

Epiphany

Based on "UFO" the science-fiction TV series created by
Gerry and Sylvia Anderson and Reg Hill (1969-1970)

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"I hate you! I hate you! I never want to see you again!" the words repeated themselves; Mary's lovely face, contorted with emotion, rose up in his dream - until he shuddered himself awake.

Ed Straker threw the bedcovers off - he was perspiring profusely and the sheets and duvet were too heavy for the time of year anyway. He'd recently found a real house - a place he could take his son Johnnie on his court appointed visits.

That was another problem. Ever since the divorce, Straker's work schedule had conflicted with his personal agenda. He had no trouble meeting his financial obligations - Straker paid generous child support and alimony on time. The difficulty was actually getting a few free hours to spend with Johnnie. SHADO's start up years occupied his entire attention and there were stretches when he simply couldn't absent himself to play Daddy.

Mary accused Straker originally of adultery (helped along by the photos her mother's hired P.I. had taken) and demanded a divorce after the near loss of their baby. She blamed Straker for her fall down the stairs, but in the intervening years Straker had noted a softening of her attitude. He got the distinct impression Mary finally realized how much her mother had manipulated the situation. The old bitch had been against the marriage from the get-go, and had never ceased finding fault with Straker.

Many years later, it was still painful for Straker to return to the house he and Mary had shared, to pick up Johnnie for the rare times he could devote to him. Always well-dressed, attractively coiffed and made up, Mary would answer the door like a coquette, smiling and blushing as though Straker was there to pick her up. It had occasionally crossed his mind that perhaps he could ask her out for dinner, but his heart couldn't take any more rejection. It seemed safer to keep Mary at a distance and just concentrate on establishing a viable relationship with his small son.

If Mary was dating again, Straker didn't want to know. He kept his personal enquiries to the state of her health and Johnnie's various stages of childhood development. The distractions of jealousy and lovelorn pain would interfere with his effectiveness as SHADO's Commander in Chief - and he realized that SHADO was now his only mistress. He'd also come to see another sad truth - his desire to fight the alien menace had overtaken his heart - and there was little space left over for anyone or anything else. Had Mary been content to play second fiddle to his work, the marriage might have survived. But fate decided otherwise - and in some ways it seemed easier not to have to worry about meting someone else's needs.

Straker had to admit he'd walked himself into the situation with Mary knowing it could bring trouble. Although she was a beautiful woman, her insecurities and lack of personal confidence at first made him feel powerful - like Prince Charming riding to rescue the Princess. She was achingly attached to him, clinging to his every word and deed. For a young man who'd grown up without his mother, and the special touch of a woman in his life, it was heady stuff. Mary seemed to care only about his happiness and well-being. Once they were

married - they discovered a powerful sexual connection as well.

Ending up as SHADO's C in C came as something of a surprise to Straker. He'd had expectations of serving as an assistant to General Henderson - the man originally put forward to command the fledgling organization. After the alien attack which caused Henderson major injuries and put him in a wheelchair for months, the Astrophysical Commission decided a younger man was necessary and Straker got the nod. Once SHADO commenced its start up, there were literally hundreds of concerns, among them tight security and the subsequent development of the Omega Corporation - SHADO's semi-self sustaining sister organization - founded in New York City. Computers were the wave of the future. While SHADO was financed from the black budgets of dozens of nations, Omega was designed as an almost purely scientific branch - it would seek and obtain government contracts, it would develop high-tech solutions, and tap into every scientific and technical advancement being explored world-wide - all for the benefit of fighting the aliens. The cream of their work would be utilized by SHADO itself in the war, and they'd make a lot of their own money conducting research projects for the military and government think tanks. Omega was also to be positioned to collect intelligence. Its legitimate real world profile would allow its operatives access to all kinds of information - under the guise of an up and coming computer development company. Straker often felt divided in his interests because SHADO was his first love, but Omega whetted his appetite for all things scientific.

Of course, none of this was shareable with Mary - even before the divorce. The veil of secrecy surrounding the SHADO and Omega start-ups in a way made Straker a target for his disgruntled mother in law. She kept pestering Mary with ominous suggestions that Straker was an unfaithful husband - that his long absences from home and his refusal to speak about his work all pointed to infidelity.

