

Actress Susan Cabot lived a B-movie life;
she died a B-movie death

The WASP

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WOMAN Stung

A few hours before Susan Cabot was bludgeoned to death by her son, her psychologist happened to call to reschedule an appointment. He was shocked to hear her so despairing, he later testified in court: "I heard a tone in her voice that I had never heard before, and I had seen her depressed." She told him she wanted to die.

Cabot had fallen into one of those classic, dismal Hollywood afterlives. Once a starlet under contract to Universal Pictures, she had acted with Humphrey Bogart and Charles Bronson. She is said to have dated Marlon Brando and Rock Hudson, and her romance with King Hussein was national news in the late '50s. But by the '80s, she was living in a cluttered Encino, California, hilltop home with a disabled son. Police photos of the house

show a jumble of detritus so thick, it must have been hard to walk through, with bags of newspapers in the bedroom and a chair and hamper in the bathtub. A regular visitor often found rats floating in the swimming pool.

Cabot had turned into something right out of *Sunset Boulevard* or *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* In her late 50s, she still wore her dresses low-cut and her makeup thick. Although she was only five feet tall—something her friends always thought had kept her from having a major career—she more than made up for it in pres-

"She was screaming. She was calling for her mother. She was talking to herself."

film business is often abusive." That was partly why she isolated herself in her house on the hill: "She couldn't take any more of that side of the ugliness of the world."

In 1959, Cabot finally quit the movie business for good. The *Los Angeles Times* ran a story in April of that year that said, "Pretty Susan Cabot abruptly flew to New York last night, ostensibly to audition for a part in a Broadway show." But friends said "the visit was prompted by her mushrooming romance with King Hussein, and most of her time in the East will be taken up by the youthful monarch." In her *Fangoria* interview years later, Cabot said she felt she had reached a dead end. "How many Wasp Women can you do?"

Shortly after she went to New York, Cabot dropped out of sight. One friend now says Hussein left her when he found out she was Jewish; that may have sent her into a tailspin.

The next four years of her life remain a mystery. The only hard fact is that she gave birth to Timothy Cabot in Washington, D.C., on January 27, 1964. It was a problem birth; Cabot had to have an emergency cesarean in the middle of surgery for a twisted intestine, and Timothy was born prematurely, weighing six pounds, four ounces, and suffering from jaundice. He was hospitalized for two and a half months. Cabot told friends that her son was the child of an English aristocrat or, alternately, the issue of an affair with a CIA or FBI agent who had gone on a mission and never returned. Later, a family attorney claimed that Timothy's father was King Hussein.

In any event, the abused child now had a child of her own, and she was proud. One of Timothy's doctors noted in a report that the boy spoke his first words and stood at twelve months: "The child does exceptionally well, especially with his artistic endeavors, according to his mother. He has an advanced vocabulary."

Just after he turned one, Timothy suddenly refused to eat. Fifteen hours later, he went rigid. For twenty minutes, he stared into space. Then he seemed to recover. There was another seizure a year later, and more in the years to come. Cabot was convinced that Timothy was a "poor feeder." She became obsessed with his eating habits. She began mixing two eggs into his milk every day. She was afraid he wouldn't grow. Eventually, doctors decided the seizures were caused by acute hypoglycemia.

By this time, Cabot had returned to Los Angeles. Hughes believes Cabot was drinking heavily then and may even have been contemplating suicide. She apparently put that behind her when she married a businessman and former actor named Michael Roman, and Roman became Timothy's legal stepfather. Cabot (now Susan Cabot Roman) seemed to rally and began taking Timothy to schools and clinics. Most of them blamed Timothy's difficulties on a mixture of physical and emotional problems. A psychologist at UCLA observed,

"Much of this youngster's immature behavior has been inappropriately reinforced by his mother. Mrs. Roman, being an actress, tends to be somewhat overly dramatic and overly concerned (i.e., 'Timothy couldn't walk down those huge stairs because of his short little legs')." By 1970, a mother's nightmare had become reality. Doctors at UCLA diagnosed Timothy's dwarfism.

In 1970, a UCLA doctor named Solomon Kaplan wrote to the National Pituitary Agency, asking permission to include Timothy in the test of a new growth hormone—the one extracted from corpses—arguing that the boy was an "unusual case." Timothy remained in the program for fifteen years.

