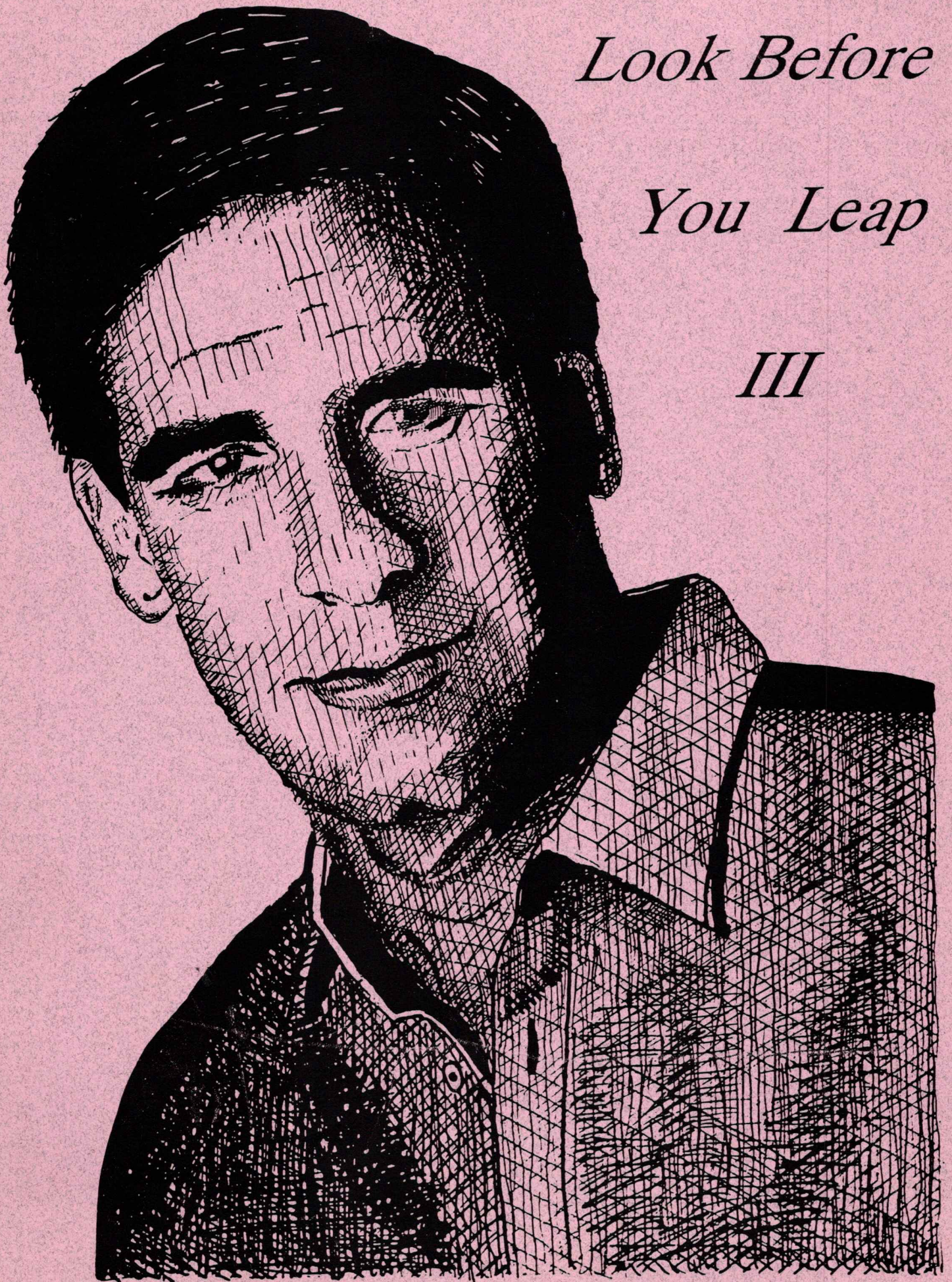


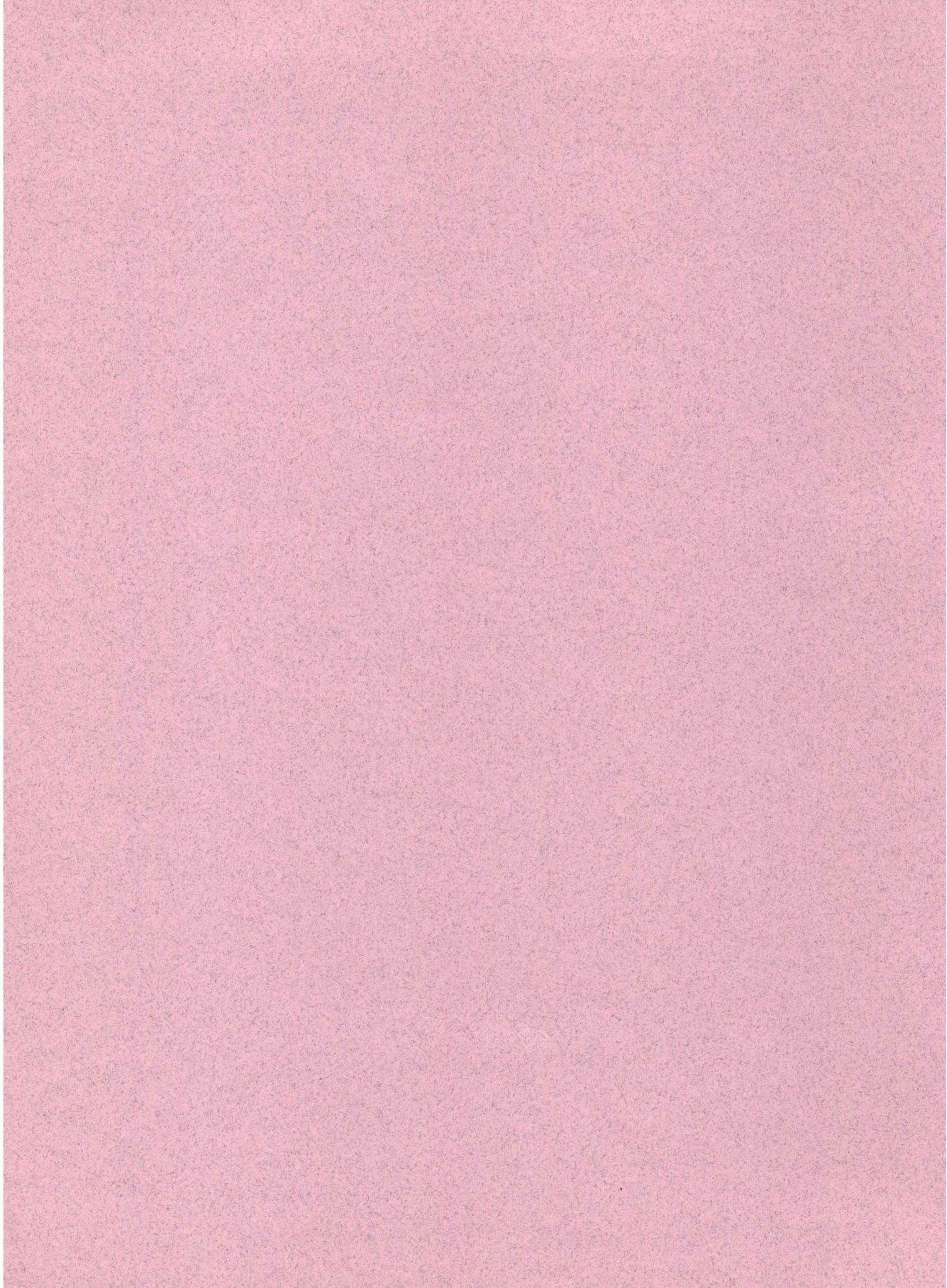
Look Before

You Leap

III



QUANTUM LEAP



LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP III

a Quantum Leap zine

FEATURING :

☆ Kindred Spirits	Gary Himes	5
☆ A Little Miracle - - Part 2	Lynn Hill	22
☆ Forget	Scott Tilson	26
☆ The Leap Back: Donna	Melissa Mastoris	37
☆ Tom - Cattin' Around	Sheila Schneider	39
☆ Remembering Beth	Melissa Mastoris	45
☆ The Wall	Tracy Finifter	46
☆ Leap To Destiny	Rick St. Clair	49
☆ Crossed Computers	Michael Ruff	69
☆ An Illogical Leap Of Faith	Juane Michaud	80
☆ Life Is But A Dream	Michael Ruff	84
☆ It's About Time	Rebecca Reeves	88
☆ Someone To Watch Over Me	Shari Ramseur	97

ART:

☆ Juane Michaud	21, 81, 89
☆ Mel Vararoutsos	27
☆ David Lawrence	85
☆ Michael Ruff	cover, 4, 19, 38, 51, 68, 107

edited by: MICHAEL RUFF

typist: GERALD CUNNINGHAM

published by: RUFF & READY PRESS

110 Cedargrove Drive, Rochester, NY 14617

LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP is a fan publication, not meant to infringe on any copyright laws or restrictions. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the written permission of both the editor and the author.

© 1993 RUFF & READY PRESS

Letters of Comment

Here are a few LOCs and a review received from LBYL II. Remember to let us know what you think about issue #3.

REVIEW BY Ruth Calkins: This fanzine had a lot to live up to after I took in the cover. It featured drawings by Kate Nuernberg, depicting moments from SHOCK THEATER, which are fabulous. While not all of the stories were up to the challenge, all of them tried valiantly.

The first story is ROOMS AND PICTURES (Scott Tilson) and in it Sam leaps into a male model and is responsible for getting the model together with a shy make up girl. This was not one of my favorites, but it was fun reading about Sam's embarrassment at being a "sex object" and there are some interesting bits back at the project between Al and the leapee. Not great, but not a bad story either.

Next comes A PROMISE KEPT (Shari Ramseur) which deals with Al finding Theresa Bruckner from ANOTHER MOTHER to keep his promise of his return. This is a good story, although the main thread concerns the idea that Theresa is in love with Al and that bothered me a little. Once I got used to it, though, I enjoyed the story. And it's always a nice change to see Al's life apart from Sam.

WINDMILLS (Heidi Sanchez) is a story based on a song by Harry Chapin entitled MR. TANNER. I really enjoyed this piece, where Sam leaps into the owner of a dry cleaning shop with musical aspirations. It is very realistic and all of the characters are handled with great expertise. And from what little I know of the song, the story is true to that as well. A great story.

ORANGE BLOSSOM SPECIAL (Sheila Schneider) finds Sam in the persona of an older musical diva who needs to get her protegee to decide to go to college instead of the road. This is not a bad little story. My only problem with it was that the protegee is theorized to perhaps be the key to getting Sam home, but when the leap is successful, the author never determines whether or not this was true. Other than that the story holds together pretty well.

A LESSON LEARNED (Paul Coppini) deals with the concept of treating someone who's different, in this case a teenager with cancer, like everyone else. It's an interesting concept, but the author doesn't quite give the characters enough depth for the point to have much impact. I did, however, find it interesting to read of Sam's struggle to cope with "his" job--that of a high school English teacher.

DREAMS OF SUBSTANCE (Shannon O'Conner) was my favorite story in this zine. Sam appears to Al in a dream (or was it?) and tells him of something he must do to save the time traveler's life. The author has a

wonderful grasp of both of the main characters and the story moves well and kept me guessing about the "dream" right to the end. A fantastic story.

I really enjoyed GENIE WITH THE LIGHT BROWN HAIR (Anne Muscarella) as well. Sam leaps into an actor who must keep his girlfriend from hopping on to a plane headed for disaster. The characters are handled nicely and the ending had a twist I never even suspected (though I expect there may be others who would have caught on more quickly). A very nicely done story.

KILLER (Michael Ruff) has Sam leaping into the accomplice of a murderer. The story was a little graphic and dark for my tastes, although Sam's moral dilemma--focusing on whether he should kill the "killer" or not--running throughout the story is very intriguing and made the story readable, if not totally palatable.

A MAN WITH A PORPOISE (Donna Hull) puts Sam into the life of a marine biologist, and he really has fun with it. He's there to keep a couple together and does a very realistic job of it. A nicely put together story, with some nice moments between Sam and Al to round it all out.

STRAIGHT AND NARROW (Michael Ruff) deals with a gay issue in a slightly different way than the show did this past season. This time Sam has to help a young man accept his homosexuality. The subject matter is tastefully handled--though some might find it difficult to read--and there are even some interesting twists that help keep the story alive.

Finally comes THE KINGSFORD DYNASTY (Rebecca Reeves.) In this story Sam is in the shoes of a very powerful and wealthy man with a very unhappy wife. Sam is there to help the wife find happiness she never finds in her original history. This is a fabulous story, with Sam being given a chance to be himself with a woman who seems to realize this is no longer her uncaring husband. I enjoyed all of this story tremendously, save for the last few pages, which I had a slight problem with (so did Sam!), but it didn't overshadow the rest of this wonderful work.

All-in-all, for the fairly low price (relatively speaking) this is not a bad zine. WINDMILLS, DREAMS OF SUBSTANCE, GENIE WITH THE LIGHT BROWN HAIR, and THE KINGSFORD DYNASTY were worth \$12 by themselves, and the others are interesting, if nothing else. So if you're looking for something a little less costly, this zine is definitely something to consider.

Courtesy of ISSUE #4, SUMMER 1992 of the HOLOGRAM--a newsletter put out by PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP, P.O. Box 77513, Tuscon, Arizona, 85703.

Letters of Comment

BETH HLABSE, Richmond Hts, Ohio

Dear Mike, thanks for the zine, LBYL II. A very nice read and the cover artwork was great, but I've always been a sucker for Kate Nureberg's work. My favorite story was THE KINGSFORD DYNASTY. A wonderful piece of work on Rebecca Reeves part. I especially liked both Sam and Al confronting Him (eyes upward) about this Leap and the line about a game of chess being Sam's version of foreplay cracked me up. It was so perfect. I'm looking forward to LBYL III.

KAREN FORD, Knoxville, Tennessee

Dear Michael, I got LBYL #2 and it was great! I liked the whole zine, the format, the art (cover & pg 38--awesome), the cartoons (Ha!) My favorite stories were A PROMISE KEPT (wish they would write an episode on this. GENIE WITH THE LIGHT BROWN HAIR--I never figured it out til close to the end, and KILLER. The only thing about KILLER, is if Sam is shot when he's Rico, he should stay shot upon leaping. According to Bellisario Productions, physically leaping and what happens to the person he's leaped into, happens to him. Other than that, it's a good story.

LEAH STARKY, Pequannock, New Jersey

I really enjoy the refreshing outlook of reading QL stories written by men. There's that sense of authenticity. Some of the female Leap fans get a little carried away with Sam's ultra pure, perfect, boy scout image. I find Sam such a terrific person because of the fact that he genuinely tries to be the best person he can--but he's human too. To read some of the stories you'd think Sam doesn't like women. I watch the episodes--he likes women! Following is my LOC for LBYL II.

ROOMS AND PICTURES: Okay, I'm going to be starting all ready. My own kind will think me the product of sex-change operation no doubt. I was pleased with the realism of Sam's character here. He was trying so..uh...hard to be good--and he especially plays the innocent b.s. (boy scout, of course!) when Al's around. But we know that just because a guy is embarrassed and uncomfortable, doesn't mean he's a nerd. I liked the contrasts between John and Sam, and their image's. A very eloquent way to show you can't judge a book by it's cover. A touch of fate and romance too when it turned out John owned Emily's work all those years. The end--how could Al EVER think that Sam would do such a thing?! This was a well-thought out story. The characters were real, for a change.

A PROMISE KEPT: I was turned off by how immature Theresa turned out.

WINDMILLS: I liked how Sam handled the leap. It seemed like he had to go against his beliefs, but he found a way to compromise. Very Sam.

ORANGE BLOSSOM SPECIAL: I like the character Sam leaped into. He's cute as a matchmaker.

A LESSON LEARNED: It was a very moving story, even though it doesn't agree with my own beliefs. Not being Catholic, I can't really say much else.

DREAMS IF SUBSTANCE: I thought having Sam appear to Al to give him the information to save a later leap was a very novel idea. I like stories that include Al more, also writer's who know there is no limit to the imagination.

GENIE WITH THE LIGHT BROWN HAIR: Poor Sam was so frantic, it gave that edge of suspense to the story.

KILLER: It's painful reading about Sam having to make such a decision. I think some things are better left totally in Higher hands.

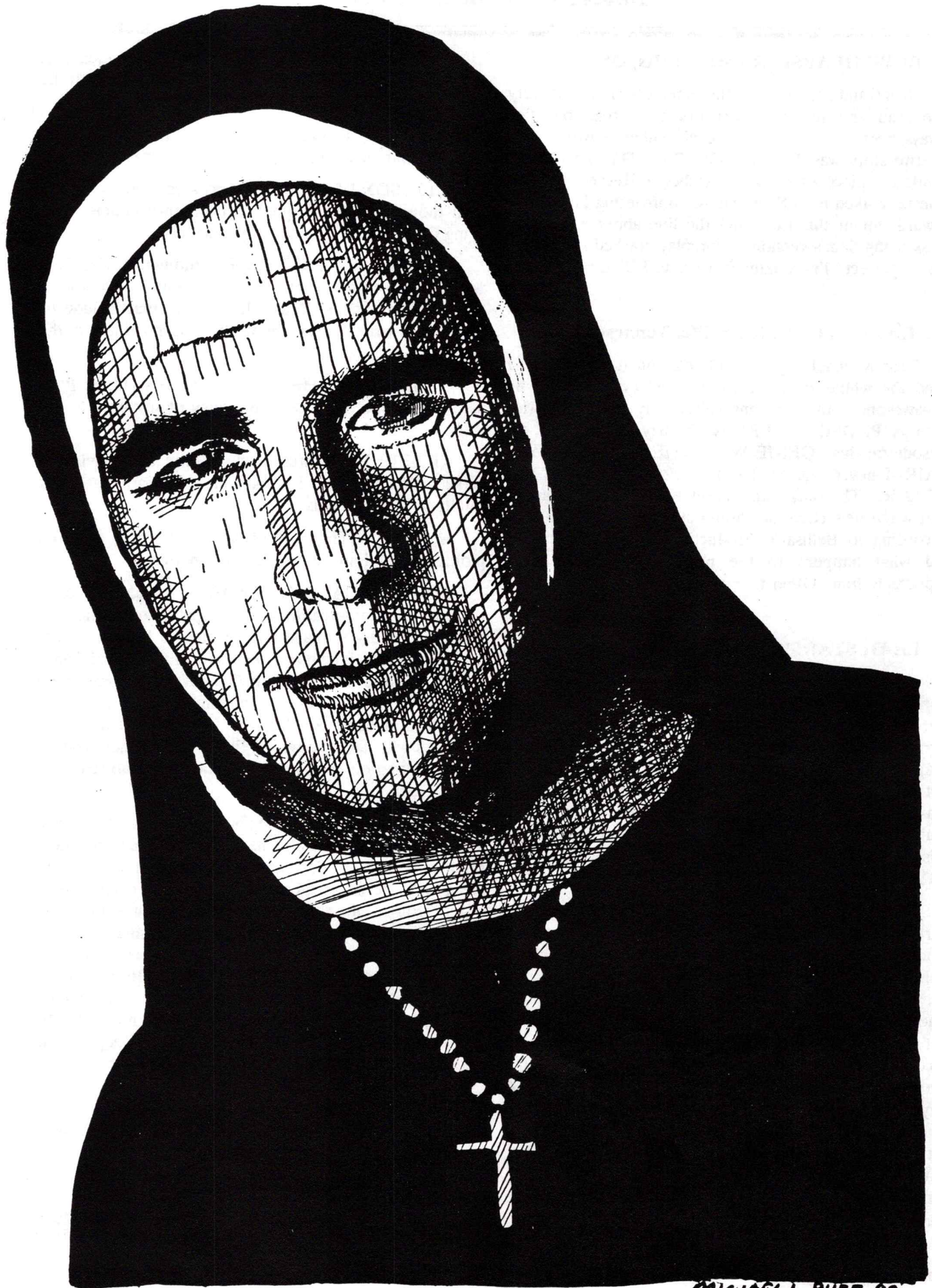
A MAN WITH A PORPOISE: A good, involved plot. Like watching an episode, only better.

STRAIGHT AND NARROW: I found this to be the best QL story dealing with the gay theme. The only problem I had was that there seemed to be a comment here and there I couldn't see as coming out of Sam's mouth. We've seen him on QL as such a passionate defender of EVERYONE'S human rights, I just can't imagine him being anything else. He handled Hank's advances with tact though. I liked Al's characterization a lot. Taking on the basher at the end, he showed what kind of man he really is.

THE KINGSFORD DYNASTY: This story had some interesting angles. It had a haunting feel to it, too. I felt very bad for Sam at the end though. It doesn't seem right he be asked to father a child. There was a point brought up that isn't touched upon very often. Al's attempts to protect both Sam and Donna. I'm in a minority, but I feel Al's constant boy scout remarks have much to do with the fact there's a wife waiting at home. The artwork was very good as well. All in all, I look forward to reading the next issue, and hopefully be seeing more work from the male writers. Keep up the good work, guys! Keep Leaping.

Sorry to say that is it for the LOCs. Remember, your comments could be here next issue. Thanks.

Note: LIFE IS BUT A DREAM in this issue is courtesy of Lorraine Bartlett's publication LEAPING TO CONCLUSIONS.



MICHAEL L. RUPF '92

KINDRED SPIRITS

BY GARY E. HIMES

There's something about the holidays; most leaps have their challenges, but it is these special days that seem to bring me my strangest experiences. So I suppose I shouldn't have been all that surprised when I appeared in a room full of children, a kindergarten class, whose every member was young and innocent enough to see me as I truly am. After all, as I was later to learn, it was only two days before Christmas.

When the blue light died away, Sam Beckett saw a group of about a dozen small children staring at him in wide-eyed shock.

For about a beat, Sam returned their stare until the children let out a collective yell, shocked by his sudden appearance in the place of their teacher. They scurried around him, yelling and screaming in a room filled with somewhat old-looking toys and rather well-worn workbooks. Obviously a classroom, he deduced.

One little girl walked right up to him and tugged on his skirt for attention.

Skirt? Sam realized. *Oh, no, not again.*

"Where's sister?" she asked in a plaintive little voice.

"Uh...your sister is missing? Is she in this class?"

"No," the child answered with impatience. "Sister Mary Margaret. She was gonna read us *Velveteen Rabbit*, then she was gone and you came. Where did she go?"

Sam was trying to think of an answer when he caught a glimpse of his reflection in a window on the far side of the room. He was dressed in a functional black-and-white outfit. A habit, he believed they were called.

"Oh, boy. I'm a nun."

Tina placed her hands on her hips, stuck out her lower lip, and started tapping her foot. "Al, c'mon! Be a sport!"

Al sighed and got up from behind his desk. He could instantly recognize when Tina was in her 'pushy' mode, but today he wasn't up for one of their bouts, no matter how much fun making up would be. *Sometimes*, Al mused, *you're just not in the mood*, and this was definitely one of those times.

"Tina, you know how I feel about this! I've got no desire to look like a doofus in front of the whole project!" Al snapped, rummaging through his desk drawer as he looked for the handlink.

Look Before You Leap

“Geez honey, it’s not like that,” Tina countered. “It’ll be fun! Hey, aren’t you the guy who loves parties?”

“Not Christmas parties,” Al grimaced. He found the handlink and fiddled with it until it gave a responding squeal.

“Always Christmas,” Tina replied, her body language changing from defiant to disappointed. “The rest of the year you’re the original party animal, but at Santa time you turn into such a...a grinch!”

“Can I help it if I don’t enjoy visions of sugar plums dancing in my head? That eggnog makes me nauseous? And, especially, that I hate dressing up like a fat old elf for the Project Christmas party?”

Tina threw up her hands in frustration. “Well then, who are we gonna get to do it?”

The admiral plucked a cigar from his coat pocket and lit it. “Why don’t you ask Gooshie? After all, he did it last year.”

“Yeah, and he barfed all over my ice sculpture of the three wise men!” she exclaimed, fanning away the smoke with her hand. “You know how Gooshie is when he gets a little of the ‘Christmas spirit’ in him.”

Al shrugged. “So you’ll find someone else; why does it have to be me?”

“Because everyone here looks up to you! Because it’s fun! And because I don’t want you moping through another holiday celebration!”

Al looked away helplessly. How could he explain to Tina his dislike of family holidays? When he had a family, they had always been too poor to enjoy celebrating them, not to mention the fact that his parents’ constant bickering only seemed to increase at those times. The orphanage had been worse; Christmas then was only a reminder of how much he missed out on by not having a family at all. Oh, the nuns had done their best, but the somber services of a Catholic Church-run orphanage and the few meager presents they mustered, simply depressed him, reinforcing the fact that he was truly alone in the world.

He’d never enjoyed Christmas since, not with friends, not with his wives, not with anyone until Sam. Maybe, he mused, that was because the scientist was the closest thing he’d had to family in a long time. But he was gone now, too, and Al just couldn’t find it in himself to celebrate the holidays without him.

The intercom on his desk buzzed. “Yeah,” Al said, pushing the answer button.

“We’ve got a visitor.” The voice that answered him belonged to Verbena Beeks, and the words were her usual code for someone arriving in the Waiting Room. Of course the ‘visitors,’ as she called them, usually didn’t concern Al, but their presence always signalled that another leap had begun.

Al tucked the handlink back into his pocket and made for the door. “Excuse me honey, but I have to go to work. Now just don’t worry about *moi*, and go find yourself another Kris Kringle.”

“But Al--” Tina protested.

“Sorry, gotta run.” Al rushed down the hall to the Imaging Chamber, thankful for the call to

Kindred Spirits

duty. Whatever was on the other side of the IC door, he decided, couldn't be half as bad as Tina's nagging and Christmas in general.

Sam held up the smallest member of the class, a cherubic little blond girl, so that she could drape tinsel on the upper limbs of the Christmas tree.

"There, now doesn't that look fine?" Sam asked the class. Actually, the tree was old and worn with time, lacking several of its artificial branches, and missing too many bristles from the branches that were left. Sam looked at it with concealed sorrow; he guessed this was the best they could afford, and that these children could not look forward to much of a holiday.

A few hasty explanations and questions had told him where and who he was--a nun named Sister Mary Margaret, in charge of the kindergarten students at an orphanage named St. Theresa's. He hadn't yet been able to ascertain when he was, and considering the initial reaction the class had to his appearance, Sam decided he was best not to push things with too many strange questions for the children.

"Hey! Stop it!" Sam looked down to see a dark-haired young boy push over a little girl and snatch away her ornaments. There's one bully in every crowd, he thought ruefully.

The little girl began to cry. "You're mean, Remo! Gimme back my dec'ration!"

Sam caught the little ruffian by the seat of his pants and hauled him up to eye level. "Remo, you know it isn't nice to steal Susan's ornament. Now say you're sorry and give it back."

Remo struggled against Sam's grip. "You can't make me! You ain't Sister Mary Margaret!"

Sitting the boy down on the top of a desk, Sam motioned for the rest of the class to gather round. "Let me explain to you all one more time why I'm here. You see, God needed Sister Margaret to help him with...a very special job. So, while she's gone, I'll be here to take care of you, and we'll all play a game where we pretend that I'm your teacher. Do you all understand?"

A little black boy shot up his hand. "Is sister in heaven?"

"No, she's with a friend of mine and she'll be back in a little while."

Susan wiped the tears out of her eyes. "Are you an angel?"

Sam cast his eyes skyward for forgiveness. "Uh, I'm kind of an angel-in-training."

Remo continued to sulk. "Ah, you're full of bulldookey."

Just then the classroom door opened to reveal the figure of an older nun. "Mary Margaret, it's time for the children's recess. Will you be coming?"

"Uh, no. No, I've got some...papers to grade?" Sam answered, snatching up a pile of finger-paintings.

"Very well." The children lined up and began to file out of the room. As Remo passed the older nun he said, "Hey, y'know that really ain't Sister Mary Margaret!"

The nun reached down and whacked Remo on the *gluteus maximus* with a ruler drawn from the sleeve of her habit. "You mind your manners boy and don't blaspheme!"

Look Before You Leap

“Ow!” the bully cried as he hurried on.

When the last of the children vanished into the hall, the nun stuck her head back into the room. “That Williams boy is a real killer, isn’t he?” she said before following the class.

Sam sighed and picked up his papers. He had gleaned from his earlier conversation with the children, that Sister Mary Margaret’s office was right next door to the classroom. Walking down the hall, he found a door with her name written on its opaque window. *Voila*, he congratulated himself mentally.

Just as he reached for the door handle, Sam noticed a tiny tendril of smoke floating straight through the door.

“Al?” Sam said as he opened the door. Inside he saw the figure of the observer looking through a window into the school’s courtyard, his face pinched into a pained expression.

“Al, what is it? What do you see?”

The admiral turned to face him, his shoulders slumping with depression. “Geez, Sam, of all the rat holes in all the cities in all the world, you had to leap into this one.” He turned his face towards the ceiling. “What is with you?” he yelled upwards, “do you get a kick out of making my life miserable!”

Sam moved next to his friend. “Calm down, Al! What’s gotten under your skin today?”

Al shook his head. “You don’t know, do you? You really haven’t figured it out yet?”

“All I know is that I leaped in right in full view of a kindergarten class, all of whom could see me, and most of whom will probably be traumatized for life by it! Now, Al, I need you to pull yourself together and tell me what’s going on,” Sam finished firmly, hiding his concern over his friend’s behavior.

Al shrugged listlessly. “You’re Sister Mary Margaret, formerly Caroline Horton, a nun working in St. Theresa’s Orphanage in Newark, New Jersey in December ‘54 and, next to the Hanoi Hilton, I can’t think of a worse place to spend my Christmas.”

Sam blinked in astonishment; during his entire speech Al hadn’t once consulted his handlink. Slowly the truth began to dawn on him. “Do you know this woman? I mean, I know she’s a nun but did you...?”

The admiral shook his head emphatically. “Sam, that’s not even remotely funny. But yeah, I know her, and I know this place too.”

Suddenly it came to him. “Here? This is--”

“--Where I grew up,” Al finished. “Welcome to the place that ruined my childhood.”

As the shock settled in, a thought occurred to the scientist. “You’re not here right now, are you?” Despite everything, the thought of a little ‘dead-end kid’ Al running around nearby, brought a ghost of a smile to Sam’s face.

“Are you kidding? I’m almost twenty-years old right now and spending my Christmas at Ft. Harrison down in Georgia. No, the day after I graduated high school, I lit out of this joint and swore I’d never set foot in it again. In fact, when I heard they tore it down in ‘77, I held the biggest disco party you ever saw.”

Kindred Spirits

“Look, Al, I’m sorry you have such sad memories of this place, but right now I need to know why I’m here,” Sam said with honest sympathy. “Let’s just do what we’re here to do, and then you won’t have to ever see St. Theresa’s again, all right?”

“Yeah,” Al grunted in response. “Ziggy says there’s a boy in your class named Mike Allen. He’s just been here a few months, and already he’s tried to run away three times--can’t much say that I blame him.”

“Al,” Sam admonished.

“Anyway, his parents died last September in a car crash, and the poor kid still hasn’t accepted their deaths--Catholic orphanages weren’t big on counseling in these days.”

“So that’s what I’m here for?” Sam asked. “To get Mike to accept his parents’ deaths?”

“Partly; it seems that in the next 24 hours the orphanage is going to be visited by a couple wanting to adopt, and Mike fits what they’re looking for perfectly. Trouble is, he won’t be here to meet them--Ziggy says he runs away again tonight.”

Sam’s expression brightened. “Well, then it should be easy. All I have to do is keep Mike from running away, and tomorrow he gets a new home and I leap, right?”

Al sighed in response. “I dunno Sam; I broke out of this place practically on a weekly basis, until finally I ended up doing a semester in reform school. You’d be surprised what a bright young kid full of energy can do.”

A fragment of memory came to the scientist. “I know what you mean--when I was seven I took my dad’s new milking-machine apart. He would’ve tanned my hide if I wasn’t able to put it back together.”

“Keep an eye on the kid,” Al answered as he summoned the Imaging Chamber door. “I gotta get back and talk my way out of playing Santa at the project Christmas party. Tina’s gonna have a fit, I just know it.”

“It’s Christmas there, too?” Sam queried. “That’s unusual, it being the same day there as here.”

“Nah,” Al responded with a shake of his head. “Not when you consider that somebody up there just doesn’t like me.”

Before Sam could answer, Al vanished through the door.

“Merry Christmas to you too,” he told the empty air.

A nun’s life, Sam was quickly discovering, was not too different from any other woman’s. Mostly it consisted of work, whether it was taking care of the class or cleaning the halls. Now, as he scrubbed away at the wooden floors on his hands and knees, the physicist decided that Al was not entirely unjustified at his dislike of this place.

A quick tour of the building had done little to buck up his spirits. Most of the orphanage was old and run down; even the children’s sleeping quarters were bare to the point of being spartan, just a single bed and locker for clothes, done in a barracks-style arrangement. At least he had

Look Before You Leap

located Mike's bed during his tour. What holiday decorations there were were faded and tarnished, the remnants of better days. Even the presents under the tree were only small boxes containing new clothes and, at best, a few donated trinkets. The whole place reminded him of something out of a Dickens' novel.

One place Sam knew he had always differed from Al was in their remembrances of their respective childhoods. For him, youth was full of fond memories of growing up with a loving family on an Indiana farm, a true slice of Americana. Seeing this place gave Sam an unhappy glimpse into his friend's past, a youth that Al had always spoke of as if he could not have waited until it was over. No wonder, Sam mused, considering the dismal place he spent it in.

The nun he had met earlier (her name he had learned was Sister Catherine and she was the mother superior) appeared and bent over him. "I'd say you've just about worn away those floorboards with your polishing," she said with a trace of wryness. "Why don't you go summon the children to dinner?"

"Yes, ma'am." The younger children were in their quarters, going through a daily ritual of cleaning and polishing. As Sam entered, he noticed they were dutifully shining their shoes.

"All right kids, time for dinner." Most of the children began to form an orderly line, except for the one boy who tried to push ahead to the front.

"Remo, you get in line and behave!" Sam ordered.

"Not gonna!" he yelled back.

"You'd better, or Santa ain't gonna visit ya!" another little boy admonished.

"There ain't no Santa," Remo grumbled, but took his place in line anyway.

Sam looked at the young 'killer' with sympathy. A kindergartener was entirely too young to stop believing in Santa Claus.

The children marched dutifully down the hallway to the cafeteria, leaving Sam to notice one little boy staring morosely out of the window. Judging from the bed he was standing by, there was no doubt as to his identity.

"Dinner's ready--aren't you coming Michael?" Sam asked.

"M not hungry," the boy replied flatly.

"C'mon, it'll get cold, and you'll be hungry later."

The boy turned to face him with sad, brown eyes. Eyes, Sam noted, that seemed to shine with an intelligence unusual for a child Mike's age.

"Do you really help the angels?" he asked in a small, plaintive voice.

Sam sat down on the edge of the bed, motioning the youngster to come closer. When he did, Sam picked him up and put him in his lap.

"I'm here to help you," he said gently. "I know you miss your mom and dad."

"I wish they'd come and get me," Mike answered, returning his gaze to the window. "If I don't get home by Christmas, I don't think Santa Claus will be able to find me."

