

Michael Connelly:

Welcome back to Killer In The Code: Solving The Black Dahlia & Zodiac Cases. This is Chapter 13, and I'm your host, Michael Connelly.

As a newspaper reporter turned crime novelist, I've been talking to homicide detectives for nearly 50 years. I've had a lifelong fascination with what I call the noble bargain. That is the bargain that homicide detectives make with themselves and society. That I will take this job that takes me into the darkest corners, to the places where humans do the worst things to one another, and I will find out what happened and why. And my part of the bargain is that I will be the sin eater, that I will carry the darkness inside of me so that the rest of the world doesn't have to know what I know. And if I do it right, probably no one will ever know. If I do it wrong, then the whole world might know.

It takes a certain kind of person to make that kind of a deal, and that's what I have been exploring and writing about my entire professional life. I first spoke to a homicide detective face-to-face when I was 16-years-old and had been a partial witness to a shooting. I didn't see the actual shooting itself. I saw the shooter running away and I saw where he hid the gun. It wasn't quite a homicide case yet because the victim, who had been shot in the head, was clinging to life in the hospital, but it was the homicide team that had been called out to work the case. And that is why I spent a night in a police station at the side of a homicide detective. But that's a story for another podcast. Suffice it to say, that night and what I saw and learned from that detective, is what set me on the path to where I am right now.

The point I'm trying to make is that during all the years, the decades I have been talking to homicide detectives, I have seen many changes. Technology has changed, training has changed, forensic sciences have changed. It seems like everything about the job has changed. But one thing hasn't: the sentiment that I heard whenever a homicide detective spoke to me about a case. It goes where it goes. That's what detectives from one side of this country to the other have told me. It goes where it goes. Meaning you follow the clues, the leads, the evidence, the suspicions, and the hunches, and the investigation goes where it goes. Sometimes to dead ends, but most times to a solution and the unveiling of a suspect.

And so it has been with Alex Baber and his team's ongoing investigation of these two infamous cases. It goes where it goes. And today we're going to talk about one place it has gone and that may very well be a dead end, but there's enough intrigue there to make it a story I think is worth telling.

Late in the morning of Thursday, October 12th, 1944, a housekeeper who worked at the El Palacio Apartments in West Hollywood, an unincorporated area of Los Angeles, approached the door of a two-bedroom townhouse where two sisters lived, Georgette and Constance Bauerdorf. The housekeeper was named Lulu Atwood. Her husband Fred worked as a maintenance man at the Spanish design luxury apartments, located just a block south of the Sunset Strip. In fact, the Atwoods lived in a basement apartment directly below the Bauerdorf's townhouse.

Lulu found the door to the Bauerdorf apartment ajar. She stepped in and called out to see if anyone was home. No one answered. Spooked by the silence and the open door, Lulu got her husband and together they came back and searched the apartment. In the upstairs bathroom, they found the body of a young woman face down in the bathtub. The water in the tub was pink with her blood.

As with West Hollywood being an unincorporated city, the case fell under the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. Investigators were called out and soon it was established that the death was no accident. It was murder. The victim was identified as Georgette Bauerdorff, the 20-year-old daughter of a wealthy oil man. Georgette had grown up in LA and had gone to the finest private schools. She shared the apartment with her older sister who was out of town on the night of the murder.

Now just about everything I tell you about this murder comes from media coverage of the case. And by that I mean the newspapers of the day. In 1944, there were a variety of newspapers covering crime in Los Angeles. It was a very competitive market and the papers ran the gamut of the staid and serious L.A. Times to the more exploitive tabloid papers owned by William Randolph Hearst.

All the papers jumped on the story of the murder of an oil heiress named Georgette Bauerdorf.

The autopsy concluded that Georgette had had sexual relations shortly before she was asphyxiated by a wad of cloth that had been pushed down her throat. Her body showed several bruises that indicated she had fought for her life. Fred Atwood told investigators that he had heard someone in high heels walking on the floor above his apartment the night before. He also heard a crash as though something had fallen to the floor in the Bauerdorf apartment. Another resident of the El Palacio reported that he woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of a woman screaming, "Stop, you're killing me." But he then went back to sleep. While expensive jewelry and other items were left in the apartment untaken, cash from Georgette's purse and her car were missing. The car would later be found abandoned about 10 miles away, its gas tank empty.

