

## Death of a Small-Timer

by John H. Richardson

The first time I talk to her, on the phone from another city, she tells me that she loved Hal, she'd be happy to talk about him. Like everyone, she is troubled by his mysterious death. She met him when the big parts dried up and hardcore came in, and he sent her out for ten years, he sent her out and got her lots of work. Hal was always a gentleman and never looked her up and down, always so gracious. "He'd say, 'I got you the audition, you got the part yourself.'" He sent her out on a lot of girlie stuff and bit movie parts and later private photo sessions with fans of her old cult movies. And he was a sweet old man, always sitting there at the desk of his little storefront movie studio on that bleak stretch of Santa Monica Boulevard, a real old-time Hollywood character in a neat white shirt and dyed hair and his famous macaw parrot sitting on the edge of his desk. A lot of times she'd shoot right there, on the sets he had rigged up in the back, boudoir and prison cell, rock 'n' roll band, clawfoot bathtub, doctor's office. But work tapered off in the nineties and she hadn't seen him for a few years.

The next time I call, she seems confused. When I drive through the blank glare of Los Angeles daylight to the flatlands below Hollywood and find her little stucco building, she opens the door wearing an old blue bathrobe. The famous boobs are gone. She has dull hammered eyes, like someone still drunk from the night before. She takes my hands and kisses my fingers like I'm a priest come to pay a death visit. She leads me into a little two-bedroom apartment that stinks of cat pee. When we sit she looks confused for a minute, then slips her hand into my lap. "Uh, that's okay," I say, something like that.

She seems puzzled. "I don't even know why you're here," she says.

I tell her I'm here for Hal, to ask questions about Hal Guthu. I met him once, liked him, wanted to look into his death. She digs through her Filofax for people I can call.

Then she stops, puzzled again. "Why are you here?"

For Hal, I say. And she starts talking about his pictures, the old stills he had of Marilyn Monroe that no one had ever seen. His collection of early cheesecake movies. She seems to believe that someone killed him to steal this stuff. "They're all gone," she says sadly.

"But why would someone kill him for old movies?"

She gets angry. "They're very very valuable! What are you kidding me!"

I make soothing noises.

"They were films that were going to always be forever."



Reb Sawitz leans back behind his scarred old desk, a fiftysomething ex-Hell's Angel with aviator glasses and a Chihuahua trembling in his arm. "First off, I don't believe the

coroner,” he says. “Second off, when I called the police and told them to speak to me, they didn’t call me back. So I called *them* back. I went down and asked them if they would tell the detective if he wouldn’t come up or see me or call me. He still has not. I’ve had Channel 11, 13, 7, and the *Times*. But not him. And I’ve known Hal thirty-five years.”

He leans back in his chair. “You tell me that he went and saw a doctor that nobody knows — that nobody could find — who told him he had two weeks to live? They didn’t find the bird either.”

Back in the sixties, Reb had worked at a collection agency just down the block from Hal’s place. They would see each other regularly, dropping in, talking business, trading clients, but Hal was funny because he never talked about personal things. Like his company was called CHN International, and Reb once asked him what CHN stood for, and he said “nothing.” Like everyone who knows Hal, he mentions the hair, “dyed black, really *pitch* black.” He’d come in at eight and stay till eleven, take off for lunch and be back open from two to five and then he would leave, and nobody ever saw him. Nobody ever saw him eat lunch either, or dinner. Reb shakes his head. Hal was a straight-shooter, a guy you could count on, a good man, but he was into his bird and his studio and who knows what else. “I think he lived over by the 118 freeway.”

Which brings Reb back around to the main mystery: the missing bird. The cops found his car on Martel, found his safe open in the middle of the day. It must have been a robbery. Hal had pictures of Marilyn Monroe that had never been seen, he says. And who knows what else? Which reminds him, he knows a model who said something about jewels; gems or jewelry he had in the safe. She would hang out at his office almost every

day, an Asian girl named Caroline who dyed her hair blonde—which just between us was definitely the right color for her. He finds her number and dials it on speakerphone. “I have somebody sitting here who’s doing a story about Hal,” he says, and makes a date for me to meet Caroline in person.



