

sparkle hayter

the last manly man

'The funniest thing to come out of Canada since the moose!' - Red



Sparkle Hayter

The Last Manly Man

A Robin Hudson Mystery

NO EXIT PRESS

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To my dad, who wrote the real polio letter,

and

Mr. Chicken, RIP

I am Tarzan of the Apes. I want you. I am yours. You are mine. We will live here together always in my house. I will bring you the best fruits, the tenderest deer, the finest meats that roam the jungle. I will hunt for you. I am the greatest of the jungle hunters. I will fight for you. I am the mightiest of the jungle fighters. You are Jane Porter, I saw it in your letter. When you see this you will know that it is for you and that Tarzan of the Apes loves you.

EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS,
Tarzan of the Apes, 1914

The Last Manly Man

PROLOGUE

For weeks after my reported death, I made light of it with friends, asking them, "Where were you when you heard I died?"

My mother didn't hear about it, thank God, but the news traveled like wildfire over the Internet to my far-flung friends. My ex-husband Burke was hanging around the state department, looking for a story, when he heard the news from a producer who worked at ANN, the All News Network.

Immediately, Burke E-mailed my old friend Claire Thibodeaux, a White House correspondent, who was on the phone with a spokesman for the Saudi embassy when she read Burke's E-mail: "Just heard. Robin killed in explosion."

"Holy shit," Claire said out loud.

"Pardon me?" said the Saudi spokesman.

"I'll have to call you back," Claire said, and she got to work forwarding Burke's E-mail to various friends, former colleagues, and ex-lovers of mine around the world.

My former colleague Susan Brave-Druper was in L.A., nursing her infant daughter, when she heard.

Tamayo Scheinman, an anarchic Japanese comedienne, was

asleep in Tokyo after attending a relative's wedding when Susan called her.

My ex-boyfriend Eric joked that when he heard, he was in a hotel room in Budapest whacking off—and thinking of me. He was always saying sweet things like that.

None of them, not even the best journalists among them, thought to check out the story before spreading it. Why? “Even though I was stunned by the news,” Claire explained to me later, “I wasn’t surprised. Do you understand?”

Yeah, I understood. Most everyone said the same thing. Because of my history of getting into jams, my premature death was all too easy to believe, kind of like the Clinton intern story.

It would have been fine if the story had merely spread among my friends, but unfortunately, the story made our air, and things went horribly wrong. If you were watching the 3:00 P.M. (EDST) news on ANN that particular July day, you, too, heard anchorman Sawyer Lash announce that ANN executive and reporter Robin Jean Hudson had died in an explosion at an abandoned warehouse in Long Island City, just a few weeks shy of her fortieth birthday.

“Correspondent George Jerome looks at Hudson’s all-too-brief life,” was the last thing Lash said before the tape rolled on what was supposed to be my prepackaged video obituary.

But instead of seeing and hearing a report on the life of a TV newswoman, our viewers got something else, and the shit really hit the fan.

A bit of background: Obits of famous people and ANN television personalities are kept on file to be run quickly to air when required. A few years ago, my friend and producer Louis Levin and I put together a fake obit for me, which shows me Gump-like in a number of different historical scenes. For example, it has me leading an infantry charge at the Battle of the Bulge, jetting off to Scandinavia to pick up my Nobel prizes for literature and peace with Sam Shepard on my arm, floating

outside *Mir* with a big wrench and a hammer, and so forth, all while dressed in a minidress and high heels, my red hair coiffed 1940s-style to enhance my already remarkable resemblance to Rita Hayworth in her scene-stealing, glove-peeling performance in *Gilda*. This is followed by testimonials from folks like Joe, the retired autoworker who, when asked what Robin Hudson did for him, says, "Cured my male itch."

The idea was, when I die, this tape would be on the obit shelf instead of my real obit, and would run on ANN worldwide, and I'd get the last laugh.

But that isn't what ANN viewers saw.

Louis Levin was one of the few people at ANN who did not hear of my death. Every now and then, Louis would update the tape, which is what he was doing when news came through that I had died.

He was hiding out in a back edit room, adding an improved version of the scene where millions of grief-stricken North Koreans in Pyongyang are prostrate before gigantic pictures of me.

So when the playback assistant went to the shelf to retrieve my obit, it wasn't there. Louis had it.

Stunned by the news and in a hurry, the playback kid mistakenly grabbed the wrong tape, and though Sawyer Lash announced my death in the intro, what the world saw was the obit of Robert Huddon, a deputy secretary of state and a close personal friend of the president. If you're up on the news, you may recall that Huddon was involved in delicate Mideast peace negotiations at the time, and that word of his death sent shock waves throughout the world and beyond, all the way to the White House. The oil markets went nuts. Huddon himself had to appear in public on live TV to put the rumors to rest. Even the president had a comment, which we have since added to my fake obit.

"Robert Huddon is not dead," the president says with visible relief. "A reporter by the name of Robin Hudson is dead."

That's the only *real* moment in the whole obit, but it's my favorite. I just get a kick out of that, the leader of the free world saying my name on national television. I'm kind of starstruck that way. It's the small-town girl in me, I guess. Sometimes, late at night, when I'm feeling lonely and insignificant, I pop a dub of that sound bite into my VCR and play it over and over.

