

RETURN OF THE HUN

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SURE, AS A PRO I was curious about how Tawny Golightly might act in one of my screenplays, but when she actually agreed to co-star in *Return Of The Hun*, I fantasized like your average Joe with three bucks left over from the unemployment check and no bar nearby, just the Quick Sale bin at the local video store and Ms. Golightly saying, "Hiya, Sailor," from the best looking box cover. She would be so grateful for the role of her life, she'd want to take in the moonlight at Malibu, on her back, with hearts-and-flowers music swelling as we made sweaty love on the cool Pacific shore. Not that I'm a crazy romantic, but there's a human side to The Biz. And I felt extremely human when Tawny called and asked me to come over to her Brentwood bungalow, sighing regrets that her husband wouldn't be there. Then she added, "An actor needs to bond with the writer."

I hit on the neighbor kid for condoms, hoping that Ms. Golightly's morals were as half as weak as I'd been letting on to *The National Enquirer*. I string on the sly. I'm not ashamed to admit it.

Nor am I ashamed to say that I hoped *Return Of The Hun* would break me out of television to put me in my rightful place. Not that there's anything wrong with *Days Of Our Lives* and a couple of episodes of *Power Rangers*, but I'm as human as Shylock, and it hurt to have one or two movies for television under my belt and not get credit for it, the sons of bitches. So even though *Return's* budget was so low it would make *Plan 9 From Outer Space* look like *Waterworld* and Sheldon my producer didn't have a contingency for even street permits, I figured the picture would have that *cinema verite* feel the critics love, like a propaganda film shot by rebels just before they seize the capital.

I confess I didn't hold a lot of hope for the director in spite of his credentials. Bruno learned the ropes as a kid under Leni Reifenstahl, but, hey, in my opinion Bruno was one gay who got passed over during Hitler's purge of party undesirables, and I'm sorry, the world isn't better because of it. That's how I feel. I can't help it.

In AA they tell us not to apologize. You never heard Francis apologize for starting with Corman, doing *Targets* for a nickel and a prayer, and I'm not going to apologize that *Return* was my first paid-for feature. I've done a dozen on spec. This one, the Guild could take me to court for working with a non-signatory and not paying dues. By the time they figured out my pen name, I planned to be in the DGA, an auteur saying, "Fuck the writer. Film by me." An ultra low budget direct-to-video movie was a step in that direction. A small step, sure, but it's a process: you pay your dues and take it day by day. With *Return* two days from shooting, I knew I was boarding the *Success Express* and might be forgiven for imagining that Tawny Golightly would want to join me for cocktails in the observation car. I should have realized that when a lady actor invites the writer to her house, husband there or not, it generally means one thing.

Dialogue changes.

Tawny had 54 pages marked. She kicked off with a long discussion about art and The Method. Like, flashback thirty years and I'm in the dorm talking Vietnam with some green book bagger. This time through it was sans whiskey and magic mushrooms because Tawny's into Health and The Environment; knows Rosie O'Donnell personally. Finally, I had to say to Tawny.... We're about two hours into bonding: it's nine o'clock at night, and her first costume fitting is at seven in the morning; I know that if I have to really make all the changes she's hinting at, I'm not going to be able to hang out and see how she looks in bra and panties, which is how Shel and I envisioned her first scene. See, she plays a Tustin typist who's into survival and thus lures The Hun into a war games date, which is when he takes a yellow paint pellet to the groin and begins to have grave doubts about his macho past life, the hinge to the entire picture. Shel wanted to introduce the typist just before she goes to work so that we realize she's an independent lady who sleeps in the nude. "Goes her own way, does her own thing, know what I mean?" but I said, "Hey, Shel, it's like life. The chase is more exciting. Let the audience work for it;" hence the Victoria's Secrets gag.... so I say to Tawny:

"Look, I've been to SC." I don't tell them I studied chemistry and flunked out; I just set the tone, intellectual then world-weary. "And I've been around the block in this crazy town. To me it's like

cramming for finals. If you want to stay up all night to do these changes, then I'm here to serve the film."