“I know this is going to sound like an alibi,” Trisha Brown says, “but I was out of the country.” Then she laughs and invites me up to her house for dinner. It’s a cozy little wooden cottage at the head of old Topanga Road, in a pocket development

“I know this is going to sound like an alibi,” Trisha Brown says, “but I was out of the country.”

called Eden Ranch. She’s in her forties, shortish and blondish and fearsome with a spoon in the hollandaise

sauce. Standing in the kitchen, she tells me that she’s the daughter of an FBI agent and a debutante, she went to Harvard and worked on a thesis on John Barth (because he wrote about people in “bizarre, transitional periods of their life”), then dropped out to work as a stripper and “traipse round” from Alaska to South America. In 1985 she ended up in Hal’s office and went in the back and took off her clothes. Hal always took pictures for the book, that was the routine. “But I said, ‘I want to be this *nice* talent, you know? I won’t do spreads. And I won’t do any manual. But he actually booked me on some things! He’d give me to Alan Funt, for *Candid Camera*.’”

After a few years, she realized she really wanted to direct, and then someone asked her to make some wrestling movies. She couldn’t believe anybody would want them, but he told her she’d be surprised and surprised she was — business was so good she

went back to Hal, this time as an employer. It was a great relationship. Hal looked out for the lambs. He was never the guy who wanted you to “demonstrate your talents in the field you’ll be performing in.” She used to take her kid in there.

Sitting around the dinner table, Trisha and her husband serve out the steaks and potatoes and every so often, when the conversation gets too salty, Trisha covers her nine-year-old daughter’s ears with her hands. I ask them to explain their business and David answers as if he’s at a trade fair. “The premise is two women wrestle and the friction of breast on breast and crotch on crotch is so stimulating and the anger and hatred and the will to dominate the other person gets them turned on, so one forces the other to have an orgasm against her will.”

“And they have to wear little short shorts,” says Trisha.

“That say ‘Everlast’ across the belly.”

“Really? It’s that specific?”

“Got to,” David says. “And they have the boxing gloves. Real boxing gloves. And they never take the gloves off.”

Hal started as a girlie photographer in the fifties up in San Francisco and moved into the cheesecake talent business in the sixties. When hardcore porn took over and all the other agents in the business went that route, Hal stubbornly stayed out of it, carving out a niche in fetish films and drive-in movies, a niche he called “pretty girl” work. Right here in the catfight world alone there are over a hundred companies, and the Browns alone have made over two hundred videos. They have two kids and a monkey and drive an hour each day to cart their youngest to a better school. “See, we’re not big time,” Trisha says. “We’re people who make a living, you know? They don’t hear about this when they talk about showbiz and Hollywood. It’s supposed to be, I don’t know, somehow bigger than this. You don’t think of

it as being quite so domestic. We live like regular people. I edit here in the house, answer phones. And Hal was connected to that middle ground, you know? He was the Hollywood nobody knows.”

“He wasn’t a saint, but if you said, ‘I won’t go there,’ he wouldn’t make you go there, whereas with other people, you’d show up and there’d be the dogs and the ponies and the snakes and you’d be goin’ like, ‘Euhhhhhh, Momma told me not to come.’”

Her daughter perks up. “There’s a song that’s called ‘Momma Told Me Not to Come.’”

“You’re kidding! Really?”

“It’s my favorite *s-o-n-g*.”

Trisha suggests I talk to a model named Stacy Burke. She seems to know the most about Hal’s death.



Stacy Burke comes down the third-floor balcony of the Hollywood Best Western hotel, a pretty blonde with a beauty mark on her right cheek and an *I Dream of Jeannie* ponytail. She’s pulling a rolling suitcase stuffed with stockings, garters, corsets, shoes and assorted other feminine implements, plus one tuna fish sandwich. She stops outside the hotel room door. “If it *was* a suicide, then where is his girlfriend? How come she’s not around, you know, going, ‘Oh my God, what happened?’ Why does she just suddenly disappear?”

Then there’s his house. The cops can’t find it. How is that possible? “It’d have to be, you know, listed *somewhere*.”

And his car. It was parked around the corner instead of behind the building in his private spot.

And the bird.

“If it was a suicide,” Stacy says, “he would have made sure his bird was safe. Anyone that’s an animal lover knows how that is, and I know how Hal was toward the bird.”

