

Novelist James Ellroy  
spent eight months with a  
Fountain Valley  
detective trying to solve his  
mother's murder. He went home  
six weeks ago with a book to  
write and no more answers than  
he had 37 years ago

BY PATRICK J. KIGER ■ PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARIO LOPEZ

# A Story Without An Ending

THIS IS THE MOMENT I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR all afternoon with equal parts dread and morbid curiosity: James Ellroy reaches into his battered paper valise and pulls out a stack of black-and-white photographs taken on the morning of June 22, 1958. ■ Across the table, Bill Stoner, a Fountain Valley resident who's a retired homicide detective from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, looks on silently. The three of us are sitting in a diner in El Monte, which today is a crumbling suburb jammed like a doorstop against the San Gabriel Mountains. Back in 1958, it was what passed for bucolic—the dusty rural outskirts of Los Angeles, the farthest you could get out into the country on the then-unfinished 605 freeway. But this isn't a nostalgic trip. First, Ellroy shows me a picture of an innocuous-looking, shiny 1957 Buick. "Here's her car," he says. Next is a shot of a road with thick bushes along the curb. "This is the crime scene," he continues, almost as an afterthought pointing out a couple of small white objects poking out of the shrubbery. "My mother's feet are down there."

The senior citizens lurching on grilled cheese sandwiches and french fries around us remain oblivious, fortunately, to the macabre show-and-tell that is unfolding. Ellroy thumbs through a few more prints, interjecting little bits of explanation along the way: "There's the drive-in we were talking about," "That's looking downtown, toward El Monte." And so on. Then, abruptly, he is silent as our gaze falls upon an image so starkly graphic that it needs no explanation: The body of Geneva Hilliker Ellroy. She is lying on her back, one arm resting on her midsection, the other bent behind her head, her ripped clothes askew, a stocking wrapped around her neck. Her face is a swollen mask, distorted by lividity. I stare, transfixed, a bit ashamed by my fascination. For a victim of violent death, this is the last indignity: one is reduced to an object of curiosity for strangers like me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I steal a glance at Ellroy. He is author of a string of highly acclaimed, best-selling crime novels, including *The Black Dahlia*, *L.A. Confidential*, and the recent *American Tabloid*. A chronicler of the dark psychic landscape of the 1950s, his literary gift is depicting depravity. His books are filled with corrupt, violent protagonists tormented by their own monstrous urges—rogue cops who push grand-jury witnesses out of hotel windows, crazed killers who don wolverine fangs, a kinky freak who collects body parts from cemeteries, a depraved detective whose lover entices him by dressing like the victim of a murder he's struggling to solve.

He also happens to be the only child of Geneva Ellroy. As Ellroy studies the image, I search for a clue about how the author feels when he contemplates the real-life muse of his violent vision, the collision between the fictional mayhem of his imagination and the matter-of-fact horror of his past. But like Stoner, the world-weary detective, Ellroy's expression is blank, unruffled, as he examines it for a long second, and then moves on.

"Here's a photo of the type of car, a '55 or '56 Oldsmobile, that the suspect was driving," he says. He comes to a pair of sketches, renderings by police artists of two different witnesses' descriptions of the suspect detectives dubbed the Swarthy Man, the companion of Geneva Ellroy on the night of June 21, 1958, the last time she was seen alive. The two sketches are similar—the nose, the hair, the ears are the same—but not quite identical; one looks almost boyish, while the other has a higher forehead, a furrowed brow, cruel slits for eyes. "This is the scarier one," Ellroy decides. "The hard look."

