

LEAPS AND *To Write What*



LEAPS AND FISHES I

To Write What Once Went Wrong

the first official C-Leaper fanzine

edited by Julie L. Jekel and Jennifer Bohn

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Introduction: "What is 'C-Leapers'?"

by Jennifer Bohn

"C-Leapers" is a group of *Quantum Leap* fans who are also Christians of various denominations. We operate entirely through e-mail on the Internet. The group formed in late-March, 1995, after Christians began finding each other through the Internet newsgroup "rec.arts.sf.tv.quantum-leap" (or "RASTQL").

Members currently represent five different countries: Australia, New Zealand, England, Canada and the United States. Within the U.S., the group stretches from California to Massachusetts and from Washington to Florida. Many professions can be found among our ranks, including (but certainly not limited to): computer-people, librarians, full-time mothers, full-time students, teachers, writers and even a chemical engineer! Ages range from seventeen to fifty-two.

What began as a prayer-only group quickly evolved into a prayer-discussion-support-chat group that has become a surrogate family for many of its 40+ members.

It looks like 1996 will be dubbed "The Year We Met," as many C-Leapers have made an extra effort to find each other face-to-face this year. Four C-Leapers celebrated the New Year together; another five attended LeapCon together in February, and six attended IndyLeap in July. These meetings, and others, just reinforce the family feeling that has grown in the group for the past year.

If you would like more information about the "C-Leapers" group, feel free to e-mail <c-leaper@bluemarble.net>.



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Because I Love You, Goodbye

by Jennifer L. Rowland

The door slammed behind the little boy as he rushed into the house. He'd saved his lunch money all week to buy the surprise for his little sister. He smiled to think how her face would light up when he gave it to her. She'd pointed to it the last time Momma had taken them to the five and dime. But Papa was away again, and money was tight. Momma always got upset at any reminder of how poor they were, so the little boy had decided to save up and buy it himself.

He found his sister staring out the living room window. Her long brown hair was tousled, covering the round face with the telltale features of Down's Syndrome.

"Hiya, Squirt," he said.

His sister spun away from the window excitedly when she heard his voice. "Al!" She ran to deliver a hug and kiss.

"I got something for you, Trudy." Her face lit up even more. "Close your eyes and put out your hands." He reached into his satchel and dropped a box of crayons into her outstretched hands. "Okay, you can open 'em now."

Trudy squealed with delight at the colorful wax sticks. She opened the lid and pulled out the red, her favorite color. She turned it over and over in her hand, mesmerized by its brightness.

Al plunged his hand into his satchel again, coming up with a sheaf of drawing paper tied with a red ribbon. "You need something to draw on, don't you think?" he said with a smile.

His sister's beaming face brightened even more. Al was glad he'd gone without lunch that week. Anything he could do to make Trudy happy; she certainly had enough to deal with. Last week, one of the Gibson boys had thrown a rock at her, taunting her about her appearance. Al chased him for a block before getting into a scuffle that cost him a bloody nose. But the smile now gracing her face made it all worthwhile.

"Well, aren't you going to draw something?" he asked.

Trudy shook her head, hugging the paper and crayons to her chest. "Not yet." She held up the red crayon. "Too pretty."

Al laughed and hugged his little sister. "I'm glad you like it." He looked around the living room. His mother's tan coat lay in a disheveled pile on Papa's favorite chair. "Where's Momma?"

Trudy stiffened in his arms and looked uncertainly to the dining room. Al winced as he heard the clink of glass against glass, and hugged his sister tighter.

"Al?" The voice from the dining room was beginning to slur. Even a six-year-old could tell that a large amount of alcohol had been consumed. "Albert!"

"Yes, Momma?" Al patted his sister's shoulders to reassure her, and himself. Their mother's voice had the impatient edge that too much gin brought.

Katrina Calavizzi staggered into the living room clutching the bottle of gin. Her other hand held a glass of liquor. "What took you so long to get home?" she demanded.

Before he could answer, Trudy toddled forward, her arms extended with the crayons and paper. "See?"

Their mother's eyes narrowed menacingly. "Where did you get that?"

The little girl smiled at her big brother. "Al."

Their mother whirled on Al. "Did you steal that?"

"No!" He was indignant.

"Then how did you pay for it?"

Al knew his mother would be furious if she found out he'd used his lunch money. He opened his mouth to deliver a story, but the growling of his empty stomach reached the surface before his words.

The bottle and glass came down on the living room table with a crash. Gin slobbered over the side of the glass. Al yelped as his mother grabbed his arm. "You used your lunch money, didn't you?" She shook him. "Didn't you!"

"Momma, I only wanted to do something for Trudy," Al stammered.

That statement earned him a slap across the face. "Are you saying that I can't take care of her?" Mrs. Calavicci shouted. "That money only goes so far! That money was for your lunch, not for you to spend on useless things!"

"But, Momma, I..."

"Shut up when I'm talking!" She screamed. "I told her we couldn't afford that! How do you think that makes me look!"

"Momma, I'm sorry. I just thought..."

"No, you didn't think! You never think, you worthless child!" Another slap rapidly descended on the little boy. Tears welled up in his dark eyes, but he refused to let any of them spill over. He smiled at his terrified sister to let her know everything would be okay. Mrs. Calavicci saw the smile and angrily misinterpreted it as impudence. "You think this is funny, young man?" the alcohol-roughened voice tightened in rage. Al cried out as the new barrage of blows struck old bruises. The tears he'd been holding back ran down his cheeks. He fell to his knees as his mother shoved him, advancing on the quivering Trudy. The child still clutched the crayons and paper.

"No, Mommy. Pretty," Trudy said in a small voice. The four-year-old backed into a corner. "Pretty from Al."

Reminding her mother of who had bought the crayons and drawing paper was not a good idea. She viciously knocked the precious gift out of Trudy's hands. Crayons scattered across the living room floor. "Go to your room," she ordered.

Trudy stared in horror at the rainbow rolling in all directions. "No! Mine!" she screamed as their mother grabbed her by the curls.

"I told you to go to your room!" She raised her flattened hand to strike.

"No!" Al yelled. He ran in front of Trudy; the blow intended for his sister caught him hard across the back. "Go to your room, Trudy. Please," he coughed out. She disappeared down the hall. Although he was still gasping for breath, he relaxed now that his sister was out of harm's way. His relief was short-lived though. His mother was in a drunken rage.

Mrs. Calavicci snatched a handful of Al's hair and twisted it. "So now you think you can raise her better than me?" The young boy had never before heard so much anger in his mother's voice. Frightened, he tried to pull away, but his mother's grip was too tight. His futile efforts enraged her. She slapped him, the large diamond of her engagement ring catching him on the brow. A trickle of blood ran down his left cheek.

"Momma, I'm sorry," he sobbed. "I thought it would help."

"I do not need you to raise my daughter for me!" Mrs. Calavicci shouted, punctuating each word with a slap. Another cut opened up on Al's cheekbone.

Anger displaced his fear. He shouted through his tears, "I just wanted to make Trudy happy! You don't seem to care about that!"

His mother flew into a blind rage. Savage blows rained upon the small body. The storm of fury came to an abrupt halt when Al's head impacted with the wall. The child's eyes rolled back into his head before he slumped into an insensate heap.

Horrified, Mrs. Calavicci backed away from the crumpled form of her son. Her retreat was stopped by the living room table. The gin bottle clinked against the glass as a result of the vibration. A shaky hand reached back for the glass. The ice tinkled inside as the shivering hand brought the drink to her lips. A small voice interrupted her.

"Mommy?" Trudy's round face was peering into the living room. "Why Al go nite-nite?"

Mrs. Calavicci's body was racked with sobs. "Go back to your room!" she screamed. Her daughter vanished. Katrina looked at the glass in her hand, then hurled it across the room. It shattered against the far wall.

Her hands clamped over her mouth, Al's mother fell to her knees beside the unconscious body of her little boy. Unsteady hands lifted the motionless form and cradled it in her lap. Tears splashed on her son's forehead as she smoothed his hair.

"Oh, Al. Baby, Momma's sorry." She began to rock back and forth, still hugging her son. "Shhh, sweetheart. Momma didn't mean it." An agonized scream escaped from her throat. "Dear God, help me," she sobbed. She lifted the hand that had been caressing his cheek to wipe away the tears that blinded her. She choked when she saw the blood on it--Al's blood--her son's blood.

"Oh, God, no," she whispered in horror. She hugged her unconscious son tighter. "I can't do this anymore," she wept into Al's hair. "It isn't fair to you, or to Trudy. I can't make my babies suffer for my mistakes."

The gin bottle rested on the living room table, directly in her line of sight. The label taunted her, inviting her to drown away the harsh reality. "No," she forced herself to look at the small bruised face in her lap. But her gaze kept bouncing up to the gleaming bottle.

"Go away!" she screamed at the bottle. "Go away," she repeated over and over again. Mrs. Calavicci looked at Al's unconscious face again. She could hear Trudy's crying drift down the hallway. "Yes, go away. I'll go away."

She got up and carried Al to the couch. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, baby," she whispered. She kissed Al's forehead. "I love you."

Mrs. Calavicci went to her room to pack.

* * * * *

She propped the note for her husband against the dresser mirror, where he would find it on his return the next day, walked into the living room with a suitcase in each hand, and checked the window for her taxi. It was waiting at the curb. Mrs. Calavicci looked at her home one final time before locking the door behind her.

The clicking lock was the first sound Al heard as consciousness returned. Despite a splitting headache, he got up from the couch to look out the window and saw his mother helping the taxi driver lift her luggage into the trunk of the cab. "Momma, no!" he cried.

He ran to the door, but couldn't open it. It had been locked from the outside, and Al couldn't unlock the deadbolt without a key. He frantically jiggled the door knob, crying for his mother all the while. Realizing the futility of his effort, Al ran into the kitchen, which was closer to the street.

Al climbed onto the counter, pressing his hands against the kitchen window. "Momma, no! Don't go!" he screamed as he beat against the window. "Momma! Come back!" Al saw his mother look back before she sat down in the taxi and closed the door. "No!" he screamed. He beat his hands against the window so furiously that one hand went through the glass, but didn't even notice. He continued calling for her. "Momma! Come back! I'll be good! Don't go!" Al screamed until his throat was raw.

He would never know how his screams tore at his mother's heart. All he knew was that she was leaving. He continued crying for her long after the cab was out of sight.

"I'll be good, Momma. Come back," he whimpered. The cold air bitterly nipped his fingers as he waved his arm through the broken pane. He stretched his fingers out, snatching at empty air. "MOMMA!" he screamed again.

He stayed at the window for what seemed like an eternity, but the bright yellow taxi never rounded the corner. The thick, hot tears filling his eyes blinded him. He pulled his hand back through the broken glass. New cuts appeared on his arm from the shards remaining in the window pane. Al couldn't hold back a whine of pain, and he hugged his arm against his chest.

He leaned his head against the cool glass of an unbroken pane. The sharp ache in his head was making the little boy sick to his stomach. A fat, salty tear splashed off the end of his nose and landed on his bleeding arm and he winced at the sting.

With his arm pressed against his chest, Al clambered down from the counter, swaying when his feet hit the floor. He sank to the ground, leaning against a cabinet door with flaking yellow paint. He stared at the red streaks on his arm, corresponding to wide stains on his white shirt.

Momma wouldn't be happy about the mess he'd made of his shirt, Al thought. He began sobbing again at the thought of his mother. "Momma, come back," he whispered, fighting to force the sounds past the thick sobs in his throat.

The force of his weeping combined with his lacerated arm and the sickening pain in his head soon proved too much for the little boy to handle. Unable to run to the bathroom, he leaned into a corner and was sick. Without a parent around to soothe his face or wipe his mouth, Al found no comfort from his nausea. He lay on his back on the cold linoleum and cried, his breathing spastic from the tears and the mild panic he always felt when he threw up. He closed his eyes in an attempt to stop the kitchen from spinning about him.

"Al?" A small voice squeaked in his ear. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes and turned his head to the side. Trudy's tear-stained face came into slow focus. She huddled on the floor in a tight ball, gazing on her big brother. "Where's Mommy?"

Al swallowed hard, battling another wave of nausea as he sat up. His sister immediately snuggled against him. "She...sh-she left," he answered.

Trudy turned her face up and blinked furiously. "Mommy go bye-bye?" she asked. She burst into tears and buried her face in her knees.

Al sighed and wrapped a comforting arm around his sister's shuddering shoulders. "It's all right, Trudy. I-I'm here."

Trudy slowly lifted her head and he brushed the tangled brown locks from her face. Her round face was flushed and a small trail of mucus was making its way down her upper lip. Al crawled to the table, too dizzy to walk. He pulled himself up with his good arm and reached for a napkin from the nearest place setting. He crawled back to the sniffling Trudy and began cleaning her face.

"Blow," he instructed her, holding the napkin below her nose. Trudy complied, giggling as she always did, despite her tears.

"Al!" she shouted. "You hurted?" She pointed to his right arm he still cradled against his body.

"I-I'm okay, T-Trudy," he stammered. He shook his head to clear it and immediately regretted it. The shooting pain resurrected a powerful wave of nausea. He dragged himself back to the corner where he had been sick earlier as quickly as he could. He spat and shoved himself away equally as quickly and lay on the floor again.

Trudy curled next to her prostrate brother and stuck her thumb in her mouth. Al was feeling so sick he didn't even try to deny her pacifier, despite the fact that he and their father had been trying to break her of the habit. He missed their mother so much that he too shoved a thumb in his mouth, something he hadn't done for several years. He gradually inclined his head until it was resting against hers. Then both children fell asleep.

"I want Mommy!" Trudy wailed.

Al battled dizziness and forced his eyes open. His sister was no longer curled by his side. The dizziness disoriented him so much that he was unable to locate her by her cries. He pushed himself up on his elbows to look around the kitchen. When he raised his head, he saw a small, brown mouse climbing across his shoe.

He screamed. Kicking his legs violently, he scooted crab-like out of the kitchen.

The living room was pitch black, which frightened the little boy to nearly the same degree the mouse had. He struggled to adjust to the darkness so he would be able to find Trudy. She became absolutely terrified of the dark. He strained his eyes against the weak light of the crescent moon. His sister's cries were muffled now, so he knew she had hidden herself where she could bury her face to feel safe.

"Trudy? Where are you?" he called. He walked forward with his hands outstretched before him like a blind man. He stumbled into the table, knocking over the abandoned gin bottle and yelping as the alcohol poured off the table onto his wounded arm.

Trudy screamed in terror and began sobbing. Al squinted until he made out the shape of his little sister shivering on the couch. She screamed and fought against him when he put his arms around her.

"Trudy, it's okay. It's me. It's Al," he tried. "It's dark, Trudy. I don't want you to get hurt."

Trudy stopped struggling. "Al?" She narrowed her eyes and tried to focus on her brother. "Dark, Al. Too dark."

"I know, Trudy," he said. "It's okay. I'm here."

"Light, Al? Make the light."

Al stared across the dark room at the wall by the kitchen. He heard the mouse skittering around the kitchen and gulped. Moving toward the light switch would not only require him to navigate the dark room, but it would place him near the mouse again.

"Um, if I turn the light on I have to get up, Trudy," Al said, hoping Trudy would decide she preferred his company to having the comforting glow of the light.

"Okay, I get up too," she agreed amiably.

Al tried to sound brave. "Okay, Trudy, hold my hand then."

She grabbed his hand and clung close to him. Taking very small steps, he led his sister from the couch to a spot right below the light switch. Trudy stumbled once on a wrinkle in the rug, wrenching his arm as she lost her balance. Al bit his lip to keep from crying out and scaring her. He steadied her and silently continued toward the light switch.

"We there?" Trudy asked.

Al nodded before he remembered she couldn't see him. "Uh-huh." He stood on his tiptoes and stretched up as high as he could. His balance was off and his body ached, so he found it difficult to push up the stiff switch.

Trudy plopped on the floor and started crying. "Light!" she whimpered.

"I'll try," Al said. He jumped and pushed on the switch. The light flickered on as his feet landed on the ground. The pain in his head flared sharply, doubling him over with nausea. It took a tremendous effort for the child to keep from throwing up.

Trudy sighed with relief and smiled at her brother. "Light, Al. Light!"

Al knelt and hugged her. "That's right, Trudy," he praised. Though he still felt ill and was scared being home alone, he found he felt much better now that the light shone down on them.

"When does Mommy come back?"

He sighed and rubbed his nose, trying to keep from crying. "I-I don't know, Trudy. I don't know when she's coming back."

Trudy pensively twisted her hair. "*Does* Mommy come back?" she asked with tears in her eyes.

Al didn't answer. He didn't want to think about their mother's absence--or about why she had left. But Trudy began crying and calling out for her. The sound of her name brought the picture of his mother stepping into the taxi to the forefront of his thoughts. He swallowed hard to keep the tears from breaking forth.

Then Trudy's tears took on a different tone. "Al?" She tugged on his sleeve. "Hungry."

He had been feeling so ill that food was the farthest thing from his mind. Trudy, however, knew it was past the time when she usually got her dinner. Al nervously glanced toward the kitchen. He didn't hear the mouse scurrying any longer. The light must have scared it away, he decided. Still, he wasn't looking forward to going back into the kitchen. He felt the bitter air coming through the broken window.

Trudy's tugs grew more insistent. "Hungry," she repeated firmly.

Al looked into the kitchen once more. No sign of the mouse. Fortunately, the light from the living room illuminated the kitchen somewhat, so he wouldn't have to fumble about blindly. He began to enter the room, but stopped when the sour-sweet smell of his sickness wafted upward. He grabbed the doorjamb and fought against the temptation to give in to the nausea.

"Hungry, Al," she complained.

Al took a deep breath and plunged into the kitchen. He looked in the cabinets for something he would be able to prepare for his sister. Momma hadn't been to the market for the week yet, he realized. The only thing he found was a small can of tuna. Al grabbed it and rummaged in a drawer for a can opener.

Al sat on the floor and began stabbing at the can with the can opener. His clumsy fingers merely produced a series of jagged holes. He couldn't coordinate his movements to cut around the edge of the can.

Trudy began to wail and showed signs of beginning a tantrum. She yelled that she was hungry over and over again. Al hurried his efforts with the can opener. As Trudy's shouts escalated to a high-pitched screech, Al slipped and cut his thumb on the ragged edge of the can.

"I'm going as fast as I can!" he hollered. He stuck his bleeding thumb in his mouth. Frustrated, he flung the can opener across the kitchen. "You'll get your food in a minute," he snapped. "Just be quiet!"

Trudy's wails abruptly ceased. Al sat uncomfortably in the silence that followed. He examined the messy lid of the can. Shards of tin gleamed in the exposed tuna. Trudy couldn't eat that, Al knew. He listened to her sniffles as she tried to keep her tears muffled.

Al shoved the can away. He hurried to Trudy's side. "I'm sorry, Trudy," he said. "I shouldn't have yelled at you."

Trudy raised forlorn eyes for a moment and then turned away. She ran to the couch and threw herself face down upon it. Her shoulders quivered as she sobbed.

Al closed his eyes in guilt. He stood, and swayed momentarily as the living room swirled before his eyes. Slowly, battling nausea the entire way, Al made his way across the room to the couch. He pressed a hand to his throbbing head before climbing onto the sofa. He touched Trudy's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Trudy. It wasn't your fault."

Trudy didn't answer. Al didn't even hear her sobs any longer. He lifted a handful of curls to find that she had cried herself to sleep.

Al shivered as a blast of cold air crept under the door and combined with a draft from the broken window. He stretched out next to his sister and pressed against her as closely as he could to warm her. He was asleep almost as soon as his head touched the cushions.

Mr. Calavizzi rubbed his hands vigorously against his arms and stamped his feet to warm himself. His breath clouded before his face in the misty early morning air. That last construction site had been in a much warmer climate, and it was taking his body a while to adjust back to the chill of the city. He blew on his fingers before reaching into his pocket for his house key. It felt wonderful to be home. He couldn't wait to see his wife and children.

The key turned in the lock as silently as he could manage. He didn't want to startle or wake them since he was there even before the milkman. The door creaked on its hinges and slowly swung inward.

Mr. Calavizzi turned to close the door quietly. As he latched it again, he realized his house didn't smell right. The living room reeked of alcohol and it mingled with a more sour smell emanating from the kitchen. He turned around and stopped short to find his children snuggled against each other on

the sofa. Al had his arm wrapped tightly around Trudy. The boy's limbs shivered, though Trudy seemed comfortable. Mr. Calavicci quickly removed his coat and draped it across his son's body.

Trudy woke up and looked around, searching for the familiarity of her room. Her face lit up when she caught sight of her father. "Poppy!" she shouted. She wiggled from Al's hold and threw her arms out. "Poppy!"

Her father put a finger to his lips to caution Trudy to be quiet and not to disturb her sleeping brother, but Al didn't stir. His arm fell limply to the couch when Mr. Calavicci lifted Trudy into his arms. She grabbed hold tightly and buried her face in his neck. "Poppy home, he home," she cried.

"I'm home, Trudy, that's right. I'm home," he smiled. He hugged her close. "I missed you, Trudy. You and your brother both. And your momma, too."

Trudy stiffened in his arms. "Mommy go bye-bye," she said with a frown. "Al don't know when she come back."

"Went bye-bye? And left you kids here alone? Are you sure, Trudy?"

Trudy's lower lip stuck out and she nodded somberly.

Mr. Calavicci stood up with his daughter in his arms and headed to the hall. Broken glass crunched beneath his work shoes as he passed the couch. He looked up to see the stain of a liquid still running down the wall. He called out Katrina's name several times, but no answer. He pushed down the fear of an adrenaline rush as he opened every door in search of his wife. She was nowhere to be found.

Trudy's cheeks glistened with shed tears. "No Mommy?"

He shook his head sadly. "No, Trudy. She's not here." He hugged his daughter again and noticed the stains covering the back of her dress.

"Oh, Trudy, you're all dirty, honey. Let's change your dress, okay?"

"No bath," the little girl protested.

Mr. Calavicci carried Trudy into the bedroom. "No, you don't have to take a bath yet." He opened her closet and pulled out a red dress. His youngest child smiled and nodded at his selection. She stuck her arms in the air and sat very still as he pulled the soiled dress over her head and slipped the clean one on her. "My, my, look how beautiful." He smiled.

Trudy beamed at her father. "Show Al?" she asked.

"Of course we will, Trudy," Mr. Calavicci replied, still smiling. He picked her up again and returned to the living room.

Al still hadn't moved an inch. Their father set Trudy on the floor and sat on the couch next to his son. "Al, wake up," he said in a gentle voice. Al didn't move, nor did he make a sound. Mr. Calavicci softly shook his son's shoulder. "Al," he said, louder this time. "Albert, wake up, son."

Al groaned, but didn't move. Trudy stood on tiptoe and poked her brother through the coat. "Al! Wake up!" she shouted.

Her father pushed her arms to her sides. "Don't poke your brother again, Trudy. I don't think he feels good."

She nodded. "He got sick. Al hurted."

"Hurted?" Mr. Calavicci turned his full attention to his daughter in alarm. "How is he hurt, Trudy?"

"Al gots red all over him," she answered.

Confused and frightened, Gino pulled the coat off his son and turned him on his back. Al's right arm was covered with drying blood, and blood was spread all over his shirt. His face was bruised purple and blue, and was marked with the black trickles of dried blood on his cheek. Mr. Calavicci yanked his son's shirt open to check for open wounds. He only found bruises, which alleviated his fear that Al's chest had been bleeding in addition to his arm.

"Trudy, what happened? Did Al get in a fight?"

She shrugged. "He went nite-nite."

Her father struggled to make sense of Trudy's cryptic answers. "Has he been sleeping the whole time, Trudy?"

She shook her head. "No, he woke up and got sick." She wrinkled her nose. "Smell bad too."

"Where did he get sick?" he pressed, trying to put all the pieces together.

She pointed to the kitchen.

Mr. Calavicci stepped into the kitchen and immediately noticed the broken window and the pile of vomit in the corner. He hurried back to his son's side.

He pressed the back of his hand against Al's forehead, checking for a fever. He felt cold, not hot. Gino lifted his son into his lap and pressed his body against him to warm his child.

"What happened to make Al go nite-nite?" he asked.

Trudy frowned. "Don't know, Poppy."

Al moaned and rolled his head from side to side. His father caught his breath and prayed silently as he waited. Then, the boy's eyes slitted open and he winced at the light.

"Al?" Mr. Calavicci asked.

The boy's head moved towards the sound, but his eyes remained slits. His father repeated his name over and over again until he opened his eyes all the way.

Al stared dumbfoundedly at his father's face for several minutes. "Papa?" he asked hoarsely. He tried to raise his limp arms to hug his father, but he began crying as the movement caused his right arm to begin throbbing.

Mr. Calavicci drew his son close. "Sh, it's all right now, Al. I'm here." He hugged him tenderly, not wanting to inflict pain on the bruises covering the small body. "How do you feel, son?"

"M-my head h-hurts," the boy stammered. "I-I hurt ev-every-w-where." He cried harder than before. His father couldn't remember seeing him so scared. Even as a baby, Al had never cried so hard. And the stammering was something new. He never stuttered. Something was seriously wrong.

"How did you get hurt, Al?" he asked.

"I-I d-don't know." Al tried to raise his head to look around the room. "W-where's M-Momma?"

