

daddy was  
killer rap  
child pe  
satanic

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pedophile  
wife beat  
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## **Janice Knowlton believes her father was the Black Dahlia killer. It's a lonely job**

**By Patrick J. Kiger • Illustration by Santiago Uceda**

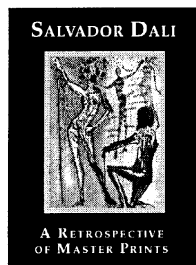
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When I arrive at Spires Restaurant in Anaheim, the woman who claims that her late father was the Black Dahlia killer is already waiting for me. I was not sure what to expect, but Anaheim resident Janice Knowlton turns out to be an attractive 59-year-old woman, dark-haired and bright-eyed, smartly clad in pink and black. "Pleased to meet you," she says in the melodious voice that I had first heard over the telephone a few weeks before, when she'd tracked me down at my home in Maryland to suggest that I do a story on her. Befitting her previous career as a public-relations consultant, she has come armed with a thick sheaf of photocopied news articles, photographs and press releases. • We settle into a booth, and, after ordering a late breakfast, Knowlton sets out in a crisply businesslike manner to convince me that the late George Knowlton, a foundry worker and milkman from Westminster, committed the 1947 murder that has become the most infamous unsolved murder in Southern California history. But that's not all. By her account, George also was a serial killer, rapist, pedophile, child pornographer, wife beater, sadist, satanic cultist and polysexual libertine of such monumental proportions that Richard Speck, Richard "Night Stalker"

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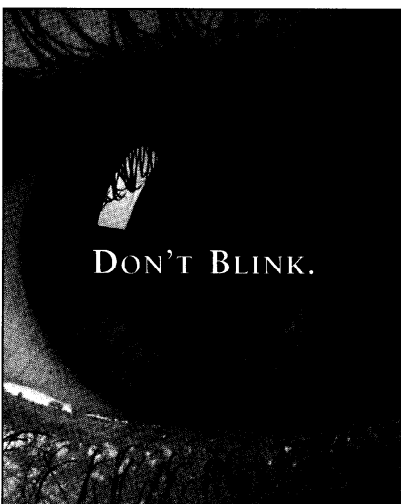
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## THE INCREDIBLE STORY

Ramirez and Charles Manson would seem by comparison to be candidates for canonization.

For starters, Knowlton shows me a grainy copy of a photograph of her father, a wiry, sullen-looking man in a white T-shirt and jeans, with a greasy pompadour, and a cigarette jammed between his lips. She says the photo was taken in July 1946, shortly after the disappearance of a woman named Gertrude Langdon, whose strangled body was found on Palos Verdes Peninsula. "If you notice, there are marks on his arms," she says, excitedly directing my attention to the squiggly black lines that crisscross his limbs. "It looks as if someone might have been scraping down his arms, while he had his hands at her throat."

The visual evidence, to my eyes, falls short of conclusive proof. But to Knowlton, the picture is only a bit of supporting documentation for her primary evidence—the torrent of dreams and repressed memories that, by her claims, she began experiencing in 1989 after a string of traumatic events that included a hysterectomy, hospitalization for depression, and her mother's death. In the case of the Langdon murder, "I had some dreams prior to the memories coming back," she explains. In her dreams she says she saw "a woman in a car going down into gravel or sand. As if I think I might have been in the back seat of the car...I would have been 9 years old. If that's what I was remembering. These may be her scratch marks on his arm."

We ponder the Langdon case for only a moment before Knowlton moves on to an array of other crimes she accuses her late father of committing. She shows me a photo of family members in New Hampshire, posed in front of a square-backed car which she says fits the description of the vehicle that picked up another murder victim, Frances Cochran, in Lynn, Massachusetts, in 1941. She claims that at age 4, she watched her father rape and kill that woman as well, though the memory supposedly did not resurface until 52 years later.

