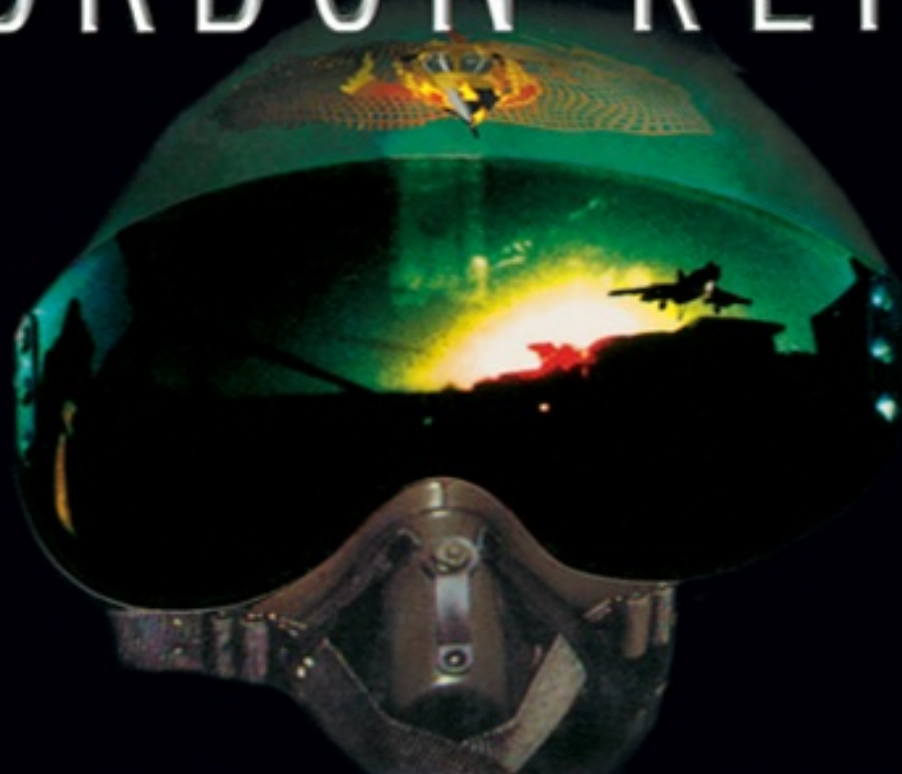


GORDON KENT



NIGHT TRAP

"FLYING, SPYING AND DYING—*NIGHT TRAP* IS THE REAL STRAIGHT NAVY STUFF. BETTER STRAP YOURSELF TO THE CHAIR FOR THIS ONE. I LOVED IT." **STEPHEN COONTS**

GORDON KENT

NIGHT TRAP

HarperFiction

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Dedication

*To our shipmates and squadron-mates,
who will know the facts from the fictions.*

14 March 1990. 2137 Zulu. Amsterdam.

He was only a small man in a dark raincoat. He wore glasses, speckled now with raindrops. A minor bureaucrat, you would have said. Nobody. Completely forgettable.

He turned into a wet little pocket park and followed the lighted path for twenty meters and then turned away into the darkness on a set of log steps that climbed steeply behind rhododendrons. At the top was room enough for two or three people who could, if they wanted, look at the Amsterdam skyline, or, if they looked down, watch the heads of people on the path below—if there had been any people.

He watched the path. After three minutes, a woman appeared. She had entered from the other direction and was coming slowly along through the pools of light, moving with the rolling caution of pregnancy. He watched her, watched behind her, then slipped down through the wet bushes and was beside her.

The woman, startled, swayed back, then seemed to recognize him and to pull herself in, as if protecting herself or her child. He spoke rapidly, very low; he might have been selling her something useful but not interesting—insurance, perhaps. She chewed her upper lip, messing the too-red lipstick.

Traffic hummed beyond the park, but here in the rain there were only the two of them, and the moment might as well have been in the privacy of a locked room for all the attention they drew.

The man asks her something. He seems urgent.

She shakes her head.

He says two or three words. His body is stiffer. What has he said: Are you sure? You won't? We can't?

She shakes her head more quickly and tries to pull away.

He took his right hand from his raincoat pocket and slashed her throat from side to side, and she fell back on the black asphalt, her red blood pumping out and spreading into a puddle of water that looked like ink.

The man walked away.

Seven minutes later, he was in a taxi. He took a white card from his gray pocket, found a black pen and with it made a mark beside the first of four names on a list. A small minus sign.

2247 Zulu. Mid-Atlantic.

“Spy?”

“Huh? Yes, Rafe?”

“Remember we’re in EMCON, and stay shut down for Christ’s sake until I give the word, got it?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

Alan Craik glanced aside at the SENSO, a senior chief so good at his craft that Alan felt like a kid with him. Alan always wanted to ask him a kid’s questions—How do you know that? How do you do that? How, why, why, but—? He was a kid, he thought miserably, a beginner among men made mature by their skills.

“Goin’ for a ride,” Rafe said. The elaborate casualness, the cowboy intonation, was what Alan didn’t have, at once both real coolness and overdone, flyboy bravado.

Alan’s innards dropped to his socks as the plane roared from the catapult. He should be getting

used to it, he thought; why couldn't he be casual and cool? Was anybody else afraid he was going to be sick? Did anybody else think they were going into the black ocean instead of the night sky?—

And would he ever be able to make a carrier takeoff and not think of his warrior father and what a burden it was to be the warrior's son?

15 March. 0121 Zulu. Near Heathrow.

Where the road makes a bend toward Iver, there is a stone bridge over a little river. At the Iver end of the bridge, if you look to the right, a sign is visible among the branches announcing the private grounds of a fishing club; there is a metal gate.

The unremarkable man in the raincoat and eyeglasses turned down toward this gate, hardly slowing although the path was dark and wet. He produced a key, unlocked the gate, and went through. As he had in Amsterdam, he went up the bank instead of along the path, this time examining the fence with a tiny flashlight and satisfying himself that the old breaks and holes were still there. The lock and the gate, it appeared, were mostly symbolic.

Again, he waited and watched. The sky was dull copper from London's light on the low clouds; on the bridge, glowing spheres of mist formed around streetlamps. After six minutes, a silhouette moved slowly to the center of the stone bridge—an overweight man, black among the bare black branches; he leaned over, seemed to study the water but actually looked up and down the fishing length. Then he, too, let himself in at the gate; unlike the small man, he moved uncertainly, and he swore once and then put on a light that he carried covered in his fingers so that only bits of it seemed to fall at his feet. He came along the fisherman's path, breathing heavily.

The man in the raincoat spoke a name. Fred. Not quite a whisper, hoarse, betraying an accent: *Fred*. The other man turned. He was a little frightened. In the soft light from the bridge, he could be seen to have heavy lips and the kind of thick eyelids that look as if they have been weeping.

The man in the raincoat went down to him. He spoke with what seemed to be urgency, one hand extended, the other in his coat pocket. Again, there was a sense of selling something, of persuasion. His head cocked as Fred lowered his eyes; he might almost have been trying to get below Fred's face to look up into it. A word was audible, as if it was so important it had been spoken louder, extended: *money*.