Sam felt himself fighting back emotion. "Mike, I want you to understand that your mom and

Kindred Spirits

dad would come back for you if they could. They didn't want to leave you, it's just that...God is always looking for good people, right?"

"Guess so."

"Well, sometimes he needs good people to help him in heaven, and sometimes he needs people to help him on earth. He needed your mom and dad to help him in heaven, but he needs you to be a good boy and help people here. Do you understand?"

"But I need my mommy and daddy!" Mike protested.

"I know, Mike, I know," Sam answered with sympathy. "But I'll tell you, your parents are always watching over you from heaven, and they'll always love you and be proud of you. But right now there are people who don't have a little boy and they need someone like you...."

"NO!" Mike shrieked, pulling away from Sam's grasp. "I don't want another mommy and daddy! I want MY mommy and daddy! I wanna go home!"

"Mike!" Sam shouted after the boy's retreating figure.

"Don't wanna be 'dopted!" the orphan cried as he ran from the room. Apparently this had not been the first time the prospect of his acquiring a new family had been brought up.

Sam cursed softly under his breath. "You know," he said to the one observer he knew was always watching, "this would be a lot easier if you'd just sent me back a little further and let me save his parents."

His only answer was a cold wind howling mournfully outside the window.

Al silently paced the halls of St. Theresa's Home for Orphans, scratching his head absently as he pondered what brought him back to this place. Certainly it wasn't Sam; the time-traveller already had the information he needed to complete his mission, and Al knew he was taking a real chance strolling casually around a building filled with children young enough to see him.

Still, a certain grim nostalgia had drawn him back here, back to see one last time the scene of so many of his youth's misadventures. Here he had taken his first drink (behind the alter in the chapel, he remembered with amusement,) experienced his first real crush (Shirley Mulcahey in the third grade,) and developed skills, from lock-picking to boxing, that had served him well in his adventurous life.

A cockroach skittered across his path. "Probably one of Kevin's great-great-grandkids," he mused, recalling the only pet he had had in those long ago days.

Damn! He'd almost allowed himself to forget this place; to forget the lonely nights when he'd struggled to muffle his tears because the older boys were fond of beating up crybabies; to forget the stern-faced nuns and their harsh, wrist-slapping discipline; and to especially forget the moment when the very same Sister Mary Margaret, who now paced the Waiting Room, came and told him his father was dead.

But, Al realized, there are some things that can't be forgotten just because they are too big a part of who you become.

Look Before You Leap

“Al!” The observer looked around to see Sam coming up the hall behind him. “I think you were right; even if I manage to keep Mike from running away tonight, he’s so scared and hostile to the idea of adoption, I don’t think he’ll allow himself to accept any new parents, or let them get close enough to want to adopt him.”

“I told you Sam; a kid like Mike, he doesn’t want any substitutes, he wants his real folks.” Al shook his head sadly. “Take it from somebody who knows, it’s not easy to think of yourself walking out of here with a couple of strangers and calling them ‘mom’ and ‘dad’ the rest of your life.”

“What happens to him if I fail?”

Al checked the handlink. “He grows up, never finishes high school and drifts from job to job, never gets married, never finds a real home and family.” Taking a drag on his cigar, Al continued, “We can’t let that happen. Nobody deserves a life that lonely--not a kid like Mike, not even....” Al couldn’t bring himself to finish the thought.

“Not even you?” Sam ventured.

“Who, me?” Al asked innocently. “Who ever said I was lonely? Between watching your butt and having Tina nag me about playing Santa Claus, it’s a wonder I ever have a spare moment.”

“Right.” Sam checked an old clock hanging over a nearby doorway. “What time tonight is Mike supposed to turn up missing?”

“Ah, Ziggy hasn’t nailed that down yet,” Al said as he slapped the side of the handlink. “Could be hours yet.”

Just then the two men were taken by surprise by a little voice from behind. “Mister Sam, who’s the man in the funny white suit? Is he an angel too?” It was Susan, the little girl from Mary Margaret’s class.

Quickly Sam stepped in front of Al. “He’s sort of my...helper. You know, like Santa has elves for helpers?”

“Great,” Al complained. “Now I’m an elf.”

Sam ignored him. “Susan, shouldn’t you be at dinner right now?”

She shook her head. “Hadda ask you somethin’.”

Sam bent down to her level to speak to her directly. “Okay,” he began cautiously, “what do you want to know?”

“Does Santa Claus know where we live?”

“I wondered that myself sometimes,” Al interjected.

Sam shushed his partner. “Of course he does! He knows where all good little boys and girls live. Why would you even need to ask?”

“Mikey said Santa Claus couldn’t find him here. He said he was gonna go find him and ask him to bring his mommy and daddy back.”

Sam and Al traded concerned looks. “Susan honey, when did Mike tell you this?”

“Just ‘bout five minutes ago,” Susan said, pointing to the clock. “I can tell time real good,

Kindred Spirits

see?"

The two men relaxed.

"It was right before he climbed out the lunchroom window," she added.

"Oh, boy," Sam said.

"No shinola," Al added. "Let me see if Ziggy can get fix on him." Al played with the buttons on the handlink, getting a mixture of a screeching and squealing sound from it. Occasionally Sam wondered how Al could get any information out of it at all, as the scientist could never quite see a display of any kind on its surface.

Al's eyes grew wide with concern. "Uh-oh; now Ziggy says Mike dies in a traffic accident five minutes from now! Your little pep talk must've set him off ahead of schedule Sam, and it changed history!"

"Where Al! Where was he hit?" Sam's voice rose frantically.

"Corner of Eleventh Street and Main--just two blocks from here." Al turned and pointed out the window. "It's in that direction, right in front of the old Rialto Theater."

Sam started sprinting down the hall. "Meet you there!" he yelled back to his holographic friend.

As Sam disappeared from sight, Al noticed Susan staring up at him, her eyes wide in amazement. "Don't worry honey," he assured her. "Mike is going to be okay."

"Oh, I know that," she answered matter-of-factly, as if she couldn't believe Al was foolish enough to think otherwise. "I was just wonderin' something."

"What?"

"If you and Mister Sam are angels, how come he didn't just fly out the window to go get Mike?"

Al chuckled. "Susie, real angels always travel first class." With that, he hit a button on his handlink and disappeared.

Susie gave a shriek of laughter and clapped at the trick; real angels, she decided, were much more fun than the ones the nuns taught about in Sunday School!

A fresh snow had fallen that morning over the streets of Newark, giving way to a black-and-gray slush by nightfall. The crowd in front of the Rialto could be heard to utter an occasional curse, as they trudged though the mess to attend the evening show. Mike blended into the mass of bodies unobtrusively, unnoticed, as most of those around him assumed he was in the company of another adult herded into line for tickets.

The child skittered back and forth up the sidewalk, looking up and down the streets for any familiar site. *Home*, he thought, *gotta go home. I'll find Santa there and he'll help me find mom and dad; he won't try to send me away with strange people like that bad angel did.*

"Where is it?" he cried aloud, tears beginning to form in his eyes. "I got to go back home!"

Look Before You Leap

The boy's sudden outburst caught the attention of one of the theater patrons. "Hey you, kid!" he yelled. "You lost? You want I should call a cop?"

Oh, no! Mike thought, images of being returned to the cold rooms of St. Theresa's flashing through his mind. He began to back away as the portly man approached him. *Run! Go home!*

The man reached down to catch hold of Mike's jacket. As he did, the youngster twisted and bolted away, out into the middle of the busy street. His flight was halted when a taxi, its driver cursing, screeched to a stop in front of him. Looking about wildly, Mike saw a truck bearing down on him. He froze as he was caught in the glare of its headlights, paralyzed by fear.

The driver slammed on his brakes, but the vehicle continued to advance as it slid on the icy road toward the stunned figure.

Mike covered his eyes and screamed.

Seemingly from nowhere, two hands caught Mike and dragged him back from the truck's path, lifting him out of the way to safety. The truck slid to a halt, colliding with the side of the taxi. Both drivers surveyed the damage to their respective conveyances and began a spirited cussing contest.

"Are you all right?" Sam asked the frightened boy, checking him for injuries. Though the shock had prompted a stream of tears, Sam noted that Mike seemed otherwise fine.

Al appeared beside him. "You got him--thank God," he said, exhaling with relief. "Is he okay?"

Sam nodded in the affirmative, putting the boy down on the sidewalk. "Mike, you musn't run away like that! You could've gotten yourself killed!"

"I wanna go home," the boy sobbed gently. "Santa will be there."

Sam couldn't be sure, but he thought he saw Al turn away and wipe something from the corner of his eye. "Sam, I'll catch up with you back at the little big house, okay?" he said, disappearing.

"Mister, got to find Santa," Mike whimpered. "I just know he can't find me at the orph'nage."

"Oh, Mike, you have to believe that...." Sam's reassurance was cut short as he realized the child was simply not going to be convinced by words. How many explanations had Mike heard in the last few months, how many excuses? And to him, they had all boiled down to the fact that his parents were gone and he couldn't go home; that strangers were determined to keep him in a place he found unfamiliar and frightening.

Now he was pining his last hope of returning to his former life on the arrival of Santa Claus, the greatest wish-granter of them all. The physicist knew he couldn't spoil that particular childhood illusion for the boy, but he also suspected Mike would never allow himself to be part of a new family until he accepted that nothing was going to bring back his old one. He wished Al hadn't taken off so quickly; considering his past experiences in the orphanage, maybe he could've thought of....

Sam's head snapped up as an idea came to him. He had to smile at its simplicity.

Kindred Spirits

"Mike, don't worry," he said softly, taking the boy's hand to lead him back to the orphanage. "I think you can count on Santa finding you after all."

Luckily, Sam and Mike had not been gone long enough to be missed, so they managed to sneak back into the building without incident. The boy had put up a minor struggle to avoid returning, but in truth he was too tired and scared to resist. Sam managed to get him tucked into bed with a promise that, despite his fears, he would see Santa Claus soon.

Sam left the children's quarters to find Al waiting for him in the hallway.

"Where did you go?" Sam demanded.

"When I saw you had the situation under control, I ducked into the Rialto," Al explained. "They were showing *Jet Pilot*. Y'know, most people don't give Howard Hughes the credit he deserves for making great films like that. I remember taking Angie Markwell to the Rialto to see *The Thing* there; we snuck up to the balcony and--"

"Al, this is not the time for your perverted nostalgia."

"Bunch of kids up there doin' it tonight," he continued. "Guess everybody wants to follow the example of the master."

"Al!"

"Okay, okay," Al pleaded. "Sister Mary Margaret used to yell at me that same way. I've wondered once in a while if you two aren't related."

"What does Ziggy say now about Mike's chances of being adopted?" Sam asked, ignoring his friend's dig.

"No better; he's going to try and run away again later tonight. And, even if you stop him, he'll be so hostile to the prospective parents tomorrow that he still won't get adopted."

Sam paced back and forth a bit. "I was afraid of that. Al, the only way Mike is ever going to get a new home and family is if we can get him to accept that he can't go back to his old one."

"So, how do we do that?" Al demanded. "He really hasn't listened to anybody since his folks died. Sam, I hate to say it, but you just don't know how he feels."

Sam took a deep breath; he knew what he was about to say would not go down easy. "I realize I don't know how he feels--I've never been totally alone, not even since I started leaping. But," his voice dropped down, "you know."

"Well of course I know," Al replied testily, "but how does that help...Sam, what are you looking at?"

"Just wondering how you would look in red."

"Red?" Al shot him a curious look. "I look great in red, but what does that have to do with...." Al noticed the faux nun's wicked smile, the pieces suddenly falling into place. "No, Sam! No no no!"

"That's pretty close," Sam teased, "but try it like this: ho...ho...ho."

Look Before You Leap

Mike bumped into the edge of a bed, his eyes not quite accustomed to the darkness. He had awoke fifteen minutes earlier with his eyes still red from crying. Despite what the man pretending to be Sister Mary Margaret had told him, Mike was still convinced that Santa would never find him here, and if he was ever to ask him to bring his parents back, he would have to ask him in person.

Mike rubbed his eyes, clearing them enough to see who he had bumped. He swallowed nervously when he saw it was Remo, who stirred slightly before turning over and going back to sleep.

They just don't understand, Mike thought as he tip-toed into the hallway. His parents wouldn't just abandon him; they wouldn't go to heaven and leave him behind. The problem was the people who were keeping him here where his mom and dad couldn't find him. No, he wasn't going to trust the nuns or even that man Sam who pretended to be one. Right now he knew there was only one person he could trust to take him back to his mom and dad, if only he could find him.

As Mike passed Sister Mary Margaret's office on his way to the exit door, he failed to notice it crack slightly as a pair of green eyes peeked out.

He slowly opened the door, doing his best to be quiet. A cold blast of air hit him from outside, causing a shudder to run through his body.

Just as he prepared to leave, a strange sound echoed from far off in the night--a sound suspiciously like bells.

"Who's that?" Mike whispered, peering into the night sky. He was rewarded with a pinprick of light that seemed to grow larger and larger. Mike stood rooted to the spot, staring in wonder at the incredible celestial phenomenon.

The light grew until it filled the sky, then seemed to burst like a huge soap bubble. Mike shaded his eyes against the glare. When he removed his hands, he practically shrieked at what he saw--only his awe of the scene kept him silent.

Parked in the playground was a sleigh drawn by eight reindeer who shimmered like cartoon images. A chubby, bearded man dressed in a red suit climbed out of it, almost tripping over the side.

"Santa Claus!" Mike gasped. "You found me!"

'Santa' finished extricating himself from his sleigh and pulled a cigar from his mouth. "Shut the door Mike, you'll catch pneumonia," the jolly old elf ordered.

Mike obediently slammed the door closed. He looked at it for a second before his mouth made a tiny 'O' as he realized he had shut Santa outside.

"Santa!" he yelled, desperately tugging on the handle. "I can't get the door back open!"

A gravely voice answered him, "Don't worry kid, I'll...oh hell...come down the chimney."

Hearing this, Mike ran down to the cafeteria where the long-unused fireplace stood. As he reached it he could see Santa's figure actually walk through the bricks!

Kindred Spirits

“Wow!” he exclaimed. “Santa, how did you do that?”

Santa waved his hand in the air like a magician flourishing a card trick. “A little Christmas magic.”

“Oh, Santa, I was scared you din know where I was! I’m so glad you come to take me home!” Mike cried, his eyes shining with happiness. “But I thought you wouldna come ‘til tomorrow night.”

“This is a special trip, just for you,” he answered, adjusting his beard a bit. “Mike, do you trust Santa?”

“Oh, yes! More ‘n anybody!”

“I was afraid of that,” he muttered under his breath. “Son, I’m afraid Santa can’t take you home. I would if I could, but your mommy and daddy just aren’t there anymore.”

The boy’s smile vanished. “But you can do anything, Santa! I kept wishing to go home, that you’d come and take me home. Please, Santa, please bring me back to my mommy and daddy.”

Al choked back his feelings. “I know how you feel Mike, and if I could bring your parents back I would. But bad things happen sometimes and we can’t change them no matter how much we want to.” He moved to look Mike directly in the eyes. “We can’t even wish them away.”

“But why?” the child demanded in a pleading voice.

“I dunno,” Al said, shaking his head. “I just know your parents didn’t want to leave you; if there was any way they could’ve stayed they would have. But they just couldn’t.”

The boy fell back into a chair, his tiny body slumping in despair. “Then I’ll never see my mommy and daddy again?”

Al bent down beside him, pulling the cigar from his mouth and flicking away the ashes before they had a chance to singe his beard. “You can see them any time you want to, son; just close your eyes.”

Mike did so without question.

“I want you to think about your dad, think about him when he was smiling and you both were playing together. Think about your mom fixing dinner or helping you get dressed, how pretty her hair was and how nice she smiled when she hugged you. Can you do that?”

Mike nodded.

“Can you see them in your head? Just like they used to look?” Al asked, his voice both warm and sad with the memory of things long ago.

“Yes,” Mike answered slowly.

“Open you eyes,” Al told him. “Mike, you can always do that. Your parents will always be with you in your memories, and in there they’ll always love you as much as you love them. As long as you don’t forget that then you’ll always be able to feel them...in here.” Al pointed one gloved finger at Mike’s heart.

“But what do I do now?” Mike asked. “I can’t go home and I don’t wanna stay here--it’s yucky!”

Look Before You Leap

“You don’t have to stay here,” Al assured him. “Tomorrow Santa is sending you a very special Christmas present--two people named George and Laura Wilson. They’re good friends of Santa’s, and he’s asked them to take care of you. Will you trust Santa when he tells you it’s all right to go with them?”

“Okay, Santa, I know you wouldna lie to nobody,” Mike said sincerely.

“Good. And remember, even if you get to love these new people, and they love you, that doesn’t mean you still can’t love your real parents.”

“I understand.”

Al winked at him playfully. *Gee, he really is a smart kid*, the admiral thought.

Al pulled out the handlink and prepared to make his exit when he heard the cafeteria door open. A hand snapped on the light switch, revealing Sam in his habit standing there surrounded by Mary Margaret’s kindergarten class. The children, including Susan snuggled in Sam’s arms, gaped at ‘Santa’ in wonder.

“It is Santa!” one little boy exclaimed.

“You said he’d be here!” Susan said to Sam.

The crowd of children rushed over and surrounded Al, who shot his best ‘I’ll get you for this’ expression at Sam. It was all the time-traveller could do to stifle a laugh.

The boy Remo looked Al up and down suspiciously. “Aw, he’s just some fake in a silly suit!”

“Oh, yeah?” Al shot back. “You tell me, could a fake do this?” Al laid one finger beside his nose as his other hand surreptitiously worked the handlink. To the crowd’s amazement ‘Santa’ began to rise into the air!

“Yikes!” Remo exclaimed as the rest of the children laughed at the show.

At about ceiling level Al vanished and reappeared beside Sam. “What are you doin’, bringing all these kids in here? I thought this little heart-to-heart was just between me and Mike!”

Sam threw up his hands feebly. “C’mon, Al, you know what kind of holiday these kids can expect. I can’t see the harm in giving them this treat.”

Al shrugged in defeat. “I guess you’re right--just warn me next time, okay?”

“Why?” Sam smiled. “Don’t you know when I’ve been naughty or nice?”

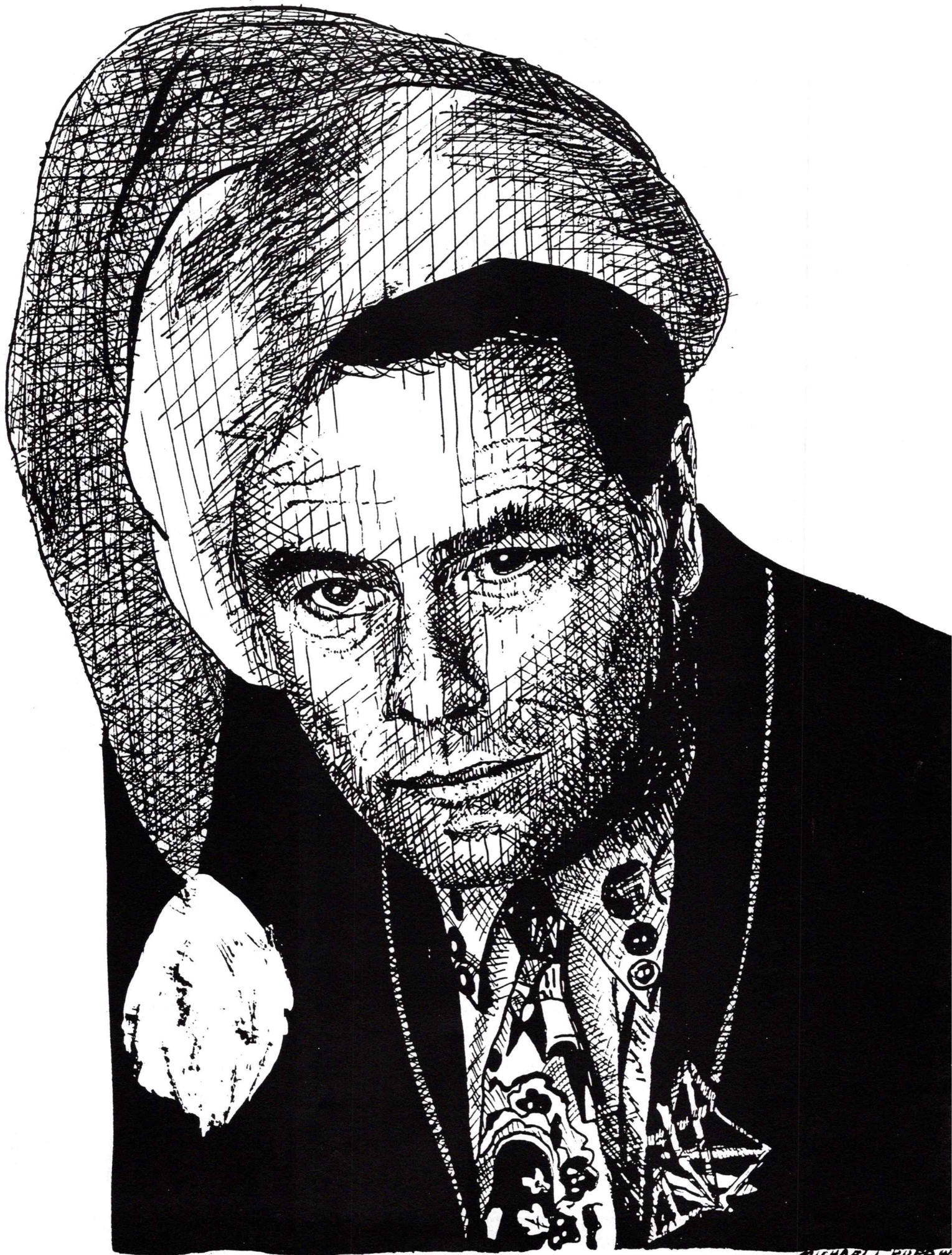
Al’s very loud groan alerted the children to his new position. As they once more swarmed around him with the questions and requests, he noticed that Remo had pushed his way to the front of the group.

“If you’re the real Santa,” he asked, “then why didn’t you bring me that bicycle I asked for last year?”

Al waved his cigar airily in the boy’s direction. “That’s the biz, sweetheart.”

“Gather around children,” Sam told the class. “Santa is going to show you some real Christmas magic.”

For the next hour Al used the handlink to entertain the children by creating an elaborate



MICHAEL L. RUFF

Kindred Spirits

holographic show featuring dinosaurs, clowns, cartoons, reindeer, and abstract images, swooping and chasing around the room. *This'll blow the project's power bills sky high*, Al considered, *but what the hell--this is Christmas!*

At last, Sam could tell by their sleepy expressions that the kids were worn out, so over many protests he began to herd them back to bed. As they marched off, each one waved good-bye to Al, having had it explained to them that on days other than Christmas, Santa was just made of light and couldn't be hugged.

The last one to leave was Mike, who, before he left, turned and ran back to Al one last time.

"Do you swear--really, REALLY swear--that these new people who'll come get me are gonna be nice?"

"I swear it," Al answered. "So help me God."

"So help you God," Mike repeated. Then, before Al could react, he reached up and gave 'Santa' a tight hug around the waist.

Mike disengaged himself and hurried after the rest of the class. Al watched him go with wide, disbelieving eyes.

Sam walked back in to see Al waving his arm experimentally through the Christmas tree. "Is that the last of them?" he asked, looking around.

"Sam, did you see--I mean, how could he--it isn't possible!" Al stuttered. "I'm just a hologram--he can't do that!"

"What?" Sam queried.

"Mike! He--" Al caught himself as he looked at Sam's confused expression. "Never mind; you wouldn't believe me even if I told you. Let's chalk it up to some of that 'Christmas magic.'"

"Suit yourself," Sam replied. "What does Ziggy say happens to Mike?"

Al checked the readout. "He gets adopted--hey, and get this: the Wilsons enjoy having a son so much they adopt three more kids! He grows up, goes to college, and becomes a counselor for abandoned and abused children."

Sam smiled. "I guess we did it. So why haven't I leaped?"

"Beats me," Al answered. "I wish you'd hurry up; I've got to get back and play Santa at the Christmas party."

"Tina talked you into it after all, huh?"

"Well, you should've seen her elf costume. Talk about joy to the world...."

Sam was about to make his standard protest, when little Remo stuck his head back through the door.

"Okay, so maybe you really are Santa Claus!" he said, then scurried down the hall to bed.

The last sound Al heard before the flash of the leap was Sam convulsing with laughter.

WELL, SAM...
ACCORDING
TO ZIGGY,
YOU'RE HERE
TO GUIDE
SANTA'S
SLEIGH
TONIGHT!



$\frac{ab}{c}$ $\sqrt{\neq}$ $\% \neq$ BEEP? HIC? BOOP? dx mc^2

R

JEM/'91

A LITTLE MIRACLE: PART 2

DECEMBER 24/25, 1997

BY LYNN HILL

"Merry Christmas, Al."

"Merry Christmas, Sam."

Then the leap took him away. A despondent Al Calavizzi walked out of the Imaging Chamber. It was evening here too, in New Mexico, Project Quantum Leap. Gooshie met him at the door, two glasses of eggnog in his hands.

"I still don't understand why you told him it was July," Gooshie remarked. Al took a sip of the eggnog. It was good.

"You heard him," Al said. "He was thinking about his own Christmas in 1962 as it was. I didn't want him to know it was Christmas here too. You know how he gets. He was mushy enough when he said Merry Christmas to me. I could barely choke out a greeting to him." He paused. "I guess it was for my benefit as well as Sam's," the Admiral finally admitted somewhat guiltily.

"Well, you'll have time to talk that over with Verbena in a couple of days," Gooshie advised. "It's Christmas Eve, Al, what are you going to do?"

Al looked at him sadly. "Well, if Sam hadn't rescued me from the bottle, I'd go home and get stinking drunk. Tina is out of town at her mom's and Sam is lost somewhere in time. I think I'll catch up on some rest before the next leap. When does Ziggy project?"

"About a week," Gooshie said, looking down.

"Oh, great. New Year's Eve. Oh, well," Al sighed. He was in a mellow mood more than anything. He couldn't be sarcastic to Gooshie on Christmas Eve.

"Bye, Pal. Merry Christmas!" Al said, clapping the programmer on the back. He headed out of the Project to his red sports car and took the long way home through the cool desert.

Still in his wild print summer shirt, Al smiled as he entered the kitchen of his home. Tina had left a tray of cookies for him. He poured himself a glass of milk, cursing Sam for giving him this wholesome habit, and took some cookies to his favorite chair.

Before he could get settled, his phone rang. Though not exactly the Bat Phone, it was the direct line to the Project. He jumped up to answer it. Gooshie was on the line.

"We got a signal that Sam leaped," Gooshie said excitedly. "But it was only for a second, and now Ziggy is saying he was wrong. All is calm here, but I just wanted you to know."

Al looked at the clock--it was two minutes past midnight. It was Christmas. Gooshie and he might not have the world's greatest relationship, but Gooshie never lied to him or held anything back. He was always sincerely honest. "Thanks for letting me know, Goosh. If you get any more

Look Before You Leap

indications like that, I'll be down to the Project. Okay?"

"Got it, Admiral. Get a good rest."

"Good-bye."

Al was puzzled. This had happened only once before, when they had first tried a retrieval over two and a half years ago. Suddenly he felt very old, as old as all of his worldly experiences. The emotion of the season, the past hectic two and a half years for his friend and himself, finally became too much to bear. He gave in to all the frustrations and the pressure of keeping a positive attitude for Sam, and put his head between his hands and allowed himself a few rarely shed tears.

Al didn't remember when he fell asleep, but it hadn't been long. It was still pitch dark outside. He awoke to a knocking at the door, of all things. Seldom did he get visitors, and not at this time of night. He quickly straightened himself up, then went into Admiral mode, preparing himself for the unexpected. He wasn't, however, prepared for the sight at the door.

"It doesn't feel like July, Al," the familiar boyish voice said in amusement.

Had Al had a lit cigar in his mouth or hand, he would have dropped it. "SAM!" he cried, glancing around outside. "Where did you come from?"

He reached out a shaky hand, expecting it to go through his friend. Instead, his hand met a solid arm, which he squeezed. Then he pinched himself to see if he was dreaming. "What's going on, Sam?" he asked shakily.

Instead of answering, Sam gave him a mischievous grin and stepped inside the doorway. "You'd better get inside, you're still dressed for July," Sam teased, closing the door as a sputtering Al gaped at him.

He walked to the couch and sat down. "You have any eggnog?" he asked. "It's Christmas, you know."

Al looked upwards. "Okay, if this is a joke, it's not funny," he threatened. "And," he said, now addressing his friend, "if you are really home, the least you could do is give me a hug instead of plopping yourself down on my sofa and expecting a drink!"

Grinning like a little kid, Sam got up and gave Al a bear-hug, which was returned with fervor, Al not understanding it, but taking advantage of being able to touch his friend for the first time in two and a half years.

They pulled away reluctantly, each slightly moist around the eyes. "Now can we have a sip of eggnog?" Sam asked.

Al went to the kitchen, not wanting to take his eyes off of Sam in case he should disappear. Tina had left him a bottle of the stuff in the refrigerator. He poured two glasses and started back to the living room.

Sam was still there, settled comfortably on the couch, acting like this was any other pre-leap Christmas. He even munched on one of Tina's homemade cookies.

"Mmm. These are good," he said, taking the offered glass. "How's Tina?"

"Tina is fine," Al said, a trace of exasperation in his voice. "But, Sam," he began, waving his

A Little Miracle : Part 2

arms around and gesturing, “where did you come from?”

Sam began by saying, “Indiana,” but apparently noted the strained confusion on his friend’s face. He patted the cushion next to him, motioning for Al to sit down.

“Oh, Al, when you said Merry Christmas to me, I know you meant it, but you seemed kind of sad, so I made a Christmas wish. It was all so magical--the star, the kids, *Silent Night*--I figured there’d be no harm in wishing I could come home long enough just to wish you a Merry Christmas in person. So suddenly I was out of New York and found myself in the desert--wearing this!” He pointed to himself. For the first time, Al noticed he was wearing his white perma-suit.

“After a few minutes I figured out how close I was to your house. I also figured out it was Christmastime here too, not July,” he said, with mild accusation in his voice.

“So I walked up the driveway, and here I am. I don’t think I have much time here, Al,” he warned. “I think this is just a brief moment for me to tell you everything’s okay and wish you a happy holiday. I didn’t have time to buy you a gift, and besides--no money!” He grinned.

The scientific, governmental side of Admiral Calavicci wanted to whisk Sam away in his car, lock him up at the Project, have him examined, have Ziggy analyze things and try to keep him there. He also wondered what happened to Sam’s body back at the Project while he was here. Gooshie should have called him by now....

His human side, however, just wanted to sit next to his friend, sip eggnog, and spend part of Christmas with him.

“Sam,” Al started, “I...”

Sam hushed him gently. “Al, I think I know what you’re thinking. You’d like me to go see Ziggy and try to figure out how to stay here. I know a lot of the time I talk about coming home, and I sure miss it,” he said fondly, “but I think I still have a mission to accomplish. I don’t think it’s time for me to come home just yet. I am okay, Al. I appreciate your concern--I NEED your help. But, know I am okay. I believe we have more adventures yet to come. Will you be there with me, Al? We started this impossible dream together and I’d like to finish it together.”

Al looked at Sam. Sam’s expression showed that he had accepted it now. He was at peace. And peace was one of the things this season was all about. If Sam was at peace about it, he surely would be also.

“Of course, I’ll always be here with you, Sam. A partner is always a partner,” Al said steadily.

The two men smiled at each other and sat back into the sofa, sipping the eggnog, bodies just slightly brushing in reassurance of touch. They sat, as long-time friends sometimes did, just enjoying the company of each other. There was so much to talk about, but both sensed there really was not time for all of that. So much would be left unsaid anyway.

As the first hint of dawn appeared, Sam shifted and turned to Al. He started to speak, but this time Al silenced him.

Al smiled warmly. “I know. It’s time, isn’t it?” he asked, already knowing the answer. “Well, Sam Beckett, as you go into a new year, you can be sure I will be there along with Ziggy to help and share the adventures. By being here, you’ve made my holiday much brighter. Thanks, buddy.”

Look Before You Leap

For the first time, Sam really looked like he was about to cry. "Thanks, Al, for everything," he said softly, not wanting his voice to give his emotions away. He took a deep breath, smiled broadly, and clasped Al's hand in his own.

"Merry Christmas, Al."

This time, with the knowledge Sam was safe and at peace with his situation, Al was totally sincere as he said, "Merry Christmas, Sam."

The blue flash of light took Sam away once again. A second later the phone rang. Al jumped to answer it. Gooshie was on the line.

"We got a signal that Sam leaped," Gooshie said excitedly. "But it was only for a second and now Ziggy is saying he was wrong. All is calm here, but I just wanted you to know."

Al took a deep breath and looked at his watch. Two minutes after midnight. His five hours sitting with Sam had taken all of a few seconds in his time--a bump in time only he and Sam knew about. No wonder no one noticed Sam's body was missing. They thought for a second that he leaped....

"Thanks for letting me know, Goosh. If you get any more indications like that, I'll be down to the Project, okay?"

"Got it, Admiral. Get a good rest."

Head spinning, as he replayed exactly the scenario of what seemed like five hours ago, Al decided to change the last part. "Gooshie," he said, "I think Sam is in good hands right now. I want you to take a few days off. Ziggy will keep us monitored. Have a wonderful Christmas, Gooshie."

"Why, thank you, Admiral. I think I'll do that. Good-night."

Al hung up the phone and walked back to the living-room. The evidence of Sam was still there, the empty glass of eggnog, the dent where he was sitting on the couch. Something remained on the couch, however. It was a Christmas present, small, but brightly wrapped. Al hadn't remembered Sam carrying anything with him. He picked it up quizzically and sat down to open it.

Circa 1962, it was a box of cigars--expensive cigars. There was a note inside:

To the Ghost of Christmas Future--the pale guy with the wild shirt--Merry Christmas and my utmost thanks.

It was signed, **Blake**.

Al didn't question it. On this night of miracles he couldn't be surprised anymore. He popped a tape of *It's a Wonderful Life* into the VCR, got settled on the couch and slowly unwrapped one of the cigars. Later that day he had plans to go to a local orphanage to distribute a bag of gifts he had in the garage. But now, instead of going with a heavy heart, he'd go with the real Christmas spirit. He took a long puff of the 35 year-old fresh cigar and smiled.

A Little Miracle, indeed.

FORGET

BY SCOTT TILSON

//...

Then, with a brilliant flare, all was quiet and soothing.

The horror was thankfully blanked out, erased from Sam's distant and unblinking eyes by a colorless and yet chaotic void. As always, his mind accepted the void as endless white; featureless except for the rare arc of crackling indigo blue that faded quickly.

After what seemed to be the merest of moments, a field of perfect wheat--tall, light golden brown, and swaying gently in the sweet easy breeze--faded smoothly in around him, like a mirage in wavering summer heat. All had been endless white, and then suddenly Sam was standing in the thick of the most divine crop he could ever have seen.

But he didn't see it.

If he thought about it, he would have found his arrival odd. Too abrupt and lacking the normal quantum flash.

