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The Devil's Halo

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Extract

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 1962 the US military detonated a nuclear warhead in space. They intended to create a short-term weapon against Soviet satellites by pumping up the level of radiation in near-space orbit. But unexpected consequences were reported.

In 1967 the USA and the Soviet Union signed the United Nations Space Treaty prohibiting the use of nuclear weapons in space.

All characters in *The Devil's Halo* are fictitious, except for certain public figures who are used fictitiously. The Galileo GPS system is also used fictitiously. The quotations cited are real.

ON SATELLITE BEACH

"Failure to react to the American domination of space will lead to our European countries becoming vassals of the United States."

Jacques Chirac
Former President of France

If only Jacques Chirac had put a sock in it that day.

Think about it. No satellite Pearl Harbor. No war with Europe. No Devil's Halo. Of course, we all feel more equal in space now. And on the ground. But nobody wants to step up and claim credit for it.

Remember those gleeful Europeans who popped champagne corks on the day America's military might came crashing down? Not many of them buy champagne any more. They're trading heirlooms for food. Or wondering how they'll keep warm this winter. And everyone on both sides of the Atlantic asks the same question:

How could it have happened?

They miss their cellphones and television and Internet sex and banks full of real money, not worthless paper. They want to believe that their world collapsed for some noble purpose. Maybe they're trying to find a hero in the catastrophic mess. But, most of all, they want to punish the guilty. I can't blame them. Because I was one of the first Americans who let my country down.

My name is Terry Weston.

As a business consultant I knew Europe. My wife Maria and I lived in Tuscany once. Our daughter Ariana was born there. For years we watched fear and loathing of the United States spread where once we had friends. And still E-Day caught us unprepared. A few alert military people had a clue, but no ability to act. Our President could have acted, but the man had no clue. Let's just say that if *Profiles in Courage* were written today few of our own politicians would even make the index.

But even their failure of imagination pales next to mine.

One year ago, blissfully soaking up the Florida sun with my in-laws, I would have laughed at anyone who might have predicted that our little girl would be imprisoned during a bloody Moscow purge, my wife and I trapped in a Battle of Paris, and one of us swallowed up in a ball of flame at home. Nobody's laughing now.

This is a true account of what happened to my family, and yours, last summer.

What I didn't know first-hand I learned from others, friend and foe. What they couldn't tell me I discovered from classified documents that fell into my hands. Of course, they might be declassified one day.

We should all live so long.

The afternoon it began, last 16 June, I had just returned from a meeting of European executives in Brussels.

Remember Old Europe as a fun place for Americans? You weren't there last year. Not after Germany went belly up and NATO faded from memory. My hosts in Brussels all stood up to toast President Broissard of France. Their new hero. Broissard managed to supersize the European Union overnight by making Russia its other half. The Greater European Union, as they now called it, could finally stand up to America. Everyone who hated the United States got a boost from the Franco-Russian tonic. Hotel clerks with reptilian smiles "lost" US passports. Taxi drivers refused to take Americans anywhere but to the airport.

Not that we suffered much.

Our two exports with no real competition—Hollywood and the Pentagon—kept us as the global Colossus anyway. But Americans spent their tourist dollars at home.

I was a licensed pilot, and had flown my client's Lear jet from Brussels to the new airport at Cape Canaveral, Florida. When we landed, a bodyguard-driver picked up my bag. My father-in-law Ted Devlin had sent his car for me.

Ted was CEO of Lycomber/TVR, the Pentagon's third-largest contractor for military space hardware, a behemoth that slugged it out with Lockheed Martin and Boeing for multibillion-dollar projects. The black cube of its Space Industries Division sat next to NASA's launch facilities. Its race to deploy the US Space Shield, the invisible bubble that would protect America and her interests worldwide, made the Cape a boom town again.

"Good time in Europe, Mr Weston?" Ted's driver asked.

"We applauded when we cleared Belgian airspace," I told him, putting on my Ray-Bans.

Florida in June felt like being wrapped in a soggy wash-cloth. But the Cadillac limousine with a hybrid engine and little retro tail fins blew ice-cold inside. I sank into the gray velour and watched *The Global Economist.* A Brookings pundit scolded American consumers for "wrecking US foreign policy with their shopping carts" by buying only products made in the USA. He argued that it officially became the paranoid 1950s again when Bank of America offered loans to build bomb shelters. A Chicago economist disagreed. I chuckled at her new shorthand. In her view, the "rest of the world" from Caracas to Pyongyang had devolved into the new media catchphrase "R.O.W". Too horrible to mention, let alone engage. That was why we needed a Space Shield at any cost.

