

The Flack

When the pix came out, my company went into crisis mode. That was my occupation ? crisis PR ? but the Boss got a special thrill by sending messages with the subject line CRISIS MODE before 4 a.m.

I flipped open my laptop to assess the situation. Nudie pix. OK, right, we just needed to launch Strategy M.B.W.A., which usually worked well. And of course we had to get clients to sign up for the comprehensive suite: monitoring every channel, posting comments, ensuring the right sort of paparazzi coverage. \$20,000 a month, a small investment, really.

'My Boyfriend Was Away,' the actress said tearfully.

If I was stuck filming in Burbank and my boyfriend was in Australia, I'd sure as hell send naked selfies ? commenter 4719 (actually, me)

Actress and boyfriend photographed holding hands in a bodega as they scope out juice options. (Note that actress is a paid representative of N'Orange, the zero calorie orange drink).

But this time, this crisis mode, was different. It was a huge dump of photos, several actresses, more leaking by the hour. A couple of our girls were in there, nothing too difficult. But then there was Sukia.

'Little asshole,' Boss said when I got into the office.

I didn't take it personally. Little asshole was just our pet name for Sukia.

You know her, or your kids do. She was huge on that show with kids who met in a treehouse every afternoon, except it started getting weird when they filmed too many seasons and had to raise the roof of the treehouse to accommodate the boys' height.

Sukia was the star. Half Russian (?The other half pure asshole' ? Boss), she looked like a doll with big lassy eyes that might blink if you tilted her. We repped her through her first crisis, when she left the show before her contract ended and the producers leaked how terribly she'd treated people on set.

i wouldn't stay on that dumb kids show i mean those other kids are just kinda community theatre rejects amirite?

? commenter bowwowbao (me)

Sukia visiting a children's hospital, handing out Treehouse Gang dolls to patients. (In the limo on the way over, she borrowed a ballpoint pen and quietly stabbed the eyes of her rival's doll.)

There's something I should say at this point, because it figures into the rest of the story.

I'm not sexually interested.

I don't mean in Sukia ? I mean, of course, I'm not interested in Sukia ? I'm not interested in anyone. It happened maybe five years ago. I had been a perfectly normal guy ? porn, scoping out prospects at the gym ? but then I couldn't make it happen. I looked at this guy who had picked me up at a PR event, someone who was exactly my type, and when he took off all his clothes I thought nah. Wanna see what's on TV? And my interest never came back.

Why I'm telling you this is because my total lack of sexual interest made me the ideal candidate for what came next. That whole nest of pictures ? I had to look through it. Sukia, little asshole, supreme teenage fuck-up, in stills and video. No M.B.W.A. option on this one, because she wasn't alone in the pix.

'A three-way with chicks we could manage,' Boss said. Boss was 55, though she claims to be 42. She kept her silver hair in a hard bob, which looked like a helmet and gave her the air of a retired general in the sex wars. She leaned into the screen to decode the tangle of limbs and implements. 'I don't even know what's happening here. Is that a weather instrument? You know, for three thousand years people fuck like cavemen, and all of a sudden these kids need to invent new shit?'

I coughed and then excused myself to get a mug of green tea.

Later, looking through the pix, I saw something else. This woman with strawberry-blonde hair. Images that looked a little older than the rest. Not vintage, just not exactly contemporary. Because of my sex thing, or my not-sex thing, I have this particular insight you might not expect. I know what sexy is.

I know this sounds ridiculous, but hear me out. Everyone else has taste. Studio heads, casting directors, agents, scouts, the bartender. They look at a girl or a guy and they think, 'Yeah, I would.' They don't think that because they have some kind of calculator to work out mass appeal; they think that because of personal taste.

I don't have an appetite. None. So when I look at a photo, I don't think, 'Wavy black hair, like I like.' I just think: yes. Or: no. Mostly no.

Strawberry blonde was a yes. A big yes. I couldn't figure out why, and I didn't need to, either. The other weird thing was that I couldn't place her. The other pix in the leak, maybe 400, were all recognizable stars. That girl from that talking cat show, the hot weather guy who went viral with a supercut of him saying 'blowy' over and over.

Strawberry blonde I knew from nowhere. I searched the message board where the leak was released to see if anyone had ID'd her. No dice. I sent a couple links to Boss w/r/t Sukia, just comments she should be aware of in case her blood pressure spike had started to decrease. The thing about Boss is that she's actually happier

when she's full-steam insane.

Then I went home, dropped a flowering tea ball into a goblet of boiling water, and watched it unfurl, each petal leaning back in a slow yawn. The doorbell rang. I let Jamie up.

I'd heard of this service a year ago and so far liked it. I'd describe it as somewhere between prostitute and personal assistant. Jamie didn't have sex with me (although he would for the right price, I guess) or do my laundry (again, who knows?), he just sort of hung out and I paid him. Also he was hot and I could bring him to parties.