The sheriff's investigators told the media that the apartment and the car produced several fingerprints that may have been left behind by the killer. Most notably and mysteriously, the investigators reported that a fingerprint had been found on the bulb of an exterior ceiling light that was in the small vestibule at the front door of Georgette's apartment. It had been turned in its socket so it would not illuminate the vestibule at night. One of the newspapers ran a photo of a sheriff's fingerprint expert holding the light bulb and a magnifier. He was holding the bulb in an ungloved hand, which spoke to the evidence protocols of the day. Two years later when the police started receiving notes from the Black Dahlia Avenger in the murder of Elizabeth Short, there was a photo of a police lab technician holding one of the notes while dusting it for fingerprints with his bare hands.

The Bauerdorf murder occurred when the United States was four years into World War II and the country was united as it had never been before. While thousands of soldiers and citizens were dying in the various theaters of the war, at home there was strong support for the servicemen in the fight. Georgette Bauerdorf was part of that support. She volunteered as a hostess at the Hollywood Canteen, which was essentially a dance hall for servicemen on leave that was opened and sponsored by Hollywood stars, including Bette Davis. On Wednesday nights, Georgette was among 30 female volunteers who would go to the Canteen and engage with soldiers from the various military bases in Southern California. The canteen had a rule that the women could not leave at the end of the night with a soldier. A guard posted at the hostess' exit door made sure of that. While Georgette followed that rule, she was also known to arrange dates with servicemen she met and liked at the Canteen.

She was also known to pick up hitchhiking servicemen, to give out small loans of money to them, and on occasion even let a soldier with no place to go sleep on a couch downstairs in the El Palacio townhouse. It was said that she also gave keys to her apartment to some of these soldiers. She was quoted by a friend in one of the stories published after her murder as saying, "I think that if these boys are willing to fight for us, we ought to do anything we can for them."

It is clear from the newspaper reports of the day that the investigation focused on the Hollywood Canteen and the numerous servicemen that Georgette had encountered. A little red address book and calendar found among her belongings had several names of servicemen in it. Many were interviewed and subsequently cleared. Investigators asked for lists of servicemen on leave from all the nearby military bases on the night of the murder, but no arrest was ever made.

At least two men made false confessions to the murder, but they were also quickly exposed and cleared. A significant focus was placed on the cloth that had been shoved into Georgette's throat. There was the

question of whether it had been done to intentionally asphyxiate her or possibly to keep her quiet during a sexual assault with her death being the unintended consequence. But also the material itself was a curious lead. It was a square piece of what was called crepe tetra, which was an elastic type of material used like an ACE bandage to wrap injuries and wounds. According to the news reports of the day, it had not been available in Los Angeles for more than two decades, giving rise to the suggestion that it had a military use and may have been brought by Georgette's killer.

There was another curious factor. Georgette didn't smoke, but there was an overturned ashtray on the floor of the living room downstairs. It appeared that someone had stubbed cigarettes out on the wooden floor before putting them in the ashtray that then was turned over on the floor. Were the cigarettes from a past visitor or had her killer been waiting for her on that fateful night?

There were more questions than answers. Through witness testimony and the forensics of the day, investigators were able to chart much of the last day and night of Georgette Bauerdorf's life. She had gotten her hair done earlier in the day and had lunch with her father's secretary. She met a friend who was also a hostess at the Canteen and then proceeded to work her normal Wednesday night as a hostess where she met and danced with several servicemen. Late that night, after she left the Canteen by herself, she picked up a hitchhiking soldier and dropped him off near the intersection of Sunset and Crescent Heights about a half mile from her apartment.

