

# The First Time and Again

**Author:** EmilyAnn

**Summary:** Before and during 'The First Time,' several of the key SMK players reflect on their lives. In response to a challenge on another list to write a story stemming from a particular phrase . . .

**Rating:** PG

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Some portions of "The First Time," by Brad Buckner and Eugenie Ross-Leming have been quoted.

**Thanks:** to the bees for issuing the challenge in the first place and reading one of the early drafts; to my friend, Kim, for reading this over again and pushing me to make it better; and to my friend, Merel, for being there . . .

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The thing that frightens me most is not the constant, looming threat of communism, nor is it the continued instability in third world countries. Racists and radicals at home do not scare me, and I'm strangely lacking in the traditional phobias.

No, the thing that keeps me up nights is the fact that my best agent is on an express train to nowhere, and I don't know how to stop his self-destruction.

Just as I begin to worry, I see him. He's come in late again. His eyes are bloodshot, and he's made only a halfhearted attempt at shaving; he looks like hell.

"Lee!" I open my door and call him into my office.

He approaches and I see on his face the familiar mask of deliberate emotional absence. His feelings are so deeply buried that they may as well be nonexistent.

"It's been six months now," Francine, my assistant comments under her breath as she, too, watches. "When is he going to let go?"

"When he's in Tony's place," I tell her, and her blue eyes widen. Though I spoke in hyperbole,

we both know that my statement hit very close to home. Lee Stetson blames himself for his partner's death and would be willing to give up almost anything to reverse the circumstances.

"Are you sure he's okay for this assignment?" she voices my own misgivings. Six months ago, neither one of us would've had any doubts. However, six months in the life of a counterintelligence agent can be a lifetime, and Stetson wears them as such.

"Even flying solo, he's the best man for the job," I tell her, and it's the truth. Lee's track record supports it. She nods in agreement and understanding as Lee enters the office.

"Sit down, Scarecrow," I instruct, and he complies.

"This came for you." He takes the relay I'm holding out, and I wait for him to digest the information before I let the other shoe drop. "Fielding was killed last night."

"Jesus . . ." a flicker of sorrow tempers the shock in his face. It's good to know he can still feel some things.

He skims the relay again. "I need to find a way to get into that party. If it'll plug our leak . . ." He thinks aloud, letting the rest of his thought trail away.

Then, without waiting to be dismissed, he leaves my office. "I'll check in with you later, Billy."

I nod slowly, hoping that, for a change, he'll be careful.

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Jake, my husband, passed away when Amanda was away at college. I was suddenly widowed, deprived of the love of my life, and couldn't even share my pain with my daughter. For her, I had to be strong.

I mourned him in private, in my own way, on my own time. It wasn't until ten years later, though, when Amanda showed up on my doorstep, tearstained and shaking, to inform me that she and Joe had decided to end their marriage, that I knew what sadness was.

I was sad, not for myself, but for her - seeing my baby girl in tears, all her plans for the future shattered, hurt me immensely. Even now, I think on that as the saddest day of my life.

I have to admit, though, as I watch her getting ready to go out, that she's come a long way in the past year. Her self-confidence is restored, and she's moving on with her life quite nicely.

I think that maybe she should have someone else to share that life with. Dean. He is so good for her. Yes, Dean -- he's nice and reliable, from a good family, and a very good listener.

He'd never run off to a foreign country and leave her behind.

As Amanda buttons her coat, I try to subtly inquire about the future of their relationship. She evades the question, and my grandsons and I smile as we reassure her that there's no pressure, but I know the truth. As wonderful as Dean is, he does have his faults - he's not patient. He won't wait forever.

She fetches her keys, and I watch her take off for the train station. It's good that she's dropping him off. Things like that mean they're one step closer to permanent.

"All right!" The door's slam jars me from my reverie, and I clap my hands to get the boys' attention. "Why don't you two finish getting ready for school? I don't want to have to explain to your mother why you missed the bus again."

"Yeah, Grandma!"

"Okay, Grandma!"

They move with such simultaneity that I think for a moment that they're twins rather than two years apart.

It would be good for them to have a man around the house. Still, as I watch them bound up the stairs, I have to admit, Amanda has done a very good job on her own.

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My favorite childhood memory is the time I spent on recess. The other military brats and I would play tag, capture the flag, and other competitive childhood games. Running all over the school yard, we would work off our excess energy until the bell rang, and we were called back to class.

Class was, I thought, pointless - there were any number of things I'd rather be doing. Of course, home wasn't much better. Life with my uncle was comfortable, but little more. Recess was the one time I was truly free to be myself, and even now, I feel a sense of contentment when I bring up the memories.

Right now, I can't dwell on that feeling, though. I'm too busy being chased by two Russians. A grown up, death-stakes version of tag. And it's not that fun anymore. The difference between this and recess is more than the stakes, though. Recess ended after half an hour; I've been running from these jokers for most of the night.

