

**A Murder
in West Covina**

Chronicle of the Finch-Tregoff Case

by

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Edited by

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FOREWORD

Reading the book "A Murder in West Covina" was not easy for me. When I came to the part of Dr. Finch's testimony, I had to pause to the next day. But this time I am not alone as I relive this story; I have James L. Jones, M.D., by my side, a fellow human being.

In a way, I almost knew that someday someone was going to put all the material together and write a documentary of the Finch-Tregoff murder trials. I am glad that it was James L. Jones who did become the author to link the events together and make us understand a little better. He has succeeded in putting all material together with a tasteful mix of facts and interviews with people that remembered the event from thirty-five years ago. He has managed to recreate the atmosphere that surrounded the three trials. It makes me feel like he was there with us.

He has done the difficult part, to pull out the most vital parts of the trials. I would add that he has given the case a "soul."

Today we know a lot more about the effects that experiences like this event have on people like myself and we deal with the effects of the trauma more effectively. For example, I know that victims are not separated from the crime scene at such an early stage, as I was, and are given time to adjust.

You need each other very much when you experience death and lose someone you love. We all have experiences, bad and good, that form our lives. This event is part of my life and it is hard to say in what way it affected me. I will never forget this experience, maybe because violence cannot be rationalized.

This documentary also shows how many human lives can be affected by one single person. There is always a reason or explanation to why we act the way we do. We should never give up searching for the truth, the whole truth.

But if one eventually does tell the truth, that must not mean that he is excused from taking the responsibility for his actions. Will Dr. Finch take the truth with him when he one day leaves this earth, or will he tell it before? For me, this case is not finished until I know.

Marie Anne Lidholm
March

8,

1993

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the journalists and other observers who witnessed and memorialized the events dramatized in this chronicle, and to the librarians and custodians who tended their records over the years.

Thanks to Callie Linder and the rest of my reading committee and to Tony and Gina Capobianco, for haunting libraries with notable dedication.

Mostly, thanks to the people of West Covina for sharing their story.

Disclaimer

This chronicle of the Finch-Tregoff case is a dramatization based on facts obtained from personal interviews, news media records, and court documents. The only name changed is that of the family later purchasing the Finch residence; all other characters are real and were famous persons, elected or appointed public employees, persons who knowingly made statements of public record, those explicitly releasing their names for use, or those allowing interviews under generally accepted rules of investigative journalism.

This portrayal of facts is for strictly literary purposes and is not intended to defame, libel, or otherwise injure any person's character. Persons made famous by the events studied herein are considered to have possibly regained their legal right to privacy and no reference is made to their current lives.

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DEDICATION:

To those victims of domestic violence unable to tell their story. May the past whisper for them.

prologue:
The Cardinal

JUNE, 1934
COVINA HIGH SCHOOL
COVINA, CALIFORNIA

Eva Reed settled comfortably on the grass in front of her school, leaning back onto a young elm tree and looking through her yearbook, The Cardinal. She was seventeen years old and had just finished her junior year. Covina High School had less than one hundred fifty students. Most had signed, usually adding a message hinting at hopes for Eva or dreams for themselves.

Were her closer friends included? "Missing a couple," she noted. Eva thought herself a plain girl whose important interests did not include boys. Her father, Tom Reed, was presiding judge at the local Citrus Municipal Court; he asked his children to be serious students. Eva was earning excellent grades and planned to be a teacher.

Her friend Lyle Daugherty plopped beside her.

"He was a good kid," Eva would later tell me, "just the nicest kid in the world."

"Eva," Lyle said, "I haven't signed your yearbook. Don't you like me?"

"Stop being silly. Here. Write something here." Her young, quick fingers moved to an opening on the page and tapped quickly. Eva was a year older than Lyle. She knew his family well; they had one of the larger farms in the area.

"Oh," Lyle moaned knowingly, "look where Bernie signed." He was looking at a page titled "Characteristics."

"You know, I wouldn't say anything bad, myself, but that's one person a lot of people are glad to see graduate," he continued. "I've heard them say so." He started writing his note. "Even though he's leaving for college, well, I wonder if he's really gone. You know what I mean?"

Almost sixty years later Eva's fingers moved across that same page as she showed me her Cardinal. The book was carefully tended, without a single tear. The pulp was yellowed, but the pictures were still clear, as were the messages from the past.

We met to talk of one of her schoolmates, one more memorable than others, R. Bernard Finch.

On the "Characteristics" page, the signer was to choose a trait best describing him, then put his name in the blank next to it. Next to "Spotlight" were H. Schulte and T. Finch. Nita Kennedy had filled in "Kissable." And next to "Stupendous" was just one name, Bernie Finch.

Eva chose not to answer any questions about people she knew in 1934. Instead, she talked of life in the San Gabriel valley during those times. And, as she talked, I listened to the Cardinal.