Her stomach contents revealed during autopsy that somewhere along the line she ate a meal, though it was never established where or when. In her bedroom, there was a folded newspaper on her bed and an indentation on the pillow, but the sheets had not been pulled back. She was found in the tub, clad only in the top of her pajamas. A torn pair of pajama pants were found on the floor of the bedroom. There was a blood stain on the carpet as well.

What happened to Georgette Bauerdorf? The known facts of the case suggest a variety of scenarios. Was someone lying in wait for her? Was he already inside the apartment when she returned home? There was no sign of forced entry. Did someone knock on her door after turning the light bulb and darkening the entranceway? Did she know her killer? Would she have answered the door in the middle of the night to a stranger while in her pajamas?

Added to those questions, you are probably asking, what does this murder have to do with the Black Dahlia and Zodiac cases and the suspect in those crimes that we have identified, Marvin Margolis, also known as Marvin Merrill. Well, first I should say that the Georgette Bauerdorf killing was often included in media accounts of unsolved murders of young women in Los Angeles in that era, connecting them by youth and the tragedy of a life cut short, if not by any actual evidence. Georgette was 20 and two years later, Elizabeth Short, subsequently dubbed the Black Dahlia, was only 22 when she was tortured and murdered, her body severed in two and left on display in a vacant lot. More than a few researchers, writers, and investigators have suggested they were killed by the same man, even though the forensic profiles of the cases are quite different.

These two victims operated on far different socioeconomic levels too. Georgette had led a life of privilege when it came to schooling and accommodations. Money was not a problem. On the other hand, Elizabeth would likely be considered homeless by today's standards. She had no permanent address or a job and relied on the kindness of strangers for meals and accommodations.

The differences in the two cases and two victims are many, but there are also many similarities. Both of these women came of age during a world war. Both knew soldiers who had been killed in battle. Both knew many active servicemen and former soldiers. The sheriff's investigators working the Bauerdorf case focused their attention on the Hollywood Canteen and the servicemen Georgette met there. Two

and a half years later, Los Angeles police investigators would learn that Elizabeth dated soldiers and reportedly was afraid of a former suitor she said was an ex-Marine.

So now the intrigue I promised. Marvin Margolis. I told you in a recent chapter of the podcast that Rick Jackson, former LAPD homicide detective and part of the team on this investigation, was able to obtain Marvin Margolis's complete military personnel file. Alex Baber, the citizen sleuth who heads up this investigation, called it a gold mine. Not only does it contain Margolis' psychological evaluations, but it also held an eight-page letter written by Margolis that includes his own recounting of his traumatic experiences during the Marine's invasion of Okinawa in the Pacific during World War II. Margolis was a Navy medic assigned to the Marine battalion that made the first landing on the Japanese held island. That's the headline stuff. Some of the more mundane records in the file are Margolis's transfer orders. This is Alex Baber.

Alex Baber:

I think that the NCIS file allows us to timestamp his location throughout his military career from March 1943 when he entered and his father, Isadore, signed off on it, to the moment he's discharged in October 1945 after returning from Okinawa. So we have specific dates, exact dates on when he was transferred, where he was transferred, and why he was transferred. We now know exactly where he's at on specific dates or significant dates within our investigation.

Michael Connelly:

How about a significant date like October 12th, 1944, the day Georgette Bauerdorf's body was found in her apartment in West Hollywood? We can now show that, through military records, that on that date, Marvin Margolis was stationed at the Marine base at Camp Pendleton in Southern California. Might he have driven up from Pendleton to Los Angeles while on a shore leave? Might he have gone to the Hollywood Canteen, where as many as 800 servicemen pass through every single night? Might he have met or seen Georgette Bauerdorf at the Canteen? There are no answers to those questions, only intrigue. But there's also this. After Georgette's murder, various photos of her were splashed all over the newspapers of the day. These included at least one photo of her posing in a Jeep while visiting with troops at the newly established Camp Pendleton. The photo is undated and efforts by this podcast and the Baber team to document when it was taken has so far come up empty.