Fred rubbed his fat chin. Both men looked around. Fred looked up at the glowing sky, said something, laughed. Nervous laughter.

The smaller man leaned in again. He repeated the question. Well? Yes or no?

Whatever Fred said, it was barely muttered, certainly not emphatic; but it was enough, and the smaller man smiled, nodded, took Fred's upper arm and squeezed the muscle, then patted it. Good *dog*. Fred grinned.

They spoke for another two minutes. Mostly, the small man explained. Fred nodded or muttered understanding. Then abruptly, the smaller man hit Fred on the arm again and walked off.

Eight minutes later, he was standing beside a telephone in the shadow of a closed pub. He lit his tiny flashlight. He took out the white card. He passed over the first name with its minus sign. His pen touched Fred's name. He made a small plus.

The pen passed down to the third name: *Clanwaert*.

He checked his watch. Then he dialed a number in Moscow and waited while the long, clumsy connection was made, all that antiquated technology, and a man's voice answered, and he said, "Tell them, 'Get ready.'"

0136 Zulu. Mid-Atlantic.

Six thousand feet above the water, buffeting at four hundred and thirty knots, alpha golf seven zero seven was flying search patterns. An aged S-3B hardly younger than her crew, she was getting tired. The men inside were getting bored.

Below, the black Atlantic roiled in a March squall, unseen, silent to the four men in the darkened old aircraft.

The S-3B was searching the mid-Atlantic for a home-bound US battle group. Running opposing force exercises on the carrier you relieve is an old tradition in the fleet, and no outbound battle group CO wants to be found by the smart-assed flyers of the carrier he is replacing. So AG 707 was the forward scout, trying to find a battle group hidden somewhere between Gibraltar and Cape Hatteras.

“I think you got us way too far south, Spy,” the pilot said now. “Where you think these fuckers are hiding, the South Pole?”

The squadron intelligence officer is often called “Spy”—if he isn’t called worse. Alan Craik was the new Spy—a very junior grade lieutenant, his ensign’s wetness hardly dried behind his ears. The pilot Rafehausen, didn’t much like him. But he called him “Spy” and not something worse because Craik was the only IO he’d ever known who was willing to crawl into a tired old beast like AG 707 and put in his hours with the grownups.

As the old line went, How is an intel officer like Mister Ed? *He can talk but he can’t fly.*

But this kid did.

Seven hours in an ejection seat was still torment to him. But there were rewards for Alan Craik—not least the discovery that he was good at the “back end” craft—reading the screens, coaxing discoveries from radar and computer. And there was the reward, to be earned slowly, of being accepted by the flyers.

And by his father.

“Come on, Spy, give us a break.”

Before he could answer, Senior Chief Craw broke in. “He’s doin’ just fine, sir; give him some slack. He’s tryin’ to find the ass on the gnat that lives on a gnat’s ass.”

Rafe groaned. The old aircraft shook itself like a dog and plowed on through the night.

0141 Zulu. Moscow.

Nikkie Geblev the go-getter punched his touchtone phone and cursed Gorbachev the president and Yeltsin the mayor and anybody else responsible for his not living in New York, or maybe LA, and tried for the third time to beat the phone into submission: *Get through, you fucker!* he wanted to shout at it. Make connections! Be a winner!

Nikkie Geblev was surrounded with electronic gadgets that had begun their existences in Japan and Taiwan and Italy and then had had the luck to be on a truck that had been hijacked in Finland. Nikkie was an entrepreneur. A New Soviet Man. A Eurocapitalist. A crook.

“At last,” he said aloud. He was making money, relaying this call.

He heard it ring at the other end, then be picked up.

“What?” a man’s voice said.

“I’m looking for Peter from Pravda.”

Pause. Resignedly: “Peter went to Intertel.”

Nikkie didn’t want to know anything about who the man was or what was going to happen next but he couldn’t help the images that rose in his mind—a tough man, unshaven, cruel—ex-military—hungry, impatient—Nikkie had dodged the draft because of Afghanistan and he didn’t like to think of

the way ex-military would treat him if they knew. They had grenades—guns—

Nikkie cut off the images by saying, “Peter says ‘Get ready.’”

He broke the connection. He was sweating and his knees felt weak.

0439 Zulu. Mid-Atlantic.

Everybody in the squadron called the plane Christine, after Stephen King’s killer car. And Christine was a killer. Her nose had taken the head off a sailor during a cat shot; squadron myth said bits of him were still embedded in her radome. Long ago, in her first life as an S-3A, she had fired the re-ejection seats without human help, sending the back-end aircrew into ESCAPAC and smashing their legs on their keypads. Now, re-kitted as an S-3B, she was like an aging queen with a facelift—older than she looked, and *nasty*.

She expressed herself tonight in vibrations and the unpredictable. Odd vacillations in a gauge. False readings from a fuel tank. A nut that could be seen slowly unscrewing itself just beyond the copilot’s window. Nothing serious, because Christine was not in one of her killer moods; only minor constant, nerve-picking trivia. A mean old aircraft for a long, dull mission.

Boredom and discomfort. Old aircraft smells, engine noise, the abrasion of personality on personality. *Four hours down; three to go*, Alan thought. He yawned. Where was the battle group? Why did he care?

Christine shivered and gave him a temporary blip and made his heart lurch, and then he saw it was nothing.

What was in his lunch box? Should he drink some coffee?

How come Craw had stood up for him like that?

Would any of these guys ever begin to like him?

How many hours to go?

“Hey, Spy, what’s the word? I’m not going all the way to fucking Ascension Island! What’s the program, man?”

Bicker, bicker. Rafehausen would never like him, he supposed. What you might call a difference in culture.

Still. “I want to get where I can catch it in a wide sweep, Rafe.”

“They won’t go that far out of their way! These bastards have been one hundred and ninety days at sea. Which you haven’t!” Rafe wanted to stay closer to the carrier. He wanted to show that he thought that this was Mickey-Mouse fun and games. He wanted to scream that this was bullshit.

The copilot, a nervous j.g. everybody called Narc, sucked up to Rafe. “Yeah, wait till *you’ve* been out for your one-ninety, Spy. Nobody wants to make it one ninety-one.” Then, purely for Rafehausen’s benefit, “Only the fuckin’ Spy—” They laughed, the sounds tinny in his intercom.

Alan felt himself blush. He tried to see if Senior Chief Craw was grinning, but he could make out only helmet and mask in the green light of the screens. But it wouldn’t have mattered if the man’s head had been bobbing with laughter. He knew people thought he was funny. Because he was serious, he was funny. There was something peculiar in that. Well, it was true: nothing was Mickey Mouse to Alan. He took even games very seriously.

Alan tried to think of something to say, something that would be funny and cool and would make them like him, but by then Rafe and Narc had forgotten him and his grids and his plots; they were bickering about fuel and the readings Christine was giving them.

How many hours to go?

Nothing ever happens, he thought. Somewhere, things must be happening. Somewhere.