"That's the last face your



Geneva Hilliker Ellroy

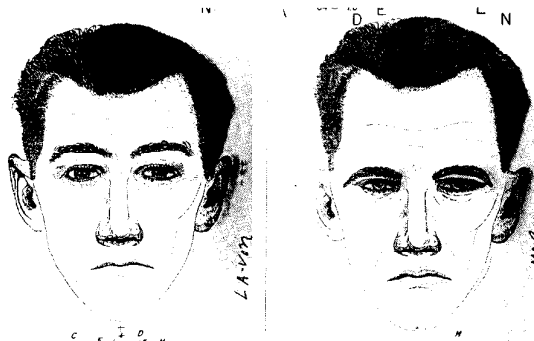
mother ever saw," I blurt. "Yes," Ellroy agrees, matter-of-factly. He is a startling contrast to the fragile, anguished survivors of crime victims who make impassioned pleas for justice on television. Instead, at 47, he is robust, larger than life—rangy, a few inches over six feet, with thinning, close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair, a lush mustache, piercing eyes behind oval wire eyeglasses. Clad in a loud Hawaiian shirt, armed with a hair-trigger intellect and a scathing, profane wit, he's as brashly confident as a mob boss who's got the DA on the take. Ellroy seems utterly unperturbed as he leads me on a tour of his dark memories. He is, as one of his Fifties hepcat characters would say, copacetic. Whatever wound he suffered was cauterized long ago, transforming him into a wise-ass genius who mocks sorrow. As he explained earlier: "It's not like you're on Oprah going boo-hoo all the time, 'Ohhhhh, my mother was murdered.' You get on with it."

Or at least so it seems. "I know you've written about this, you've been thinking about it for years," I finally say. "But it must be hard to look at this stuff, once again, isn't it?"

James Ellroy pauses, and then looks me in the eye. "There are times when I'll be lying around the apartment, and I'll feel her presence very strongly," he says. "And I'll feel the horror and the sadness of the last night of her life. And there are times when I can feel the killer very strongly, too. This happened 37 years ago and I've dealt with it in one way or another—through intellectual curiosity, through my career as a writer. But now it's time to pay the debt."


THAT BALANCE DUE, AS ELLROY EXPLAINS, IS WHY HE TEMPORARILY put aside writing the eagerly awaited sequel to his latest best-seller, *American Tabloid*. It's why he left his home in Kansas, rented an apartment in Newport Beach and hired Bill Stoner to help him sift through decades-old police documents and probe the memories of elderly witnesses. Instead of another crime novel, his next book will be a work of nonfiction in which he reinvestigates Geneva Ellroy's unsolved murder. Titled *My Dark Places*, it's due out next fall.

It's not so much that Ellroy feels he owes his mother for bringing him into the world. Rather, when he looks in the mirror, he finally sees Geneva Ellroy in his own reflection. "She had an alcoholic, promiscuous-for-her-time, profligate side," he explains. "But she also had side two—she was a German farm girl, raised in the Dutch



Two different witnesses described Geneva Ellroy's probable killer. More than 37 years later, his identity remains a mystery.

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## JAMES ELLROY

Reformed Church in Tunnel City, Wisconsin. That was the strict, moralistic side. The woman was in quite a great deal of torment trying to reconcile those two sides of her nature. I have both those aspects to my personality, too. As I've gotten older, I've become more the second side, more committed, more dedicated, more stern, religious in a way. I've moved in the direction my mother might have had she ever addressed her alcoholism in the way that I did mine. I got sober when I was 29. She died a drunk."

Thus, instead of sentimental memories, Ellroy was left with a pile of troubling snapshots and emotional recollections. His parents' breakup. The miasma of his mother's perfume. L&M cigarettes and Early Times bourbon. He remembers her thunderous mood swings when she came home from her job as an industrial nurse, and the strange, pathetic little things that are uproariously funny to a drunk, such as painting his dog's claws with nail polish; the shock of finding her in bed with strange men; the mysterious move from Los Angeles to the bleak isolation of El Monte, ostensibly because his mother claimed it would be better for a little boy to live in a house with banana trees in the yard than an apartment.

