

about 1900 words

A HAIR FROM HITLER'S MOUSTACHE

(the strange and terrible saga of the hiring of Katie Couric)

Les Moonves had worked at CBS since 1976. It was his first job out of College, where he had studied pagan art. As a wealthy man, he had accumulated the largest known collection of stone phalli in the world.

He was a sensitive man, known to others as possessing excellent hearing and acute vision. His business instincts were infallible, so far as that goes. He had brought the network from the cellar of the big three to a floor firmly above ground. He hesitated to think they were the attic of television, conflating it with notions of a batty aunt who was possibly already living there. PBS, perhaps.

It would seem, Les had parlayed the gift of gab and a soft impressionability into becoming one of the world's premier media moguls. They said he had "whiskers for shit". Well, that could just be a way of saying he exemplified the people's malaise. To get into this plebian

mindset, it was whispered he made all his executive programming decisions in the nude, though he had never confirmed this. Once he was heard to mutter under his breath, that his house had "a lot of very cold windows," and then sadly shook his head. His cadre of assistants, at the same time blinded by his white-hot infallibility, were alienated by the rangy raccoon eyes which he would dart around the office meeting room table, eventually to settle on a perched fly on the wall or a potted plant. Such eyes were the aforementioned laser-accurate orbs which somehow plucked the slate of fall programs out of the ether.

One knew better than so much as looking at him during sweeps. He lumbered around the office like a paranoid bear during this time of year. He was also constantly in contact with a man who went by the name of Henry Adamson, but who had a different name amongst the circle of cronies who gathered at the Old New York Club on 5th Street downtown. There he was known as the Motivator. He was a tony chap all-around, said his vouchers. As for Les, he felt it was a damnable habit to take up with these interesting dandies, and listen to their illuminated nonsense.

The thought had been depressing him lately, that he had become beholden to this self-styled Motivator.

Granted, the man in question had provided some excellent inroads to friends, Romans, and countrymen freckled between the FCC, Capitol Hill, and a large number of corporate boards, but this was not the life that he imagined for himself when he had been smoking pot and surfing on the Spanish coast. The Motivator called him on his Blackberry invariably twice a day at work and once in the evenings. His wife, ever indulgent of the shadow his work cast over their lives, was innately distrustful of Henry Adamson, and let Les know that frequently. This added to the weight on Les's mind.

"Why can't you just tell him where to go?" she asked, in her affected English accent, from the time she had interned in London.

"It's not that simple," said Les, a phantom pain cinching his eyes tight and puckering his lips.

"You were always so strong," she said, clasping him around the waist, "I hate to see you like this."

"Yeah, I know," was all he could muster in response.

Henry had known Les for a good mark the second they had met by the way Les would trail off in the middle of a sentence and appear to be interested by something else. This suited Henry fine, and through a cursory study of his quarry, he could identify the man's desire to penetrate the

clammy confines of rigid convention; to test the world: to toss it into confusion. Henry was impressed, and that was rarely the case.

The two men had drinks at a table in the back of the club, and Henry casually waved off anyone who might distract them while they discussed the nuances of demographics, the pseudo-science of which Les was a passionate devotee. The Motivator had a very engaging façade which encouraged people to confide in him. As Les suffered from the doubt that no one cared at all about what he was saying, he was slow to convert to the promise of their conspiracy, but now he held fast to it even while the other pieces of his life were beginning to slip.

The Motivator had told him that the secret to flagging ratings among the evening news was to steal from another network a certain newscaster darling, and make an anchor out of her. The expedient which had fallen into his lap (from Heaven?) had been the peccadillo involving a certain crusty satchel-faced newsman from West Texas who had got himself into a vat of hot water involving a story with some forged documents for evidence. It was Henry who had told him the documents were forged even before it came out on the blogs, and he had advised Les to go after this certain newswoman as soon as he possibly could.

"But she's a morning girl. She's perky... and cloying," protested Les.

"Yes, but she's ambitious. Very ambitious. She's a ratings superstar," said the Motivator.

"But she lacks gravitas. This is the Tiffany network, remember. Cronkite, Schieffer, old whats-his-name."

"That's all bull. She's malleable. She's not going to rock the boat. In this day and age, that's what's important."

Les begrudgingly nodded his head, even though he was still straining to think of a counter-argument. Something that would penetrate the cocksurety of the man across the table. He had not succeeded yet.

