

afternoon of 13 July in a neighbourhood delicatessen; she was presumably well known there, and the grocer who had waited on her could very likely have contradicted her story. As events turned out, the grocer did not remember what she had purchased, but she could not have counted on that in advance.

If the Crimmins case is viewed with the hindsight of the 1980s—when a young mother with a strong sexual appetite is less likely to be pronounced a Medea—it seems that Alice is entitled to the benefit of the Scottish verdict: Not Proven.

The Lady Killers, 1991

JAMES ELLROY

Few crime writers have come to their calling out of a background as dark and troubled as James Ellroy's. The only child of a "great looking and cheap couple," Ellroy, a native Angeleno, was six when his parents divorced. Four years later his mother's garroted corpse was found dumped near a high school athletic field. Her unsolved killing soon became linked in his imagination with the infamous Black Dahlia murder, a case (see page 524) that he first read about in Jack Webb's *The Badge*, a gift from his father on his 11th birthday.

To supplement the reading matter supplied by his father, Ellroy began shoplifting from the local bookstore. By his teens, he had become a heavy-drinking, swastika-sporting dropout and small-time thief. After an aborted stint in the army, he lived a down-and-out existence for the next dozen years, abusing alcohol and drugs and racking up roughly 30 arrests, 12 convictions, and eight months of jail time for various petty crimes. He began to turn his life around in 1977 when he joined Alcoholics Anonymous and took a caddying job at the Bel-Air Country Club. In 1981, he published the noir thriller *Brown's Requiem*, set in a seedy L.A. landscape Ellroy knew firsthand. Eleven more hard-boiled crime novels followed over the next 14 years, including his acclaimed "L.A. Quartet," consisting of *The Black Dahlia* (1978), *The Big Nowhere* (1988), *L.A. Confidential* (1990), and *White Jazz* (1992)—books whose violence and ferocity justified his self-proclaimed status as the "Demon Dog of American literature." In 1994, as described in this piece from *GQ* magazine, he set out to find his mother's murderer, a quest that became the subject of his widely admired 1996 memoir *My Dark Places*.

My Mother's Killer

I thought the pictures would wound me.
 I thought they would grant my old nightmare form.
 I thought I could touch the literal horror and somehow commute
 my life sentence.

I was mistaken. The woman refused to grant me a reprieve. Her grounds were simple: My death gave you a voice, and I need you to recognize me past your exploitation of it.

Her headstone reads GENEVA HILLIKER ELLROY, 1915–1958. A cross denotes her Calvinist youth in a Wisconsin hick town. The file is marked “JEAN (HILLIKER) ELLROY, 187PC (UNSOLVED), DOD 6/22/58.”

I begged out of the funeral. I was 10 years old and sensed that I could manipulate adults to my advantage. I told no one that my tears were at best cosmetic and at worst an expression of hysterical relief. I told no one that I hated my mother at the time of her murder.

She died at 43. I'm 46 now. I flew out to Los Angeles to view the file because I resemble her more every day.

The L.A. County Sheriff handled the case. I set up file logistics with Sergeant Bill Stoner and Sergeant Bill McComas of the Unsolved Unit. Their divisional mandate is to periodically review open files with an eye toward solving the crimes outright or assessing the original investigating officers' failure to do so.

Both men were gracious. Both stressed that unsolved homicides tend to remain unsolved—thirty-six-year-old riddles deepen with the passage of time and blurring of consciousness. I told them I had no expectations of discovering a solution. I only wanted to touch the accumulated details and see where they took me.

Stoner said the photographs were grisly. I told him I could handle it.

The flight out was a blur. I ignored the meal service and the book I had brought to kill time with. Reminiscence consumed five hours—a whirl of memory and extrapolatable data.

My mother said she saw the Feds gun down John Dillinger. She was 19 and a nursing-school student fresh off the farm. My father said he had an affair with Rita Hayworth.

They loved to tell stories. They rarely let the truth impinge on a good anecdote. Their one child grew up to write horrible crime tales.

They met in '39 and divorced in '54. Their “irreconcilable differences” amounted to a love of the flesh. She majored in booze and minored in men. He guzzled Alka-Seltzer for his ulcer and chased women with an equal lack of discernment.

