

Roadblocks

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[adult language] For Sheelagh with gratitude.

As always, I'm grateful for Commander Edward Straker's willingness to share this incident with me.

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The air in the cabin was refreshingly cool, a break from the relentless San Francisco dog days of summer heat. He gave a nod to the stewardesses and headed for his first-class window seat. He put his overnight bag into the overhead luggage area, sat and snapped on his harness. He opened his attache and looked at some paperwork from the studio. Nothing that needed immediate attending to. He closed it, slid it under his seat.

Blessedly the awards event was over, the three that Harlington-Straker had won were in his bag, and he was on his way back to Heathrow. He would have preferred one of his own organisation's aircraft, or something military and faster, but this ordinary British Airways jet would do. Anything would do. After sitting at that cramped table at that utterly absurd awards show, he would have walked home if he'd had to. First he'd been repeatedly offered liquor in spite of making it clear he never used the stuff. Then some casting director at his table had offered him some role and despite his careful explanation that, no, he was not an actor, the man had persisted. He'd nearly signed the film contract just to get rid of the guy. He grinned to himself.

He looked out through the window at the tarmac, drummed his fingers idly on the armrest. The stewardess offered him a drink and he accepted an iced- tea. A blonde woman came up the aisle, one of the last passengers to board, and settled into the seat next to him. He gave her a brief look and he blanched. She was placing a suitcase into the rack. She sat and started to smile, and then her smile froze as she suddenly recognised him. She stood straight up.

"Stewardess!" Her voice rang out. Heads turned. He stared out the window.

"Ma'am?" the stewardess came up, the eager-to-please smile plastered on her face.

"Can you seat me somewhere else, please?"

"Is there something wrong?"

"Just--just--well I don't like this seat, can you seat me somewhere else?" the woman implored.

"Ma'am, all the seats are taken, and we're lifting off in a matter of moments. Don't worry, we've had first time flyers before. Would you like a drink? Oh and Ma'am, please fasten your seat harness." The stewardess smiled wider.

"Yes--yes I would like one. A brandy please," the woman said. She fell back into her seat and fastened the belt around her. The stewardess went off to fetch it and the woman stared straight ahead. Emotions swept over the man, and he looked out the window, then back at her, then out again. The plane was airborne, and it had been airborne long enough for her to receive the brandy, and drink half of it in two gulps. It had taken him that long to even form a coherent

thought in his head. The plane began to rise into the air.

My God, how long has it been? How long since we teased each other, and laughed, and became lovers for the first time, how long, how long? A few new lines on that face I remember, the hair shorter and curled, a few inches more flesh here and there... but it's her, undeniably, unmistakably her. And me? I'm so repulsive a monster that she'd do anything, say anything to get away from me. Why not? Why not? I killed our son. As sure as if I'd run that car over him myself I killed our son. How do you explain it? How do you tell the mother of your own child that there was a priority far greater, far more important than to make sure a simple drug saved a life? Yes, oh God, yes. Hate me. Hate me yes. But sweetheart there's no one and nothing in this world that can hate me more than I do myself. Duty. Responsibility. Concepts I've lived by. Empty words suddenly. Empty like a hole in the earth before they lay your only child in it. So I'm the best and the worse of men, sweetheart. I made an attempt to contact that one outsider of his race, I hoped that maybe he'd tell us something, anything, and the war I've fought could finally be over. I was not thinking of myself or you or my dying child, but of millions, millions who live under a threat every day and are blissfully unaware of it. I was thinking of the UFO victims and of the lives lost among my own people. I was thinking of the utter and absolute grief of Peter Carlin for his sister, and the others who have lost loved ones. I gambled for them. But I lost. So I let one boy die ---my only son--

"You haven't changed," she said.

He pressed his lips together nervously. He picked up his tea and sipped a little.

"You haven't either," he replied.

"I'm surprised you're travelling on an ordinary jet like this. Nothing fancy for the famous studio executive?" she taunted. She gulped her brandy.

"I wanted to get back immediately, so I took a commercial flight. How are you?" he added, softly.

"What does that matter to you? What does anything matter to you? But that job. That stupid, stupid job of yours. Remember?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, you know. I didn't intend for this to happen. I kept away, I've kept away, haven't I? Not that you'll believe anything I say, but I do care. I know it can't be pleasant having to sit next to me. I just want you to know it's happenstance. As a matter of fact, I will get off at the next airport, catch something else back--" he decided.