But he didn't. He didn't see, he didn't think; he didn't want to see or think or hear or smell or taste anything his world could offer ever again. Not as long as...as *that* could be part of it.

He wanted everything to go away; the dry burning in his throat to be gone: the pain of his own screams. He wanted nothing to draw his attention, so he could ignore it all. Withdraw completely.

Nobody cared. Why should he?

His eyes were dry and itchy; he hadn't blinked in...how long?

Why doesn't he just close them?

Don't think. Don't want to see it.

Knees buckling, Sam's body trembled and curled tight into a fetal question mark on the cool, slightly moist earth. Its damp autumn chill flashed a remembrance of horror into his mind, but he shut it out, slamming it in the door of his consciousness again and again until it flowed away on a river of its own making. His knuckles grew pale--paler than his increasingly sickly pallor--as his arms squeezed ever tighter about his collapsed legs. His fingers dug into his shoulders through an unblemished simple shirt and the straps of a pair of clean farmer's overalls.

Lying in the perfect dirt, he remained clean.

He twitched sharply and a shiver snaked through his body as the ground seemed to warm and swing easily. The gritty earth changed. The bright floral pattern of a bench-length pillow on a porch swing now cushioned him. The whitewashed swing rocked ever so slightly under his weight, but no creaks came from its shining silvery chains.



Mel
Varvaroutsos
1993

Look Before You Leap

Still, Sam was aware of any of this in only the most detached dream-like way, lying tightly balled up on his side at the center of the comforting spotless pillow. The undemanding pressure of the white-suited man's consoling hand barely registering as that hand rested upon Sam's upper arm, patting it gently every other moment or so.

You must not give up.

Sam heard the words, but not in his ears. The familiar rough raspy voice echoed in his mind, the little corner of it that was womb sweet womb, and he found he needed to see again, if only for this.

Blinking twice to clear the hazing dryness, tension loosened its wooden grip upon his arms and legs as he slowly and jerkily rose. Sam's mouth gaped in astonishment as he recognized where he thought he was.

This was home. His real home, where he was born and raised. The thick fields, the white country farm house, the big backyard; they're just as his memory would have them. Maybe just a bit better. No peeled paint, no broken wheat stalks, no dirty clapboards. No faults. He was happy that they weren't there.

Smiling ear to ear like a overgrown kid, Sam jumped down the wide porch steps, skipped across the lush green yard, and reaching the middle, he spun round and round with wild abandon.

"I'm home!" he yelled at the top of his hoarse lungs. "I'm home!" He didn't even let himself remember what had happened to the farm after he'd left for the university and after Dad had died. The fact that nobody seemed to be around didn't really spark his interest in the least. No one except for Al, whom Sam caught blurred snapshots of as he continued his manic whirl about.

Palms resting easily on the spotless white of the porch railing, Al was leaning slightly forward and smiling a reserved proud smile. He seemed wrong: where was the hand unit, the cigar, the loud colors? What was with all that formal white? No gold braids or naval hat, just white. All pure glowing white. Even his dark hair seemed to shine from within. But Sam gave that little thought.

It doesn't matter. I'm home!

Al straightened suddenly, smile vanishing utterly into a noble melancholy, and the index finger of his extended left hand twitched casually towards the yard.

Sam reeled. His legs twisted into each other and he fell on all fours, panting like a bellows and then slumping unconscious. The barriers in his mind were crumbling and his immediate past set free.

No! Please!

His silent plea hadn't a chance against the roar of memory unchained.

"Ah just don't get it? How can you bolt down so many cream-filledes and still look that way?"

Forget

The words didn't quite register with Sam. Was she talking to him? Her accent was thickly southern. More importantly, his initial confusion left him in a bit of a daze. True to form for a new leap.

"Huh, what?" Sam almost stuttered, turning to the source of the good-humored astonishment. Wits clearing, he saw the cherubic face of a heavy-set woman in police issue blues, grinning up at him from behind a desk at the front of the office. Sam was just entering.

Responding to the question, he took inventory of himself. The smile he was returning nearly shook loose as he looked up again and caught a glimpse of his reflection in a nearby plate-glass window. Or should that be 'as *she* looked up again?' Sam was a woman once more, this time a police deputy in Telegraph, Texas, or at least that's what his--her--badge told him.

At least I'm not pregnant this time. The thought didn't slow Sam's retort a bit. "Yeah well, chasing jaywalkers does that for you, Judy." A quick glance at the clerk's badge had provided that. "Maybe it's just my metabolism."

"Well don't some girls jus' get all the luck!" the cherubic clerk laughed, and handed him a box labelled 'Reb's Doughnuts.' "You'd best confiscate these b'fore I go an' destroy the evidence!"

Overcoming his surprise smoothly, Sam made an elaborate presentation of drawing forth a powder-caked, cream-filled from the box. He waved it at Judy as he said, "I'll see to it that they're put in a safe place! Thanks." Then he plunged it into his mouth.

Wandering down the path between the desks, Sam's one thought was, *If I can just find a coffee machine now, I just might enjoy this leap!*

Having found the deputy's simple grey metal desk, he sat down. All that adorned it was a pasty green paper desk blotter, a coffee mug of pens and pencils, black plastic 'in' and 'out' trays, and a plainly framed photo of a happy young boy being motherly hugged by the woman he'd leaped into. The 'in' tray was empty.

Hmmm, no pressing matters to make sure she doesn't fall behind on. Sam leaned back in the wooden swivel chair and relaxed. Small town policing wasn't exactly high in the stress department. Or so Sam thought.

But then *Andy Griffith* was his source material.

"Well gau-aully, Sam!"

It was about time. Not that Al's smart Alec Gomer Pyle imitation against the echoing whoosh of the Imaging Chamber's door was appreciated, but his presence certainly was.

"Al!" Sam nearly shouted, but then thought the better of it. Toning down, he almost pointed to the ladies room to keep their conversation private, but also thought the better of that.

Al was not worth a damn when surrounded by women. He was already eyeing Sam's new image judiciously. Then he sharply shook his head. These leaps might be even harder on Al, dirty mind kicking into overtime to come to a brick wall stop at the realization that it's actually his best buddy.

Sam just picked up the phone on the desk and continued, "What's going on? Nothing's really

Look Before You Leap

happened, except maybe that I saved a clerk from a certain overdose of Reb's Doughnuts! I don't suppose that's it, huh?" Sam twirled a pencil about in his strong fingers.

"Sorry, oh Andrea of Mayberry," Al stated grandly, and then became more buddy-buddy. "You know it's never that simple."

Sam harumphed with an audible snort. *Wasn't that the truth!* "Well, what's the bad news?" While Al tapped a dance across the keypad of the handlink, he tilted to one side as if to lean against the wall adjacent. He staggered and almost fell as he slipped through it.

After all these trips, Sam thought the understanding would be second nature by now, and guessed it was something of a testament to the believability of the Imaging Chamber's holographic projections.

"Umm, it's not really bad news," Al hemmed, beginning to pace slowly. "Actually, Ziggy popped a circuit-breaker this morning and Gooshie and Donn...and an assistant just got him in peak working capacity a few minutes ago. Sorry, Sam. All we have is who and when." Shrugging apologetically, ashes fell from the sixth finger that was his cigar.

A glare flowed from Sam to Al. "I already have most of the who." Sam hunched forward lethargically to rest his elbows upon the desk, running his free hand stiffly through his hair. "I'm Jane Vaughn, a Texan deputy sheriff. This," Sam waved that free hand about, "is a small town by the name of Telegraph. She must really be something to get this high up in the Old Boys network."

"Hey, T.C.!" Some other patrolmen passed through the office and Sam graced them with a shaky smile from behind the receiver and mimicked their thumbs up sign.

"How...?" Al again appeared surprised at how well Sam had adapted to leaping.

Sam just lightly tapped the badge over his right breast. "I can read. But what's the 'T.C.' about?"

"Well, well, something finally stumped you, huh?" smartly snapped Al. He then turned his attention to the link, after glancing at Sam's tightly pursed lips and knotted brow. "Uhum, apparently two months ago, her partner was attacked and temporarily disabled by three cornered perps and she took them on. She won. T.C. stands for 'tough cookie.' What a woman!" Al grinned and stuffed his cigar haphazardly into the corner of his mouth. "Let me tell you some more you probably don't know. It's 1979, September 13th to be exact. She's 33, divorced, recently completed study for a black-belt in karate, shares a house with her older brother Bob, has a 6 year old son Nathan, and transferred here from New York six months ago. She says it was to get away from the heavy crimes. And you're right about her being good; she received several commendations before she left."

"That's all fine and good, Al, but what is she supposed to have done?" He turned to lock eyes with the hologram and the pencil slipped from his loose grip to rattle upon the nearly barren desk top. "Or for the fact of the matter, not to have done?"

"Err, can't help you there," Al apologized with an idle poke at the link and then proffering it helplessly. "I'll be back in a bit and see if I can shake loose anything else from that rattlebox computer!" With a wave and a whooshing white rectangle, Al was gone.

Forget

Slapping at Sam's side, Jane's walkie-talkie crackled with a squawk of static.

Sam had spent the last couple of mid-afternoon hours patrolling a beat. It had been an enjoyable leisurely stroll, and quite uneventful. The town looked, as most small ones do, as if it was stuck in the fifties, the occasional peeling of paint the only indicator of time's passing. The streets were sparsely travelled and it seemed as if every third or so parked car was a flatbed pick-up. They tended to be dust covered red, faded blue, or gun-metal grey. Not much variety beyond that. A quiet little town. Most of the townspeople he came across had smiled and waved, several saying hello and stopping him--her--for simple friendly chatter. Now, as he was sauntering back to the office, whistling a meandering tune, his police radio squawked again with a call for response. Sam tugged it from its holster and pressed a button.

"Deputy Vaughn report!" It was Judy. Tension made the words short on drawl.

"I'm here, Judy." Sam released the button and pressed another and spoke, "What's the problem? Cat in a tree?" He couldn't help but grin.

The tension did not ease from Judy's crackling voice. "Report to the station. Nathan has been reported missing."

"Now try not to worry yer head too greatly, Jane. I've got mah best men--uhm--people working on finding little Nathan. I'm heading the team personally to make sure everything that can be done is done. Everything, Jane. And I want you on the team as well. I understand at least a bit of how you must be feeling, and I know that'll make you useless for anything else."

Sam shifted uneasily in the stationary black leather chair before the expansive oak desk in the sheriff's office. A shiny golden name plaque front and center said, *Thomas D. Roman, Sheriff*. The man's voice, though softened in sympathy, was deep and rumbling, like the snorting of a bull. That was appropriate, for the sheriff was a hefty man, but only a thin layer of fat hung about his waist. The rest was thick muscle.

As the sheriff stood and padded around, the man suddenly reminded Sam of his father, if not in appearance, than in his build. A man of hard-earned strength from constant struggle. Sitting on the edge of the desk, the sheriff leaned forward and gently rested his hands on Sam's shoulders, and Sam was suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of trust.

"Remember, the teacher only said that the boy didn't come back in from recess. He could have just wandered off. Y'know kids do that." The sheriff sighed and sagged almost imperceptibly. "But I don't want to hold anything back from you. A man in a dark overcoat and fedora was reported loitering around the school-yard a short time before. The description fits the appearance of a man seen at other sights where children have disappeared all over the state for the past few months."

Sam was beginning to shiver. This wasn't right.

"Sam!" Sam's head snapped to the left at the shout to see Al, arms shaking and face a tight knot. "Jane's kid is gonna get grabbed! You've got to stop it!"

Look Before You Leap

Repressing his shocked response, Sam felt a gentle pressure squeezing his shoulders. The sheriff must think he needed more consoling. Confused, Sam sluggishly turned his head back and looked straight into the sheriff's eyes.

The man's grip and face loosened a bit and he seemed to start back.

"T-thank you, Sheriff, for telling me about my son personally. I don't know how this could happen in a small town like this. I know you'll find him." Sam's voice was nearly a whisper, head shaking to glare at Al's wide eyes and slack jaw. He swallowed hard and then added with more confidence, for himself as well as Al and the sheriff. "We will find Nathan."

Something was definitely wrong.

"Where? Where!"

The words were high and shrill, rough and on the edge of breaking. Bursting from Sam's taunt thin lips, they were echoed by his white knuckled grip on Jane's station-wagon's steering wheel. Just because the shift had ended, his search hadn't. Headlights managed to push aside the midnight dark, only in small pools. He glared again at Al beside him, partially inside the brown vinyl upholstery.

"Where can he be! I've searched the whole school-yard, the surrounding land, talked to the teachers and the locals, even checked back at Nathan's home. Bob said he hadn't come home, and now he's even out looking! The team has checked everywhere ten times over and nothing!" Sam's arms shook with tension, causing the car to nearly swerve into oncoming traffic. He added coldly, without turning his attention away from the road this time, "And where were you, Al!"

"Sam...." Al's festive Hawaiian print shirt and mauve suit were so out of place at the moment that Sam's anger left him completely abashed. Words just made him feel even more guilty.

He wasn't, but Sam wouldn't listen to that right now, Al knew. And it wouldn't be right to argue it at a time like this. Especially when he did blame himself. If he'd just been able to get Gooshie to request, entice, force that information a few minutes faster from Ziggy....

But what could he have done? The Project had become madness! The info had come too late to be of any good. Ziggy was multi-tasking at a rate that threatened to burn out the whole power grid, and he still couldn't find out what Sam should do. The probabilities kept changing every second. The bad news was that they all said that the boy Nathan would never be found and that Jane would become a flagrant hotshot. The tragedy of Nathan would bring about the slow disintegration of Telegraph. She--maybe actually Sam--would be knifed to death by a gang in the line of duty because she didn't call for backup.

With an unexpected lunge, Sam sent the car screeching towards the curb. Ziggy, overworked, was unable to compensate fast enough and Al didn't stop until he'd slipped through the windshield and was left standing in the middle of a dented grey pick-up.

Sam had already parked the station-wagon and was shrieking at the sky, fists punching at the eyes of the stars. "Daaamn you! Daaaammnnn yooooouu!!" *And damn me too, Sam*, Al thought.

Baggy, bloodshot burning coals from behind Sam's trembling accusatory finger locked onto Al

Forget

as if in response. "You. You get out of here. I want you to run a check on all reports. Check the records of anyone new in town within a year, the teachers, and even any townspeople with known mental histories. Now!" Sam's gravelly monotone softened a sliver, his eyes watery. "On time."

Not waiting for an answer, Sam jumped into the car and sped away.

Calling up the Door, Al mourned silently, *If I don't, Nathan won't be the only one to die.*

Blue. It was blue.

Why?

Returning to the suspected scene of the abduction, Sam had scoured the tarmac, grass, and outlying forest swathed in darkness with his flashlight. After two hours and seventeen minutes, a scrap of blue had floated to the surface in his portable little pool of light.

A scrap of blue cloth. It had been snagged on a rusty nail that some soul had hammered into an old tree for some distant and unknowable reason.

But why blue? It wasn't dark enough to be from the overcoat the suspected abductor reportedly wore. But what if he--or she--had opened that coat to smuggle Nathan away in? What if in the process the person had torn their shirt beneath on that nail?

Sam knew he was grasping at straws. He didn't care. It made sense to him. It was too late in the night--or was that early in the morning by now--to think any clearer than that. Where was Bob? Talking it out with him might help.

"Uhhh..." was all Al, ashen pale and sweating, could seem to manage as he appeared. His image was spotty and faded in and out. Maybe Ziggy was overloading. Al's mouth worked for a moment and then he hung his head silently, turning the handlink's bright readout to Sam's view.

Reading it, Sam mechanically swung himself from Jane's bed. He didn't turn pale; a raging red boiled upon his features. Respect for the institution had made suspicion impossible. Tucking the blue scrap into the matching blue pocket of his uniform, he reached for the holster.

Where was Bob?

Al broke up and disintegrated completely as Sam turned his back and stormed out.

"**W**here are they? Where are my son and brother?" Sam demanded, one hand resting tensely on his revolver's grip, as the other was held out between him and his superior as if a shield.

The stocky forty-something Texan sheriff flowed side to side, like he was a human tide, ebbing and surging; the crusty eight inch butcher's knife slowly dancing in the firm grip of his extending meaty left. The man grinned with pure joy.

They were playing this out in the sheriff's home; an evil chess match in the kitchen, to be exact. Al had eventually uncovered a hidden history of violent psychotic episodes in the sheriff's

Look Before You Leap

past, his current name and identity: a forgery.

"I'm better," the big man blurted out, then shouted, "I'm better! Better than all you! I got thirteen and no one knew it was me! No one caught me!"

The homicidal sheriff lunged suddenly, his butcher's blade a steel streak plunging towards Sam's rib cage.

Sam jerked right, grabbed the knife wrist, and held on for dear life as he shifted his weight, using the sheriff's own to hurl him overhead to the tile floor. The force of the impact quaked through the man's rolls of skin and muscle beneath his sweaty police blues. His grip on the knife relaxed, and Sam had it free and away in the next moment.

"Where, damn you! Where are they!" Sam roared as he twisted the sheriff's wrist and viciously kicked at the man's ribs once, and then again and again until they became pulpy soft. A low ragged moan escaped him.

The moan sputtered, red bubbles popping from the sheriff's parting lips, and the moan rolled into a wet chuckle as his face spasmed and then smoothed into an insane smirk. "Pretty little pet, that boy, but he's a base child so into the basement he goed." Sam felt a tug in the man's arm, as a harsh quiver tightened the sheriff. The quiver produced a cold hollow laugh. "But the man, he didn't want to play, so he's playing out back, in the big mud pile." He shook and coughed with his shrill giggle.

Sam shook as well, love, rage, and fear at war within him, as he let the limp wrist drop and knelt beside the man he had thought was a friend.

Effectively hog-tying the sheriff with his own and the deputy's cuffs, Sam bolted to the basement. In a dim, far corner he found the boy, curled up among a carpet of bugs and chards of bone on the cold cement floor, unmoving. His pallid skin completely bare except for the heavy rusted chain coming from the cement wall padlocked around the boy's dirty scratched neck. Cradling the boy in his arms, Sam urgently checked the boy's pulse and forehead temperature.

Good. The boy was weak, but he'd be okay. Sam turned the pasty face up to his to warm it with comfort and consoling words, and he froze.

The eyes were dead.

Behind his eyes, the boy was dead.

Somehow he got up, wandered out, and called an ambulance before he was drawn out back.

The evening sky was darkened by the fury of Heaven's tears. They merged with Sam's own as the black mud suckled at his kneeling legs. He hugged a pale, stiff arm to his chest: the arm of his host's missing brother. The rest of the body was beside him, and others were carelessly littered about, becoming exposed by the angry rain. Sam was surrounded by a field of pallid bits and bones ripe with the stench of rot.

And he screamed. On and on, without end.

Forget

Thick blobs of black mud slopped onto the kitchen floor with loud plops as the deputy's revolver pointed unwavering at the giggling, hog-tied sheriff's head. Sam was silent as he aimed the gun with stiff mechanical arms, his face void of any expression, blank except for the steady stream of tears.

The sheriff's wild eyes locked on the gun and he giggled even louder.

Just as Sam was beginning to squeeze, the air sparkled, flared white, and he was gone.

Inhaling with a sharp gasp, Sam abruptly awoke as if from a terrifying nightmare.

The most hideous nightmare would have been preferable. At least they're not real. He shivered and couldn't stop. It slowed considerably as he curled up, tightly hugging his legs to his chest again. Sam wasn't aware of the dew-wet, rich green grass that served as his bed, or the perfect golden-brown wheat around him, or the pristine farm house of his boyhood looming near.

His eyes wouldn't accept anything, except the soft glowing white suit with Al's head smiling kindly from atop it. Al kneeled beside him and soothingly stroked his hair with a solid hand.

"Wrong, wrong, wrongwrongwrong," Sam muttered, not focusing on anyone or anything. "Shouldn't...why...why..if He loves all?"

"Calm yourself, Sam." Stroking and smiling, Al spoke with a soft noble echo. "Who is this 'he' you speak of?"

Not moving, Sam responded stuttering, "He. He. He...in control. On high. All...all his children." He was silent for a minute, and when next he spoke his words were more controlled, a touch more aware. "The violence, why does He allow it to continue? The pain, the death--even to children--if God truly loves us all, how can he let it happen?"

Al sat back upon the divine grass, frowning slightly. "Ah, that is an immortal question, Sam. And not an easy one to answer. But doesn't it imply that God is controlling everything?"

"Controls...me," Sam's lips moved sluggishly.

"Not really. That He directs you would be more appropriate, and you are a special case." Al rubbed his smooth chin. "You see, if you accept the Christian book for example, then God created people with free wills and the ability to make their own choices. People aren't playthings, toys for the amusement of a greater force; they're in charge of their own lives, and what happens is people's own doing." He patted Sam's shoulder, but it remained tense and unmoving.

"But, but, but...." Sam's glazed eyes wandered past Al with no discernable direction. "He created everyone, knows everything. He is the Father. Our Father!" His breath came in hard wheezing pants.

"Yes, all people are His children, or more correctly His sons and daughters. They are no longer his children. A father cares for and controls his children--or at least tries his best

Look Before You Leap

to--until they grow up and decide to make their own decisions, to live their own lives. When they leave home he doesn't stop caring, but he must relinquish control and let them stand or fall as they will. The first people made their choice and had to leave the Garden; they wanted to be adults and so they were treated as such."

Sam shivered. "That...that's so cold. Parents don't just give up on their kids when they're grown. They can and do still help."

"And He does, through others." Stroking Sam's hair again, Al's gentle fatherly smile partially returned. "As I said, He doesn't stop caring, but He allows them self-reliance and the chance to gain the aspects of a father or mother by learning to care for others as much as for themselves. Just as a son or daughter that moves far from home, people must learn to rely on themselves before anyone else. But not to the exclusion of others, though. A true adult simply knows when to ask for or accept help and how to share their love. It's a pity that only a select few really understand." A firm hand from the white suit touched Sam's twitching bent back.

"The pain--the hurting children." With what seemed a supreme effort, Sam turned his head up to the image of his friend's pondering face. "He has the power to stop it! The pain, all the pain is wrong!"

Al shook his head slowly, and suddenly he was standing with his back to Sam. "Power is not the answer to everything. Rarely is it to anything. I would have thought you'd have understood that fact." He paused as his voice wavered, about to catch in his throat, his Al-like head bowed. "Sometimes...sometimes bad has to be allowed to happen for true and lasting learning to occur...." The voice became increasingly softer and quieter, until the words trailed off into silence, even the little echo melting into nothing.

"It's wrong!" Sam screamed, spitting frothy foam that disappeared in the air, his eyes growing dull, his balled up body quaking as a spotty red boiled upon his stretched cheeks. "Hideous, evil, wrong, wrong, wrongwrongwrong!!"

The white suit took several reluctant steps away and stopped. Shoulders hunched, his face was cradled in ageless hands as it shook ever so slightly from side to side. "I'm...sorry" whispered through Al's lips before he turned slowly and returned to Sam's side, kneeling with a slump. With an attempt at a benevolent smile awash with tears, he leaned over, hesitated an instant, and then pressed the tip of his left pinky to the center of Sam's forehead. "Forget."

The tension slipped from Sam's tight joints and muscles, as a blissful and thorough relaxation flooded throughout his unwinding body. His eyes lolled shut and the easy slow breaths of sleep escaped his limp sagging mouth, filling the surrounding endless white void. Floating in the smooth flawless white for long moments, he snored peacefully, and then with the next breath he simply disappeared.

In the distance, a bright billowing outline of a great robe faded from sight.

Life Continues

The Leap Back : Donna

-- Melissa Mastoris

I remember the sight of you
When you first stepped out
Of the imaging chamber.
You haven't changed at all
In the four years
You've been away.

And I can still feel
You in my arms,
Holding me so tight,
Not wanting to let me go
While you kiss me
Again and again.

And the love we shared
Under the desert's starry sky
Makes me even more determined
To keep you here
With me
No matter what.

Both our lives
Have been in limbo
These past four years.
When will it all be over?
I thought it might
Be done with by now.

But you can't stay.
Al needs you,
And after all he's done
You can't abandon him,
And you wouldn't;
I know you too well.

And even though
It's not fair and
The cruelest trick in the world
I have to
Let you go
A second time.

Only this time
Come back to me soon,
And try to remember
That someone here
Loves you.
I'll be waiting, Sam.



TOM-CATTIN' AROUND

BY SHIELA SCHNEIDER

"When most guys today

that women prize today,

are just silly gigolos...."

--Anything Goes

Cole Porter

It all changed in the proverbial blink of an eye. One moment, he was asking a nurse to close for him as reporters clamored outside the operating room for a word with the physician who'd just accomplished the impossible; in the next instant, he found himself in a tiny dressing room staring into a well-lit mirror. The image staring back was covered in makeup--white with orange and black stripes, eyes lined to give them a slanted look, and a small black triangle on the tip of his nose.

Someone rapped sharply on the closed door.

"Five minutes," an anonymous stagehand announced briskly.

"Oh, boy," Sam muttered, turning back to his reflection. The image staring back didn't look nearly as panicked as Sam felt. He glanced around the room, looking for a back door way out. A program booklet lay atop a second folding chair--the mate to the one on which he sat. The booklet had a black cover, a single pair of yellow eyes, and the title *CATS*.

That explained the make-up, at least. And the tight pants.

He turned, alerted by another quick knock. A Siamese cat-lady stuck her head in the door.

"C'mon, Tiger," she chided. "Time to thrill the crowd." She stepped into the room, placing her hands on her hips as she looked down at him. Her white and chocolate-brown body-stocking was so tight her nipples pressed through the fabric. It was a good thing Al wasn't there.

"What's wrong?" the woman asked.

"I can't go on," Sam blurted. "I don't know any of the routines."

The Siamese sighed, taking one step closer in order to lift a spiral-bound notebook from the make-up table.

"You've studied this, and you've gone through the dress rehearsal without a hitch. Let go of the fear, Tommy. You're purr-fect already."

"He most certainly is." An over-dressed woman stood in the doorway, dragging on her

Look Before You Leap

cigarette. "Get along, dear. You have some dancing to do."

The Siamese lifted her chin, dropping the notebook and stalking past the newcomer. She turned and made raking moves with her fingernails behind the woman's back, then hurried away.

"Now then, darling," the woman in magenta sequins announced, sauntering closer, "time to get ready. We don't want to miss our big debut tonight." She picked up a yellow tufted wig, and fitted it onto Sam's head. It gave him a distinctly lion-like appearance.

"I'll see you during intermission to discuss finalizing our deal," the woman announced. "I must get back to my seat."

"You'd think a woman of her standing would avoid stooping so low," Al announced, stepping through the Imaging Chamber door. Sam muttered something indistinct, frantically flipping through the spiral-bound pages of notes.

"Relax, Sam. Rum Tum Tugger doesn't come on for four songs yet."

Sam glanced up at the man in silver, puffing a cigar Sam thankfully couldn't smell.

"I didn't think you were much for theater."

"I have the soundtrack," Al responded, shrugging. "Besides, the actor told me."

"Tom."

"Uh, right." Al gave Sam a curious glance reserved for the few times he and Ziggy couldn't beat the time-traveler to information. "Tom is a nervous sort. Perfectionist. Take a few seconds to memorize his notes and you'll be able to knock 'em dead."

"I can't be here to trip over my own feet and ruin this guy's career," Sam lamented, frowning at the handwritten notes. "Why am I here?"

"It's what the dragon-lady wants to talk to you about," Al responded, taking the cigar from his mouth. "See, she pulled some strings and got Thomas the audition for this role. But that's as far as her influence ranged, whether she thinks so or not. The director of this troupe is a real class act--Tom got the job on talent. But Tom's got this lingering doubt on that matter," Al snorted. "Get that: an actor with an inferiority complex! Anyway, the questionable lady feels she's owed some 'favors.'"

"Oh, boy," Sam groaned. "Don't tell me I'm here to make the payment?"

"That could get interesting, but no, that's not the whole story. Tom freaks out after the show and disappears." Al lowered the handlink, meeting Sam's gaze gravely. "They find his body in the river two weeks from now."

"--'round the cathedral--" the voices on stage chorused.

"At least you don't have to do any back-flips," Al offered. "Think I'll go catch the show. Center me on the stage, Gooshie!" With that, he disappeared.

Sam sighed, flipping through the last few pages of notes. Tom was definitely neurotic, but at least he was thorough. When he put the notebook down, Sam felt he might be able to fake his way through most of the play, although his first number had him more than a little worried, particularly since he only vaguely recalled hearing the song once...or had he read the poem?

Tom-Cattin' Around

"You're on, Sam," Al called, ogling the Siamese cat.

Here goes nothing....

"The Rum Tum Tugger is a curious cat--"

The sequence passed in a blur. Sam played air guitar on his cat's tail, and the audience loved it. He went into the audience and stole a lady's seat, and the audience liked it even more.

"But I own-lee like, what I find for myself," Sam sang, standing center-stage with a smiling tabby who gave him her hand. Feeling the ham rise within him, Sam took a loud sniff of her fingers. "No," he announced shortly, stepping away from the woman. Even Al laughed.

"The Rum Tum Tugger is a cur-i-ous cat," the chorus sang. "The Rum Tum Tugger always gets in a muddle--" Suddenly, Sam caught sight of the woman in magenta sequins seated in the first row. She blew him a kiss. Sitting at her side, a large man with shoulders two sizes too large crossed his arms over his broad chest, glowering at the stage--or rather, at Sam. His anger was so intent, Sam temporarily forgot what he was supposed to do next, and settled for playing air guitar on his tail again.

He reached the finale with some sense of relief. All he had to do was stand still for this bit--there was no chance of stumbling and making a total fool of his displaced persona.

"Aaaaaaannnnnd," he sang, "there's no doing anything abouu--"

The women dancers, crouched around him in a circle, all squealed, "Awowwww--"

The 'cat' before him chased her tail in circles. One to Sam's side caterwauled, pawing the air.

"Awwwwoooowwww--"

Every woman in the circle spun to her hands and knees, lifted her backside in the air and keened, shimmying her legs. Just like cats in heat. Sam didn't dare look at Al.

"Awowowout it!" he concluded. The audience applauded enthusiastically.

Sam gratefully retreated to a position near the back of the stage while Grizabella made her appearance.

"Not a word," he mouthed at the hologram, while his own back was turned to the audience.

"That was really lame," Al complained, ignoring the empty threat. "I've seen more sexuality in a convent."

The Rum Tum Tugger glowered silently.

"You're a prude, Sam," Al said with finality, turning his attention back to center-stage. He eyed the Siamese cat once again. "I gotta find an outfit like that for Tina." Popping his cigar in his mouth, he applauded the pure voice of the actress playing Grizabella, as she shuffled off stage, making way for the padded-up Bustafer Jones.

Intermission came before Sam felt quite ready for it. While the others of the cast hurried about their business, he slowly returned to his dressing room.

He opened the door, stopping abruptly. The man from the audience, the one scowling at the side of the magenta lady, now stood in the center of the tiny room. What area he didn't take up by virtue of his considerable bulk was easily swallowed by the presence of the pistol enveloped in

Look Before You Leap

his beefy hand.

“So this is Eleanor’s tomcat,” the man rumbled.

Sam glanced at Al. Al poked buttons on his handlink furiously.

“E-excuse me?” Sam stammered, hoping to buy Al--and himself, more time.

“I think you and me should step outside and talk.”

“I don’t think that would be a very good idea, Sam,” Al warned.

“The man has a gun, what am I supposed to do?” Sam hissed.

“You should have thought about that before you started playing around with my wife, pretty boy!”

Al went back to poking buttons.

“Can’t we talk about this?” Sam pleaded. The man glared at him.

“Nah,” he answered, after a moment’s thought. “I’d rather hurt you.”

“But they’ll hear the shot,” Sam warned quickly. “You don’t have a silencer.”

“This was just to get your attention,” the large man said. “I’m going to pound you with my bare fists.”

“Terry McWilliams,” Al announced with satisfaction. He eyed Sam’s opponent dubiously. “He doesn’t look like a Terry.”

“Can you tell me what’s going on here?” Sam asked plaintively.

“Don’t play dumb,” the big man ordered.

“Terry McWilliams is the husband to Eleanor of the sequins,” Al explained quickly.

“I know you’ve been sniffin’ around my woman--”

“Sam, he’s on parole--”

“--I’ll not stand for it!”

“--served five years for manslaughter--”

“No little pansy in a cat suit--”

“--broke his best friend’s neck--”

“--is going to make a fool of me!”

“--when Terry caught the guy in bed with his wife.”

“I don’t want your wife,” Sam blurted. The other man’s expression darkened. “I mean, she’s a beautiful woman, but--well--I was only interested in the part. You know how actors are.”

“Watch it,” Al cautioned. “Some of my best friends are actors.”

“You used Eleanor?” Terry demanded, lowering his fist a fraction of an inch. His mouth twisted, and he began chuckling.

“I think you’re in luck, Sam,” Al offered. “That’s not the laugh of a man who wants to violate

Tom-Cattin' Around

his parole.”

“Guess the jokes’s on Eleanor,” the large man snickered.

“Guess so,” Sam seconded, breathing a sigh of relief when the pistol was placed on his make-up table.

“Unless you’re lying,” the man said, peering at Sam. His hand hovered near the pistol, then withdrew. “But I believe you, squirt. Eleanor was bound to find someone she couldn’t out-control sometime.”

“What a relief!” Sam exclaimed.

“Things haven’t changed, Sam,” Al warned, consulting his handlink. “Tommy still dies. Only this time, he’s shot. But they still find him in the river. You’ve moved him from suicide to homicide victim.”

“Very close call, darling,” a woman announced. Eleanor rose from her hiding place behind a clothing trunk. “Terry can have a wicked jealous streak.”

“So I noticed,” Sam responded lightly.

“Of course, you told him everything he wanted to hear. Terry didn’t want to face the fact that you might be lying.” Eleanor picked up the gun Terry had carelessly abandoned, casually checking to see if it was loaded. “I know for a fact you weren’t lying. You always stammer when you lie.” Her fine brows drew together. She turned the gun in Sam’s direction. “I don’t like being made a fool of. So now you and I are going for a little drive.”

“If you shoot here--”

“Don’t you worry about that, my darling.” She took a cylinder from the pocket of her coat. Her fingers deftly screwed the silencer onto the muzzle of her weapon. “Terry’s not allowed to own firearms, you see. So he took my gun.” She raised angry eyes to Sam’s own. “Get moving, or I’ll kill you here, you little bastard,” Eleanor hissed.

Sam turned, catching sight of Al’s worried expression as he did. Somehow, that look on his old friend’s face frightened Sam more than the potential for being shot in the back.

“No!” He turned around. “I’m sorry you’re upset Eleanor. I used you and that was wrong. But no worse than you using me.”

“I’ll kill you where you stand,” she growled, gritting her teeth so hard Sam could barely understand her.

“Then do it.”

“Sam, are you crazy?” Al demanded.

“I’m not going to have people think I couldn’t handle this role,” Sam announced. “If you kill me, do it here.”

“You are crazy!” Al yelled. “Quantum leaping not only swiss-cheesed your memory, it knocked holes in your sanity.”

“Pull the trigger,” Sam ordered.

“Ziggy, initiate that retrieval program you hypothesized,” Al squawked at the handlink.

Look Before You Leap

"Don't give me any lip! Do it now!"

