

The Ending

By Dean Yannias

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The Ending

Even as a young child, Hal Mertlesom had dreams of becoming a writer, a dreamer in words. His father, a reasonable man, wanted nothing more for him than a secure life—a doctor, a lawyer, a businessman. Something bankable, useful, hopefully profitable. So, when Hal headed off to college, his father told him to be careful what you wish for: “You want to be a writer, eh? Let me tell you -- everyone has *one* story to tell.”

That advice was delivered many years ago. Fortunately, for him, it was advice he ignored.

Now in comfortable middle age, Hal read screenplays for a living in a small, bare-bones, rented office in West Hollywood. Three movie producers paid him retainers, each one larger every year than what his father had earned in a lifetime. If the scripts he recommended went into production, he’d score a percentage of gross, an unheard-of arrangement. His producer-clients believed he was worth it because those rare scripts that came alive for him always hit pay dirt. Always. He always plucked the profitable movie from the haystacks of drivel they'd sent him.

He instantly recognized the blockbuster, the potential seven-movie franchise, spotted the movie that would be replayed endlessly on cable or streamed, and smelled out the losers. He enjoyed the work—the solitude, the semi-tacky seclusion of his office, the warm joy of discovery—that rewarded his rare talent so handsomely. But most important, each day was filled with the hope and anticipation of finding in the bottomless slush pile that flowed across his desk, the one great script that lifted off the page breathing with life,

floated through the air, and pulsed with an ineffable 'something' he could believe. And when that happened, there was nothing else like it.

He never received screen credit for his work. The only people who knew of him were in the movie business. Which was OK with Hal. He believed true creative integrity was to become a zero: to disappear into the work and let it live for itself. His quiet talent was to recognize great screenplays and give them and their authors a chance. His smile, on the rare occasions when he displayed it, had nothing to do with joy or pleasure. It was simply a practiced gesture, giving the person he was speaking with the impression that he was listening to what was being said.

Hal harbored no illusions. He couldn't afford to. He was *in* the illusion business, and *illusions are not dreams*, he once told Murray, his first client, a former New York City wholesaler of Oriental rugs, who'd taken what he called a 'flier', sold his business, drove to California, and made millions making movies. Hal had told Murray years ago: *'Tell any story the right way and the audience doesn't stand a chance—they believe it, enter into a special world that makes a certain kind of dream-sense, and can't wait to see what happens next. They buy it, whatever it is.'*

One morning, in the middle of reading the day's fourth script, his cell phone rang. The name *Sandy Sellmen* displayed with a Los Angeles area code. The name meant nothing to him, so he let it ring until it stopped. Back to work.

Hal had a mission in life. The world of movies keeps us going, he believed — imaginary people showing those of us who were totally immersed in so-called real life, new ways to dress and talk, how to light and smoke a cigarette, how to misbehave in the fashion of the times, how to dance, how to flirt—in short, what to believe and how to live

in today's 'here and now.' That was the illusion—the fantasy, the envy, the escape, the wish, the trick, the beauty of it all. Vicarious desire. Misguided desire. Perverse desire. Wishful desire. But desire, always desire. The relentless urge to see and feel a hot life not your own, living a life that you've not the guts or imagination to live yourself.

When Hal had been seduced and carried away by a script only to have it suddenly become nothing but words on a page, the spell was instantly broken. He felt betrayed and bitter. He stopped reading, tossed the script to the floor, and started on the next.

The cell phone rang again. Again, he ignored it.

Hal imagined a lonely accountant in Madrid sipping calvados and watching *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* dubbed in Spanish; or a Brazilian, glued to a rerun of an old Andy Griffith episode with a dubbed Portuguese soundtrack, who was lost in the pleasant myth of Americans as a tribe of friendly but often shrewd bumpkins; that *Gone with the Wind* was revealing its lies, betrayals, and upheavals to audiences of one or hundreds in Cape Town, Mumbai, Vienna -- who knows where? -- every minute of every day.