Right after they found Hal’s body, she talked to the cops. She told them that Hal was not the kind of guy who would burn down his own place. He wouldn’t risk other people like that. He was the last of the good guys, always dressed in those old-man kind of slacks with the belt up to here and a white button-down shirt with an undershirt. Hair dyed red, no roots showing hardly ever. He always had Tic Tacs. His nails were always clean. And he never came on to any of the girls, never ever. She went on the Web and asked tons of questions because every pretty girl in Hollywood has a Web site now, and when answers came in she’d tell the cops. That’s how she got hooked up with Carol, the C in CHN. Hal left her the business and even she’s stumped by what’s happened. “We gotta find the person for justice alone,” Stacy says. But if there is a murderer, “he’s one of *us*, probably. This person that did this could be amongst *us*. I mean, he could be a *client*. He could be a *model*. You know? There are so many suspects.”

Inside the hotel room, the curtains are pulled and the bed is pushed against the wall to make room for a red wrestling mat. A slouchy cameraman fiddles with lights as the producer introduces himself, giving me his Web site address and a little background: New York City schoolteacher, fifth grade, fired when they found out about his bondage hobby. He’s short, balding, friendly. “Of course I knew Hal. Everybody knew Hal. Hey, Tasha, you worked for Hal, right?”

Tasha’s on the crew. She has one of those impossible lean-but-large-breasted bodies and a long cowgirl face. She says she went to Hal when she was eighteen and he was a fabulous guy,

very honest and decent. He sent her out on a lot of shower scenes and body double–type stuff, like making out in a car. “I kind of specialized in that, in those days.” Another woman says she shot tons of fetish stuff at Hal’s studio too. “There are like three agents,” she explains. There’s the porn guy, the fetish guy, and Hal. “Hal is . . . the guy you go to if you don’t want to do any of that stuff. And I shot at his warehouse a *lot*.” She says she loved him and gives her real name, Candy Fleman, F-I-e-m-a-n, like she’s making a point.

Someone says they heard he had cancer.

“I heard he had it for years, and it was in remission.”

“He was very meticulous,” Tasha says. “He used to count every penny. He was always on time.”

“He said that he used to, on his lunch break, go to Fox Studios and consult about lighting issues.”

And the parrot — oh God, that parrot.

“We’d be shooting, and the bird would be sitting there. And the director would say ‘action,’ and like five minutes later the bird would say, ‘Cut!’ And everyone’s like, ‘Who said that?’”

Everyone laughs. As they start stripping down to lingerie, Candy helps set up the lights. “I’m already sore,” she says. “I got spanked yesterday.”

The photographer perks up. “Why?” he asks. “Were you a bad girl?”

She laughs. “For *money*,” she says.

“And he’d go in the changing room. And he’d whistle. And we’re like looking around, ‘Oh, it’s Max again.’”

“That’s the first thing, all of us go, ‘Ah! Where’s the bird?’”

“Maybe the bird knows the answer.”





Russ Meyer sits on his patio overlooking Lake Hollywood with his shirt opening on his big hairy belly. He launches into a story about finding a perfect location to photograph an “overbuilt woman” and then inserting her into that perfect location “in such a way that she would *lean* out the window, and shake her bagangas, which by and large are large.” I haven’t got the faintest idea what he’s talking about, and ask him to tell me about Hal Guthu.

“You guys worked together up in San Francisco?”

“It’s not a tremendous remembrance. If you’re asking me to recommend him, the best thing you should do is just recommend *me*.” He laughs.

That’s when I realize something’s wrong with Meyer. He wasn’t anything like this the last time I saw him. “Hal was a cameraman,” I prod, “I heard that he was the cameraman on *The Immoral Mr. Tease*.”

“Was he the cameraman on *Mr. Tease*? I don’t think so. Maybe I let him load the film.”

“He started a little agency, CHN.”

“I wouldn’t think much of someone starting a little agency,” Meyer says. “Most of these people are trying to get laid themselves, and not having enough push to get women that are overbuilt.”

“Excuse me?”

“Overbuilt women! That’s why I made a success. Overbuilt women!” Then the phone rings and Meyer picks it up and laughs boisterously, haw haw haw, the old operator putting on the schmooze. “Yeah, I’m ready to make pictures,” he says, “soon as I find an overbuilt woman. That’s what I need. I need an overbuilt woman!”