Eleanor hesitated, then set her jaw, raising the handgun. Her finger tensed on the trigger.

"Tommy?" another woman called from just outside the door. "Time to get back on stage."

Three things happened nearly simultaneously: the door opened, and the woman in the Siamese suit took a step inside; Sam half-turned, trying to warn her away; and Eleanor's finger pulled the trigger.

A crimson flower blossomed on the creamy-white section of the newcomer's bodysuit, just over her right breast. The force of the impact thrust her back against two of the male tumblers passing at that moment.

Sam hurried to the fallen woman's side, as a voice yelled, "Someone shot Nancy!"

"Call an ambulance!" Sam ordered.

"*The production will resume in four minutes,*" the pre-recorded announcer informed the oblivious crowd on the other side of the stage.

"Oh my God!" Eleanor cried, pressing a shaking hand to her mouth.

The Siamese looked up at her in shock. "Mother, how could you?"

With a cry, the woman in sequins raced past. The cast of the show clustered around their fallen co-star.

"*The show will begin in three minutes.*"

"Dena, you're on for Nancy," someone ordered. "Everyone else to your places."

"I'm going with Nancy," Sam announced. "Send in my understudy."

"Darling, you can't," Nancy protested.

"I'm staying with you."

"She'll be fine, Sam," Al announced, checking his information. "The bullet missed her lung and major blood vessels." He lifted his eyes from the handlink. "And she delivers a healthy baby girl in eight months--six months after the wedding."

"A baby?" Sam murmured.

"Tommy, there's something I have to tell you," the injured woman announced, as a new Rum Tum Tugger hurried by.

"Holy cats, Sam, did you see who that was?" Al asked excitedly. He poked the buttons on his handlink. "You've just helped the greatest actor of our time get discovered two years early--he gets a part in *Terminator Twelve* and wins an Oscar. I gotta' rent that movie again."

Sam felt the building energy of an impending leap...then everything changed.

He was thigh-deep in muddy water, holding a grappling hook in cold, stiff hands.

"Get 'er out of the reeds and into the body-bag, Jacobs," a woman on the bank called. "Then we can all go home before the game's over."

Sam turned, peering through the foggy air around him to the grisly objective in the water.

Tom-Cattin' Around

"This your first drowning?" the woman on the bank asked. "If it is, I'll warn ya' it ain't pretty."

Using the pole, Sam urged the still form back toward him. When the body was close enough to see well, he had to turn away.

Though muddied and sodden, the magenta sequins on her dress winked up at him relentlessly....

Remembering Beth

- Melissa Mastoris

I can still see her
Standing by the fireplace,
Dark eyes shining,
And calla lilies in her hand.

I can still feel
Her body next to mine,
Her hips swaying in time
To Ray Charles singing 'Georgia'.

I can still smell
Her perfume,
Wrapping around her
Like my arms used to do.

I wish I could
Feel her now,
When she's so alone,
And I need her so.

I can still taste
Her kisses on my lips,
Making me drunker than
Any liquor ever made.

I wish I could tell her
How much I love her,
And I wish
She could hear me
Somehow.

THE WALL

BY TRACY E. FINIFFER

Al stepped out of the hotel's entrance into the dim morning sunlight and took a deep breath. The air was much moister than what he had grown accustomed to, and it was warmer than his dawns usually were. He tried once again to loosen the collar of his duty uniform. For the umpteenth time he cursed it. He hated uniforms, so boring and bland and uncomfortable as they were. One of the nicest things about being an admiral was that there weren't many people around who could order him to wear one.

Once upon a time, in the earliest stages of the Project, Sam had urged Al to dress more conservatively when they went to Washington for committee hearings, even during their free time. In order to maintain funding for the Project, Sam wanted to keep up a good appearance, and Al's colorful wardrobe just didn't appeal to the stuffy Congressional types. Al didn't pay him much attention back then, because he knew that their funding was safe and he didn't really give a damn about the politicians and their dress codes. But things had changed. The government had actually come close several times to cutting off the Project's funds in recent years, and if that happened now, Sam might be trapped in the past forever. So while he resented it greatly, he made an extra effort to appear professional, even outside the Congressional sub-committee chambers.

Besides, his normal attire wasn't appropriate for his visit today. The committee meetings had ended a day early, thankfully, and with the results that Al had wanted. But even though the Project's Air Force jet was at his disposal, and he could fly back whenever he wanted, Al decided to make use of the morning to pay a visit which he felt was long overdue.

Perhaps it was one of Sam's more recent leaps that inspired his side-trip this morning. After all, Al had been to Washington several times in the past five years, but had never once gone to any of the memorials or other tourist sites. Leaving Sam and the Project made him feel guilty enough, even if Sam was in his 'limbo' between leaps, not to mention the fact that he hated Washington. It was too much of a concrete jungle, a symbol of the bureaucracy Al had come to detest. He loved America, and had on many occasions risked his life for it, but as for the people who ran America, he held nothing but contempt. It was chiefly for that reason that he made all his trips to Washington as short as possible.

This time, though, Al thought about Ron--the young marine from 1968 with both legs amputated--yet even in the Waiting Room it was obvious that this boy wasn't going to let anything stop him from doing all the things he wanted to in life. Al had had a long talk with him and found out about his dreams and hopes. More than anything, Ron had wanted a family, something which his wife had seemed reluctant to start before he shipped out. But now he was home and he was going to realize his dreams. Al didn't tell him about his wife leaving him, but he sensed that Ron already knew something with his marriage was wrong. It didn't really matter, Al had thought, because Kiki would be there when Ron leaped back.

But the real reason Al had decided to make this trip was Billy, the quadriplegic so depressed by his fate that he felt his life was over. In many ways, Billy was the direct opposite of Ron:

Look Before You Leap

forlorn and desperate, even though he still had a loving girlfriend and family. He had already decided that if he didn't have to face life, then he didn't have to face--from the shell of his body--those who loved him. So Billy decided to commit suicide. Al didn't think about it, but if only Billy could have heard Al that night, he might not even have attempted it. But he did try, just as he did in the original history, and if it weren't for Sam, he would have succeeded. Only faced with death did Billy realize how much he wanted to live.

Al started walking down the street towards his destination. Even at this early hour, the streets were busy with traffic. He started thinking about all the changes that had taken place in the past five years in his time-line, wondering what Sam would think when he finally came back. It seemed ironic to Al that when Sam finally came home, he would be more out of touch with his own time than he had been with any of the years he's leapt into so far. Time waits for no one, not even the time-traveler.

It was a short walk from the hotel room to the Mall, but it was only half his journey. With his final destination straight ahead of him in the distance, he knew the hardest part would come now. Taking another deep breath of the warm, humid air, he started walking again. All around him people were playing frisbee, walking their dogs, jogging, or were engaged in other activities. People were enjoying the morning, enjoying the outdoors, enjoying life. That was why Al and so many others had done what they did, to preserve the freedom of those who stayed behind. Sometimes, though, it seemed little solace.

The Wall; the smooth, meticulously cared for, black granite surface standing silently in the sunlight. Engraved on it were the names--too many names--of the people who went and never came home. Men and women who had died, or who had vanished; some into the hells which few people, including Al Calavizzi, could understand. People who deserved better than to become victims of that damned war.

Al had been here only once before, to receive his Congressional Medal of Honor, along with a group of other P.O.W. survivors. It had been one of the hardest days of his life, seeing all the thousands of names engraved on its shiny surface, and realizing how many times his name came close to joining them.

Immediately following the ceremony, he had gone to the books and found the names of the friends he had left behind. Then he approached the Wall, looking for the names, one by one. Chuck, John, Roger; they were all there. Lastly, he went to Chip's name. He had noted the names it was between, WILLIAM A DIXON on one side, THOMAS J BECKETT on the other. *Too many people*, he had thought. *Too many people*. Taking his medal in his hand, he placed it at the foot of the wall under Chip's name. "You deserve this more than I do," he had said quietly.

He couldn't bear to bring himself back, to face those names again.

Until now. Now it was 1999. Seventeen years had passed since the Wall was built, over twenty-five years since the War had ended. Still, the Wall lost none of its impact. The black granite, dimly lit in the morning sun, seemed a haunting reminder to Al of another time. It was a time he wanted so desperately to forget, but would never let himself. Not that he could forget, even if he tried.

He walked slowly up to the Wall; it was one of the most difficult things he had ever done in

The Wall

his life. Even after all these years, he still remembered exactly where his friend's names were. Chuck, John, Roger, still etched into the rock, forever silent, but their message would never die. Lastly, he walked over to Chip's name. Again, he noted the names beside his; WILLIAM A DIXON on one side, but this time, ROY L STRINGER on the other. *Still too many people*, Al thought. *Still too many people*.

Al took the small American flag that he had gotten at the nearby table of Vietnam veteran volunteers, and gently pushed the stick into the ground under Chip's name. He looked again at the Wall, noting once again the absence of Tom's name. One less victim, thanks to Sam's project.

Servants of Time. That's what Sam and Al had become. If God, Fate, Time, or whatever controlled Sam's leaps, could let them change history so that Sam's brother didn't have to die in Vietnam, why couldn't they stop the war from happening at all? It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that because of them, one man could live while the rest still died. Al took a long look down the length of the Wall at the countless thousands of names etched on it.

With a tear slowly falling down his cheek, he turned and started back towards the hotel.

Coming here had reaffirmed the importance of Project Quantum Leap to him. All the lives that Sam and Al had saved over the years: Tom, Billy, Tom and Samantha Stratton, Gloria Collins, Roger Skaggs, Edie Lansdale, Kevin Bruckner, and all the others. Lives that ended too soon, or were somehow hurt by Fate's mistakes. That was the purpose of Quantum Leap: to keep names from being etched in stone before their time.

Just too many names.

In commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Vietnam Memorial, and with the hope that we will never need to build another Wall like it again.

LEAP TO DESTINY

BY RICK ST. CLAIR

As the blue-white light of Sam's time-leap cleared, he found himself in a run-down boarding room, staring at a nearly empty bottle of sleeping pills and holding one of the capsules in his hand. He tried to focus his vision on the handwritten note on the wobbly old wooden dining table where he was seated, but his eyes would not cooperate. He felt woozy and bewildered, somewhat tired and ill. He looked at himself reflected in the glass of the bay window and was shocked to see a young, emaciated face with deep pock-marks and deeply recessed eyes.

Alarm grew in Sam's mind and he grabbed the scrawled note in front of him, determined to read it. In a slurred voice, he read out loud:

This is all I can take. I've had it, Dad.

Now maybe you will believe me.

Joey.

The horrible truth stole over Sam's thoughts as he realized he had leaped into this youth's suicide attempt. "Oh, boy," he groaned, pulling himself to his feet using the rickety old chair he was seated in. Grabbing the near empty bottle of sleeping pills and staggering out into the hallway, he felt himself reeling and unable to get his balance. As he felt the blackening approach of unconsciousness he cried out, "Help! Help me! I'm dying." Just as he did, he fell to the floor and dropped the bottle of pills, spilling its contents down the length of the dingy and poorly lit hallway.

Sam felt himself slide into a collage of disjointed images and nightmares which seemed endless. He had no concept of who he was, either as Sam or as the young man he had leaped into. He felt his body convulse with pain and his mind became a battlefield of grief and anger. The warring images raged on and on and on.

After a seeming eternity, he felt his heavy eyelids begin to slowly open to a blinding light. Squinting to accustom himself to the illumination, he managed to see the form of a medical examination lamp above him, and heard the murmuring of voices outside the door of the strange room he was in. He let out a gasp which he vocalized into a cry, straining to lift his head up to see the room. The effort was too great and he relaxed his ineffectual back and neck muscles.

The door opened and a nurse entered, saying to someone in the hallway, "I think he's waking up. I'd better go see. I'll catch up with you."

She approached his bed and pushed the bright lamp away from him to take his vital signs. Sam's eyes now opened more widely.

"Where am I? Who are you," Sam asked, his speech slow and words not fully clear.

Look Before You Leap

“My name is Mary. I’m here to keep an eye on you until the doctor gets here. You’ve had quite a night.”

“Doctor? What doctor? What happened?”

“Well, the neighbors in your building found you unconscious in the hall and sent for an ambulance. A lot of them. I guess a lot of people care about you.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Sam answered sluggishly, feeling the effect of the as-yet unpurged overdose drawing him back into sleep.

“I KNOW so,” Mary affirmed, pulling the blanket up over Sam and tucking him in on the cot in the intensive care unit of the hospital.

A new morning arrived. Dreams had absented themselves completely, and Sam was stirred to wakefulness by the smell of bland cooked cereal and hot tea. He opened his eyes and tried to straighten himself up. This time he was able to wrestle himself to a semi-upright position and saw the breakfast being wheeled in to his room. He felt rested but still tired.

“Good morning,” the melodic greeting sounded from the orderly bringing his food. “Time for breakfast.”

“Smells good,” Sam answered, looking at the gentle meal presented to him. “Thanks,” he said, mustering a weak smile before letting his head fall back onto the pillow. His body still felt drained of energy, though he was much more able to think and move than he had been last night (of which he remembered practically nothing.) The orderly smiled and walked out.

As she did, a new form appeared out of nowhere, holding a cigar which had smoke but no smell.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Rip Van Winkle,” came the crusty voice of Al. “Looks like the Big Boy really put you in the middle of the fray this time, eh, Sam?”

“Al?”

Al smiled and bowed slightly, his face half-ironic and half-worried at Sam’s state of disfunctionality.

“You almost leaped into a corpse.”

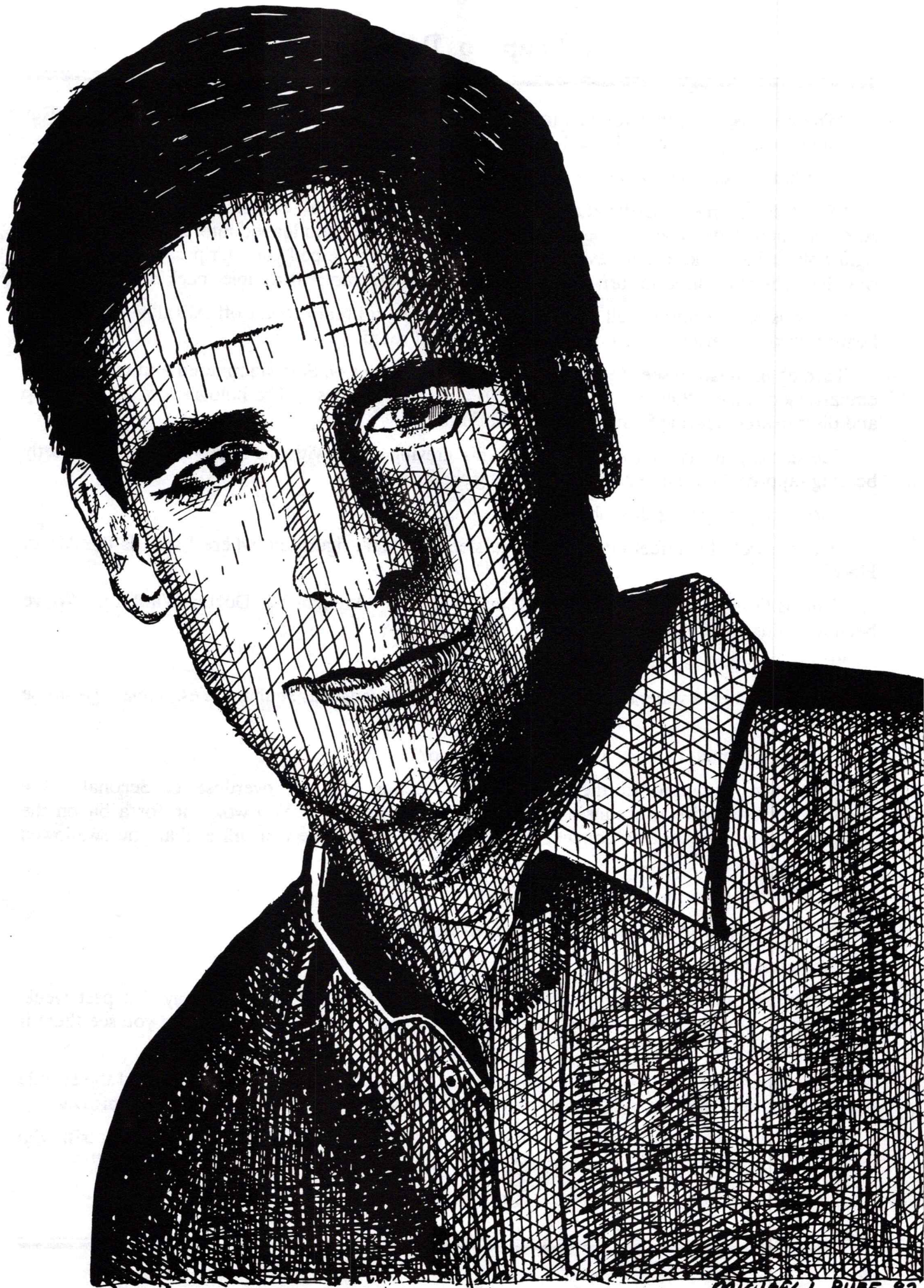
“Now I remember. I woke up from my leap inside this, this guy who was writing a suicide note. Yeah, that’s it! A suicide note to his father, and he was popping sleeping pills. All I know is I felt about to black out and I got the hell out into the hallway with the pills and cried for help.”

“And it’s a good thing you did, Sam. If you hadn’t, Joey would be a permanent resident of the Waiting Room and you would be in the Happy Hunting Grounds pushing up daisies.”

“That’s a terrible mixed metaphor, Al.”

“Sorry, I never read Shakespeare.”

“He was just as bad,” Sam muttered, not caring if Al heard or not.



MICHAEL L. RUFF '92

Leap to Destiny

“The point is, Sam, that you already accomplished your mission here, according to Ziggy. But for some reason, you haven’t leaped again. I don’t know why you’re still here.”

“I’ve hardly been here at all, Al.”

“What do you mean hardly at all? You were in a coma for a week, no, nine days. Nine days. And you know, looking at pictures of Joey, er, the young man you leaped into, and you as you are right now, it looks like the intravenous feeding has actually helped you. Cripes, I remember the way that tube chow used to turn comatose injured soldiers into real zombies back in Nam.”

Sam was now stirred to full consciousness. Drawing a breath to cut off Al’s flow of trivia, he heard a throat clearing in the doorway to his hospital room.

Turning his head to see the doctor standing in the doorway, Sam stammered and mustered an embarrassed smile. “Oh, hi. I guess I talk to myself sometimes.” The hologram of Al closed up and disappeared, leaving Sam to fend for himself.

The doctor, in his smock and carrying his greying years with dignified--if somewhat portly bearing--approached the bed with unremitting skepticism.

“How are you feeling, Joseph?”

“Uh, oh, well, I still feel kinda worn out, sleepy. I can’t figure out where I am. Is this Mercy Hospital?”

“This is Graceland General Hospital, intensive care. My name is Doctor Winthrop. We’ve been watching you for quite some time.”

“Days, I bet.”

The doctor’s eyes widened, then quickly closed to a suspicious squint. “Yes. Nine days, to be exact.”

“What happened, Doctor, uh, Doctor Winthrop?”

“You were admitted to the Suicide Alert section with an overdose of Seconal. We administered purgative procedures and put you on IV feeding. You woke up for a bit on the second day, but went into a coma for eight days. The best we can tell is that you swallowed about fifty capsules.”

“You mean, I tried to kill myself?”

“We almost lost you. Your family has been very worried.”

“My family?”

“They have been staying in a nearby hotel, visiting the hospital every day this past week. They said they will be back at visiting hours this afternoon. I said I would only let you see them if you wanted to.”

“Thanks, Doctor. That was really good of you to do that.” Sam now remembered the suicide note to his father, and realized that there was obviously big trouble between Joey and his Dad.

“Before anyone else can see you, Joseph, you have to be seen by a hospital psychiatrist who will determine, with your help, just where you’re at now and what would be best for you.”

“I don’t think I am ready to see my family yet.”

Look Before You Leap

“You can work that out with Doctor Brentworth. I’ve already left a message for him that you’ve regained consciousness and seem well enough to talk. He’ll be in later on this morning.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

“I’ll look in on you later as well. Try to keep getting rest. We’ll have to do some physical tests later to see if any damage has been done. Doctor Brentworth will explain it to you. It’s a routine examination we have to do here at Graceland.”

“Sure, okay. Whatever.” Sam’s eyes drifted out towards the small window. “Could you please open the drapes on the window?”

“No problem.” Doctor Winthrop walked over to the window and pulled the curtain open, admitting a small but cheering beam of sunlight into the room.

“That’s a lot better, Doc. Thanks.”

“See you later, Joseph.”

“Make that ‘Joey,’” Sam offered.

“Joey,” the Doctor answered with a professional smile as he turned and left the room.

Sam rolled over to look out the window. No sooner had he done so then Al returned through the time-window.

“Now what?” Sam asked.

“Doctors!” Al spewed contemptuously. “You can’t live with them and you can’t live without them.” He resumed puffing on his cigar and blowing hologrammatic smoke into the room.

“What am I going to do?” Sam complained.

“Well, it seems Joey has a problem.”

“What does Ziggy say?”

“Well, Ziggy is not saying very much on this one, Sam. But what he does say is that after Joey died, Joey’s father was put on trial for...” Al paused to whack the hand-link, which rebelled with a flutter of lights and squeals. “...Ah, for Joey’s murder. Weird case: all circumstantial evidence, no solid proof except for a pile of letters from Joey. The mother falls to pieces and ends up in a looney house.” The hand-link seemed to react to Al, letting out a jumble of signals Al could not read. Al slapped the hand-link again, lost in concentration.

Sam broke in, “Wait a minute, Al! I just saved Joey’s life. Now you’re telling me his father is going to kill him?”

“Apparently not. But you see, Joey had already tried to kill himself once before. You got him out of one scrape already, but that kid back in the Waiting Room is one freaked out young man. I’ve never seen mood-swings that fast in anyone. First he says that his father is right, that he is no good, worthless, and deserves to die. Then he says that his father is going to kill him. That’s why he keeps wanting to commit suicide, because he is afraid his father will torture him to death. He’d rather die by his own hand than look for a way out. The kid has lost the spark to fight back, Sam.”

“I think we’re looking at child abuse here, Al, big time,” Sam interrupted impatiently.

Leap to Destiny

“Unfortunately, in the year 1966, child abuse was not even an issue. It was more like the Beatles and *She’s Leaving Home*, generation gap, that kind of crap.”

“In our time we’ll call it denial.”

“In those days no one was listening to anyone. No wonder so many kids committed suicide back then. Now they’re killing themselves with drugs. That’s progress for you,” Al’s voice trailed off.

“Al, let’s get back on the track here. We’ve got to get Joey to a safer place, out of reach of his father’s abuse.”

“Ah, Sam, it isn’t just bad words between Joey’s dad and Joey, it’s a lot more.”

“What?”

“Sam, we’ve got major abuse here, from both Dad and Mom. Ziggy is now telling me that when Dad wasn’t beating up and deriding Joey, Mommy was cuddling him in the wrong places, if you get my meaning.”

“What? Sexually?”

“Yeah.” Al looked down and shook his head at the floor. “And they told us that was just what dirty old fathers did to their little girls.”

“What’s the rest of the family like, Al?”

“Let’s see. Nice family,” Al broadly intoned with sarcasm as he looked at the hand-link. “It says here, big brother is a combat pilot in Viet-Nam, and little sister is an alcoholic at age fourteen getting laid in every Middlesex village and farm. Big bro’ is dropping Agent Orange and defoliating Nam. Joey is marching in peace parades and doing pot, getting his mind fully screwed up. Lil’ sis is half way to becoming a prostitute. And the parents go to Church every Sunday and attend pro-war rallies with the VFW. Dad was in the Big One, South Seas, Okinawa. Took a lot of lead and got the Purple Heart along with all the other decorations the service could think to give him. He offed over a hundred enemy from his rifle. They called him a one-man battalion. No wonder Joey has problems. Mommy-dear worships Dad and molests Joey. There is nowhere for this kid to turn.”

“1966, eh? That was just when the peace movement was getting going. Most of the country was still waving the flag and supporting the war. Joey was....”

“Joey was a domestic casualty, unless you can do something about it, Sam.”

“Oh, boy,” Sam sighed, dropping his head back on to the pillow and gazing straight ahead. Al took that as his signal to exit, and disappeared through the time-window.

After staring at the wall and mulling the impossible alternatives for a half hour, Sam heard a gentle knocking at the door.

“Come in.”

The door opened and a young, bespectacled man entered, about five-feet-ten and unusually thin. Only his face looked young, the rest of his features, including a prematurely receded hairline, indicated someone thirty years older.

“I really am under thirty,” the psychiatrist began.

Look Before You Leap

"Don't tell me," Sam answered, "Doctor Brentworth."

"Righto," the doctor answered with a smile edging up one side of his tight-lipped mouth. It was his way of trying to radiate self-assurance to his patients.

"Have you seen my family yet? What is happening? How long am I supposed to be here?" Sam let out a blur of questions.

"Whoa, just a minute. Let me do the talking for just a second. Can I call you Joey?"

"Sure, Doc."

"Joey, you've passed through a very traumatic episode in which you very nearly died. I think it would be helpful to you and me if we could get an idea of what's been going on and see if we can figure out a way to help you."

"What's to help? My family is hopeless, they don't listen to me, and my parents are constantly abus...er, hurting me."

"Abusing?"

"It's my dad."

"What does he do?"

"He constantly downgrades me and sometimes hits me."

"What doesn't he like about you?"

"I'm against the war."

"So am I."

"You are?"

"Righto."

Sam choked up as a tear began to run down his cheek. Even though he was Doctor Samuel Beckett of the late twentieth century, he was now re-living and experiencing anew the horror of the sixties with full knowledge of how they would play themselves out historically. The tragedies of those times, his inability to communicate in ways that had become commonplace in his own time, overwhelming feelings about the boy he had just leaped into--and now, a single sympathetic voice of reason and understanding--all opened his tear floodgates.

"I know," the doctor said, "let it go. Crying is important. It's hard for men to cry. I'm glad to see you can."

"You don't understand. It's not just my father," Sam continued, wiping his tear soaked eyes on the bed sheets. The doctor handed him a box of Kleenex, and Sam took a couple in a single clutch. "It's also my mother."

"Mother? What does she do?"

"She, she gets...sexual with me."

"The doctor's eyes widened. Now Sam was at a loss. He didn't know what form of abuse Joey's mother had been perpetrating and could not give any details if pressed. His credibility was on the line. At that moment, Al reappeared through the time-window.

Leap to Destiny

"You're just in time," Sam murmured to Al.

The doctor commented, "I wish I'd seen you sooner."

Al said to Sam, unheard by the doctor, "Sam, Joey's mother is a world-class molester. She's been boffing the kid."

"Are you sure?" Sam asked Al.

"It might have helped," the doctor responded to Sam's remark. Sam turned around and sat up in his bed, arranging the pillows to form a back rest. His tone became more determined.

"You ever hear of King Oedipus and Jocasta, Doc?"

"Of course. We studied the Oedupus Complex in psychology courses."

"Forget about Freud and ancient Greece. I mean the real thing. It was like Oedipus and Jocasta, except for one thing: my mother KNEW I was her kid and I knew it too."

"You let her seduce you?" the doctor asked, unaware of the ignorance and inappropriateness of his question.

Sam shook his head, frustrated by the doctor's lack of comprehension.

Taking up the slack, Al added more information: "Sam," Al said, "she's been doing it for years, even before the kid was in puberty!"

"Doc, this is a long history. And I don't think I had any choice in the matter," Sam answered, with an irate tone creeping into his voice. "Remember what a losing struggle it was to get your own way when your mother's mind was made up? Even when you knew you were right and had won the verbal argument? What about a mother sending sexual signals to her child? Parents have power over their kids. How can a child know what is right or wrong about sex before even knowing what sex is?"

The words gave Doctor Brentworth occasion to pause and reflect. "Whew." He shook his head. "I hear you. I'm just amazed you can even talk about it. With your awareness I can't see you trying to commit..." the doctor caught himself quickly, "er, the case histories they showed us took years to uncover," the doctor replied. "It was always father-daughter," he said, his voice becoming a thoughtful murmur. Sam was having trouble reading the doctor's reaction, uncertain whether it was amazement or plain skepticism.

"YOU just try dealing with years of inescapable torture by your parents as a kid, a drug overdose and a near death experience!" Sam's agitation took his breath away. He gulped for air and slowed down. "You'd be surprised what all that can do to loosen up your tongue. I KNOW what happened. I'm telling you."

The doctor again became more animated, resolved to offer some help in a situation where he had had no prior experience. "Joey, I think you are going to need two things: a period of rest, and some family counseling and longer term psychotherapy."

"Obviously. But how am I going to get away from my family? I don't really feel ready to sit down with those people. Not yet. I would feel awful dealing with this stuff so soon after what I've been through."

"Running away from the problem isn't going to help, you know." The doctor was not used to

Look Before You Leap

hearing his patients diagnose themselves or prescribe their own treatment.

“Typical sixties mentality,” Sam scoffed.

“What?”

“Nothing. I just mean that there is a lot more to learn about recovery from childhood traumas.”

“I’m sure there is. You seem incredibly articulate. I mean, you should have been a doctor.”

“Sam,” Al chimed in, “Joey was in pre-med before he turned on, tuned in, and dropped out.”

“I was studying to be a doctor. I just couldn’t take the constant attacks from my father and my mother. She worships the ground he walks on. He’s a god to her. Then she turns around and castrates me, emotionally, and leaves me with nothing. When I try to argue how wrong the war is, Dad gets so mad he hits me and calls me a mother-friggin’ fairy. Those are HIS words.” Sam was improvising now, but winging it with conviction was his only hope of convincing the doctor.

“Good guess, Sam,” Al commented, “he also drinks like a camel and the things he says when he’s sloshed make me sick.”

“You should see him when he gets drunk,” Sam added, taking Al’s cue.

“Sam,” Al warned, “the family is outside the room right now. If they get to this doctor, Joey doesn’t have a chance. This doctor is pretty good for a sixties shrink, but not too bright about subtle come-ons like Joey’s mom pulls.”

“Doctor, you’ve got to keep my family away from me for awhile, at least until I can figure out how to, ah, sort out these problems and get some rest, like you said.”

“I’m going to have a talk with them, Joey. Just trust me. I’ll send them back home and tell them you need to get some rest and advice. After that we’ll have to talk some more.”

“Fair enough. Thanks, Doc,” Sam said as the doctor rose and left the room.

“Round one, Joey,” Al commented, wiping his hologrammatic brow. “Now the fun begins.”

In the hallway, a crew-cut man in his mid-forties was pacing, nervously twiddling a burning cigarette and puffing aggressively on it. Joey’s dad, Danworth Freeman, was the archetypal World War II vet. His wife, five years younger than he, looked a little older: her bifocals gave her appearance an almost grandmotherly look; her not unattractive body sagging with fat from food binging and a heavy sugar-and-fat and low-fiber diet. She was looking blankly down the hall, trying to avoid noticing her husband’s skittishness. Doctor Brentworth approached the two parents.

“Mr. and Mrs. Freeman?”

Silently, the two arose, waiting for and expecting the doctor to tell them the worst.

“How is my son, doctor?” asked Mrs. Freeman in a dazed voice, ridden with guilt and shock.

“Let’s walk down the hall to the cafeteria section,” the doctor convincingly said, motioning

Leap to Destiny

and drawing the parents along as if with an invisible rope. They followed without protest.

Back in the Intensive Care room, Sam was examining himself in the mirror, having made it to his feet and staggered over to the bathroom. He looked at his arm and saw several pinholes indicating where he had been injected for intravenous feeding. Looking at his face, he saw more clearly what Joey looked like, and sorrow lines were etched very deep for one of only twenty years. His skin color was not good and his eyes looked bloodshot and tired. Sam ran some water into the sink and began washing his face.

Having reached the cafeteria, Doctor Brentworth motioned to the Freemans to sit down at the table. "Coffee? Something else to drink?" he asked half-committedly.

"No, no thanks," the parents murmured.

"Joey's been through quite an ordeal," the doctor began.

"Oh, we know!" his mother chimed in, "we've been very concerned about him and, you know, the drugs." Instantly as if on cue, she let loose a flood of tears, turning away from her husband. In turn, he turned away from her and crossed his legs, unwittingly showing his embarrassment and disgust at her 'weakness.'

The doctor cleared his throat. He was disturbed by Mrs. Freeman's sudden fit of tears coming without warning. He had dealt with parents before, but this pair was a new and unpleasant experience for him. "Here," he said, offering an unopened packet of Kleenex he had fished from his jacket pocket. She motioned it away, instead reaching into her purse and pulling out a dainty cotton hanky which she delicately applied to her dripping eyes and nose.

Mr. Freeman appeared locked into a rage of uncooperativeness. He had refused to acknowledge there was a problem with Joey and he was not about to change his opinion now.

"I think it is important," the doctor continued, "that we understand what is going on here."

"There's nothing going on here. My son is being a coward again, as usual," retorted the father angrily as he mashed his cigarette butt into the ashtray and reached for his pack of Marlboros in his blue denim shirt pocket.

"Some people look at suicide as a cry for help," the doctor said.

"Help? We've done nothing but help him all his life, and then he just turned on us, started hanging out with those dirty hippies and taking drugs," Mrs. Freeman shot back.

"Mrs. Freeman, your son almost died." The doctor's words struck her dumb. The father let up his cigarette and took a deep drag, exhaling through his nose like an angry dragon.

After a minute of stone silence, she asked, "Will he be all right?"

"That depends upon a number of things," the doctor answered. "We're going to need your cooperation, and yours too, Mr. Freeman."

"Now listen," the father uncrossed his legs and looked ferociously into the doctor's face, "I

Look Before You Leap

ain't paying good money to have my kid's brain messed up, you hear? I just want him straightened out and cleaned up from those damned drugs. I'll take care of the rest."

"It's a bit more complicated than that," the doctor said.

"You head-shrinkers always say that. Bunko!"

"Mr. Freeman," the doctor's tone became grim and determined, "it is within my power as attending physician in this hospital to have Joey committed to a psychiatric hospital, whether you agree to it or not. What I'm saying is, if you are willing to accept responsibility for this, we can get him a better facility. If not, he will have to go to a state-funded facility, where treatment is not as good."

"We want the very best for our son, doctor," the mother broke in, her voice suddenly strong and forceful. "He means everything to us."

Mr. Freeman re-crossed his legs away from her again and took another heavy drag on his cigarette. He had had his flare-up and felt content for the moment. He would let Joey's mother have her way again, for the time being.

"I'll need both of your signatures, Mr. Freeman," Doctor Brentworth said to the father.

"I guess I'll have to," the father answered in a hostile mumble.

The doctor rose from the table and the parents followed suit. He motioned them to join him and they took the signal, following him to the main desk to fill out the hospital transfer forms.

Having signed them, the doctor said to the parents, "You're free to leave now. Joey needs rest and is not ready to have visitors yet."

"But you said we could see him," Mrs. Freeman protested.

"Not just yet. But keep checking with me every day to see what his progress is. It really depends on Joey and how quickly he is able to recover. He has been through a severe ordeal."

"Of course," Mrs. Freeman answered crossly, her face twisted in a rage.

