

Even in Los Angeles, where there is no shortage of remarkable hairdos, Harry Peak attracted attention. “He was very blond. Very, very blond,” his lawyer said to me, and then he fluttered his hand across his forehead, performing a pantomime of Peak’s heavy swoop of bangs. Another lawyer, who questioned Peak in a deposition, remembered his hair very well. “He had a lot of it,” she said. “And he was very definitely blond.” An arson investigator I met described Peak entering a courtroom “with all that hair,” as if his hair existed independently.

Having a presence mattered a great deal to Harry Omer Peak. He was born in 1959, and grew up in Santa Fe Springs, a town in the paddle-flat valley less than an hour southeast of Los Angeles, hemmed in by the dun-colored Santa Rosa Hills and a looming sense of monotony. It was a place that offered the soothing uneventfulness of conformity, but Harry longed to stand out. As a kid, he dabbled in the minor delinquencies and pranks that delighted an audience. Girls liked him. He was charming, funny, dimpled, daring. He could talk anyone into anything. He had a gift for drama and invention. He was a storyteller, a yarn-spinner, and an agile liar; he was good at fancying up facts to make his life seem less plain and mingy. According to his sister, he was the biggest bullshitter in the world, so quick to fib and fabricate that even his own family didn’t believe a word he said.

The closeness of Hollywood’s constant beckoning, combined with his knack for performance, meant, almost predictably, that Harry Peak decided to become an actor. After he finished high school and served a stint in the army, Harry moved to Los Angeles and started dreaming. He began dropping the phrase “when I’m a movie star” into his conversations. He always said “when” and not “if.” For him, it was a statement of fact rather than speculation.

Although they never actually saw him in any television shows or movies, his family was under the impression that during his time in Hollywood, Harry landed some promising parts. His father told me Harry was on a medical show—maybe *General Hospital*—and that he had roles in several movies, including *The Trial of Billy Jack*. IMDb—the world’s largest online database for movies and television—lists a Barry Peak, a Parry Peak, a Harry Peacock, a Barry Pearl, and even a Harry Peak of Plymouth, England, but there is nothing at all listed for a Harry Peak of Los Angeles. As far as I can tell, the only time Harry Peak appeared on screen was on the local news in 1987, after he was arrested for setting the Los Angeles Central Library on fire, destroying almost half a million books and damaging seven hundred thousand more. It was one of the biggest fires in the history of Los Angeles, and it was the single biggest library fire in the history of the United States.