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Party monster: the deranged, decadent life of Black Dahlia suspect George Hodel



George Hodel, as played by Jefferson Mays, in *I Am The Night*

- By [Alice Vincent](#)

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The jaws of the John Sowden House are softened by the large, liling leaves of banana trees these days. It's the kind of visage that looks ripe for Instagram; green and geometric, it can be perfectly framed in a square, the faux-aged concrete blocks surrounding a large, lonely window that reflects Los Angeles's cloudless blue skies – and hides a far more grisly history.

People gather there today in the same capacity that they have always: to drink and party, to see and be seen. All, of course, behind those windowless concrete walls that shield the

glistening rectangular pool beyond. The house was built in 1926 by Lloyd Wright, a cast-off job from his father, Frank Lloyd Wright, for artist John Sowden and his wife Ruth to throw parties and put on am-dram performances during their retirement. Wright built in secret rooms and stages and blocked out natural light. He created a Mayan-Revival complex made for soirees to last until dawn.

It's still a stage set now: I Am The Night, Patty Jenkins' television series about one of LA's most mysterious and tangled families – that of suspected Black Dahlia murderer George Hodel – was filmed in the property. And that's because, after the Sowdens moved out, Hodel moved in. He was the man who transformed the John Sowden House into what some believe is the city's most haunted home.

Jenkins was moved to make I Am The Night after befriending the woman whose life sounded stranger than fiction. The series, which launched in the US last month, stars Chris Pine (and Jefferson Mays as George Hodel) in a fictionalised version of Fauna's life that has won acclaim. Fauna Hodel, the granddaughter / daughter (more on that later) of Hodel, was raised by a black, alcoholic prostitute in Reno in the Fifties. Fauna was given away at birth to Jimmie Lee and her former husband with the promise that she was a mixed race baby – her birth certificate read that her father was “negro”. But Fauna was wholly white and forced to suffer exclusion and bullying in a working-class black community until she met her birth mother, Tamar, at 22. When she did, she encountered a family history even more unfathomable than her own.

Like the house (architectural marvel; Instagram backdrop; gruesome sex dungeon), Hodel's story exists in several different spheres. He was a child prodigy who performed piano for Rachmaninoff. He was a mysterious silver-haired benefactor who bugged the phones of his estranged granddaughter. Hodel was also a powerful LA city official clamouring to be part of the upper echelon of surrealist society and the host of deranged and dangerous orgies. Most of all, he is the greatest suspect in the still-unsolved Black Dahlia murder.



John Sowden House (Hodel residence 1945-1950)

Hodel died nearly 20 years ago, in May 1999, aged 97. Although he spent the last decades of his life as a kind of high-end hermit, shifting addresses from such Far East locations as Tokyo and Manila, his death knocked over a can of worms that continue to wriggle even now.

One of his greatest detractors is his fourth son (Hodel fathered 10 children officially). Steven, a former police detective who came out of retirement to gather evidence that his father killed Elizabeth Short, the budding actress whose demise made her famous. Short, called the Black Dahlia after her dark hair, was murdered in a ritualistic killing in 1947. Her womb and right breast were removed, her body was drained of blood and bisected between the second and third vertebrae before it was posed on the ground near a sidewalk in Liemart Park, LA.

The body parts were placed in such a mannequin-like fashion that the woman who discovered it thought it was a dummy: the legs apart, the arms crooked above the head. The face had been severed with a grim Chelsea smile. The Black Dahlia gained further notoriety after James Ellroy wrote a novel about her in 1987.

For the gore-hungry tabloid press at the time, such a murder was the post-War equivalent of clickbait. The Black Dahlia was reduced to mere sensation, an amoral seductress who met a bitter end. But while Short – who was 22, striking and grieving a sweetheart killed in the last week of the Second World War – became a chapter in American crime history, the Hodel family legacy continues to this day, and it is arguably even more disturbing.



Elizabeth Short, known as the Black Dahlia CREDIT: GETTY CREATIVE

Hodel was born in October 1907. An only son, he had a cosseted, privileged childhood. The young George showed serious potential: a musical prodigy, he was performing at the city's auditoriums from the age of nine, mostly at the insistence of his mother, who banned him from playing with his friends to better preserve his hands for piano playing. "As soon as she died, he quit piano, had nothing to do with it," Hodel's son, Steve, explains on *Root of Evil*, the podcast that accompanies *I Am The Night*.

