

OH
BOY
V

OH BOY V

A Quantum Leap Fanzine edited by Sandy Hall

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ART: <=minds-i-view=> cover, pages 26, 198, 210

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Terri Librande pages 86, 96, 124

Todd Parrish pages 50, 74, 190

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OBLIGATORY EDITORIAL

It feels so strange doing an editorial without Sharon. How do you do a dialog with just one person without making everyone think you're crazy or that Sam Beckett has leapt into you and you're talking to your holographic pal? Sharon, suffering post-LOVE AND GLORY burnout, took some time off editing.

Speaking of our novel, the first story in OH BOY V, *Panache* by Jacklyn M. Egolf was written about some of the events in LOVE AND GLORY. We were pleased that she liked the novel so much that she wrote a story based on it.

I want to thank my contributors for their donations. There are a wide variety of stories for you to choose from. Al fans hopefully be pleased with the Unseen Season selections. As there were only five stories with Al leaping, I incorporated them into OH BOY V. In *The Leap Not Taken*, Gary Himes starts it off with Al remaining in the body of Tom Jarret in THE LEAP BACK and continues leaping throughout the rest of the series. Lorraine Anderson with her wonderful (although slightly sadistic) sense of humor has leapt Al into a girl on her prom night in *An Orchid for Al*. Get out your Kleenex for *Nightmare Revisited* by Kim Round. It is a very smarmy story where Al is in the life of a POW in Viet Nam. For a lighter change of pace, T. Good has written Al into Daddyhood in *The Best Man for the Job*. Gary finishes off the series with his version of *Mirror Image*.

Now, to keep the Sam fans happy, there is *The Bunny Leap* by the Batterbys, where Sam leaps into a little girl. *Rewind* by Jane Freitag and *A Twist in Time* by Cheryl A. Bellucci are stories based on actual events.

There are two sequels to stories in OH BOY III. Pat Dunn and Diana Smith have written a slightly 'steamy' sequel to *Leaping to Conclusions* called *Security Clearance*. *Circles* by Jane Mailander is another two Kleenex story that takes off where *Last Leap* took off.

Again for Al fans, there are several stories dealing with Al and the Project. *Death of a Wingman* by Jane Freitag explores Al's relationship with Chip, his old Navy buddy and Sam. *Absent Without Leave* by Kim Round deals with Al and Beth's reaction to Sam having changed their past in MIRROR IMAGE. *A Brief History in Time* and *The Love of my Life* by Patricia Poole addresses with the same subject, but in a different way. Sharon Wisdom wrote another extremely smarmy post-MIRROR IMAGE story where Sam gets to again fix something for Al and at the same time, himself. Sharon also wrote the only Waiting Room story about Nigel Covington. You may be seeing more of M.J. Frank and Crystal Nauyokas' Austen in the future from *A Leap of Relative Importance*. From what I hear, they have written a whole series of stories based on him.

Full Circle by Robin C. Kwong and *Island* by Jennifer Smallwood both give Sam a much needed rest. Pat Woodhouse's *Interlude*, one of my personal favorites, contemplates the reactions of a wife left behind while her husband is leaping about in time. (I wonder if that is because my husband is starting his third year of medical school and I feel abandoned?)

Speaking of husbands, I would like to thank mine and my kids for being patient while I've put this zine together. They've been very understanding with my ravings. I'd also like to thank my co-worker, Jane Ann, who patiently looked at my layout to make sure everything was straight and gave me general support when I was about to lose it.

I'd also like to thank my artists, <=minds-i-view=> has surpassed herself with the cover, and her interior art ain't bad either! Todd and Terri came through again and I appreciate it a lot. Since I didn't have time to do a story for OH BOY V, I put in a piece of art. Please be kind, it's my first.

Sharon and I are both going to be taking at least a year off publishing OH BOY. It's difficult to do it alone, and I've been contemplating trying my hand at a vampire novel, so we won't be taking submissions for OH BOY VI. If we decide to do one next year, we will advertise.

I am publishing a Quantum Leap/ Forever Knight novella called *Leap into Knight* by Sharon and myself. You can obtain it for \$5.50 post paid from Sandy Hall, 4819 B Meadow Lark Lane, Columbia, MO 65201. I would love to hear what you think of OH BOY V. Send any LOCs to the above address, and I'll make sure the appropriate contributor receives a copy.

Last of all, I'd like to thank Don, Dean and Scott. Without you guys, we wouldn't have Quantum Leap.

PANACHE

by

Jacklyn M. Egolf

"I was born in a ditch
By a mother who left me there
Naked and cold and too hungry to cry..."

Al Calavicci paused inside the opening to the huge, almost-finished Imaging Chamber. "Sam?" he called into the dimness. "Sam?" But the only answer he got was the recording of Joan Diener, bitterly singing Aldonza's lament.

The Navy scientist knew that his best friend and nominal boss, Sam Beckett, had to be somewhere in the vicinity, if not actually in the Chamber itself. Sam considered *Man of La Mancha* the theme music for PROJECT QUANTUM LEAP. He'd played that disc, and only that disc, until everyone else on the Project was sick of it. So Sam had to have been in the Chamber when the disc started. Al normally found him perched on a crate behind the pile of building materials, dreaming *his* 'impossible dream,' and tapping formulas into his laptop computer. But Sam normally skipped over the song that was playing now; maybe he wasn't there.

"Hey! Sam!" Al called, louder this time, and took a few steps further into the cavernous structure.

"Al?" The younger man's voice came from a stack of cable spools near the center of the Chamber. "I'm back here."

Al purposefully made his way towards the half-darkened circle of utility lamps.

"--Take the clouds from your eyes
And see me as I real--"

The music cut off. The older man, amused, thought, *The kid was so involved he didn't realize what was playing.*

The 'kid' came out from behind the piled-up spools of cable, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. "I guess I lost track of the time again. Donna send you to get me?"

"No, I sent me to get you." Al stopped just inside the ring of light. "We've got reservations at Santino's, remember?"

Sam blinked, then recovered. "Oh, gosh, Santino's! The last Friday of the month! I really did lose track of the time."

Al smirked. "You lost track of more than the *time*, pal. Were you coming into work tomorrow, too?"

The younger scientist's grin was sheepish. "Just let me finish what I was doing--" He ducked behind the cable spools.

These last-Friday dinners were a continuation of a sort of tradition, started back at CLEAR STAR. Even though Sam had been working for Al at the time, and they'd seen each other every day, they'd found themselves having dinner together once or twice a month. Al had called it 'catching up on stuff.'

Over the years, the practice had continued, interrupted when the two men went their separate ways, resuming when the Navy officer would hire his civilian friend for another project. Even though Sam and Donna had exchanged frequent invitations with Al and his current wife, these dinners were no substitute for what Donna called 'the guys' nights out.' So of course, when what 'goes around' had 'come around,' and the civilian scientist had hired his Navy friend to work on QUANTUM LEAP, one of the first things Al had done had been to ask Sam out to dinner...

That had been years ago.

"Ready?" Sam had the laptop under his arm. A sports jacket hung over his shoulder by one hooked finger.

"I've been ready," the other man replied, as they began the long trek through the Chamber. "I wasn't sure you were here." He indicated the silenced disc player with a backward jerk of his head.

Sam regarded Al with a confused expression.

"You don't play that song," Al pointed out.

"Oh." The younger scientist shrugged. "I don't like that song."

"Sammy, Sammy," Al Calavicci used his best 'sadder but wiser' look.

"You gotta take the bad with the good, kid."

"Sometimes you can fix the bad, Al."

"Only sometimes, pal."

"But you've got to try." Sam's voice was tight with sincerity. "You never know what you can do until you try."

This was an old debate between them, one in which neither was willing to give in. The Navy man tried a new tack. "'To right the unrightable wrong,' huh? Who set you up as Don Quixote?"

Sam's face lit up, as it did whenever he latched on to a new idea. "So I'm Don Quixote now? Who does that make you? Sancho?"

Al could feel a grin spreading across his face. "Sancho, huh?" He hadn't seen it coming, but said, "I kinda like that."

"I thought you would."

The older man pretended to give the idea serious consideration. "I dunno, though, Sam. I'm not really the sidekick type."

"I didn't mean it like that." The Project Director was quick to correct his partner. "We work together on things. We always have." He looked a little sheepish. "But you can't deny that you keep me down to earth when I get too theoretical."

"Well, yeah."

The gray-green eyes turned mischievous. "You don't dress any better than Sancho did, either, you know. You give the term 'glad rags' a whole new meaning."

The brightly dressed man bristled in mock indignation. "Just what is that supposed to mean?"

Sam poked a finger at the precisely tailored cutouts in the lapels of the red linen blazer. "Your collar has holes in it."

"Holes!" Al stopped abruptly, Sam with him. "I will have you know, my sartorially challenged friend, that this is the hottest thing in Milan."

"But we're not in Milan."

"Well, somebody has to teach you stick-in-the-muds some style." Sam started walking again, as if he hadn't heard. Al caught up with him. "This is cutting edge stuff!"

"Cutting edge?" the other man queried. "No pun intended?"

It took the red-jacketed man a minute to understand what his companion meant. "No, pal, no pun intended. I don't think Sancho made puns."

They were still grinning as they reached the Chamber entrance. Al held open an imaginary door, and waved his boss through. "After you, Your Grace." His bow was low, but his grin was wicked.

"Now, that's just what I'm talking about." As they passed into the gloom of the lower level's main corridor, Sam's face had an expression Al couldn't read. "You're respectful, loyal--"

"Oh, pleasee!"

"You stick by me. You show me the flaws in my theories--"

"Sa-am!"

--encourage me when I can't see how I'll ever realize my dreams-- "

"Saa-aam!" The Navy man enjoyed being appreciated, but enough was enough.

Sam stopped to face his partner squarely. "I couldn't have done it without you, Al."

"Whaddaya mean, 'couldn't'? Of course you could have, Sam! I don't wanna hear 'couldn't'!"

But the look Sam gave him was half serious and half smug, and Al realized the physicist had made his point.

"Okay, okay, so I kicked your butt when you needed it." They'd reached the elevator that went up to the surface. Al pushed the call button. "But I'm not the only one--" He broke off. The Navy officer could see all too clearly where this conversation was going, and he wasn't sure he wanted to go there.

"You're not the only one what, Al?"

The admiral glanced up. He recognized that expression: it was a combination of curiosity and concern. *You oughtta set the kid straight on this one, Calavicci, he told himself sternly. He really overdoes this gratitude thing sometimes.*

Al pushed the call button again, carefully not facing Sam. "I'm not the only one who's loyal around here. I seem to recall a certain hotshot scientist helping me out a time or two."

Sam sounded surprised. "Well, yeah."

The elevator doors opened, and the two men got in. "Don't give me 'well, yeah', as though it was nothin'! You've saved my butt more than once, and you know it." The speaker jabbed at the button for the ground floor, and the doors closed.

"Al--" Sam started to protest.

The elevator started its upwards climb. *What's it gonna take to persuade you, pal? Do I have to spell it out?* Al sneaked a glance at Sam's face. Apparently he did.

"Wellll, let's see." He began counting on his fingers, his gestures wide. "One: you helped me not to go stir crazy, my first weeks back stateside. Two: you kept me from gettin' in trouble with NASA, the time I cut my arm open. Remember?" Another quick glance; his friend *did* remember, but still wasn't convinced.

Time for the mushy stuff. The older man sighed inside. Geez, the things I do for you, kid!

"And what about that weekend in Vegas? Now, that stunt would've won anybody the Purple Heart for loyalty." He'd done everything he could, those awful three days, to destroy both his career and his friendship with Sam. But Sam hadn't let him. "Hell, you wouldn't leave even when I tried to make you!" And he cocked a wry expression at his partner.

The elevator car bobbed slightly as it stopped. Al pushed through the doors before they were completely open, and started down the wide corridor, through the dim night shift lighting.

"Al--" Sam hurried after him.

He turned to watch the other man catch up. "Now what?"

"I've always wondered--maybe it's none of my business--"

Al hadn't seen Sam squirm like this in some time. "Spit it out, buddy."

"I've never understood why you started having--problems." Al narrowed his eyes at Sam, who saw the look, paused, then went on with more determination. "I mean, I know things weren't right between you and Ruthie. But I thought that was because of your--drinking--not the other way around."

What's gotten into the kid tonight? Normally Sam would never be this nosy. Al regarded his companion closely, rocking back on his heels. Sam must know he didn't want to talk about this, but he'd asked anyway. He must really need to know.

And considering what would have happened to the Navy officer had Sam not intervened that weekend, maybe Al did owe him an explanation.

"Well, lemme tell ya, pal--"

"I'm sorry, Al--"

They both stopped. Al waited for Sam to say it didn't matter, that he didn't mean to pry. But the younger man just stood there, watching him expectantly.

Al huffed a deep sigh. "It was partly Ruthie, yeah." His voice was hushed with old memories. "But mostly it was that--freakin'--job." He glanced at his friend's concerned frown, looked away. "Aw, Sam, you know how it is with me. I'm a pilot, not some desk jockey. Even when I'm not actually

flying, I've gotta be going somewhere, pushing the envelope somehow. Anybody could've written those reports." He chuckled quietly, faced his former Research Co-ordinator. "You even wrote one, so they couldn't be too hard." The physicist was quick to respond. "We wrote that report, Al. I crunched the numbers and you, well,--"

"Supplied the BS?"

"Supplied the poetry." Sam's face softened at the recollection. "'The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen...?'"

"Yeah, yeah." But the older man knew his listener was remembering the response Al had given him: 'And I hang out with a boy scout preacher, so I know the definition of faith.'

Their eyes met for a long moment, bright in the dim lighting of the hall. Then Al cheerfully punched Sam's arm.

"Let's go get you some dinner, pal. You're quotin' Scripture at me-- your blood sugar musta bottomed out."

With that, Al led the way down the rest of the corridor, past the guard, and into the deep blue twilight of the desert outside.

* * *

Joey Santino, his starched chef's hat askew on his graying hair, hovered over their table. "What do you think, *Ammiraglio*?"

Al Calavicci thoughtfully chewed the bite of sausage he'd taken. "It's not bad, Joey. But it does need something." He looked across the table. "You wanna get in on this, Sam? Or are you too full of calimari from the antipasto?"

Sam Beckett looked up, surprised, and swallowed. "You go ahead, Al. You're better at this than I am."

Joey watched, concern creasing his usually cheerful features, as his patron took another bite. "Not more garlic?"

"No, no...Less garlic." The Italian-American considered the possibilities. "More fennel, maybe...? Yeah. More fennel and more oregano."

"That's what I thought. But I needed another opinion." The restaurateur picked up the saucer with its experiment of sausage. "My father, he would turn in his grave if he knew I was making *salsiccie* with turkey instead of pork. But my customers are all so healthy these days. Low salt! Low fat! That's all I hear."

"We want to live longer, Joey," Sam's tone was gently teasing, "so we can enjoy more of your good cooking."

"You flatter me, *Dottore*. This he learned from you, eh, *Ammiraglio*?"

Al shot a sour look at his younger partner before he answered, "Sam makes compliments, Joey. He won't let me teach him flattery."

But Al was pleased to hear Sam join in the laughter, as Joey Santino went back to his kitchen.

The edge of his appetite comfortably blunted by the antipasto, Al busied himself with lighting up a cigar. He took a long drag, careful to blow the smoke away from his dinner companion, and saw the scientist regarding him pensively. "Whatcha thinkin' 'bout, pal?"

"You."

"Me? You looked more like you were tryin' to figure out that bogey in the retrieval program."

"No." The younger man let the single word hang. Sam was trying to provoke his curiosity, Al could tell.

"Okay, buddy, I'll bite. What about me?" A thought occurred: "You really *don't* like the jacket, do you?"

"Actually I was thinking how good you look." Sam put up a hand before his friend could make a sarcastic comment. "I know, I know, I usually give you a hard time about your clothes. But they're part of who you are. The cigars, the sports cars, the good food, the clothes: they're all part of your style, of your attitude towards life--" Sam broke off, either not sure his

partner would be comfortable discussing this, or not sure he could explain himself accurately.

Actually, Al was curious. He'd known for years that Sam accepted him the way he was. But this sudden glimpse of how the other man really *did* see him was intriguing. "What kind of attitude?"

"I'm--I'm not sure I can explain it." Sam's face puckered in frustration. "Well, take your clothes, for example. You always wear something a little different, some extra something. And make it work, somehow."

"Why, thank you, Sam." Al spoke softly, letting his friend know he was sincerely touched, then smiled wickedly. "Al Calavicci does not know the meaning of plain."

"That's what I'm talking about. That's who you are, that's how you live: with style, with *elan*, with--*panache!*" Sam's face got that 'Eureka!' look again. "That's who you are, Al! You're Cyrano!"

Baffled, the older man replied, "'Scuse me? I'm who?"

"Cyrano! Cyrano de Bergerac. You know!"

The young genius's leaps of intuition sometimes made the older man feel very stupid. This was one of those times. "You're in mad scientist mode again, pal. You wanna explain this so I can understand?"

"Don't you know who Cyrano is?"

"Yeah, he's the guy who thought he was too ugly to ever get the girl. What's he got to do with me?"

"It's what we were talking about before. It's okay if Sancho isn't a perfect fit. You're Cyrano, Al, and I'm Christian." The Navy officer must have looked as confused as he felt, because his companion went on in a rush of enthusiasm. "Don't you see it? The older, more sophisticated man, taking the green country boy under his wing--"

"Saaa-aam--"

--showing him the ropes, teaching him how to behave in polite society."

"Saaa-aam--! You were never that green. At least not by the time I met you. And you're pretty good at figuring out how to behave without my help."

Sam grinned, obviously too excited by the picture he was creating to let Al spoil his fun. "Well, maybe I'm exaggerating a little." Then he sobered somewhat. "But you can't deny you've taken my dreams, the things in my heart, and translated them into words other people can understand."

"What?" *Dammit, the kid was on his gratitude kick again.* "The nozzles on the Funding Committee? I just know the right buzzwords, that's all, pal; the right buttons to push."

"Yes, you do." Sam focused an intensely meaningful look at the Project Liaison, obviously wanting him to accept this appreciation of his help. Al tried for a moment to stare his boss down, but finally shifted his gaze, and took another drag on his cigar.

"And you can't deny you have his style, Al, his *panache.*"

"I do not have any hats with long white feathers, Sam."

The younger man regarded his partner with an look of affectionate disgust. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. I mean the way you do everything just a little bit larger than life."

The Navy officer stared out past their table, thinking. In some ways Sam knew him better than he'd thought, but in other ways--Sam recognized the what, without understanding the why. Al considered how much to tell him.

"I'm sorry, Al. You know how I get carried away--"

Al glanced up, saw remorse in the gray-green eyes. "Hey, it's okay, Sam, I'm not offended. It's just that, well--" *What the hell? Tonight seemed to be a night for confidences.* He met his friend's eyes straight on, took a long breath. "Runt little guys like me, we gotta be bigger than life sometimes, so we don't get overlooked." He gave a self-deprecating smile, shrugged, and busied himself blowing smoke rings.

But he could feel Sam staring at him, even through the cigar smoke. "You're not a runt, Al," the younger man objected finally. "Maybe you're not quite as tall as some guys--"

"I'm not as tall as a lotta guys." It was suddenly important that Sam understand. But how to explain--? "Did I ever tell you about Black Magic?"

"No. No, I don't think so."

"Charlie 'Black Magic' Walters. He's a pool player, the greatest in the world." His gestures got expansive as he settled into the telling of the story. "We traveled together for a while, one of the times I ran away from the orphanage. Now, he taught me a lot about 'how to behave in polite society'." Al glanced up to be sure his listener had caught the quote. "One of the things he always told me was that 'Fat ladies, short men, and Negroes, have to dress better than other folks to get taken seriously.' He was right, too."

But the face across the table still looked unconvinced. *Geez, I guess I gotta spell it out, huh?* Al shifted in his seat, uncomfortable, but determined to make Sam see. "Try to picture me dressing the way you like to, in faded jeans and a broken-in shirt."

Sam's eyes tightened with the effort. "I can't," he replied, shaking his head. "New jeans and a expensive polo shirt, maybe."

"I'd look sloppy, wouldn't I?"

"No more sloppy than I do." The voice was reluctant.

"Yeah, maybe. But you've got the size to pull it off. On you it looks like Midwestern sincerity. On me it would look like," and the speaker grimaced, "Brooklyn slum."

"Al--! I've never heard you talk like this. I mean, you've told me a little about your childhood, but this..."

"Well, it's not somethin' I like remembering. Poverty never is, except as something to be proud you've left behind you." The older man paused, shaking his head as the memories came back. "Wearing hand-me-down clothes from the neighbors' kids, three sizes too big so you'd 'grow into them', listening to your mother hassling the butcher every week for a little extra meat on the soup bones, lying about wanting seconds when you're still hungry, so your folks won't be ashamed that there's not more food--" Al stopped, amazed to hear himself whining about the bad old days like some old geezer. He'd never meant to go so far.

Al looked up, saw the stricken expression on his best friend's face. "Aw, Sam. It was all a long time ago. I didn't mean to give you a sob story. I don't know what got into me."

But his companion was absorbing what he'd heard. "If you didn't get enough to eat--that's probably why you're, well, not really tall."

"The word is short, Sam. It's okay, you can say it. And yeah, that's probably part of it, although my dad's side of the family were all pretty short people." Al smiled at more pleasant memories. "Short, dark and feisty; that's the Calaviccis."

But Sam still seemed worried. Al reached across the table to lay a reassuring hand on Sam's arm.

"Lighten up! Geez, if I'd known you were gonna take it this bad I never would've brought it up. It's all water under the bridge, anyway. All happened a long time ago."

Admiration showed in the younger man's eyes. "You've come so far, Al."

"Yeah, well...don't make a production of it, okay, pal?"

Sam seemed to know he'd better drop the matter. "Okay. Pal."

But Al suspected this wasn't something Sam would forget.

* * *

" --Somewhere in the past, they all still exist,
That first true love's kiss,
The loved ones we miss--"

Al Calavicci heard the break in Sam's voice, and opened his eyes. He looked across Katie and Jim's living room, past his friend's family. The younger man, seated on the sofa near the Christmas tree, continued to play the guitar, head deeply bowed. It seemed he was just concentrating on his

fingering. But Al would have bet money that Sam was improvising until he could sing past the lump in his throat. Al had heard breaks in that voice before.

Donna, curled up next to Sam on the old sofa, gently laid a hand on her husband's shoulder. He adjusted his grip on the guitar, and raised that shoulder to squeeze his wife's fingers against his jaw. After a moment, he continued,

"--So no matter what changes, or how far we roam,
Time can never destroy our home--
Time never can destroy our home."

Everyone in the room was still as the last chords faded. The Project Liaison met the dark eyes of the Project's senior researcher, sitting on the sofa with her hand tucked under her husband's chin. They both were thinking of offices and laboratories hidden under the New Mexico desert. They two, better than anyone else in the room, knew why the designer of QUANTUM LEAP had written that song.

"Sam, that's beautiful." Thelma Beckett was the first to speak, but softly.

"It sure is." Katie, Sam's sister, chimed in. "Why didn't you sing it earlier, before the kids went to bed? You'll have to sing it for them after Christmas dinner tomorrow."

Her brother ducked his head. "I didn't mean to leave them out," he admitted. "It just got late, and...well, you know."

Tom, Sam's brother, rose from the pillows at his wife, Melinda's feet. "What I know," he said, deliberately lightening the mood, "is that I'd like some more eggnog."

"Me, too." Jim joined him. "Who's for a refill? Al?"

"No, but thanks anyway." He'd tried Katie's eggnog earlier, before she'd spiked it, and decided once again that eggnog wasn't eggnog without some kind of booze in it. "I will have some of Thelma's grape juice, though. All this present opening is thirsty work."

As Tom and Jim took requests, Al crossed the room to Thelma. She was sitting in the big rocking chair brought from the farmhouse in Indiana, already filling a glass from the heavy pitcher. "Merry Christmas, Al," she said when he reached her.

"It *is* a merry Christmas," he told her, accepting the glass. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I know I am," he replied. They exchanged a private smile as he returned to his chair to watch another Beckett Christmas.

His first Christmas with the Becketts, Al hadn't questioned his welcome, even though he'd shown up at the last minute. But when he realized they wanted him back any year he could make it, he'd begun to wonder why. He was certain it was more than pity. Christmases with Sam's family had none of the effort-filled awkwardness Al remembered from the one year he'd been farmed out to a foster family. The people had meant well, but in trying so hard to make him feel at home, they'd only emphasized that he didn't really belong there.

That he really didn't belong anywhere.

But the Becketts weren't like that. They, like Sam, accepted him for himself, welcomed whatever he felt he could give, and made room for him at the long dinner table. So, Al came back whenever he could, and kept trying to figure out where he fit in.

Until the year the munchkins were old enough to really get into the spirit of things. Watching them tear into their presents, watching their parents laughing and snapping photos, the former orphan had been reminded of his own miserable childhood Christmases until he couldn't stand it. He'd slipped out while everyone was enjoying Cecily trying out her new Big Wheels, thinking no one would notice.

But Thelma had drafted him to help with the dishes that afternoon, after he'd had too much turkey and pie (and maybe a little too much spiked eggnog)

to keep up his defenses. She'd wormed out of him what was wrong, and had convinced him that he had a right to be there. He was welcome for himself, not as a friend of Sam's who had no where else to go.

"Even when you do have a family of your own again," Thelma had told him, "there will always be a place for you here."

So no matter what problems he'd had the year before, no matter what disasters he'd survived, if he wasn't spending the holidays with yet another wife and set of in-laws, Al Calavicci spent Christmas with the Becketts, feeling as much at home as he ever had in his life.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm ready for bed." Tom set down his empty eggnog glass. "Those kids'll be up at dawn."

Sam hesitated, then reached a long arm under the tree. "There's one more present." He pulled out a flat box, the size of his outspread hand, and passed it to Al. "Merry Christmas."

"Sam! We've already exchanged our gifts."

"I know. But this is 'something extra'." Sam looked knowingly at Al, who mentally scrambled for a private meaning to the phrase, but came up blank. "I saw it this afternoon when I took John and Cecily for some last-minute shopping, and, well..."

Al knew his friend prided himself on *not* being an impulse shopper. Whatever was in that flat box, it must be pretty special.

"Aren't you going to open it?" Katie prompted.

Al read the tag out loud. "'To my buddy, Navy pilot Al Calavicci--'" He glanced at Sam before finishing, more quietly, "'--who's always pushing an envelope somewhere.'" The phrase sounded vaguely familiar, like the younger man's previous reference, but like the previous reference Al couldn't place it. "Nice paper, Sam," and he pulled the metallic red-and-green covering off the box.

"Funny how 'pushing the envelope' is a complement," Tom put in, "but calling someone a 'paper-pusher' is insulting."

Al glanced up sharply at Tom, then at the pair on the sofa. "Don't blame me," Donna told him, "Sam did this on his own."

Al lifted the lid. Inside, wrapped in a patterned tissue paper that would have done Escher proud, was a length of white silk. He realized what it must be as Donna exclaimed, "It's a pilot's scarf!"

The Navy officer pulled it gently from the paper. It was indeed an pilot's scarf, heavy and expensive. As he held it up he saw diamond shapes shimmer through the cloth. "It's got a pattern woven into it."

"Well, yeah." Sam ducked his head, smiling self-consciously. "'Al Calavicci does not know the meaning of plain.'"

The missing conversation *dropped* into Al's mind, whole and intact. *I've gotta be going somewhere, pushing the envelope somehow...runty little guys like me, we gotta be bigger than life sometimes...you're Cyrano, Al, and I'm Christian...*

Al Calavicci looked up abruptly, his throat aching. "What's the matter, Sam, couldn't you find any white plumes?"

Sam's smile spread to his eyes in acknowledgement that his partner had gotten the message. "Even you wouldn't wear white plumes, Al. I thought you might wear this."

"Ohhh, yeah." The response was heartfelt. "I'll wear this." The older man had to swallow hard, to keep his feelings from getting the better of him. His gaze dropped back to the gift. *How had Sam known?* Everything he wanted people to see him as, everything he wanted to still *be*, lay in his hands, in that length of white silk.

"Try it on," Thelma prompted gently.

"Mom!" Tom protested, "it's a scarf. One size fits all."

"I know. I want to see Al wearing it."

But Al was already wrapping the scarf around his neck. Noticing that he had an audience, he pulled one end longer than the other and jauntily flipped the longer end over his shoulder.

"That's it!" Katie laughed in recognition. "That's perfect!"

"Yeah, it is," Al replied. "It's perfect." He looked across to the sofa, and met Sam's eyes again. "Thank you."
But his friend simply grinned in reply.

* * *

"We have now landed at Albuquerque Airport. Please remain in your seats until the plane has taxied to the gate and come to a complete stop."

"Yeah, yeah," Al muttered to himself. He was already in the aisle, groping in the overhead compartment. It was well after midnight, and the lights of the runway outside did little to augment the dim strip lighting inside the red-eye from Washington. But Admiral Calavicci didn't have time to wait for the plane to stop and the lights to come up. He had places to go, people to see.

Well, one person to see, he amended. As he dropped back into his seat, trying to keep track of topcoat, hanging bag and briefcase, the Project Liaison let himself imagine again the expression on Sam's face when he told the physicist that their funding had been renewed for another year. *And* when he admitted it had been Sam's presentation that had swayed Senator McBride to their side. The Project Director had insisted on trying to explain QUANTUM LEAP in detail, rather than snowing the Committee with flowery phrases about the Project's "value to humankind". And it had worked.

Al would willingly let the kid win that round.

They had another year!

And another year was all it would take: the only real problem left was that glitch in the retrieval program. In another year, with Sam's mega-brain and his own unorthodox approach to things, they'd have it licked for sure. By this time next year, Sam would be leaping. Al was certain of it.

Hadn't been a team yet that could beat Beckett and Calavicci!

The engines' whine ran down to the lower pitch that meant the plane was at the gate. The Navy pilot knew the sound so well that he was out of his seat and halfway down the aisle before his conscious mind registered the change, and at the door as the engines shut off. *Come on, come on, let's get this show on the road.*

"Excuse me, sir." The plane's lone flight attendant, middle-aged and matronly, called from behind him. Al was vaguely conscious of the few other passengers stretching and gathering their belongings, but he didn't turn around. He was *not* going back to his seat. He needed to get to Sam.

"Excuse me, sir." The attendant was right behind him now. "Did you drop this?"

Al turned to see her holding out a long white scarf. His eyes widened as he checked under the collar of the white topcoat draped across his arm, even as his mind recognized the diamond pattern woven through the silk.

"Yeah, that's mine. *Thank you.*" He set down his briefcase and took the scarf from her, draping it neatly around his neck. "I'd sure hate to lose this."

The attendant smiled tiredly at him. "Sentimental value?"

Just then the co-pilot came out and opened the plane's door. "Yeah, you could say that," Al replied, returning her weary grin automatically. His mind had already shifted to the logistics of getting back to Alamogordo to pick up his car.

It wasn't until he was in the terminal, half-way to the car rental counters, that he really heard what the attendant had said, and what he had answered. "*Sentimental,*" huh? He was amused. "*Sentimental*" *doesn't even begin to cover it.*

* * *

Al Calavicci send his red prototype car roaring up the flat, familiar road for the sheer joy of the speed. The wind riffling through the open car window tugged at his scarf, and he tucked it more firmly under the lapel of his tuxedo. The length of silk had a tendency to slither out from under his

collar. He'd almost lost it more than once since Sam had given it to him last Christmas. But he never quite did. Somehow it always came back to him. Somehow, things had always turned out all right.

Like now, he thought, chuckling to himself. They'd done it again, pulled the fat out of the fire, and he couldn't wait to see the look on Sam's face when he told him so...

His headlights illuminated something up ahead that made his eyes widen in appreciation. In reflex, his foot eased off the accelerator and he let the car slow as he approached what appeared to be a damsel in distress.

And--geez--*what* a damsel!

Coming to a complete stop beside her, he carefully regarded what had come his way. She was beautiful, from the flashing lighted heels that lent such an enticing curve to those long legs that disappeared in a deliciously filled pink mini-dress, to her elegantly casual blond hair style.

When his eyes at last reached her face, she smiled and he felt a kick of adrenalin. This had possibilities, definite possibilities. It was precisely what he needed to cap off a perfect day.

Sam would just have to wait a bit longer to get his news about his funding.

"You know," Al Calavizzi asked, "what I would *love* to do?"



Quantum Leap

by

Frances Smith

Sam, like a time-capsule,
warps through periods of time.
He flies into another being,
an alien substance,
a personality not his own,
and there he must make do,
must right whatever wrongs
brought him this way.
For one day, or one week,
he must react in ways unknown,
must know his unknown
friends and family,
must solve the problems
of another creature.
And then, he travels on.

THE SOUND OF WINTER

by

Sharon Wisdom

Thick, wet snow pelted hard from somewhere above towering pines that lined a two lane blacktop running through Mt. Hood National Forest. Dusk deepened rapidly about a powerful car climbing swiftly upward on the road, the roar of its powerful motor seeming to be nearly swallowed up by the silence of the deep snow and the thick forest. With every curve up the mountain, the pines seemed to edge ever nearer the road, closing in on the fiery red car.

The car's driver, a disgusted Admiral Albert Calavicci, cast the trees a wary glance. Over the past few moments, they had drawn just too near for comfort. A few miles down the mountain, the route had narrowed to just enough width for two cars to pass if both drivers were careful, and the heavy snowfall had blurred the edges of it until he had to watch carefully to find his way.

Find his way. Ha, *that* was a joke. He had no idea where he was--and up until the last few minutes, he didn't really care. He'd been driving for hours, with no thought of where he was going.

For the first hundred miles or so, since he had stormed out of the lodge, he hadn't even looked at a road sign. Hell, he'd just been shooting his high performance car up and down the twisted, challenging, mountain roads in an attempt to expend enough adrenalin to keep from exploding from sheer, frustrated rage.

Now, with the worsening weather to contend with, he began to take stock of his situation. Looked like the storm Beth had told him was predicted had come to pass and it promised to be every bit as bad as she had said it would. She had been right when she told him not to go.

Grimacing, Al eased off the accelerator a bit and wondered where he was going to be lucky enough to find a place to turn around. Seemed like Beth was always right--about the storm, about him working too much and sleeping too little, about...

Abruptly, the car's rear tires slid, fishtailing toward the edge of the road. Swearing softly, Al corrected automatically and brought the vehicle back under control. This baby was built for speed and style, not all terrain reliability. He needed to figure out his way back to the lodge before they both ended up with a bump or two.

He *needed*, he admitted to himself as he squinted through the thickening snow, to go apologize to Beth. That had been the point of this entire trip to the mountains thing from the very beginning, an apology to his wife for the mess he had been making of things the past few months. He'd better make good on it or Beeks would be on him like white on rice.

Not that he had much hope of being able to fix his strained relationship in one short week away from the Project. What he *really* needed to be doing was working at finding a way to bring Sam home. Then, things could get back to normal and he could let go of all the strain and guilt and truly make it up to Beth. It was just that no one else seemed to understand that.

Spotting a snow covered turnout up ahead, Al slowed and pulled into it. Maneuvering the sports car through the deepening snow took effort and concentration. For a moment, the tires spun in protest and Al grunted in displeasure.

He hadn't seen a snowplow yet. He must really have gotten off the beaten path. Did they even plow up here? They probably thought nobody would be stupid enough to come up this high with a winter storm pending--nobody but an idiot too caught up in his own problems to listen to the good advice of his wife who was only trying to make things better between them.

Rocking the car free, he carefully headed it down the mountain and found a yawn caught him unawares. Shaking his head, he realized suddenly that weariness had replaced the anger that had fueled him for so long. He was

tired, too tired, and he had no business here. But, there was nothing to be done but live with it and make the best of it.

Like there was any best in it, he thought sourly. As far as he could see, there was no bright spot anywhere--in the amorphous blur of white surrounding him or back in the searing heat of the New Mexico desert that he had deserted. Sam was lost, well and truly lost.

Despite all the hours Al spent in the Imaging Chamber for the past year, the searching had been to no avail. The last time the Observer had seen Sam, the physicist had seemed as if he were losing touch with reality. All that talk of Staupah--how the hell could Sam have known about *him*?--and the hysterical edge to the time traveler's laughter had scared the hell out of Al.

He had told Sam then, that he would get him out of the mess he was in. Whatever it took, he had promised with a vow he meant with all his heart and soul, he would get him out.

And then there had been nothing. No contact. No tenuous thread of rapport between them that held long enough for Al to find him again despite agonized months of trying. Nothing--just like this mesmerizing cloud of white that made it hard to even see the trees. Unconsciously, Al's foot pressed harder on the accelerator as if sheer force and speed could change the situation.

Nothingness. There was nothing to focus on, nothing to anchor to, nothing...

The rear of the car slid again on a curve, slipping on the wet, slick snow that blanketed the highway. Lulled as he was by his weariness and bleak thoughts, Al reacted too slowly. The forces of inertia and winter's physics had him in their grasp and they spun him in a sickening slide that carried him off the roadway in a rapid rush that there was no way to slow.

Fighting for control, he saw the ravine coming. It yawned beneath him. Before he could truly focus on it, the nose of his car tipped over the steep slope and gravity took him crashing down it. Grimly he fought to ride it down. But, there was no control as the trees sent him careening between them on his plunge downward.

The massive pines tossed his car like a toy, never quite stopping it, only battering it and sending it on further to their cousins waiting below. It was the largest of them that he saw coming, filling his windshield as he hurtled toward it in a moment of time that seemed to take an eternity.

It was like riding a flaming A-4 from the sky, knowing if he didn't do something quick he was going to die. But this time, there was no eject handle and no way to hope to survive. Flinging his arms over his head in an age old instinct of protection, his last fleeting thought before the crash silenced it was that he had failed Sam--one last and irrevocable time.

* * *

Consciousness returned in pieces, slow, dazed perceptions of senses that seemed oddly piercing as if they were somehow too heightened to be real. The sounds reached him first: the cooling tick of metal and the muted plop of snow dropping from branches all about him and the sharp hiss of escaping steam. Damn, the radiator. He'd smashed...

Opening his eyes, he saw the damage to his car went far beyond trauma to its cooling system. The brilliant, perfect paint job of the long, low hood had disappeared as the entire front of the car had folded upward until it lay nearly in his lap. Correction, he thought as he looked down: until it lay literally in his lap. Beyond the limp folds of the deflated airbag that had obviously been punctured by a sharp limb that jutted through the broken window near his head, he could see only twisted metal and wires.

Looking more closely, he could see bloody material pinned in among the wreckage that must cover his legs. But he felt...nothing. And when he tried to move his lower body there was...nothing.

Groaning, he let his head fall back against the seat, and heard a shower of glass from the window fall about him. Great, just great. This was just what he needed to end a perfect run of luck.

Still, he was alive. Maybe getting out was going to be tricky, but Al Calavicci was a survivor and no slip up on a snow packed highway was going to be the death of *him*. So he was gonna have to work for it. Big deal. He would get himself out and haul himself back up to the road by his fingernails if he had to, because there was no way he was giving up.

Drawing himself upright again, he braced himself, then threw his weight against the crumpled driver's door. Since his leverage and mobility were severely limited, the movement had little effect other than to rock the car. Distantly, he realized that he was sitting at an angle as if something still held the rear of the car off the ground. It was probably another one of those damn trees.

Swearing softly under his breath, he blinked away sticky warmth that was flowing into his eyes and examined the door. It looked like it had taken a broadside hit and was not going to be jarred open by a couple of hard knocks.

Grunting in displeasure, his gaze traveled over to the passenger side door. It looked relatively unharmed. But, it may as well have been a hundred miles away for all the good it did him. Whatever was holding his legs had him good and tight.

And that, he thought, turning his attention back to the driver's door, was that. You're not thinking straight, Al old pal, even if you get this thing open, how are you gonna get your legs outta this pile of scrap metal that used to be your favorite Vette?

Out of sheer spite, he slammed his shoulder twice more into the door. Again it seemed to have little effect. Hell, it didn't even hurt as much as it had the first time.

Shock. The word was like a coldness in his chest, at odds with the warmth of blood running down his face and sides. He was going into shock and he wouldn't give a tinkers damn for his chances of being found before it claimed him here in the gathering dark and the cold.

For the first time since he'd opened his eyes at the bottom of the ravine, he faced the possibility of dying. There was a very good prospect of doing just that--and all from his own stupidity.

Now you've done it, Calavicci, he thought disgustedly. You're gonna sit here and freeze to death before any one finds your sorry butt.

And, the thought spread the chill in his chest, who's going to bring Sam home now?

Groaning again, he relaxed against the seat, letting it support him as he faced the fact that this may indeed be the end. The sheer weight of regrets that descended on his chest threatened to drown him.

He never should have left the Project. Never should have let Beeks and Beth railroad him into it. Hell, the Committee had all but shut them down already. With him gone, they'd do it in a heartbeat...and God knew what that'd do to Sam.

If only God had let him see Sam one last time to know he was okay...to know he wasn't dead like everyone kept saying. If only he'd had time that last horrible leap to say goodbye. He hadn't even known Sam was going. Hadn't known he wouldn't be able to step back through the Imaging Chamber door and talk to him again. Hadn't known God was going to take Sam away forever.

God. And Sam. There seemed to be a coherent thought there if only he could find it through the growing chill that had spread upward to slow his thinking.

There was a sharp crack somewhere near the rear of the car and it dropped to the ground with a jarring thud. Maybe his rocking had done some good after all. Maybe...

There was the tearing sound of metal, and a sudden, permeating smell of leaking fuel as the car settled. Al's lips twitched upward in a faint, sardonic smile. He'd just bet that somewhere under all that twisted metal there was a hot connection or three and when the fuel trickled that far, there was going to be one hell of an explosion. At least it was a better way to go than sitting here and waiting to die by inches, and still he felt--nothing.

That's it old buddy, he thought. If you can't even work up enough spit to be mad you're dying, you're already dead.

Closing his eyes, he mentally called up the memory of Beth and each of his daughters in turn, saying goodbye. Regretfully, he wished he had longer with them. In some ways, it seemed he'd had them only this past year. Yet, the alternative set of memories that gradually crept into his past seemed so real that in other ways it truly seemed he had always been part of their lives. Somehow it just got all tangled up together, and with the pressure to find Sam, he had never really gotten it sorted out. And now, it was goodbye.

Now, it was too late to hope he'd ever figure it out. A peculiar lassitude claimed him more fully, swallowing up all the tangled power of his emotions. It left him with only a faint, bittersweet regret and a drifting curiosity about what was to come.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, being dead. Maybe They'd let him see Trudy. Maybe They'd let him see his father. Maybe, if everyone was right and the worst had happened, They'd let him see...

There was a stumbling rush of sound beyond the passenger's door, and then it was wrenched open with a protesting squeal. The rush of cold air drew Al back for a moment and he opened his eyes. Had rescue come? Blinking, he focused on the face of the man reaching in toward him and calling his name.

He looked like Sam.

* * *

Leaping the past few months had been difficult without Al and his link to information. Need drew Sam, and then he was on his own to discover what had brought him to that given place at that time. Often, that was hard without Ziggy's information, Al's off-beat insight into the situation, and perhaps most especially, the Observer's irritating, irreverent, but always unfailing support. Sometimes the physicist found himself at a loss for days at a time until he unearthed the real reason for his presence.

Sometimes. But not this time. The moment the disorientation from the leap left him, Sam saw a crumpled red sports car slammed against a huge tree. Instantly, he began to run toward it, catching the powerful scent of leaking gasoline before he had taken a few steps.

As he ran, he hastily planned his strategy. He was going to have to get the driver out quickly. There was too great a hazard for fire to allow much first aid in the car itself. Once the driver, whom Sam could see lying back in the seat as if he were unconscious, was safely away, he would assess the situation further. The man looked pale, in shock most likely and...

Sam's hand was on the passenger side door before he recognized the blood covered man in the car. "Al!" Hastily, he jerked open the door, and reached out to check for a pulse. "Al?!"

The familiar dark eyes opened and focused on him as Sam rested his fingers on the man's throat. The pulse was there, rapid and weak as his heart struggled to keep blood flowing despite the trauma to his body.

Sam drew a breath to speak when recognition seemed to come into Al's eyes. Then, unexpectedly, they darkened with what looked like irritation. "Oh, fine," the admiral grated sourly. "Now you show up."

Hesitating, the physician searched his friend's eyes. Maybe Al hadn't recognized him after all and thought he was someone else. But, now was no time to figure it out. "Al, it's me, Sam," he assured him, withdrawing his hand and turning his attention to discovering how the admiral was pinned in the vehicle. "I'll get you out."

"Of course you will," Al replied calmly, far too calmly as if it were a matter of no great importance. "That's what you do. You're a hero."

Sam let the words flow over him unheeded as he hastily examined the wreckage. He scanned the twisted metal and plastic that held Al fast, looking for the best way to free him. Even as he made the decision of where was the best spot to pry away the dash, his friend's next words stopped him cold. "That's why my brain conjured you up. I'm dying, and you're my hallucination, my rescue. It only makes sense."

Chilled, Sam looked up into Al's face and saw the Observer regarding him critically. "I think I did a pretty good job, considering," the admiral

continued. "There's pretty good detail for being a figment of my imagination. You almost look real."

Swallowing hard, the physicist grasped his friend's shoulder firmly. "I am real, Al," he assured him. "And I'm going to get you out of this."

"Sure." The admiral's shrug was eerily familiar, an easy movement of his shoulders that Sam had seen hundreds of times. It was that familiarity, so at odds with the danger of the situation that frightened him. Something was terribly, terribly wrong.

But, there were other dangers that had to be taken care of first. Reaching out, the younger man pulled the keys from the ignition. "I'll be back," Sam told him, sliding hastily from the car. "It'll be okay."

"Sure," Al said again, this time with fond teasing in his tone. "That's what you told me in that damn note you left, first time you leaped."

Letting the words slow him only a split second, Sam rushed to the trunk of the car. Finding it only superficially dented as the front of the vehicle seemed to have taken the brunt of the damage, he unlocked it and flung it open. The smell of gasoline was stronger now, and he could see it pooling beneath the car, spreading outward on the snow.

Rapidly, he reached in and flung items out and behind him for use later. There were several blankets, a flashlight, a candle and matches, a thermos and box of nuts and candy bars; winter weather emergency supplies. For all Al's bluster and devil may care attitude, he was always prepared when it counted.

Grasping the heavy metal handle that was designed to fit into the jack, Sam ran back to the front of the car, struggling in the knee deep snow. Sliding into the bucket seat on the passenger side, he noted with only a portion of his attention that Al was following his actions with mild interest. It seemed more as if the Observer were watching a movie scene unwind before him than taking part in events that could mean life or death.

Working quickly, Sam fitted the handle under a section of the dashboard and began to apply downward pressure to pry it free. For a long moment, there was no sound but the creak of protesting metal and Sam's desperate effort that took every bit of his strength and attention.

The tortured metal began to move at last and Sam leaned more heavily on the bar. As the balance shifted, he could get a better leverage and soon he would be able to move it far enough to get the trapped man free.

A sudden sound of pain came from Al, drawing Sam's startled attention to him. The man's face had gone even paler and he had grasped the steering wheel before his chest as if to hold it in place.

"Damn it, Sam," Al gasped, eyes seeking the physicist's. "I know you're a figment and all, but whatever the hell you're doing *hurts*. Just stop it, huh?"

Still straining to keep the bar in place so the metal didn't slip and cost him what he had already gained, Sam shook his head. "I can't, Al," he said, forcing the words out past the effort he was expending on his attempt to pry open the car. "It hurts because I'm releasing the pressure on your legs and you're feeling it more. Just..."

"Then don't." Despite the chill in the car, a trickle of sweat traced a path down the blood on Al's temple. "Just be a good little hallucination and talk to me until we both go blooey, okay?"

"I can't," Sam said again, face upturned to his friend. "I know it hurts, Al. But," he tried to put all the force of conviction he could into his voice to make Al believe it, "this is real, and if I'm going to get you out, I've got to do it now."

The admiral's eyes considered him and Sam's hands tightened on the bar, preparing for the last effort. "Damn," Al said at last, eyes flicking to the physicist's whitened knuckles in an unspoken acceptance of what would be, "you always were a stubborn SOB, Beckett. You still are, even as a figment."

Sam increased the pressure on the pry bar, forcing himself to look away from Al's face. There was the sound of tearing metal. It filled the gathering night, nearly drowning out the terrible scream of agony from the man trapped beneath it. Gritting his teeth, Sam closed his eyes, and let the force of his full weight fall downward on the bar.

As hallucinations went, this one was a five star extravaganza--and it was still there when he regained consciousness again. Blinking, Al took in his surroundings.

If he was to believe what his senses told him, he was lying flat on level ground with a couple of blankets wrapped securely about him. On one side and a few feet above his head was solid rock as if he lay beneath one of the rough overhangs that were so common in the area. The remaining three sides were walls of packed snow that gave back reflected heat from a tiny fire that crackled cheerily before the rock face.

Eyeing the contained fire, which seemed to be feeding on forest debris that had blown under the overhang and been protected, as the ground was, from the snow, Al shook his head. Smoke from the tiny flame traveled nearly straight upward in the absence of draft and disappeared through a small crack in the rock. There was a neat pile of extra fuel for the fire gathered to one side of it, waiting to be needed. Somebody had given a lot of thought to his survival, using the gear he had packed in his trunk when he'd started off on this ill fated trip.

Somebody. Al snorted in disgust. What was he thinking? He was still sitting in his Vette, hallucinating like crazy. The sound of the fire was probably the flames under the hood. Pretty soon now the whole thing was going to go sky high and that would end this dream real quick.

Right now, however, it looked and felt real and he may as well play it like it was because he had no other real choice. Oddly, his mind seemed clear and most of his senses sharp and real. He could smell the smoky scent from the fire, hear the soft snapping as it burned.

But, from his body there were little clues. He just felt numb, somehow, as if he were hurt too badly to feel the pain. His hands worked, he discovered as he slipped them from the blankets and flexed them experimentally. So did his neck and shoulders. Only when he tried to move his legs and lower body was there no response.

Oddly, he felt no fear at that, only an calm acceptance. His legs were still trapped in the wreckage. That was why he could neither feel nor move them. Strangely reassured by reaching for logic where there seemed to be none, he told himself firmly that was the case. Al Calavicci would not survive a near fatal crash only to be paralyzed. That was as unthinkable as the idea that Sam could have actually been there to pull him from the car. It was the hallucination, nothing more.

Making a wry face, he wriggled his shoulders against the ground, testing to see if it would vanish away into his car's glass-covered seat. When it did not, his frown deepened. If he were going to hallucinate away his last few moments of life, why couldn't he have dreamed himself back at the lodge, with a lower body that worked and a wife who he needed to make an apology to in his arms?

Sighing, he examined the snow packed walls again. They were not completely closed to the outside world. For some reason in his insanity, he had left a small blanket covered area that could serve as a door.

Too bad there wasn't somebody to come through it. He would have liked to have talked to Sam some more, when the kid wasn't busy rushing around being a hero. But that's the way Sam was these days, always dashing around saving people and then when they were safe, leaping out again. He must be long gone by now, Al thought with untroubled acceptance that still cradled him in its grasp. That's just the way it was and belly aching wasn't going to change it.

There was movement at the door, and a sound as of someone dropping to their knees before it. Watching in mild curiosity, Al waited for the person to appear. It was Sam, hair whitened with snow, an equally snow-covered blanket about his shoulders.

Watching the physicist crawl through the make shift door, Al blinked in interest. "You're still here?" he asked curiously. "I thought maybe I'd shuttled you off for somebody else." His expression turned gently mournful.

"Like Beth." Regretfully his eyes traveled over the blood soaked blanket that covered his lower legs. "Though I don't guess I'd be able to do a visit with her justice."

That seemed to give the physicist pause as he hesitated just before the door. Then, shaking his head and brushing the snow from his hair, he half crawled, half slid over to Al's side. "It's me, Al," he said, giving the Observer that patented, Beckett earnest and concerned look. "It's Sam."

"I know who you are," Al returned with a trace of affront. "I don't dream up class act hallucinations like this and then stick people I don't know in them!"

Gazing upward, he watched as Sam shook his head, looking oddly hurt. "I'm not a hallucination, buddy," the hallucination said. "I'm real. I leaped in here just a few minutes after you hit that tree."

Al made a noise of disbelief, watching 'Sam's' face. He sure looked like Sam, right down to that 'doctor look' that had come over his features as he looked him over. The hallucination's next words were of no surprise to him. "Where do you hurt?"

Where do you hurt? The question was nearly swallowed up in the numbness of shock that still held him prisoner. It should be, 'where do you *not* hurt?'. But then, maybe, that's what the hallucination was really asking.

"Mostly," Al answered, the words coming as if from a great distance though he knew it was he that said them, "I can't feel anything. Not from the waist down, anyway." Odd, how his voice sounded at once so desolate and yet matter of fact. Still more strangely, those emotions seemed so detached from him that they must not be truly his at all. "Are my legs still there?"

Even as he asked it, he told himself that it was a stupid thing to say. None of this was real. His legs were there, just trapped in a smoking pile of metal that was about to be his funeral pyre. Still, he had asked it, and now he almost wished he hadn't at the expression in the hallucination's eyes. Damn, it looked so real, so...

"You still have your legs, Al," the Sam hallucination answered evenly, its professional mask back in place after the momentary lapse. "It's just that your lower body took quite a bit of trauma, and having to jerk you out of the car like I did may have compounded it. The numbness might be temporary, though..."

Distantly, the admiral reflected that Sam never had been very good at lying as he listened to the explanation in 'medicalese' that followed. He studied the other's face thoughtfully, just letting the words flow over him. Damn, he was good at this hallucination stuff, now the kid was even reaching out to his throat to take his pulse. That was just what Sam would do. Pity it wasn't real...

Jumping as if he'd been stung at the touch of chilled fingers against his neck, he reacted instinctively with a protest. "Hey!"

"What?" Sam looked worried as he leaned forward. "Did I hurt you? Are you injured here?" Like a true physician, he rested two fingers lightly on Al's jaw. "Let me take a look."

Amazed, Al's eyes widened. He could even feel the *touch* of this hallucination. "I must be further gone than I thought," he breathed in wonder, the thought coming in clearly through the fog of shock. His eyes narrowed suspiciously, bringing the kid's eyes back to his. "Hey, I'm not dead, am I?"

"Dead?" The figment sounded like Sam right down to the incredulous protest in his voice when he thought Al was putting him on. "No, Al, you're not dead. I told you, I'm real, and I'm here." The hazel eyes that met his again held that odd hurt at being disbelieved. "Why can't you believe that?"

"Because I've been bustin' my butt for a year lookin' for you," Al growled. "And if I couldn't find you then, why the hell should *you* find *me* now?"

The kid's eyes slid away the way they did when he was hiding something. "Because you're the one that needed me the most," came the soft answer. "So I'm here."

Still suspicious, Al regarded him closely. What the hell was going on

here? "Are you dead?" he asked, voicing the only other possibility that seemed plausible as much as he hated it. He drilled the younger man with a steely gaze, daring him to admit it. "Are you?"

"No!" Sam's surprise seemed real enough as his hazel eyes came back to meet Al's suspicious ones. "Of course not! Where would you get an idea like that?"

The admiral scowled. "Weitzman's been harping on it since we lost track of you. He's just about got everyone else convinced...except me," he added as an afterthought, just to be sure Sam understood. "I knew you weren't dead."

"Good," a smile tugged at the physicist's lips. "I'm glad. So now that you know I'm here, and I'm real..."

"I didn't say you were real," Al snapped. "I just wanted to be sure you were a hallucination, and not dead." There seemed to be something wrong with the reasoning, but the admiral was reluctant to look at it too closely. It was better just to let it lie than to open up old pain.

"But, Al..."

He shook his head, trying to cut off the kid, who was wanting to force him to think something he didn't want to consider. "You never came back, Sam," he said desolately, the words giving voice to thoughts that slipped past his guard in his weariness. "You never said goodbye. You're not here."

For a long moment there was silence as if the hallucination had been taken aback by the honesty and Al closed his eyes, not wanting to see the look on Sam's face. He didn't want to deal with it, didn't want to face it, didn't want to...

With the younger man's next words, it seemed he also was willing to let the subject die. "Al, don't go to sleep. I need to know where we are."

Relieved that finally there was a question that didn't force him to think of what he didn't want to face, the admiral opened his eyes and looked back at the man kneeling beside him. "I dunno."

"What? What do you mean you don't know?" Sam frowned in concern. "Think. Where were you before the crash? I need to know which way to head for help."

"Dunno," Al answered easily, because it didn't really matter. How the hell was a hallucination going to go for help anyway? Nobody but Al would be able to see him, anyway. He almost smiled at the interesting switch that was, but Sam was pressing him and didn't seem likely to want to listen to the idea.

"Think, Al. I've got to get you some help. How far away do you think that is?"

"Miles. Too far for you to walk." For Sam's sake, Al tried to consider it as if it mattered. "I think maybe there was a town on the road I turned on to drive up here."

"At the foot of the mountain?" the younger man asked incredulously. "Yeah," Al agreed with a distracted sigh. "Unless you can have Gooshie zero you in on it, it'll take you hours. I'll be dead way before then."

There was another long silence. Then, "You're not going to die, Al." Staring at the rough rock above him, the admiral let the words wash over him like the warmth of the small fire to his left. It was all illusion, but it was pleasant. He may as well enjoy it while he could. Absently, he wondered what it would feel like to die. Would all this just disappear and he would be gone? Or would he find himself back in his car without warning with reality crashing in on his head?

"Why were you up here in the middle of nowhere in a snowstorm, anyway?" Sam sounded mad, like he always did when he didn't agree with Al's free wheeling lifestyle.

Somehow, Al didn't feel the need to smokescreen. Sam was a figment, he knew it all anyway, so he may as well say it like it was and get it over and done. "Had a fight with Beth," he answered matter of factly. "A big one. She found the pint of scotch I hid in my shaving kit."

There was a long silence as if Sam were debating about what he wanted to ask about next, Beth or the scotch. Eyes on the ceiling, Al waited patiently. He wasn't going anywhere. Not anywhere he could control, anyway, and in the pleasant cocoon of unreality that swaddled him, it didn't matter what Sam

asked. It was enough just to be there. "Beth?" came the question at last. "You're--with Beth?"

There was a world of unspoken questions in the words and Al smiled fondly. Sam had learned a lot about pumping unsuspecting people for information. He was trying to find out about Beth--and what Al did or did not remember. It wouldn't hurt to lay it on the line for him, not when Sam was only a hallucination.

Turning his head, he looked into the other man's eyes, his smile widening to a grin. At the very least his hallucination should get the thanks he never got to give to Sam. Maybe this would count for something. "Yeah, Beth," he said, still grinning. "My wife that you got back for me. She was waiting when I came home from 'Nam. Told me a guy named Sam had showed up and told her I was alive." His grin widened at the shock in the hazel eyes. "I don't think she really figured it out, though, until that first time she met you in Boston."

"She met me in Boston?"

"Yeah, don't you remember? That time you and me..." Al shook his head. "No, I guess you don't. I do, but then I remember how it went both ways--both times. I don't know if you will when you come home or not." Al's thoughtful gaze searched Sam's face. "Do you?"

"No," the other's gaze slid away and he shifted his weight to make his way to the fire. "I don't." With his back to Al, he fed fresh fuel to the flames that had begun to die.

Al's eyes lingered on Sam. There were so many things he wanted to say--and why shouldn't he? This wasn't really Sam, after all. It was all illusion sprung from his own mind. If he couldn't say those things here, he never could.

"Where've you been?" he heard himself ask.

"Out to the road," Sam answered, turning back to him. "I was setting out some flares. Though," his eyes slid to Al's and his head lowered slightly as it did when he were admitting bad news. "I don't think we really need them. I think if anybody's looking, they'd have seen your car when it blew." He hesitated, and when Al did not speak at once, added as if it would make it better, "I think it's about burned out now, though."

Sam said his car had blown. For the first time, Al became aware of the acrid scent of a gasoline fueled fire but let it go. It wasn't real, anyway. "I'm not talkin' about now," he said, regarding the physicist. "I mean the past year, after I lost you at that bar. Where've you been? I couldn't find you."

The younger man hesitated, his gaze sliding away again. "I've been leaping," he answered at last, "by myself."

"Where?" Al demanded, watching the younger man's set shoulders. "Or should I say when? And why couldn't I find you?"

The physicist settled on his haunches near the fire, seeming to concentrate on a small twig he still held in his hands. "I, well..." The repeated snap of the tiny stick in Sam's hands was loud in the small space. "I..."

Al scowled. He knew hedging when he heard it. "Saaam. Don't squirm on me. Where the hell've you been?"

"Leaping," Sam said again, head coming up to meet Al's eyes. "I just don't seem to need the link to the Project any more--if there ever really was one. I've been leaping on my own." His eyes dipped down to the stick in his hands again. "I thought it'd be better to spare you..."

Al swore so explosively that Sam's eyes came back to his, startled. "You thought it'd be better! Since when have I asked you to spare me anything?"

"It wasn't that," the other man said hastily. "It was just..."

"And what's this 'on your own' garbage? Are you saying now," Al gestured expressively, "the God-or-Fate-or-Time theory is no longer good enough for you? Who gave you the right to change the rules?"

Sam's smile was sad, and enigmatic. His answer, when it came, was soft. "God," he said quietly, still smiling that cryptic smile, "Who happens to be a

bartender named Al."

Al blinked, shocked out of his indignation. Great, just what he needed, his own hallucination going nutso on him. He was just not up to a repeat of Sam's ramblings about Al-the-Divine-bartender right now. "You're not making any sense, Sam," he retorted mildly, his anger oddly dissipated. "I was the one who got knocked on the noggin, remember? If you're going to hang around here until I go up in flames, you can at least make sense. You owe me that much."

"Okay, Al," the time traveler said meekly. "I'll try to make sense."

"Good," the admiral said with a weary sigh, briefly closing his eyes. He was just so damn tired. But then, he'd been tired for months. Ever since.

"Al," again it was Sam's voice that stirred him. "I'm going to go for help. I..."

"No." Fear stabbed through the unreality and Al opened his eyes. A hallucination wasn't much, but it was better than nothing. "I want you to stay."

"But, you need..."

"Help, yeah, pal. We both know that. But we also both know I'm gonna be dead before help arrives, even assuming you weren't a hallucination and could bring somebody back here."

"But, I'm not a hallucination!"

"Yeah, yeah, sure," Al agreed, trying to keep his voice light despite a tremor of fear that threatened to break the artificial calmness. He didn't want to be alone when he died, even if the company was only an illusion. "So," he continued in what he hoped was a reasonable tone, "why get frostbite haulin' your butt down the mountain when I'm just gonna be a popsicle when you get back?" The argument made perfect sense to him and he couldn't see why it would not make sense to Sam as well. "After all," he eyed his companion's light shirt and jeans, "it's not like you're dressed to go traipsing around in a blizzard."

Sam opened his mouth to argue, then closed it again. In the hazel eyes, Al saw uncertainty. Watching closely, he saw his argument win, though Sam was not going to give up so easily. "You're not going to die," the physician said firmly. "If anybody's anywhere near here, they saw your car go up and they should be on the way. They'll see the flares and find us."

"Right," Al agreed, trying to sound as if he believed it. What the hell was he doing in trying to convince a hallucination it was making sense? He'd really, really lost it. But, he relaxed against the hard ground beneath his shoulders all the same when it became obvious Sam had decided to stay.

For a moment, Al let his eyes drift closed, then struggled to pull them open again. "Sam?"

"Yeah?" The doctor turned to him, and Al saw with distant surprise that the blanket covering his lower body had been pulled back and Sam had been soberly examining him. Hastily, the physician flicked the top blanket back over him, hiding the sight of Al's mangled lower torso and body, but not until the admiral had caught a glimpse of blood...a lot of blood.

Bemused, Al wondered if he'd been sleeping, and that Sam had been hovering over him, doing whatever sort of first aid could be done while he was out. But, then, could a hallucination stick around when the person hallucinating it was out cold? Considering it made Al vaguely sick to his stomach and he shifted his attention back to the physician's familiar face as Sam sat down beside him again.

Wearily, Al sighed and glanced away to regard the play of the fire's light on the rock above him. "You know, Sam," he said at last, saying the words before he thought about them too long, "even if you are only a figment, I'm glad you're here."

There was a long pause, before the reply came. "I'm glad I'm here, too, Al."

For a moment, a companionable silence held between them. It was Al who broke it at last by musing aloud, "Damn, I need a cigar."

"No smoking," Sam said firmly. "A cigar is the last thing you need!"

He looked sharply at Al as if expecting the admiral to produce a stogie from beneath the blanket and light up. "I mean it, Al."

The older man made a soft sound of resigned disgust. "You sound just like Beth."

"Smoking in your condition..."

"Okay, okay!" Al lifted his hands in resignation and shook his head mournfully. "I don't have any, anyway. Beth made me quit after the heart attack."

"Heart attack." Sam's head came up sharply. "What heart attack?!"

The admiral gave a fair approximation of a shrug. "Mine. A couple of months after my big screw up with Weitzman. Wasn't any big deal."

"Wasn't any big deal!" Sam repeated as if appalled. "You..."

"It wasn't," Al repeated with a frown. "Only kept me away from the Project for a couple of weeks." He snorted in disgust, "Wasn't any reason for me to retire, I told them that." His dark eyes shifted to Sam and his voice sharpened, "And I was right, too!"

The physician hesitated, then obviously decided to let it go. He drew a slow, deep breath, then said softly, "Tell me more about Beth."

Beth. Her name touched a core of emotion within the protection of disbelief that surrounded Al. Beth was going to be really steamed when she found he'd gone and gotten himself killed. And the girls, damn, this was gonna be hell on Wendy. He'd promised he'd take her flying next weekend and he'd already backed out on that promise three times. She...

"Al?" At Sam's soft prodding, Al realized he must have been silent, lost in his thoughts for a very long time.

"Beth is fine," he answered at last. "So are my girls."

"Girls?"

Sam sounded suspicious, and Al had to grin. "My daughters, Victoria, Rebecca, Stephanie Ann and Wendy."

"Daughters," Sam shook his head, grinning from ear to ear. "There is some justice in the world after all. Al Calavicci, who loves women, has four daughters."

Al answered the grin with one of his own. "You should see them, Sam. They all look like their mother, drop dead gorgeous, and they're all sharp as tacks. Especially Wendy, she's gonna be the death of me yet. She..." Abruptly, Al let the sentence die, oddly troubled by the thought of death. Hell, he'd already accepted that, hadn't he?

"Tell me more about Wendy," Sam urged softly.

"She's great, Sam. You'd like her." Al's voice was quieter now, more subdued. "She's gotten kind of...carried away lately, though. Her and Stephanie Ann both, now that I think about it."

"Carried away?"

Al shot him a sharp look. "It's just kid stuff. Their grades will come up again when we've made it through this...rough spot. And Steff's gonna drop that loser party hound she's hooked up with, she told me so."

"What kind of rough spot?"

The admiral frowned. "It's not the big deal Beth makes it out to be. So I've been busy lately, it's not the end of the world, right? Kids have made it through before when their parents had stuff they have to take care of. They're good kids, Sam, and this whole attitude thing will work itself out. The fact I've been drinking a little bit lately has nothing to do with it. Steff and Wendy are fine!"

Sam blinked at the rising vehemence in Al's tone. "I'm sure they are," he said soothingly. "Tell me more about all your girls."

Al's eyes softened as his thoughts turned inward. "Victoria was the first," he said as if to himself. "I wanted to name her Trudy, but it didn't seem right, somehow. I mean, Trudy's not a modern name, so we named her Victoria Gertrude." His lips twitched in a half smile. "When she hit junior high, she gave me hell for that, but it worked out okay. The kids called her Vicki G, and it was kind of cute. She's graduating from MIT this semester. She..."

The reminiscing lulled him, eased the barriers still more, with Sam

hanging on every word. By his very attentive silence, the time traveler urged Al to say more and so he did. By the time he'd taken Sam through the saga of his second history, the one that included Beth, there didn't seem much need to filter what had happened next, after Sam had disappeared from a bar named Al's Place. The story just rolled on...

"Sometimes they make me nuts, though. After we lost you, they just didn't understand. Beth was always on me," Al shook his head at the memory, "'You can't live at the Project, Al'," he said in an imitation of her words. "'We all need you as much as Sam.'"

The admiral drew a deep breath. "But, they didn't, not really. They all got along fine even if there were nights I didn't make it home." His brows drew down in a scowl. "They got along fine."

There was a long pause, until Sam said hesitantly, "Maybe, they did need you, Al. Maybe..."

The older man's eyes swung back to him, "So did you. Weitzman was out to declare you dead. That bastard Bartlett was out prowling the Project all hours tryin' to find somebody who'd get loose lipped and speculate about it to him so he could run and quote 'professional opinion' to the Committee."

Al snorted, "Professional opinion, my ass. Talk wrung outta a bored tech at four in the morning, when he's keeping solo watch on Ziggy for a blip that never comes, is nothing but nerves talkin'. And he knew it." He smiled in satisfaction at the memory. "Bartlett sure as hell knew it after I threw his butt out in the parking lot when he tried it."

His lips twisted bitterly, "Fat lot of good it did me, they shut us down after six months anyway."

Sam's eyes widened. "They shut down the Project?"

"Almost. I fought like hell and kept the essential areas like Ziggy and the Imaging Chamber." Al's eyes were desolate, focused on something only he could see in the distance. "Everybody's gone but Gooshie and Verbena and three techs to keep things bare bone minimum...and me."

Sam sat silent at Al's side as if digesting this. Finally, he spoke slowly as if vocalizing what troubled him the most, "What were you doing at the Project at four in the morning if there was nothing to be done?"

The admiral shrugged, the answer coming easily within the veil of unreality that still cloaked him. "I was sitting in the Imaging Chamber, thinking."

"Sitting in the Imaging Chamber," Sam repeated, his voice uneasy. "Why?"

Rolling his eyes as if he'd heard the question before, Al sighed. "To think, like I told you. Sitting in the dark, in the Imaging Chamber, I used to think that..."

"What?"

"That maybe I could make it happen." Al's eyes darkened as his thoughts turned further inward, almost unaware of his audience, "That I could find you if I just listened hard enough, and long enough. Beth never...hell, nobody ever seemed to understand that. But...I used to feel it."

Pain grew within his chest as if the emotions stirred were struggling valiantly to push back the numbness that so deadened him. Tears closed his throat, making it difficult to speak and his next words escaped him only as a whisper. "I'm sorry I never brought you home, Sam."

Leaning near, the physicist took his hand. Distantly, Al noticed again with a shock how real the hallucination seemed when it touched him. It felt like Sam's fingers were really wrapped around his. "It's not your fault, Al." The words were earnest and sincere, just the way Sam would have spoken them. But then, what else could he expect from his own subconscious? Of course Sam would say what Al expected him to--say what Al needed him to say.

"It's not your fault," the figment insisted, "you did all you could." Hazel eyes that were suspiciously bright held his own. "You did more than any one would have demanded of you. It's not your fault I didn't come home."

"Yeah, right," Al grated, his tone a denial of the words. "I did a real bang up job. Damn near lost my wife, neglected my kids, let 'em all but close down the Project you laid your life on the line for, and..."

"Stop it," Sam flared angrily. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You..."

"I screwed up, Sam," Al shouted back, "I screwed up! I waited too long to head for the Accelerator. I should've known Weitzman was gonna have his spies. I..."

Sam's face went pale. "You tried to leap?"

"Yeah, tried," Al snarled. "Screwed it up royal. Got caught and busted for it. You..."

"Busted, Al..?"

"Dressed down and screwed, pal. That's what your good pal Al did for you."

Al looked away, unable to face the expression in Sam's eyes. But, hell, if he was gonna tell part of it, he may as well tell it all. "The night before the Committee was supposed to come for an inspection, I got rip roaring drunk in my office." His lips twisted sourly, "I was gonna have one drink, I thought." He shook his head bitterly, "What a nozzel, I should have known what'd happen. Then, after a bottle of scotch, I couldn't even see straight, let alone think straight."

"Al..."

The admiral shook Sam's hand off his shoulder. "I was just gonna go down and sit in the Imaging Chamber and wait'll I sobered up a little before I went home." His eyes met Sam's. "Damned if I didn't take a wrong turn and end up in the Accelerator and all of a sudden it made a whole lot of sense that leaping while I still could was our last chance. Ziggy was giving eighty six percent odds that the Committee was gonna make some kind of major move that day."

Again, he shook his head as if he could hardly believe his own words, "So I went and really screwed us up by getting desperate and getting caught. My stupidity is why Weitzman finally got the ammo to clamp down the Project good and tight. Another month, maybe two and he'll have the rest. If I'd made good the leap..."

"Your leaping wouldn't have made any difference, Al," Sam insisted. "I still wouldn't have come home."

Wouldn't. Al froze at the word. Wouldn't was a whole hell of a lot different than couldn't, and there had been all that confused craziness a year ago when Sam had rambled on about God the bartender. Hadn't he said something about God saying he was leaping himself around? Nailing Sam with a stare, he grated, "What did you mean earlier, when you said you'd been leaping on your own, that you didn't need any link to the Project any more?"

Sam looked away, shifting as if to turn his back as he had done before, but Al held him with his glare. "Let's have it," he demanded, searching the face he knew so well for clues as to what he was hiding. "What'd you mean, wouldn't have come home?"

The physicist drew a deep breath and met his eyes. "I've been...guiding my own leaps, in a way. Maybe, I always did, I just didn't know it."

Al's eyes narrowed suspiciously, "What do you mean, 'guiding your own leaps'? You can decide where to go?"

"Not really, not totally. I just..." the kid ducked his head a moment, then looked back up to meet Al's eyes, "I let the pull take me where it is I'm most needed. Sometimes, maybe I guess that means I chose, in a way. There's always someone who needs me, who needs my help, more than I need to go home."

For a long moment, Al regarded his friend through narrowed eyes, and finally Sam ducked his head as if to be free of the minute scrutiny. "If you could've come home, and you didn't, I'm gonna kick your butt, Beckett. You can count on it!"

"Al..."

"Don't 'Al' me, pal!" The admiral's eyes flashed angrily despite the growing tightness in his chest. "If you could've come home, and you didn't, your ass is grass!"

