A Special Relationship

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One

About and hour after I met Tony Hobbs, he saved my life.

I know that sounds just a little melodramatic, but it's the truth. Or, at least, as true as anything a journalist will tell you.

I was in Somalia - a country I had never visited until I got a call in Cairo and suddenly found myself dispatched there. It was a Friday afternoon - the Muslim Holy Day. Like most foreign correspondents in the Egyptian capital, I was using the official day of rest to do just that. I was sunning myself beside the pool of the Gezira Club - the former haunt of British officers during the reign of King Farouk, but now the domain of the Cairene beau monde and assorted foreigners who'd been posted to the Egyptian capital. Even though the sun is a constant commodity in Egypt, it is something that most correspondents based there rarely get to see. Especially if, like me, they are bargain basement one-person operations, covering the entire Middle East and all of eastern Africa. Which is why I got that call on that Friday afternoon.

'Is this Sally Goodchild?' asked an American voice I hadn't heard before.

'That's right,' I said, sitting upright and holding the cell phone tightly to my ear in an attempt to block out a quartet of babbling Egyptian matrons sitting beside me. 'Who's this?'

'Dick Leonard from the paper.'

I stood up, grabbing a pad and a pen from my bag. Then I walked to a quiet corner of the veranda. 'The paper' was my employer. Also known as the Boston Post. And if they were calling me on my cell phone, something was definitely up.

'I'm new on the Foreign Desk,' Leonard said, 'and deputizing today for Charlie Geiken. I'm sure you've heard about the flood in Somalia?'

Rule one of journalism: never admit you've been even five minutes out of contact with the world at large. So all I said was, 'How many dead?'

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'No definitive body count so far, according to CNN. And from all reports, it's making the '97 deluge look like a drizzle.'

'Where exactly in Somalia?'

'The Juba River Valley. At least four villages have been submerged. The editor wants somebody there. Can you leave straight away?'

So that's how I found myself on a flight to Mogadishu, just four hours after receiving the call from Boston. Getting there meant dealing with the eccentricities of Ethiopian Airlines, and changing planes in Addis Ababa, before landing in Mogadishu just after midnight. I stepped out into the humid African night, and tried to find a cab into town. Eventually, a taxi showed up, but the driver drove like a kamikaze pilot, and also took a back road into the city centre - a road that was unpaved and also largely deserted. When I asked him why he had chosen to take us off the beaten track, he just laughed. So I pulled out my cell phone and dialled some numbers, and told the desk clerk at the Central Hotel in Mogadishu that he should call the police immediately and inform them that I was being kidnapped by a taxi driver, car licence number . . . (and, yes, I did note the cab's licence plate before getting into it). Immediately the driver turned all apologetic, veering back to the main road, imploring me not to get him into trouble, and saying, 'Really, it was just a short cut.'

'In the middle of the night, when there's no traffic? You really expect me to believe that?'

'Will the police be waiting for me at the hotel?'

'If you get me there, I'll call them off.'

He veered back to the main road, and I made it intact to the Central Hotel in Mogadishu - the cab driver still apologizing as I left his car. After four hours' sleep, I managed to make contact with the International Red Cross in Somalia, and talked my way on to one of their helicopters that was heading to the flood zone.

It was just after nine in the morning when the chopper took off from a military airfield outside the city. There were no seats inside. I sat with three other Red Cross staffers on its cold steel floor. The helicopter was elderly and deafening. As it left the ground, it lurched dangerously to the starboard side - and we were all thrown against the thick webbed belts, bolted to the cabin walls, into which we had fastened ourselves before take-off. Once the pilot regained control and we evened out, the guy seated on the floor opposite me smiled broadly and said, 'Well, that was a good start.'

Though it was difficult to hear anything over the din of the rotor blades, I did discern that the fellow had an English accent. Then I looked at him more closely and figured that this was no aid worker. It wasn't just the sang-froid when it looked like we might just crash. It wasn't just his blue denim shirt, his blue denim jeans, and his stylish horn-rimmed sunglasses. Nor was it

his tanned face - which, coupled with his still-blond hair, leant him a certain weather-beaten appeal if you liked that perpetually insomniac look. No - what really convinced me that he wasn't Red Cross was the jaded, slightly flirtatious smile he gave me after our near-death experience. At that moment, I knew that he was a journalist.

