

The Life and Death of Larry Hillblom

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Larry Hillblom was in good spirits as he prepared for his last flight. It was to take him from the Pacific island of Saipan, where he lived, to Pagan Island, 200 miles away. Friends recall he had been “happy and upbeat” that week, talking as - as ever - about new business ideas, some connected with DHL, the courier company he had founded in 1969. There were two other people on board: one of Hillblom’s political cronies, Jesus Mafnas, and the pilot, a Vietnam veteran, Robert Long. Once, Hillblom might have taken the controls himself but two years earlier he had crashed while landing a Cessna, suffering severe facial injuries and losing the sight in the right eye.

The date was May 21, 1995. The plane, a SeaBee amphibian, took off at 7.20 a.m. and headed north. But when it reached Pagan, there was disappointment. The island was shrouded by rain-clouds and so Long turned back. Around 11.30 Hillblom called home and asked his girlfriend, Josephine Nocasa, to meet him at the airport.

They were the last words heard from the plane. Some 35 miles north of Saipan, it plunged into the ocean. There was no distress call, nothing to intimate that the plane was in trouble. When it failed to arrive, Nocasa called friends who summoned help. Searching boats and planes found nothing until the next day.

That afternoon they recovered the bodies of Mafnas and Long and fragments of wreckage. There was no sign of Hillblom until, towards dusk, a pilot spotted the remains of a body surrounded by scavenging fish. By the time rescue boats arrived, it had disappeared. The cause of the crash was to remain a mystery, US investigators concluding that the SeaBee had simply flown into the ocean. Hillblom’s death certificate merely recorded that, at the age of 52, he had been “lost at sea”.

On the Saturday after the crash, a memorial ceremony was staged at Hillblom’s home town of Kingsburg in California. Heading the mourners were his parents, both in their eighties, and his two brothers. The eulogy was delivered by Joe Waechter, a former president of DHL, who talked of the “leadership, tenacity and motivational skills that marked his life”. At DHL, he had been “the glue that held the company together, yet he had never lived extravagantly or put on airs.” Four days later, Waechter repeated the eulogy at a memorial service in Saipan.

To that point, Hillblom’s story was remarkable enough: how a man from small-town America starts up a courier company which today employs 35,000 people and earns \$3 billion a year. But the story did not end there. Following Hillblom’s death, a succession of women came forward to claim that he had fathered their children. In view of Hillblom’s wealth, their claims seemed quite implausible: all came from impoverished third-world backgrounds, several were bar-girls from the seediest strip-joints of Manila, all were teenagers, one only 14 when she became pregnant.

Since then, a vituperative legal battle has been fought out against a background of the waving palms and gleaming beaches of Micronesia. On one side have been the mothers and their attorneys, who stood to win lottery-size fortunes from Hillblom's estate. On the other have been Hillblom's family, friends and colleagues, most utterly disbelieving the women's stories, who have done their utmost to defeat their claims.

Even now the battle rages, with court hearings still raking through Hillblom's life and death. But the larger questions remain. How was this complex tycoon and purported sexual athlete forged from a Californian backwater? Can the contradictions of his life be reconciled? And how can it be that a man who was determined not to have children - and insisted he was incapable of having them - should have fathered at least four in such improbable circumstances?

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Three years after his death, Hillblom's memory inspires loyalty bordering on veneration. "So long as I live I will never meet three people as smart as he was," says a Saipan colleague, Bob O'Connor. Marilyn Corral, a former vice-president at DHL, says Hillblom was the kindest person she knew. "If you were his friend, he would do anything for you."

Hillblom's friends were also aware of his contradictions and flaws. For all his charisma, he was a slight, scruffy figure, unable to sit still and reluctant to look people in the eye. Although he was worth half a billion dollars he could be utterly frugal, above all towards himself. He was both obsessed with his health and a risk-taker for whom the term accident-prone could have been coined. Some saw him as exploitative and manipulative: "He was very much into power and control," says a former friend and colleague, Stephen Kroll. He was articulate and persuasive, yet also a story-teller for whom truth was a relative concept, liking to shroud himself in mystery. Ask him about himself, says Roy Alexander, another business partner, "and he would never give you a straight answer."

The origins of some of these contradictions may be found in Hillblom's upbringing in Kingsburg, a sedate community in central California's farm-belt, where he was born in 1943. He was indeed an exemplary school pupil, shining in class and at sport, attending the Concordia Lutheran church with his family, progressing via junior and state colleges to Berkeley in San Francisco, emerging with a top-class law degree in 1968.

Yet Hillblom's early life had been marked by tragedy. His father, Clarence Hillblom, was a carpenter who had built and operated two crop-drying machines. In the summer of 1946, while working in blazing temperatures, he collapsed and died of what his death certificate termed "heat prostration".

The outcome for Hillblom's mother Helen, then 31, was catastrophic. Larry was three and she was pregnant again. They had been unable to afford insurance and their house was repossessed. So profound were these traumas that her eyes would dampen when she passed her former home and retold the story decades later. She remarried in 1948, becoming Helen Anderson and moving into an imposing

clapboard farmhouse set among vineyards a mile outside Kingsburg. Two years later, Helen gave birth to her third son, Grant.