"But..."

"You didn't have to stay forever! You could've at least come home to let me know! You could've leaped again, if that's what you really wanted."

"It wasn't that simple! People needed me, Al! I..."
"I needed you!" The shout came from the heart, and the raw need in it tore Al's throat. "You selfish bastard! I needed you. I needed to know I hadn't dropped the ball and let you die! Couldn't you at least have come back to say goodbye?!"

The stricken look in Sam's eyes pierced Al like an arrow to his heart. Damn, now look what he'd done. Al scowled, not wanting to feel as ashamed as he did. This was *his* hallucination, wasn't it?

He was going to have to smooth this over, though why the hell he was worried about hurting the feelings of a figment of his own subconscious, he didn't know. Still, for the sake of the memory of a old, old friend, he had to try to fix it. Bad enough he never kept his promise to the real Sam, he didn't need to betray a hallucinatory one as well.

"Ah, hell, Sam, I..."

Pain, real as a crushing blow to his chest, knocked the rest of the words from him. A sound somewhere between a groan and a sigh escaped him at the first hammer like blow. This pain, he remembered, remembered very well. Too well, damn it.

"Al?" Sam sounded scared, as he bent over him. "Al? What is it?"
What was it? He knew the answer to that question, and after all it wasn't like it was a surprise. All along, he'd just been waiting to die. Maybe a heart attack was an easier way to go than going up in a fireball, anyway. Maybe. He doubted it, but there was no help for it after all. "Heart," he managed, hearing his voice and all the calm it held with a distant surprise. Oddly, as acutely as he experienced the pain, it seemed, somehow, to belong to someone else.

"No. Damn it, Al. No!"

Incredibly, even as the pain in his chest grew, the calmness that cradled the rest of him held firm. There was no way he was wrong about this. As a part of his imagination, Sam should know it. "Yes," he said evenly, feeling the calm insulate him in its warm protection. "I know what a heart attack feels like, Sam."

The doctor came to his knees, gripping Al's arms as if to hold him to life by sheer force of will. "Don't do this, Al! I don't have any equipment! You can't be having a heart attack!"

"Yes, I can," Al disagreed mildly, "And I am. I remember how this hand squeezing the breath out of me felt the last time. It's the same."

Somehow, he meant it as a reassurance, a soothing assertion that it was familiar, that things were as they were meant to be. Sam's hands bit into his arms, and the chest pain drew in tighter on itself, squeezing out breath. Strange, how he felt those things so clearly and yet the rest of him felt as if it wasn't even there. Strange.

Above him, there were tears on the doctor's cheeks as he reached out to press two fingers to Al's throat to monitor his pulse. Sam was crying, the older man saw with a disquiet that shuddered through the calm that still swaddled him in its folds. Sam was afraid for him to die, and he had to make it better.

"I remember," he said calmly, though he had no idea where the words came from, "how sore my chest was when I woke up on the Imaging Chamber floor."

"Al, listen..."

"No, you listen, Sam. It's okay. Verbena'd been jumping up and down on my chest." Distantly, he wondered why Sam couldn't see the humor in it? "I won't have to worry about that this time, because there's no one to do CPR out here in this damned wilderness." It seemed to make so much sense, why didn't Sam understand?

"I'm here, Al!" Sam shouted. "I won't let you die!" Crying in earnest now, he shook him, hard. "Please, don't die!"

"It's not my choice," the admiral said, still speaking from within the calm that had not failed him despite the squeezing pain in his chest. "I don't control my destiny like you say you do these days." There was no anger in it, just simplicity, and honesty. It was...just not possible to lie.

"No! I'm here now," Sam pleaded, cupping his hands about Al's face as

if to keep him with him. "I didn't come back just to watch you die!"

"Then why did you come back?" Still his voice came from the center of that detached calm that somehow was no longer so perfect and untouched by all that went on about him.

"To fix this! To keep you from dying in some deserted ravine just because I was too damn selfish to come home!"

"Some things, Sam, you just can't fix." The calm was beginning to wash away now, as if eroded by the constant roar and flow of emotion. "Just like I couldn't bring you home if you didn't want to come. No matter how hard I tried." He felt it, God help him, he felt the reality of it with all his being. It was true. It was real.

"That was different," Sam's voice was a whisper as he held Al's gaze. "It wasn't your fault."

"I know," Al answered softly, and knew that also to be true. He did know, with all his soul, with all his being. It was true, and he saw Sam understand that this time he really meant it.

"But," he continued, forced into brutal honesty for there was no more time for anything else, "it's the same, anyway. This is the way it has to end, now."

For the first time, he reached out to Sam and expected to find him real. He grasped the other man's shoulder and though his grip was weakened, his friend was solid and warm to the touch. *Real. Yes, real.* "I'm glad," Al said, forcing the words past the terrible crushing pain in his chest, "I'm glad you came back, Sam."

Gazing into the hazel eyes, he saw his friend realize the significance of that, and know that at last he believed truly that Sam had, indeed, come back to say goodbye. It was what had brought him back, after the last heart attack, this unfinished business between them, and now it was done.

The loss of his family, he mourned, and he would have given his legs in order to stay with them. But, if he could no longer stay, at least he had his memories, and the knowledge that things were right between he and Sam to take with him.

Light faded to darkness, though he could still feel and hear. "Al..." It was Sam's voice, choked and strained, unable to speak all the things unsaid.

But, it didn't matter, not really. Al knew them all, anyway, and it was complete between them. He had, now, what he had needed for the past year, that which no one else had seemed to understand. He was able to say it now and he let it leave him with the last of his breath. "Goodbye, Sam."

With the words went hearing, and feeling...and life. It was over, but within it, there was some small measure of completeness. Death he could no longer defy, and so, surrendering at last, he let it take him.

* * *

It was so quiet, too quiet, as if winter had muted all sounds of life and living things. Thick snow deadened even the noises of the rescue efforts, lending the scene an air of unreality. Red, yellow and white lights flashed in the night, flooding the area with intermittent bursts of brilliant illumination that reached far into the winter cloaked forest.

With their light, Sam could see a tearing wound in the ancient pines where Al's car had ripped through them in its plunge down the ravine. In the more steady light of the emergency spotlights, he could see a wench slowly dragging a blanket draped basket up over the drop off, moving it ever nearer waiting hands.

But, it was too quiet, much too quiet. In the silence, it seemed he could still hear echoing in his mind the scream that had torn his throat and reverberated through the ravine hours ago. NO!!!!

Al was not dead. *No, he was not dead!* Yet...he was. Swallowing hard, Sam stirred the rawness in his throat to pain. Dimly, he welcomed it. It was better than the nothingness that he felt now, the hollowness that rang and howled within him as his heartfelt cry had once torn through the quiet

wilderness. NO!!!

It was shock, a portion of his brain that still functioned told him. It was only shock, this numbness, this unwillingness to believe.

He had worked for what seemed hours, fighting to bring Al back, and now he relived it in finest detail. Desperate, he had sworn at his oldest friend that it was not finished, it was not over, and he could not die.

It *had* to have been why Sam was there, to fix it, to make sure it didn't happen. It was not enough to be here only to make sure that his best and oldest friend had not died alone. *Al could not be dead!*

Sam had done CPR until his arms ached from the effort and his breath grew labored and desperate from the strain of breathing for both he and Al. His hands had stung and burned, splashed in the chill of the snow shelter with the warmth of his tears that he had not noticed until he had finally been forced to admit that it was over. No matter how he swore, or cried, or so desperately wanted it, Al was not going to awaken, saying in that gravelly voice of his, "Damn it, Sam, quit bouncin' around on my chest, will ya?" He never woke up, never responded.

And he never would, Sam admitted with a bleak coldness in his soul as he watched the rescue team wrestle the basket free of trees that seemed reluctant to give up their dead. Horribly numb, he stood to one side, the blankets Al had packed in his trunk for emergencies draped about his shoulders. Silent, he watched men he did not know free the basket from the wench.

His eyes stung in the bitter cold. Lifting one hand to brush away the tears and driving snow that made it difficult to see, he was abruptly aware again of the cup of coffee he was still holding. One of the ambulance crew had given it to him and he still held it though the dark liquid in the styrofoam container had long since cooled to undrinkable.

Styrofoam, came the thought unbidden, Al will have a fit. He...

But, no. Sam followed the blanket shrouded basket with his eyes as solemn faced men carried it to the waiting ambulance. He had stayed with Al so long, holding him and crying until there seemed to be no tears left in him. Then, there had been the sound of a snow plow coming up the side of the mountain, and Sam had struggled up to the road to catch their attention. He had flagged them down and shouted to them to radio for help. They had wanted to take him down the mountain, to warmth, to treatment for frostbite. What, they had wanted to know, was he doing out in such a storm with no winter clothing?

Of course, he had not gone. He had waited with Al, thinking on all his friend had told him. Reflecting, he had turned the words over and over in his head, waiting for the help that had come too late as he himself had come too late. "I know," Al had said at last when Sam had told him it wasn't his fault. "I know." But that knowledge, that forgiveness had arrived too late. *Sam had arrived too late.*

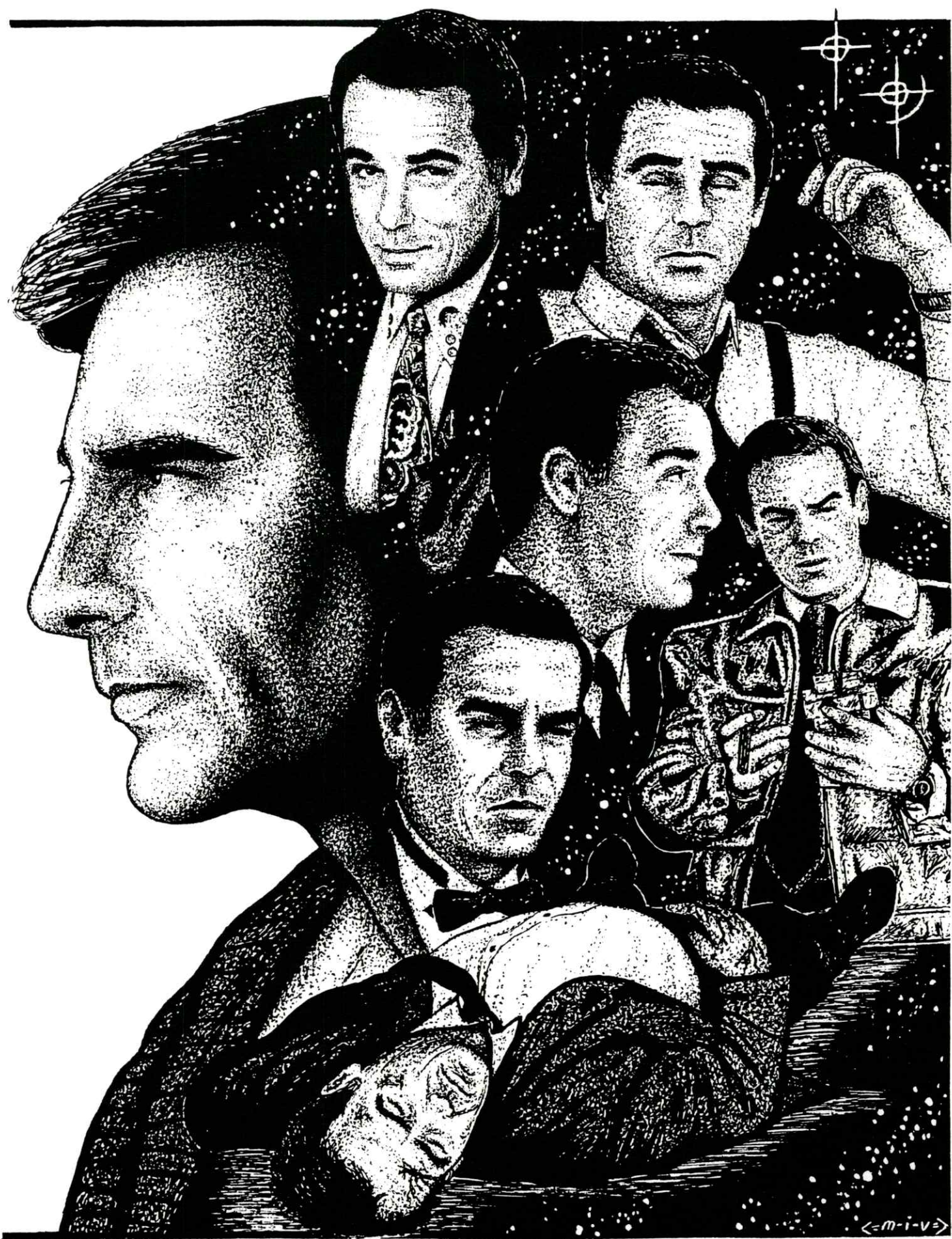
"Some things you can't fix, Sam." The soft, raspy words echoed through his mind as the ambulance crew hoisted his best friend's body into the waiting vehicle and climbed in after it. He had been so sure he *could* fix it, had thought it was why he was here, to keep Al from dying. Yet, he had been wrong.

Now these men were going to take the admiral away, back to his wife, Beth, who, this time, would be waiting. Beth. The hollowness in Sam's chest grew. He had thought he had fixed that, too; that it was okay to go on leaping on his own. Bleakly, he realized he had been terribly wrong about that, as well.

Beth had been with Al in that second history up until the juncture, until that incomplete parting from the bar that was far more than a bar. Then, the guilt and the need not to fail his best friend had driven Al away from her again even if they had continued life in the same household. It had separated him from his career, and his daughters, driven him toward a heart attack and drinking.

Such unswerving devotion, Sam thought desolately, he did not deserve. It was he who had failed.

In a moment, someone would be coming to him, wanting to know where he



<-m-i-v>

needed to go. Sam drew a deep breath, forcing himself to stir against the terrible numbness that held him. It was time to leap, time to fix another life that needed fixing. But where, he asked himself bleakly as a state patrolman closed the ambulance door with a hollow thunk that echoed with a dull finality in the snow shrouded night, was it that he should go?

This time, where was it he was needed the most?

* * *

The temptation to open the bottle was just too much. Alone in his darkened office, Al reached for the scotch. The glass of the tapered neck was cool and welcome in the palm of his hand as he grasped it and pulled it from his lower desk drawer.

Drawing a deep breath, he caressed it slowly, considering carefully what he was about to do. It had been years since he'd had a drink, and they had been hard fought years of sobriety. But now...his thumb traced the seal along the lid with a longing that was a physical pain.

He had purchased the bottle four months after they had lost contact with Sam. The moment was still crystalline clear in his mind. On the way back from a hellacious battle with the Funding Committee and a verbal slug fest with that weasel Weitzman, he had stopped off at the liquor store and bought the bottle. Hadn't opened it, though. Hadn't needed it after all. Beth had been waiting up for him and had listened to him for hours. She had understood, then, that he had to keep trying, had to keep looking for the key that would bring Sam back home.

Sam was not dead, no matter what Weitzman claimed. No matter how long it had been since Ziggy had been unable to glean any definitive trace of the time traveler's whereabouts. No matter how bad things looked now at one in the morning of the day the entire damn Committee was scheduled to come here and make a judgment on whether they were going to shut the whole shootin' match down for good.

Al's fingers tightened on the bottle when one of the transient, annoying chest pains that he had been experiencing lately knifed through his chest. Groaning, he brought the bottle and the hand holding it to press against his breastbone where it felt like a giant hand was squeezing the life out of him. The damn pains were getting more frequent. Indigestion, he thought angrily, had to be. He didn't have the time for it to be anything more.

Didn't have time. Ha! What a joke when he was sitting in the middle of a mess that was supposed to open up all of time to mankind. He never had enough time. Like tonight, he'd missed Wendy's school play. She was playing the lead, and he'd promised...

The pain in his chest shot to its peak, threatening to close off his breath until it began to ease. Grimacing, he waited until the last of the pain passed, then turned his attention back to the bottle. Holding it out before him, he regarded it longingly. Why the hell *shouldn't* he open it? One drink wasn't going to hurt, and maybe it'd ease the tightness in his chest...the indigestion...a little.

Slowly, he tightened his grip on the seal. One of his axioms of sobriety was the 'nevers'. Never let yourself get too tired, or too hungry. He needed the damn drink to get himself through the night to take up the fight for Sam tomorrow, and he was going to have it.

Beth was going to have a fit. She'd nearly reached her limit with his all nighters at the Project and broken promises. After they had realized they had lost Sam, she had sat beside him on their couch and listened to him worry that this time the kid may be gone for good. She had assured him that was not so, pointing out that he and Sam were too close for that. Some way, somehow, she had said in utter certainty, he would find Sam. After all, she had said that was what friends were for.

But now, now even she had been saying that Sam wouldn't want this, wouldn't want him making himself crazy and ruining his health for a snowball's chance in hell to find him again. If Beth didn't understand, he was really up the proverbial creek.

He was standing on damn shaky ground, he knew that, but there was no turning back, no compromise. He would not let it end like this. There was no way Sam would have let him down if their situations were reversed. Still...the hell of it was, despite all his busting his butt, he was no closer than he'd been six months ago. He was out of ideas, and nearly out of time.

Maybe the only option left was throwing himself into the Accelerator and hoping the winds of Time would hurl him to Sam--and buy them both a little more time with the Committee. Hell of a choice that was, nobody in their right mind would even think of it.

Deliberately, he grasped the bottle's seal to crack it open. The hell with 'nevers', though they did make sense. To withstand the siren call of the booze, never let yourself get too tired, too hungry...or too lonely.

"Al?" The sound of his name, coming from a form silhouetted against the darkened doorway, stopped him cold.

Hands stilled on the unbroken seal, he squinted at the form. What the hell? It sounded like...but it couldn't be. Hastily he shoved the bottle into the open briefcase on his desk. Flipping the case closed to hide its contents, he got to his feet on the attack. "Who are you?" he demanded, striding around the desk. "How'd you get past security?"

"Al," the form said again, coming forward a step. "It's me, Sam."

Scowling, Al flipped on the overhead light with an angry snap of his wrist. "Is this some kind of..."

Stunned, he found words fled as the light revealed the figure that stood before him. It was Sam! But, how...

Speechless, he stood frozen as Sam came forward, arms outstretched. "Al," he said, his voice sounding suspiciously close to tears. "I thought I'd never see you again!"

Too shocked to evade the oncoming physicist, Al found himself caught up in the other man's powerful embrace. Sam's hug was strong, and somehow desperate. Almost, Al thought dazedly, as if he expected him to melt away beneath his touch. Maybe he had gone to sleep and was dreaming this. But...this wasn't the way he had ever dreamed of Sam's homecoming.

Still, despite himself, he found his arms closing, returning the hug. Surely this couldn't really be Sam. Could it?

All his senses told him it was genuine. The time traveler felt so real, so solid, that the truth of it hit Al like a blow to his chest. Sam was home! Closing his eyes against the intensity of the emotions, he tightened his own embrace, holding the other man in a bone cracking hug that came from the heart.

Real, Sam was real. And he was home! He was never going to let him go again. He was going to hog tie him and lock him up if he had to, but he was never going to lose him again. He was going to...he was going to kick his butt!

Abruptly, he drew back, stiff arming Sam from him. "Where in blazes have you been?" he demanded gruffly. "I've looked from hell and back for you!"

Sam met his gaze, and Al saw his eyes were bright. Oh great, another five seconds and the kid was gonna go all mushy on him. That he didn't need. "Well? Where've you been?" he thundered in the same tone he used with Steffie when she'd breezed in at two in the morning after her date with that party hound. "This had better be good, Beckett, or I'm kicking your butt from here to eternity."

"Al," Sam shook his head but grinned as if welcoming the tirade. "It's good to see you, too." His eyes darkened, and he reached out a hand to clasp the admiral's shoulder as if he still needed touch to verify Al's presence. "I thought I might be too late."

"Too late?" The admiral frowned, regarding Sam closely. The time traveler looked like he had been crying for hours and there was a desperation to his tone that the Observer didn't like at all. Something about the expression in Sam's eyes frightened him. "Too late for what?"

"Doesn't matter," Sam said, releasing him. "I'm here now. Isn't that enough?"

Al shook his head in mock disgust, trying to hold onto anger that abruptly failed him. The kid looked like hell. Despite his best efforts, his own eyes were filled with tears. Damn, he couldn't cry, for pete's sake.

Giving into instinct, he stepped forward again to give Sam a quick, fierce hug. As if awakened by the movement, a spasm knifed through his chest, drawing an involuntary wince from him. Quickly, he sought to cover it, drawing away, with a hard punch to Sam's upper arm. "I missed you buddy," he said gruffly, turning to his desk. "I'm gonna let the rest of the troops know you're here."

But, Sam, whom Al could never successfully fool, caught his arm to hold him back. His words, however, caught the Observer by surprise. "You need to see a doctor, Al. Now. Tonight."

"What?"

"I mean it," Sam said firmly. "You've been ignoring these chest pains too long now. I'm betting with your diet and the way you've been smoking all these years, your arteries are seventy, maybe eighty percent clogged."

"What pains?" The tone sounded like a pretty good bluff to him, but Sam obviously was not buying it.

"The ones that are forecasting a serious heart attack in the next couple of months, maybe less." Sam's hazel eyes had that determined don't-argue-with-me-I'm-your-doctor look. He reached out, grasped Al's upper arms and shook him lightly. "The one you don't have to have, if you'll check yourself into a medical facility. With treatment, maybe a bypass, maybe balloon angioplasty, the odds of your having a MI are going to drop significantly. Maybe..."

Al's eyes narrowed. What was Sam doing showing up here out of the blue in the middle of the night, spouting odds about him having a heart attack? At the change in his expression, the doctor hesitated, and Al's suspicions grew. Something was not right here, and he was going to find out what. This time, he was going to get an answer.

"Where have you been, Sam? Or should I say when?" He studied the physicist carefully. "How come you show up out of the blue, quoting odds on my future?"

"Al, I..."

"Am I a hologram lurking around here somewhere?" the admiral interrupted, sending a suspicious, hasty glance around the room. He brought his gaze back to nail the time traveler with a glare. "Am I? Did you leap in here to mess with my life, planning to leap out again?"

Sam shook his head regretfully and answered at least one of the questions. "No, Al. There isn't a holographic you here."

Al considered him closely. "But what's the rest of it? How come you're so convinced I'm gonna have a heart attack?"

"Look at your lifestyle. You smoke, and eat rich food and..."

"And you come back after leapin' around in the space/time continuum for years and the first thing you do is start harping on my vices. Come on, Sam, let's hear the clincher."

"Al..."

"Don't 'Al' me, pal." The admiral leaned back against his desk, searching suspicion still in his eyes. "There's more to this, isn't there? Spill it. What do you know about my future?"

"The future's not set, Al," Sam said softly. "You of all people should know that. A little nudge here, a push there, and the future's something very different than it was the first time."

"Yeah, well," Al scowled. "Your nudging days are over, pal. Weitzman's due in here tomorrow, him, his watch dog Bartlett and the rest of the Committee. Ziggy lays odds at..."

Hesitating just a moment, he reached over to his desk and snatched his hand link from the recharger base. "Wait a minute," he growled, punching in keys quickly, keeping the instrument turned away from Sam's line of vision, "ninety-two percent," he said at last. "Ninety-two percent chance they close this place down lock, stock and barrel."

Sam frowned and Al hastily blanked the link before the physicist

demanded a look at it. Not missing the movement, the younger man shook his head, his expression saying plainly he didn't buy the charade. "The odds aren't really that high, are they, Al?"

Grimacing, the admiral replaced the link in its base. "Well, they're high, really high."

"They didn't close down the Project th..." Sam began firmly, then uncomfortably let whatever he had been about to say die.

The admiral shot him a glance, turned his back firmly on the hand link and supplied the unspoken finish to the sentence, "Didn't close down the Project the first time you mean. Because I wasn't about to let them. Now, *this time*," he shrugged eloquently, watching Sam closely, "even if they do, it doesn't matter. You're home and," his gaze sharpened, "nobody's gonna be doing any leaping for a long time to come. Not until we squish every last bug in the retrieval system!"

"I don't need the Project to leap, Al."

"What do you mean, you don't need the Project to leap?" Driven to his feet, the admiral stood up and began to pace, gesturing eloquently. "Of course you do, without the Project you..." Abruptly, the implication of all Sam had said sunk in, and he stopped, mid stride. "But...that's what you've been doing solo, isn't it? Leaping? In your own body because the Waiting Room stays empty." His expression darkened to a scowl. "If you're calling your own shots--uhh, leaps--how come you didn't come home before now?"

Sam shrugged, as if it were impossible to explain in words what drove him. "There are so many people who need me, Al. There's so much to be done. I'd always think I'd leap just once more, and then come home. But...it just never seemed to be the right time."

"And what makes *now* the right time?"

For a long moment, the physicist was silent. Finally, his answer came. "I think you know."

Al took a deep breath as if to argue, but whatever he would have said fled at the thought of the bottle hidden in his briefcase. Could it be Sam knew? Despite himself, his eyes flicked in the direction of the hidden bottle. When they came back to Sam's face, he saw that his suspicions were true. Yes, Sam knew. The question now was how--but maybe, that was a question to which he did not want an answer.

Slowly, he took another, calmer, breath, feeling a tiny, warning stab of pain beneath his ribs all the same. "Well, you're home now, to stay," he said, trying to make it sound as confident as he wanted to feel.

"Not to stay."

"Like hell!" Al exploded, striding forward to grasp the younger man's wrist. "You're home and you're going to *stay* home if I have to clap you in irons!"

Surprisingly, Sam laughed. "That's not what you said before. You said I could come back, and then leap again if that's what I had to do."

"Before," Al repeated, suspiciously, "exactly when, before?"

Gently, the time traveler pulled his wrist free, shaking his head. "No one should know too much about their future, Al."

"Saam," the admiral protested, "I never said anything about you using this Project as a rest area for Boy Scout time travelers!"

At Sam's chiding glance, he persisted, his voice rising. "I didn't! Well, though," he admitted diffidently, "I might have, if I was desperate. But," he nailed Sam with another glare, "if I did, I lied. Any and all promises made under duress in any other timeline are henceforth null and void." His voice rose triumphantly, "You're not going anywhere. Capeesh?"

"I can't stay, Al," Sam said softly. "Not yet. There's still too much I have to do."

"Damn it, Sam," Al protested, gesturing expressively "the world's chock full of grief. You can't fix it all, especially by yourself. Everybody deserves a rest now and then. Even He," Al stabbed a quick finger upward, "understands that. He kicked back on the seventh day of creation. What makes you so sure He didn't send you back here for a little R&R?"

"He didn't send me."

"What, you're a solo agent now? Nobody's leaping you, not God or Fate or Time? You're the one who calls all the shots about who lives, who dies, who succeeds and who fails?"

"Stop it, Al!"

"Stop what?" Al strode forward, pressing Sam. "Stop making you think about what you're doing? Stop pointing out that maybe, just maybe, there's more to this than what you're seeing? Why are you here, Sam? Why are you really here?"

"To say goodbye!"

The words obviously came from Sam's heart, and they halted Al in his ruthless search for answers for a long moment. Then, slowly, holding Sam's gaze, he said, "And what if I'm not ready to say goodbye?"

"Al, stop making this so hard."

"I want it to be hard. I want it to be damned hard. I want you to know all that you're giving up when you jump back out into the wild blue yonder."

"I know what I'm giving up," the physicist snapped, his voice rising.

"I know!"

"Do you?" Al shot back. "Are you sure that saying goodbye is what you really want, Sam? Or do you want more than that? Do you want my blessing to go back to leaping and leave us all alone here with no sense of where you are?"

"Al, I have to go."

"Do you? Or do you want to go? There's a big difference there, Sam."

"I..." Sam turned away, running a hand through his hair, head lowered in thought. He turned back to Al, meeting his eyes. "I don't know if He'll let me stay."

"I thought you said He didn't send you any more."

"I," Sam frowned slightly, "I'm not sure."

"Then, maybe, you should get sure," Al said softly. "If He doesn't want you to stay here, He'll pull you out. Nothing you could do could change that anyway, if He wants you."

Sam hesitated, obviously torn and the admiral pressed the advantage.

"If quantum leaping is meant to be, it will be. Without you, they're going to close us down here, Sam, soon."

The physicist shook his head. "Not if you don't get desperate and do something radical and give them ammo to use against you. Not real soon anyway."

Al's gaze was sharp and discerning, but he only shook his head. "Maybe not this month, or next, but for sure within a year, no matter what happens. If you're gone, and you control your own destiny as you say, it doesn't hurt you. But Quantum Leap is dead, and all its potential for helping humankind dies with it. Think about that, Sam, think about all the good that goes down the drain, good you could have kept alive if you'd stayed and fought to keep the Project alive."

"I can't stay." Sam's voice was quiet, almost a whisper in the quiet room.

"Why not?" Al persisted. "If you control the leaps like you say, you can go anytime and no one can stop you. Not me, not Weitzman, not the Committee, not anybody. You've got all the time in the world to go back and fix whatever you want. But, if you stay, you have the chance to perfect the process of quantum leaping, and there's not another man alive in this century who can do that. That job, pal, only Sam Beckett can fill."

"People need me."

"People need you here."

"I know you think you do, but..."

Al snorted. "I think it's you who needs me, pal," he said with a half grin that took the sting from the words. "What's Don Quixote without Sancho? But, I wasn't talking about me. I was talking about your mom, and Katie, and Tom."

"Tom?" Sam's head came up. "How is Tom?"

"Stay and see for yourself," Al said evenly. "If you're still leaping and this is just a rest stop, I'm still not supposed to tell you anything,

right?"

"Al!"

"Hey, Sam," Al shrugged elaborately, "you gotta decide what rules you want to play under!"

"I should have known you'd do this."

"Do what?"

The physicist shrugged, throwing his hands up in annoyance. "Muddy the waters, confuse this issue!" he snapped, beginning to pace. "Take everything that *made* sense and turn it all around until *none* of it makes sense any more!"

Al half smiled, leaning against his desk as he watched Sam pace in short, agitated strides about the room. "Everybody's good at something, Sam. This just happens to be what I'm good at. It's why you brought me on as Observer, for a different point of view."

Sam shot him an irritated glance tempered with fondness. "Yeah? Well, you're fired."

"You can't fire me," the admiral returned, unperturbed, "unless you're back to stay. If you're still AWOL, you've got no say here. If you decide to stay, on the other hand, I can kick back and let *you* handle Weitzman tomorrow."

The physicist snorted in disgust, "From what I remember of Weitzman, that sounds like a threat."

A smile twitched at the corners of Al's lips. "Well, you've given me more than a few grey hairs in the past years, pal. I think fair is fair after all."

Abruptly, what amusement there had been in Sam's eyes fled. "I'm sorry, Al. I haven't been fair to you, I know that." Something of the haunted expression was back in his face as he stepped forward and Al felt another fleeting spasm in his chest. This one, he kept from outward reaction as Sam went on, "I'm sorry for all I've put you through."

Lightly, the admiral shrugged, "Forget it. I owe you, too." He hesitated only a moment, "For Beth. I know that it had to be you that changed things, giving her back to me along with a whole new set of memories." He paused, "In some ways, I still haven't gotten it sorted out. It's tricky as hell, remembering it both ways, you know."

"I know," Sam answered in a voice that was somehow at once completely honest and yet guarded.

For a moment, Al sat silent, regarding him. There it was again, that oddness that sent a chill down his spine as he looked into Sam's face. When he'd been a kid, and that spooky chill from nowhere made him shudder, he had laughed and said a goose walked over his grave. Over his grave. That didn't seem so funny now.

The silence was so complete between them that Al caught the faint sound of the elevator at the far end of the long hall leading to his office open and close. Getting to his feet, he realized he had done the best he could in his arguments. Whether Sam decided to stay, or leave, there was no way Al could control it beyond what he had set in motion here. However it all lined out, he was going to have to make his peace with it. Have to, or face whatever fate the future held for him that Sam wasn't talking about. At least he'd had this chance to say goodbye.

The physicist's eyes met his, and in them Al saw indecision. Maybe he'd done some good after all. The time was done for arguments and now he had some things he needed to say. Catching up the photo that rested on his desk, he took it with him, stopping just before Sam. "You do what you have to do, Sam," he said quietly, "and I'll do the same. Like you said, the future's not set in stone. Neither of us really knows how it's going to all turn out."

"I want to stay," Sam said softly. "I really do, but there are so many other things I have to do. Maybe, someone else can take my work and build on it. Then..."

Al shook his head, "An Einstein only comes once in a century or so, Sam, and you're it." He handed the photo to the time traveler, "My daughters," he said quietly, and named them in the order they stood, clustered around him and Beth, "Rebecca, Stephanie Ann, Victoria, and my youngest, Wendy."

Taking the framed photograph, Sam studied it a long moment. "They're beautiful, Al, all of them."

"And smart," the admiral added with a hint of a smile. "Vicki's graduating from MIT next semester, Rebecca from Cal Tech next year."

"That's great," Sam said, running a light thumb over the smiling faces one last time before returning the photo.

Al's dark eyes held the lighter ones. "Thanks, Sam. Thanks for my family, and my chance to do my life over. Before, I didn't even know how much I was missing."

The footsteps Al had been listening to grow nearer stopped before the open door. "Al?" came the voice from the doorway behind him. "I got your message from Ziggy. What's so urgent?"

Silent, the admiral stepped to one side so the visitor could see to whom he was talking. The reaction was everything for which he could have hoped. "Sam?!"

Al looked to the physicist, who seemed shocked beyond words. Sam's eyes widened, and he stood stunned and silent for a space that seemed far too long to the admiral. *What if he doesn't remember? What if...*

Finally, the younger man took a step, his arms coming up hesitantly as if afraid to believe his eyes. "Donna?"

Releasing a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, Al grinned as the two rushed together. Damn, and to think he'd missed this the last time. Beaming, he watched the two embrace. It was going to work, because it had to work. It was the last ace he had up his sleeve.

Stepping away to his desk, he allowed them some privacy, not that they seemed to even know he was there. He heard Donna's voice, blurred with tears, as she said, "I knew you'd come home, I *knew* it!"

Sam drew her still closer to him. "I promised," he said. "I promised I'd be back, didn't I?"

Al lifted his head, knowing what was coming. Sam's head came up as well, his eyes meeting the admiral's. "How could you not tell me?"

A sad half smile tugged at Al's lips. How much did Sam remember of the last time he came home? Not that it mattered. They were starting over now--all of them. "I'm not good at keeping all promises," he answered, "but I'm good at keeping some of them. Still," his eyes shifted to Donna's, "sometimes I bend them a little just to be sure everything comes out the way it's meant to."

"You mean the way you want them to," Sam said with fond amusement.

"Well, that too," Al shrugged, "This time, that just happened to be one and the same thing. Seize the day, I always say."

Donna's eyes shifted back to her husband as if she sensed some of the hidden message in Al's words. "Sam?" her voice was uncertain, and just a little bit frightened. "How long have you been here?"

Hearing a wealth of question in her tone, Al snapped his briefcase closed with a great show of briskness. "Well," he said, lifting the case from the desk, "I'll leave you two kids to talk it out between yourselves."

Donna half pulled from Sam's grasp to follow Al with her eyes as he moved to the door, but it was to her husband that she spoke. "Sam? What does he mean?"

Reaching the doorway, Al half turned, his hand on the knob, ready to pull it shut behind him. His eyes met Sam's over Donna's head. "I'll see you later, Sam." The words were light; he'd said them thousands of times. But, never had so much depended on the answer.

"Yeah," the physicist answered quietly, and in the soft inflection of his tone, the admiral heard loud and clear all the unspoken message beneath the words, "I'll see you later."

Grinning broadly, Al gave him a wink and withdrew, closing the door on Donna's beginning questions. Some questions, and answers, were better given in private.

Sam's words and the memory of his expression as he said them were a warm glow in Al's heart as he moved quickly down the corridor, briefcase in hand. *See you later.* Sam was home, home to stay.

The admiral just couldn't contain his triumphant grin. Al Calavicci did very, very good work and sometimes, just sometimes, desperate gambles did seem to pay.

* * *

Brilliantly elegant jazz swept Al down the dark suburban street to his home. It had been years since he had listened to this particular compact disc. In fact, he had been a little surprised to find it still neatly in its place in the storage case between the bucket seats when he looked for it on an impulse as he left the Project.

The last time he had played it had been the night he sped down a desert highway under beautifully cold stars to tell Sam they had gotten funding for yet another year. The jazz had fit his smug, buoyant mood perfectly and he was looking forward to giving the news to Sam. He had never gotten the chance, for the brilliant fire of the physicist's premature leap had lit up the night with a splendor Al hoped never to see again.

Somehow, the jazz, and all its memories had been too painful to bear, and he had put it away in the case in the stunned first days after the time traveler's first impulsive leap. There it remained, until this night, the night Sam came home to stay.

Smiling, Al let the jazz sustain him as he took the final curve to his home. Sam was back and now everyone at the Project knew it. While the younger man and his wife had been talking things over, the admiral had wakened them all and they had come to see for themselves.

It had been a boisterous and long awaited celebration, though short lived in the time traveler's best interests. Sam had been verified healthy by Verbena, though he had a baffling, mild case of frostbite he steadfastly refused to explain. Then, he had been thoroughly welcomed by every living soul that still remained at the Project and sent home with Donna for their own private welcome home.

Home. Still buoyed in the warm sense of well being, Al pulled into the driveway of his own home. This night, unlike others, he did not kill the headlights to avoid waking Beth. Tonight, he wanted to wake her, wanted to wake everyone in the house to tell them the wondrous good news that Sam was home. Sam was home!

But, he admitted reluctantly, as he pressed the button to open his garage door, perhaps that wasn't the best idea. Maybe he should wait until breakfast to tell them. It was the middle of the night, after all.

Pulling in, he shut off the car and stepped out into the quiet darkness that enfolds him. He moved easily in the familiar space that up until six months ago was alien territory to a man who had spent most of his adult life living in apartments.

Turning sideways, he edged past Wendy's ten speed that had been carelessly left before the door. That wasn't like her, he thought. Usually, she was meticulous about her belongings. He still remembered how she and Steffie Ann had nearly come to blows when Steff had left Wendy's roller skates out in the rain.

But, the thought came unbidden, things had been a little rough lately. Wendy had been reacting in her own way to all the tension in the household. So, now was the time to do something about that.

He let himself into the shadowed darkness of his kitchen. The sole light was a double globe above the sink that had been left on for him since he was late, again. A place of golden oak and gleaming chrome, it smelled faintly of cinnamon and vanilla. It was a smell that he had come to treasure in the past months--or was it the past years?

Quietly, he slid his briefcase onto the nearest counter, thinking. Now that Sam was home, he was going to take some time off. They could take a vacation, a real one, with no hand link secreted in his pocket and no worried calls back to the Project.

Maybe he'd take his family to Portland. Smiling to himself, he found that he liked the idea. He'd take them to stay at that lodge up on Mt. Hood.

Timberline Lodge; he'd spent a honeymoon with a model there once, in another life that seemed more and more a dream. This time, he would cement himself more firmly into this reality by taking his family there.

Wendy and Steff would love the skiing. Maybe he could talk Vick into flying in from Boston, and Becca from Pasadena. It was just past mid term, they ought to be able to come at least for the weekend.

A fleeting pain fluttered through his chest and he took a deep breath. One of them had caught him unaware during Sam's boisterous homecoming with the rest of the Project, and Verbena had called him on it. Actually, she'd called him on it a couple of times lately, but this time he gave in gracefully. He'd agreed to let her refer him to a cardiologist she knew in Alamogordo. Guess he'd have to take care of that before Portland and...

"Dad?"

The voice, coming from behind him as he reached for the locks on his briefcase startled him badly. Jumping, he spun about to see a sleepy young girl standing in the doorway. Grabbing his chest in what was only partially an act, he shook his head. "Geez, Wendy, don't do that. You're gonna give me a heart attack!"

Abruptly, he wanted to call the words back for some inexplicable reason. The dark haired young girl growing from early teen awkwardness to grace didn't seem to notice his expression. "I'm mad at you," she said emphatically, as she came further into the kitchen.

Al felt a sudden constriction in his chest that had little to do with physical pain as she stopped before him, hands on her hips as she regarded him angrily. When had she gotten so tall? How much had he missed of the precious gift Sam had handed to him a year--or was it thirty nine--years ago?

Wendy, however, was obviously not swayed by the change in his expression. "You promised you'd come to see me in the play! Where were you?"

"At the Project," he answered, as he had answered so many times before in the past months.

"But, you promised!"

"I know, honey," he said contritely. "I started crunching some numbers for the Committee tomorrow and I lost track of time. By the time I realized how late it was, it was too late."

She regarded him a long moment, her chin lifted at an angle so like her mother's that it made Al ache. What was it in the future Sam had seen that brought him back? How close had Al come to losing all of this? Finally, Wendy said quietly, "I wanted you to see me be Ondine."

"I know," he said again. "And I wanted to, sweetheart. I messed up bigtime." Gently, he took her shoulders and squeezed them lightly. "Forgive me one last time?" he asked softly. "Please?"

Her dark eyes regarded him soberly for a long moment. "Okay," she said at last. "If tomorrow morning you'll watch the video Mom made of the play, and drive me to school in your car since I'll have to miss the bus to have time to watch the tape with you."

Almost, Al replied that he couldn't. He had to be at the Project early. The Committee would be arriving by nine and... "Okay," he said, his lips twitching in a barely concealed smile as he looked into his daughter's face. "You know, you drive a hard bargain with a guy."

"I know," she said, a smile sparking in the dark depths of her eyes as he released her shoulders. "But, you still got off easy."

Al's eyebrows lifted. "I did?"

"Yeah," her teasing smile twisted the sweet pain in his chest. "I remember that time you told Vickie, 'if a guy calls you sweetheart, and begs you to forgive him, slug him because he's up to no good and call your daddy to come get you and take you home'."

"Weeell," Al drew a deep breath, floundering for something to say. He remembered that conversation, but was amazed Wendy, who had to have been all of four at the time, did as well. "I guess I did, but..."

"So," his triumphant daughter continued, "I figured since I was already home, I'd make you take me to school," she shot him a sharp glance to be sure he was paying attention, and qualified, "in your red car, not the blue one,

and," she shrugged, "I thought I'd let you off easy and not slug you." Her dancing eyes told Al she knew very well what he'd really meant but was going to let him off the hook by pretending innocence.

Al shot her a narrow eyed glance and pushed his briefcase further back on the counter. "You know too much for your own good," he told her and hastily changed the subject. He was new at this dad stuff--sort of--and there was only so much he could handle. "Were you good in the play?"

"Great," she answered, her eyes lighting up in glee. "Wait'll you see the tape. I got two standing ovations."

"Yeah? I knew you'd blow them away."

"Yeah. And," her grin was wicked as she leaned forward conspiratorially. "Natasha forgot her lines."

"No kidding." Al's own grin revealed the inspiration from which hers had sprung. "Serves her right for hiding your costume at rehearsal and trying to get you in hot water with Mrs. Rand."

"That's what I thought," Wendy agreed with a firm nod. "What goes around comes around and her karma spun right around and bit her in the butt."

Stifling a laugh, Al thought he should probably say something fatherly, but he was damned if he could think of anything when he so thoroughly agreed with her. His daughter's next words, however, assured him that Beth was still guiding the moral uprightness of their children. "I kind a felt sorry for her, though," Wendy admitted, "so I pretended like I coughed and told her the line. I don't think anybody could tell."

"Good for you," Al said, sweeping her to him for a quick hug. "I'm proud of you."

Unexpectedly, she clung to him. "I missed you, Dad."

Somehow, Al got the impression that she was talking about far more than just the past evening. He tightened his hug. "I missed you, too, baby. But things are going to be better now, you can count on it." He pulled back a bit so he could see her eyes as he gave her the next news. "Your Uncle Sam's home."

"He is!" Her eyes widened in delight. "For real?!"

"For real, and to stay," Al assured her. "And you're the first one here to know."

"Yes!" Wendy punched a fist into the air. "I knew even before Steffie! She's gonna be pi..." Hastily she shot a glance at her father, and corrected, "mad."

Al shook his head in mock resignation. "And that's all you have to say?"

Wendy laughed, knowing she was being teased. Her next words, however, were sincere. "I missed him, Dad. I'm glad he's back. When's he coming over?"

"Tomorrow, maybe," Al answered, mind turning briefly back to the Project and the work remaining to be done. "There's a lot of stuff he has to do."

The admiral brought his gaze back to his daughter. "And you have to get back to bed if you're going to get up early enough to show me this tape of yours."

"But not too early," she corrected, "since I don't have to catch the bus because..."

"Because I'm driving you," he finished, "in my red car, I remember. Now, off to bed with you."

"Okay," she agreed, reaching up, she kissed him lightly on the cheek. "I love you."

Catching her for a quick hug, he kissed her hair. "I love you, too, baby. Sleep well."

"Night, Dad."

Saying good night, he watched her leave the room. Standing before the counter that held his briefcase, he waited a long moment. In the silence that held the house, he could hear her movements as she went up the stairway, and into her room. When there had been silence for a bit, he turned to open the case.

Pulling out the bottle of unopened scotch, he regarded it for a long

moment. So close, he had come so close, and he had seen the consequences for his own future in Sam's eyes. Not too many people were lucky enough to have that chance.

Purposefully, he moved to the sink, taking the bottle with him. Beth had been more right than either of them had known that night they had lost contact with Sam. She had told him that he and the time traveler were far too close for him to be lost forever. Somehow, it was that closeness that had brought Sam home, though in a way that it chilled Al to consider.

What was it Sam had seen? Perhaps, now, Al need never know. Briskly, he cracked the seal on the bottle and upended it into the drain. As the expensive amber liquid ebbed ever lower, the chill down Al's spine began to lessen. It seemed almost in some way that the liquor flowing harmlessly down the drain took the admiral's fear and apprehensions with it as it disappeared, out of reach forever.

"Al?" Beth's soft voice came from behind him in the direction of the same door through which Wendy had disappeared. "What are you doing?"

What was he doing? Unhurriedly, he pulled the empty bottle's neck from the drain and recapped it. Turning on the water to run to wash away the last of the scent, he neatly disposed of the bottle in the trash can beneath the sink, then turned off the faucet. His movements were calm, and certain. He was quite, quite certain of what he was doing.

Turning to face his wife, who had moved up behind him, he smiled at her gently. Beth, his love, his life, was his and he had yet another, incredible second chance to get it right.

Troubled, his wife frowned slightly. "Al, I asked, what are you doing?"

"I'm changing the future," he told her softly as he took her into his arms.

"What?" Her head lifted and she searched his eyes in the dimness, searching for assurance that this act was as it seemed.

"Changing the future," he told her again, lowering his head to kiss her. She felt so real, so warm, so eternal against him that he felt as if surely God must have made a very large mistake that Al Calavicci was so blessed.

"Al," she said uneasily, "what's going on?"

"Come upstairs," he whispered against her cheek, "and I'll explain."

With the perception of one who had shared his life, she searched his eyes a last moment. She could have chosen to argue, to demand an explanation then and there about why was he pouring scotch down their sink and how much of it had he had to drink. But, at last, she only nodded. "All right," she agreed softly with a hint of warning in her tone. "But, admiral, this explanation had better be good."

"It will be," he assured her, slipping an arm about her waist to guide her to the door. "I promise."

And, he thought sincerely, in what was more nearly a prayer to the Eternal Being and silent thanks to a loyal time-traveler that made it possible, from now on, all my promises, I keep.



THE LEAP NOT TAKEN:

by

Gary E. Himes

based on a script by Donald P. Bellisario

* * *

September 13, 1999

11:47 p.m.

It felt as if I had never leaped. My pre-leap memory had returned while the last four years were fading as quickly as a bad dream in the light of a beautiful morning. Life would be perfect if Al wasn't in such desperate straits...

"Gooshie, is the Project on line?" Sam asked the curly-haired technician, entering the control room hand-in-hand with his wife.

Gooshie adjusted the multi-colored console. "In 3.4 minutes doctor."

Sam reached over to activate the computer. "Ziggy?"

"THAT was a quickie, Dr. Beckett," Ziggy remarked, her sultry voice emanating from within her pulsating CPU.

"What've you got on Al?"

"He is 175.26 centimeters tall, weighs 71-" the machine began.

"Ziggy!" Sam chided.

"Yes, doctor?"

Sam took a deep breath, recalling how he used to deal with Ziggy's difficult personality. "Give me what I want, baby."

* * *

June 15, 1945

8:55 p.m.

Al lit two cigarettes, handing one to Suzanne. She picked up the handlink and admired it. "It's beautiful."

"It's useless," Al replied, plucking his cigarette from his mouth. He'd forgotten that 1945 was well before anyone had developed the concept "low tar". He coughed as he expelled the bitter smoke from his throat.

"Tommy? You okay?" the young woman asked, her eyes equally reflecting concern and adoration.

"I really don't smoke," he answered while drawing her close again. "Cigarettes."

She smiled. Al thought he had never seen such a brilliant smile, or a woman who looked so much in love. It was so easy to pretend those feelings were for him and not an Army Captain named Tom Jarrett.

Suzanne waved the useless handlink before him. "So it doesn't work?"

"Well, maybe in about fifty years."

"Maybe all it needs is a little encouragement, too," she said flirtatiously. Cuddling close to him, the look on her face was easy to read. Al leaned down and planted a long, wet kiss on her gorgeous lips.

So engrossed was he in the beautiful girl beneath him that Al failed to hear the rush of the Project door.

"Al, you didn't! How could you?" came Sam's shocked voice, quickly followed by, in lecherous tones Al was all too familiar with, "then of course, how could you not?"

Nearly jumping out of his skin, Al pulled away from Suzanne. "It wasn't like that!"

"Like what?" Suzanne asked in confusion as she buttoned her blouse.

"Look, we need to talk, alone-okay?" Sam looked away in disgust.
"Where's a Men's Room when you need one?"
"Good idea," Al answered.
"Tommy, you're talking to someone who isn't there. It's frightening me."
"Oh Suzanne, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Al said, trying to calm her fears.
"I've got some delayed stress syndrome from the war--"
"No no no!" Sam corrected him. "In '45 it was shell shock!"
"Shell shock," Al blurted. "I'm sorry."
"Ooohhh, you poor baby!" Suzanne said sympathetically. She cradled his chin in her hand and drew close again.
Al felt his resolve weaken. "Oh boy!" he said as he kissed her passionately.
"Al, c'mon, would you!?" Sam shouted impatiently.
Al broke away. "I'm okay, I just have to take a...uh..." Damn, he couldn't remember the correct euphemism for taking a piss in 1945!
"Oh sure," Suzanne nodded in understanding, stubbing her cigarette out in the ash tray. "Me too."
She walked away into the woods for privacy. Sam began to follow her, a lascivious smile on his face.
"Sam!" Al yelled.
"What am I doing?!" the scientist ran back to the car, the smile fading from his face.
"You dog!" Al said angrily.
"Well it's your filthy mind!" Sam defended himself.
"Yeah, well, I want my mind back!" Al said. "These choirboy thoughts are drivin' me nuts!"
"Well they didn't seem to stop you a minute ago."
"That was a beautiful moment," Al countered. Sam scoffed in disbelief.
"I've never experienced anything quite like that. I guess I owe that to you."
Sam smiled a small, sheepish grin. "Yeah, well, I guess I owe you one, too."
"Only one?" Al questioned.
Sam shot him an offended look and then consulted the handlink. "Ziggy has figured out why you leaped into Crown Point, Indiana in 1945. In the original history it seems Tom and Suzanne drive off this cliff tonight in an apparent double su...su..." he struck the handlink, "Suicide."
Al shook his head in response. "No, it couldn't be suicide. Suicide is the farthest thing from her mind."
"Then what?"
The two of them traded a grim look. "It could be murder," Al voiced the unspoken thought.
Suddenly a scream cut through the air.
"Suzanne!" Al jumped from the car and ran towards the sound, Sam right behind him. "Have you got a fix on her?"
"No," Sam replied. "Gooshie, what's wrong?"
Al searched through the brush, calling Suzanne's name repeatedly. Sam pounded at the handlink but couldn't get enough data for a lock.
Al found her limp body lying in a small clearing. "I've got her Sam!"
Ziggy's voice issued from the handlink. "Dr. Beckett, I should warn you that a Clifford--too late."
A dull thud came from the direction of the clearing. Sam turned to see Al's unconscious form sprawled next to Suzanne's, Clifford standing over them with a club.
"You sonuvabitch!" Sam cried, springing at him. His holographic form passed though harmlessly. Neither did the numerous kicks and punches he threw have any effect.
Clifford picked the girl off the ground. "Al c'mon, you've got to wake up!" Sam pleaded. The admiral's body remained motionless.
"He has suffered a blow from a blunt instrument to the right lobe of his cranium," Ziggy interjected. "This has resulted in an unconscious state that will terminate in 8.7 minutes. Unfortunately, Admiral Calavicci will terminate in 5.2 minute when he drives a 1942 Olds Convertible off Lover's

Leap."

"How can he drive when he's unconscious?!" Sam exclaimed.

"Excellent point doctor; Clifford must push the car over."

"Brilliant, Ziggy, brilliant," Sam said sarcastically. "C'mon Al, you've got to get up!"

"Admiral Calavicci cannot regain consciousness for another eight point--"

"Damn it Ziggy! Tell me something I don't know!"

"Tina is having an affair with Gooshie."

Sam winced at Ziggy's non sequitar. "A WAY TO SAVE AL AND SUZANNE!"

"Stop Clifford from pushing the car over the cliff," Ziggy replied sternly.

"How? They're in 1945, I'm in 1999."

"I didn't say it was easy."

Sam looked mournfully down at the prostate figure of his closest friend.

"I'm sorry Al," he said in a grief-stricken voice. "I should be lying there, not you."

A strange look crossed Sam's face almost as he spoke the words. Sam punched the command into the handlink that opened the Project door. As soon as it slid open he ran through it back to the Quantum Control Center.

* * * * *

September 14, 1999

12:01 a.m.

Sam was peeling off his shirt as he reentered the Control Room.

"Gooshie, activate the Accelerator Chamber. Set it for June 15, 1945."

"What?!"

"Do it," Sam told him. There wasn't a second to spare. "Tina get me a fermi-suit," he ordered. "Now Tina!"

She hurried off to get the outfit. "Ziggy, how much time til Al dies?" Sam asked as he stripped off his pants.

"One point six minutes. Yum, great legs, doctor."

"Sam, what are you doing?" Donna asked in a fearful voice.

"Trying to save Al," Sam answered as he accepted the fermi-suit from Tina and began putting it on.

"How?"

"By leaping into him."

"What?" Donna answered in disbelief.

"Donna, four years ago my first leap was targetless, subject to a whim of fate. Since then I think my subconscious has been working on the problem because I now know how to hit the bullseye. I can leap into Al!" Sam fastened the collar around his neck. "He'll leap back into the Project where he was when the lightning strike simuleaped us and I'll leap into 1945 where I can stop Clifford!"

"Forty-five is eight years before you were born," Donna protested. "You can't leap further than your own lifetime!"

"When we simuleaped some of our neurons and mesons obviously merged. Part of me is Al."

"One minute and counting," Ziggy reckoned.

Sam walked determinedly towards the door to the Accelerator Chamber. Donna chased after him.

"How will you get back?" Donna asked, afraid of the answer.

"Use the retrieval program," Sam replied with a stony expression.

"It didn't work the first time you leaped."

"I've updated it." He hoped he didn't sound like he was lying.

Donna looked at him doubtfully. "Ziggy. What are the odds of retrieving Dr. Beckett?"

"Nine point six percent."

Sam walked over and gripped his wife by the shoulders. "Donna, I can't let him die."

"And I can't let you go, not when you've just come back to me!" she

pleaded, her eyes becoming moist.

"How many times has Al saved my life?"

"Twenty-three," Ziggy answered.

"I don't care!" Donna cried, turning away from him. "It isn't fair, Sam; it just isn't fair."

"I know."

"Please don't leave me again--I don't think I could stand it if you left me again."

"Thirty seconds...29...28..." Ziggy counted.

Sam stared at his wife, then turned to look at the Accelerator, torn as to what course of action to take.

Donna turned back, her cheeks stained with tears. "Go," she said in a small, pained voice.

"What?"

"Go!" she repeated, more forcefully this time.

"I'll be back," Sam promised. He took her face in his hands. "I swear to God, I'll be back."

He kissed her once and then strode back up the stairs to the door.

"Sam, I love you!" Donna cried out.

He turned back and hugged her one last time. "I love you, too." Then he hurried through the door to the time machine they had built together.

* * * * *

June 15, 1945

9:05 p.m.

Clifford dragged the limp body of the man he believed to be Tom Jarret, towards the car's open door. In seconds, he would sit beside the unconscious form of that lying whore, Suzanne.

Then they would both pay.

* * * * *

September 14, 1999

12:03 a.m.

Powerful apparata hummed with arcane energies. Lights all over the Project flickered as Ziggy awaited the final command to activate the Accelerator.

"Eleven...ten seconds...nine..." Ziggy continued to count.

"Syncotron on line," Gooshie announced. "Stand by to fire."

Donna went to her customary place at the control panel, her hand poised over the final switch which would once again exile her husband to the past.

It isn't fair, Sam.

"Six...five...four..."

Oh God, please, help me. Help US.

"Fire!" Gooshie yelled.

Her hand pushed the switch.

* * * * *

In the Accelerator, Sam was bathed in blue light, the familiar sensation of being ripped away through time and space coming over him.

* * * * *

Donna felt a reassuring hand touch her shoulder. Turning, she saw it was Verbena.

"Courage," the psychiatrist said.

Without warning, a red light began to flash on the console, followed by a high-pitched whine emitted from Ziggy's CPU.

"Omigod, we've got a stabalizer failure!" Gooshie cried. "Abort! Abort!"

Donna and Verbena exchanged a terrified look. Then the scientist turned back to the controls and started to adjust them frantically. The least malfunction, she knew, could kill Sam.

With a prayer for her husband's life, Donna cut the power.

* * * * *

Sam basked in the energies of the quantum field, feeling his mind and body begin to wrench themselves into another's place.

For the briefest instance, he could sense Al, feel his living mind and the part of it that belonged to Sam himself. An odd sensation washed over him, as if the thoughts that were his, were flowing back into him from Al's mind, while the part of him that was Al, seeped back into its proper owner.

Then, suddenly, the light faded. Sam looked around and realized he was still in the Accelerator Chamber.

"Oh lord," Sam gasped. "Al!"
He hadn't made it.

* * * * *

June 15, 1945

9:06 p.m.

Clifford arranged Al's body in the car. He couldn't see a light from a far end of the spectrum surround Al's body only to quickly flicker out.

Clifford reached for the gear shift. Nobody made a cuckold out of him. Nobody.

He didn't notice Al's eyes snap open.

In one blinding motion, Al slammed the car door open into Clifford's gut. As the intended killer bent over in pain, Al sprang at him and landed a solid right jab on his enemy's glass jaw. Clifford went down like the proverbial sack of potatoes, toppling down the hill and coming to a rest, senseless, at the bottom.

Al peered down after him, expelling a sigh of relief. He brought a sweaty palm up to rub his throbbing forehead.

"Damn, that was too close; if this is leaping, you can have it Sam," he muttered. Then he noticed he was alone. "Sam?"

The scientist's holographic image was nowhere to be seen. Where was he? Al wondered. And why does my brain feel like somebody hooked jumper cables up to it?

And where were the choirboy thoughts?

* * * * *

September 14, 1999

12:04 a.m.

Sam raced frantically from the Accelerator Chamber. "What happened? Why did we abort?"

Donna and Gooshie were checking frantically over the controls. "I don't know!" she cried. "Just suddenly the stabalizer failed. We haven't been able to isolate the problem!"

"Ziggy!" Sam cried. "What about Al!?"

"He should now be at the bottom of lover's leap, both he and Suzanne deceased from physical trauma resulting from multiple fractures and lacerations..."

Sam turned a cold, pale color as he heard the words. Ignoring Tina's sobbing figure he raced for the Imaging Chamber door.

"Let her be wrong," Sam prayed as he entered the Chamber. "Please God, let Al be alive."

* * * * *

June 15, 1945
9:08 p.m.

Al bent over Suzanne and felt her neck, checking her pulse. He wasn't a doctor, but he had enough medical training to tell she was probably not seriously injured. Exhaling a sigh of relief, he looked around again for his partner.

"Sam!" He was rewarded by the sight of a rectangle of light sliding open and Sam, dressed in a fermi-suit, stumbling through it.

"Al! You're alive!" Sam rushed at him as if to hug him, only to pass through him harmlessly. Al turned to see his friend had tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Sam, what happened? Where did you go? And why are you wearing that monkey suit?"

Sam took a breathe to compose himself. "Clifford cold-cocked you and tried to push you and Suzanne over the cliff. Ziggy gave you zero odds of surviving."

Al did a doubletake. "What!"

Sam nodded in response.

Shaking his head to clear out the cobwebs, Al swallowed hard. "Thank goodness that prediction was just as unreliable as everything else that stuck-up junk pile ever told us."

"But that's just it; Ziggy was right on the money. You should've died. I have no idea why you didn't."

"So why are you in the magic jogging suit?"

"I tried to leap into you to save you, but something went wrong. I was almost here when the Accelerator malfunctioned."

"You did what?!" Al shouted. "Sam, promise me you won't ever try something crazy like that again! We both coulda ended up lost in time!"

Just then the handlink gave a whine. Sam punched a button to activate Ziggy's voice synthesizer, a function Al always seemed loathe to use, as he tried to avoid her nagging.

Sam listened for a minute, then turned back to Al.

"Ziggy has a theory," Sam began. "She thinks that, just before the power cut out, there was enough force built up to relink our neurons and switch back the mesons we absorbed from each other earlier. Apparently that was enough to 'jumpstart' you back to consciousness."

"So what're you saying? That we've got all our brains back where they belong?"

"At least 95 percent, possibly all," Sam replied, then added, "hey, I remember!"

"Remember what?"

"My leaps!" Sam cried joyously. "That reverse magnaflux must've been a side effect of our meson swap; when I got my mesons back they also brought my memory back!"

A sudden moan from the car caused Al to glance back at Suzanne. "Sam, what about her? Will she be all right?"

"She'll be fine," he said, consulting Ziggy. "Suzanne and Tom get married and have two sons and a daughter--Allan, Bert, and Calla."

Al whistled. "Too bad I can't be here for that."

"Al," Sam chided, recognizing the return of his friend's normal attitude. He had to smile at it, only to have the smile fade when a realization hit him.

"What is it Sam? That suit squeezing too hard in vital areas?"

"Al, you're stuck back in time, just like I was. I don't know if we can get you back." Sam looked away in shame. "This is my fault."

Al drew himself up and looked Sam in the eye unflinchingly. "Sam, this was an accident, pure and simple. No blame, no regrets, okay? Now you go back to your wife and find a way to get my butt home. Until then, we're still a team; only difference is, this time I'm the Lone Ranger and you're Tonto."

Sam sighed. "You're letting me off too easy."

"Hey, none of that. I might even get to like this," Al grinned. "You ever notice that women in this time have really BIG gazongas?"

Sam blushed. Actually, he had.

Suzanne stirred and called out a weak "Tom?"

Al felt a strange tingle begin to spread over his body. He looked over to Sam, who nodded in the affirmative.

"See you on the other side, buddy." Al gave a jaunty little wave. "But first, do me one favor, will you?"

"Anything," Sam replied.

"Keep an eye on Tina 'til I get back; I think Gooshie has been sniffing around her again."

Sam opened his mouth to reply, but before he could say anything Al was gone.

* * * * *

September 14, 1999

3:46 a.m.

Sam stood alone on the Project's observation deck, trying to find some solace in the beauty of the night sky over the desert landscape. Despite Al's protests, he couldn't escape the sense of guilt over his friend's predicament.

He searched the eastern sky for a hint of the morning light, remembering. Al had grinned that cocky, what-the-hell smirk of his as he leaped, as if it all was just the greatest wild weekend a man could ever find himself on. Though he'd always known Al to be almost fearlessly adventurous, Sam realized the expression had been for his benefit. It wasn't the admiral's style to waste time on laying blame--he had wanted to ally Sam's fears, no matter how terrified he himself was inside at whatever terrors might wait at the end of his leap.

At least, whatever unknown force was pulling the strings, had given Al an easier landing his second time. When the physicist had last seen him, Al was on a stage in a Catskills night club telling jokes and cutting up as a stand-up comedian, putting the audience in stitches with every off-color story his swiss cheese memory could recall from his navy days.

"Sam? Are you all right?" Donna stepped tentatively onto the deck. "I just came from seeing Tina."

Sam continued to stare at the sky. "How is she?"

"Poor thing, Verbena had to give her a sedative to get her to sleep." Donna put her arms around him. "She cried her eyes out when she realized Al wasn't coming back...just yet."

Sam turned to look at her, his face tired and haggard.

"Donna, four years ago I made a choice: I decided that losing my life, my family, my reputation, anything was worth seeing Quantum Leap through to the conclusion, even if those fools in Washington thought we weren't worth a few extra dollars. When I walked into that Accelerator, I knew the risks I was taking, but I believed the possible rewards justified it."

Donna laid her head on his shoulder. "I know, Sam; I've always known that's how you felt."

"But I was wrong," he said flatly. "I could make that choice for myself, but I never really considered what price those I'd left behind would pay. Now, Al's paying that price in full. I swear Donna, if I'd ever suspected for an instance this could happen, I would have destroyed that Accelerator with my own two hands before I ever used it."

Putting her arms around him, Donna began, "Sam, you know you can't--"

Sam shushed her by placing his fingers gently on her lips. "I know what you're going to say. Don't bother; Al's already said it to me in 1956. 'Don't blame yourself', 'It's just a twist of fate', and 'It's not your fault'. Sure. Still, I wish the reverse leap had worked."

Donna looked up with alarm. "Sam, you're not thinking of trying that again?"

"No," Sam answered. "Al made me promise not to. Besides, I think the

Accelerator failure was another sign from HIM..." Sam looked briefly skyward again. "...and I've learned that, when He wants things a certain way, they stay that way."

A moment of silence passed between them as Donna considered her husband's words. Finally she drew a handlink from a pocket of her robe.

"Ziggy, locate a star approximately 43 light years from earth," she requested.

Ziggy replied in a subdued tone, "Teletha, a white star 1.7 degrees in magnitude in Ursa Major. Right Ascension eight hours, 59.2 minutes. Declination 48 degrees, two minutes." Together they located the tiny dot of light in the sky.

"You came back," Donna said. "Al will too."

"I know." Sam looked at the star almost prayerfully. "I'll find a way to bring him home. No matter what it costs me."

Teletha, as if to answer, seemed to grow brighter in the northern sky.



PHANTASMS

by

Todd Parrish

Beyond tomorrow, through the gate
dreams haunt me, passing like wraiths through memories.
Faces, blank of expression stare at me
as if meeting nothing, yet look into my soul.
Inexplicably, the yearning comes
drawing me near, but something tears us apart.
Reaching out to touch, no warm flesh caresses...
escaping my grasp, gone like the wind
leaving tears in the wake, then frustration.
Remembering friends, family, dates and places
becomes too difficult to bear.
Better to day dream, or lie sleeping
rather than face the truth:
that my memory is a void
pulling me deeper
until forgetting is the last thing I remember.

DEATH OF A WINGMAN

by

Jane Freitag

Admiral Albert Calavicci sat alone in the cafeteria. It was 3 am and he couldn't sleep. Sam had just leaped and was still caught in the fabric of time, not having landed yet. Al sipped his cooling coffee and took another short pull on his cigar. He flicked the ashes into a paper ashtray and his gaze fell on the cup next to his hand. He idly wondered if perhaps it was the coffee that was keeping him awake and started to push the mug aside. He caught a glimmer of his reflection in the brown liquid and his eyes widened. "You look like hell," he told his reflection.

"It's been a long hard day," he reminded himself silently. His mouth rose in a half smile which promptly vanished. He was still recovering from the emotional ups and downs of Sam's last leap. He wondered if he'd ever get over it completely. As usual, Sam had managed to fix things and even save Lisa's life in the process. She was as beautiful as he remembered. Al smiled at the thought. It was great seeing her and the guys again. And coming in on Cougar's flight path, instead of just zeroing in on Sam, had been an added bonus.

Talking, literally, to himself had been a real kick in the butt. When Sam first approached him about the Quantum Leap Project, he could remember vaguely being previously transported in time. He had thought it had been some sort of weird dream or practical joke. Now he realized that it had, indeed, happened. "Full circle," he muttered. His fingers, still clutching the cigar, played with the handle of his coffee cup. He sighed.

And he thought about Chip. His facial muscles relaxed and, if there had been anyone around, the casual observer would have seen his eyes drift back to another day, another time. The Admiral closed his eyes to try and prevent the day from surfacing once again in his mind. The activity was pointless. He knew he'd never forget that day. It was embedded in his soul and nothing anyone--even Sam--could do would ever be able to change that.

Al Calavicci and Chip Ferguson had been friends and tailpipe buddies for ten years. They had both married Navy nurses and re-enlisted when their time in service expired. Chip had been Al's wingman, Al priding himself on the fact that he was the better pilot. They flew together off of a Naval aircraft carrier, doing bombing raids off the port of Hai Phong, sharing both the good and the bad of wartime experiences. They believed in what they were doing, too, and had a pride in their country that so many seemed to lack at the time. Still, that fateful day had started no different from any other of the previous week or the week before that.

Any tedium that Al felt at the routine of daily bombing raids always vanished the minute he stepped foot inside the cockpit of his plane. He needed to fly almost as much as he needed to breathe. And the faster he could go, the better. He had always like fast things. Fast cars, fast planes, fast women...until he met Beth, of course. Beth was his moment of serenity in his otherwise fast world. His island. Something he could always return to when he needed comfort after a day when one or another of his flying buddies bought the farm. At least mentally. Physically, she was waiting for him at the Naval base in San Diego where she was stationed. Six weeks and his tour of duty would be over. He could return home and hold her in his arms again. He could almost taste it.

In the meantime, he and Chip had another run to do. His fingertips caressed the body of his plane as gently as if it were the woman he loved. Chip walked over to where he was standing, both men toting smoldering cigars. "Ready, Bingo?" He clapped Al on the back. No one but Chip called him that anymore.

Al grinned and gave him a thumbs up sign. "Captain said takeoff at 0500. With luck, we'll be back before the heat gets unbearable."

Chip looked up. "Ah, for those cool California days."

Al wriggled his eyebrows. "Ah, for those steamy California nights."

"Six weeks, Bingo. We only have to hold out six more weeks."

"Do you have any doubts we will?" he remembered asking.

And Chip's reply still echoed in the recesses of his brain. "We're a team, Bingo. We'll make it anywhere, even into space if we stick together."

"I made it, Buddy," Al muttered to the empty room. "I still made it into space, but it wasn't the same without you."

They had suited up and Chip's last words before entering his own cockpit were, "Let's go give 'em hell for Stacker, Bingo." They had heard that their training buddy, Stacker, had been shot down two days before. They had no idea if he had made it or not. James Stacker's name had been added to the growing list of MIAs.

They had found their target and Al had deployed the bulk of his bombs when all hell broke loose. Chip's job, as wingman, was to watch out for Al's tail. Al recalled his voice clearly over the radio in the silence of the flight. "Trouble coming up at six o'clock."

"Is he within range?"

"Can do, Bingo." Al heard the gunfire coming from Chip's plane, the whine of the downed aircraft, and then Chip's laugh. "Say bye-bye to the nasty."

"Good riddance, you SOB," Al muttered. Then to Chip, "Shall we get..." And the sentence was never finished.

He heard the explosion first, but within nanoseconds the air currents from the blast rocked his plane. It was all he could do to keep it steady. He fought the controls but took the fraction of a second that was needed to glance down from his window and confirm what he knew had happened. The VC had used Chip's gunfire as a target and zeroed in on him with a SAM missile. Al watched in horror as flotsam and debris floated silently towards the ground. But there was no time to cry out. There was no time for return fire. There wasn't even a second to pray. There was no time to do anything except pull the eject switch and bail out and hope that he'd clear the distance before the SAM missile already heading his way would reach his plane. Hanging in the silence of the open sky, Lt. Al Calavicci knew that soon his name, too, would be added to the list of MIAs.

At the thought of the way his parachute had drifted him deep into enemy territory, Admiral Albert Calavicci's eyes drifted back to the present. The years spent as a POW had given him plenty of time to make up for those seconds he had been deprived of. It had given him years to mourn for Chip, now long gone. Chip, who had been alive and young and well only yesterday. Oh, they had such fantastic dreams. Now only the blue sky gave witness to the beer and cigar Al shared with him at his grave site every now and then. The same blue sky they had once conquered together as friends. And now he had new dreams...and a new friend.

"Admiral Calavicci?" The band of colorful blocks Al wore around his wrist came to life.

"Yes, Ziggy. What is it?"

"Dr. Beckett has settled in a new time placement."

"Do you have a fix on him?"

"I wouldn't have notified you if I didn't, Admiral."

"When is he, Ziggy?" The question still sounded strange.

"He's in the year 1957. Did you want to go into the Waiting Room first or will you be proceeding directly to the Imaging Chamber?"

Al took a long pull on his cigar and savored the taste. He wiped the grit out of his eyes and stood up, stretching to get the kinks out of his back. "Back to work," he grumbled, trying to sound annoyed but not really feeling that way at all. Dr. Samuel Beckett was his new, best friend. A friend who had dreams so wild they made Chip's seem microscopic by comparison. It was good to find someone like that, no matter where--or when--that person might be. Sam had made him believe in dreams again, too. And now that friend needed him.

"Admiral Calavicci, you haven't answered my question."

Al smiled. "I'm on my way, Ziggy. Where does Sam need me most?"

Because that's where Al Calavicci knew he would be. He knew he had become, in effect, Sam's wingman. And a wingman is never more than a call for help away, always watching out for his partner, no matter when or where he may be. Al picked up his step as he approached the main control room of Project Quantum Leap and removed the wristband, exchanging it for a handlink. As Sam's wingman, Al vowed he'd never let him down regardless of the cost. It was his job and he'd do it to the best of his ability. Besides, he grinned at the thought, he found the speed of time travel the biggest kick in the butt of all. "Hang on, Sam," he said to no one in particular. "I'm coming."

DR. SAM BECKETT

NEVER RETURNED HOME

NOT!

