



Objects in the Mirror

Rating: PG-13 (language)

Classification: Vignette, Angst

Spoilers: primarily "Adrift," but also the pilot episode, "Death Watch," "Gypsy Eyes," "Legacy"

Disclaimers: There's more than one this time. As always, I don't own Harm or his many issues. I just borrow them for entertainment. Also, I have to confess that I've completely plagiarized the concept for this story from "The West Wing". Those of you who are Josh Lyman fans (best character on the show, IMHO) will recognize this setup from the second-season WW episode "Noel". Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, right? Especially since I think WW lifted parts of *their* setup from the finale of M*A*S*H...

Author's Notes: This doesn't really fit into or around any of the episodes from season seven, but that's where it needs to go. I know we're operating in a fictional world here, but real people don't bail out of a fighter aircraft, spend hours floating in a storm-battered ocean, and then snap back to normal within days. Not even our dashing hero. I married a psychology major, but this is out of his area of expertise, so any specifics about PTSD are pretty much made up.

November 20, 2001
JAG Headquarters

"So how do you want to start this off?"

The visitor gazed at him calmly and shrugged. "Why don't you tell me about the Carter court-martial?"

From the far wall of the conference room, where he'd been walking aimlessly - he refused to consider it pacing - Harmon Rabb shot a knowing glare at the other man. "Look, I don't know what they've told you, but it wasn't that big a deal."

"Who's 'they'?"

"Whoever called you in here. The admiral, probably. It sure as hell wasn't me."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me," the older man returned with a smile.

Harm rolled his eyes and turned to face him. "What exactly's going on here, anyway? If I don't unload all my problems on you, are you going to suspend me from duty, or what?"

"I'm not a clinical psychiatrist, Commander. I deal specifically with victims of trauma. I've consulted with all sorts of service members, from the USS Cole sailors all the way back to the Marines in Beirut. But I doubt that anything I say about my qualifications is going to impress you very much."

He ignored that last statement. "I'm not a victim of anything. Whatever you think happened to me was part of my duties as a naval officer and nothing more."

"That doesn't mean it wasn't traumatic. And it has nothing to do with what I 'think' happened to you. I know exactly what happened to you. Your schedule's been cleared for the day, Commander, and I don't make house calls very often. So will you at least give me the courtesy of sitting down before you attempt to invalidate me entirely?"

With a defiant look that recalled years of teenage rebellion, he took a seat at the table.

"Let's start again. I'm Commander Anthony Jarrett. Most people call me Tony. May I call you Harmon?"

There was no use in fighting this at every turn. He'd have to choose his battles. "Harm," he answered with cool civility. "But if you know so much about me, you already knew that."

"Of course. But I wouldn't have been insulted if you wanted me to stick with 'Commander' instead. I know you don't want to talk to me, Harm; if I were in your place, I wouldn't want to talk to me either. The thing is, a lot of people are worried about you. If you want to try and prove to me that there's nothing wrong, go right ahead. But I'm awfully hard to convince."

"Whatever. Let's just get this over with."

Jarrett leaned back in his chair, ever calm. "So what happened with the Carter court-martial?"

"Nothing that doesn't happen every day around here. Do we have to dance around it like this? The Carter case doesn't matter. The Carter case isn't what almost got me killed. That's what you want to talk about, right? The fact that I punched out of a malfunctioning aircraft into the biggest thunderstorm in eight years?"

"Yes, I do want to talk about that. But one step at a time. The accident was six months ago. The Carter case was last week. It does matter, and I think you know why. Otherwise you wouldn't have been so eager to tell me it 'wasn't a big deal'."

Harm shook his head, already exasperated with the proceedings. "If I'm supposed to know why things matter, what are you doing here in the first place? I got frustrated with the case, and I blew off steam in an inappropriate way. It was stupid, but it was hardly the first time someone's gotten frustrated in this office."

"I don't doubt it. But this wasn't what I'd call typical frustration, and it wasn't just 'someone'. It was you. One of the senior officers on staff, with a reputation for being able to handle damn near anything. I got the basic story from some of your colleagues, but I want to know how you saw it, from the very beginning. How did the day start out?"