But Hodel was also highly intelligent, reportedly scoring 186 on an IQ test. By 15, he had graduated from high school, with the highest grades in California state history, and was packed off to CalTech. It was here that he began the sexual havoc that would define the rest of his life, embarking upon an affair with the wife of one of the university's professors and impregnating her, breaking up her marriage in the process. Still in his teens – and expelled from CalTech – he followed her to her native Massachusetts where he proposed marriage. She had their child, named it Folly, and rejected him. Hodel headed back to Los Angeles utterly dejected. According to his son, it was "one of the big triggers in his life".

It's interesting to see Hodel as a man who never quite achieved recognition for what he aspired to be - namely, an artist. By 17, and kicked out of CalTech, he published a self-made art newspaper, which included book reviews and pontificating essays on Surrealism. He had a photography show in Pasadena but was never personally recognised for his own artistic pursuits. Instead, he would mingle with artists and collect their work for the rest of his life.

As art became a hobby, Hodel became a doctor. He had responsibilities and mouths to feed; there had been a son, Duncan, born to a woman named Emilia in the mid-Twenties. By the next decade, he'd fathered a daughter, Tamar, with Dorothy Antony, a model from San Francisco.



Hodel, aged 38

Tamar's name suggests that Hodel was already deep into warped, avant-garde thinking. At this time, outdoorsy Californian poet Robinson Jeffers was reaching the peak of his popularity, and in 1935 – the same year Tamar was born – released one of his best-known epic poems, Tamar. In it, a young girl (the titular character) seduces, and falls pregnant by, her brother. The pair's father, meanwhile, has an incestuous relationship with his sister, or their aunt. Tamar then decides to destroy her whole family by burning down the family home. It would prove strangely, thematically, prescient.

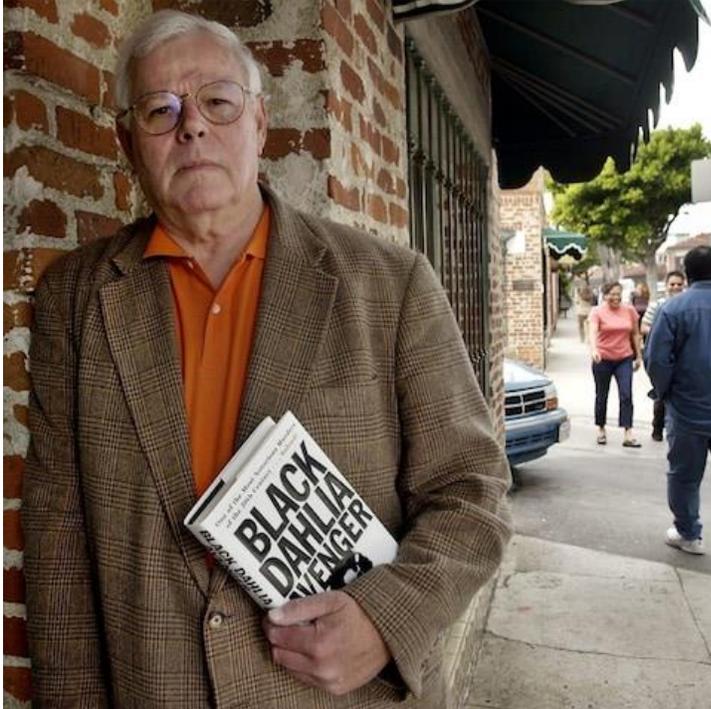
After enrolling at University of California, Berkeley, Hodel went to medical school and studied surgery, graduating in 1936. Decades later, it was this that would become of major significance in the revisited Black Dahlia case - only surgical students in this era were taught hemicorporectomy, or, the amputation of the lower half of the body that was practiced impeccably upon Elizabeth Short's body. In short, it was a rare and delicate piece of archaic surgery that few other people would have been taught how to do.

Hodel didn't, though, end up becoming a surgeon. Instead, it was venereal disease that guaranteed his fortune and power – and led to his first suspected murder. In Thirties and Forties, 10 per cent of the US population would contract syphilis during their lifetime, and 20 to 40 per cent of the population would suffer gonorrhoea. It was considered the last major infectious epidemic, spread further by the stigma and significance that having a “VD” held: they were a blight associated with the working classes, people of colour and infidelity in a society that was class-obsessed, racist and believed staunchly in the purity of marriage.