Trudy looked curiously at her brother. "Mommy go bye-bye, Al," she said sadly.

Al shook his head in despair. "No. Nooooo," he wailed. He gagged on his tears and the bile that the sudden movement of his head brought up.

Mr. Calavicci gently propped his son into a sitting position and ran his hand up and down the boy's trembling back. "Shh," he whispered, kissing his son's forehead. Al shivered from the cold and his sobbing.

“Trudy, Honey, run next door to the boarding house and get Mrs. Lorenzo to come over, okay?”

Trudy nodded and ran out of the house, slamming the door behind her. The sound of her shoes clattering on the pavement grew fainter as she left the yard.

Al’s breathing was growing labored and harsh. His eyes widened in panic and he clutched his father’s shirt. “I d-don’t f-feel good, Papa.”

Mr. Calavicc grabbed a glass bowl and dumped the wilting flower arrangement and water on the floor. He held the bowl for his son as Al emptied his stomach. If it were possible, the boy began crying even harder. He seemed to be hyperventilating. His father forced him to lay on his back and gently rubbed his chest to calm him. As his breathing settled down, Mr. Calavicc reached for his handkerchief and dabbed at the corners of his son’s mouth.

The door slammed open and a panting Trudy ran in, followed by the plump form of Mrs. Lorenzo.

“Oh, Lord!” their neighbor exclaimed as she caught sight of Al’s face. “What happened?”

“I don’t know, Mrs. Lorenzo. I came home to find him like this. Apparently my wife has left, I don’t know where she went or why,” he explained. “Will you please sit with Al while I use your phone to call a doctor.

Mrs. Lorenzo nodded. “Go! Go!” she gestured at the door. She sat on the couch and put Al’s head in her lap.

Mr. Calavicc hesitated only a moment before running out of the house. The door slammed behind him.

The boy’s eyes wandered about the room aimlessly. Mrs. Lorenzo ran her hand across his forehead and murmured soothingly to him in Italian.

“So, Trudy,” she said to the little girl, “your Momma went away.”

Trudy nodded and blinked away tears. “Mommy go bye-bye.”

“And your father doesn’t know where?”

Trudy shook her head. Al moaned quietly and called for his mother.

Mrs. Lorenzo cursed in Italian. “I know where she went! And with who!” She caressed the little boy’s forehead again. “I can’t believe she would leave her own family for that good-for-nothing salesman! Thinks he knows everything because he sells knowledge. Encyclopedia salesman, pah!” She spat on the floor and continued talking to herself. “I saw how he looked at her. Even when he was at my door he kept looking back over here. And she was on the porch looking back. That’s where she went, mark my words!”

Al’s mind brought back a picture of the man with the books who had been at the door the other day. He looked like one of the movie stars. Was that really where his mother had gone? Had she left to be with the salesman? He rolled his head to the side in distress. “Come back, M-Momma! I’ll b-be good!” he cried.

Mrs. Lorenzo looked helplessly at the despondent child in her lap. She smoothed his hair as she spoke. “Al, you are a good boy. You’re a very good boy. And you take such good care of your little sister.”

She stopped to smile at Trudy, who was staring at her brother. The little girl’s brow creased as she tried to think of a way to help him. She slowly walked to his side and kissed his cheek. “I love you, Al. Don’t be hurted.”

Mr. Calavicci hurried back into the house. "Thank you, Mrs. Lorenzo. The ambulance is on its way." He supported Al's head as they exchanged places. "Thank you very much," he repeated.

Mrs. Lorenzo looked down at Trudy thoughtfully. "Do you think seeing her brother in an ambulance will scare her?"

"You're right, it might do that," he realized. "Would you...?"

She held her hand up and spoke to the little girl. "Are you hungry sweetie? Would you like some breakfast?"

Trudy nodded and looked at her father for permission. Mr. Calavicci nodded with relief and smiled as Mrs. Lorenzo led her to the boarding house.

Al tried to look at his father, but his eyes kept trailing off. Gino quickly racked his brain for a way to keep his son's attention. The doctor he had spoken to had told him not to let Al fall asleep.

"Al, I'm very proud of you, son," he said. Al's drooping eyelids rose at the praise. "You did such a wonderful job of taking care of Trudy while I was gone. Such a big boy."

His son smiled weakly and parted his lips to speak. "N-not that b-big."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Mr. Calavicci broke in. "I've seen how you look after her. I've even seen how you defend her."

A sob broke into Al's words. "M-Momma don't l-like it when I f-fight."

His father hesitated before he spoke again. "Perhaps not, but you took care of your sister last night, didn't you?"

The boy struggled to remember. He did seem to recall trying to do something for Trudy. What was it? "I g-guess s-so."

Mr. Calavicci decided to try and change the subject before Al became distraught again. "I got a letter from Uncle Jack," he said.

His son's face brightened at the mention of his favorite uncle. "Is h-he gonna come v-v-visit?" he asked.

"He's gonna try," Mr. Calavicci promised. "And he's going to bring your new aunt too."

Al looked confused. "N-new aunt?"

Mr. Calavicci smiled at his son, relieved that he had caught his interest. "Uncle Jack just got married," he explained. "To a lady named Clarissa. So that makes her your Aunt Clarissa. And you'll get to meet her when they come visit."

"Aunt C-C-Cla-r-r-r-isssss-a," the boy struggled to force the syllables out. He looked exhausted when he finished.

Mr. Calavicci looked out the window in hopes of seeing the ambulance. He threw another topic out before Al could fall asleep.

"So, Al, what movie would you like to see with Uncle Jack? He said he wants to take you during his visit."

His son perked up again. "O-one with a M-Mickey M-Mouse c-cartoon. A W-Wester, p-please."

"A Western? You still like watching those?"

Al smiled at his father. "Y-yes, s-sir. I l-like 'em a l-lot."

Mr. Calavicci relaxed at the sound of the sirens outside. Al tensed in fear at the unexpected noise. "W-what's th-that, P-Papa?" he asked.

“That’s an ambulance, son. It’s going to take you to the hospital so you can feel better.”

“H-hos-p-pital?” Al’s eyes widened. His body jerked when the paramedics knocked on the door.

“It’s open,” Mr. Calavicci called. He held his son’s hand. “It’s okay, Al. I’m right beside you.”

Al squeezed his father’s hand tightly when the paramedics approached. He shrank back from the stranger dressed in white.

The paramedic lightly ran his hands across Al’s face and head, checking for bumps. The little boy jerked his eyes towards his father pleadingly. He cried out when the man’s fingers grazed the back of his head.

“There it is.” The paramedic nodded. “Probably a concussion.” He noticed Al’s terror and stuck out a hand in greeting. “Hi there. My name’s Bob, what’s yours?”

Al looked at his father. When Mr. Calavicci nodded, he answered Bob. “A-A-Al.”

“Well, Al, you’ve got a nasty bunch of cuts and bruises here. We need to take you to the hospital to get you all fixed up so you can run around again. My friend Nelson here is going to help you onto this nifty bed. It’s got wheels on it, like a car.”

Nelson came near and smiled at Al. “Nelson, be careful of the right arm, okay?” Bob instructed. He held the bed steady as the other man lifted the boy from Mr. Calavicci’s lap and laid him on the bed. He stretched belts across Al’s body without a word. The little boy began to scream and cry.

“Al, Al buddy,” Bob soothed, casting a nasty glare at Nelson. “We don’t want you falling out of bed. Those are just to keep you safe.”

“P-Papa,” Al wept. “I w-want my P-Papa!”

Mr. Calavicci rushed to his side and took hold of his fingers. “I’m right here, Al. I’m right beside you, son.”

The paramedics pushed the bed out of the house and carried it down the steps of the porch. Al cried out in terror when his father had to let go of his fingers. Mr. Calavicci spoke in a low voice so his son would know he was still there. He climbed into the back of the ambulance and held the boy’s fingers all the way to the hospital. Al sobbed for the entire trip.

When they arrived at the hospital, the paramedics instructed Mr. Calavicci to wait in the lobby and whisked Al down the hallway to the emergency area. The boy’s terrified screams echoed down the hall.

“Sir,” a nurse spoke behind him. “I need you to fill out some forms for your son, please.” She led the way to a nearby desk and handed him a stack of papers.

He looked down the hallway again and set about filling out the forms, thinking he had never seen so many blank lines to be filled in. He felt as relieved as one could feel in a hospital when he reached the final form requiring his signature. The nurse thanked him, took the papers, and led him to a waiting area.

“Wait here,” she said.

“Can’t I see my son?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No, I’m sorry, it isn’t allowed. Someone will come get you when you can see him.”

Mr. Calavicci sighed and rested his head in his hands. He was worried about his son, and there was nothing he could do. Nothing at all. Except....

He looked up and caught the attention of another nurse. "Nurse, is there a chapel?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," she answered. "Follow me." She walked briskly down the hallway and opened a heavy wooden door. "Right in there," she pointed.

Mr. Calavicci thanked her and stepped inside.

He dipped his fingers into the bowl of holy water at the entrance and crossed himself before entering the sanctuary. As he reached a pew near the front, he knelt before the great crucifix on the wall and crossed himself again before slipping in. Lowering the prayer rail, he knelt, resting his elbows on the pew in front of him.

He began by praying to the Virgin Mary. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for our sins," he prayed aloud. He recited every prayer he knew, and when he had exhausted those, he began speaking his thoughts.

"Lord, there's nothing I can do to help my son right now. He's scared and alone and he's hurting. I know You can help him. Help him to stop hurting and be with him so he's not scared. His mother is gone, I don't know where, though I'm sure You do. I don't know why she left, but You do. Please be with her, too. Bring her home."

He stopped when he heard the door creak open behind him. He turned to see a young nurse walking down the aisle. She stopped uncertainly by his pew.

"Mr. Calavicci?" she asked. When he nodded, she continued. "Dr. Whitman sent me to find you. You can see your son now."

Mr. Calavicci leapt from the pew and barely stopped to cross himself again. "How is he?" he demanded.

"I'm not allowed to deliver prognoses," she said, as if reciting a script. "You'll have to talk with Dr. Whitman. Follow me, please."

He expected to be led to the hallway Al had been wheeled down upon his arrival, but she brought him up to the second floor. She paused at the nurses' station and spoke briefly with the nurse behind the desk before leading Mr. Calavicci to a room.

He stepped inside and saw a nurse winding a white bandage around Al's right arm, which was covered with stitches. Al's head was covered with a bandage, with only a few dark curls peeking out from the front. Butterfly bandages sealed the puncture wounds on his brow and cheek. Surrounded by the white of the bandages and the bed linens, the bruises on the boy's face stood out more sharply than they had at home.

The nurse finished winding the bandage, taped it down, and smiled at Mr. Calavicci as she left. He looked at his son's face and sighed. Al's closed lids were tinged blue. *From bruises*, his father guessed angrily.

He carefully edged his hip onto Al's bed and took his son's hand. The small fingers tightened reflexively around his big hand. "You're not going to be hurt again, Al," he promised. His thumb covered his son's fingers protectively.

He heard a throat being cleared behind him and turned to see a tall man in a white coat enter the room. The man extended a hand and introduced himself as Dr. Whitman. Mr. Calavicci shook his hand and introduced himself as well.

“Your, uh, son was in pretty bad shape,” said the doctor.

Mr. Calavicci nodded. “I was out of town on business. I found him like that when I got home this morning. I don’t know what happened.”

Yes, well, uh, your son couldn’t remember anything to help us either,” Dr. Whitman said. “But it, uh, it looks like he was, uh, beaten.” He looked uncomfortable. “You, uh, wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

Mr. Calavicci shook his head. “No, doctor. I’ve had to spank him before, but that’s strictly on his rump. He does get into fights over his little sister. She’s retarded and the neighborhood children make fun of her.” He smiled down at his son. “Al doesn’t like that, and he defends her.”

Dr. Whitman nodded. “Yes, some of the bruises look like they came from a fight, but, uh, others are very recent, and they look like he was beaten by someone much bigger than him.” He pointed to the bandaged arm. “Those lacerations were very deep, too. Do you know where they came from?”

“The kitchen window was broken. That’s the only place I can think where he could have gotten cut. Although I did find some broken glass on the floor this morning, too,” Mr. Calavicci said, thinking back. He pictured the kitchen. “He threw up several times, does that mean anything?”

“Yes, uh, it confirms what we suspected. Your son suffered a concussion. It appears his head came into violent contact with a solid surface,” said Dr. Whitman. “Did your wife have any clue as to how this happened?”

Mr. Calavicci frowned. “No, she wasn’t there. My daughter said she had left the day before, but Al couldn’t remember his mother leaving or how he got hurt.”

“He may remember, he may never remember. Head injuries are tricky things. Well, I appreciate your help, Mr. Calavicci. I’d like to keep your son here for twenty-four hours, just to be safe.”

Mr. Calavicci nodded and shook the doctor’s hand in thanks. When he was alone with his son again, he picked Al’s hand up. Once again, the child’s fingers tightened around his hand. Mr. Calavicci smiled and traced his son’s jawline.

“That’s my strong, strong, son. You’re going to be fine.”

Al’s eyelids fluttered open and he tried to adjust to his surroundings. He visibly relaxed when he saw his father. “P-Papa,” he smiled. The stutter was still there, but it wasn’t as severe as it had been when the ambulance arrived. “Where am I?”

“You’re in the hospital, Al. The doctors fixed you all up, and you can come home tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? W-why can’t I come home now?” His eyes filled with tears.

Mr. Calavicci patted Al’s hand. “Dr. Whitman wants you to spend the night here to be sure everything’s fixed inside your head.”

“Inside my head?” Al asked. He pulled his hand from beneath his father’s and touched his head. His eyes widened when his fingers encountered the gauze. “Am I b-broken forever?”

His father chuckled. “No, no. You’re going to be fine. Have I ever lied to you?”

Al shook his head, smiling when he didn’t immediately feel sick. He raised his arm for a hug, snuggling his head against his father’s chest and holding on tightly with his good arm. “Can you stay here with me, P-Papa?”

“No, Al, I’m afraid I can’t. I’m sorry, son, but I can’t leave Trudy alone.”

Al’s face fell. Mr. Calavicci hurried to come up with a solution. “But I will come back this afternoon and bring Trudy to visit you, how’s that?”

“Okay,” Al smiled. He still looked disappointed.

“Hey, I’m not leaving *now*. I can stay with you for a little while longer,” Mr. Calavicci tried. It worked. Al relaxed and beamed at his father. He reached up and slipped his small hand inside his father’s giant, strong one.

“C-Can you tell me a story?” asked Al.

“Of course. What do you want to hear?”

Al shrugged and grinned. “I don’t care. You pick one. I’ll l-listen.”

“Fair enough. How about Jack and the Beanstalk?”

Al nodded and snuggled against his pillows as his father began telling the story. He giggled and imitated the giant’s chant with Mr. Calavicci. “Fe-f-fi-fo-f-fum,” he stammered with a huge grin on his face. Al fell asleep moments before the beanstalk toppled to the ground.

“The End,” Mr. Calavicci whispered. He leaned over and kissed his son. “I’ll be back later. Sleep well.”

Mr. Calavicci stepped off the bus and walked down the streets of his neighborhood. Within minutes, he reached his street. He paused before his house, and decided to go inside and straighten things up before getting Trudy from Mrs. Lorenzo’s boarding house.

He pushed the door open and steeled himself before he walked into the disaster he realized was his home. Alcohol and vomit assailed his nose again, and he decided to clean the kitchen first. Mr. Calavicci stuffed a towel in the broken pane to block the frigid air, although by shutting out the moving air, the smell hung in the kitchen. As quickly as he could, Mr. Calavicci cleaned and disposed of the remains of Al’s sickness. He tossed the mop and the bowl he had held for his son earlier into the refuse heap. That done, he set about cleaning the alcohol from the living room.

Mr. Calavicci wiped the spilled alcohol from the table first, pausing momentarily to fling the empty gin bottle into the refuse heap as well. He moved to the wall and scrubbed the stain as best he could. The glass crunched beneath his shoes again, and Mr. Calavicci knelt to pick up the broken pieces. He began at the wall and worked his way back. When he had collected all the pieces in his hand, he turned to rise and carry them to the refuse. He pressed a hand into the corner to steady himself, and that was when he felt the depression in the wall.

He tossed the glass out and returned to the corner. He squatted down and ran his hand inside the dent in the wall again. The depression was about Al’s height and Mr. Calavicci remembered the doctor’s diagnosis that Al’s concussion was the result of striking his head against a solid surface. The blood drained from Mr. Calavicci’s face as he contemplated the force required to create such a mark in the wall. Suddenly, all the pieces fell into place: the alcohol, the bruises, his wife’s absence, and Al’s concussion.

“Oh, God. Oh, God, no. How could I have been so blind?” He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his hand inside the depression. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, not knowing whether he was addressing his children or his wife.

and buried his face in his hands. His thoughts were flooded with memories of Al's face. How many black eyes were the result of fights defending Trudy and how many had come at the hands of his mother? How could his wife do this to her child? He dropped to one knee and thanked God that Al seemed to be doing well. Mr. Calavicci found himself praying that Al would never remember the circumstances surrounding his mother's departure.

Mr. Calavicci ran his hands through his hair and raised his head. He stared at his haggard face in the dresser mirror, searching for an answer to the question of how he could have missed the signs that his wife was beating their son. His job took him away very often, but he didn't excuse himself on that account. He dropped his eyes, noticing a letter propped against the mirror.

He picked it up and sat down on the bed to read it. The letter was smeared in places, where his wife's tears had fallen. As he read, his own tears added splashmarks.

Dear Gino,

I don't know where to begin. My hand is shaking as I write this. I have done something terrible. It's unforgiveable for a mother to do what I have done. I am so ashamed of myself, and I can't stay here to see your face and the faces of our children--especially poor Albert's face. Each little mark, each bruise...I have caused them. I was so drunk I didn't even know what I was doing. I'm surprised I even noticed when he fell to the floor. Oh, God, when I think about the sickening sound of his head hitting the wall....

And the first thing I did was reach for a drink. My child was lying on the floor and all I could do was pick up a glass of gin. I can't do this anymore. I can't handle the children, I miss you so much all I do is drink, and then I have no idea what I do to my babies. It's better if I leave. It's better for our children to have no mother at all than a mother like me.

I know one day you will make it, just like you planned. Then you can give our children the life they deserve. Perhaps you can make up for all the evils I've done. I leave because I love them. Because I am afraid I will hurt them even more one day and not know what I did.

One day, maybe, they'll understand. When they are old enough you can explain things to them. Until then, know that I love them, Al and Trudy. And you, Gino. I love you. Goodbye.

Love,

Ratina

The Reality of a Dream

How can you not see me
after all we have shared?
I thought our love would last forever.
Once again, it seems I was wrong.
Like when I left you to fight for a cause.
I believed in it--still do--even now.
But I shouldn't have put it before you.
Maybe that was my mistake.

Why didn't you wait for me?
I was coming back.
Your face carried me through the darkest nights.
I held you in my arms a thousand times--
even though I was alone in a hootch.

I thought we'd always be together,
but I see I was wrong.
And to see you again--so much pain and regret.
I still love you--can you at least feel that?
I thought we'd be given a second chance,
but it's not to be.
I'll still come home alone.

He wants me to see you--to let go--
and so I'm standing here trying to do that.
How can I let go of the dream of a lifetime--
a reality of love and beauty I held for one brief moment?
I'm sorry, I can't.

How I wish I could wrap these arms around you,
to dance with you--really dance with you--
like you're pretending to do with me right now.
Believe me, I'm very familiar with dream love.
I don't think you're silly. It proves you still care.

Won't you please wait for me?
I promise it won't be too long if you hold on to our love.
Don't let me go. I'm not just a memory.
I'll give you everything you want if you'll only wait.
Children, a house in the country, the moon.
I could do that, you know. I've been there.

Is this what he's talked about?
This knowing it's time? Not yet, please.
I don't want to let go.
Wait for me, darling.
I'm coming home.
One last try.
A kiss to build a dream on.

by Jennifer L. Rowland

One Touch

I touched you.
I don't know how, but I know
I touched you.
I expected that if I leaned against you,
Like I'd done so often when we were together,
I'd fall.
And you'd never even know,
Like when you walked through me
A moment before.
But for one moment, I was there.
Without even Leaping,
I reached across time
And touched you.
I just wish I knew how.

Did you feel it, Beth?
Or am I just imagining
That my lips really touched your brow?
He Leaped before I had the chance to find out.

You must have known I was there.
You laughed when I told a joke,
You put on our song,
And when you danced,
You held your arms just the same way
As you did when we danced together.
Did you know I was dancing with you again?
Did you know you weren't dancing alone?
Did you hear me ask you to wait?

Was that my second chance?
Did He give me the power to touch you
So I could tell you myself
That I was coming home?
I tried.
Oh God, I tried.
But you didn't hear.
If you had, I wouldn't be standing here alone,
Wondering why I spent my life
Looking for you
When I knew you were lost to me forever.

I guess Sam was right.
It was never meant to be, you and I.
But how could a love as strong as ours be wrong?
And why couldn't he do for me
What he'd done for himself?
I'll never understand
And I can't tell him how selfish he's been
And I wouldn't even if I could
Because he's already helped me more than I deserve.

I hope you know I understand.
For me, all I had was you,
You had life all around you
Calling to you to move on.
But if you sensed me there that night
Why did you still give up?
Did you know I was saying goodbye?
Did I lose you by trying to hold on?

All I know is that you're still gone
And I still can't let you go.

But our time together,
The years we shared
And that one last moment I had with you alone,
I will cherish the rest of my life.

One chance,
One dance,
One moment,
One kiss,
One touch.

I love you, Beth.

by Julie L. Jekel

Hold On 1: Lead Me to Your Arms

by Julie L. Jekel

April 2, 1969

Hold on.

That was what Mom had told her when she called to tearfully announce that Al was MIA. Her mother had been surprised at how vehemently Beth felt the loss, since only a week before she had talked of filing for divorce when Al came home. But by the end of the night, Beth had admitted that she was still in love with the daredevil pilot. So Mom told her to hold on. Hold on to that hope, that love, and it will bring him home.

"But it didn't bring Dan Merrill home," Beth accused the empty silence around her in their bungalow. "Anne loved him more than anything, and he still died out there. How could you do this to me, Al? If you loved me as much as you said you did, how could you leave me?"

Naturally, her absent husband did not respond, but still, to Beth it felt like another betrayal--one of a long list. Already the memories that kept her holding on had begun to seem insignificant.

"I can't hold on any longer!"

There was still no reply. Both the lawyer and the cop who had seemed to be courting her the past few days had left long ago. Dirk was chased away by the over-persistent Jake, who had then mysteriously departed with muttered apologies. Now, the solitude closed in around her.

Then, there was a change in the room. Nothing looked different, but the feeling of loneliness had vanished, as if Al had just walked through that door.

If he does come back, she wondered, what will he be like? Will he still be my Al?

He would advance in rank, no doubt. She smiled, thinking of how he had once told her that anyone with a rank above lieutenant was a horse's ass!

Beth laughed softly, and the room seemed to hold its breath at the sound. On impulse, she stood and walked to the record player, for some reason putting on their song--"Georgia On My Mind." She closed her eyes and Al's presence suddenly seemed almost tangible.

Slowly she began to dance the same familiar steps they had danced together so many times before--even the first dance at their wedding. With her eyes closed, she was dancing with him again. She could feel him close to her, their hands almost touching, but for some strange reason, not quite.

And she heard his voice--that rich, rough voice that could still make her shiver. He was asking her to hold on, but in the moments of silence between his words, he was also saying goodbye.

I want you to wait for me, Beth. Don't give up, honey. 'Cause I'm alive out there. And the only reason I'm alive is because of our love. And someday...Oh, Beth...someday, I'm gonna come back home to you.

He kissed her, and the sensation was more real than anything else that had happened that night. She felt his lips press against her forehead, and then he was gone. Beth opened her eyes once again to the empty house.

"Al..."

Her hopes faded with that whisper, the echo of his goodbye still ringing in her thoughts.

"Beth?"

Startled, she turned. There was a man standing in her house, a man she had never seen before. Amazingly, she was not afraid. Wary, but not afraid.

"Who are you? How did you get in here?"

"I'm not going to harm you," he promised, honesty and something else she couldn't quite identify gleaming in his green-gold eyes. "I'm here to help you. Help you, and help Al."

"Al?" She stared at him, this strange man who looked so young but old, naive but also wise, all at the same time. A streak of silver in the front of his hair caught the light, and as his eyes met hers once again, she realized her lack of fear was because she...recognized...him. She tried to shake the thought out of her mind because she KNEW she had never seen this person before in her life, but the evening had been so full of strange impressions that defied her senses that she couldn't shake the sense of familiarity. He had said he was here to help her and Al...maybe he knew Al, and she was sensing that mutuality. She had always been able to understand her husband on some level she couldn't explain.

The stranger nodded.

"You're a friend of Al's?" she continued.

"Yeah, I'm a friend of Al's." There was a deep sense of loss, of separation in his voice, causing it to break as he pronounced her husband's name. *He sounds like he thinks he'll never see him again.* She fought to hold back tears. *I know that feeling all too well. Oh, God, please don't let that be what he has to say!*

"Do you think we could sit?" he asked hesitantly.

Beth nodded, noticing for the first time how tired her visitor looked--as if he'd been carrying the world on his shoulders for years, without any chance to set it down and rest. They sank into the couch, facing each other. She tried not to let him see in her face the fear that was executing a victory dance right that moment in her heart.

