

JACK WEBB

Raised in a poor section of downtown Los Angeles, Jack Webb (1920–1982) began his radio career in 1945 following his discharge from the U.S. Army Air Forces. After playing a tough detective on a show about waterfront crime, he began working with the LAPD to develop a new police series based on actual police files. The result was the pioneering, documentary-style *Dragnet*, a huge hit on radio (1949–57) and subsequently a staple of early TV. (After going off the air in 1959, *Dragnet* returned in a second incarnation that ran from 1967 to 1970.) With his clipped delivery, stony affect, and trademark request for “just the facts,” Webb’s detective hero, Sgt. Joe Friday, became one of the iconic figures of mid-20th-century American popular culture.

Webb became so completely identified with his character that he merged, in the public’s mind, with his role. It is Friday’s laconic voice that seems to be speaking in this selection from Webb’s 1958 book *The Badge: True and Terrifying Crime Stories That Could Not Be Presented on TV, from the Creator and Star of Dragnet*. His account of the infamous “Black Dahlia” case had a life-changing impact on the celebrated crime writer James Ellroy, who received a copy of the book for his 11th birthday, not long after the murder of Ellroy’s mother. As Ellroy declares in the introduction he contributed to the 2005 reissue of the book: “*The Badge* got me hooked. I just followed Jack Webb’s lead.”

The Black Dahlia

She was a lazy girl and irresponsible; and, when she chose to work, she drifted obscurely from one menial job to another, in New England, south to Florida, westward to the Coast.

No matter how they die, most drifters leave nothing behind, and many of the 25,000 graves dug yearly in Los Angeles are marked by blank stones, for their occupants didn’t even leave a name. Yet today, more than a decade after her strange and awful death, this girl remains hauntingly, pathetically alive to many persons.

To the sociologist, she is the typical, unfortunate depression child who matured too suddenly in her teens into the easy money, easy living, easy loving of wartime America. To the criminologist, though the case is almost too melodramatic in its twists, her tortured, severed body is an eerie blend of Poe and Freud. To millions of plain Americans, fascinated by the combined savagery and cool intellect that went into her murder, she is “The Black Dahlia.”

The other side of the shield.

Right from the first erroneous report to the police at 10:35 A.M. that gray mid-January day in 1947, the investigation was askew through no fault of the police. In the days, months, years of sleuthing that followed, it never quite got back into balance, again through no fault of the detectives. More than any other crime, murder is sometimes like that.

In the University section, along a dreary, weedy block without a house on either side, a housewife was walking to the store with her five-year-old daughter, scolding her a little because she wanted to play in the dew-wet lots.

Halfway up the block, the mother stopped in horror at something she saw in one of the lots. “What’s that?” the child asked. The mother didn’t answer. Grabbing her hand, she ran with her to the nearest neighbor’s house to call the police.

And the first, wrong alarm went out: “Man down, 39th and Norton.”

Within ten minutes, about 10:45 A.M., the first patrol car had reached the scene. Quickly a team of detectives from Central Division, a full crew from the Crime Lab, newspaper legmen, and photographers followed. The street was blocked off to keep back the curious, and the investigation got underway.

Sergeant Finis Arthur Brown of the Homicide Division, who was going to live with this ugly thing for months and years, hadn’t yet arrived.

At 9 A.M. that day, he had been in court to testify in another case. After that, he went to Sixth and Rampart Streets to check out a dead-body report. An elderly man had died of natural causes, but Brown

followed through with routine questioning of the rooming house operator.

Then there was a phone call for him. Captain Jack Donahoe told him to get over quick to the 3900 block on South Norton. "Looks like we got a bad one, Brownie," he warned.

At 11:05 A.M., just half an hour after the discovery of the body, Brown was there. He saw what he was up against, and, in another twenty-five minutes, additional manpower was at the scene. Nobody could say later that LAPD hadn't rolled hard and fast on this one.

Efficiently, detectives fanned out through the neighborhood. They wanted to find the woman who had made the first call. They hoped to locate some resident who had perhaps heard or seen something, *anything*, though the chances were one-hundred-to-one against them. The lot was a good hundred yards from the nearest house, and the body had probably been dumped at three or four o'clock in the morning.

They got nowhere. Neither did the "hard facts" men who sifted patiently through the weeds, turning up broken glass, rusted cans and other rubbish; but not a clue. The only bit of physical evidence was a set of tire marks on the pavement; and, if they came from the killer's car, they were never to prove useful.

But there was the body.

Old homicide hand though he was, Sergeant Brown had to make a conscious effort to study it.