What's more, venereal diseases hampered America's boys in the Army; during the First World War, the greatest number of fighting days were lost due to VD-infected soldiers. And the country was preparing for battle.

So when Hodel joined the LA county health department in VD control and swiftly rose to the top, he also became the secret-keeper and potential blackmailer of the city's most high-profile infected patients. It gave him both prestige and something to blackmail people with. Furthermore, he used the inherent shame of the ailments to earn money on the side, falsely diagnosing clean patients with STIs for hefty payments worth the equivalent of \$1,200 - \$1,500.

“He was actually mis-diagnosing, it would come back negative on the slides and he would say, ‘Yeah, it's positive’,” explains Steve Hodel. “It became an extra source of income”.



Steve Hodel, with the book he wrote about his father CREDIT: BLACK DAHLIA

That money, meanwhile, was funnelled into Hodel's nocturnal activities. Between Hodel's prestigious position and fascination with the art world, he had made friends with Surrealism's most prominent stars; the photographer Man Ray, the artist-turned-director John Huston, the painter Fred Sexton and Henry Miller, whose liberal attitudes towards bestiality, public sex and incest saw his books banned in America until the Sixties. In 1940, Hodel married Huston's first wife, Dorothy.

To avoid confusion between her and Tamar's mother, also named Dorothy, Hodel nicknamed her Doreros, a portmanteau between the Ancient Greek words for gift, Doro, and erotic love, Eros. "I always liked the name Doreros, I liked the way it sounded," Dorero and Hodel's youngest son, who now goes by Kenny, said, "I never knew what it meant until I just found out recently."

Hodel moved Doreros, their three sons, Michael, Steven and Kelvin, Tamar and her mother Dorothy into the John Sowden House. "It was like entering a cave with secret stone tunnels, within which only the initiated could feel comfortable," remembered Steve. "Growing up in that house, my brothers and I saw it as a place of magic that we were convinced could easily have greeted the uninvited with pits of fire, poison darts, deadly snakes, or even a giant sword-bearing turbaned bodyguard at the door. Right out of Arabian nights."

While technically still a practicing doctor, Hodel blurred the lines between work and play constantly. He'd take his sons out in his army jeep to make house calls, but, as Steve recalled in the podcast, "he'd leave his medical bag [in the car]."

“He would sit us in the back of the car and he would say, ‘I don’t want you to move out of this seat. Do not get out of the car.’ And we’d sit there for two, sometimes three hours, waiting for him to come back,” remembered Kenny. “We know he was making sexual housecalls.”

“One day he comes walking out with a very attractive woman, arm-in-arm, and they walk up to my side and the woman says, ‘Oh, is this your son? He’s so beautiful! Can I keep him?’” Steve continued.

The boys lived in fear of Hodel, whom they described as a “kind of cold, distant man” who had little time for children. “He was capable of just blowing up at any minute,” Kenny said, recalling an incident when Hodel discovered crayon on the wall and, when none of the three brothers confessed to who was responsible, punished them by making them wait on the threat that someone wanted to speak with them. Minutes later, Hodel pretended to be God speaking through the house intercom system. “Steve and I got the hell outta there, not wanting to piss off God,” Kenny said. “And Mike sat there just trembling, waiting for the wrath of God to come down on him.”

None of the brothers witnessed the rampant orgies that went on by night in the same house supposedly visited by God, although Steve said he had sensed the violence that had gone on behind closed doors. Their mother, too, was later candid about her marriage: “She told me there was always a line of girls to my father’s door, that there were orgies, that he would have her pick up girls for him,” Kenny said. Dorero was bisexual, and participated in group sex with George’s other women, but, her son “also felt she feared him. She knew what he was capable of and he would take things out on our mother and that disturbed me as a young boy.”

Tamar’s memories of her father’s household shows how much her half-brothers were sheltered from. Having lived with her mother in San Francisco for most of her childhood, Tamar was moved into the John Sowden House when she was about 11, and was fascinated by the ethereal, adult home of her elusive father.