As an only child, and overly attached to her mother, Mary began to believe the claims. The whole thing crystallised when Mary's mother paid a Private Investigator to follow Straker. Captured on film were photos of Straker and Nina Barry going to attend special SHADO training sessions. Straker had to admit the evidence against him was damning, but he couldn't tell Mary the truth, either. Her hysterical outburst on the stairwell and subsequent fall caused her to almost miscarry their child. Johnnie was born by Caesarean Section, but the doctor told him she had been so injured internally, that she would probably never be able to carry another pregnancy to term.

Guilt was a powerful motivator. Mary's parents rushed into the situation, pushing Straker out and convincing Mary that a divorce was the only option. He didn't contest the divorce; he gave Mary the house and promised large support payments. Straker felt it was all he could do in the end.

As the days and weeks passed and Straker continued his duties with SHADO and later, Omega, he began to realize how much easier his life had become now that he was single again. His work occupied him continuously, so dating wasn't even a possibility. Plus he had no desire to get married and suffer similar problems with a new spouse and an old problem. All marriage had really cost him was pain and frustration.

Part of his frustration with Mary had come from her refusal to do anything for herself. She'd quit her secretarial position as soon as they were married. Once they bought the house, she concentrated on decor and cooking, to the exclusion of her former galpals, making new friends of her neighbours or pursuing any hobbies. Mary seemed content to spend her time day-dreaming about getting pregnant, wand waiting for Straker to come home. This reduction

of personal activities meant Mary spent a lot of lonely nights alone while Straker wrestled with the logistics of getting SHADO, then Omega, operational.

His mind occupied with such serious concerns made it hard for Straker to listen to Mary prattling on about his absences. He actually began to dread going home. The later it was, the more likely he was to get a lecture on what Mary expected from their marriage, and towards the end, she had totally lost sight of the fact that he too, might have had some expectations of his own. It became all about what a louse he was. Straker took to spending nights in his office at SHADO, which only fuelled Mary's suspicions about him. By the time Johnnie was safely delivered, and Mary's parents took her home, he was almost ashamed to be relieved of his responsibilities as husband and father.

With time and distance, Straker put the past behind him. Every January he wrote out twelve post dated support cheques and mailed them to his former address. Except for the few times he got to spend with Johnnie, it was as though his marriage had never happened. He kept an up to date photo of Johnnie on his desk, more to discourage female attention, than of fatherly interest. It wasn't that he didn't love his child. He just didn't have the time to be a father.

The inevitable did happen. By 1975, Mary's parents had found her a new husband - one they liked - and she gave in to their importuning. They would have reminded her that she was a single mother, a woman alone in a man's world. Rutland would look after her and help her raise Johnnie, seeing as how Straker wasn't much of a father figure in the boy's life. Straker knew exactly how his former in-laws probably couched the whole thing.

Straker didn't have any time to dwell on it. He had a sneaking suspicion that Mary still loved him, but was marrying Rutland to shut her parents up. All it meant to Straker by then was a change in the amount of support he paid monthly. Once Mary became Mrs. Rutland, he ceased alimony payments and provided only child support, albeit very generous. Alec Freeman knew about Mary's remarriage, but as Straker's best friend, wisely kept his prying questions to himself. He always noticed the tightening in the muscles of Straker's jaw when his ex-wife was mentioned.

So why did Straker have this recurring dream of Mary screaming at him? Since the divorce, they'd actually managed a fairly amicable relationship - for the sake of their son. Straker thought he'd put all the angst behind him. Was it because he had scheduled a parental visit with Johnnie for later this week? Was that prospect dredging up unresolved feelings in his mind? Unable to go back to sleep, Straker got up and walked down the hall and into the small room he'd fixed up for Johnnie. He hoped when the child was older, he could wrangle permission from Mary to have him stay overnight with him sometime.

Straker smiled. He'd planned a fun visit for Johnnie. The Harlington-Straker studio offered all kinds of amusing diversions. Johnnie loved vintage cars, and the studio had several, so a cruise in a Model T was on the agenda. The studio commissary provided a full menu of all kinds of treat foods Johnnie loved: pizza, hot dogs, fish and chips. Staying on the studio lot was also a plus just in case something vital happened with SHADO. If he had to, he could call Mary to pick Johnnie up from the front gate while he attended once more to business.

Mary had taken his transition from military man to film exec without comment. Perhaps all that had mattered to her in the end were the regular support cheques. For Straker, the prospect of spending more time with his only son would be a welcome diversion from his more onerous duties. After all, what was SHADO doing, if not making Earth a safer place for Johnnie to grow up in? Straker owed him that much!

It was time to jump in the shower and get into yet another busy day as SHADO's
Commander in Chief...
The End