I found my mother in bed with strange men. My father hid his liaisons from me. I loved him more from the gate.

She had red hair. She drank Early Times bourbon and got mawkish or hellaciously pissed off. She sent me to church and stayed home to nurse Saturday-night hangovers.

The divorce settlement stipulated split custody: weekdays with my mother, three weekends a month with my father. He rented a cheap pad close to my weekday home. Sometimes he'd stand across the street and hold down surveillance.

At night, I'd douse the living-room lights and look out the window. That red glowing cigarette tip? Proof that he loved me.

In 1956, my mother moved us from West Hollywood to Santa Monica. I enrolled in a cut-rate private school called Children's Paradise. The place was a dump site for disturbed kids of divorce. My confinement stretched from 7:30 A.M. to 5 P.M. A giant dirt playground and a swimming pool faced Wilshire Boulevard. Every kid was guaranteed passing grades and a poolside tan. A flurry of single moms hit the gate at 5:10. I developed a yen for women in their late thirties.

My mother worked as a nurse at the Packard Bell electronics plant. She had a boyfriend named Hank, a fat lowlife missing one thumb. Once a week she'd take me to a drive-in double feature. She'd sip from a flask and let me gorge myself on hot dogs.

I coveted the weekends with my father. No church, sleepover studs, or liquored-up mood swings. The man embraced the lazy life, half by design, half by the default of the weak.

Early in 1958, my mother began assembling a big lie. This is not a revisionist memory—I recall detecting mendacity in the moment. She said we needed a change of scenery. She said I needed to live in a house, not an apartment. She said she knew about a place in El Monte, a San Gabriel Valley town twelve miles east of L.A. proper.

We drove out there. El Monte was a downscale suburb populated by white shitkickers and pachucos with duck's-ass haircuts.

Most streets were unpaved. Most people parked on their lawns. Our prospective house: a redwood job surrounded by half-dead banana trees.

I said I didn't like El Monte. My mother told me to give it time. We hauled our belongings out early in February.

I traded up academically: Children's Paradise to Anne Le Gore Elementary School. The move baffled and infuriated my father. Why would a (tenuously) middle-class white woman with a good job thirty-odd miles away relocate to a town like El Monte? The rush-hour commute: at least ninety minutes each way. "I want my son to live in a house": pure nonsense. My father thought my mother was running. From a man or to a man. He said he was going to hire detectives to find out.

I settled into El Monte. My mother upgraded the custody agreement: I could see my father all four weekends a month. He picked me up every Friday night. It took a cab ride and three bus transfers to get us to his pad, just south of Hollywood.

I tried to enjoy El Monte. I smoked a reefer with a Mexican kid and ate myself sick on ice cream. My stint at Children's Paradise left me deficient in arithmetic. My teacher called my mother up to comment. They hit it off and went out on several dates.

I turned 10. My mother told me I could choose who I wanted to live with. I told her I wanted to live with my father.

She slapped me. I called her a drunk and a whore. She slapped me again and raged against my father's hold on me.

I became a sounding board.

My father called my mother a lush and a tramp. My mother called my father a weakling and a parasite. She threatened to slap injunctions on him and push him out of my life.

School adjourned for summer vacation on Friday, June 20. My father whisked me off for a visit.

That weekend is etched in hyper-focus. I remember seeing *The Vikings* at the Fox-Wilshire Theatre. I remember a spaghetti dinner at

Yaconelli's Restaurant. I remember a TV fight card. I remember the bus ride back to El Monte as long and hot.

My father put me in a cab at the depot and waited for a bus back to L.A. The cab dropped me at my house.

I saw three black-and-white police cars. I saw my neighbor Mrs. Kryzcki on the sidewalk. I saw four plainclothes cops—and instinctively recognized them as such.

Mrs. Kryzcki said, "That's the boy."

A cop took me aside. "Son, your mother's been killed."

I didn't cry. A press photographer hustled me to Mr. Kryzcki's toolshed and posed me with an awl in my hand.

My wife found a copy of that photograph last year. It's been published several times, in conjunction with my work. The second picture the man took has previously never seen print.

I'm at the workbench, sawing at a piece of wood. I'm grimacing ear to ear, showing off for the cops and reporters.