The real 'trick' (it was always a trick) was: which genius or honest craftsman could make you care about 'what happens next' to the characters on the screen, events that everyone has experienced or wished they'd experienced, movies that made you forget you were watching a movie at all? Hal's three clients paid him to find *that* script. And if *that* script was in the boxes of scripts they sent, *that* script announced itself to Hal within minutes after landing on his desk. Those scripts were as rare as true love.

"I don't know how you do it, Hal," Bobby his second longest client had said years ago.

“I’ve just got the knack. I know what’ll play, what’ll make money. It’s magic.”

Hal believed it. More than that, Hal kept proving it.

The phone rang again. Same Sandy.

Hal stood and stretched his short, paunchy frame. He often lost track of time. His knees ached, his back was sore, his neck was permanently stiff. As he stretched, he saw a face, his face, floating in the gold-framed mirror by the door. This morning it looked like a stranger’s face, a mask stuck on the front of a balding blonde head, a pair of old wire-rimmed glasses resting on his small pudgy nose beneath his flat forehead.

He’d grown old reading movies. Not too old, but certainly old for this odd business. Hal’s imagination failed completely when he tried to remember the pivotal moments of his own life, the river of real time that had whisked him away, then dumped him somewhere in the phony delta of L.A. The years had just slipped away without leaving a trace other than what showed on his middle-aged face and dull body.

Fifty to sixty scripts were delivered every day in shipping containers to his uncluttered office. Jeff, the gawky, heavily tattooed young messenger who collected them from Hal's producers' offices on Wilshire or Sunset Boulevard, delivered them on a two-wheeled hand cart in the morning and retrieved them every night at five.

Hal had become a rare asset, what Hollywood producers called 'bankable' -- a term usually reserved for movie stars who could carry even a bad movie into profitability. He read two or three boxes on a good day and returned each of them with a yellow sticky-note pre-printed with the name of one of his producers' agencies so that the writer felt that some human hand had touched them. Hal added a personal note — ‘still needs a

little work,' it was a 'very fine effort indeed, better luck next time'. He always felt the writer's despair.

The thought of someone with little or no talent devoting all that time to writing a movie script depressed him. Winning the lottery had better odds than having your movie script produced. But writers don't see the illusion game for what it is. They're too busy trying to create a new world's version of an old and conventional human experience, an emotional connection or disconnection in an unforgettable, believable way.

Hal dismissed clichéd love stories, deceived wife/deceived husband melodramas, old detective stories with fashionable 'cyber' twists, stories set in yet another small town in West Texas or southern Alabama or the delta of Mississippi with its fresh palette of local drunks and religious maniacs and sexual deviants. Most of all he hated those precious stories set in suburban Connecticut with stock, fifth-generation Presbyterians who lounged around in breezy, screened gazebos, their cool white wine growing warm and stale, the lipstick-imprinted glasses recklessly canted on wicker tables like so many burnt-out church candles embedded in sand.

Coming-of-age stories bored him. He read them until they resembled *The Last Picture Show*, then tagged them and dropped them on the floor. As Murray said one day: "Tell you something, Hal. You can't relate to coming-of-age stories. You've always been forty years old. I can't see you in high school grab-assing in the backseat of your dad's Chevy trying to get into some girl's pants. Where the hell *were* you?" Hal just smiled. He'd been at the movies, usually alone.

The phone again.

He didn't expect calls, didn't get calls. No emergencies happened in his life. He didn't *have* to do anything. He read scripts for a living. He didn't deal with a Sandy, *any* Sandy.

In more than two decades (not counting his apprentice days at the Universal and Columbia movie factories), he'd read exactly twenty-seven great movies. Two-and-a-half great movies a year. Those were the source of Hal's bankable reputation. They'd all made money, of course, got terrific reviews, and many made millions. Five had been nominated for Oscars. His fame was legend, so he always had work. Other producers wanted a piece of him, but he remained loyal to the three he had. Three was enough.

