older than Gonzales, was too old. Four days before the murders, Gonzales argued with his mother, who said Gonzales would not be welcome in the family if the relationship continued.

ONCE they were dead, Sef became sole beneficiary of the will and was able to live the life he wanted, free from their control. Within 72 hours of his parents' murders, Sef met his father's accountant to find out how much money they had and whether anyone else had tried to get it. He embarked on a long legal battle to use his parents' \$1.5 million estate to fund his legal defence, but was unsuccessful.

In the ensuing months he put deposits on a Porsche and Lexus SC430, quelling the disquiet of the car dealers' concerns about such a young man asking to test drive their best cars by saying he was expecting an inheritance from overseas. He also tried to pawn his mother's jewellery; he did sell her watch. And he moved into an 11th-floor apartment in Chatswood, furnishing it with the yellow lounge from his parents' house while he advertised their cars, selling them without his grandmother's permission.

In the 11 months between the killings and charges being laid, he was out clubbing. His main concerns were thoughts of an impending singing career, having been a singer in an a cappella band (Definite Vibe), and was free to indulge his vanity, collecting more than 15 bottles of aftershave. He also sent persistent emails to his aunt, Annie Paraan, in the Philippines, who managed the Sef family affairs there - asking for money. He even created false death certificates on a computer to speed up the process.

But his plan to kill had begun in a different way. In February 2001 Sef had begun searching for poisonous plants on the internet and ordering lethal seeds. Searches

he thought he had deleted from his computer were later traced.

He told police he did this because he wanted to kill himself, so distraught was he over losing this girl he adored. He said he had told his friends that he had cancer as a way of preparing them for his death. Just weeks before the murders, Sef received the seeds, shelled them and mixed them with warm water. He kept the prepared potion in a film canister under his bedside table.

Realising then that if he was to poison his family, he would need some kind of explanation as to how it had happened, he typed a letter to a major food company: "Three of your products have been poisoned. By now they are on supermarket shelves. This is what you get for treating employees like garbage. Good luck finding infected cans before someone dies. Go to hell!!!"

The letter arrived on July 2, just over a week before the murders. He also wrote letters to the Federal Police and the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service. Traces of the letters were found on his laptop and his fingerprint was lifted from one of the envelopes.

The next day, his mother reported violently ill at the Sydney Adventist Hospital, saying she believed she had food poisoning. Sef also feigned a minor stomach upset, telling people he believed there might have been something in the tap water at a restaurant in which the family had dined.

But his mother recovered and returned home. Realising he could no longer continue with the poisoning plan, he tried to cancel one of his orders for seeds on July 5. It seems likely he threw the remaining seeds into the backyard, because three years later a poisonous plant was found growing there.

After the killings, Sef appealed for help to find the killer and told anyone who would listen he wanted justice and was setting up a foundation in memory of his family.

In a police media conference he said: "It is difficult to explain the love and ties in my family . . . but if you were to picture the four corners of the world, in my world we were the four. The three corners of my world are now gone."

By December, detectives in Strike Force Tawas had told Sef that they didn't believe his story. Through a friend, they leaked the fact there were the two recorded sightings of his car on the murder afternoon, and he began to panic. He needed a new alibi.

He knew that his new story had to accommodate the two car sightings that afternoon and a reason why he had lied to police for so long. Not realising his phone was being tapped, Sef desperately called brothels. Did they have surveillance cameras? How long had they been opened? Did they keep copies of their rosters?

Choosing as his alibi witness a woman he had been with before who worked at a Chatswood brothel, Sef told police that he had been too ashamed to say it earlier. He said he was also embarrassed to admit to his extended family that he had been with a prostitute. They all believed Sef, a former altar boy and singer in a liturgical choir, was a good, Catholic virgin.

Walking with a friend in Hyde Park he revealed his new alibi, telling him he was worried it would "blow up in my face again".

When it turned out the woman he had chosen had taken that week off work, he had no choice but to stick to his plan, as he had already changed his story once. He paid a taxi driver \$50 to write and sign a dictated statement saying he drove him to Chatswood that day, asking him to backdate it.

He also began fabricating emails which he handed to police. One said a wealthy Filipino businessman had been responsible for the deaths of his family and he should lie low and search through his father's business records.

Before all of this, police had no murder weapon and not enough evidence to charge him, but he was grasping, desperately trying to force people to give him statements and creating scenarios. All of it was taped.

The farrago of lies collapsed as police approached his friends. Not only was it a lie that he had cancer, but many of his other stories also proved to be hollow. He did not own a television production company, he was not training for the Olympics, he did not have a black belt in tae kwon do and was not attended by bodyguards.

His story that he had been offered a record deal after his moving rendition of *One Sweet Day* at the funeral was also fabricated.

When he met the prostitute he would later try to use for his alibi, he told her he was a gang member. He bragged to a girlfriend later that the prostitute had said his sexual prowess was so incredible he didn't need to pay for her services.

He claimed he had flown to a funeral in New York after the collapse of the World Trade Centre and paid for the air fare of a victim's mother. Sef also bragged he was launching a "Sef-G street kids on stage" project and after the murders would call organisations such as the Starlight Foundation, telling them he was Sef Gonzales and expecting to be on their A-list for functions.

He created a website, pretending a friend had set it up in honour of their friendship, dedicating it to him. In truth, it was all Sef's work. Most of the messages on the site were fabricated.

Desperate for the approval that he had not received from his parents, he treated his friends generously. Some even felt motivated by how much he had supposedly achieved. "I always respected him for his dedication and motivation, so I thought keeping in touch with him will help me learn something and mature a bit more," said one. "He was a really good influence on me and always kind."

Another detailed how kind he had been to her. "He was very affectionate and had a way of making me feel special. We had good conversations and he was really fun to talk to and a good listener when something was wrong. He would get along with everyone we met."

While his claims were extremely outlandish they seemed genuine to all who heard them until they had reason to believe otherwise. "He seemed very genuine," said a friend who had known him for some years. "When I think of it now he fooled so many people and I remember the shock I felt when I found out about all the lies. He was a master of deception. That's why he was able to fool so many people. The things he said came out so genuinely it was hard to question them ... even when he was boasting he seemed modest."

One of the many stories about his father that he would repeat was this one: "My father would always say to me," Sef would begin. "There's no softer pillow when you sleep at night, as when you have a clear conscience"