"I'm gonna tell you a story, Beth. A story with a happy ending, but only if you believe me."

Beth blinked, startled by the unexpected beginning. "And if I don't?" she asked curiously.

"You will. I swear you will," he promised. "But instead of starting with 'Once Upon a Time,' let's start with the happy ending." He hesitated, and Beth realized that she was holding her breath.

"Al's alive. And he's coming home."

Tears welled up in her eyes at the unexpected news and a wave of astonishment swept over her. *I believe him!*

She didn't question how he knew, just believed. And in that moment the power to keep hoping, to keep holding on, returned. Her visitor turned to look over his shoulder at something behind him, as if he had heard a sound. Just as she had earlier that evening, Beth could have sworn Al was in the room, though there was no way he could be.

Suddenly, the stranger's form seemed to explode into a brilliant flare of blue-white light, and he disappeared. Stunned, Beth just stared through the thin film of tears at the place where he had been, wondering if it had been a dream or a vision.

Her mother's words came back to her--"Hold on"--and with them the words she had prayed earlier that day: "Give me a reason to hold on. Give me some reason to believe he's still alive out there."

May 10, 1970

"You're living in a dream, Beth. It's been almost four years! Just because you had a dream a year ago about an angel telling you Al's alive doesn't mean it's true."

Beth sighed. It had been a long year, and she had often wondered herself if it had been a dream. Maybe Cheryl was right.

"Then what do you suggest I do?"

"Go on with your life! This guy, Dirk, who's been such a help to you--go out with him sometime or something!"

"I don't know...Cheryl, I'm still married."

"To a dead man!"

There was an uneasy silence.

"I'm sorry, Beth. I didn't mean to be so blunt. Look, I wish Al were still alive too. I know how much you loved him. But don't you think we would have heard something by now?"

Beth nodded mutely. Her sister's logic was not only blunt but difficult to dispute.

"I don't want you to give up hope, but I don't want you to be miserable holding on to false hopes either."

Hold on. How many times had she heard that since Al disappeared? But a person could only hold on for so long. Maybe it was time to let go.

"All right. I'll call Dirk and see if he wants to join us for dinner tonight. Will that be all right with Jim?"

"Sure."

The phone rang just as Beth reached for it. With an amused smile in Cheryl's direction, she picked up the receiver.

"Beth?" a familiar voice asked.

"Captain Chase! How are you?"

"I'm all right. Listen, can you come down to the base? There's something here I think you should see."

A cold chill wrapped itself around Beth's heart. "What is it?"

"I can't tell you until you get here, I'm afraid. How soon can you come?"

"I'll leave right away."

"Beth, this is Lieutenant Tom Beckett. Lieutenant, Beth Calavicci."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," the young man responded politely. Beth took the offered hand, trying to shake the feeling of familiarity. The lieutenant looked like someone she had met before, but who?

"Beth, Lieutenant Beckett is the leader of a SEAL team that was on a mission in the same area where Al's plane was shot down. About two weeks ago, they got this."

Chase handed her a manilla envelope, which Beth took and opened with trembling fingers. A photograph fell into her hands and her breath caught in her throat.

"Oh my God..." she whispered.

It was Al. The man at the end of what looked like a chain gang was Al. He was the only one looking back.

"He's alive! He *is* coming back!"

The captain and lieutenant exchanged an uneasy glance.

"He WAS alive as of a month ago, ma'am. We don't have any more recent information. Much as we'd like to see him come home, we can't make any guarantees."

Beth didn't need their guarantees. Al's eyes in that photo were guarantee enough. Somehow, he must have known that picture would one day be in her hands. He was looking at her, his eyes saying the same thing she had heard him say the night the angel appeared--*I'm alive out there. And I'm only alive because of our love. And someday...Oh, Beth...someday, I'm gonna come back home to you.*

Hold on.

July 25, 1973

"Mrs. Calavicci."

Beth spun, startled at the sound of her name. A young man with Lieutenant-Commander rank insignia waved at her. He looked familiar, but she couldn't quite remember why.

"Remember me? Tom Beckett."

Her face brightened. "Oh, of course! It's good to see you again, Lieutenant. Or I guess I should say, Commander. How have you been?"

"Pretty well. I banged up my arm a little bit, so they're sending me home on leave for a while." He indicated his cast. "This is kind of a halfway point."

"What happened to your arm?"

"Multiple fractures, I think they said. Nothing permanent, but it puts me out of service for a few months. If you want to know the full diagnosis, you'll have to ask my little brother. He's in med school."

"Your *little* brother?"

The young officer's face was shining with pride. "Yeah. He's nineteen. Graduated MIT in two years with a double major in Physics and pre-med. He was the youngest person ever to graduate *summa cum laude* from that school."

"Wait a minute..." Beth shook her head in amazement. "Your brother graduated MIT in two years, at age nineteen?"

"No, eighteen actually. He graduated from High School at sixteen, and he's been in Med school for a year now and is also polishing off Masters' in Theoretical Physics and Archaeology."

"Well, either your brother is a genius or he never does anything except schoolwork, not even eating or sleeping!" She smiled.

Tom beamed. "He's got a once-in-a-generation mind, we've been told."

"He must. Sounds like someone I'd have to see to believe."

"Well, you might get a chance, if you work here. He's flying out here for a few days, and we're going home together. He should arrive tomorrow."

"Actually, I'm going to Mississippi tomorrow. A friend of mine, Anne Merrill, lost her husband in 'Nam a few years ago, and it's always been hard for her to be alone on the anniversary of the day he died."

He nodded sympathetically. "I can imagine. What about your husband? Have you heard anything else?"

Beth shook her head, her eyes sad. "Not since you gave me that photograph." Her fingers drifted automatically to the bracelet on her wrist that she had worn night and day for six years now.

"I know how hard on you this must be, Ma'am."

"I keep wondering if I could have stopped him. I was so mad at him when he left for his second tour--I almost told him if he left I wouldn't be here when he got back. I thought it might make him stay. But I couldn't. I told myself at the time that it was because it wasn't proper to divorce a man just as he's going off to a war, but I realized later it was because I could never leave him, not as long as I have any reason to believe he's alive. But I still sometimes wish I'd tried harder to get him to stay."

The l-c nodded. "That sounds familiar. When I was getting ready to leave for my first tour, my brother about had a heart attack." He smiled fondly. "He got this crazy idea into his head that I was going to die on April eighth, 1970. Said he had come from the future to save my life. He tried everything he could think of to keep me from going. When that didn't work, he got me to promise him I'd crawl into a hole on April 8th and stay there all day."

"That's unusual," Beth commented. "Especially the coming from the future part."

"Actually, Sam's always been interested in time travel. His favorite show when he was little was *Captain Galaxy*. He's said for years he was going to travel in time someday. The *strange* thing about it was that he was so SURE..." his voice trailed off thoughtfully. But soon he shook himself out of it and laughed.

"It's a good thing I didn't listen to him, though, because if we hadn't gone on that mission, we wouldn't have gotten that picture of your husband." Tom's eyes saddened. "We were supposed to free the men in that camp. I only wish we'd found out sooner that it was a trap, then maybe Lieutenant Calavizzi would be home now. I'm sorry, ma'am."

"It's all right. Al wouldn't have wanted you to walk into a trap he was the bait for. I'm sure if he were here he'd be telling you to be thankful you got out of there alive, and not worry about him."

"But if he doesn't get out of there alive, Mrs. Calavizzi--"

Beth stopped him with her hand. "He will. Don't ask me how, but I know he's coming back." Her voice was calm and confident, though the pain of separation still came through clearly.

"You sound as sure as my little brother did that I'd be killed," he replied softly. "It scared me, you know, how certain he was. I argued with him about it a lot because I was trying to convince myself that he was wrong. Sometimes I still find myself wondering if maybe he WAS telling the truth. What if he *had* come from the future somehow to warn me? And what if he somehow found a way to save my life? It sounds crazy, doesn't it?"

"Not really. You never know, after all. Miracles happen every day."

Tom smiled. "My mom says that sometimes. I don't know..." he shook his head, his eyes haunted with invisible images. "It's hard to believe in miracles after you've seen what I have."

What the Viet-Cong's done to those people, and even worse, what *we've* done to them. But I keep trying to believe, and maybe someday I will again."

Beth was silent, watching the young officer. He reminded her of Al, or rather, of what Al might be when he came back. This disillusionment was something she'd seen so many times. It made her begin to understand a little bit the drive behind the anti-war protests and draft dodgers. She'd been so condescending towards them at first, before the first of the wounded started coming in... She hoped Al would keep his sense of self and humor as well as this man seemed to.

"You know...there's something I think I should tell you. When we first got the roll of film that photo was on printed, it was brought back to our team so we could be the first to see them. One of the guys, 'Magic' we called him, went straight to that picture, as if he knew it was in there. And when he saw it, he looked up, as if he was looking at someone, and said 'You could have been free.' I don't know why, but I feel sure he was talking to the picture--to your husband. And the scary thing about it is, we could have succeeded on that mission, but I probably would have gotten killed, like Sam said." He shook his head slowly. "It always makes me wonder--'You could have been free.'"

June 15-16, 1975

June fifteenth, 1975. Al's forty-first birthday. Beth bit her lip to hold back the tears. Eight excruciating years had passed since he disappeared from the skies over South Vietnam, six since an angel had promised her he was coming home, and five since she had seen the photograph that confirmed he was alive, giving her the strength to believe the heavenly promise.

She wondered where he was spending his birthday. Was he still in that POW camp? Had he somehow managed to escape?

As if in answer to her questions, the phone rang.

"Beth? It's Ryan Chase."

"Captain, good to hear from you again."

"I thought you might want to know, Al arrived on Oahu yesterday from Saigon. He should be getting on a plane out of Honolulu right about now. He's coming home."

Beth almost dropped the receiver. Tears filled her eyes as the news she had been waiting so long to hear sank in. *He's coming home! He's really coming home!*

"When will he be here?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Sometime tonight, if all goes well. They wanted to bring him in through Bethesda, but I convinced them to send him to Balboa instead, since you guys live here."

"Thank you." There was more she wanted to say, to thank him not just for this call but for risking his career to show her that classified photograph five years ago. For doing everything he could to help her hang on to the hope that Al would return. But she knew if she said any more she would break into tears.

"I'm just glad I could help. But I hope you don't mind if I ask you to break the news to him about his promotion. He might take the news that he's become a horse's ass better from you."

Beth laughed. She had forgotten how widely known Al's comment was in San Diego's Naval community. It was a good thing Captain Chase knew him well enough to not take it seriously.

"I don't know, Captain. After all this time, he might take the news well from anyone. He probably thinks it's about time."

"Maybe you're right. Well, I'll see you tomorrow. Take care of yourself, Beth."

"You too."

She set down the receiver with trembling hands, tears of joy streaming down her face. He was finally coming home. That promise she'd been given so long ago was coming true.

Beth shivered as she realized for the first time how close she'd come to abandoning Al. If that angel hadn't appeared in her living room, she probably would have given up hope of ever seeing him alive again. But he was alive, and would have been even if she had given up. But he might have come home to an empty house.

"Thank you," she whispered, a tearful prayer of gratitude. "Thank you for not letting me give up."

Then she glanced at Al's picture on the mantel, the young, vibrant, carefree sailor who had left her so long ago to fight for people they'd never even met. They'd waited eight years for the chance to be together. Now, at last, the waiting was almost over for both of them. He was finally coming home.

"Happy Birthday, Al."

Beth arrived at the hospital before her shift began the next morning. She had wanted to meet him at the airport last night, but had forgotten to ask where he was coming in. For all she knew, he could have been flown into Miramar, North Island, or even Lindbergh Field. But she knew he was coming to Balboa Naval Hospital-- Captain Chase had made that very clear.

"You're here early," Jennie commented as Beth stepped out of the elevator. "Any reason in particular?"

Beth just smiled, and the other nurse studied her, curiously. "Okay, what's going on? I haven't seen you glow like this since..." she paused, a connection falling into place. "Oh, my word...Beth, they found him didn't they?"

She nodded vigorously, trying to keep in check the happy tears that threatened to overwhelm her. "He's here!"

"What?!?! Here at Balboa?"

She nodded. "Captain Chase said they were bringing him in last night. Now all I have to do is find his room and who's assigned to him. "

"Oh, Beth, I'm so happy for you!" Jennie threw her arms around her friend. "I don't know how you waited so long, hon, but I guess it was worth it."

"What was worth it?" Susan asked.

Jennie released her at the sound of the other nurse's voice. "Al's home!" Beth managed to gasp out. "Captain Chase convinced them to repatriate him through San Diego, since we live here, so he was supposed to arrive here sometime last night!"

Susan's delighted shriek attracted the attention of every other nurse on duty it seemed. Within moments, they were all clustered around Beth, who repeated the news to her eager audience. The subsequent cheers caught the curious stares of passing doctors and orderlies, but those stares changed to knowing looks upon seeing who was at the center of the hubub.

"Wait a second..." Nancy put her fingers to her forehead. "I think I remember hearing something about a POW being brought in under security last night. If you'd called me and told

me he was coming home, I would have paid better attention and then I could have told you where he was." She smiled.

"Wait, I'll check the schedule," Bronwen interjected. She reached behind the nurses' station and flipped through the papers on a clipboard. "Room 234. That's one of Jennie's rooms this shift."

Jennie blushed. "I wish I'd checked that one first. I haven't even gotten up there yet." She glanced at her friend. "Do you want to trade, Beth?"

Beth shook her head. "No. I'll just get some time off. If I was assigned to Al, I'd be with him all the time and neglect my other patients."

Nodding, Jennie flipped through the papers on her clipboard until she came to Al's file. When she found it, she tugged on her friend's elbow, a mischievous smile dominating her face. "C'mon. I'm going to go check on my new patient and I INSIST you come with me for consultation purposes."

Jennie squeezed Beth's hand as they approached the room. "You go in first," she whispered. "I'll come in after you two have had a little time to get reacquainted."

She grinned. "Don't give us THAT much time! You know how Al would define 'reacquainted' where the two of us are concerned."

The other nurse giggled softly. "All right, but I'm waiting at LEAST ten minutes."

Beth nodded and took a deep breath before peering into the room. Her heart leaped at the sight of that face, framed by dark, curly hair that had grown too long during his imprisonment. His eyes were closed, as if sleeping, but she could tell by the tortured look on his face that he was anything but rested.

She was startled to note that he was curled up on the floor, instead of the bed. Dragging a glucose IV with him, he had somehow stumbled out of the bed and into a corner on the room, where he now lay, curled into a tight ball with the blanket half-pulled over him. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut against a scene that she was sure was only in his mind, and therefore invulnerable to the physical darkness he was subjecting himself to.

He's so thin, she thought, her eyes sweeping over his frail frame that was frightfully visible through the inadequate coverage of the hospital gown. She knew he was suffering from malnourishment. That, and the fact that he had picked up several nasty parasites had been in his file, which she and Jennie had reviewed together before coming down here.

He stirred slightly, his sleep light and fitful. Beth hesitated, almost afraid to go in, because it might wake him. A shudder went through his body, followed by a low moan of pain, and one word.

"Beth."

That was all she needed. She had waited too long to hear his voice say her name again. There was no way she could walk away after hearing it, even to let him rest. Quietly, she entered the room and knelt at his side.

"Come on, we need to get you back in the bed," she told him quietly, the nurse taking over because she could think of no words to capture how she felt. "And I'll need to check that IV too."

Al was awake now, but not looking at her. His eyes were on the floor, seeing no more of her than her shoes. He tried to pull away from her hold on his arm, making Beth realize that he

did not yet recognize her. A pang of fear went through her, followed by the realization that his mind was probably still in the cage she was told he had been kept in for much of his time as a POW. He was on the floor because things like beds had become too foreign to him.

Gently she eased him to his feet. He resisted, but was too weak to put up much of a fight. "Al, please."

It was as if the sound of his name pierced through the clouds in his mind like a ray of sunlight. He straightened a little, and for the first time, looked at her. As their eyes met, she saw lucidity return to him. Maybe it was only there for a little while, but it was there.

He was staring at her, drinking her in with his eyes as if he couldn't believe she was there. But she was, and to assure him of it, she took his left hand in hers, entwining their fingers as they had done so often before he left. Al reached up one shaky hand to touch her face. As he brushed a strand of hair away from her ear, Beth caught her breath. Every nerve in her body reached for the place he had touched, the longing of the past eight years pinnacled in this moment of closeness.

Then, unexpectedly, her husband wrapped her in tight embrace, more powerful than he seemed capable of. Her arms went around him in return, and years of pent-up tears broke free from her eyes.

They were still holding each other and crying when Jennie returned a half-hour later to check on him. Smiling, she quietly hung his chart outside the door and left. Neither Beth nor Al even noticed she had ever been there at all.

Only the beginning...



To Walk a Mile...

by Gail Christison

The director yelled action and the scene began.

As the master rolled, Scott Bakula climbed the fiberglass cliff face as instructed, finding grips and gradually inching towards the top of the artificial precipice. As always he worked patiently in spite of the elements, including the high speed fan trying to blow him off it.

He was about two feet from the top, with co-star Dean Stockwell feeding him lines from a cherry-picker so that he could respond realistically to a hovering hologram that didn't yet exist, when he missed a grip.

His toes were the only other thing holding him on his current perch--but only until the weight shift caused him to lose his footing and swing sideways. He was left with all of his weight hanging by one arm from a hunk of fiberglass painted and covered with dirt to make it look more realistic.

"Scott!" Dean screamed and yelled at the picker driver to move closer, only to find the operator was on a break while the scene was being shot. One of the ground staff made a dash for the machine, but it was too late.

As Bakula tried calmly to swing back to where he could get a grip with his free hand, the fiberglass fractured off and he crashed to the ground.

After a micro-second of terrible silence, everyone converged on the crumpled form. Moments later a stage-hand finally brought the cherry-picker down. Dean leaped from it a meter from the ground and pushed his way forcefully through to his friend.

"Somebody get a doctor!" he ordered hoarsely. "Call a damned ambulance." He was angry. Second unit stuff was always less formal than the rest of the shooting schedule, but the fact that they always took it for granted that Scott would put his safety on the line when they wanted Sam Beckett to do some crazy new stunt made him more than just angry.

He swallowed a lump in his throat. "You're too damned good," he muttered, watching Bakula's chest rise and fall in even breaths as someone went over the rest of him looking for breaks and swelling. While Scott continued to breathe, he could keep telling himself everything was going to be okay.

The cameraman lifted one of Scott's eyelids, then the other. "He's out cold," he announced. "We won't know any more until the doctor gets here, but I don't think anything's broken. Anybody got a blanket in case of shock?" Someone else arrived with a first aid kit. A small packet containing a silver-colored emergency 'blanket' for shock victims was produced.

A shiver went down Stockwell's spine as his friend was cocooned in the thing. He turned away.

* * * * *

His head ached. His back hurt. Bakula tried to open his eyes. Where the hell was he?
And what..?

Finally he got his eyes open. He was at the bottom of a cliff face on his back. He squinted against the bright light as the wind continued to buffet him.

Wind? Why hadn't anyone turned off the wind-machine? He craned his head up. "Dean?"

Stockwell was in costume, instead of the beige polo shirt he was wearing before. He turned slowly, cigar in one hand, gummi-bears in the other.

"Sam! You're awake!" he said in character. "Jeez, Sam, you had me worried. I've been going out of my mind trying to work out how to get help."

"What happened?"

"Ah, you fell. Some stupid bush or something gave and you lost your footing and fell about five meters. You could have broken your neck."

"Stop clownin' around, Dean. Where is everyone? And tell them to turn off that damned wind-m..." Scott trailed off. He'd raised himself to a half-sitting position and was looking around at the very real cliff, weather and trees that surrounded them.

"Is this another practical joke? If it is, it's not very funny. I ache all over. I feel like I was kicked in the head. Where is everyone? How did we get from the shoot to this place so quick? Or was I out for that long?"

Dean was looking at him as if he were raving. "Sam, have you got a concussion? You're not making any sense."

"Sam?" Scott repeated. "This is a joke, isn't it?"

Dean made a very Al-like face and put his cigar fingers on his brow. "Don't tell me you lost your memory again, Sam?"

Scott sat up properly, his head swimming. This joke was getting very un-funny very quickly. And it was very unlike his friend to carry a practical joke this far. For that matter, it was way out of character for Dean to be involved in any kind of joke that involved anyone getting hurt.

"Dean?" he ventured again.

"And who the hell is Dean?" Stockwell demanded in Al's voice. He hit the gummi-bear prop and it lit up on cue.

When it squawked, Bakula jumped three feet in the air, making his head even worse. There was no way the crew could rig those sound effects that realistically.

"Remote control," he growled. "That was done with a remote, wasn't it?"

"Remote what, Sam?" Dean asked. His concern seemed to be real, and yet he was continuing the Sam and Al charade.

"Dean, stop calling me Sam. You've got me worried now. I remember falling off the damned prop. I remember you feeding me lines from the cherry-picker, but I don't know how we got here or why the others are nowhere to be seen. The joke's over."

Dean's expression grew harried. "Sam, it's not a joke. You must've really hit your head. Don't you even remember who I am?"

Confused and beginning to feel a little frightened, Scott shook his head.

"I'm Al, remember? Al Calavicci, your buddy. This is some stupid canyon in South Dakota. That nozzle Coustas left you in here, in this box, so you couldn't interfere in his operation any more."

As if in a daze, Scott began to play along. "And what...what am I doing here, Al?"

Dean's face relaxed a little. "You're Ryan McBride, a narc trying to crack Coustas' amphetamine racket. You found out how the stuff is being shipped from the factory out here in the boonies somewhere, across state lines to all the waiting suppliers. But you aren't here for Ryan, or the bust, which was eventually successful anyway, you're here for Shannon Laughlin, a local kid who stumbles into the operation a couple of hours from now when she's out horse-riding. Her body is found about three months from now in a shallow grave with a single bullet hole to the back of the head. You have to get out of this canyon, Sam."

Scott looked up at the cliff face. It made the prop cliff look like someone's back fence. He looked back at Dean.

Well...it had to be Dean...didn't it?

"Look, I don't care what's going on here, I'm too sore and too tired to care..." Scott stopped again. It had been late...like about eight-thirty at night, when he fell. It was now broad daylight. Why did he still feel like he'd been working hard for fifteen hours straight? He gathered his wits again.

"I know my name is Scott Bakula and this is...was a television production. This must be some kind of location shoot. If you're trying to make me angry, Dean, somebody is about to lose a bet," he said in a voice colored by rapidly rising temper.

However, instead of Dean confessing and reassuring him that it was a joke, the man was hitting the prop and yelling at Dennis...no, Gooshie, to do something. The prop squeaked again.

Scott shuddered. The noise was unnerving.

"Sam, Ziggy says you have a concussion. She doesn't know if anything else is wrong. Try to stay still for a while. Maybe it'll pass." The handlink squeaked again. "But don't go to sleep."

Scott got to his feet and brushed himself off. Then, without warning he lunged at Dean, intending to swipe the stupid prop from his friend's hand and tell them all the game was up.

All he got was a handful of air.

He tried again and this time stumbled right through Dean. His neck hair stood on end, adrenaline sending chills crawling across his scalp and skin. He turned, head throbbing.

"What's going on? That was impossible. Dean, wherever you are, this isn't funny!" he screamed at the top of his lungs.

Calavicci winced. "Sam, Sam, that's not good for your head."

Scott deliberately put a hand through Al's hat. "What is this? There's nothing out here but trees. There's no such thing as free-standing 3-D holograms. Will somebody tell me what's going on?!?!"

"Sam, please," the other man begged. "I can't help you if you go running around and make your concussion, or whatever it is, worse. You're a doctor. You should know that."

"I am not a doctor!" Scott shouted. Scott never shouted. He was not a man easily driven to anger. But he was angry now, and confused, and worried. "My name is Scott Bakula. I am an actor. That is what I do. Sam Beckett is a character in a television show. Al Calavicci is a character in a television show. God forbid there should really be an Al," he muttered to himself.

"Aw, Sam, that hurts," Al complained.

Bakula immediately felt contrite. Whatever was going on, Dean Stockwell was not himself. However, if it was a joke, he was damned well going to pay for it later!

"Sorry. I just want to know what the hell is going on and whether or not my family is okay."

The other man completely lost all color from his face. "Family? You mean your mother and your sister?" he asked hopefully.

"My mother..?" Scott started to look truly harried. "My mother is in St. Louis. I'm talking about my wife," he said through his teeth.

"St. Louis? Your mother is in Hawaii, Sam," Al/Dean told him, fervently hoping the distraction would work.

Scott's eyes narrowed. "If you're going to not tell me about Donna, forget it. I know the whole back-story, remember?"

"Back-story?" Calavicci asked, hiding behind a cloud of cigar smoke from his worried puffing.

"Yeah. You know, the star-crossed lover thing that Deborah came up with. Sam Leaps into the college where Donna is and gets her together with her father so that she doesn't jilt him at the altar. Then at...ah...about the end of the third...no, the beginning of the fourth season, we did that show where Sam and Al simo-leaped and Sam gets to find out he is married."

It was the hologram's turn to look scared. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Scott shrugged. "Scott...Scott Bakula."