THE BUNNY LEAP

by

Elaine M. and Anne E. Batterby

The first thing Sam heard was a very exasperated voice. "Well, I can tell the ballet lessons didn't help. How could you be so clumsy?" the woman demanded crossly. "You've ruined your new shoes."

Sam looked down at his feet. A carton of eggs had smashed on the pavement, spreading runny yolks all over small patent leather shoes. "Oh, boy," he moaned in dismay.

"I'm afraid it was my fault, Mrs. Clarkson," a skinny adolescent boy said. "Jamie bumped into me, and I bumped Chrissie's eggs. A bunch of us were clowning around, trying out a new line dance to go with a new song, and she was just watching."

"Her name is Christine, and she should have been doing as she was told. As for you, young man, I will be calling your mother about this. Hanging around on the streets, interfering with people who have every right to be there! Now come along, Christine, we'll be late."

"But what about the eggs?"

"If you had gone to the car as I told you, you'd still have them, wouldn't you? You just won't get to color Easter eggs this year, that's all." She took Sam's hand, after wiping it off with her handkerchief, and pulled him over to a dark blue car, high off the ground, with rounded fenders. It looked like it must be from the late 40's or early 50's.

"Hey, Sam!" Al said, suddenly appearing beside him. "Great old car! I had one almost like that once."

Sam climbed into the passenger side, urging quietly, "Al!"

"Oh, right. Well, your name is Christine Clarkson, you're six years old, and Sam, Ziggy says Christine disappears for about twenty-four hours tomorrow. No one ever finds out what happened, and she doesn't speak for a year. When she does start talking again, she has no memory of the time of her disappearance. Her father is suspected for a while and it really breaks him up. Breaks up the marriage too."

By this time, the big sedan was cruising down the village street, and Al appeared to Sam to be levitating right alongside. "That's terrible, Al," Sam whispered.

"Are you ready for your music lesson this time, Christine?" Mrs. Clarkson asked. "Mrs. Levitt was not pleased last time when you hadn't practiced enough. A violin makes such awful noises when it's abused."

"Oh, boy."

"Now that's terrible," Al said.

"Does that mean no, Christine?" asked Mrs. Clarkson severely. "You know I told you you couldn't go with your father Saturday unless Mrs. Levitt was satisfied with your lesson this evening."

"I'll do my best, Mother," Sam said, sending a beseeching look Al's way.

"Sorry, kid, as far as I know, you don't play the violin," Al replied, shrugging apologetically. Sam closed his eyes.

"You had better, young lady. And don't you count on your father overruling me about this, either. Your father and I had a little talk, and that will not happen again."

"Yes, Mother." Sam sighed, feeling sorry for the little girl whose life he was there to help, and wondering how badly the music lesson was going to go...

"I don't like this woman, Sam," Al said. "She's one cold witch, if you ask me. Maybe Christine runs away, and gets picked up by the wrong person," he said musingly.

The big car pulled into a driveway next to a small white house and parked. "Don't dawdle, Christine," Mrs. Clarkson said. "Get your violin out of the back seat, and go inside for your lesson."

"Yes, Mother," Sam answered, getting out of the car.

A young woman came out of the house and approached the car. "Oh, Mrs. Clarkson! I tried to reach you. Aunt Sarah - Mrs. Levitt - has been taken ill. Christine's lesson has been cancelled for this evening."

"There's a lucky break!" Al crowed.

Stifling a smile, Sam said, "I hope it's not anything serious."

"I'm not sure. The doctor's with her now," the young woman said.

"I'm sure your aunt will be fine, Doris," Mrs. Clarkson said. "It would have been courteous if she had let us know before we drove all the way out here, but let's not waste any more time. Come along, Christine."

With an apologetic smile over his shoulder at Doris, Sam followed Christine's mother back to the car. As he got closer, he noticed there was a bulge in the tire on the passenger side, in the front. "Mother, I think there's something wrong with this tire," he said.

"Oh, that is all I need!" she said, coming back around from the driver's side. "I suppose I'd better take the car right to the garage. But you are going to practice your violin when we get home, young lady. Put your violin in the back seat carefully and get in."

As Sam climbed in the big car, he looked questioningly at Al.

"Ziggy doesn't have anything on this, Sam," he shrugged.

Sam turned to Mrs. Clarkson. "Can I still go with Dad on Saturday?"

"The circus was to be a special treat, Christine. Right now I can't say that I think you deserve it." She started up the car and pulled away from the curb.

Sam endured the car ride with the angry Mrs. Clarkson in silence. Finally she pulled the car into a small gas station and parked. "Stay in the car while I go talk to the service manager, Christine," she said, frowning at him. "And don't sulk - it's not attractive."

"Yes, ma'am." Sam watched her walk away. "Al, can you tell me anything about the last time Chrissie was seen before she disappeared? And why her father was suspected?"

The hologram consulted his handlink to Ziggy, the project's hybrid computer. "According to the police reports, she disappeared from the playground at lunch time, Sam. I'd say Clarkson was suspected because he was there when she came out of school - he claimed he brought her an apple because her mother wouldn't put any dessert in her lunch because she was 'disrespectful' at breakfast," Al said. "Oops, here comes Ms. Witch."

Mrs. Clarkson climbed in the car, started it, and pulled over to a service bay. Shutting off the car, she said, "Get out now, Christine, and go stand in the office while you wait for me. Don't touch anything and don't talk to anyone. Do you understand?"

"How does that poor kid put up with her?" demanded Al.

"Yes, ma'am," Sam answered Christine's mother, wondering the same thing.

"I don't like that smart tone, young lady," Mrs. Clarkson declared, "but I don't have time for that right now. We'll discuss it when we get home."

Sam quietly got out of the car and headed toward the office under Mrs. Clarkson's disapproving gaze. As he went inside, Christine's mother restarted the car and drove it into the service bay so the tire could be checked out.

There was someone in the station's office, so Sam said, "My mother told me to wait in here. Is that all right?"

There was a gray-haired man there, distractedly looking over paperwork and keeping an eye on the gasoline pumps out front. "What? Oh, sure, Christine. Why don't you sit right over there while you wait?" He indicated a straight wooden chair. As Sam went over and sat down, the bell rang out front. "That's a customer. I'll be right back, Christine."

"Okay. Thank you."

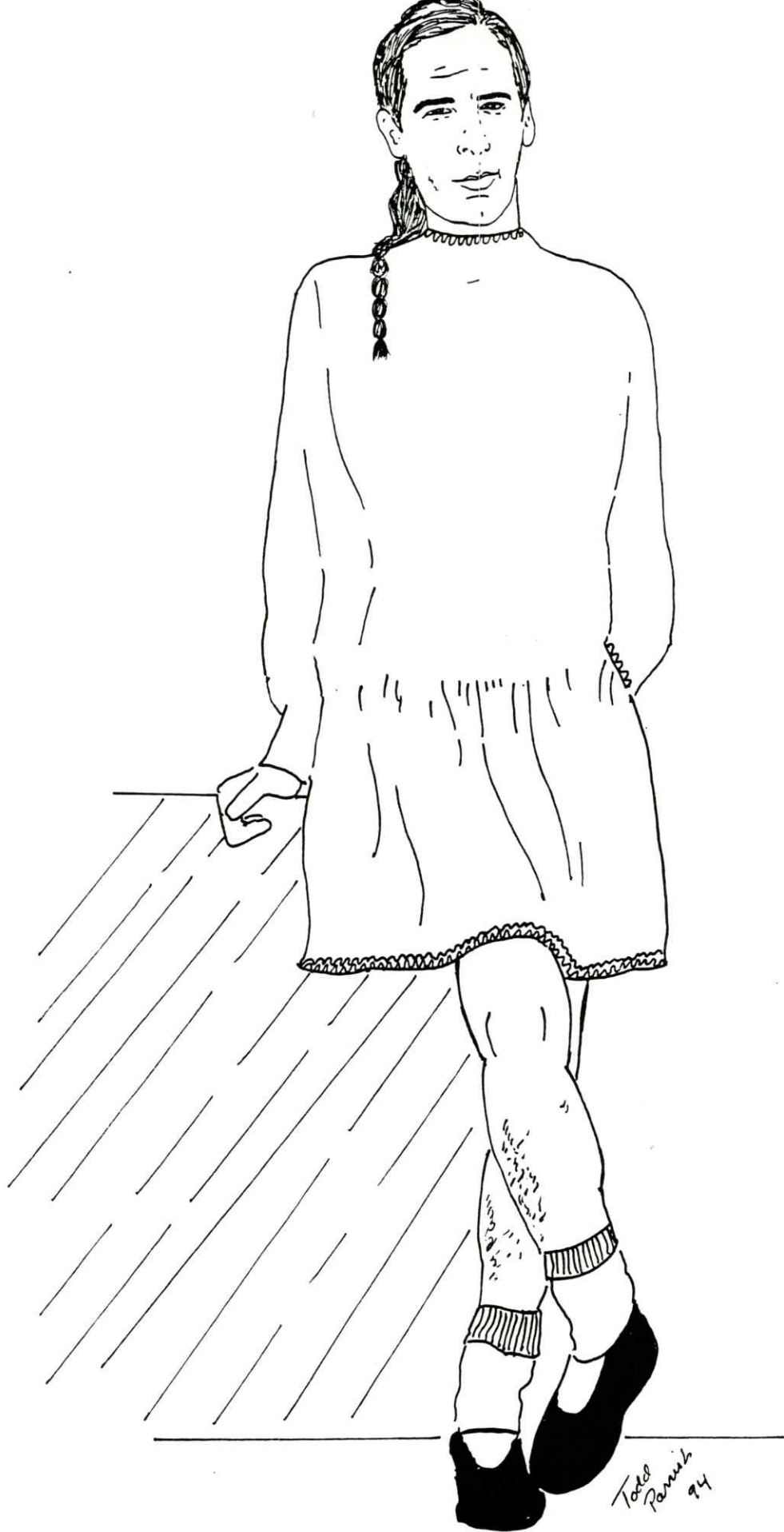
Al stood next to Sam's chair, punching buttons and muttering about the handlink's readout. "I don't understand this, Sam."

A younger man, wearing gray coveralls, came into the office from the service area, wiping his hands on a rag. "Well, hello there!" he said.

"Whose little girl are you, cutie?"

"Hello," Sam said cautiously. "My mother is here to get a tire fixed."

"Oh, yes. The lady with the Plymouth."



"Sam!" Al said, almost frantic. "I don't know what is going on here."
The front door opened as the gray-haired man came back in to the office. "Jonesy," he said, "Mrs. Peterson is waiting for you out in bay 3 with a flat tire, remember?"

"Sorry, Mr. Lincoln. On my way." He winked at Sam as he turned to leave.

Mr. Lincoln followed Jonesy out the door, taking change to his customer at the gas pumps. Sam turned to his holographic partner. "What do you mean, Al? What's Ziggy telling us?"

"Well, the percentages were going way up. It was beginning to look like we'd already solved Christine's problem somehow. Don't ask me how! Anyway, then we came here, and they started to slide. Now everything is right back the way it was when you leaped in!"

Sam frowned. "When did the percentages start going back down?" he asked unhappily.

"Just a couple of minutes ago," Al replied, still puzzled.

"When I was talking to Mr. Lincoln? Or when Jonesy came in?" Sam persisted.

"Gotcha," Al said, consulting his handlink again. "Oops! Sorry, Sam. The percentages actually started dropping a little as soon as Chrissie's mother pulled into this station. Hmm... Here we go. Ziggy says they really started sliding when Jonesy came in, calling you 'cutie'." Al scowled. "Let's see what we've got on the slimeball."

Mr. Lincoln came back into the office at that moment. "Are you doing okay, Christine?" he asked kindly. "That was quite a frown you were wearing."

"Oh, I'm fine, Mr. Lincoln," Sam said, feeling slightly embarrassed. "Thank you for asking." He shifted his feet, thinking quickly as the gray haired man continued to look at him with friendly skepticism.

"I didn't get to have my violin lesson today because my teacher is sick," he told Lincoln. "I was just wondering if Mrs. Levitt is all right."

The man's face cleared. "I'm sure it's nothing serious, Christine," as he went back to his chair. He smiled at Sam. "Your mother should be ready to leave soon."

"Ziggy's having a hard time getting a fix on Jonesy," Al said. "Let's see..." The holographic figure walked over to the desk where Mr. Lincoln was working, peering over his shoulder. "Ah. Here's a receipt signed 'W. P. Jones'. Maybe that will help." He punched buttons on the handlink.

Mrs. Clarkson came into the office from the back. "I suppose I should be grateful you had the tire in stock," she said, handing a paper to Mr. Lincoln. "It's a common size," he said mildly. "That will be \$20.00."

As she pulled bills from her purse, Al said, "That's strange, Sam. Ziggy says W. P. Jones should be Wendell Peter Jones, age 29. But we have no record of him after this job. And from tax records, he was - or will be - terminated in a week."

As Sam considered this, he found his hand grabbed by Mrs. Clarkson, who was apparently ready to leave. As he went out the front door with her, the Plymouth was being brought around by another mechanic. He was a chunky blond boy, looking hardly old enough to be working. He climbed out, leaving the engine running and the door open for Mrs. Clarkson. She got in the car.

"Come along, Christine, don't dawdle."

Sam hurried around to the passenger side. As he was getting in, he saw what looked like the garage's tow truck parked across the street. Tan colored, it said 'Lincoln Service' on the side - just like the sign on the building. There was someone in the truck; he was willing to bet it was Jonesy. *But where was Al?*

As if in answer to his thought, Al's face peered in the car window. "Don't look now, Sam, but Jonesy is across the street, checking you out." He scowled. "I think we know who to watch out for tomorrow."

"Sit up straight and stop grimacing like that," Mrs. Clarkson said as she drove cautiously out of the garage's parking lot. "It's very unbecoming."

"Yes, Mother," Sam said with a sigh as he tried to straighten in his seat.

Al's scowl transferred to the woman driving. "You know, Sam, maybe you ought to see if you can figure out a way to split up the Clarksons and make sure Chrissie's father gets custody," he said speculatively.

Privately, Sam thought that that was rather unlikely in the fifties, but he didn't dare answer the hologram. It was hard to tell what Chrissie's mother might do if he suddenly said something she considered peculiar.

Al sighed, as if reading his friend's thoughts. "Not real likely, is it? Unless she's secretly an ax murderer," he added hopefully.

Sam struggled to hide a smile.

"Now why is that tow truck following us?" asked Mrs. Clarkson in annoyance as she turned a corner. She kept glancing at the rearview mirror. "I suppose that idiot forgot to tighten a lug nut or something..."

"What's the matter, Mother?" Sam asked as the woman's words trailed off.

"Nothing, Christine," Mrs. Clarkson answered as she pulled to a stop in the driveway of a small dark green house, and the tow truck went on by. "Get your violin and go inside. You can practice in your room until it's time for dinner."

Sam glumly followed Mrs. Clarkson into the house, wondering how he was going to practice on this unfamiliar instrument. As they went inside, he saw a small living room, done in grays and navy blue. A brown-haired man in work clothes stood up from where he had been sitting in an armchair, reading a newspaper. "Ellie, Chrissie! You're home early."

"Her name is Christine, James," Mrs. Clarkson said, "and we're early because Mrs. Levitt cancelled the lesson." The words sounded like her usual acid style, but Sam noticed a softening in her expression as she looked at her husband. He glanced at Al. His friend was looking at Mrs. Clarkson in fascinated disbelief. "Ellie?" he said.

"Mrs. Levitt was sick, Dad," Sam said, hiding a smile. "Doris said the doctor was with her."

"Oh, that's too bad. I hope she'll be better soon."

"I'm sure she will," Mrs. Clarkson said. "Christine, go upstairs now. And before you say anything, James, I want Christine to practice now because she admitted to me that she hadn't practiced for tonight's lesson."

Mr. Clarkson smiled. "Sure, Ellie, I understand." He winked at Sam, who trudged upstairs with the violin.

Half an hour later, desperately tired of trying to figure out how to produce sounds that resembled music, even with Al's dubious help, he took a breather. The room he was in was very nice, if he had really been a six-year-old girl, but the pink and gray wallpaper, all flowers and teddy bears, really didn't appeal to Sam. He sighed. At least Al had quit making remarks about the decor. At Sam's suggestion, which he had accepted with suspicious haste, Al had gone back to the Project to see if he could get any more information. Sam pulled back a gauzy pink drape and looked out the window.

Beyond a carefully mowed lawn dotted with small spruce trees was a side street. A familiar tow truck was parked there. Sam tensed. Was something supposed to happen to Chrissie now? He wished Al would come back.

Movement caught his eye near a tiny flower garden close to the house. A white rabbit with a big pink bow hopped to the edge of the garden and began nibbling at the leaves of a peony. That setup would have been irresistible to little Chrissie, Sam thought. He wondered where Jonesy was. *There! Behind a small spruce, about ten feet from the rabbit. Sorry, Jonesy, you'll have a very long wait this time,* Sam thought with satisfaction.

He glanced back at the truck. A small face was peering out of the side window. A little boy, it looked like, maybe four years old. *Had Jonesy already kidnapped a child? What kind of monster were they dealing with here?*

That might explain why Chrissie wouldn't speak for so long, Sam thought. If Jonesy did something to that little boy in front of her, then told her he'd kill her if she talked... He felt himself doing a slow burn as he tried to figure out what to do. Al, where are you?

There was a small tap on the door. "Chrissie, honey, are you okay? Can I come in?" The door opened slightly, and James Clarkson peeped in.

"Uh, sure, Daddy," Sam said. "I'm okay."

"Something interesting out the window, button?" asked Chrissie's father, coming to look over Sam's shoulder.

Yes! thought Sam. Aloud he said, "There's a bunny in Mother's flowers. And the man from the gas station is out there watching it."

"What man from the gas station?" Clarkson demanded, peering out the window toward the flower garden.

"Mr. Lincoln called him 'Jonesy'," Sam answered. "Do you think he has a little boy, Daddy? There's a little boy in his truck."

Clarkson was plainly upset, but trying to hide it from his daughter. "I don't know, sweetheart, but maybe I can find out," he said. "You stay here and play quietly, and I'll come back and get you in time for dinner."

"Okay, Daddy." Mentally, Sam crossed his fingers. *I hope that does the trick.*

At that moment, Al reappeared, resplendent in purple and black. "Sam! What did you do? Ziggy says everything is changing," he exclaimed, regarding his handlink and waving his ever-present cigar.

"What do you mean? It's getting better, right?"

"Better, worse - depends on who Ziggy's checking out," Al said, staring at the handlink. "Right now, this looks like a little slot machine, trying to keep up... Sam! Mrs. Clarkson has a 67% chance of being run over...in about fifteen minutes. She's downstairs, right?" He looked blankly at his friend.

"Yes. In the kitchen, I think. She must go out... I'd better get down there." Sam ran out the bedroom door.

"It's still changing," Al said plaintively. "Wait." He looked up, and hurried after Sam, muttering.

Partway down the carpeted stairs, Sam paused, listening. He could hear Mr. Clarkson in the next room, on the phone.

"Okay, can I speak to Sergeant Todd, then? Yes, I'll hold on, but this is urgent!" Then he called, "Ellie, don't go out there. Ellie! At least wait a minute...Sergeant Todd?"

Sam didn't listen any further. He slipped out the front door and hurried around the house to where Mrs. Clarkson might be. Before he rounded the corner, he heard her.

"James, he is still out here, trying to hide behind the tree. I can't imagine what he is doing - and in my yard! Are the police coming?"

Sam hurried around the corner to catch at Chrissie's mother's hand. "Mother, Daddy says you should wait for the police," he told her. Al followed him, still scowling over the handlink.

Mrs. Clarkson stopped in her tracks and stared at Sam in astonishment. "Christine Clarkson! You were told to stay in your room!"

Oh, boy, thought Sam. "Uh, Daddy was acting funny, so I thought something must be wrong. You shouldn't be out here with that man," he said, trying to see beyond her to where he had last seen Jonesy crouching.

"Sam!" Al yelled. "He's heading for the truck! Ziggy says he's going to throw the little boy out and bolt!"

Oh, no! Sam thought. *What on earth can a six year old girl do?* But he was already in motion, avoiding Mrs. Clarkson's outstretched hand, and running across the lawn toward the tow truck.

"Christine!" shouted Chrissie's thunderstruck mother.

"He's going to hurt that little boy," Sam blurted as he continued running.

"Brat!" Jonesy spat in his direction as he raced back toward the tow truck. "You've ruined everything!"

"Christine!" Mrs. Clarkson shrieked behind him. "What are you doing?"

"Sam, look out!" Al cried in warning. "Don't let him run you over!"

"James! Please come out here now!" Mrs. Clarkson cried, moving across the lawn after her daughter.

Sam avoided the front of the tow truck, heading toward the side door where Jonesy was grabbing roughly at the frightened child inside. Jonesy snarled, "Catch!" and threw the boy at Sam's face.

Instinctively grabbing hold of the boy, Sam felt himself falling backwards. Jonesy aimed a kick at him before jumping into the truck. It

caught the side of Sam's right foot as he fell. Unable to catch himself, Sam landed flat on his back, the little boy on top of him.

The child was clutching him fiercely, his eyes shut tight, little whimpers escaping him quietly. Sam was content for the moment to hold him and try to get his breath back. He heard the squeal of Jonesy's tires at the same time Mrs. Clarkson came running up.

"Mother!" he said, wanting to keep her away from Jonesy's vehicle, but nothing came out but a little grunt. He struggled to get up, as the little boy clung to him tighter.

"Christine, are you all right?" Mrs. Clarkson said sharply. "What you thought you were doing, I don't..."

As it became obvious that her daughter couldn't answer her, her voice trailed off. "Chrissie?" she said uncertainly. "James! Something's wrong with Chrissie!"

Mr. Clarkson knelt next to Sam and looked him over. "Got the wind knocked out of you, did you, sweetheart?" he asked.

"Sam! Are you all right?" Al asked anxiously. He had followed Sam across the yard, wishing mightily that he weren't a hologram, that he could confront the monster who would harm a child.

Sam nodded, recovering and drawing in great gulps of air. He stroked the blond hair of the terrified boy who still clung to him, eyes closed.

"James, how can you sound so calm? She can't talk, and her foot is swelling!" exclaimed Mrs. Clarkson shrilly.

"I see it, Ellie," James answered, and he was already removing Christine's egg-ruined shoe. "It's just a nasty bruise, I think, and she should be able to speak just fine in a minute or two. Right, Chrissie?" he added with a grin for his daughter while he carefully examined the injured foot and ankle.

"Yes, Daddy," Sam answered. His voice still didn't sound quite like his own, but he was starting to feel less stunned.

"Can you sit up now, honey?" Clarkson put a hand behind Sam's shoulder to help him up. "Do you know this little fellow, Chrissie?" he asked gently.

"No," said Sam truthfully, looking at Al.

Al consulted the handlink, its colored lights flashing. He grinned. "His name is Adam Wicker, and he's going to be just fine!" he announced happily.

Mrs. Clarkson, who had been looking on in distress, took a deep breath of relief, then frowned. "I don't know what you were thinking of, Christine," she began in a stern voice, "but--"

"Ellie, not now," her husband interrupted.

Mrs. Clarkson stared at him in astonishment.

James ignored her, and spoke to Chrissie again, as he rubbed Sam's shoulder gently. He made no move toward the little boy, who seemed to be relaxing a tiny bit. "That was a very brave thing to do, Chrissie," he said. "How did you know your little friend needed help?"

"Brave!" sputtered Mrs. Clarkson. Her husband frowned at her severely, then turned back to Sam, who was trying to think of something to say.

"Don't look at me, Sam," Al said. "I have no clue what a six year old girl would say in a situation like this!"

Sam shrugged helplessly, and said, "He looked scared."

"James, the police are here," Mrs. Clarkson announced.

"Go and show them where we are, dear," Clarkson ordered. Looking bewildered, she did as she was bid.

Later that night, after being tucked into bed and kissed good night by James Clarkson, Sam lay in Chrissie's pink bed and waited until he was sure her father was out of earshot.

"Al? Why am I still here?"

"Ziggy's not sure," the project observer replied. "Adam is going to be okay, Chrissie is going to be okay, Jonesy gets caught and put away..." He frowned in perplexity.

"So, what's left?" Sam asked.

Just then they heard voices from downstairs. Al cocked his head, then

grinned. "I'm gonna go play eavesdropper!"

He returned a few minutes later, eyes a gleam. "Hoo, boy, are things going to change around here!" he said triumphantly.

"What do you mean?" Sam asked, yawning.

"Well," Al said, puffing on his cigar, "first Clarkson told his wife to imagine what might have happened if she had gone marching out there to confront Jonesy in her usual fashion."

Sam shuddered.

"Then he told her to think about what might have happened to Adam if Jonesy had gotten away with him, and he told her it could have been Chrissie. You should have seen her face!" Al said with relish.

Sam smiled at his friend. "So what now?"

"Oh," Al replied loftily, "they're having a little chat about discipline and violins and Easter eggs and six year old girls." He grinned, rocking up on his toes and back down. "The Clarksons are going to be just fine, Sam. All three of them."

"That's great, Al," Sam said sleepily, then his world turned silver and blue again, and he leaped.

When the dazzle began to fade so he could begin to see around him, he still blinked at brightness. But this was sunlight, a shaft of it, summer-bright, shining straight in his face. He was sitting; he shifted, feeling pine needles and the soft duff of a forest floor beneath him. A tree blocked the sun as he moved, and he could really see his surroundings. His movement startled something small that scuttled away, rustling pine needles and dry leaves.

Sam took a delighted breath, enjoying the pine scent and the peacefulness of the woods. In front of him was the path this person had perhaps been following. Behind him was his pack, shrugged off for this rest. A canteen lay ready near his hand.

The legs stretched out in front of him were clearly male, and young and strong. He sighed in relief. Whatever discomforts, terrors, or uncertainties this leap might bring, at least he had that. That, and this breathing space alone in peace and quiet.

Idly, he reached up to scratch an itch behind his ear. When he brought his hand back down, he was startled to notice that the tips of his fingers were covered with blood. *What?! he thought. Nothing hurts...* Then he realized his bare skin was attracting large numbers of small black flies.

He started swatting at them, trying to keep himself from being bitten any more, when from somewhere behind him he heard a woman's voice shrieking, "I can't stand these dratted bugs!"

"Oh, boy..."



Absent Without Leave

by

Kim Round

For just a moment, Al thought his lips brushed her forehead. Now, instead of facing Beth's holographic image, Al faced the stark walls of the Imaging Chamber. It would be so much easier, he thought, if the frustration could lead him to anger. However, an overwhelming sense of sorrow engulfed him. It was worse.

Building the Project, Sam had remarked that he and Al were in the "impossible dream" business. When the experiment took on a life of its own, Sam found himself not just an observer of history, but a participant. Ziggy's explanation had startled Al. Sam's leaping through time, at the mercy of God, Time, or Whatever, was to put right, what once went wrong.

In his life, Al knew quite a few wrongs that needed correction. He had learned, through the process of picking up the pieces again and again, there was no sense in dwelling on them. When he allowed himself to think about those disappointments, Al craved escape. Until not too many years ago, that escape included a bottle. Sam Beckett had fished him out of that oblivion and Al was damned if his ghosts would haunt him into another one.

Nonetheless, in the last two days, an undeniable specter rose up again in the form of the Observer's first wife. Apparently there to right another wrong, Sam was back in 1969 with Beth. Al dared to let himself hope. Hope led to desperation. Desperation led to hopelessness.

Trying to still his threatening tears, Al shook his head. Beth had been standing directly in front of him. For a moment, just a moment, he thought she heard him. Regardless, Beth walked right through him like he was the ghost. As in the past, Al was alive somewhere, far away, loving her. Just as sure as he was still caged in Vietnam, Al was helpless to tell her.

The admiral stopped fighting the tears and let them come. Behind him, he barely registered the Imaging Chamber door opening.

"Admiral? Are you alright?" Gooshie's tentative voice broke the silence.

The head programmer was not fond of approaching Al after he had been with Sam. One could never guess the mood the admiral would be in. However, Ziggy announced over seven minutes ago that Sam had leaped. It just was not like Al to hang around the empty Imaging Chamber unless he had a certain female in his company.

When Al did not respond, Gooshie moved to face him. The head programmer flinched.

"Ver--Verbena!" Gooshie cried.

Dr. Verbena Beeks darted into the Chamber. Her movements usually reflected an inward serenity. Notwithstanding, Gooshie's panicked yell sent her racing.

Swiftly, the Project psychiatrist assessed the admiral's condition, her eyes wandering over him. Al appeared on the verge of exhaustion. Normally impeccably groomed, he was unshaven. His shirt was wrinkled and sweat stained as though he had run a marathon. Most obviously, the Observer was severely distraught.

Having only encountered her colleague close to tears once before, Verbena tensed. That last time, Ziggy just announced he would be unable to retrieve Dr. Beckett.

"AL! AL!" The psychiatrist rubbed the Observer's shoulders to get his attention.

"It isn't Sam, is it? Is Sam okay?" she forced herself to ask evenly.

Nodding his head, Al turned his face to the wall. He loathed having an audience, especially Gooshie and Beeks. Since Gooshie's affair with Tina, the admiral never confided anything personal in him. Although a good friend, Verbena would have him in counseling for the next three years. Al struggled to regain his composure quickly.

Verbena gave soft spoken instructions to Ziggy. Meanwhile, Al rubbed away the tears savagely, momentarily ridding himself of the damning evidence. "...get...here, please..."

Few of Verbena's hushed words impressed themselves on him.

"Already done, Dr. Beeks. ETA thirty seconds," the computer responded efficiently.

Emotions under somewhat better control, Al turned slightly. Entering the Chamber, a trim brunette regarded his unshaven, tearstained face and immediately bolted toward him.

"Al! What is it? What's happened?"

Pulling him close, she felt his ribs through his shirt. Lord, if he didn't even feel different! Still, there was no time to ascertain the cause.

Recognizing her touch, Al recoiled sharply. His eyes locked with hers. Then, he collapsed.

* * *

Beth shifted to break his fall. Nevertheless, it was Gooshie, who firmly caught the admiral and gently laid him on the floor.

Instinctively, the former Navy nurse moved to take his vital signs.

"Ziggy! Get Dr. Wade," she commanded.

She kneeled at Al's side feeling positively incredulous. This man only slightly resembled her jaunty husband, who had just been in Medical teasing her mercilessly.

"I've already notified him. I estimate that Admiral Calavicci is in shock, Mrs. Calavicci," the computer replied. Given his efficiency during this crisis, Ziggy sounded downright pleased with himself.

"Forgive me, Ziggy, if I don't take your word for it," Beth remarked abruptly.

Taking Al's pulse, Beth thanked heaven. At least, he hadn't had a massive coronary.

The nurse cradled Al's head in her lap, waiting for the medical team. His breathing was steady. Nonetheless, the Observer's pale complexion confirmed Ziggy was probably quite correct.

"Ziggy, what happened in here?" Beth inquired truly shaken.

"Mrs. Calavicci, the admiral has just witnessed a change in history. This change effected the course of both your and Admiral Calavicci's lives. Further data is available."

"Ziggy! Compile all data you can. I will access it later. Protection code 3135," Verbena interrupted the computer.

Already, Al had told Verbena about changes in history of which only he was aware. Could this have happened here? He had looked at Beth as though she was a long dead relative; someone who couldn't possibly be present in this time or place.

"Data is classified. Protection code 3135," Ziggy confirmed.

Verbena sympathetically wrapped her arm around Beth's shoulders, puzzling over the ramifications.

* * *

"Welcome back, Sailor. That must've been some shore leave," Beth joked, using her best bedside manner.

Al thought someone had said something. Her face was coming into focus. He believed it was her voice. Disoriented, he mulled over the cause. Was he dead? She couldn't be here. It must be a dream. But, that was her hand holding his. He felt it. She was wiping his head with a cloth. She was here. He felt her!

"Beth..." Al whispered, staring at her in awe.

Beth pulled closer, softly running her hand through his hair. Down deep, she knew there was more going on here than a case of exhaustion. Nevertheless, she ignored her instinct. Previously, Al had witnessed many traumatic events in that Chamber. He had emerged visibly shaken more than

once. Not only that, but her husband had not been sleeping. The Observer's rest was continually interrupted by worry over Sam. Beth reasoned Al had to be tired and wrung out.

Still, her husband's weight bothered her. Beth had not noticed him losing weight. She chided herself. Why hadn't she noticed it before?

Like many nurses, she had a difficult time thinking logically, when someone she loved was sick. Beth knew too much. Personally, she had seen too many worst case scenarios.

"Al, I don't know what happened--what you saw. It's just important that you rest. It's going to be okay," Beth contended evenly.

Attempting to pull himself up, Al felt the dizziness roll over him in waves. There was pressure on his shoulders, urging him to lie back. Somehow, the ghost had taken form.

"You--you weren't supposed to be--here," he rasped, before the darkness could come again.

About to respond, Beth paused when the meaning of his words sunk in. She shook her head as if to push them away.

"Close your eyes, Al, and sleep. I am supposed to be here. I won't leave you. I haven't for thirty five years." Gently, Beth gripped his shoulder to drive her point home.

Al knew better, only the dizziness was winning. He could not fight it anymore. Allowing himself to relax against the bed, the Observer closed his eyes. This time, he did sleep. But soon, the nightmares began.

He was in another hospital. Was it another life? No, it had happened! He remembered them telling him about her remarriage. She wrote him that damned letter! How could she be here? She said she'd stayed with him thirty five years!

Al fought his dreams. After a while, there was a strange prick in his arm and he sank deeper.

* * *

"Beth, I think it's time we talked," Verbena said softly entering the room.

The Project nurse was uncharacteristically disheveled. It was evident that she had sat by Al's bed all night. An orderly had brought in a cot, which had not been touched since.

Rising from the chair, Beth sighed. Her back was not what it used to be. Perils of her profession, she guessed. Of course, Al had always been more than willing to work the kinks out of it.

During the long night, Beth focused one part of her mind on watching Al and another theorizing. There *must* have been a time shift. Beth did not know the technical details as she was schooled in how to heal people, not hybrid computers. Nonetheless, Al and Sam had spent many hours enthusiastically brainstorming in her presence.

Now, meeting the Project psychiatrist's eyes, Beth knew Verbena was there to break bad news. She recognized that facial expression all too well. Beth had used it herself.

"He's too thin, Verbena," Beth stated matter of fact.

"I think I can explain that now."

Verbena looked down at the sleeping admiral. She had not noticed his weight in the Imaging Chamber. Now that Beth mentioned the fact, it only supported the authenticity of Ziggy's information.

Beth decided the direct approach was the best. She would not be handled with kid gloves.

"How much time have we lost or shifted or whatever?"

"Listen, Beth, you look like you can use a good cup of coffee. Let's go talk in my office," Verbena responded, hoping the nurse would not identify the ploy to speak with her privately, away from the medical staff.

Beth took a quick glance at her sleeping husband and let a long breath out. Bestowing Verbena with a shrewd glare, she gathered herself toward the direction of the psychiatrist's office.

"You know, you don't look so hot yourself," Beth said, settling into one of Verbena's overstuffed chairs.

There was history of candor and loyalty between these two women. Beth, being Project Quantum Leap's head nurse, had many interactions with Verbena. Having similar values and backgrounds, they quickly became friends as well as professional colleagues.

Verbena long considered Beth an excellent window to understanding the enigmatic Admiral Calavicci. The psychiatrist's job precipitated working closely with Al. Verbena found him a very complicated man and only sporadically communicative. On occasion, she would seek Beth's council. Usually, the nurse would grasp her husband's point of view, whether she actually agreed with him or not. However, Beth could be stubbornly tight lipped if she felt she might betray a confidence. Verbena surmised her relationship with the admiral would be complicated at best without Beth's presence.

"I've been thinking all night, Verbena. Sam changed history so that I'm alive now. I wasn't supposed to be. Al said that," Beth proposed directly.

"What did he say? When?" Verbena blinked in surprise.

"He woke up for a minute, last night. He said I wasn't supposed to be here."

Beth could see the understanding in Verbena's eyes. Yet, the nurse deliberated. That *had* to be it! Didn't it?

"In the original history you weren't *here*. But, you are supposed to be alive," Verbena answered slowly wondering just what Beth had figured out.

"We're living an alternate time line. That's why Al is thinner. He must be fifteen pounds thinner," Beth's voice betrayed her tension.

"I guess he's appreciated your cooking through the years." Verbena smiled her most serene smile in an attempt to relax the nurse.

Beth let out a wistful chuckle. The man would rather starve than eat tomato sauce from a jar. "Cooking? Verbena, he *likes* to cook."

"Well, maybe he ate more because of you," Verbena continued, knowing they were approaching sensitive territory.

"You said years. Just how many years?" Beth urged.

Verbena's shoulders heaved a long sigh, her chocolate brown eyes meeting Beth's impatient stare.

"How about over twenty five?" Verbena plunged ahead.

The psychiatrist watched the older woman's eyes narrow with shock.

"That's impossible!"

Nonetheless, they both knew it was not.

"Beth, Sam was in 1969, while Al was missing. He..." Verbena tried to go on but her companion interrupted.

"He changed history." Beth's words held slight sarcasm.

Verbena only nodded.

"You mean, to Al, he's been living a different life for twenty five years? He's going to remember everything, isn't he?" the older woman asked quietly. Her lovely face was ashen.

"It may take a while, Beth. You see, in the original history, you met a lawyer that weekend and eventually married him," the psychiatrist replied hesitantly.

"Married somebody else?! How could I have been married to anyone else but him?" Beth levied incredulously. This was too much!

As the tears welled in Beth's eyes, Verbena moved to hold her. It seemed like forever. Twenty five years of Beth's marriage had been erased in a blink of an eye. Although they both knew Al's memories would eventually return, neither woman knew exactly when. The Observer could bear other memories as well, difficult to handle within the marriage.

"Beth, I'm going to help you with this," Verbena stated firmly.

The Project nurse pulled back and smiled wanly at her old friend. Beth reflected affectionately that Verbena always did her best to reassure her, no matter what. Drawing on an inner strength she always possessed, Beth rallied.

"I'm going to need all I can get. I just have to remember, it's been worse. There were three years when I thought he was dead."

Beth's mind was still reeling. She hardly remembered the detective Sam leaped into, let alone Dirk Simon, the man she was supposed to have married. She did recall when Al took his second tour, they had been fighting. It was the same old story. Beth wanted to settle down and raise a family. He still wanted his freedom.

Al had mentioned something about not wanting to drag kids all over the country, but Beth didn't buy it. As far as she was concerned, he behaved like a care free bachelor. She felt he treated their marriage as an afterthought. While she never doubted he was faithful or his love, Beth was exasperated with Al's inability to make their relationship top priority.

Al had not known two people involved in a long term committed relationship as role models. Beth consoled herself with conjecture that because of this, Al might not really know how to be married. Growing up in an orphanage, her husband would have little idea of how wonderful a family life could be. It took convincing before he trusted even Beth would love him forever. Up until then, Al slept with the proverbial one foot out the window, able to give part of himself, but not all.

While sympathetic to the impact of Al's childhood memories, Beth was losing patience. Every time a friend announced her pregnancy, she felt a stab of loneliness. It was not just that she had not had children yet. Rather, Al did not seem committed enough to want to be a father. Beth could never comprehend why Al refused to take this next step. It had hurt her desperately.

Saying goodbye that final time, Beth tried, but she could not hide her anger. Al's eyes flashed with pain as he walked away toward the aircraft carrier. Nothing more was said.

Over the next month, Beth heard little from him, although this was not unusual. Taking almost three weeks to arrive, the mail from Southeast Asia, especially from a carrier at sea, was notoriously slow. She had just started receiving a few unemotional run downs of the day's events, apparently, written the first two weeks out of port. Then, the telegram arrived along with two young officers. It stated Al's plane was shot down. Reconnaissance had not located a body. Therefore, regrettably, Beth's husband was now considered missing in action.

The following days were spent in a daze, punctuated by the increasingly apologetic letters which arrived. The letters, apparently written the week before Al was shot down, were almost harder to bear than the initial telegram.

Then the letters stopped. When the days turned into weeks, weeks into months, months into years, with no news, Beth was so sure he was dead. The Navy thought there was still a chance. Nonetheless, the Navy did not live with the silence every day. It was a kind of torture. A wound that could not close because there had been no concrete ending; just waiting.

Beth was tired of the bureaucratic stone wall she encountered at every turn. These faceless people she called or wrote, begging them to look harder, remember better, or just offer sensible advice had *their* lives. No one seemed to care that this one issue kept her from moving ahead with either her grief or hope; toward the process of healing.

She found herself unable to make even simple decisions about the house, let alone decisions regarding relocation. Logically, it was time to start facing the reality. Al might never come home and if he did, it might not be for a very long time. Maybe if Beth began settling the small issues nagging at her, she could feel some control over this state of enforced limbo.

She remembered starting slowly. Looking over the living room which had needed to be re-done for the past year, Beth allowed herself to pick out a wallpaper she loved even though it was not Al's taste. He used to complain that he saw enough blue in the military and didn't like seeing it on the walls. He always seemed to like warmer colors. However, he was not staring at the walls everyday; Beth was.

Then, a friend suggested she take Al's name off the checking account, stating her finances would be better secured against fraud. Beth reluctantly

did so and then stared curiously at the new checks when they came through.

Rationalizing that none of the steps she had taken thus far were irreversible, Beth felt a little better. They could easily re-paper the living room and put Al's name back on the bank accounts should he return home.

Beth then considered that Al's car had been sitting dormant for a year and a half. It really needed to be put up on blocks. From time to time, she drove it to work but generally it was being left to deteriorate.

Consequently, Beth talked to the mechanic at the shop. He had a friend who could store the car and within a few days, they came to drive it away.

More phone calls and letters confirmed there was no further information to be had concerning Al's whereabouts. If anything, there was less reason to believe he could be still alive. Methodically, Beth changed the bills one by one over to her name.

A sad turning point came when Al's wing-man returned home sorrowfully reiterating that he did not see a parachute or any flares. In fact, the plane had gone down in such a way that he would be surprised if Al was not killed instantly. Perhaps, the pilot said, Beth should take solace in the fact that her husband did not suffer. A few days after the officer's visit, she wistfully sold the black convertible. It really was getting too expensive to store it.

A few months later, Beth braced herself and carefully packed Al's clothes, storing them in the crawl space over the ceiling. This act proved almost too much for the Navy nurse to bear. She quietly wept as she pulled his jeans and sport shirts from his bureau. Next, the spare uniforms, dress pants, and starched shirts came out of the closet. His shoes, still polished to perfection though a little dusty, then were placed carefully in shoe boxes. They joined the worn tennis and high top basketball sneakers in the space up above. Though she had left it sitting in the closet for close to two years, Beth then opened the large box containing Al's personal effects from the aircraft carrier. The uniforms had been placed on hangers and covered with plastic. That was easy enough. She could put those and the shoes they had shipped upstairs with the others. More sports clothing had already been packed into boxes. Beth did not look at them and carried them up the ladder. Unfortunately, the two items left in the box undid Beth's resolve.

She reverently lifted out Al's beloved old bomber jacket. He had worn it and his dark pilot's sunglasses on their first dates like badges of honor. It seemed announced to the world that Al was a give 'em hell fighter pilot. And, Beth was inwardly amused he felt he needed to impress her. After he proposed, she had teased him that he would probably wear it to bed. With a disarming laugh and a wolfish smile, Al had told her he knew some guys that did.

The last item was Al's wedding ring.

Beth had no idea he took it off before a mission. She always thought the ring was with him, wherever he was. Perhaps, because the assignments became so dangerous he had taken to removing it; afraid it would get lost.

She gripped the ring tightly and carried the leather jacket up the ladder. Briefly, she considered zipping the ring into an inside pocket. Thinking better of it, Beth brought the ring back downstairs and placed it carefully into her jewelry box.

Finally, against her better judgement, the Navy nurse recalled becoming attached to a young burn patient. He was so much like Al. So alive and ready to beat the odds. When the soldier succumbed and died of his burns, Beth's dwindling hope died too. The very next day, Goodwill retrieved the stored clothes, minus Al's flight jacket, from the attic.

Beth felt she had been strong throughout the entire ordeal. Burying herself in her work, Beth did not unload her grief on others. However, when she took a drive to the Marina after Goodwill came and the car tire went flat, Beth felt an irrational wave of frustration claim her. She kept telling herself it was not the tire that upset her so. Only that tire was the proverbial straw which broke the camel's back.

That was right! Now, Beth remembered Dirk Simon and the undercover cop, Jake Rawlins. How silly she must have looked crying over a flat tire!

However, over the next few days they had shown her just how willing they both were to rescue a damsel in distress. Although she had prided herself on her independence, Beth truly welcomed a little rescuing.

Acknowledging she needed to get on with her life, the nurse decided "missing" was just another word for "dead". She accepted that Al was not coming home, ever. Deep down, maybe she had always known it.

With amusement, the Navy nurse then recalled how Dirk and Jake had been not so subtly competing with each other for her attention. Then, Jake ran out, saying he didn't think he was supposed to be there. Much as she hated to admit it at the time, Beth felt a little rejected. She wondered if she would have the strength to go through all of this "dating business" again?

Beth remembered feeling that it *would* be nice to fall in love again someday, though that was still too much to hope for. Maybe she really was too much of a romantic, as Al used to say. Smiling ruefully, she should know better. But perhaps, she speculated, maybe she could love someone again if she could find a man with patience. Dirk had seemed nice, Beth reflected. He was no Al Calavicci, but he seemed stable and settled.

Stable and settled! Beth had chuckled. When did that become her prerequisite for choosing a man? It was precisely Al's gusto and passion that Beth had fallen for.

The Project nurse remembered putting "Georgia" on the stereo.

It had been safer to think about the old days. Closing her eyes, Beth recalled dancing with Al at the base Officer's club. They would dance all night, forgetting about the separations, any problems. Those times were so truly special.

The song was winding down to the end when she had felt him kiss her forehead. She opened her eyes but the spell was broken. She stood in the empty living room, curiously still feeling the warmth on her forehead.

At the time, Beth wondered if her loneliness was getting the best of her. Either that, or maybe it was Al's ghost which had somehow taken enough physical form to say good bye. The nurse had heard similar stories from her Irish relatives. Her aunt had sworn she saw her mother-in-law "just checking on" her uncle, three days after the elderly lady was buried. Had a ghostly Al seen Dirk and Jake in their home this afternoon? Did he somehow know Beth was getting ready to move on, even considering dating again? The nurse shivered. This was too eerie or perhaps she was just tired.

Then, of course, came the visit from the hazel eyed stranger. Back then, she had been so rattled to see a strange man in her living room, she could hardly remember what he looked like. Instead, she listened to his pleas intently, hoping against hope that the stranger was right. Later, however, Beth breathed a sigh of relief when he left.

Had he been a hallucination? Perhaps a dream? No, Beth knew she hadn't been sleeping. Certainly, the man couldn't have climbed in the window without her knowing. Most likely, it had been a hallucination born of grief. And, she accepted that conclusion because the alternative was just too unnerving.

In any case, Beth had decided that maybe she wasn't ready for a Dirk Simon yet, after all. Obviously, she needed more time.

Dirk had phoned the next day. He mentioned something about a yacht club dance the following evening only Beth was unable to bring herself to accept. Still shaken from the previous evening, she politely declined his invitation and he did not call again.

Enmeshed in her work at the hospital, Beth found herself drawn to the former POW's passing through Miramar. Even though these men were rarely admitted to the burn ward, the nurse began to take extra shifts on other floors.

Would Al look like them? Was Al even one of them? Beth had no one's word besides her hallucination's that her husband was alive and held by the North Vietnamese.

Given the condition of the men she had seen, the Navy nurse actually felt strongly ambivalent. Perhaps it was selfish of her to wish he was alive and living through the torture these men had endured. Certainly, it would be much kinder if Al had died in that crash. Did she really wish such a fate

upon him just so that he could come home to her? Most likely, he wouldn't be the same man or even be able to pick up the pieces of his life. He might not even want to see her. Beth had practically been run over by a young Navy wife bolting from her husband's room. Apparently, he told her he wanted a divorce; never wanted to see her again. That man had been held captive a year and a half. Al had now been missing for three.

No, Beth had thought it more probable that someday they would find Al's remains. Her future with him was a military funeral with full honors; not a tearful reunion, plenty of physical therapy, and an eventual change of heart about babies. Thus, six months later, when Beth found herself summoned into her CO's office, she steeled herself.

They've finally found his body. Oh God, who do I call? I'll have to call his uncle. There's Stacker and... Where is he now? I don't know where Stacker is! How could I lose track of Stacker? Lord! I can't believe it! Goodwill took the uniforms. What will they bury him in? Oh Al, I'm so sorry. I'll have to get him another. Will they have it in time? What am I thinking? Of course, it's going to be closed casket. It's been three years, there may not be much...

Did he want to be buried? Maybe he wanted to be cremated? He never said. No, the Catholic church doesn't allow cremation. Not that Al was that big on the Catholic church. Oh God, Al, why didn't we settle these things?

Maybe he would want to be in New Jersey with Trudy and Pop. Uncle Jack would know where the plot is, wouldn't he? Where's the deed? Damn, knowing Jack, he lost it.

I won't cry when they tell me. No, I'm not going to cry. Al wouldn't like that--I won't.

Beth had then settled herself down across the desk from her commanding officer. Another officer stood somberly by the window, his presence confirming her suspicion. She had never seen him before around the base. Most likely, he was some sort of honor guard. Perhaps, they'd brought Al home already, Beth had mused.

A photograph was then gently placed in her hands by the officer, but Beth glared at him in anger.

Why would they want to show her a picture of Al's body? Didn't they have any sensitivity?

Fiercely, she slammed the picture face down on the desk.

"I think you'll want to see that, Beth," the CO had suggested with uncharacteristic softness. "It's all right. Look."

Slowly, her trembling hands reached for the photograph. Turning it over, Beth had stared at the picture and gasped, bringing her empty hand to her mouth.

A gaunt, frightened, thoroughly worn yet familiar face stared at her across miles, years, and speculation.

Commander Johnson had gone on to explain that a well known female war photographer had taken pictures of POW's being hustled through the jungle, only a week before. Al's picture was the very last she took before she was killed. And, while Johnson commented that the photograph would probably win Maggie Dawson a Pulitzer, Beth had amended that the picture had done something far more important. It had won her hope. For that, no matter what the outcome, she would always be indebted to the late photographer.

Gratefully, she had studied the familiar dark eyes once more before surrendering the photograph over to the Naval intelligence officer who brought it.

April the 8th. He was alive on April the 8th--only six days ago. For the first time in three years, Beth's inexplicably maintained faith had basis.

Only the years had dragged on.

Still, the Navy nurse consoled herself that Al was now officially a POW rather than missing and presumed dead. Intelligence reports released to families stated that all POW's were now apparently held in the Hoa Lai Prison in Hanoi where the American Red Cross was allowed access. And, while peace talks began, stalled, ended and originated again, the Red Cross had noted better treatment toward the POWs; where North Vietnam had been accused of

violating the Geneva Convention and wanted to cover its tracks.

If Al had made it through the jungle camps and survived, he'd have a good chance of making it home alive, Beth had reasoned. Although she had heard in vivid detail about the torture and the tiger cages. One patient she took care of had committed suicide the very first time he had been left by himself. Apparently, he could not live with the memories. What condition Al might arrive home in remained to be seen.

In any event, Beth had resolved to stay in San Diego until Al was returned alive or dead, sane or insane from torture. She buried herself in her work once again, standing double shifts and then throwing herself into bed. Making the veterans more comfortable allowed the Navy nurse to feel some control.

In 1973, the peace treaty was finally arrived at in Paris. There had been rumblings the summer before and then one January day, it was official. All POW's would be released within the next two months. Since the North Vietnamese had never officially listed Lt. Albert Calavicci as a prisoner, his name was not on the roster of men being released. Again, Beth waited, praying for the word that her high spirited husband with the lop-sided grin was among them.

That call finally came.

Flying to a hospital in the Philippines, Beth met what the VC had left of Al.

There are some things that Beth had trouble remembering about her husband. What town in Italy did his father come from? Then, there was the name of the little girl he'd pulled into the cloak room in the fourth grade; that choice bit of information was forgotten almost immediately. However, the way Al looked when she was first brought to his bed side that day in 1973 was forever etched in her memory.

He had been pale and emaciated. Truly, he was only a shadow of himself. The boyish features had disappeared to be replaced with lines of stress and pain around his eyes.

It was perhaps his eyes that chilled her the most. Warmth had been replaced by ambivalence. Other than the first quiet tears he had shed upon her arrival, he showed little emotion. His nurse had speculated that Al was still focused on rudimentary elements of survival. The next drink, the next meal, clean clothing, and Beth's continued presence seemed all the former POW had energy to concentrate on.

Little by little, Beth saw that change. He was never the same husband who went to war all those years ago; that Al Calavicci was gone. However, as little pieces of his personality returned, albeit modified, she still found common ground. After all, treating war casualties had transformed her radically as well.

His nightmares were the worst, calling up images of the atrocities he must have witnessed. What Beth could decipher from Al's nocturnal ordeals, detailed it all in living color. It brought back her own nightmares; the ones she had when the war first started, delivering victims to her burn unit daily.

Nevertheless, they had somehow mustered through against improbable odds. Through physical therapy, peer counseling with other vets, and rigid determination, Al had become whole again. And while other marriages fell apart around her, Beth's stayed together. Years before, when she considered divorcing him, the Navy nurse never would have banked on that happening. However, Al's priorities had changed radically. Obviously, he had not spent six years subsisting on memories of flying and the Navy to keep his sanity intact. His focus had been on Beth. Thus, the cocky young pilot with one foot out the window was no longer. Although Beth missed this earlier incarnation of her husband, the older, weathered man with both feet firmly grounded in the marriage had become a welcome replacement.

Now, Verbena maintained that in another time line, Beth had begun dating the lawyer. Only months later, they were married. It broke her heart to think that the man now lying unconscious in Medical came home to no one.

* * *

Al stretched. Opening his eyes, he felt disorientation play with his sense of equilibrium. However, he could recognize the Medical unit. Not that he had spent much time there. The Waiting Room was outfitted with any necessary equipment for the Leapee. In fact, Al could count on one hand the number of times he had landed in the infirmary. Usually, Sam had insisted. Now, with his friend gone, Al rarely found himself on the Medical floor.

Looking around, his eyes then rested on Beth's. For long minutes, Al was immobile, unwilling to trust his own faculties.

I'm magnafoozled from too much stress and Wild Turkey. That's it. Geez, at least the pink elephants are a lot prettier this time around. Usually, when I've been this bad, I see Sam's mug staring me in the face; not that he's a bad lookin' guy.

I never see her. If only she was real.

Tentatively, Al's hand reached out to touch Beth's shoulder. When his fingers did not pass through her, he flinched.

She was older but undeniably, it was Beth! It had worked! Somehow, she'd waited! Without further hesitation, Al pulled her to him, hiding his face in her shoulder as tears began to flow.

There were few things in his life he could be more grateful for. Vegas, Tina's back rubs, and the occasional tryst in the file room never filled the emptiness.

Finally trusting fate enough to let her go, Al took a good look at her face. "I've missed you so much," he choked out.

Beth stroked his cheek trying to still his tears. Apparently, she realized the effort was useless when she could not stop her own.

"I look a little different than you remember me," she managed to say.

Al shook his head. "You've never been more beautiful to me." His hand gently pushed the hair from her face.

Staring at the lines on his face, Beth became painfully aware that some of them were not there the day before.

"I know you don't remember everything I do," Beth whispered.

"I remember that I love you," he reminded her, his eyes misting over anew.

She was done with being brave. Beth needed him to hold her. She craved the strength of his embrace and its unvoiced promise that they would get through this predicament, like so many times before. Pulling him so close she could feel his heart beating, she buried her face in his neck.

After a few moments, the Observer gently guided Beth's face so that she met his eyes. Bending his head, he greeted her soft lips. The kiss, he had longed for all those years while caged in Vietnam, was even more poignant than he imagined. He became lost in her, never wanting it to end.

Verbena knocked and waited, not entering.

"Can I come in?" she asked in a hushed tone.

Reluctantly withdrawing from Beth, the admiral forced himself into reality. He would have to have a talk with Verbena one of these days about her sense of timing. At least, he would do so when his head cleared. Wiping his eyes, he spied Beth's wedding ring. It rested on her left hand the same way he had put it there over thirty five years ago. He took the hand between both of his.

"It's all right, Verbena. You can come in," the Observer diffidently prompted.

Gingerly, Verbena entered the room. She had never been made privy to the workings of the Calavicci marriage, despite her long friendship with Beth. With a sigh, the psychiatrist decided she would do best to tread lightly.

"Do you feel better now, Al? You passed out," Verbena began on a safe topic while sitting down.

"I'm okay. Thanks," Al waved off her concern.

However, his expression swiftly changed from mild embarrassment to fear.

"Verbena! Oh God..." Al lifted his hand to his forehead and shot up to pace nervously.

"What is it, Al?" Verbena inquired, sitting forward in her chair.

Beth watched him, obviously uncomprehending his sudden change in mood.

"What else? What else have I changed?" Al stopped pacing momentarily. His eyes implored Verbena to speak the truth and quickly.

"It's okay, really, Al," Verbena reached out to take his hand and tried to soothe him. "Ziggy says your whole career followed the same path. No one else's life was seriously disturbed by the change," the psychiatrist continued.

"But, what about Sam and the Project?" Al was not willing to be reassured just yet.

"It still happened, Al. The events leading up to your friendship with Sam are a little different. The end result is the same. Ziggy confirms it," Verbena replied confidently.

Relaxing a slight bit, Al felt Beth's hands slip around his shoulders, kneading the tight muscles there.

"Not to say, Al, that I shouldn't report you to the Committee for breaking one of our golden rules around here," Verbena attempted to reprimand him.

"You can't do that, Verbena. Sam needs me," he said with a cocky grin that seemed a little forced.

"Just don't let it happen again." A small smile worked at the sides of Verbena's mouth.

She had made her point. She would not overlook any further violations. That was part of the Project psychiatrist's job. Acquiescing, Al noted that Verbena Beeks did her job very well.

Apparently, however, Beth decided enough was enough.

"I'm going to take Al home now. You can reach us there if you need to, Verbena." Turning her attention back to him, Beth took Al's hand. "Do you want to go home?" she asked softly.

Al thought a moment and shifted his eyes to the floor.

"I've wanted to go home for over 25 years." His words escaped and for once, the Observer did not care who heard them.

* * *

Al noted the changes to the house he remembered living in alone. The fragrance of calla lilies pleurably assaulted his senses. Wandering, the Observer was drawn through the house as if beckoned by something unseen. He ended up in his--no, he corrected himself, *their*--bedroom.

Blue. Al shook his head, silently amused. The bedroom was now wallpapered in blue. Apparently, in this time-line, he'd finally given in to her, knowing blue was her favorite color.

Beth approached him from behind. Putting her arms around his shoulders, the nurse had thought Al would be more of a stranger. However, his essence was very much the same. He was harder, that much was true, and very wary. Not much different from the man who had come home twenty years ago determined to build a new life.

"What do you think? Do you like the house?" Beth mentally shivered as she recalled asking him that same question years ago.

"More than you know." Al's tone was distracted.

The Observer examined the room, drinking it in like a man lost in the desert without a canteen. The subtle touches, making the place home, were missing from almost every house he had lived in since leaving for Nam. In particular, Al never thought this house, mainly used as an office or a bachelor pad, could ever feel like a home. Now, somehow, thanks to Beth, it was.

Turning around to face her, Al watched Beth force a smile. This wasn't easy for her, he reflected. God, he wanted to hold her and love her. He ached just looking at her.

Sensing Al's change in mood, Beth pushed away her doubts and moved to embrace him. She could almost touch the loneliness that hung in the room like a black cloud.

After a moment, Al gently began kissing her. His actions belied his deepest emotions. For her sake, he was restraining himself, while making an

impassioned silent plea she would respond. He pulled back, looking into her eyes for acceptance. Beth's fingers began to work at his shirt in answer. Gratefully, Al allowed his desperate yearning to finally reach the surface as he kissed her more urgently. For a few long moments he forgot about time and space. There was only her.

A long ago lover had once accused him of waiting for Beth to materialize in the form of another available woman. He could not admit back then the emptiness he felt waking up with someone else. After a while, the former pilot stopped looking for a replacement. All he could derive from most other women was superficial physical pleasure. Deciding that was all he would anticipate, Al figured it would not hurt so much when his relationships yielded nothing more. Only now, Beth was here and nothing about this felt empty.

As he tenderly laid her down on the bed, Beth's hands stroked Al's bare back. He moved as though not by conscious thought, but by his desire alone. Feeling the warmth of her bare skin against him, he savored the feel of her as long as he possibly could until they brought their passion to its fullest expression.

Later, with Beth snuggled against him and sleeping contentedly, Al lay awake. Damn, if he had always felt compelled to be completely honest with this woman. Here he had gone ahead and made love to her before anything was settled. Looking over at her, Al mentally skewered himself.

My needs, my problems, my--everything. Maybe that's why she left me in the first place. Maybe she was better off if all I'm going to do is hop in the sack with her and not care about how she feels.

Reaching to brush the hair off of her cheek, Al felt like a criminal. He did not sleep much the rest of the night, finally dropping off around dawn. As Beth stirred, he was awakened only a few hours later.

"Hi hon. Did you sleep okay?" Beth asked dreamily, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. Al felt her snuggle closer, laying her arm across his chest. She traced circles on his skin and affectionately brushed his shoulder with her lips.

"Yes, fine," he replied with distraction.

When she moved on to his neck, Al felt his earlier anger with himself weaken to be replaced with another more primal emotion.

Taking her more firmly in his arms, he rolled her onto her back and caught her lips with his own. When the kiss ended, Al gazed down into her contented visage.

She was so willing to trust him. How could he take advantage of that?

His next kiss positioned itself on her forehead and reluctantly, he pulled away from her. Swinging his feet to the floor, he felt cool fingers travel down his spine.

"Oh, Al, why are you getting up?" Beth's disappointment rang in his ears.

"I'm getting cold," he lied, making his way over to his dresser.

In actuality, the wood floor under his bare feet had warmed with the beginnings of strong desert light.

"I'll warm you up," Beth responded, watching him intently.

Memories of the night before filled her awakening consciousness. He had been so intense in his lovemaking, something that Beth was no stranger to. Nonetheless, the gentleness that surrounded it to the point of pure reverence had touched her more deeply than the soft hands and tender kisses.

Puffing up her pillow and pulling the blankets more tightly around herself, Beth indulged in her early morning ritual of watching Al dress. She had always enjoyed witnessing his transformations from lover to admiral, Observer, or husband. He truly was a chameleon, able to shift in and out of personas effortlessly, and had become even more so with age. Curiously, though, she wondered why he was headed for her sweater drawer.

"What're you doing?" she asked before realization dawned.

Straightening up, Al pushed the drawer back into place and turned to face her. "I'm looking for something to wear."

If he did not look so odd, Beth might have giggled, given the humor in

the situation. However, his expression did not invite teasing of any sort. Perhaps, he was just tired, Beth speculated. She had grown used to his mood swings since Sam leaped.

"The other bureau, Al. You've got socks and underwear in the top drawer. Sweatpants and sport shirts in the others," she said easily, surprised to note how well adjusted she felt. Ignoring her little pangs of anxiety, when Al did not do what she expected, was actually becoming simpler. After all, even in the other time line, her husband was never what she would call "predictable".

Al padded over to the other bureau. Finding a pair of boxer shorts, he slipped into them and began examining the other drawers for a suitable pair of pants.

Beth pulled on her cotton robe and joined him. Greeting him with an affectionate hug, she could feel the tension in his shoulders. When Al's arms did not close around her, Beth slowly drew away, now worried.

Maybe she was adjusting too quickly. Maybe there were things here that could never be worked out. Maybe he didn't...

Beth tried to calm herself and moved away, depositing herself on their bed.

Perhaps sensing her concern, Al turned to look out at the New Mexico desert. The giant sliders which led to a their raised deck afforded a magnificent view of the coming dawn. However, he seemed to barely notice.

"I wouldn't blame you if you were mad as hell at me," he began quietly, roughly pulling on the sweatpants he had selected from the bureau.

Beth knew this was going to come up sooner or later. Later was a better possibility since she doubted either of them felt strong enough to pursue the subject. Nevertheless, after thirty five years of marriage, she knew when Al had dug his heels in. This was definitely looking like one of those occasions. Sighing, she decided that the light approach was always best.

"Just what, Al, am I supposed to hate you for? Did you notice how angry I was last night?"

Slowly, Al faced her. Leaning against the window sill, he buried his hands in his pockets.

"Beth, that was my first night home with you. I didn't talk to you. I just..." Al couldn't finish.

"There wasn't anything wrong with that, Al, unless you became a believer in celibacy in that other time line. I am your wife, you know."

Beth's cheeks were flushed. Al could not discern if she was a embarrassed, angry, or a little bit of both.

"No, no, I didn't do that. That's kind of--the problem," Al mumbled, scratching his stubbled chin. Damn it! Where were his cigars anyway?

Embarrassed, Al decided to switch tactics. He forced himself to meet her eyes. "How can you not be angry? I took that second tour. You didn't want me to. You spent the next six years alone," he argued.

"Al, is that what's bothering you? That's very old history," his wife countered.

"Well, not to me. You forget, I haven't seen you since then." He looked away.

"No, Al, I'm well aware of that fact," Beth stated, attempting to hide her impatience. When he started pacing like this and his gaze shifted everywhere, her husband was always skirting the point.

Her increased agitation began to fully dawn on Al. Hell, he didn't want her to feel like this. She'd been dealing with the situation without a complaint. Even last night, he wouldn't have blamed her if she didn't want him in her bed just yet. But no, she'd been wonderful and here he was upsetting her.

Still, if she was going to accept him with open arms, she better damn well know what she was getting. He never knew Beth to tolerate even his mild flirtations with other women very well. How was she going to rationalize his past life style?

"But, then, I kind of fell apart; the marriages, the drinking, the-- women." Al paused, waiting for her reaction.

He physically couldn't continue looking at her and found a few spots on the carpet to study.

Beth paused, then said softly, "Tell me about it." As much as she hated the idea of what was to come, Al was right. They were going to have to talk this out.

"I'm sure Verbena and Ziggy..." Al answered warily. He did not want to hash over the details. If only he did not desperately want to clear the air, it would be so much easier not to discuss it.

"I heard most of it, Al. I don't like it. I don't think any wife would but you weren't married to me then. It's not your fault," Beth replied gently.

"It's a hell of a thing to do to someone. Now, you've got twenty five years of a marriage that I don't know anything about; the way a marriage develops over time. That's all gone." Al's voice became thick with emotion.

"It's better than having spent those years with--what's his name?--Dirk Simon," Beth countered. "Besides, you came home and found I wasn't there. You didn't think that was 'a hell of a thing to do to someone'?"

"But, you didn't do that," Al reassured softly.

"But Al, I *would* have. How does that make you feel?" Beth had to know.

"I can't blame you for that, anymore. You were alone a long time," Al whispered hoarsely.

"But, you *did* blame me Al, didn't you?" Beth felt tears sting her eyes as the revelation struck her.

"*NO!*" Al slammed his hand on top of the bureau. "I blamed that *NOZZLE* for taking advantage of you."

Beth reached for his hand. Pulling him closer to her, she stared into his dark eyes.

"This is not going to be easy. Neither of us can be disappointed, angry, or any of the other things you're worried about. It was a different life. Someday, you're going to remember our's. Verbena says that you may have flashes of the other time line. We'll have to deal with that but, you can't blame me and I can't blame you," Beth conveyed brightly. Maybe Al would not notice just how forced her sunny facade was.

"You know it's not that simple," Al stated.

"I'm not going to let myself worry about comparisons, if that's what you mean," Beth replied instantly feisty. That was what he was referring to...wasn't it?

Al immediately understood.

"There were no comparisons. You were the reason why it didn't last with anyone." He squeezed her shoulders as if to implore her to believe him.

"Except Ruthie," Beth responded simply, waiting for his reaction.

The Observer drew in a deep breath and put his arms around her. Admittedly, it was a sore subject given the depth of how much he had cared for his third wife. Even now, he still had a hard time talking seriously about Ruthie. It was much easier to talk about the trivial things. Only, he *had* started this.

"Ruthie--Well, my second marriage to Eva was a disaster." A sad smile crossed his features.

Beth listened, determined to hear him out.

"I was still messed up from the war--on the rebound." He waved his hand descriptively. "It only lasted a couple of months, before Eva couldn't stand it anymore and she left. Then a few years later, after I had time to think about what went wrong, besides the fact that we weren't obviously meant for each other--I met Ruthie."

Al stopped but Beth motioned him to continue.

"Ruthie was never married but she lost a fiance in Vietnam--I guess you could say we had some common ground. Anyway, we were friends, mostly. She kind of mothered me--she also had this *huge* family." Al smiled at the memory.

"You know, aunts, uncles, parents, lots of nieces and nephews. I found out how much I really liked kids, there were so many of 'em--Anyway, I was just starting to learn how to be really married again..."

Beth felt his muscles tense up as he paused, a dejected expression

coming into his eyes.

"...when she got sick, Beth. She got sick and she was gone within the year."

"Did you love her?" Beth ventured, not sure that she wanted to hear the answer.

"I came as close to loving her as I could love anyone after you. I know I probably drove her crazy. I wasn't easy to be married to. She had a lot of patience and I needed someone like that--and now, it's hard for me to imagine that none of this ever happened."

Beth remained silent, knowing that Al needed to confess it all.

"Then, after I lost her, I climbed into a bottle and got married again too quickly, on a drunken night. I knew better, but I was so wasted I didn't care. So, I tried to make it work, but I was still drinking too much--and she was too. We split up and she actually sued me to get custody of our dog. Can you believe it? Anyway, the drinking got worse. I really bottomed out and then, Sam came along. He tried to help me dry out but it took longer to stop than I thought it would. By then, I had met Maxie. I guess I was lonely and I wrecked that marriage too. God, five marriages. I was able to walk away from the booze, completely, when he leaped. I felt like he needed me too much."

"Al, you're going to forget all of this and remember the life we've had," Beth said quietly, confidently, almost more to herself than to her husband.

"Beth, I don't want to hurt you and God knows, I want to remember that other life with you--but, there are some things I don't want to forget," Al admitted.

"Like Ruthie." Beth sounded resigned.

"I don't think I'm going to have any control over what I remember, honey --or what I'm going to be like when I'm done remembering--if you'll still..." Al wondered why he always made such a mess out of things.

"If I'd still love you for the man you are, right?" Beth finished for him.

"I just want to be honest. I don't want to con you...or try to impress you--or get you to just stay the night." He drew in a breath, "I just want to be married to you and be myself. I wanna do all the things for you and with you that I told myself I'd do, if we'd stayed together. I want to make it up to you, Beth."

Beth paused, collecting herself and then smiled ironically.

"And I thought I'd be the one making up to you," she sighed.

"Honey, you really don't get it do you?"

"No--No, I don't get it." Al stared at her with confusion.

"If what you just said is true than you're no different than the man I was married to a week ago. I love you and I respect you with all my heart, Al. You'll never have to worry about that. I always have. Nothing's changed."

Holding him, Beth recalled she had seen Al through some very hard times. Even in this time line, she was sure the new memories would be hurtful to him as well. He was an extremely complicated man. Life had dealt him some enormous blows. He was lucky to be alive. A man like that would have to have some rocky points. She accepted it long ago.

"I love you, Al. This is going to be very difficult. But, I've been living in the bizarre and exciting world of Al Calavicci much too long to want to miss a moment. We'll work it out." With a sly smile intended to lighten Al up, Beth added, "It could even be like a second honeymoon for a while."

"Oh yeah, what do the women's magazines call it?--'Having an affair with your husband'?" he asked, beguiled by Beth's grounded attitude.

"That's right, hon, and no guilt!" Beth chuckled. More seriously, she then continued, "...for either of us."

Some of the pain Al carried around for years then dissipated. In its place, just a memory or two. There was a sailboat and Beth, looking happy and vibrant. He was gleefully chiding his wife that the wind didn't carry a watch. But, that memory was not decades old. That happened only a few years

ago. It was the vacation they took just before the Accelerator...

* * *

A few days later, Al worked feverishly in his office. An emergency Senate funding hearing had been called. He needed an infallible strategy, which would kick the chair out from under Wietzman, landing him flat on his butt. The year before, the little weasel had almost cost them the Project. Faintly, he heard a knock on the door.

"Uh, yeah--C'mon in," Al growled, fully into his divide and conquer mode.

Tina entered or sort of bounced in. The Observer barely looked up too engrossed in his latest tactical design.

"Hi Al," she greeted in her little girl voice.

"Uh, Hi--Tina."

Al did not want to be rude. She always was so sensitive. How she had ever managed to deal with some of his less controllable moods was beyond him. However, if he rebuffed her now, she would probably pout or cry. God, he hated it when she cried. So, he resigned himself to half listening to her. He was gonna have to nail Bartlett's hide to wall too.

She was off on one of her long stories again. Damn, she's always doing that, Al reflected; there was that time she kept him up all night talking about her sister's engagement. If she could only just leave him alone to think about this funding thing.

"...I just wanted to make sure you didn't hear it anywhere else..." Tina continued.

"Hmmm?--What's that?" Al responded automatically. Maybe he could convince the Committee to have the hearing at the Project and...

"I'm two months pregnant," she said meekly.

"Oh, really, Tina, you're two months pregnant?" the admiral replied casually. Then, the voluptuous technician's statement finally struck home.

"YOU'RE TWO MONTHS PREGNANT!?"

Al felt the room spin as panic grabbed at him from all sides. He finally looked up at Tina, meeting her gaze for the first time. Her eyes were filled with tears.

"Oh Al!--I thought you'd be happy. I mean--I didn't know you'd take it this way." She fumbled for a tissue.

Al stared at her incredulously.

"How do you think I'd feel? I'm..." The Observer was going to say, "too old to be a new father." Only, Tina's tears were really flowing now. Feeling numb and more than a little disgusted with himself for his initial reaction, he backed down.

"Tina, we'll work it out--We'll..."

She's pregnant! Panic stabbed at him again.

"Tina, I thought you were--you told me--you were using--you know!" Al hung his head pathetically. *By the time he's a teenager, I'm gonna be asking him for rides to the movies!*

Tina sniffed and blew her nose.