Little James didn't buy it for a minute; he went around stabbing the trees with a letter opener, pretending to be a crazed killer. He knew his mother was hiding something. He never did find out what. One weekend, when he was staying with his father in Los Angeles, she went out to a local bar, the Desert Inn, was seen in the company of a dark-haired man and a blonde woman, and then later with just the man. The next morning, in a field next to Arroyo High School, a troop of Cub Scouts found her body. A cop gave 10-year-old James a candy bar to comfort him. He posed, grimacing, for a newspaper photographer. The story made page two of the *Times*—this was 1958, when there were only 43 murders in all of Los Angeles County, all but two solved. Geneva Ellroy was one of the two. After that, attention quickly faded. "Even then, it was an obscure murder," Ellroy notes. "As a crime, it was so prosaic. A man met a woman, sexual combustion occurred, it

went bad, and he killed her."

Ellroy went to live with his father, whom he buried when he was 17. He hit the streets; went wild. In his 20s, he guzzled cheap wine, shoplifted cough syrup, ground up Benzedrex inhalers to snort the contents, became a Mickey-Mouse burglar. He ended up in restraints at a hospital drunk ward, hearing voices, diagnosed with brain damage. But unlike Geneva Ellroy, her son didn't die. Somehow, he managed to clean himself up, and worked at dead-end jobs while he tried his hand at writing crime fiction, laboriously printing out his prose in block letters on note tablets.

Burned out on California, he fled east, published a half-dozen novels, and then hit it big in 1987 with *The Black Dahlia*, a fictionalized retelling of the infamous 1947 Elizabeth Short murder—which, like his mother's killing 11 years later, had gone unsolved. At his then-publisher's urging, he exploited that eerie parallel, dedicating the book to his mother with "a valediction in blood" and milking Geneva Ellroy's sad fate for all it was worth in interview after interview.

Eventually, he wrote three more novels set in postwar Los Angeles—*The Big Nowhere*, *L.A. Confidential*, and *White Jazz*. Critics started commenting less about the irony of his mother's murder and started noticing a startling prose style that was as staccato and frenetic as a Coltrane sax solo, an adrenalin-hyped successor to Dashiell Hammett or Jim Thompson. "[Ellroy] makes previous detective fiction read like Dr. Seuss," a reviewer for the San Francisco Examiner once wrote.

Ellroy didn't need his mother any more to pump up his career, but she didn't zoom out and fade to the credits. In early 1994, the author got a call from a friend back in California, a newspaper reporter who was writing a feature about some long-unsolved murders in the San Gabriel Valley. One of the cases was Geneva Ellroy. Her son the author decided that he wanted to see her file, too. For one, it might tell him a few more things about his mother, fill in a few gaps. And besides, it would make killer material for a magazine article for *GQ*, where he had become a contributor. He called Stoner,

who at the time was winding up his stint in unsolved homicides, and flew out to California for a look-see.

STONER, FOR HIS PART, RECALLS NOT knowing quite what to think of Ellroy at their first meeting. Ellroy had sent the detective copies of his books, and Stoner had picked up *White Jazz*, whose protagonist—a bad-apple L.A.P.D. detective named Dave Klein—pushes a grand-jury witness out a hotel window in one of the opening chapters. “I was taken aback at first. I thought, ‘Wow, this guy has made all the cops look like total assholes, basically,’” Stoner says with a laugh. “The minute James walks in, we shake hands, and I ask him, ‘Have you ever met an honest cop?’” Eventually, the two men hit it off, and when Ellroy asked for Stoner’s help in giving the case one more go-around, Stoner agreed.

“One thing James and I have in common is the ability to interview people,” Stoner explains. “The technique of being soft with someone, nice and polite. I was surprised, because his books have such a high-pitched speed to them, everything is bang-bang-bang, but James is a very good listener. You’ve got to have the patience to let people ramble, particularly old people, and he does. And I was most surprised, probably, at how moral a person he is. With all his arrests, and the alcoholism and the drug usage, I thought at the start [this might not] work out. But as I got to know him, I saw that his thinking about life is right in line with mine.”