These traumas left their mark on Hillblom. In later life he praised “Andy” Anderson for raising his two stepsons as if they were his own. But one effect of his mother’s sudden impoverishment was an engrained frugality, even his friends describing him as “cheap”. A second was a perpetual struggle for control over his life. It is hardly surprising, in the wake of her bereavement, that his mother felt protective towards her children. But as Hillblom grew up, she seemed unable to let go, deploying all the manipulative tricks in a mother’s arsenal to hold on to her son.

Hillblom’s friends describe her as controlling, manipulative and domineering. “If she did something for him, she expected gratitude,” says a school-friend, Dave Crass. Hillblom fought to escape her grip, resenting any interference with his life, refusing to allow his parents to fund his way through college, working at a local canning factory instead. Around 1975 he broke with her completely, not seeing or talking to her for the next 15 years.

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By then, DHL was well under way. While at Berkeley, Hillblom had spotted an opportunity for flying ship’s documents to their next port, so that the formalities were under way when the ship arrived. His trick - and the idea on which DHL was based - was to offer air passengers free tickets in return for using their baggage space. In 1969 he enlisted two partners, Adrian Dalei Dalsey and Robert Lynn, whose initials combined to make DHL. Their first operations were between California and Hawaii, soon extending to the Far East and Australia. They won contracts from banks, construction and finance companies and opened offices in London and the Middle East. They fought law suits from competitors and federal authorities convinced there was something wrong about Hillblom’s unconventional methods. Hillblom relished the challenges, which cast DHL in the role of David versus Goliath, and in 1979 won a landmark battle which ended the monopoly of the US post office.

Joe Waechter, who joined DHL as a driver in 1973, found that Hillblom set a frenetic pace. “He was tenacious, dedicated, hardworking. When he got into a project he was on it 24 hours a day.” Another early recruit, Marilyn Corral, saw how Hillblom created strong loyalties among his staff. “It was fun and smart to be with, the work was very challenging and pioneering, and they felt they were doing something special.”

Hillblom’s personal characteristics left their mark. He contended it was wrong to pay top wages because it inflated employees’ expectations. He set an appropriate example, persisting in wearing a pair of boots even though the sole was flapping free. “He didn’t like money,” Waechter says. “He liked frugal living. To him, money was a scorecard, a measure of success.”

During this period Hillblom was involved in the most committed relationship of his life. In 1971, he met a New York psychology student, Carla Summer, who at 21 was seven years younger than him. He was enraptured by her looks - short, with long

curly hair - and her bubbly personality. Summer considered Hillblom “unremarkable” but he pursued her with the single-mindedness he displayed at DHL. She succumbed when she visited him in Hawaii the next spring and he persuaded her to stay.

Summer found Hillblom compassionate and tender, with strong business acumen. She saw the same paradoxes as his friends and agrees that he delighted in confounding others. “He wanted to be an enigma, definitely”, she says. She witnessed his fixation with health, as when he declared that grapefruit were the ideal food and ate nothing else for days. She found him touchingly naïve at times - “he had a lot of the child in him” - and curiously absolute in his judgments. Life for him was “very black and white - there was not a lot of gray for Larry, emotionally.”

She observed his discomfort with his mother when they visited Kingsburg and, after the final break, would field her phone calls. She also witnessed a painful episode in 1976 when Hillblom’s brother Grant, who had been working as an administrator at DHL, announced he was going back to Kingsburg to farm. In the battle with his mother, Hillblom saw Grant’s decision as a switch of allegiance which left him feeling abandoned and betrayed. “The loss was very profound,” Summer confirms.

By now, issues of family and marriage were blighting their relationship too. At first, Hillblom had declared his opposition to marriage. “He talked about how ridiculous marriage was. I felt the same way.” He also said that he never wanted to have children.

Summer was taken aback when, several years later, Hillblom asked her to marry him. She demurred. Soon afterwards, Hillblom returned from San Francisco saying he had had a vasectomy. He looked pleased - “he was beaming all over his face” - but Summer was not surprised, as he had already discussed the idea, citing a hereditary illness his mother suffered from as a reason not to have children himself.

One immediate consequence was that they stopped using contraceptives. But the issue was to bedevil their relationship, strengthening her refusal to get married. Summer reasoned: “If we’re not going to have children, why should we bother? In those days I very much wanted a child of my own.” She also declined Hillblom’s proposal that they might adopt. “At the time I thought, no. Now, I would do it differently.” Hillblom broke down in tears as they searched for solutions, in vain. Soon afterwards, their relationship ended.