He wanted to resist. He wanted to tell this guy where to stick his psychoanalysis and walk out. But rational judgment overrode those urges, and besides, there was some part of him that wondered if maybe this might actually do some good. If it meant that he might not have to lie awake again tonight, feeling the way he had for the past few days ... maybe ...

He sighed. "I was late to work. Way late. That's how it started out."

November 13, 2001

"You're in for it," warned a slightly amused Mac before he could even step off the elevator. "The admiral's on the warpath."

Harm shot her a 'thanks a lot' look, shaking the rain from his overcoat. "It's a monsoon out there. Can't I be a little late for once?"

"Sailor, forty-two minutes is not 'a little late'. You'd better get in there and take your licks before court, because I've got plenty more waiting for you on cross-examination."

The good-natured taunt was characteristic of their friendship these days, the way it had been all those months ago. Usually it would have provoked a retort in kind, but this morning he just continued on toward his office, a distant expression clouding his eyes. Mac frowned. "Harm? Everything okay?"

He turned in her direction without really focusing on her. "Sure. See you in court." He didn't notice her watching him carefully as he dropped his coat and cover on a chair and

prepared himself to face the admiral's wrath.

"Your C.O. reamed you out?"

"With decent justification, I guess. He wasn't particularly satisfied with my excuse, but court was about to start, so I got saved by the bell."

Jarrett raised an eyebrow. "What excuse did you give him?"

"The truth," Harm replied, a little defensively. "I got held up. The Beltway was like a demolition derby that morning."

"Okay. So what happened in court?"

For the first time, his features held the slightest hint of a smile. "Mac kicked my ass," he admitted. "Maybe my head wasn't entirely in the game, but she nailed my guy cold. Petty Officer Carter was up on drug charges - possession with intent to distribute. I was sure she couldn't prove the intent to distribute, but it turned out my client hadn't exactly told me everything."

"I could see how that could be frustrating. You're trying to help the guy, but he's not cooperating."

"That's an understatement. Carter didn't have any direction whatsoever. He kept jumping around, changing his rating, so he never got anywhere in the Navy, and he couldn't figure out why. I felt sorry for him - maybe I even identified with him a little. The jumping around part, at least." The therapist nodded fractionally, as if that had been precisely the right answer. "I honestly wanted to help him, see if he could get himself straightened out. But he obviously didn't trust me."

"So when court went into recess, what happened?"

"If you're asking, you already know."

"Humor me."

"That was a hell of a surprise in there, Petty Officer," Harm hissed as he stormed out of the courtroom. "Surprises are really not good in this setting. You realize that, don't you?"

"I'm sorry, sir. It's just that - "

"What? You don't think I can help you? Spit it out, Carter, or you're likely to be spending a long time in Leavenworth."

His raised voice was drawing some attention, but it didn't register in his mind. Carter

shook his head. "You wouldn't understand, sir," he replied tightly.

Something there in that moment snapped, and for a brief instant, the full, irrational force of Harmon Rabb's emotions escaped.

"God damn it, Carter!" Before the bailiff or anyone else could react, Harm had slammed the younger man up against the wall.

"Harm! What the hell!?" Mac moved first, wrenching her partner away with a level of determination that only a worried Marine could summon. He didn't look at her: she wasn't sure he'd even heard her. "Jesus, Harm," she breathed, more quietly. "What's going on?"

After a second, he jerked free of her grip. "Nothing," he said dully. As the assembled staff members watched, stunned, he stalked into his office and slammed the door.

"That was it. Really. I apologized to the petty officer that afternoon, and everybody stayed out of my way for a while, but that was it."

"Not quite," Jarrett pointed out. "Some of the officers in the bullpen heard a fairly loud crash in your office just afterward."

"I was clumsy."

"You were angry."

"I was both. I just knocked something off my desk."

"Your Tomcat model was broken." Harm glanced up in surprise, but the other man only shrugged. "Your friends notice these things. It was missing the next day. Did you knock it off the shelf, or did you throw it across the room?"

With that, the proud, defiant commander seemed to deflate a little. "Somewhere in between," he confessed quietly.

"Harm, people get angry. We all understand that. But you know this isn't you. This isn't the way you normally act. Doesn't it make sense that there should be a reason why you feel like this?"

"Hey, if you've come up with one, I'm all ears."