They most likely chalked my clowning up to shock. They couldn't know that that shock was instantly compromised.

The police reconstructed the crime.

My mother went out drinking Saturday night. She was seen at the Desert Inn bar in El Monte with a dark-haired white man and a blonde woman. My mother and the man left the bar around 10 P.M.

A group of Little Leaguers discovered the body. My mother had been strangled at an unknown location and dumped into some bushes next to the athletic field at Arroyo High School, a mile and a half from the Desert Inn.

She clawed her assailant's face bloody. The killer had pulled off one of her stockings and tied it loosely around her neck post-mortem.

I went to live with my father. I forced some tears out that Sunday—and none since.

My flight landed early. L.A. looked surreal, and inimical to the myth town of my books.

I checked in at the hotel and called Sergeant Stoner. We made plans to meet the following day. He gave me directions to the Homicide Bureau; earthquake tremors had ravaged the old facility and necessitated a move.

Sergeant McComas wouldn't be there. He was recuperating from open-heart surgery, a classic police-work by-product.

I told Stoner I'd pop for lunch. He warned me that the file might kill my appetite.

I ate a big room-service dinner. Dusk hit—I looked out my window and imagined it was 1950-something.

I set my novel *Clandestine* in 1951. It's a chronologically altered, heavily fictionalized account of my mother's murder. The story details a young cop's obsession: linking the death of a woman he had a one-night stand with to the killing of a redheaded nurse in El Monte. The supporting cast includes a 9-year-old boy very much like I was at that age.

I gave the killer my father's superficial attributes and juxtaposed them against a psychopathic bent. I have never understood my motive for doing this.

I called the dead nurse Marcella De Vries. She hailed from my mother's hometown: Tunnel City, Wisconsin.

I did not research that book. Fear kept me from haunting archives and historical sites. I wanted to contain what I knew and felt about my mother. I wanted to acknowledge my blood debt and prove my imperiousness to her power by portraying her with coldhearted lucidity.

Several years later, I wrote *The Black Dahlia*. The title character was a murder victim as celebrated as Jean Ellroy was ignored. She died the year before my birth, and I understood the symbiotic cohesion the moment I first heard of her.

The Black Dahlia was a young woman named Elizabeth Short. She came west with fatuous hopes of becoming a movie star. She was undisciplined, immature, and promiscuous. She drank to excess and told whopping lies.

Someone picked her up and tortured her for two days. Her death was as hellishly protracted as my mother's was gasping and quick. The

killer cut her in half and deposited her in a vacant lot twenty miles west of Arroyo High School.

The killing is still unsolved. The Black Dahlia case remains a media cause célèbre.

I read about it in 1959. It hit me with unmitigated force. The horror rendered my mother's death both more outré and more prosaic. I seized on Elizabeth Short and hoarded the details of her life. Every bit of minutiae was mortar with which to build walls to block out Geneva Hilliker Ellroy.

This stratagem ruled my unconscious. The suppression exacted a price: years of nightmares and fear of the dark. Writing the book was only mildly cathartic; transmogrifying Jean to Betty left one woman still unrecognized.

And exploited by a master self-promoter with a tight grip on pop-psych show-and-tell.

I wanted her to fight back. I wanted her to rule my nightmares in plain view.

The Homicide Bureau was temporarily housed in an East L.A. office complex. The squad room was spanking clean and cop-antithetical.

Sergeant Stoner met me. He was tall and thin, with big eyes and a walrus mustache. His suit was a notch more upscale than his colleagues'.

We had a cup of coffee. Stoner discussed his most celebrated assignment, the Cotton Club murder case.

The man impressed me. His perceptions were astute and devoid of commonly held police ideology. He listened, carefully phrased his responses, and drew information out of me with smiles and throwaway gestures. He *made me* want to tell him things.

I caught his intelligence full-on. He knew I caught it.

Talk flowed nicely. One cup of coffee became three. The file rested on Stoner's desk—a small accordion folder secured by rubber bands.

I knew I was stalling. I knew I was postponing my first look at the pictures.

Stoner read my mind. He said he'd pull the worst of the shots if I wanted him to.

I said no.