At DHL, Hillblom was approaching a watershed too. By 1980 the company had 2500 employees and sales of \$100 million a year. Hillblom was still the majority shareholder but despite his strategic vision, says Waechter, he was a hopeless day-to-day manager, threatening chaos with his impetuous ideas. Other shareholders resented his attempts to diversify into property development and tourism. Hillblom became impatient with the daily round of meetings. “It was no fun for him,” Waechter says. Instead, Hillblom looked for new territory to conquer. “He just went and didn’t come back,”

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Hillblom's new home was Saipan. He arrived at an ideal time. A classic south-sea island of jungle, beaches and coral reefs, it had long been a US fiefdom, depressed and indolent, funded by US welfare payments. Its 50,000 inhabitants were a mix of native Chamorros [spelling correct] and US expatriates. In the early 1980s, as part of the new Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, it began prising itself free of US hegemony. Its economy opened up, bringing potential fortunes in real estate and tourism, with bonuses of low taxes and freedom from the American tax system. "He hated the IRS with a passion," says his Saipan lawyer, Mike Dotts.

Hillblom moved into development and real estate, pursuing projects in Saipan and other Micronesian islands, then acquired a bank, newspaper and television station. He bought an investment company, the United Micronesia Development Association, which owned a stake in Air Micronesia, a subsidiary of Continental Airlines. Later he started developing hotels and golf-courses in Vietnam, circumventing the US trade embargo by using a surrogate partner based in Hong Kong.

In Saipan he cultivated the local politicians, drinking beer and eating steak with them at the beach-side restaurants. They liked his informality and his penchant for wearing tee-shirts with jeans or shorts, even for business meetings. As qualified lawyer, he assisted their battles to establish their independence from Washington, as well as becoming a part-time judge in Saipan. He also drafted his own legislation. When he needed to toughen Saipan banking requirements to make life harder for his competitors, he typed out the bill himself at the Saipan legislature and it was voted into law a few days later.

At the same time he could display a puzzling lack of proportion, devoting inordinate energy to minor projects. He took a stake in a local pawnshop, insisted on driving the delivery truck for his newspaper, and wasted time on a doomed venture to establish a tourist attraction called Cow Town - complete with cowboys from Oklahoma - in the barren north of the island.

Waechter especially found this frustrating, as Hillblom still kept a close eye on DHL. Waechter would arrive in Saipan to seek his approval for a decision worth millions of dollars, only to kick his heels for days as Hillblom fixed the sound system at a beach restaurant he had just bought. Waechter believes that Hillblom's refusal to recruit investment partners when DHL needed new aircraft and tracking systems cost the company vital market share. The reason, for Waechter, is clear: "Larry didn't want to lose control."

He was still obsessed with his health, still as frugal as ever. He had discovered Retin-A, the anti-ageing cream that works by generating fresh skin, and was using it "by the caseload", says Waechter. He displayed primitive joy at spotting bargains advertised in the local newspapers, stuffing his fridge with chicken breasts or ketchup which had been marked down a few cents.

Meanwhile the old family tensions were simmering. Hillblom was still not talking to his mother, refusing his colleagues' entreaties to call her on mothers' day, and furious when they sent her flowers in his name. A further crisis arose when Hillblom hired his younger brother, Terry, to help run DHL's operations in Hawaii. Terry was

not up to the job and returned to Kingsburg humiliated, leaving his mother more aggrieved than ever.

In 1990, Hillblom returned to Kingsburg for his stepfather's 80th birthday, the first time he had seen his mother in 15 years. He did not tell her he was coming and stayed in a hotel. When they met he gave her a brief hug and exchanged a few words. In 1991 he was back in Kingsburg for a high-school reunion, organised by Dave Crass. Hillblom visited the family ranch but it was an excruciating occasion. His mother told him he should share some of his fortune with his brothers but Hillblom, says Crass, "just grunted and tried to edge away." Later Hillblom asked Crass why his brothers needed money, since they already spent more money than he did on himself.

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What, meanwhile, of Hillblom's emotional life? Never again, having separated from Summer, did he conduct a relationship of such intensity. He embarked on shorter relationships with women who, Summer observed, became ever younger and less challenging. Nor was Hillblom faithful to them, Summer fielding calls from these same women anxious to know where he was. Summer believes that Hillblom - who continued to confide in her - was wary of any deeper commitment, both because of the painful way they had parted, and because he did not want to replicate the thrall in which his mother had held him. "He was afraid of being overwhelmed and controlled."

After several relationships had ended in recrimination, Hillblom turned to Asian women, finding them still more passive and subservient. Certainly that applied to Josephine Nocasa, a Philippino who lived with him in Saipan for nine years. To Hillblom's friends, they were acting out a facsimile of marriage. While she hardly spoke in public, in private they were cloyingly affectionate. "It was almost like a teenage relationship," says Roy Alexander.

At the same time, Hillblom was relentlessly unfaithful to Nocasa. He organised groups of friends and colleagues for visits to Manila (known lubriciously as "the farm".) Here, in clubs with names such as Visions, Vixens and Myfair, young women, many desperate to escape the poverty of the Philippines, would parade half-naked before their potential clients. Hillblom bought an apartment on the Manila waterfront where he could take the girls. For once he was not frugal, spending up to £100,000 - he called it his "fuck money" - in six months. His preference was for virgins, for whom he paid up to £1000. At the bars, the *mama-sans* earmarked new arrivals and had them examined by a doctor to ensure they were intact. He told friends, including Summer and Waechter, that he preferred virgins from a fear of AIDs. Others regard this as an excuse for sexual tastes which had crossed the line into paedophilia.