The words were still harsh, but the pain behind them was beginning to creep through. Jarrett leaned his elbows on the table and spoke evenly. "You were angry because you weren't in control of the situation. Is that a fair assessment?"

Harm avoided the question. "Tony, in this line of work, the days where I actually *am* in control of the situation are few and far between."

"I very much doubt that, but I see your point. The kid, Carter, had thrown you for a loop, but that wasn't the real reason you were so frustrated. It wasn't the first thing that

happened to make you feel out of control that day. Was it?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" he responded evasively.

Jarrett fixed him with an unwavering stare that very nearly made him flinch. The ensuing query, however, actually did make him flinch.

"Tell me again why you were late to work that morning, Harm."

After a long pause, he spoke up, and his voice was almost too low to be recognizable. "It was the rain. Like I said."

"I know. But there's more to it, isn't there?"

"I really don't want to go there right now."

"All right. Later, maybe." The therapist stood up and crossed over to the small table in the corner. "You want some coffee?"

"No. Thanks."

Jarrett poured himself a cup and came back to reclaim his chair. "We might as well dive into the real issue here. You're obviously self-aware enough to figure out that there's a connection between what happened last week and the accident in May."

"If you say so. What I don't get is why."

"Hey, you can sit here and tell me it didn't affect you until you turn blue, but it's not going to get you anywhere. You were flying in the middle of a record-breaking storm. Your aircraft lost power and forced you to eject over the ocean. You spent hours out there fighting to survive. The toughest aviator in the Navy would have been terrified. No matter how much you try to convince yourself that it was just another day at the office, you're still going to have to deal with that trauma."

He gave a short, rueful laugh. "I think you need to understand something about me, Tony. My entire life has essentially been one traumatic event after another. If they all affected me like you think, I'd be in a padded cell by now. I handled this one the same way I handled the rest of them. Trust me."

"You 'handled' it?"

"Yes, damn it, I handled it!" Harm stood up from the table, boiling with sudden rage at this condescending son of a bitch. "That's what I do, all right? I don't have much choice. My father went MIA, I dealt with it. I crashed my plane, killed my RIO, lost my flight status - I dealt with it. My best friend and sometime girlfriend was murdered, and her damn doppelganger showed up as my new partner - I dealt with it. I found out my father's dead but had another son, who's a prisoner in a place where I can't do a thing to help him ... are you picking up a freaking pattern here?"

Absolutely unfazed, Jarrett shook his head. "Harm, the biography you just rattled off would shock a lot of people, and I'm sure that was your intention. But I've got it all right here in front of me." He gestured at the open file on the table: probably containing his service

record, and God knew what else. Harm honestly didn't want to know just how many psych evals had been done on him over the years. "And even if I didn't ... believe it or not, I've seen people in this Navy far more traumatized than you."

"What does that mean? I'm not screwed-up enough for you?"

"It's a good thing, Harm. You really don't want to be a challenge to me. But we're getting off track. As for that list you just gave me, you already know what I'm going to say, so let's get it over with. You haven't 'dealt with it'. Any of it. It's all still there, just like it always will be, and you'll continue to deal with it, because there's no finite endpoint to this process. Now I'm going to say something you didn't expect, so hold on. All that baggage you have isn't nearly as influential as you think it is."

Harm frowned, not comprehending. "I'm sorry. Did you just tell me that I've been leaning on my past as an *excuse*?"

"That's the polar opposite of what I'm saying."

"Well, that's what it sounded like."

"Then listen more carefully."

"I've gotta tell you, doc, your bedside manner - "

"I take my cues from my patients."

At that, Harm fell silent. At least now he didn't feel like he was being patronized. Jarrett continued. "Okay. What I'm saying is that you believe you're being driven by all these things that have happened to you, and in a way, that's true. You act with your passion, and sometimes it allows you to do things that others wouldn't be able to do. But when something doesn't go your way - when there's something you can't fix, or someone you can't help - you don't blame your past. You blame yourself. Almost beyond the point of reason, I'd say. There's something incongruous about that, don't you think?"

After a second or two, Harm slid back into the chair with a small shrug. "I'm sorry. I don't see where you're going with this."

The therapist smiled. "You're an intelligent man, and an excellent officer. Not all of that is a direct result of outside forces. Some of it's simply you, your strength of character. At some point, you're going to have to take personal responsibility for your successes, not just your failings."

