



Episode 028 – Sinister Spouses (Transcript)

Introduction

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Announcements

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Story

And now for today's story.

"Research suggests that the general public's fascination with [true crime] is much like our fascination with car crashes and natural disasters. It's pure spectacle and drama, and anything outside of the norm of our day to day lives draw[s] attention." What is even more fascinating is when the crime happens in your own backyard. Burbank is a relatively safe place to live, but like any city it is not immune to crime. This is one such story.

The Castillian apartment complex at 2021 Grismer Avenue is an unassuming building that by all appearances hasn't changed much since its 1968 inception into one of L.A. County's most infamous murder sites. Sure, it has a fresh coat of paint and new windows, but it will always bear the history of being the location where 22-year-old Cheryl Perveler was slain while her car idled in the carport. The tale that unraveled from this murder made for news fodder, tv movies, and even a book that accounted both the crime and trial.

Cheryl was a newlywed. She married Paul Perveler on March 1, 1968. Paul was the 31-year-old owner of the Grand Duke Bar that was located at 1623 N. San Fernando in Burbank. He had also recently purchased a second bar he called the Grand Duchess that was in Sunland. Cheryl and Paul had a whirlwind romance, but what Cheryl didn't know was that Paul's persistence to get hitched came with a hitch. What Cheryl didn't know was that during the year prior to their courtship and marriage, Paul had proposed to three other women, including his ex-wife. What Cheryl didn't know was that there was an expiration date on her marriage and her life that was predestined by her groom.

Within one week of their marriage, Paul had taken out a \$25,000 double indemnity policy on his bride. This type of life insurance pays out twice the benefit if the death is caused by an accident. This would also not be the first insurance policy that Paul Perveler had cashed in on. Another thing that Cheryl didn't know was that Paul had a longtime girlfriend, and she was in on the con, Kristina Cromwell. And would it surprise the listener to know that Kristina's husband was murdered less than two years prior to Cheryl?

So, let's go back to December 11, 1966 in a modest home in El Sereno, a residential community on the east side of Los Angeles. Marlin Cromwell had polished off a few beers and was watching television when someone came from behind and shot him three times in the head. There was no sign of a struggle, so police determined Marlin was unaware of the intruder. The shots to the head killed Marlin instantaneously, but then the killer "stepped to the other side of the room and, as if taking target practice, pumped two more bullets into the slumped body" (Bugliosi, Pg. 7). Finally, they set the house on fire, but from the back so it never actually reached the living room to destroy the evidence of the murder. Marlin's wife, Kristina, just happened to be at Palm Springs that weekend. An

unexpected getaway that she planned last minute. Marlin was a stock clerk at Sears and was considered so passive and unassertive that no known enemies could be identified. Coincidentally, it was this demeanor in his personality that caused Kristina to divorce him in the summer of 1965. However, they reconciled and remarried in the fall of 1966, shortly before his death. Also, not coincidentally, Kristina took out an insurance policy on Marlin just weeks after their second vows.

Kristina wasn't initially considered a suspect in the murder of Marlin because of her airtight alibi. But when the police went to her former place of work, the Automobile Club of Southern California, and questioned her old co-workers, one name consistently came up: Paul Perveler. It turns out that Kristina and Paul met at the Automobile Club when he was an insurance adjuster there. I'll introduce Allen Halverson here as he is integral later to the story. He was also an Automobile Club employee and became Paul's best friend and confidante. The fact that Paul and Kristina had a romantic relationship was not a well-kept secret. And so, shortly after Marlin's murder, the police kept an eye on Paul and Kristina. What they found was that days after Kristina received her husband's life insurance payout, along with a payout from a Sears employee policy, she and Paul traveled to Las Vegas under assumed names and lived it up for a few days. Upon their return, Paul suddenly had the money to buy the Grand Duke bar as well as lease a new car.

And if you thought the story couldn't get more convoluted, let me introduce you to Lela Hensley. Remember those other life insurance payouts I mentioned? Well, those came courtesy of Lela, Paul's first wife; whom he married in 1964. All in all, he tried to kill her three times. She was struck by a hit-and-run driver twice during their brief marriage. They received a \$5,000 settlement each time. He also nearly beat her to death when he suspected her of cheating. She ended up in the hospital but refused to press charges. She finally left him in early 1966. They remained on friendly terms, but she later revealed it was only because she feared him.

So, let's pivot back to why we're here in the first place...poor Cheryl. She never had a chance. They hadn't even been married two months and Paul pounced at the chance to cash in on his investment. The timeline of events that happened the