"You have my number. Feel free to contact me," the doctor replied, taking his leave down the corridor away from the area where Joey was staying.

"Dear, I have to wash up. I'll be a minute," she said to her husband, and she walked down the corridor towards Joey's room.

Sam was finished washing up and had gotten back into bed with the new change of bedclothes left for him. *Where is Al?* he thought to himself, in need of further consultation about this predicament. As he pulled the bedsheets over himself and got his pillows comfortable, he heard a tapping at the door of his room. Assuming it was a nurse, he said in a buoyant voice, "Come in, it's open."

Around the door appeared the face of a woman with a pixyish smile on her face. "It's me, dear. The doctor said I could see you for a bit."

"You aren't supposed to be here," Sam answered, insistently realizing who she must be. She

Leap to Destiny

made her way into the room anyway, ignoring his protests.

“Now, now, dear. You don’t want to chase away your mommy, do you? Let me make it feel better.” She walked up to the side of the bed and before Sam could realize what she was doing, she patted his crotch through the bedsheets.

Sam flailed his right arm in a reflexive thrust, hitting Joey’s mother in the face. Her glasses went flying across the room and shattered against the wall. She staggered back from the unexpected blow and began to shriek.

“Don’t you EVER do that again to me, mother!” Sam shouted.

Footsteps crescendoed outside the room and a nurse rushed in. Mrs. Freeman was dazed and holding on to the visitor’s chair at the end of the bed.

“What’s happened?” the nurse probed urgently.

“He, he HIT me! My son HIT me!” she cried hysterically.

“You come right on out of here,” the nurse said, grabbing the mother by the arm and pulling her out of the room.

“But he HIT me!” Mrs. Freeman cried again as she was escorted from the room.

An orderly appeared at the door. He was tall and muscular. Sam straightened up in bed. “Who authorized my mother to come into this room?” Sam queried, infuriated.

The orderly came at him and pinned him down to the bed. “Getting violent, are we now?” The orderly’s eyes reflected anger, and apparently he was looking for an opportunity to ‘restrain’ a mental patient.

“Get your hands off me!” Sam protested. The orderly whipped Sam’s body around into a half-Nelson and pulled out a syringe with the free hand.

“Either you quiet down now or you get a shot of this,” the orderly threatened.

“Okay, okay. I’ll take it easy. Just, please, let go of me.”

The orderly held on, sadistically glaring into Sam’s eyes, apparently enjoying the torment he was inflicting. But he knew his duty, and was compelled to go get the doctor. As he slowly released his iron grip, Sam started to gasp with relief. *This ape can’t be trusted for anything*, Sam concluded to himself.

“I’m going to get the doctor. You stay put. See?” the orderly said sharply, poking Sam’s upper left chest with his pointed, chisel-like index finger.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Sam answered, summoning his strength to sound meek, and overriding his impulse to pound the orderly to a pulp.

“You’d better not,” the orderly retorted with a sneer. He closed the door, locked it behind him, leaving Sam trapped and alone. At that moment, Al appeared again through the time-window.

“Sam, what’s going on?”

“I don’t know. I thought the doctor was going to keep Joey’s parents away from me. Then that gorilla jumped me.”

Leap to Destiny

“The Missus didn’t take no for an answer, Sam. You’re right, she’s one sick broad.”

“Al, I feel violated. Really violated. I’ve never felt this way in my life. First that woman, and then that orderly. Joey wouldn’t be strong enough to handle this; his brain is weakened from substance abuse and trauma. Help me, help us!”

“Sam, I already told you this woman is bad news. But here’s some better news for you. From what’s happened so far, Joey doesn’t kill himself, and instead of his dad going to the klinker, his mother does. She gets convicted of child abuse, Sam.”

“Why doesn’t that cheer me up, Al?”

“Sam, it wasn’t meant to cheer anyone up. I’m just saying she gets nailed as the real guilty party.”

“Then why am I still here?”

“I’m trying to get Ziggy to answer that right now.” Al slapped the hand-link again and scratched his head at the readings. “Now that doesn’t make any sense.”

“What doesn’t?”

“Now it says that Joey ends up in an insane asylum for, um, twenty years.”

“TWENTY YEARS?” Sam cried out.

“Ah, Sam, better hold your voice down around here.”

The lock was released and the door opened. Doctor Winthrop came in with the orderly and a nurse.

“Oh, boy, here comes the Rat Patrol,” Al said bitterly.

“Joey, we’re going to have to sedate you for a bit,” the doctor declared perfunctorily.

Al, in a futile reaction, shouted, “Get your mitts off him, you butthead!”

“What’s that you’re giving me?” Sam asked.

“It’s a high dosage of Lithium,” the doctor said.

“That’s dangerous stuff, Sam,” Al warned.

“Lithium? I don’t need medication that strong! A milder substance like librium or an anti-depressant such as fluoxetine would be much more appropriate,” Sam said, recalling his medical training.

“Fluoxe-what?” the doctor asked, screwing up his face.

“It’s an anti-depressant for treating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD.”

“This is 1966, Sam, remember?” Al interjected.

The doctor had never heard of either and he suppressed a chuckle of sarcastic disbelief.

“Look, all I know,” Sam insisted, “is that a high dose of Lithium will not help me.”

“I think I know what you need,” the doctor retorted defensively, irritated by Joey’s statement of seeming fantasy mixed with a verisimilitude of reality. He indicated to the orderly and the nurse to pin down Sam.

Look Before You Leap

“Wait, this is completely unnecessary!” Sam protested again, as the orderly wrestled Sam to a defenseless position and the nurse took his right arm. The doctor approached with the needle and administered the injection.

“Sam, stay with it! We’ll get you out of this. I gotta go now, I’ll see what Ziggy says.” Al’s holographic projection disappeared in the time-window.

“Stay with him until it takes effect,” the doctor barked to the orderly, who signalled his compliance with a leering smile as he held Sam down tightly.

Sam had ceased wrestling against the orderly’s bone-crushing grip but the orderly held on for twenty more minutes, barely allowing Sam’s blood to circulate in his arms. “I won’t struggle if you let me go,” Sam said meekly.

“You expect me to believe that?” the orderly said, tightening his grasp until Sam cried out in pain. The orderly seemed to have had enough fun inflicting pain and the medicine was having its effect, so he finally let go and pushed Sam back on the bed.

Sam felt groggy, light-headed, and euphoric all at the same time from the heavy dosage. It was not a feeling he was used to, so he became disoriented. After a few more minutes of close observation, the orderly looked into Sam’s eyes and checked his reflexes with a snap of his fingers in his face. The daze Sam felt travelled to the rest of his body, which now felt warm and soothing. “Man, what a high!” Sam commented absent-mindedly to himself, having forgotten that he was not alone in the room.

“I’ll bet,” the orderly murmured. “Junkie.” He turned and left the room, making sure to shut the door quietly. As he did, Al entered through the time-window.

“Little Boy Blue, time to have a bedtime talk,” Al said to Sam in a singsong tone.

“What--? Who are you?” Sam asked.

“Uh-oh. They’ve been medicating you, Sam. We need to talk now. Come on, pull yourself together. Ziggy’s got some new information.”

“Who? Who’s Ziggy?”

“Never mind. Think. Remember, you’re Doctor Samuel Beckett and you time-leaped into Joey Freeman. Okay? Remember?” Al’s voice showed the first signs of panic.

“Leave me alone. You’re weird, totally weird. I can’t listen to you. You’re a bad dream!” Sam rolled over and shut his eyes. “I don’t hear you, I don’t see you. See no evil, hear no evil, feel no evil. Sleeptime.” Sam’s voice trailed off.

“This was not supposed to happen,” Al moaned, and became even more aggressive, not about to let Sam lose consciousness when so much needed to be done. “Sam!” Al shouted.

“Go away!” Sam shouted back.

“Sam! Don’t do this, don’t give up! We have to talk. You’re life is in danger!”

Sam rolled back over and looked at Al through his slitted, groggy eyes. “What is that supposed to mean?” he asked in a slur of irate words.

“Sam, the doctor gave you a big jolt of a big bad tranquilizer so you would stop thinking. You have to fight it or we’re all done and everything we tried to accomplish won’t turn out. You

Leap to Destiny

might not even be able to leap again.”

“Al?”

“Well, thank God for that--he remembers me! Yes, Sam. I’m Al. I’m a holographic image from the future--where you came from. Coming back to you now?”

“Yeah, right. What was that stuff they stuck me with?”

“It’s called Lithium. They use it for really desperate cases, suicide types. It dulls the feelings so you don’t have the desire to tie your shoes. But Sam, we’ve got work to do.”

“Lithium? That’s heavy stuff all right. Okay, I’ll try to fight it, but if I start to slip again give me another jolt. This is very hard.”

“Sam, your--er, Joey’s mother has been admitted to the hospital now. She’s a hysterical wreck after that smack you gave her.”

“She was molesting me, Al. Where were you anyway? If I’d seen that coming, I’d have--”

“Can’t keep her mitts off Joey, can she? Damned witch!”

“She’s a very sick woman, Al. Something has to be done, and soon.”

“Ziggy gives only a 43.5 percent chance that either Joey or Momma-dear will live more than a year. Uh-oh, what’s this? Since we were talking the odds got a lot worse. Now it says that Joey spends the rest of his life in asylums, and his mother kills herself. A lot of letters and circumstantial evidence get the father convicted of manslaughter and he goes to jail. Not a pretty picture.”

“Al, I think I’m here to expose the mother and get the father to believe I’m telling the truth. Joey doesn’t have the strength to fight for himself now, and who would believe him, the state he’s in? He’s too much a victim. There isn’t anyone in the medical or psychiatric profession in 1966 who would even believe him if he were absolutely clear on the facts. Not even that doctor, what’s-his-name.”

“Brentworth.”

“Yeah, Brentworth. They just don’t think that way in this time, Al. You were brought up in that time like I was, but you’ve also lived through the eighties and nineties. You can relate to what’s going down here. Even you know that sexual abuse is bad.”

“Thanks,” Al snorted at the left-handed compliment.

“I didn’t mean it that way. I mean, we were both brought up in a time where the awareness didn’t exist--THIS time, right here. Somehow we’ve got to get Joey clear of his family and into a healing environment, and to take his mother out of circulation without destroying the whole family in the process.”

“Ziggy says that there is a 62.3 percent chance that you CAN accomplish both of these goals, Sam. But that depends on whether you can get anyone around here to listen enough to take you seriously.”

“I’ve got to get to Joey’s father first. He’s the first one I have to reach.”

“Oh, great. And how are you going to do that? I think all of his brains got shell-shocked into

Look Before You Leap

ground-beef back in Oki-knock-knock. Sorry to be pessimistic.”

“Al, the first thing you can do to help me, is find out where Joey’s father is right now. Just find out that much and get back here as fast as you can.”

“Okay, Sam, but you take care. I don’t like this snake-pit of a hospital. That orderly is ready to kill.”

Sam nodded, appreciating the advice but anxious to get the information he needed. Al took the signal and disappeared. Again Sam let his head fall back to the pillow, and he quickly dozed off.

In minutes, Al came back with the location of Joey’s father, but found Sam fast asleep. “Sam!” he shouted; but Sam was out cold. “Damn!” Al cursed to himself. “Well, I’ve got other things to find out too. I can’t stand here trying to wake up Sleeping Beauty.” Al stepped out of the room, his form dissolving through the door.

Travelling up the corridor, he saw the report on Joey Freeman at the Nurse’s Station. The nurse was prim but quite attractive, only twenty-seven years old, a fact not lost on Al. Al came up beside the nurse, who could not see him because he was a hologram, and he spoke boldly to her, “My, how I’d like to take you out for some jolly times.” Then he came in closer to her and whispered into her ear, “C’mon, baby, let’s go slow dancing. We could make beautiful music together!”

The nurse, not hearing Al, put down the file on Joey which she had been looking at and walked right through Al’s projection, leaving the station to check on another patient.

“Look at that!” Al protested. “Turning up her nose at me! She doesn’t appreciate the finer things. You’re missing an opportunity of a lifetime,” he called after the nurse, knowing she could not hear him. “Huh!” he snorted, “didn’t really like her anyway,” he jokingly soothed his not-really-hurt male ego.

“Now, let’s see; what have we here?” Al continued, perusing the open file on Joey. “Joey..aha, here it is: Joseph Freeman. Hmm.” Al looked at the charts and doctor’s comments studiously. “Keep under sedation until moved to Granville. Use restraint if necessary. Barbarians!” He continued to read down the page, “Mother in sedation from attack by patient. Recommend report to legal authorities.” Al grew alarmed. “Uh-oh, got to get Sam awake. This is bad news.” He dashed back to Sam’s room. What he found, he did not like. He saw not one, but two heavily muscled orderlies wrestling Sam into a straight-jacket. Sam was barely conscious.

“Sam! I just found out. They’re moving you to Granville, a looney bin.”

“Granville?” Sam stumbled over the name.

“Hey!” the new orderly started, “how did you know?”

“Shut up!” the first orderly snapped. “He doesn’t. He’s just guessing.”

“Sam,” Al shouted, “they can’t take you to Granville without the psychiatrist’s release!”

“You’re taking me to Granville. That’s illegal. You don’t have the papers,” Sam protested with the little energy he had.

“You attacking your mother like that, we don’t need papers,” the first orderly retorted.

Leap to Destiny

"She attacked me. I was defending myself!"

"Yeah, sure. She looks real tough," the second orderly chuckled.

"Wait, I have to see Doctor Brentworth first. He's my psychiatrist. I have rights. I get to talk to my personal doctor. Don't you know the law?" Sam lashed back, desperately.

"Maybe he's right," the second orderly said. "We should at least check."

The first orderly let go and grabbed the straight-jacket off Sam in a fury, storming out of the room. "I know how to deal with these loonies!" he muttered. "You'll see, you're just wasting the hospital's time!"

The second orderly, stunned at the viciousness of the remark, looked his partner in the face and walked past him silently out into the corridor to find Doctor Brentworth. After he left, the first orderly, who was the same one that had pinned Sam down earlier, turned on Sam and snarled, "We know how to take care of your type, druggies and hippies. They can take good care of you at the asylum." Satisfied with his nasty threat, he let out a silent snicker and left the room in an arrogant huff.

"Whew!" Al heaved a sigh. "That was close!"

"Al, I've got to make my move now. I've got to see Joey's father. There's no time." Sam began to get up out of bed.

"Sam, you can't go now. You're too drugged to make sense to anyone."

"I have to, Al, or everything is lost." Sam fished through the closet next to the sink and found a bathrobe stashed away. He also grabbed a towel to use as a prop if he needed to make an excuse that he was going to take a shower. Quickly he donned the robe and staggered to the door, opening it and peeping around the corner.

"Sam, I'm warning you. This is a very bad move. Ziggy says your chances are only 10.1 percent of pulling this off!"

"I haven't lost much if I fail. If I succeed, then I'll have done something." With that, Sam made his escape from the room--the orderlies in their haste, having forgotten to lock him in. He shuffled down the hallway. He saw a nurse approaching and turned sideways, holding the towel as if he were drying his hair. She didn't notice him and he kept on walking. Fortunately, there were other patients milling around in hospital clothes near the cafeteria where he hoped he would find his father. Having got past the psych ward, he would be less likely to be noticed.

Al popped in behind him. "That's him." Al pointed.

There was Joey's father, puffing away on a cigarette. Sam walked directly up behind him and said, "Dad, we need to talk."

Dan Freeman had had quite a few shocks in his life, but this one he was not ready for. He whirled around and looked straight into what he saw as the face of his son, Joey. "How in the name of--?" he stammered.

"Dad, don't say anything yet. I know you think I'm crazy and just a stupid anti-war demonstrator, but there is something you need to know. LISTEN to me. This is the truth."

Too stunned to protest, the father said, "Over here, away from the people." They seated

Look Before You Leap

themselves at the far end of the cafeteria.

“Dad, do you love me?” Sam began.

“What a question. Of course I do. Not that you make it easy,” the man fumed.

“Here’s the story. Dad, the doctor, I mean Doctor Winthrop, just shot me with a massive dose of Lithium. It’s a very strong medication. I’m not dangerous. What I did to Mom was, well, I had to do it because she was...was trying to feel me up.”

“What! You dirty little--” the man growled and started to rise from his chair.

“Dad! Please listen. You think you know your wife, my mother, but you don’t. All you see in me is someone who doesn’t conform to what you want me to be. You don’t see me for what I am. And the same goes for Mom. You only see her the way you want to, not for what she is. She’s a very sick person, emotionally.”

“Well, I’ve known that for years, heaven knows.”

“What do you mean?”

“She was always a bundle of tears when we met just before the war. She made me feel like a real hero. I was a real sucker for a line like that. She still gets me with her crying. After the thing that happened in your room, the way she lost control, they had to treat her like you. You know, sort of crazy.”

Sam couldn’t believe the sudden honesty in Joey’s father. “Dad, it isn’t just this one time. Mom has been doing this to me for years. She feels me up whenever she gets lonely.”

The father looked blankly at Joey, then turned away. “I saw her doing it once but didn’t say anything. I figured she was examining you for a problem. I didn’t think it was any of my business.”

It IS your business, Dad. We’ve all got to get together on this and--”

A hand reached down to grab Sam’s shoulder. “That’s him,” the security officer said.

“Okay, I left my room.” Sam anticipated their next move. “I’ll go back quietly. I just needed to be with my Dad for a awhile.”

The mean orderly took hold of Sam’s right arm in an iron-lock grip, glaring into Sam’s eyes with ice-cold rage. “Hi,” Sam said meekly to the orderly, who mustered a suggestion of a sinister smile.

“Let go of my son!” Freeman said, rising and scowling at the orderly.

“As you say, sir,” the orderly said, complying with the veiled threat.

Later in the day, Doctor Brentworth made his rounds and stopped in at Joey’s room. “Quite an eventful day, I heard. How are you doing?”

“I think I convinced my father about what my mother has been doing to me all these years. He may not really grasp it, but he witnessed some of it and now has an idea of what has been happening.”

Leap to Destiny

“Joey, I heard from the medical staff that they were trying to transfer you to Granville without a psychiatric release. That’s illegal in this state. I’m bringing charges against the orderlies and need a statement from you, if you want.”

“I’ll be glad to, but in fairness I must tell you that it was that bruiser, I don’t know his name--”

“Steenerson,” the doctor interjected.

“Yeah, him. He was the bad apple who was misleading the other guy. When I complained, the other guy agreed with me and sent for you. Please don’t have them discipline him.”

“Duly noted, Joey. Now, how about you?”

“I am going to need to recover from this. It won’t be easy.”

“It never is,” the doctor mused in agreement. “But it’s worth the effort.”

“What will happen now?” Sam asked.

“Well, it looks like your father got a face full of reality pie, Joey. Your mother--well, she’s a very sick woman who has been given a long rope in life, and I guess, you could say she finally hung herself with it, figuratively.”

“You have a gift for words, doc,” Sam smiled.

“So do you. I’m hoping you’ll get back on track and back into pre-med. First, though, I think you should have a stay at the good psych facility in this area. All the latest stuff, minimal drugs, no electro-shock, no tough orderlies. Are you game?”

“I’m game. I could use the rest.”

“Good, I’ll put it through. You’ve been a real eye-opener to me, too, Joey. I’ll never forget this.”

“Bye, Doc.”

“I’ll be seeing you again, if you want, or you can pick a different therapist.”

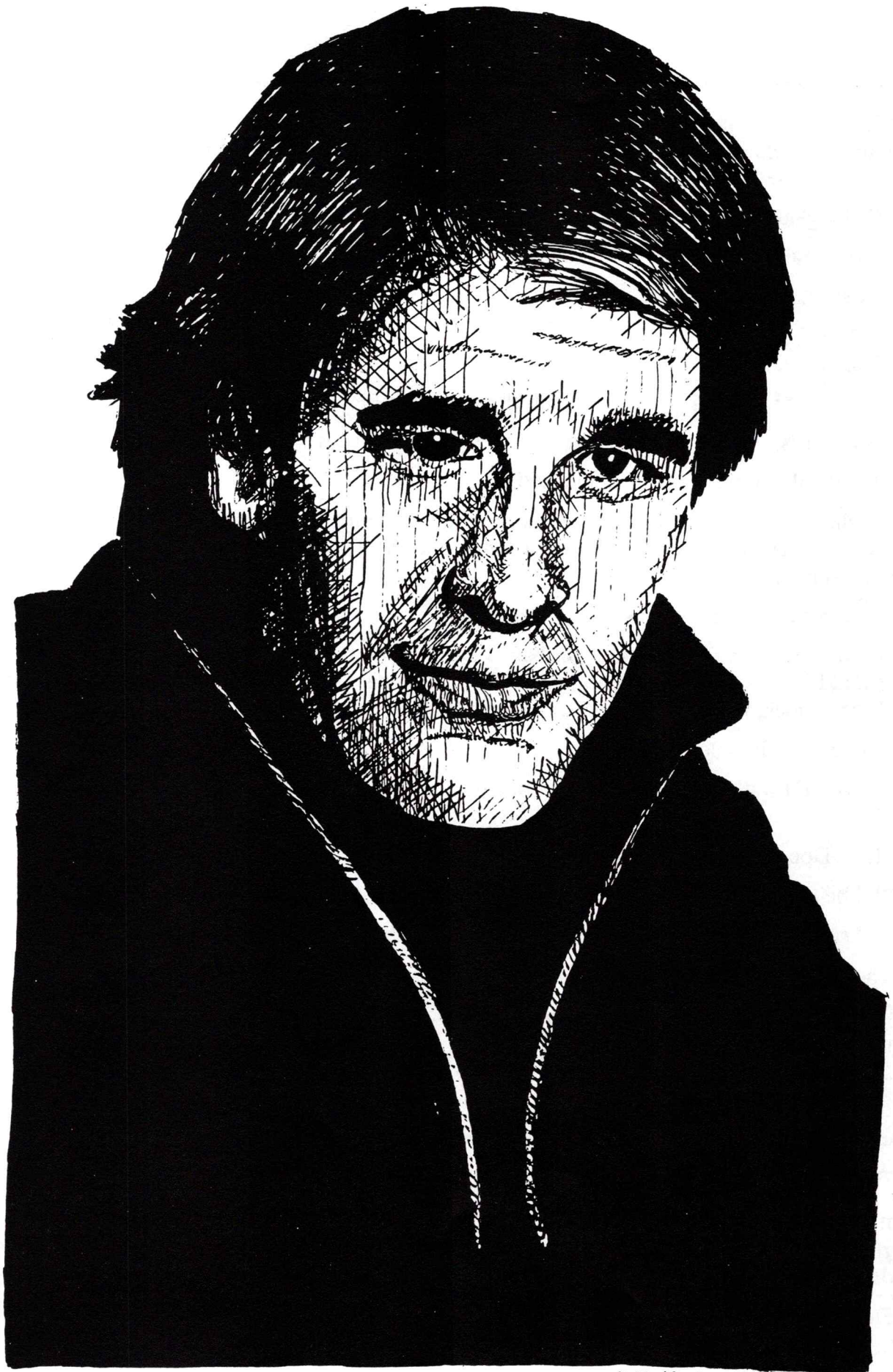
“I’ll see what the hospital has to offer first. But thanks for the suggestion.”

The doctor smiled and left the room and Al reappeared.

“Where do we stand, Al?” Sam questioned, concerned about the effect of his apparent triumph.

“Well, Ziggy now says that...Sam, you won’t believe this. Joey spends a nice few months in a good asylum and comes out strong and able to handle life. The mother, well, she spends the rest of her long life in a mental hospital; she never acknowledges what she did, but there’s a trial and she gets convicted. The lawyer gets her sentence commuted from prison to a mental institution. The father doesn’t exactly become a peacenik, but when his older son comes back from Viet Nam missing an arm and telling horror stories, he starts writing to Congress to stop the war. And Joey gets married in three years, becomes a successful paramedic, and has...three, three healthy children. Sam! We did it!”

Sam grinned, but before he could relish the victory, the blue light swirled around him and took him out of this time into a new leap, leaving Joey Freeman in a safe environment and empowered to begin a new life.



MICHAEL L. RUFF '93

CROSSED COMPUTERS

BY MICHAEL RUFF

“Now, Gooshie! NOW!”

Surging electricity sparked and sizzled through the flashing multi-colored lights.

“More power!”

Brilliantly the Imaging Chamber console arced with a blue-white blinding flash.

“Nothing yet, Admiral!”

“Gooshie! More power! Beeks says he’s not back yet!”

One big burst of energy jolted the Chamber. The lights on Ziggy’s mainframe pulsed more violently and randomly, and the Imaging Chamber seemed to be on overload. Smoke started to pour from every last piece of mechanical equipment.

“That’s enough, Admiral,” Gooshie yelled, “Ziggy can’t take all that energy! You’re going to--”

And then all went black and silent. Dr. Beeks could be heard coughing up smoke, and Gooshie’s footfalls echoed down the hall. One click from a master power switch bathed the time-lab with dim emergency lighting.

Al glanced around and waved his hand to dissipate the smoke from in front of his face. “What happened?”

“What happened?” Gooshie shouted in reply. “What happened? I’ll tell you what happened! Your brilliant idea to get Sam back went up in smoke along with every circuit in the Project. I told you it wouldn’t work!”

Al shook his head at the verbal pounding he took from the project assistant, even though he already knew his plan had failed. With Sam’s help, and that of other prominent Project scientists, Al had developed a hypothesis on how to bring Sam back--a theory that worked perfectly on paper, but one that failed horribly in reality.

“Look what your idea has done, Admiral. Gooshie pointed to the Project’s massive mainframe computer which was devoid of all signs of activity--no lights, no sound, no motion. “Look what you’ve done to Ziggy!”

Al looked up at the central computer, stone-faced. He didn’t know what to say or do. Ziggy was more than just a computer, he was the lifeline to Sam and also the main reason why Sam had been so successful in his leaps. It was bad enough that they lost such a valuable source of information, but the worst thing was that without Ziggy....

“Sam!” yelled at the realization, and Al turned quickly, darting to the Waiting Room door. It was open, and Dr. Beeks was standing over the prone person on the diagnostic table.

Look Before You Leap

"It's him," she said coolly.

"Great!" Al finally smiled.

"But his metabolism is...wrong. It's something I've never seen before. It's like his mind has forgotten how to make his body work."

"Is he in any danger?"

"Don't know. But it certainly doesn't look good."

Sensory deprivation. Not cold, not warm. No light, nothing. Quiet, empty.

What's going on? Did I leap into...a coma victim? A blind, deaf quadriplegic? Or worse yet, a corpse? Al? Get me out of here! Where am I? Al? Al? Don't leave me here!

Her dark gentle hand stroked his razor-stubbed cheek. No response. She brushed a few stray strands of white hair from his brow. Still no reaction. "He's stabilized. Seems like his body is readjusting to whatever trauma he incurred."

"Then he'll be all right?" Al asked hopefully.

The doctor raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

Al's hopeful smile dropped from his face.

Verbena Beeks turned and started to the door. "I'm going to have him transferred to the hospital. Something's not right here. He should've recovered by now."

Al remained standing by Sam's side, staring at his friend's closed eyes. "Wait," he yelled upon catching a glimpse of movement, "he blinked! Sam blinked!"

Al could hear Verbena stop in her tracks and turn around, but he kept his eyes glued on his pal's face.

Sam's left eye opened wide--only his left--and shut suddenly. "He did it again!"

Dr. Beeks sidled up alongside, just missing Sam's movement. "Are you sure?"

"Just watch." Al pointed. And then it happened again, but this time, his right eye opened and shut. Finally both eyes blinked in unison, although they appeared somewhat stilted in movement.

Al hugged Verbena and laughed excitedly, then turned and grabbed Sam's hand.

"Come on, buddy, what else can you do?"

In response, Sam's jaw shifted from side to side and his mouth opened slowly as if he was trying to work the rust out of stiffened joints.

Al's brow dropped in concern. "What's going on?"

Crossed Computers

Still nothing. Still no sounds, no sights, no smells, nothing to touch or feel. What is this place? Wait! What was that? Wait! There it is again. Nothing substantial, nothing physical. Only a...dream--a sense of something out there. Got to get access to it. Wait! There it is again! Almost reached it. Got to try harder. There, again! Numbers. A sense of numbers. Patterns, repetitive patterns. Ideas, images, words, equations, thoughts--INFORMATION!

That's it! Information. What's out there is information. Complicated mathematical problems; engineering schematics; names, dates and faces; and lots of mentions of the Project. Got to access it. Got to learn to reach the information, grab it, process it.

There! There it is: accelerator schematics; bios: Calavicci, Beckett; leap histories; detailed blueprints: Imaging Chamber, Accelerator...wait! This is information only I would know...and Ziggy. And its detailed and organized in a way no human mind would. That could only mean one thing....

Oh, boy! I'm Ziggy!

"Sam, wake up!"

"Admiral, I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

Al shot her a glance that seemed to say, 'I know what I am doing.' "We've got to try something. He's on the verge of coming out of this."

"It's too bad that Donna is doing research in Tokyo. Maybe her voice could bring her out of it."

Al reached up to Sam's pale face and lightly slapped his cheek. "Sam, it's Al and Verbena. Come on, wake up!"

As if on cue, the eyes burst open and Sam's rusty jaw started to work.

"Can you hear me?" Al asked hopefully.

Sam's head moved from side to side in response, indicating 'no.'

Al flashed Dr. Beeks a puzzled look. "It's me, your buddy Al. Do you recognize me?"

This time, Sam's head moved in a circular motion as if to test the dexterity of his neck muscles. Eventually, he nodded in the affirmative.

"Great! Glad to have you back, Sam."

And then Sam's voice could be heard trying to speak; first slowly and gravelly, then laboriously rising into a hoarse whisper, "I am...not...Sam. I am Ziggy."

Can't believe I'm stuck here in Ziggy. This isn't supposed to happen. Something's gone

Look Before You Leap

terribly wrong. No body. This hasn't happened before.

Maybe I can find out why. Maybe I can access the information and find out why I'm here. And how to get out of this...void.

Here it is...here's the information. Boy this gets easier once you learn how to assimilate data. According to this information, Ziggy says...I mean I say, the problem was caused by an attempt to retrieve Dr. Beckett.

Oh, so that's what happened. Somehow when they tried to retrieve me, something went wrong. Maybe if I can access what they tried. Here it is. Ah...wait, if they checked with me--and it says they did check with Dr. Sam Bebbette--then it shouldn't have resulted in this.

But, wait, Bebbette; there's something wrong here. There's a lot of simple mistakes here; misplaced numbers and letters in this information. Too scrambled to be data input error; this looks deliberate. Sabotage! But who? Maybe that's why I'm here. But what to do about it? Got to tell someone. Got to get someone to find the culprit. According to this, there's a 57 percent chance that's why I'm here. Fifty-seven percent--I'm starting to sound like Ziggy. And can I believe this information if it's been tampered with?

Got to talk to AI. But how? Search through the files. Down this path, down that path--not the right files. Ah! Here's something; sensory input. Hearing! Great! Trace the path, activate the file, redirect power and...voila! I can hear!

"Sam is that you? Can you hear me?"

AI! Yes I can hear you, but I can't seem to figure out how to talk yet.

"Give me a sign, Sam, if you're in there."

A sign? What kind of sign? Here, let me see. What can I do? Search those files. Searching. Ah, visual receptor; sight! Let's connect that. Great! Look, there's AI! Oh, geez, what is he wearing? That's got to be the worst outfit yet. Zebra stripes? Better adjust my vertical hold. There, that's better.

"Is that it, Sam? Is that your sign?"

He must have seen Ziggy's lenses move. Maybe I can activate his voice mode. Wait, here are his blinking lights. There.

"Sam it is you!"

Very good, AI.

"Can you talk?"

What do you think I've been trying to do for the last hour? Ah, here it is. Finally. "Can you here me now?"

Al heard Sam's words using Ziggy's feminine voice and smiled. "Sam, you're all right!"

"Do I look 'all right?'" he asked sarcastically.

Crossed Computers

Al tried to wipe the smirk from his face. Sam had leapt into some weird situations before--even a non-human; the chimp--but none as bizarre as this. "Sorry, Sam. I just meant that I'm glad to see you."

"Okay, I'll forgive you, if you get me out of here."

"All right, we'll start with what you know."

Sam answered after a momentary pause, "The information I have accessed points to something unexplained happening when you tried that retrieval process. It might have worked, except there is evidence of tampering with the files."

"Tampering? With Ziggy's files? That's impossible! Only the most trusted Project employees have any access at all to Ziggy."

"Nevertheless, Al, someone has sabotaged your attempt to get me back."

"But why?"

"Don't know, Al. But I do feel that this could be another weird leap. Logically this could never happen, even in the confines of leaping. No, I believe something or Someone sent me here."

"Stranger things have happened. But if it is a leap, then what are you here to do?"

Sam's external lights blinked in thought. "Check your handlink," Sam said playfully.

Astonished, Al withdrew the link from his pocket and clenched his cigar between his teeth to momentarily free up his hands. He removed the stogie and tapped a few keys of the blinking machine. "Ziggy says...I mean you say there's a 57 percent chance that you're here to find the sabo...." Al slapped the side of the link.

"Sabo...saboteur. "Great! All you have to do is fix the problem, catch the culprit, and maybe you'll leap out of here."

"Easier said than done, Al. By the way, who's in the Waiting Room."

Al shifted uncomfortably and hesitated. "It's your body, but...."

"But what?"

"Believe me, Sam, you don't want to know."

"And what is this?" asked Ziggy through Sam's voice, pointing at the yellow food in the cafeteria's buffet trays.

"That's corn, and that is lettuce, and those over there are french fries," Gooshie explained as he pointed from tray to tray at the buffet bar.

Ziggy then pointed to the tray with something brown and lumpy swimming in it. "What is that?"

Gooshie's face contorted in confusion. "Even I don't know what that is."

The mouth on Sam's body lifted upward at the corners. "That is humorous."

Look Before You Leap

“Ziggy, you’re smiling!”

Now Sam’s brows lowered as Ziggy frowned. “Was that not an appropriate response?”

“Why, yes it was,” Gooshie tried to explain, “but I’m just amazed how quickly you’re adapting to your new body.”

He smiled again. “I am learning a great deal, especially about different emotions.” Ziggy watched as the server plopped scoops of the corn and mystery meat onto his lunch tray.

“But how is that possible? No offense, but you’re still a computer.” Gooshie led the way to a long, beat-up cafeteria table.

“But I have a body now, and I can feel things, see things, touch things--and all those experiences are directly linked to emotions. Because I can touch, I can feel pain or pleasure, and pleasure makes me smile. Maybe it is not the same way you experience it, but the diverse experiences are very enjoyable.” Ziggy lifted his fork up to his mouth following Gooshie’s example. He paused and sniffed at the mystery meat. “Interesting.”

Gooshie shook his head in disbelief, and watched Ziggy open his mouth and eat the food.

Ziggy tilted his head as if momentarily calculating his response. “This is what you would call...delicious.”

“What do you mean? This stuff is terrible!”

“When you’ve only had a steady diet of raw electrical energy all your life, you tend to appreciate a little variety.”

“**A!** Wake up!” Sam said raising the volume on Ziggy’s computerized voice.