In his early years, as a contract screenwriter at MGM, he'd once toured the lot. He remembered walking into the archives, a sprawling, dusty warehouse the size of an airplane hanger where thousands of four-drawer file cabinets stood side-by-side, row after row, each crammed with movie scripts—stories, treatments, initial development drafts, first drafts, production scripts, re-writes, final shooting scripts. A smaller room held the movies MGM had produced and brought to screen. Most of the others, cranked out by salaried MGM staff writers and not making it to production, had been destroyed. Standing in that warehouse surrounded by millions of hours of human effort, Hal realized he no longer desired to create movies himself. The thought of writing an original screenplay depressed him. The thousands that filled the file drawers, the thousands of forgotten movies they'd become, simply overwhelmed him. Standing in the script warehouse, he decided to devote himself not to writing them but to discovering them. He knew scripts and outlines were filed away there, some untouched since the 1940s --

scripts by Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, William Wyler, Joe and Herman Mankiewicz, the Epstein brothers. Never made, never seen, never to be seen.

The goddamned phone again. It stopped after two rings.

Hal knew ‘money shots’ and ‘money lines.’ In those rare moments when he read one, his head expanded—that breathtaking, unforgettable moment when a screenwriter pulled out all the stops, had created the perfect setup with exquisite timing, and pure emotion flowed seamlessly from the writer’s brain onto the script and into Hal’s brain. Hal could see it on the screen, hear it in the magic place in his head. He imagined the excitement of seeing “*Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.*” when it existed only on paper. Or “*Put on your seatbelts. It's going to be a bumpy night*”. Sometimes even an actor ad-libbed a perfect line that wasn't in the script: “*You're gonna need a bigger boat.*” Pure magic for some, but for Hal, it was the writer’s triumph of inspiration or perhaps nothing more than good luck feeding on fear. He knew some typist had pounded out the words on a manual typewriter during a rewrite session at 3 a.m. in some smoke-filled, dusty back-lot office, her hairpins and earrings on the desk beside her. Writers were hourly employees back then; the studio owned every word and idea they wrote. Writers punched time clocks. It was a job. Hacks. Drunks. Wasters of life. Nobody in their right mind would spend a week or two to write a movie! Jack Warner called screen writers “Schmucks with Underwoods.”

Hal lived for those special movies that made you forget where you’d parked your car, where you lived, your empty checkbook with bills to pay, your cold, empty house. Or cold empty heart. Forget, that is, until the movie ended and you found yourself dumped back into the real world, finding it only faintly familiar then suddenly alien – like that ill-

fitting coat you'd snatched from a pile on a bed with someone else's car keys in the pocket.



Again, the damned phone. 'Sandy Sellmen', same number. He finally turned it off.

Later that night, Hal would call his ex-wife. He knew she was there, but she never answered. He'd wait for the answering machine and leave the same message: "I love you. Hope you're happy. When are you going to die?" then hang up. Out of sheer boredom, she'd left him a few years earlier—not for another man or woman or career, but for a small yellowish house in Laguna Beach. She imagined the new man in her life would come along, appearing right on cue. Like in the movies. Her dull life imitating dull art.

A knocking on the door pulled him back into real time. It was five o'clock.

Jeff stood in the hallway with his cart ready to haul the cartons of scripts back to Hal's producers. But this time, standing silent in the deep shadows, Hal saw a young woman pressed against the far wall. Hal signed the delivery book and watched as Jeff wheeled away the daily cartload of scripts. The woman—very pretty, nicely dressed, black hose, white blouse, scarlet silk scarf and matching bag, black jacket with pleated skirt—stood there practicing what she believed was her killer smile.

"Don't tell me. You're Sandy." Hal stared at her. What was she? Twenty-five, twenty-eight at most?

"I am. And I'm twenty-seven. Single."

Hal found himself staring at her. "Let me guess. You're my pain in the ass. Where did you get my name? Who gave you my number?"

"Just want to talk about movies," Sandy said.

“Listen. I’d love to invite you in for a professional chitchat, Sandy, but it’s late. I’m on my way home, and you’ve *really* pissed me off.” He turned his back to her. “One question, if I may?” He turned to look directly at her. “*What don’t you get when someone doesn’t answer your goddamned phone calls?*” He hadn’t raised his voice in months. He had to admit it felt pretty good.