Calavicci shook his head. "This is too weird." He hit the handlink. "I'm going back to talk to Ziggy, " he mumbled, obviously unable to come to terms with the turn of events at the moment.

Bakula watched, mouth open. What looked for all the world like the special effect for the chamber door in the show suddenly appeared in thin air and the guy claiming to be Al Calavicci stepped through it before it snapped shut, leaving...nothing. He blinked, walked around in a lost circle, then grasped his head suddenly.

* * * * *

Moments later he was looking up from the ground once again. This time, however, there was a roof overhead and a lot of people around him, not least of whom was Dean Stockwell, looking as though he'd just lost his best friend...

"Al?" he asked tentatively.

Dean raised surprised eyebrows. "Scott? Are you okay, buddy?"

"You called me Scott," Bakula exclaimed, squinting up at him in the fierce light of the spots.

"Of course I called you Scott. Did you hit your head?"

"Dean?"

Scott put his hand on his friend's arm, grasped it, shook it, then laughed and pulled himself up and embraced Stockwell. "It is you. It must have been a dream. Thank God."

"Take it easy. You sound a little shaky there," Stockwell told him as he scrambled unsteadily to his feet.

Bakula shuddered, his face turning a horrible shade of gray. "Dean...I feel kinda sick," he said, swooning.

Stockwell only just caught him in time....

* * * * *

Bakula woke to the sound of the chamber door opening.

No, that couldn't right. That was a post-production effect.

He opened his eyes slowly. He was now in a home of some sort and Dean was there, back in costume, lighting another cigar. He didn't look well.

"Dean?" Scott croaked.

"No, it's Al, Sam, remember? How's your head? How many fingers do you see?"

"I see a house. Who moved me? Where's the cliff? Where's the sound stage?"

"Shannon's dog found you while she was out riding and she used the horse to haul you out of the canyon. You've stopped her from being killed by Coustas' men, because she's so busy with you now she won't be out riding when she's supposed to have stumbled onto the factory."

"You're talking about a script I've never heard of," Scott wailed. "I'm not interested in shows that aren't even written yet. We're supposed to be going home in an hour. Does Krista know about this? If she's worried for nothing--"

"Still concussed," Calavicci told someone worriedly. "Don't worry, Sam, Shannon has gone to get help for you. You're gonna be okay. Trust me."

"I am not concussed!" Scott objected. "I want to go home. I want this to end, now."

"End? Sam, it can't end until he," he gestured upward with his thumb, "decides he doesn't need you any more."

"Don't keep calling me Sam," Bakula groaned and lay back on the pillow. He was dizzy and his head was swimming again.

Al watched him with alarm. His color was still terrible and a cold sweat had broken out on his forehead. His eyes were glassy and Calavicci suspected that his pulse wasn't going to be too hot either.

"Sam, don't go to sleep. Get something to raise your legs. I think you're going into shock. Please, Sam...Scott, just do it. I can't help you, God dammit! You have to do it yourself."

Scott opened his eyes again. The genuine panic in the man's eyes moved him to do as he was bid. It was an effort to slide off the bed and retrieve two pillows lying on a trunk under the window.

By the time he collapsed back on the bed and forced the pillows under his knees he was utterly exhausted.

"C'mon, Shannon," Al said desperately. "You gotta come back and help Sam."

"S...Scott," Bakula managed without opening his eyes.

"Scott," Al corrected. He was worried. Sam couldn't remember his own name, yet he could remember Donna and leaps of which he'd previously had no memory. He was even more worried that he wouldn't be able to keep his friend awake until the young woman returned with a doctor.

"Tell me about Scott," he said gently.

Bakula struggled to open his eyes. When he did he met brown ones identical to Dean's looking at him with the same kind of intense regard that Dean was able to focus on people, particularly when he felt strongly about something. Only these eyes were also filled with worry...and fear.

Fear for him.

"Me?" he said with difficulty. "I'm an actor. I have a beautiful wife and two beautiful kids. I was born in St. Louis. I got my start there..." He went on to haltingly describe his childhood, his early career, his misadventures with a local production of Man of La Mancha, his introduction to Broadway, his first film and the first time he met Krista before he stopped, too out of it to continue.

"Sa--Scott, stay with me," Al begged. "Tell me about whassisname, Dean--"

"Dean..?"

"Yeah, him."

"W...wish he was here," Bakula said plaintively, his eyes closed again.

"Yeah, well, if it would keep you awake, then so do I."

Scott chuckled weakly. "You're him."

"I'm him?"

"Yeah. His face, his voice...his cigars."

A door rattled.

"Finally," Al huffed, storing Scott's revelation for later.

A girl of perhaps seventeen lead an older man in a heavy coat into the room.

The doctor spent several minutes examining Bakula before rising and going back to Shannon. Al followed him.

"He has a depressed fracture of the skull. I'm going to arrange an ambulance. We're lucky he's a strong one. I think he'll be all right now, but you did right to call me."

Al sighed with relief. Sam was going to make it.

* * * * *

The hospital was small and parochial. One couldn't have done much more than throw a cat in casualty. They were lucky that it wasn't busy.

Scott had lost consciousness and Calavizzi hovered over him like a guardian angel as the duty surgeon and a single casualty nurse worked to stabilize him for surgery. The procedure seemed to take an eternity. Afterward Al followed the gurney through the corridors, rode up in the elevator with it and sat by the bed until Scott regained consciousness some hour and a half later.

"M...my head," he whispered.

"You banged it good, Sam. They operated to drain the haematoma. Ziggy says you're out of the woods."

"I'm in a hospital..? Where's Krista? Did you tell Krista?"

"Sam, it's me, Al. You are Sam Beckett, Quantum Physicist, Doctor of Medicine and prude extraordinaire...remember?"

Scott squeezed his eyes closed. "No," he said tremulously. "No. I'm Scott...Scott Bakula. Please, whoever you are, I want to wake up now."

"Sam, c'mon, buddy. You are waking up...from an anesthetic. Give yourself a chance to remember. You hit your head awful hard. Verbena says its more than likely that you're temporarily scrambled, that you're remembering something from one of your leaps. Just rest. We'll talk when you feel better."

Al reluctantly turned to activate the chamber door.

A wan, disoriented Scott raised a trembling arm. "N...no, Dean...don't leave me here."
Al looked at the hand for a long moment, his eyes growing very moist, his knuckles whitening as his hand tightened on the handlink.

"S...Sa...Scott, I'm here. I'm not going anywhere," he said with difficulty, came back, and sat alongside the bed.

Bakula subsided, his arm falling slowly back to his side. In moments he was sleeping peacefully.

Al sat staring at the handlink. There were moments when he came close to hating Sam Beckett for what he did--for leaping without finishing the project and leaving himself stranded in time. Leaving himself so far away. Sometimes...

"When are you coming home, Sam?" he asked softly, watching the youthful face in repose. "I'm tired, and I know you're tired. When is it gonna end..?"

* * * * *

Scott woke to find himself in a hospital bed. He blinked. A private room. He was alone.

He lifted his wrist to look at his watch. No watch. He found it in the side table. It was morning. He'd been out all night. That explained it. He'd been dreaming. Weird, frightening dreams. He'd never felt so alone, so isolated before in his life...

Carefully, he eased himself out of bed. He had to go to the bathroom, but part of him was still afraid. Afraid reality wouldn't be what he expected it to be. His head ached abominably. He was momentarily very dizzy and more than a little nauseated. Most of it passed, however, and the urge to go to the bathroom would not be ignored. He untangled his drip tube and pushed the stand along with him as he'd seen the women do in the maternity hospital when Chelsy was born. He reached the doorway of the smaller room and found himself looking into a mirror.

After a beat his heart rate slowed and he smiled just a little. He was himself. Disheveled, lacerated across the temple, kind of bruised, but still Scott Bakula, despite the force-ten headache.

The face in the mirror stared back at him. Of course, it wasn't only his face...

He thought of his nightmare and chided himself for even considering the possibility that he would see anything else there.

He was back in bed when someone finally arrived with breakfast. They were followed soon after by his doctor and a nurse.

"Where's my family?" he demanded immediately.

"They're at home right now. Mrs. Bakula spent most of the night here but we sent her home when it became obvious that you were not in danger and that she was approaching exhaustion herself."

"She's okay?"

"Oh, yes. Mister Stockwell drove her home a couple of hours ago."

"Krista..." he whispered.

"Mister Bakula?"

He screwed his face up as pain arched across his skull. "When can I get out of here?"

"We're holding you for observation," the doctor explained. "After that we'll see."

Scott could barely lift his head. "S...So there's no fracture? No haematoma?"

The doctor's eyes widened. "Why do you ask?" he questioned, not quite steadily.

"Oh...I don't know...something someb...somebody said," Scott muttered with growing difficulty.

"Well, that's not something you need to worry about, Mister Bakula. We'll give you something for that pain and I'll be in again this afternoon to check on you."

For Bakula the hovering nurse injecting something into his drip barely registered as he descended into a cotton-wool ocean bordered by pain and laced with a barely grasped fear that wouldn't leave him alone.

And then there was only blackness.

* * * * *

"Krista...?"

"It's okay. You're dreaming. You're going to be fine."

Bakula stirred, trying hard to open his eyes against the bright sunlight streaming in the window across from the bed. A young woman, almost a child, was watching him worriedly, her long chestnut hair framing a smooth, oval face set with the darkest ebony eyes he'd ever seen. There was still a residual sprinkle of freckles across her nose. Just like Chelsy's...

"Wh...who are you?" he asked, swallowing an insane urge to burst into tears.

"Shannon. Shannon Laughlin. I found you--in one of the canyons around here. You were hurt. You're going to be fine though. They're taking good care of you."

He tried to move but Shannon put a firm hand on his shoulder.

"No," she said. "You aren't ready to move, yet. Don't even try to lift your head for a while. You just had surgery. This is the first time they've let me in to see you since we brought you in two days ago."

"T...two days? Where's De...I mean Al?"

"Who?"

Scott closed his eyes as reality blurred and re-defined itself again. Of course the girl wouldn't see a hologram...but, hell, there was no such thing as a neural hologram, especially one that looked like Dean. And yet...he remembered one...

"No.." he whispered. "It was just a dream. I'm home. I've gotta be home. Krista! Krista, where are you?"

Cool hands closed around one of his. "I'm sorry," the strange voice said. "I'm sorry I'm not Krista. Please, please try to relax, or the doctor won't let me visit you any more."

At that moment Bakula heard the imaging chamber door open again. "Crazy," he said without opening his eyes. "This is crazy. There's no such thing..."

Calavizzi looked from the girl to the distressed Bakula and back again. He shook his head. He'd spent a sleepless night worrying about the possibility that Sam might not regain his memory at all. What he didn't understand was why Ziggy didn't seem to have any trouble maintaining a lock despite the fact that Beckett seemed to have assumed the identity of some stranger, some memory from a previous leap or something...

"No such thing as what..?" Shannon asked.

Bakula exhaled slowly. "Nothing," he whispered, and finally opened his eyes again. He knew a sudden leap of the heart when he saw Dean's face behind the girl, then just as suddenly a void opened up and swallow the small spark of hope. The hologram again...

"I think I'd like to sleep now," he told the girl.

"Good," she said softly. "I'll be back next visiting hours."

"Why is she so interested in me, Al?" he asked the moment she was gone. She doesn't know this Ryan McBride guy from Adam."

Calavicci came to his side. "Try not to move too much, Sam. Ziggy says they did a good job with the surgery but if you don't take it easy you could make things a lot worse."

"Worse?"

"Worse. So lie still and let me do the talking. Shannon has been at your side pretty much since she rescued you. She's kind of adopted you. It happens, same as it happens to nurses who get too involved with their patients," he added, a haunted look in his eyes. "She's a good kid, and you need someone, so let her be."

"Dean, if this is a gag, if you can stop whatever is happening, stop it now," Scott pleaded. "It isn't funny anymore."

"Sa--Scott, if I could help you, I would. "Don't do this to yourself any more. Until you get your memory back, just trust me that you're Sam Beckett, my friend. Me and Ziggy are gonna be with you until you're well again, I promise."

Bakula's head had begun to ache again. Not just to ache, but to throb. He suspected that his medication was wearing off. He decided once again to play along, at least until he could get some kind--any kind--of handle on what the hell was going on.

"Are...are you telling me that Sa--that I'm not gonna leap?"

"Ziggy says there's only a 20 percent chance of that. You changed history. Now Shannon isn't murdered by Coustas, but she still doesn't have much of a future. She's nineteen years old and she lives with her grandfather. She gave up any chance of going to college to stay here and look after him. Right now he's in hospital. She thinks it's for elective surgery. In a week he comes home and in three months he dies of congestive heart failure."

"And Shannon?" Scott asked reluctantly.

"She ends up alone, with nothing. "It turns out her grandfather never thought to change his will. Everything goes to the widow of the old guy's eldest son. And she doesn't give a damn about Shannon."

Scott raised a hand fitted with a canula, put it down again and drew the other one over his eyes.

"I'm supposed to make certain the will gets changed, right?"

"Right. That way Shannon gets to keep this place instead of ending up on a slab in downtown Chicago."

"She dies?"

Al nodded. "If nothing changes between now and then, the kid loses almost everything. She goes to Chicago to find a job, jay-walks one night after walking the city all day looking for work and gets hit by a Buick."

The hand slid from Bakula's pale, strained face. "And I'm supposed to stop this from happening? With a fractured skull?"

"Yeah, well, we'll work around it."

Bakula half-laughed. "Work around it? Yeah, right. Like I worked around a busted foot."

"Busted? You mean when you sprained it falling out of Captain Galaxy's time machine?"

Scott sighed. "Yeah, sure. Future Boy. Right. How long are they going to keep me in here?"

"Ziggy says a little over a week, probably, provided you don't do anything to aggravate the injury."

"Okay," Bakula subsided. If he was dreaming he was bound to wake up again, eventually. "So what about McBride? Somebody has to be worried about what happened to him, where he is?"

Al tapped the handlink. "Like I said, he's divorced. The only people likely to be looking for him now that the police department has been notified--"

"They have?"

"Well, yeah. All the hospitals in the area were directed by the police when you went missing, to keep a look out for anyone brought in who matched your description. As I was saying, the only people likely to be worried are your kids and your friends on the force. And none of them are in a position to drop what they're doing and come down here when they know you aren't in any danger."

Al paused. Bakula had closed his eyes again, tiredness etched in every line of his pale face.

Reluctantly he punched something into the handlink. "You get some rest. I'll be back before then, I promise."

Scott did not hear the chamber door close. He was already in a deep sleep.

* * * * *

When he opened his eyes again it was very dark. His nose told him he was still in a hospital. But part of him was afraid to guess whether he would be Sam Beckett or Scott Bakula this time. Sense of humor re-emerging, ne pinched himself. It hurt.

So did his head.

Once again the fluid being pumped into him by the drip made it's inevitable consequences felt. He had to get to the bathroom. When he reached it an unreasonable dread of turning on the light suddenly gripped him. Eventually, by sheer force of will he flipped the switch.

And exhaled before dragging the drip stand past his own reflection to the pedestal.

When he re-emerged from the bathroom the light from it enabled him to see someone slumped in the armchair in the corner of his room. He moved a little closer, to be swept by an overwhelming sense of relief. It was a sleeping Dean, dressed in relatively subdued Nike runners and jacket, and cream sports pants. He smiled to himself.

A moment later his legs turned to jelly, forcing him back to the bed. In his haste to avoid passing out on the floor, he forgot his attachment to the stand and pulled it off balance. It crashed into the beside table and bounced onto the carpet floor.

In seconds Dean was there, picking up the IV, righting the stand and hanging the pack of solution again before helping Scott back into the narrow hospital bed. Without fuss he then picked up the hand with the canula in it, checked it and put it down again.

"You were lucky you didn't pull that out," he said, blinking sleep from his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Nope."

"What d'you mean 'nope'?" Dean demanded, used to Scott's wry humor.

Scott scowled. "No. I'm not all right," he repeated. "Either someone is playing a monster practical joke on me or I'm losing my mind."

"I don't understand?"

"I go to sleep and I wake up somewhere else, with Al Calavicci hovering over me. I go to sleep there and I wake up here. I feel like a bloody yo-yo."

"You're probably still having after-effects from the anesthetic."

"Anesthetic? I was operated on here, too? Why didn't the doctor tell me that before?"

Dean shifted uncomfortably, a worried frown knitted on his brow. "Scott, you've probably been dreaming, or delirious. You fell off the stupid prop and hit your head. They operated to relieve the pressure under a depressed fracture. It went like a piece of cake. Krista was here for fifteen hours straight. I made her go home to the kids. When we found out you were going to be okay I told her I'd call if there was any change."

"Thanks," Scott said quietly. His affection for the older man was boundless. "Dean, level with me. There's no gag? It wasn't you?"

Stockwell put a hand on Scott's shoulder. "We thought we were going to lose you. Nobody was thinking about pranks. You haven't been any where but the studio and here, kid."

Bakula closed his eyes. "Then it was a dream. I don't have to make certain the will is changed."

Dean screwed up his face in puzzled bemusement. "What will?"

"Al said I changed history. Shannon doesn't die any more but she's going to be left destitute when her grandfather dies in a month or so..."

"Are you telling me you've been dreaming about the show?"

Bakula opened his eyes. "I was Sam Beckett," he said, staring straight into Stockwell's puzzled gaze.

"Oh," he said, deadpan. "How do you feel now?"

Scott swallowed. "Confused. My head hurts. It was all so real. Al Calavicci was so real...I jumped right through him, Dean."

Stockwell chuckled. "Helluva dream, kid. Still, it's a lot better than having Freddie Kreuger or momma Alien chasing you."

"Yeah, right," Scott said quietly. "How long have you been here?"

"Oh, couple hours. I promised Krista...you know."

"Yeah," Bakula agreed, looking up at his friend, emotion in his eyes, his voice. "I know."

Dean silently acknowledged his feelings with the barest of nods and a smile in his brown eyes, before Scott continued.

"You'd better get home yourself. I know Joy. She'll be waiting up."

Stockwell grinned. "Take it easy, kid. No more dreams, huh? I'll be back later. Krista will be in first thing."

Bakula nodded and watched the older man head for the door.

"Dean--" he called quietly.

Stockwell turned in the open doorway.

"Thanks..."

* * * * *

He didn't remember going to sleep again. For a moment he lay with his eyes closed, his mind gradually rousing from slumber.

...And remembering.

Okay, so it was okay to open his eyes. He'd talked to Dean. He was back. One, two...three.

He blinked. The hospital room looked different. No, he told himself. It's not. It's just your imagination. He remembered being lucid, going to the can, knocking over his drip. He looked around. It was still there. But the arm chair was gone. And so was the carpet. Hard linoleum covered this floor.

"NO!" He roared under his breath, then subsided as the door opened. "Shannon," he said weakly.

She frowned and moved swiftly to his side. "Are you okay? You look awful."

Bakula couldn't help smiling. "Great bedside manner you got there, Doc."

Shannon flushed. "I came to see my grandfather and I thought I'd check on you while I'm here. Can I bring you anything?"

"Yeah, my clothes," he muttered.

"Well, it may not be any picnic in here, but you're going to have to at least wait until they take the drip out," she told him dryly. "In the meantime, if you want I can get you some decent pajamas, something to read, even a rental TV--"

Scott contrived to frown and look amused at the same time. "Pajamas, maybe, and a toothbrush. I think it's going to be a while before I need any television, or books. Something suddenly occurred to him. Today's paper. I want today's paper."

Shannon nodded. "I'll get the paper now. I have to go back to Grandy. And I'll bring the rest tonight."

She was back in ten minutes with the local rag. All Scott was interested in was the date. He took the paper and held it up without opening it. October 4, 1990. The day after the shoot. It could still be a gag...

"What is it?"

He looked up at the young woman. "N...nothing. Thanks for the paper. Your grandfather will be waiting. I'm fine," he told her. And he was, pretty much...

But if this was a dream...If he went to sleep again he'd wake up back in his private hospital room in L.A. And if it were a dream he really didn't need to stay in bed...

Once Shannon had left the room he sat up, ignored the sudden nausea and the renewed thumping in his head, swung his feet over the side and got down.

For a dream it was pretty dumb. He felt terrible. After a concerted, but fruitless effort to get through to his subconscious that he was indeed, only dreaming, Scott managed to get to the closet. His clothes--McBride's clothes--were there, pressed and cleaned.

He found underwear in the side table and put on the pants, socks and boots. By the time the last boot was on he felt as though he was going to die. He looked at the drip hanging on its stand, then down at the canula imbedded in the back of his hand.

With a silent one-two-three he pulled it out, grimacing. This was one painful dream. He pushed the stand into the bathroom, dropped the canula in the sink and washed off his bloodied hand. When he looked up, the face looking back at him in the mirror was not his own.

For all his experience with Sam Beckett and mirror shots, the shock was still comprehensive. The man staring back at him was about thirty-five, fair-haired and thick set. He had a young, but kind face.

Scott backed away and was on his way to the door when the chamber door opened.

"Sam!" Calavicci exploded. "You aren't supposed to be out of bed. You'll kill yourself."

"This is a dream, Al. I'm not really here. I'm in Los Angeles, asleep. I can do whatever I want."

Calavicci's expression grew grim. "Oh yeah? Well, if this is a dream why are you whiter than those sheets?"

Bakula swayed, the pounding in his head reaching a crescendo.

"Look at you. You can hardly stand up. For God's sakes, Sam. You're a doctor. You know what could happen."

Bakula walked right through him and opened the door. "My name is Scott and I told you before: I am not now, nor have I ever been a doctor."

"Yeah, well, whatever your name is you can't go out there. There's no reason to go putting your life in danger. If you really are from L.A. what the hell good is going to do you to go wandering around South Dakota?"

"Anything would be an improvement on--"

"Sam..!!"

* * * * *

"Scott..!!"

Stockwell only just made it in time to stop Bakula from collapsing heavily to the ground. He lowered his friend slowly.

"Scott, what are you doing out of bed? What--?" The canula had been torn from the back of his hand, which was bleeding. The carpet was wet with solution from the damaged drip.

Bakula was unmoved. It took a concerted effort on Stockwell's part just to get him back into bed before hitting the call button to summon the nurses.

By the time Scott had been cleaned up and connected to a new drip he'd started to come around again.

Dean watched the slow, reluctant, almost fearful opening of the green eyes and waited. They moved slowly over him, as if assessing something.

"Dean?" his friend croaked.

"Who else?" he growled.

"Where's Krista?"

"She's been here all day. I came in about ten minutes after she went home to the kids. Don't you remember?"

Bakula closed his eyes again. "The last thing I remember is trying to leave the hospital. I figured what the hell, it's just a dream. I didn't make it, did I?"

"This isn't a dream, Scott."

"No, but Shannon and the other hospital is. This is insane, Dean. I just...I just keep bouncing back and forth between two hospitals. There I'm supposed to fix things for Shannon and here all I want is to see Krista, but I never seem to get any closer to doing either."

"Scott," Dean said softly.

Bakula opened his eyes.

"Whether you like it or not you fractured your skull. You've had a severe concussion, an operation, a general anesthetic and obviously way too much stimuli. I think a nightmare or two isn't out of the question, huh?"

Scott half-chuckled. "I'm not crazy?"

"Nope."

"I am tired."

"Yeah, well, the way you've been sleeping, I'm not surprised," Stockwell said dryly.

"Why are you here so early?"

Dean's face grew grim. "Everybody's worried about you, kid," he said non-comittally.

Scott wasn't fooled. Before he could speak, however, a doctor arrived and Stockwell was temporarily ushered out.

After a full going-over by the less-than-impressed medico, Bakula was pronounced none-the-worse for wear and warned not to leave the bed again until she gave permission. A nurse injected something into his drip. By the time she left Scott's mood had darkened by several degrees.

"What?" Stockwell demanded the moment he came through the door.

Scott was still scowling.

"Bedpans."

Stockwell repressed a smile. "Bedpans?"

"And bed-baths. I'm not allowed up until she gives permission."

Dean laughed. "Serves you right. How's your head?"

"Same," he said reluctantly. "I'm ignoring it."

"Oh, very grown up of you," Dean chuckled, then looked more closely at Bakula. "They give you something?"

"I guess. The nurse stuck a needle in the drip thing. They didn't say... Why?"

"You're beginning to look like a lot of people did all the way through the sixties," Dean smirked.

"Oh, no, not again," Scott muttered in a slurred voice...

* * * * *

A voice was calling him from somewhere in the distance.

"Sam?"

No, not him after all...

"Sam?"

Bakula opened his eyes slowly, disgusted that he'd allowed it to happen again so soon. He was on the floor with an agitated hologram hovering over him.

"Haven't we done this already?" he muttered painfully.

"Sam? You're back. Thank God. The doohickey, you pulled it out of your hand. You shouldn't have done that. I couldn't even call for help," Calavicci blithered.

"Al, I'm going to be okay," Bakula told him reassuringly. "Trust me."

As he struggled to his feet, Al put out a hand and then withdrew it again. "You remember who you are?" he asked almost plaintively.

Scott considered his options. "Yes," he said finally. "And I still have to make certain that Marcus' will is changed."

Al grinned. "Right," he agreed happily. "Now get back into bed and push that call button so they can fix your whassis there."

"It's called a canula, Al. And if they come and fix it, I'm not going to be able to go very far. And I'm especially not going to be able to go see Shannon's grandfather..."