"But don't our plans to deploy the Space Shield," the Brookings man asked, "invite attacks on our space satellites before it's completed?"

The Chicago economist looked blank. In doing so, she spoke for most of us.

Last June space was just too far out there. A vast, inky void that few understood or believed relevant to their daily lives. So we never thought about it.

In Ted's Cadillac, it only dimly registered that I was watching satellite TV. Just as most other Americans gabbed over their Dellphones, tracked their children's or spouses' whereabouts with iCu, and flew to Iowa and West Virginia on those "Rediscover Our Heartland" tours, blithely unaware of our space satellites that made all those activities possible.

I only knew about the Space Shield because Ted Devlin was building it. His people were scrambling to launch, by the following fiscal year, a satellite constellation armed with bullet shaped flechettes that could be dropped from space for a horrific impact on Earth. The media anointed them "Rods from God."

Naturally, our intentions disturbed R.O.W. And in a more thoughtful way, my wife Maria. She believed that space should be kept free of weapons catastrophic enough for Biblical nicknames.

Maria had earned her PhD in Aeronautics and Astronautics at Stanford. But she was no ordinary rocket scientist. She worked as a consultant to DARPA, the Pentagon's Advanced Research Projects Agency. And she was

a rock star in her classified world. The week I spent in Europe, she brought our daughter down to Florida for the 27th Annual Symposium of Defense Scientists where Maria would be one of the speakers. Ted, of course, invited me to join them at his house on Satellite Beach.

But with Ted, there was always a catch.

At his house in Satellite Beach Colony the white wall with red bougainvillea had a plaque engraved "Casa Terrifica". My father-in-law knew how to enjoy the taxpayers' money. The double doors burst open. My daughter came running out to greet me. She already looked tanned, her blue eyes wide open and fearless, with a new line of freckles over her nose.

"Daddy!" she screamed, and jumped up for a big hug.

Ariana had just turned six, in the middle of a childhood oscillation from adventurous to shy and pensive. But she was an enthusiastic traveler who could already ask "Are we there yet?" in three languages. Out of my bag I pulled a children's book called *Eloise in Paris.*

"Oh, wow," she squealed. Under her mop of dark curls, she frowned with a little crease over her nose just like her mother. "It's in French."

"You remember the Champs-Elysées? That's where Eloise is this time."

Ariana sat on the front steps and plunged into the book. She was obsessed with Eloise, a spoiled little girl who lived at the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan without parental supervision. Then I caught a glimpse of my wife's bronzed legs. Maria wore a clinging white top and shorts. Pillow-ready curls touched her moist cheeks. She brushed my mouth with lips that tasted of ocean air and piña colada mix.

"My hero. Back from the business wars." Her blue eyes looked even brighter against her tan.

"Ready for my spoils," I said. "Let's get lost in the mango bushes."

"After the barbecue. Ted invited the boys over."

"What boys?"

"From the conference." She started unbuttoning my shirt. "Come out and play with us, or we'll drop a daisy cutter on you."

Defense-scientist humor. The "daisy cutter" was a bomb for clearing airfields.

"Drop it on me now," I begged.

My wife snickered. "Be nice."

She gave me a provocative kiss and took Ariana back to the party. They

looked alike in their white outfits, their dark curls bouncing on slender shoulders. Maria long and languid, my daughter cute and kinetic.

I was a lucky man.

Head buzzing with jet lag, I changed into a pair of tan shorts and a black polo shirt. My mirror check confirmed that I still had the all-American-boy look that stopped being popular about the time I started dating. Whistling a festive tune I went outside to mingle, resigning myself to being Mr Maria Weston for the afternoon.

I greeted Geofredo, Ted's faithful security man. He waved from his white booth without taking his eyes off the video screens.

The defense scientists partying on Ted's slice of paradise had mastered the tricky calculus of alcohol and belly surfing. The Atlantic Ocean rolled them on waves of deep blue onto bone-white sand. I stopped under the coconut palms planted by the sea wall. A perfect oasis for the bar.

"I'll have a grayhound," I told the bartender. Vodka and fresh grapefruit juice from Ted's own fruit trees.