It was nude. It showed evidence of slow, deliberate torture. There were neat, deep slashes around the breasts and on them. Rope burns on the wrists and ankles indicated the victim had been spread-eagled to heighten her agony. Her mouth had been deeply gashed from ear to ear so that her face was fixed in a grotesque and leering death smile. Finally, the body had been cleanly, surgically cut in two at the waist.

Brown was glad to turn away and check with Lee Jones of the Crime Lab. There were two interesting things to note. A sprinkling of bristles on the body indicated that it had been scrubbed. And, despite the lavish mutilation, there was only one drop of blood in the field.

Scientists, especially hard-bitten police scientists, usually don't give

in to emotion. Lee Jones couldn't restrain himself. "This is the worst crime upon a woman I've ever seen," he blurted.

Sergeant Brown's pressing job was identification. But the body had been stripped, and there was only the long shot that maybe the girl had got into trouble and maybe her fingerprints were on file. Brown had copies of them rushed to the FBI in Washington by means of newspaper telephoto equipment.

Then he used the press another way, asking them to publish an artist's recreation of the girl's face (without the awful death smile). And, though not for publication, he had every inch of the weedy lot photographed, right down to three-dimensional shots of the severed corpse.

No one came forward to identify the victim, and though the forlorn files in Missing Persons were checked and rechecked, not a single description resembled the butchered remains at 39th and Norton.

But even before they knew whom they were looking for, LAPD launched the biggest crime hunt in modern Los Angeles history.

Every one of the city's dozen police divisions was subdivided down to each radio car beat. House to house, door to door in the apartment buildings, more than 250 policemen rang bells and asked questions.

Did you hear any unusual noises or screams last night or yesterday or the night before?

Have you noticed anything unusual around the neighborhood? Anybody acting peculiarly? Anybody digging in a yard, maybe burying a pile of woman's clothing? Or burning anything?

Very possibly, one of the 250 officers, talked to the killer that day, or to someone who had a terrible suspicion about his (or her) identity. Yet all 250 drew a blank. Where the girl had been murdered was as much a mystery as the why of it, and the who, for that matter.

Next day the FBI kick-back supplied the who. Her name: Elizabeth Short, age 22; height, five feet five inches; weight, 120 pounds; race, Caucasian; sex, female; description, black hair (died) and blue eyes.

The FBI had her because just once, four years earlier in Santa Barbara, Elizabeth had been picked up. She was a minor then, and a police-woman caught her drinking in a bar with a girl friend and two soldiers.

In a sense, it was ironic. The wrong way of life that was to lead her to death at least had left behind a clue to her identity, and she would escape the drifter's nameless grave.

Now that Brown had something to go on, the pace of the investigation accelerated. Who was Elizabeth Short? Where did she come from? What did she do? Boy friends? Associates? Habits? When was she last seen alive?

For seventy-two hours, Brown and many of the original twenty detectives assigned to the mystery worked day and night without letup. In fact, during the next thirty days, Brown was to cram in an additional thirty-three days of overtime. During one three-day period, he never got around to changing his shirt.

At the end of the first, furious three days of investigation, Brown knew a great deal about Betty Short or "The Black Dahlia," as an imaginative police reporter had re-christened her for all time. Those seventy-two hours had yielded the secret of The Dahlia's past right down to the date of her disappearance. Another seventy-two hours of such detective work, at most a week, and by all the normal odds LAPD would be putting the collar on a suspect.

Four years later, Sergeant Brown was down in Texas, chasing still another lead that led nowhere.

The girl who was to bloom into a night flower was one of four sisters reared by their mother in Salem, Massachusetts. About the time the war broke out, when she was in her middle teens, Betty Short went to work. She ushered in theaters, she slung plates as a waitress. It was the kind of work where a girl too young and attractive would meet too many men.

For a time, her father reappeared in Salem, and then left again for northern California. Maybe there was something romantic about this man who came and went; maybe he told her stories about sunny California, so different from cold little Salem. At any rate, at eighteen, Betty went West and joined him briefly.

Then she struck out on her own for Los Angeles, the city of oppor-

tunity where many another waitress, poor but beautiful, had made it in the movies. She settled near the campus of the University of Southern California, and she may even have walked past the lot at 39th and Norton. It wasn't far away.

Los Angeles, like every other city, was at war. On a tip from a soldier, Betty went to Camp Cook, north Los Angeles, and got a sales job in the PX.

Then the first ominous thing happened. Betty suddenly threw up the job. There were barracks room whispers that some soldier had beaten her up badly. Why? Nobody seemed to know.

Betty drifted on to Santa Barbara; and, after the policewoman caught her in the bar with the two soldiers, she returned to New England. For almost two years, she sort of settled down, working as a waitress and cashier in a Boston restaurant.

Restlessness seized her again, and she took a bus all the way to Miami, working there for a winter. Then she came back to Boston and got a job across the Charles River in Cambridge in a café near the Harvard University campus.