Al sighed. "I hate it when you're right," he muttered.

Scott grinned weakly and got himself back onto the bed.

Calavizzi continued: "The question is, are you really well enough to get up? You aren't going to do Shannon or Marcus any good if you end up on your face in the middle of the men's medical ward."

Scott took stock for several long moments. Finally, he looked up into the eyes which were also Dean's eyes.

"I don't know," he said truthfully. "All I can do is try. I have to try."

Al stared back at him, a strange feeling in his gut. "If you're not Sam Beckett, you sure sound like him," he said quietly.

"I'm not," Scott reiterated.

"Then where the hell is Sam?" Al demanded, unconvinced.

"I'm him too. I mean, we're both me...I mean, I don't know what I mean, only...well, put it this way--I'm kind of borrowing him at the moment."

Al shook his head. Ziggy still wasn't having any trouble whatsoever maintaining a lock on Sam, or whoever he said he was...It had to be the concussion. Had to be...

"Yeah, right. Well, right now Shannon is home making plans to celebrate when her grandfather gets out of hospital. Nobody tells her how sick he is until after he dies. It stinks," Al declared. "You gotta get down there and see the old coot and make him realize what he's going to be doing to Shannon--"

Bakula raised his aching head from the pile of pillows he'd constructed to try and ease it.

"Wa--wa--wait a minute. It's one thing to say I have to do this, but I know absolutely nothing about the guy--"

Al poked at the handlink.

"Marcus Laughlin. Seventy-five years old. Retired cattle rancher, widowed fifteen years now. He also had two sons, one of whom died in a farm accident when a tractor turned over--" He dropped the handlink to his side momentarily. "--And the other one died in Vietnam. Victim of friendly fire," he finished darkly. "The first one was Shannon's dad. She was two years old when he died after the tractor he was driving rolled on the side of a hill and crushed him."

Bakula closed his eyes for moment, ran a tense hand through his hair, then carefully eased himself back out of the bed. He made his way slowly to the cupboard and selected a plain blue shirt.

The journey down the corridor was a painful one. They passed several staff and visitors, but since Scott was dressed no-one took any notice of him. The hospital was so small it was laid out entirely at ground level. Al showed him the correct corridor and stayed with him as he moved stiffly through the building looked for ward C.

"How come I got a private room, Al?"

"Oh, the police department arranged that," Al said off-handedly, raising cigar-filled fingers to point to the open door of the ward they'd been looking for.

The eight bed ward was half-filled with ill men ranging from those sitting up in bed reading or playing solitaire to several who were completely out of it.

"The third one on the right, Sam. The guy cheating at solitaire."

By the time Scott reached the visitor's chair next to the man's bed he was both exhausted and in pain.

"Hello," he ventured. "I--I'm Sam.."

"No, Sam, you're Ryan McBride," Al interjected swiftly.

He started again. "I'm Ryan McBride."

"That bump on the head giving you hell, boy?" the other man inquired, seemingly amused.

"Then you know--?"

"Shannon gave me the technicolor version already," he chuckled. "Damned tight situation you got yourself into, McBride. If Tige hadn't found you, you'd be lizard-bait by now. According to Shannon if the doctors hadn't operated when they did you probably wouldn't have survived."

"Yeah, well I still don't feel so good," Scott added ruefully. "But I came here to talk about Shannon. She's a good kid. I know the two of you are all alone and I got to thinking about you being in here and what would happen to her if anything happened to you--"

Marcus lifted a grizzled eyebrow. "You asking to court my grand-daughter?"

"Careful," Al warned.

"Ah, no. Not that she isn't a lovely girl, but I, well, she's just a kid," Scott fumbled uncomfortably.

"Glad you got that worked out," the old man replied, warning in his tone.

"It's not that. I've had a lot of time to think, lying in that hospital bed and, well, its just that I started to worry about what would happen to her when--"

Marcus held up a staying hand. "It's all right, boy. Don't fret. Somebody told you why I was in here, didn't they?"

Scott looked across at Al. "Ah...yeah, something like that."

"You haven't said anything about this to the girl?"

"No, sir," Bakula assured him.

"Good, because I don't want her to know. You can't change what God already fore-ordained and I don't see any need for her to spend the rest of my time grieving over it."

Bakula frowned. "Maybe that isn't how it would be. Maybe if you gave her the chance you'd find that the best thing you could possibly do would be to give her a chance to come to terms with it and to be ready to go on after you're gone."

The old man shook his head. "I've thought about this for a long time. I knew for many months that my wife was going to die. Every moment of every day from the time the doctor told me until she went was agonizing for her, and for me."

His eyes had grown unfocused as he reached back into a hurtful past, for those last moments as husband and lover to his beloved Eileen. "Watching her die like that--"

Scott closed his eyes for a moment. Being Sam Beckett was all very well in a television studio, but this felt intrusive. It felt wrong. And it hurt...

"I know, Sam," Al said softly, walking through the bed to stand at Bakula's shoulder. "But it's Shannon's life we're talking about now."

"Mr. Laughlin, the most important thing you can do for Shannon right now is to make certain she will be secure when you're gone."

"You ever lost anyone, Mister McBride?"

Bakula drew in a deep breath. He certainly couldn't speak for Ryan McBride, but he could speak for Sam...

"Yes, sir."

The old man's blue eyes fixed him with a piercing gaze.

Scott swallowed again, thinking about the back-story for Sam Beckett, for John and Tom.

"And what I do know is that it's those who are left behind who suffer the most," he finally replied. "Do you have any idea what she'll do when you're...when you--?"

"When I die?" Laughlin said bluntly, then smiled a little. "This is no place to get shy, boy. She'll have the ranch, my assets. More than enough to get by until she decides what she wants to do."

Scott took the plunge. "Will she?" he asked, his tone implying just the right amount of skepticism.

The old man was unfazed. "Why sure. My will is being re-drawn as we speak. I put it off for so long I figured I oughtta do something before I came back in here again." He chuckled but his eyes were drooping with fatigue.

It was not what Bakula expected to hear. If the will was being changed, what could have gone wrong..?

"Well, it's been good talking to you, sir, but if I don't get back to my room they'll probably send the cavalry after me," Scott told him and withdrew.

Back in the private room Al was waiting for him.

"Find out who handles his legal affairs, Al. I want to know who is drawing up that will."

Al punched the request into the handlink. "You think there's something fishy about the whole setup?" he asked.

Scott nodded. "I'm only guessing...hell, I don't even know what I'm doing here, but if I were Sam I'd want to know."

The handlink chirruped.

"Ziggy says there's no record of a new will being drawn up. Laughlin's lawyer is J.D. Soames. Soames' father was his lawyer for thirty years until he died. He drew up the old one."

"But Marcus believes his will is being changed," Scott muttered, sitting down on the bed to pull his boots off.

"Sam, you're a doctor. How long before it's safe for you to get out of here and find out what the hell's going on?"

Scott laughed. He couldn't help it. After everything that had happened, being asked to make a medical diagnosis of his own condition was just too crazy...

"Now," he replied when he sobered. "I can go now."

Al looked at him skeptically. "I don't know. It's too soon..."

"It's okay," Scott reassured him. "There's no way this is going to do me any harm."

It was after all, just a dream...

"Then put your boots back on before some nurse finds you dressed and sics the paramedics on you," Al told him, concern still etched in his features.

* * * * *

Being fully clothed, Scott encountered few problems getting out of the hospital. His dressing was small and could easily have been applied in outpatients to a minor wound. He was beginning to feel nauseous again and his head pounded, but it felt good to finally emerge into the warm sunshine.

They circumvented the transportation problem by hijacking someone's cab as it pulled up outside the reception area. For the duration of the trip to town Scott became Mister Chester Arkwright.

The town was small and it didn't take much to find Soames' address in a phone book.

"Ziggy says this guy is clean. He has no criminal record and nothing in his record to say that he was ever charged with anything," Al reported as Scott made his way to the second story office. "It's the window with Soames, Kellerman and Soames still painted on it."

"How do you suggest I find out what's going on without getting kicked out?" Scott asked, wondering when he was going to wake up again.

"Ziggy says you should try the direct approach, and if that doesn't work we'll think of something sneakier."

Scott looked at him sideways, looking, did he but know it, very much like Sam Beckett.

"Sounds like a great plan," he drawled, opened the ground floor access door and started climbing the wooden stairs. It smelled musty and cloying and the timber walls were dark and close.

A receptionist old enough to be his mother looked up as he came through the office door.

"Can I help you?" she asked without smiling, looking over her tortoise shell butterfly glasses.

"Um, yeah. I wanted to see Mister Soames," Scott mumbled.

"Do you have an appointment?" she asked, with the air of one who was being kept from something far more important.

"No, but it's about Mister Marcus Laughlin. It's important."

She exhaled delicately and looked down at the open diary on her desk. "He'll be able to see you at four fifteen," she announced after several moments.

Scott looked at Ryan's watch. It was just after two-thirty. "Are you certain he couldn't see me any earlier?" he asked in his most charming voice.

"No," she said without looking up.

Bakula made a face at her and was forced to contort it into a smile when she unexpectedly looked up, surprised by his silence.

He tried again, aiming for the sympathy vote. "I'm not well you see. I came straight from the hospital."

"Pathetic," Al told him. "She's a dragon. She wouldn't care if you came in here on a stretcher. She's not going to be nice to you just because you have a little patch on your head."

The receptionist rose without speaking to him and went into the inner office. A few moments later she reappeared, her expression unchanged.

"He'll see you for five minutes, Mister McBride," she informed him, sat down and got on with her typing.

Scott turned smugly to Al.

"She heard me," Calavicci muttered.

"How did she know my name--?"

"Small town," Al opined as they went into the inner office. "And you were rescued by the old boy's grand-daughter."

Scott shot him a doubtful look, then faced the lawyer. The junior Soames looked anything but junior. He was perhaps in his early forties but his hair was almost gone and he was showing the effects of a sedentary, indoor lifestyle. He fixed Bakula with watery blue eyes in a pale face and pressed a finger against his graying mustache.

"So you're the cop Shannon rescued? A miraculous recovery wouldn't you say?" His tone was mannered, but his words were barbed.

"Not really. I haven't actually been discharged yet, I just had a strong reason to go AWOL. Right now I'd be quite happy to barf all over your real nice table and go to sleep on your real nice sofa over there," Scott said with equal civility, "but since that would be impolite I'll suffer in silence while we talk."

Soames looked at Scott's dreadful color and nodded his head in grudging acquiescence.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

Bakula drew a deep breath. "I have a problem, Mister Soames."

Al drew on his cigar and watched him curiously.

"You see, Shannon saved my life. I owe her, big time. Now, it has come to my attention that her grandfather is in a bad way and that he is all Shannon has right now."

Soames sat back in his chair. "And you want to take her off his hands?" he asked unpleasantly.

Scott shook his head gingerly. "What I want is for Shannon to be protected. What I want is for her grandfather to go to his grave knowing that she was going to be secure. What I don't want is to find out in a couple months from now that she ended up with nothing and had to go to the big city to find work. People get lost in big cities, Mister Soames."

Soames cleared his throat. "What gives you the impression that Miss Laughlin will not be looked after?" he asked, the clear implication that it was none of Scott's business in his tone.

"Let's just say that I checked into things. Mister Laughlin believes his will is being altered to make certain Shannon is to be taken care of. I happen to know that isn't the case. You wouldn't want to tell me why a new will hasn't been drawn up yet?"

Soames was looking at him as though he were ghost. Certainly his complexion has paled several more degrees and his mouth had drawn tighter than a rubber band.

"I don't know where you got your information from, Mister McBride, but that is a patent untruth."

"Words, Mister Soames," Scott said quietly.

Soames buzzed the outer office.

The receptionist appeared almost instantly.

"See Mister McBride out, will you," he ordered without preamble.

"Are you admitting that what I said was true?" Scott demanded. "I'm not going until I get a reasonable explanation. And short of carrying me, Attila here can't force me to go."

"Way to go, Sam. And Attila's name is Elspeth McGrowther. Her bark is worse than her bite."

The receptionist harrumphed, looked over her shoulder at the boss then left without another word.

Soames cleared his throat again. "I'm sure you are aware that I cannot disclose personal information about a client to anyone without the appropriate documentation," he pointed out.

"Then I'll have to assume that you are not acting in Mister Laughlin's best interests and inform him of your change of heart," Scott returned, his poker face near perfect.

"That...that won't be necessary," Soames managed, clearly a small-time professional with little or no experience outside the musty confines of his office. "Of course Mister Laughlin's will is being reviewed. He requested it himself. The fact still remains that I cannot show you private documents pertaining to any of my clients without the appropriate authority."

"How well do you know Mister Laughlin's daughter-in-law--?"

"Elaine Laughlin," Al filled in.

"--Elaine Laughlin?" Scott finished.

Soames laughed. "I grew up with her. I grew up with both of them. Rob was good man."

"And Elaine?" Scott prompted.

He laughed again. It wasn't a pleasant sound. "Elaine could have picked anyone. She chose Rob."

Scott's eyes went to the man's ring finger. It bore no sign of ever having held a wedding band.

"Maybe she fell in love," he suggested.

"And maybe she was seduced by looks and by a physique that every girl in the district wanted a piece of," Soames muttered, smoothing an eyebrow nervously. "Rob had everything but a future."

"He died in Vietnam," Scott said through his teeth. "No one, not even you, could have predicted what his future might have been if he hadn't given his life for his country." He eyed the other man. "You were still in college, weren't you? You didn't have to go."

Soames stood up suddenly. "Who are you, a stranger, to come marching in to our lives, to meddle in affairs which are none of your business? I demand that you leave this office, right now, or I will call the sheriff."

"And I demand to see that will drawn up exactly as Marcus requested. I'll be back here tomorrow morning with Shannon Laughlin. If you haven't completed the work to Mister Laughlin's satisfaction I'll expect you to make her a full refund of any costs already incurred by him and to relinquish any legal documents belonging to the Laughlins."

When they were out on the street again, Scott finally breathed. He swayed, pale and drawn in the bright sunlight.

"Al, get back in there and monitor every move he makes. I want to know who he calls, what documents he gets out after I'm gone, even what he says to Attila."

"Sa--Scott, you look awful. I'll go if you promise to get a cab back to the hospital. I don't want you collapsing in some hotel somewhere with no way for me to get help or anything."

"Yeah, fine," Bakula agreed, too nauseous to argue.

He was emerging from a long hot shower, dressed in the clean pajama shorts left for him by Shannon, when Al returned to the hospital.

"Anything?" he asked, color now back in his cheeks from the heat of the shower.

"He called Elaine Laughlin. He's trying to woo her, Sam. It's pathetic. He thinks if he gives her the will she might actually consider marrying him. The guy has never married. Apparently he was ready to propose right when Rob Laughlin asked Elaine to marry him before he went to Vietnam. Soames, it seems, has never gotten over it."

"And Elaine?"

"She's not exactly the wicked witch of the west, if that's what you're asking. As the widow of the eldest son she has some justification in believing that she's entitled to part of Marcus's estate."

"But as an Aunt she kinda sucks, right?"

"Ziggy says she never had any kids of her own. There wasn't time with Rob and she's never remarried. She hasn't been back here since she left six months after his death to go to college. She made a career in teaching political science and has been on the staff of several prestigious universities. I don't know what her personal motivations are and we can't do much about them, since she's there and we're here."

"I can call her," Scott pointed out and lay back on his pile of pillows.

"Well, there is that," Al conceded. "It could be an interesting call, if she doesn't hang up in your ear. Women don't much like getting calls from strange men even at the best of times."

The door to the room opened. A nurse entered with a tray, eyed Scott's half-naked form lying on top of the covers--covers with several very damp patches on them now from his wet hair and back--and proceeded to help him bodily from the bed before changing the linen. Scott rolled his eyes as she briskly towed his back and gently patted the excess moisture from the back of his head, put a new gown on him, helped him back into bed, tucked him in and lifted his wrist to take a pulse.

After a time she let go and recorded it, but not before using her other hand to thrust a thermometer into his open mouth. He rolled his eyes again at Al and waited for her to finish her readings.

"Doctor Thurman missed you today, Mister McBride. You know you haven't been cleared to be on your feet for extended periods," she pointed out, removing the thermometer.

"Yeah, well, sorry about that. I was bored. I went for a walk around the hospital and got talking to some people..." Scott improvised.

"Well, I wouldn't be going for too many walks for a while, if I was you," she warned.

"You are not well enough to exert yourself as much as you obviously have today."

They watched her go, the door swinging closed behind her, before Al spoke again.

"She's right, Sam--"

"Scott."

"Scott. She's got a point. Verbena says I should never have let you get up in the first place."

"Yeah, well, what's done is done. Keep an eye on Soames. I'll fill Shannon in when she comes in later and we'll see what happens."

"Your eyes look weird. Are you sure you're okay?"

Scott nodded gingerly and motioned Calavicci to go before closing his eyes again.

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Less than fifteen minutes after Al left a tap at the door roused Scott from a strange, fugue-like drowsiness.

"Yeah?" he called.

Shannon let herself in and smiled as she approached the bed.

"Hi."

"Hi," Bakula replied.

"How's the invalid today?"

He smiled. "I have a headache."

Laughlin chuckled. "My grandfather likes you."

"I like him too. A lot."

"He says you're worried about my future."

Scott looked at her. She was so young, so untouched by the worst of the world. In spite of her personal losses, her eyes held no contempt for life, no hint of past grief, only a warmth and a spontaneity such as he'd only seen in recent times in the eyes of his own children...

He swallowed. He wanted to go home...

"Yeah, I am. You saved my life, and when I found out about your grandfather I was concerned about what would become of you. I checked out this Soames guy and I found out that while your grandfather thinks his will is being changed, Soames is really far more interested in winning back your Aunt."

"Elaine? I've seen pictures but I've never met her. When my mother was alive she mentioned her a couple of times when she was talking about high school and how she met my dad..."

"Yeah, well, he's been in touch with her and my source believes he's still in love with her. He thinks making certain she gets your grandfather's estate is going to win her over."

"Wow, that stuff about cops having sources they can't divulge--that's all true?"

Scott smiled again. If she only knew... "It sure is. What you have to do is make absolutely certain that the will is drawn up exactly as your grandfather wanted it to be. There's no way he wants to leave this life without knowing that you'll be provided for and that all his wishes have been acted upon."

"Well, Grandy's will is his own business, but I can certainly check to see that he's getting exactly what he paid for," Shannon said thoughtfully. "Why are you so worried about me? Anybody would have gotten you out of that canyon, and the dog found you, not me."

His smile widened. "It's what I do," he told her, feeling exactly like Sam Beckett. "I'd want to help no matter how we met. Besides, I like your grandfather a lot. I don't want to see him hurt either."

"You're a nice guy, Ryan McBride. If you were ten years younger--" she grinned.

Scott chuckled. "Thanks," he said sheepishly. "But you should worry about yourself and your grandfather right now."

Shannon nodded. "And you should rest. You've done all the wrong things to that poor head of yours."

Bakula smiled. "I will," he told her. "Don't worry about me."

He watched her leave before closing his eyes, pain twisting his boyish features with ferocious intensity as he lowered his head to the pile of pillows on the bed.

* * * * *

When Al Calavicci returned to check on his friend, he found him asleep. A closer look, however, sent a chill down his spine. He tapped an urgent demand into the handlink to which Ziggy replied with alacrity.

Sam was unconscious and his condition was deteriorating...

* * * * *

Scott opened his eyes slowly. He was disoriented, groggy, unaware of anything except waking up and pain. He squinted against the daylight.

As recent memories began to filter back he closed his eyes again. He didn't want to look. He didn't want to be anywhere but home.

"Sam?" a voice called quietly.

"No," he whispered, tears in his throat. "No..."

"Can you hear me, Sam?"

Miserably Scott forced his eyes open. Calavicci was wearing an impossibly nauseating tie.

"Al? I didn't go home, Al."

Calavicci swallowed. So what was new?

"Sam," he said softly. "We almost lost you. I should never have let you get up."

"Didn't," Scott mumbled. "My idea."

"Yeah, well, who wants to argue, buddy? The main thing is you're still alive."

The cotton-wool began to clear from Bakula's brain. For the first time he realized he was back on a drip. The frustration was overwhelming.

"What the hell is going on?" he demanded through his teeth. "I want to go home."

"God, I know, Sam, but you know Ziggy can't bring you back."

Scott closed his eyes. Ziggy, Al, Sam...

Was it ever going to end..?

The handlink chirruped.

"Sam, you did it," Al told him in a pleased voice. "Ziggy says that as soon as Shannon found out what Soames was doing she told her grandfather and he pulled the will completely. He's lodging a new one this week with a rival law firm. Shannon goes to college and goes on to be a really good social worker. At the age of twenty-seven she marries another social worker and she's expecting a baby this year--1999--in about three months."

"I did it?" Scott repeated, amazed, bemused and still a little out of it.

"You sure did, kid. Get ready to leap."

"Leap?" Scott yelped in alarm. "I can't leap. I've got to go home. I can't...!"

He felt the tingle of electricity, then a sensation--as if his whole body was being consumed by warm liquid energy--suddenly grabbed him.

He leaped.

* * * * *

"...Le-e-ap!"

It stopped.

"No-o-o-o!"

Scott panicked. He tried to get up. He wasn't going to go through another one of Sam Beckett's adventures, dream, nightmare, gag, whatever it was.

He wanted to go home.

"No!" cried, hauled himself up and opened his eyes, terrified of where he would find himself. He was tired of being hurled--or leaped--around like...

Like Sam Beckett...

Scott looked around the room slowly, disbelievingly. Then he checked the back of his hand, his head. Was it real or..?

There was a slight movement at his side. He looked down and swallowed hard.

"Krista..." he whispered, careful not to wake her.

I'm home..!

He touched her hair and grinned, wiped the moisture from his eyes.

For a long time he was silent, unmoved. It had all seemed so real, so vivid. Dean, Al, the canyon...even leaping...

Finally, as the familiar scents, sounds, shapes of his own room re-established themselves in his consciousness, he believed.

He looked up at the ceiling and smiled to himself. "It really was a dream."

And as all of the tension finally left him, he found himself chuckling softly.

Two Deans, he mused. All those practical jokes paled into oblivion next to his friend's dual invasion of his dreams...

He shook his perfectly healthy head and chuckled again.

Just wait, Stockwell. Just you wait...

THE END

Meanwhile at Project Quantum Leap: Chick Howell

by Nancy M. Mathews

One minute he was cueing up Little Richard's "Tutti-Frutti" and preparing to read a commercial, the next thing he knew, he was here in this all-white room. He felt befuddled, but did remember that once again, he and Rachel had 'had words,' and they weren't the kind he wanted to have with her. They were constantly arguing with each other, while all he wanted to do was to take her in his arms and kiss her. Now it looked like he might never get the chance unless he found out where he was and got out of here. As the world began to coalesce around him he uttered one word in a wistful sigh.

"Rachel." He tried to get up, but the restraints on the bed (or whatever it was he was lying on) held him fast. Still confused, he attempted to clear his head and began fighting against the constraints.

"Easy. You'll only hurt yourself. You must believe me when I tell you that the last thing we want is for you to harm yourself in any way," Verbena said in a calm voice.

"Who are you?" Chick asked, ceasing his struggle.

"I'm Doctor Verbena Beeks," she replied as she calmly removed the constraints. "These were only for your protection while you were asleep. Now that you're awake you don't need them."

He sat up, still puzzled but taking an interest in his surroundings.

"Where am I? Don't you think this place could use some bright colors? They would do wonders to brighten it up a bit."

An amused smile flitted across the doctor's face. "As to your first question, I'm not at liberty to tell you, but someone will be here soon who can answer some of your questions." Verbena watched the medical monitors, seeming satisfied with the 'visitor's' vital signs. "You seem to be OK. Either Al or I will be back to visit you."

"Al?" Chick asked, still perplexed. She turned and smiled at the question.

"Yes, I think you and he will get along fine. You both seem to like bright colors."

"Good, because I gotta get back to the station. Some pompous squares are trying to ban Rock & Roll from the air and that's just squares-ville," he replied. Verbena hid a smile at the sound of the archaic language coming out of Sam's mouth. She walked to the Waiting Room door, pressed in the security code, and exited. The door closed behind her, shutting Chick inside alone. He fretted and paced, wondering how to explain his disappearance to Rachel, and trying to figure out what on earth had happened.

* * * * *

Verbena gained admittance to Al's office. He was in conference with Ziggy.

"Admiral Calavicci, I have a location for Dr. Beckett."

"Sam!" Al exclaimed, relieved at the news. "It's about time. Where is he?" he demanded.

"According to the data I have collected so far, Dr. Beckett is in Peoria, Illinois, September 9, 1959. I am unable to determine anything further until you go into the Imaging Chamber and make contact with him, or until you provide me more information via the occupant of the Waiting Room," Ziggy replied sulkily.

Al looked up and saw Verbena. "Well, Verbena? How's our 'guest'?" he asked, puffing on his ever-present cigar.

"He's conscious, confused, worried, and asking a lot of questions."

"Good. I have quite a few questions for him too."

"I thought you might. He checks out medically, and seems to have suffered only minor disorientation. He said something about squares trying to ban Rock & Roll?" she reported, puzzled by the reference.