He thought of Kim. He resisted thinking of Kim, her inescapable eroticism a painful pleasure these surroundings. Beautiful. Rich. Fun. Sex, my God. A woman who would—
Think of the radar screen instead. The pale green blank, with its hypnotic moving radius. Kim in the bed in Orlando. Kim laughing, nude. Kim—
Think of the radar screen.
How many hours to go?

0459 Zulu. Brussels.

He had circles under his eyes now as he came into the air terminal, but he was little different from the others. Businessmen getting a jump on the day—businesswomen, too. They carried sleek attachés and laptops and were dressed for success, but nobody looked very bright yet.

The rain had ended but the tarmac was still wet. He came out of the terminal, took a taxi to a hotel within the airport, and, when he had dismissed the car, walked away toward the terminal he had just come from. A half-mile brought him to an area of sheds, more like a factory than an airport. Without pausing, he went between two of the buildings to a loading dock where trucks would be backing for another hour. He checked his watch, then the sky. No sign of the sun yet.

He waited in the shadows. He did not lean against the wall, despite his fatigue. He was a man of will, not easily recognized as such because of his fussiness and his pedantic attention to detail—the flashlight, the list.

Clanwaert plodded toward him through a shallow puddle. Clanwaert was a plodder, the thing he prized about the man. Unsurprising, steady. Capable of change? Perhaps not. In the pocket of the raincoat, his hand tightened on a piece of steel wire.

He called to Clanwaert from the shadows. Clanwaert tried to see him, failed, perhaps caught the glint of his eyeglasses because he began to search for a way up on the loading dock. To his right was a dumpster, which might have offered handholds to a younger or more agile man. Instead, he walked fifty feet the other way and struggled up a steel ladder like an exhausted swimmer coming out of a pool. He plodded back toward the shadows.

The man in the raincoat spoke for a full minute. His tired voice had the same tone of urgency, a kind of metallic hopefulness. Would Clanwaert? This great opportunity. More money.

But Clanwaert resisted. His voice rose; even invisible in the darkness, he was a man taking a stand. Surprising, to anybody who had seen his heavy plodding, he was a man of passion—and, it seemed, hatred for the man in the raincoat. The word *traitor* hissed out.

“That is all dead now,” the man in the raincoat said.

Clanwaert raged at him. Perhaps the man had meant that a god was dead, for Clanwaert resisted the way people resist a threat to their religion. At last, he ran down, gave a rumble or two, fell silent.

“I am sorry,” the other man’s voice came clearly from the shadow. “Look out there.” One hand appeared in the light. Clanwaert turned to follow where it pointed.

The steel garrote fell over his face silently and tightened; heavy as he was, the smaller man was able to deal with him. Exercise of the will, passion of a different kind.

Grunting, he dragged Clanwaert to the edge of the loading dock and rolled him into the dumpster.

Twenty minutes later, he was in a terminal different from the one at which he had landed. He found a telephone in a bank of telephones, half of them occupied now by business people making the arrangements for the day. He put his notecard in front of him as he cradled the telephone and began to punch the buttons: another call to Moscow. As the connection was being made, he put a minus sign next to Clanwaert’s name.

“Yes?” the tight voice said in Moscow.

“Tell them, ‘Go.’”

He put the instrument back and looked at the last name on the list. *Bonner*. He touched it with his pen. He sighed. *Bonner*. He made a small question mark next to the name. For a few seconds, he hesitated there, apparently unsure of himself for the first time—made so by fatigue or by the thought of *Bonner*, and whatever difficulties that name represented.

0615 Zulu. Mid-Atlantic.

“Spy? You shut down back there?”

The night was almost over. Alan’s hand hovered over the switch that would shut the back end down. Once he threw it, the old computer (“the best technology of the 1970s”) would die and the radar sweeps would end. Their search for the homebound battle group would be over.

But he didn’t want to give up. “What if the BG went north of the Azores?” he said into the intercom. “Radar might have missed them if they hid between those islands.”

“Come on—shut down! This mission is over!”

He hated to let go. One more sweep, one more experiment—he didn’t believe there were problems that couldn’t be solved.

His hand wavered over the switch but didn’t touch it.

“We went way north of the Azores coming back in ‘86,” *Craw* said in his Maine twang. *Craw* always sounded like a comedy act but was a deeply serious man who couldn’t understand why people smiled when he spoke. “Admiral Cutter, there wa’nt anything he wouldn’t do to keep from being found, no sir.”

“Oh, great,” *Rafe* moaned. “Jeez, Senior Chief, whose fucking side are you on? I want a slider on the rack! Spy, next time have your great idea before I’m almost in the stack, for Christ’s sake.”

Narc nosed in with, “Anyway, we’re in EMCON.” EMCON—Emission Control Condition.

But the senior chief’s voice was as stubborn as a lobsterman’s defending his right to put traps where his father and his grandfather had. “We’re not inside fifty miles just yet. Look heah—” This to Alan. “Set up the sweep as we turn nawth. The stack’s offset this way anyhow.”

“Oh, Christ—!” he heard *Rafe* say.

Alan peered forward, just able to read the compass. He set up the sweep as the senior chief instructed; let *Rafe* contradict them with a direct order if he cared so much. As the compass touched north he punched the keyboard, and the radar expanded to cover hundreds of miles of ocean. *Craw* watched from his own board as the circular picture of their world appeared, at the center their aircraft. To the east were the fourteen ships of their own battle group. Two blips showed visibly larger than the rest: their carrier, *USS Thomas Jefferson*, and, unusual for peacetime, a second carrier, the *Franklin D. Roosevelt*. To the north and west were the Azores, more than two hundred miles away and showing only as grainy blobs. Alan sorted out those shapes, the real islands’ outlines stored somewhere in his brain along with a knowledge of the effects of this radar; his fingers coaxed more detail from the computer, put the name PICO in bright green capitals on the island to which it belonged.

Just south of the main island, two faint blips glowed. He tabbed each on the computer and updated it until he had a standard course and speed. *Bingo!* He was excited by the chase now, oblivious to *Rafe*.

“Two UNID surface contacts! Range two-ninety. Christ Senior, we must have some duct.”

“She’s a beauty.”

“Speed thirty to forty knots. One big banana and one little banana. I think—I think, guys—” His fingers worked the keyboard as he prepared to place the contacts in the datalink.

Rafe's voice sliced into his excitement. "This is the Mission Commander—just to remind you two I just put us fifty miles out from the carrier and we're in EMCON. *Do not rotate or radiate!*" He was silent for a second or two to let it sink in. "Now shut down the back end!"

Alan debated the notion of rebellion. He was angry, but he knew part of the anger was fatigue. What the hell—Rafe was in command; let him take the flak if there was any. But still—Fuck it. He pushed the switch, and the radar image collapsed on its center and was gone. He began to clean up his side of the aircraft.

0619 Zulu. Moscow.

Number 1743 was a nondescript office building put up sometime after the Great Patriotic War, vaguely influenced by Western designs of the fifties, so probably from the seventies. It had a central entrance and a guard who was nothing more than a presence—an aging man in two sweaters who sometimes had this or that to sell. He would be no trouble.