There was a brief romance with a Harvard undergrad. All spring they dated; they even exchanged photographs. But when the school year ended in June, he went home; and Betty was on the move again. For a time, she lived in Indianapolis, and then in Chicago in the bright and noisy hotels that cluster round the Loop.

Something happened there that never has been fully established. Apparently, she met a handsome young Air Force flier. Maybe she even married him. No one has been able to check it out definitely, one way or the other.

At any rate, she loved him enough to go halfway across the country when he pleaded with her by wire to join him in Long Beach, California. There he met her at the train and took her to a hotel room he had arranged. From there, they journeyed on to Hollywood.

And then one day he told her he had to fly East to be separated from the service. He was like her college student; she never saw him again.

The war was over, the men were going home. At twenty-one, when

she should have been starting married life or maybe a modest career, she was already obsolescent.

For three months, The Dahlia moved in with a girl friend; then went to a small home for would-be actresses; moved again to a private home; then to a hotel for girls in Hollywood.

She had no job. She killed time hanging around the radio studios and attending the radio shows. She sponged off friends and even got money from her mother back home. She lost her clothes to the landlady in lieu of rent. She mooched at the night spots and the bars where a pretty girl could easily cadge a drink. She was careless about the company she kept.

Two or three times, friends later remembered, Betty had hitched rides to the Sixth Street area when she was out of funds. After a day or so, she would reappear, mysteriously replenished. Where she got the money never was known.

Some six weeks before the end, The Dahlia met a salesman in Hollywood. The salesman rented a room for her in a hotel, but he signed the register "Mr. and Mrs." Later, he took her to a bus depot, bought her a ticket for San Diego and said good-bye.

In San Diego, aimless, drifting, The Dahlia happened into an all-night theater. She got into a conversation with the cashier. Little by little, The Dahlia let drop her affecting story of misfortune and unhappiness.

Generously, the cashier brought her home with her that night and then let her stay for the next month. But something seemed to be driving The Dahlia toward her fate. She met another young salesman and begged him to drive her to Los Angeles the following day.

Perhaps with romantic hopes in mind, he did so, but as soon as they arrived, The Dahlia skillfully avoided a dinner date with him. She had some other plan in mind. Her sister, she explained, was down from Berkeley and stopping at the Hotel Biltmore. Regretfully, the salesman waited while she checked her bag at the bus depot and then dropped her off at the hotel.

It was 7 P.M., January 10.

For three more hours, The Dahlia moved freely. Three hours in

which chance, a friend happening by, or an attractive well-dressed stranger might have diverted her from her plan, whatever it was.

Dozens of men must have observed her, for she spent the time waiting near the phone booths and she was, in her black cardigan jacket and skirt, white blouse, red shoes, red purse, and beige sport coat, the kind of girl that men observe. Yet none offered a merciful, life-saving flirtation.

Once The Dahlia changed a dollar bill at the hotel cigar stand and made a phone call, maybe two. Then she waited, as though expecting a call back. When none came, she walked out the front door, smiling to the doorman as he tipped his cap. He observed her trim form swinging south on Olive Street toward Sixth, the slim legs striding easily, the red heels tapping purposefully on the sidewalk.

It was 10 P.M.

And thus Sergeant Brown traced The Dahlia back to childhood, forward to the brink of eternity. And there the investigation stood still. Five days, from the doorman's last salute to the living, up to the discovery of the mutilated thing, remained a blank.

Medical evidence could say what must have happened during part of that time, but not why or by whom, nor could it locate the abattoir.

The Dahlia had been roped and spread-eagled and then hour after hour, for possibly two or three days, slowly tortured with the little knife thrusts that hurt terribly but wouldn't kill. She had made the rope burns on her wrists and ankles as she writhed in agony.

Finally, in hot rage or *coup de grâce*, there had come the slash across the face from ear to ear, and The Dahlia choked to death on her own blood.

But the killer had not done with her body.

Afterwards, he (or she) drained the system of blood, scrubbed the body clean and even shampooed the hair. Then it was neatly cut in two and deposited at 39th and Norton.

Five days after the first report of "man down," the twenty original investigators were increased to fifty. Now the newspapers were playing the case as no crime had ever been played in Los Angeles, and the publicity was both a blessing and a burden to LAPD.

Every hour seemed to turn up a new "lead" that had to be checked out; and suddenly dozens of persons who had not recognized The Black Dahlia's sketch in the papers four days earlier volunteered bits and pieces of information about her life. Nothing, however trivial, could be ignored. Everything was run down, saved or discarded.