Al nodded thoughtfully. "Well, In 1959 we were still using the term 'square' and there were several movements against Rock & Roll, especially in the Bible Belt." He got out of his seat and walked across the room toward the door, followed by Verbena. He grinned and addressed the computer. "Ziggy, Sam programmed you with all of Elvis Presley's hits. Pump all the ones that were popular as of September 9, 1959, into the Waiting Room. Oh, and any other Rock & Roll hits of the same time period, like stuff by Buddy Holly, Little Richard, or Bill Halley and the Comets. Let's show our Visitor that we aren't 'squares.'"

Verbena looked at him and smiled. "Hmm...it might work."

Al winked at her, feigning ignorance of her insinuation about his order.

"What? I just want to hear some Rock & Roll, sort of prepare myself for the times. Sam's Leaped into 1959 and that's the music that was popular then." Al smiled slowly, remembering some event from his and Sam's past. "The kid will love it!"

Verbena smiled and went to her office while Al continued in the direction of the Waiting Room.

He entered it to find Chick pacing in time to the music. Ziggy was playing Buddy Holly's "Oh Boy." The DJ stopped pacing and looked up at the man dressed in a light purple shirt, black pants and silver jacket who entered smoking a cigar and singing along with the music.

Al stopped singing and smiled. Ziggy lowered the volume of the music to provide a comfortable background for conversation. Chick immediately began questioning the Admiral.

"Where am I? What am I doing here?" he asked.

"Well, that's hard to say. All I can tell you is you're someplace safe, and we'll try to get you back to where you belong as soon as we can. Now in order for us to do that, you have to help us. I'm Al. What's your name?"

Chick looked at Al, trying to decide if he should answer his questions if he wasn't going to get any answers himself. He decided he might as well, and put on his radio persona.

"Chick Howell. Howling Chick Hooooooooooooooooowell," he replied, using the howl from his show. "You don't recognize me?"

"No, but you're not from around here, so why would I?" Al replied.

"Where's here?" Chick asked curiously.

"New Mexico," Al replied simply, watching the visitor very closely.

"New Mexico?! I was in Peoria, Illinois, less than an hour ago. How did I get here?"

"You traded places with a friend of mine. You're here, he's there. Don't worry, you'll go back there when he finishes whatever it is he has to do. So, the more you help, the quicker you can get back to Peoria," Al explained.

"Look, man, I must have drunk some strange coffee." Chick was still trying to make sense out of the bizarre idea. "Whatever it is, I don't have time for this right now. I have to help Rachel

fight that Beeman guy to keep Rock & Roll on the air in Peoria. Those squares are trying to ban it. Even though Rachel and I don't agree on very many things, this is one issue we DO agree on."

"Rachel?"

"My boss, Rachel Porter. She owns WOF Radio in Peoria, and WOF is the only station in town to play Rock & Roll. She's stubborn, and irritating, and loses her temper a lot, but she's no square and we both agree that Rock & Roll is today's music and the wave of the future."

"You can say that again," the Admiral commented. Ziggy monitored the conversation as Al listened carefully to Chick's description of the events that had transpired. He was rapidly becoming convinced that Sam was there to help Rachel and Chick get together and establish Rock & Roll in Peoria. He would need to observe events there first, but if he didn't miss his guess (and he usually didn't when it came to men and women's feelings for each other) Chick was in love with Rachel. Eventually the DJ finished explaining what he remembered of the situation and Al left the Waiting Room to the sounds of Bill Halley and the Comets' "Rock Around the Clock."

Ziggy had finished processing the information and reported to the Observer as he made his way to the Imaging Chamber.

"Admiral, I project a 92.4% probability that Dr. Beckett is in Peoria to save Rachel Porter."

"Save Rachel Porter?"

"Rachel Porter lost the radio station, which her father had built, in March of 1961. She eventually lost interest in everything and moved to Chicago. There she tried odd jobs, but everything she had was invested in the defunct radio station. She died destitute a few years later." The computer sounded depressed.

"Because of a radio station?" Gooshie asked absently as he went on with his work. Al picked up the handlink and entered the Imaging Chamber.

"Evidently the radio station means a lot to her," he answered over the intercom. "We'll know more after I talk to Sam. Gooshie, center me on him!"

He immediately found himself in the hallway of a building just as Sam entered the same hallway from another direction in the middle of an argument between Rachel Porter and Frederick Beeman. He watched Sam attempt to make peace between the two.

* * * * *

By the time Chick Howell had eaten, seen Verbena, and taken a nap, Al was back at the Waiting Room. The Admiral was steaming, and he let Chick know about what had happened.

"Boy, that nozzle Beeman is threatening to get a law passed to ban Rock & Roll from being played in Peoria! If that's not enough, he's yanked his advertising spots from the station, and he's threatening to get other owners and advertisers to do the same," Al reported. He was disgusted with the events and Beeman.

"He's gone too far!" Chick exclaimed, frustrated and angry with this new information. "I've got to get outta here now!"

"We're doing all we can. No one can pass a law banning Rock & Roll. It's unconstitutional." Al replied calmly, attempting to placate the DJ.

"You don't know Beeman. He's the owner of a hardware store, and the editor of the PEORIA DISPATCH. He can print whatever he wants. The Mayor, the Police Chief, and

probably a lot of the Town Council will go along with his ideas," Chick warned him grimly, not buying Al's assurances.

"Well, Sam will figure something out. He wouldn't be there if he couldn't," Al replied, his voice ringing with confidence.

"Sam?"

"Yeah, Sam Beckett. He's the friend I told you about."

"Sam is there with Rachel?" Asked Chick in concern.

"Don't worry about that. He looks like you and you look like him. Everybody in Peoria will think he's you." Al explained ambiguously.

"Oh," replied Chick, not understanding, and not certain he really wanted to. This whole thing was giving him a headache. Maybe this was all a dream, and he hadn't reported for his shift yet. Whatever it was, he might as well just go along with it.

"Now, Sam has to do your radio shift tomorrow morning. What kind of records do you play? Anything in particular?" Al asked.

"No, man. I play the same stuff that's played here," Chick replied, referring to the selections Al was having Ziggy pump into the Waiting Room. Al smiled at the answer since that was what he'd been expecting and hoping for.

"I think he can handle that. These are some of my favorites," he commented.

"He'll have to do some talking."

"Talking," Al echoed as he puffed on his cigar, thinking it over.

"Yeah, talking. You know, in between cueing up the records. Do a little news, make a few jokes. You know, DJ stuff. You've got to put your own style to things. You *do* know what I mean, don't you? You seem like a cool guy."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. No problem," Al assured him, thinking of an old movie he had seen in the late 80's and remembering some of the DJs he had heard and hung out with throughout his colorful life. He turned his attention back to Chick. "Well, you get some rest. I'll be back to visit you sometime tomorrow. If I don't come and talk to you, Doctor Beeks will. I'll have to help Sam tomorrow. Don't you worry about a thing," said Al as he exited the Waiting Room. Privately, although he didn't show it, he wondered how he was going to get his Swiss-Cheesed friend to make like a radio DJ. Sam was good at many things--after all, he *was* a genius--but public speaking was not one of them, and this included most of the elements of public speaking and *then* some.

* * * * *

Chick only saw Al once again briefly. He was dressed in a powder blue jacket, with bright orange neon tie, and a multi print shirt. Chick thought Brian would love Al's outfit. Al was very perturbed at the events that were transpiring in Peoria. Al burst into the Waiting Room waving his hands in disgust.

"Someone threw a brick through the window of the station and it hit the radio console, but don't worry, Sam was able to fix it and get back on the air. Then those nozzles *did* pass a law banning the playing of Rock & Roll, but don't worry about that either. Sam has some ideas up his sleeve. He and Rachel are going ahead and playing Rock & Roll, pointing out that they have the right to under the first amendment."

"That won't make any difference to Beeman," Chick commented, alarmed. "How are he and his crowd taking it?"

"They cut the power to the radio station. When I left Sam, he and Rachel were trying to get the power back on with one of those old Civil Defense generators."

"I'm not surprised."

"Oh, before I forget. You met Chubby Checker today and he brought in a demo of a new song. It's called 'The Twist.' Now Sam told Rachel to play it, so since he is you, sort-of, she thinks that you told her to play it. So, now you have to hear it, so she doesn't think it's weird that you don't know what she's talking about. A neat dance goes with it," explained Al as he demonstrated 'The Twist.' He winked and commented. "Rachel sure looked good dancing to it too."

Chick looked at Al for a minute. "She did? Why would I care how good she looked?" he asked cautiously. "She's just my boss."

"Yeah, but when you get back there, this whole experience will tear down most of those so-called barriers, and then you can tell her how you really feel."

"How do you know how I feel about Rachel?" Chick asked suspiciously.

"I'd have to be blind, deaf, and dumb, not to see how you feel about her. Besides, I can see the way she feels about you," replied Al.

"You mean him," stated Chick flatly.

"No, I mean you," Al corrected quietly. He went on to explain. "It's obvious in the way you've been at each other's throats. It's like when you pull a girl's pigtails and she sticks her tongue out at you. It's the beginning of love."

"I don't know...but I hope you're right," the DJ admitted.

"Trust me, I am." Al assured him. Chick thought about what the Admiral had said and tried to picture Rachel doing the dance that Al had shown him. The more he pictured it, the more he wanted to hear the actual song to put to the dance steps.

"OK, Play it man. I'll listen--like I have a choice."

"Oh you'll like this song. It's got 'hit' written all over it," Al assured him. Chick was skeptical. He and Brian had heard that line before.

"I'll be the judge of that," Chick replied. Al had arranged with Ziggy to play it on cue, when he fingered any key on the handlink residing in his pocket. He tried singing along and danced "The Twist." Soon Chick was trying it out.

"Maybe you're right. I think this might be a hit."

"Sure I'm right. Trust me, 'The Twist' is going to be big. Anyway, that's what's going on so far. I gotta get back to Sam. If all goes well, you won't see me again. If not, I'll give you an update when I get back." Al hurried out of the Waiting Room, back through Control, and entered the Imaging Chamber. Gooshie had Ziggy Center him on Sam and he arrived during a slow dance between his friend and Rachel.

* * * * *

That was the last Chick saw of Al. Hours later, he felt a tingling sensation and blacked out. When he came to, he was standing next to Brian, howling his howl, knowing he was supposed to buy Rachel breakfast after he finished his shift. He felt for some reason that he and

Rachel would get married someday. He really didn't remember much--it had been a dream, hadn't it? Maybe, but it wouldn't hurt to act as if it had really happened.

THE END

*The preceding story was my thoughts of what happened to Chick in the Waiting Room at PQL during the aired episode of "Good Morning Peoria." I've tried to stay true to the episode so there would not be any obvious contradictions. It is not intended to infringe on the Copyright of Universal, nor Bellisarius productions nor anyone else. Characters and elements of this story were based on the "Good Morning Peoria" script written by Chris Ruppenthal for the television show **Quantum Leap**.*

--NM Dec. 26, 1995

Almost an Angel

by Kerry Blackwell

It was not a particularly nice letter. Of course, demands for money never are, whether they are outright threats or, like this one, disguised by so much jargon and legalese they might have been written in a foreign language. Al Calavizzi flipped back to the beginning and considered simply screwing up the offending pages and letting the cleaners deal with them. Unfortunately, he was well aware that lawyers don't look very kindly on such treatment of an important document like a court summons.

There were problems with somehow having collected a string of ex-wives the way someone else might thread beads into a necklace or make daisy chains. In theory, they should all have disappeared into the mists of his past with the finalization of each divorce, but those automatic alimony payments were a constant reminder. And occasionally one of them would decide she needed more. She would use *his* money to hire a lawyer to sue him for an increase, which he felt was really *most* unfair. Especially since it tended to cost him even more money to fight it. A little personal discourse between the principal parties had been known to work wonders, but he was sure that wasn't going to get him anywhere this time. No, what he needed was a lawyer. A good lawyer. Preferably a good-looking good lawyer.

Al dropped the letter back onto the desk and pulled out a cigar. There was nothing like a good cigar to promote a little creative thinking. He'd tried to convince Sam of that once but his friend had refused to be persuaded. Al sighed, wondering where Sam was now. He was somewhere between leaps, lost in time and space, and the staff here at Project Quantum Leap could do nothing but wait, in varying degrees of calm or anxiety depending on their individual personality, until he landed somewhere again. It made for periods of calm followed by ones of frantic activity, but it had been going on long enough now that Al was almost used to it.

The cigar was working its promised magic. He remembered now that somewhere, in the black hole he called his desk, he had a business card for a big city law firm. That girl had given it to him, the one he'd almost knocked over, back when he and Sam...

Al came down the stairs to the plush hotel lobby, looking for Sam. They had been having trouble with one of their suppliers for Project Quantum Leap. They finally had the go-ahead and the funding and Sam's dream was slowly taking shape out in the New Mexico desert. Sam had been convinced that once that huge obstacle was overcome his problems would end. Al hadn't been so sure, but he had felt unable to play the pessimist in the face of Sam's wide-eyed optimism and enthusiasm. Unfortunately, it was Al who had been right. They had been having trouble with Dyson Electronics almost from the beginning, but since they were the only people that made the item Sam wanted, and since it was essential for the computer he was building (the one Al was sure could never do all the things Sam was describing), they were stuck dealing with them. Letters, phone calls, faxes and electronic mail had all failed to produce a response, so here they were, about to do battle in person. Or they would be once Sam finished talking to Donna, got off the hone and joined Al here in the lobby.

He checked again, but there was still no sign of Sam. The receptionist behind the marble desk across the room was looking harried, and while the man she was dealing with had his back

to Al, there was a belligerent set to his shoulders that suggested he was the cause of her distress. A small girl with dark curls and a naughty smile who couldn't be more than four was hiding behind one of the huge potted ferns growing at the bottom of the carved pillars that graced the hotel entrance while an elegant woman with an impatient face looked for her. A large number of people were disappearing down a corridor past a sign that read 5th Annual Hilligers Law Convention. Dark-suited men outnumbered severely-dressed women and, bored, Al turned away, deciding the receptionist would be a more interesting way to pass the time. Perhaps if he rescued her from her troubles she would be better inclined to spend some time attending to his needs.

He hadn't made more than three paces towards the desk when a young woman appeared out of nowhere at a run, failed to see him and crashed into his side. Instinctively, he reached out and grabbed her, catching her before she could fall, but the load she was carrying tumbled to the floor in an untidy shower of papers, pens, computer disks and slides.

"Oh, bother." The expression was muted, but the look on her face suggested she was thinking of much stronger responses that she was too polite to actually utter.

Al realized he was still holding her arms and let her go. She stepped back and stared at the mess on the floor with a rueful grimace.

"Sorry," Al said, wondering as he spoke why he was the one apologizing when she had instigated the collision.

At his words she looked at him for the first time and the annoyance of her face disappeared to be replaced by surprise. "Angel Al!" she exclaimed, her voice sounding both pleased and questioning at the same time.

Confused, Al blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

She ran a hand through her hair, suddenly looking embarrassed. "I'm so sorry," she said, refusing to quite meet his eyes as a self-conscious smile worked its way onto her face. "It's just that you remind me of the invisible friend I had when I was four."

"Oh." Al wasn't sure how to reply to that. "As far as I know, I've never been invisible."

She laughed. "Probably not. I'm sorry. Just let me pick up my mess and I'll leave you alone."

"Let me help," Al offered gallantly, and bent down to gather up the scattered slides.

"This looks like conference material," he added, thinking of the sign in the corridor. "Surely you're too young to be a lawyer." He doubted she was any more than twenty, and with her long, dark hair spilling loosely over her shoulders, her sunny smile and green print-cotton dress she also didn't look nearly serious enough to be a lawyer.

The smile reappeared as she answered. "No, I'm not. I'm just a lowly law student, working in a firm over the summer. That means I carry bags, call taxis and sort slides." She took the pile back from him. "And it looks, like I'm going to have to do these ones again, so I guess I'd better hurry."

But as she was turning to leave, she stopped and looked back at Al. She bit her lip, as if unsure whether or not to speak, before smiling a nervous smile. "Do you know someone called Sam?" she asked.

Al stared at her in shocked amazement. "Why?" he managed.

"My invisible friend had a friend," she explained. "Sam and Al. I hadn't thought of them in years until I saw you." Watching his stunned face, she nodded. "You do know a Sam, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," Al admitted, feeling like he had just stepped into the Twilight Zone. He half expected eerie theme music to start playing at any moment.

"What a mystery," the girl commented, sounding fascinated. She fished a small business card out of her disorganized pile, found a blue ball-point pen from among the collection rattling about on the top of the paper and scribbled something on the back of the card. She held it out to Al. "That's my name and phone number. If you ever solve it, please give me a call."

Al took the card, mostly as an automatic reaction, just as they were joined by a young man in a sensible suit who was looking severely strangled by his shirt collar and austere navy blue tie.

"Hurry up, Terry," he ordered. He looked at the clutter she was holding and heaved a huge sigh. "Great. Now, we'll have to redo everything." Taking hold of her arm, he steered her firmly towards the convention sign and all she could manage to give Al was a backwards glance and a farewell smile...

Sam had joined him then. Al had slipped the card into a pocket without even reading it and almost forgotten about it. On his return to the Project it had been dropped into a drawer and this time he did forget it completely. Until now. After scrabbling through the accumulated rubbish and treasures in two desk drawers, he finally found it at the bottom of the third. He leaned back in his chair again and finally took the time to actually read the printed words. *Hill, Dawson and Associates*. It certainly sounded impressive anyway.

"Admiral." Ziggy's voice broke the silence, sounding usually loud in the small office.

Al looked up. "Yes, Ziggy?"

"Dr. Beckett has leaped again. We have a new visitor in the Waiting Room and you're needed in the Control Room."

"I'm on my way." Al got to his feet, letting the card fall from his fingers. It tumbled to the desktop and landed upside down, scribbled words and numbers now visible, begging to be read, but unseen and ignored as Al hurried out the door.

Ziggy activated the Imaging Chamber and Al found himself in a kitchen. It was a comfortably homely kitchen, filled with enough modern appliances to fit the date of 1981 that Ziggy had given him. Sam was standing with his back to Al, but he still managed to look like the harried mother he had leaped into. A boy of around fifteen stood near him, finishing off the last of his breakfast. Standing in the doorway across the room were his two sisters, the older about ten and the other much younger. As Al swiftly registered all these details the older girl spoke.

"See, it's Mommy."

Her little sister wasn't buying it. "That's not Mommy, that's a man," she announced, much to Al's horror. "And so's the guy in the yucky shirt," she added.

Al was affronted. "This is my favorite shirt," he protested. He gave her a offended look. "This is cutting edge stuff."

"It's yucky," she insisted.

Her sister gave her a funny look. "This is too weird."

The little girl suddenly seemed to realize that the situation wasn't going to change back to the way it should be any time soon, and that her mother really had vanished. "I want my mommy," she wailed and ran from the room.

Al could hear her cries growing fainter as she got further away. But they didn't stop. They were a background noise as the older children finished getting ready for school (with typical sibling arguments that never quite seemed to stop) and eventually Sam and Al were left with an empty kitchen and a child calling in the distance.

Teresa reappeared a little later, looking cautious and carrying a broken doll. She got right to the point. "Where's my mommy?"

Al and Sam exchanged grown-up glances. Sam went over to her, crouching down so he was closer to her height. Then he hesitated, unsure where to start. Al came over to join him.

"Your mommy..." he began, trying to bail out his friend but soon finding himself hesitating as well. "Your mommy had to go away for a little while, but she's going to be back real soon."

Sam jumped right in beside him. "Yeah. My name is Sam." He gestured in Al's direction. "And this is Al and for the next couple of days everyone's going to pretend that I'm your mommy."

He didn't sound very sure of himself and Al wasn't convinced she was going to buy it. "Why?" she said, asking the most obvious question.

"Why?" Al and Sam blankly repeated together.

Al pulled the handlink out of his back pocket and checked it. "Oh, to help your big brother."

"Do what?" Teresa asked.

Al looked again. Not wanting to read what it really said in front of her, he said the first thing that came into his head. "Ah...to win the swim meet."

Teresa gave them both a thoughtful look. "Are you angels?" she asked.

Sam said "No," at exactly the same moment Al said "Yes," but it was Al who took control of the resulting conversation. "Yes, this is Angel Sam and I'm Angel Al."

Sam didn't seem impressed with this tactic, but while he muttered under his breath he didn't contradict what Al had said.

Al held out a hand to Teresa. "Here, I'll show you. Try and touch my hand."

She came forward and hesitantly reached out a hand of her own that, of course, passed right through Al's larger one. She gave a delighted crowd of laughter and jumped right through him. Al turned around to face her. "Come on back here."

Sam obviously wasn't happy about it, but he made use of Al's explanation. "See, we're a couple of angels and we're here to help Kevin win the swim meet. And after that we'll be gone and your mommy will come back."

Teresa thought about it. "Promise?"

"Oh yeah, promise," Al said earnestly.

"Promise," Sam echoed.

She nodded, accepting the promise and accepting them. She held out the doll. "Can you fix it?"

Al pointed in Sam's direction. "Angel Sam is the doll elf."

Sam took the doll and Teresa, happier now, soon disappeared upstairs to find a book for Al to read her, agreeing that holding the book and turning the pages was a good deal in return for a story.

* * * * *

Al and Teresa were playing dinosaurs. As Al used to handlink to generate a hologram of a succession of the giant creatures, Teresa calmly and correctly identified each one. They had just reached the diplodicus when Sam interrupted the game.

Al turned from Teresa to look at him and the glance he got in return was a warning one, full of meaning Al could understand, even if he didn't like it. He turned back to the little girl.

"Teresa, your mommy's coming back," he said gently.

"Mommy?" The word was questioning, as if she had temporarily forgotten what it meant.

Al nodded. "Yeah."

"Can you stay?" she asked.

"No," Al answered with a shake of his head.

"But I don't want you to go," Teresa said, sounding forlorn.

"I don't want to go," Al agreed, feeling rather forlorn himself. "But I'm going to come back. I don't know when, but I'll come back."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

He held out his hand and she touched hers to it, her fingers sliding through his palm, but somehow he was sure he could feel the contact, the touch a promise too.

Sam leaped, the image faded, Teresa disappeared and Al was left alone in the empty Imaging Chamber. He made his way slowly back to his office, suddenly feeling unaccountably lonely. He walked through the door and flicked on the light. The little room looked as disorganized as ever, and with a sinking heart he recognized the letter of summons he had managed to forget about. Then his gaze slid past the typewritten pages to something that lay beyond them.

There, sitting in stark and solitary splendor, white against the buff envelope it was lying on, was the business card he had abandoned so abruptly at the beginning of the leap. Its back was uppermost, covered in untidy, blue handwriting. He picked it up and, for the first time ever, read the name scrawled on the cardboard. *Teresa Bruckner*, followed by a telephone number.

Helplessly, Al began to laugh. He had suspected for a while that God, or Time, or Fate or whoever it was who was *really* running Project Quantum Leap these days, had his own way of doing things. Things that made no sense or seemed unrelated all fitted into some overall vision that was far beyond the understanding of the people who lived it. A vision Sam, and through him the rest of the Project team, had a part in shaping, but could not see.

He sat down and pulled the chair up to the desk. Absently, he turned the card over and over in his fingers, thinking of a little girl who had liked dinosaurs. He'd promised her. And angels, whether divinely inspired or ones who were just masquerading under false (but well intentioned) pretenses, should always keep their promises.

Holding the card in one hand, he unearthed the phone from underneath diagrams of Ziggy's insides that were already out of date and punched in the numbers. He leaned back in his chair, listening to the phone ring and waiting for a little girl, newly met but all grown up now, to answer the call.

THE END

Green Eggs and Sam

by Jennifer Beatty

with mondo apologies to Dr. Seuss

That Sam-I-Am, that Sam-I-Am.
How I love that Sam-I-Am.
Can you make green eggs and ham?

"I cannot make them. Sam I am."

Could you make them in a tree
Saving cats unselfishly?
Could you with a Russian wrestler?
With a side of mush an' messler?

"That last line did not make sense!"

Can't you make them? Are you dense?

"I'm not dense, I'm very bright,
Though I am afraid of heights.
But I can't make green eggs and ham.
I cannot make them. Sam I am."

Can't you make green eggs and ham?
Can't you try to, Sam-I-Am??
You could make them with a priest,
Adding just a dash of yeast.
Wouldn't hurt you in the least.
Little Violet was deceased.
I bet you'd cook green eggs and ham
So masterfully, Sam-I-Am!

You could make them as a sailor,
Sleeping naked in a trailer,
Making babies with Abigailer.
I would like green eggs and ham
If you made them, Sam-I-Am!

"I can fly the high trapeze
Swinging by my quaking knees;
I can diagnose an ill,
Dance with "Tool Time" Taylor's Jill;

I can dance for inspiration
In the disco's conflagration.
I don't look that great in dresses.
Al gets me in dandy messes.
But I can't cook green eggs and ham.
I cannot cook them. Sam I am."

Could you, would you, in a train?
Flying in a haunted plane?
Could a single drop of rain
Make you dream of King in Maine?

"I can sing the sweetest songs,
I can right the wrongest wrongs,
I can do this all day long.
But I can't make green eggs and ham.
I cannot make them. Sam I am!"