Caroline's hair is cut short and spiky with the black roots showing and she's a master of the breathy, giggly, oddly vacant Asian courtesan style — someone said she was like a blonde anyway, so she just decided to go blonde and go blonde she did. She walked into Hal's office in July of '99 and ever since then she's been coming to his office every day from two to four and just, like, hanging out. "I had a lot of energy and he had a lot of energy and we got along," she says. "And he was like my psychic reader because he would tell me things like 'You're gonna make it so good,' and 'Try everything, you never know who you're gonna meet.' And I'd hang on to every word of it. I don't know if he says that to every single girl. It feels like he's saying it just to me." Hal would give her a hundred bucks to buy some clothes, she says. He wore custom shoes because one foot was smaller than the other, from a plane crash when he was young. He told her he had three wives. He would bring out all his old photos and sometimes he would talk about his kids. "I just wish he wouldn't have to dye his hair — *so* red. That particular shade of red."

She's pretty sure someone killed him. He would close the car in the back and lock the gate, every time. So why is his car parked in the street? And he would talk about his girlfriend and sometimes the girlfriend would call when she was there, so that was definite. *Plus*, there was some jewelry. "He showed it to me," she says.

"He showed you jewelry?"

"Yeah, jade and diamond ring," she says. "Yeah. Gold ring. Rubies. All inside the safe. And I called the cops and asked them if they have it, and they said, 'We don't have it.'"



Bill Margold's apartment is just off Sunset Boulevard, a dark little place with a fraying brown carpet and stuffed bears everywhere and football trophies and stacks of old newspapers with articles he wrote and a whole bookshelf filled with videos of his old movies. He stops at the poster of *Disco Dolls*. "That's probably my favorite," he says. "I get my dick bit off at the end, and spit out into the audience. I take a stake and skewer a woman. I kill another woman, sodomizing her while I'm drowning her in a vat of chicken soup."

Margold would send Hal the girls who didn't want to do hardcore and Hal would get them work on pretend-Hollywood movies where they'd barely get scale, and they'd feel better. Margold has a soft spot for Hal because he was nice to Viper, the love of his life. People snubbed her when she first came into town — she would do anything, even double anal, and the other women freaked and wouldn't work with her, but Hal got her work in the fetish world and gave her a home and kept her going. "I think Hal liked her because she was such a battered puppy, and Hal was a kindly man," Margold says. And Hal got her the part she played in *Vice Academy* as the bombshell in the purple dress who teaches the course on sexology, which was perfect for her because she was so wise — she used to say that men were rabbits and women were snakes and that she went into the porn business because then she could have sex with ten thousand men instead of just one, stuff like that. But unfortunately she also had a bad drug habit and ended up frying herself down to eighty-five pounds, and in February '91 she went naked down Santa Monica Boulevard and got put in Thaliens. And then disappeared into America. Last year a magazine writer went looking for her and turned up nothing, just her ID card left on a gravestone out in one of those states.

Bill is fifty-six years old and well over six feet, with a scrappy moustache and a basketball gut. He will tell you that the five most important letters in an adult performer's makeup are r-e-b-e-l and that "the *real* last American outlaws were the hardcore performers of the 1970s" and that the thing an adult performer wants more than anything else is a hug.

He knocks on the door of his extra bedroom and introduces me to a skinny young brunette from Germany, the latest in a series of unsettled young women he calls his "kids." Small and

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soft-spoken, Marlene tells me she met Hal eight or nine weeks ago and he was kind of like old Hollywood, taking her in the back to shoot a naked Polaroid. But he seemed nice enough and he sent her out on

one job. Funny thing is, it was a hardcore job. Which didn't bother her so much — she hands me a cassette with her face on the cover, eyes wide and mouth stuffed — but the guy was totally amateur. "He didn't know what to do, like how to hold the camera and how to shoot."

Later, Margold says this was an example of Hal's decline. "I think Hal had settled into his dotage, and finally didn't care."

As I get ready to leave, Margold combs through his book for helpful phone numbers while simultaneously stuffing my hands with porn goodies. We shake hands and he frowns. "The question that nags me is, 'Where's the parrot?'" he says.

"That's what everyone says."

"Sure. Where's the parrot?"



Bob is certain it was murder, he tells me as we tour the industrial park where he runs his bondage empire. Twenty years ago, he and his wife were New York City schoolteachers with an interest in bondage. Then computers came out and Bob started a bondage newsletter and overnight he had four hundred subscribers. But that brought heat from the city and he ended up escaping to Hollywood like so many others before him. Now he runs his bondage empire out of an industrial park south of LAX with a warehouse and a series of offices and a soundstage across the alley where all of the sets were designed by a top Hollywood set designer. “That is a dungeon,” he says, taking me on the tour, “if you come over this way, this is a jail cell. And you may notice some of the details — there’s an actual floor. And we even have a drain. We can keep a girl in here for hours.”