His Saipan lawyer, Mike Dotts, had the task of helping to conceal Hillblom's activities from Nocasa. She was intensely suspicious and so Dotts made Hillblom's travel arrangements. Hillblom would leave Saipan without telling her, then phone

from Manila to say he had been called away on business. Dotts believes that Nocasa managed to convince herself - just - that Hillblom remained faithful.

By the end of the 1980s, this belief was becoming harder to sustain, for there were rumours that Hillblom had fathered a child on the island of Palau. The supposed mother was a local woman, Kaelani Kinney, who confronted Hillblom on several occasions to tell him that her son - named Junior, born in 1984 - was his.

Rather than deny her claim outright, Hillblom told her to submit to a DNA test, which she never did. She was not the most impressive witness, as she had been in trouble over drugs and accusations of prostitution. What was more, she had first registered the father as another American, and when she did change the name, misspelled it Hillbroom. To Summer, he seemed in no doubt. "He didn't think it could be his," she says. "It just didn't follow. If he had a vasectomy, then this child couldn't be his."

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One of the ironies of Hillblom's death was that he almost lost his life in a plane crash two years before. He had become a flying enthusiast, buying several planes, including a Cessna and the SeaBee, which he shipped from Louisiana in 1991. His friends were troubled by his scant regard for safety procedures and the fact that he never bothered to acquire a full pilot's licence. They regarded him as irredeemably accident prone, citing the time when one of the Cessna's wheels collapsed on landing, a spectacular motor-cycle crash in Saudi Arabia, and the occasion he plunged his car 15 feet into a ditch on his ranch near San Francisco.

On August 15, 1993, Hillblom took off from Saipan in the Cessna. He was barely airborne when the engine throttle stuck open, making it almost impossible to control. Hillblom headed for the neighbouring island of Tinian and tried to land by cutting the engine. He aborted the landing but then stalled and crashed.

While his two passengers walked away from the wreckage, Hillblom suffered serious injuries to his face and chest. He was flown to San Francisco where a plastic surgeon spent 14 hours repairing some 70 fractures, the worst around his nose, eyes and cheeks. He lost the sight in his right eye and was still undergoing surgery 18 months later.

One of Hillblom's managers, a Londoner named John Spice, was present when Hillblom's mother arrived at the hospital. Both were clearly nervous, Spice reassuring them both that the other wanted to meet them before leading Hillblom's mother into the room. "They just looked at each other," he says. "She was very strong and did not break down. They talked, and she told him she loved him."

Spice believes that in that moment, Hillblom and his mother were reconciled. After recovering from the worst of his injuries, Hillblom visited Kingsburg several times, inspecting his old haunts and staying at his parents' ranch. "He was so happy it was unbelievable," Spice recalls.

Once on his feet, Hillblom plunged back into his business projects. He convalesced in Manila, where he was planning a new hub for DHL. In December he was in Vietnam, visiting his two planned resorts, one at Phan Thiet, the other at Dalat. He wasted no time in pursuing his sexual needs, doing so more openly than ever, inviting his plastic surgeon, plus several colleagues and their wives, to Manila, where he took them to the bars and asked if they wanted a girl.

This time, however, there was a difference, for Hillblom also started fathering children. Such, at any rate, is the testimony of three young women, based on legal documents and our interviews. These are their stories.

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Nguyen Thi Be met Hillblom at Phan Thiet in December, 1993. Aged 18, she was working as a waitress at Hillblom's hotel, sitting with guests if they requested. She was petite and demure, and Hillblom found her immediately attractive. His plastic surgeon had evidently done a good job, as she remembers only light scars on his face, although she later discovered a long scar on his chest.

When Hillblom asked her to join him, she was at first reluctant. She thought that he was a "boss", but did not know he owned the hotel. A night or so later she agreed to go to Hillblom's room where they had sex. She knew nothing about birth control methods but later realised he was not using contraceptives. Be found Hillblom "a fun person who was nice to me - he made me laugh". Hillblom came and went from Vietnam and although he gave her money she regarded this as a present, not payment for sex.

In March 1994, Be discovered she was pregnant. She was ashamed to tell her parents, not least because there was still strong anti-American sentiment in her village. She told Hillblom the next time she saw him. He seemed surprised, then hugged her: "He seemed so happy." Hillblom said he had to return to the US but promised to help when her baby was born. Be's family had been hostile when she told them she was pregnant but with a month to go they relented and took her back in. Her baby was born in September, 1994, and she called him Lory. Despite his promise, there was no word from Hillblom.

By then, he had become involved with a woman in Manila. Julie Cuartero had become a domestic servant at 12. At 16 she headed for Manila where she worked in restaurants and factories before enlisting at Vixens nightclub. The mama-san told Hillblom about her - she was still a virgin - and he bought her a drink and took her back to his apartment. After they watched a video, Hillblom told her to undress. She hesitated and so he removed her clothes himself. When they started intercourse, she told Hillblom it hurt and he promised to be careful. Afterwards he gave her £150 and sent her home in a taxi.