Before the day was done, ANN would retract the story of Huddon's death, and of mine, and report that I wasn't dead, I'd been revived and heavily sedated and was in critical condition, albeit heavily bandaged.

I'm the girl behind the Robert Huddon mistaken death story, which shook the world for a moment. Ten years from now, someone may ask you that in a trivia game. I'm also the girl who broke the Last Manly Man case wide open, but as is too often the case, I didn't get my due credit for that. No biggie. All I did was save the world, sort of. But I'm not too bitter about not getting full credit, since I haven't had to take my due blame for a lot of bad things in this lifetime.

My name, as I said, is Robin Jean Hudson. Born after *Sputnik* and before color TV transmission, I am divorced and I live on Manhattan's Lower East Side with my cat, Louise Bryant, who is now retired from a lucrative career in cat food ads. Until recently, I was the boss, and a reporter, in the Special Reports Unit at the All News Network, not to be confused with the new Investigative Reports Unit, which does *60 Minutes*-style pieces for its weekly newsmagazine show.

Special Reports does three- to five-minute rating grabbers that run repeatedly during regular news programming. Our content tended toward the sensational and absurd, e.g., evangelical Christian preachers who claim to have been abducted by UFOs; and low-grade consumer fraud, e.g., the shady side of the hairpiece industry. But we tried to do these pieces intelligently and with wit and we tried to do a few serious-minded

pieces too. That had been harder to do once Investigative Reports, headed by former foreign correspondent Reb "Rambo" Ryan and his shrewd and sneaky Cardinal Richelieu, Solange Stevenson, came on the scene and stole every good hard news story out from under us, leaving us with the fillers and the features. All this at a time when I was trying this new thing, Taking the High Road.

But back to reports of my death, which, as Mark Twain once said of his own, were exaggerated.

The whole mess began in late spring, when I went barhopping with Jack Jackson, the CEO and fearless leader of Jackson Broadcasting and its subsidiary networks.

Every once in a blue moon, Jack comes down from his penthouse to Keggers, the bar in the basement of the Jackson Broadcasting Building, to mix with his employees. After hanging out for a while, he picks one employee to go barhopping with, and that fateful spring night it was me. We got really drunk, hit some of his favorite joints, then some of mine, all the while talking about two things: men and women.

We both had a lot to say and ask on the subject. Jack was one of the sponsors of a big women's festival being held in the city that summer and was to give an "important speech" at the end of it. He was trying to "figger out wimmen," he said, and though he didn't say it, he meant one woman specifically—actress Shonny Cobbs, who had recently dumped him after a two-year relationship. The man was a canny visionary who slew dragons daily in the business world, but he couldn't figure out how to keep his woman happy.

As for me, some primal urge was pushing me to figure out men and work it out so I wouldn't end up spending my dotage alone, except for the male nurse I'd pay to change my diapers and listen to my life story. Did I mention I was about to turn forty? I figured if I couldn't make this man thing work for me now, when I was still young and energetic, it was only going

to get harder down the road as my various internal organs started to shut down.

But I had another agenda: impress Jack and save my Special Reports Unit from the budget ax, as its fate at that time was iffy.

For hours and hours that spring night, Jack and I asked questions about each other's gender, exchanged loopy theories, admitted sexist notions, and drank a lot.

Sometime around 6:00 A.M., at a gritty, unlicensed waterfront bar on West Street that caters to men coming off the night shift, I suggested a series on the Man of the Future, looking at how far men had come and where they might evolve to in the future. In this context, I was sure, I could pinpoint exactly what it was that made a man a man, beyond anatomy, through all times and all fashions. I would pinpoint that mysterious quality good men have that makes them so attractive, despite how annoying they sometimes are. Whenever I try to give this mysterious thing a name—call it courage, strength, whatever—I think of a bunch of women with the same quality. This thing is something I find only in men, and not in all men.

It was a crazy fool idea, fueled by vodka and the attention of a famous man. Crazier still, Jack believed in me. The next day, he gave me his personal go-ahead for the series and a more important-sounding title: senior executive producer.

That booze-filled night with Jack started the ball rolling that led to my prematurely announced death and all the trouble in the worlds of fossil fuels and international diplomacy, among other things.

Between the booze-filled night and all the trouble came a man in a hat, a pack of Doublemint gum, and a bunch of crazy people.

CHAPTER ONE

It was a hot July evening in New York, the steamy post-rush hour, and in addition to the harried office workers streaming away from their offices toward subways, midtown was crawling with feminists and bees.

The feminists were arriving to set up for a corporate-sponsored conference on women's rights, ten days of symposiums, films, art shows, and rock bands, culminating with a big bash the last day.

Why the bees came here was still a mystery. The local media made a big deal out of the fact that the bees flocking to New York City were country bees seeking flowers, as opposed to our native New York City bees, who are lazy and tend to congregate around doughnut shop Dumpsters.