Could you try to, Sam-I-Am?
Try to make green eggs and ham?
Try it for the piano man?
Try it for the nerd named Cam?
Try it for a hologram?
Make them! Make them, Sam-I-Am!
Try it for the debutante,
For the girls who like to flaunt,
For the models, way too gaunt,
Try it for the Future Boy,
Try it for a guy named Roy,
Try it having scary dreams,
Try it for that Norma Jean,
Try it for the bounty hunter,
Try it for the football punter,
Try it for a mom of three,
Try it floating out to sea,
Try it for the private eye,
Try for Texas vet, so shy,
Try it for the 'Nam G.I.,
Try it for the death-row inmate.
At so much, you've really been great,

So I know green eggs and ham
Will be so easy, Sam-I-Am!

Try it for the Evil Leaper,
For your wife, (the girl's a keeper),
Try it for the Great Spontini.
Pour yourself a dry martini,
Settle back and just relax,
Eggs-n-ham make lovely snacks.
Try it for the chimpanzee
Whose little head you had to free,
Try it in the Civil War.
Try it! Try it!

"Stop! No more!
I will make green eggs and ham!
I will make them! Sam I am!
I will try it, prob'ly wreck it,
I will make them--ala Beckett!"

I wish to dedicate this story to Terri Librande and Beth Hlasbe for their encouragement and editing help. And to Debby from Detroit for coming up with the story swap idea and giving me a deadline so I had to finish this.

Special thanks to all my e-mail friends and others who have always told me to "go ahead and try," and especially to all the Fan Fic writers out there who always made me feel, "Gee...I'd like to try that."

-F. Lee Whaley

July 18, 1995

ONE LEAP OVER THE MOONIES

by F. Lee Whaley

As Sam came out of the Leap he found himself walking down a street carrying slightly wilted carnations. Two young men who appeared to be with him were handing out the flowers and asking people for donations for some obscure charity. He looked around at the streets and houses. "San Francisco." He realized he had spoken aloud when a woman turned and looked at him. He was a little bewildered and confused as he went to hand her a flower. She turned in a huff and walked away. Sam realized that he was falling behind his companions and turned and started after them.

Sam was unaware of the van that had pulled up beside him until someone called out "Hey" to him. He took his flowers over to the van and held out one to the driver.

His companions yelled, "No, don't! Watch out!"

Before Sam knew what was happening he found himself grabbed and pulled inside of the van. Two beefy men pushed him face down on the carpeted floor of the van. They held him tight as he felt one of them tug on the back of his jeans. The upper part of his hip was exposed and he felt the bite of a needle as it was plunged into his hip. Darkness set in and that was all Sam knew.

He woke up with a pounding headache. Blurry-eyed he looked around at his surroundings. He was lying on a large oak bed. The room was bright and sunny. Crisp white curtains moved slightly in the breeze from the open window. He started to lift his head when a wave of nausea hit him. Lying back down, he groaned. Bill filled his throat and he looked around desperate for something to be sick in. Noticing a half-open door, he staggered over to it. Thankfully he found it was a bathroom. He was violently sick, too sick to even care when he heard someone come in. A cool hand went over his forehead as he retched over and over.

When he was finished, he looked up at a tall, concerned-looking woman. Taking a wash cloth she wiped Sam's face and then gave him a glass of water.

"Don't drink this," she instructed, "just use it to rinse out your mouth."

Silently he did as he was told.

Handing him another glass she said, "I want you to drink this one. It's a little salty but you need it and it will settle your tummy."

Sam drank the salt water, grimacing as he did so. Finally he was able to choke out, "Who are you?"



She didn't answer his question. Instead she said, "I want you to take a nice hot shower. Afterwards I'll give you something to eat, something that will stay down. Once you've had a good meal you'll feel better."

As she left, Sam heard the door lock click home. Kidnapped and now locked in, Sam's stubborn streak was setting in big time. He hated being pushed around. However, he was feeling really scruffy. He had slept in his clothes and apparently been sweating a lot. Smelly and itchy, Sam decided to take her up on the shower idea. While he was drying himself he studied his reflection in the mirror. A young man between seventeen and twenty years old looked back at him with piercing blue eyes. He was way too thin and his sandy blond hair had seen better days. When he came out he found clean clothes laid out on the bed. He got dressed. The t-shirt and shorts were a little big on the boy's spare form, but the sandals fit. He found that the bedroom door was now unlocked so he ventured out and down the stairs.

The two men who had grabbed him and the tall woman looked up when he walked in.

"Now Jonny, you come in the kitchen and Cook will get you something to eat." Sam's stomach churned at just the thought of food but he followed the woman down the hall into a huge kitchen. A robust woman was buttering some toast. The toast she set in front of Sam was dry and a hot cup of tea was steaming. Sitting down, Sam forced himself to eat. He knew the woman was right, that this would help the nausea go away. When he finished he found he did feel a lot better. He looked over at the cook who was eating her breakfast and asked, "Where am I? I mean what is this place and who are these people?"

The cook looked at him strangely and said, "What are you talking about? No games now, Jonny. Your father is waiting for you in the sitting room. Get along now."

Muttering an "Ohhhhh boy," Sam got up and wandered down the hall. He just hated that it was assumed he knew everything in a Leap, and he knew nothing. One thing was for sure, he had no idea where the sitting room was. Hoping it was the same room he had seen before, he back tracked and found the tall woman in there.

"Jonny, your father is waiting for you. Come along now."

Thankfully he followed her. She took him to a bright, sunny, empty room.

"Looks like he's not here. You sit down and don't move."

As she left the room, Sam heard the Imaging Chamber door open. Happy to see Al, he opened his mouth to ask him a lot of questions, but the Observer held up a hand to stop him.

"Wait, Sam. She's coming back soon and I need to give you the information you're going to need when you meet your 'father.'" Gesturing with his cigar he said, "Peggy is that woman who was just here. She's your father's secretary and all-around helper. It's July 16, 1975, and your name is Jonathan Preston, called Jonny by your family. You're 18 years old. Your father is Mark Preston. Your mother is deceased and you're an only child."

"Al, I was kidnapped and brought here by force. Why would my 'father' want to do that?"

"You belong to a cult run by a guy called Rev. Sun Myung Moon."

"I'm a moonie?"

"You remember them?"

"No...yes...well, I remember the name."

"Well, you're right. The Sun Moon guy runs the Unification Church or Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity. Your father has kidnapped you to de-

program you. He wants you out of the cult and back home with him. A lot of this was going on in the '70s."

"De-programmed? What are they planning to do to me?" Sam was really starting to get nervous.

"Relax, Sam. Most of the time they just let you get caught up in your sleep and start getting three good meals a day down you. Most of these kids were really run down and it didn't take that much to get them back on the right track."

"But I'm not Jonny. It won't do them any good. When I Leap he'll just be into the cult again."

"Ziggy thinks you're here so we can work on him at the Project. In the original history Jonny's de-programming didn't work. He OD'd on drugs and his father was heartbroken over it. What you need to do is resist his plan for a while and then when we finish with Jonny you should Leap out of here."

"I don't know how to act like I've been in a cult. Do they walk around in a trance or what?"

"Well, they chant a lot...."

"Chant? Chant what?"

"Ah..." Al slapped the handlink. "Wait, don't do that because it's some real mumbo jumbo. But you would probably have disowned your father and made Rev. Moon your father. Just don't go overboard on anything. Be polite but stubborn. You should be good at that."

Sam just glared at him and was about to give him a nasty retort when Mr. Preston walked in.

"Who were you talking to? I thought someone was in here with you."

"Ah...no one. Ah...I'm just chanting."

"Good one, Sam." Al checked the handlink and said, "I'm going back and check on how Beeks is doing." With a *swoosh*, he was gone.

"I won't have any of that crazy chanting in my house, Jonny."

Sam looked at the man and, seeing the worry in his eyes, hated what he had to say next.

"Why did you bring me here? You had no right to do that. I'm old enough to make up my own mind on how I want to live my life."

"Son, I'm not going to argue with you about that cult. I'm your father and I know what's best for you."

"I'm not your son. Reverend Moon is my father and besides, what do you plan to do? Keep me locked up?"

The look of pain in the man's eyes was almost unbearable. This was so much against Sam's personality. He just stood there and looked at the floor as his father answered him.

"I will do what I have to do to save you from their clutches. I'm not going to nag you or try to brainwash you. That's their style, not mine. But I am going to keep you here at the house. If you have to go anywhere you will have one of my men with you. If you try to run away again, I'll have you brought back."

"You can't keep all this up forever, you know."

"Maybe, but I can put you in an institution and have you treated for what they've obviously done to your mind. That's one choice I hope you don't force me to make."

At the threat of being put in an institution, Sam broke out in a cold sweat. Ever since the shock treatment he was deathly afraid of being locked up in such a place again. He sat down heavily on the couch.

"I...I don't want to give you any trouble. I just don't understand why you're doing this."

"I love you, son. I know what's best for you. Look at yourself. You're way too thin. Your hair is brittle and I bet you haven't had a well balanced meal in months. I'm only doing this to help you. It won't be so bad. You'll see."

With that he turned and left the room. Feeling disjointed, Sam made his way back to the bedroom and lay down on the bed. He closed his eyes just to think and fell fast asleep. Al found him that way when he returned. He watched him sleep for a while and then left. There wasn't anything now so he figured he might as well let him sleep.

* * * * *

Back at the Project, Dr. Beeks had her hands full. Jonny wasn't cooperating in any way. When she tried to talk to him, he would just chant. With a sigh she left him and went out into the hall where she ran into Al.

"Any luck?" Al had a feeling what her answer was going to be and she didn't prove him wrong.

"No. He just won't let anyone talk to him. I think I have an idea though. I'll need your help. Can you wait here for just a minute?"

"Sure, but..."

She was gone in a flash and back almost as fast, holding a large mirror.

"Doctor, are you sure this is a good idea?" Al knew the rules and was willing to break them more than the average employee on the project, but Dr. Beeks was a stickler when it came to "her" patients.

"I know I've always said that we shouldn't let them see themselves, as it often puts them into shock, but I don't think we have a choice this time. Shocking him is the thing to do. We need to do something to get him to talk to us."

They entered the waiting room together. Dr. Beeks went over to where Jonny was sitting. He had been looking around the room at the white walls and furniture. From his place he could see an observation booth and knew he was being watched. He looked up at Dr. Beeks and started to chant again.

"Jonny, I want you to have a look at yourself."

Jonny started to chant louder but ended in a squeak as he got a look at his reflection. Taking the mirror from her, he looked around at the back of it. Turning it back over he said, "Neat trick, but it won't work."

Al muttered "Yeah, right," as Jonny slid towards the floor in a dead faint. He and Dr. Beeks gently eased him down and sat with him as he came around. Very confused, the young man just sat there looking at his reflection again. He was no longer chanting, but Al wasn't sure he was listening either. But this was now the Doctor's problem. Al needed to check with Ziggy and he couldn't do that around Jonny. Excusing himself, he left the room.

"Ziggy, bring me up to date on Sam."

A sultry female voice came out of everywhere and nowhere.

“Dr. Beckett is still sleeping. He should awaken in five point three minutes.”

“Any idea on why he’s there yet?”

“I told you before, Admiral. He’s to take Jonny’s place until Dr. Beeks can de-program our guest. There is a seventy-eight percent probability that this is what we are supposed to do.”

Al could swear the computer was pouting. Ziggy had been miffed before and could really cause problems when she was upset. Figuring this was a good time to get back to Sam, Al entered the Imaging Chamber.

* * * * *

Sam was just waking up when Al arrived. He looked up and, trying to focus his eyes, asked, “Ziggy come up with anything new yet?” Out of habit Al started punching keys on the handlink, but he really wasn’t looking at it.

“Well, Ziggy says that you’re still here to take Jonny’s place until we can convince him to leave the Moonies.”

“Al, I’ve been thinking about that. What right do we have to interfere with his life? Is being a Moonie such a bad thing?”

“Interfering is what we do, Sam. Besides, if he stays in, he dies.”

“I...I forgot about that. How are things going with Jonny?”

“Well, we got him to stop chanting, but I don’t think he’s ready to listen yet. I wanted to check on you but Beeks needs me so I really need to get back. Are you going to be okay?”

“Sure. So far, except for when they first grabbed me it’s been easy. I just hope it stays that way.”

* * * * *

The next few days were really quiet. Sam spent his time reading books out of the library that he’d discovered on one of his trips exploring the house. Jonny’s father had arranged for a guard to be with him at all times. The only time he was allowed to be alone was in his room sleeping or in the bathroom. A man who specialized in de-programming talked to him several times a day. Using information that Al provided him with from the arguments that Jonny was giving them, he put up a good fight. As Jonny slowly gave in, so did Sam. His father seemed to be more relaxed as Sam pretended to give in more and more to the arguments of the de-programmer. He was now allowed to go for walks around the grounds of the property. On a bright sunny Saturday morning he overheard his father talking about going into town. Sam had cabin fever from being locked up so long.

Taking a chance, he asked, “Dad...can I come along? Please?”

Thoughtfully, Mr. Preston looked at him.

“You’ve come a long way, son. You can come this time but Hank and Rick are going to be with you. And me too of course.”

Smiling, Sam answered, “Great! I don’t care if they come along. I just want to get out of the house for a while.”

They took the same van that had brought Sam to the house. Arriving in town, they stopped at a hardware store. Sights and smells brought a lot of memories of Elkridge back to

Sam. They did a lot of shopping, going in and out of stores. After a stop for ice cream, they headed home. Sam thought he had spotted the guys he had been with when he had been kidnapped, but he wasn't sure. He decided to keep quiet about it until he could discuss it with Al.

He was now allowed to be alone in the house. That made it a lot easier to talk with Al. He was in the Library looking for something to read when he heard the Imaging Chamber door open. He smiled when he saw his hologram friend. Al looked very bright and cheery in his red shirt and hat. He had on white suspenders and black slacks. Sam had to admit that, although the outfit was bright, it looked great on Al. He couldn't resist a little teasing.

"Hey, Al. Wow! Maybe I should go get my sunglasses."

Trying to look hurt, but not quite succeeding, Al replied, "Tina gave me this outfit. She likes me in red--says it turns her on."

Sam suppressed a laugh and asked him how it was going back at the Project. Al didn't have to check the handlink as he had been working with Dr. Beeks and Jonny.

"Jonny's really coming around. You should be able to Leap any time now."

"Great, although this has been one of the easier Leaps."

"Good. And since it is so easy, I'll check back tomorrow. Tina and I have plans for tonight."

Sam could guess what those plans would be. He waved at Al as he stepped through the Imaging Chamber door. It wasn't until after he was gone that Sam remembered that he hadn't mentioned the Moonies he thought he'd seen.

* * * * *

Several trips had been made to town before Sam was allowed to go with just one guard. He wondered if he would ever be trusted enough to be on his own. He had to admit that, if he had a son that had joined a cult, he wouldn't have an easy time letting go either. But there comes a time when you have to decide that a person must live their own life, right or wrong. Sam found himself getting a little tired of always having a baby-sitter around. Rick was a nice person, for a guard. He was friendly and willing to do whatever Sam wanted to do. He was ever watchful, though Sam doubted if he noticed the two Moonies that had been following them the last three times they went into town. At first Sam hadn't been sure who they were. He had been with them for such a short time and even with a photographic memory it was hard to be sure. But after seeing them over and over again, he knew it had to be his companions from the cult.

He and Rick had stopped for a burger when he saw them again. He caught their eye this time and they nodded to him and stepped outside of the restaurant. Sam and Rick finished their burgers and, as they went outside, Sam looked around for them. He didn't see them and turned to follow Rick back to the car. They were about halfway back when a car pulled up beside them and three young men jumped out. Before Sam knew what was happening, he was pushed into the car. Rick had been pushed to the ground and was unable to stop them. As they sped off, Sam untangled himself from the bodies in the back seat with him.

"Kidnapped twice in one Leap is just too much. What's going on?"

One of the men looked at him strangely. "What do you mean, Leap? And we haven't kidnapped you. We rescued you. Don't worry, we're taking you to camp where you'll be safe."

“Camp? Rescued? From what?” Sam was really mixed up. This was crazy.

“You didn’t think Father Moon would let you stay in the clutches of your worldly father, did you? We’ve saved you. A few days back at camp and you’ll be okay. Was the de-programming bad? They are so awful trying to do that to you. We’ve been trying to get you back for days, but this was the first chance we had.”

With an “Ohhhhhh boy,” Sam settled back into the seat. He looked at his companions and tried to reason with them.

“I don’t want to go back. I...I’ve changed my mind about being a Moonie. Look, just let me out here. No hard feelings, okay?”

“Come on, Jon, you know you don’t mean that. We’ll just take you to camp. Just give us one night. If you want to go back home then, you can.”

Sam wasn’t sure what he should do next. It was a great relief when he heard Al arriving.

“Sam, we think Jonny’s ready to come home. You can get ready to Lea--what are you doing with these nozzles? These are Moonies. Are you crazy? Get out of this car!”

Al was so upset that he dropped his cigar. It disappeared into nothingness. He started punching data into Ziggy. Not liking what he was reading, he whacked it hard on the side. It let out a loud squawk. Sam couldn’t talk to Al because of his companions, but he gave a pleading look to his friend, hoping he’d be patient until they could be alone to talk in private.

“Sam, you’re messing everything up. You’re not supposed to re-join these guys. Remember?”

Sam couldn’t take it anymore. Audience or no, he said, “This is not my fault!”

Thinking the statement was for him, the driver answered. “Of course it’s not your fault. The programmers do a nasty job of it. Like we said before, just give us one night and if you still want to go, go.”

Al was fuming. This Leap was going downhill fast. Ziggy continued to give him data and as Al read it he calmed down just a little.

“Okay, Sam. Ziggy says you shouldn’t Leap now. There are too many changes going on to track history. You’ll need to ride this out until things settle down. Do what you can to get away from them.”

“I’ll try.” Sam was getting very good at answering two different questions with the same answer. Appeasing the Hologram and the Moonies at the same time was the least of his worries. he was still wondering about this ‘camp’ they were taking him to.

“Ah...how far away is the camp?”

“About two hours. Have they made you forget everything?”

Taking the hint, Al checked the handlink. “It looks like they may be taking you to their main camp. This is where they take new people to teach them about Reverend Moon’s teachings. It’s called a hundred-day training camp, and this is where Jonny was when he decided to join the Moonies in the first place. Play along with them while I go back and try to figure out what you’re supposed to do next.

Sam watched his friend leave. Al was right. This Leap was going “ca-ca” fast, but for now, all he could do was try to enjoy the ride.

* * * * *

They arrived at the camp and Sam found himself being bundled off to a barracks. He was very tired and looked forward to getting some sleep, but apparently that wasn't to be. After using the bathroom, he was taken to a building next to the barracks. He found himself sitting on the floor with about twenty other young people. They were singing--"Where have all the flowers gone? Long time passing..." The song was vaguely familiar. When they were finished, a heavy-set man came forward and started to speak. It was to be the first of many lectures Sam would attend. He looked around at his companions, then brought his attention back to the lecturer.

"...Jesus did not die to redeem man's original sin, as in orthodox Christianity. He was not meant to die at all. He had been thwarted in his mission which yet another messiah would now have to carry out. He is here. He is on Earth. The messiah is born and he is here. Now! The Reverend Moon."

Sam was thinking about what his mother would think of this speech when everyone stood up and joined hands. Soon, everyone around him was praying aloud and some were in tears. Suddenly the leader screamed "Abo gi!" which Sam recognized as Korean for 'Father.'

Everyone around him jumped up in the air, threw up their hands, and cried, "Mon sei!" He thought it was kind of like a victory yell.

It was very late when Sam fell exhausted into bed. It seemed as if his head had just hit the pillow when he was shaken awake. A young woman, around twenty-three years old, was standing over him with a silly grin on her face. She was wide-eyed as she encouraged him to "Jump out of bed for the Father."

He was treated to a breakfast of cold cereal and dry toast. He followed everyone outside and found himself in some sort of game where a basketball was being thrown around. There didn't seem to be any rules, but there was a lot of shouting going on. He was drawn into the strange game and the frenzied pace at which it was being played.

As suddenly as it began, it stopped. The group joined hands and, without warning, began to pump their arms up and down. A chant of "Choo, choo, choo, choo," started up. Again Sam was drawn into the group. This went on for about five minutes, then stopped. Once more the strange ball game was played. About an hour of this and Sam wished he was any place but here.

They were then herded into what appeared to be the main meeting building. Sam sat through lecture after lecture.

To his mind, it didn't make much sense. He was brought up in a firm Christian background, and wasn't the sort to be drawn to this kind of teaching. On the other hand, he wasn't sure what he was supposed to be doing, or how he was supposed to be acting. He just went along with the group, waiting for Al to arrive. He knew one thing for sure--he wasn't putting up with this garbage for a hundred days.

Sam also knew that pressure was on him not to return to Jonny's parents' house. He was discouraged from seeing his family, but he wasn't forcibly restrained. He realized that force wasn't necessary. The mind set, for those who believed Moon's teachings, was that the rest of the world was in the hands of Satan. They were told that their family members were their enemies and that they could be expected to try to bring them back to the old, evil ways. It was a catch-22 mode of thinking, because if you were sane, they were crazy, and if you were crazy, they were sane. (But if you were crazy, you weren't about to concede they were sane.) Sam recognized it as a lot of bull, so found himself in the unique position of having to submit to a hundred-day cerebral

scrubbing, and act like he believed it all, while trying not to slip into the mind set of everyone around him. It was hard.

It was the next day before Al came back. Sam was in the middle of another lecture when his friend showed up.

"Where have you been?" he hissed. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, the lecturer pounced on him.

"Okay, John. Since you seem to have a problem sitting still today, I want you to go to Magdalene and tell her you need a cleansing of the soul. Rob will escort you."

Sam gave Al a pleading glance as he followed Rob out of the room. The hologram took the opportunity to fill him in.

"Look, Sam, I know you can't talk to me right now, but listen up. Ziggy says there is a sixty-two percent chance that you have to spend the full hundred days here. Then, when they send you out to procure money for them you can call your father and patch things up."

The time traveler gave Al an "Are you crazy?" look.

Rob escorted Sam to a room in the back of the barracks. He knocked on the door and, hearing a "Come in," opened it and herded him inside. A woman in a gauzy white dress with love beads cascading down her bosom was sitting at a desk.

Rob introduced "Jonny" to Magdalene. He explained that Sam was on his second trip through training after deprogramming by his parents and that he was having a big problem being still during the lectures. With that, he left the physicist alone with the woman.

Patting a chair next to her, she said, "Come, sit." Sam came over to her and sat down. Al looked around the room and then decided he could better use his talents elsewhere.

"Ah, Sam, I'm going to check this place out. I'll be right back."

Unable to protest due to Magdalene's presence, Sam watched him go. His attention was brought back to his current companion as she spoke to him.

"What seems to be the problem, Jonny?"

"Ah...I...well, I just...I guess I'm a little restless."

"Well, I've got a cure for that." She reached into a drawer and pulled out a brown bottle that looked like it had been around for fifty years or so. She opened it and, pulling a spoon out of the drawer, poured some foul smelling stuff out of the bottle into the spoon.

"Here, now. I want you to take this. It will help you settle down and concentrate on our Father's teachings."

Sam leaned away from her. He didn't know what that evil-smelling stuff was, but he wasn't about to put it in his mouth. "No thanks. I'll pass. I'm sure I can listen better just knowing I don't have to take that stuff."

She looked at him, shaking her head. "Now Jonny, you've been through this training before. You know you have to follow the rules. It's either take this or the elders will have to discipline you. Now you don't want that do you?"

Not knowing what type of discipline she was talking about and having been deserted by his hologram buddy, he made a face, took the brown goop in his mouth and, gagging, swallowed it. It tasted as bad as it smelled.

Almost on cue Rob came back in the room. He escorted Sam back to the lecture. Sam felt himself feeling as if he were floating. With alarm he now wished he had choosing the

discipline, whatever it was. It had to be better than putting whatever junk she had fed him into his body. He just hoped he hadn't done any permanent damage.

Al had arrived back and after a quick get-together in the bathroom. Al hit the ceiling when he heard what Sam had done.

"Are you crazy Sam?" he yelled. "That could have been LSD or something even worse."

Sam had trouble forming his words but managed to ask Al to have Ziggy check to see if any permanent damage had been done.

Al checked with the hybrid computer hitting the hand link harder than was necessary.

"According to Ziggy, you don't have any damage to your system. It was just a mild sedative that she gave you. But don't you ever do that again! I thought you knew better than to take things when you didn't know what they were." Al was really fuming.

Sam gritted his teeth. "I do know better Al. But I'm having problems big time right now. I can't take 100 days of this. I've got to get back home before they brain wash me."

Whacking the hand link Al frowned. "Okay, this is a little better. Now Ziggy says you stand a chance of being out of here in three days. It seems that collections have been down and they need more people on the street. But first you get married." Realizing what he had just said, Al gave the hand link another hard whack. It squawked in protest.

Sam looked at Al with his mouth agape. "Married? What the heck are you talking about?"

"Ziggy says you have to get married." Al was reading the printout as fast as he could. "It seems that this Moon guy has these mass weddings and you're suppose to be in the next big wedding."

"But Jonny doesn't even have a girlfriend, does he?"

Once more the handlink was whacked, and once more it gave up its information.

Al read, "You don't get to pick your wife. Rev. Moon assigns you one." Suddenly Al grinned. "Hey Sam, this is just what you need. You just might get this cute little--"

"Al!" Sam was so upset to put up with Al's teasing. "I can't get married. Now I know I've got to get out of here. Why can't I just walk away?"