Then there's a picture of the garage behind the house where Knowlton's family lived in Westminster in the 1940s, the

place where shortly after her 10th birthday, she claims to have witnessed her father brutalize Elizabeth Short, the young woman who became known as the "Black Dahlia." As she tells it, George Knowlton raped, tortured and mutilated Short, hammered her to death, and then cut her body in two with a circular-blade saw. "First I saw the knife, and then I lay down on the bed and took a deep breath," she recalls.

As she recounts the Dahlia murder, Knowlton speaks in a tremulous voice, simmering with emotion. Later, I realize that it's a tone markedly similar to the one she used in telling the same story on a 1991 segment of *Hard Copy*, one of the five TV shows on which she has appeared. In 1991 and again in 1993, she told the story to two different *Los Angeles Times* reporters, who each wrote articles about her allegations. She's also the co-author, with collaborator Michael Newton, of the 1995 book, *Daddy was the Black Dahlia Killer*, published by Simon & Schuster's Pocket Books imprint. "It's in its second printing," she informs me. Her story has been optioned by a movie producer, so we may see a dramatic version on the small or big screen.

**W**HETHER OR NOT YOU BELIEVE Knowlton's story, one thing is clear: she's energetic about promoting it. Not only is Knowlton convinced she's the daughter of the alleged Black Dahlia killer; she's also a salient example of what in the 1990s has become a fixture of popular culture, the self-proclaimed victim-turned-celebrity. Not that Knowlton tries to conceal it. To the contrary, she lent me a videotape of her appearances on *Larry King Live*, *Sally Jessy Raphael*, *Inside Edition*, and other shows. "I am being interviewed by a tabloid now," she says, apparently confident that one more media competitor won't dissuade me from writing her oft-told tale. "I am delighted that anybody would get the word out."

And what is the word that we're all supposed to get out? Basically, that the Los Angeles Police Department should heed Knowlton's revelation and re-open the case of Elizabeth Short, a would-be starlet whose body was found in pieces in an empty lot in Los Angeles in January

1947—but this time, with George Knowlton, of course, as the prime suspect. Never mind that the case is five decades old, or that the alleged perpetrator died in a car crash in 1962.

“He was conspicuous by his absence in the [original] investigation,” complains Knowlton, who advances an elaborate conspiracy theory that the probe was quashed because of her father’s connections to influential customers of a kiddie-porn ring. As supporting evidence of her father’s link to Short, Knowlton trots out a handful of obscure leads—a deceased actor who lived in Short’s apartment house and supposedly told neighbors that the victim was dating a man named George, and a 1947 *Los Angeles Times* story in which Short’s acquaintances mention her talking about “George, a pilot from Texas.” George Knowlton wasn’t a pilot, but he did live on Texas Street in Westminster.

But mostly Knowlton cites what she claims are repressed memories of her father’s relationship with Elizabeth Short. She claims that as a young girl, she spent a considerable amount of time with the Black Dahlia, who made such a powerful impression on her that years later she unconsciously styled herself to resemble the famous victim.

“She told me some of the things about her dreams and she showed me pictures. And when I went back to New York City and had my publicity photo taken, I have a pearl on a chain, one of those angora-type sweaters. She is in the same thing...notice how I picked [the photo] that is completely the same, as if it is stored in my memory on some chip back there.”

In Knowlton’s book, in addition to her claimed memories, details from contemporary news accounts are gleaned, deconstructed and reassembled into an elaborate collage that portrays her father as a serial killer. She cites the existence of a 1940s Satanic cult in Los Angeles, for example, to render plausible her account of being offered up for sexual abuse by her devil-worshipping dad. In some instances, the logic is not only inductive, but circular. In constructing the case that George Knowlton showed signs of being a sex criminal in adolescence, the book notes that “based upon observations from

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## THE INCREDIBLE STORY

his adult years, we may assume that he took pleasure from abusing animals.”

After discerning her memories, Knowlton says, she took her story to LAPD detective “Jigsaw John” St. John, who had been one of the original investigators on the case in 1947. Not surprisingly, St. John, who solved nearly 700 murders in his career—including the crimes of serial killer William Bonin—didn’t think much of Knowlton’s lead. “John St. John refused to take a statement,” she recalls with irritation. “And he began discrediting, well not discrediting me, but...yeah, he was discrediting me.”