Sandy didn’t back down. “What I *don’t* get is a half-hour with you, that’s what I *don’t* get, Mr. Mertlesom.” He turned to look at her again. Sandy’s eyes fixed on Hal’s, her smile now warm and inviting.

“I don’t *have* a half-hour, Sandy.” Hal stared at her; he couldn’t help it. Something about her face was familiar, though he couldn’t immediately place her. A producer’s party? A script meeting? A waitress, a Nordstrom’s clerk? Some actress in some film he’d seen?

“Then fifteen minutes will have to do.” she said.

“Sandy...” Hal grabbed his thin, battered briefcase, flicked off the light, and stepped into the hallway. The door clicked shut behind him. “I don’t consult. I don’t teach. I don’t script-doctor. I work. Alone. I’m a one-man shop. Sorry.”

Even in heels, Sandy was slightly shorter than he was. “Tell you what,” she said. “I’ll buy you a drink. We’ll talk. Then decide.”

“I don’t drink, dear. The only person in Hollywood who doesn’t.” He looked at her again. She was even more stunning in the half-light of the hall. “I’ve already decided that there’s nothing to decide. No advice here. It’s strictly Hal-only. No room for Sandys. Or anybody.”

“But I’ve a proposition for you,” she said.

“The last thing I need today is a proposition.”

“*I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse.*” She delivered the line with a gruff Italian accent and a smile. From somewhere, a nickel-plated automatic materialized and she leveled it at his belt buckle.

Hal dropped his briefcase, slowly raised his eyes and then his hands and turned toward the wall to assume the position. “A goddamned movie junkie. You like cliché’s? OK. How’s this? *The keys is in my pocket, Dollface. Just don’t shoot. OK?*”

Sandy poked the automatic into the middle of his back and reached into his jacket pocket for the keys. “*Make a sound, you’re going down, Bub.*” She unlocked the door.

Hal picked up his briefcase, stepped back into his office, and tossed it on his desk. “May I offer a refreshment? I have warm club soda or warm club soda. What’ll it be?”

“No thanks, Hal.” A small silver flask came out of her scarlet bag. “I hate to drink alone, Hal, but I’d like a drink. The gun’s a prop.” She handed back his keys and he dropped them into his pocket. She quietly unscrewed the flask and took a big swig.

“Like I don’t know a prop gun,” said Hal looking at his watch as if he had someplace to go. The refrigerator under the sink in the small kitchenette rattled to life briefly. Next to the sink was the bathroom. A leather recliner stood behind the mesh-backed swivel chair at his desk. The gold-framed mirror. No books, no magazines, no food, no bed. Just a case of club soda, warm.

Hal leaned back in the recliner, crossing his arms behind his head. “So tell me, Sandy Sellmen, what’s your proposition? Thirty seconds. Go.” She sat at his desk and swiveled the chair to face him. The dusty Venetian blinds slit the late afternoon sunlight

into thin slices of silvery gold, connecting Hal and Sandy as conspirators but for only a moment. She had terrific legs which she crossed precisely when he glanced at them.

“I have a...” she said reaching into her bag again.

“Don’t tell me. A script! Everyone in L.A. writes screenplays. Wouldn’t live here if you didn’t. How’d I know?” He leaned forward abruptly in the recliner and started to stand, hoping she would get the message that he was really pissed now and just leave. This time she removed a revolver from her bag.

“This one’s real, Hal. Sit down.” She waited for him to sit again, then raised it quickly and shoved it into her mouth. Before he could move to stop her, she bit into the barrel and grinned. It was chocolate. Hal sat back heavily on the recliner.

“Full of tricks, aren’t you?”

“I’m a tricky chick, Hal. Gotta start somewhere. Pretty takes you only so far. You smart guys can’t deal with pretty. Pretty and smart together gives you brain freeze.”

So here was this Sandy Sellmen drinking from a silver flask and chewing on a milk chocolate revolver in his office. Whatever was going down here was going nowhere. Hal looked down at his stubby fingers for a few long seconds then back up at her.