But we do know through his military records that Marvin Margolis was transferred from a base at Puget Sound, Washington to Camp Elliot in San Diego on May 17th, 1944, and then a week later to Camp Pendleton for continued training as a battlefield medic. In July of that year, he would graduate 16th in a class of 71. We also know through his own words in the letter he would later write that he was not happy about his transfer to Southern California and felt he had been victimized and sent on a path toward battle because the base at Puget Sound was rife with antisemitism.

His records show he was shipped out of Pendleton with the First Marine Division to the Pacific theater of the war on October 20th, 1944. That was eight days after Georgette Bauerdorf's body was found in her apartment in West Hollywood.

Again, the intrigue. Could Margolis have met or seen Georgette during her visit to Camp Pendleton? Could that have been the crossing point between predator and prey? Could Margolis have had access in his medical training to crepe tetra bandages? We will never know, but here's the kicker. In 1945, Marvin would spend 62 days on Okinawa during one of the bloodiest and costliest battles of the war. He worked day and night on the battlefield taking care of wounded men. At one point, he was in a cave that collapsed and he was buried up to his neck for a day before being rescued. He was withdrawn early from

the fight when it was determined he was too traumatized to continue his service. His diagnosis: battle neuroses. He was then transferred stateside and discharged with a mental disability pension. In September of that year, as the one-year anniversary of Georgette Bauerdorf's murder approached, a high school girl found a note addressed to the police that had been left on a stone wall that was within sight of the El Palacio apartments.

You can see this note on our website, [killerinthecode.com](http://killerinthecode.com), but I will read it here. The note was stained with drops of iodine that investigators surmised was supposed to look like blood. This is what the note said. "To the police, between now and October 11th, the one who murdered Georgette Bauerdorf will appear at the Hollywood Canteen. The murderer will be in uniform. He has, since he committed the murder, been in action at Okinawa. The murder of Georgette Bauerdorf was divine retribution. Let the Los Angeles police arrest the murderer if they can."

So there's a lot to consider here. Back in the day, the sheriff's investigators were not sure if the note was a prank or truly from the killer, but they didn't know about Marvin Margolis and Okinawa as we do now. As it is said, hindsight is often twenty-twenty. This is Alex Baber again.

Alex Baber:

We know from our investigation that Marvin Margolis, AKA Merrill, was stationed in Okinawa from the day one, which is April 1st, for approximately two months before he returned stateside.

Michael Connelly:

And this is Rick Jackson.

Rick Jackson:

Looking at it in hindsight and what we know about Marvin Margolis and the military records, it would not be a hoax to me. I mean, the dates of his leaving for Okinawa just eight days after Bauerdorf's murder. The fact that he was back from Okinawa, traumatized, when the note was left, it all clicks. I mean, it's like a holy shit moment, to be very honest. I mean, Okinawa was carried out mostly by Marines from Camp Pendleton. This is definitely a lead I would have pursued, no doubt about it.

Michael Connelly:

This is Mitzi Roberts, another veteran homicide detective who is part of the investigative team.

Mitzi Roberts:

That particular battle in Okinawa was heavily led by Marines who are stationed in Camp Pendleton. So there's all these little coincidences or nexuses that I don't think you can discount as a hoax until you can eliminate it. That's the thing about cold cases. As time goes by, we always say time is our friend and new information comes forward, what may have been discounted as a hoax, once you sort of start keying on a possible suspect or suspects, that note now becomes relevant if you can somehow incorporate into your suspect and that specific suspect's MO, which is why I think it's so intriguing about Marvin Margolis.

Michael Connelly:

There's also the taunting nature of the note to consider, the catch me if you can sort of baiting of authorities that has a strong echo in the messages that would be sent later by the killer of Elizabeth Short, and then many years after that by the Zodiac.

Mitzi Roberts:

Again, when we're talking cold cases is we have hindsight to go back and look at other murder cases with notes. I can say that I've never had a murder case besides the Black Dahlia that had these taunting notes. So it is something that we would search for to link cases. And then once you sort of say, okay, now we have these specific cases, they're in the same general area, they're in the same general time era in Hollywood, and we have these people writing these taunting notes. And this note was written and recovered before the Black Dahlia was even murdered. So I don't think you can discount it just because, again, there's just not that many murderers that decide to send or post or leave taunting letters, these cryptic letters to law enforcement.