“And you have a rack.”

“Of course. What self-respecting sadist would not have a rack?”

Bob is in his sixties now, with a gray beard and white hair and the rumpled self-regard of a self-made man who has spent his life sitting around one office or another, pushing things along. He says that it’s going to sound funny, but even though you’re surrounded by beauty and gorgeous women and you have two live-in slaves, after a while it’s the product that you worry about. “That’s my legacy. I mean, the name ‘B&D Pleasures’ and ‘Bondage-dot-org’ have a reputation that I know is going to live on long after I’m gone.”

When I mention Hal, he’s off, saying that Hal was an amazing guy and the oddest of ducks and never had lunch or hung out and always closed his office from eleven in the morning to

two in the afternoon. And he had a parrot that would eat Polaroid photographs, “but *only* black-and-white Polaroid photographs — a very discerning bird.” He was proud of his movie past and showed off books where he was mentioned, kept excellent records and expected commissions promptly, took pride in his dungeon but always thought the bondage stuff was kind of kooky. “I do know that I’ve been told that some of the girls were sexual companions of his. And I have been *told* — once again, that’s a rumor — that he provided women for sexual purposes, as well as photographic purposes, to some very big names in Hollywood.

“The question remains, who has it in for him? The latest theory is that there was somebody who was actively trying to steal Hal’s girls. And allegedly this person said to Hal, ‘I’m gonna put you out of business and put you under.’”

I ask him who this person is.

“Let’s go into my office,” he says.

We cross over to the production building. Sitting on a sofa, he dials the phone and gets a man I’ll call Mark. They haggle for a few minutes. “I mean, he’s an honest-to-God reporter, and you say, ‘This is not for attribution,’ he will not put a name with it. But he would like to try to investigate it, and I think that maybe the memory of Hal might deserve that.”

Then he hands me the phone. The voice on the other end is blustery, confident. He says he’s been in the business twenty years and Hal trained him, taught him everything, and that’s why he’s talking to me now. “There’s a guy who’s been a competitor of Hal’s who’s been out to put him out of business,” he says. “His name’s Cam Smith. He’s been around a year and a half, his girlfriend signed with Hal and he’d follow her to all her shoots and try to sign Hal’s girls. Hal told me the guy was double-dip-

ping, taking money from girls. He reported it to the State Labor Board. He told me so, in July or September. In my opinion, that's the guy."



Cam Smith is on the phone when I get there and waves me in, still talking. "She's been a little flakey lately, but she just did great today on *Hot Bodies*. And she's fired up to work, definitely." Spread out in neat rows across the beige wall-to-wall carpet of his small Hollywood apartment are rows and rows of naked pictures of pretty girls.

Cam is a good-looking Midwest kind of guy, sandy hair and an earnest face. He was a UPS driver in Iowa when he met his wife at a bar and she was beautiful and he was just friendly with her at first and later they fell in love and she wanted to be a model so they moved to Chicago. She got some work but then they made the big move out to L.A., put all their stuff in storage and drove out and got a hotel room and a manual on how to find an agent. Jobs trickled in and he did the dirty work, the phone calls and negotiations and driving and coordinating, and six months later they were still struggling when someone slipped him Hal's number. Tracy's career began to take off. For the next eighteen months, Cam talked to Hal regularly about jobs and billings. He says the same things about Hal that everybody says, that you could trust him and that he took the side of his models. Then Tracy left him, and Cam went into a tailspin, drank himself almost to death and ended up in the hospital back in Iowa. "Then I made the big decision — I'll quit drinking. I'll go back to L.A. I'll represent talent."

I ask him how he's finding the girls.

"Word of mouth," he says.

“Are they hard to find?”

“No. I’ve got more girls in the pipeline than I can get to right now.”

Is it true he had a clash with Hal over client-poaching?

“What happened was, Hal and I knew a lot of the same peo-

“So . . . you didn’t like get pissed off and go down and kill him or anything, did you?”

ple, some of them were people that I had met through Hal. So he understandably had a right to be upset about

that.” Then he qualifies the denial. “But some of his girls, a lot of his girls, would come to me and say, ‘Look, we love Hal, but the guy hasn’t got me a job in four months, and I need the work.’”

