

One Inch Under

by Ed Straker
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This one's for my wife. 14 February. Any guy can give their wife a box of chocolates or a diamond ring. How many guys give their wives a UFO story they've written just for her? I love you.

"Please, Mel. Don't talk. You know what the doctor said."

"That isn't my way, Ruthie and you know it. Besides, so many memories come back to me. Way back when, some fool teacher thought it was a good idea to bring an entire rowdy fourth grade class into the precinct. You know how kids are. I did my best to answer all their questions, but I couldn't help noticing this one skinny kid way in the back. He was quiet, but those big blue eyes of his were taking everything in. When finally it was all over, he came up to me shyly.

"Yeah?" I tried to sound gruff to see if he'd be impressed. He wasn't. I soon was.

"I wanted to thank you personally for agreeing to let my class do this, Captain. That's all."

"Wait. Don't leave so soon. You didn't ask me a thing, young feller. How come?"

"That wasn't meant to be any kind of an insult, Captain. I just didn't have a need to ask."

"You know that much about police work huh?" I laughed.

"Enough. I believe in learning at least a little about all kinds of subjects. I don't intend to do police work when I grow up, astronomy is my chief interest at the moment."

"Stars, huh? Most kids your age like playing cops and robbers."

"Why would anyone want to pretend to be a criminal? "

I just stared at him. I had never thought about it that way.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Edward Straker."

"Is the idea of even pretending to be a bad guy so disgusting to you, Edward?"

"Isn't that clear, Captain? From your talk, I got the idea that it is how you feel and why you became a police officer and later the youngest ever lieutenant in Boston to become a police captain. When they told us we'd be coming here on a field trip, I looked you up."

"You weren't kidding at all, were you, son? You didn't need to ask me anything. Well, Edward young feller, I was about to go have lunch. Keep me company?"

"It's a generous offer, Captain. Unfortunately I have to go get on the school bus."

"Edward Straker, consider yourself under arrest."

He brightened right up, figuring out right away what I meant by it. He was the cutest little kid. Had thick white blond hair, I remember. It was so perfectly in place I wondered if he used Elmer's white glue to keep it that way. Your heart would have melted at this kid, Ruthie. I know mine did.

"What am I accused of, Captain?"

"Unusual intelligence for your tender age?"

"Some teachers have accused me of that now and again. It gets me accused of being teacher's pet. I don't even like my current teacher much. Is that a real flintlock?"

"Want to see it up close? My great great granddad carried it."

"It's a beauty, Captain. I like small arms from all historical eras. Anybody can hit the broad side of a barn with a rifle. It takes more skill to hit the target when the bullet you're firing comes out of a handgun. At least I feel that way. Captain, I'd buy you lunch but I lost my wallet."

"Now if I heard that coming from one of my men I'd call it a joke. Coming from your mouth I'd say it was the truth. So who took your wallet, boy and why are you telling me a whopper?"

"My mother taught me never to lie, Captain. It's just that some kids don't appreciate me being a little more advanced in some subjects than they are. My current teacher is intimidated by their parents, so she's never raised the issue with them. After a while I stopped bringing it up."

"Don't appreciate meaning they beat you up and take your money, huh?"

He looked down at the floor for a moment. After that he looked me in the eyes.

"Look closely at me, Captain. I'm not particularly strong physically. My mother keeps telling me I'll get a growth spurt any day now. It hasn't happened yet. I'm planning to compensate for that by studying martial arts. They'll regret what they did to me."

I'm telling you, Ruthie, he said that with a ferocity that impressed me.

"Come on. Let's get some burgers. My treat."

"Do you usually allow criminals to have burgers?"

"Smarty pants." I told him.

He grinned.

Ruthie, that kid knew more than the guys in my squad combined. That day we discussed politics, world leaders, the United Nations, music, the arts. He discussed aerodynamics with me for Christ's sake! He made me start to feel like I didn't have a lick of sense. He had this odd quality to him. He shook my hand and I hugged him. He seemed surprised and even sad, like nobody ever hugged him before and then he hugged me back with a big smile. I didn't see him for a long time. Then I started to get letters from him frequently. I remember one in particular.

Dear Mel,

I wanted to touch base with you. I know, you probably don't remember me, I haven't written in so long. I was involved in a classified incident here at NASA Ames Research Center connected with my training in our 20 G centrifuge. The guys named it the salad spinner. Now I know what romaine lettuce feels like. I find myself laid up just days before I was supposed to be assigned to the Gemini mission. The incident left me with a regrettable aversion to enclosed spaces. Claustrophobia. Ugly word. Not an ideal situation for an astronaut, as you can well guess. The psychiatrists are working with me, they assure me that a man with my strength of will no doubt will be strolling in space before long. I was just a little precocious kid when I met you. I had that determination even back then. Remember me, the kid who didn't have anything to learn from a police captain. Wicked nerve that kid had, huh? I thought that you'd like to know that less than a month after we met, nobody ever beat me again. Interestingly, the group of kids that didn't appreciate my intellect wound up with broken legs. Martial arts are a wonderful thing to learn. Of course the sensei that much, much later assigned me my first degree black belt would have objected to me using it when my nine year old life wasn't actually in danger. My pride took more of a beating than my body did, true enough. Pride counts for something. Some police chief told me that over a platter of french fries once. Justice took a beating every day my teacher looked the other way when I'd limp to my desk, so I'd say there was some balance due there too.

You've got to admit, I compensated for the situation like I told you I would.

Mel, my growth spurt finally came in, too. Must have been the loaded burger. I'm a full six feet tall.

All right, all right. One inch under. Happy now?

Mel, I know the threatening letters you get in the line of your work don't bother you, but will you please look after yourself? Give my regards to your lovely wife.

Respectfully yours,

Ed Straker

P.S. One lousy inch, and wipe the grin off your face.

Ed is a damn fine indiv-Ruth-Ruth ...

MEL! NO!

He didn't hear her sobs.

Police Captain Mel Laurence had gone flatline.

Ruth Lawrence got a letter some days after the burial of her husband. It was postmarked as being from England. It was in longhand.

Dear Mrs. Laurence,

I was deeply saddened to hear of the death of your husband and I was so glad I had time to fly out to my hometown to attend the funeral. Courage is an admirable thing, but even courageous men often make stupid decisions. Your husband was like a father to me at a time I needed one. I meant to tell you that to lighten your grief. I found it best to just allow the others to give you what little comfort is possible at times of loss like these.

Often, the better decision to take is to do a more practical thing. It is in that spirit that I enclose this check.

It isn't charity, Mel Laurence would never accept such a thing, and I know his police pension will ensure that your and your family's basic needs are taken care of for the time being. However, the economy hasn't improved any in my home state, and expenses do arise over the years.

So I'm finally paying for one bacon cheeseburger, one platter of french fries, and one glass of root beer, which your husband bought for a boy that may be grown now, but that boy in me still never fails to repay a debt of any kind.

I've adjusted the amount a little, as you can see from the receipt I've also enclosed. I asked your husband to give it to me that day, assuring him that I would pay it back. I have now.

If something seems a little amiss about the amount of the check, don't worry. My friend and partner Alec Freeman who always reminds me a lot of Mel, jokingly tells me I never learned to count. Take advantage of it. Mel

would laugh and approve, trust me.

All my love,

Ed Straker

THE END