The file was a mishmash: envelopes, Teletype slips, handwritten notes and two copies of the Detective Division Blue Book, an accumulation of reports and verbatim interviews. My first impression: This was the chaos of Jean Ellroy's life.

I put the photograph envelope aside. Penal-code numbers and birth dates jumped off the Teletypes.

The DOBs ran from 1912 to 1919. The codes designated arrests for aggravated assault and rape.

My mother left the bar with a "fortyish" man. The Teletypes deciphered: requests for information on men with sex-crime priors.

I read some odd notes. Minutiae grabbed me.

The Desert Inn bar: 11721 East Valley Boulevard. My mother's '57 Buick: license KFE 778. Our old house: 756 Maple Avenue.

I read the names on the front of the Blue Book. The investigating officers: sergeants John Lawton and Ward Hallinen.

The squad room lapsed into slow motion. I heard Stoner telling people that Bill McComas had aced his surgery. I spotted two full-size sheets of stationery with memo slips attached.

Early in 1970, two women wrote Homicide and informed "To Whom It May Concern" that they believed their respective ex-husbands murdered Geneva Hilliker Ellroy. Woman Number One stated that her ex worked at Packard Bell and had had affairs with my mother and two other women there. The man "behaved in a suspicious fashion" in the weeks following the killing and hit her when she pressed him about his whereabouts on the night of June 21. Woman Number Two said that her ex-husband harbored a "long-standing grudge" against Jean Ellroy. My mother refused to process a workers' compensation claim that the man had proffered, and his resentment sent him "off the deep end."

Woman Number Two included a postscript: Her ex-husband

torched a furniture warehouse in 1968 to avenge a dinette-set re-possession.

Both letters read vindictively sincere. Both were respectful of police authority. Memorandums indicated that the leads were checked out.

One detective interviewed both ex-husbands. He concluded that the allegations were groundless and that the women did not know each other and thus could not have colluded.

A relatively obscure homicide. Two disturbingly similar accusations—*unrelated* accusations—eleven and a half years after the crime.

I examined the Blue Book. The reports and interview transcripts lacked a continuous narrative line. I scanned a few pages and realized that my basic knowledge of the case was sufficient to make odd bits of data cohere.

The crime-scene report was logged in mid-book. The first El Monte cop to respond reported that "the victim was lying on her back at the side of the road. There was dry blood on her lips and nose. The lower part of the victim's body was covered with a woman's coat. The victim was wearing a multi-colored (blue and black) dress. A brassiere appeared to be around the victim's neck."

Further examination reveals:

The brassiere is really a stocking.

A necklace strand rests under the body.

Forty-seven individual pearls are scattered nearby.

The coroner arrives. He views the body and points out bruises on the neck. He thinks the woman was strangled with a window-sash cord or clothesline. Drag marks on the woman's hips indicate that she was killed elsewhere and brought to this location.

The investigation commenced. My memory filled in Blue Book continuity gaps.

No identification was found on the body. The El Monte Police Department called in the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Detective Bureau.

Radio bulletins went out. The dead woman's description was flashed Valley-wide.

Our neighbor Mrs. Kryzcki responded. She was brought to the county morgue and identified the body. She said Jean Ellroy was a fine lady, who did not drink or date men.

My mother's car was discovered parked behind the Desert Inn. Bar employees were detained at El Monte police headquarters.

They identified my mother from a snapshot that Mrs. Kryzcki provided. Yes, the woman came in last night. She arrived alone about eight o'clock and later joined a man and a woman. Said man and woman were not regular patrons. None of the staff had ever seen them before.

The man was a swarthy Caucasian or a Mexican. He was about 40 years old, thin, between five feet nine and six feet tall. The woman was white, blonde, and in her late twenties. She wore her hair tied back in a ponytail.

No one heard them exchange names. A waitress recalled that a regular named Michael Whitaker had several drinks with the dead woman and two unknowns.

A waitress supplied more names: every *known* patron in the bar Saturday night. Sergeants Hallinen and Lawton checked the El Monte PD arrest docket and learned that Michael Whitaker was picked up for plain drunk at 4 A.M.

The man, 24, was spotted on foot near Stan's Drive-In. He sobered up in the El Monte drunk tank and was released at 9 A.M.