“Did he file some kind of complaint against you at the Labor Board or anything like that?”

“May have.”

“Really?”

“He may have. I don’t know that for a fact, but I had a person who was in town from the East Coast who had gone to see Hal, and what Hal didn’t realize was that this person had also been in contact with me, and I found out from this person that Hal had said that I was under investigation by the FBI.”

“Really?”

“And that the LAPD was looking into me. And some stuff that was really outlandish.”

“So . . . you didn’t like get pissed off and go down and kill him or anything, did you?”

“No,” he says, and laughs. “No, I didn’t.”





Finally I meet up with Carol Hargraves, the C in CHN. She lives an hour south of Los Angeles in the kind of upscale beach town with million-dollar ranch houses and housewives who look like aging actresses. She's waiting for me at an oceanfront coffee shop and she's elegant with tossed red hair and a black velvet dress and one of those baggy thick sweaters that hangs around the neck like a shar-pei dog. She has a tiny diamond stud in her nose. "There are *so* many stories," she says. "Everybody wants to romance this. In fact, one of the big speculations at first, that it was a land grab — somebody wanted the building from him. But he didn't own the building."

Carol met Hal in 1965, when she was twenty years old and a sportswear buyer at Bullocks. Hal was mostly a photographer and cameraman then, an attractive forty-two-year-old man who seemed very kind and protective. He helped her put together a fashion model portfolio and they became lovers. They lived together in Hollywood and had two matching black Lincoln Continentals that he kept spotless. They both loved exotic animals, and his first gift to her was a gibbon, "the smallest of the great apes." They found a snake in the desert and added that to their menagerie, then a great horned owl, two Malaysian clawless otters, and some "incidental lizards." One day they decided to expand the operation into a talent agency. The N in CHN was their other partner, a young guy from Brooklyn named Nick, a wannabe photographer who disappeared after a few months and turned up dead from a gunshot in Vegas in '89.

She knew that Hal came from a very religious family in Oregon, that he had been a photographer up in San Francisco, that he was married back in the fifties but never had any kids of his own. And he had original pictures of Marilyn Monroe. Beyond that he was incredibly private. Mostly they drove out to

the desert or to San Francisco and San Diego, hitting flea markets and antique stores to stock up his prop rooms. He never socialized and had no close friends. They hadn't even owned a telephone.

What about his hair? Red or black?

"He had dark brown hair."

"Did he dye it?"

"He had — a solid ego. He kept his body weight down. You could always count on his clean shirt — white shirt — with the top two buttons open. Always."

"Did he have cancer?"

"Eight years ago, he told me he had a growth in the back of his neck. That was as much explanation as I got."

And the girls, did he truly care for them? Was he the grandfather he seemed to be?

"I'm trying to put into some sense of order how he really felt about the models, and the business," she says. "And it's really hard, because he — he had disregard for most people? He did not have disregard, but he did not have a lot of regard? And I think he saw it strictly as a business, in that, for those girls that wanted to do it, it was OK. I think he was emotionally removed."

Hal kept a distance from her, too. Any time she got too close, the wall came down. He used to tell her that she was looking to him as a father figure. He wouldn't even let her take a picture of him, always said the same thing — he was behind the camera, not in front of it.

The only thing she can figure is that it was because of his deformity.

"His legs?"

"Yes," she says. "They were crushed in an airplane accident."

Then she stops. That's not really true, she says. Actually, it was a common birth defect. She doesn't want to use the actual word out of respect for him. "He used to say it was a plane crash, because he was ashamed."

I ask her straight out, what's her opinion: Murder or suicide?

"You know, there are so many unanswered questions . . . the car being one of them. The safe was opened and empty. All his books were burned. The woman he was dating. He had shoots set up for Monday. He was to meet with my son on Tuesday and he was going to teach him about lighting." She goes on: he didn't like guns and smoke, and would a guy who ate the same breakfast cereal every morning for thirty years be the kind of guy who took himself out in a blaze of destruction?

And then there's the bird. When he thought he had cancer, he asked her to take care of Max if he died.

"What about the suicide note?"

"To me it didn't sound like Hal. It didn't sound the way he would speak. Hal was not a whiner, and the note was very whiny. That he had cancer and got to the point where he had a very short time to live. He didn't say anything about Max. So I find it difficult to believe that he wrote that. To me, it looked like somebody was trying to copy his handwriting."