“I have this premonition,” Hal said, looking down at the floor as he raised his fingers to his temples. “This isn’t going to work, Sandy Sellmen. Call it male intuition. Call it experience. Call it ‘I’m tired.’ I’m out of here. You are too.”

She stared at him, sipped her whiskey, then slowly put her flask back in her bag. “I know when to quit. You’re the boss. It’s a shame. You have *the eye, the ear*. You know what’s good and what’s not. What works and what won’t. I’ve gotten this far. You like me but won’t admit it. In your mind, I’m too pretty, too young, to be any good. The

story of my life. But you're a pro, Hal, and you think—no, you *know!*—I'm just wasting your time. Tell you what.”

She reached into her bag once more, this time coming out with a manuscript.

“Give me a minute's read. The first five pages. Whatever it takes. *Then* tell me to get lost.” She handed it to him.

“Sandy. Please. I'm being kind. I'm cutting to the chase. Just get lost.” He tossed the script back at her.

Sandy relaxed in the chair, finally resigned. Her voice turned soft. “OK then. Thanks for the chat, Hal. Ta-ta!” Hal turned toward the windows and had a little trouble shutting the blinds. He heard the door open. A second later she was gone.



The sun sat on the ocean slowly beginning its disappearing act. It was late for him. He'd established a comfortable routine over the years for no other reason than he had nothing better to do. He never dined out. He had few friends. His wife was gone. No kids. No reason to leave his office and nothing to do when he did, except to go home. Nothing and nobody waited for him. Sometimes he forced himself to go to movies, but after today's disappointing hash of scribbling—and the Sandy thing—he knew the professional world of fantasy would be flat and stale. If he could even get himself in the frame of mind to enter it, he knew what he'd find. Not things as they were in the story, but things as they were in his head. So how are you, he asked himself? Empty, he answered.

But his ten-year old silver Mercedes was not in his parking space behind the yellow brick office building. In its place on the warm concrete was a black cell phone.

Tara's Theme was playing on it. He checked his keys. The one for the Mercedes was missing. She'd slipped it off the key ring when she'd taken them from his pocket. He answered the phone.

"Hello Sandy. Where's my car?"

"Read my script, Hal. I slipped it into your briefcase when you were messing with the blinds. I'll call tomorrow. Don't call the cops." Then silence.

Hal threw the phone across the parking lot and it shattered against the far curb. She'd stuck him with the script after all. He crossed the lot to the street where he caught a cab. He'd read it in the morning. Maybe.



Abby and Martinique. Another goddamned chick-flick? By the end of the first page, Hal thought he knew the whole story and almost pitched it in the trash. He'd read it before, a hundred times. A pretty girl's idea of a different take on *Thelma and Louise*. But something kept him reading. Before he knew it, he was on page seven. Then page fifteen, twenty-two, thirty-one, fifty, seventy-one, eighty-eight. THE END appeared, swiftly, silently, perfectly. Maybe not brilliant, but almost brilliant, luminescent, really good, really very nice. Almost wonderful. He set Sandy's script aside on his desk, opened the day's first box of scripts, but glanced at *Abby and Martinique* throughout the day, adding a note, suggesting a line of dialogue.

When he'd finished forty scripts – two boxes – he picked up *Abby and Martinique* again and re-read the pages he'd marked. On a separate sheet of paper, he scribbled a few suggestions. P. 29. *Have Abby wander over to the window at this point, stick her finger in her mouth like the insouciant little girl that she is, and write her name backwards on the*

glass. Sandy was either very good or very lucky or both. *Abby and Martinique* was a great movie. Offbeat but real characters. A bizarre but believable story line. Wonderful elliptical dialogue. Perfectly timed reversals. And a strangely upsetting but pitch-perfect ending.

She called him late in the afternoon.

“My car, please,” Hal said. “And no, I didn’t call the police. My fee for your unauthorized rental and my reading your script is dinner. You’re buying.” No, he wasn’t going to discuss it or the script on the phone. “Bye then,” she said. Seconds later someone knocked. Too early for Jeff.

