

**Author's Note:** Originally written for the **HODOWE: Mardi Gras Challenge** and evokes the idea of a period of indulgence in expectation of a period of deprivation.



There is only one real deprivation... and that is not to be able to give one's gifts to those one loves most.

*May Sarton*

## DEPRIVATION OF THE HEART

BY [LAH](#)

### **Late Winter 1958**

Warm. This room was warm; the bed where he lay was warm; the body of the woman beside him was warm; his innermost heart was warm. He should be content. He was; yet he wasn't. Because he knew it was coming: the chill.

Napoleon Solo was not a man who freely acknowledged anything as inevitable. He fought against any such resigned nod to the Fates with every fiber of his being, with every synapse within his brain, with every beat of his heart. So for the past few weeks he had been indulging in the warmth as much and as often as he could. Like a man about to face a long fast who

ravenously gobbles every scrap of nourishment available to him prior to that period of foreseeable deprivation.

The woman at the center of this current almost manic period of indulgence was his Clara. At the moment he simply could not get enough of her either physically or emotionally. Being close to her in sensation and in sentiment was an overpowering need in him, all centered on the fact that she indeed owned his heart. Yet his soul belonged to the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. And she knew it. His Clara. Not that he had ever tried to deny it to her. Not that he hadn't always made unambiguous the distinction between his devotion to her and his dedication to U.N.C.L.E. And they had reached an understanding, he and his Clara. He had thought they had... or maybe he had only hoped.

He didn't really know if what he expected of her was fair: that she accept she in many ways would always be second to U.N.C.L.E. in his life. He didn't really know if what she expected of him was fair: that he put her first in everything in his life. Like all people in love they had made promises to one another: she that she would be tolerant of and compliant with his chosen life path; he that he would fulfill his responsibility to her no less than he fulfilled that to U.N.C.L.E. She always wore the diamond ring he had given her in pledge, knowing it would be years before they could marry, not until his career in the field was over. He often wore the gold lovers' knot cufflinks she had given him in pledge, knowing he was asking much of someone to whom he freely proclaimed himself heart-bound.

Lately both had begun to find it more and more difficult to adhere to those promises. Lately his commitment to U.N.C.L.E. had truly begun to overpower anything else in his life. Lately his Clara had truly begun to become restless with the acceptance of a secondary position in his life and with the waiting. Thus lately their time together had been more often than not spent in bed, spent in overwhelmingly intense sex, spent in kissing and cuddling afterwards, spent in purposely not talking and not thinking about any of the compromises. But this period of self-indulgence could not last and likely they both recognized that inevitability, though they admitted nothing.

Now, however, that inevitability was closing in on Napoleon's consciousness and would no longer be ignored. His head throbbed with that awareness and he squinted, his brow wrinkling as he attempted unsuccessfully to fight off the sting of his own knowing.

"Bad headache, Napoleon?" questioned Clara with real concern.

Napoleon turned his head on the pillow to fully face the woman lying in bed beside him, the woman to whom he had just made love with obsessive abandon, the woman who owned his heart but not his soul. "Excruciating," he confessed.

Pleasantly cool hands massaged his brow. "You let them crack you on the head too often."

Napoleon laughed a bit uncomfortably. "Well, it isn't by choice you know."

"Yes, it is by choice, Napoleon. You decided on this career and thus on all that goes with it."

Was that the sound of a shoe heavily dropping that echoed in his head? More like a lead-toed boot. No, much more like an explosion: promises self-detonating. And what would the fiery blast leave behind?

“That’s kind of an unfair statement, Clara,” he made a last-ditch endeavor to rescue their relationship and his own heart from the eruptive conflagration. “I chose U.N.C.L.E.: yes. But I chose it because I believe in what it stands for. It makes me realize I can make a difference for the better in this world, even if that does entail enduring occasional hard knocks on the head, amongst other painful experiences.”

“But I didn’t choose that lifestyle, Napoleon, and I don’t want to be dragged into it,” Clara decimated the last of his efforts.

“You’re not—”

“I am, Napoleon,” interrupted Clara sternly. “Every day I have to wait and worry whether I’ll ever see you again. I can’t plan anything special for us, not even a simple dinner, with any guarantee you will actually be there to share it. And if you do manage to show up, you likely will be bruised and battered, giving me yet more cause for anxiety. That’s not even mentioning all the times I’m left with nothing but prayer to hold my heart together as I wonder whether you’ll live through some serious injury or other.”

“I’m sorry, Clara,” apologized Napoleon sincerely. His heart was heavy. He hated hurting her; never intended doing so. Things just were as they were. “I understand it’s difficult for you, but—”

“No, you don’t understand, Napoleon. You really haven’t a clue. You are too devoted to your deeds of daring derring-do, too involved with saving the world to really be involved with me and my singular life.”

Napoleon eyed with some alarm the woman he loved more than he had ever anticipated loving anyone in his always secretly isolated existence. “What exactly are you saying, Clara?” But he already knew, didn’t he? Of course he did. His heart literally ached with that knowledge.

“I’m saying I can’t do this anymore, Napoleon. I’m saying it has to be me or U.N.C.L.E. You can’t have us both.”

“Clara, don’t make me choose,” he pleaded with heartbreak clearly evident in his voice.

“It seems you’ve already chosen,” Clara forestalled any further beseeching of his case. “Have a good life, Napoleon,” she finalized as she got up out of their shared bed for the last time. “And I do genuinely mean that, though I doubt you currently realize how lonely that life will likely turn out to be.”

She walked out of the room, out of the apartment, out of his life, and as abruptly as that she was his Clara no longer.

Despite what others assumed of him, Napoleon Solo was well versed in the techniques of self-discipline. Thus at that moment he determined he would never permit himself to love again as he loved Clara; never again would he surrender his heart so completely. Such love put his heart in conflict with his soul and a man could not live like that, not and remain sane. The season of deprivation had begun.

Chilled. This room was chilled; the bed where he lay was chilled; the empty space beside him was chilled; his innermost heart was chilled. He should be discontent. He was; yet he wasn’t.

Because he now knew and acknowledged the truth: that love for him needed to be insouciant, insubstantial, undemanding; not a responsibility to be faithfully fulfilled but a freedom to be extensively sampled.

In this season of deprivation of the heart, there was no other choice.

**—THE END—**