There were four men. Despite differences, they looked alike because they were all of the same age and they had all led the same life—former *Spetsnaz*. Three of the four needed a shave; none of them wore a tie or a hat.

The guard waved them to stop.

The first man put a hand on the old man's chest and pushed him gently back while the others went past. Then the man told him to lie face down, showing him a pistol. The old man lay down. The youngest man shot him in the back of the head.

They trotted up the two flights of stairs and turned right and trotted to a door that said VENUX in English characters. Inside were fluorescent lights and head-height partitions in cheap beige fabric, a sense of modernity and busyness rare in that building, in that city.

The four men went through the door, took out silenced Type 51 Kalashnikovs and began firing through the partitions. They sprayed the room methodically, and when one ejected a clip he would drop it into a bag and slam home another and resume shooting. Men and women were screaming and trying to run away, and a man looked over a partition by jumping up and down until he was hit. Others were heroic and tried to shield the fallen, until they were hit, too.

Two of the men went from cubicle to cubicle, shooting each body in the head, alive or dead. The third man guarded the door, while the fourth took a device from his backpack, carried it to the center of the room, and, checking his watch, tripped a timer.

They trotted out one after another, covering each other, the first one firing at the horrified people in the corridor, and each one after him, firing as he ran, to the stairs, down the stairs, and they were gone.

The bomb blew and fire belched from the smashed windows.

0624 Zulu. Mid-Atlantic.

Christine was seconds from the wire. She had two thousand pounds of fuel—plenty for one landing, a dicey if she had to go around again and nobody up to give her more. To Rafehausen, Christine felt like a reluctant partner at the prom—she did what he wanted, just not exactly in time to his moves. *Mushy*, he thought.

Rafe wanted to see the boat. He didn't dare glance at the altimeter; instead, he was staring into the darkness, trying to find the lens—the cluster of lights at the port bow that would guide him down. Where was the fucking lens?

Then Christine broke out of the squall and there was too much light, too much brightness, as if the

whole reflective surface of the deck had struck his dark-accustomed eyes at once. He winced. At the same time, he found the lens, and the voice inside his head that was really eight years of flying experience said *Wrong!* Wrong set of lights, it meant.

Wrong.

Wrong for landing.

Wrong for me. And this inner voice, which the good pilot hears like an angel's whisper, said much more: it said Power; it said Go; it said airspeed lift altitude move MOVE! All in an instant because the lights were not set for an S-3B, meaning that the tension on the wires was wrong and the instructions were wrong, and the boat was expecting somebody else.

Rafe wanted to look over his shoulder for the F-14 that might be landing right on top of him.

And the voice said *Wrong*: you're trying to land on the wrong fucking boat.

Blinding light all around him. The deck was there there there THERE! The tail slammed down; the plane lurched; Rafe went to high power—

—and they didn't stop. No blow to the ribs. No neglected junk flying past them in the false wind deceleration. Only hurtling down the deck on the edge of airspeed, night vision shot to shit by the landing lights, sparks rooster-tailing from their hook, and a second later falling over the front end in the dark without a hope, yet hoping, praying.

All of them astonished and scared and seeing nothing but light as they flashed down the deck the wrong carrier—not seeing the startled air officer in Pri-Fly, not seeing the deck crew flinch back from them, not seeing the man who was down on the catwalk, safe but still flattening himself against the far bulkhead as if he thought they would take his head off, their lights flashing on the name-plate on his left breast: *Bonner, S.*

0625 Zulu. Mid-Atlantic.

Alan clenched his teeth. Even in the back end, the light as they came out of the squall had dazzled him, yet he had stayed braced. Then, the failure to stop had tricked his senses; he had even leaned into his harness as if the hook had caught. Now, as they came off the bow, he felt the plane falling. Light vanished; everything was blackness and electronic green. And then, climbing agonizingly away from the black water as if crawling out of a hole, he felt Christine decide not to kill them.

“Bolter, bolter,” Craw muttered.

“Shut up!” Rafe bellowed.

“Hookslap?” Narc said.

“It wasn’t my lens.” Rafe was incapable of dishonesty, at least about flying—and at least about another pilot. He cut the back end off the intercom and said to Narc, “It wasn’t my boat! Fuck, fuck, fuck fuck FUCK. Twelve hundred pounds of fucking fuel left! We gotta land on the wrong fuckin’ boat!”

On the flight deck, the Landing Signal Officer was already jabbering to Pri-Fly, where a paunchy commander in a yellow jersey with “Miniboss” across the chest was staring into the rain.

“What the hell?” the Miniboss (the Assistant Air Officer) moaned.

“It was an S-3. We haven’t got an S-3 up.”

“You *sure*? You better be *sure*!”

“I’m sure.”

Miniboss turned away from his bubble window and muttered, “Well, I’m not,” and he hollered at the lieutenant he didn’t know to check the sheets for an outstanding S-3. Had they got the goddam count wrong or what? And while you’re at it get somebody up here who knows S-3s even if you have to wake the squadron’s skipper because that sonofabitch is going to come around again; and he said into his mike to the LSO, “What’s he going to do?”

“We’re under EMCON; I’m not in contact.”

“The way I read it, he’s from the *Jefferson*. Get his fuel load.”

“We’re under EMCON.”

“Well, get out from under! Set the lens for an S-3 and find if he can get back to his own boat! If he can’t, prepare to receive.” He turned away to order somebody to keep the Combat Air Patrol airborne until it was over; get their fuel and estimated time aloft; while you’re at it—

The LSO had already had the lens reset. He was already prepared to receive. He had expected to recover two F-18-As; the lens had been set for them. He imagined the S-3 catching a wire set for the much lighter F-18-A and winced.

All in a night’s work.

Rafe caught the flare of lights that signaled him to try again. Narc had talked on the ball to the LSO and told him that their fuel was down. So, the worst was going to happen: he, LT George Rafehouse, a veteran carrier pilot, sometime wingman of the squadron skipper, was going to land on the wrong boat. Rafe blew out his breath in disgust.

This time he kept it simple. By the numbers. He gentled Christine into the approach. His angle

attack was perfect. At least he'd make a good landing.

Then he watched as the carrier began to turn.

He had to chase the turn. His numbers went out the window. They were turning away from the squall to help him, but that made no odds to him. Why weren't things ever easy?

"Smoke in the tunnel," Spy's voice said over the intercom.

There was a break, then Senior's voice: "Tape's still turning. Friction fire. Gawdamned Christine. Then, "I'll get it."

The brightness of the deck was close.

"No time," Rafe said. "Senior, stay strapped; I'm putting this sucker down."

Rafe coughed as the smoke hit him. Why wasn't he wearing his mask? His eyes watered. This time he kept the carrier in sight. He had his landing well in hand again; he could feel it. Again the light hit him, and then the deck reached up and slammed the plane.

His angle was too steep. Not by much, just some instant's inattention in the fumes. Too steep and too soon, and the tail smashed the deck just forward of the one wire. Bitched. Rafe felt it and was in high power, and the plane shot off into the looming dark.

Another bolter. He couldn't believe it.

The LSO was already on to Pri-Fly. "Hook snapped," he said.