Hillblom had sex with Cuartero several more times, paying her up to £80. He was not using condoms and in September she found she was pregnant. But Hillblom disputed whether he was the father, giving her £20 and saying he would support the child if it proved to be his. The next time he came into Vixens he refused to talk to her, saying he was too busy. On the next occasion she followed him into the men's

room and showed him she was pregnant. Hillblom gave her £100 and told her to have an abortion.

Hillblom had switched his attention to a third woman, Mercedes Feliciano, who lived in a one-room tenement with her family in Manila. She was just 14 - and looked even younger - when she started work at the Myfair earning a basic £3 a night. Knowing Hillblom's tastes, the mama-san had her examined by a doctor to establish that she was a virgin.

Hillblom's friends say that he became infatuated with Feliciano from the moment he saw her. He took her and one of her friends to his apartment and offered her around £600 for sex. She refused and so Hillblom had sex with her friend while she waited in the next room.

Hillblom embarked on a campaign to overcome Feliciano's resistance. He paid her £35 a week to leave the Myfair, courted her family by taking them to funfairs, and arranged for an eye specialist to examine one of her sisters, who was blind. In January he took her and her family to the resort island of Cebu. That night he asked her mother if he could sleep with her daughter. Her mother did not demur. Feliciano was entirely unprepared for sex: "It was painful and I was shocked," she says. Hillblom gave her around £1000 which she promptly handed to her mother.

Hillblom treated Feliciano as a regular partner, playing golf with her and taking her to a high-level meeting at DHL. He told her stories about his plane crash and, after sex, bathed and cuddled her and let her sleep in his arms. She remembers his "smooth, fair skin". In March, 1995, she too became pregnant.

Back in Vietnam, baby Lory was six months old. That month Hillblom returned to Phan Thiet, where he learned that Be had given birth to his child. They met later that day: "He was very happy to see me," says Be. She handed him three photographs of Lory and he gave her £200, promising to look after them both the next time he came back from the US.

In Manila, Cuartero's baby, whom she named Jellian, was born on May 4. According to her lawyers, she met Hillblom a few days later, telling him she wanted her daughter to have his name. And according to Feliciano's lawyers, she too met Hillblom at this time, telling him she was going to have his baby. Hillblom, they say, told her he had to leave Manila but would arrange for her to be checked by a doctor when he returned.

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If Hillblom was feeling under pressure, he did not reveal it to his friends. On May 7 he flew to Pagan Island with Nocasa and Dotts in the SeaBee, piloted by Long. He and Nocasa collected mangoes, then posed for a photograph beside a palm tree. "He was very relaxed," Dotts recalls. Hillblom flew to Vietnam via Manila for the opening of his hotel at Dalat on May 11, the day before his 52nd birthday.

It was an extraordinary event, attended by most of Vietnam's nascent business community. Hillblom was ecstatic that his \$50 million investment had passed such a

watershed. “He was getting accolades,” Waechter says. “He was as happy as I had ever seen.”

The following week he was back in Saipan, discussing business ideas with Dotts and playing golf with Alexander. He wanted to use the SeaBee in Vietnam and so asked Long to take it up to Pagan again that weekend as a final test before the long island-hopping flight to Vietnam. There was a spare seat and Hillblom left a message inviting Alexander along. To Alexander’s eternal relief, he did not retrieve the message until the following afternoon.

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Some four weeks after Hillblom disappeared, Josephine Nocasa took a phone call at their house on Saipan. It was, she relates, from Joe Waechter. Briskly, he asked her to dispose of Hillblom’s clothing and personal belongings.

Nocasa packed Hillblom’s clothes, shoes, toiletries and medicines into bin-liners which she buried in a pit at the far end of their garden. She did not question Waechter’s instructions, saying now that she knew what lay behind them. “It was about Junior,” she testified in June, “and DNA.”

Waechter tells a different story. He arrived at the house to find that Nocasa had gathered Hillblom’s clothing and believed it was “some Philippine traditional way - either burning or burying - of disposing of his clothes.” He adds that Nocasa had asked him if she could do so and while he consented, “I did not tell her how, when or why.”

Waechter was due to face further questioning in a bid to reconcile the divergent accounts. But the attorneys who represented Hillblom’s purported children have no doubt what was afoot. Nocasa’s clandestine burial ceremony was part of a conspiracy to prevent the children from proving that Hillblom was their father and thus block them from claiming their inheritance. The battle has lasted for three years and is still not fully resolved.

It all began with Hillblom’s will. On the Friday after Hillblom disappeared, a San Francisco attorney, Pete Donnici, who was DHL’s company lawyer and a close personal friend, took the will to Kingsburg. He showed it to Hillblom’s family when they gathered at Grant’s ranch after the memorial ceremony.

The will was notable for both what it said and what it omitted. Hillblom had left the bulk of his estate to a charitable trust to fund medical research - which had the bonus of being exempt from estate tax, as US death duties are known. There were to be five trustees, including Donnici and Hillblom’s brothers, Grant and Terry. As for his family, Hillblom’s brothers were to receive a modest bequest: his jewellery, clothing, furniture, and “personal automobiles”, plus \$300,000 each, the maximum sum not to incur estate tax. He left his mother nothing.

