

The Strange Case of the Buried Rug And How TikTok Detectives are Making Everything More Complicated

By Erianne Lewis

On a late-September morning in Columbus, Ohio, Katie Santry discovered her laptop screen was shattered and things had been moved around in the sunroom of her home. Perplexed by the situation, she uploaded a [TikTok video](#) with the caption “I think my house is haunted.”

In the one-minute video, which now has over 9.3 million views, Santry, 34, briefly mentions – as an aside – that she and her boyfriend had recently discovered a rug buried in their backyard, underneath a Bloodgood Japanese maple tree, where they were digging a hole to build a fence. The rug alone didn’t cause her to post the video, Santry told me. But after the computer incident, she started to wonder if “there’s a body in the rug and this is the ghost that broke my computer?”

From there, a 33-part TikTok series followed over the next few days. At the urging of “TikTok detectives,” Santry called the local police department. “I felt so silly being like, ‘Hey, I’m just calling because there’s a rug in the dirt,’” she told me – and yet she did it. When the police arrived (yes, they came), they told her that while the rug being buried was indeed “super weird,” Santry told me, but without any evidence of a crime, they couldn’t “deploy any resources” into digging it out (no pun intended).

Santry was ready for that to be the “end of the story.” But TikTok was not. Santry reassured the hundreds of thousands of viewers, who were now tuned in, that the odds of there being a “dead body were probably low,” but still, “we will get this rug out, I swear to you.”

She did have a moment of hesitancy after discovering the Bloodgood tree that was planted above the buried rug, was worth around \$1,000. “I just can’t do more damage to my home without just cause. The only thing I can commit to, is leaving it be,” Santry told viewers.

Pressure from TikTok sleuths continued, with random strangers offering to bring an excavator to her property, commentators urging her to question the neighbors because “surely they’ve seen something,” and people insisting she find a “retired cadaver dog” to come and look, because “they’re senses still work but they’re just not healthy enough for a full-time job.”

After all of this, Santry was able to get the police out to her property... again. Since the situation had now gained so much media attention, the Columbus Police Department’s homicide unit decided to investigate further, by dispatching cadaver dogs.

The dogs “hit” the area surrounding where the rug was buried. Suddenly, everything started to feel *very* real. “The news showed up, my whole cul-de-sac got caution taped off, and that's when it became a real thing,” Santry told me. “I was like ‘oh my gosh, this is potentially a real crime,’ and that's when it affected my family.”

Santry told me she was also contacted by representatives from the Menendez Brothers and Laci Peterson documentaries, who were prepared to turn her story into a documentary, if a body was discovered.

The rug incident – which played out over three weeks this past October – is by no means the first example of TikTok detectives “investigating” a crime (or crime-adjacent) story, inserting their opinions in the comment section, concocting theories, and then expecting around the clock updates. But what happens when the theories people are *so* vocal about expressing are just... wrong?

In Santry’s case, no body was found in the rug, despite the police taking it away. She brought a new laptop and shifted her content away from “rugtok” and back to her lifestyle videos, trying to move on with her life. But the TikTokers would not give up.

“We’ve just gone a little too far with morbid curiosity. It’s become such an entertainment. When there ended up not being a body, there were so many people like, ‘I was really hoping there was a body,’” Santry said.

Some commentators wrote things under her videos like “I simply cannot accept this answer,” and “This saga isn’t over. Something happened on that rug.” Some viewers even went as far as to theorize that someone died on the rug, but the body must be buried elsewhere. People were commenting under her Instagram posts and sending her many, many DMs.

It was all slightly reminiscent of the [Gabby Petito](#) missing persons case from 2021, in which—after learning of the disappearance of a 22-year-old woman who went on a cross-country road trip with her fiancé—social media users poured over the footage Petito uploaded on her feeds, looking for clues. They posited that her last Instagram post, which was captioned “Happy Halloween,” was written in a different writing style than the others. They also dove into Petito’s Spotify playlists and her then fiancé, Brian Laundries, reading habits, according to [AP](#). Later, after her body was found, but before Laundrie’s diary admission that he killed Petito and then died by suicide, sleuths believed that her murder was tied to the murders of Kylen Schulte and

Crystal Turner, who were killed around the same time Laundrie and Petito were spotted in Moab, Utah.

Abbie Richards, a misinformation and disinformation researcher who focuses on TikTok content, remembers feeling “uneasy” with how social media users were treating the Petito case.