Some fifteen times, the Crime Lab and men from the Detective Bureau went over houses, from cellar to attic, where the slow torture killing might have been played out. They found nothing. Having been lost en route, The Dahlia's trunk at last arrived from Chicago. Again, nothing.

There had to be a touch of lunacy in a killing like that, and madness communicates with madness. Now the "confessions" began pouring in to irritate and distract Finis Brown. One man telephoned that he was coming in to surrender, and he did—three or four times when the detectives wouldn't believe him the first time. "Confessin' Tom," they finally called the nuisance.

At Fort Dix, New Jersey, a soldier sobbed out the story of the murder he hadn't committed. Four times at his own expense, a man traveled west from Utah and sat, drenched with sweat in the interrogation room, while he begged detectives to believe his preposterous admission of the killing.

At times it seemed the case needed a division psychiatrist more than a Homicide man, but with remarkable restraint, LAPD booked only one of the confessors for insanity.

In all, thirty-eight confessions had to be double-checked, and the waste of time was deplorable. Scores more had to be at least listened to before detectives knew they weren't worth even a rundown. Now and then, fighting to unclutter his few hard facts from all the fancies being pressed on him, Finis Brown wondered if he wouldn't tip over himself.

But if a madman had killed The Dahlia, he might be among those

psychos, and the loony bin had to be emptied, one poor deluded mind at a time, just to make sure.

Then there were the stacks of mail that came in daily, mostly abusive, obscene or plain crazy but now and then intelligently written notes that were even more annoying. These contained pompous advice from amateur detectives telling the police how to go about their business.

Everything had to be read because The Dahlia's butcher might just be the egocentric who would delight in needling the police. At first, Sergeant Brown kept a ledger to catalogue the mail, but the volume overwhelmed him. So names and addresses of the writers were filed on cards to be checked out gradually when there was time for it.

In ten days, the hysteria seemed to have run its course. For the first time, the newspapers took The Dahlia off page one, and LAPD enjoyed a moment of quiet. The quiet before the storm, as it turned out.

That very same evening, a mail truck emptied a box near the Hotel Biltmore, and among other pieces picked up a simple carton, wrapped in brown paper and addressed to the police. Next morning, when they unwrapped the package, Finis Brown and his detectives relieved themselves with words that would have made an old Army sergeant shake his head in envy.

Inside were The Black Dahlia's purse, her Social Security card, her birth certificate, a batch of miscellaneous cards and papers, scraps with numbers and names on them, even an address book. The killer was laughing at Homicide, telling the detectives contemptuously to go ahead and make something of it.

But he (or she) had been careful to leave no traces. Postmark and printing, carton and brown paper, yielded no clues. There was a faint odor to the contents, and scientific tests confirmed the suspicions of the detectives. Everything had been carefully washed in gasoline to remove any trace of where it had been or who had touched it. Tantalizingly, about a hundred pages had been ripped out of the address book. Some two hundred names remained, and Finis Brown had each one checked out, in vain.

With this mocking gesture, the killer bowed out; and, though the papers hastily brought *The Dahlia* back to page one, though the humiliated detectives bird-dogged even harder, this was really the end of the line.

There is no statute of limitations on murder, and LAPD will not admit defeat.

Two years later, Finis Brown thought he had a lead on the mysterious soldier who had given Betty the bad beating at Camp Cook. The lead ran dry.

Three years later, he was able to make a complete check on the salesman who had signed the register "Mr. and Mrs." in Hollywood and then put her on the bus to San Diego.

Four years later, he was down in Austin and Dallas, Texas, and after that up in Boston interviewing the Harvard man who had dated her one spring.

Nothing, nothing, except to close out false scents and then try to get back to the right one.

Sometimes police know their man and yet cannot pin the evidence on him. Sometimes they sense with the hunter's intuition that they are close, very close, and lose him only because he has suddenly died or managed to flee into obscurity. Usually, almost always, they can reconstruct the motive and sex of the killer. Murder is their business, and these things are not surprising.

But with the monster who slowly, delectably tortured *The Black Dahlia* to death, they have never felt that they were anywhere near close. They have never known the motive, nor whether the slayer was man or woman, nor where the agony was perpetrated.

Was the killer *The Dahlia's* lover or husband who felt he had been betrayed? But what betrayal, even unfaithfulness or a mocking laugh, merited revenge like this?

Was it perhaps a woman who had taken *The Dahlia* as wife in Lesbian marriage? Was that why the body had to be bisected, so that she could carry out the parts to her car?

Was the killer, man or woman, a sadist with a blood fetish who slashed for no comprehensible reason at all?

All LAPD can say is that its detectives have exonerated every man and woman whom they've talked to, including the scores who insist to this day that they are guilty.

Beyond that, you are free to speculate. But do him a favor—don't press your deductions on Finis Brown.

The Badge, 1958