"Oh, shit."

"Readying the net."

"Understood."

Hooks take a beating. Crews check them after every landing. But they can miss a hairline fracture, especially if a man is thinking about his wife or his debts or his future. Or maybe in this case it was Christine, trying something new.

Anyway, they had lost their hook.

On the flight deck, men in blue jerseys were clearing away the broken hook. Others in red jerseys stood by—the crash crew.

The LSO announced the hooksnap to a stunned audience of four and said that the barrier was being rigged. Asked for their gas status: eight hundred pounds.

Alan, for once, was unworried. Sometimes, ignorance *is* bliss. His father had told him tales of landing crippled aircraft into the "barrier," which Alan, as a kid, had seen as a giant volleyball net raised across the deck to catch wounded planes. His father used to say he had done it so often that he called him "Net" at the club. He said it was the easiest landing in the world.

And, after all, you have no choice. There is no other way to put a hookless aircraft down on a flight deck—not one that keeps the pieces together.

Senior Chief Craw seemed more worried about the smoking computer tape. He unclipped his harness and lunged for the tunnel behind their seats, wrestled with the box and swung it open. The smell got worse. Alan, now concerned for Craw because he was unstrapped and the break might come at any time, grabbed his thermos and, without thinking, poured cold coffee over the fire.

The smell changed from burned electrics to burned coffee.

The plane banked. Craw slammed against his seat and then slipped into it. The plane banked again.

"Make ready!" Rafe growled.

Senior Chief Craw was clumsy getting his straps clipped. The aircraft turned hard, and Craw winced. Alan realized that the man's hands were burned.

Alan reached up under his own safety toggles and pulled the clips. Free from the waist up, he leaned across the aisle and pushed the Senior Chief back in his seat, then moved the man's hands away from the straps. Surprisingly, getting the prongs into the clips turned out to be easier on somebody else.

"Here we go!" Rafe said.

Alan slammed back into his seat and reached over his shoulder for his harness straps. They weren't there. Of course not; he was leaning back on them.

"Ejection positions!" Narc snapped.

He forced himself to move slowly: lean forward, reach up and over your shoulder. Get one. Flip out into position and pat around for the other. Find it. Lean back. Don't think about ejecting. Clip on restraint. No problem. Clip the other. Regain your landing posture and brace. Only now do you have time to think, *If we'd had to eject while the straps were off, I'd be dead.*

And then, he realized that he didn't feel airsick. He felt fine. His mind was strangely, eerily clear. He felt ready for—was that Death, just down there ahead of them? No, it couldn't be. He felt ready then, for whatever came next. It was liberating, not having to think.

He wanted to tell Rafe not to worry; that Rafe would catch the barrier just fine. He wanted to tell his father that he, his son, would be okay in the Navy; give him some slack. Yes, he had needed to experience this. He felt good.

"Good lineup."

"Four hundred pounds fuel."

"You're left."

"Good lineup."

"Power."

"Nose up—nose up—POWER!"

Thirty thousand pounds of airframe hurtled into the net stretched above the wire and the wire strained and the tail rose and the whole mass skidded down the deck to the limit of the wire extension and the tail slapped down with a final crack, and alpha golf 707 came to a dead stop.

Christine was home.

She snarled. She still had enough fuel to bitch with.

Rafehausen had put her down with as little damage as could be hoped for. Christine would fly again, even though most barrier survivors are scrap from the moment the net is pulled off.

The LSO had sweated through the calls and brought this bird home. Now, he drawled to the waiting ship:

"Beautiful landing, American flyboy. Welcome aboard USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt*—your home away from home."

It was the first hint Alan had that they were on the wrong boat.

He understood perfectly when Rafe's shaking voice whispered over the intercom, "Nobody say that fucking word to me. Not a fucking word!"

Alan was not feeling too well himself. The coolness of moments before had vanished, leaving not airsickness, but real nausea. He had been wrong: Death *had* been waiting on the boat, grinning at Christine as she roared by, throwing sparks like a welder's torch. *Catch you next time*, Death had signaled. Or the time after. Or sometime.

Reality check.

Alan breathed in the stinking air and tried to focus on something else. The wrong boat. That meant his father's boat. He had just landed on his father's carrier. That brought him to. He felt the o-

reaction—welcomed it as relief from the aftershock of the close call—the old shortness of breath and slight dread. Perhaps it was simply expecting too much of every meeting, or perhaps it was fearing that too much was expected of him. Always, always when he was preparing to meet his father in any of those years they had lived apart, there had been this reaction.

So he sat in the net-wrapped plane, numbly watching figures in red and orange as they hustled to clear the flight deck for incoming CAP craft, scuttling around Christine like ants servicing the queen.

He loved his father. He feared his father. Where was the balance between those things?

And Alan Craik, thinking only of himself and his father, did not guess, could not guess, that a man who would change his life was out there among the hurrying red jerseys.

0719 Zulu. Brussels.

In a stall of a men's room in the Brussels airport, the small man stood over the toilet, a cigarette lighter in one hand and the white card in the other. Most days of his adult life, he had gone through this little ceremony, burning the day's notes to himself, a secret act of defiance and a terrible act of hubris—"wanting to be caught," the psychologists (whom he despised) would have said. They would have been quite wrong. No part of him, physical or mental, wanted to be caught. The very idea made him smile.

He looked down the list. Two minus signs. He was sorry to have lost them; he would have much preferred those signs to be pluses. The minus signs were like defeats. But they would not discourage him. Depression came more easily with fatigue; he knew himself that well. Still—He flicked the lighter and touched the flame to the corner of the card. As the flame spread toward his fingers he watched Bonner's name and his question mark disappear, then dropped the burning paper to the water and flushed.

He wished that the question surrounding Bonner could be so easily disposed of. Bonner, to his profound regret, was out of his reach just then.

He pulled himself up and marched to a ticket counter and bought a seat on a flight to Naples.

0723 Zulu. Mid-Atlantic.

Alan stepped down to the flight deck and wavered, rubber-legged. He made himself cross toward the catwalk as if he felt cool and strong, not wanting anybody to see his weakness. Craw came behind him. Alan had already lost track of Rafe and Narc; when had they got out of the plane? He took his helmet off—the plain helmet of a beginner, without nickname or logo. You had to earn the boastful, joking graphics that aircrew lavished on their helmets. He had no idea what he would use, if he was even allowed. He could imagine what Rafe would choose for him—a winged asshole?

He was cold, but the fine, stinging spray of rain was a relief, the clean sea air a tonic after the aircraft. Moving at twenty knots, the carrier made a wind that seemed to blow him clean.

He turned, looked past the senior chief at Christine. She was already being moved to an elevator, one wing folded, her tires blown. Irrationally, he felt at that moment an uncomplicated affection for her.

Craw's hand touched his shoulder. Alan jumped. "I appreciate what you did there, sir. Helping me."

"I-uh—hey. How're your hands?"

Craw held up palms shiny with burn ointment. "I got more grease on me than a slider."

And they both laughed. They laughed because it was funny just then, laughed because they had survived and were alive to see another fireball rise over the Atlantic.