One of Timothy's attorneys later referred to him as a "human experiment." But it was an experiment that apparently worked. Timothy made his mark on medical history by growing to the height of five foot four—four inches taller than his mother. At the trial, Timothy's doctor told the court that he was not a textbook case but "the classic textbook case. . . . We used him to write the book." In fact, one textbook on diseases of the glands features a picture of Timothy, nude.

Nevertheless, Timothy would also have to take a combination of steroids, synthroid, hydrocortisone, and testosterone. Actress Edith Fellows remembered visiting Cabot's Beverly Hills home in 1970. "The kitchen looked like a doctor's office," she says. Cabot talked of going back to acting, but "she didn't know if she could trust anybody to take care of the boy as well as she did."

In 1981, Cabot was divorced. A Los Angeles real estate broker named James Weinstock started tutoring Timothy that year and often spent the night in a spare room in Cabot's house.

In those years, Weinstock says, she was going to a therapist three or four times a week. The clutter had begun to accumulate—"Her house

was stacked up with boxes, like some weird old lady's," he says. The house smelled of dogs—Cabot always had about ten dogs of exotic breeds, Shih Tzus or Akitas. She was well-off; Weinstock says she owned a Rolls-Royce, a Bentley, and a custom Mercedes-Benz. Though the source of her income is unclear, she often talked about being a self-made woman. "She was streetwise," Weinstock says. "She'd say, 'I'm a tough cookie, I did it by myself.'"

During that period, Cabot talked often of returning to show business, but she didn't like the idea of playing "mother parts," Weinstock says. "That's not how she conducted herself socially. She acted like a romantic lead." Weinstock says Cabot "liked young guys" and flirted suggestively at parties.

Timothy was getting deeper and deeper into martial arts. At times, he "would go into something akin to a catatonic state," Weinstock says, "where he would stand outside the door of his bedroom and swing those ninja sticks." His mother was overprotective, Weinstock thought. She wouldn't let him drive, for example, though he had a license. "He would want to do something with his friends, and she'd say, 'No, Timmy, you're different from other people.'"

FOR THE NEXT SIX YEARS, TIMOTHY and his mother lived alone in their house on the hill, among her junk and his kung-fu fantasies. Hughes says Cabot's paranoia flared up at parties. She would angrily demand to know what people were saying, as if she feared they were talking about her. At one party, Hughes heard someone singing "Summertime," Cabot's old song, then was embarrassed to see Cabot come to the piano and take over, drowning out the other singer with her big voice. Hughes says, "It was a show-offy, nifty thing to do. She ruined somebody else's beautiful performance."

In 1983, a psychologist named Michael Carter became Timothy's tutor. By that time, the house was "very disheveled, very dirty, very unkempt," Carter said in court. He found Cabot "very up-and-down and very, very dramatic." Timothy would react by becoming "very muted, very passive." Although Timothy told the court she sometimes struck him, Carter insisted, "Tim never raised his voice to his mother."

There were other serious problems. Cabot had to regulate her son's many medications carefully. If his thyroid level dropped too low, he would fall into a lethargic state. If it rose too high, it would make him confused or agitated. Emotional stress also affected the mix—without a properly functioning pituitary gland, Timothy's body was unable to perform the routine chemical adjustments that ease stress in normal people.



"THE WASP WOMAN," KOBAL COLLECTION; CHILDREN (TIMOTHY CABOT, RIGHT), COURTESY OF MATTHEW HUGHES

Timothy took injections of growth hormones extracted from the glands of cadavers.

ence. She was always glamorous and made a habit of dramatizing even the smallest details of her life. When guests came over, "she would just, I guess, almost act differently, like an actress would," her son told the court at his trial. "Just to try to be as glamorous as she could. I guess to impress them."

The way her psychologist, Carl Faber, diagnosed it, Cabot was one of those people "so dissociated from their life experience, they can't hold on to reality." It was exhausting to be with her. "You have to hold on to reality for both of you. And it winds up feeling like somebody is pulling it out of your bones."