Other informants told me Bernard had announced he was planning to be the richest man in the valley and was choosing medicine as the way to do it. He was the only kid in school to have his own car, not a bad feat in 1934, and the "spoiled" oldest child and only son in his wealthy family. Good-looking, with big, brown eyes and dark, curly hair, he was known as a "charmer" and usually had his way.

I searched Eva's book for any hint of the future. There he was in the varsity tennis photograph. "Best high school tennis player in the valley" many had said. Then on page nineteen I saw his name under "Exclusive Organizations, Heckler's Club." I read on.

"Qualifications for membership: the prospective member of this organization must possess an uncanny ability to bother people."

Part 1

The Death of Barbara Jean Finch,
the Preliminary Hearings, and
Grand Jury Indictments

one

The Death of Barbara Jean Finch

**SATURDAY, JULY 18, 1959
LARKHILL DRIVE
WEST COVINA, CALIFORNIA
11:30 P.M.**

A nineteen-year-old Swedish girl took off her robe and laid it on the foot of her bed. She had just checked on the children she watched. The six-year-old boy was asleep. The eleven-year-old girl, Patti, had gone to bed. They all had watched the Miss Universe Pageant, held in nearby Long Beach, and then the news before turning off the television.

The Swede walked into the bathroom, running her fingers through her long, blonde hair. Picking up her hairbrush, she studied her image in the mirror.

"Everyone says I'm attractive," she thought to herself. "But am I really?" Leaning forward, she poked at an early blemish that seemed exploding on her cheek.

She had come from Sweden the previous September to work as a governess for a wealthy physician and his wife, tending their six-year-old son and the wife's daughter by a previous marriage. It had been obvious for some time the couple was not getting along. The doctor had moved out three weeks earlier after his wife announced she was filing for divorce. This saddened the young girl. Her own parents had divorced when she was fourteen. She knew how the children would suffer.

Brushing her hair, she contemplated her future. "It would be nice if I could keep my position long enough to finish my art studies." Art was her first love; she had been studying since age five. Teachers always praised her talent for observing things and transferring them to paper or canvas.

Her ability to see and remember was soon to be tested in one of the most publicized crimes of the century.

She heard a car arriving in the garage. There was a familiar squeak of a brake-it was the doctor's wife. The motor stopped. She waited, expecting to hear footsteps and the sound of the door opening into the house. Nothing. Then: Angry voices, a woman screaming for help.

She put on her robe and glasses, then ran to the hall. There she met Patti, who had also heard the noise. "Come quickly!" she commanded. The two went to the sliding door that led across a patio to the garage.

They opened the patio door and began running to smaller door of the garage, forty feet away. Then, from inside a woman's voice screamed, "Marie, help!" and a dull thud echoed out-the sound of a body being slammed against something hard.

The two stopped; the older grabbed the other by the shoulders, instructing her in a thick Swedish accent. "You go back to the house and wait for me there." Patti ran back and locked the patio door behind her; she stood watching.

The light in the garage was out. The governess flipped the switch on the wall. There, lying on the garage floor was her mistress, next to the driver's side of her car, a Chrysler convertible. The woman seemed dazed and was trying to sit up, holding the right side of her head. Blood was coming from wounds on her cheek and temple.

The governess ran toward her mistress. But someone grabbed her, lifting her trim, five-foot, one-inch frame up and over to the garage wall, and without saying a word began pounding her head against it.

Once.

She could feel the plaster of the wall crumbling beneath her head. Her glasses clattered onto the concrete floor.

Twice.

Pieces of plaster rattled inside the wall.

Then nothing.

She woke not knowing where she was; then remembering, she tried to get up. The garage was dark again.

"Get into the car or I'll kill you," he was yelling. It was the man she worked for, the physician. And she was sure he was going to kill her.

"Please don't kill me," she was sobbing. "Don't kill me!"

The garage seemed to explode. It was a gunshot. Sparks flashed from a gun muzzle. She could see the man's outline against the dim night sky as he stood between her and the garage door. And she could see the revolver in his hand.

"Get in the car!" the man again commanded.

She staggered to the driver's door of the convertible, passing her dazed mistress, who still lay on the garage floor. Once in the car, the young woman leaned toward the left corner of the seat, keeping her head just high enough to see.

The man lifted the semi-conscious older woman; she wobbled, unable to stand on her own. He pulled her around the back of the car, then up to the passenger door. Her bloodied left hand was on top of the car, trying to hold back, leaving wavy streaks of red, but the man was too strong. He opened the door and pushed her down onto the front seat. She was sitting sideways now, her feet on the garage floor. Her right hand was at the side of her head. Blood from her ear ran between her fingers, dribbling down her forearm, then dripping onto her white cotton dress.

He slid behind the steering wheel.

"Give me the keys or I'll kill you, I mean it!" he said to his wife. He held the gun with his left hand and took the woman's small white purse, rummaging through it with his right, seeking the keys. Then he noticed the keys were still in the ignition. He started the car, racing the motor three times. The lights came on. The radio was playing.