Just as I saw that he was looking me over, appraising me, and also probably working out that I too wasn't relief worker material. Of course, I was wondering how I was being perceived. I have one of those Emily Dickinson-style New England faces - angular, a little gaunt, with a permanently fair complexion that resists extended contact with the sun. A man who once wanted to marry me - and turn me into exactly the sort of soccer mom I was determined never to become - told me I was 'beautiful in an interesting sort of way'. After I stopped laughing, this struck me as something out of the 'plucky' school of backhanded compliments. He also told me that he admired the way I looked after myself. At least he didn't say I was 'wearing well'. Still, it is true that my 'interesting' face hasn't much in the way of wrinkles or age-lines, and my light brown hair (cut sensibly short) isn't yet streaked with grey. So though I may be crowding middle age, I can pass myself off as just over the thirty-year-old frontier.

All these banal thoughts were abruptly interrupted when the helicopter suddenly rolled to the left as the pilot went full throttle and we shot off at speed to a higher altitude. Accompanying this abrupt, convulsive ascent - the G-force of which threw us all against our webbed straps - was the distinctive sound of antiaircraft fire. Immediately, the Brit was digging into his daypack, pulling out a pair of field glasses. Despite the protestations of one of the Red Cross workers, he unbuckled his straps and manoeuvred himself around to peer out one of the porthole windows.

'Looks like someone's trying to kill us,' he shouted over the din of the engine. But his voice was calm, if not redolent of amusement. 'Who's "someone"?' I shouted back.

'Usual militia bastards,' he said, his eyes still fastened to the field glasses. 'The same charmers who caused such havoc during the last flood.'

'But why are they shooting at a Red Cross chopper?' I asked.

'Because they can,' he said. 'They shoot at anything foreign and moving. It's sport to them.'

He turned to the trio of Red Cross medicos strapped in next to me.

'I presume your chap in the cockpit knows what he's doing,' he asked. None of them answered him - because they were all white with shock. That's when he flashed me a deeply mischievous smile, making me think: the guy's actually enjoying all this.

I smiled back. That was a point of pride with me - to never show fear under fire. I knew from experience that, in such situations, all you could do was take a very deep breath, remain focused, and hope you got through it. And

so I picked a spot on the floor of the cabin and stared at it, all the while silently telling myself: It will be fine. It will be just . . .

And then the chopper did another roll and the Brit was tossed away from the window, but managed to latch on to his nearby straps and avoid being hurled across the cabin.

'You okay?' I asked.

Another of his smiles. 'I am now,' he said.

A further three stomach-churning rolls to the right, followed by one more rapid acceleration, and we seemed to leave the danger zone. Ten nervous minutes followed, then we banked low. I craned my neck, looked out the window and sucked in my breath. There before me was a submerged landscape - Noah's Flood. The water had consumed everything. Houses and livestock floated by. Then I spied the first dead body - face down in the water, followed by four more bodies, two of which were so small that, even from the air, I was certain they were children.

Everyone in the chopper was now peering out the window, taking in the extent of the calamity. The chopper banked again, pulling away from the nucleus and coming in fast over higher ground. Up in the distance, I could see a cluster of jeeps and military vehicles. Closer inspection showed that we were trying to land amidst the chaos of a Somalian Army encampment, with several dozen soldiers milling around the clapped-out military equipment spread across the field. In the near-distance, we could see three white jeeps flying the Red Cross flag. There were around fourteen aid workers standing by the jeeps, frantically waving to us. There was a problem, however. A cluster of Somalian soldiers was positioned within a hundred yards of the Red Cross team - and they were simultaneously making beckoning gestures towards us with their arms.

'This should be amusing,' the Brit said.

'Not if it's like last time,' one of the Red Cross team said.

'What happened last time?' I asked.

'They tried to loot us,' he said.

'That happened a lot back in '97 too,' the Brit said.

'You were here in '97?' I asked him.

'Oh yes,' he said, flashing me another smile. 'A delightful spot, Somalia. Especially under water.'