“His library was filled with books that dealt with the fantasy world of gods and goddesses, all making love,” she recalled, in *One Day She’ll Darken*, the memoir written by her daughter. “He was very handsome and mysterious. In their home, the cinder part that covered the outside was where they lay naked in the sun. There was this whole bevy of servants; you didn’t have to do anything. His whole life was dedicated to sex.”

Hodel groomed Tamar, letting her into his world, normalising his fetishised attitudes to sex by introducing them to her. When he forced her into giving him oral sex at 11, he told her it was a “special privilege”; when Tamar told her mother, Hodel told Dorothy that Tamar had made the same accusations about her. Tamar was painted a liar, while Hodel continued to bring her into the elaborate sexual games that went on in his social circle.

In a transcript of a recorded interview Steve made with his mother in 2004, she describes losing her virginity at 14 to her father after an evening of ritualistic behaviour, involving other women and Fred Sexton. She describes being given a drink before undressing without much understanding of why.

Tamar recalls having an out-of-body experience while her father raped her: “I felt as though I was looking down on myself from up high in the ceiling. I was in shock about everything that was going on. I can’t explain to you what happened, other than my consciousness left my body for a few minutes... I thought it was a very romantic thing that was going to happen, but no. He felt angry, guilty, weird.”

Among other things, Hodel produced a number of storytellers. The life he tried so hard to keep secret – moving to a secluded home; using his power and position to win silence; escaping to foreign climes – has since become the subject of spiralling narratives. They spread from this one, mysterious man like spiderwebs, paper trails of police reports and letters mixing with testimony and oral tradition to build a myth. With so many living relatives keen to understand the historic trauma at the heart of their family, it gets complicated fast.

But here are the facts. Elizabeth Short was killed in 1947. Hodel’s secretary and sometime lover, Ruth Spaulding, officially died of an overdose in 1945. Tamar was raped by her father in the January of 1949, and by Christmas Eve that year, Hodel had been acquitted of incest in a trial between the pair of them that had attracted nationwide attention. She was 14 and branded a pathological liar. In August 1, Tamar gave birth to a daughter, Fauna Hodel.

Fauna is a whole other story in herself. She died in 2017 after meticulously recording the unfathomable events of her life, and that of her mother, on to tapes. The family still don’t know if Fauna was fathered by an Italian boy from her mother’s neighbourhood or by Hodel. But Hodel did insist upon Fauna’s name; like Tamar’s, it came from a Robinson Jeffers poem, in which a woman named Naeus tempts her husband to have sex with a woman named Fauna.



John Huston in Chinatown

Some of Tamar's stories wound up in public consciousness long before Fauna or Steve, who began investigating his father after he had died, started to tell them. It was a friend of Tamar's, The Mamas & The Papas singer Michelle Phillips, who told then-boyfriend Jack Nicholson about her friend's adolescence, in the process informing the script of Chinatown. Of all people, it was John Huston, Hodel's former friend, who was cast as the powerful father who raped his own daughter and forced her to carry the child.

By the time Fauna arrived, Hodel had already had his fair share of run-ins with the police. The apparent suicide of Ruth Spaulding in 1945 caused them to rap upon the large, glass doors of the John Sowden House. Hours before Spaulding died, in a coma, in hospital, Hodel and Dorero had been at her house, Steve claims. Spaulding had discovered that Hodel was mis-diagnosing his patients and performing illegal abortions. Taking revenge for having been romantically spurned by him, she threatened to go to the authorities. Within hours, she was dead – and Dorero had been tasked with burning the evidence Spaulding had prepared. Hodel skipped town, using contacts he had from an old job in China to return there.

Tamar's confession brought the police to Hodel again. This time, they searched the house, took away what pornographic material they could find within the cavernous, confusing house. They left behind wires that tapped conversations and recorded the women screaming into the early hours. On February 19, 1950 – months after Hodel was acquitted for incest – the humdrum of Hodel's sex life was interrupted with something more incriminating: "Realise there was nothing I could do, put a pillow over her head and cover her with a blanket. Get a taxi. Expired 12:59. They thought there was something fishy. Anyway, now they may have figured it out. Killed her."

On a subsequent recording, Hodel was heard saying: "Supposin' I did kill the Black Dahlia. They couldn't prove it now. They can't talk to my secretary any more because she's dead."