"I know, Al. Gooshie and I were going to wait, but, it just happened."

He continued to stare at her. Slowly, he became aware that his mouth was open. She had said the words, hadn't she? He repeated them softly to himself and then, over again to confirm he had really heard them.

"Gooshie and I?" he whispered.

"But--Al, I just wanted to explain why I'd been taking so much time off. The morning sickness has been really bad and..."

Al stopped listening, feeling his heart beat once again. Reality dawned and the Observer became cognizant of just where, in time, he was. Taking a deep breath, he forced a smile. Damn swiss cheese anyway.

Tina looked confused.

"Congratulations, Tina. Poor Gooshie, I guess if we all thought he was nervous before..." Al used his most sincere voice.

There was a quick knock and Beth entered the office.

"Oh, I can come back?" Beth said politely, backing out the door. Al shot up from his chair firmly grounded in the present.

"No! No, Beth, don't leave. Stay!"

The Observer tried not to sound nervous, but that was impossible. How could he have gotten so confused? Geez, maybe he should go have that talk with Verbena after all.

"OK--Well--Bye, Al," Tina said staring at him like he had lost his mind as she turned to leave.

Al shook his head. *No Tina, I just temporarily misplaced it.*

Taking Tina's hand, he squeezed it. He sounded convincing even though he fought a tiny pang of jealousy. *Gooshie--I always thought he'd move in if something happened to me--That little...*

Looking at Beth, the Observer amended his thoughts. Well, at least, Tina ended up happy too.

"That's really nice, Tina. I hope--Well, I hope you feel better."

"Thanks, Al," she responded blandly and left.

"Is everything OK?" Beth inquired, noting her husband's pale expression. She had seen that look a great deal in the past few days, but not quite so pronounced.

Al looked into her eyes and felt himself relax. Just let it go, he told himself.

"Uh huh," he murmured, pulling her close, smelling her hair, feeling her embrace. "Everything will be fine, Beth," he whispered softly. Wherever and whenever Sam was, Al hoped it would not be long before he could tell his best friend the same thing in person.

* * *

Epilogue Over a period of weeks, Al's memories of the alternate time line fully returned, along with vivid recollections of his four young daughters, ranging from in age from twelve to twenty five. During the time frame of "AWOL", the three oldest daughters were away at school. Upon Dr. Beeks suggestion, the youngest daughter, Samantha, spent time visiting her grandmother. She returned to a very grateful father.

Author's Note: Given that Sam felt so guilty for not having saved Al's marriage in "Mirror Image", I am assuming that Sam might try to go back and accomplish this, if possible, during the "MIA" time line. Thus, the change would have occurred when Al asked Sam to make it, rather than years later after "Mirror Image".



SECURITY CLEARANCE

by

Pat Dunn/Diana Smith

Al pulled up in front of Jessica's house, wondering again at the odd message she'd left on his voice mail. She'd asked him to pick her up for dinner but not to make any plans.

Obviously the little imp was up to something, he decided, getting out of the car and walking up the front steps, carefully avoiding the tiny bicycle with training wheels, the skateboard and assortment of toys.

"Al!" squealed a small bundle of energy as it flung itself from the top step and into his arms. "Mommy has a suprise for you."

"Does she, munchkin?" Al asked the little girl, kissing her before carrying her into the house.

"Uh-huh. She says me and Adam can't go," Abby said, trying her pout.

Hmm, did that mean she was planning a night for just the two of them? Al wondered.

"Well, Mommy is the boss, you know."

"Abby, don't badger Al. I told you that you may stay up an extra hour tonight," Jessica chided, coming into the living room and taking her daughter from Al's arms. "You like Mrs. Kramer, remember?"

"Like Al better."

Al was weakening. "Jessie, maybe--"

"No," Jessica said firmly, setting Abby down. "I'm the boss, remember?"

Al looked as sheepish as the four-year-old, and Jessica shook her head. "Al Calavicci, you're as bad as the children. Abby, kiss Al goodnight."

"Good night? I just got here," Al protested, bending down for his kiss.

"And you're just leaving," Jessica said with a smile. "I have plans for you, Calavicci, and they don't include my children." She gave him a very Calavicci-leer.

Al blinked, taken aback by Jessica's boldness. He was usually the one pushing for more, the one making the lewd remarks. But unless he was mistaken, Jessica had just propositioned him. Well, well, did wonders never cease?

He decided to let Jessica lead, since she obviously had something in mind and he had to admit to a powerful curiosity about it. "Abby, I'll get you a new outfit for your Barbie, okay?"

"Don't bribe my children, Al."

"Hey, Abby and I have a deal, that's all," Al said in self-defense.

"You're a pushover, Al."

"Yep, I'm a sucker for big brown eyes," Al admitted, wagging his eyebrows at her.

"So am I. There's a box by the front door and a large bag," Jessica said, patting Abby on the head and sending her off. "Would you put those in your car? And no peeking, Al."

"Whatever you say, Honey," Al said, giving her his best salute. He found the box and bag, raised an eyebrow at the weight of the box as he hefted it. What did she have in mind, anyway?

"All loaded," he announced five minutes later. She joined him at the car, another bag slung over her shoulder. "Care to tell me where we're going?"

"Your place," she said, getting into the bright red sports car. "And step on it."

"Yes, Ma'am," Al said with a knowing grin. A nice quiet dinner for two sounded just the ticket, and just maybe he'd convince her to indulge in a little necking.

He didn't spend much time at his apartment in town, finding it easier to stay in his quarters at the project. "It's a little dusty," he apologized as he showed her in.

"It's fine," she said, sounding a little nervous. "While I get dinner

ready, I'd like for you to go get us a bottle of wine."

"I think I have something here that should--"

"Please, Al? Something special?"

"Your wish is my command," he said, kissing her hand and winking at her.

"I'll be right back."

"Give me a little time, okay?"

Al could hardly stand the suspense, but he agreed. He managed to take a good half-hour in selecting just the right wine and when he returned, his heart fell. The apartment was dark.

Had she lost her nerve and taken a cab home? Or had she gotten a call from home and something had happened? Only one way to find out, he decided, going into the darkened apartment.

Only it wasn't totally dark. There was a soft glow coming from the open bedroom door. And music was playing softly.

"Jessie?"

"In here, Al," came a sultry voice from the bedroom. Wine bottle clutched in his hand, Al approached the bedroom and froze in the doorway. She had transformed his cold, lonely bedroom into a fantasy chamber. Candles of all shapes and sizes covered every dresser top and window sill, the soft glow warm and inviting. A low table sat at the foot of the bed where a bucket of ice waited for the wine, along with a tray of cheese and a loaf of crusty french bread. A bowl of fruit completed the lay-out.

But the focal point was Jessica lying curled in the middle of the bed. She wore a black lace and satin negligee that made Al forget everything else. He stood in the doorway, drinking in the sight.

"It's all wrong, isn't it? I'm sorry, Al, I shouldn't have...I assumed...I'm so embarrassed," she said, sitting up and reaching for the bedcovers.

"Oh, Jessie," Al said, finally moving forward. "I don't deserve you." He sat on the side of the bed and reached for her. "You're making a special time even more special."

She buried her face against his shoulder. "When you didn't say anything, I thought--"

"I couldn't say anything, Honey," Al murmured, caressing her back. "You took my breath away."

Al could feel her body relax as relief flooded her. "We have the whole night--if you want it," she said, suddenly shy. "Mrs. Kramer is spending the night, and she has this number if there's an emergency."

"If I want it? I've wanted this from the first day I saw you," Al said, kissing her neck.

"I know I said you'd never have me to yourself because of the kids, but that's not right, Al. You should be a priority, not just an 'if-I-have-the-time'. I wanted you to know how much I've come to love you."

"Jessie, you have no idea how much I love you," he told her. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You'd find someone else," she said, one hand stroking his cheek. "After all, I'm not the first--"

"You are the first one I've loved this way," Al interrupted, wrapping his arms around her. "I told you right up front that there had been other women, but none as important to me as you are. Jessie Honey, I never thought I'd love anyone as much as I love you. I didn't believe I'd ever be allowed to have someone like you in my life."

"You're a good man, Al Calavicci, no matter what you've come to believe," Jessica said, now nose-to-nose with him. "And I don't want to hear about this Sam Beckett that you've nominated for sainthood. I don't want you comparing yourself to him anymore. Maybe he is as good a person as you say, but you have your own wonderful qualities. I don't love this perfect Sam Beckett, I love you with your imperfections and good points."

Al pressed his lower body against hers and nuzzled her neck.

"Albert," she said warningly. "We'll get to that, believe me, but we need to have this talk. I know I've been reluctant to take this step, and I don't want you to think I'm expecting a commitment from you. I know you don't



want that, and I'm not trying to manipulate you."

He raised an eyebrow at that. "Jessica, I know why you've been reluctant to do this, and I don't blame you for one minute. But as far as you trying to manipulate me by deviously allowing me to do this..." He kissed her lips lightly, murmured, "And this..." Al trailed a series of kisses down her throat to her collarbone, then paused and looked into her eyes. "Well, I'll certainly be on my guard against that!"

"Al, I'm serious," she said, looking hurt.

He sighed and looked away. "I know, Jessie. I didn't mean to make fun of you. It's just--" he stopped, gave a little hitch of his shoulders, then stood up to move around to the table and busied himself with putting the wine bottle into the ice bucket. "Jessie I was just a kid when I met Beth. I thought I knew all about love--true love--and how to make a marriage work. I found out later that I didn't know one damn thing about it."

He set two glasses side by side, busied himself with looking for the corkscrew so he wouldn't have to meet her eyes. "Getting a commitment from me isn't the problem, Jessie. I'm already committed to you, more than you know. But if you'd rather not get into a relationship with an old man--"

"You're not old, Al," Jessica said, coming up behind him.

"Old enough to know better," he said, turning around and looking down at her. "You know, I once told Sam that my one chance at love was with Beth, and I'd never find another one, no matter how long I searched." He smiled and grasped Jessica's hands. "I'll have to tell him I made a big mistake on that one... Because I think I've found my second chance, Jessie."

"When Glenn died, I thought I'd never love again," she said, her voice soft. "In fact, I didn't want to love anyone and I devoted all my energy to my children. I tried very hard not to fall in love with you, but my heart was stubborn. It knew a good thing when it saw it." Her smile was warm and Al couldn't resist kissing her.

"Then I'd say we're two lucky people," he said, touching her cheek. His hand entwined with one of hers, and Al tugged her towards the bed.

Jessica resisted, and he gave her a puzzled look. "I know this was my idea, Al, but there's something I must say."

"Still?" he asked with a little sigh.

She nodded, hanging her head, and Al became concerned.

"Jessie Honey?" Al touched his fingers under her chin and turned her face to his.

"Al, I know I'm not like the kind of women you usually--date," she began, catching her bottom lip between her teeth and looking very uncertain.

"That's what drew me to you," he interrupted.

"Maybe, but what I'm trying to say is that I've never...that Glenn was the only one," she said, and Al stared at her.

"You mean you've never," he jerked his head toward the bed, "with anyone but your late husband? But, Honey, he died five years ago!"

She nodded, chewing her bottom lip. "So you see, I don't know much about--that. And it's been a long time for me."

He cupped her face in both hands. "It's been a long time since I've really made love. Oh, yeah, there's been a lot of sex with lots of women, but it wasn't making love. This will be a first time for both of us--the first time you've been with someone besides Glenn, and the first time I've made love with my whole heart."

"Oh, Al," Jessica sighed, closing her eyes as he gently kissed her. Her arms wrapped around him and Al drew her close.

"Al?"

"Umm?"

"Are you going to leave your clothes on?"

He chuckled. "Interesting proposition, but I wasn't counting on it. Why don't you check and see if the wine's cold enough yet, while I go get--comfortable. Unless you want to help me?"

"Interesting proposition," she echoed, slipping from his arms. She slowly began to undo his buttons, let her hands slide inside his shirt.

Al inhaled deeply, his eyes half-closed. "You have a magic way with

buttons," he said, voice thick with desire.

"I'm doing all right?" she purred into his ear as she pushed his shirt off his shoulders.

"More than all right," he assured her, capturing her mouth with his. He heard the hiss of his zipper and then with one swift movement she jerked his trousers to the floor. She knelt at his feet, helping him step out of his pants. He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his shoes and socks, then reached for Jessica.

"Al..." she sighed, sinking into his embrace.

"There's still time for second thoughts," he cautioned, hoping she'd say what he wanted to hear.

"Are you having any?" she asked, nibbling on his neck. He managed a shake of his head, and she smiled. "Me neither. So--you want to make out or what?"

"Oh boy," Al said with a heartfelt sigh.

* * *

Several of the candles had burned out, but a few still cast flickering shadows. Jessica was curled up on her side and Al was curved around her, spoon fashion. He toyed with a curl, kissed her neck until she began to stir.

"Hi," he said softly when she turned her head.

"Hi," she said, smiling at him. Shifting around so she faced him, Jessica draped one arm around his neck. "We never did drink that wine."

"We didn't? I sure feel as if I've drunk bottles of that stuff," Al told her, nuzzling kisses along her throat and up to her lips.

"Drunk on my kisses, Al? How corny--and how sweet," she said with a soft laugh.

"That's me, the corny sweet Italian stallion," Al said, puffing up his chest. One hand cupped her bottom, moving her against him.

"Is it true you can lead an Italian stallion to wine but you can't make him drink it?" she asked, cuddling against him.

"What do you think?" he asked, forestalling any answer she might have made with a deep kiss.

"Umm," Jessica said when it was over, "I'm a little thirsty, though."

"You stay right there," Al said gallantly, "and I'll get us each a glass and some of those yumola munchies you set out." He kissed her again, then reached for his robe.

Jessica stretched, luxuriating in the feel of the satin bedsheets against her skin. She placed the pillow against the bed's headboard and sat up, watching as Al poured the now-chilled wine into the stemmed glasses she had brought.

"You really did think of everything, Jess," Al commented, popping a grape into his mouth. He picked up the platter of cheese and bread, took the wine glasses and returned to the bedside. "You're incredible, you know."

She took the tray while he slipped back into bed. "Not me," she denied with a blush which delighted Al. "I'm just the simple mother of four kids--nothing incredible in that."

Al handed her a glass, put one arm around her shoulders and drew her to his side. "You arranged all this, made sure the kids were taken care of, and made me happier than I've been in--well, since I can remember. That's pretty incredible to me, Honey. Why, you even remembered these little items," he said, picking up a small square packet from the nightstand.

Her blush deepened and she took a gulp of wine to hide her embarrassment. "I've never bought--those--before," she said in a low voice. "I hope I got the right kind--I never knew there was so much to choose from... I told the check-out girl they were for my son."

Al chuckled at the image, kissed her cheek and took a drink of wine. He considered telling her she'd gone to all that trouble for nothing, that he had an ample supply on hand, but he chose to keep silent. "Well, I think you got enough. Even I couldn't use a full dozen in one night," he teased, picking up a slice of cheese and holding it to her lips.

"The night's still young," she retorted, taking a bite of cheese.

"But I'm not."

"You're young where it counts," she protested, feeding him a grape.

"You make me feel young again, Jessie," he said seriously. He'd once told Sam he'd always be 16 in his heart but Jessica truly made him feel young and carefree.

Jessica deliberately tipped her glass and let the wine trickle on Al's chest. "Oh dear, I've spilled my wine," she said in mock seriousness. Al's eyes widened when she bent her head and began to lick the wine from his bare skin.

"Oh Jessie," he breathed, setting his glass on the nightstand and reaching for her. The phone rang, and he let his head rest against hers for a moment.

"It might be Mrs. Kramer," Jessica said worriedly. "Adam had complained of a stomachache but I thought he was just jealous."

Or Sam had leaped again. He knew Sam had no control over when or where he leaped, but he did have the most rotten timing. With a heavy sigh, Al reached for the phone.

"Calavicci here. What? Okay, Gooshie. Thanks. Yeah, I'll be right over." He hung up and met Jessica's worried gaze. "I'm sorry--I really hoped we'd have more time tonight..."

"If it hadn't been your Project, it would have been my kids," she said, smiling sadly and stroking his cheek. "It will always be that way, won't it, Al? I was wrong to think I could do this, that I could have someone like you in my life. I know your Project is top-secret, that it's important, but I can't help being jealous. At least I can share my children with you, and you can be a part of our lives. I can't share in yours. I guess we weren't meant to be--"

"No, I won't accept that," Al interrupted fiercely. "I just found you-- I'm not giving you up that easily. I've waited a lifetime for you...we can work it out, Honey."

"I've tried to understand, truly I have, Al. But how can I compete with your Project? It consumes you." Jessica slid from the bed and picked up her clothes, hugging them to her. "Don't worry about seeing me home--I'll call a cab."

"Jessie--"

"You promised you'd be right over, didn't you? You can't afford to take the time to drive me home, and I'd really rather you didn't anyway. I think it's best if we say good-bye here. I'll explain to the children that we decided not to see each other anymore." She ducked into the bathroom and closed the door.

Al stared at the door, then bounded over and tried the knob. Locked. "Jessie, don't do this to us," he pleaded, panic setting in. He couldn't-- wouldn't--lose her now. He'd searched his whole life for her. But he couldn't abandon Sam...if Jessie only knew Sam and how much he depended on Al, she'd understand. She had to understand.

Al made his decision, and when Jessica came out of the bathroom he was dressed and waiting for her. "Let's go," he said, taking her arms.

"Al, please," she sighed. Her eyes were red-rimmed and swollen from crying, and she was in no mood to argue with him. "I told you I'd call a cab," she protested as he tucked her into his car.

"Our evening's not over yet," he said, stepping on the gas. "I've decided it's time you saw just what I do, and why it's so important for me to jump every time I get that call. My best friend's life depends on me, Honey."

"But what about national security?"

Al glanced at her and smiled. "I trust you."

"Al--"

He patted her knee. "Sam trusts my judgment."

"Sam? Saint Sam?"

"More like an Eagle Scout, but yeah, that Sam," Al agreed with a grin.

"You'll like him. But I have to warn you, he's--well, he's not quite himself these days."

"He's ill? Al, I didn't know--I wouldn't have--I am sorry," Jessica stammered.

"Not ill, just not himself. You'll understand in time, Honey. I'll explain it at the Project. Just trust me, okay?"

"Okay," she said after a moment. Nothing Al had said so far made any sense, but she was willing to give him a chance to explain. He deserved that much, especially if he cared enough about their relationship to tell her about his top-secret job.

"Thanks," Al said, flashing her a smile before concentrating on his driving. At the Project Quantum Leap complex's entrance, he slipped his security pass into the gate and drove through when it opened.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Jessica asked as Al parked the car in front of an imposing building.

He turned to her and clasped her hand, his expression serious. "Jessie, if the only way I can keep from losing you is to do this, then I will. Don't worry, we'll get you a security clearance later. Come on, Honey."

"Maybe we should wait for the clearance," she said, hanging back. "I don't want you to get in trouble with your boss."

Al laughed at that, tugged on her hand. "Not much worry there, Honey. I am one of the bosses--this is Sam's and mine project. I'm in charge of security."

"Oh." Jessica let him lead her inside the building, looking curiously around as they hurried along the brightly-lit corridors. They saw very few people, but obviously someone had to be here to have called Al.

"First I want to show you the Waiting Room, so you can see Sam," Al explained. "And I need to get some information before I go to the Imaging Chamber."

Jessica shook her head at the strange-sounding rooms. 'Waiting Room' implied a hospital of some sort. Al led her to a blue-walled chamber containing what appeared to be an examining table, but lacking much else in the way of medical equipment. There was a man on the table and he was either sleeping or in a coma. The man was dressed in a shiny white jumpsuit, and not the hospital gown she'd half-expected.

"This is Sam--sort of," Al said, still not making it clear. "I mean, this is his body, but he isn't in it."

"Astral projection?" Jessica asked helpfully.

"Not quite, but Sam is out of body. You see, our project is about time travel and Sam's theory is that your life is like a piece of string. Tie the ends together and your life is a continuous loop. Ball up the string and the days of your life touch each other but out of sequence. We called it taking a 'Quantum Leap'. And we developed a machine that allowed Sam to do just that, only it went a little--ca-ca."

Jessica stared at the inert body, then turned to Al. "He's trapped?"

"That made sense? You don't think I'm nuts?" Al asked, surprised by her acceptance of his explanation.

"I'm a science fiction fan, Al. Of course it makes sense."

He blinked at that. "Science fiction? Oh, well, that's good...it'll make this easier to explain. You see, Sam stepped into the Accelerator before all the tests were finished, because--well, he had a good reason, or thought he did. Anyway, it leaped him back to 1956." Al took a deep breath and glanced at the bed. "We tried the retrieval program, but it didn't work."

"So he's still in the past?" Jessica asked, excited by the concept of time travel. "Really?!"

"Yeah," Al said, rubbing the back of his neck. "We're--not in control of the Project anymore. Someone--God, or Fate, or Time--keeps leaping Sam around. He jumps in and takes over someone's life. When he's made things better for them, or fixed whatever went wrong the first time, he leaps out again."

"Can't you bring him home?"

"We keep trying," Al told her. "When Sam's back in the past, he looks like the person he's replaced, and while they're here, they look like Sam. So that's what I mean when I say Sam's not himself."

"This is incredible," Jessica said, smiling at him. "It's terrific. But Al, how does Sam know what to do to impersonate all these people?"

"Uh, well, that's where I come in," Al said, with an apologetic shrug. "Come on, I'll show you the Imaging Chamber." He took her by the arm and started to lead her away from the Waiting Room. "Oh, Verbena--hi."

The tall, exotic black beauty made Jessica stop in her tracks. Al knew women like this--why did he bother with her? She could never compete with the sophistication this woman radiated.

"Admiral," Verbena greeted, looking at his companion. "A new employee?"

"Verbena, I didn't expect to run into anyone this time of night," Al said with a bluffing laugh.

"Sam has leaped--You know I always check in on the leapee," she reminded him, one elegant eyebrow raised as she studied Jessica.

"Oh, uh, Jessie, this is Dr. Verbena Beaks, the Project shrink, uh, psychiatrist," Al said, seeing that he wasn't going to escape. "Verbena, this is Jessica Randall. I'm, uh, showing her around."

"Showing her around? In a high-security, top-security, top-secret compound? Admiral Calavicci, if one of your subordinates pulled such a stunt, what would you do?"

"Court-martial the bastard?" Al suggested, pulling Jessica closer to her side. "But this isn't like that, Verbena. Jessica is--special."

"She must be, for you to break your own rules. I just hope you know what you're doing," Verbena said, extending her hand and a warm smile to Jessica. "Pleased to meet you. I believe you have a daughter? With a Barbie doll?"

Jessica looked puzzled as she shook the taller a woman's hand. "Why, yes, I do. How did you--oh, Al must have mentioned her?"

"You might say that," Al muttered. "Listen, Verbena, I've got to get down to the Imaging Chamber. Any word on where Sam's leaped this time?"

Verbena hesitated, then answered, "he's a cowboy in 1982, on the rodeo circuit in Wyoming."

"Oh, great," Al said, images of flailing hooves and tossing horns filling his mind. "Thanks, Doc. Come on, Jessie." He led her out of the room, pausing when she dragged him to a halt.

"Al, maybe I shouldn't be here. I really don't want to get you in trouble--"

"If there is any trouble, I can handle it, honey," Al assured her, touched by her concern. "I am in charge of the security here--in fact, with Sam gone, I'm in charge of the whole damned operation. Your security clearance is just a matter of paperwork; you're already cleared--personally, by me." A note of what Sam called his "admiral authority" crept into his voice.

"I...see."

"Honey, I appreciate your concern, but there's no need for it. I'm a big boy--remember?" he reminded her, wagging his eyebrows at her.

She choose to ignore his leer. "What's the Imaging Chamber?"

Al sighed, tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. "It's where I go to see Sam. Without going into a lot of technical jargon, I appear to him in the form of a hologram and then I can access Ziggy for him, give him information regarding his leap."

"A hologram? Like in Star Wars?"

"Yeah, like that." Al gave her a thoughtful look. "Wanna be one?"

"A hologram? How could I do that?"

"I'll take you with me. So long as I hold onto you, Sam will be able to see you and you can see Sam. And we rigged up an auditory link once before so he could hear a leapee. Yeah, that's what we'll do," Al decided, ignoring the fact that it would be a tremendous power drain. This was important and in his mind, that made it acceptable.

Gooshie was on duty, waiting at his station for Al. Ever since the Tina debacle, his relationship with the admiral had been strained although lately Al had begun to loosen up. Gooshie's pop-eyes widened even more with shock when the admiral brought in a strange woman, but he kept his comments to

himself.

"I'm going to check on Sam first, then I'll come back for you," Al was telling the woman. "You wait right here, Honey."

Jessica watched as Al picked up a brightly-colored box the size of a TV remote control, and walked up a short metal rampway. A door slid open and Al stepped through, paused and turned to wink at her as the door closed.

"You must be a pretty good friend of the admiral's," said the man Al had called Gooshie.

Jessica glanced at him, rubbed her arms. "Yes. Very good."

"Then why didn't the admiral introduce us?" asked a petulant, sultry voice.

Jessica looked around but saw no one except Gooshie.

"The Admiral did not clear your presence with me."

Gooshie cleared his throat. "I'm sure he meant to, Ziggy."

"Ziggy?" Jessica repeated, looking bewildered. Was the man a ventriloquist?

Gooshie jerked his thumb towards the glowing screen high on the wall behind him. "Ziggy's the computer--"

"Artificial intelligence," Ziggy corrected.

Wide-eyed, Jessica approached the computer. "Just like the Zen computer on Blake's 7," she said, awestricken.

"You and Sam will get along great," Gooshie moaned.

* * *

"Where have you been?!" Sam demanded, pulling off his red rubber nose. "I nearly got killed out there! And they expect me to do it again!"

"Calm down, Sam," Al said, waving his hand. "I'm here now. Nice outfit, by the way. Little flashy for my taste, but nice."

Sam looked down at his costume. He was attired in bright-red longjohns, over which he wore tight-fitting overalls cut off at the knees. Huge colored kerchiefs hung out of his pockets, and well-worn athletic shoes bore the evidence of the arena. Sweat streaked the grease paint on his face, and the grime on the seat of his overalls told Al Sam had already been hard at work. "Very funny. Al, that--that beast with the horns tried to gore me! I just barely got over the fence before he could succeed!"

"You're all right, though?" Al said, sounding concerned. He gave Sam the once-over, then began tapping the handlink keys.

Sam took a deep breath, exhaled. "Yeah, I guess so. But I'm supposed to go out there and do it again, and I'd really rather not..."

"Well, that's your job, Sam," Al said. "You're a rodeo clown named Red Bailey, and it's up to you to help distract the bulls and broncos from fallen riders, so they don't get hurt. It's very important work, Sam."

"I don't know how to do it," Sam objected. "Indiana isn't exactly rodeo country. Sure, we had the county fair but chasing greased pigs isn't quite the same as riding wild bulls. We didn't have rodeo clowns."

Al scratched his ear. "Well, maybe you can learn by watching him." He pointed at a clown with orange hair who was waving a red handkerchief at a bull. "That's Dusty O'Reilly, one of the best rodeo clowns around."

Sam leaned against the corral fence, his eyes on the action in the arena. "Why am I here, Al?"

The Observer consulted the handlink again. "According to Ziggy, it's the 1982 All-American Championship Rodeo Semi." He frowned and whacked the side of his hand against the link, producing a squeal. "Finals--oh, Semi-Finals. The cowboys who win here go on to the big Rodeo in Madison Square Garden. Hmm... Oh, here's something, Sam. A young cowboy, a bull rider named Kit Tyler, was killed today--trampled."

"Oh boy," Sam muttered. "And I'm supposed to save him?" "Ziggy says it's an 80% probability." Al looked at the arena, where the calf-roping competition had just begun. "Looks like you won't be needed for awhile, Sam. Let's go somewhere more private--I want to talk to you."

It was then that Sam noticed Al's edginess, and he led the Observer out

to a small dressing room. "How's this?"

"Fine," Al said, wiping his hand across his mouth in a gesture that Sam recognized as indicating he wanted to confess something and wasn't sure just how to do it.

"What's wrong?" Sam asked quietly, sitting on a stool before the mirror and checking his makeup.

"Wrong? Nothing's...you've got dirt on your face," Al said helpfully.

"Al."

Sometimes Al suspected Sam of being a mind reader. "You remember Jessica Randall?"

Sam frowned at his reflection, turned his head to look at Al. "Did I leap into her?"

"Nah, you were a cop assigned to her husband's suicide--"

"Only it turned out to be murder," Sam finished, picking up a pot of white makeup. "The murderer then tried to kill her."

"That's right," Al agreed, tucking the handlink in his jacket pocket.

"And she was a friend of yours," Sam continued, dabbing the makeup on to cover the smudges.

"Yeah," Al said, hand wiping across his chin. "She still is, Sam. A real good friend."

"Wife number 6?"

"Maybe."

Sam dropped the pot of makeup, whirled his head around to stare at Al. "You're serious!"

"Never more so."

"What about Tina? I thought you were serious about her!"

"I was--she wasn't. I caught her in bed with Gooshie," Al said with a shrug, looking at his feet.

"And you never told me?" It was obvious that Sam's feelings were hurt.

"I didn't want you to worry," Al apologized. "And then I met Jessie. I wasn't sure how to tell you about her, especially after I told you that Beth had been my only shot at true love and I'd never have another. But after you leaped in and helped her, I knew I'd have to tell you. Just as I've had to tell her about you and...the Project."

Sam silently regarded his friend. "What?" he asked at last.

"You heard me--and don't look at me that way! You remind me of Sister Mary Margaret, back at the orphanage... Sam, I had to tell her, Jessie, I mean. She didn't understand why I couldn't be with her and the kids more often, why I was at the Project at all hours..." Al was pacing now, hands waving. "Tonight was the first time we'd had love since I met her. And then I got the call that you'd leaped, and I tried to explain, only I botched it up..." He stopped, sighed. "She was going to leave me, Sam, and I couldn't let that happen! The only thing I could think of was to bring her here and let her meet you."

"Here? You've brought her here?" Sam demanded, looking around. "Are you nuts, Al? She can hear every word you say, even if she can't hear my side of the conversation--"

"She's not in the Imaging Chamber yet." Al glared at Sam. "How stupid do you think I am? I may not be a genius and have six doctorates, but I did graduate top of my class from M.I.T. I wanted to talk with you, my buddy, first. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about her sooner--Dad. This hasn't been easy for me, Sam. I mean, I finally meet a woman who means everything to me, and I couldn't even share that with my best friend. You'd have just thought it was another of my 'sleazy affairs' as you call 'em. When you leaped into that cop, I thought I was gonna lose her."

Sam nodded as he recalled that particular leap. It was hazy, as much of his memory was, but Al's behavior during that leap was unforgettable. The longing and the pain in his eyes whenever he'd looked at Jessica, his sudden disappearance, the way he'd hung around her and demanded that Sam help her...all explained now. "How long have you known her?"

"Three months, I guess," Al said with a careless shrug. "Well, actually this is our three month anniversary. Probably why she picked tonight."

"Three months? And you've waited that long to have sex? You want me to believe that Al Calavizzi, resident stud of the Project, hasn't had any for three months?" Sam shook his head in disbelief.

"Okay, I'll admit that at first I did pick up a couple of girls, but they weren't Jessica. After that, just being with her was better than empty sex. And she was worth waiting for, Sam."

Sam met his eyes, and smiled at what he saw there. "I sure hope so, Al. You deserved someone like that in your life."

Al ducked his head in embarrassment. "Thanks, Sam. I knew you'd understand."

"you'll get her a security pass, though, right?" Sam went on.

"Well, of course--"

"We don't want any trouble with the Committee."

"Now, now, we sure don't want that," Al agreed, rocking back on his heels.

Sam waited then finally said, "So when am I going to get to meet this wonderful woman? I mean, I know I already did meet her, sort of, but she doesn't know me by name--my name."

"Uh, yeah, I see what you mean," Al said. "I'll go get her--you stay put, Sam." He raised the handlink and punched a button, opening the Imaging Chamber door.

Sam watched him leave, then shook his head in amusement. He hoped Al knew what he was doing. The Observer didn't need any more heartbreak in his lifetime. He'd already had more than his fair share.

The sound of the Imaging Chamber door brought his head around and Sam watched as Al led forward a woman who he remembered as being Jessica Randall.

She was as unlike any of Al's women that Sam could remember seeing. He tended towards tall, leggy showgirl-types, the good-time girls. Jessica couldn't have been more than five-foot-two-or-three, and Sam couldn't help grinning as Al protectively tucked an arm around her when she stumbled slightly.

"Kick in the butt, ain't it?" Al asked cheerfully, gesturing with the handlink at the image before them.

Jessica blinked, gripped Al's hand as it rested on her shoulder. "It is a little unsettling," she said, looking around. "One minute we're in a stark metal chamber and the next instant we're here."

"Takes a little getting used to," Al told her.

"It all looks so real," she said, reaching out her free hand to touch a wall and gasping when her hand passed through it.

"Oh, uh, honey, this is Sam," Al said, noticing the physicist watching them. "Sort of."

Jessica studied the rodeo clown, then held out her hand. Grinning, Sam reached out and let his hand pass through hers.

"This is the best we can do, until I'm back home," Sam told her, wanting to sit down at the makeup table but manners preventing it.

"This is all so...so 'Star Trekish'," Jessica said, awe struck. "I can see why Al couldn't tell me about all this."

"And I can see why he has," Sam said, studying his friend as Al watched Jessica. "You need to understand what he does, why it's so important for him to be here when I need him. He's my anchor, Jessica."

"Aw, Sam--"

"Without Al, I wouldn't know who I am, what I'm supposed to do," Sam continued, ignoring Al's protest. "He's saved my life countless times."

"I can believe it," Jessica said, smiling lovingly at Al.

The Observer cleared his throat. "Yeah, well, never mind all that. I just wanted you two to meet and--"

"Red!" a man exclaimed, poking his head into the room after a perfunctory rap on the door. "Get your butt out there for the second half of the bull riding--now!"

"Yeah, okay," Sam said, feeling his stomach twist at the thought. But if all he had to do was save a rider's life, maybe the sooner he did it, the sooner he'd leap.

"Bull riding! But you're dressed like a clown," Jessica said, giving Sam a worried look. "That means you have to run interference between the bull and the rider, don't you? That's even more dangerous than riding!"

"He knows that, honey," Al said, giving Sam an apologetic smile. "That's why he's here, to save a cowboy's life. In the original history, Kit Tyler was gored to death when Sam here, uh, I mean Red, stumbled and failed to distract the bull."

And you expect Sam, a quantum physicist, to perform as a rodeo clown when a man who does that for a living couldn't do it?" Jessica asked, looking aghast. "He could be killed!"

"Now, Jessica--"

"It's all right, Al," Sam said. "I appreciate your concern, Jessica, but this isn't something we've got control over. If I want to leap out of here, I've got to try to do what Red was supposed to do." He shrugged and gave her a crooked smile. "I've been lucky so far." He went to the door.

"Go on, Sam," Al said. "We'll meet you at the arena." He touched the link, tightened his grasp on Jessica's hand and they vanished.

Sam heaved a sigh and headed out down the corridor to the rodeo arena, resigned to the task before him.

"Where have you been, boy?" asked Dusty O'Reilly, the veteran clown.

"You've got to learn to stop burning daylight!"

"He means to stop wasting time," Al put in, from his friend's elbow. Jessica looked at him curiously.

"Okay," Sam said, ducking his head.

"Let's go, Red," the older man said, vaulting over the fence. "Watch out for this first bull, Thunder. He's a mean sonofabitch with a nasty habit of hooking towards the left."

"Right," Sam muttered, hands on the top rail.

"Uh-oh, Sam, this is it," Al said, looking at the handlink. "Thunder is the bull that killed Tyler and Red."

"And Red?!"

"Oh, didn't I tell you that part?" Al asked with false innocence.

"No, you didn't," Sam hissed, glaring at the Observer.

"Well, Red saw the bull goring Tyler and he ran out to distract it, only he fell and the bull turned on him," Al said, looking apologetic.

"And you didn't think I needed to know that little bit of information?" Sam demanded, staring at the chute where a cowboy was setting on the back of a huge bull.

"You're gonna save Tyler, so it's not gonna happen that way."

"I hope you're right," Sam muttered, as he swung a leg over the fence and dropped down inside the arena.

"Al," Jessica said, "are you both out of your minds?!"

"Not now," Al answered rather absently, his gaze fixed on the chute as it opened to release the bull and its rider.

"Uh-oh," the Observer said. "Jessica, stay here!" He dropped her hand and walked through the fence into the arena.

As soon as she lost physical contact with Al, Jessica found herself standing in the blank Imaging Chamber, watching in bewilderment as Al began waving his arms and running around the room.

"What's happening?" Jessica cried.

"The bull has gone after Dr. Beckett, and the Admiral is distracting it," came Gooshie's disembodied voice from a hidden speaker.

"How do you know that?! I can't see the bull!"

"Ziggy is relaying the action to my monitor," the programmer replied. "Now the bull is charging the Admiral--"

"Al!"

"It's perfectly all right, Mrs. Randall," Gooshie continued. "The Admiral is a hologram and cannot be harmed. Dr. Beckett, however, can be killed. We're not certain what will happen if he dies on a leap-- he could leap back here, or die there..."

"He ain't dying!" Al shouted, waving his hands and bouncing on his toes.

"The announcer is going wild, trying to keep up with the action,"

Gooshie related. "Apparently the bull is charging at nothing, and is now heading for the gate."

"He's charging at Al, isn't he?" Jessica asked the ceiling.

"Yes. The bull can see the Admiral. All animals and small children can see and hear him while he's in holographic transmission," Gooshie informed her. "Something to do with their alpha waves--"

"He's in!" Al shouted, jumping up and down. "Sam's safe!"

Jessica ran to Al and threw her arms around his neck, and suddenly she was once again in the arena. The crowd was going wild, whistling and stamping their feet and calling for Red. Even though the bull had apparently gone berserk, the clown had nearly sacrificed himself for the rider and he had become an instant hero.

But to Jessica and Sam, Al Calavicci was also a hero. Sam knew that Al would have done the same thing even if he hadn't been a hologram and could have been hurt. If Al could, he would take Sam's place and the risks.

"Oh, Al," Jessica said, kissing him.

"I'm okay, Honey," Al said, arms around her. "I'm a hologram, remember? It couldn't have hurt me."

"But it could have killed your friend," Jessica said. "Al, I do understand why you have to answer the call. If you hadn't been here, Sam would have died, and it would have been my fault. I understand now."

Al hugged her and kissed her forehead then swung around as Ziggy's link beeped from his pocket. "Okay, Zig, hold your microchips," he muttered, fishing out the flashing device. "Gee, Sam, looks like you did it. Red's a hero, and goes on to be a terrific clown. Two years from now, Kit Tyler wins the big championship rodeo. Oh, but he gave up bull riding."

"Don't blame him," Sam said, smiling.

"Took up steer wrestling instead."

Sam's brows drew down over his eyes, then he shook his head and laughed. "Thanks, Al. Jessica, I'm glad we had a chance to meet. You look after him for me."

"I will," she promised, squeezing Al's hand. "Good luck, Sam."

He nodded and raised a hand in farewell, just as the tingling sensation of the next leap took him.

Jessica blinked as the Imaging Chamber reverted to its original appearance. "What happened?"

"Sam's leaped," Al told her. "It usually takes us a while to target on his next destination. Come on, Jessie--I could use a cup of coffee and a cigar." He escorted her to the entrance.

"Is that all you need?" Jessica asked softly, glancing at Gooshie who was shamelessly eavesdropping.

"You got a better offer?" Al asked lasciviously.

"Maybe," Jessica said noncommittally. "We never did finish our dinner, you know."

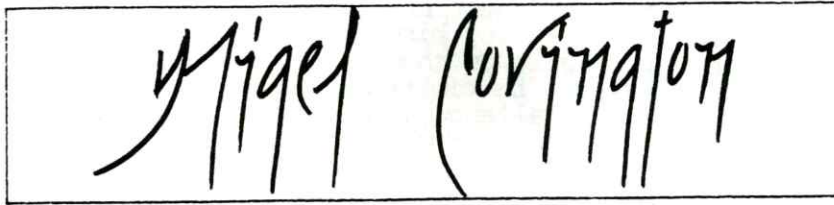
"Yeah, it seems to me we were rudely interrupted," Al said, tucking her hand in his. "But all that cheese is probably warm and yucky, and the bread dried out. And the wine... Well, I've got quarters here at the Project. Nicely stocked kitchen, reasonably comfy bed, and I can have my calls from the apartment forwarded here, in case someone tries to reach you."

"But I didn't bring my nightie."

"You won't need one," Al promised, leading her down the corridor to his private quarters.



THE WAITING ROOM

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature reads "Miguel Covington" in a cursive, slightly slanted script.

by

Sharon Wisdom

"Danger!" howled the cursed tides that roiled about him. Brilliant blue beams spun through the ebony flood like deadly blades of light. They whipped his darkness into a maelstrom out of control.

Danger!

Snarling, he rose to meet it, fangs bared and fully extended to battle an enemy made of light. He would not be vanquished so easily, tossed and driven by a foe he could not even touch. He would..

Abruptly as it had come, the force was gone and he found himself snarling into an empty room. It was devoid of any enemy he could see, and it was far, far too bright.

Hurt by the brightness, he spun, right arm coming up in an ancient, instinctive move. But, there was no comforting sweep of cape against his face. There was nothing to give him even a little respite from the harsh, burning light that filled this nearly barren space.

Confused, he spun again, head coming down still further in an effort to shield his eyes. This place had nothing about it of the comforting, gothic candlelight place where he had expected to awake. Where had the hateful blue light swept him?

Arm covering his eyes, he blinked hard, willing his eyes to adjust as best they could to the terrible brightness. Slowly, as the pain lessened, so did his confusion. He began to evaluate his condition with more logic, less ruled by the atavistic senses that had served him so well for so long.

His own beautifully formal clothes were gone. In their place, he wore a strange form-fitting garment of white made in a style he had never seen. Never, in any century, had he know mortals to wear such a thing.

The garment was ugly and restrictive, anonymous, and bland. In some ways, it was like the sort of thing chattels and servants may be dressed in to take away their sense of self. Chattel, he realized grimly, or servants, or those prepared to be sacrificed. The thought brought a half-snarl back to his lips. Cautiously, he lifted his head. Blinking, he sent quick, darting glances about the space. It was amazing, given the intensity of the light, that he could see at all but he found he could look about him with far less pain than he expected.

As he had glimpsed before, the room was brightly lit and devoid of mortals. It was nearly lacking in furniture as well. Before him was an curious, hard table on strangely tall legs. It looked like a work surface--or an alien altar.

So close upon his thoughts on the nondescript garment he wore, the idea brought his half formed snarl to completion. *Danger!* The old instinct still sang its warning within him, though its voice was now disturbingly muted.

Could it be that whelp Victor had more teeth than he had anticipated? Hissing slightly in his rage, he spun and began to pace the confines of the room. Sealed entrances gave it the feel of a prison as he tested them all with disturbingly sluggish senses. It felt almost as if something had invaded his very being, slowing and hampering him until he found himself constrained

by mere locked doors.

He was trapped.

The idea threatened to sweep away the rational portion of his mind that kept him in control. Grimly he fought not to give in to raging, restrained instincts that would have him beating himself against the terrible white walls if he did not maintain a firm grip on them.

Pacing the confined space, he tightened his grip on his rationality. In this age of twentieth century challenges, he had found the forces of his mind often were preferable over the more brutal methods he used in his fledgling days. Whatever had happened here, whatever was yet to happen, he could handle it. He felt certain of that with the confidence of a being that had been thwarted by nothing for over three hundred years.

Slowly, he began to feel more in control. He was trapped, imprisoned by a force he did not know. If that was the truth of it, so be it, he thought with grim, icy anger. Here he would wait until an enemy he could fight appeared.

His pacing stride lengthened, dangerous and fluid now rather than jerky with the edge of panic. In his mind, he imagined the drape and swirl of dark cloak about him and it soothed the rage in him still more.

Let Victor think him vanquished. Let him think him cowed in a serf's ugly garment of white. When the upstart showed his face, he would have his throat as he had planned all along. Nigel's thin lips hardened into an icy smile. With Victor dead at his feet, he would sacrifice Alexandra with his own hand and bring the woman Claudia over to darkness to be his wife.

It was not exactly as he had planned it. But, it would be satisfactory. Smiling, he felt the tiny prick of his fangs against his lower lip before they receded until he needed them. With the thought of the warmth of Victor's blood soon to come, he thought it would be most satisfactory indeed.

* * *

It seemed like there was a vampire pacing the Waiting Room.

Sheesh, Sam would laugh him right out of the Imaging Chamber if he told him. The whole thing was ridiculous.

Resolutely, Al did not break his stride down the short metal hallway to the multi-million dollar Chamber. Here was technology. Here was cutting edge physics and high level hardware. Here was a Project so cerebral that it soared over old superstitions rooted in human primal brains like Ziggy surpassed a cleric's abacus.

It was just that watching Nigel Covington snarl and pace in the Waiting Room had given him a bad case of the creeps. The guy looked almost animal, and yet far too cunning and dangerous to be only animal. He looked insane...or something.

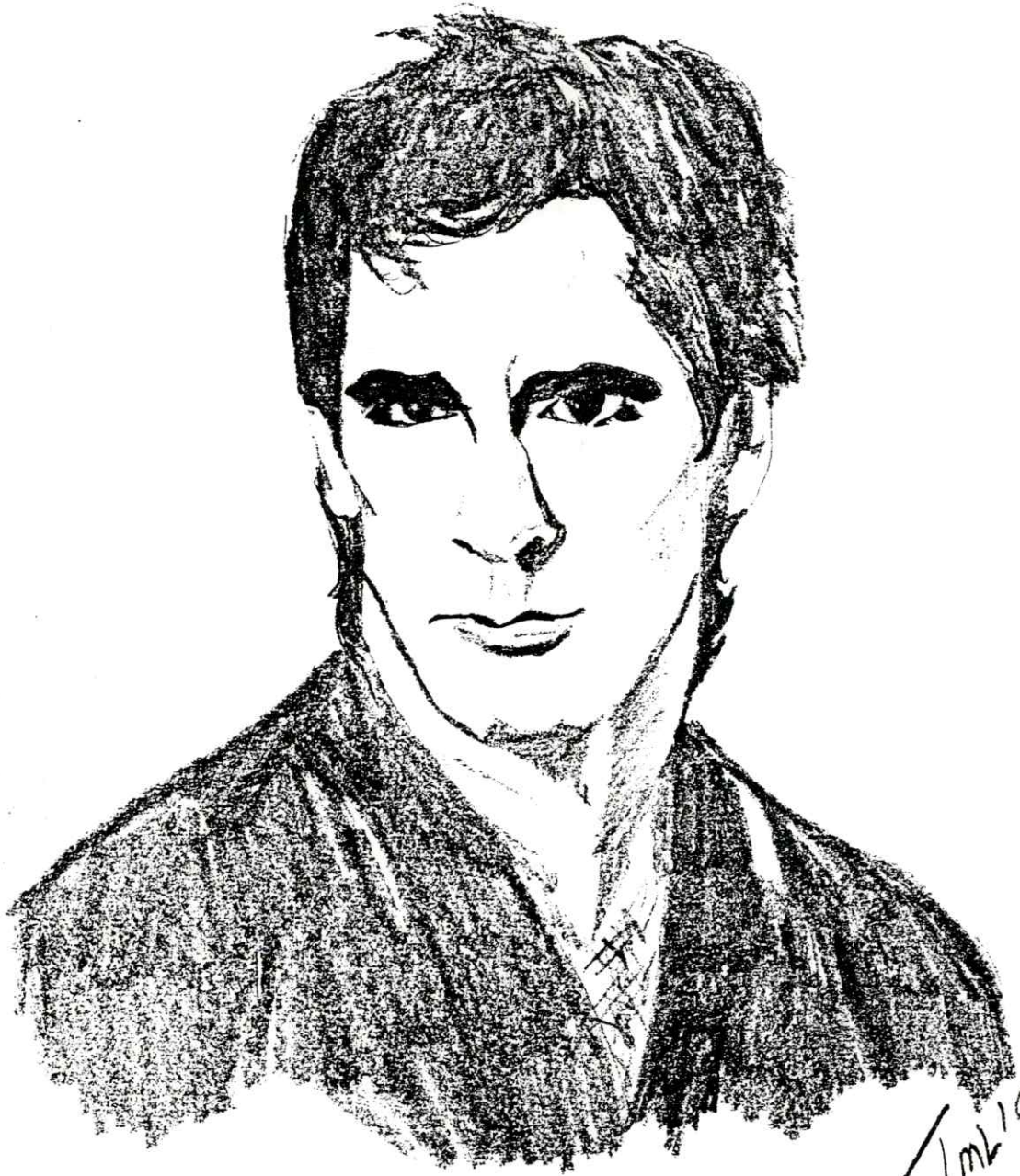
Before the Chamber door, Al pulled the handlink from his pocket. Okay, so, he hadn't talked to the guy yet. He would, soon. The guy was just some kind of nutcase that had managed to fool the rest of the world so his background check made him look harmless.

Nigel had to just be crazy. There was no way he could be what he looked like, no way. But...something deep in Al's heart refused to listen to the logic of his intellect.

The hair on the nape of his neck lifted and tingled with an unnamed sense of darkness and danger. He could not control his visceral reaction to what he had seen. A chill chased down his spine, triggering a shiver he could not deny.

Vampire. The whisper echoed in his mind like it had been spoken aloud and he could not deny that deep in his heart he believed. There was a vampire in the Waiting Room.

Sam was going to have a fit.



1/26/94

AN ORCHID FOR AL

by

Lorraine Anderson

"Oh, no, Sam." Al retreated from the mirror. "You can't make me."

Sam continued to point. The hand link blinked balefully...or so it seemed to Al. "You have to," Sam repeated. "Otherwise, you and Randy will die..." he smiled, "...and you won't leap. And you *know*, I can't try out the modified retrieval program unless you're already leaping."

"I know," Al almost whispered, then caught himself. "That's right, Sam, don't worry about *me*, just worry about saving a test subject."

Sam pointed again, grinning. "Made you think, didn't I? Besides, there are worse things than...*that*."

"You're sure."

"Positive."

True. He was right. How hard could this leap be? After all, he had been a POW in Vietnam, he had been through five marriages--there would be a sixth when he got back, if he had his way. After those living nightmares, how hard could this be? He concentrated on what Sam had already told him...the couple had died in a fiery car crash tonight. He had to keep the young man from getting drunk, which was probably the secondary cause of the pileup.

So, much as he hated it, it must be done if he were to save the two. Still, this leap hit where it hurt.

"Besides," Sam continued, "you already have the underwear on." He looked like he was trying hard not to smile.

Al looked down at the tiny bra draped around his chest and groaned. "I have never--ever--been into cross-dressing."

"This is not cross-dressing," Sam smiled and looked pointedly into the mirror. "And it's not that bad. Just a little uncomfortable."

"A lot uncomfortable." He flicked at a bra strap. "I remember the trouble you had."

"You do?" Sam looked uneasy.

"I haven't forgotten everything." He picked up the short red dress gingerly, then glared at the matching three inch heels. "I'll look sweet in this."

"No, Candy will look sweet in that."

"Sweet Candy?" Al raised his eyebrows.

Sam grimaced at his unintentional pun. "Sorry. What I meant is that everyone is going to see Candy, so you won't have to worry. Certainly, I know that I *will* enjoy seeing Candy..." He looked blank, then shook his head.

"Your neurons talking again. What I meant to say is that I'll be enjoying every minute of it." He looked blank again, then glared at Al.

"You don't have to blame my neurons all the time, you know."

"Much easier."

"I hate paybacks."

"So do I," Sam grinned. "On my end. But I have a long memory." He looked speculatively at Al. "I just wonder whether it's yours or mine."

A blonde teenager peeked into the room, then shrieked. For a startled moment, Al thought she saw *him*. He pulled the dress protectively in front of him.

The girl was looking at the dress. "Oh, Candy, it's lovely! Omigod, you're going to be the loveliest girl at the prom!"

"I...am?" Al stammered.

"Well, of course!" The teenager came into the room and led Al to a wall mirror. The glass was festooned with pictures of young men that Al couldn't readily identify--although he thought one might be the singer Donnie Osmond. Oddly enough, however, there was a picture of Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly in Sailor suits--autographed with their names, yet!--with a small boy between them. He latched onto that picture, avoiding looking into the mirror...he almost remembered that movie--of course he would've been very young at the

time..

"Al," Sam said. He looked down at the hand link. "This must be Candy's sis..." He looked frustrated, then gave it a whack. "...Candy's sister, Tammy." He looked at his hand, then at the hand link, then glowered at Al.

With a sigh, Al shifted his attention to the mirror. He saw two teenage girls with long blonde hair. So. He...Candy and this girl were sisters. He filed this information for future reference, then realized the girl expected an answer. "Yeah, I guess I'll look alright."

"Tammy," came an older female voice from downstairs. "It's time to set the table. Candy, are you ready? Randy will be here soon."

Tammy rolled her eyes at Al. "I wish I was going to the prom, too! 'Specially with Randy. He's cute." She sighed heavily, then exited the room.

"Coming, Mom."

"Candy?" the voice yelled.

"That's you...remember?" Sam pointed out.

"Oh." Al closed his eyes. "Almost ready...Mom." he yelled. He stared at the dress.

"Don't mess your makeup," Sam said.

"At least I know how to do that."

Sam looked at him blankly. "You do?"

"Tina...enjoys being made-up." He shrugged. "So did Ruthie...and Janet..."

"Al..."

Al slipped on the dress. "Where's the neck to this damn thing?--oh, here it is... But, Sam, I am not wearing makeup!" His head emerged from the neck of the dress, and he glared at the hologram.

"I wasn't kidding," Sam said quietly. "Candy was wearing makeup when you leapt in. You didn't notice?"

Al leaned forward and looked into the mirror. "Well, I'll be damned! I thought that kind of stuff leapt along with the leaper."

"Clothing doesn't. Rings don't. So it follows that something applied to the outside of the skin doesn't. Only one thing ever did, and only because of the lightning."

"The hand-link," Al said ruefully, struggling to close the zipper of the dress. He remembered that all too well. It was that lightning strike which had forced Sam and himself to switch places. Well, that was the past, and the present was hard enough. "Boy, I wish you could give a fellow a hand," he muttered, as he finally reached the top of the dress.

Sam applauded.

Al rolled his eyes. "You have an odd sense of humor."

Sam appeared to look inward. "Mostly yours."

"Oh, no, Sam. I distinctly remember you programming Ziggy to whisper me dirty jokes at one committee review..." He heard a doorbell.

"Candy," the girl's mom yelled. "Randy's here."

"Damn," Al said.

He heard the front door open, and Candy's mother exclaiming, "Well, now don't you look nice!"

Al grabbed the shoes, glared at them, then jammed them on his feet. They had a tendency to wobble, but he knew it wouldn't take long to get used to them. As a fighter pilot, he had a good sense of balance, and he hadn't lost that as he grew older.

"Walk like a lady," Sam said quietly. "Don't take big strides. I don't think Candy wears heels too often."

"How do you know?"

Sam looked a little embarrassed. "I peeked into the closet--mostly flats --so you won't have any trouble on *that* score."

"Thank God. And why were you looking in the closet?" Al combed his hair, marvelling at how the girl's long blonde hair in the mirror seemed to straighten out as well as his short hair.

He put the comb down and looked into the mirror. Candy was pretty, if a bit young. Made him wish he were years younger. He grabbed the earrings with a sigh--thankful he could find a nice pair of clip-ons in a drawer full of

pierced earrings--then snapped one on one earlobe, and winced at the slight pain and the unfamiliar pulling. Then he snapped the other one on.

"Beautiful," Sam said.

"Don't you have something better to do?"

"No, I mean it! Makes me wish I were years younger..." An odd look crossed his face.

"You're reading my mind again," Al said quietly.

"I think...I had better leave now," Sam groaned, "and find Dr. Beeks. Quick."

Al grinned. "Now you know how I felt." He picked up Candy's grip, then thought a moment and looked in it. As he thought...no ID. Locating Candy's purse, he picked out the driver's license and transferred it to the grip. Then, with a determined step, he exited the room and started down the stairs. He heard the Imaging Chamber door close behind him.

At the bottom of the stairs, his "mother" was talking with a dark-haired young man Al presumed was Randy. Randy and Candy. Sounded like some kinky game... He quickly suppressed the thought and swallowed the laugh that was threatening. He squeaked.

Randy looked up. "Hi, Candy." He blushed, looking down. Apparently noticing what he had in his hand, he looked up again and shoved an orchid box at Al.

"Hello, Randy," Al replied. He stared at the box. "I think you're supposed to...pin that on me?" He barely avoided making the last statement an order. Randy reminded him too much of the raw Naval recruits he had seen.

"Oh. Yeah." Randy gingerly fingered the box.

"Oooh," Candy's mom said. "I just have to get a picture!"

Al exhaled. "Must you...Mother?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "You just wait right there 'till I get my camera."

Al looked around. "Mom...where's Tammy?"

The woman was already disappearing. "She remembered that Joannie invited her over to supper tonight. She went over there."

Terrific. That meant he was alone with Randy, the hormonal King. He looked the kid up and down, then decided he didn't have to worry. The poor boy was more nervous than he was. He almost felt sorry for the kid. Perhaps he should teach him the ropes...now wait a minute! He looked down at the dress, and decided that idea wasn't so hot, after all. Still, he could help in some way.

God, he was a sucker.

But that was how he got involved in this in the first place.

The kid was struggling with the plastic box. At this rate, the orchid would be crushed. Al took it from Randy and gently applied pressure to one corner. The box flew open.

"Thanks, Candy," Randy blushed.

"No problem," Al said. He saw a flash. The Wonder Mother was back.

"Ok!" she said. "You can pin it on her now!"

Al wasn't looking forward to this. He was certain that he was going to be skewered. The boy moved forward and carefully drew the pin from the flower. Carefully looking at his hands, he placed one hand behind the fabric of the dress and started pinning it to the accompaniment to sudden flashes of light.

"Ouch," he said lowly, and Al sniffed. Oh, no. Not this. He had been drinking already? Was he going to have to play chaperon to a drunk?

Still, the kid didn't seem drunk. Maybe it was just something to buck his nerves up.

Right. And Al was a cross-eyed pilot.

He glanced at Candy's mother...which was a mistake. The flash burned into his eyes. "Ok," she said. "Back to the wall. I want to take another couple..."

"Dozen," Al whispered. Randy grinned.

"...pictures." The mother finished.

"Must you?" Al said.

"This only comes once in a lifetime, darling." The woman came over,

kissed Al's cheek, and backed the couple into the wall.

"Ouch," Randy said as the woman repositioned herself. Al looked at him. "Doorknob in the spine," he muttered.

Al grinned slowly. As much as he hated to admit it, this was getting funny.

She took pictures of the couple in various poses, and Al thanked the heavens that the Committee wouldn't be able to see this. Hell, he was glad Sam wasn't here.

"Oh, darn," the woman said, glancing down at the camera. "I'm out of film."

"Darn," Al smiled. "What a shame." He struggled to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. "Guess we had better go, then."

"You have a good time, darling." The mother walked over to hug Al. He was surprised, then chagrined, to see the tears in her eyes. The woman meant well.

"We will, Mom, we will," he said, kissing the woman's cheek.

"Bring her back safe."

"Of course," Randy said.

"I'll make sure of it," Al said. "See you later."

Well, he rather hoped he wouldn't see her later, but at least he would make sure Randy drove safely. If that was the problem. If it weren't something to do with the other car that he had no control over. He shivered, then walked determinedly out the door. If it were something he had no control over, then he wouldn't be here...would he?

God, self-doubt was horrible.

Must be some of Sam's neurons. Couldn't be any of his. He grinned.

They walked silently out to the car. Al noticed absently that it was a 1967 Mustang, a bit old for the mid-seventies. He reached for the door handle. Smoothly, Randy cut in front of him and opened the door. Well, at least the kid had manners. He smiled as he tried to settle into the car somewhat gracefully, then gave up and plopped himself down.

A three year old boy, walking down the sidewalk with his mother, giggled at him. "Look, Mommy, look at that funny man with the dress on!" The mother looked at Al, then looked at the kid and shrugged.

"Don't knock it until you've tried it, kid," Al muttered.

"Excuse me?" Randy said, sliding into the driver's seat.

"I'm looking forward to tonight," Al said brightly. Like hell he was. He was looking forward to blisters on his heels!

"Good," Randy said. "I hope we do."

Al glanced at him. "I hope we do...what?"

Randy blushed. "I mean, I hope we have a good time."

Sure, kid. Sure. Ain't no way this kid was going to get close to him.

"Going to...slow dance?" Sam said. Al lurched forward, then glared into the back seat. Sam had an innocent face on. "Gee, did I startle you? Sorry."

Al rolled his eyes. Sure, you're sorry. And the Pope wears camouflage cassocks.

"Really! And face forward. Randy's looking at you."

Al cleared his throat. "Sorry. Thought I saw somebody I knew...um... who do you suppose will be at the dance?"

"Smooth maneuver," Sam said. "I think...anyway, Ziggy's come up with a new wrinkle. Now there's three bodies found in the car."

Al draped his arm behind Randy's head and held up three fingers.

"Three," Sam confirmed. "Randy, Candy, and...Tammy."

Al looked over at Randy, his eyes looking back at Sam. He held his palm up.

"I don't know how she gets in the car, either."

Al thumbed at the trunk. "I don't think so...but I'll look." Sam's head disappeared through the back seat, then reappeared. "No, it's dark in there, and the trunk seems to be closed. If she were back there, she wouldn't have closed the trunk...I hope." Sam punched the hand link. "No, she was found in the back seat."

Al suddenly realized that Randy had asked him a question. Sam grinned.

"He asked you about trigonometry homework. Whether you had gotten it done."

Sam and his five-track mind. Or something. Al seemed to remember Sam concentrating so hard that he practically had to get a crowbar to get him away from the computer.

"I don't think so," Al fudged.

"You don't think so?" Randy said.

"Well," Al said. "You know trig. This chapter was rather hard. I'm not sure whether I got the answers right."

"Yeah, don't I know it!" Randy laughed. He seemed relaxed for the first time that evening.

"Maybe we should study together."

"Yeah." Randy looked startled. "You mean it?"

"You seem surprised."

"Um...no. I'd like that. I need all the help I can get."

They drove a few miles, Al talking about school in general terms, then Randy turned the wheel. "We're here. I'll let you off at the sidewalk and park the car."

Al looked up at a massive brick building and shivered. Sure looked like a high school...grim and foreboding. He was always rather glad he missed most of it...in spite of the fact he had to make up so much of it later to get into flight training.

Randy stopped the car at the curb and practically ran around the car to open Al's door. "Really, Randy, that's not necessary," Al objected.

"My pleasure."

Sam snickered in the back seat as Randy extended his arm. Al took it as gracefully as he could and climbed out of the car. He had to admit, with the heels on, he needed all the help he could get.

Randy got back into the car and pulled away. Sam appeared beside Al.

"Why don't you do something useful?"

"I am," Sam grinned. "I'm being amused." His face sobered. "Frankly, I was thinking of doing some spying around the gym. Maybe I can find some clues as to why Randy got so drunk."

"Alcohol will do it."

"Randy doesn't seem drunk."

"You didn't smell his breath...but you're right." Al looked at the approaching teenager. "Maybe it's something else."

Randy came up to Al. "Did you say something?"

Al stared at the teenager, point blank. "Have you been drinking?"

Randy blushed. "My dad gave me a sip of his scotch before I left. He said I looked pale." He looked at Al. "I don't drink. I don't want to drink, after Bobby's parents..." He gulped. "Bobby was my best friend."

"Bobby?" Al pressed.

"You remember Bobby Jameson, don't you? His parents had been drinking and drove into a train?"

Al chewed his lip. Oh, God. That reminded him of a couple of near misses he had been in. "Yeah, I remember," he said thoughtfully.

"I'll go to the gym," Sam said, looking thoughtfully at Randy. "There must be some other explanation."

"Yeah," Al said. He looked at Randy. "Well, are we going in?" *Let's get the inevitable over with.*

Randy smiled. "Let's make our entrance."

Lovely way of putting it. Al hoped he wouldn't trip.

* * *

"Oh, God," Al moaned.

"Yeah, it is kinda nice, isn't it?" Randy said admiringly.

Sure, Al thought, if you liked neo-Southern ante-bellum, with a cardboard grand entrance and painted paper walls. Tony Orlando and Dawn ended singing "Knock Three Times" and the Carpenter's "We've only Just Begun" was cued up. Hopefully, that wasn't going to be the theme of the evening.

"Care for some punch?" Randy whispered.

Al needed something. He had liked disco, but that period just before it... he needed some sort of bracer. "Yes. Please."

"I'll get it." Randy wandered over to the punch and cake table, at the other end of the gym.

"Hi, Candy," a girl said. She looked Al up and down. "I like your dress. Where did you get it?"

"I don't know," Al said. The girl looked confused. "I mean, my mother got it for me. It was a surprise."

"Gee, your mother has good taste. My mother wanted me to wear the ugliest thing!" She started to go on, but a young man came up to the two.

"Hi, Jimmy," she drawled. "Where's your slut?"

Al whistled to himself and raised his eyebrows. Strong terms.

Jim glared at the girl, then gave Al the slow once-over. Al shivered involuntarily. He didn't like the looks of this one. Physically, he was alright, Al supposed, if one liked thick-necked football players. However, he didn't like the look of possessiveness that the young man gave him.

Jim noticed his shiver, and a slow smile crawled onto his broad face. "So," he said. "You do still feel something for me. When are you going to dump that creep you came with?" He reached a hand towards Al.

Al danced backwards. "Certainly I feel something for you... I believe utter disgust covers it, you nozzle."

Jim put a hand over his heart and rolled his eyes. "I'm struck!" He looked at her. "You know you still love me." He lunged forward and grabbed Al's arm.

Al grabbed the boy's little finger and bent it back. "Up your..."

"Al!" Sam said, appearing beside him.

"...nose with a rubber hose," Al said innocently, while Jim slowly turned pale and loosened his grip.

He rubbed his hand, staring at Al. "Come on, Candy. Don't be like this. You know I love you. Susie just...caught me in a weak moment, that's all."

Al took the girl's arm, who had been quietly gaping at Al, and started walking away. "Do you hear something?"

The young woman grinned. "Not a thing, Candy. Not a thing."

Sam looked at Jim. "I don't trust this guy, Al. I think I had better tail him."

Al nodded.

They met Randy coming back as they strolled away. "Sorry I took so long. The guys were talking basketball, and, well..."

"That's ok," Al grabbed the punch out of Randy's hand and took a sip. So far, so good. The punch didn't seem to be spiked. He knew that the dance was supposed to be chaperoned...but he didn't really trust the chaperons that far. He turned back to Randy. "You didn't miss anything. Just girl talk."

The young woman choked.

"You alright, Treece?" Randy asked.

"I'm ok, Randy." Treece...short for Theresa, Al supposed...looked around. "Have you seen Bill lately?"

Randy smiled ruefully. "Over by the punch table. Want me to grab him for you?"

"No, that's alright," Treece grinned. "I'll get him. He's gotta dance with me sometime tonight."

Al paled. Damn it, he's going to have to dance with Randy. Well, there could be worse things, he supposed. But Sam was never going to let him forget it, and neither was anyone else back at the Project. Thank God it was a top secret project.

He shook his head. He was getting carried away. He'd just pretend he was...instructing the boy to dance. Yeah, that was it. Somehow, it didn't help. His homophobia ran too deep. He knew that, but he couldn't help himself.

"Candy?"

Al looked at Randy. "Sorry, just thinking about something else. Did you want to dance?"

Actually, it wasn't too bad, when they finally got to the dance floor. He always had enjoyed dancing. The high heels didn't bother him a bit. Still, he begged out of the slow dances. He even smiled as they went through the Grand March, then had their picture taken. After all, he reasoned, he had to smile. Poor Candy wasn't going to have any memory of this prom...she may as well have the pictures.

He sat on the bleachers, looking over the young crowd. Sam appeared beside him. "How's it going?"

Al put a scowl on his face. "I've had better times."

"I saw you grinning. You were enjoying yourself, weren't you?"

Al smiled slowly. "After a fashion. I just had to remember not to do those deep splits that used to drive the women wild." He frowned down at the dress. "Why, I remember when I was in a nightclub...just about in this now, as a matter of fact..."

Sam sighed.

"Ok, I'll skip the story. How's your boy?"

Sam looked apologetic. "Actually, I'm not sure. I had to slip out of the Imaging Chamber a second."

Al felt alarmed. "Anything wrong?"

Sam cleared his throat. "Call of nature." He punched the hand link.

"I'll check on Jim now." He disappeared.

...and reappeared. "You have to get to the men's room, now! A bunch of kids are forcing vodka down Randy!"

Al swore to himself, then jumped up. "Where?"

Sam pointed.

Al ran across the dance floor, oblivious to the stares in his wake. He rushed out into the high school hall, located the men's room door, and slammed it open. Sam was right. Randy was struggling in the middle of a group of five young men...four were holding him, and Jim was pouring the vodka into Randy's mouth, while holding it open. "That'll teach you to steal my girl," he muttered.

Al cleared his throat.

"Hey," one of the guys said, looking up. "You can't come in here. This is the men's room."

Al kicked Jim's arm, and the bottle shattered on the floor. Randy spat out what was in his mouth. "Wrong. This is the little boy's room. There are no men here." Unconsciously, he had slipped into "Admiral" mode. "It's very obvious what you're doing here. Let him go." They looked at him. "Now!"

Two of the young men let go, then Jim grabbed Al's arms and turned him. "Make us."

Sam appeared. "I think I went to school with this kid. Guess bullies are the same all over."

Al barely gave Sam a glance. "You'll regret it."

"I doubt it," the young man grinned.

Al smiled. "Sorry." Suddenly, Al's knee went upwards, and Jim dropped, clutching himself. Al whirled, threw a punch at one young man, then knocked the other one backwards with a foot. They looked up at Al, wide-eyed.

"Good job, Al!" Sam cheered. "My neurons are paying off for you."

Randy looked embarrassed...to be shown up by a girl, Al supposed. "I'm sorry, Randy," Al said. "I couldn't figure out what else to do."

Randy smiled. "Hey. No problem. I like tough girls."

Applause came from the door. An older man stood there, grinning from ear to ear. "Mr. Fuller," Jim groaned from the floor.

"Mr. Houston," the man looked down. "I saw just enough. You...all of you...are in deep trouble. I will personally call your parents to pick you up." He turned to Al. "I'm glad I followed you. I was curious to see where you were going to in such a hurry. Where ever you learned that, keep it up. Women need to know self-defense nowadays."

"Thanks for getting us in trouble with the principal," Jim muttered.

"You got yourself in trouble, this time," Al said.

Another chaperon came to the door. "John!" Mr. Fuller said. "I need you to help me to escort a few young men to my office."

"What in the world..." the other man looked questioning at Mr. Fuller. Mr. Fuller grinned at Al. "I'll tell you later." He glanced sharply at Randy. "Perhaps you two had better call it a night, too. I'll call Randy's parents to tell them what happened, so you won't get in trouble."

Al sighed and looked at Randy. He was beginning to look a little woozy. "Thanks. And I'll drive." Fortunately, he remembered that he had dropped Candy's license in the little grip.

"I can drive!" Randy protested.

"Not for much longer," Al said sharply, then his voice softened. "Look, I know it's Prom night, but we'll be safer if I drive. Ok?"

"Well..."

"She will drive," Mr. Fuller said definitively. "No macho man heroics."

"I guess you'll drive. Dad can drive you home." He still didn't look happy.

* * *

Randy sat back in the weeds, hard. He still looked green. "Sorry, Candy."

"Poor kid," Sam said. "I remember the first time I experimented." His face turned blank. "Was that me or you?"

Al smiled ruefully at Sam. "I guess I should have insisted that we stay at school until it hit bottom. You think you'll be ok now?"

The young man closed his eyes. "The world's still spinning. I thought this stuff was s'posed to make you feel good!"

Al shook his head. "Not necessarily. Alcohol is a depressant. Usually it makes you feel nothing."

"You talk like you know."

"I've...studied it. In school." Well, it wasn't an entire lie. He *did* drink in flight school.

Randy opened his eyes and looked at Al, puzzled. "M'be there's something else in that bottle. You kinda look like a guy, if I close one eye. In fact, you look kinda like that astronaut...um...Cala...um..." He pointed at Sam. "And I can see through him."

Al looked at Sam, raised his eyebrows, then back at Randy.

"Hallucinogens. I wouldn't put it past them," he sighed dramatically. "You should be all right in the morning. Just don't believe everything you see and hear tonight." He turned to Sam. "Right?"

Sam blinked. "Right. I'm just a hallucination. Don't pay any attention to me."

Randy had his head down again. "Ok."

Al turned to Sam. "What've you got?"

"What have I?... Oh." Sam punched the hand link, then looked up.

"There's no change."

"What?"

"And here comes trouble."

"Huh?" Al turned around to where Sam was pointing. "Oh, damn."

"Candy, Randy...what are you doing here?" Tammy said, walking down the side of the street. "I thought you were at the prom." She looked down at Randy, curiously.

"Excuse me," he mumbled. "Had a little...accident."

"Jim Houston and his friends...poured at least half a bottle of vodka down Randy."

"Because of you."

"Because of me."

"I told you you never should've went out with that jerk in the first place!"

"Yeah, well...what are you doing here?"

"Joannie is Jim's sister...remember? I got sent home, because they had to..." She looked at Randy. "Oh. Yeah. They had to pick Jim up at the prom."

"Why didn't they take you home?"
"Well, they offered, but it was only a mile, and they were too upset to insist. And Joannie can't drive either. So I said I'd walk."

"Well...ok."
Al looked at Sam, who shrugged. "It seems like you're going to get in an accident tonight, regardless. Waiting around here isn't going to stop it."
Al sighed. "Well, we still have to take Randy home. He's in no condition to drive or to walk."

"Amen," Randy mumbled, and looked around. "We're 'bout home, anyway."
"Grab one side, huh?" Al took hold of Randy's right arm and Tammy took hold of the left. Together, they managed to lead him to the car. He laid down in the back seat.