He reached to pull the woman in. She was gone.

She was running for her life, down a steep irregular slope that led to the house next door. Her father-in-law, the father of the man who had just attacked her, lived there. She was a few feet from safety. The long heel of her right shoe came off. She moved slowly, hobbling, nearly stumbling.

The governess left the car and ran to the house when the man chased his wife. Patti was opening the sliding-glass door.

"What happened?" Patti was crying.

The two went to the telephone and the older girl dialed the number for the police. As she dialed, there was another gunshot. She turned to look outside, listening to the shot reverberate through the dark hills surrounding the house, each echo rumbled from farther and farther away.

She was on the phone to the West Covina police station. It was 11:47 P.M.

"Police," the voice said.

She spoke slowly, telling what had happened. "He's going to kill her. He has a gun and he shot at me, too."

She hung up and turned to Patti. "We must go outside and look for your Mama." They walked onto the home's asphalt driveway, looking into the night. The Chrysler's motor was still running. On the car's radio: Connie Francis singing "Everybody's Somebody's Fool." They never saw the woman.

Soon, two police cruisers were winding up the long black driveway.

The man, the physician, was running wildly down the hill, past his father's house. He had just watched his wife of six years die. His arms were raised out to the sides for balance as he

fought the Boston ivy grabbing at his shoes. He weaved through the many eucalyptus trees standing around the homes. In one hand was his wife's purse and some of her jewelry; in the other, the gun that had killed her.

He did not go back to his house where his twenty-two-year-old, red-haired lover was waiting behind a thick bougainvillea plant. He ran the opposite way, not knowing what he was going to do.

Hours later, the woman who had waited for him was driving east, up the Cajon Pass, to an apartment in Las Vegas, two hundred miles ahead. The pass was the traditional eastern "end" of the Los Angeles basin. Through it, fifteen miles of highway rose four thousand feet, winding through the San Bernardino mountains to the high Mojave desert. Once through it, the traveler was free of the metropolis.

Stars faded quickly in the sky before her as a blanch spread from the horizon. Soon, she would be in the desert. There would be few cars and no radio stations for the next four hours. She turned on the radio; the last sounds of Los Angeles poked through the crackle and fizzle.

It was then that she heard the first reports of the death of Barbara Jean Finch. And the bulletins said police were looking for the man she loved, Dr. R. Bernard Finch. The radio fizzed once more, and there was no more news. She was alone.

two

The Library

FEBRUARY 15, 1992
WEST COVINA, CALIFORNIA

A rare rain was beginning as I parked my car near the West Covina Library. Large pellets of water stung at my face and kicked up small circles of dust on the sidewalk, leaving small damp circles. As it turned out, this rain signalled an end to California's longest drought in recent memory.

Desert dust and smog had long been settling onto our buildings, sidewalks, trees, and mountains. Soon, everything would be scrubbed clean by a storm that would last for days. Tomorrow the air would be clear enough to see the San Gabriel Mountains to the north and even the more distant buildings of Pasadena, twenty miles to the west.

I was about to look into the past, to a time when a tidal wave of world attention washed onto West Covina. In 1959 one of the most publicized crimes of the century took place in this then-rural community.

The eastern part of the San Gabriel Valley had changed many times. With the introduction of irrigation water and refrigerated railroad cars in the early part of the century, the valley had been converted from desert to farmland, supplying citrus fruits and some vegetables to markets "back east."

During the 'sixties a ripple of blue- and white-collar workers settled into the many housing tracts that replaced the groves. Many who moved here worked in the area's booming aerospace industry.

In the 'seventies large numbers of Hispanics migrated into the area, and in the 'eighties a wave of Asians. West Covina had evolved into a multicultural suburb, home to over one hundred thousand people.

But in 1959 West Covina was a farming community of less than eight thousand people. Everyone was known, especially if they were rich and beautiful. And no one could imagine a murder in the town.

Anyone who has lived here long has something to say about the Finch murder, and usually knew someone close to it.

This is the story of that murder-told as often as possible by the people who lived and worked here and by those whose lives were affected and whose perceptions of human nature were sharpened.

It is also a study of the dark side of the mind, of intrigue, infidelity, betrayal, deceit, and manipulation. It is also a story of naive courage and the faith of uncomplicated innocence.

As I reached the library entrance the damp circles on the sidewalk had joined into one long, clear, shimmering film, pushing to the walkway's edges. I shuffled my shoes on a mat and entered. After checking out some microfilm at the reference desk, I studied the machine to project the past. The reel whirled to Monday, July 20, 1959. The Sunday papers had been printed on Saturday, before the murder took place, so the first print news was published on Monday. I fine-tuned the focus knob just enough to take out the blur. There it was: "West Covina Medic Faces Murder Quiz."