"Well, I suppose you could do that. At first we thought you could just get away from them, but you might Leap when you do and that would put Jonny back here without being with his father. He just might go back to the Moonies. And if he does make it home his father will stick him in a mental hospital. Remember that his father thinks you ran away again. Remember his threat to have you locked up? Do you want that?"

"What am I suppose to do Al?"

Al punched the keys on the hand link. "Ziggy says to at least act like you want to be a Moonie. That will buy us time to figure out what to do next. By the way, you aren't supposed to know about the wedding so don't let on. Meanwhile I'll go back and see if I can find anything else out.

Watching his friend leave, his brow wrinkled in worry. He was dizzy from the sedative, which didn't help his thought process any. He tried to fight the tears that threatened to overwhelm him. What was the matter with him? He usually could handle Leaps better than this. He wiped away the tears as he went back to his bunk.

* * * * *

The next day, Sam wasn't feeling so hot. He hadn't had more than two hours sleep the night before and they kept them moving at all times. During the lectures they had started to make them move even while being lectured...It was a guaranteed way to keep them from falling asleep. At lunch, which consisted of Twinkies and chocolate milk Sam had fallen asleep in mid bite. He had been yanked to his feet and along with other sleepy Moonies he was marched around the table. They were now into chanting big time. Over and over they would sing-song, "Father Moonie be with us. Make us strong." Sam tried to fight it but the lack of sleep, food, and being kept on the run all the time was taking its toll. Al tried to give him encouragement to hang in there but all Sam could think of was how much he just wanted to sleep.

That night they were allowed a glorious four hours of sleep. After what they had been getting this was wonderful. He found himself back in the little office. A man he hadn't seen before was sitting behind the desk.

"Jonny, you have been chosen to be one of Father Moon's special children. This is a great honor. You will be married in the mass ceremony this week."

All Sam could do was gape at the man. He knew this was coming but now that he was faced with it he couldn't seem to get his mind to work. He jumped as Al's voice came from behind him.

"Tell him you are very honored and pleased to be one of the chosen."

"I'm very honored and pleased to be one of the chosen." Sam parroted.

"Good, then the arraignments will be made. You will leave here at once to be prepared."

Sam found himself being escorted back to the barrack bedroom area. He had nothing to pack so he just sat on the bunk he had been sleeping on and waited for what ever was going to happen next. Al gave his friend a worried look. Sam was being very passive for Sam. His brow furrowed as he took a closer look at him. He shivered with fright as he realized that his buddy had that wide-eyed look of the other members of the cult.

"Sam, look at me."

Sam turned slowly and looked at Al. "What Al?"

"Sam are you okay? You don't look so good."

"I'm okay, I just need some sleep and something to eat. I've never been so tired in my life."

"Look Sam, Ziggy has some information for you that may make you feel better."

Startled Al realized that Sam wasn't listening to him. "Sam!"

Sam jumped. Looking at Al he said, "Don't do that Al. You know, I really feel out of it. I think I may be coming down with something."

"Well, Sam, you're alone now. Why don't you lie down and get some sleep while you have a chance?"

"But there is work to do for the Father."

Al looked at him in shock.

"Sam, did you just hear what you said? Come on Sam. You've got to fight this."

"How Al? I...I don't know what's happening to me."

"Try running numbers in your head. Even something simple. Start with addition facts. Anything. Just get your mind off the Moonie Teachings."

Sam had only gotten to double digit addition when he fell asleep.

"That's up to you."

Frowning Sam said, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"If you keep shaking like that every time someone comes near you they'll never let you out of here. You've got to settle down." He ignored Sam's glare as he continued. "You've got to convince them that there is nothing wrong with you. That it's just your father's worry about you running off to the cult that got you in here. That you're not mentally ill, just stubborn."

"Al..."

"If the shoe fits...."

"Okay, so I convince them I'm sane and I get to Leap?"

"As soon as you get back home, yes. Now why don't you do what they told you to do and get some rest?"

Sighing, Sam settled back into bed and was asleep as soon as he closed his eyes.

* * * * *

Back at the project Jonny was getting restless. He turned accusing eyes towards Dr. Beeks. "I thought you said I could go home soon."

Trying to mollify him she said, "I know but I don't think you want to go home just yet."

"Why not?"

Dr. Beeks could see that this wasn't going to be easy. Even with the swiss cheese effect she didn't want to tell him too much. Taking a chance she said, "Well, right now you're not with the Moonies or your father."

"I know that. You told me I, I mean he was in the hospital."

"Ah....you've been moved."

Frowning he asked, "Moved? Moved where?"

"Does St. Matthew's ring a bell?"

"That's a mental hospital. Are you telling me I'm going to end up in a mental hospital?"

"No. I didn't say that. I'm telling you that we hope you don't go back until Dr. Beckett has things back in control, and that when you do go back it will be to your father's house."

Their conversation was interrupted by Al beckoning Dr. Beeks outside for a conversation.

"Excuse me, Jonny. I'll be right back." All she got for an answer was Jonny's glare.

Out of ear shot Al brought Dr. Beeks up to date on Sam. "He's calming down. I think it was a big help that the place doesn't look like a horror palace. If he can stay calm he shouldn't be there more than a couple of days. I'm afraid that's a big 'if.'"

Dr. Beeks had a worried look on her face as she asked, "Is he having flash backs?"

"I don't think so. At least not while I've been with him. But he's not a happy camper. That's for sure."

"In that case maybe you better stay with him as much as possible."

"I think so too. I'm going to grab a sandwich and then get back to him."

Shaking her head Dr. Beeks went back to her patient.

* * * * *

Three days later Sam's psychiatrist had a long talk with Jonny's father. Al's prediction that the doctor would come to the conclusion that Sam was sane held up. "Mr. Preston, I know you're worried about your son, but we can't hold him any longer. There isn't anything wrong with him."

Johnny's father paced back and forth. "If you release him he'll go back to those damn Moonies."

"I doubt that very much. He has a very strong desire to be at home with you. He's not a minor you know. I can't sign papers keeping him in your custody when I can't find anything mentally wrong with him. Except for a strange fear of mental hospitals he's fine."

"You say he wants to come home with me even if he legally doesn't have to?"

"Yes, and I don't believe he's trying to pull a fast one either. Relax Mr. Preston. Take your son home and get to know each other again."

Sam was pleasantly surprised to find himself back at Jonny's house. Al was taking a much needed break back at the project with Tina. Sam was very thankful for his hologram friend. Al had stayed by his side the whole time he was in St. Matthew's.

He looked up as Jonny's father came into the room. Smiling shyly Sam said hello to him. Mr. Preston was carrying some forms and what looked like College catalogs. "Son I think it's time we get these filled out. You do still plan on going to college don't you?"

Taken by surprise Sam muttered an "I guess so." He reached for the catalogs.

"Just look these over and let me know what you think." As he left the room Al arrived.

"How's it going Sam?"

He held up the catalogs as he said, "Look what I'm suppose to go through. How am I suppose to pick a college for Jonny? I need to Leap so he can do his own choosing. Any idea why I haven't Leaped?"

Talking around the cigar in his mouth Al said, "Ziggy's not sure. She thinks that things may have to be a little more settled and then you'll Leap."

"But I don't know what college to choose. I don't even know what he wanted to major in."

Al punched some keys on the handlink and then taking the cigar out of his mouth said, "Jonny's told Dr. Beeks that he wanted to go to Ashland College in Ashland, Ohio. It's a small college run by the Brethren Church. It's free of cults so it would make a good choice."

About an hour later Sam was in the sitting room with Jonny's father. He was having a hard time convincing him to let him go away to college. All the catalogs he had been given were all in his home town or close by. "Look Dad. There aren't any cults on campus. It's a small town and the dorms have strict rules. I'll be fine."

"Son...."

"Come on dad. The place is perfect. Small town, small college, good reputation. You've got to trust me sometime." Sam could be very persuasive when he wanted to be. Al grinned. It was good to see someone else on the other end of that smile for a change.

"Okay son. I give up. Ashland College it is. But I want you calling home twice a week or I'll be down there checking on you."

Laughing Sam gave Mr. Preston a big bear hug. He looked over at Al just in time to see him wave good-bye as he felt the tingling start of a Leap.

THE END

A little background is needed (at least, I need to give it).

At the time I met my husband, Jim, he told me the story of a very exciting part of his life. At the time, I was a journalism student in college, and we talked about writing down his story for posterity's sake.

Thirteen years later (one year dating, twelve years married) we have not yet collaborated on the effort. However, I have often looked at my husband's personality and realized how easily his life could have gone a very different way.

That is the premise upon which this piece of QL fiction is built. So not only was I able to give Sam another story, but, in a way, finally keep part of a long-standing promise to Jim.

**-Jennifer Bohn
September 8, 1995**

Family

by Jennifer Bohn

As the intense blue light faded and his vision cleared, Dr. Sam Beckett looked around, taking stock of his surroundings.

Hospital. 1960s...no, 1950s. Sam inhaled deeply, the smell bringing back memories of his days as an intern. *Babies...I hear babies. A maternity ward.* Sam began to search for a mirror, a sick feeling settling in the pit of his stomach.

Bobbie Jo? Betty Sue? No... Those names didn't quite fit, but the circumstances were certainly taking on a familiar feel. *Billie Jean? That's it! Billie Jean.* Sam glanced heavenward. *But everything was FINE when I leaped out of there,* he complained in confusion.

"Nancy?" The nurse entered Sam's room, crisp in her starched uniform, and smelling slightly of...Sam couldn't quite remember. "How are we today, dear?"

The nurse had that sugary quality to her voice, the kind that made Sam want to gag from saccharine overload.

"Here, let's get comfy. A couple pillows, straighten your covers. Now, I'll be right back."

Sam frantically swept the room with his eyes, needing to confirm what he feared, hoping he was wrong.

The nurse returned. "Here's your new son, sweetheart. My, he's a big fella." She handed the baby to Sam.

Sam Beckett, holder of six doctorates, Nobel prize winner, and time-traveling quantum physicist, could contain himself no longer.

"Oh, boy...it's a boy," he groaned.

Half an hour later, Sam had gotten to know his charge fairly well. The little guy had slept most of the time, Sam noted gratefully, but now he was waking. And rooting.

"Al, where are you?" Sam half-whispered. "I have a hungry baby here, and nothing to feed him." The baby became fussier, eventually working his way up to a full-blown wail.

AL! Sam wailed internally, in chorus with the infant.

"What is that baby doing in here?" Another, older, nurse came charging into the room.

"You're not supposed to have him. You're not even supposed to see him."

"I'm not?" Sam asked.

"Of course not. You gave up that right when you signed the adoption papers," she snapped. She grabbed the baby from Sam's arms, turned on her heel, and hurried out of the room.

Sam noticed an empty feeling in his heart, and in his arms, just as the familiar leap effect took hold.

* * * * *

As the intense blue light faded and his vision cleared, Dr. Sam Beckett looked around, taking stock of his surroundings.

At least this time he didn't have to look any further than "up" to find a mirror. With relief, he noted that he was, at least, male this time. *A young male, early twenties*, he thought. Sam half-laughed to himself. *I sound like an FBI agent...wait, I've BEEN an FBI agent... "Just the facts, Ma'am."* This leaping business, on top of the swiss-cheese effect his memory suffered each time, made it more difficult to remember his names that it was to remember all of Elizabeth Taylor's husbands. Or Al's wives, for that matter.

"Jimmy? Come eat your supper before it gets cold."

Mom. It had to be...*Jimmy's mom*. Only a mom could sound like that. Sam grinned.

"Coming, Mom." He finished drying his hands.

As Sam walked out of the bathroom, he was surprised to find that the house wasn't very large at all. Five rooms, from what he could tell. And there was no way to get lost between the bathroom and the kitchen. For one thing, there wasn't anyplace to get lost. For another, all he had to do was follow his nose.

He was greeted in the kitchen by a frail-looking, little lady. *Probably early-to-mid-sixties*, he thought, slipping into his detective mode again. Supper looked delicious--meat loaf, mashed potatoes, corn on the cob, bread and butter. *Only two plates. Must be just us*, he noted.

Sam did the polite thing and pulled out a chair for his "mom." He especially felt compelled to help when he noticed that she walked with a limp.

Sam sat down in the other available chair. "Mom" sat with her head bowed, hands folded.

Oh boy. She expects me to pray. Sam looked around for some clue. Should he do a Catholic prayer? Some other routine recitation? Or just speak casually? "Thee" or "You"?

Sam glanced upward, hoping for divine inspiration. Suddenly, the words came back to him. "For these Thy gifts we are about to receive, we thank You, O Lord, Amen." It was a comfortable feeling to know he had remembered the words Dad had uttered over many family meals when Sam was growing up.

Scooping food onto his plate, Sam intentionally avoided the surprised look he received from "Mom."

"How was work?" Sam heard the woman ask.

I could tell you if I knew what I DID, Sam thought. But all he said was, "Umm, fine. You know, the usual."

Get her talking. Find out what's going on. "How was your day?"

"Oh, you know how spring makes those kids behave," "Mom" said with a chuckle. "I declare, I'm getting too old to put up with them anymore."

Sam heard the comforting *Whoosh* of the Imaging Chamber door, and felt his shoulders relax now that Al had arrived.

"This supper is great, Mom. I can't remember when it's tasted so good." And in reality, Sam couldn't remember the last time he'd had such a delicious meal. But then again, Sam couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten, period.

"Aw, Sam. That's not fair," Al whined, as Sam stuffed another forkful of mashed potatoes in his mouth. "You're feasting like a farm boy, and I'm stuck with the stuff in the cafeteria." Sam looked up at Al, grinned, and with a flourish took a bite off the ear of buttered corn.

After finishing off a second helping of everything, Sam looked for an excuse to get alone with Al. One glance out the window provided the answer. "Well, it looks like I better try to get some mowing done." Thankfully, it wasn't a large yard, but it would be enough to give him and Al time to talk.

Al popped out and popped in again a few seconds later. "C'mon Sam, the mower's out back, in the shed."

With Al in the lead, Sam soon found the push mower, had it started and was cutting paths up and down the back yard, Al walking at his side. "What've you got for me, Al?"

"Not much yet. We know your name is Jim Bohn, you're twenty-four, and you live in a small town in southern Indiana."

Indiana. Memories came rushing back to Sam. Memories, and one word. *Home.*

"Indiana." He said the word aloud, and Al instantly picked up on the meaning behind the utterance.

"No, Sam. Not Elk Ridge. You're in a small town called Loogootee. And it's April, 1981. Hmm...Reagan's still recovering from being shot."

"Reagan?"

"The current president. But don't worry, that has nothing to do with you right now."

"Jimmy!" a voice sounded from the house. Sam cut the mower's engine so he could hear better. "I'm going walking with Avis. We'll be back in a bit."

"OK, Mom. See you after a while."

"OK, who's that?" Sam asked, nodding his head toward the closing door.

"The chef?" Al's voice still held a hint of jealousy. "That's your mom, Marie. She's sixty-four."

"And my...I mean Jim's dad?"

"Uhh...oh," Al checked the handlink. "He passed away in '77. It's just the kid and his mom now."

Sam felt a slight twinge of disappointment. Somehow, he'd hoped he'd been here to help Jim and his dad. He hadn't been able to help his own...

Sam snapped his thoughts back to the present. "So why am I here this time?" he asked.

"We're not sure yet," Al replied. "This kid Jim certainly isn't your daredevil type that needs to be rescued. Actually, he's a pretty good guy--stays here and helps his mom, has a steady job, isn't involved in anything illegal or dangerous, the darling of his family and his church." Al read a bit further as the handlink scrolled the information. "Here's something a little unusual. He was adopted as an infant. That might explain why he seems to be a favorite with so many. But there's nothing obvious right away that you need to deal with." Al stopped in his tracks, causing Sam to pause also. "Hey, kid, looks like you get to sit back and enjoy this one for a while until

we get things figured out. I'll be back as soon as I know something." And with a jab at the handlink and a step backward, Al was gone.

Sit back and enjoy. Sam didn't usually get to relax much during his time quantum-leaping. Seemed like as soon as one crisis was resolved, God, Time, Fate or Whatever would throw him smack in the middle of the next one. Of course, there was that one time he actually got to stay with Tamlyn for two weeks.

As Sam finished the mowing, dusk was settling on the neighborhood. And indeed, it very much had the feel of a small town neighborhood--kids out riding bikes or shooting basketball in the driveway, older people taking an evening stroll around the block, the smell of meat being grilled coming from across the street. A warm spring evening in Indiana.

Inside, Sam noted that Marie wasn't back from her walk yet, so he took the chance to dig around some. A quick look through dresser drawers and closets told him which bedroom of the two was his. In the top of the closet in Jim's room, Sam found a box full of clippings and articles, all dealing with adoption. There were magazine articles on adoption in general. Then deeper down were newspaper clippings and photocopies of old yearbook pages. All of them dealt with the same family name--Armes.

Armes. The name rang in Sam's ears with a familiarity that he couldn't explain. If he could only remember...

The front door opened. "Jimmy? I'm back."

"I'm in here, Mom," he answered, as he hurriedly put the box and its treasures away. He went into the living room to greet the lady Jim called "mother."

"Would you like some ice cream? You're probably hot after mowing."

"Well, I'm not all that hot, but yeah, ice cream sounds really good. Let me just get a shower first and get all this grass off of me." *A little physical work, a sweet mother, and ice cream on a warm spring day. This leap may not be so bad after all,* thought Sam, as he headed to the bathroom to find some towels.

Fresh and clean, wearing only a pair of cutoff jeans he'd found, and with a belly full of Neapolitan ice cream, Sam sat on his bed, quietly going through the box of papers again. Marie had long ago gone to bed and now Sam was left alone to solve the puzzle of this leap.

He started through the clippings and photocopies again, this time more slowly. There were school yearbook pages copied, with names of various members of the Armes family highlighted. There was a clipping of a couple celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary, and another one of a girl announcing her engagement. They all related to the same family, and Sam could see the family resemblance.

Suddenly he remembered his own current reflection, and glanced up into the dresser mirror. His--Jim's--face carried the same traits he could see in the girl's face, the same deep set eyes and dimple in the chin.

Oh, God, he thought. *This is Jim's family. His biological family.*

Whoosh

Al appeared again, cigar in hand, looking dapper--if colorful--as usual. "Sam, I think we've got something on this kid. Where can we talk?"

Remembering the layout of the small house--and the lack of doors on any of the rooms except the bathroom--Sam opted to go with Al out to the enclosed back porch. He flipped the

light switch on as he went, and sat on the old couch tucked into a corner. "I already know Jim is adopted and has been doing research on his family. Al, he's found a lot of them. He has pictures from the newspaper of grandparents and a sister." Sam really enjoyed being able to beat Al to the punch once in a while.

Al waited while Sam explained his findings, listening to details Ziggy had already told him. Finally, Sam was finished and Al continued the story.

"Sam, remember how I told you this guy is a real good guy, never bothered or hurt anyone in his life?" Sam nodded. "Well, it's the niceness that's going to ruin his life."

"How can someone's life be ruined by being nice?" Sam asked with a hint of sarcastic disbelief.

"Sam, this kid is so worried about upsetting the lives of his blood family that he doesn't follow through."

"Follow through on what?" Sam really got irritated sometimes when Al played these games, making him ask for the information in pieces.

"Where's the letter?" Al asked as he started looking around.

"What letter?" Sam's impatience was growing.

"There has to be a letter here somewhere. Jim wrote a letter to his family, wanting to make contact with them. But because he didn't want to disrupt their lives, he never sent it. And without making that contact, there was something missing in his life, leaving him feeling slightly ungrounded. Sam, as much as Jim seems to love his adoptive parents, he still just kind of drifted through life, miserable over not being able to make himself go through with this."

Sam went back to Jim's bedroom and, as quietly as he could, began searching everywhere for the letter. Thankful that older people tend to be heavy sleepers, he rummaged in the closet and through dresser drawers. Finally he found his prize, tucked between the mattress and box springs of the bed. He opened it and read:

"Dear Mr. and Mrs. Armes,

You don't know me, but I have reason to believe that your daughter, Nancy--"

With a sharp intake of breath, the pieces connected. *The name on the door of the hospital room...Nancy Armes!* Sam looked up at the mirror again, grinned, and whispered softly, "Well, it looks like you got more than that one dinner, baby boy."

Knowing that he had double-leaped into both mother and son, Sam continued reading the letter: "You don't know me, but I have reason to believe that your daughter, Nancy, might be my birth-mother."

The letter went on to detail what little Jim knew of his birth--the date and location--and the fact that a minister who had been a friend of Marie and her husband Carl's for years, and who was also a cousin of Mr. Armes, had finally given Jim just enough information to set him on the correct path. The letter concluded with a request for a visit, nothing more. Jim wanted nothing from the family except to know them and let them know he was okay and had been raised in a happy home.

Sam looked up at Al, who had been reading the letter over Sam's shoulder. "So you mean all I have to do to leap is mail this letter?" he asked.

"Well, it certainly couldn't hurt to try it and find out," Al answered. "But since you can't do that until tomorrow, why don't you get some sleep, and I will too."

"Yeah, right. I will," Sam answered, still absorbing what it must have meant for Jim to find his family, yet not be able to approach them.

Al left with a *whoosh*, and Sam crawled under the covers, turning the events of the day over in his mind, until sleep finally claimed him.

Epilogue

The next morning, after breakfast, Sam walked down the street and deposited the letter in the mailbox on the corner, where he--or anyone else--could not change their minds and retrieve it.

As he returned to the house, Al was waiting for him on the front porch. "Did it work?" Sam asked.

"It more than worked, Sam. You just turned this guy's life around entirely. His grandparents write back to him, and he goes to visit them. Through them he meets his mother, her husband and their two children. It gives him a whole new family to be a part of."

"So the ending is a happy one," Sam continued.

"Yeah, I'd say so. Besides being totally accepted by his biological family, Jim is able to use his story to counsel with other adoptees who are thinking of searching for their parents.

"But the best part is, Jim is now secure enough with himself that he's able to marry and have a family of his own--let's see..." Al's voice trailed off as he gathered his facts from the handlink. "Gets married in '83, has a daughter in '89."

Sam grinned, knowing that even though he had not been able to influence his own family while in Indiana, at least he had made a difference in someone's family. *And family is what it's all about.*

And the blue light consumed him once again.

The End



Jim Bohm with his wife, Jenni (the author) and their daughter, Kim, May, 1995

Author Bios

Jennie Rowland

Jennifer L. Rowland, 22, is a native New Orleanian. She holds a degree in Liberal Arts and is currently working on a master's degree in English. She describes herself as an "Al-coholic" because of the extreme dynamism of the character of Al Calavicci as seen on the show, developed by Don Bellisario, the writers, and most of all, portrayed by Dean Stockwell. A Disney enthusiast as well as a Leaper, she hopes to incorporate her love of writing with her love of Disney professionally. She has been a part of C-leapers since its inception in March of 1995.

Gail Christison

Gail Christison, 38, lives in Kiama Downs, New South Wales, Australia. A former member of the Royal Australian Air Force, she is now a full-time wife and mother of three.

Nancy Mathews

Nancy M. Mathews, 43, was born in Northwest Indiana near Chicago, IL. She went to Indiana University in 1971, fell in love with the campus, received a BA in History/Political Sciences, and a Master's in Library Sciences, and moved there permanently in 1980. She now works in the Indiana University Libraries Serials Department on the Bloomington campus. Hobbies include watching TV, reading, cheering for favorite sports teams, writing QL stories, collecting and reading QL fanzines, attending QL conventions, and reading e-mail and newsgroups. She joined C-Leapers sometime during 1995.

Kerry Blackwell

Kerry Blackwell, 27, was born, raised and currently resides in Palmerston North, New Zealand, although she lived in Melbourne, Australia for several years. She has a Bachelor of Science with Honors degree in chemistry, but having developed Chronic Fatigue Syndrome 6 years ago she has been unable to put it to practical use. She hopes to do so in the future, possibly in a different but related field. When she has the time and energy to spare she enjoys reading, writing and cross-stitch embroidery.

Jen Beatty

Jen Beatty, 26, was born and raised in Leo, Indiana, and now resides in Fort Wayne with her writer/librarian husband John. She has a Bachelors of Science in Elementary Education which she is putting to good use as a data conversion operator for the United States Postal Service. She hopes one day to do some actual teaching. Her hobbies include singing and community theatre.

Freda Whaley

Freda L. Whaley, 51, is a native of Akron, Ohio, but has resided in Pensacola, Florida for the last 23 years. Also known as Ziggy the Traveling Balloon Lady, she keeps very busy twisting balloons and working as a Teacher's Aide. She is one of the original C-Leapers.

Jenni Bohn, editor

Jennifer Bohn, 33, lives and writes in Bloomington, Indiana. A former newspaper editor, she currently is full-time wife and mother who is homeschooling her daughter. Jenni was the founding member of the C-Leaper group when it began in March 1995.

Julie Jekel, editor

Julie L. Jekel, 20, is a native of Southern California, specifically San Diego County, although she now spends most of the year attending a small Christian college in Pennsylvania, where she is a junior. Her major is in English with a writing emphasis, and she has a minor in Spanish. Writing is not only a hobby for her, but hopefully a future career. She joined C-Leapers in July of 1995.