Sandy stood in the deep shadows of the hallway. She slipped her phone into the smaller scarlet bag she now carried as she stepped into the light. Her tight white jeans and blue sweater made her look much younger. A red ribbon in her hair accentuated her lips. Pretty women knew how little it took.

“Nice old car, Hal. I gassed it up. No hard feelings?” She held out the key as a peace offering; he took it and put it back on his key ring.

“Think about where you’re taking me for dinner. I still have work.” Hal returned to his desk. He had a few more scripts to read by five. “By the way, don’t ever do that again.”

“I know my place. I’m a statue. Get to work.” She sat behind him on the recliner and read magazines that magically appeared from her bag.

Hal read non-stop for another hour and found one script from a Hollywood writer in Bobby’s stable that had a small something going for it. The sticky note he attached

said so, and he shoved the annotated script into the shipping box with the others. Jeff arrived at five and the boxes were gone.

“I’m hungry,” said Hal. “Let’s go.” He stuffed Sandy’s script into his briefcase as she waited at the door.

Traffic slogged along through the early evening horns and smoggy marine-layer and Sandy told him to turn left on Santa Monica. A few blocks later she had him make a soft right onto Wilshire. They drove along a winding street lined with palms until she pointed to a driveway.

“This is it,” Sandy said. “Dinner’s on the way. A working dinner.”

Hal pulled into the wide driveway paved with stones that matched the color of the house. It stood back from the street on a gently rising slope behind a wall of mariposas. The large living room on the first floor overlooked the pool in back. A Lichtenstein, a few Warhol's here and there, and a Pollack fashionably off-center over the ornamental fireplace. Sandy had taste and money.

She made herself a drink and brought him a tumbler of sparkling water with ice and a slice of lemon. Dinner arrived – Italian from La Scala -- and very good. They ate quietly on a side balcony in the sun-warmed air without uttering a word. When they’d finished, Sandy looked at him with the disarming stare of a very pretty woman.

“Bottom-line, you liked it, I can tell.”

Hal pushed back from the glass-topped table. “Yes I did, very much. I was surprised, humbled. I admit it. I owe you an apology. And dinner was good, too...a few glitches, to be expected, but very nice. The script not the dinner. Which was also perfect.”

He followed her into the kitchen. Then they stood at the island counter where they went over the script. Hal lost track of time, but it had to be very late when they finished. Hal's notes were explicit and for the most part Sandy agreed with everything he'd suggested: tightening the dialog in the bathroom scene, omitting the cliché lipstick bit, and telling her not to worry so much about on-screen directions. "Directors do that better than you ever will."

"What now?" Sandy asked when they'd finished. It was dark; only the kitchen lights were on. Hal saw his pudgy, balding reflection in the dark floor-to-ceiling windows and felt old and vulnerable.

"Let's see what you do with my notes. I'm not the writer, but I can help you make it better. Next move is yours." Hal looked at her remarkable face.

"*You know how to whistle, don't you? You just put your lips....*" This is the part in our script, Hal, where I seduce you." She stood back and then touched her lips. "Come on, Hal. Give it up." She kissed him gently, took his hand, and led him to the nearest bedroom.



Hal had been an adequate lover, barely adequate, but what he remembered in the morning left a smile. Alone in bed, he saw that Sandy's sheets and covers weren't even rumpled.

"Sandy?" he called out. "Coffee?" No answer. "Sandy?" he called out again. He got into his shorts and walked through the empty house peering into one room after another. She wasn't there. Her scarlet bag was gone. The script too. Not even a note. Nothing.

So, she got what she wanted and then split. Where? She lives here, right? Maybe taking a swim? He looked, but the pool was empty, the glass surface reflecting the early morning sky. What did he expect? He'd go home, shower, then drive back to the office. His car was still in the driveway. Thanks for small favors.

Someone banged hard on the front door. He quickly pulled on his pants as the knocking grew louder and more insistent. "Be there in a sec. Hold on," he shouted.

The uniform introduced himself as Officer Kane of the LAPD. Another hard-eyed cop slid past him and began checking out the house. "Had a call from a neighbor, Bub. Someone saw lights. Thought it was the timer until this morning when they saw the car in the driveway."