"Tammy," Al said. "Why don't you sit back there with him and make sure he's all right? Randy, sit up and put on your seat belt."

"Why?" Randy mumbled.

"It's safer. Ok?"

Randy gulped and sat up, looking green. "Here," Tammy said, sliding in beside him. "Lay your head on my shoulder."

"Alrigh'." He buckled his belt, smiled at Tammy, then closed his eyes and leaned on her.

Sam positioned on the front seat, keeping an eye on the hand link. "Do me a favor. Drive very slow. I want to see what it does for the averages."
Al inclined his head, started the car, then crept away from the curb. "Yeah. That's it. The averages are going way up. Try going extremely slow."

Tammy looked puzzled. "Why are you going so slow? That's not like you."

"I...um...think there's something wrong with the car." Al concentrated on the car. Come to think of it...

He hit a pothole and knocked his head on the side window. Tammy squeaked. Automatically, Al hit the brakes...which went all the way down to the floor. He pumped the brakes. No response. He glanced at the stop sign coming up, then steered for the sign of the road, putting on the emergency brake. The car bumped into the sign, then stopped, just as a truck roared down the cross street. Al saw Tammy's mouth drop open in the rear-view mirror.

"What's goin' on?" came a weary voice from the back seat.

"Kid...this just ain't your evening. The brakes just went out." He felt the side of his head. "Ouch."

Randy sat up, alarmed. "What?!" He laid back, holding his head. "Oh, damn."

Tammy was staring at the cross street. "We could've...?"

"That's right," Al said wearily. "We could've."

"You did it," Sam crowed. "Candy becomes an actress in New York...and, um... Well, I guess Randy and Tammy's future is still in flux, but they're still alive." He looked at the two, puzzled.

Al shrugged. "Well, anyway," Sam said. "I'll get back to the console so I can try the retrieval program. You can leap any time." He stood up, walked out of the car, and opened the Imaging Chamber door.

Right, Al thought, watching Sam. As if he had any control over leaping.

A woman was running down the lawn and ran through Sam. He grinned at the woman bemusedly, then went through the Imaging Chamber door, which closed behind him. "Are you all right?" the woman said.

"Hi, Mrs. Henderson," Tammy said.

"Yeah, Mrs. Henderson," Al said, looking at Tammy. "We're ok. The brakes went out. Better call the police."

She nodded back at her house. "My husband's doing that. You better get in the house. It's getting cold out here. And you aren't dressed for the weather."

Al looked down. He had forgotten he was still wearing that short red dress...and his legs were freezing. He blushed. "Thanks." When was he going to leap?

"So why haven't I leapt?" Al paced back and forth in Candy's room. He had put on Candy's pajamas. At least they were slacks.

Sam sighed. "How should I know?"

"You have the hand link." Al looked at the picture of the sailors at the side of the mirror. For some strange reason the kid looked kinda familiar.

"But Ziggy's not coming up with anything," Sam said, pounding on the hand link absentmindedly, and Al grinned.

"Candy?" A voice came from the door, and both men jumped.

"Yeah. Tammy?" Al said, when he got his voice back.

"Um...I hate to ask this, Randy being your prom date and all...but would you mind if I went out on a date with him?"

"Randy?" Al puzzled. "No, I guess I don't mind. He's not really my type."

Tammy smiled radiantly. "Thanks, Candy." She hugged Al, then left.

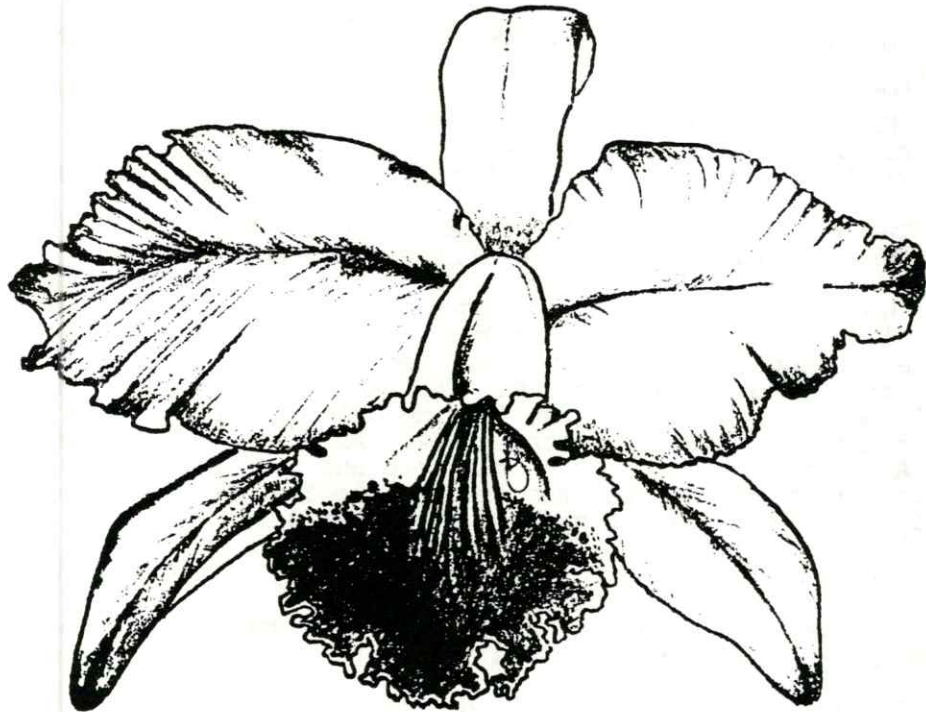
The hand link beeped. "That was it, Al! Now, Randy marries Tammy, and they have three kids."

"That's all I had to say?" Al felt a funny tingling. "Uh-oh. I'm going to leap."

Sam opened the Imaging Chamber door, then paused to look back. "I'm going to miss those legs." He blinked, then quickly went through the door, muttering, "Gotta get that retrieval program working."

"And no more cracks about my legs!" Al yelled after him. "God, I hope I'm a big fat sumo wrestler next time," he muttered. Then he groaned as he leapt, hoping that thought wouldn't come true.

But it did.





CIRCLES

by

Jane Mailander

Author's Note: This story is a coda to "Last Leap," which appeared in OH BOY III.

Dr. Samuel Beckett was going home. After years of uncontrolled leaps through time and space in his haywire Quantum Leap experiment, guided by God, time or fate to set right what had once gone wrong through his own lifetime, he was now flying back to Elk Ridge, Indiana, this time to stay. As always, Admiral Albert Calavicci, the Project Observer on Quantum Leap, Dr. Beckett's only link to his own time during his leaps, and Sam's closest friend, went with him. Donna, Gooshie, Dr. Beeks and the majority of the Project staff were also on the flight, but all their seats were scattered due to last-minute booking on a crowded flight.

Al sat in his airline seat, his hands busy knotting strings into loops. He sat next to a stranger, a beautiful young woman he had never seen before. He took no notice of her. His mind was on the strings he was tying, the lines of printout in his briefcase, and on what lay in the cargo section of the aircraft.

Sam Beckett was dead. His body was being flown home for burial in his home town.

In Sam's last leap, he had saved the life of a child, a young girl who eventually grew up to be Dr. Marlette Williams--who in 1997 won the Nobel Prize for the discovery of a drug which completely counteracted all secondary infections of the AIDS virus--as had diabetes in the 1920's, AIDS had been transformed from an absolute killer of all who carried it into a treatable chronic condition.

Sam had saved 7-year-old Marlette's life in 1973, by jumping up in a subway car and diverting a mugger's gunshot from the little girl to the man Sam had leaped into. He had taken the fatal bullet meant for the girl and--refusing to allow his fate to fall upon the man he had leaped into--Sam Beckett had died in her place. And only then did he make the final leap, home to the lab.

But the iron Fate that had let Sam choose death for himself had given him a last act of kindness as well. Sam did not die immediately after his body stopped working due to the bullet's violent path through his upper chest and aorta. Instead, as his bloody, gunshot corpse had leaped home his spirit had leaped into Gooshie, co-occupying his body for one last precious hour of life; long enough for him to say goodbye to his wife Donna and the other members of Project Quantum Leap--and to go out into the desert night to find a grief-stricken Al and make his peace with his best friend.

It was that peace that buoyed Al Calavicci now. That, and the steady monotonous work of knotting strings that he had been doing with Donna, Gooshie, Tina, Dr. Beeks and the other staff members for two days now. Over and over, using ordinary white twine that could have been meant for flying kites or holding a newspaper together, his fingers made loops of string.

Must be why so many women knit while doing other things. Meditative focus, keeps them from helpless rage, screaming, pounding the walls with their fists--steady, Calavicci. I got to say goodbye to him and that's more than I thought I'd be able to do. He explained why he'd done what he did, he told me how he wanted the Project to continue in his absence, what he wanted me to do when I broke the news to his family...and both of us said what we've felt for years. And it wasn't too late, because he was there to hear me when I told him I--

His fingers clenched in the soft mounds of string. They shook, gently. His eyes stung, but he shook his head once, wincing at the pain. All the crying he had done since Sam's death three days ago (27 years ago?) now gave

him headaches. Dehydration, perhaps, or stress. And he was grateful for the physical diversion.

As he was grateful for this idea. It was his idea, and Dr. Beeks'... ..The lab had been like a raw open wound when Gooshie had led a stumbling, tearblind Al back from his flight into the bitter desert night. After the coroners had taken the body away for autopsy, the hounds had descended upon the lab--police, press, investigators--and the resulting clashes with all involved had given Al something solid to hang on to, to do. This project was Sam's child, and Al stood fast against all comers with the single-minded ferocity of a grizzly protecting its cub. And it was Al who had made the calls to Elk Ridge and Hawaii, so that Sam's family would not find out by watching the 11:00 news.

Investigators found no evidence of any of the on-site guns firing recently enough to have caused the damage, and ballistics showed that none of the guns at the Project could have fired the fatal bullet. The Project's Top Secret rating, and the signatures of a few D.C. personages, were enough to hush the matter enough to release the Project staff on their own recognizance.

By unspoken consent the staff gathered that next night at the Project; the cafeteria became the site of a wake. Some people brought out personal liquor stores and poured them for those who wanted them. (Al was not among them. Out in the desert, Sam had warned him to beware of going back to the bottle because of his death. So Al had spent the night drinking unsweetened grapefruit juice--its bitter taste fulfilling a need inside him.) Food was brought out; many people were able to eat.

People spoke quietly to each other, by twos and threes. Occasionally Dr. Mendelson gently recited poetry--Dylan Thomas, Rudyard Kipling, Robert Frost, Psalms--about death and change, and courage in the face of despair.

Donna Elesee, Sam's wife, had sat at one table by herself, staring at nothing and making an odd crooning sound as she cried. She was in almost utter stillness. She did not look at anyone.

As the night dragged on, people were able to start telling funny stories about Sam, and even to laugh a little at them. Some people hugged Donna and persuaded her to eat. They stayed in little clumps, sitting or talking softly; Gooshie led one group in a game of hearts at one of the tables.

Al sat by himself in a corner, still wearing his rumpled and stained dress whites in which he had sat with the mortally-wounded Sam so that the time-traveler would not die alone among strangers. He could not bring himself to go over to Donna, or to look at her. One thought corkscrewed its way through his head, over and over, as it had ever since the tragedy: *I didn't save him. I didn't warn him in time. I should have gotten the information to him faster. I should have spent less time trying to trace Elmo's history. He was counting on me. He was my best friend, and I failed him. And one overriding thought, wrapping around his mind and heart like a thin black wire, cutting to the bone: I should have leaped in to take his place, the way he did to save my life. I should have died, not him. I deserve to die for not saving him. I want to die...*

Part of Al was deeply shamed for that thought, the part that saw how Donna was enduring the loss of her husband with far greater grace and strength than he was showing, the part that admitted that no one was staring at him with hatred or blame for what had happened to Sam; but the essential Al--coaxed by a brilliant, sensitive young physicist to open iron doors bolted shut by a drunken angry admiral--felt as if the fatal bullet had gone through him and taken out his vital organs.

Al had never had a friend like Sam in his whole life. He'd never thought he'd ever get close to another human being again, not after the deaths of his father and sister, not after coming home to an empty house in 1975. He had seen the world with different eyes, had been given hope and courage again for his own life, because of that friend.

And it was not yet 24 hours since he'd seen that friend shot and killed before his eyes. He was alone again.

This wasn't helping. He didn't belong here anyway. Sam had picked him as Project Observer and had fought for his right to be there when everyone

else had questioned Sam's judgment. But Sam was gone. There was no reason for Al to be here any more. He'd go home. Tina would be home from her mother's tonight; he'd had to break the news to her too. She'd liked Sam. He would go home and wait in that empty house, and let the solitude he had created punish him.

He stood up to leave, and Dr. Beeks was there at his side. Her closeness, with its unwanted and implied compassion, was painful, but Al said nothing. It wasn't worth it. Nothing was worth anything any more. He was leaving.

"And they will never know what they owe him," she said in a soft voice. "None of them."

Al didn't look at her; he stood, frozen. Verbena Beeks had exactly verbalized Al's thoughts; had spoken the words he could not. They were thoughts he'd had out in the desert, watching the sun set on Sam's life.

"All the lives he's saved," she continued gently, "the lives he's changed for the better. The families. The communities. The world. None of them know what they owe to one man."

A fist closed on Al's windpipe. He couldn't breathe; and part of him was hoping it would be fatal and he would die and stop hurting--

"They will never know," she said. "But you do. Better than all of us." She got up to talk to Donna and left Al standing as if he still meant to go, with something gently unfurling in his mind, as new and tender as a green leaf...

...It left Al on an American Airlines flight to Fort Wayne with a lapful of string and busy fingers, intricately recalling all the knots he'd learned as a midshipman (some were singular loops, some were linked together; one was a continual coil, tied tightly together at one point). It left him with a briefcase containing printout listings from Ziggy's files, Gooshie's carefully compiled data on each of Sam Beckett's time-leaps, and his own journal. It left him with a lapful of peace that gave him ease as he worked, like the mindless stroking of a dozing cat.

He remembered the tiger cage, the firefight, the photograph--and Sam's eyes meeting his in a noisy Vietnam bar; Sam's grief and remorse meeting his serenity and acceptance. Another string.

He remembered four-year-old Teresa Bruckner, rattling off the names of the dinosaurs Angel Al was making for her out of thin air, and Sam folding clothes and beaming at them both; a rare moment of peace and happiness for the displaced man. Another loop knotted.

He thought of Sir Edmund Hillary, being greeted by the Nepalese.

He thought of Jimmy Cagney in Yankee Doodle Dandy, George M. Cohan stepping out in front of his mother, father and sister to thank the cheering audience.

And he thought of rosaries and prayer wheels, omphaloses, mandellas, the Tao symbol, Ghost Dances, flower garlands, string garlands, Celtic crosses, Wiccan wreaths--all the ways human beings use circles to speak to God.

The hearse was waiting at the airport, and the coffin was ferried off the plane amid a small crowd of curious onlookers. Al stood with the others, iron-eyed, watching. Donna stood like an anchor post, silent tears rolling down her cheeks unchallenged and unchecked. Gooshie was pink at the eyes and nose, one hand clutching a well-used handkerchief. *He leaped into you to say goodbye to us. Cherish that memory, Gooshie. I would have traded my soul to have had Sam leap into me...*

He had tried. He had prayed to take Sam's place as his friend lay dying. But Fate, God or Time had had no further use for Sam; had used him and tossed the crumpled remains aside--

He squeezed his eyes shut.

No. No, he mustn't.

Al. *It's not His fault.*

It had been Sam's choice from beginning to end. Sam had stepped into the Accelerator of his own free will. He had taken the bullet meant for a little girl in the same way.

Al felt a touch on his shoulder. "Come on, Al," Gooshie said quietly, turning back to the terminal. "Let's go get the bags." Everyone from the Project that had come to Indiana was moving in that direction--including those who had brought only carry-on items with them. Like terrified sheep huddling for comfort after the sudden disappearance of the shepherd, the entire group was in one clump, staying together.

Most of the bags from their flight had been claimed by the other passengers during the transfer of that one precious parcel to its keepers. Al now stood with the others and took his single suitcase from the carousel. He had done this with Sam in Oslo when they'd gone to Norway for the Nobel Prize ceremony. And with Sam in Arlington on their way to Washington D.C. to plead for funding for Project Quantum Leap. And with Sam in Albuquerque on their way to inspect the Project's buildings...

He gripped the rubber edge of the carousel, shaking. He closed his eyes.

A gentle hand on one shoulder, stroking gently. He didn't need to open his eyes to know it was Verbena. Strong arms holding him close to a terrible smell for a quick embrace; Gooshie. He straightened, opened his eyes, nodded to let them know he was all right again. He continued to wait with the others, once again holding a tiny seed of peace at his center. And in his mind he felt strong arms squeezing the breath from his lungs, and heard Sam's tear-choked voice whispering *Al, it feels so good to touch you again...*

Al was grateful for the imagination that had saved his sanity in My Choy--letting him escape his captors for hours at a time by mentally dining and dancing with Beth, flying a jet at Mach 4, reliving his entire walk from Selma to Montgomery--even painting a battleship bow to stern. Now, in the worst moments of his loss, he clung to the memory of his friend's love--and that final meeting in the desert--like a life preserver.

The heavy weight of the briefcase still in his hand was another reminder. All of them would be up late tonight in their shared hotel rooms.

"Admiral Calavicci?" a woman called as the group re-emerged into the lobby of the airport. Al saw a woman approaching them, well-dressed in a dark blue shirtwaist and pants that suited the short dark hair. He recognized her, changed though she was from the last time he'd seen her. Even if he had not, the reddened eyes and the grief on her face would have been enough for him to know her.

"Mrs. McCann," he said.

"Kate," Sam's sister corrected him. And she put her arms around Al.

Al hugged her back. His heart felt as if it would split with pain.

Please, don't let her hate us. Don't let her hate me for what happened. I hate myself enough already.

Kate McCann sobbed, once. "They said it was an accident that killed Sam," she whispered. There was a question in her voice as she pulled back to look Al in the eyes.

Al looked at Kate. "You know what Sam did. Don't you." Neither were questions.

"Accident" was the official notification. Project Quantum Leap was still Top Secret.

But Katie nodded. "From the moment I heard 'Imagine' on the radio for the first time--three years after Sam sang it to me at Thanksgiving."

"It wasn't an accident," Donna said levelly. "Sam knew the risks when he started the experiment. His death was a deliberate act of will, to save someone else." Donna recited that line very well now; she had been saying that for three days. Perhaps, someday, she would believe it.

"We'll tell you about it, Katie," Al said. "We'll tell you everything."

She sniffed and nodded. "Will you be staying at the house?"

"We have rooms at the Holiday Inn. But I'll go to the house to speak to the family." The look on Al's face suggested that he'd be happier with an assignment to pull his own teeth. "I'll do that right away."

"Let me do it, Al," Donna said calmly. "I'm family." *And you're not,* Al heard as clearly as if she'd said it out loud. He set his teeth against the whipcrack of pain produced by the words.

Verbena looked from Donna to Al and back. Her face was set.

But Al shook his head slightly. *I can't blame her. I had Sam practically to myself, all those years; and at the very end, he went to me, not her. I know what it is to be rejected in favor of someone else.*

"Come to the house with us, Al," Kate said. "Please."

Al turned to Gooshie, who only waved him on. "Go on, Admiral, we'll take care of the hotel."

"Go, Al," Dr. Beeks said. Without changing tone or inflection, she added, "You're a member of Sam's family, too."

Al couldn't resist shooting Donna a glance as he joined the two women. He was sorry he had. The wide wounded look in her exquisite eyes, the set to the full mouth, betrayed Donna. She had not lashed out at Al in malice or hate, but only to deflect some of her own pain, in the only way she knew how.

The life preserver...

Al lifted his briefcase up so that Donna saw it, and met her eyes.

"We'll be very busy tonight," he said. "All of us."

Something to do. Something to ease the shock and the tragedy.

Something that would balance the scales and bring a sense of justice and rightness in the face of this brutal cosmic injustice. Something that was Al's idea.

Donna nodded. "Yes," she said softly. "Yes, everyone at the house can help us, too." And her beautiful bereft eyes thanked Al.

The peace accord had been signed by both parties.

The church was warm and packed with people who had known Sam since his childhood. The closed casket stood before them all, draped with roses and honeysuckle. More bouquets adorned the church and altar. A small table stood beside the coffin in the front, holding a soft white pile of something unidentifiable.

The organ music died down. After a brief pause, Sam's sister ascended the podium. Katie opened a book with waving gold grass on the cover and read aloud in a clear solemn voice.

"He went looking for a road
that doesn't lead to death.
He went looking for that road
and found it.

It was a stone road..."

Her voice carried the poem plainly and clearly--a plain, clear poem about a man who, in trying to escape death, turns to stone, unable to dance, weeping stones, not dying and not living either. Katie resealed herself. Al and some others nodded softly, understanding the words and this stark reminder that death must come for all that lives. But most of the people in the church were shuffling and whispering, uneasy; this poem from another culture they saw only as sacrilege, un-Christian.

Most of the rest of the service was the usual cut-and-dried platitudes about the deceased sleeping with the Almighty's blessing, the senselessness of violent death, God's merciful plan--with thinly-veiled asides about the scientists that had lured Sam away from the Beckett farm into the dangers of the city, and who had destroyed his life in the process. Al sat with his teeth clenched as the minister extolled young Sam's virtuosity on the basketball court and what a pity it was that he had never gone professional with this true vocation of his; how Sam had also probably done some good as a scientist, though his skills would have been put to better use in his home town, helping his family after his father's death...

The prophet is not without honor save in his own country.

But Al let the pious accusations go in one ear and out the other with a serenity he'd learned from his alcoholic rehab counseling sessions--the ones Sam had made him attend and which had saved his life.

The true service would begin after the official one...

Just before the viewing, Katie once again ascended the podium and faced

the congregation. "My mother, my brother Tom and I would like to thank you all for coming today. You are all invited to come back to the farm for a small reception after the internment. And we would ask that you please reseate yourselves after the viewing."

The ushers turned the casket and lifted the lid. Sam was dressed in the gray suit he'd worn to Katie's wedding; he was lying in state, his hands folded together. People began to stand up and file down the aisle.

Al did not join them.

But when the last mourner had filed past and reseated herself, Al stood and walked to the pulpit.

He looked out over the people of Sam's home town. He blinked and stared, seeing the sorrowful face of Senator McBride in the front row; he hadn't noticed her coming in.

He pulled the sheets of paper from his pocket and smoothed them before him where he could read them clearly. He took a deep breath.

"Sam Beckett," Al said clearly and levelly, "was a scientist, in the most elemental sense of that word. All his life, he was obsessed by a need to know, to find out how things were and how they could be made better. His search led to six degrees and the Nobel Prize, and the most unique and daring project the United States has ever funded. He had the brains of a genius. But genius is not enough.

"Whatever he did, wherever he went, whoever he encountered, Sam's open heart and clear conscience guided him--those qualities instilled in him from his childhood by his family, his church, and you, his community. He worked to better the lives of all his fellow human beings. He had the heart of an angel. But compassion is not enough.

"Sam Beckett also had the will to achieve great things, the ability to continue in the face of overwhelming defeat and futility, and the sureness that he was doing the right thing. His work required great sacrifices for many people--but especially for Sam, who had to remain out of touch and far from the people he loved for the sake of his work." Al stopped and took another deep breath to steady his voice. "He had the courage of a hero--the courage to use his great brain and great heart for the sake of many. He knew what was important. And all he wanted, in the end, was his home."

He blinked, trying to quell the reaction of his eyes.

"Sam's work has benefited more people than I can begin to count--most of them people none of us at the Project ever knew. I firmly believe that Sam Beckett was an agent of God, and of good.

"Because of the nature of his work, and the fact that we are still unable to divulge the complete and true nature of that work, the changes Sam made appeared to have been made by other people. It was typical of him that he would not want the credit for all the lives changed and the people bettered because of his work. For the most part, the people he touched do not know what they owe to Sam."

Al raised his eyes to look out at Katie, at Tom, at Senator McBride.

"But some do. And I do."

With that, Al held up a single loop of string, taken from the table; a small tag of paper was attached to the string, and something was written on it. "One of Sam's theories was that time--the human life--is like a piece of string, with birth at one end and death at the other, and that the string is in a loop. Each loop of string represents one human life.

"Most of the people he changed will never know who Sam was. But we do. We know what he has done, and whom he has touched. And in their names, we honor the man who brought about so much good."

Al descended the podium. Gooshie, Beeks, Donna, and Mendelson all stood up and joined Al, standing in a row before the first pew. Al put the loop down on the table and took up another one, made of three loops of string held together with one paper tag.

Then, and only then, did Al turn and face the open casket and its occupant.

"Dr. Samuel Beckett," he called in a clear strong voice picked up by the entire church. He stepped forward, and laid the string over Sam's folded

hands as he read off the names on the slip of paper. "Captain Tom Stratton, Peggy Stratton, and their daughter Samantha thank you for saving all their lives."

He moved aside to let Dr. Beeks lay another loop from the pile over Sam's hands as well. "Sam," she said, "Timothy Fox thanks you for saving his career."

Gooshie stepped forward with a double string. "Nell Tyler and Melanie Trafford thank you for saving their lives, Sam."

Donna lowered a single loop. "Gloria Collins thanks you for saving her life," she said quietly.

Al was back with a double loop. "Jimmy and Cory LaMotta thank you for their lives."

So was Verbena, with a single loop. "Katie McBain thanks you for justice done."

"Joe and Irene Bausch thank you for saving their marriage," Gooshie said solemnly, laying down a double loop. He stood back and closed his eyes, and softly chanted, "Baruch Ata Adonai, Elohenu Melech ha-olam, Dayan ha-emet." His eyes opened, full and bright. "Shalom aleichem, Samuel." And he went back to the table for another string.

"Billy Jean Crockett and her daughter thank you."

"Roger Skaggs thanks you."

"Rosa Panzini thanks you for her life."

Over and over, they laid loops of string over Sam's hands, like Sir Edmund Hillary's folded hands being covered in string garlands by Nepalese villagers as a welcome and a blessing.

And all the while, the singer in the choir loft was gently singing a song; the congregation began to join in on the refrain. Al knew the Harry Chapin song by heart, but though the remembered words echoed in his mind neither he nor his colleagues ceased their calling out of the names and their garlanding of the still hands.

*All my life's a circle, sunrise and sundown;
Moon rolls through the nighttime till daybreak comes around.
All my life's a circle, still I wonder why
Seasons spinning 'round again, years keep rolling by.*

It took a long time. It was like graduation, the calling of the names, the constant, long-term reminder of how much was owed. The long roll-call was interrupted only by the coughs and sniffles of the congregation; the soft sounds as the townspeople began to realize the scope of what Sam had done. Lives saved. Lives changed...

Dr. Beeks stood over Sam, her hands gracefully moving, her fingers dancing. Dancing... Just as Al knew what she was doing, Beeks interpreted the sign language aloud. "For her life and her chance to dance, Diana Quinna thanks you."

Too low for the congregation to hear, Gooshie whispered, "Jacqueline Kennedy thanks you for her life." In the same way Al said softly, "Elvis Presley thanks you for his chance," and Donna whispered "Norma Jean Baker thanks you."

Another song from the choir loft, and a soft guitar the only accompaniment to the clear high tenor singing. This was Katie's doing, surely; the absolute proof that she did not blame them for Sam's death. Al held himself together; kept chanting the names and laying string circlets on automatic pilot as the man crooned:

*Imagine no possessions.
I wonder if you can.
No need for greed or hunger;
A brotherhood of man.
Imagine all the people sharing all the world...*

"Norma Bates thanks you."

"Moe Stein thanks you."

A soft wind of a noise swept the church. Al turned, and stared as Senator

Diane McBride stood up at her pew and moved to the center aisle. She walked up to the coffin, her face composed with sorrow. Her hair swung loose around her shoulders; a black circular hair band was in her hands. Verbena stopped her with a hand on her wrist; without a word, Dr. Beeks rummaged through the loops remaining on the table, and pulled one from it. She handed it to Senator McBride who stared at it, read the tag, and blinked, then nodded. She walked forward and honored Sam, saying, "Thank you, Dr. Beckett, for what you did for me and my husband so long ago. Thank you for the words that helped me attain my chosen career." And as she turned to return to her seat, tears shining unshed in her eyes, she rebound her loose hair with the black hairband that she had intended to use for her own circle.

And the names continued. The deeds done. The words said.

"Kevin Bruckner thanks you for his life."

The table was nearly bare. Sam's hands were a mass of soft white string.

Katie stood up from the family pew and walked up the aisle. She took a string from others that had been set a little aside from the main pile. "Sam, thank you for saving me from my first husband." She drew a short, sharp breath as she laid the string down. "It was you, that Thanksgiving," she whispered fiercely before returning to her seat. "It was you."

Only the Project members heard. The ones who kept the truth safe.

Tom Beckett stood and approached the coffin. He did not take a loop of string. "Little brother," he said. "I always knew you had the brains to do anything you wanted to do. I knew you could do anything--" His voice broke. He reached in his pocket and pulled out something that jangled. "Thank you, Sam," Tom said softly. "For my life; and for the lives of Laura, Nina, Sammy, and George." Al stared, his eyes wide to keep them clear, as Tom laid his Vietnam dog-tags over the strings on his brother's hands. He stood back, snapped off a salute, and returned to his seat, blinking hard. His wife hugged him; the four children shifted around.

Donna took up a double-loop. "Sam. Donna Elesee and her father Colonel Wojciehowicz thank you for reuniting them." She laid the doubled loop over the piles of string engulfing Sam's hands. Then she pulled at her left hand, eyes soft and dark with pain. Al saw the light glint off something small and gold before she laid it in the coffin and turned away from the presenters to reseal herself.

One single loop left. And one massive multiple loop.

I know this is hurting you badly, Al...I'm sorry...

He trembled. *God, please give me the strength to help my friend this last time.*

Al moved like a wooden doll. It was the end of everything, the beginning and end like that single loop of string that he now took up. But his voice was clear, and he forbade it to quaver as he let everyone know what this meant. "Sam," he said loudly, and walked forward, seeing only the white of the strings engulfing the hands, the silver glint of Tom's dog-tags, the gold glint of Donna's wedding band lying over the dead man's heart: circles, all of them. "For his life, that you saved three times; for believing in him and fighting for him when no one else would, including himself; for your friendship and for your love..." He laid the string over the clasped hands. "...Albert Calavicci thanks you."

He stood to one side as Donna walked up again, holding the big multiple loop. A pang hit Al at the symbolism as she laid it over Sam's heart, to engulf and hide the wedding band. The loops of string represented Marlette Williams, and a fraction of the millions of people all over the world who would not die of AIDS. "Sam Beckett," she said clearly. "Those we do not know, whom your work has saved, thank you for their lives." She stood back, her face as carved and still as it was the night she let her husband go back into the Chamber to save Al.

Neither she nor Al took their eyes off the still face as the ushers moved in and lowered the coffin lid over it. The church was full of the silence of grief--a grief tinged with awe as the people of Elk Ridge finally realized, in some small way, what their native son had accomplished with his life.

There was a massive warmth at Al's back that moved around the coffin to face him; Tom, as tall as his brother and broader, with something of Sam's level intelligent manner in the way he looked at Al. Gooshie and Verbena were there as well. There was Katie. And there was Donna who stood across from Al. They all looked at each other over the smooth brown curve of the wooden box; and there was a peace in all their eyes, a kind of proud grief. They took hold of the handles and

wheeled Sam down the aisle.

The wheels on the conveyor squeaked a little. A baby fussed and whimpered, ineffectively shushed by its parent. That sound touched a living wire in Al's heart and made it resound.

Sam, is that baby alive today because of you?

The people who joined Al in this task were a tangible presence inside. They felt warm and full of life, and they were beautiful because of it.

And Al would not have felt them there at all, if Sam had not reawakened him to life and love and other people, so long ago. And so recently--

If you shut other people out, I won't ever forgive you.

He closed his eyes and smiled. *I won't, Sam. I promise.*

Sam had loved people. Impossible for anyone to stay close to Sam and not catch it himself.

Al would not be alone, if he chose not to be alone. Today, this afternoon after the burial, the Beckett farm would welcome everyone in for a heartland-style wake: food, coffee, conversation, and quiet tender grief. As Sam had requested, Al would speak to Katie, Tom and Thelma about their brother, her son. He would begin to form ties with these people, Sam's family that Sam had bequeathed to his best friend out in the desert that night. His loop of string would join theirs, if they would let him.

There was the Project. Surely, out in academia there was another one like Sam; brilliant, under-used, unappreciated, capable of incredible leaps of thought. He would find that person; he could find that person. He had seen greatness in the gawky, big-nosed young professor at MIT who had whispered "Time travel," into Al's ear in the faculty lounge; there would be another to carry on the work Sam had left behind.

The sky blazed a brilliant blue as they emerged from the church door; scudding, impossibly-white cloud-sheep drifted free. Some bird was warbling a thready little music. The cemetery adjoined the church; a new rectangular hole bridged by planks lay beside a heap of rich brown soil in the vivid green grass bright with flowers. Only Al knew that Sam was being buried in the exact spot where Tom had been buried in the timeline before Sam had saved his life in Vietnam; that plot of ground seemed to have been decreed by fate to hold a brave Beckett.

A purple swallow knifed past in silence as people gathered at the site where the coffin was laid over the boards. From there Sam would be lowered into the ground and held safe there; his string knotted in a way that would have made his father proud.

Al let go of his burden and stood back amid his colleagues, Sam's family, the other mourners. Peace filled him inside, putting out frail tender leaves in his heart; the peace that came from acceptance of the pain of life rather than from the cold allure of death's silence.

Sam had known; he had known that his friend would be strong enough for this parting.

This is not Sam, this wooden box with metal handles. This is--this is just his Waiting Room. Sam is still out there, leaping. Leaping for joy. Leaping in the halls of Heaven. His beautiful spirit is home at last.

He did not listen to the minister's droning words, the old and oft-repeated assurances to the living. His heart was full of the memory of garlanded hands and a thousand lifetimes worth of goodness acknowledged before the prophet's home country.

There was another gift Sam had given him, a long time ago in Philadelphia; a gift he had nearly flung away in his rage and grief and which Sam had given him back again, that night.

Yes. Sam would accept this. He would understand what this meant to Al.

His hands were empty. But in his mind he saw the circle of beads.

Albert Calavicci raised his right hand to his forehead and crossed himself, warm tears gently limning his cheeks without obscuring his vision. The words, unspoken and unthought for three decades, bubbled up into his mind as if they had never left him.

"We believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth," he whispered, and began the recital of the rosary over his friend's grave.

-- TERMINUS EST --

ISLAND

by

Jennifer Smallwood

It had all happened so fast. Sam turned his back on the room, the unreal figures lying on the floor, the couch, the... He walked stiffly out the door, into the hallway clutching securely the unconscious form of the child in his arms.

"Sam?" Al asked hoarsely.

Sam heard the question, heard the pain in his friend's voice. The pain and fear for him. God, he didn't need any more pain.

"Sam?"

"I'll take him, Mr. Brett." The uniformed officer spoke to him calmly, respectful of the incidents in the room behind Sam. The officer tenderly removed the burden from Sam's not quite protesting arms.

Sam wandered unheeded down the hall, past hurrying detectives and paramedics. The flash from the cameras of crime scene photographers strobed behind him, giving an eerie glow to the hallway and Sam's passage. He meandered into an unoccupied room, vaguely aware that Al still trailed after him, his demands for a response becoming more insistent. Sam found it hard to care.

Shock, Sam thought dispassionately and without much concern, I'm in shock.

"Sam." Al's gentle voice sounded again. "There was nothing else you could have done." Absolving him.

Sam's unfocused gaze fixed on the family portrait hung above the mantle. Only one of the happy faces there would ever smile again, and Sam doubted it would be in the near future. Not enough. Not enough. Not quick enough, not smart enough, not...

"Sam, you couldn't have helped what happened..."

Helped? I caused it! "Timothy was the reason you were here. The only reason, Sam..." Al's voice again, strident. Dimly, as if from a great distance, Sam could hear the squeaks and protestations from the handlink as Al attempted to fill him in on what his tampering with the timestream had changed. Why? Why? WHY?!

The question burned its way into Sam's brain, past present tense events and the future tense of Al's concern.

Not enough for...

Other images crowded into Sam's head to take the place of the room he'd just left, other people, other times...

Joseph. Hilla. Tom. Maggie. Al. Lonnie. Yin and Yang. Jesus. I'm sorry Al, it should be me. Pathology Lab. I've killed Al. JFK. Alia. Abigail. Alia.

I DON'T WANT TO REMEMBER THIS! Where's swiss cheese when you need it? Nowhere to run...

Zoe. Clayton. Crane. HooYah. Cochaphus. Rene.

Sam felt an odd lurch. A leap? But it aborted itself, the force of leaping unable to pierce the force of Sam's anguish. His chest constricted, loosened, constricted again. What might have been a sob, or a scream, crowded into his throat and choked him, blocking any further expression as well as his airway.

So many faces, so many...they're dead and I've killed them and killed them all again...

He raised his head from the nonexistent space he'd been examining - still looking for escape - and found Al. The familiar sight of Al frantically abusing the handlink in search of coherent data. The arm grasping the handlink dropped immediately at Sam's motion and Sam saw Al's expression change from one of frustration and panic to understanding and empathy. The Observer took an unconscious step forward, as though drawn by Sam's need, reaching out a holographic hand... Help me Al, I'm drowning.

Sam reached back, the lament within him struggling for release that could not come while he was in another's life, another's place in time. Sam reached back...reached forward and grabbed for Al's image and more...pulling on his lifeline until...

Al recognized the look on Sam's face, an expression he'd seen before, but only in the mirror. Sam was bottoming out - he'd reached and then surpassed his limit of stress and fear and guilt and grief and he needed the tactile reassurance of reality that only Al could provide.

Words would not be enough this time.

Al reached out, forgetting for a moment that he couldn't touch the friend who so desperately needed him. Al reached out and Sam returned the gesture, reaching...and as their images met, Al saw his holographic world explode into blue as the kid warped time and space to his satisfaction, using the power of emotions which could no longer be denied.

Suddenly Al found himself grasping the very real hand of Sam Beckett in the Imaging Chamber. Then, grasping all of him as he folded up like a house of cards blown apart by an errant breeze. The handlink clattered to the floor, unnoticed, as Al gathered Sam into his arms and the two followed the mechanism downward at a slightly slower pace.

"I've got you, Sam." And Al held on for all he was worth as the first sob broke loose. The first of a raging, screaming torrent.

Some part of Al was aware of Gooshie hollering for information over the intercom, but Al was too preoccupied to respond. His head swiveled around at the sound of the door cycling open and he pinned the frenetic programmer with his gaze.

"Find Donna. Get her down here."

Gooshie did not appear to acknowledge the command, his perception riveted to the unexpected sight of Al holding Sam in the middle of the blue picture null of the Imaging Chamber.

"Now, Gooshie!" Al all but yelled and saw the intensity of his demand finally penetrate Gooshie's shock. "Y-yes, Admiral," he stammered, tumbling out of the doorway. Other bodies filled the empty space, but Al paid them no mind, his concentration solely on the shuddering, shivering, sob-wracked frame of the man in his arms.

He felt, rather than saw, it as Donna burst through those obstructing her way in order to take her place by Sam's side. He shifted his position so that he and Donna could enclose Sam, cradling his body and spirit with their loving arms. He heard, as if from a great distance, Verbena - arriving on the heels of Donna - physically shove everyone out of the Imaging Chamber and into the Control Room. He thanked God as she sealed the door against prying eyes and left them alone - an island of concern and grief in a sea of blue.

There were tears on his face and after a while, Sam was aware that not all of them were his. But he was blind in his passionate despair and could not recognize the faces that comforted, the hands that soothed. He knew only that there, in that island of blue, cradled by those arms, he was with family. He was home. He was safe. And so could give vent to the long denied sentiments that threatened to weigh his soul to the black bottom of eternity.

Sam didn't understand the voices, the reassurances they poured into his ears. He knew only his pain and that for now, it was safe to be Sam, to feel for Sam, to cry for Sam. Safe to yell and scream, to rage and fear for and at all those he had met and been in his long tenure as quantum leaper. Safe in this cradle of love, he could unload some of what he'd carried.

Hours, days, or centuries later, he felt the change. The pressure was gone and...somewhere, somewhen, he was needed. "Thank you," he whispered to his cradle and he leaped.



A TWIST IN TIME

April 2, 1974

by

Cheryl A. Bellucci

The first thing Sam realized as the blue haze cleared itself from his eyes was that there was a hose in his hand. And water running from the hose. Then he heard the shout.

"Hey Wayne, could you please watch what's chere doing?" The voice came from a man standing next to a car. The hood on the car was open and, judging from the man's apparel, Sam figured him to be a mechanic working on the car. The stream of water from the hose had come close to his foot.

"Uh, sorry, guess my mind was wandering." Sam let go of the spigot on the hose, and the water stopped. He looked around at his new surroundings. He was in the middle of a car lot, and by a quick assessment of the car styles, he thought he might have leaped into a time period about the early to mid-seventies. A look into the side mirror of the car he found himself standing next to, revealed a younger face looking back at him, probably a teenager, not much older.

"Wayne, what is wrong with you today?" The mechanic had stopped his work and was watching Sam trying to adjust to his new climate. "You have to finish washing this whole row of cars before you can go home. You got spring fever or something?"

Sam smiled at the mechanic. "Maybe. I'm sorry, I'll get right back to work." He found a bucket and sponge on the other side of the car. As he finished soaping and rinsing the vehicle, he studied what he could see of where he was. It appeared to be a small to medium-sized town, not too busy but pleasant. He was ready to work on the next car in line when he heard the Imaging Chamber door open.

"Hi, Sam." Al's familiar holographic image punched a couple of buttons on the handlink, and the door closed. "Got you doing hard labor this time, eh?"

"Not too bad." Sam glanced around at the mechanic who had gone back to work under the hood of the car, but was still watching him, particularly when Sam had the water running. "Al, I'm a kid again."

"Well," Al replied, reading the display on the handlink. "I guess, if you call nineteen a kid." He continued pressing buttons.

"Okay, who am I?"

"Your name is Wayne Garber. You work here cleaning and prepping cars, but you've been accepted at Ohio State University to attend in the fall. Oh, says here you're going into medicine, and you won a partial scholarship. Very impressive." Al glanced over at his friend.

"Ohio State? Am I in Ohio?" Sam had to keep his voice low, the mechanic was watching him more closely now.

"Uh huh, a town called Xenia. The date is April second, 1974." Al paused and frowned at the next readout.

"Looks like a nice place."

"Well, Sam, take a good look. Half of what you see isn't going to be here tomorrow at this time."

"What do you mean, Al?"

"At 4:40 PM on April third, 1974, over forty percent of Xenia will be destroyed by a tornado."

"Oh boy..."

* * *

"Al, what am I here to do?" Sam was staring at his friend. He couldn't comprehend almost half of a town being destroyed in one afternoon.

Al studied the handlink. "Ziggy isn't too sure. There's too many

stories, and too many people who will need help for her to lock in on just one event." He looked at Sam. "You're just going to have to play it by ear."

"What happens to Wayne?"

"According to Ziggy, he's okay. The car dealership isn't hurt too bad by the tornado. Wayne goes to school in the fall, becomes a doctor, and is still practicing in Chicago today."

"Wayne!" Sam hadn't been paying attention to the hose even though the water was running. The mechanic slammed down the hood of the car and stormed over to where Sam and Al were standing. "You're supposed to wash the cars, not me." The mechanic stuck out his now soaked foot to show Sam what he had done.

Sam glanced quickly at the name tag just above the mechanic's shirt pocket. "Uh, sorry, Walt, guess I'm just paying more attention to the weather than I am to my work."

Walt glanced at the sunny sky. "Yeah, I can understand that. Okay kid, rinse off this car and knock off early. It's not that far from quitting time." He shaded his eyes from the sun. "Hard to believe it, but the forecast calls for rain, anyway."

"Thanks." The mechanic turned and went back to the garage area of the dealership. Sam opened his mouth to ask Al another question but the blare of the intercom interrupted him.

"Wayne Garber, phone call," came the slightly tinny voice over the loudspeaker.

"You better answer that, Sam. I'll meet you inside." With a press of the button, Al disappeared.

Sam picked up the bucket and sponge and followed the path the mechanic had taken moments earlier, stopping to turn off the water at the connection just outside the door. Once inside, he saw Al standing next to a phone. Sam picked up the receiver and pressed the blinking button.

"Uh, hello," he spoke hesitantly into the phone.

"Wayne, dear, could you please stop by James' on the way home and get some bread for supper tonight?" The female voice on the other end of the line sounded older.

Al answered Sam's questioning look with information supplied from the handlink. "Wayne lives with his mother. According to our records, he doesn't get married for another 6 years."

"Sure, Mom," Sam spoke into the phone. "Any particular kind?"

"No," came the reply. "Just whatever is on sale."

"Okay, see you in a little bit." After the voice on the other end said good-bye, Sam hung up the phone. "Al, what happens to Wayne's mother, is she..."

Al had been pressing buttons and getting information from the handlink since Sam picked up the phone. "No, the apartment you two share gets some damage, but nothing major. No reports about Wayne's mother getting hurt." Al shrugged. "Ziggy just doesn't know yet, Sam."

Sam was about to ask Al another question when he noticed Walt watching him. "That was my mother. Gotta stop by James' and get some bread on the way home," Sam chuckled as he met Walt's gaze.

"Then get out of here, kid." Walt had taken his wet shoe and sock off, but the tone of his voice was amused, not upset. Sam started to go out the way he came in. "Wayne." Sam stopped and turned around to look at Walt again. "James' is that way," Walt added, pointing to the front of the dealership building.

"Uh, yeah, sure. Don't know where my head is today."

Walt laughed. "Just don't get lost walking home."

Sam threw an inquisitive glance at Al, who answered, "Three blocks that way." He nodded his head in the direction Walt had indicated. "Across the park, another block. James' is a grocery store on the way."

In fact, it was right across the street from the dealership. Sam went in, found and paid for a loaf of bread, then met Al once he was outside again.

"You know, Sam, the grocery store gets destroyed in the tornado. So will this music store." Al pointed to a building marked "Kincaids" that they

were passing by, then he stopped and indicated a large brick building just in front of them. "And this school." Sam stopped, too, while Al consulted the handlink. "In fact, this whole block will be gone. The buildings aren't flattened by the tornado immediately, but there is so much structural damage they have to be razed later."

"Al, this is hard to believe. So much destruction in one afternoon?"

"Try four minutes. That's about how long it will take for the tornado to run from one end of Xenia to the other, with nothing but broken buildings in its path. And death."

"What?"

"Thirty-three people are going to die in this town tomorrow. That doesn't include two National Guardsmen who get killed in a fire guarding a furniture store a couple of days from now."

"Al, run scenarios on all the people who die and cross those stories with Wayne's background. See if Wayne has a chance to save any of their lives."

"You mean Sam Beckett." Al pressed a few more buttons. "Okay, Sam. By the way, you live at 101b Smith Street. Go one block to the right, then two blocks north, past the park, and then Smith Street is just to the left. Your apartment is on the second floor." Al looked up from the handlink. "Here's some information that might be helpful tomorrow. The hospital is only two blocks north of the park." Sam nodded, then Al frowned as the next bit of news flashed on the display. "Sam, you're going to go by a high school that gets destroyed tomorrow, and four homes, and..."

"Al, go. Buildings can be replaced, people can't." Sam heard the Imaging Chamber door open and close as he turned to find the apartment.

* * *

If Sam hadn't been so preoccupied with the knowledge of what was to happen the next day, he might have enjoyed the walk to Wayne's apartment. As he crossed the street, all he could do was wonder which houses were to be destroyed and who would die. He walked across the park and looked up at the trees. *What would be left after tomorrow?* he wondered as he paused next to the pavilion and watched some kids play tag, unaware of the disaster that was to befall the town in less than twenty-four hours. The high school Al had mentioned was just across from where he was standing. School had been out for a while, but some of the students and teachers who had stayed late for one reason or another were coming out of the building and getting into their cars.

He wished he knew exactly what it was he was supposed to do. In any kind of disaster extra help was always needed, and his medical knowledge would definitely be useful. But Al had said both Wayne and his mother would be okay. Was there someone in particular he had to save? Until Ziggy came across something in the original history, there was no way of Sam knowing just what wrong he had to put right so he could leap out.

Not that this was a particularly bad place, at least not today. Sam frowned. Growing up in Indiana, he had heard about the destructive forces of tornadoes, and one farmer close to his dad's place had had a barn blown over in a storm. But Sam could not imagine half a town being destroyed in one afternoon. Four minutes? Is that what Al had said? How many lives? *Thirty-three, Sam thought. Al said thirty-three people are going to die in the tornado. If I can save just one.*

He shook his head and turned back to the way Al had pointed out for him. Smith Street was easy to find, but Sam was glad the different apartments were well marked, because all the small buildings looked alike. He found the one marked 101 and proceeded upstairs to meet Wayne's mother.

The door opened to a modest living room containing a television, a couch, and a couple of chairs. Sam could hear and see an older woman working in the kitchen area who he assumed was Wayne's mother.

"I'm home, Mom." Sam put the bread on the small table.

"Hi, you're a little early." Wayne's mom kissed Sam on the cheek. "Anything wrong?"

"No, just a little 'spring fever', as Walt calls it. I was having trouble concentrating on what I was doing, so he told me to go home."

Mrs. Garber frowned. "You didn't get in trouble, did you? Wayne, you know that scholarship isn't going to handle all the expenses of college. And with medical school being so expensive, you need all the extra cash you can get." Her hands worriedly wiped at the apron she was wearing.

Sam smiled. Mrs. Garber reminded him of his mother. "No, Mom, everything is okay."

"If you say so." She turned back to the vegetables she had been cutting up on the counter. "Supper won't be for an hour or so."

"Anything I can do to help?"

Mrs. Garber turned to look at him again. "Wayne Garber, are you feeling okay this afternoon? You never offer to help in the kitchen."

Sam backed towards the kitchen doorway. "Just kidding, Mom. I'm going to get something to drink and go out here and watch TV." Sam nervously opened the refrigerator door, grabbed a can of pop, and retreated to the living room.

He switched on the television and flipped through the channels. There was the usual fair of afternoon talk shows and cartoons. He settled on Bugs Bunny, sat down in one of the chairs, then just let his mind wander. Sam sat up and took notice, however, when a news bulletin interrupted the show.

"...Although none have been sighted, conditions are right for the formation of thunderstorms and tornadoes. We anticipate some thunderstorms to roll through the Miami Valley later this evening and tomorrow. Stay tuned to channel..."

Sam turned off the television and walked over to the window. The weather outside was still clear and sunny. He tried to remember how accurate weather forecasting was in the seventies, but couldn't recall. None of his scientific interests concerned meteorology, anyway.

"Mom," he said, turning toward the kitchen, "do you know what to do if there's a tornado?"

"Wayne, they've been calling for bad weather every day this week, and so far it's just been sunny." Mrs. Garber was busy putting dishes on the table.

"So far," Sam replied. "But just in case, what should you do?"

"Well," she paused, hands on her hips. "I really don't know."

"I think you should go to the center of the house, but on the lowest floor." Sam frowned, trying to remember what he had been told when he was a boy.

"Anyway, supper is ready, so go wash up." Mrs. Garber went back to placing food on the table.

* * *

"That was very good," Sam declared once he finished eating. "I'll just wash up these dishes," he said, picking up his plate. Then he noticed the worried look Mrs. Garber gave him, and he quickly added, "Well, I think it's about time I help around here, don't you?"

Although Mrs. Garber looked rather surprised, she nodded. "I'll help," she said as she started to get up, too.

"No," Sam insisted, transferring the rest of the dishes to the sink. "You just sit there and tell me about your day."

Mrs. Garber's look shifted from surprise to skepticism, but she did begin. "Well, I went to visit Estelle this afternoon. She's been having trouble with her arthritis, you know."

Sam smiled. Although he had no idea who Wayne's mom was talking about, her continued narrative of the day reminded him of his mother and how she used to relate similar tales about friends and relatives to his father when he came in from his chores at the end of the day. The time passed quickly as he washed, rinsed, and set the dishes on the drainer to dry.

"Okay, all done," he announced as the last spoon was placed in the holder. "I think I'll go for a walk."

"Don't forget, the Academy Awards are tonight." Mrs. Garber finally rose from her seat at the table and kissed Sam on the cheek. "Thank you."

That was nice."

"Well, hopefully I'll do it more often," Sam suggested, but didn't dare promise.

Sam left the apartment and started back towards the park. He walked in the direction of the downtown area but went a couple blocks west of where the car dealership was located. Finding a bench across from the Court House, he sat down. The town was relatively empty, and traffic was sparse.

He turned to the sound of the Imaging Chamber door opening. "Any news, Al?"

"No, Sam," Al answered, carefully monitoring the handlink display as the door closed. "No one particular event we can isolate that you, or Wayne, would have the chance to change." He looked up at the buildings across the street. "That whole block will be gone, Sam, so will the block behind that."

"Stop it, Al. I feel weird enough just knowing what's going to happen, I don't want to start looking at everything like it's a ghost."

"Sorry." The handlink chirped. "Ziggy says you might want to start walking back to Wayne's apartment soon. There's a thunderstorm coming."

"Wayne's mom says they've been forecasting bad weather all week, but it's been sunny every day. What's the chance Ziggy is more accurate than they are?" Sam smiled.

Al looked up from the display as the handlink chirped. "Ha, ha, Sam. Ziggy didn't appreciate that very much." Al read the display of the communications device as it sounded out another series of whistles and beeps. "In the original history, Wayne went right back to his apartment after the tornado. Ziggy says there's a sixty-five percent chance that whatever it is you are supposed to do will happen between the car dealership and the apartment."

"But what am I supposed to do?"

"Can't help you there, Sam. You'll just have to keep your eyes open."

Sam hadn't been paying attention to the sky while he was talking with Al, but a bright flash and sharp crack of thunder certainly made them both look up.

"That's the direction the storm will come from tomorrow," Al said, changing glances from the handlink display to the southwestern sky. He glanced down as the handlink offered a loud squeal. "Ziggy says that now you have an eighty-five percent chance of getting soaked before you get back to the apartment. She finds that piece of information rather amusing."

Sam gave Al an 'I'm not surprised' look. "Tell Ziggy I want an eighty-five percent chance of knowing what I'm supposed to do tomorrow," he responded, just as heavy raindrops started falling.

As Al opened the Imaging Chamber door to leave, Sam turned and started walking back towards the apartment. He quickened his walking to sprinting as halfway across the park the raindrops fell harder and the thunder clapped louder.

"Why can't Ziggy figure the chances of important things happening right?" Sam mumbled out loud as he climbed up the apartment stairs and opened the door.

"Wayne, you're soaked!" exclaimed Mrs. Garber as she looked up from the television.

"Yeah, I got caught in the storm. Guess the forecasters finally got something right."

"Go dry off. The Academy Awards are about to start. Who do you think will win Best Actor, Robert Redford or Paul Newman? I just love Paul's blue eyes."

Sam paused, trying to recall the Oscar results to no avail. "Sorry, Mom, I have no idea. I think I'm going to my room for a while, okay?"

Mrs. Garber gave him a worried look, but didn't say anything about it. "All right. By the way, there's a chocolate cake out on the counter."

"Thanks." Sam went to the kitchen and cut himself a piece of cake, popping a piece of the corner into his mouth before he even left the kitchen. "This is really good," he told Wayne's mother on his way through the living room. "Tastes just like the cake my mom makes."

"Wayne," said Mrs. Garber, looking up at him and replying with concern. "I am your mother."

Sam hesitated at the entrance of the hallway, turned and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, then that's why it tastes just like the cake my mom makes, uh, because you made it." He walked over and gave Mrs. Garber a kiss on the cheek. "I'm going to my room, Mom. Enjoy the Oscars." Then he went down the hallway and found Wayne's room, which wasn't too difficult since there were only two bedrooms.

Sam opened the curtains and leaned against the window sill, watching the storm as he ate the cake. Since the apartment was situated on a curve in the street, he could see all the way to the park where the lightning made eerie shadows on the buildings. Sam hadn't seen lightning like this too often: the bolts danced across the clouds, almost in slow motion, instead of traveling down to the ground, and their movement made strange patterns on the night sky.

The storm passed after a while, but Sam stayed at the window. He finally decided to go to bed when he heard Wayne's mother call out "Goodnight" before she retired, but he found it hard to go to sleep, and ended up tossing and turning all night.

* * *

Sam couldn't help but be apprehensive the next day. From the time he said good-bye to Wayne's mother, making her promise she'd keep an eye on the weather and be extra careful all day, to the time he arrived at the car dealership, he was extremely nervous. But, remembering what Wayne's mother had said about the college scholarship, Sam realized it was important he not do anything to jeopardize Wayne's job.

To Sam's relief, the first job Walt told him to do was finish washing the cars Wayne was working on when Sam leaped in the day before. At least Sam could work by himself, outside, and watch the sky without too many people bothering him.

"You finish that row without getting anyone else wet?" Walt asked him when he brought the bucket and sponge back inside. Sam nodded. "Good, now take the charger and check out the red Buick in the front row. Ted said he had trouble getting it started this morning."

"Uh, yeah." Sam looked around and scratched his head. "Do you remember where we put it last?"

Walt gestured toward the far side of the garage area. "It's where it always is, Wayne. You better find a cure for this spring fever you've developed these past couple of days."

Sam walked over to the battery charger and wheeled it out to the lot. He had just opened the hood of the car Walt mentioned when he heard the Imaging Chamber door open.

"Al, did Ziggy figure out what I'm supposed to do yet?" Sam asked, glancing around to see if anyone was watching him.

The expression on Al's face said "no" before he even replied.

"We've been feeding Ziggy scenarios all night, Sam. We can't pinpoint it down to one particular incident, just that whatever will happen will probably happen on Wayne's walk from the dealership here to the apartment."

"It would be great if Ziggy could narrow it down some." Sam sounded frustrated.

"Yeah, well, Sam, there's just too much data on this one for her to make a definite guess." Al glanced down at the handlink then back up at Sam. "All I can tell you is that according to the original history, both Wayne and his mother come out okay. There must be someone else you're supposed to help."

"Like Ziggy is supposed to help me, by telling me who it is!" Sam's sleepless night was catching up to him. He hadn't meant to snap at Al like that. Unfortunately, Al wasn't the only one who heard him.

"Wayne, are you okay?" Sam looked up to see Walt standing next to the car.

"Yeah, sure. I got the charger hooked up here to the battery. What's

next?"

"Lunch. I just thought I'd let you know a bunch of us guys are going down to McDonald's, and we thought you might want to come."

Sam shot a nervous glance to Al. After a few button presses, Al looked back at Sam. "Nothing's going to happen until 4:40, Sam. Go ahead," Al responded, then added after glancing back down at the handlink, "You know, McDonald's is one of the places that will be destroyed, and the--"

"Sure, Walt, I'll come." Sam answered the mechanic after taking a second to glare at Al. He was having a hard enough time without Al telling him exactly what buildings were going to be ruined in the storm. If only he knew exactly what to do.

"We'll try some more, Sam," Al assured his friend before disappearing behind the Imaging Chamber door.

* * *

Talk around the table during lunch concerned the streaker who had made an unwelcome appearance at the Academy Awards the night before.

"Did you see him, Wayne? Just ran down the stage behind David Niven's head, right on camera!" Walt laughed.

"No, I was watching the storm," Sam replied.

"Yeah, it was kinda weird, wasn't it? The lightning ran across the sky instead of down to the ground," Ted added.

"The weather bureau is calling for more storms today," Sam continued. "And there's a chance that some of them will be severe."

Walt chuckled. "Yeah, like all the severe storms they've been calling for all week. Look outside, it's beautiful."

"For right now, but the weather we get this afternoon is being formed in the west and south right now. It could change." Sam could tell by the looks on his coworkers' faces they weren't buying it.

"Since when are you a weatherman?" Walt asked. "I thought you were going to college in the fall to become a doctor."

"Well, I heard all that stuff on television." Sam decided he wasn't getting anywhere with the conversation, so he dropped the subject. "What do you think, did *The Godfather, Part II* deserve the Best Picture Oscar?"

"Part II? Wayne, there's only been one Godfather movie. *The Sting* won Best Picture." Walt looked at him suspiciously.

"Oh yeah. I heard they're making a second part to *The Godfather*. I heard that stuff--"

"On television," more than one of the guys answered for him.

"Yeah." Sam went back to concentrating on his sandwich, and just listened to the rest of the lunch conversation.

* * *

As if the time before lunch wasn't bad enough, Sam found himself glancing at his watch every minute or so once he got back to the dealership. Walt had given him a list of things to do to various cars on the lot, and Sam was grateful for the solitary work.

He noticed the weather getting hotter as the day wore on, but the sky was still clear and sunny. He quickly rolled up his shirt sleeves, and as he went from car to car, he constantly had to wipe perspiration from his brow. Sam took a break about 3:30 and went inside to get a drink of water.

"Hey, Wayne, they just came over the radio and said we're supposed to get some more of those severe thunderstorms this afternoon," Ted told him worriedly. "You suppose everything is gonna be all right?"

"Does your family know what to do if there's a tornado?" Sam didn't ask him where he lived. Wayne probably already knew that.

"I don't know. We've never had a tornado around here before."

"Does your house have a basement?"

"We got a cellar."

"Okay, that's where you should go if we have tornado warnings."

"I'll go call my wife right now."

Sam looked over to see Walt eyeing him suspiciously again from under the hood of a car. He shrugged his shoulders before turning and going back outside to finish his work on the cars.

He wasn't sure if it was because he was expecting it, but Sam was positive he could feel the barometric pressure start to drop around four o'clock. Although it was still sunny, Sam could see cloud cover building up in the southwest, but nothing that looked too threatening.

"Where are you, Al?" he asked, barely above a whisper just in case Walt was watching him. "The stage is being set."

With the hood up of the car he was working on, Sam could watch the weather without anyone from the garage noticing. The storm appeared to build slowly; the sunny skies ahead of it lending a false sense of safety. The rain started to fall about 4:20, although not too hard, and the strange, eerie lightning followed shortly after. The tremendous noise of the thunder and the swirling movements of the clouds didn't match the sparseness of the raindrops. The night before during the storm the rain had poured down, but today it was only sprinkling.

Sam had his hand on the hood of the car, ready to slam it down, when Walt yelled at him from the garage.

"Wayne, get in here."

But Sam was watching the storm. In a matter of seconds, the sky had turned a gray-green. In contrast to the dark sky, objects and buildings on the ground seemed to be brightly illuminated from an unseen light source. Although he heard Walt, Sam didn't move, his eyes transfixed on the dark, spinning mass making its way toward the center of town.

"Did you hear me, Wayne?" Walt's voice was closer, in fact he was right next to Sam. "You gotta get inside! The radio says there's a tornado heading this way!"

Sam didn't say anything, just pointed in the direction the storm was coming from.

"Oh, God." Walt took only a split second to watch the twister, then he grabbed Sam's arm. "Wayne, get your ass inside, now!" And with that the older man pulled Sam in the direction of the garage.

Walt was still directing Sam's movements once they reached the safety of the garage. One of the managers had led the other workers and a couple of customers to an inside room without windows. Sam and Walt were the last to arrive, and as Sam took a place along the wall, Walt stood by the door and held it open a crack.

The radio on the desk in the room was issuing orders. "If you are in Xenia right now, take cover. Get to an inside room, the basement, whatever. The National Weather Service has issued a tornado warning..."

Sam's attention was drawn to the door where Walt was. Outside they could hear an incredible roar along with the sounds of breaking glass. Then the lights flickered a couple of times and went out, leaving the room in darkness. The radio fell silent also.

"Don't anyone move," the man who had led the others to the room said. "Walt, what's it like out there?"

Walt opened the door a little wider. "I don't know, it's kinda weird."

Sam noticed it, too. For all the noise they were hearing a few seconds earlier, it was strangely quiet. He thought of the term people would probably use to describe it: dead calm.

"C'mon Wayne, let's go see." Walt motioned for Sam to join him as he opened the door, and Sam followed Walt to the front of the dealership the way Sam had left the night before. Broken glass and wet papers lay everywhere, but the building seemed to be okay.

Sam looked outside, and realized the first of Ziggy's predictions was true. The grocery store across the street had a corner missing. The bricks and debris laid scattered like a child's building blocks.

"I'll go get the others," Walt said behind him. "Go home, Wayne. But be careful." Walt turned and went back to the room they had used for refuge.

"Call Wayne's mother." Al's voice behind him startled Sam, who was

still looking at the destruction in the street and hadn't noticed the sound of the Imaging Chamber door opening.

"Al, the phones won't work." Sam turned and gestured toward the desk. "The electricity is out."

"Try it. Here's the number." Al held up the handlink so Sam could read the display.

Surprisingly, Sam could hear a dial tone when he picked up the receiver. He dialed Wayne's phone number and listened to the ring on the other end.

"Hello?" a very nervous and upset Mrs. Garber asked.

"Mom? Are you okay?"

"Wayne, thank God! I'm fine. I went downstairs to Estelle's apartment when the warnings came out. Are you okay?"

"Uh, yeah. How is everything?" Sam noticed people beginning to come out of the different buildings and meet in the street.

"The apartment is okay."

"Great! Everyone around there okay?"

"Yes, most of the neighbors are in the street right now."

"Okay, Mom. I want you to stay put. I'll be home in a while, but I might stop to help some people on the way. All right?"

"Wayne, please be careful."

"I will, Mom. Promise. Bye." Sam put down the receiver just as Walt came back up front with a couple of the other mechanics.

"What are you still doing here?" Walt asked. "I told you to go home."

"I called my mother to let her know we were okay."

Walt gave Sam the same suspicious look that Sam gave Al when he was told to phone Wayne's mother. Walt picked up the receiver and placed it to his ear. "Wayne, the phone is dead."

Sam glanced at Al and then looked back at Walt. "I just used that phone."

"It's dead now." Walt replaced the receiver. "Get out of here, Wayne. Go home."

Sam nodded, then carefully stepped through what was left of the showroom door. Al met him outside.

"Okay, Al, what am I supposed to do now?"

"Uh, Sam, Ziggy still isn't sure--"

"What do you mean, Ziggy isn't sure?" Sam watched as Al shrugged his shoulders. "That's what she's supposed to do...be sure!" The Observer shook his head, and the time traveler threw up his hands. "Great."

"There's still the sixty-five percent probability that whatever it is you have to do will occur between here and the apartment. So, Ziggy suggests you head back there." Al summoned the Imaging Chamber door. "We're still checking. I'll be back in a little bit." And then he disappeared.

Sam crossed the street. True to Al's words, the music store was damaged; the roof completely gone. He stuck his head through the frame of the front door and called out. "Anybody here?"

"Yes." An older man came from the back of the store. "But we're all okay."

"You sure?" When the man nodded, Sam turned and continued his walk.

The school across the street didn't look too bad on the outside, but Sam could tell the structure was badly damaged from peeking in through a broken window. Pieces of the ceiling lay on the floor, and deep cracks ran up the walls. Turning around, he saw what he took to be a teacher and two students coming out of the building. "Everyone okay?"

"Yes," the teacher answered. "We've accounted for everyone."

"Miss Little, I got scraped." One of the students held up his arm.

Sam looked at the injury, but it wasn't too deep. "You'll be okay, just make sure you clean it real well." Then he remembered and quickly added, "But you'll probably need a tetanus shot." The young boy made a face, and the teacher put her arm around him. "I'm sure the police or someone will be here soon," Sam said. In fact, only seconds after the tornado went through, the sounds of sirens from various rescue and police agencies began, and would continue throughout the night. "Where do you live?"

"I live over there." The boy pointed in the direction Al had told Sam to take the day before.

"I'll stay here with Cindy," the teacher assured Sam. "Can you take Tony home?"

"Sure, I'll walk him home." As Sam led the boy across the street, he noticed damage to a few more buildings. Tony noticed it too. "Pretty scary, huh?" Sam asked him.

"I saw it, it was big." Tony was shaking. "There!" He stopped and pointed at an undamaged house. "There's my house, and it's okay!"

Sam walked Tony up to the front door and knocked. A woman answered. Before Sam could say anything, she grabbed Tony and hugged him. "Tony, are you okay? I was so worried."

"Mom, I'm fine," replied the boy, embarrassed by the attention.

"He's got a scrape on his arm, but it's not too bad. He'll need a tetanus shot, though," Sam told the worried mother.

"Thank you for bringing him home." She shook his hand.

"No problem, I'm trying to make my way home, myself."

"Good luck. From what they're saying on the radio, there's more destruction just north of here."

Sam left Tony with his mother and continued down the street towards the park. He stopped just in front of the high school. Yellow buses lay in the middle of the building like discarded toys, and half the building was flattened. Police and rescue workers surrounded what was left.

"Is everyone okay?" Sam asked a nearby policeman.

"We're pretty sure everyone got out okay. We've got crews in there checking it out."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"Not here. We don't want any more people in the building than necessary."

Sam turned to see Al standing on the corner, and he raised his shoulders in question. Al shook his head. "There were some kids in there practicing a play or something, but they're all okay."

As Sam walked toward the hologram, he noticed the destruction in the park. What few trees were left were wrapped in debris or stripped of their limbs, and all the glass was broken out of the pavilion. People were standing in front of the houses across from the park. "Well?" he asked Al.

"Sam, I don't know..."

"Well, I'll just keep helping people until you do know. Go ask Ziggy again." Sam watched his friend disappear once more behind the Imaging Chamber door. He asked everyone he came up to if they were okay. Most of the people looked a little dazed, but responded that they were fine.

"But I want to find her now!" Sam overheard the protests of a young teenage girl arguing with her mother as they stood on the sidewalk in front of one of the tornado-damaged houses.

"You are not going back in there," the older woman insisted.

"What's wrong?" he asked the woman. "Is someone missing?" He glanced up at the house. The entire roof was gone, as was the left side wall. The structure looked like someone had thrown down and smashed a doll's house.

"We're all okay, but she thinks she needs to go back in and find her cat," the mother answered, indicating the girl. Behind her stood two young boys, wide-eyed and scared.

Sam looked back up at the house, then at the girl. Everyone looked shocked and dazed, but otherwise uninjured. "Your mom is right," he told her. "You should wait until someone says it's safe to go back in."

"And how long do you think that will take?" she asked skeptically.

"What if she's hurt?"

He glanced up at the house again, then looked to the mother this time.

"How about if I go with her?"

"Are you sure it's safe?" The mother looked at the house.

"I think so. We won't go in if it doesn't look, uh, safe." Sam wasn't sure what he was saying, he had no way of knowing the integrity of the building.

"Be careful," the mother cautioned as the two started up the steps. Sam followed the girl up to the wide open front door. He grabbed her shoulders before she could go in, and he noticed she was shaking.

"Wait, we go in together." Once inside, he noted that the staircase ran along the right side of the house, opposite from the missing wall. "Where do you think your cat is?"

"The basement. That's where we were. I couldn't find her before the storm hit." Sam followed the girl along the wall to another set of stairs that ran under the first, down to the basement.

"My name is Wayne. What's yours?"

"Carol." She was still shaking.

"Okay, Carol. We're going to go downstairs, me first. But we're going to take it slow, okay?" She nodded. Sam started down the staircase, carefully testing each step before putting his full weight on it. Once at the bottom, he stopped and looked around. "Come here." He motioned for her to step in front of him, and he took her by the shoulders again. "Now, where do you think she is?"

Carol shrugged. "I'm not sure."

They took a couple of hesitant steps toward the center of the basement, looking around to the corners. And they both jumped when they heard a loud pop.

Carol froze. "What was that?"

Sam looked down. He had stepped on a small bag of potato chips; the bag had burst beneath his foot. He started laughing. So did Carol. "I think we needed that bit of comic relief." They stood there for a couple of seconds, then Sam asked, "Any ideas?"

"She hides behind the stairs sometimes."

"Okay." Carol led him to the back of the steps they had just come down. There was a set of shelves there leading to a hole in the wall. Sure enough, when Sam looked up just beyond the highest shelf, a pair of eyes looked back at him. He reached up and pulled the cat out and handed her down to her owner.

"Thank you."

"No problem. Now, let's get out of here." He followed the girl up the stairs and out of the house. *I couldn't have been here to save a cat*, he thought as he headed back towards the sidewalk. Then he saw Al motioning to him from across the street.

"Al, did you guys figure anything out?" Sam whispered as he reached the hologram.

"We're not too sure, but there's an eighty-four percent chance that--"

Al was interrupted by a shouted "Hey!" from the park. They both turned to see two teenagers half-carrying another man from the pond area. Sam rushed down to see what was wrong.

"He says he was fishing and didn't pay any attention to the storm until it was too late," one of the teenagers explained.

"Got hit by some flying garbage," the man gasped.

Sam took a quick look. The man appeared to have some broken ribs, and he was bruised pretty badly. Nothing life threatening, but he did need medical attention. "Okay, can you bring him up to these steps?" he asked, indicating the house he just rescued the cat from. The teenagers nodded.

"All right, careful." The youths gently led the man to the steps and helped him sit down. "We're going to take you to the hospital, okay?" The man nodded.

Sam stood up, then asked the small crowd gathering around, "Does anyone here have a car that works?"

A lady spoke up and pointed to a house two doors down. "I think mine will work, but the side window is broken."

Sam and one of the teenagers helped the man up and led him to the car. The woman had gone back into the house and brought out a set of keys, which Sam used to start the car while the teenagers brushed the glass off the back seat and helped the man in. The owner of the car got in beside Sam.

"You okay back there?" Sam asked, looking into the rear view mirror.

The man groaned in response. Sam put the car in gear and backed out of the driveway. He remembered Al had told him the hospital was two blocks from the park. Al! he suddenly thought. *He was going to tell me what I was supposed to do!* He glanced around outside, but his friend was nowhere to be found. He looked back at the passenger in the back seat, obviously in pain. *Oh, well, this guy needs supplies I don't have here. Al will just have to catch up with me at the hospital.*

But once at the hospital, Sam didn't have time to look for Al. The Emergency Room staff had their hands full. The hospital was running on generator power, and injured people were coming in from everywhere. What ambulances that could get through brought in the more seriously hurt. The place looked like an Army hospital in a war zone. Patients were scattered on litters, gurneys, beds, any kind of surface along the corridors and hallways. Doctors and nurses were running from makeshift bed to makeshift bed, doing their best to keep up with the influx of new arrivals, some coming in by ambulance, some brought in by neighbors and friends who had used any sturdy item they could find, including doors and broken tabletops.