Photographs of Elizabeth Short in an album left to Steve by his father CREDIT: AP

Within a month, detectives had gathered enough evidence to charge Hodel with Short's murder. There were other things, too: Hodel had been a consort of Short's, he'd been spotted near the hotel where she had gone missing, his alibi had been fragile. Not to mention the surgical procedures done to her body and the similarity its final resting position bore to Man Ray's artwork.

But it was too late. Hodel had moved, leaving the John Sowden House and Los Angeles for the Philippines, where he once again married and started a new family. He wouldn't formally return until 1990, although Fauna's memoir, *One Day She'll Darken*, suggests he made trips back to keep an eye on her and had her phones bugged. In his absence he became a kind of myth, even to his own family. As Fauna wrote, upon meeting her estranged family: "she noticed how clearly fascinated they were. It was as if they were discussing a supernatural being who occasionally paid a visit."

When Hodel moved back, he returned to California, marrying again, to a woman named June. He died nine years later. It was only when Steve discovered photographs of Elizabeth Short in an album Hodel had left him that he started to unravel his father's greatest mystery.

Now, all that remains are the stories and the house.

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STEVE HODEL RESPONSE TO TELEGRAPH POSTED IN COMMENTS SECTION OF NEWSPAPER AFTER READING ARTICLE IN JUNE, 2019

Steve Hodel 25 Jun 2019 4:47PM

This article's research and reportage needs a fair amount of "housekeeping."

First, let me say that I am the son of Dr. George Hill Hodel and have spent the past twenty-years investigating the facts surrounding his mysterious life and his serial crimes.

George Hodel in truth, never "bugged his granddaughter's phones" That's fiction.

Neither was he my niece, Fauna Hodel's "granddaughter/daughter." We have obtained DNA evidence that has proven to "a scientific certainty" that my father was NOT the biological father of Fauna.

As noted by other contributor's GHH died at the age of 91, not 97. His birthdate was, in fact, Oct 10, 1907.

The reporter's statement, "Steve came out of retirement to gather evidence that his father killed Elizabeth Short" is categorically untrue. In fact, when my father died in May 1999, and a few days after his passing I was informed (for the first time ever) on the telephone by my half-sister Tamar that "The cops told me during taking me to and from the incest trial in 1949, that they suspected him as maybe being the killer of the Black Dahlia." I told Tamar, there was "no way our dad could have killed her" and began my research to exonerate him and show any suspicions were totally unfounded. (Unfortunately, by "following the evidence" it took me 180' in the opposite direction.)

In describing the trauma to the victim, Elizabeth Short, the author's claim that "the womb was removed" is false. In fact, it was intact.

Reference to my mother's name as "Doreros" is inaccurate. Father named her "Dorero" no "s" on end of her name.

My younger brother's name is Kelvin, not "Kenny." I believe the writer mistook his name "Kelly" a derivative of Kelvin, as "Kenny"? There is no "Kenny" in our immediate family.

The interview she mentions that I made "with my mother" (Dorero) was not with my mother, who died in 1983. I interviewed Tamar, who is my half-sister, same father, George Hodel.

Fauna Hodel's name did not come from her grandfather, George Hodel. He had no part in naming her. Her mother chose the name Fauna, from another poem by poet Robinson Jeffers, because she wanted her daughter to follow her, just as she was named for another Jeffers poem, "Tamar."

Fauna never met her grandfather in life and was never inside the Sowden/Franklin House until long after my father's death in 1999.

There are no “secret rooms” nor were there ever any at the Sowden/Franklin House. There exists one small storage area, approximately 4’x12’ behind the sliding bookcase in the living room. That storage area was built in 1926 to store booze during Prohibition.

While the “I Am the Night” miniseries is as stated “95% fiction” (I had no part in the production, nor was I aware of it being made until seeing the trailers a month prior to it airing in the U.S.) The “companion podcast”, “Root of Evil: The True Story of the Hodel Family and the Black Dahlia” mentioned by the author of this article is highly accurate and factual and I did involve myself by providing extensive interviews and factual accounts of my father’s life and the now twenty-year criminal investigation.

Detective III Steve Hodel #11394 LAPD Hollywood Homicide (ret.)

www.stevehodel.com

LINK TO ORIGINAL TELGRAPH ARTICLE BELOW

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/0/party-monster-deranged-decadent-life-black-dahlia-suspect-george/>