"And?" replied Hal pulling on his shirt.

"And nothing. The folks who live here are in Spain for the month." The cop stared at Hal, sizing him up. "The neighbors keep an eye out for this sort of thing. What are you doing here?"

"He's alone," the other officer shouted from one of the hallways.

"I came here last night with Sandy Sellmen. She had the key, she opened the door, we ate dinner and did some work. She lives here. Or so I thought." The officer just stared at him and waited for more.

"The Dobson's live here, Bub. For sixteen years. What's your name?"

Hal walked into the kitchen and sat at the counter. "She had the key. I figured it was her place." Hal saw that Sandy – or whoever she was – had even tossed out the garbage from last night. The dishes were clean, put away.

The other officer checked the door. “No sign of forced entry, Chris. The alarm wasn’t set.”

“You wanna tell me what’s going on here, bub?”

•••

They believed him. After checking his record on the squad car's computer—no priors, no traffic tickets outstanding — and calling Hal’s clients to confirm he was ‘legit,’ they waited as he finished dressing. They told him to follow them to the station for fingerprinting (just for the record they told him), where a smirking watch-sergeant asked a few more insinuating and insulting questions, and he was released. “The guy’s a nut job or so hung over he can’t remember shit. He’s local. Nothing’s missing. A neighbor reset the alarm. We’re covered. I’ll do the report.”

Hal drove to his pastel house tucked away in a *cul de sac* in Culver City, showered and changed, and dealt with the heavy morning traffic. Jeff watched as he pulled into his parking place.

“Hey, Mr. Mertlesom! I left your stuff outside the door. That OK? Need any help?”

“No thanks. See you later.” Jeff waved, his small cart clattering behind him. Then Hal called out again. “Hey, Jeff! Remember that good-looking girl with you the other day? The one dressed all in black, red scarf, white bag? You see her around lately?”

“I don’t remember seeing anyone like that around here. If she was good-looking, I’d remember. Sorry.”

Back in his office, Hal called the La Scala, but the restaurant manager didn’t find any record of a delivery to that address, no credit card receipt from a Sandy Sellmen.

Hal's cell phone would have a record of all the incoming calls from yesterday and the day before. He knew how to do that, but nothing there either. There was no record of her at all. He knew there'd be no listed number, so he didn't bother calling the phone company.

When his phone rang; it was Bobby. "Hal. How've you been?" Hal listened. He spoke to his producer-clients once maybe twice a month. "Haven't seen you in a while, baby, haven't talked in ages."

"Hiya, Bobby. What's up?"

"Just wondering what you've been up to, Hal."

"Just working, Bobby. You send 'em, I read 'em. Same as always."

"Peachy." There was a long pause. "Listen. I know you do a ton of scripts for me and the other guys. What you read in a day? I know I send you a box of them. Gotta be a couple a dozen? More? That's way too many, don't ya think?"

"Not a problem, Bobby. I've been doing it for a long time. I love it. I know what I'm doing." Hal sensed that Bobby was hedging, beating around the bush. "Come on, Bobby. What's on your mind?"

"I took a peek at what you sent back yesterday." Bobby broke into a strange little laugh. "I don't know how you do it, Boy-o. I'd go bloody nuts reading that trash all day."

"You gotta be bloody nuts to do this, Bobby. That's why you send it to me. Why I make the big bucks. Every now and then we strike gold, don't we? Makes it easier to deal with the crap. What's on your mind?" Hal was opening the first carton of the day as he talked to Bobby, the tiny cell phone clamped uncomfortably between his ear and shoulder.

“You sent one back we didn’t send you. Not logged in here, not one of mine. I called Murray and Al. They don’t have a record of it either. So who’s this Sandy Sellmen? Chick or dick? Friend of yours?”

Hal didn’t answer right away. “She’s a she. Sort of dropped in here day before yesterday, made a pest of herself. Don’t know how she found *me* to pester. Got my name and number from somewhere. So you read *Abby and Martinique*? I’ll run over to your place and get it. Sorry.”