"I want to help," he told the first nurse he could find once his passenger had been seated and attended to.

She glanced at him quickly. "Okay, take these bags and tape," she said as she handed him the supplies. "Cover all the water fountains on this floor. The supply might be contaminated. No one drinks out of any of them."

"No, I can help out in--" Sam began to protest, then paused as he realized what the nurse had just told him. "The water supply is contaminated?"

"We're not positive, but we can't take a chance."

"But, then how are you--"

"We've got sterile supply coming from Dayton and the Air Force Base. Look, I don't have time to chitchat. Are you going to help or not?"

A quick glance assured Sam that everyone was needed to do something. "Sure," he answered, raising the roll of tape. "I'll be back when I'm finished for another job."

For the first time since speaking to Sam, the nurse smiled. "I'll have one waiting for you."

Sam went from drinking fountain to drinking fountain, carefully taping the handles and covering the faucets while marking "No Drinking" on the bags. As he worked, he watched the other doctors and nurses going from patient to patient, disaster training working, but stress showing through. He offered help more than once, however, outside of holding compresses on patients for a moment or two, he was turned down on almost all counts.

The last water fountain safely covered, Sam made his way back to the Emergency Room. He found the nurse he talked to when he first arrived, and was about to ask for another job when a rescue team burst through the doors with another victim.

"Head trauma!" the ambulance driver shouted as he and another worker wheeled a gurney through the already crowded waiting room. An unconscious man lay on top with a bloody bandage wrapped around his head. Even though the man's arms were littered with broken glass, Sam knew the head injury required the first look. Early treatment would be the difference between life and death.

"Oh Lord, that's what most of the serious ones have been coming in with," the nurse exclaimed as she rushed to the victim's side, gurney still moving.

Sam followed her. "I can help." He was already reaching for the bandage to remove it and begin an examination.

"You can help by finding a doctor," the nurse replied as she pushed him away and started her own examination.

Sam wanted to shout back at her, "I am a doctor," but a quick glance in glass of one of the framed posters on the wall reflected back Wayne's youthful face. He relegated himself to looking for someone the nurse would believe in.

He quickly found a likely candidate with a stethoscope bent over another man lying on a litter on the floor just down the hall. "There's a new head

trauma just brought in by the rescue team. Nurse says you're needed stat!"

The doctor looked up at him briefly with a nod of thanks before taking off in the direction Sam had just come from. Sam replaced him at the patient's side, wishing he, too, had a stethoscope and other necessary equipment to complete an examination. He leaned over the man on the floor.

"Hey, Doc, you still there?" the man moaned.

"No, the doctor had to go look after someone else. What seems to be the problem?" Sam asked.

"Got whacked in the back from something, not sure," the man answered slowly as he tried to open his eyes. "Doesn't hurt much, but my chest is tight."

"Did you tell the doctor that?" Sam questioned as he opened the man's collar a little wider.

"Didn't get a chance," he answered, breathing a little more labored.

"Any pain in your arm?"

"A little. Comes and goes."

Sam realized he was talking to someone who had just had or was about to have a heart attack. "Are you on any kind of heart medication?"

"Naw, wife keeps telling me to get checked, but, who has time?" The man tried to chuckle, then grimaced in pain. "God, there it goes again," he gasped as he clutched his left arm.

"Okay, stay calm. We'll take care of you." Sam glanced up for a doctor or nurse. The two rescue workers who brought the other victim in were leaving, and Sam jumped up to grab the driver of the ambulance. "This man is having a heart attack!" he told them as they rushed to help.

In the short time Sam took to stand up and look around, the patient on the floor had turned an ashen gray and stopped breathing. The driver knelt beside the man to check him quickly. He looked up at his partner. "No pulse, no respiration."

Sam pushed the other man aside and got down on his knees, immediately beginning CPR and resuscitation on the man in tandem with the ambulance driver. That freed the driver's partner to search for a doctor.

It seemed like hours before the partner returned with someone. Sam and the driver were still working on the unconscious man, keeping him alive.

"My name's Dr. LeBlanc." The man kept introductions short and to the point. "Are you okay with what you're doing, son?" The question was directed at Sam.

"Yes, sir," Sam answered, still applying CPR.

"Okay, easy now. We're transferring him to the gurney, then to coronary." Sam was too busy helping with the patient to notice the surprise in the doctor's eyes as he skillfully helped move the patient from the litter on the floor to the gurney from the ambulance, then continued procedures on him as they wheeled the man down the hall.

"Coronary" turned out to be a corner of the Intensive Care Unit hastily prepared for victims with heart and respiratory problems. No beds were immediately available, so the "team" worked on the patient right from the gurney. It took a little time, but the patient was finally stabilized and sent back out with the ambulance for transfer to a hospital in nearby Dayton.

"That was a good job, son," the doctor commended once the crisis was over. "The man probably owes you his life."

"Just helping out, sir. And I want to do more," Sam insisted.

"All right. Follow me."

Although Sam never got another chance that night to really use his doctoring skills, he helped out where he could, consoling patients, aiding family members in the search for loved ones, transcribing names and information for the doctors, and moving supplies from area to area. The nurses and doctors on duty, some borrowed from surrounding communities, expressed their gratitude for his help, not always with words, but at least with a tired smile or nod of the head.

It was almost eleven PM before activity in the hospital started to stabilize. "Wayne, why don't you go home?" a nurse who had introduced herself earlier as Becky asked Sam. "You've done a lot already, and things are

slowing down."

"But there's still--" he began to protest.

"You look tired," she admonished. "Go home."

Sam wanted to tell her she looked tired, too, but he then he remembered how long it had been since he spoke to Wayne's mother.

"Okay, I probably need to go check on my mom."

Becky kissed him on the forehead. "Thank you so much, you've been a real help."

Sam smiled. "No problem." He turned and walked out of the hospital. It was nighttime, and unusually dark. Because the electricity was out over the city, there were no street or house lights, so the hospital looked strangely bright. Al was standing in the parking lot lighting a cigar.

"You did it, kid."

"What did I do, Al?" Sam asked as he walked up to the hologram.

"Well, the fatality count from the tornado went down by one. Maybe by helping out in the Emergency Room, you gave the real doctors time to work on someone who needed it."

"Al, I *am* a real doctor. Who was saved?" Sam recalled the man on the litter in the hallway. "Was it someone who had a heart attack? I performed CPR on a guy. Was it him?"

Al looked down and read the display of the handlink. "No, kid. Says here it was a Jason Smith. Came in with a head wound. This time around there was a doctor available to give him immediate help." The Observer looked up.

Sam frowned. "No, Al, I helped with a heart attack victim. They transferred him to another hospital once he was stabilized."

Al punched buttons as the communications device squealed. "Wait, Sam. Here's the answer. The ambulance guys who transferred the guy you helped out with are the same ones who brought Jason in."

"But I sent the doctor over to have him look at the head wound. Then the guy who the doctor had been looking at had a heart attack--"

"Just like he did in the original history," Al interrupted. "He lived through it then, and he lived through it now, thanks to you. And, since you freed a doctor to look at Jason, he's alive now, too."

Sam shook his head. "I just wish they would have let me done more, Al."

"They thought you were just a kid, Sam. They didn't know." The handlink beeped, and Al read the display. "This is interesting."

"What's that?" Sam moved over to where he could see the output.

"Now Wayne doesn't go to Chicago right away. Once he becomes a doctor, he works on a medical team for the Red Cross that specializes in disaster work." Al looked up. "You see, Sam, sometimes it isn't one big event, just a couple little ones that add up."

Sam smiled. He was tired but he felt good...and hungry. He hadn't eaten since lunch. "Maybe Mrs. Garber has some more chocolate cake at the apartment," he said out loud. But Sam never got chance to find out, because just as he said that last sentence, blue haze enveloped him, and he leaped.



Nightmare Revisited

by

Kim Round

Dr. Sam Beckett was unable to stop staring at the Leapee. Up until now, the newcomer lay catatonic on the Waiting Room table. Mumbling unintelligible disconnected numbers and letters, the stranger built Sam's frustration. In turn, Verbena Beeks leaned closer to the displaced individual, calmly attempting to interpret the moans.

"Sam, if we can't get Al's whereabouts from this person, Ziggy is eventually going to find him," Verbena briefly consoled the Project Director. She didn't want to miss the Leapee's clipped utterances.

Sam would not be soothed. Seeing through Al's aura, he fretted that perhaps Ziggy was already too late. Verbena did not possess Sam's unique point of view. Unlike the Project Director's, her neurons and mesons were not connected with Al's. Otherwise, the psychiatrist may have been more alarmed. No, it was obvious to Sam, the admiral had leaped into a exceedingly unhealthy middle aged white male. Exhibiting a chalky yellow complexion and sunken cheeks, the stranger looked like he hadn't had a decent meal in months... years?

A disturbing supposition plagued Sam. What if Al had leaped into a skid row alcoholic? While Al's own body was no longer alcohol dependent, he had to be conscientious for the rest of his life. Perhaps, if Al's memory wasn't so swiss cheesed, Sam wouldn't find the prospect so terrifying. However, the former Observer was afflicted with half memories and half truths. In his confusion, Al might not remember his old nemesis and how difficult it was to beat it.

Sam's pondering was interrupted. Mumbling something that sounded like, "Lieutenant", the Leapee captured the physicist's flustered attention once more.

"Sam!" Verbena whispered in shock, "I think he's repeating...his name, rank, and serial number."

Returning Dr. Beek's horrified expression, Sam fought the urge to give in and scream at God, Fate or Time. No, he couldn't jump to conclusions, not now.

"Did you get a name, Verbena?" Sam asked, barely controlled. Al was probably much worse off than even he originally thought.

"Robert L. Mason? Ziggy, run a history on a Lt. Robert L. Mason, serial number 3245-6112-332," Verbena instructed, running a shaky hand over her forehead.

"My records show Lt. Robert L. Mason was a Naval pilot shot down, during the Vietnam conflict, on September 28, 1969. Mason was captured by the Viet Cong and died after undergoing interrogation on April 11, 1970. More data is available..." the computer responded with vain efficiency.

"What are the chances that Al is there in 1970?" Sam commanded.

There was a brief pause.

"I postulate with 95.7% accuracy that you will find Admiral Calavicci leaped into Robert Mason..."

Sam didn't wait to hear the rest of it. Already, the physicist was racing to the Control Room at break neck speed.

"Gooshie! Do you have the Imaging Chamber on-line?" Sam blew into the room.

"Ziggy just fed me the destination, Dr. Beckett. It'll be about three minutes." The head programmer feverishly worked at the main console. Gooshie had aimed to keep the information quiet. Nonetheless, there were people present in the Control Room, who were visibly upset, most notably, the admiral's girlfriend.

Tina hesitantly put her hand on Sam's arm.

"Is he really back there?" she queried. Tina's bouncy air-head persona was gone now. Suddenly, she looked much older than Sam knew her to be.

"We think so, Tina," Sam said quietly, drawing his best friend's long time lover into a comforting embrace.

"Sam, he won't be able to handle it... He used to have nightmares...wake up screaming or crying. Even the night before you leaped into Havenwell...he..." Tina murmured the information softly, so the others wouldn't hear. Abruptly, her throat tightened and she couldn't go on.

"Dr. Beckett, Imaging Chamber is on-line!" Gooshie shouted.

Squeezing Tina's hands, Sam attempted to at least look confident, for her sake.

"Tina, this time he has me. He won't be alone," Sam replied soothingly.

Tina blinked her wet eyes and watched as Sam sprinted toward the Imaging Chamber.

* * *

The empty Chamber transformed into a burst of swirling images. Until the jungle abruptly emerged around him, Sam was disoriented. Getting his bearings, the physicist frantically searched the landscape. Straight in front of him, a figure lay slumped in a tiger cage. The form was still. However, the cage was swaying slowly, it's movement generated by the hot wind.

Charging toward the enclosure, Sam prayed it wouldn't be his friend's body he'd find lying limp in the high afternoon sun. Unfortunately, fate had other plans. The physicist beheld Al's battered and bloodied frame, tattered pants displaying knees skinned raw. Perhaps, to prevent an escape attempt, the VC had slashed the admiral's bare feet. Bitterly shaken, Sam eyed the bruises covering most of Al's left side and the blood dripping from his lacerated shoulder.

"Oh God, Al, you must have leaped in for the interrogation," Sam whispered, feeling his own eyes sting.

Goading himself for not locating Al more swiftly, Sam stood frozen. If he had just been here a few hours earlier, he could have been with Al. Sam might have even helped him avoid the interrogation, altogether. Now, the admiral was unconscious, totally unaware of even Sam's presence.

Smelling blood, the huge mosquitoes were ruthless. Sam questioned how Al could combat a case of malaria while leaping. Had he, himself, ever been hurt during a leap? Sam couldn't remember. Most of those memories had faded. If Al survived and eventually leaped home, Sam hoped Al's reverse swiss cheesed brain would lose this leap first.

Al tensed his muscles with approaching consciousness. Pain stabbed at him from all sides, then settled into to a dull roar claiming his mid-section. Instinctively, Al recalled when the body hurt in too many places, one only felt pain where it hurt the most. The rest of his body felt numb, like it belonged to someone else. Weakly, he wondered if his body did, in fact, belong to someone else.

"Al?" Sam waited but there was no response. *Damn it! If he was just here in the flesh, he'd be able to do something.* Pushing his feeling of futility aside, Sam reminded himself that Al only needed to survive to leap again.

"Ziggy, was Al just here to go through the interrogation for Lt. Mason?" Sam ventured a guess.

"Lt. Mason was very weak before the interrogation, Dr. Beckett, both mentally and physically. He wasn't able to survive the beating and the complications from it. There's a 82% chance that Admiral Calavicci leaped in to Lt. Mason to help him survive till they move him to Hanoi next week. He must not be interrogated again."

A recollection from one of Sam's history classes (or was it something Al said?) brought him up short. All POW's in the outlying camps did get moved to the Hanoi Hilton in 1970. There, the conditions were better. As Sam remembered it, the routine use of torture ended shortly afterwards. The heat was on the North Vietnamese. Nixon had called world attention to it's violations of the Geneva convention. The previous President, Lyndon Johnson, was hesitant to make such a move, fearing the result would spell even worse

treatment of the POW's.

"So, Al just needs to stay here long enough to insure that Lt. Mason is not interrogated again?" Sam pressed the computer.

"That is correct, Dr. Beckett," the Ziggy responded smugly.

Sam let out a heavy sigh.

"Ziggy, I don't know if Al can stay alive until tomorrow, let alone a week, in this hell hole," he commented, sparing a glance at the atrocities around him.

"The admiral has done it before," the computer postulated.

"I know, Ziggy, but I don't think they could have interrogated him like this every time. No one could last six years under these conditions."

"That's correct, Dr. Beckett. There are no living survivors from this camp."

The physicist's apprehension grew exponentially.

"Did the VC purposely execute them?" Sam pumped with agitation.

"Insufficient data at this time, Dr. Beckett," a surprising note of sympathy caught in the computer generated voice.

Fighting into full consciousness, Al heard Sam's conversation with Ziggy as though it was a dream. *Why was he here anyway? At least, Sam was here.*

"Sam?" Al rasped, not quite sure how he'd found his voice.

"Al, I'm here now," Sam crouched down to look into his friend's dulled eyes.

"Where's now?" Al winced as he tried to move. The cage would never allow him to get comfortable, he knew that. The admiral just never thought he'd need to remember that rather loathsome detail again.

"You're in a POW camp, Al, in 1970. You've just got to hang in there and you'll leap out."

Sam cringed inwardly. This was Al's long time nightmare revisited. On more than one occasion, Sam witnessed his friend's latent post traumatic stress. It usually manifested itself when the older man was particularly tired. Then, Al seemed to fight the war again in his sleep.

The former Observer sluggishly lifted his head and examined the suspension arrangement of the cage.

"Hang in there...Sam...that's real funny," Al tried to force a smile, however, his face protested. Instead, the admiral wearily rested his head against the bamboo bars.

"Ziggy, what's Al's condition?" Sam asked quietly.

"Admiral Calavicci has two hair line rib fractures, a third degree laceration on his shoulder, and assorted bruises and contusions. It is 92% probable, his shoulder will become seriously infected."

"What are his chances for survival over the coming week?" Sam stared at his friend, whose eyes were closing once again.

"There is a 52% probability that the admiral will survive the week with no medical attention. However, given the unknown factor with regard to execution, the admiral's odds dip down to 13%"

Sam considered this for a moment and subsequently felt Al's shadowed gaze upon him.

"Sam...I didn't leap into me, did I?" Al's voice sounded strangely innocent, like a scared little boy. Leaping had stripped away most of his wise guy exterior. With most of his remembrances missing, the admiral had little need for an outside veneer.

"Oh no, Al. No, you leaped into a Lt. Mason," Sam assured, idly wondering why it mattered so much to him.

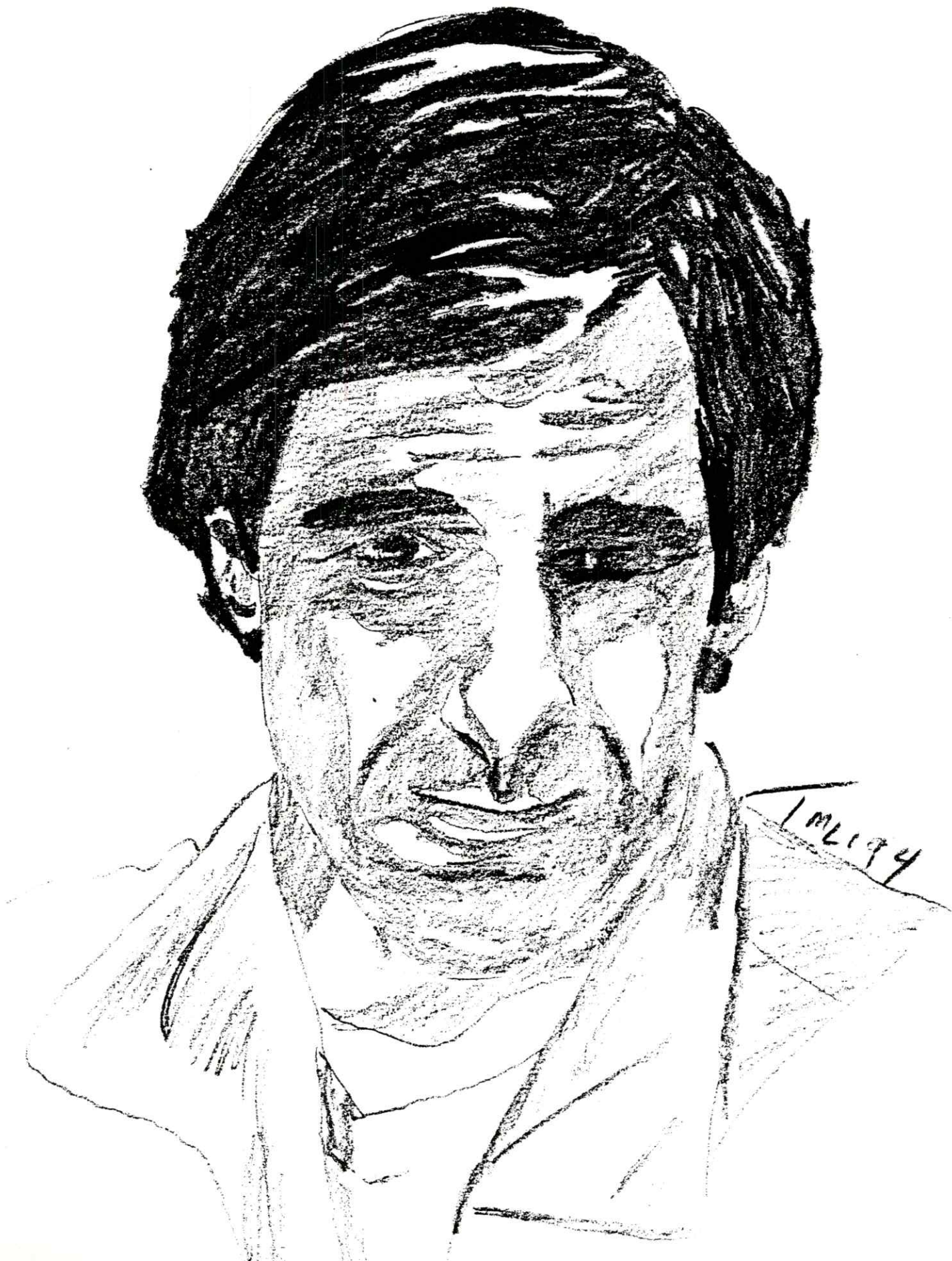
"Oh..." Al was quiet for a few moments. "Somehow, that makes it easier."

Giving the matter further thought, Sam understood that it probably would. Still, he had to concentrate on getting Al out of here.

"Ziggy, what are Al's chances if he escapes?" Sam tried a new tact.

"The odds go up to a 70% chance of survival, given his current condition and the availability of your direction toward sympathetic forces," Ziggy responded.

"How far?" the most significant question was asked.



"7.2 miles southeast."

At Ziggy's reply, Sam felt some hope drift away.

"What's between there and here?" the physicist queried, the skepticism beginning to show in his voice.

"A few dozen Viet Cong soldiers, 43 booby traps, 342 snakes..." Ziggy continued.

Sam glanced down at Al's scored feet.

"Ziggy, there's no way Al can go 7.2 miles," Sam cut the computer off.

"My past experience with Admiral Calavicci and his current service record indicates there is a 70% chance he will be successful," Ziggy insisted.

Bearing witness to the above conversation and understanding little of it, the admiral spoke up.

"Where am I supposed to go?" Al asked groggily.

Sam turned his attention back to him.

"Aw, Al, Ziggy says we got to get you out of this camp," Sam was about to continue but, Al interrupted.

"You invented a billion dollar hybrid computer to tell you that? I could've told you that..."

At least, Al sounded strong enough to be annoyed. However, when Sam checked his friend's expression, he saw understanding there.

"How do you feel, Al?" Sam still wondered if escape would be an option.

The admiral glanced around the camp and suddenly shuddered. While muscles tensed, dark eyes darted across the country side. However, Sam was engrossed in obtaining further data from Ziggy.

"I feel like I need to get out of here, Sam," Al responded emphatically.

Just noticing Al's severe agitation, Sam blinked. The change had come so quickly. Mentally or physically, there was obviously something very wrong.

"Al? Are you remembering something?" he asked gently.

Al gasped for breath. He attempted closing his eyes but, the images would not go away. Shaking uncontrollably, the admiral was starting to hyperventilate.

With Al's memory so swiss cheesed, Verbena had postulated that his post traumatic stress, if triggered, might be harder to control.

"Ziggy! I need Verbena, now! Al, hold on! Just try to take one deep breath. One at a time," Sam pleaded.

Al was in too deep now and couldn't hear his friend's steady support. As panic tried to claim Sam, he felt fingers close around his hand.

"Al...Al, you've got to come back now...that's enough," Verbena soothed resolutely.

With only the sound of her voice, Al felt himself inexplicably relax a little. Who was she? She sounded so familiar... Nonetheless, the pictures were relentless. Wrapping his arms around his legs, Al strained to steel himself against them.

After a few more similar attempts, Verbena shook her head.

"Sam, he's in too deep, you're going to have to let him ride it out. Then, try to keep him distracted. It could be the first wave of memories coming back. He may be alright, after this," Verbena speculated professionally.

Kneeling down, the psychiatrist tried get a look at Al's face, buried in his knees. Unwillingly, Verbena grimaced with sympathy. Reaching out, she tried to brush his hair, but her hand passed through him.

"God, this is so hard, Sam. I mean I knew observing was..." Verbena's words drifted off. *This was hell on earth. Why did Al have to relive this? He was doing so well.*

Realizing her emotional response wasn't going to help Dr. Beckett, Verbena deliberately redirected her thoughts.

"You'll get him out, Sam. You always do. If anyone can do it, Sam, you can..."

Amid the grisly prison camp, Verbena's confidence sounded phoney, even to her.

Nonetheless, Sam didn't seem to notice. Lost in his own thoughts, he responded simply, "In a place like this, Verbena, I don't think we'll have a

second chance."

As they spoke, a VC guard strode to Al's cage. Opening the door, the guard grabbed the admiral by the hair and yanked his head up.

Al's eyes were dazed. As comprehension slowly dawned, adrenalin surged through him. With a strength no one would guess he'd possess, Al seized his captor by the belt and snatched the knife sheathed on his hip. Before Sam and Verbena could react, the guard laid dead at their feet, his throat cut. Throwing himself out of the cage, Al fell momentarily face down in the mud.

Thinking fast, Sam scanned the camp for more VC. Presently, no one else had seen the incident. They had a window of opportunity.

"Al! Al! You've got to move NOW!" Sam yelled.

They were well past the point of no return.

Lifting his head up, the admiral trembled.

"Get his shoes, Al and run! RUN NOW!" the physicist pleaded, unsure Al heard him through his mental fugue.

Scrambling on his hands and knees, the older man pulled the VC's boots off. Al dragged the footwear on, not bothering to tie the laces, and moved quickly toward the jungle.

"Dr. Beckett! You must direct the admiral toward the direction on the handlink!" Ziggy broke in.

Sam let go of Verbena's hand.

"Gooshie! Center me on him!"

Al was crouched over, moving more by instinct than any single thought of the direction he should be going. He had to get away. If he was going to die, he didn't want to do it in that damn cage. They could shoot him or he could trip over a booby trap. In his present state of mind, he'd gladly choose either alternative over remaining anywhere near the camp.

"AL! AL! Listen to me, please!" a familiar voice demanded attention.

Al tripped and landed painfully on the ground.

"Al! This is all for nothing, if you don't go the right way," Sam entreated Al to broach some awareness.

"Gotta keep moving...get away," Al said, rising to his feet.

Sam knelt down and put his face inches from Al's.

"Al, listen to me! LOOK AT ME!" Sam pleaded.

Glazed dark eyes finally stopped darting like those of a frightened animal and settled on the physicist's.

"Al, you have to go Southeast. Ziggy's got the coordinates. You've got to follow me or you're gonna get killed. AL!...DON'T give them the chance they didn't get the last time!" the physicist implored.

As he stared at Sam, recognition flowed into the admiral's eyes. Sam nodded his head. Gazing at his friend's kind features, so different from his captors, Al numbly thought how incongruous it was, a good man like Sam Beckett could be in such an evil place. Actually, he wasn't really here, was he?

"C'mon Al, let's get out of here," Sam urged.

Gritting his teeth, Al hoisted himself up.

"You'll need to find a good place to hide until dark. You won't be able to outrun them. Ziggy says there's a cave hidden under some brush just over there." Sam pointed towards a small outcropping of rocks.

Al bleakly speculated that the guards probably knew all about the cave. Nevertheless, the distant sound of men in pursuit made his heart beat like a jackhammer. He moved as noiselessly as possible, until he was well hidden from the VC now, only a few yards away.

Watching the VC search the area, there was no doubt in Sam's mind, they wanted to give Al a slow, agonizing death. To escape, warranted death, if only as an example to the other prisoners. To kill a guard...the prisoner would beg them to finish him off.

As the soldiers moved off, Sam felt a surge of hatred rising up within himself. In turn, he remembered something that Tom had written him. Before Tom became too hardened by battle, he had outwardly wondered if some of the VC weren't so ruthless because the war was fought on their home soil. It was their land, their friends and relatives, the VC would find ripped to shreds. The Americans lost buddies and that was horrific enough, but they did not find

their wives and children dead in burning villages. Sam endeavored not to hate the VC for what they wanted to do to Al. It took effort.

When he returned, Al was propped up against the cave wall. Sam noted how exhausted he looked. Al's chest heaved from the exertion of running wildly through the jungle. Each deep breath caused a surge of pain from his side. He needed rest and a good hospital, Sam thought ruefully, neither of which were in the offing.

He's too old for this... He should be slowing down a little now, basking in Tina's attention, somewhere warm and safe. Leaping is eventually going to kill him.

"They're gone, Al. You can rest here until dark. Then, you're going to have to get moving," reminded the young man sadly.

"You know, Sam," Al fought to keep his breathing steady and to keep his mind on something other than his current predicament, "I think I remember this girl... She used to bring us water once in a while, when the guards weren't looking...I think she must've lived near the camp. Anyway...she had the biggest, roundest..."

"Al, I thought I still had your dirty mind!" Sam was momentarily stunned.

"...jugs of water I'd ever seen...and it was always on the driest days she'd show up. I wondered why she'd take the chance. She must've known what they'd do to her if they'd caught her. She had the cutest smile..." Al's breathing was smoother.

"Do you know what happened to her?" Sam inquired with curiosity.

"Oh, I don't know. I don't really remember. Sometimes, I used to think I was just imagining her, you know...like she was this angel...cause, it was always during a real dry spell, she'd show up... But, she was real, Sam...at least, I think she was..." The admiral's eyes drifted shut.

"You need to rest, Al. I'm going to have Ziggy monitor your situation. I'm going to go back and get some more information. Are you going to be okay for a while?" Sam asked reluctantly.

Al's answer was a wearied affirmative grunt. Curling onto his side, the older man wrapped his arms around himself, already half asleep. Sam punched the handlink and stepped back into the present.

Greeted by concerned stares as he stepped out of the Imaging Chamber, Sam shook his head.

"We've got to get him out of there...Ziggy, what are the chances now that Al makes it?"

"I postulate a 50% chance for success," the computer responded coolly.

"Wait a minute, Ziggy! I thought you said before that Al had a 70% chance for survival?"

Sam was growing extremely agitated. Every time he thought this leap had reached it's worst, it sunk to a new level.

"Yes, Dr. Beckett, I did. However, that was before Admiral Calavicci killed the guard. During his escape, he suffered internal injuries." Ziggy back pedaled.

"You mean, Al hurt himself running from the camp?"

"It was actually during the struggle with the guard. Admiral Calavicci's lung is in danger of being perforated."

Sam slammed his hand down on the Control console. He wasn't given to outward displays of anger but, he couldn't ever remember feeling this helpless. Perhaps, maybe he could remember and that was the problem...

Donna approached him from behind and slipped her arms around his broad shoulders.

"Sam, he's resting now. You've got to get some rest too. You haven't slept in 24 hours and you've got to give him your best," she prodded gently.

"Al would never go to sleep and leave me like that," Sam's loyalty was bordering on irrational. However, Donna was well aware his emotional state was connected to this particular leap.

"Sam, I can give you a list of times one of us personally dragged him out of here. He couldn't help you, if he wasn't thinking straight," Donna conveyed.

Donna took Sam's hand. Al's absence obviously forced her to grow up just a little.

"Sam, please go..." she requested simply.

Running a weary hand over the back of his neck, Sam let himself be escorted out of the Control Room.

* * *

Despite Donna's best intentions to calm him, Sam lay awake staring at the ceiling. Beside him lay two empty mugs. Originally, they held decaffeinated tea intended to induce sleepiness. At least, that was what the package said.

Donna had been taking a shower and was surprised to find Sam wide awake when she came out. Inwardly, she sighed in frustration. One man was in physical pain, the other in just as much emotionally. As much as she wanted to, Donna couldn't do anything to help Al. Nonetheless, she could look after Sam.

"Al's been through this before. He's a very strong man," Donna quietly stated.

"Donna, Al is not in his thirties anymore," her husband replied grimly.

"Oh, c'mon Sam, you know Al, he's a survivor. He has that intrinsically."

"And, you're saying he's got more lives than an alley cat... Well, Donna, if you had seen him..."

"Verbena told me. She was pretty shaken up," Donna spoke now in a hushed tone.

"What am I going to do, Donna, if they find him? Tell him jokes while they slowly kill him? Do you know what they'll do to him?"

Seeing her husband's eyes so full of fear, Donna let her emotions slip.

The physicist immediately stopped. It wasn't his wife's fault. Noting Donna's eyes were red with unshed tears, Sam realized the situation was probably hell on her too. Al and Donna had been good friends.

Sam's face was lined with pain and something else...guilt, maybe?

"You feel like it's your fault? Don't you, Sam?" Donna ventured hesitantly.

"I invented the thing, Donna. He wouldn't be back there if..." Sam trailed off.

Donna found herself lacking the words to respond. All she could do was gather her husband in her arms. Sam Beckett, who was so many things to so many people, needed her right now. There was no easy answer and she respected him too much to offer platitudes.

The link on his wrist beeped. Sam activated it, quickly.

"Dr. Beckett? I'm sorry to interrupt you," Ziggy was uncharacteristically considerate.

"What is it, Ziggy?" Sam tensed.

"I have noted an elevation in Admiral Calavicci's internal temperature. I advise that he start making progress toward help or he may..."

"OK, Ziggy, I've got it," Sam jumped out of bed. Roughly, he pulled his trousers and a shirt on.

With one last embrace from Donna, the physicist was on his way to the Control Room.

* * *

Materializing in the cave, Sam observed Al gently snoring, still propped against the dirt wall. His friend's normally pale complexion was blotchy with red fever patches.

Crouching down, Sam noted that Al looked so peaceful, even though exhaustion still lined his face. Sam didn't want to wake him but, it was now or never.

"Al?...You got to get going now," the young man asserted softly.

Al stirred into consciousness. Pushing himself up, Al gasped as the

pain was momentarily uncontrollable. Grimacing, he carefully made his way to the mouth of the cave.

"Okay, there's no patrols in the area right now but, about a quarter mile in our direction, there is a booby trap. You're going to have to watch your step," Sam instructed.

"Easy for you to say," Al remarked.

Al began walking and then stopped, abruptly, when he caught the hurt expression on his young friend's face.

"Aw, Sam, you're not beating yourself up for this? Are you, kid?" the admiral asked with fatigue.

"No, I'm fine. We're gonna get you out of here," Sam said resolutely.

"No matter what, Sam, this is not your fault," Al affirmed.

"Shhh, Al. You'd better be quiet now."

* * *

The battered prisoner and hologram had been walking for three miles, once narrowly dodging a patrol only to come within inches of a booby trap. Additional fever patches were showing up on Al's abused skin. The man was bathed in sweat. His feet dragged with every step. Nonetheless, Sam didn't tell him to stop. He wasn't sure he could get Al up and going again. There were times his friend looked like he was moving by pure momentum alone.

Suddenly, Al lost his balance and fell heavily on the ground. Holding his ribs, Al coughed uncontrollably. When Sam observed the blood Al had coughed up, he knew the admiral's lung was perforated. Soon, the lung would collapse. Al couldn't move any further.

"Al, easy now... Maybe, I can get them to come to you..."

Sam wasn't willing to give up yet.

"You gonna trust my rescue to the mentally absent?" Al retorted in a fevered whisper.

"Yeah, I guess the only adults that could see me would fall into that category," Sam pondered aloud.

"...and dumb blondes," Al rasped.

Sam considered his options. However, even as he did so, Al was dragging himself off the path, headed toward the brush.

"Al, there could be snakes in there! What are you doing? Al!" Sam yelled with incredulity.

With a few seconds more regard, Sam knew what exactly what Al was doing. His friend was moving toward the thickest brush, hoping he'd be long dead before the VC could find him. In effect, Al was burying himself. The tears burned Sam's eyes as Al painfully launched himself off the path and rolled into the jungle.

Settling under the shade of thick leaves, Al felt numb. The pain was gone. For what seemed the first time in days, the admiral stopped being scared. Sam was kneeling next to him and saying something but, it was so hard to hear. It just made him feel good to see Sam there. Looking up into his face, Al thought about the friend who had seen him through failed relationships, alcoholism, listened to his past when he couldn't bring himself to talk to anyone else, and now this... Sam always had been there for him.

Forgetting Sam was a hologram, Al tried to reach out to him and watched his fingers pass through.

"Sam...I want to go home." Al's voice was a whisper.

When a chill racked his body, he wondered if it wouldn't be long, he'd be going somewhere. Al just wasn't sure where.

Sam viciously punched the handlink. Keying up the door, the physicist ran out of the Imaging Chamber.

"Oh Sam, don't leave him there by himself!," Tina cried.

"I'm going to leap into him!" Sam exclaimed, frantically searching for a Fermi suit.

Pulling Sam aside, Verbena sadly shook her head.

"Sam, it wouldn't do any good. Al's only got a few minutes left. Ziggy says that if you leaped into him, his body would bounce back here and there

would be nothing we could do for him in time. He's too far gone. Then, you'd be lost leaping again... Just go." Verbena's tears were running unchecked down her face, "Go be with him. He doesn't have to die alone."

Gooshie put his arm around the Project psychiatrist and walked her back to the Console. He still had to function but, he could comfort Verbena while doing so.

Tina appeared older than ever. Taking her hand, Sam led her into the Imaging Chamber. At least, Al could see her one more time. Maybe, saying "goodbye" would help Tina accept his death better. Besides, Sam wasn't sure he could stand being alone with the results of his experiment gone wrong. He'd killed his best friend.

He believed in me and what did it get him? He got the grave, in Vietnam, he avoided the first time around.

* * *

Everything was so vivid now, Al reflected. All the memories he previously could half recall, touched him with amazing clarity. He could remember everything, especially, the young woman kneeling next to Sam. Wishing God, Fate or Time would just let him hold her a few more minutes, Al silently locked gazes with her.

The former Observer thought he felt some of Tina's tears fall on him but, then, realized it had started to rain.

Suddenly, the girl from before, the one who brought water, was beside Sam and Tina. Smiling, the girl motioned to the sky. Her smile said it was raining. He could drink as much as he wanted.

Al opened his mouth to catch a few raindrops and...leaped.

* * *

"So, you're saying that Ziggy was wrong?" Sam asked Gooshie impatiently.

"Apparently, Al was there to help Lt. Mason escape. However, when he wasn't able to do that, he did the next best thing. He didn't let Lt. Mason die in a cage," Verbena answered for the bewildered programmer.

"But, what about Al? You said, even if he leaped back here, he'd die within minutes. I've been to the Waiting Room, he's fine," Sam countered.

"Well, this would happen with you as well, Sam. Your body would heal itself during the leap out. Al's not coming home next time but, he will someday," Donna interjected.

Sam shook off their concerned glances as he stalked into the Waiting Room. Al lay motionless on the bed. Taking his hand, Sam sat down beside him and ran his other hand through Al's unruly hair. The curls falling down over Al's forehead were not exactly military. He was in sore need of a haircut.

"You scared the hell out of me, you know," Sam whispered.

There was no response from the admiral.

"If you ever decide to crawl into a hole and die again, I'm going to tell Tina... Aw, hell, Al, I don't know what I'll tell her," Sam's voice broke as tears began to claim him.

"Now, I know why you do all those crazy things...God, Al, I'm so sorry. I've put you into another kind of a prison, haven't I?"

Sam wept silently.

"You know that's not true, Sam," Donna's voice broke the silence.

Sam turned around and allowed his wife into his arms.

"That's Al, you know. He was living fast, drinking too much, partying too hard, sleeping with someone new all the time. You saved him from self destructing, Sam. You gave him something to do with all that energy of his. You gave him something to focus so intently on, he didn't need to run away from his problems anymore. You saved his life, Sam. He loves the Project and he loves you. He wouldn't blame you for this." Donna brushed some of the tears from Sam's cheek.

"I blame me for this, Donna," her husband whispered.

"God, Sam, you're not perfect. You can't take all of this on. Al

wanted to help you. He said, if he was given the chance, he'd leap for a while. He wanted you to come home so badly. You'd been through so much."

Donna took a breath and continued resolutely.

"Sam, you're the one who has to fix the Retrieval Program. All the time you were gone, we weren't able to do it. If you want to help Al, put that genius head of yours to work and get him home."

Sam considered this for only a moment. Without another word, he rose to return to the Control Room. When they were finally able to tear Sam away from Ziggy, he'd fallen asleep next to the main console...thirty six hours after Al leaped.

CHOICES: Two Sonnets by Jane Mailander

Freedom of Choice

You told me I could do this on my own,
That my own strength and courage was enough;
That I could choose from all the timelines shown
And pick the best one--though it would be tough.
I could--I *can*. Your wisdom saw this plain:
That someday I would have to fly away
To be the lonely angel fighting pain
And death that signals Entropy's decay.
I made a choice to dance through Time's design;
I chose to save my brother, not my friend--
Now, too, the choice to give you love is mine.
My brother has my life. Now let it end.
My choice gives hundreds happiness, not me;
Through them I live. Now I am truly free.



The Price of Freedom

I saw her in my wallet, and I *knew*
What you had done, and when--and I knew why.
The memories flooded in, all fresh and new,
Beside my old ones. I began to cry.
They didn't understand that I can see
The changes you have made in every life--
That I remember my old history,
Though now I hold a picture of my wife.
To them I'd headed Starbright all these years
Of marriage to my Beth, my four girls born;
Our budget news was good. Why all my tears?
I couldn't answer. I could only mourn.
Four children, or my friend. Your wish I'd know.
And now I have no choice but let you go.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME

by

Patricia Poole

April 3, 1969 - San Diego, California

Sam leaped, and the universe changed.

December 22, 1999 - Stallion's Gate, New Mexico

Al Calavicci was hurrying back to the Imaging Chamber when the wave of time displacement hit him. He stood very still, and let it wash over him. There was no point in hurry now anyway. Sam had leaped, away from that eerie bar "Al's Place", into the unknown.

This time the buffeting surf felt spiked with changes, dangerous and somehow personal. Al wondered what the hell Sam had been up to. He sensed everyone around him continuing with their work, unaware of the tidal wave which enveloped him alone. It was always the same. Only Al felt the change, as Time healed up whatever wound Sam Beckett had inflicted on the continuum.

Only Al remembered all the changes. Ziggy was supposed to remember. But when Al mentioned his Apollo 8 mission, Ziggy had contradicted him, and pointed out that Borman, Lovell and Anders had circled the moon on that voyage in Christmas, 1968.

Anders?

Spending five years in a North Vietnamese prison camp, instead of being one of the first men to leave the gravity well of Earth hardly seemed a fair trade. Well, life wasn't always fair.

Al was growing weary of all the remembering, of keeping the time lines straight. What would happen if he ever forgot? When he leaped home, would Sam be able to remember? Or would the original time line be lost forever? What did the original time line mean, anyway, when all that was left of it was Sam and him? Because, no matter what Sam changed, even their own lives, the two of them and the Project remained the same. Al had finally reconciled himself to the fact that he wasn't going to disappear in a puff of paradox.

That didn't mean that newly made history was always easy or pleasant. The storm around him was subsiding. In a moment, Al would probe his memory, and try to figure out what Sam had changed this time.

Oh, My God. Oh, Sam, what have you done?

THE HISTORY:

Samantha Ann Calavicci was born on August 8, 1974. It was an unremarkable birth, and Sammy was in many ways an unremarkable baby. If she was a particularly good-natured and serene child, her first time parents did not note it. Later, her father would observe, "The Joker in the Sky always has one up his sleeve. Sure, the first kid was an angel. If we'd known what was coming, we would have stopped at one."

Beth chose their first daughter's name. She once made an off-hand comment that "a friend of Al's" had suggested it to her. She never elaborated.

Al claimed she had been watching too many "Bewitched" reruns. The twins followed on March 17, 1976. Teresa Elizabeth and Alexis Marie were nicknamed "Contessa" and "Princess". By the time they could walk, the name had changed to "The Kamikaze Kids". From the age of two, they were incorrigible tomboys. If there was no mischief to get into, they made their own. Although fraternal twins, their twin bond was unusually close.

Al and Beth called them "Tessa" and "Lexa". They called themselves "Terry" and "Alex". Eventually, the twins won that tug of war - as usual. Beth complained that everyone thought they had three sons, not three

daughters.

Secretly, Sammy was Al's favorite. She was the image of her mother, and even as a small girl carried with her an aura of calmness, but strength.

Secretly, the twins were Beth's favorites. They attacked life with the same reckless abandon as their father.

Although the universe had changed, one fixed immutable point could not change. Al Calavicci met Sam Beckett on June 15, 1983.

Al was recruiting for Project Star Bright. Although Al had been repatriated too late to be an Apollo astronaut, too late to be part of those glory years, he spent the rest of the 1970's working on unmanned probes at NASA. It was a frustrating time to be part of the space program. So much bright promise was fading. The agency had put him through MIT, and got him his aeronautical engineering degree. For that he was grateful - just not grateful enough to be an administrator of a sinking ship. He wanted out, and when the chance came to oversee Star Bright, he grabbed it.

Al got the lead that Dr. Samuel Beckett might be right for the project from Professor LoNigro at MIT. He was the right age, he had the right qualifications - *more* than the right qualifications. The only problem was, he wasn't interested. He flatly refused to have anything to do with any project connected with the Department of Defence.

Al accepted Sam's final word on the subject, but pointed out that it was his birthday - Al's forty-ninth. Sam could join him for a birthday lunch, couldn't he? They ate at Locke-Ober's and each ordered Samuel Adams beer. They discovered they both followed basketball but weren't fans of the Celtics (a heresy in Boston), liked the city despite the lousy weather, and about a hundred other things they had in common. They left the restaurant just as the dinner rush was starting, exchanged telephone numbers - and didn't give each other another thought for almost six weeks.

Al was back in Boston in early August, and called Sam on a whim. When he discovered it was Sam's thirtieth birthday the next day, he insisted that he would stage a "return birthday engagement". Sam never did find out exactly how Al engineered the party on such short notice, or who had helped him with the guest list. Blow-out birthday bashes weren't Sam's style, but he had shrugged and conceded you only turn 30 once.

Al introduced the petite brunette with the mischievous eyes as his date, Beth.

Neither Sam nor Al could ever give a cogent account of what alchemy occurred between them that night. Through a beery haze, Sam recalled he had expounded his first tentative framework of what would be the string theory. He was surprised, then excited when this stranger paraphrased Sam's musings, cutting to the core of the matter. Never mind that Al boggled at the math, or was as relentlessly practical as any engineer. ("But what can you build with it Sam, and how would you do it?") They both caught fire in shared enthusiasm.

From across the room, Beth watched them and realized that something fundamental had just changed in her life. Later, she recalled, "It was as if God had spot-welded them together."

From August 9, 1983, Dr. Sam Beckett was Director of Design at Project Star Bright. If he had any remaining qualms about being involved in a D.O.D. project, he never voiced them.

It was at Thanksgiving that year that Al confided to Sam, rather shakily, that Beth was pregnant.

"I thought you had that covered," Sam replied.

"Damn it, we did!" Al retorted. "What we seem to have here is a serious method failure."

Sam had replied that it happened...and apparently this time, had happened to Al and Beth. Al had some restless nights, until the results of the amniocentesis arrived. It wasn't that he would love a child with Down's Syndrome any less, but the specter of Trudy's early death still haunted him. The tests showed that the child was genetically normal - and female.

At least it made the name game easier.

When Al asked Sam to be his daughter's godfather, he pointed out that the obvious name choice had already been used in their family. Besides, Beth had decided that this girl would be Catherine. She defied anyone to come up with a masculine diminutive.

Catherine Beckett Calavicci was born on June 15, 1984. From the very beginning, Al dubbed her "the demon child of our declining years". She was alarmingly precocious, startlingly bright. Her first word, when she had her hand slapped for reaching towards a hot stove burner, was "Why?"

From that day on, the questions never stopped.

Al called her his "Kitty-Cat", then "Kit". Beth threw up her hands in mock horror. To her, this girl-child was, would always remain, "Catherine".

Dr. Donna Elesee joined Project Star Bright later that year. Sam Beckett took one look and fell hopelessly in love.

A bewildered Sam asked Al, "Do you believe in love at first sight?" They were in Toronto, for their first international physics conference together.

"Men believe in love at first sight. Women believe in practical things, like love after they figure out if you'll leave the toilet seat up."

Sam sighed that she probably barely knew he was alive. He managed to look like a sick sheep. Al concluded that it was true love.

Al was Sam's "minder" at the conference. He was supposed to see that Sam observed security regulations, spoke to the right people, and didn't speak to the wrong ones.

They got into an amazing amount of trouble, even for them.

When the dust settled, Al persuaded their superiors that Sam's nocturnal visit to the room of the female Soviet physicist was pleasure, not business. Sam fumed. Why hadn't Al told the truth? What would Donna think?

Al shrugged. The truth, he reminded Sam, would buy them more trouble than they needed. Besides, when the story hit home - and it would - there would be no question that Donna would know Sam was alive.

When Sam showed Al the ring he had bought, Al warned, "Take it slow. If you rush her, this one looks like she'll bolt."

Al was right, but for the wrong reasons. Donna was sure about Sam Beckett. But, as she asked Beth, how did you deal with the fact that these two men came as a package deal? Beth laughed, and shrugged. She loved Al. Through everything, he had been worth it. Al loved Sam like a brother, and the two of them had already mapped out the next twenty years of their working lives. Beth *thought* Al was kidding when he told her that he figured Sam would win the Nobel in '88, if they could get everything written and published on schedule. At least Donna could talk shop with both of them.

"So how do you stand it?" Donna persisted. "Al spends so much time with Sam. Most of the rest of the time he seems to be off..." Donna searched for a word, and finished lamely, "socializing."

"Women, you mean?" Beth asked. "Al's a born flirt. It doesn't mean a thing, and heaven knows he's never been unfaithful. But, he'd flirt with a rock if he thought it was female."

"How do you sex a rock?" Donna mused.

"Run it under Al's nose and see if he flirts with it," Beth replied. Then she hugged the younger woman, and told her softly, "I don't blame you for being scared. Deciding to marry any man is tough. Living with someone as driven as Al or Sam is tougher. Sam's probably worse than Al, and they do egg each other on. So, the prospect of putting up with both of them for the rest of your life is giving you second thoughts. But remember, any man comes with excess baggage - a history, a family, faults. I've learned Sam is very special. And," she smiled, "like everyone around here says, Sam's got a great learning curve. He seems very trainable."

"He's not a dog, for heaven's sake!"

"No...it's a good metaphor, though. I have never," she reflected, "been able to completely housebreak Al."

Donna married Sam on June 5, 1985.

Dr. Beckett won the Nobel prize for physics in 1988.

When the doctors concluded that Sam and Donna could not conceive children together, the ache was eased by the fact the Calaviccis' youngest daughter was a fixture in their lives.

At three, she rejected both "Catherine" and "Kit", and announced her name was "Cate". Since Sam had taught her to read, she even insisted on spelling it.

The communal living necessitated by Project Star Bright meant Cate spent her first years constantly in the company of extraordinarily bright adults. She followed Sam around faithfully.

Al insisted she was a walking billboard for "nurture" over "nature". Sam suggested that the only way to find that out for sure was for Al to finally write an I.Q. test. Al insisted that he couldn't sit still for that long...and besides, if he had dodged the boffins for this long, now was no time to give in...and besides, unlike some people he knew, he didn't make a hobby out of writing the damned things...and besides, why didn't Sam go bug Beth, why did he always pick on him...and besides, he already knew he was smarter than his dog Chester and dumber than Sam, so what was the big deal?

Al Calavicci never wrote an I.Q. test.

By her fifth birthday in 1989, Cate learned from Sam how to play the piano. Donna taught her the multiplication table, and that girls could do math. Beth jokingly suggested that they take Cate on a long term lease, since she and Al had their hands full with their three older daughters.

Sammy had sailed into adolescence serenely. At fifteen, she showed the promise of great beauty. Boys called her constantly. Al wondered how could there be so many teenaged boys in the New Mexico desert who could get a classified telephone number. Sammy reminded him that White Sands was nearby. Jet jocks have sons.

Al remembered being a jet jock. Al remembered being fifteen.

Al was terrified.

Terry and Alex attacked adolescence, like an assault on an enemy gun position. They were 13. They were boy crazy. They were car crazy. They started calling all the sons of the jet jocks at the Sands. A sixteen year old driving a convertible started offering them lifts into Alamogordo.

Al remember his first car. Al remembered what you could do in a car that you couldn't do on a motorcycle.

Al was practically apoleptic.

Meanwhile, Cate drove everyone quietly crazy. The teacher at the Project was concerned about her attention deficit in school. Cate complained that she was bored. What was algebra and could she learn it?

In Sunday calls to Pearl Harbor, Thelma Beckett offered no-nonsense advice, and calming words on the perils of raising a prodigy.

Al confessed, "I love them all, Sam. But our little accident, the demon child? I couldn't bear to have missed out on her for anything."

In 1990, when the last "Back to the Future" film hit the screen, Sam and Al giggled in suppressed glee at the silliness of it all. And, couldn't Spielberg come up with anything more credible for the first film than time travel by lightning bolt, for heaven's sake?

Project Star Bright became Project Quantum Leap - same location, same management, new technology, some new personnel. Lots of new government money.

They had anticipated that Sam's Nobel prize would help wrestle money from Congress, but it was never easy. The 18 hour days were often spent equally between research and chasing funding.

Dr. Christina Martinez-O'Farrell joined the Project. She went out of her way to be helpful to Al. He seemed especially flattered.

One day Beth confronted Tina in the control room. Donna was at Beth's shoulder. Sam and Al were lost in schematics nearby. Beth pointed at Al. "See?" she asked quietly. Tina flicked a nervous glance at the admiral. "Mine," Beth said. "Got it?"

A pause. "Got it."
"Good. Bright girl."

Donna reminded Beth that she trusted Al. Beth reminded Donna that she was neither blind nor crazy.

Tina started an affair with Gooshie. Al didn't appear to notice or care.

Sam's hair went white in a single lock that fell over his forehead. Donna called it "Sam's blaze". She considered it his signature, and very endearing. Sam considered it appalling that he was going grey, but did it quietly and privately. Beth wondered why that white lock was suddenly familiar, but dismissed the echoing deja-vu.

The Imaging Chamber proved to be one of the toughest design problems of Quantum Leap. How do you create a holographic image of someone in the present, for someone in the past, that is visible to the leaper only?

Through the hand link, the brain waves of the Observer were tuned to the brain waves of the Leaper. Sam described it as "induced telepathy". It gave everyone but Sam and Al an incapacitating headache to use it. The design had never been intended to be exclusive to them - it had only worked out that way.

In 1994, Sammy was working on her B.S. in Nursing. Terry and Alex weren't sure what degree they were working on, but they were doing it at Cal Tech. They had also discovered that they were plane crazy, and were getting their hours for their pilot's licenses.

Cate had just finished a session at Space Camp in Huntsville, and announced she was going to be a mission specialist when she grew up.

Al told Sam that supporting five women was keeping him flat broke, and speculated that bimbos would have been cheaper, more fun, and less hassle. Sam grinned and said he doubted it.

By the spring of 1995, they were almost ready. All of the hardware was in place. The computer code for retrieval was still an uncertainty, though.

Al claimed it was still garbage and that Sam should admit it. Sam retorted that it could use work, but that Al should stick to engineering. Al blazed back that he wasn't a total moron, he could read code well enough to know what was convoluted nonsense.

The congressional committee threatened to cut their funding for the umpteenth time. This time, they sounded like they meant it.

At night, Sam lay next to Donna and held her close. Ready or not, they were going to have to try it, and soon, he said. The only way to test the retrieval code was by using it. Donna tried to persuade him not to do it, not yet.

Al lay next to Beth and stroked her hair. Ready or not, Sam was going to try this thing, and soon, he explained. If the retrieval code went sour, far better if Sam was at the Project to fix it, and be the Observer. Al would have to try to beat Sam to the Accelerator. Beth tried to persuade him not to do it, not yet.

Dr. Sam Beckett stepped into the Quantum Leap Accelerator, and vanished. History began to change.

December 22, 1999

The storm around him was subsiding. In a moment, Al would probe his memory, and try to find out what Sam had changed this time.

Oh, My God. Oh, Sam, what have you done?

Al was torn between the urgent need to run to Beth, and the knowledge that Sam had leaped out again to God only knew where. He sensed with sinking certainty that in one last grand gesture Sam had cut his moorings and was travelling on, alone.

Here's your life back, Al. Goodbye.

Damn him, damn him to hell!

With an ease grown of long practice, Al donned this new time line and

gathered its freshly minted memories around him. He restarted his life as if what now was had always been. But, he would remember, and he knew what he had to do. Hadn't he promised Sam he would do whatever it took to get him out of there? Tomorrow he would start the long weary business of finding Sam Beckett all over again.

That night he made love to his wife.

This time, the neuron lock didn't work.

There was still no one in the Waiting Room to quiz about Sam's whereabouts. Apparently, he was still leaping as himself, if at all. Morale at the Project reached an all time low.

Al tried to reconstruct exactly what Sam had said in that last encounter in the Imaging Chamber. He remembered thinking that Sam had finally come unglued under the strain. Leaping himself through time? How could that be?

For the first time in almost five years, Al Calavicci had the time to sit down and stare hard at the puzzle pieces, to see if he could fit them together. With what he already knew, and what Sam had told him, they were beginning to take a vague shape. It was one Al didn't like at all.

Not even the startling reality of having Beth and Cate and the twins with him for the holidays could break his black mood. Sammy's husband, the neurosurgery resident, called December 26. Al and Beth's first grandchild had been born that morning. Mother and son were doing well. They had decided to name him Sam.

Al met the news with composure, then locked himself in his office and cried.

New Year's Eve, 1999 came and went, and the last year of the old century began.

When everything that is supposed to work doesn't, you have to try something that can't possibly work, Al decided. So, he sat down and cleared his mind, and tried to find Sam Beckett.

Through all the years of leaping, Al had developed a sixth sense about what was going on with Sam during a leap. He knew when he wasn't needed in the Imaging Chamber, because Sam was asleep. His off-hand certainty had drawn strange looks, and Al learned to keep his certainty to himself.

When he and Sam had switched places after being hit with the lightning bolt, the vague insights became steadily clearer. He had tried to ignore them usually. But during that last leap, Al had known positively that wherever Sam was, it was his birthday. He had told Gooshie so. He hadn't told him about the haunting images of the bar Al had seen in his mind, but could not pin point until Ziggy got the neural lock.

Maybe, after almost five years of "induced telepathy" with the hand link, Al could find Sam all by himself, if he tried hard enough.

In the end, it proved surprisingly easy.

"Gooshie, I want you to dig out that program he used when Sam leaped into me - remember?"

Gooshie blinked myopically. "No...what program? I don't think I remember -"

"June 15, 1945. Crown Point, Indiana. Sam and I changed places. He changed us back. I want the program. Find it. And hurry."

* * *

Dr. Sam Beckett opened his motel room door, and tossed the key on the dresser. He opened the newspaper he was carrying, and sat on the bed to read it.

He was in Cincinnati, Ohio, and it was March 2, 1984.

Sam read through the paper methodically, back to front. He finally found the item he had been looking for. The police had dropped charges of armed robbery against a teenager, and charged someone else. Jamie, the boy he thought he was here to help, had been completely cleared.

Sam leaned back against the headboard, satisfied. Leaping alone had been tough these first three leaps. When Al had been the Observer, he could

give him probabilities of what he was there to do. More importantly, he could tell Sam when it was done. It had been impossible to get the police to tell him, a stranger, anything about the charges against Jamie. But, the newspaper confirmed that he had done what he had come for. He could leap now, whenever he wanted.

Since that day several weeks ago in "Al's Place", a calm had settled over Sam. He knew what he was doing with the rest of his life. He would be leaping to help people. He had had the chance to go home, but had chosen to reunite Al and Beth instead. Now he couldn't go home. Home didn't exist. That place and those people were gone, because he had changed them.

He wished that he could see Al and Beth together and happy, then pushed the thought aside. No regrets, no going back. But for a moment, a few weeks ago, an image had flashed onto his retinas. Al was opening a Christmas parcel, and Beth had been with him. Were the other three his daughters? The image danced away. Wishful thinking, Sam decided.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror on the opposite wall. The reflection was his own, but the face he saw was haggard. It was just that he was so very tired. If only he could rest, just stop for a while...perhaps he didn't have to leap out just yet...

A flash of blue electricity filled the room, and the leaper materialized.

For a moment they stared at one another in mutual disbelief, then Sam Beckett hugged Al Calavizzi for the first time in almost five years.

"If it's really you, how did you find me?"

"Sure it's me. Who else? I told you I'd get you out of here, and that's what I came to do. As for how I found you, that's a little tougher. I think," Al said slowly, "it's a little like sonar."

"Al, you sound as if you've been swiss-cheesed. Sonar?"

Al shook his head. "No, really, I feel fine." He glanced in the mirror at his own reflection. "Maybe - " He shrugged. "Is leaping as yourself easier? Who knows. But as for the sonar, I don't know how else to describe it. I decided I was going to find you. I sat and concentrated on the thought, 'Where's Sam?' The message that came back was that," he pointed to the tag on the hotel room key, "and that." He gestured towards the Cincinnati paper bearing the date. "Simple."

"Not simple. If you're saying - "

"I'm saying that five years of monkeying with the hand link has done weird things to our neural circuits. We're tuned in. Look, haven't you ever suddenly had a mental picture of where I was or what I was doing? Sure you have, I can tell by that expression on your face. Well, it works two ways. If I try, I can find you."

"Al, that might have been real useful if you were back at the Project, but you're not. You're here and," Sam shook his friend by the shoulders, "as wonderful as it is to see you, what are you doing here?"

"I was trying to leap in and replace you. You did it once." He shrugged. "Didn't work this time."

Sam shook his head. "There was no one in the Waiting Room to balance the equation."

"Well, it was worth a shot."

"Was it really!" Sam blazed. "I bet you just charged off in all directions without a thought about what would happen if it didn't work. Now what? Of all the hare-brained - "

"Shut up. This from the man who leaped without a retrieval program."

They glared at one another. Sam retorted, "So we're even. Are you happy? Oh, boy, what a mess."

Al looked at Sam thoughtfully. "No, this can still work. We can leap out together. Sam, I'm bringing you home with me."

Sam turned aside. "Al, I can't go back. There's no place to go back to." He sat on the bed. "I don't understand. I thought I changed things. How can you be here? I thought I got you and Beth together."

"You did." Al sat on the bed beside Sam. He tried to grasp the words to thank his friend, and couldn't find them. He settled for grasping Sam's

hands instead. The silent understanding passed between them.

"But Al, that would change everything - who you are, how you've lived your life, the Project, everything. How can you, the Al I knew, be here?"

"All I can tell you is what happens when you change something and leap. Those changes echo back to me. No one else seems to notice, but I do. The deck reshuffles, but I don't change. I know the way it's been, and the way things are."

"Like a pebble in a pond, the effects ripple outward."

"No, I don't think so. That would mean the changes spread out and get bigger. It's more like a cut that heals itself. I think Time has this terrific self preservation instinct. So, there's only certain stuff you can change in a leap. You can right a wrong, or you can change some minor details that don't mean a thing. But, what you can't do is change the basics, the key events. Also, you can't change what brought you here. You leaped because of the Project. So the Project has to continue to exist, no matter what."

Sam shook his head. "Al, it just doesn't make sense. It's against all the rules that -"

"Rules?" Al bellowed. "Believe me, kid, the one rule I've learned is that there are absolutely no rules!" He took a deep breath. "Look, most days I feel like I'm climbing a sand dune that's constantly shifting underneath me. It all keeps changing, even the so-called rules. But you've plugged the two of us into the loop. There are a few things that can't be changed, and now you and I are somehow a part of that."

Al stood and began pacing. "You got Beth and me back together again. That was possible. So, it isn't one of the fundamental things. If it was, you just wouldn't have been able to change it, no matter how hard you tried."

"Do you and Beth have children?"

Al smiled. "Four girls."

"But, Al, how can that not be fundamental? Those four lives just didn't exist before."

"I don't pretend to understand it all, Sam. But...I am me. I am here. Therefore it's possible. Believe it."

Sam sighed. "But it doesn't change one thing, Al. I can't go home."

"Listen, Sam -"

"No, you listen. It's my turn to tell you what I've figured out. I can't go home. This is my life now. This is what I do. I'm not a quantum physicist any more. I'm not going to head home and publish our results. Our plan for the Project, and the next one, and the one after that, it's all out of the question now."

Sam stood, and moved to the window. He stared out for a moment in silence. "There are all kinds of people with problems out there, and it's my job to help them. That's a job that can never be finished, Al. So, there's no going home for me."

"Sam saves the world," said Al, sourly.

"Sam *changes* the world. One person at a time. We all do what we can to make things better. Well, this is what I can do. And I'm going to do it."

Al looked at Sam and saw the certainty in his eyes. Sam Beckett, immovable object. This was the vague foreboding Al had felt and feared, and he wrestled with it. "Okay," he said at last. "So, we'll do it."

"No, Al, this is my job."

"Not without me!" Al strode towards Sam, reached up and shook him by the shoulders. "Not without me, dammit. You can't do this alone. No one could. But even if I wanted to let you, don't you see? We're *both* plugged into the loop. I can't walk away. Somehow, I'm part of the pattern too. You tried to cut me loose, to give me a life separate from yours, but it just can't be done. We're linked to each other, and we're linked to Time itself, like it or not. Me, I don't like it...but there it is. You're going to need my help. Well, you've got it."

Sam looked at Al and saw that familiar set to his jaw. Al Calaviccini, irresistible force. Impossible to say which of them was more stubborn.

He sighed and shook his head. "So you're here to help, but how? Even together, we're on our own. Al, it's tough without Ziggy, when you don't know

whether you've really done what you have to do to change the past." Sam began to pace. "Unless - I've always wondered why I never leaped into the future. It's part of my lifetime, it fits the theory. Of course, Ziggy wouldn't be much help in dealing with things that haven't happened yet. But now we don't have Ziggy, so maybe..." more to himself than to his friend he said, "maybe that's how the leaps are going to get tougher." He turned to Al. "It's sort of exciting when you think about it. A whole new set of problems to solve!"

Al flopped back on the bed. "Do you mind if we don't solve them all next week? Sam, what you really need now is a rest. You look like hell. You've been going flat out for almost five years, and dragging the rest of us along with you. Maybe that's okay for me, or Gooshie, or Beeks, or any of the people, but explain it to the hardware. We have some basic maintenance problems that just can't be ignored. So, you need a break, and I'm going to see that you take it. You may have convinced me that leaping is what you're going to do with the rest of your life, but there's no reason to make a martyr of yourself over it. Don't even martyrs take vacations?"

"Well...the other Al, the bartender, did say something about sabbaticals. But, Al, there are so many times I have wanted to go home so badly. Even if I am leaping myself, I can't seem to make it happen."

"Yeah, I've been thinking about what you said, about you leaping yourself. I think I know what's going on here. I know you. You're so determined to get on with this job, which even you admit is endless, that you just won't stop. Finish one leap, go on to the next one. You want to go home in a vague sort of way, but you don't really believe it can happen."

Al got up again from the bed. He paced, building up steam. "So, you just keep on leaping. Left to yourself, you'd never figure the time was right for you to do anything for yourself. You'd leap and leap, until you got burned out, did something stupid to get your brains blown out, or went mad from the stress, or just died of old age. Well, I've got news for you, kid. I'm not going along with that plan. If you can leap and change things, then so can I. That's why I've leaped in here, and I believe in it enough to make the leap happen. So - we're going home. You ready?"

Sam shook his head in confusion. "No, Al, it just won't work. I can't. How long could I stay? How could I ever leave once I got home? The temptation would just be too great. No, we've just got to go on from here. Into the future, I'm sure of it. But," a note of panic edged into his voice, "what if we don't leap together? What if we get separated?"

"Geez, Sam, don't even think about it. As if we didn't have enough problems without you inventing new ones. It won't happen. You've got to believe that. It would just be too stinking unfair -like you never getting home again, so just forget it. As for being tempted to stay put once you got there, I have an idea about that. I think you'll know when you have to leap again. Something will happen. Like I keep saying, we're part of the loop now. We'll get yanked back in, whether we plan on it or not."

Al stood still, planting his feet squarely. "So, c'mon. Let's go. Home. I've got a wife waiting, and for that matter, so do you. I bet you haven't remembered that or you wouldn't still be here. Am I right?"

Sam stared at him blankly, then the wonder of comprehension dawned on his face. "Donna," he breathed softly.

"Right, Donna. That's one of the things you changed. She's there for you right now. You're going back to her. Home." He grabbed Sam's hands.

Sam and Al leaped home together, and the universe changed.





THE LOVE OF MY LIFE

by

Patricia Poole

January 17, 2000

In the past five years, Project Quantum Leap staff had discussed different theories of what Sam Beckett would do first when he finally leaped home to stay. Some were sure that Al would corner him for debriefing, and no one would see either of them for days. Others were certain that Donna Elesee would quietly but firmly spirit Sam off for a romantic reunion. Inevitably, someone started a Project pool.

Verbena Beeks held the winning ticket in the "leap home" lottery. Sam Beckett slept for 36 hours.

The rest of the staff's predictions followed, in jumbled fashion. Sam called his family in Hawaii, and promised a visit in person as soon as possible. The medical staff pronounced him surprisingly healthy, all things considered. Dr. Beckett and Dr. Elesee disappeared utterly for a day, and not even Ziggy asked why. There was a blur of reunions with various team members, but one stood out for both Sam and Al.

A shy teenaged girl drifted towards the circle of babbling staffers knotted around Sam. Her straight dark hair was cropped at jaw length, and her dark eyes gazed downward. She raised them hesitantly and met Sam's puzzled stare. Sam glanced at Al in confusion. Next to him, his friend palpably held his breath.

Sam turned back to face the girl. "Cate?" he asked tentatively, placing his hands on her shoulders.

Catherine Beckett Calavicci, Al's youngest daughter, stared up at Sam with eyes that were bright with tears. "Hi, I...I thought for a minute you didn't remember me."

Sam grabbed her in a bear hug. "Honey, I didn't recognize you. You're...fifteen? You've grown up!" Over her shoulder, Sam met Al's gaze levelly, and nodded. "Of course I remember you. I remember everything again."

Sam and Al talked about it later that day. Officially, debriefing had started, behind closed doors. The two men faced each other across the conference table in the room usually used for staff meetings.

"It's incredible, Al. On one hand, I remember how everything was the day I leaped - the long hours we spent working on the Project because neither of us had anyone to go home to, all the women in your life - "

" - all the alimony I was paying," Al interjected.

Sam smiled fleetingly, but refused to be deflected. "But I also remember *this* time line. Not just the broad outlines either, but the details. I remember how much Sammy reminds me of Beth, and how the twins drive everyone crazy, but - especially, I remember Cate. I was there the day she was born. It was hot, and my shirt stuck to my back sitting in the chair in the hospital waiting area. It's all so vivid. But so is the original time line. So...which one is real?"

"Both of them." Al managed to keep his voice steady. "Thank God you remember now, Sam. This past year has been kinda hairy. First the leaps started coming closer together, then there was the Oswald thing in June, and the evil leaper we had to deal with during the summer. But, the worst was in September when we simoleaped. When I got back, and heard about this 'reverse swiss-cheese' effect, I wanted to kick something. It would have been tough if you forgot all we'd done, and there was no one left to share it with."

"How did you stand it, Al? Coming out of the Imaging Chamber each time, never knowing what changes you'd find? I thought my job was tough, but - "

"I coped," replied Al, cutting Sam off. "Did what I had to." His tone

was neutral, but Sam Beckett knew Al Calavicci too well not to realize what his body language said. Al's shoulders were hunched, his jaw tight, his eyes opaque. There was a painful wound here Al didn't want probed. But, with all the irreconcilable memories coursing through his brain, there were some answers Sam simply had to have.

"Can you forgive me, Al? For screwing up your life?"

The words crackled like electricity between them, and Al's hands shot across the table to grab those of his friend. "What the hell do you mean, kid? You *fixed* my life! You got me and Beth back together again! I can never thank you enough for that."

But Sam pivoted in his chair, pulling away from the older man's grasp. "Sure, I fixed things - after I made them wrong in the first place." Sam forced himself to meet Al's gaze. His stomach felt like a clenched iron fist. "In the original time line you were an astronaut. Your Apollo 8 mission was the first to leave earth's gravity well. Al, you spent Christmas in '68 orbiting the moon - not in a tiger cage. But, both of them couldn't happen, could they? When I started leaping, you hadn't been to Viet Nam. You never became a POW." Sam's voice fell to a hoarse whisper. "My God, Al, what did I do to change things?"

Al stared at his friend levelly. "Dunno." His voice was even and detached. "We'll try to figure it out in the debriefing. As far as I can work it out, the time line changed about a year into the leaps, but I'm not sure exactly - "

"How can you sit there and discuss this so calmly! You went through utter hell, and - and it's all my fault." Sam leaned against the table for support.

"It's your Project alone, is it? I thought we were in this together."

The words snapped Sam to focused attention. "Of course we're in it together. What's that got to do with anything?"

"Just that before you blast off on a guilt trip, you better remember one thing, buddy. The two of us knew that time travel could be a risky business. We're both responsible, so don't give me any maudlin garbage. Besides, we talked this through once before, remember? I made it through everything, so it's okay. I survived." Al reached again across the table, encircling his friend's hands, refusing this time to let Sam shake free.

There was certainty in Al's eyes. "It's not your fault, Sam."

Sam exhaled the breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. "It still stinks, Al."

Al loosened his grasp. "Yeah, well...life's like that, I guess. But Sam, if you remember how things went the first time around, you know it didn't work out then for Beth and me either."

"I remember."

"Well, you really did fix things. You brought us together."

"Al," Sam began, tentatively. A long pause stretched between them.

"Are you going to tell Beth about the two of you in the original time line?" he asked finally.

"Are you going to tell Donna?" Al shot back.

"I don't know."

"Me neither."

They stared at one another.

Sam finally spoke. "If we're going to do a full report to the Committee, Al, we have to include everything. We're scientists. We can't withhold data."

"Yeah, well, there's data and then there's *data*," Al rejoined. "Nobody reports every detail of a project this big. Besides, we're going to have to preserve the anonymity of the leapers if we ever publish, anyway. So - "

"It's not the same thing," Sam interjected.

"I know," Al conceded.

This time it was Al who broke the heavy silence. "I won't tell if you won't."

"It won't work, Al. How can we possibly keep this secret from the women we love?"

"It'll work if we make it work," Al insisted. "Sam - do you really think they'll want to know? Would you want to know," he persisted, "if in some other time line you dumped the love of your life? C'mon, do we have a deal?" "Deal," Sam agreed reluctantly.