Well. I mean, we were talking re-writing screams and gasps to what? Grunts and yells? Big deal. But if you suggest to an actress that you're going to stay up all night, it means puffy, red eyes the next day, and the camera takes 'em in like open cans of Sterno. I pressed the advantage by asking for an ashtray.

I admit it. I'm still a smoker. Two hours I'd been in Tawny's kitchen, and I could feel the holes opening in my head, which needed filling with nicotine before I called the wife to tell her maybe she should hold dinner.

Tawny joined me outside where her true colors came out. She lit up a joint. "Talk about addictions," I said, "talk about polluting the atmosphere, sheesh, lady, all I asked for was an ashtray and some bourbon." She demurred that she had heard I was an alcoholic, to which I was able to use one of my great lines. If you're into soaps, you heard it eight or nine years ago on *Days*. "Show me a fifth of Virginia Gentleman, and I'll show you an alcoholic. Anything else, I can handle."

Cut to interior. Tawny returns to the kitchen and comes back with the bottle of champagne. I commence to become invisible.

In case you think The Biz is all that glamorous, Tawny's brand of champagne is Trader Joe's house special. Tawny didn't drink much, occupied as she was with converting an entire lid of Maui Wowee into CO₂ and water, and fortunately, there was another bottle from The Trader.

Incidentally, inquiring minds soon discovered that the sultry Ms. Golightly had a refrigerator packed with Dom Perignon and clam dip, the secret to her quick weight loss diet. You see, I really don't run people down: I try to reinforce Mr. and Mrs. America's dreams.

Anyway, I was able to titrate ethanol into my bloodstream at a steady and I thought reasonably controlled rate. Enough to loosen my tongue and talk about myself for a change, not Tawny and what she thought the script needed "from an actor's point of view."

I discovered that Tawny had an ear for conversation. She seemed to sympathize with my philosophical problems about AA's "theology." I mean, Twelve Steps as religion, for Christ's sake, whatever happened to Limbo and Communion wine?

"It's so exclusive," she said. Then she said some other stuff, as if she'd been into Dianetics or Zen, or maybe just a lot of Talk Radio, mentioning with emotion that she believed a person could transcend dependency and co-dependency.

I don't know where it came from...the truth, I mean; from the heart, I guess...but I said, "You know, Tawny," I let my eyes swim with sincerity, "I've never heard those two terms defined by anyone I trust."

So she gave me a definition. I can't remember it. Maybe it was as circular as all the others. But at least it felt warm and real out on her patio with Wilshire traffic buzzing in the distance like background presence on a soundtrack.

Whatever she said must have made me trust her because I started spilling my innermost like that gutted wannabe Great White in the first *Jaws*. The usual woes of a writer. We're like architects and composers, but The Biz gives contractors and conductors all the say. All I wanted to say was something important and meaningful that would make people feel good about themselves.

Tawny jumped on the cue like a pro and asked what was I trying to say in *Return Of The Hun*? If I'd been sober, I might have growled, "Can't you read? Or do you just move your lips when you got pages in front of your face?" Instead, I was on a left brain roll and pitched the concept that first grabbed Shel:

A barbarian can be at home only in a barbaric age. This is what two assistant professors without tenure discover when, during a period of unusual sunspot activity, a scientific experiment goes awry, yanking The Scourge Of God from The Sack Of Rome and dropping him in the middle of UCLA. The Terrible Tartar didn't get off the steppes by not being adaptable, so he immediately attracts a horde of admirers and enemies who keep trying to make him fit their preconceptions of who he should be. With the professors playing Miss Manners and Svengali, The Mad Mogul exchanges mammoth skins for Doc Martins and a sleeve of tattoos, causing screaming mallites to think he's the lead in a ska band. When Attila mistakes the intentions of an ROTC drill and, as one Vice President used to say, "Kicks a little ass," he's given a football scholarship. Unfortunately, The Hun's university application requires a Social Security number. As the can of worms to Attila's precise origin opens, undocumented aliens all over the

southland take on The Hun as a *cause celebre*, which, of course, meets the community involvement requirement of a Rhodes Scholarship. That and The Hun's amazing grasp of early Oriental languages has him winging his way to Oxford, and the rest, as they said on the *Hindenburg*, is history.