Al lifted his head and groggily rubbed his eyes, nearly knocking over his half-empty mug of now-cold coffee. The razor stubble prominently adorned his chin and cheeks, and dark bags sagged under his drooping eyelids. “Haven’t you found anything yet?” asked Al as he started to sip the coffee, only to pucker his lips at the bitter taste and set it back down.

Sam answered, “You know I can’t do too much without you. I’ve already accessed Ziggy’s back-ups and repaired all 1,297 files that were damaged. Now I need to get you to verify all of the incoming systems.

“Can’t you relax, Sam. Can’t you give your circuits a rest?”

“Al, what’s got into you? This is the Project we’re talking about; and my life is at stake.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Al, it’s hard for me to explain, but suffice to say I can’t survive in here forever without my body--without someone’s body. I can already feel my...humanity slipping. It’s only a matter of time ‘til I...”

“Sam, are you sure?”

“Data doesn’t lie.”

Al struggled and lifted himself from his chair and headed over to stand face to face--sort

Crossed Computers

of--with his friend. Compassionately, he asked, "Sam, what's it like?"

"Empty." Sam answered without a moments hesitation.

Al didn't say a word.

"Quite frankly, Al, that's the main reason I've asked you to stay here all night. Don't get me wrong, I do need your help, but I don't think I could make it without my friends. I've got nothing in here to keep me going. It's just a flat existence--letters, numbers, formulas, files, and calculations. Nothing to look forward to--except your visits."

"Geez, Sam, I hadn't thought of that."

"Now you know why I'm in such a hurry to get out of here."

"And you'll even promise not to complain about the next body you leap into?"

"Well, I don't know if I'll go that far. But please, help me."

Fingers pressed the play button on the remote. The theme from *2001: A Space Odyssey* began playing as the hands pulled back the tab on a can of Budweiser. The slippered feet perched themselves on the soft cushioned footstool as a hand reached for a slice from the pizza box on the end-table. A doorbell rang and the slippered feet swung to the carpet and headed to the front door. The hand reached to the knob, turned it, and pulled the door open.

"I thought I'd find you here," said the aggravated Admiral who plowed through the doorway and into the Beckett living-room.

"Is there something wrong, Admiral?" Sam's face maintained a blank expression.

"You bet there is, Ziggy. You should be back at the Project helping Sam track down the saboteur."

Ziggy turned and headed back to the living-room and plopped himself in his reclining chair.

"Ziggy? Did you hear me? We need you back at the Project to help switch you and Sam back."

Ziggy slowly looked up at Al who was standing over him and glared. "Why would I want to do that?"

Al's jaw dropped in disbelief. "What do you mean? You've got to help Sam. We've got to put this mess right. The Project is at stake, your programing is at stake, and Sam's life is at stake."

"Am I at risk?"

Al lowered his head. "Well...no, not that we know of, but you can't stay this way forever. That's my best friend's body you've taken over. He needs it!"

Ziggy set down his beer and stood up face-to-face in front of Al, trying his best to intimidate him. "What do you want me to do about it? Sam has access to all of the information and all the time in the world to work on it. Nothing I could do could speed things along."

"Bull!" Al shouted. Sam doesn't know how to sift through that kind of information. He's

Look Before You Leap

been thrown into a whole new world, and he's not even sure what is supposed to be there and what information has been sabotaged."

"It is easy," Ziggy began, "all he has to do is.... Wait, I am also stuck in a whole new situation that I must deal with and adjust to. I have learned so much from my experiences in the last few days--more than I ever could, trapped in that silicon hell. It is making me a better, well-rounded...person."

"Person? Person? You're a machine, damnit!"

"Not anymore, Admiral."

The Project lights automatically dimmed, and Al strained to see the time on his wrist-watch. Midnight. "Sam, haven't you found anything yet?"

"Afraid so. Unfortunately many of the same files that I repaired two days ago have been altered again."

"That means the saboteur has struck again."

"Yes, but who? And how?" Sam asked, the volume of his computerized voice had significantly diminished over the past few hours. "And will we find him in time? I'm starting to lose it in here. The data suggests I only have eight to twelve hours before I lose my identity."

"Has anybody tampered with your programming since the other repairs?" Al asked, pacing in front of Sam in his best detective stance.

"No, there hasn't been anyone working on me at all, unless they erased the memories. It must be some kind of virus or information transmitted from outside the Project."

"Or by someone who has extensive knowledge of the...programming." Al's face frowned as he whispered to himself, "Ziggy?"

"What?" Sam asked.

"Nothing."

"I know my audio sensors are not up to par, but I could've sworn you said 'Ziggy.' Al, what aren't you telling me?"

"Uh...um...nothing, Sam." Al turned his back to Sam's visual sensors.

"Al?"

Even though I can't see you very well, your body language tells me you're hiding something. What is it?"

"All right." He turned and faced the computer. "I've had a chat or two with Ziggy--in your body--and," Al lowered his voice and mumbled the rest, "he doesn't want to leave."

"What?"

Al responded, shouting and clearly enunciating each word, "He doesn't want to leave!"

"But he has to," came Sam's bewildered response.

Crossed Computers

Frustrated, Al let his hands drop to his sides. "I know that, you know that, but Ziggy has discovered that he likes having a human body. Tina even told me he tried to hit on her. I don't think he's going to cooperate."

"Isn't there anything you can do?" Sam's emotional plea could still be felt through the mask of the computer voice.

"I can't just lock him up or force him at gunpoint."

"Why not?"

Al felt the desperation in Sam's question. His heart pounded furiously at the thought of losing his best friend. They had been through a lot together, and Sam had pulled off some tough leaps before--many of them were life-and-death situations--and he had come through alive...with Ziggy's help. It was ironic that this time....

"Sam, I need to take a break--get a cup of coffee or something." The truth was that Al was close to tears and knew that allowing Sam to see him in that condition wouldn't help the situation. Al made his exit, heading to the cafeteria.

Sam went back to work, recorrecting the saboteur's damage. File after file, he verified against the backup and then repaired them. He was making progress when he saw, through his visual sensor, a familiar person move into the room.

It was kind of an eerie feeling seeing his body standing in front of him and walking about. His face looked slightly older than the last time he had viewed it. Still it was refreshing to see his own image rather than reflections of the other personas he had leapt into.

"Ziggy?" Sam called to the person in the room.

The person turned and looked at him, but remained silent.

"Why are you here?"

The face on Sam's body tilted his head, puzzled. "I am not sure. Curiosity?"

"Then you're not here to help me?" asked the voice coming from the mainframe."

"No." Ziggy paused. "Not specifically."

A series of blinking lights flickered over the external portions of the computer consoles as realization suddenly hit Sam. You're the saboteur, aren't you, Ziggy?"

Ziggy spun around. His face appeared hurt. "Sam, how could you think such a thing. You were my creator, my mentor."

"And this is how you repay me?"

"Computers do not have a conscience," Ziggy replied.

"Nor do they have feelings and emotions, nor do they make their own decisions. You're more than a mere computer, even before you ended up in my body. You're special--kind of a thinking machine. Besides you're a friend, a comrade; and I can't believe a friend would do this to me."

Ziggy hung his head slightly. "I am not doing anything to you."

Look Before You Leap

Sam raised his volume again. "That's right, you're not doing anything. You have the opportunity to help the one person who practically gave you life, and you chose to turn your back on him and frolic in your new body! That's pathetic, Ziggy! I'm ashamed that I ever turned you on."

Ziggy opened his mouth, but no sound came out for what seemed like an eternity. "But...but, this is my only chance to experience life--"

"But you don't experience life at the expense of another life. Surely you know that I can't survive much longer." Sam paused to let his emotions sink in. "I do feel that you are developing a conscience, and I don't believe that you would let me die."

Ziggy sat down and dropped his head into his folded arms.

Sam could only watch as the conscience took hold.

Footfalls could be heard echoing hollowly down the hall as Al returned. "Sam, Ziggy, what's going on?"

Ziggy slowly lifted his head, his face red and puffy.

Sam answered, "I think he's had a change of heart."

"Then he's not...."

"No, Al, he's not the one. He just got caught up in his first few days of living."

Ziggy stood up and wiped his eyes. He made his way over to the keyboard interface and began typing in binary sequences.

For the next hour, the two worked frantically restoring files and trying to trace the source of the sabotage. All the while, Sam's energy and consciousness were growing weaker. Ziggy picked up the pace, typing codes and running diagnostic programs at lightening speeds. Then he stopped.

From over his shoulder, Al asked hopefully, "Find anything?"

"I am afraid not, Admiral." Ziggy turned and shook his head. "There is nothing more I can do."

"Are you sure?" Al asked, a panicked look was etched in the wrinkles on his face.

"I have double-checked everything. All the codes match up perfectly with the backup program."

"Sam?" Al called. No answer. "Is that it? Is Sam...gone?"

"Not yet," Ziggy answered matter-of-factly. "I believe he has shut down all non-essential systems to buy some time." As if on cue, the computer's lights went dark.

"Ziggy, we've got to do something."

The being in Sam's body just shrugged.

"Isn't there anything else you remember?" Al hoped Ziggy could pull a rabbit out of his hat. "What about checking things from an earlier back-up. Maybe the saboteur is already on the backup that you're working from."

Crossed Computers

“That would not work,” Ziggy replied as he pulled out a chair and slumped down into it dejectedly. “The Pentagon had changed its codes since then, so everything would be different.”

“Pentagon?” Al’s eyes brightened. “I haven’t received any notification....” Al jumped over to Ziggy and pulled him to his feet and pushed him back to the keyboard interface. “Double-check where, when, and how you received those codes.”

Al stepped over and stood in front of the mainframe. “Sam? Can you hear me?” No response. “If you can, blink your lights once.”

Momentarily, there was no reaction, but then the computer’s lights blinked weakly.

“All right!” Al exclaimed, then settled down and explained. “Sam, look for the Pentagon codes and try to establish your link. Blink again if you find it.

“He’s getting through,” yelled Ziggy from his keyboard position.

Sam’s lights blinked.

“He’s there,” Al added and turned back to Sam. “Is it tied into Pentagon Security? One blink, yes, two blinks, no.”

The lights on the mainframe immediately blinked, then stopped. Al waited for a second blink which followed weakly.”

“Ziggy, Sam says the link is wrong; can you trace it?”

Ziggy frantically tapped more keys. “It’s connected to the...payroll department at the Pentagon.”

“Then the saboteur is really the Pentagon,” Al deduced. “Someone must have got the lines crossed.” Quickly, Al scurried over to the hot-line phone to the Pentagon to straighten the problem as Ziggy reinstalled the old codes.

When finished, Ziggy tapped in one more message:

Sorry, Sam.

**You were right. Having a life would mean little if I
had to sacrifice your friendship to get it.**

Almost instantly, a reply scrolled across the monitor in little green letters:

T-H-A-N-K-S, Z-I-G-G-Y.

T-H-A-T W-A-S A V-E-R-Y H-U-M-A-N T-H-I-N-G T-O D-O.

Inside, Sam could actually feel the familiar sensation of the leap pull him away.

AN ILLOGICAL LEAP OF FAITH

BY JUANNE MICHAUD

"Mr. Freedman. Mr. Freedman? Sir...are you all right?"

"Huh? Oh...I, uh...I'm fine."

"You just seemed to blank out for a moment, Mr. Freedman. Gave me a bit of a scare."

"I-I'm all right. Miss-Miss--"

"Is it another one of those migraine headaches, sir? If you don't mind me saying so, you should see a doctor. You never know. God forbid, it might be a brain tumor, or something worse."

"Migraine headaches are not usually symptomatic of brain tumors."

"What's that, sir? I didn't hear you."

"Ah, never mind. I-I was just thinking aloud, that's all."

"Perhaps we could finish this memo later, sir. Maybe you should take a break."

"That's...that's a good idea. I'll just take...take a little break. Why don't you take an early lunch...or something..."

"Lunch? Mr. Freedman, it's 2:30 in the afternoon!"

"Oh, right. I just forgot...this...headache...is getting worse. Take a coffee break--a long one. Get some fresh air."

"In New York? But thank you, sir. I'll take just a little break."

"You go right ahead. I'll just rest...or something."

"I got you a new bottle of aspirin, sir. They're in the usual place."

"The usual? Oh, right. The usual. Thanks...thanks very much."

"We'll finish the memo when I get back."

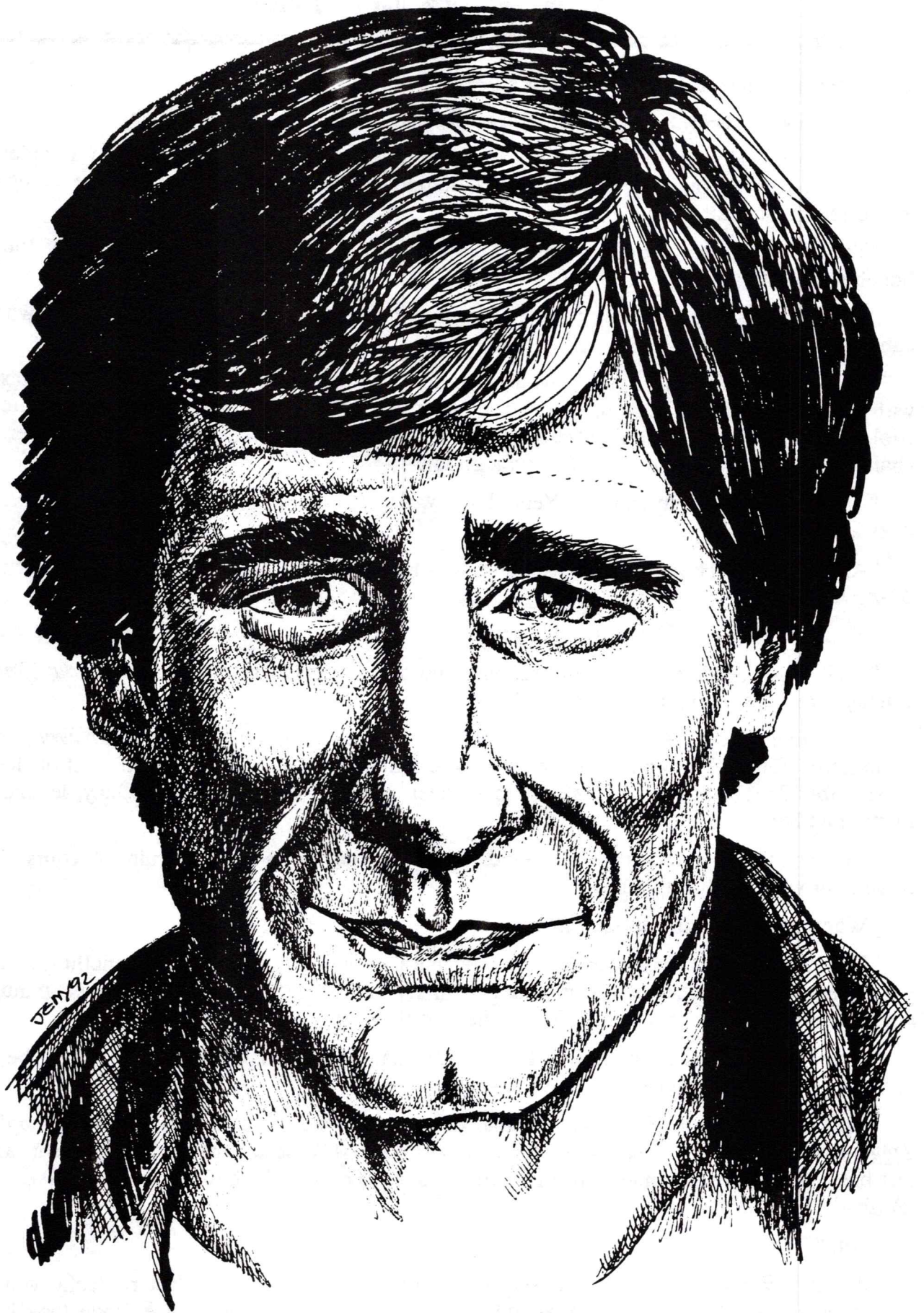
"Right. When you get back...Miss...oh, boy. Whew. She's finally gone. Just once, I'd like to know what I'm doing without all of this fumbling around. Let's see...Stanley Freedman. Hmm...what's this...a business card...programming head, NBC entertainment section. And here's a day book...lunch with a Mr. Spelling...tomorrow, November 15th, 1968. So it's 1968! Well, at least I know that much!"

"Wow! Great office, Sam! Look at this--a real leather couch. Nice and comfy. I'll bet this guy gets a lot of use out of this, too! You know what they say--"

"Al! Al!"

"What? What's your problem, Sam?"

"My problem is, I don't know what I'm doing here! Get your mind off the couch--and out of



Look Before You Leap

the gutter--and give me some information!"

"Okay, okay...sheesh. Sometimes, you know, Sam, you can be a real grouch."

"A grouch? How'd you like to be leaping around into strange people without any idea why, and then have the only person who might happen to have the answers end up being more interested in the leather couch?"

"Take it easy, Sam. Geez! Okay...you're Stanley Freedman, and you're one of the head honchos at NBC--"

"I know that! And I know that it's November 14, 1968. What I don't know is what I'm supposed to do."

"Okay, okay. You sure some of your neuronic whatchamacalit molecules didn't get mixed up with this guy's? I'm telling you, what we've got in the Waiting Room is a prime candidate for a triple by-pass--only they don't have them at this time, do they? This nozzle has ulcers, is a chain-smoker, hops around like a flea on a griddle--"

"--And suffers from migraines. Yeah, I know, Al. What I don't know is why I'm here. What does Ziggy have to say?"

"Ah, let's see. Hmmm...well, according to Ziggy, there's a 95.8 chance you're here to save *Star Trek*."

"*Star Trek*? Save *Star Trek*? How?"

"Well, this Freedman guy, he's the one who has to decide whether or not *Star Trek* gets cancelled or goes onto a fourth season."

"Well, that's great. All I have to do is write a memo saying not to cancel *Star Trek*, and I'm outta here. Easy! You know, Al, I always liked that show. We used to watch it all of the time. It was *Star Trek* that made me think time-travel might be really possible. Okay, let me get a memo pad here--"

"No, no, Sam, you don't understand. I guess that swiss-cheese brain of yours doesn't remember what really happened."

"What are you talking about, Al?"

"For some strange reason, in this altered time-line--you must have done something in one of your other leaps to change things--this guy didn't cancel *Star Trek*. At the last minute, he decided to give it another chance. You're here to make sure that doesn't happen."

"You mean, cancel *Star Trek*? But you just said Ziggy thinks I'm here to save the show! How can I save it if I cancel it? That's crazy!"

"Just listen a minute, Sam. This is what happens if you don't cancel the show. According to Ziggy--let me see--come on, you dumb...okay. Look. The series has a fourth season and it's terrible! Much, much worse than the third season. The fourth season episodes make *Spock's Brain*--"

"Huh?"

"*Spock's Brain*; it was a third season episode, a real stinker. You're lucky you don't remember it. Anyhow, the stuff that follows in the next year makes that episode look like the

An Illogical Leap of Faith

height of intelligent tv.

“Like I was saying, the fourth season is terrible. Just awful. It’s so bad that no one can ever take *Star Trek* seriously again--not even the fans. So the show never goes into syndication, the movies never get made.”

“The movies?”

“Yeah. Ziggy says there should be at least a half-dozen of them. But it gets worse, Sam. Gene Roddenberry has a stroke, brought on by over-work, exhaustion and fighting with the network over bad scripts. He spends the rest of his life in a home. So he and Majel Barret never marry, and their son is never born.

“William Shatner is finished as a serious actor. He ends up doing dinner theaters in the southern states, just to make ends meet.

“Leonard Nimoy never gets a chance to work on *Mission: Impossible*, so he never has the financial security to do serious theater and then go on to directing. He ends up as the host on one of those Friday night fright-night things on a cable television show--ears and all!

“Nichelle Nichols never gets to work for NASA. And because she never works for them, they never get all of the women and minority groups that she recruited, so that means lots of people who should have become astronauts and scientists never do!”

“All because of a tv show?”

“Don’t underestimate that show, Sam. Lots of people became astronauts, or computer programmers, or doctors, or engineers because of *Star Trek*. And there are lots of people who become writers and artists who got their start writing *Star Trek* stories, or doing *Star Trek* artwork. But if you don’t cancel the show, they never will!”

“I don’t know, Al...it doesn’t seem right, somehow.”

“Listen, it gets worse. Walter Koenig commits suicide, he’s so depressed. And Jimmy Doohan just drops out of sight--disappears, poof! Patrick Stewart dies homeless, in London, England...Sam, the list just goes on and on. I know it sounds weird, but you’ve got to make history right--or you won’t leap!”

“Okay, Al, I believe you. I guess we’d better just do it and get this over with.”

“Don’t look so glum, Sam. You’re doing the right thing.”

“Okay, okay. Miss, er, Miss--”

“It’s Mrs.--Mrs. Standmeyer.”

“Oh, thanks. Mrs. Standmeyer, get me, ah...”

“Gene Roddenberry on the phone. You know, Al, I feel terrible about doing this.”

“I know, buddy, I know.”

“I feel like...like I’m performing an amputation.”

“Yeah, but Sam, it’s the only way the patient will survive.”

“That’s no consolation. I really like that show! What? Oh, thanks...Mrs. Standmeyer. Yeah, hello? Gene...baby...”

LIFE IS BUT A DREAM

BY MICHAEL RUFF

Sam woke.

He rubbed his eyes to remove the disorienting effects of his restless, dream-filled sleep. He propped himself up and glanced over at the other side of the bed which was rumpled, but empty. Looking around the dimly lit room, he saw familiar images painted by beams of the morning sun, which poked in from between the curtains.

Sam smiled. His eyes first were drawn to the huge bookshelf packed neatly with books arranged meticulously from A to Z. Next to that stood an antique brass lamp, complete with a shade that sported hanging teardrop crystals. Near the window was the old oak desk with the carved mahogany dolphin carefully displayed on top.

A rubber tree plant, a stereo system, and even a print of dogs playing poker (a gift from Al)--the only tacky thing in the entire room--all made Sam smile.

He was home.

Not home in Indiana, but his New Mexico house near the Project.

It's just like I left it. He scratched his head, puzzled, and then tossed back his blanket and swung his feet to the floor. His hardwood floor reassuringly soothed his bare feet.

What's going on here? Am I really home? Cautiously standing, still unsure, he dashed into the hallway and headed for the bathroom. *Gotta find a mirror.* He turned the corner and literally skidded to a halt, squeaking against the white linoleum.

What he saw in the mirror wasn't totally expected nor unexpected. "It's me!" he said to his own reflection. The man in the mirror, in the nightshirt, was Dr. Samuel Beckett. *I really am home.*

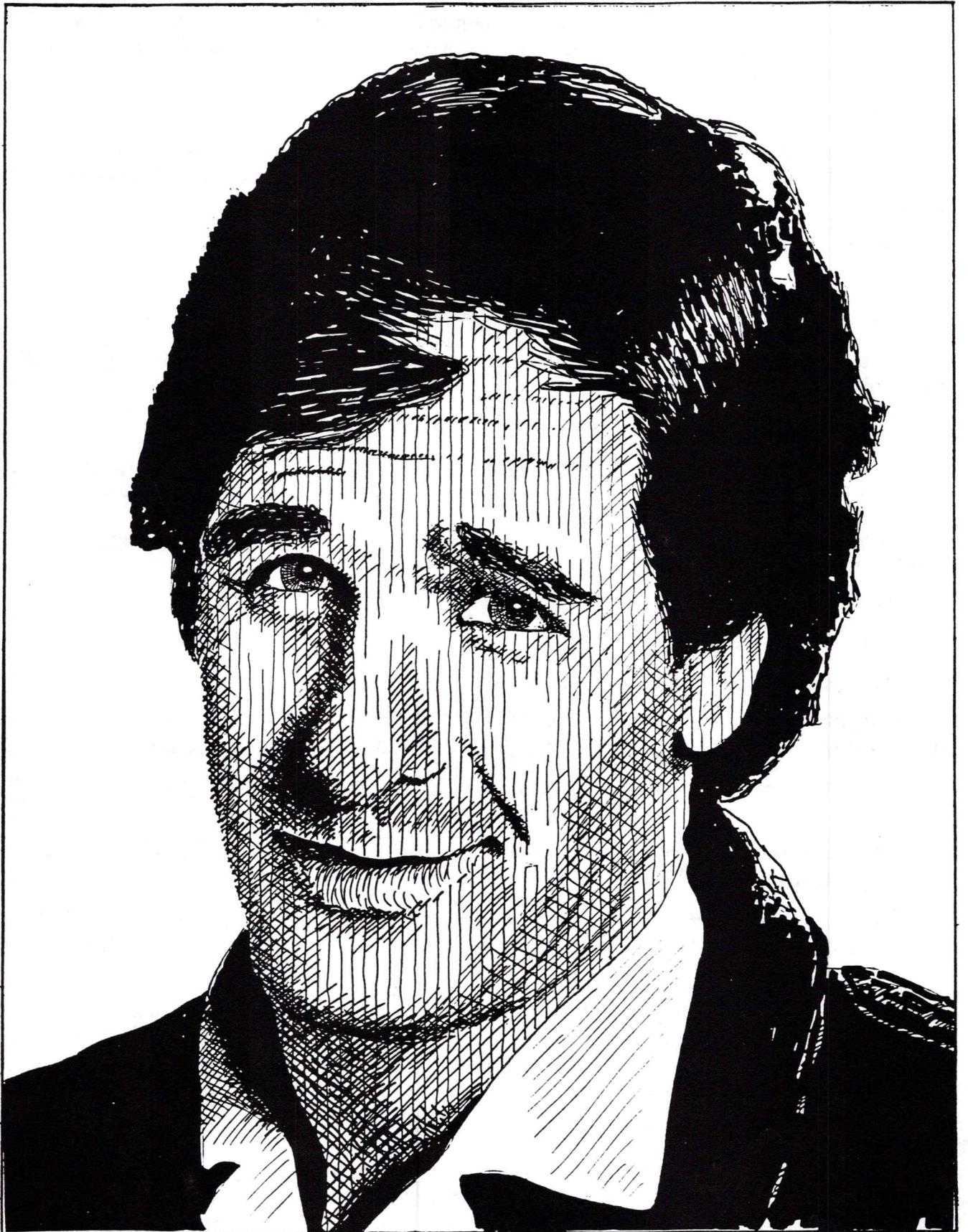
Is it really over? he asked himself, his voice almost lowering with disappointment. At that moment he realized all the experiences his leaping had entitled him too. Even though most of his time trips were awkward or uncomfortable, all had been tremendous learning experiences, experiences the common man could only dream about or recollect.

Slowly, Sam shuffled back to his bedroom, confusion overshadowing the excitement and the wonder.

But why didn't I leap back into the accelerator? No one answered as he opened his dresser drawer and withdrew his favorite polo shirt. Doubt flashed through Sam's sometimes swiss-cheesed mind, a dour frown replacing the excited grin. *What if this is just another weird leap--and I've leaped into me again?*

After putting on his pants, Sam sat on the edge of the bed and pulled up his white socks and slipped on his high-top sneakers. *But if it is a leap, then where is Al?*

Al! The mere thought of his friend brightened his expression. *Gotta get in touch with Al!*



DAVID LAWRENCE 92

Look Before You Leap

“Al?” Sam called into mid-air. Silence. Sam knew he couldn’t beckon his friend, but it was worth a shot. He turned and began pacing, awaiting Al’s inevitable arrival. Again he noticed the desk and this time the brass phone resting on it.

Why not? he thought. *If I am home, he should answer.*

Sam dialed Al Calavicci’s number. It had been a long time since he’d had occasion to use it, but his photographic memory--when it wasn’t compared to a certain dairy product--recalled it instantly.

His hand trembled slightly when the ringing stopped.

“Hello,” greeted a distinctively female voice--definitely not Al’s.

“Tina?”

“Sam, is that you?” She sounded more annoyed than excited. “Do you know it’s 5:30 in the morning?”

“But...I’m home!” Concern crept into his voice.

“Good, I’ll tell him when he wakes up. Bye, Sam.” Her sweet voice was final.

“Wait!” he shouted into the receiver. “I need to talk to Al, now! It’s important.”

On the other end of line, Tina paused, then sighed. Sam could hear some groggy groans and finally an annoyed “Hello.”

“Al?”

“Sam, can’t this wait?”

“But, Al, I’m home!”

“Congratulations.” The voice on the other end of the line dripped with sarcasm. “I’m always impressed when a man with a handful of degrees can find his way back to his house.”

Sam shook his head. *What’s going on?* “Al, I’m home! I’ve made it back! I’m done leaping!”

A pause signalled Al’s concern. “Sam, I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. Are you okay? Done...leaping?”

“Leaping,” Sam tried to explain in vain. “You know, where I travel into another time, another place, another body...putting right what once went wrong...with my faithful sidekick hologram Al.”

“You know it’s still just an unproven theory, but it sounds like a great premise for a TV show.” Al’s chuckle echoed through the receiver. “But seriously, Sam. You okay? You’re still not having memory lapses from that Accelerator accident? I thought you and Dr. Beeks had worked out all your memory problems.”

Sam switched gears. “Al, when is this?”

“It’s only three weeks after the accident.” Al paused, worry again evident in his voice. “Damn, we thought you were fine after we pulled you out of the Accelerator. You know, you shouldn’t have tested it before it was ready. Now listen to you, you’re having delusions. Better

Life Is But A Dream

let me call Dr. Beeks. I'll send her over and the two of you can have a nice long talk."

"Wait!" Sam had to pause letting it all sink in. "You mean it was all in my imagination--a dream?"

"Fraid so," came the honest reply.

"You mean Gloria, and Jimmy, the lion, Alberta, Beth, my brother Tom, and 'Oy Vey, I'm the Rabbi' were all in my mind?"

"I guess so. I don't know any of those people, 'cept Beth."

"Don't you remember Melvin, the mortician; or George Washakie, the Indian; or the time I was Jesse standing up for civil rights, or the time I was on death row?"

"Saaam, you're starting to worry me." Al paused, and Sam could imagine him taking a puff on his cigar, even if it was early morning. "It sounds like you're developing multiple personalities."

"Like the time I went through shock treatment?" Sam offered, hoping it would trigger something.

"Shock treatment? Sam, I'm really worried about you. I'll get Dr. Beeks and we'll be right over. You just take it easy." The receiver clicked and Sam let his own phone drift back to its cradle.

Could Al be right? He walked over to the bed and kicked off his shoes. Was it just a dream? Didn't I help those people? Didn't I make their lives better? Didn't I help make the world a better place? Didn't my experiment work...? Sam laid down, his head cushioned in the pillow. Am I going crazy? But I remember all those people, those times those places.... Could that accelerator accident really have screwed up my mind? I hope Al and Dr. Beeks get here soon. I need to talk to them and find out for sure. Visions whirled in his head, just like in the dream from the night before. But it was so real.... Vietnam...Maggie, the photographer I made love to...the Viet Cong I had to shoot down...the trapeze...the piglets...g-strings...rock star...locket...Mommy...ghosts...pregnant...Seymour...home...dreams....

Rap, rap, rap.

Sam bolted upright at the sound of the knocking on the door. Funny, but he could almost swear he dreamed the tingly feeling of the leap, and, for some strange reason, he smiled.

"Al? Dr. Beeks?" he called to the door--a door that now wasn't familiar. He hoped his friends were there to help him. *Could I be dreaming now? This seems so real!*

"Open up!" a voice shouted from outside. "This is the police."

Sam looked around at the new surroundings. The whole room was unfamiliar, including the mirrored dressing table, and the reflection in the mirror. Neither were his. *What's going on? I thought all the leaps were just dreams.*

"Open up or we'll shoot!"

He pinched himself and winced, but then grinned at his new opportunity.

"Oh, boy."

IT'S ABOUT TIME

BY REBECCA REEVES

Sam Beckett entered the room and the leap at the same moment in time. The first thing he noticed as the sparkling blue and white light cleared his eyes, was the sound of the door shutting behind him.

He stood where he'd 'landed,' and carefully took stock of his surroundings. The room was not large, although that could be deceptive. Had it not been for the mountains of knickknacks shoved onto every available table top and filling every corner, the room could have been quite pleasantly spacious. Instead, it looked something like a cross between a pawn shop and...and the room of his first History professor!

With a chuckle, Sam found that he remembered Professor Sinclair quite vividly. Given how 'swiss-cheesed' his memory had been when he had first begun Quantum Leaping, it was a pleasant surprise. He'd liked Professor Sinclair a lot, even with the man's bizarre idiosyncrasies--or maybe because of them. And Sinclair's cluttered rooms, just off campus, had to be about his biggest idiosyncrasy. The man refused to part with *anything*, saying that each item had its own story, and as long as they were with him, his life was full.

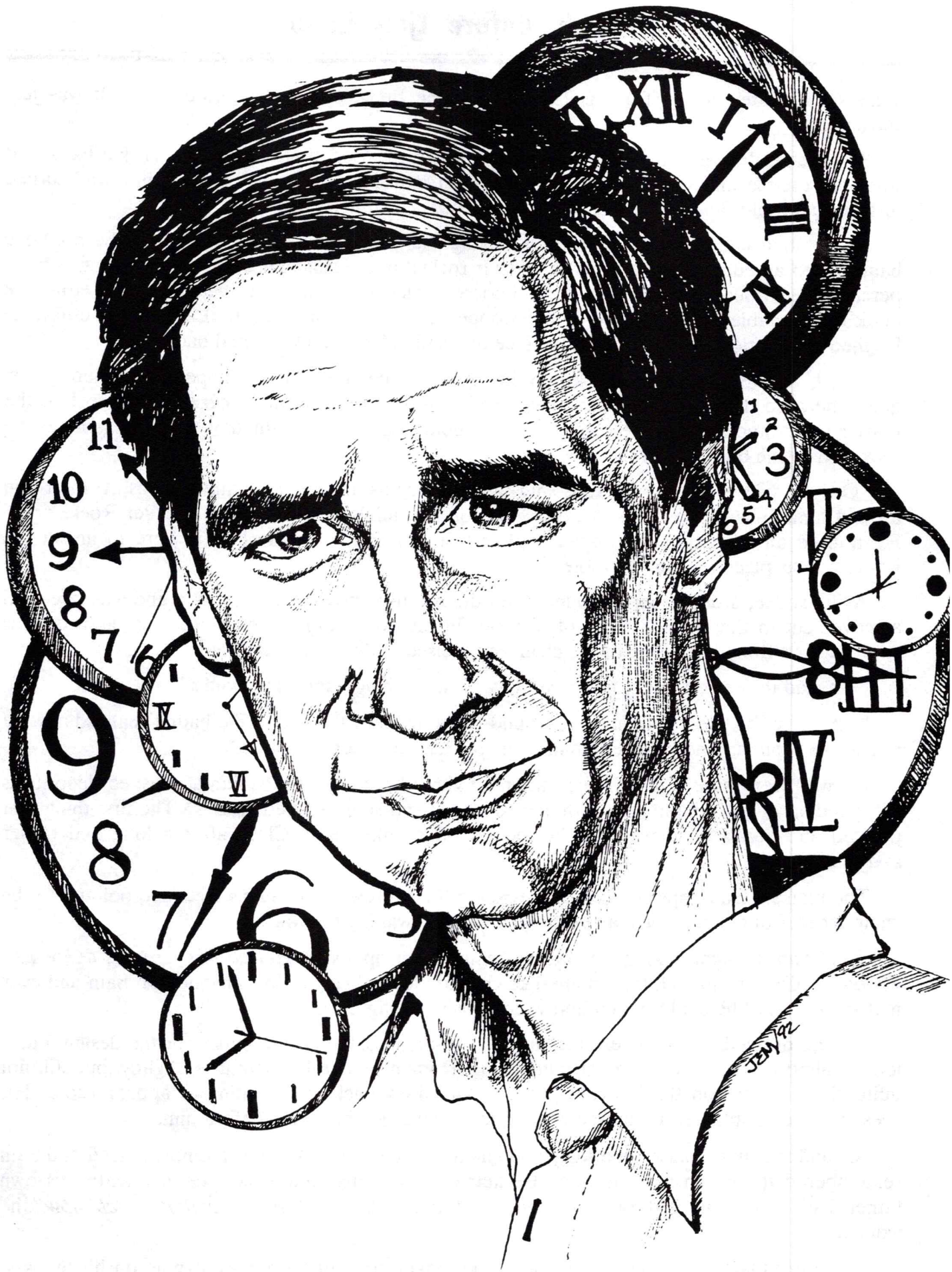
Well, thought Sam, *this room was certainly that--full!* He moved in a step, still not quite sure what he was doing there, and scanned his new environment. There certainly wasn't room for paintings or anything of the sort; instead, three floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, crammed full of books, magazines, and an assortment of bizarre, mismatched objects lined the walls. Everything from antiques to fairly modern computer cartridges and laser discs were represented. There would be no placing this moment in time from the available clues. That, like who he was and what he had been sent here to do, would have to wait for Al's arrival.