It was also the first time in his career that Stoner had partnered with the relative of a victim. “The first time that we went out to the crime scene. I said to James, ‘Before we go much farther, we’re going to have to have a meeting of the minds. There are things that happen to partners during a homicide investigation—we might start making jokes about the victim, or using terminology that is sort of crude about the type of woman who was out bar-hopping. You’re going to have to forgive me right now because of all the times I’m going to slip and say things about your mother, not even thinking about it. Because if you don’t maintain a sense of humor doing this work, you’ll go crazy.’”

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## JAMES ELLROY

And it's worked. We really clicked."

"Bill and I have become great friends," Ellroy says. "We even joke about my mother. Or about framing Bill's father, who is 83, for the killing. The only problem is he's a little too tall."

AS STONER CAUTIONED ELLROY AT the start, an investigation gone cold nearly four decades ago is not easy to resurrect. From the old case file, they were able to glean just the bare bones of the facts; in those pre-computerized days, Stoner explains, investigators kept information in personal notebooks. "One of the original investigators is deceased, and the other is 83 years old and doesn't remember the case," Stoner explains. "We went down to talk to him in San Diego and hit him up about the notebooks. His wife remembered that they'd thrown them away when they were getting ready to move from Los Angeles." Even so, Stoner and Ellroy managed to track down many of the original witnesses who are still alive: the Ellroys' landlords, a would-be suitor who danced with Geneva Ellroy that night, a carhop who waited on her and the man presumed to be her killer.

She was seen around 9 p.m. that night arriving at the Desert Inn, an establishment with a lethal karma. "It had various incarnations—Chet's Rendezvous, Outlaw's Hideout," Ellroy explains. "The owner at the time was a man named Robert Ellis Outlaw—what could be better? Later, he went off to Arizona and was murdered, as was the wife of one of the police officers who used to hang out there, too. It was the place to go, because they had live music—the Ink Spots, Spade Cooley played there. Also there was bookmaking, you assume dope. Just a place for lonely juiceheads to come on a Saturday night." The hostess, now deceased, told police that Mrs. Ellroy was not a regular, and Ellroy and Stoner learned from witnesses that in the days before her death she'd been asking people if there was a bar around town where a single woman could safely go. "Maybe she decided to come out here to El Monte to clean up her act, to give up the booze

and carousing, but then she started falling back into it," Stoner theorizes. Ellroy, from his own experience, concurs: "Alcoholics have this thing they call the geographic—they think that if they go to a new place, everything is going to be different. Which is bullshit. The thing that would make things different is to stop drinking."

That night, Geneva Ellroy wore a sleeveless blue dress and an imitation pearl necklace. She was accompanied by a younger blonde woman, and either then or later they were joined by the suspect who has come to be known as Swarthy Man. James Ellroy has committed his description to memory: "Between five-nine and six foot, hair slicked down, thin in the face. A suit and a sportshirt—a swinger." Although El Monte is a heavily Hispanic area today, Ellroy and Stoner have deduced that Swarthy Man was not Hispanic. "In those days, not many Hispanics came into that bar," Stoner explains. Mrs. Ellroy, the blonde and Swarthy Man seemed to know one another. Though police would later focus upon Swarthy Man as the most likely suspect in Mrs. Ellroy's murder, a witness at the Desert Inn recalled that he showed enough manners to help Mrs. Ellroy slip off her coat.

The trio was later joined by a 24-year-old man named Michael Whittaker, a drunken stranger who tried to insinuate himself into their party. Whitaker danced with Mrs. Ellroy, suggested that they go out on a date, got her phone number. Thirty-seven years later, Ellroy and Stoner tracked him down in San Francisco. "He gets on the phone," Stoner recalls, "I said, 'Michael, I'm reinvestigating this homicide from 1958 and you were interviewed regarding—He says, 'All I did was dance with the woman!' He remembered it, bang." To their disappointment the author and the detective found his memory was addled by years of booze and drugs, and was not particularly reliable. "He thought my mother, who was fair-skinned and looked every one of her 43 years, was 22 years old and a Mexican," Ellroy laughs.