That omission was overshadowed by a far larger one. American wills often include a clause disinheriting illegitimate children who have not been acknowledged by their fathers. Hillblom's will contained no such clause. It thus presented the awesome prospect that if Hillblom *did* have any illegitimate children, their claims would override the rest of the will, and they would inherit his entire estate.

At that time, both Donnici and Waechter were aware of the rumours that Hillblom had a son on Palau. Grant knew of the rumours too, but since Hillblom had told him he had had a vasectomy, he considered them preposterous. It was Donnici and Waechter who headed the fight to block the children's claims, Donnici planning the strategy, Waechter doing whatever it took. They were backed at different times by Hillblom's family, the other trustees, colleagues from DHL, and the medical bodies which stood to benefit under the will.

Waechter insists they were guided by their desire to see the will implemented as Hillblom wished. "This was our friend," he says. "This is what he wanted us to do." Waechter also acknowledges that once they knew there was to be a claim, they were determined to fight it "to the death."

The first claim came from Kaelani Kinney. In an affidavit lodged with the Saipan court in July, she described meeting Hillblom at the Nanyo Ocean Club in Palau in August 1983. Hillblom bought her drinks and danced with her, then spent three nights with her at a hotel. He was not using contraceptives and Junior was born in May 1984. Afterwards she met Hillblom four or five times, usually to ask him for money. Although he challenged her to prove Junior was his, he gave her up to £500, to be spent on her son.

Junior, 11 when Hillblom died, provided testimony too. He had been brought up to regard Hillblom as his father, and there was a photograph of Hillblom in his grandmother's home. Junior remembered meeting him several times - "and each time he seemed pleased to see me."

Junior's case was taken up by two lawyers, David Lujan and Barry Israel, both of whom had known Hillblom. Lujan, from Guam, had an impressive record as a criminal lawyer; Israel, from California, had made a name representing Asian and Pacific governments in legal battles with Washington. Regarded as combative, determined and sceptical, they made a formidable pair. They admit that Kinney was no angel: she became involved in drugs and prostitution, spent time in jail, and had six illegitimate children, most brought up - like Junior - by Kinney's mother in Palau. But they found her story plausible, especially when they saw Junior in court: he had the same wide forehead and the same nervous leg-jiggle as Hillblom himself.

The response to Kinney's claim was uncompromising. Waechter denied that Junior was Hillblom's son and called it "an attempt at extortion".

The first move by Lujan and Israel was to search for DNA evidence that could prove Junior was Hillblom's son. Since Hillblom's body had never been found, that ruled out the most obvious source. It was now they discovered Hillblom's house had been

scoured clean. They sent investigators to Tinian in the hope of finding traces of blood from his 1993 crash, without success.

Then they learned that scar tissue from Hillblom's operations had been kept at the San Francisco hospital. But when the hospital produced the tissue they declined to have it tested on the grounds that no-one could prove it was Hillblom's. Their caution proved justified, for the hospital later admitted it had produced the wrong sample - the result, it claimed, of a labelling mistake.

The suspicions of Lujan and Israel deepened when they scrutinised the manoeuvres among Hillblom's colleagues following his death. Hillblom had named the Bank of Saipan, which he part-owned, as executor to his will. Donnici and Waechter saw that as an obstacle to their aim of controlling his estate, and decided to take over the bank. They set up a front company and borrowed from DHL the money to buy the bank, Waechter becoming the executor. After complaints from Lujan and Israel, a court investigator condemned them for self-dealing, conflict of interest and breaches of duty of loyalty, which included manipulating and misrepresenting the estate's assets.

The court appointed new executors, leaving Donnici and his group to negotiate on behalf of Hillblom's proposed trust. Meanwhile the revelations had made Lujan and Israel even more suspicious towards the Hillblom ~~Donnici~~ camp did. "I represent criminals," Lujan says. "I knew what they were doing."

In November, the Hillblom camp offered to settle Junior's claim. It was for \$5 million up-front, topped up with payments through his life which could accumulate to \$50m. Lujan and Israel were wary, guessing that Donnici would not have made the offer unless he was certain Junior was Hillblom's son. Waechter denies that, saying they were giving Junior "the benefit of the doubt". Lujan and Israel rejected the offer, principally because they did not know the size of the estate: if the \$500m estimate was correct, this was hardly a generous figure. They responded by asking for more money, an admission that Junior was Hillblom's son, and a role for Junior in his late father's affairs. Not surprisingly, they were turned down.

In December, a new claim was lodged, from Julie Cuartero. Inside the Hillblom camp, there was surprise and scepticism, not least because they had learned that lawyers had been posting notices in the Manila bars in a search for more children. Lujan and Israel were sceptical too, as well as worried that further claims could reduce Junior's share. "We treated them as enemies of Junior's claim," says Israel bluntly.