And Craw said, "You goin' to do all right, sir."

They grinned at each other across the divide that separates officer from enlisted, despite age and experience, knowledge of life and death.

"We gawt to clear outta here," the senior chief said. "Aircraft incoming."

They walked together down the nonskid catwalk toward the ready room, the debrief, the awful meatballs that sailors call "sliders," supposedly so greasy that one will slide the length of a table with

a minimal shove; toward this floating world of maleness, this tangle of stresses, traditions, affection, hidden feelings; walked toward it in a momentary but perfect companionship. At the door to the light lock, they hesitated, and Alan opened the door because he thought Crow's burned hands wouldn't let him do it. They exchanged a look, and Crow was gone.

Alan, the shock of the landing fading, realized that he had never felt so content.

And ready to meet his father. Somewhere on board, probably tomorrow.

He stepped through into the darkness of the light lock. The far door was just closing on Crow's heels, the wedge of light folding to nothing. Alan, blind from the glare of the deck, was aware only of a bulk nearby before he was wrapped in an embrace.

"Welcome aboard, kiddo."

"Dad." He returned the embrace, glad of it, glad of the darkness that hid their embarrassment.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"My SDO woke me up. How'd you like the net? Fun, huh?"

They moved into the passage, Alan squinting at the brightness, chattering too fast. "I've got to go to the debrief. You know, the new guy gets the dumb job? You look great, Dad. Yeah, what a ride—"

"I'll walk along."

His father was a commander, CO of an attack squadron of A-6s. He would be hard-pressed for sleep, but he had sacrificed it for these minutes in the dark hours of a morning to be with his son. He could not say so. He could only do it, make his being there stand in for any expression of emotion.

They had last seen each other three weeks before at the O club. That had been different. This, Alan realized, was the first time in an operational environment. It was a little like the moments with Crow—looking across a divide with new eyes, getting something new back. Yet they chatted of trivialities. Everything was hidden.

Until, at the debrief door, his father grasped his shoulders. "Proud of you," he said—and abruptly turned away.

On the flight deck, silence marked the end of the twelve-cycle flight day. The glare was turned off and only disembodied blue flashlights pierced the dark, darting about as if searching for something—as if, perhaps, they sensed the traitor whose existence was not yet known, like hounds looking for a scent. They moved in silence, only the wind generated by the *Roosevelt's* twenty-plus knots sounding where earlier jet engines had shattered the night.

Thirty-six inches below the flight deck, bunkrooms of snoring ensigns finally achieved real sleep, free from jet-blast deflectors and engines screaming for launch, free from the "THWACK-thud" of jets making the trap right over their heads.

Alan tumbled into an empty sack and was instantly asleep. He dreamed old dreams of examinations for which he was unprepared and woke at last still locked in their fear of failure.

In another part of the ship, Petty Officer First Class Sheldon Bonner stripped to his skivvies and lay back on his rack, an envelope in his left hand. It had already been opened, the letter inside already read. Yet, he took the paper out and read it again. He yawned. *Dear Dad*, it began. Unconsciously, Bonner smiled. He held the letter above him. *Dear Dad, How are you doing? Everything here is A-OK but I get tired of Navy schools. I bet you have an exciting time in the Med.*

Bonner read it all through. He got paper and a ballpoint from his locker and lay down again, this time on his side, and began to write. *Dear Donnie. Great to get your letter. I am thinking of that time we fished for trout in Idaho, remember, I bet you forgot. We had some great times, you bet. You do*

~~what your old man tells you and make the most of that school, your future is secure if you do good there. Now I am serious about this. I want you to make chief, super chief, unlike your old man, you got potential to do anything. Aim for the stars.~~ He wondered if that was too much. No, he meant it. His kid could be anything. Anything!

0953 Zulu. Moscow.

In Moscow, a cold rain was falling. In the old KGB building, now the SVRR building (and called “the old KGB building” by everybody), Darya Ouspenskaya stared at her window, tracking the drops that streamed down it like tears. She muttered aloud, “*Il pleut sur la ville comme il pleure dans mon coeur,*” and smiled at herself. Down in the street, a few people hurried, shoulders hunched against the downpour. *My poor Moscow,* she thought. The city looked even dirtier in the rain.

Darya Ouspenskaya was overweight but still pretty, a jolly woman who radiated good humor. Men liked her, found her sexually attractive because her face seemed to promise that everything would be taken lightly; any mistakes or failures would be laughed away. She humored them all, slept with none. She was long since divorced from a man she hardly ever thought of any more. Her few sexual adventures were short-lived now, never allowed to be serious.

Her telephone rang. She picked it up with habitual distaste, an ancient dial phone that felt great no matter how much she bribed the babushka to sterilize it. Darya wanted a new telephone, green gold, touchtone, something reeking of high tech and smartness.

“The Director will see you now,” a female voice said.

“At once.”

She avoided the lift, which might again be stopping only at every other floor, and walked up the two flights of broad stone stairs. Big muscles in her calves and thighs raised her; she enjoyed feeling them work. She wore clothes picked up in London, “the Raisa Look,” everybody now mad to imitate Gorbachev’s wife.

“Go right in,” the secretary said. She was younger, inexplicably severe-looking; Darya, by keeping her supplied with perfume and little favors, had overcome that severity and now got special bits of gossip from her, preferred access to her boss.

Director Yakoblov was sitting at his desk with his face down in a file, his bald spot pointed at her. He had a cold. He breathed heavily and blew his nose into a tissue and swore. A plastic bag at his feet was half filled with soiled tissues.

“What have you got?” he said.

“You should be in bed,” she said; between them, such words had no sexual connotation.

“Rotten, simply rotten,” he said. “But if I stayed home, they’d think I wasn’t indispensable, and then you’d have my job. What have you got?”

“Efremov.”

He groaned.

“You directed me to look into his disappearance.”

“I know what I did! My God, Ouspenskaya—!” He clutched his forehead. “Aaah! I need antibiotics, they give me decongestants! Well?”

“He seems to be gone. His apartment has not been visited in three days. I ordered an entry; I have the report, but the essence is his clothes and so on are there, as is money, keys, even a passport.” She paused.

“Go on, go on.” He blew his nose.

“He has a second flat near the Gorki statue, under the name Platonov. Internal Security had

wired; I suspect he knew all that. Not a beginner, after all. He had a woman there sometimes, always the same. A little delicate.”

The Director looked at her over another white tissue.

“The daughter of Malenkov the gangster. We assume the other listening devices were his.”

He blew his nose. “Continue.”

“I interviewed her myself. She is terrified of her father. She is married to one of his boys; one of the other will kill her if they find out about Efremov, she says. As if Papa didn’t already know. She hasn’t seen him in—” she checked her notes “—ten days. She was to meet him at the flat three days ago but he didn’t appear. That checks out with Internal’s records—she was there for an hour alone and then left. Anyway, she doesn’t know where he is, she says, has no plans to meet him in some other place, and so on and so on.”

“You believe her?”