He said nothing to that - there was nothing he could say. Jarrett nodded slightly and spoke again. "I didn't come here to talk about your ramp strike, or your family. You're not clinically depressed. Somehow, through your friends or some other means, I think you've accepted those events well enough to be able to not dwell on them so much. This one is different for some reason. I think you're still seeing it." Harm hesitated for a moment, torn. His reaction was evidence enough. "You are, aren't you? You play it over and over in your mind, trying to change what happened, trying to regain control of it. But it doesn't work. You just end up feeling that desperation and fear all over again."

The aviator's piercing eyes burned into the smooth tabletop as conflicting instincts battled in his mind. At last, he surrendered. "It's only been like that for a couple of weeks,"

he said softly, his voice wounded. "I don't know why it started, but I can't make it stop."

"It's normal for the effects to be delayed a little," Jarrett reassured him. "Six months is on the long side, but it's not unheard of. Sometimes a person simply doesn't have the opportunity to focus on the experience right after it happens. They're recovering from injuries, or dealing with other issues. When things return to normal, and you realize that 'normal' doesn't feel the same ... that's when it really hits you in the face."

Harm thought about Mac, and the emotional roller-coaster they'd been riding over the past few months; and he thought about the attacks in September that had turned everyday life into another world entirely. Suddenly, 'normal' felt as distant as Atlantis or Camelot. "When *what* hits you in the face?"

"Post-traumatic stress disorder," Jarrett replied, as kindly as possible. It didn't do much to dull the impact of his statement.

Harm paled slightly, but his features remained as if carved in stone. After taking a moment, the facetious air crept back into his voice. "I'm not too thrilled with the word 'disorder'," he remarked, trying to smile and falling short. "It sounds kinda ... well, permanent."

"Not really. Serious, though. You discovered the hard way that it can't exactly be ignored indefinitely."

"How could I have a disorder? It's not like I'm afraid to fly or anything. I mean, Christ - I've been flying chase detail at Pax River every other week."

"And it's not working, is it? You can fly three hops a day, and the nightmares keep coming back."

"Now hold up a minute," he fired back defensively. "I'm flying because they need me, not for some personal quest for absolution. In case you haven't noticed, most of our active pilots have sailed for Afghanistan by now."

"Okay. But regardless of the reasons, Pax doesn't fly tests in inclement weather. You may have jumped right back into the saddle, but you already knew you weren't afraid to fly. It wasn't the crash that made the accident so awful. You've crashed before. But this time, you were out in the storm for four hours. You were injured, and hypothermic, and you didn't know if anyone in the world knew where you were ..."

The words rapidly faded into the background as memories assaulted his mind: the jarring force as his body first struck the water; the tug of the parachute lines that threatened to drag him under; the driving rain against his bruised face; and the bitter helplessness that had settled over him as everything melted into a numb oblivion amid the endless waves. There was nothing to see in the darkness - nothing to hear over the roar of water. In his entire life, he'd never been so utterly, painfully alone.

There was a hand on his arm, and he gasped audibly before he could stop himself, jerking sharply back to reality. Tony Jarrett was standing beside him, gazing at him with compassion, and for once he didn't resent it. Belatedly, he realized that he was shaking, and that his hands ached from the force with which he'd been clenching his fists. Shocked, he stared up at the therapist with raw pain radiating from his expressive eyes.

"It's okay that it still hurts," Jarrett said quietly. "It's supposed to hurt. That's part of life. You just have to be able to admit it."

Wordlessly, Harm nodded.

"Are you ready to talk about what happened last week?"

Drawing a deep breath, he nodded again. As if in a trance, he moved toward the window, where the sun was beginning to sink below the trees. "It was the rain," he said again, his voice weak but certain. "A car spun out in front of me on the Beltway, and I almost got caught in a major pile-up. I had to do some pretty fast maneuvering, and in the middle of it my pager started going off, and suddenly it just felt like..."

"Like what happened just now. Like you were going down all over again. The warning sounds, and the storm, and the loss of control - it doesn't take much to bring it all back."

"Yeah. Only this time, I couldn't shake it off. I had to pull off the road because I couldn't keep my hands steady to drive. That was a new experience." He shook his head, almost in disbelief. "I sat there for twenty minutes, just crying, because I had no idea how to get back under control. I can't remember ever crying like that before. And I was so angry at myself for losing it like that..."