Why would so many tens of thousands of bees suddenly, spontaneously, decide to make a—forgive me—beeline for Manhattan? Not that New York doesn't have a great deal of greenery for enterprising bees to feast upon, tucked away in a million window boxes and rooftop gardens as well as in a couple of parks. But it takes a lot more work to find pollen sources here than it would in a rural field of clover, and the hazards of city life—pollution, taxicab windshields, and marauding youth

gangs—meant there was also a great deal more risk involved for these greenhorn bees.

But as one newspaper pointed out, bees follow their queen, and evidently some queens had a taste more for the risky city than for the bucolic country life.

A couple of confused bees evidently had a taste more for me, or maybe just for the floral notes in my scent, *L'Heure Bleue*, which I had sprayed on a little too heavily as I was leaving my office. In addition to dodging large groups of women pulling wheeled suitcases and walking abreast, I was dodging two bees as I crossed Third Avenue, heading toward Wingate's restaurant. Once people saw the bees, they gave me a wide berth. Couldn't help thinking how handy these bees would come in during management meetings, salary negotiations, and Saturday night movie lines.

Because of the bees, and because, as usual, I was completely self-involved, I didn't notice right away that there was a man in a hat following me until I heard him say, haltingly, "Ex . . . cuse . . ."

I turned and gave him a quick glance, decided from his rolling eyes that he wasn't talking to me and tuned him out, though I put my hand in my jacket pocket and grabbed onto my pepper spray because I've been stalked before and learned the hard way that—duh—it's better to be safe than sorry. I was in a hurry. I had places to go, people to meet, a butt to kiss.

Kissing butt with grace is one of those adult skills, like telling believable lies, that are almost essential to success. There's an art to it. As the old line goes, when you can fake sincerity you've got it made, but it's not an area of expertise for me. In fact, I was pretty lousy at it and normally I'd rather hammer a railroad spike up my nose than kiss ass. But in one of those compromises grown-ups are required to make every now and then, I was on my way to meet with a flack for the

anthropologist Wallace Mandervan and lay a big wet one on his rosy behind. This was especially humiliating—I wasn't going to kiss Mandervan's ass, but the ass of a snotty proxy who would then report back to the man himself.

At the end of another hard day, all I wanted to do was go home, take off my clothes, and kiss the ass of a mad Irishman I'd been neglecting lately. It was Wednesday, and Mike, the mad Irishman, was leaving the next day. I'd been all set to leave my office at the stroke of five, and then Benny Winter, Power Publicist, called and said he could meet me for dinner tonight, and tonight only, to discuss getting Mandervan for my Man of the Future series.

Just as I was about to go into Wingate's, I heard, "Miss . . . miss," behind me.

That's when I really noticed the man, an older guy, maybe in his sixties, wearing a dark brown suit with a matching hat, walking erratically. Before I could get into the restaurant, the man had moved in front of me and stopped, barring my way, while the bees buzzed above me. A strange look crossed his face. He walked a few steps one way, stopped and turned around, walked a few steps the other way, and stopped again. He looked around himself, scared, as if he was trying to recognize his surroundings and couldn't. It was almost like he was drunk, but he didn't smell of liquor. Then he looked down at his feet and took a few more tentative steps away from me, still looking down, as if his feet might remember the way home and all he had to do was follow them.

If it wasn't for the feet thing, I would have thought he was just your garden-variety loony toon and abandoned him right there. Call it coincidence, whatever you like. My witchy neighbor Sally calls it my Alzheimer's-finder karma. Three times in as many years, I'd happened upon someone who had Alzheimer's and helped them find their way home. Two of them did

the same thing with their feet. (The third kept smelling his hands, one after the other, as if they smelled bad. They did not. He had worked for many years in the Fulton Fish Market.)

The other times this happened, I was free and able to help the lost people, do my bit for my fellow man and feel like a big hero afterward. But I was in a hurry now—Benny Winter was a notorious stickler for punctuality—and I resented this stranger's intrusion upon my time. How I wished I could just look away, move past the lost man, and put him out of my mind. How well I know that no good deed goes unpunished, that stopping to help a disoriented stranger can cost you your life. It's a heartless city sometimes, but you have to look out for yourself. Since I'd started this new thing, Taking the High Road, one of the central questions of life—my life, at least—had been: How do you walk out the door and be a good person without getting the shit kicked out of you?

On the other hand, if I didn't help this poor slob, something terrible might happen. Even if it didn't, I'd worry later and feel guilty—and construct terrible fantasies about what had happened to him—all because I would not take the time to help in my hurry to kiss up to some jerk in order to further my career.

"Do you have a wallet?" I said, sighing, as I danced about to avoid the bees, which he was completely oblivious to.

He felt his pockets, but turned up nothing except a half package of Doublemint gum. His eyes rolled back and then rolled forward again. He took off his hat and handed it to me.

This was the second hat-wearing lost man I'd encountered in my life. The last one, Dr. Seymour Gold, a retired thoracic surgeon with Alzheimer's, had his name and address written into the inside of his hat by his wife.

Before I had a chance to look inside this man's hat, a thin trickle of blood dripped down the side of his head.

"Did you fall?" I asked, as I wiped the wound with a tissue