“Oh, yes. She’s a scared little thing. I threatened her a bit, she almost fainted. She needs to be questioned by somebody with more time than I have, really go over everything, her memory might turn up a clue. But we’d have to promise her something good—protection from her husband, maybe. Maybe her father, as well.”

He waved a tissue.

She looked up at him. He stopped sniffing and stared back. “I’ve had a look at his computer files. Surprisingly—mm—bland. I make no judgments, as you know, but—if I were the famous Sherlock Holmes, I would say they are significant for the fact that they are so insignificant.”

“Well, after all, his agents are run by underlings. He has how many agents?”

“He claims eighty.”

The Director looked up. “‘Claims’?”

Ouspenskaya, with a tiny shrug, said, “We pay for eighty; I am not entirely convinced that I see all the files for eighty.”

The Director nodded, gloomy, as if his worst fears about her cynicism were confirmed.

“No evidence in his shredder or the burn box. By that, I mean only that there is no indication that this was a man preparing to leave. Everything points rather to a man who, mm, is not with us against his will.”

She looked, waited. The Director opened a drawer and took out a nasal spray, stuck it up one nostril and shut the other with a finger. “Continue,” he said. He sprayed.

“His computer may have been purged of some files. It’s hard to say, impossible for me, in fact. I’m not an expert. That computer, as I’ve told you a thousand times, is an antique and not to be trusted. American secretaries have better computers on their desks than you and I have in our—” He was waving his free hand at her, meaning *Shut up, shut up, I’ve heard it over and over*. “Well. The sum and substance is that Efremov has disappeared and I’ve found no evidence of anything. He’s gone. Kaput. Disappeared. What is it the British say? ‘Done a bunk’?”

“‘Taken a powder,’ the Americans say. A colloquialism I don’t understand at all.”

“Face powder? Or, sleeping draughts used to be called powders. Quite nonsensical.”

The Director threw himself back so hard that his chair springs made a catlike noise; he sniffed and then worked his nose up and down. “Efremov,” he said. “I like him. I *trust* him. Don’t you trust him?”

“He is devoted to his work.” She knew that she would gain no advantage with this man by claiming to have suspicions. In fact, she was afraid of Efremov and stayed away from him.

“All right. What are your suspicions?”

“Director! You hurt my feelings. Why must I have suspicions?”

He cleared his throat, like a man preparing to spit. “Between ourselves,” he said, “I admire your suspicious nature. Tell me what you think. I won’t necessarily believe you.”

She stared at the distant window. “I surprise myself by having no suspicions. Odd. I think I don’t know enough yet. But that makes me suspicious, because I have been looking into the man’s life for two days and it is all—bland. Like the creation of a perfect bureaucrat. And why not? Colonel Efremov has a splendid record, some might say brilliant; he has no ‘past,’ no quirks, no secret life except the girlfriend. Still—” Her voice trailed off. “He has decentralized his work over the past forty years. One might say it is an example of *perestroika*. Or one might say it is the opposite—obfuscation. He has divided his agents into somewhat irregular groups for purposes of administration and created his own sub-sections to handle them. Nothing wrong, exactly, but—he has followed the CIA model of creating false entities, companies on the new free-market model, and using them to mask his organizations. Nothing wrong, but they are a little difficult to track.”

“Accountability?” the Director said hoarsely.

“Financing, to be sure.”

“False agents?” The Director sounded heart-broken.

“I have no evidence of such a thing. But—!” She stood up. “Suppose the girl’s gangster father learned something, maybe from her, maybe with his taps, maybe somewhere else—let’s say that he learned that his daughter’s KGB colonel—sorry, SVRR colonel—was making money from his elaborate administrative structure. Let us just say he learned that we are paying for agents who don’t exist. He confronts Efremov. He says, ‘Do such-and-such for me, or I tell your bosses.’”

“‘Such-and-such’?”

“Oh—information about KGB—SVRR—penetration of foreign businesses, or a lever on contracts or—my God, you know how illegal money is made as well as I!”

The Director blew his nose. “Proceed.”

“And Efremov says no, or he tries to exercise some power of his own, and Papa has him killed. Consider another scenario, Efremov kills himself!”

“Rather Lermontov, that.”

“I agree. Or he leaves the country.”

The Director rubbed his already red eyes. “Or he could be lying in a stalled car in the snow beside a back road he took by mistake on the way to his dacha.” He looked at her between his fingers. “We mustn’t overlook the accidental.” He studied her face. “There’s something more. Come on.”

She shook her head vigorously; her brown hair bounced back and forth. “Only an anomaly. Nine months ago, he set up another of his entities to support four agents. For him, perfectly normal procedure—except that all his other entities support twelve to fifteen agents.”

“That doesn’t seem much to me.”

“His *best* four agents. You know how he liked to brag—keeping a secret and bragging at the same time. Like those note cards he always had in his pocket, writing down the most important things he was doing that day: something a rank beginner would know better than to do. He would brag about something that one of his agents had brought him, then cover his tracks by hiding the nationality of some such. In fact he was deliberately transparent about some things—their jobs, for example. I knew that he’d had an agent who was on the maintenance staff at NATO in Brussels, for example. Also somebody in the American military. Those and two others had been set up in this new entity.”

“The others?”

She shook her head. “One I think was a woman. That’s all I can tell at this point in time. If you allow me some expert support to go into his computer—”

He shook his head. "Keep it in the house." He spat into his tissue and looked at the result. "Maybe he'll turn up. Maybe he's just sulking someplace. Maybe he's dead." The contents of the tissue made him even gloomier. "Maybe it's we who are dead, hmm? Moscow, the city of the dead? I would have been reprimanded for treason for saying that once. Now, I wish there was somebody to reprimand me."

1038 Zulu. Mid-Atlantic.

He reported to a lieutenant commander in the inboard intel center. Peretz was a slouching, slight bald man his father's age who had sick-looking circles under his eyes and a constant air of gloom.

"You Mick Craik's son?"

"Yes, sir."

"Siddown, siddown. Your father and I go way back. In fact, the first squadron I served with Peretz wore glasses and used them like an academic, looking over the tops or pointing them for emphasis. Now, he pulled them down his nose and stared at Alan. "I understand you *fly*."

"Yes, sir."

"Gonna stay with it?"

"I want to."

Peretz made a face, half-grotesque; his gloom was a mask for a sardonic sense of humor, Alan realized. He pushed his glasses up. "What do the flyboys call you?"

"Spy."

"Could be worse. 'Dickhead' is a favorite. You get along?"

"I think so."

Peretz nodded, a rapid head movement that made his shoulders bob. Looking at his hands, he said "You know the other battle group found us last night."

"Oh, shit."

Peretz looked up at him. His eyes were shrewd and perhaps amused. "Did you do a wide radar sweep just before you made the stack last night?"

Alan flushed. "We weren't in EMCON."

"*JFK* thought somebody found them last night. They were sure we'd be on them." He looked up from his fingers. "No report was made."

"No, sir."

"You didn't know you'd flashed them?"

Alan hesitated. Should he protect Rafe? He thought that Peretz was trying to teach him something that this was between two intel officers, the flyers not part of it. He took a chance. "I caught two bananas south of Pico and ID'd one as the *Kennedy*. Was I right?"