“People were treating this missing young woman as fuel to feed the burning fire of endless content creation. It’s really dark,” Richards said. “I remember watching one girl who just had like hundreds and hundreds of videos about it [on TikTok], and she would just green screen in front of completely unverified things and you’d be able to hear that she was eating food while talking about this missing girl ... very unsettling.”

In the case of the University of Idaho murders in 2022, in which four students were stabbed in an off-campus house, multiple people, including an American history professor, were accused by TikTok sleuths of being involved in the deaths – leading to at least one lawsuit. Rebecca Scofield, the aforementioned professor, ended up suing a TikToker and “physic” named Ashley Gulliard, who had posted [over 100 videos on TikTok \(and later YouTube\)](#), which have since been taken down, accusing Scofield of orchestrating the murders because Scofield was “romantically involved with one of the victims,” according to the [lawsuit](#). This, Scofield has contended from the start, is also not true.

Apart from Scofield, internet sleuths also “identified” a [“guy in a hoodie”](#) – actually, just a man flirting with the girls – who was standing in line at a taco truck behind two of the victims in their last public moments. They also went as far as to accuse the [two surviving housemates](#) – who were awake and allegedly texting each other as the murders happened – of also being suspects. All of these suspicions were unfounded, and the alleged killer is actually a young man named Bryan Kohberger – a former PhD criminology student and teaching assistant at Washington State University’s Pullman campus, has been [charged](#) and is now awaiting trial for the murders. Jury selection is set for July 30, 2025 and the trial is scheduled to begin in August 2025.

“I think it’s interesting that people haven’t even been paying attention to the fact that they could be liable for what they say online,” Richards said about the Idaho murders, in regards to the defamation case Gulliard is facing. “That hasn’t occurred to them, and so it’s interesting to see how this plays out. I would like to think that maybe they will face some repercussions for just spreading lies.”

Apart from the widespread and publicized cases, there are also smaller instances of social media detectives attempting to ruin the lives of strangers, often based on unfounded theories. Heather Marulli, a LA-based comedian, was accused by complete strangers on X, in 2023 of “covering

something up” with the unexpected passing of her friend Jacqueline Beaubien, who went by the stage name, Jax Dell’Osso. Prior to Beaubien’s death, she began posting “paranoid” and “untrue” things on X, about her ex-boyfriend, alleging that he was a part of a sex trafficking ring and that he killed one of his ex-girlfriends (who was still alive). Marulli was worried about her friend, so she contacted the New York Police Department to do a wellness check. Jax, a NYC-based stand-up comedian, didn’t answer when the police arrived. A couple days later it was revealed that she had been hospitalized and died due to complications after a suicide attempt.

Prior to official reports that she was deceased, Jax’s “supporters” took to X to call out Marulli for getting the police involved. Accounts like @findjaxnyc and @jaxdwasmurdered popped up quickly and were adamant that Marulli and Jax’s best friend, Aliah Janine, were accomplices in a big “cover up” scenario that also allegedly involved Jax’s ex-boyfriend, Chris Cortez, who they said was abusing Jax.

“I was accused of being an abuse apologist,” Marulli told me. “It was so fascinating that some stranger just online had the balls to say that to me. People were just like, kind of ganging up on me.”

Marulli believes this relates back to the “true crime fanaticism” by today’s society. “In a way it’s that people want to feel special, or that something is happening to [them], and that it’s historic,” she said. “It definitely felt like there was this just build up of people wanting there to be something more complicated than what it really was.”

Most recently, social media sleuths weaseled their way into playing detective in the disappearance of [Hannah Kobayashi](#)—a 30-year-old woman from Maui, who disappeared after not boarding a connecting flight from LA to NYC—in early November. In Kobayashi’s case, she was reported missing Nov. 11th, and people soon stalked her social media accounts and began concocting theories. Under her [most recent post](#), which was uploaded on Nov. 11th, one Instagram user commented: “Did anyone notice that the number of people she is following went up by 1? I swore yesterday it was at 2,487, and today it's at 2,488.” This has now led to a thread where people are speculating about what that could mean. Kobayashi was deemed a “voluntary missing person,” by the LAPD on Dec. 2, after footage of her “willingly” crossing the border into Mexico surfaced. After returning to the U.S., Kobayashi released a [statement](#) admitting, “I was unaware of everything that was happening in the media while I was away, and I am still processing it all.”