"How noble of you," she said. "I'm getting off at the next airport anyway. So don't put yourself out."

He sighed. He drank more of the tea.

"I see." he shrugged. Maybe I should get up and go. Maybe I should jump out of the damn plane. Maybe I should stab myself with a dinner knife., he thought darkly. He rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"We're going to have to sit next to each other for a little more than an hour. I suggest we talk to each other like two adults. What brought you out to San Francisco?"

"That's none of your business."

He stared at her. His lips drew together in a taut, thin line. Then they relaxed.

"You know, for the first time I'm realising I'm a damn lucky man," he said.

"What on earth do you mean?" she said.

"We're divorced. When this plane lands I can walk away from you. I only have to sit here a while, and then I can go and live my life far away from you. I won't have to listen anymore to your hateful words."

"How dare you speak like that to me!" she said.

"How dare you keep me from seeing my child for the last time? How dare you prevent a father from going to the services for his own dead son? How dare you assume that I didn't love my son? I'm fed up with being the villain in this little story of yours. I loved Johnny. I would have moved heaven and earth for Johnny. If you'd sit and think for one moment, you'd know that what I'm saying is true," he implored her.

"I don't have to listen to this!" she replied. She turned away from him.

"No. You never listened to the truth. Once you said to me you always have to go. Well, the truth was I did. I did have to. I had a job," he said.

"Oh that job. Yes, you had that mysterious job that was more important than your own son. And you ask me why I kept you from attending the funeral? Because I didn't want you sitting there, in pretend grief, in grief for a son you allowed to die. I begged you not to let us down, and what did you do? What kind of cold blooded sick bastard are you?"

"One that loved his wife and son with all his heart." he said. He stared out the window.

"Really? You have no conscience." she spat at him.

"And I guess you do? I guess the fact that you kept me from attending his funeral, and denying me a few minutes to see a boat he'd made didn't bother your conscience. Did it ever occur to you that if you'd given me that extra moment to see the boat that he'd never have run after my car like that?"

"What are you talking about?"

"He had wanted to show me something. Remember? Remember the sailboat we found crushed next to him? He had it in his--" he closed his eyes tightly for an instant, his voice breaking. When he continued, his voice was calm but low. "He wanted to show it to me. The model boat I'd sent him. I always sent him presents, even on those rare occasions where I couldn't keep my monthly visits. He came to show me the boat. He said wait for me --wait for me Dad--and I couldn't. I couldn't. I couldn't." He sighed. "You said it was better I went. I always respected your wishes. I accepted that Johnny had a new family, didn't I? He still called me Dad. Know something? You can believe whatever you want to. I know in my heart that up to the last minute he loved his real father. That's always brought me peace." He finished the tea in a gulp. The stewardess and captain had gone through their spiel, and he unbuckled his harness.

"I never said anything about him not loving you. He looked forward to your visits. But don't you try and blame me for his death." she said furiously.

"No, no, that's your privilege, isn't it? To blame me. When we could have mourned him together. Found some solace with each other. Made some sense of that terrible day. No, you wanted to blame me. You never wanted to see me again. You let that man you married stop me from entering the funeral home. And you let your mother have a detective follow me. You decided that you wouldn't even let me explain what that woman was doing with me. Well, you know something? If I'd really believed you had had an affair with someone, I would at least have given you the chance to explain. A chance you denied me. Not that it matters after all these years, but I never even as much looked at a woman while we were married. Why would I? I had fallen in love with the only woman I wanted. I married her. She was having my child," he said urgently.

"Why should I believe you? You and your dirty little secrets? You and your all-important job? That's the only thing you cared about. Not me. Not Johnny."

"I wish to God that what you say were true. Because then I could live in peace, and not

be haunted by the sight of my son's bloodied face, and the sound of the woman I adored telling me she never wanted to see me again. But even now, as I listen to your hate, that isn't true. There's two holes in me and one has your name and one has my son's. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to use the bathroom." He rose, moved past her and walked swiftly down the aisle.