The invitation for Admiral Calavicci to appear on "Larry King Live" took Al by surprise. He had forgotten about the earlier appearance that had been cancelled when a middle eastern civil war blew everything else off the news. That program had been scheduled to discuss government funding for research, at a time when the producers' first choice for a guest, Dr. Samuel Beckett, had been as Al put it, "absolutely unavailable".

Sam was relieved to let Al take the flak from the media. Wardrobe was discussed with some heat between Al and Beth, then Al and everyone else, before it was agreed that his dress white uniform was an acceptable compromise.

Most of the available staff gathered in the Project recreation room to watch the broadcast. Sam sat with Beth and Donna. Tina wandered over to join them.

On screen, Al seemed relaxed and controlled in the introductory exchange of pleasantries, but the interviewer soon peeled back the veneer of congeniality. "Admiral, isn't the government record of spending in the research sector pretty abysmal? After all, what did the American people get from the space program except \$400 wrenches and Tang?"

A chorus of groans and hisses came from the Project audience. Sam prayed silently that Al wouldn't explode.

The admiral leaned back in his seat, and regarded his inquisitor. "Empty your pockets, Mr. King," he said finally.

A collection of whistles and whoops erupted in the recreation room, and Sam grinned. Al was going to be fine, and this was going to be fun to watch. Puzzled, Tina leaned over to ask, "What's going on?"

Echoing her remarks in the television studio, the host inquired, "I beg your pardon, Admiral?"

"Empty your pockets please, Mr. King - I'd like your help in illustrating a point," Al Calavicci replied, with a deceptively pleasant smile.

Sam turned to Tina to explain. "You joined the Project too late to be in on this. When we were working on funding, Al and I developed a patented routine for exactly this attitude. Watch," he urged, gesturing towards the screen.

The interviewer turned out his pockets, and the accumulation lay on the desk. The admiral sifted through the items, and selected a computerized desk diary in a vinyl folder.

"Nice piece of electronics," the admiral remarked. "Of course, the reason it exists is due to the research NASA did in the '60's and '70's which made the computer revolution possible. Space program." Admiral Calavicci flung the folder, none too gently, back at his host. He reached for a set of car keys on the desk.

"Does your car have electronic ignition? Computer diagnostics? Computer generated aerodynamic design? Space program." The keys followed the diary into the interviewer's lap.

The litany continued, with Al drawing connections between all of the everyday items in front of him, and the advances resulting from the space program in polymers, plastics, magnetic strips on credit cards, heat resistant ceramics (Mr. King had not taken the inquires about his dental work with good humor) and a variety of other areas. He concluded with the stack of bills and coins left as the last item in front of him.

"It's true billions of dollars were spent on the space program, back when a billion dollars was really worth something. But, for every dollar spent, it created a hundred dollars worth of spin-off jobs and industry. And no, I'm not just talking about military dollars. The space effort affected our everyday lives."

Refusing to be bested, the questioner rejoined, "But, Admiral, surely

you concede that we were on the threshold of a technological revolution in the 1960's. Wouldn't all of these developments have taken place anyway, due to research in private industry?"

Al shook his head. "With the cost involved? Which industry, exactly? But - okay. Let's suppose some corporation would have come up with these bright ideas. Corporations make money. They'd want a monopoly on their discoveries for their investment."

The admiral took a deep breath and continued. "Y'know, the American people never cease to amaze me. Do they think business is hot on protecting public interest? Would anyone agree the police should be run for profit? What about the fire department?"

The camera zoomed into tight focus on Al's face. "Some things are just too important to be handled that way. For my money, science is one of them. When our government stopped funding pure research, this country started to lag behind others in technology. Being cost effective is fine, but you can't always tell what you're going to discover with your research money until you do it. Sometimes, you just gotta kick back and take a chance. Someone has to shake people awake so they understand that."

The look of sour disapproval on the features of the interviewer faded to one of studied neutrality. "We'll take a station break and be back with your questions." The scene segued to commercial. Back at the Project, the audience clapped and laughed. Sam turned to Beth and Donna and smiled. "I don't know why I was worried. Trust Al to pick up the ball and run with it."

But when the familiar face of his friend returned on the screen, Sam stiffened. "What's wrong?" He turned towards Beth.

"Oh, no, Sam - look, he's got a cigar out. Al, please don't light it," she appealed to the screen.

The unlit cigar was clenched between Al's teeth. His face was a studied, careful mask. "What's wrong?" Sam repeated to himself.

The talk show host began, "We're back, and our first caller is from Chicago, someone who is no stranger to the space program."

"Hello, Larry," said the well-known voice. It cut through Sam like a knife. "No, please God, no," Sam hissed.

"Sam, what is it?" asked Donna, alarmed.

He turned to her, the pain clearly written on his face. "It's Jim Lovell," he explained.

Which of course, explained nothing.

Donna stared at him blankly. "The astronaut?" She turned to Beth, who also looked at Sam with bemusement. "What's the matter?"

Impossible to explain, Sam thought. Impossible to imagine what Al was feeling, hearing the voice of the navy flier he had worked with so closely in the Apollo program, the man who shared so many experiences and dreams, the friend that had flown with him to the moon and back, the buddy that a younger and awed Sam had met...who, in this time line, had never even met Al.

Sam forced himself to focus on the screen, and the disembodied voice. "I don't think we've ever met, Admiral, but our paths ran parallel for a while. I left flight duty in '71 to join the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston. Weren't you working on unmanned deep space probes about the same time?"

"Not until 1973...Jim," Al replied. Did only Sam hear the struggle for control in Al's voice? "When I was repatriated from a Vietnamese prisoner of war camp." Al intoned the words dully, as if to convince himself that they were real.

"Yeah? Well, I got into research after my last space mission. I figured four flights were enough for anybody, and after that last one thought I'd better get out while I was ahead."

"I remember Apollo 13," agreed Al, quietly. Sam groaned.

Everyone remembered Apollo 13, and April 1970 when the whole world held its breath. No one remembered it like Al Calavicci, though. Al had been the astronaut assigned to mission control. He had been the frantic friend trying figure out what caused the explosion that robbed the capsule of power and air, who could only wait impotently to see if the course adjustment to lunar orbit

instead of landing would work. His cheers were loudest when voice contact had finally been re-established after the Aquarius emerged from the dark side of the moon, and confirmed that the three astronauts in her were headed home.

Only, except to Al and Sam, in this time line it hadn't happened that way.

Dimly, Sam heard Lovell's voice continue, "It's great to hear someone say something nice about Apollo again, especially someone who wasn't a part of the program in those years."

It was the final twist of the knife. "I'm sorry, I just can't watch this." Sam bolted from the room.

Donna found him later, sitting alone in his office. Sam glanced up when she entered.

"Is it over? How did Al do?"

"He did fine. Things were a little shaky there for a bit, but he recovered." She smiled. "He really zapped Larry King a couple of times near the end. You should have been there."

Sam smiled wanly. "I bet."

Donna leaned back against the closed door. "Are you ready to talk about it?" she asked gently.

Sam looked down at his hands, his fingers interlaced and knotted. "I'm not sure."

His wife strode across the space that separated them, and knelt beside him. "Sam, what is it? We're worried about you. Beth is outside, waiting to hear what's going on. What happened?"

Sam took a great gulp of air into his lungs, then let it out in one blow. "I don't think I can talk about this. It's really between Beth and Al."

Donna considered this for a moment, then looked up at her husband with a mischievous grin. "Well, I admire your scruples, but I don't know whether your best friend will. By the time he flies back here, he's going to have a frantic wife on his hands. To top it off, no one will be able to douse the rumors by then."

Sam stared at her. "What rumors?"

Donna shot him an exasperated look. "Sam, *honestly* - you know what this Project is like. You've seen Tina's t-shirt that says 'I hate to spread gossip, but what else can you do with it?' Even Al admits this place runs on equal parts caffeine and rumors. You can't expect to dash from a room when your best friend is on television without the gossip mill cranking at full speed."

She clasped his hands, pulled them towards her, and kissed them tenderly. "Can you tell me at least? Is it something that got changed with the leaps?"

Sam gave her a guarded glance. "What makes you think that?"

Donna glared back at him. "Since when were you the only person with a functioning brain in their head around here?" But the concern in her tone took any sting from the words. "Tell me," she entreated.

Sam stood and gathered her into his arms, nuzzling her neck and taking in the intoxicating scent of her hair. "Tell me," she repeated.

No question that he would have to tell her something - but how much, and what? Picking his way through this mine field, he replied, "It's just that, in the original time line, Al knew Jim Lovell. We must have changed something, and it hurt to see Jim not even recognize Al."

"And you remember that, do you?" She gave him a thoughtful look. "So, how well did he know him?" With one finger, Donna traced the line of his collarbone, and stared into his eyes.

Oh, boy.

"Well enough," he replied gruffly, averting his eyes. "They...flew together."

"Sam Beckett, are you saying that Al was an astronaut?" As he stiffened he realized what his body language would reveal to her. "That's it, isn't it?" she whispered. She laughed, a chime of pure glee. "I should have

known, he fits the profile perfectly! And he went up with Jim Lovell?" she urged.

"And Frank Borman," Sam replied.

Donna frowned. "But how could he? They only started sending up three man missions with Apollo, when Al was a prisoner in Viet Nam, so -"

"NO! I mean, he went up instead of Frank...with Jim," Sam ended lamely. Damn!

Pulling away from Sam's embrace, his wife's features transformed to reveal the determined scientist - or a hound running a hare to ground. "That would be Gemini VII? In '65?" Of course, she knew each mission. Hadn't their shared passion for spaceflight been one of the things that first brought them together? She gazed at him with unrelenting steady scrutiny.

After the practice his years of leaping had given him, could he make this convincing?

He met her look levelly. "Yes."

Her eyes called him a liar.

She stepped tentatively to the door. "What can I tell Beth?"

"Please, Donna," he begged, "I promised Al..." His voice trailed off when he saw the alarm in her eyes. Regaining his composure, Sam continued, "I really think it's up to Al to tell her, sweetheart. But, you're right that the last thing he'd want would be to come home and find I'd sent her into a panic. What do you think she should be told?"

"I think she should be told the truth," Donna replied pointedly.

The taut silence stretched between them. "I think," Sam said finally,

"I'll go up to ground level and meet Al's plane."

"Yes, you'll want to warn him," she replied, with a trace of asperity. Then her guarded expression melted in a naked appeal. "Sam, why are you two holding back about this?" she pleaded.

The knot in his throat made any reply impossible. As he turned from her, she slipped out the door.

Beth was waiting down the corridor. Donna approached, and they fell into step together as they headed towards the dormitory portion of the Project.

"Well?" Beth asked finally.

"Well, it's about what we figured," Donna replied, trying for a light tone. "The leaping has changed some things in their own histories, and they're trying to protect us from knowing about it. Code of silence...cross their hearts, hope to die, spit and swear on the secret decoder ring."

"I don't know which one of them I want to strangle more, my husband or yours."

Donna smiled. "Don't strangle mine, please. I just got him back, and I'd like to keep him around for a while."

Beth laughed, the sound hollow with the echo of anxiety behind it. "Donna, what are we going to do? Al's always been like this, trying to protect me. Most of the time it's more endearing than maddening. But this is just too much. And - Sam! I can't believe that he's going along with this. Just who," she said indignantly, "do they think they are?"

"Haven't you figured that out?" Donna replied with sly irony. "They think they're Han Solo and Indiana Jones."

Beth's giggle was light and musical. "Okay, so you've made me laugh about it. But, we're supposed to be sisters in adversity, and you still haven't told me anything. So, tell me," she urged.

Donna considered for a moment the least alarming approach to this.

"Well...for starters, your husband was an astronaut."

Beth clenched Donna's shoulders in amazement. "Honey, you can't be serious! How? When?"

As innocuously as possible, she related what Sam had told her.

In the end, Beth was puzzled. "Why is this a secret, Donna? Remembering both time lines is mind boggling, but...what are they afraid of?"

Donna shook her head. There were a dozen disturbing answers to that question, but absolutely no point in speculating on them. "They'll tell us when they're ready. I think they need...time."

Later that night, Donna had a long talk with Ziggy. The answers to her questions were not comforting.

Sam met Al's plane, on the piece of abandoned road the Project used as an airstrip.

He emerged from the cockpit of the jet, and knew without words being exchanged what Sam had to tell him.

"I lost it," Sam admitted. In semaphore fashion, he reported what had happened.

"We all ground loop now and then, Sam," Al replied. "Look, you did a job on damage control. Now," he mused, "I've got to do a little spin doctoring."

Unlike Sam, Al had no compunction about lying. A necessary lie was almost the truth, could be the truth if you believed in it and needed it enough. The secret to successful lying was to keep the lie simple and straightforward.

In their bed, Al held Beth close. "So, you were a Gemini astronaut?" she asked.

He stared deep into the eyes of the wife he adored. "Yes," he answered.

"And went up with Jim Lovell in Gemini 7?" she continued.

My, God, how he loved this woman. "That's right."

"But Al, how does it all fit with what I remember?"

Al considered how to splice the lie to the truth. All he had to do was to roll back the dates a couple of years. "Well, I applied for the program and got accepted in '62. We lived in Florida a couple of years while I was training," he added with perfect truth. "Then, I flew one mission, and decided to get out."

"So...you're saying you were with NASA instead of flying your first tour in Viet Nam?"

"Uh-huh," he replied. Close enough, he thought.

Beth's expression was troubled, and she studied Al's face for reassurance. "It's all so strange, that for you it happened both ways. What changed things?"

Here, he was on solid ground. The truth would do just fine. "Well, I don't have Sam's memory, and we haven't got that far in the debriefing yet, but I think I know what happened. Do you remember Charlie 'Black Magic' Walters?"

"The pool player who helped you when you ran away from the orphanage? Of course, he was one of the leapees."

"Yeah, well that's the thing. Sam leaped into him in '54, and helped his granddaughter keep her club. But I saw him for the last time in '55, after I finished with Annapolis - or it finished with me, depending how you look at it," he mused. "Anyway, I had to make some decisions back then, about whether to go straight to flight school or take up the Navy on their offer to send me to MIT. I'd kept track of Charlie, and wanted to see him."

He paused, and Beth shifted in his arms. He stroked her hair and continued. "Life really used him up and spat him back out. His eyes were gone, and he had nothing after Violet lost her place. I remember thinking that it was damn unfair. He was the best - the absolute best at what he'd done. But, he was black, and poor, with no education, and being the best hadn't done him any good. I figured a wop orphan was crazy to turn down an edge like an engineering degree, if the Navy was crazy enough to pay for it. I wanted to fly so bad, I almost couldn't wait...but I did."

"And Sam changed that?" she asked softly.

"Yeah, I guess. I don't remember how that last visit went this time, which probably says it all. Things would have been better for him, and maybe I didn't think much about a chance to go to school when I could be flying. So, I didn't go. When the space program came along, they were looking for test pilots with degrees in engineering and science. Annapolis gave me a B.S., but I didn't think it was enough. Never applied." He shrugged.

"But you remember it both ways? That's what I can't understand. Which

one is real?"

"They're both real," he answered, echoing what he'd told Sam. "Different time lines, but both real."

Beth sighed. "And I can't remember it. What kind of astronaut's wife did I make?"

"Aw, sweetheart, the best. I couldn't have made it without you, with the news nozzles and the rest of that crap." He grinned craftily, and ran his hands sensuously down her back. "So, you want to hear an outrageous story about us back then?"

Beth pecked his lips, then rolled tantalizingly out of his grasp. "Is it silly and sexy?" she taunted.

"Absolutely," he replied.

"Absolutely," she mimicked.

"Well then, come back here and I'll tell you," he growled. Lazily, she curled into his arms, resting her head against his chest. "It was in '64, when I was in training. We were flying parabolas - you know, high dives to simulate zero gee. We called it the 'vomit comet'. Good name." Beth giggled. Encouraged, he continued. "Anyway, the guy piloting the plane was an old buddy of mine, and we fixed it so I was alone in the cargo bay with just one other person...this petite, curvy, very female person, despite the flight suit and helmet that were too big for her."

"Me?" Beth inquired.

"My favorite nurse," Al agreed. "You remember when I initiated you into the 'Mile High' on our honeymoon?"

"I remember it happening a bit earlier than that."

"Yeah, well, don't tell the kids. Anyway, you were absolutely, positively the first ever to join the 'Zero Gee' club, honey."

She laughed, then rolled over to face him, flicking her hand along the line of his jaw. "So, am I still your favorite nurse?"

"You know it."

"So prove it," she said huskily.

Which he did.

Somehow, the Project gossip got quashed. A watered down rumor circulated, that Al had known Jim Lovell in an alternate time line. No one found much juice in it, and interest passed on to who was being unfaithful with whom, where and why.

Sam and Al resumed debriefing. Everyone relaxed when it was evident that this time, there was no "reverse swiss cheese" effect, and that Dr. Beckett retained his memory of the leaps.

Overdue maintenance was done. From department heads, reports summarizing operations began to be compiled. The Project assumed an air of normalcy it had not had for five years.

For Sam, it was an illusory aura. It was impossible to be or feel normal after all the trauma and change. Still, he felt himself easing into the familiar cycles - working in the same place, sleeping and waking up in the same bed - and fought taking it all for granted. After all the struggle, he was finally home. Each day should be savored, cherished. He would not let this sunny time be chilled by the possibility this was only a sabbatical, and his fear that, in the end, he must leap again.

Cate Calavicci was unwittingly responsible for the next cracks in the facade Sam and Al had built.

Of the four Calavicci daughters, only Cate remained at the Project. At fifteen, the contrast between she and her sisters was striking. At the same age, Sammy had a poised and assured maturity, and a knot of devoted male slaves who drove her father to distraction. With the twins, Al and Beth had careened to the teetering edge of their sanity. But Cate was shy and quiet by nature. It was easy to forget her brilliance.

From the beginning, the quality of genius she possessed invited comparisons to Sam. As a small child, she followed and imitated him. Even now, quirks of the mobility of her face and body convinced people there was a

physical resemblance where none existed.

But, in the years of Sam's absence and her budding adolescence, Cate found a mentor in Donna Elesee. Cate loved her parents with more insight than the ruthlessness of other teens, but talked to Donna of things she could not discuss with them. Donna found it easy to love this child who was so achingly like Sam.

Cate turned to Donna with her latest problem. "They won't let me go to university in the fall. They say I'm too young."

"You won't be sixteen until June, Cate," Donna replied reasonably. The two of them stood next to coffee machine outside the control room, where the Project bulletin board was located. It was the crossroads of non-work related activity at the Project.

Cate leaned back against the wall and groaned. "C'mon Donna, not you too. Lots of kids finish high school early now and go off to college. Things have changed."

"You mean, since I was in school, and the dinosaurs roamed the earth?" Donna asked. Her tone was self-mocking and she grinned.

Cate flushed, but spoke seriously. "I mean changes like the cost. Mom and Dad put all my sisters through school. The tuition alone at Cal Tech for the twins was out of sight. Then the goofs blew a year hopping from one major to another. Sure, they finally got engineering degrees, but someone had to pay for the extra courses. But I can pay my own way with a scholarship. I've heard from lots of schools, but MIT and USC are the most interested. They'll pay everything, even housing expenses if I live in a dorm."

She paced. "But, both schools want a commitment now. Dad keeps insisting nothing will change if I wait a year but," Cate said wryly, "one thing being a Project brat has taught me is that funding is unreliable. How many times has Dad said, 'Take the money and run'? So...I want to take the money."

Donna met Cate's determined gaze thoughtfully. "Well, it all sounds sensible enough. But, are you sure you're ready?"

Cate's dark eyes blazed. "Don't treat me like a little girl. If I spend another year here at the Project school, I'll go crazy and die. And if you think when I get away from home I'll blow up into little pieces like the twins did, then you just don't know me. I'm not going to get distracted by wild parties, and frat stunts, and stupid things like that. I want to learn."

Donna shook her head and stared downward, and her hair fell across her face. Brushing it back, she gazed at Cate directly. "I almost wish you would get distracted, just a little. You can handle the work. It's the rest of it that worries me. No matter what you say, sweetheart, there are some ways in which we both know that you are still a little girl."

Cate blushed furiously, but managed to meet Donna's gaze. "Then it's time I grew up, isn't it?"

Donna studied her, and made her decision. "All right, I'll talk with your mom."

Donna did so later that day. "The issue isn't whether she's ready to leave," she told Beth, "but, what happens if she doesn't leave. She's bored, and needs to stretch herself. It's a bad time to put limits on her. We've never done that before. We're sending the message we don't think she can do it. Do we want that?"

Beth sighed. "I just don't know. Everything you say is perfectly true, but I still feel that she's my baby." She smiled. "I guess I have to take this one to a higher court."

"Who?" asked Donna, puzzled. "Al?"

Beth laughed. "Don't be silly. This is the first daughter Al's certain is a virgin, and he'd like to lock her in a cell until she turns thirty to keep her that way. No, I mean our own expert on the care and feeding of sensitive budding geniuses."

Donna grinned in agreement. "Thelma."

February 25, 2000

The Becketts and Calaviccis fell back into their old habit of spending Friday evenings together at Sam and Donna's house on the Project site. Donna wryly dubbed these nights "The News of the Week in Review". Over dinner, the past seven days were re-hashed and a plan for the next week drawn up. But talk about work was banished after the meal, and the evening spent in conversation, and playing board or card games.

Reflecting later on that Friday night, Sam knew he should have realized something was wrong. Donna wore her "Quantum Leap Ladies' Sewing Circle and Terrorist Society" sweatshirt. He noticed the days she donned the shirt, his wife also wore a certain attitude along with it.

Beth and Donna were quiet over dinner, which had been another clue. Unaware, Sam and Al enthused over the progress made that week in debriefing, speculating on when they would be ready to report to the Committee. After the dishes were cleared Beth and Donna finally broached the subject that weighed on their minds. Beth directed the opening volley at Sam.

"I spoke with your mom on Monday. She said the five days you spent there weren't enough after almost five years away."

Guilt flashed across Sam's face, but he sensed that something more menacing than maternal rebuke lurked under the remark. "Why were you talking to Mom, Beth?"

"I wanted her advice about Cate. She's being recruited by universities that want her to attend this fall, and they're really crowding her. I thought Thelma might have some words of wisdom, and as usual, she did. She said the same thing had happened to you, and that you got tons of mail trying to pressure you into going to one school or another before you were ready."

"It wasn't the mail that bothered me, it was the recruiters that just showed up at the door," Sam recalled. "Mom was polite, but if they came to the barn during milking, Dad let them know they were being a nuisance."

"I guess living on a high security base has some advantages." A faint smile lit her features for a moment. "Anyway, Thelma said she would put a package together of some of the stuff you got and ship it off to me. She thought I might want to show Cate that things haven't changed that much. This is what I got today."

Inside a cardboard box was a plastic bag full of letters, and a one page note. It read: "Dear Beth - Having a son who refuses to throw anything out has some advantages. Here is a sample of the letters Sam got. Hope it helps. Tell Sam that this is the only way I can get rid of anything in those boxes in the attic. That's my real motive, but I'd rather have him come here to finish the job himself. Love, Thelma."

Sam emptied the contents of the bag on the coffee table, and sat on the sofa to sift through them. Sitting down next to him, Al observed, "Geez, Sam, this is a sample? I thought Cate was being pressured, but this is amazing." He picked through the pile.

"Actually, I have the most interesting letter here," Beth said quietly. She extracted an envelope from her pocket and placed it on the coffee table between the two men, and perched expectantly in a chair. In a fluid movement, Donna sat on the floor next to Beth, and took the older woman's hand.

The handwriting on the envelope was unmistakable. It must have taken Beth only a minute, Sam figured, to spot the sprawling, looped, but surprisingly legible script on opening the box.

"Hey, that's my writing!" Al scooped up the envelope, and whipped out the single page in contained. With Sam, he scanned what was written on it, and they exchanged a look of wonder.

The message was on Johnson Space Center letterhead. It read:

"Dear Sam,
You don't know me, which is the point. Some genius on the MIT alumni committee thought they could lean on me to write and try to convince you to go there next fall. What I haven't figured out is why you're supposed to be so impressed by hearing from some jerk in Houston, that you'd go to his old college.
If you're half as bright as he told me, it won't take you long to

cut through that crap. I hear you've narrowed it down to MIT and Cal Tech, both great schools. So - you'll go to the one that gives you the best deal, no matter how many letters you get. That's what I told the dipstick on the 'phone, but when I hung up I realized there was some advice I could give you. Has either place offered to fly you out to see out the campus? Take them up on it, but remember - one dorm is pretty much like another. Check out the two towns. It's dumb, but I still get sentimental when I visit Boston. It's where I finally got a glimmer there were big unanswered questions out there worth working on. I don't think I could ever feel the same way about any place with palm trees. You may feel different. See which town is a good fit for you, 'cause you're going to look back on these years a lot, and for the rest of your life. I won't sign this, partly 'cause I don't need to, but mainly to annoy that jerk when he calls back. Good luck. P.S. - After you've made your best deal, lean on them again, hard. They want you bad, kid. I think you can write your own ticket."

Al looked up, stunned. "It was you. I remember that they asked me to write to some kid, but I had no idea - " He broke off, and slapped the letter repeatedly in his palm. "Did you know about this? That our paths crossed for the first time back then?"

But Sam took the letter gently from his hands. "No, Al, you're missing the point. It's more than that. What we have here is a real, honest-to-goodness time paradox. It's from the other time line, where you were an astronaut. It shouldn't exist, but it does. Maybe it's because you didn't sign it, maybe..." Sam shook his head. "But the point is - "

"No," Donna interposed. "You're both missing the point. This letter was postmarked in 1969. How could Al write anyone then, when he was in a Vietnamese prisoner of war camp?" She shot an anxious look at Beth, whose haunted eyes pleaded silently for an explanation. "What happened?" Donna exhorted.

Al's face registered the pain and shock of someone hit over the head with a rock. Sam turned to his wife, and found anxiety but acceptance in her expression. "You already know, don't you?"

"I think so," she replied softly, "but tell us both."

Sam steadied himself with a deep breath, but Al interrupted. "No, this is my job, let me." He crossed the floor and pulled up a chair next to Beth. As he sat and grasped her hands, Donna rose and assumed the seat he vacated next to Sam.

Al stared down at the small hands held tightly in his own. "Honey, I lied to you and I'm sorry." He forced himself to meet Beth's troubled gaze. "But I only did it because I didn't want you to worry about this."

He paused, seeming to wait for her reply. Getting none, he slowly continued. "Anyhow...in the original history, I really was an astronaut, like I told you." He stared into the distance, as if finding the images he spoke of projected there holographically, visible only to himself. "I was accepted with the third group of guys. It was the moon shots we were working on - not Gemini, the Apollo missions. Y'know, I still can't imagine anything more exciting. I was with NASA all through the 60's, baby." Al turned to gaze into the depths of Beth's eyes, probing for understanding. He found only mute disbelief. "I could write that letter, 'cause I never flew in 'Nam, and never got shot down. The leaping changed that," he said quietly. Al glanced down at the painfully white knuckles of Beth's hands, and released his crushing grip.

"I guess that if I couldn't strap myself to a Saturn rocket, jocking an A-4 was the next hottest pair of wings I could find. I know it didn't turn out so good." Al leaned heavily against the chair back, and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he found the same anxious look on the face of his wife. "Other people wonder what would have happened if they'd done things differently. I got to find out. I'm sorry you had to, too."

Beth broke her long silence. "You're saying that the worst thing that ever happened to either of us was because of this damn Project." Her voice was flat, exhausted of emotion. "That if Sam hadn't leaped, we'd have a life without that pain. You wouldn't have the scars on your back from the torture. Or here," she said, as she brushed her hand across his temple. He flinched, and her voice quavered. "God knows that waiting for you wasn't half as hard as what you went through. But now, you're saying it was all unnecessary? How can you live with that?" She turned a stony stare on Sam. "How can either of you, knowing what you've done?"

"Dammit, don't you dare blame him!" Al roared. "I told you how it happened. Nobody, not even Ziggy, could predict that some other leap would have this domino effect. By the time things changed for me, Sam had leaped. There was no going back, no way to change it again. It's not Sam's fault, or anyone's fault." Al glowered darkly. "Even suggesting it is just plain bitchy, Beth."

Beth impaled him with a daggered glare. Before she could speak, Sam's voice sliced between them. "Al Calavicci, don't lie to your wife again. This is my fault, and you know why."

"Don't, Sam," Al warned.

"No. She has to know the truth." Sam confronted Beth with eyes full of pain. "You're right, and I need to talk about it." His voice dropped to be barely audible. "But now I don't know how to start." He swallowed and began again more steadily.

"You must remember that right after I leaped into myself back in high school, the next leap was to Viet Nam. I was so sure about what I was there to do, I never even asked Al to check with Ziggy."

"You were there to save the life of a man in your outfit," Donna prompted.

"That's what I did. But Al never told you his name, did he?"

Puzzled, Donna shook her head.

Sam fixed his eyes on Beth, unwilling to look at his wife. "It was Tom. Tom Beckett. My brother." Beside him, Donna gasped.

"The first time around Tom didn't make it home from Viet Nam." Beth shook her head, more in confusion than disagreement. Sam continued, doggedly. "I know that doesn't make sense to you now, but you have to believe it. I was so determined to save my brother, I didn't ask any of the right questions. Beth, that leap was supposed to be for Al." Sam felt his throat tighten, but forced out the necessary words.

"Tom's mission was to rescue some POW's. It turned out to be an ambush. I saved Tom, but the mission failed. A woman photographer died, who shouldn't have."

A flicker of recognition flitted across Beth's features. "That photograph," she breathed.

"Yes," Sam agreed. "Maggie's last photo was the one of Al that won the Pulitzer. He was one of the POW's Tom was there to rescue. I did what I wanted most and saved my brother. But as a leap, it was a disaster." He rubbed his temples in weariness, and glanced at Al. "Later on, I wondered where you got that idea, 'Success has nothing to do with leaping.' I guess I've finally figured it out," he said wryly. "So - now you know. Al could have been liberated in 1970. Those extra three years he spent in Viet Nam were my fault." He turned to Al. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Hey, kid, you're supposed to have a better learning curve than that," Al replied gently. "I told you then, and told you when you got home. O.K., third and final time. I didn't tell you because I knew that I made it. I survived. I didn't need to cut those years short, because I knew I would come home in one chunk. I already had come home. It was all behind me, and you deserved your shot at saving Tom. Losing Maggie, that was a damn shame, but at least she got the Pulitzer she always wanted. And, you may not have asked me to, but I did run the scenarios. Ziggy said the odds about what you were there to do weren't all that clear. I figured it wouldn't be fair to make you choose, so I decided to let things spin out and see what happened. Sam - it's not your fault."

For a moment, the silence was absolute.

"Al's right," Beth said. "You have nothing to apologize for." She turned to her husband. "So," she began softly, "you ran the scenarios, and decided to let things spin out, did you? I don't suppose you considered letting anyone else in on this decision?" Beth's eyes blazed. "Did you think even for a moment that this had something to do with me, too? I know I was just the one waiting at home, but I went through my own kind of hell, Al. Why were you entitled to decide our fates alone? In forty years, I've put up with a lot of crap because I love you - damn you, anyway. But this? What kind of strutting male ego trip were you on, anyway?"

Helplessly, Al sputtered, "But I *couldn't* ask you. I - "

Beth blasted out of her chair and pivoted to face her husband. "I remember that leap. You spent two whole days locked behind your office door, closeted away with Ziggy. Not once did you stick your nose out, to share what you were going through with another human being, not even your wife."

Beth crossed the living room to the door, and Sam moved to block her. "Beth," he began, but she silenced him with fingers pressed against his lips, then reached down to squeeze his hands.

"I'm all right, Sam. I can't remember when I've been this spitting mad, but I'm not mad at you." She shot a poisonous look over her shoulder. "As far as I'm concerned, Al can sleep alone tonight. I'd appreciate it if you'd put him up on your couch. And say good night to Donna for me." Before Sam had a chance to stop her, Beth slipped out the door.

For the next few days, the atmosphere between Beth and Al was arctic. It slowly eased to a mere perceptible coolness. Everyone knew this was not the Calaviccis' first fight, but it was obviously also not their last.

Al mused with Sam over the unfairness of alternate time lines. Had he kept silent during that leap because he was an egocentric jerk? Or was his behavior dictated by the fact Beth hadn't been there to consult in the other time line? Maybe he left her out of the decision because somehow his actions couldn't be changed, Al rationalized - but admitted the jerk option sounded more familiar.

By the time debriefing finished, and arrangements were made to present the summary of the leaps to the Committee, any signs of strain had disappeared. The two couples agreed to travel together when Al and Sam made their pitch to Senator McBride and the others to declassify the Project so that the results could be published.

March 17, 2000

It was in Washington that things finally and irretrievably unravelled.

The hearing was scheduled to start Monday, but they flew into Dulles airport Friday afternoon. The Becketts and Calaviccis planned a relaxing weekend, before congressional scrutiny began.

They reserved a table for four at one of Washington's high profile restaurants. The two couples decided to spend their usual Friday evening together in unusual style.

They were seated at the linen covered round table, and their appetizers had just been served when disaster struck.

Al and Sam simultaneously spotted the tall striking blonde in an impeccably tailored suit as she scanned the restaurant. The faint smile on her lips failed to warm the cold depths of her eyes.

It was Sharon.

"Oh, boy," breathed Sam softly.

Al groaned. "It's the barracuda woman." They exchanged panicked glances.

Then, in a gesture of studied nonchalance, Al dropped his starched napkin on the floor. "Oops," he remarked to the world at large, dove under the table, and stayed put.

"Get out from under there, Al," Sam hissed. He hunched sideways to talk to him without taking his eyes off Al's ex-wife.

"Deal with it, Sam," he ordered in a low growl.

As if drawn by the flurry of movement, Sharon's eyes locked onto Sam. Smoothly and surely, like a fish cutting through water, she crossed the room directly towards him.

Sam considered his options, and decided he didn't have any. He settled for sizing up the enemy. Sharon hadn't changed much. She was still a beautiful woman, and her glacial stare could still pierce him like an icicle. The only gambit he could think of was a high-voltage smile, so he used it.

From her startled reaction, the grin suffered an electrical brown-out. She stopped and stared down at him. Sam felt the cold sweat spread across his back and wondered what he could possibly say to Al's fourth wife.

The rich contralto voice held a puzzled note. "Hello, I'm supposed to be joining a party, and I noticed the empty chair. Are you Congressman Bragan?"

Stunned, Sam shook his head. At the periphery of his vision, he glimpsed the gesture of a man beckoning in their direction. Apparently, Sharon noticed it too. "That must be him. If you'll excuse me?" she said, and darted gracefully between the tables towards her quarry.

She hadn't recognized him, Sam realized. But then, in this universe, of course she wouldn't, he thought. Al had never married Sharon. He was still married to Beth. The relief warmed him as it spread, replacing the chill Sharon left in her wake.

"Is she gone, Sam?" begged the plaintive voice from under the table.

"Yes, she's gone," Sam replied in a tone ripe with disgust. "Now get out from there, you moron."

Al poked his head out from under the tablecloth, and darted a look in all directions. Satisfied, he hauled himself back into his seat, and grinned. "Well, that's certainly one way -"

He froze.

"Oh no, Sam, look - here she comes again," Al moaned. "I swear, that woman is just like a shark. She smelled blood in the water, so she's coming back for a second pass."

Sam looked up to find Sharon's inscrutable eyes fixed on him. "Doctor Beckett?" she asked in a pleasant tone. He nodded mutely.

"I thought so. It took me a moment to place you. I'm sure you don't remember me. I'm Sharon Leeson."

Sam rummaged through his memories of this time line. How did he know this woman if not as Al's ex-wife? He shot his friend a frantic glance, but Al was slowly inching lower in his chair, apparently trying to make himself invisible.

"It was back in '88, just after you'd won the Nobel prize," Sharon prompted. "You were in town to see Diane McBride, and she was sharing office space on the Hill with Senator Tomaszewski. I worked for Pete back then."

"Of course," Sam replied, trying for his most charming smile.

Sharon turned, and Sam finally discovered what it took to warm her cold eyes. She impaled Al with a molten stare and murmured, "It's Admiral Calavicci, isn't it? We met that day, too. I certainly remember you. It's good to see you again."

Al floundered like a fish on a gaff. "Yeah, right," he finally managed.

"Well," said Sharon, and paused. She gave him a significant glance, as if expecting something more. "I must be going, but I wanted to stop by to say hello." She turned, then shot Al one final look over her shoulder. "Tell me, Admiral - just what were you doing on the floor?"

Al reddened. "Dropped something," he muttered, and gestured with his napkin.

"Mmm," Sharon replied. "Next time, if you need help finding something, just ask me." With a parting smile, she glided away.

Sam and Al simultaneously exhaled in relief.

"Are you both quite through with the Monty Python routine?" The two men jerked to attention. They gaped at Donna, who sat with arms folded across her chest. Clearly, she knew what they had just realized. Through the exchange, both had utterly forgotten that their wives were even there.

Her voice dripping with annoyance, Donna asked, "Would either of you mind explaining -"

Beth's soft words broke in chillingly. "Were you lovers, Al?"

His response was involuntary, automatic. "I never loved her."

The magnitude of this blunder dawned on Al's face. "No, sweetheart, you have to believe me. There hasn't been a day, not once in the years I've been married to you, that I've been unfaithful. Beth, honey, you must know that," he pleaded.

Her gaze was bright with unshed tears. "I thought I did. I'd never seriously doubted it before. But please don't sit there and pretend that you don't know that woman. I saw how you reacted. More than that, I saw how she looked at you - as if she owned you."

"That's just Sharon in action," Al spat back. "The witch makes trouble for the spiteful fun of it." He lowered his voice, trying to deflect the interest of other patrons. "Baby, you've got to believe me. She's nothing. Forget her. Please."

Her reply was a mere whisper. "I'm leaving right now unless you tell me how you know her." Beth's eyes still shimmered with tears, but also with a glint of steeled resolution. "This time, make it the truth." She raised her chin to meet Al's eyes levelly.

He returned her scrutiny with a look filled with love and pain. "She's my ex-wife."

Sam closed his eyes while the room spun. The truth was finally out, and he felt the relief and dread well up within him.

The blow seemed to stun more than wound Beth. "Ex-wife? You mean, before you met me? No," she answered herself, "that's ridiculous, she's be in diapers. Another time line then," she concluded, and made it a question.

"Another one, Al?" Her voice shook. "Dear God, will this nightmare never end?" She steadied herself, and met Al's anxious gaze. "Don't worry, I know we're in public." Her tone took on a new determination. "I'm Navy, too, you know. I can take this, whatever it is."

Al's face contorted in a fleeting painful spasm before the mask slipped back into place. "Let's go. We'll talk later."

"We'll talk here and now. You're going to tell me what you did. This was...when? 1988? I was 49, you were 54. We had four daughters, age 4 to 14. Was I beginning to bore you? You needed a new love interest, and met this woman. I found out about the affair. We divorced. You married her. Is that how it happened? I have to know, Al." Turning to Sam, she transfixed him with the intensity of her gaze. "And you fixed it, somehow, didn't you? You put Humpty Dumpty together again." A bubble of noise almost like laughter erupted from her, and died in the open air.

The edge of hysteria in Al's tone matched Beth's own. "No, sweetheart, nothing like that. This goes back to -" Al closed his eyes, drew a long breath, then continued. "Do you remember April Fool's Day in '69? The flat tire you had that day, and the policeman who stopped to help? His name was Jake Rawlins. That was Sam, honey."

Beth darted a curious glance at Sam Beckett, but focused again on her husband. "Go on."

"Sam was there to save Rawlins' partner Skaggs, but I asked him to do me a special favor. I asked him to stay with you and help you through that weekend. I knew it was a tough time, what with losing that Marine you were nursing and, well, everything."

Beth leaned across the table towards her husband, her concentration absolute. Al returned her scrutiny with equal intensity. The restaurant, the other diners, even Sam and Donna, had simply ceased to exist. There was only the two of them.

"How do you know how bad that weekend was? How did you know about that Marine who died at all?"

"Because, in the original history, you wrote me a letter about it. You wanted to explain..." Al faltered.

"To explain what?"

"To explain why you hadn't been able to handle it. Why you had me

declared dead." Al wrestled with each word. "Why you didn't wait for me, and weren't there when I came home in '73."

"No."

The word had no shading of emotion. It was a declaration, a flat contradiction of a suggestion as silly as the sun rising in the west.

Beth's eyes shifted to Sam in an appeal for corroboration. "No," she repeated.

"I'm sorry," Sam answered gently.

"No," Beth said again, this time with furious force.

Sam rushed to fill the yawning chasm he felt opening up between them. "Beth, try to understand. Anyone could have given up hope. Hope wasn't reasonable, given what you'd been told about Al's crash. But I knew Al really was alive out there, and one way or another I convinced you it was true. Things had gone wrong, but I could help make them right. I could change it, because it really was wrong - not just for you, but for Al, too. Without you, he just drifted from relationship to relationship. It was because he loved you so very much that none of his marriages ever worked."

Beth recoiled. "Marriages? Al, how many women were there?"

"Sam, do me a favor and this time, DON'T HELP." Al lowered his voice when the woman at the next table turned to stare. "What Sam's trying to say, honey, is that it's all O.K. now. It didn't happen. You did wait for me, and we're still married." He took her hand. "The two of us - together - that's all that counts now."

Beth shook her head. "No, Al. That story might have worked on me before, but not now. You've done too good a job showing me how real that other time line was, where you were an astronaut." She dropped her eyes. "Aren't you the one who said both time lines were real? Don't try to sell me now on the idea that it never happened. It happened. I truly didn't wait for you. There really were other women in your life. Sharon actually is your ex-wife."

All three of them stared helplessly as Beth fought to shuffle together some semblance of composure. She squared her shoulders, then raised her eyes to face each of them in turn. "I'm going back to the hotel room now. I'd like to be alone. Please excuse me."

She rose and turned away, and almost made it to the door before her shoulders heaved with the inevitable onset of tears. Beth ran the last few steps out the door.

Sam felt paralyzed, then realized he had been capable of one convulsive movement. He was holding Donna's hand. He clutched it like a lifeline, and looked at her. She nodded mutely, in answer to his unmasked question.

Sam turned to Al. "Go after her."

As his friend raced out after the woman he loved, Sam did the only useful thing he could think of. With his free hand, he gestured to the waiter to bring the bill.

Sam and Donna spent the taxi ride to the hotel in silence. Not a word was exchanged as they ascended in the elevator, entered the room, and closed the door behind them. Sam mutely gathered Donna into his arms, holding her impossibly close. Burying his face in her hair, he quaked with the intensity of the emotions coursing through him. Finally, he broke the long silence.

"Did Al do the right thing? Would it have been better to keep it from Beth?" He probed tentatively. "Should you tell someone how different their life was in an alternate time line?"

Donna leaned back within her husband's embrace, and stared into his troubled eyes. "I don't know what was right for Beth. I can only tell you what's right for me. I need to know." She brushed a strand of hair from her eyes to meet his gaze more perfectly. "It's time for us to discuss this. Something happened to the two of us, too. What was it Sam? Please tell me."

The gentle words sent a frisson through Sam. "No," he keened softly. He pushed away from her in dread and shame and collapsed on the edge of the bed.

Donna joined him. "Yes," she affirmed. "Sam, I must know. I've

watched these secrets eat away at you. It has to end. We can get through anything if we do it together. This won't break us. Our love is too strong for that." As she caressed his cheek her hand trembled, betraying the doubt her words denied.

"What do you know so far?" Sam asked dully.

Donna drew a breath, and marshalled her facts, as if this was merely an intellectual exercise. "I know that Ziggy is a confused girl. She claims to know all the changes made by the leaps, but clearly she doesn't. There are gaps, and she's covering up for herself. It's very human of her," she added ironically, "and would be a gratifying development under other circumstances. Instead, it's a nuisance. The memories in Al's head and yours are the only record of those gaps. You know that if you're challenged, you have no proof Al was ever an astronaut?" Sam nodded, and she continued.

"I know that there are also a lot of changes in the time line that Ziggy does know about, but has been ordered not to divulge. About the second or third leap, Al slapped a security net around the data that's so tight, nobody gets through. Believe me, lots of people have tried. Also, around that time Al became very secretive. At first, I figured he was trying to protect me from knowing when you were in danger. But as time went by, and he opened up more, I realized he was pulling very few punches. Still, sometimes when he came out of the Imaging Chamber he seemed completely paranoid. I finally realized that the time line was changing for him, and he never knew what he would find changed next. It was frustrating to know what was going on, but not be able to remember myself." She paused. "Sam, am I right that for you, there are only two time lines? The one before the leaps, and the one now? But that for Al, there are as many time lines as there were leaps?"

"Yes," Sam agreed, "but Al says it's not as bad as it sounds. Most of the leaps had no direct impact on him or the Project."

"Even so - " Donna began.

"Even so," Sam agreed, "it's incredible he can sort through the dozens of tangled time lines at all. I don't know how he stood it. I feel so guilty about all I've put him through." He flushed, and added, "And you."

Donna shook her head. "You feel guilty about too many things, Sam." She wavered for a moment, and considered discarding this academic discussion for the simple pleasure of holding the man she loved. No. The need to unearth the truth was too strong, and she forged on. "What you feel most guilty about is breaking your own rules, isn't it, Sam?"

Sam met Donna on her own terms. If she could discuss this scientifically and reasonably, so could he. "It was bad enough when I got back enough memory to realize the essence of what I was doing, changing history, was absolutely the thing I originally wanted to avoid." Sam shook his head. "It's different out there in the trenches. Things happen so fast, and you don't always have as many options as you'd like. Al summed it up - you take your best shot, and call it good." He sighed. "Then things got personal. Almost from the start, I ran smack up against my own commandment: Thou shalt not alter Time to benefit thyself." He smiled ruefully. "When I think about how pompous I was! I'd only thought about stock market tips, sports results, tangible things. The intangible ways you can benefit from a leap suddenly took on a new dimension. Is it wrong to save a life, just because it's your brother's? Wrong to change something to help a friend?"

"But all that came later. You said you ran into this dilemma almost from the start. What happened, Sam?"

Their eyes met, acknowledging they had reached the thorny nub. Sam tried to pretend this was a debriefing, and related the facts as calmly as his racing pulse would allow. "It was the third leap, June 15, 1972. I leaped into Dr. Gerald Bryant, an English prof at Lawrence. I was there to get one of his students together with the jock who was in love with her, but I took a detour. I saw the woman I loved, and knew she needed help with a problem of her own."

Donna stared at Sam in wide-eyed awe. "You," she breathed. "You took me to see my Dad before he shipped out." Suddenly she began to giggle, and covered her mouth to suppress the sound. "I'm sorry, but Dr. Bryant was just

so sleazy. He hit on everyone. But he was sort of sweet and - " She paused to run a finger down the length of his nose. " - And it was you all the time. Oh, Sam." She smiled, then sobered at the sight of his grim face.

"Is this it, somehow? How can this have changed anything?" She frowned, ransacking her memory. Suddenly an image came into focus, and she clutched Sam's arm. "He explained the string theory! That night, on the way to Washington." She frowned. "No, that was something else. That's when he told me I had to settle things with my dad, so I wouldn't be afraid of commitment, like the fiancée who left him at the altar..."

Donna stared at Sam in stupefaction. Gravely, he met her eyes, and nodded. She had, he thought, the look of a deer caught in the headlights. He wanted to hold her, soothe her, convince her it wasn't real, but fought back the impulse. It was real. She herself said she had to know. Knowing now, she must accept this. There were no words right now that would help, no physical gesture that would not smother her. He could only wait and be here for her, and let her make the first painful move. He held his breath.

Donna spoke at last. "I was afraid you'd leave me, like my dad left my mother. So, I left you first?"

Sam nodded.

She shook her head, then forced a smile. "Wow, now there's a piece of incisive reasoning. Sam, are you sure they give Ph.D.'s to physicists who use Occam's Razor to slit their own wrists?"

Sam expelled the retained air in his lungs in sputtering laughter. Before he could move towards her, she was in his arms, kissing him. It was a hungry kiss, but without any sense of urgency. It was as if they finally had all the Time in the world.

At last, the kiss ended, and Donna held Sam's face cradled in her hands. "I love you, Sam Beckett," she said fiercely.

"I love you, Donna Elesee," he replied, and sealed the affirmation by brushing his lips lightly against her own. "Are you all right?" Sam asked earnestly.

"All right?" Her laughter was a hollow bark. "No. I think I understand what happened. I may even be able to accept what I did - but I am definitely not all right."

"What are you feeling?" he probed gently. Sam reached out to hold her, his chest pressed against her back.

She nestled against him. Her words came tentatively. "Mainly shame, I think. Anger? That too. I'm furious with myself. But the most urgent thing I'm feeling is the need to keep this from the rest of the world. Sam, I would just shrivel up inside if anyone, anywhere found out. Tell me - does Ziggy know?"

Sam shook his head. "But Al does. You must realize that."

She nodded. "He's the main reason I knew something was very wrong. He did a pretty good job keeping the time lines straight, but he made a few slips. Sam, who's Brenda?"

Sam made a face. "Someone Al set me up with. I dated her a couple times. That's all." He kissed her exposed collarbone. "There was no one else, sweetheart, no one who mattered. There couldn't be. Is that what you needed to know?"

"You're very stubborn once you've made up your mind, aren't you?" His only response was a grin. Donna shook her head in exasperation, then brushed back a stray tumbled lock. "What about my life without you?"

"All I really know is that you never married." Sam struggled for the right words. "You see, once I realized that I'd really lost you, I had to keep a certain distance."

"It hurt too much." There was perfect understanding in her tone. "Seeing you would have hurt for me, too, but differently."

Sam hugged her tighter to him. "You asked about Ziggy, and that's one thing that is very odd," he mused. "Ziggy knows what I did to save Tom's life. But any of the changes to do with you and me, or Al and Beth, seem to be too close to her. She doesn't remember. Maybe she has a blind spot in her tarriell cells," he considered. He eased his wife next to him to stretch the

length of the bed. Massaging the tension from her shoulders, his fingers met a steeled unyielding mass. He nuzzled her neck. "Donna," he murmured, "this is not your fault."

"It happened because of a decision I made," she replied.

Sam exhaled in a sigh. "Please don't feel guilty. I can see why you had your doubts." Tentatively, he admitted, "I know my work doesn't make me the easiest man in the world to live with..."

Sam's voice trailed off as he watched the corners of Donna's mouth begin to twitch. "Really?" she asked, with mock gravity. Then the bubble of laughter spilled out of her, and she asked, "So tell me - just how long have you been aware of this fact?"

In a deadpan tone, Sam replied, "It think it was when Katie pointed out that my ant farm had invaded her bedroom."

"Yes," Donna agreed. "But after all, you were her brother. Katie wouldn't know that as a husband you have your compensations." Her eyes met Sam's meltingly.

Sam responded by gathering her hair in both hands to expose the velvet skin of her neck. He kissed her behind her ear. "At least now I can explain why I didn't remember you while I was leaping. Until the simoleap this past September, I didn't even know we were married, or that I'd succeeded in bringing us together. And you'd told Al not to tell me anything." Sam grinned. "I bet Al we'd wind up together. I wish I could have been there to collect when he came out of the Imaging Chamber."

Sam felt Donna's laugh echo through him. Then a frown flickered across her features, and she asked, "How do you think that they're dealing with this, Sam?"

"I don't know. Not like this. Both of them would rather cover the wound, deny it happened." He shook his head. "I wonder what other people would think about us laying here, calmly discussing an alternate time line."

"We aren't other people," Donna replied.

"No," Sam murmured, as he eased his hands down the length of her back. "We're dispassionate scientists, cold blooded people who separate our thoughts from our emotions." He smothered Donna's face in gentle kisses, losing himself in the scent of her skin and hair. The last conscious thought he remembered was Donna asking him to turn out the light.

Much later, in the tranquil dark of their room, Donna asked sleepily, "Sam? If Al was an astronaut originally and didn't go to Viet Nam, what happened to he and Beth in that time line?"

"Didn't work out," Sam muttered.

"But how - " Sam's gentle caress silenced her, and the two of them drifted together into a dreamless sleep.

The weekend passed without the Becketts and Calaviccis meeting again. Sam and Donna took the two days to finally air the wounds and uncertainties that were the baggage of the past five years. It was a blissful and healing time, except for the specter of doubt of what was happening to Beth and Al that hung over them.

Doubt escalated to concern, and finally panic by Monday morning. Sam paced near the elevators outside the hearing room, checking his watch every few moments, as ten o'clock drew closer. At the stroke of ten, the elevator doors parted, and Al strode out. He grabbed Sam by the elbow, and kept walking, dragging his friend along. "C'mon, Sam, you should be inside already. It's showtime. Let's not keep the people waiting."

"I was waiting for you," Sam retorted. "You're late."

"I'm exactly on time," Al corrected. Sam glared at him as they entered the room, and joined the waiting ensign at the counsel table from which they would make their presentation.

The glare softened to a thoughtful look as Sam took in the details of Al's attire and attitude. The man beside him was the precise military officer, his uniform pristine, his mien flawlessly correct and almost brittle. As the morning wore on, Sam's thoughtfulness crystallized into concern. The presentation might be going well, but clearly all was not well within Al

himself.

Finally, a brief recess was declared. Al broke quickly for the corridor, but Sam anticipated him. Outpacing him with longer legs, Sam backed Al against a water fountain, and blocked his escape with arms propped against the wall. Both men appeared unaware of Donna, who materialized from the visitor's gallery.

"What is it, Al? I've been worried about you. Didn't you and Beth finally get to talk things through?"

Al's voice was a hollow rasp. "I talked. Beth just stared at me." He brushed his hand across his face. "Leave it, Sam."

"I can't. Please tell me," Sam answered.

Al exhaled in exasperation, and averted his eyes. "This isn't helping, kiddo. Let me go, huh? I gotta take a leak."

"The man with the famous iron kidneys? I bet. If you want to go, go ahead," Sam gestured, "but I'll follow you. Heck, we've had some of our best conversations in the men's room."

Al shook his head. "Look, ease up on me, okay? I spent the whole weekend talking to Beth, and I've talked myself out." His voice shook but he brought it back under control. "I told her everything, Sam. Seems the more I told her, the more she drew away. She didn't say more than fifty words all weekend. It's like she blames me - for the Project, for getting us all into this paradox mess, everything." He hesitated. "She left a note this morning. She's headed for the Naval station to hop a transport home." Al raised his eyes to meet Sam's gaze squarely. "I'm losing her, Sam. All the pain, all we did, it was for nothing. I'm losing her anyway." He pushed past Sam, into the men's room. Sam didn't follow.

Donna eased away, still unobserved. She returned to their hotel room and left a letter for Sam, to explain what she knew she must now do.

Donna knew all about military transport planes from her years in the Naval Reserve. Backtracking across the continent in a dozen stops was not her idea of fun. She snicked her credit card down on the airline counter without a murmur about the outrageous price of a one-way flight to El Paso. An Air Force colonel at White Sands would return a favor owed, and pick her up there.

Back at the Project, waiting for Beth was nerve-wracking. All evening, Donna mentally rehearsed what she wanted to say. The words turned to dust when Beth finally walked in the control room.

Beth gaped at her. "Why are you here? And how did you get here first?"

Donna laughed. "How was easy. Anything with wings could have beaten you home. As for why, let's get a cup of coffee and talk about it."

They took their mugs to Donna's office, where the younger woman settled into her desk chair. Beth faced her, standing so rigidly that every line of her body seemed stretched to its limit.

"I want to talk to you about Friday night."

"Me too," Donna agreed. "That's why I flew home."

But Beth continued as if she had not heard Donna. "I'd appreciate it if you kept the truth strictly to yourself. It's going to be for me, with you and Sam knowing about this. You can both ease that for me by making sure no one else finds out."

"Of course. I know what you're going through."

"No, you don't," Beth snapped. She made a small sigh self-exasperation. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to take this out on you, but no one else can possibly know what I'm going through." Beth paced. "I suppose Sam filled you in on the details?"

Donna studied her friend. There was something oddly familiar in her restless movements. Recognition dawned in Donna. This was Al at his most tightly wound, a mainspring about to snap.

"No," Donna answered finally. "Sam told me nothing. I overheard Al tell Sam this morning that things were rocky between the two of you. Other than that, I know exactly what I did when you left the restaurant. Do you feel like talking about it?" Donna asked gently.

"Absolutely not."

Donna tried another approach. "Beth, why are you so mad at Al about this?"

Beth whirled to face her. "Who told you I was mad at him?"

"No one. I told you, I overheard them. It's what Al thinks, though. Why, Beth?"

"I'm not mad at him. I'm mad at me." Beth's voice was low and unsteady. "Men!" she spat. "Mine has the sensitivity of a slug. Doesn't he realize what I'm going through? It was just unending, all weekend long. The more he told me, the worse it got. How can I - " she stopped, and glared at Donna.

"Go on," Donna urged. "You need to talk to someone about this. If you couldn't work it out with Al, then let it be me."

"You? You're the last person I want to talk to right now."

Donna recoiled, stung.

"You just don't get it, do you?" Beth fumed. "You stood by your husband. You waited for him for five years. How can I talk to you about how it feels to betray the person you love?"

"But that was different! I knew where he was, that he was alive."

She broke off at the sight of Beth's blank stare. "You can't possibly understand."

Donna realized that until this moment, she hadn't reconciled herself to the fact she would have to tell Beth the truth. Somehow, she had hoped it wouldn't be necessary. She steeled herself, and began.

"I do understand. If anything, it's worse for me. At least you had the sense to marry the man you loved when you had the chance. You only gave up when you thought he was dead. I gave up before we even started."

Beth gawked at her. "What are you saying?"

Donna's throat tightened. "I'm saying that I left Sam at the altar. I never even showed up." She smiled weakly. "Oh, evidently I sent him a note, explaining I couldn't go through with it. I think that was a nice touch, don't you?"

She felt Beth's eyes on her. This was hard, much harder than she thought it would be. Donna swivelled out of her chair, onto her feet, needing the release of any kind of movement.

"Why?" Beth asked at last.

Donna shook her head. "I don't really know. No guts?" she suggested. "Sam says I was afraid to commit, because my dad left my mom, but that's just psycho-babble. No guts," she concluded.

Damn, this hurt, Donna realized. While she had made her peace with Sam, forgiving herself was harder. It was harder still to face a friend and see yourself diminished in their eyes.

"How did it get fixed?" Donna responded to the unasked question. "Sam took me to see my father back in '72, when he leaped into a professor of mine. That did the trick, so maybe it was more than psycho-babble after all. You may recall that you still had to rub my cold feet before the ceremony, but at least I went through with it," she quipped ironically. Donna felt something wet on her face. She reached up to brush it away, and realized it was her own tears.

Suddenly Beth was holding her. "I wouldn't have been there the first time to rub those feet. This may be part my fault, too."

"That's just what you need, more guilt. Stop it, Beth."

Beth squeezed her shoulders, then stepped back. "How long have you known?"

"Since Friday, after dinner. I knew the time line had changed, but I couldn't pry the details out of Sam until then."

Beth shook her head in disbelief, then folded into the second chair in the corner of the tiny office. "You're right, I do need to talk, but I didn't think there was anyone to talk to."

Donna perched on her desk chair. "Tell me," she urged.

Beth drew a steadying breath. "Where do I begin? It's all so awful. I had Al declared dead in '69. When he came home four years later and found out I hadn't waited for him, he married some bimbo on the rebound. Evidently that

lasted for about ten minutes, so he started in on women in general. He was at the Pentagon for a while, and whacked all the willing women in Washington, as he put it. That was followed by three more wives, God only knows how many affairs, and some more one night stands for good measure."

Donna giggled. "I'm sorry, it's the thought of Al without a wedding ring. I keep thinking of a kid in a candy store."

Tears brimmed in Beth's eyes. "Donna, it's not funny - it's horrible. The more stunned I was by it, the more he confessed. Once he decided to tell me everything, he just wouldn't quit. I thought it would never end. There was one thing, though," she amended, "that I made him tell me. I needed to know who his woman at the Project was. I knew there would be someone. Guess who?"

Donna shook her head.

"Tina. I knew that cat was after Al from the moment I set eyes on her. This only proves it. Keep her away from me, or I'll strangle the little minx."

Donna looked at Beth like she was a jigsaw puzzle with some of the pieces missing. "Beth, I just don't get it. You're mad at Al because there were other women?" She struggled for a tactful way to phrase this. "Is that really fair? After all, you weren't there in that time line."

"But that's just it," Beth wailed. "I did this to him. Don't you see? I didn't just leave him, I ruined him. He was walking wounded. It's my fault his life was a mess."

"That's just plain silly," Donna shot back. "No one ruins someone else. It may not have been Al's fault there were all those women in his life without you, but it's not your fault either. Honey," she said gently, "it only proves how much he loves you. You really were the only woman for him."

Beth shook her head. "You still don't know what I did. What was your life like without Sam? Has he told you?"

"I don't think he knows much. We just drifted apart." She shrugged. "What are you getting at?"

"I remarried."

Donna faced this statement with equanimity. "Well, so did Al," she responded reasonably.

"I met him on April 1, 1969. His name was Dirk Simon. He helped me change a flat tire." Beth began to cry. "Donna, we married in June. I had Al declared dead, and I was married 10 weeks after I met this man."

Donna stared at her, stunned.

"It gets worse," she whispered. "By the time I saw that photo that proved Al was alive, I was pregnant. Al seemed to think I'd feel better knowing why I hadn't gone back to him. He was wrong."

Beth crossed the space between them and knelt by Donna. "At dinner, Al explained that when Sam leaped into that policeman, he tried to help me. What he didn't say was that Sam couldn't fix things the first time around. He had to come back and try again." Beth looked up at Donna, tears flowing freely down her face. "It was one of the last leaps. It happened in December, just three months ago. That's when things got fixed. Until then, I was married to someone else. I'd had his children. Our four daughters were never born. My babies," she sobbed, and reached out to Donna.

Donna folded her into her arms, and felt the numb tide rise within her. Cate, she thought. The child I could never have, who I helped raise as if she were my own. Donna tried to imagine Cate winking into existence a few short weeks ago, and failed utterly. Her own eyes stung with tears, and she clutched Beth tightly.

"Do you see why I couldn't face Al? How can he ever look at me and not see what I've done? How could he ever trust me again?"

Donna released Beth from her embrace. "Easily," she answered. "Because he loves you."

Beth raised her hands in a gesture of denial, and Donna clasped them, saying, "Listen to me. I think you've been looking at this the wrong way, and you almost had me convinced, too."

Donna rose from her chair, lifting Beth with her, then turned to pace in

the claustrophobic space. "You've been thinking of Time as a single reality. You spoke about these things as part of your past. But they happened in an alternate time line, not this one."

Donna probed her way through this line of reasoning, drawing conviction as she went along. "Wasn't your first reaction to being told you'd had Al declared dead disbelief? Didn't you feel you could never abandon him that way? You were right. You didn't."

She pivoted to face Beth. "That was another Beth. Another time line, another person. Sam changed the time line. He didn't change you. You never made that fatal mistake. You were rewoven like a thread into this tapestry, this reality. You are who you've always been. Your memories are real. Your children and your life is real. You have to believe that. We both do," she said softly.

Beth shook her head, clearly struggling with the concept.

Donna continued. "Don't you see? Al keeps telling us it's true, and we have to believe him. It's all real - all of the alternate realities. He's the one who first had to accept that, had to pick up wherever he left off and simply play the cards in his hand. Our job is much easier. Things don't keep changing for us. We can simply go on from here."

"But the pain is real. Al has seen so much pain in all of the time lines."

"Yes," Donna agreed, then paused. "Beth, is there something else?"

Beth nodded. "C'mon, it can't be that bad. What is it?"

Beth sat, usurping the swivel chair. Donna perched on the edge of the desk next to her. Beth's voice held a note of bewilderment. "It's hard to explain. Haven't you wondered what happened to Al and I in the original time line? The one where he was an astronaut? Donna, I died."

Her younger friend grappled with this impossible truth. "Go on," she managed to say.

"It was that flat tire. It's hard to believe so much changed because of it. Since Al was with NASA, we were in Houston, not San Diego. So, I wasn't on a city street when it happened. I was on the interstate. The police told Al I probably was driving at about 70 mph when the tire blew. I crossed the median, and hit a semi head-on. The truck driver survived, but I was killed instantly."

Donna swallowed. She reached for Beth's hand. "You are not a ghost." She squeezed. "You exist, here and now. We've dealt all along with the idea that Sam was saving lives. You've found out that yours is one of them. That may be hard to get a handle on, but from another point of view, it's a very special gift. You've had a glimpse at what might have been. We both have."

Beth returned the pressure of Donna's grip. "Yes, but that's not what really bothers me. It's all the pain I've caused Al." She smiled to fight back the tears that threatened to spill again. "There hasn't been much happiness for him. In all the time lines, something terrible happens."

"Yes, how dreadfully disloyal of you to go and die on him."

Beth bit back an involuntary laugh. "Please, don't joke about this. It seems like we're ill-starred. What will happen next?"

"What will happen next," Donna answered firmly, "is that the two of you will go ahead and live your lives. Your happiness has been bought and paid for, and you deserve it."

Beth shot her a puzzled look, and Donna reddened. "This is going to sound moralistic and unscientific, but I've always believed a proverb I read somewhere: 'Take what you want and pay for it, says God.' I think for us at least, it's true. Our husbands were both determined to have what they wanted most, but we all paid a terrible price. Al got you back, but you both lost a precious part of your past, and had it replaced with a nightmare instead. Sam and I wound up together, but the past five years have not exactly been a picnic, and God only knows what lies ahead. The worst part for Sam was the price of Tom's life. Though Al gave the gift freely, Sam can't accept that he cost Al those extra years in captivity. But, even that pales compared with the knowledge his brother's life cost the life of that innocent woman."

Donna ducked her head. "My gentle husband, who wouldn't hurt the

smallest creature, feels he murdered her, just as surely as if he took a gun to her head. He'll take that guilt to the grave. So," she finished, meeting Beth's gaze, "The most foolish thing either of us could do would be to throw it all away." Donna glanced at her watch. "It's two am, but I have a hunch Al isn't getting much sleep. Why don't you call him?"

There was a new light in Beth's eyes, like a fire rekindled. "You've made me feel good about myself again," she said.

"So have you," Donna answered with perfect truth.

Beth smiled back at her. "Can I use your 'phone?"

Donna made a telephone call of her own, at a more usual hour on Tuesday morning. Sam seemed relieved to hear her voice. As she explained to him what had happened, she discovered she ached like a schoolgirl to go flying back to him. With a shock she realized this was their first separation since Sam had leaped home, and that she had initiated it, racing off without a word. She fought back temptation, and agreed to meet him when he and Al flew in Friday.

It was a long three days.

Friday finally arrived. Donna and Beth waited on the tarmac as the small jet taxied up. Sam popped out, and hugged Donna.

They glanced at Beth, who said, "Go ahead. Al will have to do the post-flight checklist, and run her up to the hangar. I'll wait for him here."

Before she could finish, Al emerged from the cockpit. "I can do that later. How are you?" He faced her tentatively.

"I'm fine." She advanced toward him, standing near enough to feel his body heat. "Now that you're here," she added softly.

Then his arms were around her, and their lips met in a long dizzying kiss. "I missed you," he murmured.

"You won't have to miss me, ever again," she replied.

Just as suddenly as he had grabbed her, he let go. "So," he said breezily, "you want to help with the post-flight? Sam's no damn good as a co-pilot."

Over Sam's protests, Beth interjected, "I should hope not, if I know what you have in mind."

Al grinned.

Beth faced the other couple. "I think we should cancel our weekly dinner, just for tonight."

In the quiet hours of the night, Donna lay next to Sam in the tangled sheets of their bed. Faint moonlight reflected off the walls and gently lit his face, softening the lines around his eyes. She admired him with an aura of possessiveness before she spoke. "I'm glad you're home." She snuggled next to him.

He wrapped her in his arms. "I'm glad to be home." He gave her a brief, nuzzling kiss. "Al and Beth seem to be back to normal, don't you think?" He paused, then asked, "Was telling Beth about us tough?"

"Tough enough. But it was necessary, too. There were a few things I hadn't fully faced yet. Beth helped me do that. We helped each other, in fact."

Sam eyed her with concern. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No, not tonight. I don't need to. Things are still going to come up, but we'll work them out as we go. We can now. Right now, all I think either Beth or I need is some privacy. Does it all have to come out when we publish, Sam? The scientist in me says certainly, but another part of me is kicking like a mule."

"Well," Sam waffled, "there's no guarantee that we're going to publish at all. The Committee won't make its decision on declassification of the Project for weeks yet."

Donna sighed. "Sam, I know you. You've already made this decision, based on what you think is right. What is it?"

"I'm not really sure," he conceded. "I have to admit what I did about Tom. Not only does Ziggy know about it, suppressing it would skew the data. Not everything I did during the leaps worked out. Anything we publish must

reflect that. But - " He stopped.

"But?" Donna coaxed.

Sam hugged her tighter. "I don't want to compound a wrong by concealing it, but I don't see what good it would do to tell about the four of us. Chances are, we won't be able to convince anyone it was true anyway. No," Sam said decidedly. "We bury it."

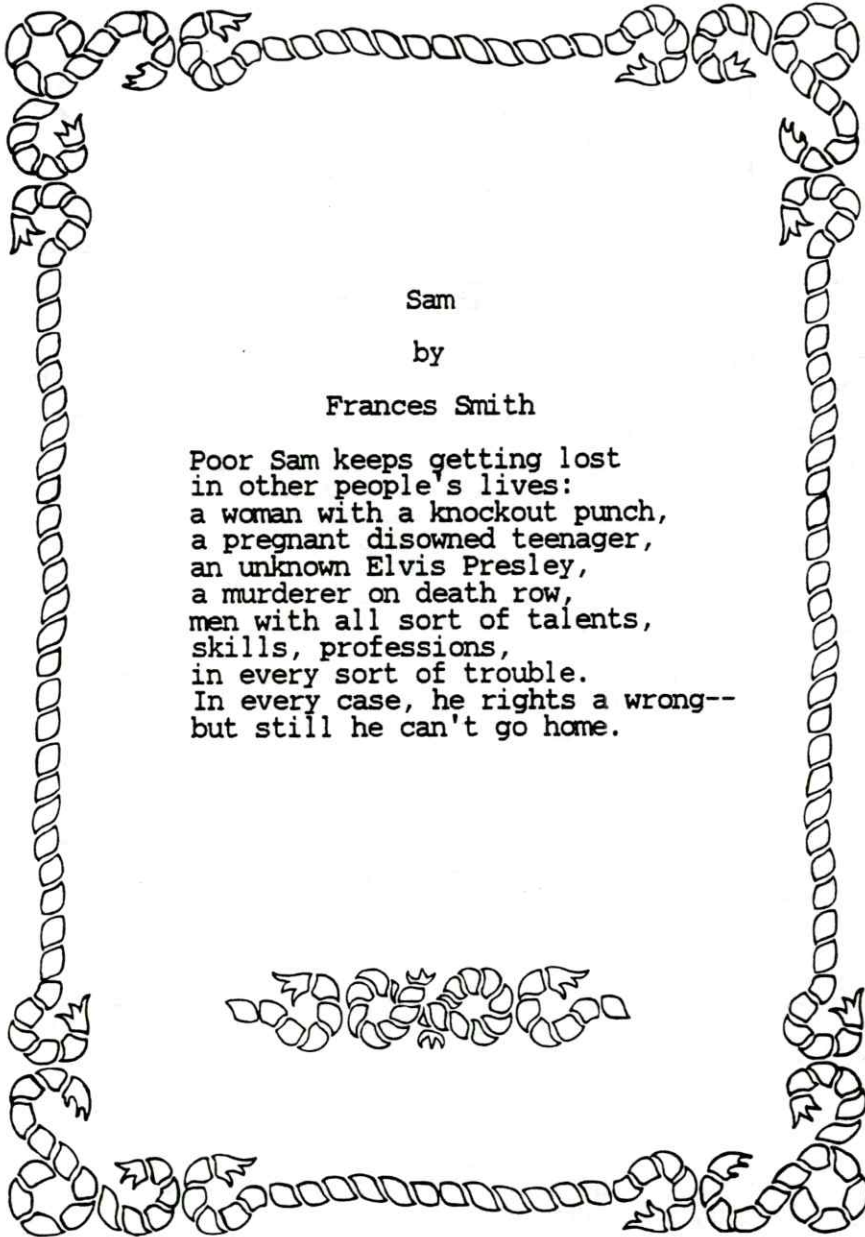
"You're sure?"

"Yes," he answered with conviction.

"I'm relieved," Donna admitted.

"Maybe now things can get back to normal around here."

"Normal?" Donna asked playfully. "How could we tell?"



Sam

by

Frances Smith

Poor Sam keeps getting lost
in other people's lives:
a woman with a knockout punch,
a pregnant disowned teenager,
an unknown Elvis Presley,
a murderer on death row,
men with all sort of talents,
skills, professions,
in every sort of trouble.
In every case, he rights a wrong--
but still he can't go home.

THE BEST MAN FOR THE JOB

by

T. Good

The disorientation was overwhelming, vaguely reminding him of his early days as an astronaut. In fact, leaping-in was very reminiscent of all those equilibrium tests that NASA had put him through, just to see how long it would take for him to toss his cookies. Thank goodness, it wasn't quite as bad as the Tea-Cup Ride at Disneyland.

The room slowly stopped its nauseated spin and settled into a small, cozy kitchen. Admiral Albert Calavicci shook his head, trying to clear his mind of the leap-induced cobwebs. Finally able to focus, the admiral noticed the bright sunlight spilling through the kitchen window. It was early morning by Al's estimation, and a warm breeze softly stirred the ruffled, blue and white check curtains. The time traveler hesitantly sniffed the air, catching a whiff of lilac carried on the breeze. Late spring, maybe? He smiled smugly. He was getting good at this game.

The admiral scanned the room, then glanced down to find himself seated at a small oak table, holding a newspaper--one edge of which was precariously close to a mug of steaming coffee. He pulled the paper out of harm's way and chuckled at his good fortune. It wasn't often that he leaped in and found vital information right at his fingertips. Al pressed his advantage and inspected the newspaper's masthead. It was the Washington Post--June 15th, 1969.