Life had played Cabot a particularly cruel joke. Her best performance was in Roger Corman's *The Wasp Woman*. She played the title role, an aging cosmetics queen named Janice Starling, who tries to regain her youth (the better to advertise her product) by injecting herself with wasp venom supplied by a mad scientist. As a result of this Faustian bargain, she turns into a huge, bloodsucking insect.

By a baroque coincidence, her son, Timothy, received injections, too. Instead of younger, he wanted to be taller—or rather, his mother wanted him to be taller. Timothy (who declined to be interviewed for this article) was born with a dysfunctional pituitary gland. His body did not produce the necessary growth hormones or male hormones. A history of seizures and hypoglycemia had left him slightly handicapped (at 24, he was still childlike, with a layer of baby fat and a slightly dazed, eager-to-please expression). At five, he had been diagnosed as suffering from dwarfism and was given shots that consisted of extracts drawn from the pituitary glands of human cadavers.

No wonder Susan Cabot was troubled. The confusion between illusion and reality is an actor's occupational hazard. But most actors lose themselves in dreams. Cabot lost herself in nightmares.

THE YEAR IS 1951. THE FILM IS *The Enforcer*. Humphrey Bogart shoves a picture of Susan Cabot under the nose of a killer. From earlier glimpses, we know the face: dramatic, with high cheekbones, exotic dark eyes, and eyebrows so black and arched, they seem almost kinky. "Maybe this is the face that will haunt you," Bogart hisses. "Maybe these are the eyes that'll drive you crazy."

Bogart is investigating the murder of Cabot's character, asking the same questions real policemen would ask 35 years later: Who was she? Where did she come from?

"She came from out of town," her roommate tells Bogart. Beyond that, no one knows anything about her.

In real life as well, Cabot seemed to like it that way. Richard Miller acted with her in a series of Roger Corman B movies. "Usually someone would say, 'I'm going with somebody, this is the person I'm married to,'" Miller recalled. "None of that ever transpired with Susan. I didn't know where she lived; I didn't know who she saw. She'd come to the set, and that was it."

Cabot had reasons for her reticence. She was born Harriet Shapiro in Boston on July 9, 1927. Shortly after Cabot's birth, her mother was institutionalized with mental problems and her father abandoned the family. After that, Cabot lived in as many as fourteen foster homes, where she was "emotionally and sexually abused," said Faber in court. As a result, Cabot suffered from a kind of posttraumatic stress syndrome, he said. "She had extreme irrational terror, as abused children and war veterans do, about those experiences, and was in and out of psychotherapy her whole adult life."

After moving from Boston to New York City, Cabot got interested in acting. As a student at Washington Irving High School, she wrote scripts and hung lights for the school drama club. The year she turned eighteen, she married Martin Eden Sacker, whom actress Kathleen Hughes remembers as an artist who made "somewhat gloomy paintings." After graduation, Cabot moved to Maine and joined a small theater group. At some point in the '40s, she began landing television roles.

Her break came when impresario Max Arnow cast her as a Samoan maiden in Columbia Pictures' *On the Isle of Samoa*. Shortly afterward, Universal signed her to a four-year contract, and she went on to play a Sioux maiden in *Tomahawk*, an Apache maiden in *The Battle at Apache Pass*, and a Persian maiden in *Son of Ali Baba*. At Universal, Cabot became best friends with Hughes, then a fellow contract starlet at the stu-

dio. "In those days, Universal had classes—acting classes, dancing classes, horseback classes—so we were together all day," Hughes says. The two ingenues were sent on publicity tours together, to Texas, Oklahoma, and even once to Argentina. Friends from that period describe Cabot as smart, vivacious, creative, and above all, fun. She sang beautifully and was the hit of parties, with arias from *Tosca* or a belting version of "Summertime." "There were 9,000 parties every night," says Miller. "It was a light, happy, frothy time." He remembers Cabot as a good chess player, very pretty, and very intense. "She was always kind of uptight," he says. "It took a lot to relax her, to get her to be a calm person."