"I don't know how someone like you can live with yourself," she said to his retreating back. Her voice was pitched deliberately loud enough so that the rest of the passengers could hear her. Some cast puzzled looks at him, some at her. He did not see them or stop, he did not look around but walked straight ahead, went quickly into the bathroom and locked it quickly behind him. In that awkward space he allowed himself to shed tears he'd been far too proud to share with anyone, not even Alec. He bent and splashed cold water on his face. He sighed. As much as he would have liked to, he couldn't hide in there. For one thing, it was cramped and gave him vague unsettling memories of the claustrophobia he'd believed he'd beaten. Memories. What a curious thing they were. One tended to forget the everyday things, like a phone number, an address, a melody, where you'd stashed your car keys. But the awful, horrendous wounds in one's life, they stayed forever. Like the wooden roadblocks they used to stop cars from crossing the road. They stopped you. Blinking at you accusingly with their yellow lights. You couldn't ignore them. But you could go around them and pretend they weren't there. For a while at least.

He sighed.

And then you'd walk on a plane and a person out of your past would sit next to you and all the painful memories would fill your senses until you wanted to scream. Just when you thought the facade you'd spent years building up around you was hard as steel, one little curveball in the game of life, and wham, you were weak again. He looked into the mirror. A more pleasant memory came to him.

"No use acting like a kid who knows his mother and her spoon of castor oil is coming, and hides under his bed," he told his reflection aloud. He smiled slightly. "She always finds you. You always have to swallow that foul stuff. I'll have to ask Alec if he ever had to swallow that stuff. Maybe he would have had some foolproof escape techniques for that smaller Ed." The thought of Alec warmed him considerably, and he unlocked the door and returned to his seat. The stewardess had left him another iced tea, and he noticed Mary had a fresh brandy on her tray. He pasted a civil smile on his face.

"You want the window seat?" he asked her. Silence. He shrugged. "I've always preferred the window seat, when I could get it." he said. "Even when there was nothing to look at." he chuckled softly. That brought a look from her.

"Yes. Go right ahead and amuse yourself," she said bitterly.

He didn't seem to hear her, but fiddled with the package of nuts he'd been given. He examined a cashew briefly for some unseen imperfection, and then popped it into his mouth.

"Cashew? They're actually pretty good," he said. She stared at him. "Guess not." he shrugged. He caught the grin on the stewardess' face and he smiled slightly at her. Her interest in him hadn't gone unnoticed. He generally got that look from the starlets at Harlington-Straker. It was something Alec always gave him a hard time about. He always pretended to be irritated by it. Truth was, he generally thrived on Alec's teasing of him. But give Alec the pleasure of knowing that? Not a chance. He knew perfectly well Alec knew this. He knew perfectly well that Alec knew he knew. That was part of the amusement. He smiled.

"Why don't you ask her for her phone number?" she said sarcastically to him.

"Too short for me," he said. Good, Straker, much better. Play studio executive for a while

and then you can put this behind you and get back to SHADO. Maybe see if Alec is free to get a late supper. There were some issues he'd wanted to discuss with Alec, but the awards ceremony had come up, and naturally Alec had maneuvered *him* into attending. Years of knowing the burly Australian. Literally years, and he still lost most of his battles with Alec. He smiled to himself. He couldn't imagine it any differently.

When the woman finally got off, he looked out and watched her go down the stairs. And for the first time, he felt no regrets. One roadblock evaded, he thought. One victory.

"We'll be serving dinner soon on this flight," the stewardess said. He gave a little jump. He hadn't expected her to be leaning over him so close like that, he'd been too intent on his thoughts. His head was a mere inches away from what was an very impressive bosom. "I can personally suggest the spaghetti marinara. By the way, I don't know if you noticed, but my name is Heather." She tapped her little name badge. He gave her a weak smile.

Roadblocks, he thought miserably. One goes, another one pops up. Yes, I'll just bet you can personally suggest the pasta dish. I have the feeling you've decided I may make an excellent dessert.

"Fish." he said. He reached down and collected his attache case. As he'd expected, she stepped away. "I had been intending to have the salmon. And then doing some of this work I have to catch up on." He opened his attache. Was it his imagination or did she actually pout? He picked up papers and a calculator and made a show of looking busy.

"Well, if you need anything--" she said.

He nodded. She smiled, a tad less of the willing-to-please smile. This one was forced. He grinned widely at her back as she walked off.

Roadblocks, he thought. Some you evade. Some you ignore. And the ones named Heather you push over. He smiled, and picked up another cashew.

The End