The known patrons were brought in and questioned. Several remembered seeing my mother with the Swarthy Man and the Blonde. None of them had ever seen my mother before. None of them had ever seen the Swarthy Man or the Blonde.

Michael Whitaker was brought in. Hallinen and Lawton questioned him. A police stenographer recorded the interrogation.

Whitaker's memory was booze-addled. He couldn't recall the name of the woman he was currently shacked up with. He said he danced with my mother and hit her up for a Sunday-night date. She declined, because her son was coming back from a weekend with his father.

Whitaker said the Swarthy Man told him his name. He couldn't remember it.

He said my 43-year-old mother looked "about 22." He said he got "pretty high" and fell off his chair once.

He said he saw the Swarthy Man and my mother leave together at about 10 P.M.

The Swarthy Man told Whitaker his name. This supported my long-held instinct that the murder was not premeditated.

A waitress confirmed Whitaker's account. Yes, Michael fell off his chair. Yes, the redhead left with the Swarthy Man.

Hallinen and Lawton retained a sketch artist. Desert Inn patrons and employees described the Swarthy Man. The artist drew up a likeness.

The drawing was circulated to newspapers and every police agency in Los Angeles County. The Desert Inn crew examined thousands of mug shots and failed to identify the Swarthy Man.

Officers canvassed the area around Arroyo High School. No one had noticed suspicious activity late Saturday night or Sunday morning. Hallinen and Lawton interrogated a score of local cranks, perverts, and career misogynists.

No leads accumulated. No hard suspects emerged.

On Wednesday, June 25, a witness came forth—a Stan's Drive-In carhop named Lavonne Chambers. Hallinen and Lawton interviewed her. Her testimony—recorded verbatim—was precise, articulate, and perceptive. Everything she said was new to me. Her statement radically altered my take on the crime.

She served the Swarthy Man and my mother—*on two different occasions*—late Saturday night and early Sunday morning. She described my mother's dress and mock-pearl ring. She described the Swarthy Man's car: a '55 or '56 dark-green Olds. She said the sketch was accurate and ID'd the man as white, not Latin.

They arrived at 10:20, shortly after their Desert Inn departure. They "talked vivaciously" and "seemed to have been drinking." The man

had coffee. My mother had a grilled cheese sandwich. They ate in the car and left a half hour later.

Miss Chambers worked late that night. My mother and the Swarthy Man returned at 2 A.M.

He ordered coffee. He seemed "quiet and sullen." My mother was "quite high and chatting gaily." The man "acted bored with her."

Miss Chambers said my mother looked "slightly disheveled." The top of her dress was unbuttoned, and one breast was spilling out.

Sergeant Hallinen: "Do you think they might have had a petting party?"

Miss Chambers: "Maybe."

They left at 2:45. Jean Ellroy's body was discovered eight hours later.

I turned to the autopsy report. The coroner noted signs of recent intercourse. My mother's lungs were severely congested, presumably from years of heavy smoking.

She died of ligature asphyxiation. She sustained several blows to the head. Her fingernails were caked with blood, skin, and beard fragments.

She fought back.

I opened the photo envelope. The first stack of pictures: detained and exonerated suspects.

Cruel-looking men. Rough trade. White trash with a vengeance. Hard eyes, tattoos, psychopathic rectitude.

I recognized Harvey Glatman, a sex killer executed in 1959. A note said he passed a polygraph test.

The second stack: miscellaneous photos and wide-angles of the crime scene.

My father, circa 1946. A notation on the back: "Vict's ex-husband." A faded snapshot: my mother in her teens. The man beside her? Probably my German-immigrant grandfather.

Arroyo High School, 6/22/58. Santa Anita Road and King's Road—a football field with jerry-built goalposts. Those right-hand-corner X marks: the curbside bushes where they found her. The topography

lacked perspective. Every detail hit my eyes as too small, and unequal to the central myth of my life.

I looked at the pictures of my dead mother. I saw the stocking around her neck and the insect bites on her breasts.

Lividity had thickened her features. She did not look like anyone I had ever known.

I knew it wasn't over. I knew my hours with the file constituted an ambiguous new start.