"What about the girlfriend? Is it possible that it's like the plane crash, he's giving himself a girlfriend he doesn't really have?"

"That's possible."

She says that Hal started changing about two years ago, he was getting older, he was in bad health. "He was becoming a sweet old man, that told a lot of sweet old stories. And I think some of them were about himself."

That's why she can't be sure. Maybe he just reached a point

where the pain was too much and he had to control it somehow. “He had controlled his life, all his life. He did things his way. So possibly it was his way of saying, ‘I’m out of here, and I’m takin’ all my stuff with me.’”



Now dim the lights, please. Put a little Theremin on the soundtrack. And here’s Hal Guthu himself, alive and well and sitting behind his desk in his storefront office just as he has five days a week for the last thirty years. He’ll be dead in nine months, but for now he’s still a natty little man with black-framed glasses and a white shirt, the type who takes his time and does things right and takes satisfaction in it. Is he surprised that I don’t have a business card? Not a bit. He slips a piece of paper across the desk and tells me to write out my name and address. A big parrot stands on the edge of the desk, clicking its toenails on the tattered wood. I slide the card back and Hal takes out the famous books, big black ring binders filled with pictures of pretty girls who are naked or almost naked, four or five poses to a page. I sit there flipping pages and whenever I pause, Hal supplies a comment. “I’ll be honest with you, she’s ugly as hell in person.” Or, “she won’t do open leg.” I ask him why he’s so adamant about not doing hardcore and this is what he says: “I have a philosophy about that. I’ll degrade women up to a point, and no more.”

On the flip side, Hal seems to have very little respect for models who won’t do nudity at all. “They’re afraid it will hurt their career,” he says dismissively. “I tell them every star in the world has done it.”

Hal transforms when the phone rings. “You’re working?” he says, a big grin on his face. “Oh you sweetheart, that’s terrific!”

It's an ex-model calling to say she landed on her feet. He writes down her number and tells her to keep in touch.



A few days after my interview with Carol Hargraves, the cops find the bird dead of smoke inhalation in the prop room and file Hal's death away as a suicide. But nobody is convinced by this explanation. They keep on whispering about the Russian mafia and the Lost Pictures of Marilyn and stolen jewels and jealous boyfriends, insisting the murder will never be solved. After all, the cops still can't find his house, and the girlfriend never turned up. "Hollywood is full of

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these mysterious deaths and mysterious doings," says one old rival. "It's almost like the stories that you try to tell somehow come true." He says it with a certain relish.

A few weeks later, forty of Hal's friends gather in Griffith Park in front of an old zoo habitat, showgirls and old Hollywood sports in Gucci loafers and solitary photographers of the kind who have extensive collections of vintage glamour photography. It's peaceful and cool here among the piebald eucalyptus trees. The freeway hum feels almost meditative. There's a sign-up sheet for models who want to carry on Hal's work, and a man with a hundred live doves in white wicker boxes. A leg fetish videographer named Bob is saying that it doesn't mean anything that the safe was always open. "He kept props in there, like costume jewelry, that's all." Stacy Burke says hi to Caroline Koh.

“Do I know you?” Caroline asks.

“Don’t you remember?” Stacy answers. “We did that bondage video together. In the cage.” Someone else says that maybe suicide was Hal’s way of adding a cloud of mystery, of grasping a bit of immortality. “He did have the devil in his spirit. He loved a good joke. And maybe it was his way of just kind of thumbing his nose. Getting the last laugh. And people would never know for sure.”

Then a man hands out candles, and a succession of friends and colleagues tell stories about Hal. When the words are all said, a young woman sings a pretty song about finding peace with the angels and a man opens the wicker boxes and the doves fly straight out over our heads, wings whirring in blurry white circles, urgent and strong, beating hard for home.

As the crowd breaks up, Mark, the man who anonymously fingered Cam Smith as Hal’s murderer, falls in with Caroline, the blonde Asian. “I’ve been in production lately,” he says, “but now with Hal gone, I’ve gotta go back into the modeling business full-time.”

She asks, “Is it hardcore?”

“No hardcore,” he says, “just the way Hal trained me twenty years ago.”

Video Bob lingers with Stacy Burke, talking intently about something that involves high heels and seamed stockings. “Think about what you want,” he says.

Her answer gets lost in the freeway noise. ■ ■ ■