I joined my wife. She winked at me from behind her sunglasses, listening to a painfully sunburned DARPA colleague tell a story about my father-in-law to a couple of young scientists.

"Ted lost his eye flying in Vietnam," the Darpa man said. "That's how he got to be a legend at the Pentagon. Northrup was beating his company on the stealth-bomber contract. Ted wanted to keep a piece of it. So he strolled into a conference room full of Air Force desk jockeys and made his pitch. 'Northrup can make its plane appear on enemy radar smaller than an eagle,' he said. Then he plucked his glass eye from its socket and rolled it down the conference table like a marble. 'But I can make it smaller than an eagle's *eye*.'"

Maria laughed for the thousandth time at what a character her father was. Then the man himself appeared next to me.

Ted draped a heavy, freckled arm over my shoulder. A highball glass sweated in his other hand. With his physical heft, and the Top Secret burdens that showed in his piercing good eye but not its prosthetic twin, my father-in-law looked more intimidating than most Fortune 500 CEOs. Ted Devlin had spent almost forty years with the churn of hot and cold war for his business cycle.

"Hey, buddy. Flight back was okay? Didn't get yourself lost?"

Ted liked to needle me because my former Air Force community had more pilot amenities than his Vietnam-era brethren.

"Lucky I still had GPS, according to a Brookings guy," I said to needle him back. "He says all the hype about finishing your Space Shield next year just makes our satellites juicier targets right now."

America's GPS constellation broadcast precise navigation signals. Our military would literally be lost without it.

"He's right." Ted waved his glass at the sky. "You have no idea how vulnerable our satellites are right now. Everybody knows how much we rely on GPS. You can't even find a parking place at the Pentagon without it."

That unnerved me, Ted agreeing with a Brookings pundit. "I thought they paid you to harden the new satellites."

Ted shook his head. "Congress didn't want to get serious about the threat. They nickel-and-dimed us for Band-Aids. Our satellites are about as secure as a litter of kittens until we get the Shield deployed."

And, at that moment, our lives changed forever.

"Hey, neighbor." I heard a voice like an ice-crusher call out from behind me. "Sun over the yardarm yet?"

Ted guffawed. "Get over here, Ed. Meet my family."

As his neighbor ambled toward us I recognized the rugged face. And the gold-plated dog tags clinking over his red T-shirt. Ed Casey, ex-Marine, producer of action movies. One of the ten most powerful people in Hollywood, which I knew because our housekeeper kept leaving her *Entertainment Weekly* in our bathroom. Ted told us he kept a house on Satellite Beach. Maybe he was trying to find out where America's next case of failed diplomacy might be so he could make the first movie about it.

"What a treat." Maria awarded Ed one of her best smiles.

The former warrior took one of her small hands in his two meaty ones and turned the full effect of his soulful eyes on her. "The genius. Your old man's always chewing my ear off about you."

Ted ushered us to where his wife Sunny, tanned and lean in a yellow bikini, shared her chaise lounge with our daughter. They cracked each other up blowing bubbles through their drink straws.

"Jeez, Sunny," Casey greeted our hostess. "You dress like that with all these wild men around?"

Sunny crinkled her soft grey eyes and blew him a polite kiss. Her hair

was icy blonde. Ted called her his "lemon gumdrop." Privately, I thought of her as Ted's belated trophy of the Cold War. Sunny's real name was Sonia, an orphaned Team Moscow swimmer who defected at fourteen. Ted discovered her twenty years later selling real estate. As soon as he had her checked out by his CIA pals, he'd persuaded her to become the second Mrs Devlin.

"And this is my granddaughter," Ted said, beaming.

"You look just like your mom," he told Ariana. She gave him her own winning smile, then a more solemn look when he reached down and tousled her hair.

"Professor Weston." Casey kept my hand in a solid squeeze. "You wrote the industrial-espionage article last month in *Foreign Policy*."

"Glad you read it."

"More than once." He nodded, looking genuinely delighted to find an obscure academic right next door. "I hear you do consulting. Maybe we could talk."

"Sure. I'll be back in my office on Tuesday."

He flashed a self-effacing grin. "I was hoping we could talk now."

I glanced at my host.

"Use my den, guys," Ted volunteered. "It's secure."