night of her murder would be revealed in the trial. Cheryl was with Paul at his Sunland bar and at around 10:30pm, he gave her the following instructions: go home, but first stop at the gas station and gas up the car, and then stop at the restaurant across the street to settle a bill they had from their wedding reception. He also instructed her to park in the carport, not on the street like she usually was accustomed to. She followed these instructions and pulled into the carport of the Castillian apartment building just before 11:30pm. It was around this time that tenants of the complex heard three gunshots. But it was the apartment manager John Miller and his wife, who had just come back from a party that found her. “The car’s motor was running, its headlights on. The radio was playing softly. As he walked around the back of the [convertible] he heard a terrible sound, a low and guttural moan. [He] ran to the side of the car and found Cheryl. She was sitting upright in the driver’s seat, her head thrown back. Her right hand was still on the gear shift. Cheryl’s eyes were closed, her mouth open. She was gulping for air. There was so much blood flowing from the left side of her head, [he] didn’t see the blood flowing from her breast as well (Bugliosi, Page 124).” The police and ambulance were called. She was initially sent to Burbank Community Hospital, but was immediately transported to L.A. County General where she died at 1:35am, as she was be prepped for surgery. Burbank detectives were informed that their case of attempted murder was now officially a murder. When they viewed the body, they found not only had she been shot twice in the head, grazed across the breast with a bullet, but also she had blunt-force-trauma on the back of the head. “It was one of the most vicious murders the officers have ever seen. Two bullets in the head had not satisfied the perpetrator. Seven times the murderer had brought something – perhaps the butt of the gun – smashing into Cheryl’s skull (Bugliosi, Page 127).” Paul’s alibi for the night of Cheryl’s murder was that he was at the Grand Duchess Bar in Sunland. One of the Burbank detectives, Harry Strickland, did a timed drive from the crime scene to the bar and it was a twelve-minute drive. That would have been plenty of time for Paul to get to the apartment and back to the bar before he was called and informed of the tragedy. But his staff corroborated his alibi.

It was ultimately Cheryl’s homicide that allowed the police to investigate Paul and Kristina on Marlin’s murder. Prior to that they had nothing connecting Paul to the crime except for the weak evidence that he helped Kristina spend the insurance

money. With Cheryl's death, they could now establish a pattern and parallel motive for both murders.

The story became more sensationalized when a promising young prosecutor took on the case, Vincent Bugliosi. "Bugliosi began his law career in the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office in 1964, where he served as a deputy district attorney for eight years. He successfully prosecuted 105 out of 106 felony jury trials, which included 21 murder convictions (Wikipedia)." He was most famed for have prosecuted the Charles Manson case. Bugliosi authored sixteen books, one of which was titled "Till Death Us Do Part: A True Murder Mystery." In it he recounts (using pseudonyms) the crimes of Paul Perveler, Kristina Cromwell and their subsequent trial.

Paul was so adept at covering his tracks, that Bugliosi had only circumstantial evidence to prosecute on. No weapons were ever found for either crime. Bugliosi demonstrated the monetary motive, indicating that it wasn't relevant if Paul pulled the trigger on Cheryl or if he merely orchestrated it. And if you recall the friend Allen Halverson that he worked with at the Automobile Club? During the trial, Allen shared that Paul confessed to him that he had murdered Kristina's husband. Paul's ex-wife, Lela, finally got her day in court as well. Paul Perveler was charged with the first-degree murder of Marlin Cromwell, the first-degree murder of Cheryl Perveler, and the attempted murder of Lela Hensley. He was convicted on all counts and sentenced to death. Kristina Cromwell was convicted of murder in the first degree of Marlin Cromwell and sentenced to life in jail. When California's death penalty was overturned in 1972, Kristina's sentence downgraded and she became eligible for parole. She was released in 1976, having served just 7 years of her life sentence. It is rumored that she changed her name and moved to Northern California. I had trouble finding any evidence on Paul Perveler's whereabouts. The last known article was from the L.A. Times in 1989 in which Lela Hensley (now Lela Halverson) fought to keep him behind bars because he had threatened to kill her if he ever got out. And notice Lela's new married name? Yep, that's right. She married Allen, Paul Perveler's former friend, who she met during the trial. So, at least there is some light in this dark tale. I guess the moral of the story is that crime doesn't pay even when it does.

News from Burbank

Today's news comes from the July 1991 Burbank Leader.

Pair Seized in Bizarre Incident Which Led to Murder for Hire

Officers have arrested a woman who allegedly hired a juvenile to kill Burbank resident Jose Salazar last year because she was in love with Salazar's wife. A 22-year-old woman infatuated with a grocery clerk's wife paid a gang member \$100 to kill the clerk so she could pursue his wife.

Jose Salazar, 37, died of gunshot wounds to the head around midnight [on] August 22, 1990, Police Lieutenant Larry Koch said.

After a 10-month investigation, officers arrested Maria Elena Serrato for hiring the gang member to commit the murder. [She] is being charged with murder, including special circumstances in which she allegedly hired the suspect to [lay] in wait. Detective Dave Gabriel, [who led the] murder investigation revealed that the suspect, who was paid to do the killing, went to Salazar's home and awaited the couple's return. Salazar was getting out of his car in front of his apartment in the 700 block of East Cedar Avenue when he was ambushed. He had been returning home with his wife, Cecilia, who had picked him up from his job in Echo Park.

Serrato and Cecilia Salazar met at a Vons Supermarket in West Hollywood where [they] both worked. Serrato told the police they became lovers, but Cecilia denied being sexually involved with Serrato and said they were just friends. Police said Mrs. Salazar is not a suspect.

"If for a price like that you can have somebody killed just because it's someone you're mad at, or jealous of, what would it take to kill someone who's a witness?" Lieutenant Koch inquired.

Serrato's attorney, Public Defender William McCallister declined to comment.

And that's the news from July 1991.

End Credits

RememBURBANK was researched, written and hosted by Carolyn Alves; recorded and edited by Marcos Alves. Funding for the podcast came from the Friends of the Burbank Public Library, a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting books and the library to the Burbank community. The proceeds from their fundraising efforts help fund Library programming and purchase special equipment for the library. The music you hear now, and at the beginning of the podcast, is Burbank's 1924 official song "In Burbank" by Code Morgan. You can find show notes for this episode, learn more about the show, and view historical photos of Burbank at burbankinfofocus.org Thank you for joining us today.