St. John died last year at age 77.

“We have a lot of people offering up their fathers and various relatives as the Black Dahlia killer,” he told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1991. “The things that she is saying are not consistent with the facts of the case.”

Knowlton had better luck convincing the Westminster police that her father’s crimes were worth investigating. In 1991, she convinced them to dig in the yard of her former family home. According to newspaper reports, they found costume jewelry, the skeleton of a dog, and other items, but nothing to spur further criminal investigation.

**K**NOWLTON SAYS SHE STARTED remembering her father’s connection with the Black Dahlia case in November 1989, after her sister told her about *Black Dahlia*, the James Ellroy novel inspired by the case. “What she did by saying that was open the gates. But I had no conscious memories of the murder. Until then, I didn’t know there was a Black Dahlia murder, until we started talking about it. But I had been dreaming it out and writing in my journal...and then that opened the flood gates.”

Knowlton claims she didn’t know anything about one of the most highly publicized murders ever committed, one that served as the inspiration not only for Ellroy’s novel but for John Gregory Dunne’s *True Confessions*, which was made into a popular movie starring Robert Duvall and Robert DeNiro. Indeed, the Black Dahlia case was so notorious in its

day that Jack Webb even made a joke about it in the 1950 film *Sunset Boulevard*, introducing his friend William Holden at a party as a “Black Dahlia suspect.” That blank spot, she claims, was a consequence of her memory repression. “Whenever it was around me in any way, the book or movie or anything, I was unaware of it consciously—but of course, unconsciously I was,” she explains.

The LAPD wouldn’t investigate her allegations, and members of her family didn’t embrace them either. “My brother would not allow me to talk with him about it,” Knowlton recalls. “Whenever I would bring it up, he would brush me off.” When she told him her belief that their father had been a serial killer, his reaction was “basically dead silence.” The last time she called and brought up her allegations, “He said, ‘You never give up, do you?’ And he hung up on me.”

But she could try the case in the media. Knowlton already had some experience getting coverage. As an “outspoken advocate” against hysterectomies, she’d appeared on Joan Rivers’ talk show and other TV programs. In November 1990, a year after her Black Dahlia epiphany, *Orange County Register* columnist Alan Bock wrote a column called “Memories of a murder” about her claims. After a subsequent write-up in the supermarket tabloid, *The Globe*, she began getting invitations to appear on TV shows.

“I had to use whatever I could to possibly get more information,” she explains. “Look at undercover cops. They dress up in outlandish things, they pose as hookers, this and that. They have to go do some pretty degrading stuff...I was grateful for any program that would give me an opportunity to get some justice.”

**S**EVERAL YEARS LATER, NOW THAT she’s made the rounds of tabloid TV, the publicity is a little harder to come by. Knowlton complains that it has been tough to get attention for her book. “No major television shows have interviewed me, I did some phone and radio interviews, I had quite a few book reviews but they always try to attack it, rather than look at it objectively.” Her voice takes on an impassioned edge. “When I say, always, ‘I’m sorry, but that’s what I’ve seen.’ So far, it has been biased...Some

people have been very biased. You know, 'Oh no, there's no such thing as repressed memories.'

"If I had reviewed books about repressed memory before I got my memories back, I think I would have not been too objective. I would have *thought* I was being objective, but I would have been influenced by the fact that I wouldn't have believed that was possible, that the mind could blot out so much."