We overflew the soldiers and the Red Cross jeeps. But the aid workers on the ground seemed to know the game we were playing, as they jumped into the jeeps, reversed direction, and started racing towards the empty terrain where we were coming down. I glanced over at the Brit. He had his binoculars

pressed against the window, that sardonic smile of his growing broader by the nanosecond.

'Looks like there's going to be a little race to meet us,' he said. I peered out my window and saw a dozen Somalian soldiers running in our general direction.

'See what you mean,' I shouted back to him as we landed with a bump.

With terra firma beneath us, the Red Cross man next to me was on his feet, yanking up the lever which kept the cabin door in its place. The others headed toward the cargo bay at the rear of the cabin, undoing the webbing that held in the crates of medical supplies and dried food.

'Need a hand?' the Brit asked one of the Red Cross guys.

'We'll be fine,' he said. 'But you better get moving before the Army shows up.'

'Where's the nearest village?'

'It was about a kilometre due south of here. But it's not there anymore.'

'Right,' he said. Then he turned to me and asked, 'You coming?' I nodded, but then turned back to the Red Cross man and asked, 'What are you going to do about the soldiers?'

'What we usually do. Stall them while the pilot radios the Somalian central command - if you can call it that - and orders some officer over here to get them off our backs. But you both better get out of here now. The soldiers really don't see the point of journalists.'

'We're gone,' I said. 'Thanks for the lift.'

The Brit and I headed out of the cabin. As soon as we hit the ground, he tapped me on the shoulder and pointed towards the three Red Cross jeeps. Crouching low, we ran in their direction, not looking back until we were behind them. This turned out to be a strategically smart move, as we had managed to dodge the attention of the Somalian soldiers, who had now surrounded the chopper. Four of them had their guns trained on the Red Cross team. One of the soldiers started shouting at the aid workers - but they didn't seem flustered at all, and began the 'stalling for time' gambit. Though I couldn't hear much over the din of the rotor motor, it was clear that the Red Cross guys had played this dangerous game before, and knew exactly what to do. The Brit nudged me with his elbow.

'See that clump of trees over there,' he said, pointing towards a small patch of gum trees around fifty yards from us.

I nodded. After one fast final glance at the soldiers - now ripping into a case of medical supplies - we made a dash for it. It couldn't have taken more than twenty seconds to cover the fifty yards, but God did it seem long. I knew that, if the soldiers saw two figures running for cover, their natural reaction

would be to shoot us down. When we reached the woods, we ducked behind a tree. Neither of us was winded - but when I looked at the Brit, I caught the briefest flicker of adrenalin-fuelled tension in his eyes. Once he realized that I'd glimpsed it, he immediately turned on his sardonic smile.

'Well done,' he whispered. 'Think you can make it over there without getting shot?'

I looked in the direction he was pointing - another meagre grove of trees that fronted the now-deluged river. I met his challenging smile. 'I never get shot,' I said. Then we ran out of the trees, making a manic beeline for the next patch of cover. This run took around a minute - during which time the world went silent, and all I could hear were my feet scything through the high grass. I was genuinely tense. But like that moment in the helicopter when we first came under fire, I tried to concentrate on something abstract like my breathing. The Brit was ahead of me. But as soon as he reached the trees, something brought him to a sudden halt. I stopped in my tracks as I saw him walking backwards, his arms held high in the air. Emerging from the trees was a young Somalian soldier. He couldn't have been more than fifteen. His rifle was trained on the Brit, who was quietly attempting to talk his way out of this situation. Suddenly the soldier saw me - and when he turned his gun on me, I made a desperate error of judgment. Instead of immediately acting submissive - coming to a complete halt, putting my hands above my head, and making no sudden movements (as I had been trained to do) - I hit the ground, certain he was going to fire at me. This caused him to roar at me, as he now tried to get me in his sights. Then, suddenly, the Brit tackled him, knocking him to the ground. I was now back on my feet, running towards the scene. The Brit swung a clenched fist, slamming it into the soldier's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. The kid groaned, and the Brit brought his boot down hard on the hand that was clutching the gun. The kid screamed.

'Let go of the gun,' the Brit demanded.

'Fuck you,' the kid yelled. So the Brit brought his boot down even harder. This time the soldier released the weapon, which the Brit quickly scooped up and had trained on the soldier in a matter of seconds.

'I hate impoliteness,' the Brit said, cocking the rifle.