Richards believes that the way people treat true crime content and the crafting of theories “as a recreational activity,” is very bizarre.

“The way that it's fundamentally making people profit, either directly or in the value of attention, and it's making a lot of profit for the platforms, because people are there watching ads in between all of that content, it's just really gross,” Richards told me.

In Santry’s case, she watched firsthand as people began concocting elaborate theories based on hardly any information. First, there were a number of local cold cases people were “trying to connect,” she said – including one about missing 44-year-old, father of seven, [Dennis “Danny” Fout](#), whose sister showed up for the dig. Fout disappeared in 2019, with “no trace,” after asking his mother to pick him up during snowy weather.

Many commentators were saying things like, ‘Her house is this many miles from the last place that this person's cell phone pinged at, and the year that her deck was built is the same year that this person went missing,’ Santry said. Next, people began searching her house on Google Images, year after year, to see if they could “see when things like a tree was planted or the deck was built.” It was discovered that the Bloodgood tree was planted in 2010, the same year the deck in her backyard was built.

For every few people completely invested in this situation, there was another person who was skeptical of Santry’s motives and felt that she was “too giddy” about the possibility of being a part of a true crime situation.

Comedian and TikTok creator, Meredith Lynch, posted a [video](#), where she expressed skepticism after the situation hit her TikTok for you page. Lynch recognized that Santry has long been involved in the content creation sphere and she likely knew how to create a viral moment. Santry formerly had a YouTube channel with her sister called “Katie & Karleigh,” where they interviewed The Jonas Brothers, Noah Cyrus and Demi Lovato, among others.

“She had a good grasp of how to get attention in the media, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that, however she was giving an air on her TikTok that she was kind of just a ‘nobody’ who suddenly found themselves viral,” Lynch said.

Kat Benson, a registered dietitian and self-proclaimed “true-crime follower,” echoed feelings of skepticism when it came to the around-the-clock updates Santry was posting. “Let’s say there was really a body in that rug and that person's family just seeing that [content] ... I know I would not appreciate someone capitalizing off it,” Benson told me.

Santry acknowledges that people were critical of some of her early sentiments as everything was unfolding, but that was largely because she, like many people, were desensitized to this type of content, she says.

“There were people who were really offended by me making light of a potential body. Like [when I said] ‘Oh my gosh, it's like I'm living in an episode of true crime.’ But that's how it felt. That's because we've turned crime into entertainment as a society,” Santry told me.

The local news coverage of the case – where news crews camped out Santry’s home to livestream the dig and pester neighbors with questions – also caused Santry’s address to be released to the public, because she lives on a street that only has three houses. Once, she said, a random couple showed up to her home to do their own sleuthing. It was particularly creepy, she said, because she was about to get into her car to pick up her shattered laptop, which of course had started this whole saga. The couple started pestering her with questions – “Can we go in your backyard?” “Can we see the rug?” – while recording the entire time.

“They walked with me in my backyard. And I'm like, ‘What are they gonna try to ... like kill me? Put me in the ground?’ Like, what is going on?” Santry told me. After she told them she needed to leave to pick something up, she ushered them back to their car. The couple got back in their vehicle, but stayed outside her house and kept recording, until she drove off.

There was also another incident where a guy showed up at Santry’s home and started taking photos and videos from the front lawn. In that case her boyfriend scared him off with their two big dogs. Those were the only cases where people got out of their cars, Santry told me, but a lot of people would show up and just sit in their car then drive away. “This was all so strange to me, Santry said.

It’s been two months since the initial rug post now, and things have started to calm down. And while she doesn’t want to feed into the social media madness – she has stopped discussing the situation and shifted back to lifestyle content – Santry still has questions. Just two weeks ago, she reached out to the police department for updates about where the rug was – and to her surprise, she was informed that it had been placed in the homicide department. I called the Columbus Police Department and spoke with Officer Wright who remembered Santry’s case slightly as the “TikTok case.” After asking about the rug, he informed me that, “it wasn’t placed in the homicide department.” He continued, “We have a property room, where we store all of our property. We don’t store property in the homicide department, that’s where detectives work. As far as I know, there’s nothing that ever came of it.”

Though Santry originally told me, “When [the police] left my house with the rug, they went on the news and said that it was tested and there was nothing on it. I'm assuming they're still testing it.”

The detective that she spoke with told her that, “eventually, someday,” she would get a letter in the mail telling her she can come pick the old rug up. She isn't sure she wants it back.

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