The fourth wall, the one directly opposite the door, was taken up with what appeared to be a large bay window, beyond which, in total contrast to the cluttered mess inside, a single crescent moon hung in a pitch black sky.

The room was lit by three small gas lanterns. The light they provided was sufficient, though not overly bright, and seemed to give the room a cosy at-home feel. Directly in front of Sam were two wing-backed chairs, the largest, a rich burgundy color, facing away from him. Professor Sinclair had one of those too, Sam remembered, and he'd often wished he could've conjured up the nerve to sit in it when the professor wasn't looking. But, the few times he'd had the honor of visiting the good Professor on his home turf, the man had never once left the safety of his 'throne,' and Sam, much to his chagrin, was never given the opportunity. Had he not been witness to Sinclair's mad dashes through the campus, arms flaying behind him like propellers, Sam might have wondered if the man had lost the ability to move.

For a moment the familiarity of the place caught in Sam's throat, stirring even more memories of his days at M.I.T. and the other centers of higher learning where he had garnered his various degrees. What a time for his memory to be slowly coming back, and what strange, scattered images!

This was not Professor Sinclair's room, of that he was certain. It came pretty close, but there



Look Before You Leap

were subtle differences. The gas lanterns for one thing, and the assorted junk. It was just too...assorted.

"Where am I?" Sam said aloud, reaching for a small wooden rendering of a Trojan Horse. It was very precise and very old. Carefully, he set it back on the shelf nearest him and turned instead to a well-thumbed copy of Newton's *Principia Mathematica*.

"Interesting collection," he mused, scanning the laden shelves. Turning slightly, his knee banged into an equally packed small table. It rocked and a small speckled object that had been perched precariously on the top of several board games, fell to the floor with a thud. Setting the book on the table, Sam steadied it and stooped to retrieve the object. Lifting it carefully, he laughed as the friendly, brightly painted face of a smiling Pet Rock grinned back at him.

"Well," he said, tossing the rock into the air and catching it. "I sure hope Al gets here pretty quick because I haven't a clue what needs putting right around here. Unless I'm the housekeeper...and if that's the case, I'm going home right now!" Standing upright, Sam set the rock next to the book.

"Or," he said with a mischievous smirk on his face as his eyes continued to absorb the room around him, "maybe I'm here to extrapolate on Einstein's theory...market the Pet Rock...or...." He noticed an old unicycle propped haphazardly in a corner. "Maybe I'm here to invent the wheel!" This place was unbelievable.

As he spoke, a deep roaring sound filled the room--a cross between a lion and a...snore--and a movement in the chair in front of him caught his eye. Sam inched closer, just as two arms stretched out from either side of the chair and a disembodied voice followed.

"I'm glad to see you finally got here. I was just catching a thousand winks."

"Ah, sorry I'm late." Sam moved around to the front of the chair. He hadn't realized anyone was in the room and hoped his flippant dialogue had not been overheard.

He was pretty sure it hadn't been when he viewed the chair's inhabitant. Nestled deep in its soft padding was a frail old man with a white beard and steel rimmed glasses. The first thing that popped into Sam's mind was that he looked rather like Santa Claus after a long and rather severe diet!

The man smiled a lopsided grin as if reading the expression on Sam's face, and pointed to the chair across from him. "Have a seat, boy. I've been waiting for you."

Well, Sam thought, taking the slightly smaller chair opposite, *at least I'm sure this fellow isn't Professor Sinclair*. In fact, this gnome-like creature looked very unlike anyone that Sam had ever met--at least that he could remember, which wasn't saying much.

He was dressed in a rich velvet dinner jacket--Sam couldn't quite make out the design, but it looked almost like a long series of numbers or Roman numerals. Squinting slightly, but still not quite able to focus on the intricate pattern, Sam drew back, not wanting to appear rude. His eyes, however, continued to discreetly analyze the strange apparition before him.

Around the man's neck, on a long gold chain, was a watch. Another memory stirred and Sam remembered the watch that Grandpa Beckett had once had, and how after his death, his own father had kept it in a drawer next to the family bible. *Where was that watch now?* he wondered.

The other man was watching Sam when he looked up, but there was a smile on his lips and

It's About Time

he looked pleased, as if things were going just the way he wanted. He leaned forward and indicated the silver tea service on the cluttered coffee table in front of them. "Tea?" he asked. "It's your favorite."

"Yes, please," Sam answered, determined to stall for as much time as possible. Where was Al when he needed him?

"So," the old man said, handing him the tea cup without asking if he took milk or sugar. "Drink that up and then we'll get down to it. We've got plenty of time." He blinked and smiled.

Oh, boy! Sam thought, *if only this fellow knew.* Time was something he never seemed to have enough of.

Following the old man's example, he gratefully took a sip of his tea--and sat back in surprise. It really *was* his favorite! For once, it appeared that he had leapt into a kindred spirit, at least as far as taste went. The tea was a unique blend of Chinese teas--oolong and some other he couldn't quite remember--that Al had brought back to the Star Bright Project after a fact-finding mission to Hong Kong. With a knowing smile, his friend had said Sam would 'love it,' and love it he did. It had been years since he'd tasted the subtle blend, and the sensation brought back, while not memories, at least the essence of happy times. Sam found himself relaxing immediately and thought that perhaps this leap wouldn't be so bad after all. If he did nothing else but sit around and sip Chinese tea, he'd be quite happy.

Finding himself in a calmer space, Sam began to notice other similarities between himself and... With a start he realized he didn't even know his name this time around. Well then, at least he had similarities between himself and his new persona, whoever that might be. First off, he was wearing a pair of lightweight, tan corduroy slacks and a baggy beige sweatshirt with the M.I.T. logo. He'd had a shirt just like this and, he remembered with a chuckle, clothes conscious Al had cringed at the way he wore it for days on end during the construction of Project Quantum Leap. It had been Al's contention that the casual attire made Sam look even younger than his 30 odd years and didn't quite present the image that the brains behind a multi-million dollar venture ought to project. But the sweatshirt, slacks, and desert boots made Sam feel more at home, and he didn't really care what others thought.

Stretching his feet, he looked down at the tan-colored desert boots and smiled. Nope, this wasn't going to be such a bad leap after all.

"I'll be with you in just a moment." The old man had lifted a clipboard stuffed full of papers from the floor and was busily noting figures down one column with a thick fountain pen. "Everything in its proper place and time you know," he muttered, adding what looked to be a large 'X' to a box on the top of the last page.

"Yes, I know." Sam glanced once more around the room. It seemed odd for this fellow to be so precise in his work. He certainly didn't seem to care what his quarters looked like!

Returning his gaze to the coffee table, Sam studied the mound of books and objects assembled there, all carefully crammed in around the china tea service. His eyes widened and he sat forward in surprise. There were quite a few things here that he actually recognized. First--he reached forward tentatively and ran a careful finger down its cover--a copy of the book *The Physics of Time* by Dr. A. L. Terego. He knew the book to be ancient and yet it looked brand new. It had been one of the first publications he'd ever read on the subject of quantum physics and the theory of time-travel. He'd still been in elementary school when he'd first borrowed it

Look Before You Leap

from the Elk Ridge Library, and it had been old and out-dated even then. But, more importantly, it had sparked his interest and propelled him to a future of questioning, research, and now, quantum leaping.

Beneath it on the table was a tattered copy of *Scientific American*. Sam remembered this too. It was the very issue that contained one of his first published articles on the subject of...gosh, he couldn't remember. It seemed the returning memories were highly selective.

Picking up the magazine, he glanced over at the old man. Muttering to himself and chewing on the end of his pencil, he now looked like a cross between Rip Van Winkle and Isaac Asimov. No doubt he'd get around to Sam when he was good and ready, and in the meantime the physicist saw no harm in further examination of the room's contents. They were obviously here for a reason, if only he could piece together what that was.

Opening the magazine, Sam let the pages fall where they may. And there it was: his first article on the infinite and finite progression of Time--a predecessor to his string theory. He was a undergrad at M.I.T. when he'd published it, and on the whole, it had been received in the scientific community with reserved tolerance. The standard theory at that time, was that Time--in the grand sense--either continued from now and moved forward, or didn't exist at all. Very few people were ready to accept it as a loop, especially from a young upstart. And to offer an alternate theory, when there wasn't even an established one to refute, was considered even bolder. His physics and math had been faultless, if incomplete--he'd amended them somewhat since--but there was also no concrete application, and, while they were ready to consider it, Sam was sure that none of his peers really believed him--with the exception of Dr. LeNigro. His own sister, Katey, had thought it was a pretty neat idea...what she understood of it, which wasn't much. Sam smiled, remembering how she'd thrust her hands on her hips and stormed, "That's my big brother, the one with the big words!"

Sam's eyes glazed at the memory of his sister and how much he missed her now. This room certainly had a way of churning up memories that had long been hidden.

The old man sighed then, and setting down his clipboard, looked at Sam deeply. "Good," he said, pointing to the tea cup. It was not really a question, but rather a statement of fact.

"Yes," Sam answered. "It's my favorite blend."

"I know. So, shall we get down to it?" He sipped at his own tea and seemed to be sizing Sam up. "Are you happy?"

"Happy?" Sam spluttered, having just taken another sip. *Oh, boy!* They were getting into the heavy questions fast.

"Yes, happy. I know it isn't an easy question. But then, any question that really means anything isn't easy, is it?"

"I guess not." *Where are you, Al!* Sam screamed silently.

"Do you enjoy what you're doing?"

And what's that, Sam wondered. It was the sort of question that could be taken any number of ways, depending on who he was this time around. If the man only knew what he--Sam Beckett--was *really* doing, he'd be blown out of his chair. And, seeing as Sam didn't know much at all about the person he had leapt into, he was at a loss for a proper answer.

It's About Time

Was the man across from him a Psychology Professor perhaps, or maybe a Philosopher? Could it be that he was just a Counselor. Maybe this was a college--possibly even M.I.T.--and maybe the fellow he'd leapt into was having trouble with his studies. The atmosphere certainly seemed scholarly though it probably wasn't right on campus. Maybe it wasn't even an academic problem that had brought Sam here. Maybe the fellow just didn't know where he wanted to go in life. The clues were adding up with slightly more clarity, Sam thought, but without even knowing his current name, he still wasn't sure what answer his mentor was looking for.

"M.I.T. is a good school," Sam offered finally, fingering the logo on his sweatshirt and trying to draw the old man out.

"Yes, it is."

His 'opponent' took another sip of his tea. "Did you enjoy your time there?"

Did! That was the past tense. Whoever he was, Sam felt sure he was no longer a student.

Sam nodded. "I did. It was very challenging, and there were plenty of good teachers."

"What about the other students?"

"Well, I was kept pretty busy with my studies, so I didn't have a lot of time to socialize."

"Do you regret that now?"

"Ah...." Sam shrugged. "In some ways, yes. Though at the time I didn't give it much thought." He found he was answering the questions as himself, Sam Beckett, and not as whoever it was that he was here to help. Well, for the time being, he supposed that his own answers would have to suffice. Certainly most students would experience the same sort of problems. And faced with a major identity crisis, at least he could be fairly certain what *he* would answer--or could he?

"Remember this?" The old man pulled a basketball out from under the table and tossed it to Sam.

"It's a basketball."

"Not just any basketball. You won the finals with that one." Sam examined it carefully.

It looked like any normal basketball to him, but he figured he better play along. "Yes, I guess we did."

"How did you feel about that?"

"Great!" he answered genuinely, enjoying the touch of the ball in his hands. "I like basketball, it's a great team sport."

"And you were pretty close to your team, weren't you?"

"Yeah...we did some pretty crazy things in those days."

"And when you went away to school, did you keep in touch with your teammates?"

Sam felt a hurt growing in his chest. He hadn't. The pressures of being the youngest student at a prestigious school like M.I.T. had kept him with his nose to the grindstone. And, he realized with regret, also being the youngest, he had felt very out of place with his classmates. He'd felt more at home with the teachers and staff, although in later years, even a few of them had turned cold and less tolerant of the 'whiz kid.'

Look Before You Leap

"It's a busy world we live in," Sam skirted the question, and, dropping the ball to the floor, poured himself some more tea.

"It's always been a busy world, if we choose to make it so," the man across from him said. "Even the early Etruscans had little time to enjoy themselves unless they set their minds to it."

Reluctantly, Sam nodded. "I guess you're right."

"But even though you were busy, you always made time for your family?" For once this was a question, but somehow, Sam felt the answer was already known.

"I tried," he replied honestly. "I really did. But after my brother died, I kind of put my nose to the grindstone."

"You felt you had to take his place? Be the one to prove them proud?"

"Oh, Tom made them proud, in everything he did. Basketball. The Military. I didn't feel I had to replace that--or surpass it. It was just..." he groped for the proper words, "I just wanted to show them I could accomplish something."

"And show yourself?"

Sam's eyes met the old man's. "Yeah, I guess so."

"A little headstrong are you?"

"I was. I don't think I am so much anymore. I've come to realize that there are more important things in life than achievements."

"Ah."

"I don't mean that as it sounds. I do think it's important that we set goals and strive to top ourselves. And that we keep seeking knowledge. But, at the same time, we can't forsake all else. We have to stop and smell the roses, as Al would say."

"Quaint phrase, that."

The time-traveller chuckled. "Yeah, well it fits."

"So, back to my original question. Are you happy?"

Sam weighed his answer carefully. "My first impulse is to say, yes, I am. I've achieved a great deal. I'm doing good with my life, helping others and improving their lot. I have a friend who helps--"

"Do you appreciate him?"

"Very much so!" Sam leaned back in the chair. "I couldn't do it without him. He's sort of a life-line."

"Do you ever tell him you appreciate him?"

Sam considered. "Yes. But not enough. I tend to snap his head off a little more than I should."

"Criticizing those we care for doesn't mean we don't appreciate them."

"I know...it's just that he's put his life on hold for me. I don't often consider the strain he must be under. And I guess I've grown to depend on him."

It's About Time

“And he depends on you?”

“Not so much, anymore. He did once.” Sam thought back to the time he had been there for Al, just as Al was there for him now. “I snapped his head off then too, but it worked, and I got him on the right track.”

“And that was important to you?”

“Yes.” Sam grinned at the similarity to what he was doing now. Quantum Leaping might not be directly affecting Al’s life, but each of those he’d ‘saved,’ had someone who cared for them as much as he cared for Al. “So, now he’s helping you do that for others.”

“I wonder if he looks at it that way? He’s always been there for others, I just don’t think he gives it a lot of conscious thought.”

“Perhaps he looks at it that if he’s helping you, he’s helping himself.”

Considering, Sam nodded. “I hope so.”

“You think he still needs help?”

“I think we all need a little help now and again. With Al...” Sam paused, wondering if he should clutter up this leap with names from another time, names that wouldn’t apply in the here and now. “You asked if I were happy. Well, I often wonder if my friend is. He’s so busy ‘living,’ I often wonder if it’s just his way of keeping one step ahead. If he stopped for a moment, life might just catch him.”

The old man blinked and smiled. “Ah yes, well, sooner or later Time will win out. It always does. You can’t run forever.”

I wonder how much of a philosopher this man really is, Sam thought. “Time is an interesting concept,” he ventured.

“Yes. It is at that.”

“But even Time isn’t perfect,” Sam added. “You’d be surprised at how much needs to be put right.”

“Surprised? No, I don’t think I would be.” The old man shoved the clipboard under the table with his toe. “There’s an infinite capacity for change. And an infinite number of ways to go about it.”

Sam nodded. “Well, I know one way....”

“You say that as if you wished you didn’t.”

“Did I? Frankly, I don’t know. I don’t know all that much anymore. You spoke earlier about forsaking one’s family and friends for one’s work. I’m beginning to think there comes a time when one has to forsake the work and concentrate on the family.”

“Maybe forsake is too harsh a word.” The man fingered the watch round his neck. “Perhaps it’s just that your priorities have realigned themselves sufficiently. Maybe it’s time to give someone else a chance. And you, in turn, could ‘be there’ for a friend.” He smiled. “It might give him a chance ‘to stop and smell the roses’ as you say. Time does have its own way of righting things, and maybe your friend could benefit from living the lives of others. It might take him a little out of himself.”

The thought of Al leaping through Time stirred Sam. What the old man was saying, made

Look Before You Leap

sense, though Al certainly wouldn't agree with it; in Sam's opinion, his friend carried far too much 'spare baggage.' Unless...unless he was as magnafoozeled as Sam had been when he first set out. Then perhaps Al would be able to really face a situation and not hide his true emotions behind a career or his relationship with women. Sam had been privileged to see the real Al Calavizzi, buried deep beneath the flashy exterior. Maybe it was time Al did.

"Well?" The old man interrupted his thoughts.

"Ah," Sam sat up further in his chair. The conversation had certainly gone in an interesting direction, making Sam stop to consider who this man was really meant to counsel. He'd give anything to look in a mirror right now. "Well, it's certainly a promising idea," he continued, "but I don't think it's likely to happen."

"And why not?"

"I wish I could explain. But I don't think either of us has the time."

"My dear boy, I have all the time in existence, right here in this very room. You see that?" He pointed to a baseball lying on one of the shelves. "That's from the time Bobby Thompson hit a home run to propel the New York Giants into the World Series. And that..." he indicated a charred piece of wood in one corner, "is a fragment from the pyre of the very last witch burned in Salem. Beside it, that's a piece of alloy from the first intergalactic ship to reach the Andromeda Galaxy." Sam frowned. "So you see, Time is all around us. And it is capable of a great many things. Even sorting out the lives of quantum physicists and their navy buddies."

"Oh, my God..." Sam stood quickly and moved behind his chair.

"No, no. That's another department."

The old man stood, no sense of age in his frail-looking body, and, picking up the tea service, moved towards a hitherto unseen door at side of the room. "The other Powers claim I'm not gracious enough, so I suppose I should say 'thank you.' It's been a pleasure working with you, Sam Beckett, and I do appreciate all you've done."

Sam gaped. "You mean...I'm done. I can do home now?"

"Of course." The man stopped and spoke over his shoulder. "And I think you're right. It's about time I gave Calavizzi a shot at setting his life on the right track.

You..." he faced Sam and winked, "you concentrate on reestablishing contact with what is really important. Your family needs you."

"Then you aren't mad? You aren't mad that I played around with your domain and...and invented quantum leaping to begin with?"

"My goodness, young man." He balanced the tea service on one arm and opened the door with his free hand. "Who do you think started the whole ball rolling in the first place?"

"You..." Sam began to feel the tell-tale tingling of a leap. "Wait! I have so much to ask. Will we ever meet again? Will I remember this--" His words were cut off as the leap overtook him.

For a brief moment there was a twinkle in the old man's eyes. "Of course not," he answered all the questions at once. "That would spoil all the fun."

SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER ME

BY SHARI RAMSEUR

“It’ll get easier as time goes by.”

“The worst is over now.”

“Now you’ll be able to start the healing process.”

“At least he’s not in pain any more.”

“He’s with God now.”

“It’s all for the best.”

“At least he died the way he wanted to, in bed.”

The words, well-meaning as they were, did nothing to comfort Sam Beckett as they echoed in his head. So many people had been there at the funeral; precious few of them had managed to be there before when they could have been of some help. Still, he couldn’t be bitter; he didn’t want to waste the energy. He smiled a bit at the memory of all the women who had attended; women of all ages, most of them beautiful, all of them crying. Al had left behind a lot of broken hearts, but Sam knew most of them would heal quickly enough.

Now he needed someone to comfort him, and there was no one who understood. Donna did her best; she came closest to understanding how devastating a loss it was, but somehow nothing she said or did, no matter how sincere, had the effect he wanted. He needed to talk things over with his best friend, who, ironically enough, was the one he was mourning, and hence unavailable for giving advice and comfort. Donna was quiet on the trip home, sensing Sam needed time to think. Once they were home, she left him alone as she went to prepare dinner.

Sam knew he hadn’t gotten enough rest in the past three days since Al’s death, and as a doctor, he fully understood that both the body and mind needed sleep. He was tired, and although Donna had urged him to take a nap, he knew he wouldn’t be able to fall asleep.

He was positive he was wide awake when it first happened. He’d been staring blankly at the empty fireplace, avoiding looking at the pictures on the mantel, the pictures that included several of his best friend.

When he saw the movement out of the corner of his eye, he turned quickly, but saw nothing.

“Donna? Was that you?” he called out.

“What?” Donna came to the doorway, drying her hands on a towel. “Did you say something, honey?”

Look Before You Leap

Sam smiled uneasily at her, trying to sound more cheerful than he felt. "I thought I saw you in here a minute ago. I saw someone, anyway. Thought I did," he amended, as he tried to hide a yawn behind his hand.

"Why don't you lie down for a little while, Sam? You'll feel better after you sleep," she said, concern evident in her voice.

"No, I'm fine, really." He tried to smile more sincerely this time, and was almost successful.

Donna leaned over the back of the couch, wrapping her arms around Sam's chest and resting her chin on his head. "I wish there was something I could do for you, honey. I'd do anything to take the pain away."

"I know you would, and I appreciate it, but there really isn't anything...I'll let you know if I think of something, okay?" Sam lifted his head to look up at her. The upside-down image smiled back at him.

"Okay." She kissed his mouth tenderly. "Dinner should be ready in a little while."

"I'm not really hungry," Sam started to protest, but stopped when he saw the determined look in her face. Donna could be as stubborn as he, and he didn't want to get into an argument about it. He knew that in her own way she was trying to help, as if feeding him would help ease the emptiness in his heart. "Okay, okay, I'm suddenly starving. Now will you please go keep an eye on the food before you burn the kitchen down?"

The light-hearted teasing seemed to have the desired effect. Once again alone with his thoughts, Sam was startled for the second time. This time he thought he heard something. He looked around curiously, then heard it again. It was quiet, but definitely was not his imagination.

"Sam."

His name, spoken in a very familiar voice. He willed himself not to react, trying to rationalize all the reasons he could be hallucinating.

"I'm over here, Sam."

He couldn't ignore it any longer. Turning his head to the corner of the room, he saw something he'd never thought to see again. Dressed in an outrageously loud, yet fashionable electric blue suit, Al appeared to be stepping out of the wall.

"Oh, boy." *Now I've done it. I've somehow managed to go around the bend. I've gotta get some sleep.*

"Sam, why are you looking at me like that? I thought you'd be happy to see me." The familiar voice sounded reproachful and sad at the same time.

"Oh, sure, I'd be thrilled to see you if you were real, or still a hologram, but since I'm obviously not quite all here at the moment, forgive me if I don't jump up and down for joy." Sam was grateful for the noise of running water that would keep Donna from hearing him talking to himself. She was worried enough about him as it was.

"Well, if it's any consolation, I'm not all here either."

"This is worse than when I first leaped. At least then I had the excuse of my brain being magnafluxed. This is not a good sign." Sam continued to speak aloud in order to prolong the

Someone to Watch Over Me

delusion that he was actually talking to Al the way they used to when his friend was a holographic Observer. As delusions went, it was a pretty good one.

“Sam, you’ve got to listen to me. I don’t like this any more than you do, believe me! I always thought it’d be interesting to hang out at my own funeral, but it was creepy. I stayed till the end though. That was nice, what you said, Sam. I really appreciate it.”

The water stopped running, and Sam looked nervously in the direction of the kitchen.

“If you keep your voice down, she won’t hear you.”

“This is crazy!” Sam whispered, turning back to the figure in blue. “It doesn’t make any sense! And why aren’t you wearing your uniform? Shouldn’t you be wearing what you were buried in?”

“Oh, sure, that’s what I’d be wearing if you were imagining this, because it’s what you’d expect. But this is real, Sam, not a dream or hallucination! One good thing about all this is you get your choice of clothing--or none at all, if you want--and I always liked this color.”

“I can’t believe this is happening.” Sam slumped further into the couch.

“Donna’s right, you know, you should get some sleep.” The solicitous tone underscored the caring in the words. “Go on and take a nap till dinner’s ready.”

Sam looked directly at Al, studying the image carefully. He blinked several times, but the image didn’t change. Still, he refused to believe it was really Al’s ghost. He was desperately tired, but was afraid if he fell asleep, his hallucination or whatever it was would come to an end. As bizarre as it seemed, Al’s presence was comforting, even if it wasn’t real, and Sam didn’t want to lose him again.

Al seemed to know the direction of his thoughts.

“It’s okay, Sam. I’m not going anywhere. At least not anywhere I can’t come back from. I’ll still be around when you wake up. If I’m not, just concentrate on me for a while and I should show up.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“Well...” Al hesitated just a bit, “pretty sure. It may take a little practice, but I’m not going anywhere where you won’t be able to reach me if you need me. I promise. Now try to get some sleep, okay? I’m worried about you, kid.”

Sam laughed softly. “You’re worried about me? That’s pretty funny.” He began yawning and couldn’t suppress it any longer. “Maybe I will take a short nap, if you’re sure you’ll still be here.”

“Cross my heart and hope to--ah, well, I’m making as firm a commitment as I can here, okay? I’ll be here, now just go to sleep.”

“Okay,” Sam mumbled, sinking quickly into slumber.

Al shook his head, amazed at how quickly Sam could fall asleep, as if willing every troubling thought out of his mind. It was a handy trick to have in your repertoire, that was for sure. He sighed, perching on one of the nearby chairs, watching Sam sleep. Nothing was going as easily as he had hoped. He’d thought Sam would balk at believing he was real, but he hadn’t expected

Look Before You Leap

quite such an alarming early rejection. At least now it seemed Sam was willing to consider the possibility of his existence.

Sam tossed his head back and forth, shifting around, trying to get comfortable on the couch. Something was wrong, very wrong, but he couldn't seem to identify what it was. There was something nagging at the back of his mind, but he wanted to ignore it. All he wanted to do was sleep, then he'd be able to concentrate on whatever problem was bothering him. The light tap on his shoulder startled him, and he jerked awake, looking alarmed.

"Sorry I startled you, honey. I hated to wake you up, but dinner's ready."

"Dinner?" It seemed such an alien concept, until he remembered Donna had been preparing the meal just before he fell asleep. Something else was going on then, too, but he was suddenly too distracted to think about it. He realized he was starving, and suddenly dinner didn't seem like such a strange idea.

They were both quiet during the meal, Sam trying to concentrate all his energy on the food, and Donna watching him, trying not to let him know she was observing him. His preoccupation during a meal wasn't unusual, but this time she was worried. He'd been acting so strangely all day. Not that he didn't have every right to, considering the funeral and all; he'd lost his best friend, and it was natural for him to be quiet and subdued. Still, she couldn't help but worry.

When he refused the offer of dessert, even though it was one of his favorites, she knew something was wrong. They washed the dishes together in silence. When Sam said he was going to go into his study and get some work done, she wanted to ask him to talk, to tell her what was troubling him, but held back. He'd tell her when he was ready. Sam wasn't secretive by nature, and usually shared his concerns with her, but she knew he wanted and needed privacy to sort out his feelings. She had work of her own to do, but decided she needed to relax a bit and found a book she'd been trying to read for days. It looked like she'd have plenty of time to finish it tonight.

Sam sat at the computer console and stared blankly at the screen. He looked at, but didn't see the tropical fish that currently swam and cavorted across the monitor. He hadn't lied when he'd said he wanted to work, but now he just didn't feel like it. He'd always found a measure of comfort in the old-fashioned computers operated with keyboard and mouse, although he occasionally missed Ziggy's presence.

"Aw, look at all the cute little fishies! I still think I like my screen-saver program better, the one with the strippers that really strip. You never did really look at that one for very long, did you?"

"It was disgusting! Not to mention degrading!" Sam got caught up in the familiar bantering before he even realized he was talking to someone who couldn't really be there.

"What's happening to me? Am I going crazy? I know you're not really here. You have to be some kind of figment of my imagination."

Someone to Watch Over Me

“Hey, thanks a lot, Sam! Can’t you treat the dead with a little more respect than that? What do I have to do to get you to take me seriously? I’m real, I’m here. Deal with it.”

Sam spun around in his chair, looking at Al with a gleam of inspiration. “Al, I think I’ve got this figured out. Apparently there was a lot more involved with the link of our neurons and mesons than we first realized. Remember the time we simo-leaped, and even after we got straightened out again, we still seemed to have parts of each other’s minds? Well, I’ve got a theory that since the link was never removed because we thought it was too dangerous, we still had a part of each other’s mind. That’s what’s allowing you to come back like this.”

“I’ve got a much simpler theory, Sam. I’m a ghost; accept it.”

“I can’t. There’s no such thing as ghosts.” Sam’s voice was firm and confident.

“What about Mrs. What’s-her-name, Troian’s housekeeper? How do you explain that, if there aren’t any such things as ghosts?”

Sam narrowed his eyes and glared at him. “I was hoping you wouldn’t remember that. Still, this is all so hard to believe.”

“Any harder to believe than psychics, angels, and mummies walking around? Not to mention that time you fought with the Devil? Do you still say you don’t believe in him? Boy, am I glad I didn’t run into him again! Come on, Sam, admit it, we’ve both had to take another look at the supernatural. It still gives me the creeps, but I have to accept it. By the way, Angela was wrong.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed as he stared suspiciously at Al. “What do you mean? Wrong about what? And who’s Angela?”

“You remember--ah, never mind, you don’t. She’s someone you met a long time ago. Anyway, she’s wrong about there being a dress code. Like I said before, you can wear what you want; they don’t care.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“The Management,” Al explained, exasperated. “So Angela was just kidding about that.”

“What was she kidding about? The Management where?” Sam was getting confused and frustrated.

“Uh, I can’t tell you too much, but I can tell you Angela was right about being your guardian angel.”

“What? Guardian angel? And I thought I was the one going nuts,” Sam whined.

“You are.” Al shook his head as he realized what he’d said. “I mean, you’re not going nuts, but you’re just getting confused. I know this isn’t making much sense. Let me try again. Angelita Whatever-Jimenez-Whatever was someone you met on a leap, but you’ve blocked it out. You’ve heard of the Flying Nun? Well, this was the Singing Angel. She said she was your guardian angel, and I didn’t believe her. Well, now I do. But she’s not your guardian angel anymore....”

“Al, I can’t believe this conversation! I don’t believe in angels, guardian or any other kind!”

“Well, thanks a lot, pal! So what am I, chopped liver?”

Look Before You Leap

“No, you’re dead,” Sam reminded him bluntly.

“Well, yeah, of course. Geez, Sam, you really know how to hurt a guy. I’m not exactly an angel--”

“This is news?” Sam asked sarcastically.

“Don’t interrupt! I’m not an angel, but I am your guardian. Sort of. Temporarily.”

Sam laughed. He didn’t mean to, but he couldn’t help it. It was just too bizarre to deal with in any other way.

Al waited for Sam’s laughing fit to end, then went on. “I’m here to help you out. I don’t know exactly what I’m supposed to do yet, but I’ve been assured I’ll figure it out eventually. Until then I have to stick around and kind of watch over you. Kinda like when you were leaping, putting things right that once went wrong....”

“So what’s going to go wrong in my life that you’re here to fix?” Sam was genuinely curious, his scientist’s mind suddenly interested.

“I just got through telling you, I don’t know that yet. I guess we’ll have to wait and see what happens. I don’t know exactly what I’m supposed to do or how I’m going to do it, but in the meantime, I have to say I don’t mind this chance to talk to you again. I miss you.”

“I miss you, too.” Sam’s eyes were suddenly misty, and he hastily wiped them with his sleeve. Al turned away, not wanting Sam to see his own reaction. He’d never been comfortable with anyone else’s openly displayed emotions, although he was often wildly emotional himself. He could always blame it on his Italian heritage, but it was something he’d had a hard time reconciling in his own mind.

Sam was beginning to accept the unbelievable, but wanted confirmation. The scientist in him wanted empirical proof, although he doubted it would be possible.

“I wonder if Donna can see or hear you?” he asked aloud, intrigued with the idea.

“Nope. At least I’m pretty sure she can’t. I’m sure we’ll find out eventually. Now, Sam, don’t get that look--don’t call her in here and ask if she can see me! She’ll think you’ve gone around the bend.”

“You’re probably right.” Sam looked disappointed, then brightened. “Hey, it’ll be just like it was when I was leaping! In a way I miss it.”

Al didn’t like the direction of the conversation. “You’re not thinking of trying it again, are you? You could have been killed in the Accelerator! You heard Ziggy, it’s now totally inoperable.”

“Maybe it could be fixed. I could try....”

The wistful tone in Sam’s voice hurt Al. He knew better than anyone how much Sam’s experiment meant to him. Still, the possible danger far outweighed the benefits. He thought Sam had agreed with him that Whoever had been controlling his leaps was through with him and didn’t want him to try again. In fact, now he knew it for a fact. Maybe that was why he was there, to talk Sam out of trying anything so foolish. Not that Sam was easy to talk out of anything, once he’d set his mind to it. Look what had happened when he leaped; common sense

Someone to Watch Over Me

and Ziggy's warning were overridden by his desire to prove his theory and save his Project. Never mind that his life might have been forfeit. Al didn't want Sam taking such chances again, ever.

"Sam, I don't think you're supposed to try again. You did it once, and you proved it could be done. That should be enough to satisfy anyone! You got another Nobel, you had your 15 minutes of fame, and now it's time to get back to a normal life."

The moment the words were out of his mouth, Al knew that that was the problem. He had seen how restless Sam had been the last few months; Donna had noticed it as well and tried to help, but Sam seemed to be resisting help. Verbena Beeks had done her best to counsel him, to help him adjust to regular life again, but Sam had insisted he was fine and didn't need counseling. After the first half-dozen sessions, she hadn't been able to convince him to come back, as he was no longer required to. He'd fulfilled his obligation, but that was all he'd been willing to do.