You could say so. The back of Ted's house consisted of huge slabs of bulletproof glass, since Ted threw lots of stones in his business. Small bumps and antennas poked out of the roof. I led Ed Casey through the sun-drenched two-story living room and past Ted's mahogany-paneled study.

Casey looked in. "How about in there? Ted said it was private."

"Private for Ted, maybe," I said. "He records everybody else."

I motioned him to the guest room that Maria and I used. If Ted bugged his guests, Sunny would kill him. It was a bright room with a white duvet on the bed and two overstuffed chairs.

Casey sat across from me and we stared at each other for a moment.

"So you hold the Francis Cabot Lowell Chair of International Business Ethics at NYU." He smirked. "Who funds that chair, anyway?"

"Anonymous donors through a foundation. I don't know who they are." Not true, but also none of his business.

"Well," he said, "they've got a hell of a sense of humor."

"Why? Francis Cabot Lowell was a great nineteenth-century industrialist."

"He was a great industrial spy," Casey said. "He stole the Cartwright-loom technology from England. That's how America became an economic powerhouse. But like your article said, now *we* have the technology and the rest of the world's intelligence services steal it. You identified Russia's SVR, France's DGSE . . ."

"The FBI identified them. Their agents got caught violating our Economic Espionage Act."

"You don't trust the French and Russians, if I read you right."

"I don't distrust them. I admire their stunning cynicism."

He grinned. "What did that Count who ran the French industrial spies say?"

"You mean the Comte de Marenche. He said that 'spying enables our intelligence service to discover a process in another country which might have taken French industry years to invent.' They've been stealing American technology for fifty years." I was getting tired of his game. "What's on your mind, Ed?"

"My new movie *Red Crescent* got stolen. It's supposed to open on the Fourth of July, but somebody stole a master copy from the studio. We can't let it get bootlegged before it opens. We could lose half a billion dollars."

"What makes you think I could help you?"

Casey took out his wallet. He removed a business card and handed it to me. No name. Just a picture of a stiletto-thin black bird in flight. And a telephone number with the country code for Ecuador.

"That *fragata* bird's found in the Galapagos Islands," Casey said. "It's klepto-parasitic. Has to steal food from other birds to live. Kind of a joke. The guy who owns this card, he steals for a living, too. I need to hire him. A friend gave me the card."

I stared at him, flicking the card with my finger, trying to read his motives for contacting me. All I could discern was the profit motive.

"What friend?"

Casey spoke the name of a client I had worked for many times.

Satisfied, I put the card in my pocket and leaned back in my chair. "Tell me how your movie got stolen."

"The studio doesn't know. The master was secured with military-level encryption. Supposed to be hack-proof. Your father-in-law's commercial division sold the studio the program."

Naturally. "So who do you think took it?"

"A real asshole. He doesn't need the money. He just hates the US."

"Where is this asshole?"

"Russia."

"I have to pass." And just when it was getting interesting. "Industrial espionage goes on every day and nobody gets killed. Except in Russia."

"The recovery fee is five million dollars."

I hesitated, then started up from the chair. "Sorry, Ed. I won't go there."

"What about your tax problem?"

I sat back down and gave him a long look. "I don't have a tax problem."

"You do now." I could tell that Casey got a kick out of this. "The studio already put the five million offshore in a numbered account. Your name's on it. If you take the job, you get the account number. If not, the IRS gets it on a tip. You'll have a hard time explaining, considering your history with those guys. Best case, you'd have to pay taxes on money you never earned. Worst case, they'd go after you again just because you pissed them off. You know what they're like."

And I did.

A Federal indictment with my name on it, probably faded over time but hardly erased, still sat in a vault at the US Justice Department. How had Ed pierced their iron veil of secrecy? No doubt by lifting a phone. Ed Casey had plenty of admirers inside the Beltway. Terry Weston, on the other hand, had some detractors.

"Hey," Casey grinned. "Don't feel bad. I think up this kind of stuff for a living. So how soon can you get started?"

Greed and fear both focus the mind. But not always accurately.

Later that evening, Maria and I walked the beach alone. She asked if I was crazy. I argued that nobody would kill anybody over a movie. She brought up my boycott of Moscow. I dismissed it as an old prejudice from the bloody *mafiya* era, no longer relevant now that Russia belonged to the Greater European Union. In a few days, I promised, I would return with stories and an extra nest egg to put away for Ariana's college years.

"Okay," she finally sighed. "You're the one taking all the risks."