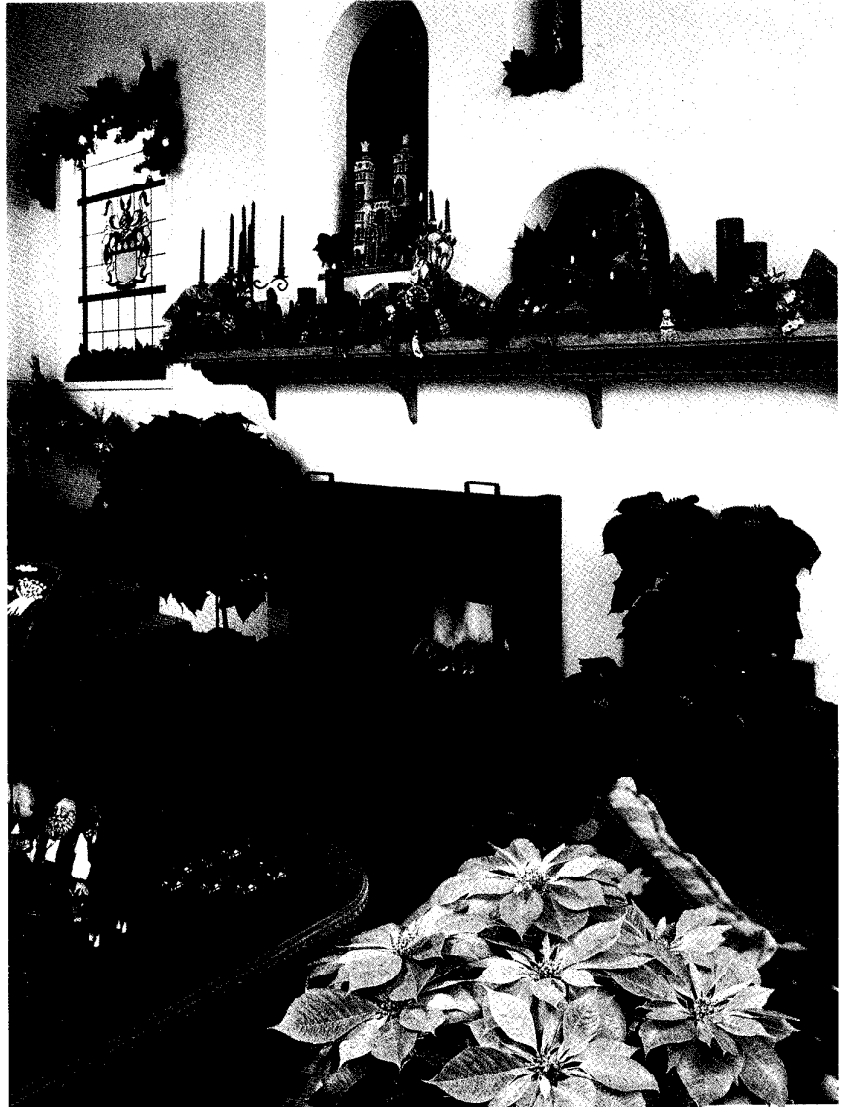
Try as I might to be objective, I must confess that although I have not formed an opinion on the subject of repressed memories or on the Black Dahlia case, I am skeptical about some of Knowlton's assertions. For example, she suggests that her father was responsible for the 1958 murder of Geneva Ellroy, mother of *Black Dahlia* author James Ellroy. She began having detailed flashbacks of a murder in El Monte in April 1994—a year after she and her co-author obtained Mrs. Ellroy's autopsy report from Los Angeles County authorities, according to the footnotes of her book. Draw your own conclusions here. (Several months after our interview, Knowlton complained in a letter that "when I made a statement or gave an opinion, you often rebutted it, giving an alternative reason or theory," and advised me that "as I assume you aim at being an objective journalist," that was "a counterproductive habit.")

But no matter. Knowlton confides that she is weary of her crusade. "I'm continuing to have flashbacks...when I do interviews, when I have to go through the stuff that I've gone over and over, it keeps flashing up, and it's not to my benefit. There's a certain amount of therapeutic value to talking it out, and after that it's self-punishment to keep rerunning it." At some point soon, "I'm going to try and put all this stuff away, and not do this anymore. You may be the last one to be this bored by it all."

But maybe not. A few weeks after our meeting, she called and asked me to return the videotape of her television appearances. She said she wanted to send it to another show that might be interested in interviewing her. OC

Orange Coast contributor Patrick J. Kiger is based in Takoma Park, Maryland.

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