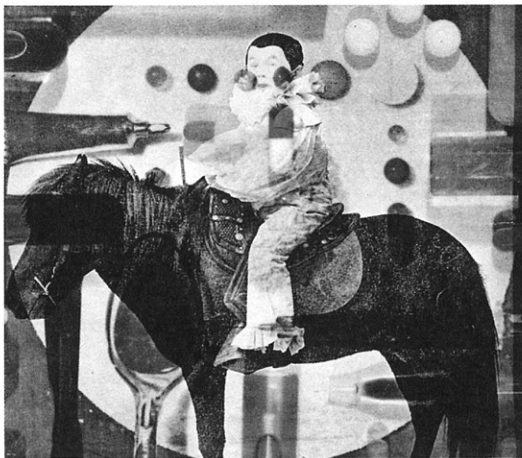
But Cabot would always be frustrated. At Universal, she never rose above the Indian-maiden roles, and when her contract expired, she went back to New York and appeared in a Broadway play, *A Stone for Danny Fisher*. She tended to speak in italics, using expressions like "totally mad." Even such good friends as Hughes found her "very, very vain, very self-centered, really preoccupied with her looks. She was incredibly talented, but she was incredibly neurotic."

Cabot was one of those women who invariably fall in love with the wrong man, Hughes says. "She seemed to go out of her way to have relationships with men that could come to no happy ending. She could never let anything go. [A romance] would be finished, and she would just go on and on about how she would never get over it. It just got annoying. She would never listen."

When Corman rediscovered Cabot on a trip to New York in the mid-'50s, he had been studying Method acting at the Neighborhood Playhouse. He brought her back to Hollywood and gave her over-the-top, melodramatic roles that suited her extravagant personality: an evil high priestess in *The Saga of the Viking Women and Their Voyage to the Waters of the Great Sea Serpent*, a disturbed coed in *Sorority Girl*, a moll in *Machine Gun Kelly*. "I really felt that she was one of those people who should have had a major career, and for whatever reason, a career did not take place," Corman says.

Cabot was more frustrated than ever. "She had a tremendous amount of talent, which wasn't being tapped," says Noel de Souza, an actor friend who used to join her for coffee. De Souza remembered her as volatile and troubled. Years later, Cabot told the horror-movie fanzine *Fangoria* that she had problems playing villains: "I loved it from the standpoint of their being a challenge, but it was very hard for me to play an unfeeling character—to do or say something cruel to another person, not feeling it in my bones or in my heart, and know that the other person is suffering. I've been victimized by people like that, and it hurts."

Cabot often talked about being victimized. "She was very thoughtful about abuse," said Faber in court, "because she was an abused person and the



Timothy said Cabot grabbed a scalpel off her nightstand and attacked him with it.

Timothy's UCLA specialist was unhappy with Cabot's nursing abilities. "We believed she was not giving him his medication at times or not doing it according to the way we prescribed it," she said in court. Specifically, the boy kept coming in to the hospital with "very, very low" levels of male hormones. This kept his sexual functions and body hair to a minimum. Timothy's specialist thought Cabot was doing this on purpose, even going so far as to note her suspicions in Timothy's permanent medical record. One month before the killing, a blood test revealed a thyroid level so high, Timothy's doctor called Cabot in alarm and told her to reduce his dosage immediately.

Timothy's doctor said he had suffered some brain damage as a result of his glandular problems and his seizures as an infant. But his first lawyer argued—before he was replaced—that his mother's obsession with his height may have been partly to blame. In 1985, at least four people died from a tainted batch of hormones supplied by the Pituitary Agency. In court papers, the lawyer said that Timothy "reports that even after his mother received the 1985 warning, she had given him at least one and possibly more injections of the natural growth hormones on hand at the residence because of her interest in stimulating his growth."

IN THE WEEKS BEFORE CABOT'S DEATH, SHE HAD become even more erratic than usual, to the point where Timothy was "very frightened," his therapist testified. She had been talking about reviving her acting career, and Timothy said one day she decided she had to get into shape for the cameras. She borrowed a bar from one of Timothy's weight-lifting sets to get started. She also decided to sell her house. In her last two days, Timothy said, she suffered from asthma attacks that left her bedridden. Her psychologist testified that she was terrified that she and Timothy would end up penniless—a lifelong fear, he said, even though her estate eventually totaled about a million dollars.