“I did read it, Hal. It’s terrific. Next time, you get something like this, call me. *First*. You hear? Your notes say it needs a little work here and there, but I smell a winner. I can smell it, I really can. Quirky. Foxy. Sexy. Smart. It’s what’s in. What’s her number? I’ll call her myself.”

“I don’t have it.” Hal dealt with Bobby’s long silence.

“Ohhh...kaaaay!” Bobby’s voice suddenly took on a harsher tone and Hal, after all these years, resented it.

“Listen Bobby. I’m not screwing with you. I really don’t have it. I’m trying to get in touch with her myself. We had dinner last night, then she disappeared. She’s a real looker. She’s good, or at least the script is. When I get in touch with her, I’ll tell her to call you first thing. OK?” Hal listened again to the silence.

“First thing? You don’t frigging say?” The nasty tone again. “So let me get this. *You’ll call me?* After how many years? Now I hear ‘*You’ll call me?*’ That’s cool. That’s very cool. Who died and left you *maitre d’*?” Bobby abruptly hung up.

Hal didn’t know where to start. Was her name even Sandy Sellmen? Who the hell knew where anyone lived these days? They were even running out of phone numbers.

It was almost ten. Hal hadn't even looked at a script yet.

By late afternoon he'd almost caught up. Another particularly bad day for Hal, lost as he was in his endless pile of crappy scripts. Shortly after Jeff made his five o'clock pickup, Hal's cell phone rang. It was Sandy.

"Hal, it's me."

He collected himself. "The cops were a nice touch. What's going on? After being fingerprinted, I looked for you. Tried to put it all together. A house that isn't yours. A phone without a phone number. Tracking down a phantom script. Dealing with a pissed-off client who turns out has it. Thinks I'm cheating on him. What's going on here? I know I didn't send it. I thought we had something going here, Sandy. An understanding. A level of trust."

"We do, but..." She stopped talking. "Hal, stop complaining."

"Where are you right now?"

"I'm right here."

Hal jumped from the desk to the door and opened it. He looked down the hall. Nothing. But as he closed the door, he caught a glimpse of her in the gold-framed mirror. He turned and there she was, in the flesh, as calm as a rock, sitting in the recliner with her silver flask in hand.

"How'd you do that?"

"I've been here all day, you poor baby. A crowd of one, in the background. Just sipping my drink and watching you work. Quiet as a mouse. Didn't want to interrupt." She scrunched up her face to be cute, turned on her killer smile, sipped from her flask.

Hal couldn't take his eyes off her. She was always lovely, but this time she was stunning in her pale-yellow sweater and white slacks, her hair up and tied with a yellow ribbon. "I need another copy of your script, Sandy. Somehow the one we worked on last night found its way to Bobby's office." Sandy smiled at him.

"You already told me that. Hate to be the one to break it to you, but I committed a sin, Hal. I had only one copy, the one we worked on last night. And you took it. Or I thought you took it. I don't have another. Really."

"I'll get it from Bobby in the morning. He's really pissed. Thinks I'm running my own talent pool. And what about a phone number so he can call you."

But she never answered.

Hal sat motionless at his desk. The late afternoon light began to fade. As he looked at her, wordlessly trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together, the flask in Sandy's hand began a slow dissolve and soon disappeared completely in the gathering darkness. He caught a faint glimpse of her brilliant smile and watched as her yellow sweater faded to beige, then to ever-changing shades of gray in the dimming light. He could faintly see her white slacks and her white bag as she shifted ever so slightly on the leather recliner. The light kept fading. The hair ribbon hung in the air, disembodied, ghostly, attached to nothing Hal could see. Then it too faded away. He rubbed his eyes and kept looking at Sandy until only the recliner remained.

In no time at all, or as long as it took for the sun to lose itself, Sandy was gone, had exited the scene silently, casting only one last fleeting glimpse of her unforgettable smile. Then the room was empty as it faded to black.

THE END

Teaser:

A Hollywood who-done-it, a beautiful woman, where memories come from, and where they go.