Geneva Ellroy, Swarthy Man, and the blonde woman left the Desert Inn around 11 p.m. Mrs. Ellroy left her car

behind the bar, where it was found the next day. Not long after that, Mrs. Ellroy and Swarthy Man showed up at Stan's Drive In, about five blocks away, in a green Oldsmobile. He had coffee, she had a grilled cheese sandwich. They left, only to return to Stan's at about 2:15. Lavon Chambers, the carhop, noticed that Mrs. Ellroy's dress was undone, partly revealing a breast. Mrs. Ellroy had chili and coffee, and seemed in high spirits. Swarthy Man again had just coffee. He looked restless, bored.

But for a sad twist of fate, Ellroy and Stoner discovered, the case might have been solved. "We went out to talk to Lavon Chambers," Stoner explains. "She was just getting out of the hospital for asthma. We had been talking to her for 20 minutes, and she found out that James was the 10-year-old son of Mrs. Ellroy. She started crying. We said, 'What's the matter?' She said, 'I've always felt so guilty. We always wrote down the license-plate numbers of cars, in case they split without paying. But I saw his mother and the suspect were adults, so I didn't write it down.'"

Stoner's and Ellroy's theory is that Geneva Ellroy, who was menstruating, had said no to intercourse, and that Swarthy Man became enraged, took her to a secluded spot, raped and killed her. Like the investigators in 1958, they also link Swarthy Man to another crime, the rape and murder of a woman named Bobbie Long, whose body was found in the City of Industry on Jan. 22, 1959. From there, the trail becomes faint.

Still, Ellroy has not given up hope. "There's a good chance publicity will solve this case. You've got an alcohol-fueled lust killing, and you've got a witness, the blonde woman, who knows damned well who the killer is. And people have routinely described the blonde woman as being somewhat younger than both my mother and the man who presumably killed her. These people are boozers who love to do two things—drink and talk. That means there are people who know who this woman is, or at least know elements of her story, and can help put it together for us. The more publicity we get, the better shot we have at getting some of them." He's set up a toll-free number,



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## JAMES ELLROY

800-717-6517, for anyone who might be able to help him.

In late November, Ellroy returned home to Mission Hills, Kansas, where he'll continue to follow up leads even as he begins to write. Although he hasn't decided how he'll tell the story, he says it will be a stylistic departure from his plot-driven, hyperbolic novels. It will write itself. "I've got some ideas already, but I've pretty much forced myself not to jump the gun." The book itself, he thinks, may provide the ending to the story. "As much publicity as we're getting now, there will be 30 times as much when we publish the book. And that's when somebody comes forward and we nail [him]."

Even if Ellroy does manage to identify Swarthy Man, of course, he knows that bringing him to justice "is an extreme longshot, because there's no physical evidence. He'd pretty much have to confess." For some, that might be a haunting prospect, knowing that the killer of a loved one is alive and free. Not Ellroy. "I'd torment the motherfucker, call him up all the time."

As for his own peace of mind, "what people don't realize is this: I'm 47 years old. I've got a great marriage. I've got the kind of career that people dream about. Bill and I have become great friends. I'm a happy man."

If there's any anger or sadness in Ellroy, it's from contemplating the chance that he got, but his mother missed. "When I got sober at 29, my parents were both dead. When push came to shove, I was able to take responsibility for my own life—though in part, that was because I never learned to trust people, because I figured they were just going to get murdered, or die on me... Unfortunately, my mother never got to that point. She could have had a moment of clarity and gotten sober the next year, but somebody killed her. So she never got the chance. Even though she was competent at what she did, and in some ways had a strong character, she never got the chance to grow up." OC

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