Rick Jackson:

And like I've said in the previous podcasts we've done, this taunting and communicating with and sending in evidence from a crime scene is very, very unique evidence, very, very unique. And yet each one of these cases we have that happening. I've never once had a case where a killer made contact with me, made contact with the newspaper, made contact with the media, any of those things, despite the fact that there's 22 years roughly between the Zodiac and the Black Dahlia killings, the fact that the same kind of letters, the same kind of taunting of police, of the media, that is significant to me. And in this case, we have a very similar thing. I mean, this guy's showing up at a crime scene, across the street from a crime scene and leaving a note like that, that's so unusual. It goes from being very interesting all the way to being circumstantial evidence showing that there's a good chance that there's a connection. We also have the Cheri Jo Bates case, the Riverside case, and the same type of thing. I know that hasn't definitively been linked to Margolis yet, but I think there's a significant chance that it will be.

Michael Connelly:

I think what I find most intriguing is the reference to Okinawa, obviously, and the chronology. Marvin was in Southern California at the key times of this case. The day of the murder was a week before he shipped out. He was back stateside and transitioning out of the military when that note was left less than a block from the El Palacio apartments. Yes, Camp Pendleton is almost 90 miles from where the Hollywood Canteen was located, but it was a favorite destination of servicemen from all the various military bases in the region.

Rick Jackson:

The Canteen was a major, major focal point for all of Southern California, including Camp Pendleton, which is just under a hundred miles away. There's another thing about that note that kind of intrigues me. The fact that the writer mentioned specifically he will be making an appearance at the Canteen in the coming days. I mean, that kind of focuses the Canteen on somehow being directly involved in the murder. I don't think he would've made a mention of the Canteen had the Canteen not played a part in it. Whether it was he met her there, whether he met her when she was down at Camp Pendleton, according to the newspapers, and then did a follow-up to come up to the Canteen to see her again, who knows?

Michael Connelly:

Of course, the passage of time makes all this speculative at best. We do know one thing though. Marvin's military file contains his fingerprints, and these were offered to the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department for comparison to fingerprints still on file from the Bauerdorf case. They were accepted and a comparison was made to the print found on that light bulb as well as others collected in the case. There was no match. So, does that mean Margolis is cleared of this crime? This is Mitzi Roberts.

Mitzi Roberts:

It doesn't rule out anybody. There was a lot of prints recovered from the crime scene, but there's no way of knowing if they had the prints of the killer. We don't know for sure that this was a planned murder, but if you're working on that assumption, which when you throw in the taunting letter, and if you think that's connected, it leads me to believe that this probably is a sexual sadist that went there to murder her. One would assume that he would at least take the precautions not to get caught, wear gloves, things like that. The fact that the fingerprints don't match does not necessarily mean that Marvin Margolis couldn't have been the perpetrator of this murder.

Alex Baber:

We don't even know if the individual who committed the crime unscrewed the light bulb. That's an assumption made, which does make sense to some degree. You want to darken the entrance so she can't really see when she opens the door, but it's not verifiable. It's a educated assumption, and it doesn't mean that the individual that unscrewed the light bulb committed the crime either.

Michael Connelly:

Remember now, Georgette Bauerdorf was murdered before Marvin Margolis went off to war and experienced the traumatic things he recounted in a letter many years later. To make him a suspect in the Bauerdorf case would seemingly change things. In previous episodes of this podcast, the Baber team has suggested that those traumatic experiences on Okinawa, which resulted in him being discharged from the service on a mental disability, were a psychological turning point that put him on a collision course with Elizabeth Short. What would it mean now if Elizabeth Short was not his first victim?

Alex Baber:

So we know from the two psych evals that are discovered in the military file that prior to even being deployed overseas, he had some identifying factors that stood out to the medical board. So he may have had the foundation that later was triggered by the combat, being on the front lines. It may have triggered something that was already in him from the get-go.