I left the squad room and drove to El Monte. The years then to now had been cruel.

I clenched up. It felt like something had to hit me at any second. I kept expecting a migraine or a bad case of the shakes.

New prefab houses had aged and split at the joints. Smog obscured the San Gabriel peaks.

The Desert Inn was gone. A taco hut replaced it. The El Monte PD building had been razed and rebuilt.

Anne Le Gore School remained intact. Gang graffiti on the walls provided an update.

Stan's Drive-In was gone. My old house had been face-lifted past recognition.

Arroyo High School needed a paint job. The playing field needed a trim. Weeds grew thick all around the X-marked spot.

The town had compressed. Its old secrets had subsided into the memories of strangers.

Stoner told me Sergeant Lawton was dead. Sergeant Ward Hallinen: 82 years old and living outside San Diego.

I called him and explained who I was. He apologized for his failing memory and said he couldn't recall the case. I thanked him for his efforts thirty-six years ago. I remembered a cop who gave me a candy bar, and wondered if it was him.

It wasn't over. The resolution felt incomplete.

I canceled a dinner date and willed myself to sleep. I woke up at 3 A.M.—unclenched and sick with it.

Conscious thoughts wouldn't process. I went down to the hotel gym and slammed weights until it hurt.

Steam and a shower helped. I went back to my room and let it hammer me.

New facts contradicted old assumptions. I had always thought my mother was killed because she wouldn't have sex with a man. It was a child's coda to horror: A woman dies fending off violation.

My mother made love with her killer. A witness viewed postcoital moments.

They left the drive-in. He wanted to ditch this desperate woman he fucked and get on with his life. The combustion occurred because she wanted more.

More liquor. More distance from the Dutch Reformed Church. More self-abasing honky-tonk thrills.

More love 16,000 times removed in desiccation.

I inherited those urges from my mother. Gender bias favored me: Men can indiscriminately fuck women with far greater sanction than women can indiscriminately fuck men. I drank, used drugs, and whored with the bravado of the winked-at and condoned. Luck and a coward's circumspection kept me short of the abyss.

Her pain was greater than mine. It defines the gulf between us. Her death taught me to look inward and hold myself separate. That gift of knowledge saved my life.

It wasn't over. My investigation will continue.

I took a new gift away from El Monte. I feel proud that I carry her features.

Geneva Hilliker Ellroy: 1915–1958.

My debt grows. Your final terror is the flame I touch my hand to.

I will not diminish your power by saying I love you.

August 1994

Crime Wave, 1999

ANN RULE

Hailed by her legion of readers as America's "Queen of True Crime," Ann Rule (b. 1935) was exposed to the world of law enforcement at an early age. Her grandfather and an uncle served as sheriffs, another uncle was a medical examiner, and a cousin was a district attorney. During summer visits to her grandparents in Stanton, Michigan, she got a close-up look at small-town police work and spent time around the county jail, helping her grandmother serve meals to inmates. After graduating from the University of Washington, where she studied creative writing and criminology, she worked for 18 months as a provisional police officer with the Seattle Police Department before failing her eye exam. She later began contributing pseudonymous articles to true detective magazines, writing as the masculine "Andy Stack," while taking classes in forensic science to increase her expertise. Her commercial breakthrough came about through an eerie circumstance: in the early 1970s Rule worked at a suicide hotline at the Seattle Crisis Center, where she manned a phone next to a clean-cut student volunteer named Ted Bundy. Her personal knowledge of the man who turned out to be one of the most infamous serial killers of the 20th century helped make her first true-crime book, *The Stranger Beside Me* (1980), into a particularly gripping narrative. Since then, she has produced a steady stream of non-fiction best sellers, some of them book-length studies, others collections of short case histories. Like the selection reprinted here, taken from her 2001 book *Empty Promises*, Rule's true crime accounts are characterized by taut, suspenseful narratives, sympathetic attention to the victims, and admiring portrayals of the dedicated and selfless agents of the law.

Young Love

Unrequited love can be as painful as an abscessed tooth. The pain is throbbing, searing, and anyone who has suffered from it remembers the wakeful nights when sleep would not come. But there is nothing more agonizing than the loss of first love. Those