The dill which continued to pickle him was the fact that Couric had tanked the already rather low ratings. She had lost the geriatrics who watched the show and the resultant revenue from lavish pharmaceutical commercials; and they hadn't made any headway into the coveted 18-35 demo. What good, he pondered with sound business sense, had it been to sell his soul to a shill?

If there was a chance in Heaven (not likely), he would have to be the man to take control of his network and steer it by the balls (Couric's if necessary) in a new direction. He had only the combined ambitions of Couric and Adamson to

thwart and a cratered wasteland of American popular sentiment to rise up and disabuse its TV god of its incessant pandering. What if the public could sluice off its wilderness of lies and identity-confusion? What if a messiah could rise from the electric tomb of TV and transfix the public with a compelling vision? That of patriotism, tolerance, peace, forbearance, and rational industry? What if CBS could be the channel which issued forth this Utopia? More importantly, how could he work this into a mission statement?

Les's computer keyboard clacked late into the night and then into the wee hours, setting forth a bold new Word doc. As if tapped into the same frightening sap, Henry called him six times, the last at three in the morning. Les didn't answer, couldn't answer, he felt free. Finally at five in the morning, he cracked his knuckles and flipped the switch on his monitor. He had written fifteen single-spaced pages, a sort of manifesto for future mega-corporate entertainment czars to read, study, and memorize. His wife was stirring in the bed, the sun was peeking from behind the green hills of Westchester County, and he was stripping down for bed. Take a personal day, every CEO's allowed one in the course of their career, he mused. But no, he still felt so amped! It was unbelievable how he felt,

unprecedented, high with all the connections he had made. He even took off his underwear. There he was, a man of 54, not too flabby, granted he wasn't a physical man, never had a callous in his life, but still, healthy. Instead of crawling into bed, though, he found himself walking back into the living room. He sat at the leather couch in the sunken floor, and looked at all the thin binders containing show prospecti on the glass-topped table. Naked as a jaybird, his hairs standing on end, he selected the new mid-season shows, haphazardly, confidently, and I repeat, nakedly. He piled the winners and tossed the losers off the table. All that remained at the end of his frenzy was a glossy 8X10 of his evening anchor. Looking at it, his humor turned black, and as suddenly, the temperature of his anatomy dipped exceedingly cold. He held his arms close to his wooly chest, shivering.

His wife emerged, unnoticed by him, in slippers and a shimmering robe, as he made his way to the cold cold window.

Her words stopped at the gate of her larynx. He approached the window hesitantly, shivering, like a boy being lured by the most gauzily filtered of dream-like seductresses. At the window, he rested his palms on the cool glass, and then slowly, eased his whole body up

against the frosty panes. The glass chirped and stuck to his skin, and he could swear it was fast growing colder. It sucked the heat from his body like a demonic vacuum cleaner. By now his wife was struggling to gather her breaths long enough to scream because she saw his backside turning blue. It appeared to her that there was a pattern of static enveloping her husband as he sunk his hand through the transparent screen which the window had become. Was this her husband's cruel and apt punishment for mortgaging his soul's immortal glory, to be sucked into the Devil's den by an ad-hoc TV set? Alas the spell was broken. It was merely the window again, but Les had all of his weight propelling him through the porous glass. And it too broke, sending him flailing prostrate, begging forgiveness of the earth before he hit it in the form of garage pavement twenty feet below.

That night, about 6:30 eastern time.

Katie Couric: "Les Moonves, the chairman and CEO of this network, plummeted to his death from the window of his 3-story home in Westchester Country early this morning. At this time, we are still awaiting his wife's statement,

though we are told this was a terrible accident. Those close to him said that he often took in the view of the surrounding hills through his enormous plate-glass picture windows, and after a particularly feverish night of work, selecting shows for the upcoming season, he must have slipped or fainted, and fell to his demise. The coroner has requested an autopsy in this case to determine the cause of death, and drug-test his wife. Our sincerest condolences go out to the Moonves family, and on behalf of the network which he so competently stewarded into the future, I say, sir, you will be missed. God bless.

[dignified pause and then slightly perkier] We'll be back after these announcements."

The red camera light blinked off and the anchor raised her eyes from her sheaf of papers and locked them with a shadow, slunk against the corner of the set. She quietly flashed the thumbs-up to The Motivator. Those watching on satellite, where there was a delay to cut away to commercial, always wondered why.

END.