Then came news of a battle on another front. With two claims in the offing, the Hillblom camp decided to make good the omission in his will concerning illegitimate children. In Saipan, lawyers prepared a bill to prevent illegitimate children from inheriting from their fathers unless they could prove that their fathers had treated them - in an curious legal turn of phrase - "openly and notoriously" as their own. In case anyone doubted this was intended to rule out any of Hillblom's children, the proposed new law was to apply retrospectively. "There is no question that if Larry knew about these kids," says Waechter, "he wouldn't have left them his estate."

To become law, the bill had to be passed by both houses of the Saipan legislature. Waechter, together with Hillblom's key political ally in Saipan, Joe Lifofoi, conducted a massive lobbying campaign. "It was a very difficult time," says Diego Benavente, a former fisherman who was speaker in the lower house. "There was a lot of hard pressure, coming down." In the dynastic nature of Saipan politics, some leaning on Benavente were his own relatives, but he stood firm. "I just didn't think [the bill] was proper."

Even so, the bill squeezed through the lower house by 10 votes to 8 and was endorsed by the upper house, 6-3. In honour of its spiritual begetter, it became known as the Hillblom Law. The children's lawyers were despondent at their opponents' triumph, "We completely underestimated their power," Israel says.

Lujan and Israel took stock. Like most of the children's lawyers, Lujan and Israel were working on contingency fees which would bring around one-third of any award. So far they had spent around \$250,000 - the sum was eventually to top \$1m - which they would forfeit if they lost. The Hillblom camp had spent around \$1m, and the sum would eventually reach \$4m, mostly funded through loans from DHL. Lujan and Israel decided they had to press on. "It was all or nothing now," Israel says.

Lujan and Israel resolved to follow a twin-track policy. The first was to demonstrate that Hillblom had indeed acknowledged Junior as his son. They learned that whereas in Saipan Hillblom had always denied that Junior was his son, in Palau he had done the opposite, even telling the island's President Nakamura that Junior was his. The second was to challenge the Hillblom Law itself, which they considered unconstitutional under Saipan and US law. If it could be overturned, that would bring DNA evidence back into play - and here, they believed, they had a trump card.

Exactly how, or when - or even if - they secured it is something they refuse to reveal. Other lawyers believe that it consisted of a DNA sample from Hillblom's mother, which could prove that Junior was Hillblom's son. According to one version, a private detective obtained a saliva sample from Hillblom's mother, at a time when she was undergoing medical treatment, by the simple method of asking her to open her mouth and taking a swab. Lujan and Israel decline to discuss these stories, beyond insisting that they did nothing improper or illegal.

In May, 1997, Lujan and Israel met Donnici and assorted lawyers in San Francisco. Lujan and Israel had enlisted two renowned DNA experts, Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld, who told Donnici they knew "with scientific certainty" that Junior was Hillblom's son. Lujan and Israel refused to tell Donnici how they knew, saying only that they never bluffed. After the meeting, says Israel, the two sides were on an equal footing. "We both knew, beyond any doubt, that Junior was Larry's son, and we both knew that the other knew it too."

By then, no fewer than five women were claiming to have had children by Hillblom. Besides Kaelani Kinney and Julie Cuartero there was Mercedes Feliciano, whose daughter, Mercedita, had been born in December, 1995; plus a woman from Manila, who said she had had three of his children, and a woman from Saigon. For the trust, Donnici had made a new offer, proposing 10% for one proven child, up to 35% for seven or more. Until then, the children's lawyers had been watching each other

warily, as suspicious of each other at times as of the Hillblom camp. Lujan and Israel now proposed they pool their resources in a bid to learn just which children were genuine. Scheck and Neufeld would use a method known as sibship testing to see if DNA from the children's blood proved they had the same father. If so - in view of what they knew about Junior - that father could only be Hillblom.

At that point the Manila woman claiming three children dropped out. A few weeks later, Neufeld sent Israel an Email containing the sibship results: Jellian Cuartero and Mercedes Feliciano were Hillblom's; the Saigon child was not. An expert appointed by the Hillblom trust questioned Neufeld closely before reporting that, beyond all but a freak of statistics, the children were genuine. Lujan and Israel are frank enough to admit this was a bitter-sweet moment. On one hand, Junior's pay-out had been greatly reduced. On the other, says Israel, "We were convinced now that settlement could be concluded."

Two thousand miles away in Vietnam, Nguyen Thi Be knew nothing of these events. Having learned of Hillblom's death, she had resigned herself to life without him. Her plight was desperate, for she was treated as a virtual outcast in her village for having had a illegitimate child by a westerner, and had no income to speak of. Her sister approached some officials at the Phan Thiet hotel and told them Hillblom had promised Be his support, but they told her brusquely there was nothing they could do.

In May 1997 a US lawyer, John Veague, met Be in her village in Vietnam. When Veague heard her story, he instinctively believed she was telling the truth. As for Be, "all she wanted was enough money to eat and to prove this is the father of her son". When Veague reached Saipan, he found himself as welcome as the ghost at the feast, since his claim would represent a further diminution of the spoils. In early August the results of fresh sibship testing came through: Lory was Hillblom's son. Veague felt "a huge sense of relief."