Tawny was pouting thoughtfully. "But what's my character arc?"

Tawny Golightly has a body that doesn't make you think of character arcs. If you were born in a cave, put a couple of Loral Corporation nosecones on a pair of long legs and you'll get the picture. Nonetheless, inside that pretty, wide-eyed head of hers, I sensed a mind with synapses glowing. I said that her character was The Hun's love interest. Forget the cheerleaders in the script; the Tustin typist's job is to teach Attila how to share other peoples' pain. The typist shows him that he can't just light torches whenever he wants and treat woman like chattel or sex kittens then litter the roads with beer cans.

"But it's not there," she said.

By now we were back in Tawny's kitchen where, not just the tilt of the room, but the emotional geography had changed. Tawny would grab my arm to get eye contact, and it was OK to smoke inside. I was breathing in her second hand dope like it was hair spray on a prom date during a slow dance, and as if looking for another partner, I was going through her cupboards because, well, it's a simple fact of life. Everybody keeps cooking sherry. I had my tape recorder spinning too, because now I really was creating speeches for her, like some kid harmonizing "I Honestly Love You" into the ear of his high school steady.

I had Tawny's character telling The Hun about Greenpeace and Save The Whales, trigger locks and The Right to Choose; beautiful stuff, all there on cassette, with Tawny's voice repeating my words, smooth as warm honey, making me fall in love.

Yeah, Barney, you heard me. Love not lust. It happened when she murmured, "You know, there's just one other thing."

"What?"

"I'm 41 years old."

Damn, I could have spit up the Nyquil. I had figured, maybe 36, and she was looking younger by the minute, and now without batting an eyelash, Tawny Golightly was confessing that she's entered mid-life hell just a few years behind me.

"I suppose I could talk to the director and the cameraman..."
Jeez, not Bruno. Bruno would eat her alive.

"...but it would be less embarrassing to just have the writer put it in the script."

"The actor and the writer, they're really the creative force," I said.

She nodded gravely, then said with a slight smile, "Well, with all the lying down and all....I mean, I sag a little."

"Gravity," I explained huskily. "I know gravity.

"I shoot better if I'm standing up or sitting."

"Dear lady, that's as good as in the script."

I suspect I was true to my word or else Tawny did have it out with Bruno because there was never a close up of her lying down in the final cut. At least, I think there wasn't. Something about Shel not paying back taxes and the Feds confiscating his assets, including the negative.

The reason I'm not quite clear is that I more or less had a blackout about the time I knew I was falling in love with the woman behind the star. The woman who was simple, honest, vulnerable and asked a pretty hardboiled guy for a favor. As for the blackout, well, AA keeps saying, if you slip, put it behind you, forge ahead.

There are noises at the tail end of the tape that sound like Thumper in rut. I like to think what we were doing on the Congloliolum was pretty special. Subsequently, too, I'm sure, even if we never got to the beach. Again, I don't really know because I didn't come to my senses until three weeks after the wrap party.

The wife was gone. They do that from time to time, and I'm not one to speak ill of a lady who didn't ask for alimony. Slow dissolve to Tawny refusing to talk to me ever again.

I don't think it's because of the item she caught me feeding to the print media about our being the new millennium's Miller and Monroe because, first, I gave her age as 29, and afterwards I offered, "Hon, I'll call back and give you top billing." No, I know Ms. Tawny Golightly and believe it was merely a matter of putting others before herself. Seeing how she married Shel after her divorce and as he's in Lompoc for a while, he might go nuts wondering whether the flame still flickers between Tawny and me.

Truth be told, there's warmth there. I've just been too busy to get in touch with it. A friend of mine got promoted at Turner

and made me a development exec. Television's not so bad when the pay's good and you have the power to tell a Nazi like Bruno to jump a rolling doughnut. I'm here, after all, to reaffirm the human spirit and do my little bit for the planet. That sounds goody-goody, I know, especially from a guy who's had his nose bent in this crazy town, but Show Biz folks really have a heart for people, and I for one am not ashamed to say how big it is.