Michael Connelly:

I get stuck on that phrase from the note, "The murder of Georgette Bauerdorf was divine retribution." That is haunting to me. Retribution for what? Was it something she did or was it a greater slight that the killer felt? Was it retribution against society in the form of the murder of an innocent woman? It is clear from Marvin's own words and writing that he despised society, that he felt left out, that he didn't get what he deserved in life. The murder of Elizabeth Short certainly was a retribution. You have to remember that the killer of Elizabeth Short identified himself as the Black Dahlia Avenger when he

wrote his taunting messages to the police. Vengeance, retribution. It is easy to argue they are part of the same psychological set.

Alex Baber:

Both messages cast a killing or the crime in a deserved justice or a narrative. In my opinion, the tone of both the note and the postcard are very similar. The author feels like he's been done wrong and that he owed both women or individually, if it's not the same perpetrator, both perpetrators felt like they owed the victim some degree of punishment for whatever they did.

Mitzi Roberts:

I definitely think it is something that you have to consider. It definitely would go in that box where it seems to be very similar in nature, like the actual murder of Georgette and the actual murder, although the murder of Elizabeth Short was much more violent. But just that wanting to take out vengeance on a woman and then actually doing it really horrifically, I definitely think it's something that you have to consider. It's something that you can't discount. And I think that's a key between those two cases for sure and other cases that we're looking at as well.

Michael Connelly:

While there are things that don't correlate, for example, the Bauerdorf note was typed while the Black Dahlia Avenger notes were not. There are at least two other similarities between them that bear our attention here, even though we will have a full linguistic analysis of the cases in this investigation later in the podcast. The first similarity is the promise of an appearance by the author of each note. The Bauerdorf note says that the killer will appear in uniform at the Hollywood Canteen near the anniversary of the murder. In a note the Black Dahlia Avenger wrote to police, he promised to turn himself in. Here's exactly what he wrote. "Turning in January 31st, 10:00 AM, had my fun at police." And he signed it Black Dahlia Avenger. The killer of Elizabeth Short did not turn himself in as promised. It is unknown if Georgette Bauerdorf's killer showed up at the Hollywood Canteen, even though authorities were keeping watch.

If he showed up in uniform as written, he would've blended in. A military uniform was required for entrance to the Canteen and hundreds came every night. In its three-year run, nearly three million servicemen passed through its doors. And then there is a similarity in the taunts directed at the police. "Let the Los Angeles police arrest the murderer if they can," reads the Bauerdorf note. "Catch us if you can." Someone claiming to be the Black Dahlia Avenger put in a postcard to police.

Alex Baber:

Both documents, the letter and the postcard, which are approximately three years apart, two and a half years, the tone of those and the actual linguistics are eerily similar. You have the catch me if you can or catch us if you can, which are in both cases. And you also have the fact that the potential of the common authorship is there. And then you inject the Okinawa part of the letter or note, and then you have the likelihood that notes like this were extremely rare. They weren't noted, even today very few murderers leave notes behind or mail notes to authorities or newspapers. So the tone between both notes are eerily similar. Now, whether Marvin Margolis is the author of both notes, we will never know.

Mitzi Roberts:

The Georgette case is very intriguing and there's enough similarities that, of course, it came to our attention. And it's just one of those things, especially with these very, very old cold cases that, there's just not enough there left of the case that we'll probably ever be able to connect it. And I think that's why we were so hopeful with Marvin Margolis' prints, such as cold cases and you just keep going on and try to find other things to connect it. Or these cases just kind of live on as just these great old historic L.A. mysteries.

Michael Connelly:

And so, it goes where it goes. You have been listening to Killer In The Code: Solving The Black Dahlia & Zodiac Cases. This chapter was written and produced by me, Michael Connelly. It was edited by Terrill Lee Lankford, with music and post-production services by Mark Henry Phillips. We will be back with another chapter soon. Many thanks for listening.