He'd had almost limitless choices in career after his triumphant return to his own time in the year 2000, but he had a great deal of difficulty deciding what to do. Research and development, teaching, lecturing around the world, starting his own medical practice, all had some appeal, but none was what he really wanted. It was obvious he didn't know what he wanted. He'd settled for heading the Physics Department at M.I.T., but was already becoming bored and restless.

Sam had been silent for a few moments, considering Al's words. He knew it was true that he should leave well enough alone. He'd accomplished far more in his life already than he'd ever had a right to expect, but it just wasn't enough. He loved being back in his own time, and remembering his marriage to Donna had been one of the best moments in his life. As much as he loved her and thought he wanted to settle down to a normal life, it was becoming more and more difficult to resist the temptation to try to go back and fix the Accelerator. While leaping he thought that he couldn't wait to get home. Now he was home, he wanted to be travelling through time again, facing new and challenging predicaments. He'd learned so much, about himself and others, and living other people's lives was an incredible experience in itself.

"Al, I don't think I want things to get 'back to normal,' whatever that is. I want to make a difference in people's lives."

"There are a lot of ways you can do that, Sam," Al objected. "You could use your medical degree to heal the ones that are sick, or do research into finding cures for diseases. You could try to do something about the depletion of the ozone layer, or other environmental problems. You could help the whole world that way. There are so many things you can do, Sam, with your knowledge, your compassion, and your understanding of people. Why don't you put that brain of yours to use thinking of ways you can help others, without endangering yourself by stepping into the Accelerator again."

Sam sighed in frustration. He'd already come up with a number of things he could do, but none would give him the immediate, direct satisfaction he'd often had while leaping, where Al could give him instantaneous updates on people's lives after he'd helped them. Being a doctor or doing research, even working on solutions to the destruction of the environment, were all commendable things to spend his time on, and they would all help a number of people. But it just wasn't the same, and he knew Al was aware of that. They were practical suggestions, just not quite what he wanted to do. Teaching in itself was great, in some ways, because he could see how he was affecting some of the students. Others, however, seemed to be in his classes for

Look Before You Leap

reasons other than learning about physics. He wanted them to care about the subject, really care. It wasn't that he expected all of them to have the same passion for it that he had, but if they were honestly interested in learning, that made it worthwhile. Unfortunately, a lot of them seemed to be there more because they had to, rather than out of any choice, while some were more interested in taking a class with the 'famous' Dr. Beckett, the celebrity flavor of the month.

Then there were the inordinate number of young women who spent their time gazing dreamily at him, giggling whenever he called on them. They preyed on him after classes, lying in wait in his office, with offers they thought he couldn't refuse in exchange for a passing grade. Some of them thought they could make it worth his while to give them an 'A.' None of them seemed to care that he was married, or pick up on his broad hints that he didn't approve of their predatory seduction attempts. He knew it was a situation Al had envied, but it wasn't one he appreciated, and neither did Donna. It was almost enough to drive him back into the Accelerator again. Almost, but not quite. Then, there was also the fact that his best friend had just died. All in all, things were not going well.

"Things just aren't working out like I thought they would, that's all. When I was leaping, I wanted a nice, normal life. Now that I have one, I want to be out leaping through history again, living parts of other people's lives. Something must be wrong with me that I can't just be happy with what I've got."

"Nothing's wrong with you, Sam."

He jumped guiltily at Donna's voice, not having heard her enter the room. Al looked as if he were ready to bolt, and Sam shot him a 'don't you dare' look. Al stayed.

"I know you're used to talking your problems out with someone no one else can see, but you can talk to me now. You don't have to talk to yourself." Donna tried to make a joke of it, but Sam could see she was hurt.

"I'm sorry, honey. I know I should be talking to you about this. I guess I was just trying to get it clear in my mind first."

"Gee, thanks, Sam. I'm a ghost instead of a hologram, and I still don't get no respect."

"Yeah, you and Rodney, what a team," Sam muttered.

"What? Did you say something?" Donna asked, still wondering at his odd behavior.

"Nothing," Sam covered quickly, "it's not important."

"Hey, if you're gonna insult me, I'm leaving. I don't need to listen to this."

Sam knew Al was only kidding, but he didn't want to take a chance he might leave and not come back.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I didn't mean you're not important."

"That's better." Al seemed mollified for the moment.

"I'm glad to hear that." Donna seemed relieved. "It's nice to know my opinion counts."

"Of course it does," Sam reassured her, hugging her tightly. "You're right, I shouldn't keep things to myself so much. I've just had so many things on my mind lately."

"That's perfectly understandable, with all you've been through. I just wish you'd let me help,

Someone to Watch Over Me

that's all." Donna looked at the computer screen. "You haven't done anything at all, have you? Have you been sitting in here and brooding all this time?"

"Who, me?" Sam laughed, a trifle guiltily. "No, I've just been sitting here talking to myself. It helps me to sort things out in my mind."

Donna pulled up a chair and sat next to him. "Well, then, you just go right ahead and talk to yourself, if that works. Or, you could always try talking to me."

She said it quietly and non-judgmentally, but Sam felt guilty anyway.

"I'm sorry, Donna, I don't mean to be keeping things from you. It's just that I don't really know what I want. I don't want you to get the wrong idea if I say I'm not happy with the way things are going. It's not a reflection on you, or how I feel about you. It's more how I feel about myself."

He had an earnest, sincere look on his face that Donna knew well. She knew what he was trying to say was difficult, and yet he was concerned about her feelings. Smiling, she took one hand in hers and held it comfortingly.

"It's okay, Sam, I know you've been getting restless lately." She squeezed his hand slightly to stop him from interrupting. "Don't worry, I know it's not me you're unhappy with. I know you love me as much as I love you. You've had such an incredible transition to make, and you've handled it much better than most people would, but it's got to be a shock to your system."

"It is. I still can't quite believe I'm home for good. I wake up in the middle of the night and wonder for a minute where I am, who I am this time."

"I know." Donna had been aware of the nightmares and subsequent waking shock, but had tried to let Sam work things out himself, at his own pace. He usually settled down immediately, as soon as he realized he was home, in his own bed, and wasn't going to be leaping somewhere else.

Al hadn't been aware of his friend's sleeping problem, but it didn't surprise him in the least. He'd gone through the same thing for years after being repatriated, waking up in a cold sweat, terrified he would find himself back in the jungle again. It was always such a relief to have the freedom of a large bed, instead of a cage that was too small to stand up or sit down in. His sympathetic gaze met Sam's, as the younger man struggled to explain himself.

"I keep thinking this is all a dream, and I'll wake up soon, and be somewhere else, living some stranger's life, not having a life of my own. I know that's not rational thinking, but it's there. And yet a part of me wants that back again. For years I wanted nothing more than the stability of a routine, daily life. Now that I have that, it's just not enough. I need to feel useful, like I'm doing something to help. Instead I just feel trapped."

Looking at Donna to gauge how she had taken his words, he saw, by her smile and her eyes, that she hadn't taken them personally.

"I know this is rough on you, Sam, and I wish I could do something to help you. Don't you think it's time you started taking care of yourself first? I know you want to help people, and that's wonderful, but you can't do anyone any good if you're not healthy yourself. There's nothing wrong in wanting what you can't have; I think that's just part of the human condition, to never be content with what's right in front of you. Usually we don't realize what we have until

Someone to Watch Over Me

it's too late."

Al had moved to stand next to Donna, and Sam looked directly at him as he spoke.

"I know that's true, and I have waited too long to appreciate what I have. I did that with my Dad, and now with Al. I wish I could have told him how much he meant to me."

"Aw, Sam, don't get mushy on me," Al protested, although his own eyes were misty.

Donna hugged Sam, holding him tightly. "I'm sure Al knows. I wouldn't be surprised if he's listening to you right now."

Al shot her a sharp look, wondering if she could sense him, but she didn't turn around.

"I'm sure you're right. He's probably still watching over me from wherever he is now." Sam didn't dare meet Al's gaze. No sense scaring Donna with a laughing fit; she was worried enough as it was.

"That's right, Sam, and I'm gonna make sure you don't do anything stupid," Al asserted.

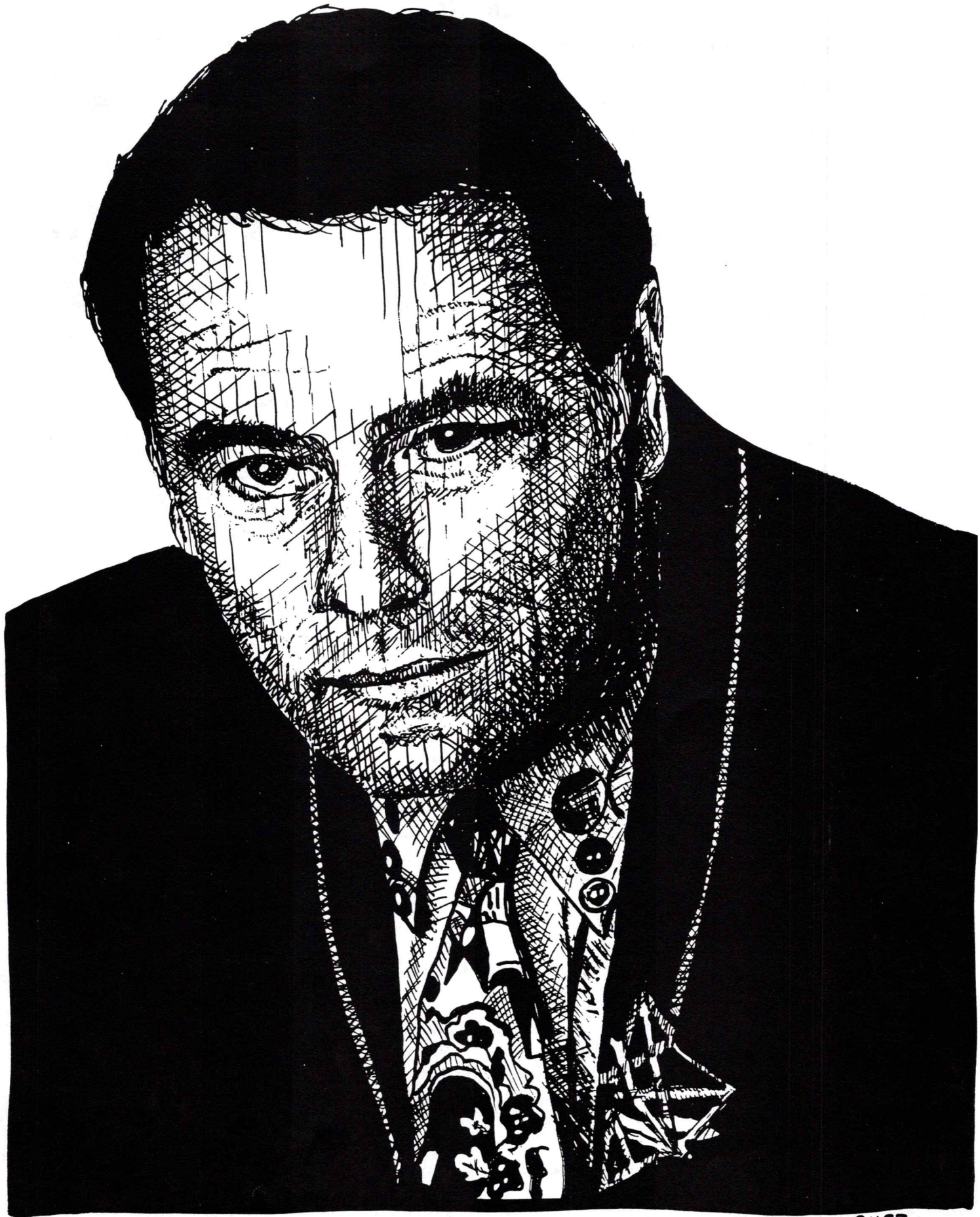
"I know if Al were here he wouldn't want you to do anything hasty or stupid, Sam. You've had a lot of things on your mind lately, and it's not a good time to be making any important decisions."

Wanting to reassure her, Sam smiled and kissed her. "Okay, I promise I won't make any hasty decisions. I'll be okay, I just need time. I won't do anything as dangerous as leaping without talking it over with you first. Sometimes it helps to talk things through. I wish I'd done that before I leaped, but I didn't feel like I had time. I wouldn't give up what I did, but I have you to think about now, too. I didn't the first time around, or..." Sam paused as he considered his words.

To Donna, there was only one history, the one she had gone through. She had felt somewhat betrayed when Sam had leaped without talking to her about it, although she thought she understood his reasons. In Sam's memory, he knew things had been different before he leaped, but he couldn't remember the details.

"I still don't remember exactly what happened the first time I leaped. I mean, I remember the second time, the one you remember..." He looked at Donna's face to see if she were following his train of thought. She nodded and he continued. "I know intellectually what happened, because Ziggy kept track of both histories. I just don't remember it happening that way. I remember wanting to talk to you and Al about it, but you were both at that fundraiser. I didn't tell Gooshie till the last minute, because I didn't want to argue with him. I knew he'd say, 'Listen to Ziggy,' and I didn't want a computer's advice. I guess I should have listened anyway, but..." he sighed, gesturing with his hands, "...I can't help thinking God wanted me to leap. He wanted to use me to set things right. I still don't know if it was my own stubbornness that made me do it, and He took the opportunity to use me for His purposes, or if He somehow guided me into doing something I wouldn't normally do."

He waited for Al to give him an answer, but he didn't get one. Instead, Donna took his restlessly moving hands in hers and held them still. "Honey, I know you want to work everything out, but I don't think you'll ever really know. Some things just aren't meant to be known. It wasn't like you to do something so reckless, but you'd never been under that kind of pressure before. I've lain awake quite a few nights, trying to decide if I would have done the same thing, if



MICHAEL L. RUFF

Look Before You Leap

it had been my decision to make. I still think you did the right thing. I've missed you terribly, but I wouldn't want to change things. You did so much for so many people; that's got to count for more than the worry and concern of one person.

"I know it wasn't an easy decision to make, and those years you were gone were probably much worse for you than for me. Think of all the wonderful things you saw and did, people you met whose lives you improved. You would never have done all that under any other circumstance. Maybe if you'd waited until Ziggy said the Accelerator was ready, maybe the experiment would have worked the way it was supposed to. You wouldn't have changed any lives, just observed the past. If it had worked like it was supposed to, you couldn't have changed anything. This way, God used you to give people a second chance. I firmly believe that; even Ziggy admits it. If you believe that, too, it should make your mind rest easier."

"It does, in a lot of ways. I just wish I knew for sure, one way or the other, if it's really over."

"It is over, Sam. Trust me." Al had never looked or sounded so solemn.

"I wish I knew what to do or say to convince you. You're back home where you belong, this is real, and you're not going to leap again. Not unless you use the Accelerator again."

"Try and convince me this is real," Sam suggested, grinning at her. "I'll bet if you put your mind to it you can think of something to convince me."

"Hmmm. Maybe I can at that."

Al watched with great interest as they kissed, forgetting for the moment this wasn't a leap, and he wasn't an Observer any more. When he realized Sam was glaring at him, he started guiltily, then waved good-bye before disappearing. He'd be back, later--the next time Sam needed reassurance or advice, or someone to talk to--until his mission was accomplished. It was a good sign that Sam didn't appear worried about when or if he'd return. Perhaps he'd done all that was necessary to help Sam. He hoped not, as he wasn't ready to lose his best friend just yet.

The next day found Sam in a lighter mood. He was almost ready to believe Al's appearance had been a hallucination of some sort, until he had another surprise visit. He was in the middle of drafting a letter to the Committee, rejecting their offer to continue Project Quantum Leap. Sensing someone looking over his shoulder, he expected to see Donna there. To his surprise, he found Al, wearing an almost tasteful peach-and-lime combination. Only Al could have carried it off.

"Don't sneak up on me! I don't even have the Imaging Chamber door opening as a warning!"

His complaint was automatic, not serious, but Al had already given it some thought and had a solution. Reaching into his inner jacket pocket, he produced a small gold bell on a chain. Dangling it in front of Sam's nose, he rang it a couple of times. It produced a pleasant, but quite audible chime. Grinning, he draped it over his own neck as Sam watched with amusement.

"There. You happy now?"

"Ecstatic! At least now I'll know when you're around. You could have left a little earlier last night, you know," he added reproachfully, as he recalled Al's hasty exit.

Someone to Watch Over Me

Al didn't blush, but he did look away, anywhere but at Sam. "Sorry about that. I just kind of forgot it wasn't a leap. I didn't mean to watch, I just couldn't help it! Can I help it if my libido is still working?"

Sam grimaced. "That figures. You would find a way."

"I'll try to be more careful in the future. I don't think Donna would appreciate the thought of--"

"No, she wouldn't!" Sam interrupted, not caring how rude it sounded. "I don't want to chase you away, but just try to give us some privacy, okay? Can't you go to..." his arms waved expressively in the air, in an unconsciously Al-like gesture, "...wherever it is you go to when you're not here?" he finished uncertainly. He started to open his mouth to ask a question, but Al stopped him quickly.

"Uh-uh, Sam, I can't tell you that. Top secret." He stilled Sam's next attempted objection. "You don't have clearance for that. You'll find everything out eventually, but hopefully not for a long, long time. And don't even think about asking me that! Even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you."

"This is as bad as when I first leaped!" Sam grumbled. He was enjoying the familiar banter too much to want it to stop.

"What is? Honey, you're talking to yourself again." Donna had entered the room quietly and had heard part of Sam's side of the conversation. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were talking to Al!" Her smile indicated amusement, but it didn't reach her eyes.

Sam was good at thinking on his feet, but he hated deceiving Donna. "What would you say if I told you--"

"Saaaam," Al sighed warningly, "don't tell her!"

--I was talking to Al?" Sam gave Donna his most charming smile.

"Sam, don't do this!" Al was pacing with agitation, reaching automatically into his pocket for a cigar. He remembered he no longer carried them and looked for something else to do with his hands.

Donna returned Sam's smile, coming over to put her arms around him. "There's nothing wrong with that, honey, as long as he's not answering you back!"

"Well--"

Al nervously pulled at the chain around his neck, causing the little bell to tinkle lightly.

"What was that?"

Donna looked in Al's direction. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Sam tried to think of a way to distract her.

"It sounds like a bell. There it is again!"

Al stopped pacing, looking alarmed. "Time for me to get out of here, Sam," he muttered.

"No!" Sam's response was automatic.

Donna had turned quite pale. "Sam, that sounded like Al's voice!"

Look Before You Leap

“You can hear me?”

“You can hear him?”

The simultaneous responses didn't deter Donna. She still couldn't see Al, but she could hear him.

“What's going on? Al, is that you? This can't be happening!”

“It isn't, it's all a dream.” Al knew it didn't make sense, but it was all he could think of to say.

“Don't patronize me, Al!” Donna wasn't looking directly at him, but in his general direction, and it made Al nervous. It was one thing for Sam to be able to see and hear him; quite another for Donna.

“I don't like this, Sam! I'd better go check with the Management and find out....” Without thinking about it, Al had tried to punch the exit code into the Ziggy remote he no longer carried.

“The Management? What are you talking about? Sam, what's going on?”

Sam stood and held Donna tightly to him, trying to soothe her. “It's okay, don't be frightened. It's only Al.”

“Oh, great, Sam! Thanks a lot! Now we've really blown it!”

“Why? You're still here, aren't you?” Sam asked logically. “Maybe it's not like leaping, Al. Maybe it's okay for Donna to know.”

“Know what?” Impatience was making Donna's voice ragged.

“I guess it's too late now, anyway,” Al sighed. “Can you see me, too?”

“No.” Donna's voice was a bit calmer. She clung to Sam, trying to look past his shoulder, to see if she could spot the elusive Al.

“But you can hear me, right?”

“Yes. I didn't hear you earlier, just Sam. After I heard the bell, though, I could hear you.”

“This is crazy, Sam!”

“You're telling me!” Donna replied. “Sam, can you see Al?”

“Mm-hm. And hear him,” he added, “since yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” Comprehension dawned suddenly. “Is that why you were acting so strange last night?”

“Yeah. I didn't want to scare you, and I didn't understand it myself, at first. Then we thought maybe you weren't supposed to know.”

“Then how come I heard the bell?”

“Good question,” Al interjected. “That's one I'd like to find out.”

“Where'd you get it?” Sam asked curiously. “Or is that 'classified' too?”

“No, it's not classified!” The scathing look Al gave Sam ensured he could finish his explanation. “I got it the same place I got the suit.”

Someone to Watch Over Me

“Then maybe it was meant to work that way. Maybe that’s the way He wants it.” Sam punctuated his words by looking up at the ceiling.

“The Management,” Al corrected. “Maybe you’re right. I hadn’t thought of that.”

There were still quite a few unanswered questions that were disturbing Donna. It was also annoying not to know exactly where Al was.

“Sam, where is Al now?”

“He’s over there.” Sam pointed to a spot near the corner of the room. “Now he’s--Al, will you stop pacing and just stand still for a minute? Or sit down? If you can, that is.”

“Sure I can.” Al sat on the battered old couch across the room from Sam’s desk. “Is that better?”

“Much. Thank you.” Sam dropped the sarcasm and pointed out Al’s location to Donna. “He’s on the couch, just about dead center. Sorry, Al,” he apologized as his words sank in. “Poor choice of words.”

Donna couldn’t see Al’s expression, but could imagine it. She faced him and tried to address him directly. “I hate to ask this, Al, but...are you a ghost? You can’t be a hologram.”

“Of course I’m not a hologram. The Imaging Chamber’s been shut down for months. I guess a ghost would be as accurate an explanation as any. I prefer to think of myself as a guardian angel, though. Sort of.”

“Ghost or guardian angel, right. Thank you.”

Donna turned to Sam and smiled tightly at him. “Could I talk to you for just a minute? Alone, please?”

A bit uneasily, Sam agreed. “Will you stay here, Al? We’ll just be minute.”

“Take your time.” Al waved them out the door. “I’ll be here. Got nowhere else to go at the moment.”

The moment they left Sam’s study, Donna shut the door. “Would you mind telling me just what is going on?”

“Al just told you.” Sam didn’t think it would be enough of an explanation, but didn’t think he could explain it himself, either.

“I heard what he said, but I can’t quite believe it. I’m a scientist and so are you. How can you believe in ghosts? Or guardian angels?”

Sam smiled and led her into the living room, sitting down with her on the couch. Once they were settled comfortably, he tried to explain.

“I didn’t know what to believe at first. I thought I was going crazy, hallucinating, something like that. But then I kept seeing him and talking to him, and we figured out what happened. I didn’t want to believe it, but I have to. I saw a lot of strange things on my leaps, and I met a lot of different people; including a ghost, and a guardian angel--according to Al, though I don’t really remember her. Also a mummy, and even the Devil, who I definitely did not believe in.”

“Sam, I know what Ziggy reported, and I know what Al wrote up in the official reports, but

Look Before You Leap

it's all so fantastic....”

“More fantastic than travelling in time? Honey, I did something everyone said was impossible! Most people don't believe in time-travel, any more than they believe in ghosts, but I did it. I saw a UFO of some kind, too, even though Al never really believed it. I think he was afraid to think about it, but I know what I saw! Al told me my guardian angel, Angela, saved my life, and I believe him. Now he says he's here to help me, sort of like I was helping people on leaps. He's here to make sure I don't do something disastrous with my life.”

“Like what? What could he be here to fix--oh, Sam, you don't mean you were seriously thinking about leaping again!”

“I was. Was being the operative word. Al kind of talked me out of it; well, he and you together, actually. He helped me to see how much good I can do for people without having the instant gratification of knowing exactly what I've done and how it will help someone in the future. I don't have to know the exact impact I've had on someone in order to help them. I can see that now. It would be wrong for me to leap, and Al's assured me the Management doesn't want me to do it. In fact, there's a possibility of some kind of penalty if I do leap, and I don't wanna find out what that is.”

“Oh, Sam, I don't know what to say. I agree it would be wrong for you to leap, but I don't think I like the idea of there being some kind of cosmic penalty. What about the balance of right and wrong? If there's an evil force out there, the Devil or something else, that's trying to undo what you've done, what's happening now that you're home? Is someone like Alia still out there trying to change the things you put right?”

“I don't know, but I don't think so. I don't think I would have come back home if He weren't through with me. Or the Management, that is,” he corrected with a wry smile.

“If all this has helped you decide not to leap again, that's wonderful, because I don't want you to leave me again. On the other hand, you were able to help so many people--”

“And us, don't forget,” Sam interjected playfully. “I got us back together again, before we even met!”

Donna smiled and leaned forward, kissing him. “That's one thing I'm thankful for, no question about that! What I was thinking about was how much I appreciate having you here with me, not out there somewhere, alone....”

Sam put a finger to her lips, shushing her. “I wasn't alone, not really. I had Al there with me a lot of the time. I don't know what I would have done without him, how much I would have remembered on my own. I'm not even sure I could have done any of the things I needed to do without his help and advice. I just wish there was some way I could do something for him. I can't help thinking if I could just pinpoint the right time, I could go back and--”

“And what, prevent him from having a heart attack? How? What could you possibly have said that would make him change his lifestyle? He knew he was taking a lot of risks, but no amount of lecturing about cholesterol or quitting smoking would have changed his mind. Tina nagged him enough about it while you were gone, anyway. She still feels so guilty, like it's somehow her fault.”

“It could have happened any number of ways. Just because they were in bed at the time

Someone to Watch Over Me

doesn't mean it was her fault."

"Well, they were trying something new at the time, and I guess she thought maybe if they hadn't..." Donna's voice trailed off and she stifled a giggle, knowing it wasn't right to laugh at the tragedy.

"Oh." Sam's face colored a bit, though the news didn't really surprise him. "Well, at least he probably died happy, right?" They broke out into convulsive laughter, unable to hold back the building tension.

"Hey, what are you two cackling about out here?" Al's voice sounded indignant, which made Sam laugh even harder.

When he had quieted his laughing fit, Sam faced Al. "Hey, I thought you were gonna wait in the other room."

"I didn't know you were gonna take so long," Al complained. "I was getting ready to fall asleep in there, so I figured I'd better come out here and see what's going on. So," he continued, looking at Donna, who refused to look at him and was trying to wipe the tears of laughter away with a tissue, "you want to let me in on the joke?"

"No, I don't think you'd appreciate it," Sam teased.

"What? I have a great sense of humor! Try me," he coaxed.

"Should I tell him?" Sam asked Donna, trying to prolong the suspense.

"Why not? It's not like he's going to be shocked." Donna was trying not to giggle again, but it was an effort.

"What, what?" Al was growing more impatient by the second.

Sam finally relented. "We were just discussing the, er, cause of your demise, and whether or not Tina should feel guilty about it. We decided she shouldn't," he added generously, watching Al's reaction.

"What a way to go! All I can say is, if it was my time to go, I couldn't have picked a better way! You two should try it sometime. I doubt it'll cause you any problem, at your age."

"No thanks," Sam demurred. "I don't want to try it, whatever it is. I don't even think I want to know."

"Oh, I don't know, Sam, it might be fun--" Donna stopped when she saw the glare her enthusiasm had earned her. "Never mind."

"Sometimes you're such a prude," Al chided his friend affectionately. "Just for that, I'm not gonna tell you what we were doing."

"Good." The decisive tone in Sam's voice underscored his contempt. "Next time don't try something so complicated." His voice faded away as he realized what he'd said.

Al shrugged philosophically. "There won't be a next time, ever. If I could give you some advice, pal, it'd be 'lighten up.' You need to learn to enjoy life more, stop worrying about every little thing. Right, Donna?"

"Oh, I agree."

Look Before You Leap

“Great, now you’re ganging up on me. I can’t believe you; you’re still nagging me about my sex life!”

“I don’t have any complaints,” Donna interjected in a seductive tone of voice.

“Uh-oh, I think that’s my cue to get outta here. I’ll be back if you kids need me.” Although Al still didn’t have the handlink, he automatically began making the motions, and seemed perplexed when he didn’t materialize in the Imaging Chamber. With a sheepish grin, he looked up and said, “Now, please.” His Sam imitation didn’t help either, and he began to get impatient. Without warning, he disappeared, to Donna’s amazement and Sam’s amusement.

“Oh, boy, do I know what that’s like,” he uttered with heartfelt sympathy. “Now that we’re alone, do you want to elaborate on that last comment?”

“Fishing for compliments?” Donna teased.

“Mm-hm,” Sam replied, kissing her.

“Well, let’s see what I can do to boost your ego.”

Hours later, Al watched the two sleeping figures, neither of whom appeared to be restive. After a while, he spoke softly, barely above a whisper.

“I’ve been told you won’t remember any of this, and neither will Donna. That’s the rules. I’m gonna miss you, but I think you’ll do just fine on your own now. I’ll see you later; a long time later, I hope. Good-bye, Sam.”

Sam shook himself awake, thinking he had heard his name. Pale moonlight shone in through the curtains, illuminating the room enough to see that Donna was still fast asleep. There was no one else in the room, not that he really expected to find anyone there. The voice he’d heard sounded like Al, so it must have been a dream. His mind was at rest now that he had solved the ‘mystery,’ and Sam turned over and went back to sleep, ready to tackle the adventures the new day would bring.

Biographies

One final THANK YOU goes to the contributors of LBYL III. Without them, the zine would not be possible. I'd like to take the time to introduce them to you:

SCOTT TILSON: Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. Scott is a wild and crazy guy (not!) who works in a food distribution warehouse for his bread and water (though a thick pay-check might have something to do with it too.) Even though he describes it as job a chimp could be trained to do, it allows him a lot of time to think, enjoy his music collection of over 200 tapes ranging from Billy Joel to Pink Floyd, and to sneak in some science-fiction or Star Trek reading. At 25, he's spent a fifth of his life active in fandom but has enjoyed STAR TREK, comic books, and the works of various SF authors long before that. A late-comer to QUANTUM LEAP, he found it to be a buried treasure (and he doesn't mean the way NBC hides it in the schedule) and has spent the last 3 years as the Treasurer of the Toronto based QUANTUM LEAGUE and in-house author of the story serials in its newsletter, *The Newsleaguer*. *Forget* is an expanded revision of a one-shot from there called *The Sidestep*. Beyond this, he likes to enjoy nature (walks in the park), let his mind be stimulated through audio/visual means (veg before the tv), and play with his young cocker spaniel, Duffy.

LYNN HILL, Burbank, Illinois. Lynn is a teller supervisor from Chicago. Though QL is her favorite at the moment, she got into fandom through THE MAN FROM UNCLE, and enjoys most buddy, action-adventure, imaginative type shows and movies. No cats, but she does have a huge pet goldfish named Napoleon. Baseball is a favorite spectator sport of hers.

RICK ST. CLAIR, Sommerville, Massachusetts. Age 46, and born in North

Dakota, has only recently become active in fandom: he attended his first con in 1991, began writing fanfic in 1992, and premiered his first zine, *Loose Ends*, at MediaWest XII the same year. His love of TREK and DOCTOR WHO goes back to the '70s, as a sideline to his career as a recognized classical composer. He holds an M.A. and a Ph.D. in music from Harvard and has composed over 70 works for instrumental and vocal combinations. Rick strives for the same range of emotional expression in his fannish work as in his music. His story, published here, is partly autobiographical and partly drawn from a composite of fellow incest survivors' experiences. A booklet which he wrote on the dangers of cults to incest victims will be published in the near future. He is active in the recovery community and finds fandom to be an exhilarating and cathartic outlet.

GARY HIMES, Aberdeen, Ohio is an English Instructor at Eastern Kentucky University. In the past he has contributed QL stories to such fanzines as *Oh Boy, Play it Again*, and *Quantum Mechanics*. He recently returned from a wild weekend at the second QUANTUM LEAP Convention where he claims Deborah Pratt touched his wrist (which he has sworn never to wash again.)

TRACY FINIFTER, New Brunswick, New Jersey is a computer science and history major at Rutgers University. She has been a QUANTUM LEAP fan since the show's beginning and is also a fan of STAR TREK. *The Wall* is Tracy's first attempt at fanzine writing, but she has many new leaps in the works. When she is not studying or writing, Tracy serves as a volunteer on her hometown and her school's volunteer fire departments.

JUANNE MICHAUD Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Juanne works as a temporary, and freelances in art, hoping to eventually earn a living by writing and drawing. She has been in fandom for 7 years now, and

Look Before You Leap

her other interests include writing, (mainstream sf. & mysteries) music, political cartooning; reading, and she is an avid cat lover. Her fan interests are in STAR TREK, QUANTUM LEAP, MAN FROM UNCLE, and gaming. Juanne's cartoons have been published professionally in *Starlog* since Oct. 1991 and has had political cartoons published in an Ontario daily paper. In fandom, look for her work in *I.D.I.C. I*, *Look Before You Leap I*, *A Different Reality*, *Edge of Forever III & IV*, *Alien Brothers I & II*, and *Trekzine Times*. She is currently working on a STAR TREK novel *An Oasis For My Soul*.

SHARI RAMSUER, San Carlos, California. Shari is a receptionist at an Independent Living Center. She has been in fandom for about 5 years, and has been a QL fan for 3. Other of her favorite fandoms include SHADOW CHASERS, MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. and BLAKE'S 7. She has had several MFU short stories published under various names, and has other QL stories published, *Journey's End* in *Green Eggs & Ham 2*, *A Promise Kept* in *Look Before You Leap II*, and *Once Bitten, Twice Shy* for *Green Eggs & Ham III*. She also has written a QL zine novel, *Shattered*, which was nominated for a 1993 FAN Q award. Shari is currently working on two other QL novels, *Do No Evil* and *Obsession*, both due out in the summer of 1994.

MICHAEL RUFF, Irondequoit, New York. Michael works as a television news photographer in Rochester, New York. He has been involved in fandom for four years, since publishing his first novel, a STAR TREK & NEXT GEN crossover entitled *Time And Time Again* which received the 1990 Fan Q award for Best STAR TREK Novel. Since then, he has edited and published many other zines besides this one, namely *I.D.I.C. I & II* (STAR TREK), *Times Change* (LOST IN SPACE/STAR TREK), and *Pitchforks and Pointed Ears* (STAR TREK.) Mike has also

contributed to *Rerun 10*, *Leaping To Conclusions* (QUANTUM LEAP) and *Curses Foiled Again* (FRIDAY THE 13TH). Along with the debut of this zine, Mike's second novel, a sequel to *TATA*, *Time After Time And Time Again*, has been published. Mike's first attempts at artwork are contained in this zine, and he hopes to continue with his fan art in his free time.

SHIELA SCHNEIDER, Portland, Oregon. One of the original contributors to *Look Before You Leap* recently changed jobs, which doesn't give her much time to write; but does afford her the chance to work in the middle of a city, reported to be facing an earthquake measuring 9 on the Richter scale, sometime in the next decade. She has been in fandom 10 years and has written nearly 200 stories to date, most of which have been accepted for publication. The 50 or so are attempts to break into the professional market, including 2 novels. Her fandom interests include DOCTOR WHO, MacGYVER, QUANTUM LEAP and whatever else seems to be too good for television alone, she says.

REBECCA REEVES, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Rebecca, another original contributor, has been in and out of fandom for the past 25 odd years, but until QUANTUM LEAP, has never found a show that stirs her creative juices quite so much. In the space of 3 years, she has written dozens of stories. An editor in her own right--with 4 issues of the BLAKE'S 7 zine, *Input*, to her credit--she dwells in the 'real' world in Victoria, British Columbia, where she works for CFAX Radio.

See you next Leap!