Peretz nodded. He seemed fascinated by his own fingertips, even sniffed them from time to time. "How come you didn't give us a blast?"

"Are we in trouble over this?"

"We? You mean, you and your pilot? Naw. This is between *Kennedy's* 10 and me and the gatepost."

"I thought the admiral would be pissed."

"He is. But you're too young to feed to an admiral. He wouldn't get any satisfaction from reaming you out; admirals want commanders or higher." Peretz grinned at his hands. "A Brit wrote after World War II that flag officers are best thought of as old ladies who need very careful handling." He raised his eyebrows and glanced at Alan. "Keep it in mind."

“I didn’t report it because my mission commander—let’s say he ruled the mission was over.”

Peretz swung forward, hands on knees. “Okay. Learning time. You had important information and you didn’t do with it what you’re supposed to. It’s no good saying to yourself it’s his call and he’ll take the heat. You going to do this in a combat situation? You’re an *intelligence* officer—you have responsibility. I don’t care how much you like to fly! Information, information! You let us down. You let yourself down.” He leaned back. “And I’d have done the same thing.” He smiled. “You must be pretty good with that TACCO rig, to pick them up like that.”

“It was iffy.”

Peretz nodded. “As a TACCO, next time let the intelligence officer in you decide whether the iffy stuff is worth following up. Okay? End of lecture.” He waved a hand. “Nobody gets in trouble over this one.” He did the same rapid head-nod. “You want to belong. Am I right? You want to be one of the boys. Aviators are a funny lot.” He chuckled. “I coach my daughter’s soccer team. All girls. They taught me a lot about aviators. I began to see aviators completely differently once I learned to look at them as a girls’ soccer team.”

Alan thought he was supposed to laugh, did, felt like a traitor to his mates, and said, “Girls?”

“Yeah. Think about it. Lots of nervous laughter. Very cliquey. Full of insecurity. Always clustering around the most popular girl—that is, the guy with the most clout with the skipper, or the best landing grades. Love gossip. Get in corners and giggle together. Share secrets a lot—snicker, snicker. Try it. It might make you worry less about being an 10.”

He was, Alan thought, a disappointed man who had found a little fantasy to cover his own failure. Granted, being a Jewish 10 would be even harder than being Alan Craik; and he guessed that Peretz came across to flyers as a weird nerd, to boot. Still, the idea of his squadron as a cabal of prepubescent girls had its appeal. He changed the subject by saying, “How do I get back to my ship?”

“You don’t. Not till we hit the first liberty port. They’re cutting orders for you to stay here with me until then.” He saw Alan’s stricken face. “This is important! You’re going to do a lieutenant’s job—learn the joint-ops template and brief it on your boat. You brief the squadron commanders, air wing, ship’s captain, the works. I would have had to pull somebody over here from your boat, otherwise.”

Alan thought of the flying hours missed. That, he realized, was precisely what Peretz had so gently read him out for—thinking more of the flying than his real job.

“Sounds good.” Did he mean that?

He found his father in his squadron’s ready room. His father grabbed him, held on to his arm to keep him from escaping while he explained something to two other officers. They moved into the passage and then his father continued to carry on brief exchanges with passing men while he talked to Alan. His father seemed to know everybody, so that every few words he was interrupting himself with “Hey, Jack,” “George, how’re they hanging this morning?” “Smoker, good to see you—” His eyes flicked constantly away from Alan, up and down the passage, as if he were a politician looking for constituents. Perhaps he was; being a squadron commander has its political side.

“So,” he said, “you get some sleep? *Hiya, Gomer.*”

“I was wiped.”

“*Bill.* I hear you’re going to be here a few days. *Kincaid, I want a report on Florio’s mother—it’s cancer, give him compassionate. Yeah, today. You meet B ernie Peretz?*”

“Yeah, I—”

“*Hey, Deek, stand by, man, I need to talk to you. What’ja think?*”

“I liked him.”

“You did. *Hey, Mac. Yeah, Bernie’s an okay guy. Uh—he’s getting out, you know.*” His father said that in a faint tone of warning, meaning—what? That he shouldn’t take Peretz too seriously. Shouldn’t use him as a model?

“Why’s he getting out?”

“Passed over for commander. *Phil, you guys stank yesterday. This isn’t the Mongolian Navy we’re running here. We care, get me?* He didn’t make the cut. Bernie’s okay, but—he likes to stay home with the kids and the dog. He’s good at what he does, though—learn what you can from him. Word to the wise: do good on this one, it’s all money in the bank. You do these briefings, your name gets around—it’s all part of the profession.”

“You always used to tell me that doing my best was all that mattered.”

Why had he said that? Already, he had put that prickly hedge between them. *Let him say whatever he wants*, an inner voice cautioned. But too late.

“Doing your best *and* having other people know it. You gotta be practical, kiddo. Something you’re not very good at—they don’t teach it in the ivory tower, right?”

Don’t rise to it, the inner voice said. *This is as hard for him as for you.* It was the old opposition. Style. Culture.

His father said, “Anyway, we’ll have a look at Naples together, okay?”

“Palma.”

“*Your boat’s going to Palma; we’re making liberty at Naples. You’re on this boat, kid.*”

“Oh, God! Dad, *Kim’s* meeting me at Palma!”

“Kim? The redhead with the big gazumbahs I met at Shakey’s with you?”

And he lost it. “Goddamit, Dad—!”

“Oh, sorry—I meant to say, ‘the young lady with the enormous intellect.’ *Snake—Jackson, hey—* He yanked his arm away. “Dad, Kim and I are practically engaged!”

His father gave him a strange look. His eyes stopped flicking up and down the passage. He took plenty of time, perhaps thinking of something and then deciding to say something else. “Like father, like son, huh?”

“You said it; I didn’t.” His father’s record with women was abysmal: he had been married twice, both failures, the first to Alan’s mother, the second to a fleshy woman named Thelma who had had huge breasts and the brain of an ant, although she had been smart enough to get out after eight months. Alan almost said, *When I get married, I mean to stay that way*, but he bit the words off. Instead of forcing himself to be calmer, he said, “You’re talking about somebody you don’t know anything about,” and his cheeks flamed.

His father made a face. “Sorry, she looked like Son of Thelma to me. Give me her address, I’ll give you a message to her you’ll be in Naples.” Again, he looked at Alan strangely. “I think there’s a lot I don’t know about you all of a sudden.”

1311 Zulu. Langley, Virginia.

George Shreed heaved himself off his metal canes and into his chair, propping the canes against the desk, supported on a decorative turning that was faintly worn from years of such use. His shock of gray hair stood up on his head, rather startling, almost as if he had had it styled that way, looking not unlike the Nobel winner Samuel Beckett. He lit a cigarette and turned to the morning book—pages already digested and analyzed intelligence, winnowed, prioritized, emphasized, and most of it crap, like that thought. He flipped pages. One item caught his eye; unthinkingly, he put a little tick next to it: *Moscow. Massacre in office building. At least thirty dead in military-style attack. Probable organizer*

sample content of Night Trap

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