By then, the Hillblom trust had vastly increased its settlement offer, declaring it would accept a 60:40 split in the children's favour. Among the children's attorneys, all but Lujan and Israel wanted to accept. They were pressing for 70:30 on the grounds that they had every chance of overturning the Hillblom Law. However, they also suspected that the trust would appeal all the way to the US Supreme Court if necessary. On the day before the first hearing on the law, they were asked again if they would accept 60:40. "We said yes," Israel relates. "Everyone was stunned."

In crude terms, the settlement gave the children around \$35million each, after tax, to be placed in trust funds on their behalf. Their legal teams would receive on average \$15million each. The Hillblom trust would get around \$200 million, although even now negotiations are continuing, with claims, counter-claims and insults still being hurled across the table.

In the Hillblom camp, there is a persistent sense of grievance, with some - including his family - finding it impossible to believe that the children are his. Carla Summer talks of the greed of the mothers and their attorneys. "These women have millions or dollars," she says. "They're destitute women, they are prostitutes some of them, they have millions of dollars riding on whatever story they concoct. What do I have? I have nothing. It's ridiculous."

The sceptics' key argument centres on Hillblom's vasectomy. The children's attorneys have been inclined to dismiss this another of Hillblom's fictions, spun as an excuse for breaking up with Summer and subsequent partners. Summer insists Hillblom told her the truth, since they gave up using contraceptives and she did not get pregnant (and she had a child in later life).

Until now, there has been no way of reconciling these accounts. However, Dr Lawrence Smookler, Hillblom's personal doctor, has evidence which may provide the answer. Some time in the late 1980s, Smookler recalls, Hillblom telephoned him to discuss vasectomies. Among his questions, Hillblom asked if they could be reversed.

Smookler has related his conversation to investigators from both sides in the Hillblom case. Until now, he interpreted Hillblom's question as meaning (a) he had had a vasectomy and (b) he wanted to know if it could be reversed by surgery. Smookler now realises it can be taken another way: having had a vasectomy, Hillblom wanted to know if it could have reversed itself. Smookler confirms that the answer is yes, adding that although precise figures are hard to come by, "that certainly happens".

Smookler's revelation helps provide the first all-embracing explanation of Hillblom's behaviour. Confident from his vasectomy, he continued to have unprotected sex after breaking up with Summer. When Kinney gave birth, Hillblom was certain Junior could not be his child. As Junior grew older, this became harder to deny - and he telephoned Smookler to have his suspicions confirmed.

Summer confirms that Hillblom took up using condoms again. He told her that he did so, even though he had acquired a taste for virgins, for fear of sexually transmitted diseases, not least AIDS. In 1993, after his near-fatal crash, everything changed. As events make clear, he abandoned using contraceptives. He knew by spring, 1994, that Be was pregnant and continued to have unprotected sex, first with Julie Cuartero, then with Mercedes Feliciano.

So how to account for Hillblom's behaviour? Some of his Saipan friends believe that after surviving the 1993 accident, he believed he was immortal, and threw caution to the winds, in sex as in other matters.

Others see his actions as more conscious and deliberate. Having had a glimpse of mortality, they contend, he wanted to make good the omissions of his life. They cite his unprecedented happiness before his death, stemming in large part from the reconciliation with his mother, and buttressed by his knowledge that he had fathered two children at least, possibly four. His attitudes towards marriage and fatherhood, stultified since his own childhood, had become unlocked. His fear of commitment had eased, his desire to become a progenitor had been liberated.

But why should Hillblom decide to have children in such unpropitious circumstances? Why did he neglect his promises, above all towards Be? The answers must lie in the contradictions still unresolved in Hillblom's psyche: still making promises which

went unfulfilled, still unwilling to face the consequences or responsibilities for his actions.

The final conundrum concerns the clause Hillblom omitted from his will in 1982. There was no question then that he had any children. By 1992, he knew that Junior was probably his. That year, his lawyer Mike Dotts points out, he helped judge a case in Saipan involving an illegitimate child who had not been acknowledged by his father. Since Hillblom ruled that the child should benefit from his father's estate, the question must have been uppermost in his mind.

Shortly afterwards, Donnici began pressing Hillblom to alter his will, almost certainly because of the strengthening Junior rumours. Although Hillblom declined, saying he was too busy, Dotts believes he knew what was doing. He points to his predilection for sowing confusion among his friends, and also believes he wanted Junior to prove himself a battler like his father and to fight for what was his.

Hillblom, says Dotts, did not believe in free rides. "He believed you got what you were able to make for yourself. If Junior could prove his right to his inheritance, he was entitled to what he could get. Larry would have been proud of his son."

* * * *

Junior's immediate plans are to continue his education in Hawaii, later in the mainland US. His grandparents want him to become "a productive and responsible citizen." Julie Cuartero is pregnant by an American in Saipan and she and Jellian may eventually move to the US. Lawyers acting for Mercedes and Mercedita Feliciano, still in Manila, say "their lifestyle will definitely improve". Nguyen Thi Be considers Vietnam her home, but hopes to take Lory to Kingsburg to meet Hillblom's family. Her lawyer, John Veague, says she wants Lory to "grow up with an understanding of who his father was and where he came from".

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