Cabot's old habit of asking the same question over and over had turned into a demand for "repetitive reassurance" so oppressive that she was often—as Faber hesitantly characterized it in court—"provocative of anger." Put bluntly, she drove people crazy. "You would give a reassurance or you would explore it in a problem-solving way," he said, "maybe even suggest that one of the options might have more value than another. And the minute that you would be done with it, it was gone, and she would ask you all over again, as if you hadn't said it. If I got exhausted in 50 minutes, Tim spent years in that house with her. I know that Susan must have brought those fears to Tim. They were together with that fear."

Cabot's depression and anxiety got worse and worse as the end approached. At about 5 o'clock on the last afternoon

of Cabot's life, a real estate agent called about the house; she said Timothy told her his mother was too sick to come to the phone. Later that night, Cabot had begun to have some sort of nervous breakdown, Timothy told the court. "She was screaming," he said. "She was calling for her mother. She was just talking to herself."

Sometime that evening, Timothy finally tried to call the paramedics. His mother, he said, was infuriated: "Put the phone down, leave me alone," she screamed. According to her son, she was screaming so hard, she literally fell off the bed. As she regained her balance, he said, she reached for the heavy weight-lifting bar Timothy had lent her. "She picked it up and started swinging it at me," he told the court.

At this point, Timothy's memory started to get fuzzy. He couldn't remember if she'd actually hit him. "She might have grazed me or something," he said. "I tried to get it away from her. I think I grabbed it. And she still kept going."

Cabot grabbed a scalpel off her nightstand and attacked him with it, Timothy said. He paused in his tearful narration to explain that his mother carried the scalpel when she went for walks, using it to cut flowers she liked.

Finally the attorney asked the big question. "Do you recall hitting your mother with the bar?"

"The last thing I remember is trying to push her away from it," Timothy said. "Just to get out of that—to get out of that room."

Timothy called the police at 11:30 P.M. They arrived to find his mother facedown on her bed, wearing a purple nightgown—a detail the newspapers picked up to paint a lurid picture of a fading glamour queen drowned in her Hollywood dreamworld. As if to keep the story tabloid, Timothy told the police detectives that a masked ninja warrior had broken into the house and knocked him out. But a few hours later, the police found the murder weapon

in his room, buried in an oversize detergent box, and he soon confessed.

In court, Timothy's attorney asked him why he lied to the police. "Because I was scared," Timothy said. "I didn't want to be responsible. I didn't think anyone would understand the situation of what had happened."

In fact, just about everybody understood. Along with Faber, Cabot's mother, ex-mother-in-law, ex-husband, and friends all rallied to Timothy's side. So did the judge, reducing the original homicide charges to involuntary manslaughter and observing that "there was no question that the defendant loved his mother very much"—which earned the judge a mocking notice in *Newsweek*. Timothy's stepfather moved from New Orleans to Los Angeles to help his son recover. "It was a very, very trying life living with Susan," he says. "Extremely trying. And that's on the best of days." Hughes, Cabot's friend of 36 years, appeared to speak for everyone when she said, "This is such an awful thing to say, but after it came out that Timothy had done it, knowing Susan as well as I did, I thought if he did it, she must have had it coming."

EARLY ONE NOVEMBER MORNING three years after the 1986 killing, Timothy sat in court, literally on the edge of his chair, his face pale and tense. He had been released on bail after spending nearly three years in jail awaiting trial, and seemed terrified at the prospect of going back. His aunt, grandmother, and a friend sat beside him. "You're making yourself sick," said his aunt. "You're not going to go back." The friend squeezed his hand, saying, "There's every chance in the world you will not go back." Timothy's attorney strolled over to reassure him. "It'll be over today," he said.

But Timothy remained stiffly on the edge of his chair. He stayed in the same position for the next half hour, until the judge sentenced him to three years' probation and time served, calling his mother's death "a tragic occurrence brought on by the bizarre and irrational behavior of the victim." There was a small notice in the newspaper.

Today Timothy is in better health. According to his stepfather, he has cut back on medications and his hypoglycemia is no longer a problem. Despite his unwillingness to be interviewed, he did say, "I'm trying to get away from the past and start a new life." He still dreams of doing special effects for the movies and is going back to school. And his mother exists only on the late show.

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TIMOTHY CABOT, "LOS ANGELES TIMES" PHOTO: SUSAN CABOT, PHOTOGRAPH