I'm in good shape. I've run marathons, and can disarm an enemy agent bare-handed, but playing tag with Boris and Natasha all night has left me drained.

Hoping to get lost in the crowd, I duck into the Callahan Drive train station. Leaning against the ticket counter, I pause long enough to glance briefly over my shoulder before I once again

take off in a sprint.

I spot a parked train and use it for cover. I believe in making the most of every opportunity. Suddenly, someone catches my eye. A woman -- tall, brunette, confident - another opportunity.

"Just walk with me." I grab her arm, and plead with her.

"I beg your pardon!" On a fundamental level, I can't blame her for being taken aback, but the stakes now are too high.

"Please . . ." I look deeply into her eyes, and am struck by how intense, how expressive they are. For a moment, I get lost in them, and then quickly am returned to the present, and feeling oddly as though I've connected with her in more ways than one.

"All right," she agrees, albeit reluctantly. Tag has suddenly grown a lot more interesting.

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The thing I regret most about my life is saying good-bye. It wasn't as if I had any choice, really. I knew that I could make a difference here. She belonged at home, with our children.

I thought about giving her an ultimatum - if you really loved me, you'd come with me - but it wouldn't have been fair. When I think about it, she could've easily done the same thing - if I really loved her I would've stayed behind. Instead, she said that because she really loved me, she was letting me go.

It's frightening to be on the receiving end of so much unconditional love.

Africa is hot and dry. The people regard me as some sort of wonder - a white man from far across the sea come to solve all their problems. I'm not though - I'm just a man, as fallible as any other.

Yes, I know I have a lot to offer - a western education, a law degree, and a limitless supply of good intentions. The delivery chief hands me the manifests and I sign them absently, pointing in the direction of the warehouse and speaking in my broken, bush French.

With another nod in his direction, I head back toward the government buildings. A Lammergeier soars overhead, greeting the morning and searching, like the people in its land, for food.

I study it for a moment, and try to shake off my residual self-doubts. The people of Estoccia are starving, and I CAN help. That's what I'm here to do. Two more young native men approach me, chattering rapidly, their eyes alive.

Only months ago, I had visited their home with other EAO workers, distributing antibiotics

and grain as they lay in beds, starving and sick with parasitic fever. Seeing them now, full of life, warms my heart. I AM making a difference.

"Good morning, Mr. Prime Minister." I nod in acknowledgment as I enter the building.

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If I could go anywhere in the world, I'd go see my dad in Africa.

I love my mom and my grandma, and Jamie's okay, but I miss my dad. It would be cool to see him, and all the different people and animals he talks about in his letters.

It would be awesome to go to a different country and spend more time with my dad.

Arlington is boring; I bet Africa would be exciting. School is the worst; Joey Robinson says they don't even have schools in Africa. And since there's no water either, my dad wouldn't make me take a shower every day.

Dad says there's not much food either. And if it's hot there might not be any way to keep ice cream cold.

Maybe I could go see him, and then come back.

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I won! I did it! I won the spelling bee!

Phillip said I couldn't do it, but I won!

I got a blue ribbon. Ribbon - R-I-B-B-O-N. I even knew the difference between carrot, carat, and karat.

I won, and I beat a fifth grader.

I think this has got to be the thing that I'm proudest of. Even prouder than the time mom let me walk to the store by myself. Even prouder than the first time I rode a bike without training wheels.

Phillip's over there on the other side of the playground. Maybe I'll go over there and tell him. Arlington is so exciting!

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Damn strange men and their stupid mysterious packages.

All I wanted to do was take Dean to the train station, drop him off and get on with my day.

If I could accomplish one more thing in my life, that would be it. To live one day just for myself without worrying about my mother, my sons, or Dean, or . . . strange men in train stations.

It sounds selfish, and I cringe at the thought, pushing the package away, and turn back to dinner preparations. Phillip and Jamie will be home soon, and mother has another dinner date with her podiatrist friend.

I pull a head of lettuce from the refrigerator and begin shredding it for the salad.

What right did he have, anyway? Coming into my life without being invited - giving me an impossible task. Man in the red hat indeed.

Still, it was rather exciting, and heaven knows I've been missing that lately. Dean's nice, but he's **not** exciting.

But *him* . . . his eyes. There was something in there. Something that said he really *did* need my help -- something that wouldn't let me say 'no'. I wonder what it was all about; it was almost like we made a connection for a moment. He didn't look like a gangster, but I can't really think that he'd be something like a spy. Spies don't do things like that.

I suppose that I could always call him, and find out what was going on. It's the only way that I'm ever really going to get any answers, and heaven knows I don't want that package in my house. If I called because I was curious, and not because I felt I had to, that would be doing it for myself, wouldn't it? And I am curious . . .

**end**