He also liked, or pretended to like, the nature shows I enjoyed, the ones where it's a family of hedgehogs and the camera somehow follows them for the whole season: birth, winter, the death of Grandpa Hedgehog, spring.

'Did you see there's a new one about lorikeets?' Jamie said, pouring himself a drink.

I was still on the couch looking at my flower bomb, now completely deployed, though I hadn't taken a sip. The water had gone cool.

'Rough day?' Jamie asked.

I slid my laptop toward him and showed him the pix.

'Right,' he said as I scrolled. 'I saw that.'

I paused at the picture of the strawberry blonde.

'Radhia,' he said.

'What?'

Jamie took a big gulp of wine. He could drink too much now because he was young, but he wouldn't always be.

'Radhia,' he said. 'My dad had a picture of her in the garage above his workbench.'

Pretty sure she's from that country where everyone died.'

I sipped cold tea and looked her up. PR isn't about endings, is the thing. PR believes in the new beginning, the chance. The next big step. Mars, Jupiter, beyond. Stupid non-planet Pluto, then whatever is after Pluto that we'll discover and then demote. That's what Boss would say, but the reality is that we're self-centered. When there's a real crisis, like when all of those people on Radhia's island were killed, there were memorials for weeks. I remember someone in the office wearing a ribbon. Or maybe that was just fashion. But then we moved on.

'So she's dead then,' I said, looking at her skimpy Wikipedia entry, which showed her place of birth and an estimated death date in brackets.

'I guess,' Jamie said. 'If not dead, at least old. Late 30s or early 40s? For your purposes, dead either way.'

I should pretend to be embarrassed that I immediately started plotting. I'm not good with shame though, never was. After Jamie ordered dim sum, we settled onto the couch for 'Lorikeets: Heaven in the Clouds,' but my mind was ticking.

If I didn't recognize her, most people wouldn't. Here was a tragic star. She was beautiful and dead. If I could find a way to make her a thing, something that could make me a few bucks, I could also get out of crisis PR. My mortgage was paid off, I had cash in the bank, and I just needed something to keep my interest so I didn't turn into a golf robot.

So that's how I got to where I am now. I contacted a few archivists to help me find images and videos. Not just more: I wanted all of them. I hoarded a stockpile and hired specialists to create a brand as well as some custom images. They made edits to some pix I owned, popping Radhia's head on models' bodies, so that I'd have pix that weren't available elsewhere because they didn't exist. I bought rights to her old films, cheap monster movies that were made in her home country.

OMG that girl? I was OBSESSED with her. Whatever happened to her?

? commenter alfonseG on news of her films being screened in Chinatown as a double-feature (and this actually was not me)

The thing I know, after years of this, is that you want it because you can't have it. That's why Sukia's crisis was a crisis. Because if you thought that she was indiscriminating, then you couldn't fantasize that you were special. It was your sense of humor, your charm, that sparkle in your eye. That's awful, you say, but it's true. That's why a dead bombshell is the best bombshell: Diana, Brigitte, Verity, Cerrada, and now Radhia. No one can have them, not even you, but in that way, they are yours completely.

Recently Jamie dropped by. I hadn't seen him in a couple weeks. He asked to borrow a couple thousand, to tide him over until the check arrived from some catering job.

I was looking through the cabinets when he asked, sure that I had disposable chopsticks somewhere.

'I'm sorry to ask,' Jamie said. 'It's just that I don't think I can make rent.'

I closed the cabinet and turned to him. He was thinner than the last time I'd seen him, but his face looked like he hadn't slept in weeks. I said we'd figure it out.

We got onto the couch and I pulled a blanket over us. It was a surprisingly chilly night. I gave a voice-command to the screen, which flicked on, and then we scrolled through the available programs. One of Radhia's movies was airing.

'Ch-ching,' Jamie said.

He was right ? I'd get a little something, but not much.

The monster was cheap looking, made of common household goods. Her country's film studios never had money, and the budget was invested in buckets of fake

blood. Jamie's eyes closed, which gave me the chance to look at him without him flexing or posing. I decided then that I'd take care of him, or try, at least.

Though he fell asleep, I kept watching. I'd seen this one, of course, but that didn't lessen the appeal. This was Radhia's first movie. She was just a girl then, maybe 16, and you can see the inexperience when she's hanging at the edge of the screen, not sure what to do. She looks a little lonely. At one point, she sticks her hands in her pockets, although she's with a pack of students supposedly being terrorized by a demon beast that invades high schools.

Finally, her big moment. She wasn't the main actress, and because of this, she couldn't survive.

Her death came in a dark forest. The camera took the monster's POV as it chased her, following her long red hair like a lit match flickering through the dark. Radhia stumbled. Radhia fell. She tried to get up, but fell again. She turned around and looked at us. Her eyes said please no. But we were the monster, and we were upon her.