Finally, he turned back toward his guest. "That's why I was late," he finished lamely.

Jarrett nodded approvingly. "Nicely done, Commander. It takes some people weeks to get to this point. I should have pegged you for an overachiever."

Harm studied him for a minute. "You knew what I was going to say," he stated curiously. "You'd already figured out what happened that morning."

"I had a hunch," Jarrett offered simply. "It's much more common than you think. Why did you try so hard to hide this when it started?"

"I don't know. I guess I didn't want to have to admit that it was still bothering me. It's been months ... everyone's long since forgotten about it all by now."

"I don't think anyone's forgotten about it, Harm. Certainly not the people who waited in this building through that entire night, praying not to lose you."

"But - this isn't supposed to happen, is it? At least, not - "

"Not to people like you? Hate to break it to you, but yes. It is."

Harm rubbed at his eyes, drained by the effort of the past few hours. "So what happens now?"

"Now, you go home, and hopefully you sleep a little easier. I'll give you a call later on in the week, and we can set up another couple of meetings."

He looked wary. "That's it?"

"For now, it is. Like you said - you can handle it. As long as you're willing to accept

help, from me or from your friends.” The therapist shook his hand firmly, with a confident smile. “You’re lucky to have people who care so much about you.”

“Yeah, I guess I know.” He smiled back, the first open, honest smile in days. “Hope you can convince the admiral that I’m okay to stay on duty.”

“Your C.O. didn’t call me, Harm.”

The commander frowned. “Seriously? Who did?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say she’s probably on the other side of that door, waiting for you.” Jarrett extended his hand. “Take care.”

Harm returned the handshake gratefully and moved to the door. Sure enough, Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie was sitting on the bench in the hall, leaning against the wall. Seeing her sent an inexplicable feeling of warmth through him, and he blinked rapidly to erase any evidence of tears.

“How are you doing?” she asked softly.

He shook his head wonderingly. “How did you know?”

“I could tell something was wrong for a while. I just didn’t know what it was until right after the thing with Carter. Even that was more luck than anything else...”

Helplessly, Mac watched her partner pull himself away from her guiding hands and vanish into his office. The slam of the door halted her immediate instinct to go after him, and she paused for a moment, uncertain. The staff members in the bullpen were staring at the closed door with a kind of bewilderment, and she managed a curt “As you were” before going into her own office, her heart breaking for her friend’s inexplicable pain.

Falling into her chair, she found herself looking blankly at the wall in the direction of Harm’s office. That wasn’t the man she knew in there. He didn’t lose control: it wasn’t in his nature. What didn’t she know? What had happened to him that she couldn’t see?

Frustrated, she shoved aside the papers on her desk, causing the latest copy of the Navy Times to fall partway open. The words “Patrick Henry” caught her eye, and she looked closer. The article was a feature on the carrier’s medical staff. Idly she flipped the page - and nearly dropped the paper in shock.

A picture filled the top of the page. Its caption read: “A concerned RIO looks on as doctors tend to her injured comrade. The aviators were forced to eject from their crippled aircraft into the frigid Atlantic last May. ‘With search and rescue, sometimes it’s a matter of minutes,’ one rescue medic described. ‘This guy was incredibly lucky.’”

In the photo, it was easy to recognize Skates, leaning over the bed and grasping Harm’s hand with an expression of fear and desperation. His battered, motionless body and pale-gray skin made for a terrifying image, and Mac’s eyes involuntarily filled with tears. She hadn’t seen him like this - she’d never seen him like this. She’d only seen what all of them had; his determination to be strong, to bounce back and be exactly what everyone expected of him in a

matter of days. In an instant, she understood how impossible that was. Even for him.

With the slightest tremble in her fingers, she reached for the phone.

“I only wish I’d figured it out sooner. You shouldn’t have had to deal with this on your own.”

In response, he reached for her hand. “You’re my angel, Marine,” he whispered.

“Not really. I’m just somebody who knows what it’s like to need a friend.” She handed him his cover and linked her fingers through his. “Come on, sailor. I’ll buy you a cup of coffee.”

Hand in hand, they headed for the door.

**** THE END ****