The smug smile crept back. He was way ahead; Where and When were covered, now all that was left was Who. It was a favorite little game of Al's--to see how much information he could attain about his new identity before Ziggy located him and centered Sam in on the situation. Leaping had swiss-cheesed his mind and the admiral had very few pre-leap memories, but he did recall how annoying it had been to show up as Project Observer, ready to save the day, only to find that Sam was already a step ahead. Now, with Al leaping through time and Sam playing Hapless Holographic Helper, the admiral took his revenge where he could get it.

A movement of the newspaper in front of him attracted Al's attention. A soft tapping sounded as the paper moved slightly in his grasp.

Tap, tap.

Al's eyes narrowed as he watched the paper shimmy once more.

"Daddy? Where's my breakfast?" The voice was tiny and emerged from behind the wall of newsprint.

Al closed his eyes. *God, please don't let this be happening.*

"Daddy?" the insistent little voice beckoned again.

Al sighed, looking up at the heavens. *Thanks a lot.*

The admiral begrudgingly opened his eyes. He held his breath in a silent prayer and slowly folded the newspaper down to face the situation.

The 'situation' turned out to be a dark-haired little girl dressed in Winnie-The-Pooh pajamas. She took one look at Al and stuck the thumb of her right hand in her mouth. From the other hand dangled an obviously well-loved stuffed unicorn.

There was a brief moment of silence as the two faced off. Al's expression followed that of the child's as his face mutated into a frown. She was perhaps five, maybe six.

Very young.

Way too young.

Never one to borrow trouble and hoping for the best, the admiral employed his finest weapon--the Calavicci Charm.

"Hi, sweetheart," he said, leaning down closer to the little girl and donning an encouraging smile.

The child's expression didn't change. Her eyebrows were knit together in a equal mixture of distrust and fear, her lower lip trembling in a pout.

Al tried again, this time pushing his chair around so he could fully

face the little girl. "Sweetie, what'cha doing?"

"You're not my daddy," the little girl said vehemently, clutching the unicorn to her and taking a step away from the admiral. "And I'm not supposed to talk to strangers." She removed her thumb from her mouth as she spoke, but then defiantly popped it back in.

Al tried not to let his frustration show. No sense frightening the poor kid anymore than she already was. He had to tell her something though. Begrudgingly, he decided on the truth.

"No, I'm not your daddy. Your daddy had to go away for a while and I'm here to take his place until he comes back. Which will be real soon--I promise," Al said, trying to sound comforting and feeling like a complete heel as he looked down at the trembling child who stood before him.

"No, no!" the distraught youngster screeched. Tears filled her eyes and she moved a step back from the stranger and his frightening words.

"Al," Sam's voice caused them both to jump.

The physicist was standing across the table from the admiral, the sunlight from the window casting an eerie halo about his holographic form. At Al's frustrated shrug, Sam punched at the handlink, then looked back at the two.

"Al, this is Rachael Newsome, and I bet that Rachael is pretty scared right now. Aren't you, sweetheart?"

In response the child stared skeptically at the hologram, sucking fiercely on her thumb, and now holding the unicorn in what looked to Al like a death grip.

Sam cast a quick glance at Al, then focused his attention on Rachael. "You know, Rachael, there's really no reason for you to be scared. My name is Sam and that's Al, and we've both been sent here to take care of you while your daddy's away."

"Tried it already--she ain't buying it, Sam." Al continued to frown down at the little girl.

Sam took a step toward the frightened child, and in doing so, unknowingly walked through part of a kitchen chair.

Rachael's tiny mouth dropped open, her thumb falling out. She still had the unfortunate unicorn by the neck. She stared at Sam for a moment then down at the stuffed animal. Looking back over at the hologram, she favored him, surprisingly, with a small smile.

"Who sent you? Are you fairies?" This was whispered in childish excitement as she looked back and forth between Sam and Al.

"Yes," Sam agreed, smiling and nodding his head.

"No," Al protested, frowning and shaking his head.

The child's smile grew. "You're fairies like in the book Mommy used to read to me." She totally disregarded the admiral's negative response and reluctant pout.

"Yes, Rachael, we are fairies," Sam shot Al a warning look. "We're Special Fairies that the Queen of the Fairies has sent to look after you while your daddy's gone."

"Great," Al griped, "I'm not just a Fairy, I'm a Special Fairy. Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"Al," the hologram warned, casting a troubled glance at Rachael who was watching the naval officer intently.

"Well, it *doesn't* make me feel better," Al continued grumbling. "I don't wanna be a Fairy. Why can't I be an Angel, like before."

"Because you're not, that's why," Sam hissed at the uncooperative Naval officer.

"He's awfully grumpy," Rachael interjected, studying Al like a bug under a microscope.

Sam smiled down at Rachael. "Yes, sweetheart, he is *awfully* grumpy."

"My Mommy would make him take a time-out."

"A time-out?" Al blurted out in annoyance, leveling a glare at the tiny munchkin that was still scrutinizing him. She no longer seemed fearful of him or Sam.

"I agree," Sam smiled. He tossed Al a wry glance. "I think a time-out

would definitely help Fairy Al's disposition."

"You can use my room," Rachael offered helpfully.

"Oh, thank you so much," Al muttered, shooting a narrow look at his tiny nemesis.

"Maybe later, okay?" Sam couldn't help but smile at the child's earnest little face and his friend's obvious annoyance.

"Okay," Rachael sighed, obviously disappointed that Fairy Al wasn't going to get his.

* * *

"What's she doing now, Sam?"

Al watched as Sam looked through the wall that connected the small kitchen with the living room. The upper half of Sam's body disappeared as he checked-up on Rachael's activities.

"She's watching cartoons. You're lucky, Al. You leaped in on Saturday morning, she'll be occupied for hours." The hologram pulled back from the wall to smile at the disgruntled time-traveler.

"Lucky?" Al frowned at his friend. "No, Sam, I'm not lucky. I'm 'Daddy'." The Naval officer managed to make the endearment sound like a four-letter word.

"Yeah, ain't it a kick in the butt?" Mimicking back to the admiral one of his own favorite phrases, the physicist chuckled, amused with himself. At Al's sour look, the chuckled converted to a slight cough. Sam shrugged. "I'm sorry, okay? I realize this is a...unique...experience for you."

"Yeah, well..." Al shrugged off his friend's apology. "Unique is one way of putting it. What am I here to do, Sam?"

Sam poked and prodded the hand-link, causing it to shriek in protest. "Well, your name is Robert Newsome. Rachael is your six year old daughter. Her mother, Monica..." the physicist punched a few more buttons on the hand-link and looked hesitantly over at Al.

"Her mother, Monica...what?" Al urged his friend on with an agitated shrug.

Sam swallowed, eyes back on the hand-link. "It seems she walked out on Robert and Rachael about three months ago." The physicist ventured a peek at the older man.

"You mean she deserted them?" Al frowned.

"Yeah," Sam nodded, studying the time-traveler. He wondered if this leap might not hit a little too close to home for his friend. Al's mother had deserted the family when he was just a child and this situation could dredge up all those feelings. Sam could only hope that Al's swiss-cheesed memory could finally be put to good use and protect him from those old memories.

A brief, puzzled look flitted across the Admiral's face. He rubbed at his chin uneasily, then seemed to shake the odd feeling off with a shrug of his shoulders. He turned his attention back to Sam. "What's Ziggy say about this?"

Still troubled, Sam's gaze shifted back to the hand-link. "She says there's a 87.2% chance that you're here to help prove to Robert's family that he can take care of his daughter on his own. In the original history, Robert's sister, Kathryn and her husband convinced Robert to give up custody of his daughter to them. They ended up raising Rachael. Robert felt he'd failed Rachael and ended up leaving town. Rachael never had a real father-daughter relationship with him and it's adversely effected her adult relationships. Ziggy says you're here to keep the two of them together--to prove that Robert can cut it as a single father."

"This sister sounds like a real piece of work," Al growled.

"Well, I think her intentions are good, just misplaced," reasoned the physicist.

"So, I just need to..." Al hesitated.

"Convince Kathryn that the best place for Rachael is with you," Sam continued for him. "You need to prove to Kathryn that Rachael will be well taken care."

"I don't know about this, Sam. I mean, I'm not sure if I'm the right man for the job."

"Al, you're an admiral in the Navy, you've been a test-pilot, an astronaut, a project engineer, a holographic observer--"

"But Sam, those jobs were a piece of cake. Now I have to be..." the older man swallowed the large pit of fear that was wedged in his throat. "...a daddy."

* * *

"Where do I start?" Al paced nervously the length of the kitchen.

"Well," Sam pondered. "I think a good start would be getting breakfast. What do you usually have for breakfast?"

"A Bloody-Mary."

Sam frowned at his friend. "I'm serious, Al."

"So am I."

The physicist shook his head. "Guess we're going to have to start with the basics."

Al scrambled for paper and a pen.

"First rule, no alcoholic beverages. Got that?"

The admiral nodded, scribbling furiously.

"We need something nutritious."

Al picked up a bag of malted-milk balls from the counter.

"I said, nutritious."

"They have milk in them," the admiral argued, pointing with his pen to the label to prove his point.

"Cereal," Sam ordered, leaving no room for argument.

"Cereal," the admiral agreed. More scribbling. Tentatively he questioned, "With milk?"

"Yes, with milk," Sam said impatiently. "Al, after breakfast you need to get to a book store."

"Book store," the Naval officer said, writing at the same time. He looked up at his friend. "What do I need at the book store?"

"Everything you can find written by Dr. Spock."

* * *

While Al was getting Rachael dressed and ready for their trip to the book store, Sam went back to the control room to see if he could get some help from Ziggy.

He was still concerned that Al's pre-leap memory of his own abandonment might resurface. He wanted to get Al out of this leap as quickly as possible with the least amount of harm to all concerned. As an Observer, Al had had to face enough personal demons--Sam was going to do whatever it took to keep his friend from reliving any more anguish.

When questioned, the hybrid-computer implied, in a rather nasty way, that there was no help for Al. After witnessing the Breakfast Fiasco, the physicist had to agree.

* * *

Several hours later Sam found Al in the kitchen putting away the remnants of lunch--he was stuffing leftovers bits of cheese, a carrot and several orange sections in a baggie.

"How about if you invite Kathryn and her husband over for dinner. That way they can see Rachael--"

"In her natural habitat?" Al interrupted, his gravelly voice heavy with sarcasm.

"Al, she's a child, not a zoo animal," the physicist reasoned.

"Uh, huh," the older man grunted, not totally convinced. He tossed the baggie into the refrigerator, slamming the door closed with more than necessary force.

Sam followed the agitated Naval officer into the living room.

"When they come over they'll see that you're handling everything just fine," Sam tried to assure his friend.

A silence fell as both men slowly looked around the shambles of the living room. It appeared that a small nuclear device had been detonated. The room was overflowing with toys, piles of discarded clothing, and dirty dishes. A vacuum innocuously stood in the middle of the room, its cord stretched dangerously across the entrance to the hallway, just waiting for a hapless victim.

After scanning the wreckage, the men's eyes met.

Al raised a skeptical eyebrow. "From this they're gonna see that everything's just fine?"

"I didn't say it was going to be easy, Al. Call and invite them for supper this coming week. You take a few days off work--that's the best bet anyway, considering--and use the time to get this place into shape."

"Sam, I went to the Naval Academy, I can clean with the best of them, but this..." Al waved a hand at the mess. "Sam, this is disgusting. I mean, are you sure this is what we want for Rachael?"

"Al," Sam said, "Ziggy believes that Kathryn never gave Robert the chance to get over his wife walking out on him. At first he did let things go a bit."

"A bit?" Al raised an eyebrow at the physicist. "This place is a disaster area. Sam, I can't even find the phone. It rings occasionally--but I can't find it. Rachael says they have a cat. She hasn't seen him in about a week. I don't even wanna think about what's happened to that poor creature. To tell you the truth, I'm scared I'm gonna misplace the munchkin in this mess."

"Okay, okay," Sam pleaded. "Give the fellow a break. He was depressed. His wife just up and walked out on him and Rachael. It took him a little while to adjust, but Ziggy feels he just needs the extra time you're going to give him. That, and a little boost up."

"Yeah, right onto my shoulders," grunted Al. "Okay, so, I clean up all this," his gesture encompassed the entire house. "I try to take care of Rachael, with the help of these," he picked up one of the mountain of books he'd purchased at the book store. "And...?"

"And, that evening you put Rachael in her Sunday-Go-To-Meeting Duds, play the perfect daddy, and cook dinner, proving to your sister that you are capable of taking care of your daughter." Sam eyed the Naval officer suspiciously. "You can cook, can't you?"

"Of course I can cook," Al looked offended. "I'm Italian."

* * *

Al, efficient as always, wasted no time in rolling up his sleeves and getting down to business. He found a pair of old blue jeans in Robert's bedroom closet, along with a faded Washington Redskins' t-shirt. The perfect clean-up gear and his favorite team to boot.

His problem of what to do with Rachael was solved when her little friend Tina came over. They both retreated upstairs to Rachael's room for a grueling game of Candy Land.

The admiral was just finishing the final touches to the living room, polishing the teak-wood coffee table to a brilliant luster, when he heard the Imaging Chamber door open.

"Al," Sam said, "this looks great. At this rate you'll be finished in no time."

"You haven't seen the bathrooms yet."

"Oh?"

"Or the laundry room."

"Oh."

"Or Munchkin Land."

Sam looked a question at the admiral.

"The kid's bedroom," Al explained. "It was the worst. I did, however,

find the cat."

"I don't think I want to know."

"You don't. Sufficed to say, he went through an entire box of Kitty Nibbllets in about 4.2 seconds."

"How's everything with Rachael?" The physicist exited the unpleasant topic of possible animal abuse and entered what he hoped was safer territory.

"Fine, except for feeding her."

"What's the problem," the hologram asked.

"She'll only eat things that begin with the letter 'C'," Al explained. At Sam's look of confusion he continued. "She's learning her alphabet and 'C' is her favorite letter. She decided that if it doesn't start with 'C', it doesn't pass her lips.

"You're kidding?"

"Nope," Al said simply with a shake of his head. "It's like a Sesame Street Eating Disorder. But, it's not as limiting as you might first suspect. Her main staples seem to be carrots, cheddar cheese, Cheetos, and Chiquita bananas. I figure we have the four main food groups covered, that is if Cheetos are considered a bread.

"I don't think so, Al."

"Damn." The admiral was obviously disappointed.

"Have you tried to change her mind?" the hologram asked.

"Believe me, Sam, nothing's gonna change that kid's mind. But you're welcome to give it a shot?"

"Ah, no thanks."

"Coward."

* * *

Al made the call to Kathryn and her husband Bill, inviting them for dinner Tuesday evening. Al re-evaluated his initial opinion of Kathryn after talking with her. She seemed like a truly caring person. She was just desperately worried about her brother and her niece. Al hoped that this dinner would help to squelch her fears and enable him to leap out of Parental Hell.

It wasn't that Rachael was a terrible child. She was, simply, a child, and as such, a complete mystery to Al.

By Tuesday morning he'd finished most of the heavy cleaning and was down to trying to get the household running with military efficiency. He was sitting at the small desk in the den, trying to make some sense of the jumbled paperwork piled there, when Rachael entered from the living room.

"What'cha doin'?" she asked plaintively.

"Um...I'm working on these papers," the admiral answered without looking up.

"Doin' what?"

"Getting them in order," he grunted.

"Why?"

"Because they need to be put in order, so I know where everything is."

"Why?"

Al finally looked over at the child. She was leaning on the door jam, picking at the eye of her stuffed unicorn. That poor animal had a tough life.

"Rachael, don't you have anything to do?"

She shook her head dejectedly.

"How about going to play with Tina?"

"She's visiting her grandmother."

"How about cartoons?"

Another shake of her head shot that idea out of the air.

Al sighed. He looked back at the pile of unopened letters and bills.

"Al, would you play a game with me?"

The innocent timbre of her voice tugged at his bachelor-hardened heartstrings. *Maybe this wasn't so bad after all. I mean, look at her. What a sweetie. She was just bored and a little lonely for her real daddy. It wouldn't hurt him to spend a little time with her. What harm could it do? He*

was an adult after all. He could handle this situation.

Al answered Rachael with a smile and a pat on his knee. She skipped over to him giggling, and he pulled her onto his lap. Rachael leaned back against Al's chest as he tried to straighten the barrettes that were precariously holding her curly hair out of her eyes. When he finished, Al gave one dark curl an affectionate tug and winked at her. Rachael looked up at the admiral and winked back. She then started to recite all the games she owned--giving him all his alternatives.

The Naval officer's mind wandered as the litany of her vast toy collection rolled on. This leap hadn't been as bad as he'd thought it would be. In fact, he was actually enjoying it. Not the cleaning part--but taking care of Rachael was starting to seem easy, almost normal to him. She was certainly worming her way into his heart at an alarming rate. Al tried to remember if he had any children of his own. His first instinct was to say no, but somewhere in the dark tunnel that was now his memory came images of reading fairy tales and singing lullabies. The admiral tugged at the recollections, trying to bring them into clear view, but they dissolved back into the murky darkness. He shook off the odd feeling, mentally making note to ask Sam.

Al glanced down at Rachael in enjoyment. This afternoon he would share with her. After all, playing a few games with the munchkin easily beat out balancing a check book. Maybe he'd even teach her a thing or two--passing on his knowledge to that of the younger generation. Yeah, things could be worse than spending a relaxing afternoon playing games--this leap was like taking candy from a baby.

* * *

"Give me all your twos."

Al threw his cards on the table in disgust. He watched as the child reached out a small, chubby hand to retrieve the three cards, adding them to her overflowing hand.

"You're cheating," he said, his eyes narrowing.

"Prove it," she smiled sweetly.

* * *

"Mother, may I?"

"No, you may not."

"Rachael, are you ever going to let me move?"

"No."

"I see."

* * *

"Damn," Al swore softly under his breath. "How many of these ugly broads are there in this deck?"

"That's why it's called Old Maid. I win."

"What a surprise."

* * *

"I win. Again."

"Say, kid, how would you like to learn a new game ... it's called Poker."

* * *

"I have four of these, is that good?" Rachael pushed the Ace of Spades under Al's nose.

Silence.

"What does it mean?" the child asked again, waving the card at the

admiral.

"It means you win," he answered tightly.

"Time to play another game."

"No. It's time to take a nap."

* * *

The nap seemed to have worked wonders for both Al and Rachael's dispositions and the evenings' horse and pony show turned out to be a smashing success. The father-daughter team sailed through the "inspection" without a hitch.

Al and Sam had both agreed that the holographic Observer be absent from the festivities. They didn't want to have to worry about Rachael reacting to her new "invisible friend" in front of curious relatives. Even without his friend's help, Al managed to do all the right things, say all the right words. Rachael helped the most by being on her best behavior. Although he hadn't gotten any word yet from Sam, Al considered the evening a battle won. Kathryn and her husband had been sufficiently impressed with the house, Rachael, and the meal. It went smooth as silk--considering.

There had been a few rough moments when Rachael had called him Al, and when Kathryn had asked about the cat, but all and all things went well. Rachel seemed convinced that their success was solely due to her dramatic prowess. After her aunt and uncle had said their goodbyes, she'd sprinted upstairs and was now at her dresser mirror acting out what Al could only deduce was a scene from Camille as there was a lot of coughing involved. While "Greta Garbo" hacked away upstairs, the admiral took a moment to thank his benevolent higher power who had once again seen fit to look out for small children and fools. Al had been able to convince Robert's sister that he was competent enough to handle single parenthood and she'd promised their help when needed. Al was sure that they wouldn't be trying to take Rachael away from Robert now.

Al went upstairs to tell Rachel she needed to brush her teeth and get ready for bed. He found her, still poised in front of the mirror, but now clutching what appeared to be an old bowling trophy and giving her acceptance speech for an Academy Award. He allowed her to finish her list of "thank yous", which included the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, and Toys R Us, before hustling her into the bathroom.

Although he'd hoped to leap out before he had to pull K-P duty, Al headed back downstairs and into the kitchen to assess the damage. It was immense. Undaunted, Al rolled up his sleeves. He was wrapping up the left-over lasagna when Sam popped in.

The hologram peered into a crusted saucepan that was sitting on the front burner.

"Macaroni and cheese?" Sam asked in disbelief. "You tried to make a good impression with Macaroni and Cheese?"

Al turned to his friend, a knife in one hand and a small can of anchovies in the other. "Don't make me use this," the Naval officer threatened.

"What? The knife or the fish?"

"Take your pick." Al finished covering dishes and placing them in the refrigerator. He glanced up at Sam. "The Cheese and Macaroni was for the munchkin. I thought I'd better serve her something she'll actually eat-- figured it would look good for Kathryn to see her take in food."

"Oh, yeah," Sam shrugged an apology. "What else was on the menu?"

"The grown-ups ate Calavicci's famous lasagna and Caesar salad with," Al threw back the cover of the bread basket with a flourish, "homemade garlic croutons."

"Wow," Sam breathed, looking with admiration at what was left of the feast. "You really can cook."

"Son, I've always said that the quickest way to a woman's heart is through her stomach." His dark eyes narrowed into a leer. "Unless of course it's through her--"

"Al," the hologram admonished, blushing.

The admiral chuckled as he finished his clean up. "So, what's the news from Ziggy? Did I do good?"

Sam smiled at his friend. "Yes, Al, you done good. Rachael ends up staying with Robert. In fact, there's even more good news. Rachael's mom comes back. Robert and she never get back together again, but Monica ends up sharing custody with him."

"That's great, Sam." Al's voice was husky as he finished wiping his hands on the dish towel and tossed it over his shoulder. "I'm glad it worked out for Rachael. I'm glad she didn't have to go through--that she got her Mommy and Daddy back."

"Yeah," Sam said hesitantly, watching as his friend leaned back against the kitchen counter. "Al, are you okay?"

"Sure, Sam, sure, I'm okay," the admiral shrugged off his friend's concern. "So, why haven't I leaped? If everything is a-okay with the munchkin, shouldn't I be outta here?"

Sam checked the hand-link. "I'm not sure, Al. I'll go back and check with Ziggy."

Sam opened the Imaging Chamber door and disappeared. Al tossed the wet dish towel into the laundry room and wandered into the living room. The room was dark, except for a small lamp sitting on the end table. The admiral took advantage of Sam's errand and Rachael's absence to stretch out on the sofa. Three days of constant cleaning and child-rearing had taken its toll. He was exhausted. He didn't mean to doze off, but the quiet darkness and soft ticking of the wall clock lulled him to sleep.

When Sam arrived with an update from Ziggy, he found his friend softly snoring. He went into the kitchen to check things out. Sam was about to head back to the Project, leaving his friend to a few more moments of much needed rest, when the sound of tiny footsteps in the hall stalled him.

Peeking out through the kitchen wall he watched as Rachael walked over to the sleeping Naval officer. She poked at his arm, but received only a soft grunt for her trouble. Sam was about to intervene for Al's sake, when the little girl climbed up on top of the snoozing admiral, wrapping her arms about his neck and resting her head on his shoulder.

Sam walked quietly to the back of the sofa, gazing down at the incredible view. His slightly bedraggled best friend had Rachael snuggled safely in his arms, his faint snores ruffling the curls on her forehead.

Sam smiled sadly.

This was a side of Al that no one would ever see--the life that Al could have had if only...if only what? If only there had never been that damned war? If only Beth had been waiting for him when he got home? If only he'd given Ruthie--or any of his other wives--the chance to prove they weren't going to leave him like Beth had?

The image of his friend holding this little girl, tugged at the physicist's heart. He'd worried about Al and this leap. But the worry had been pointless. Al had faced his temporary fatherhood like he'd faced everything else in his life; with courage, conviction and good humor. It was sad to realize that this thoughtful, caring man would never get the chance to be a real father--fate had dealt him a malicious hand and even Sam hadn't been able to put right that wrong. It just wasn't meant to be--except maybe like this. Maybe, this was Al's only chance to realized those dreams. Sam smiled through the ache in his chest. Maybe this leap was His way of letting Al experience fatherhood--of allowing him to do and feel those things that fate had denied him. It wasn't fair, but it would have to do.

The handlink chirped it's warning of the impending leap. As the room began to swirl about the physicist, he took one more look at his friend and the little child in his arms. The tingling energy of the leap engulfed his friend and Sam raised his eyes to the heavens and whispered, "You really did pick the best man for the job."

INTERLUDE

by

Pat Woodhouse

Outside, the cool desert night swiftly fell, and Dr. Verbena Beeks began what she called her "rounds", her periodic walk through the complex of buildings that made up Project Quantum Leap. During it, she would talk with whoever she happened to meet, though sometimes she would look up a person who she knew was having problems, but was reluctant to make an appointment with her. Although she did keep regular office hours (at least, as regular as she could manage), she'd found that this helped her to better gauge the psychic health of the Project's personnel.

As usual, she stopped by the Waiting Room first. Actually a small suite of rooms, it was where the current occupant of Sam Beckett's body lived for the duration of his leap. Sam was in transit now, that period of time between his last leap and the next. Though to Sam the leaps were instantaneous, on the Project end it could be a few hours to several days before he showed up somewhere in the past. This particular transit had already lasted nearly 12 hours.

Verbena inserted her keycard into the slot beside the door, listened for the click of its lock releasing, then pushed it open and went in, crossing the simply furnished living area to the bedroom beyond. She spoke briefly to the duty medtech, her eyebrows lifting in surprise as she received an interesting piece of news. Verbena thanked the woman, then moved to the bed where Sam's comatose body lay, connected to and surrounded by state-of-the-art monitoring equipment. Equally state-of-the-art life support equipment stood ready nearby; Verbena fervently hoped it would never have to be used.

Aside from the muted beeping of the machines, the room was utterly still. A single glance at the monitors would have apprised Verbena of Sam's condition, but she examined him anyway, being a firm believer in the therapeutic value of touch. She then checked the padded restraints (a necessary evil) about his wrists, making certain they weren't too tight. Having done all she could for now, she merely stood there, one of his limp hands in hers, looking down at him.

No matter how often she'd seen him like this, it always hurt, especially when contrasted with the alive, vital person of her memories. One day, she knew, they would get him back, but sometimes doubts would come to gnaw at her mind...

Resolutely she pushed them back, reaching down to gently touch Sam's face, the slack features almost as pale as the blaze in his dark hair. Then, with a parting nod to the technician, she left the room.

After some deep breaths to restore her equilibrium, Verbena next went to look in on Al. This last leap had been very harrowing, with the Observer just about dead on his feet by the end of it. Since it had been out of the question for him to try driving back to town, and with her office closer to the Imaging Chamber than his quarters here on-site, Verbena had settled Al in there.

The lights came on automatically as the door opened, and she slapped hastily at the dimmer switch, though she needn't have worried; Al, his small frame sprawled on the couch, one arm and leg dangling over the edge, only stirred a little, his sleep unbroken. But it was far from restful, as Verbena saw when she drew closer; his features were pulled into a frown, and he muttered unintelligibly, limbs twitching.

Her dark eyes clouded with concern, Verbena set about making him more comfortable, rearranging the trailing limbs on the couch, and spreading the afghan he'd thrown off, back over him. Al's body gradually relaxed, as if, even in the grip of nightmare, he could sense the psychiatrist's calming presence.

Verbena straightened up with a sigh, watching Al's face smooth out as he slid deeper into sleep. His and Sam's friendship went back years; in many

ways this was as hard on him as it was on Sam. But she was well acquainted with Admiral Albert Calavicci's career history and psych profile, and was convinced that if Sam had been less adamant on having him as Project Observer, Al would've been well on the road to alcoholism by now.

Making a mental note to see that Al got some food in him after he awoke, Verbena left the office and continued her walk. While passing a certain door in the complex's residential wing, she noticed a thin ribbon of light beneath it, and paused. Considering what the Waiting Room tech had told her, she wasn't really surprised to find Donna still here, although until recently she'd rarely used her quarters; after finishing work she'd usually returned to the ranch house she and Sam had off-site. Verbena hesitated to disturb her, but pressed the door buzzer anyway; if Donna didn't want company, she would say so.

"Just a minute," came the muffled reply from inside. A few seconds later, the door opened and Dr. Donna Elesee stood there. She and Verbena were of a height, though she seemed taller because she carried herself so erectly. Her light brown hair, usually worn up, tumbled loosely around her shoulders, framing a handsome, slightly narrow face lively with intelligence, lit up now with pleased surprise.

"Hi, Verbena," she said, opening the door wider. "Come in."

"You're sure I'm not disturbing you?" Verbena asked, hesitating, for the welcoming smile on her friend's face didn't quite hide the tiredness she saw there.

"No, no. I was just finishing up something. Please." She closed the door and seated herself at her desk, shuffling together some papers on it, while Verbena took a nearby armchair. "How's Al?"

"Still sleeping," Verbena told her. "I just looked in on him."

"Good." Donna nodded. "He needs the rest."

"And so could someone else I might name," said Verbena, her tone slightly scolding.

Donna flushed, but accepted the mild reprimand, knowing it was deserved; she had been keeping far too many late hours than was good for her, especially now. She touched the gentle swell of her belly, feeling again that utter sense of wonder, tinged, as always, with sadness.

"I know, Verbena," she said, "and I'll get some after I'm done here." She gave the psychiatrist a small smile. "Promise."

"All right." Verbena paused. "Claire told me you were in to visit Sam today."

"Yes," said Donna softly, sobering.

Carefully, Verbena said, "I...didn't know you ever did."

But the other woman didn't take offense. "I try to be unobtrusive about it," she said, "though I've heard the rumor, that I don't go see him at all."

Verbena nodded; she'd heard it, too, and was ashamed that she'd put even the least amount of credence in it. Anyone who had seen the two together before Sam had begun leaping, as well as during that all-too-brief time when he'd come home, could not have doubted the depth of their love. Now, though, because of the magnafluxing effect of the leaps, what Al called the 'swiss-cheese' effect, Sam didn't remember her, and the Observer wasn't allowed to tell him.

"I'll try to stop it," she said, angry with herself now for letting it go on as long as it'd had.

Donna shook her head, though her face tightened with pain. "It'll just start another, possibly worse, one. Besides, it's partly true. During the leaps I stay away; I couldn't bear to see someone else looking out of his eyes, speaking with his voice..." Her own voice shook slightly and she took a breath to steady it. "So I go to see him during the transits. That way I can look at him and see only my Sam, and hope that the next time his eyes open he'll be looking out at me, not some stranger." Tears trembled along the edges of her eyelids; she blinked them away impatiently.

"It's okay to cry, Donna," said Verbena gently, leaning forward to touch her hand. "Have you cried at all since this began?"

"Almost everyday, for the first few months. But," she sighed, "you can

do that for just so long, before you feel your hopes start to fade." A sudden fierceness suffused her voice. "And I won't let that happen!"

"None of us will," Verbena promised.

"I know," said Donna. "That helps, too." She smiled, then, somewhat self-deprecatingly. "I write him letters, you know." She waved a hand over the neatened papers on her desk.

"And why shouldn't you?" Verbena countered. "After all, it's not as if Sam were dead." She said it as briskly as she could, trying to exorcise the memory of that too-pale face against the pillows in the Waiting Room.

"No, it's not," Donna echoed. But she saw that face in her mind, too, and her fingers twisted the broad gold band on her left hand.

Verbena nodded toward the closely-written sheets. "Will you let him read them?"

Donna let her hands fall apart. "I don't know," she admitted. "Some of them are...very bitter." She looked away, but not before Verbena saw a spark of that bitterness in her eyes. She yanked open a drawer and grabbed a bulging manila envelope, flinging the papers from inside it across the desk. "Should I let him read"--and her voice grew brittle--"how angry I am with him for stepping into that damn Accelerator before perfecting the retrieval program? Or how jealous I am of Al for being able to at least *talk* to him? Or that I even hate him sometimes for leaving me again? Or--" Her voice broke and she sat there, taut, her eyes tightly shut. Tears squeezed out from beneath the lids and slipped down her face.

Alarmed, Verbena quickly crouched beside Donna and put her arms around her, calling her name, using her voice and touch to anchor the other woman against the fierce tide of emotions swamping her. At last, the tension draining from her body, Donna slumped back into Verbena's supportive embrace. When she opened her eyes, they held only dismay and shame. "I'm sorry," she murmured, pushing herself upright and caressing the bulge of her child, as if to soothe it.

"For what?" Verbena chided. "Being human?" She gave Donna a reassuring squeeze. "No. If that were the case we'd be apologizing to each other constantly."

Donna swiped a hand, childlike, across her damp cheeks, lips thinned in self-disgust. "Is it *human* to have such ugly feelings toward someone you love?"

"Yes," Verbena answered firmly. "As long as, after the anger and jealousy and hatred are gone, the love is still there."

Rubbing her wedding band as if it were a talisman, Donna said softly, "It is." Then doubt crept into her voice. "But will his still be there for me, if I let him see these?" She fingered the pages strewn over her desk.

Verbena sighed, but Donna raised a hand, forestalling her. "I know you can't decide this for me," she said, her gaze level. "Just tell me, as a friend, what you think."

Touching Donna's ring, Verbena said with conviction, "Sam married *you*, Donna. All of you, the ugliness as well as the beauty. And if you believe he can't face that and still look at you with love, then you're not being fair to him. Or yourself."

Verbena stood as Donna, a reflective look on her face, carefully gathered the scattered pages back together, slipping the thick bundle back into the envelope and replacing it in the drawer. "Thank you," she said quietly.

Verbena grasped her shoulders. "Just keep loving Sam," she said earnestly. "One day we *will* bring him home, and it'll be for good." Donna walked with her to the door and they hugged warmly.

"Finish your letter, then get that rest," Verbena advised. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night." Donna closed the door, and sat back down at her desk, scanning the last few lines she'd written before Verbena's visit. With a nod of satisfaction, she picked up her pen again.

'Verbena just came by, Sam, and...

FULL CIRCLE

by

Robin C. Kwong

"--All right, Sam. Just one left--"

Lightning stabbed the night sky over their heads, followed directly by a deafening clap of thunder. The small boy next to him clutched Sam's leg in terror. "Daddy!"

The boat listed dangerously, and Sam held on to the four-year-old with one hand, bracing himself against the railing with the other. He peered up through the driving rain at the dock above him. The darkness and the storm nearly blinding him, he could only barely make out the several figures that he knew were there. The shipping dock wasn't at the correct height for the small sailboat, but it'd been the closest one.

"Just get the last one up, Sam. Hurry!"

Carefully grasping the boy beneath the arms, he lifted him towards the waiting hands above. Just at that moment, the sailboat pitched sharply, throwing him off-balance.

"Sam--"

"Kevin--!" The panicked voice of the boy's mother rang out overhead.

Immediately, Sam lowered the boy back to his feet, catching himself against the mast at his back. "It's all right!" he called back reassuringly.

He shielded the both of them against the buffeting wind, the deck treacherously slippery with excess water. Lightning flashed again, illuminating the purplish, rolling clouds above them, and the tossing waves beneath. He could feel the boy's heart hammering against his chest, mirroring his own.

"Daddy..." came the muffled wail.

"Shh, it's okay," Sam told him, though he was forced to raise his voice above the sound of the storm. He glanced up at Al's figure beside him, read the anxiety on his face, and the helplessness he felt.

Another roll of the waves, then for a brief moment the boat was still. Quickly, Sam steadied himself, grabbed the boy again, and swung him upwards. For a heart-stopping instant, he feared he would lose his precarious position, then he felt the child's weight being lifted from his arms.

"Mommy's got you, sweetie," he heard the sobbing voice gasp above him.

"Kevin, come up, please!"

"Go on!" Al urged.

Sam clung to the railing as another wave swept by, fighting to keep his footing on the rain-slick deck. Lightning crackled angrily around him, dangerously close. At the next possible moment, he stretched out his arms, biting back a groan as the boat tilted away from the dock, his fingers just brushing the metal of the ladder.

"Daddy--!"

In desperation, Sam lunged for the ladder again. This time, his hands closed around one of the rungs, and with a sudden surge of power -- adrenaline, no doubt, his mind noted distractedly -- he pulled himself up against it.

"Good, Sam." Relief was evident in the Observer's voice. "Now, just go on up--"

Sam didn't need to be told twice. His feet found a firm purchase on the lowest rung, and he started to climb. His wife reached down to him, her other arm around one of the children.

"That's it, Sam." The faint electronic sounds of the handlink, sounding completely incongruous in the storm, somehow made it though the noise of the wind. "Kevin and his family get through this all right; everyone's fine..."

The gale nearly shook him from his perch, but he grimly hung on. He felt a faint, undefinable tingle start, and knew that he was about to leap. The blue glow began to form--

A bolt of lightning snapped just beside him, seemingly inches from his

head. Miraculously, he was untouched. He heard the frantic cries from the woman, Al's startled shout -- but even as his brain acknowledged the words, the blue was already filling his sight, and he was leaping...

* * *

Abruptly, Al found himself back in the Imaging Chamber. He nearly staggered with the sudden disorientation; the transition was never easy, but this time the shock practically sent him reeling. He shook his head to clear it, blinking back the after-images from the final burst of lightning.

Sam! Was Sam-- "Goosh--"

"Admiral!" the programmer cut in, before he could finish. "Ziggy's reading a sudden power surge. Are you--"

"I'm fine," Al snapped back impatiently. "What's happened? Is Sam all right?"

A short pause, although for Al it was far too long. "We don't know," Gooshie's voice filtered back. "There's no data whatsoever. All Ziggy knows is that Dr. Beckett's leaped again. Into somewhere else, that is."

"Damn." Al didn't know whether to be relieved or more worried. Assuming Sam hadn't been affected by that last bolt, who knew where he might have leaped in? The fact that the computer had no further data only made him more uneasy. Quickly punching in the exit code, he strode out of the Chamber.

"I'm going to the Waiting Room," he tossed at Gooshie by way of explanation as he hurried through Control. "Let me know immediately when you find something. Anything." He didn't wait for the programmer's acknowledgment before he was out the door.

Thrusting the link into his pocket, he made his way swiftly through the halls to the Waiting Room. If something had happened -- God, he hated these innumerable limits, this feeling of powerlessness that came with only being able to observe. He'd hated it from the beginning, and even after all this time; it wasn't something one could get used to. Sam...

The medic on duty there halted him at the door to the Room. "Sir, I don't think you should go in so soon--"

"Shove that, son. I'm going in."

But the young man blocked his way. "Dr. Beeks is coming soon, sir. If you'd just wait a moment..."

Al paused, mostly out of surprise. For an instant, he considered simply pushing his way through, but the medic had a point. Normally, no one dared argue with the admiral where Sam was concerned, but obviously this time the medic saw something in his manner that made him hesitate to let him through.

Taking a deep breath, Al attempted to calm himself down. The medic was right; in his agitated state, he'd be highly unlikely to treat the leapee with anything remotely resembling patience. And putting the leapee in a further panic than they usually were in wouldn't help at all.

"I just want to talk to him -- or her," Al said, leveling his voice as much as he could. "Whoever it is might have some information on wherever Sam's leaped into this time. I'm not going to scare them. All right?"

"Yes, sir," the medic said, picking up on Al's change in tone. Stepping aside, he deactivated the lock on the door and let the admiral in.

As usual, the person in the Room was lying on the bed. He was unconscious, but that wasn't what made Al stop dead in his tracks as soon as he entered the room. His gaze locked on the figure inside, Al shut his eyes, then opened them again, unable to believe what they were telling him.

It was...

"Oh, my God..." he breathed, nearly stumbling in his hasty rush to the bedside. Hesitantly, he reached out to touch him, to reassure himself that he wasn't dreaming. His fingers brushed the warm shoulder, traced across the familiar line of his cheek.

He withdrew with a shudder. No. He couldn't assume that, yet. He turned and flung himself out the door again, past the startled medic. "Are you sure Dr. Beckett's leaped into someone again?"

The young man stared at him, bewildered. "I..."

Al all but launched himself at the nearest intercom, viciously jabbing at the buttons. "Gooshie! You said Sam's leaped into someone?"

"y-yes--"

"So the person in the Waiting Room should be whoever Sam's leaped into, right?"

"Yes...I don't underst--"

"Oh my God."

"Admiral, what--"

He didn't reply, whirling back instead towards the Room. Dr. Beeks and the medical team had arrived, and Beeks was starting towards him, obviously alerted by his frenzied manner.

"Verbena!" he cried, before she could even open her mouth. "That's -- that could be--"

"I know, Admiral," she returned calmly. She'd already pieced together what she'd seen, and could fairly guess what he meant to say.

Her voice had a soothing quality, and despite his excitement, Al felt himself quieting down somewhat. "We're getting brainwave readings," she continued, still in the same gentle tone, "which means, yes, Dr. Beckett's aura is being occupied at the moment. The readings are slightly erratic, but that doesn't mean there's anything to worry about. I take it, Admiral, that you see him as Dr. Beckett?"

"Yes." It was all he could do to keep his voice even. "Normally, I see him in here as whoever he's leaped into. So, if I see him as Sam now, that must mean he's leaped into himself...doesn't it?" The words were almost pleading, but he didn't care. He had to know if Sam was home.

"So it would seem, Admiral," she replied, but she was too much of a professional to accidentally build up false hopes too soon.

"It has to be," Al insisted. That last leap-out had been... He sucked in a startled breath at the sudden memory. "Lightning struck just as Sam leaped out the last time. I don't think it hit him, but it was damned close. Sam always said that being struck by lightning just as he leaped out might bring him home! That's it -- that's what's done it this time!"

Dr. Beeks only nodded, but he could see the hope welling in her eyes. He found himself grinning like a fool, and he cared about that even less.

"I gotta go tell Goosh -- tell him to run it through Ziggy."

While the admiral hurried off towards the intercom again, Dr. Beeks took a closer look at the brainwave patterns that they were getting from the 'patient.' The computer hadn't quite been able to match them to those of Dr. Beckett's, but the patterns did indeed show a trace of an electrical shock of some sort. Certainly not a lethal shock, but a substantial one, nonetheless. It was entirely likely that the admiral's theory was right; she fervently hoped it was. To have Sam Beckett home again...

Al burst into the room, triumph clearly in his eyes. "Ziggy gives it a seventy-seven percent chance! It was only a near-miss -- the lightning, that is -- so it isn't entirely on par with the theory, but it's close enough."

Beeks gestured towards the readings. "These patterns would seem to support that," she told him, finally allowing herself to smile.

Al nodded joyously; he was staring again at the still figure in the bed. His lashes lowered slightly, only partially hiding the particular brightness behind them. "Can't you...wake him up?"

"It looks like he'll be out for a while," one of the doctors spoke up. "But he's definitely in no danger," he added, noting the tenseness in Al's expression. "It may be for a couple hours yet...or a few days. But it's only temporary; the shock was considerable, but not great. He'll be fine."

Al nodded again, relieved. Almost without his bidding, his hand had already sought out and closed over Sam's, gripping it tightly. Only now was he letting the realization sink in. Sam was home. "And I'm staying right here until he does wake up."

His voice held a slight tremor, but it brooked no argument. Nor did anyone try to dissuade him.

* * *

Sounds drifted in on him, soft as gentle snow, as if from very far away. He couldn't tell what they were, nor did he particularly wish to. They were still mostly quiet, and didn't quite disturb him, and he was content to let them go on.

His mind felt incredibly weary; he wanted only to rest. The sounds, whatever they were, stayed muted, allowing him to do so.

...And then they gradually faded again, and he slipped back out of awareness.

Sleep...

* * *

The medics had eventually cleared out of the Waiting Room, concluding that nothing further could be done at the moment. Dr. Beeks had retired to her office with her colleagues to study the readings she'd taken earlier. Work went on, but now the mood of the Project was noticeably lightened. The news had spread like wildfire through the halls; by the time Dr. Beeks had stepped up to the intercom to announce the news only minutes after receiving Ziggy's probability statement, it was doubtful there had been anyone left who hadn't yet heard at least a rumor. There was even talk of a celebratory party sometime in the next few days.

Gooshie and his techs were still working over Ziggy. Although the immediate emergency was now past, its inability to deliver data was still puzzling, and all the more a surprise since Dr. Beckett had now returned to the Project. Speculation among the techs ran wild. They ranged anywhere from theories that the power surge when Sam had leaped had caused a shorting out of Ziggy's circuits, to the thought that Sam's present state of unconsciousness made Ziggy unable to reach him, to the possibility that now that Sam was back, the tracking capabilities of the computer were now beyond the parameters of the original program. Gooshie was, not surprisingly, vehemently against this latter theory. The truth was, they really didn't know.

Al, left by himself with Sam in the Waiting Room, simply didn't care. It was all but unbelievable that Sam was now home. He hadn't been expecting it then, although certainly the hope had never gone away.

He felt as if an immense weight had suddenly been lifted from his shoulders. He hadn't been aware of just how much tension all of them had been under for the past few years while Sam had been leaping. The level of anxiety, of constant alertness that had been a necessity, had at some point become the norm under which they'd all worked.

Not that it'd ever become *normal*. The initial leaps had been met with a larger degree of excitement than anxiety, but the pulse-racing pressure that came with each individual leap had never quite died down, no matter how many they'd gone through. *When this all first began, Al reflected with a tired contentment, we were all practically scared out of our minds, because we had no idea what was going on, where Sam might end up next. After awhile, we sort of got the hang of it -- but we still had no idea where he'd wind up after each leap...and we'd seen some of the situations he'd get put into. Got some idea of how serious it all was.*

A couple of times, maybe almost too serious.

But he had Sam back, now. No more the pain of watching his friend go from one crisis to another, unable to do more than speak and watch, each time fearing for his sanity -- or his life. No more nights anxiously waiting at the Project, afraid to leave because Sam was trapped in some hazardous situation, somewhere, somewhen. These past few years, he'd been tied to the Project almost as securely as Sam had been, although he, unlike Sam, had done it out of choice. He'd never resented it, of course. Sure, he could easily have gotten himself assigned to another project. Rank had its privileges. But he'd never have done that. Abandon Sam? The thought was purely out of the question.

He smiled gently down at his friend's peaceful face. How often had he seen *that* since Sam had started leaping?

* * *

Sounds again. They tapped at him a little more strongly than before, now. Muffled, still. Indistinct. Hazy, like blobs of subdued color swirling aimlessly in a field of black...

He couldn't see any color, though. Not here, not while he was so tired. His mind refused to process the concept.

There was an undefinable sense of...something, however. Exhausted though he was, it pushed at him.

Urgency. It meant something...

Blackness came to sweep him gently away again. He sighed, letting it take him. He was so tired...

Another sound. It pushed him back towards consciousness, and he was powerless to resist the external force as it drew him back towards a feeling of light.

The noises came more frequently.

"...shh..."

Voices?

"...os...k...up?..."

"...ver...don...worry..."

He moaned faintly, in his mind. Wouldn't they go away? He wanted to sleep...

* * *

The Waiting Room was quiet. The single bed stood in its center, its headboard against one wall. Monitors and various other types of medical equipment were clustered near it; within ready distance, but far enough away from the bed that they weren't obstructive. Light from the overhead OR lamps illuminated the sterile walls, adding their fluorescent glow to the blank whiteness already there. Functional, but somehow the overall effect managed to be neither stark nor glaring. Even with the racks of equipment about, it seemed softer than the other Waiting Room, the nearly-bare one which they used when they had a need to speak to a leapee without external distractions. Dr. Beeks' precautions, apparently. Hospital rooms seemed to do nothing towards making people relax.

In here, everything was cushioned, almost isolated, from the busy workings of the rest of the Project. It was a necessity, to protect the leapee from the implications of what was -- to them -- their future.

But now, this filtering quality of the Room had become an unforeseen blessing. It was, in its own way, rather peaceful. The only sounds came from the relaxed, even breathing of the bed's lone occupant; sounds to which his friend, at the bedside, was more than content to sit by and quietly listen.

Al gave his hand a light squeeze, slumping down a little lower in the chair. Someone had brought that in for him, sometime during the initial flurry in the WR. He couldn't remember who -- didn't even remember accepting the chair and sitting down. "Guess I was a little distracted then, huh, kid?" he murmured softly.

Sam didn't respond, and Al sighed, feeling the small flutter of fear in his stomach no matter how hard he tried to reassure himself. The doctors had assured him that the patient would undoubtedly be waking up, that all Sam needed now was time.

It made him grin, if a bit lopsidedly. *Time, huh? Well, Sam, you've got all the time you need now.*

"You got a lot of catching up to do, pal," he said aloud, half to Sam, half to himself. "There's your sister Kate, and her kids and Jim. And your mom -- she's a real sweet lady, you know that, Sam? 'Course you do. I felt horrible, trying to come up with all those excuses these last couple of years as to why she couldn't see you. Not that I minded; I mean, covering for you, you know. And I'm not trying to make you feel guilty -- God, Sam, you didn't have a choice!"

"But it didn't feel right, not telling her the truth. If anyone deserved it, it was her. I...sometimes had the feeling she didn't really believe me, but she trusted me enough, that I would make sure nothing happened to you. That meant a lot to me. She was right, too, you know," he added, blinking back the sudden sting of tears behind his eyes.

"And Tom...Oh, geez, Sam, are you going to have a fit when you see him! Vice-president of a big computer corporation. Incredible, huh? He's really made a name for himself, kid; one of the most respectable businessmen around. You'd be proud. Oh, and get this -- he's forward for the company basketball team. Won their last company match, too. No surprise there, really.

"I'll call them...as soon as you wake up." He wasn't sure what had made him decide that. He didn't want to alarm them unnecessarily, of course. And obviously Sam's return would mean nothing to them if they weren't to have known that he'd been gone all this time. Until Sam could actually talk to them, it wouldn't help anyone to hear about his coming home. Besides, he thought -- a little self-indulgently, but he couldn't resist -- it was kind of nice to have Sam to himself for a while before the hordes started pouring in. It'd been far too long.

* * *

"...let...rest..."

"...sure?..."

"...he'll...right..."

He felt the faintest pressure, but it was from an even farther distance than the sound. The sensation had been almost physical, but in his state, he couldn't be sure.

"...if...back later..."

Yes, come back later, he agreed silently. Let me rest.

* * *

Al leaned back, studying his friend's face as the other continued to sleep. Funny, he'd never had the time, during all the leaps, to look closely at Sam. But he had definitely noted changes about him.

The way Sam had begun to open up to people, when he'd been shy and reserved before around anyone else but Al. *Both of us then, I guess. I certainly wasn't shy, but in my own way I was just as reserved as he was. Initially, that had probably been largely due to the swiss-cheese effect, taking away his memories of some of what had shaped him to be Sam Beckett. Not everything; not his sensitivity or courage or genuine good-will towards people, but perhaps the recollections of some of the events which had led him to be as quiet an adult as he'd been. Being behind someone else's face had probably helped him with that, too.*

But after a while, when Sam had begun to remember more, he'd remained just as open. He'd learned as much from his leaps as he'd shown others; the importance of communication and relationships and human emotions. And getting Tom back, even if he had no conscious memories of him, had seemed to support that as well; eased some of that stifling grief that had settled on him with the sudden loss of his older brother.

And helped me, also; all of it. At first I think I was even a little...well, jealous, when you started being so friendly with everyone. But I learned, too, even if I was only standing back and watching. Gave me a whole new way of looking at people, different from the way my life had shown me to look at them for all those years.

Al had noted, too, when the leaps had begun to take their toll on his friend. Some of the leaps were themselves lost to swiss-cheesing, but not the majority of them. And God knew there had been many. Sam had seen families broken up, loves lost; had been put through intense physical as well as emotional pain. Had seen people die; had killed, himself.

And Al had seen it register: in his eyes, shadowed with a silent grief; the guilt, at times, almost a physical weight on his body. A thread of steel

newly-woven into his character, and a guardedness of a different sort than had been there previously. Leaning forward, he reached out with his free hand and ran it gently over Sam's near shoulder. How many times he'd wanted to do just that -- to try and ease some of the other's pain during the rougher leaps. At times like those, words had been merely cold comfort. *But all that I could do for you then, Sam. I'm sorry.*

Still, Sam had somehow managed to mostly hold on to that sense of innocence which had endeared him to Al the first time they'd met. Or the first time he'd been sober enough to notice it, anyway. At that point in his life, Al hadn't had the patience to deal with anyone who seemed beneath him...least of all the potentially clueless. But it was only the old hurts that were making him say what he didn't mean to out of desperate self-defense. Not that he hadn't accidentally hurt Sam on more than one occasion nonetheless, with some of his careless or too-strong words in the beginning. But Sam had understood...and more, he had stayed.

Al had been the type to let anger drive him relentlessly on, allowing the fury to propel him from one day to the next, but over the years, the grief had eventually given way to numbness. He'd already begun the gradual tumble into endless oblivion when Sam had entered his life and caught him back just in time. The younger man had been like an unexpected breath of fresh air; and he hadn't even noticed until then that, all along, he'd been slowly drowning.

Sam had been such a difference from all the people he'd known at the time -- people who either glanced superficially at the surface he presented, or else tried to probe too deeply looking for hidden motives. He'd finally found someone who wouldn't try to play games with him or use him or merely gawk at his past. Sam simply accepted him for who he was, and for that one natural gesture, he was eternally grateful.

That first night, when I was drunk, and you wrestled the hammer away from me. You grabbed me and tried to talk me back down to sense. I hated you then -- hated you like all the others, thought you were only trying to come off as a hero or something. It didn't occur to me until a long time afterwards, that you hadn't just taken one look at me and called for security and left me to them when they arrived.

I guess I must have recognized some of that innocence, even then, even if I didn't appreciate it. I saw it in your eyes, but I didn't want to acknowledge that I knew it was there. I was afraid to -- scared that you would disappear like the rest of them had, that it would all turn out to be a cruel joke in the end, or worse, that I would wake up and the dream would fade away to emptiness again. The bottom of a pit is safest, because from there, you can't be dropped, or fall. I'd been dropped too many times before. You said you weren't sure, when I asked you why you were trying to stop me; only that I was in trouble and you knew you had to help. I just laughed in your face, told you that you were stupid to want to get involved in other people's business. But you were dead serious.

And you didn't walk away.

"If it hadn't been for you, I don't know where I would be now," he told the silent figure. So I always tried my best to help you as much as you did me. I'd have given my life for you then, you know that? Still would. Always will. I owe it to you, after you picked it up off the floor and put the pieces back together and gave it back to me.

Once he'd gotten past those first few weeks of intolerance, that very innocence had become something he found himself wanting very much to protect. He'd told himself that he was growing soft, but he'd known better.

And then had come these leaps -- he'd feared them far too harsh for Sam's sheltered fragility, but the other had surprised him with his resilience. Sam hadn't given up; instead, he'd grown stronger from the experiences, although never losing his fineness of character. Come to think of it, knowing Sam as he did, he shouldn't have been surprised at all. A weary smile touched the older man's lips, a mixture of admiration and sympathetic regret. He wouldn't have to worry that way, not after tonight, not anymore.

All of these things, Al had noticed. Thinking on it now, though, it

seemed he'd only looked at those aspects which had been reflected in Sam's attitude, in the mannerisms he used. There simply hadn't been enough time along the way to look any closer.

Sam did look slightly changed, now, but it was almost imperceptible until he turned his attention to it. The hair was a bit lighter than Al remembered it; he slid his fingers through it, frowning at the new streaks of grey. Exhausted darkness shadowed the eyes. The cheeks had a faint hollowness to them, looking almost sunken; there was a tiny scar along the far cheekbone. Al shook his head in dismay. He knew he couldn't expect these countless crises to not leave their mark, but somehow, he just hadn't thought about it.

"Well, don't you worry, kid," he murmured. "We'll have you back to your old self in no time."

* * *

They'd come back -- the sounds had, at least. No, it wasn't really a sound. But a significance, of some sort, although its meaning continued to elude him.

He could sense something almost vaguely...familiar. Yes, familiar. But he couldn't pin it down, yet. Still, it gave him a feeling of security. Idly, he wondered if he only felt better because he'd found something which he finally seemed to recognize, or if it was because some part of him knew that, whatever it was, it was a comfort in itself.

Whatever it was...

Physical awareness snapped back then, like a sudden jolt -- and he could hear, and feel, again. He didn't have control over his own body yet, though; couldn't open his eyes. Strangely enough, he didn't feel the hurry. That could wait; he felt, somehow, that he was safe for the moment.

The place he was in was silent. He felt a pillow beneath his head, sheets draped over him. A bed? Was he supposed to be... What was he doing here?

He took a careful breath, then another. The distinctly antiseptic smell of the room stirred a distant memory. Where was he? Was he in a hospital?

And something else...

The sense of urgency again. Stronger, now -- something he should do, but he didn't know what. Something...waiting...

He forced himself to open his eyes, to take a look around him. Everything was just a blur; he closed his eyes, waited a few heartbeats, tried again. This time, the irregular patterns of light obligingly coalesced. He blinked.

A whiteness. A ceiling, aglow with light. It was an acute change from the darkness of the past seemingly-interminable length of time, and it hurt his eyes. Turning away from the glare, he shifted his gaze elsewhere...and saw Al there, by the side of the bed.

Sam felt a smile begin to form on his lips, relief washing over him at the sight of his friend.

* * *

Al had lost all track of time, but still he remained sitting where he was in the Waiting Room. Surely, if he'd been there too long, someone would come and try to drag him away. Either Gooshie or, more likely, Dr. Beeks. Hah. Let them try. He'd camp out here if he had to.

He was starting to doze, however. He didn't want to do that; he wanted to be awake when Sam finally came out of his sleep. Folding his hands in his lap, he re-focused his gaze on the ceiling. Aside from the several OR lamps, it was blank, featureless, but he stubbornly began to survey it for any cracks or imperfections. Or...the walls, perhaps.

The floor.

The...

He was starting to drift again. Almost angrily, he jerked his attention

back to wakefulness. If he couldn't even stay up for his best friend...

But the day had been too much for him, he knew. The emotional strain alone was enough to warrant him sleep for a week. Add to that the sheer physical tax of having stayed up for the last forty-eight hours -- a congressional meeting yesterday, followed shortly by Sam's leap into Kevin McHollen -- and then this. He'd have to go speak with Dr. Beeks, as soon as he could...which probably wasn't going to be for a while, at least. But he wasn't complaining.

He shifted uncomfortably in the chair, rubbing at the headache that was building up behind his eyes, but which he'd ignored during all the excitement. He felt his eyes starting to close, and by reflex snapped them open again -- too quickly. The room spun around him, out of focus, and he gripped the arms of the chair to keep himself upright. He squeezed his eyes shut, taking a deep breath and willing the dizziness away. When the room had re-settled once more, he let the air out slowly, and opened his eyes again. He passed a shaky hand over them, waiting for the whirling violet-black spots to clear. Casting an automatic glance at the bed in front of him, he stared for a moment -- then bolted to his feet.

Overhead, the intercom blared a warning, even as he was out the door and running for the Imaging Chamber faster than he'd ever run in his life.

* * *

Sam blinked the fuzziness from his vision, squinting slightly against the brightness from the ceiling's single lamp. He moved to sit up, but lacked the strength. Lying still, he could feel the energy slowly seeping back into his body. A temporary weakness, it seemed; he'd be all right in a few minutes.

He turned his attention back to the bedside, from where the Observer was watching. A relaxing warmth filled him. He swallowed once, found he could speak. "Al...Al, it's good to see you."

"Hi, Sam." Al's voice was little more than a hoarse whisper.

Something was wrong. Sam's eyes widened as he looked more carefully at his friend. Al was standing, his back rigid, his jaw clenched fiercely; his hands were jammed into his pockets. He had lowered his head, refusing to meet Sam's gaze. The younger man caught his breath, certain he saw the unmistakable glistening of tears behind the dark lashes.

"Al, did something -- What's wrong?"

"Noth -- nothing, Sam. It's just that...for a while there, we..." He paused, clearing his throat. "We...lost contact with you for a little while, that's all."

Sam frowned, recalling the state of semi-consciousness he'd been in. "I was unconscious, wasn't I?"

Al nodded.

"Was that what...caused it?" He remembered now. "The electrical storm, during the last leap -- it must have done that!"

Al only nodded again.

"But everything's...all right now, isn't it?" he pressed.

"Just fine, Sam."

The words were barely audible. Sam stared at him, completely baffled as to the source of his mood, and wishing his Observer would tell him what was troubling him. Even if he couldn't help...

As if suddenly remembering something, Al raised his head again to gaze at him intently. Sam shifted uneasily under the close scrutiny. The other man didn't seem to be threatening, or even angry, but merely...searching for something...?

"You don't have a scar on your cheek," Al sighed in seeming relief.

"And your hair's not--" He broke off abruptly.

"Al, what's wrong?"

The other was silent for a long moment. Then, in one quick convulsive movement, he stepped closer to the bed. He made no effort to hide the telling glitter in his eyes, and in sympathy for his friend, it brought tears to Sam's

OWN.

"I just...I just miss you, kid," Al whispered. His voice trembled, but he went on. "And...I wish you were...home. That's all." Automatically, his hand started to reach for the man in the bed, and Al jerked it back, wiping it once across his eyes. It left a damp streak.

"Al, I'll be home," Sam managed, past the lump in his throat. As he caught and held the other's gaze, the cold walls of the hospital room and the sounds of the other patients seemed to recede into the background, leaving only the two of them. Usually, it was Al who did the reassuring, but this time, it didn't matter who said it -- this time, they both just needed to believe. "It'll all work out, somehow, in the end." He essayed a shaky smile, longing to do something, anything, to comfort Al. But it was impossible to touch a hologram. "After all...I have you here, don't I?"

Al bit his lip, his throat closing too tightly to reply to the quiet words. But their effect had reached him, and after a moment, he was able to return Sam's smile.

* * *

V. Beeks -- Project Journal, 4/10/1999: 0212 hrs:

I finally persuaded the Admiral to go to bed only a few minutes ago. I do not normally prescribe sleeping pills, but I am fairly certain he would not be able to rest properly without them.

It appears that the power surge caused by the lightning bolt that struck in Dr. Beckett's near vicinity just as he leaped out resulted in a temporary loss of the neurological contact between Dr. Beckett and the Project computer, as well as between him and the Admiral. For a while it was concluded that Dr. Beckett had indeed returned to the Project, although no such announcement was made outside of the Project premises. When the link was restored just over seven hours later, it was apparently simultaneously restored to both the computer and Admiral Calavicci, and the error was discovered. At his point, contact was immediately re-established with Dr Beckett via the Imaging Chamber.

According to reports from both the technicians and the Admiral, there was a minor resurgence of the link shortly before this, but its effects were partial and detected only in retrospect.

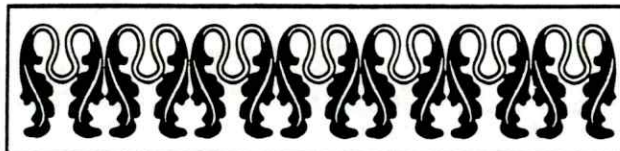
Despite the delay, and the leapee's persona having been admitted to the hospital during Dr. Beckett's collapse, the leap appears to be progressing normally. Reports on the current leapee are in the Medical Journal.

Dr. Beckett appears to have suffered no ill effects from the lightning shock, other than remaining unconscious during the time that the link was disconnected. Admiral Calavicci has informed me that Dr. Beckett was not told the full details of what took place. The Admiral himself remained in composure during the hour that he spent in the Chamber, breaking down only when he exited the Control Room; at which point I urged him to rest. I plan to speak with him as soon as he awakens in the morning. There is some concern, but the Admiral has always proven to be a strong individual in past situations, and there is no reason to assume any problems as of yet.

As usual, this journal entry is subject to confidentiality between myself and directly concerned parties only.

Further references: PQL Technical Journal, PQL Medical Journal (pertinent dates).

-- End of File --



REWIND

by

Jane Freitag

12/11/84

The first thing Sam Beckett noticed as the world coalesced around him was the steady sound of water dripping. His eyes focused on the sound, not more than a foot in front of his face. "Oh, boy," he sighed as he realized it was falling all over the papers at the desk he was occupying. He quickly removed them from the desk and placed them on an empty, near-by, table to dry. Grabbing some tissues, he swabbed the desk, glancing around for something in which to catch the still dripping water. He caught sight of a plant and put it directly under the drip. His initial problem resolved, Sam finally had a chance to survey his damp surroundings.

He was in a small office made up of work cubicles separated by self-standing dividers. A quick tour told him the office was some sort of data processing center, judging from the computer terminals on a number of the desks. Considering the catastrophe that had befallen his desk, he was rather glad his desk wasn't one of them. He was the only one in the office at the moment but a magnetic in/out board next to the door indicated that ten people had space there. Only the name 'Tim' was checked in. "Okay, my name is Tim," he muttered to the empty room. "That's a good start." *At least I'm not a woman,* he added silently.

He walked back to the table where the papers were drying, seeing if he could learn anything more from them. The soggy papers contained rows and rows of numbers, some circled in red. Only one column had words in it, and that was a list of linens. Sam's face twisted in confusion. "An overgrown laundry list?" He shrugged, leaving the papers alone to finish drying, and walked back to his desk.

The calendar there read December 11, 1984. Another piece of information. "Almost Christmas," he mused. He was flipping through the day by day calendar, looking for other clues as to his reason for being there, when he heard footsteps coming down the hall. Sam walked back to the table holding the drying papers in order to get a better view of the door.

A large young woman turned into the room, immediately moving the button next to the name 'Anna' from the 'out' to the 'in' position. She did an about-face and broke out laughing.

"What's so funny?" Sam asked, not quite sure how to respond.

"I see we've had another visit from the rain god."

"The rain god?"

Anna pointed to the ceiling.

"Oh, yeah, that," Sam shrugged.

"Have you told Roger about it yet?" she asked, taking off her coat.

"I haven't seen anyone else around here yet."

"They're probably in the cafeteria having their morning coffee. Do you want me to go tell them?"

Sam glanced at the ceiling and then back at Anna. "Thanks, but that's okay. I think it's under control until they get here. Let them finish their coffee."

Anna walked closer to Sam, glancing down at the papers. "Did anything get totally ruined?"

"I don't think so. I think these will be alright once they dry out."

"Too bad." Anna waved her hand as if to brush the incident away.

Sam screwed up his face in question. "Huh?"

"Well, the only way we're ever going to get this problem taken care of permanently is if one of their precious reports would be ruined for good."

"Ah," Sam nodded, understanding. "I suppose so." *So Anna knew the background workings of the office.*

"Take it from me," she said, stretching. "Oh, I hate days like this."

Sam looked out the window. It was sleeting. "The weather?" he guessed.

"The help line," she answered. Her voice indicated that Tim would know what she was talking about. "Some of those people can't follow the simplest directions."

"Is your computer system that hard to understand?" Sam asked. Now here was a subject he at least knew something about. *Maybe I'm here to clean up the system.*

"The system is easy," Anna went on to explain. "It's the idiots who don't know the difference between a colon and a semi-colon that are hard to understand."

A small laugh escaped Sam's lips. *So much for that reason.*

"I better get to work," she said, starting to walk to a cubicle on the other side of the room. She turned back to Sam before she got there, a question on her face. "Why are you here so early?"

Sam looked at the papers which were now almost dry. "I had a mess to clean up," he said simply.

Anna's face lit in a smile and she started to laugh. It was a deep-throated laugh of sheer delight. Sam immediately decided he liked Anna and hoped he wasn't there because of some disaster that would befall her.

Not knowing what Tim's job actually was or what to do with himself until either Al or the other people in the office arrived, Sam made himself comfortable in front of the IBM personal computer sitting on a table not far from his desk. He smiled as he turned the machine on and rested his fingers on the keyboard as it booted up. The system was certainly a far cry from Ziggy. Within minutes, Sam happily lost himself in checking out the various programs the system had to offer. It wasn't until he felt a hand on his shoulder that he looked up from the screen.

"Oh," he smiled at the woman standing behind him. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you come in. Did you need to use this?"

She shook her head, briefly smiling back, and pointed to the now-dry papers on the table. Her eyebrows drew together in a question.

"They got wet," Sam explained. "I was letting them dry. Do you need them?" Maybe this quiet girl would be able to tell him what the papers were all about.

Again, a shake of her head. *Another idea down the tubes. Where the heck was Al?* "I need," she gasped, her voice weak, "the table," she finished quickly, drawing another huge breath.

Sam's clinical eye studied the girl with concern. "Are you okay?" Her reply was a shrug and sad smile followed by a nod of her head. "Are you sure you should be here?" he asked, getting out of his chair to stand next to her.

"I'd rather," gasp, "be in the," gasp, "Bahamas." The answer was accompanied by a slight twinkle in her eye.

Sam knew he was being teased. He could only smile at her apparent lack of concern at her vocal problem. He walked with her over to the table containing the papers and, together, they piled them in a neat stack.

"Good morning." A cheerful, thin, balding man approached the pair. He motioned to the papers and then to the plant sitting on Tim's desk, still getting its share of water. "I see we had a little mishap last night. Anything ruined?"

"No. The only damage is what you see here. I found it when I...got here this morning."

"I'll take care of it." *This must be Roger, the man Anna had mentioned,* Sam realized. Roger gave the ceiling a glance and then pointed to the computer Sam had been toying with. "Tim, are you going to be needing that all day?"

Sam shrugged. "Uh, no."

"Good. I've got a batch of files that I'd like Jean," he pointed to the woman on Sam's right, "to update. She'll need the PC."

Sam watched as she rolled her eyes good-naturedly at Roger and then nodded her head, walking back to her desk. It was then he noticed that Roger watched Jean with equal concern. As soon as he felt that she was both otherwise occupied and out of hearing range, he nodded his head in her direction. "Is she all right?"

"It's been a rough year for her, what with the cancer surgery and all." Sam did a quick glance in her direction then looked back at Roger. A look of amazement was on the other man's face. "I'm honestly surprised she's as cheerful as she is all the time. I don't think I could deal with everything as well as she does."

"Some people are a lot stronger than others."

"Well, Jean's one of the strongest people I know." Roger looked down at the pile of papers still in Sam's hand. "When you get those sorted out, why don't you bind them and then help me move furniture so the ceiling can be fixed. We can't get anything done around here until we have a solid roof over our heads."

Roger went to his cubicle and Sam sat back down at Tim's desk, spreading the papers out around the plant, looking for some sequence to the jumble of papers. Admiral Albert Calavicci, Quantum Leap Project Observer, picked that moment to arrive. He took in the dripping ceiling and the array of papers in front of Sam. "Quite a mess you have here," he said, puffing on an ever present cigar.

"Al," Sam look up, pleased. "I think I know why I'm here."

"To fix the ceiling?" Al asked.

Sam waved his comment aside. "No, not to fix the ceiling," he said in a hushed voice. "Although it looks like I may end up doing that, too. No, I'm here to help a girl named Jean, right?" He looked at Al expectantly for confirmation.

Al poked at his computer hand link. After extended whirs, bleeps and clicks Al nodded, gratified. "Gee, Sam, you're right. For once, you and Ziggy agree on something."

"I'm here to see that her cancer doesn't get any worse, right?" he asked hopefully.

Al looked down at the hand link and then back at Sam, confusion on his face. "Cancer? No. Ziggy doesn't have anything about that. She has cancer, too? Poor kid."

"Too? What do you mean, 'too'? Al, what does Ziggy say I'm here to do?"

"Ziggy's not exactly sure, but something happens in her life within the next couple of days that puts her over the edge. She ends up dying because of it. You're here to prevent that."

"Something to do with her condition?"

Al frowned as he read the hand link. "Drug overdose."

"Suicide?" Sam asked, stunned, watching the subject of their conversation take the seat at the computer that Sam had previously occupied.

Al tapped a few more keys on the hand link. "Not exactly suicide, Sam. She's taking so many different drugs--all legitimate prescriptions--that the distraction of the incident causes her to miscalculate her insulin and she dies from a reaction."

"Insulin? She's a diabetic, too?"

Al nodded. "And an epileptic. Geez," he said, continuing to read the handlink. "She's a walking drug store. It's no wonder she gets confused. And she's walking an emotional edge right now."

"She seems to be holding up okay."

"She's putting up a good front, Sam. Keep an eye on her," Al pressed a key opening up the Imaging Chamber door. "I'll go see if I can dig up exactly what happens to put her over the edge."

Sam nodded, his eyes drifting to the woman at the computer. He heaved a sigh and went back to the task of sorting the papers. On closer examination, he found page numbers in the top corner of every sheet. Once that mystery was solved, the job of putting them in order became a snap.

Sam carefully lay the sorted pile on a clean spot on his desk and walked over to where Jean was tapping away at the computer. "How's it going?" he asked quietly, not wanting to startle her. She gave him a small smile and bobbed her head up and down. The action highlighted the recent scar on her throat. Sam forced himself not to stare. "Well, if there's anything I can help you with, let me know, okay?"



She looked at him with penetrating eyes and grasped his arm as he was about to walk away. "Thanks," she rasped, the word obviously costing her valuable air.

"Anytime," Sam reassured her.

He was about to go tell Roger he was ready to move furniture when Anna's voice announced to the room, "Break time." Evidently, it was a group activity. Sam watched as others in the room made their way towards the door. He glanced back at Jean, who was frowning with indecision.

He walked back to the computer. "Go," he told her. "You need the break. This isn't going anywhere," he nodded towards the computer.

She smiled her thanks, walking to the door. When she got there she paused, looking back at Sam.

He took long strides to catch up to her. "Are you waiting for me?" He was secretly grateful that she was, otherwise he had no idea which direction to head.

She walked next to him down a long hallway. Sam took note of other offices and, more important, the men's room along the way. At the end of the long hall was a set of double doors, both open. The doors were the entranceway to a small cafeteria. As Jean walked through the doorway, Sam noticed her eyes do a quick, apprehensive search of the room, as if afraid she might see someone she didn't want to. He instinctively moved closer to her in case she needed protection. She noticed the action and relief flooded her eyes. *Is this why she waited for me? Does she feel safe around Tim?*

Jean poured herself a cup of coffee then picked up the glass decanter full of hot water, staring at Sam's empty hand. She took a deep breath. "You forgot," another deep breath, "your teacup."

Evidently Tim drinks only tea. Sam grabbed a styrofoam cup from a stack. "I'll use one of these." He was pleased that at least there were a variety of different kinds of tea available. Black-raspberry sounded tasty. Next to the teas were individual serving bags of hot chocolate and a variety of fresh pastry. Jean waited for him to make his selection, Sam very much aware that she neglected to take any for herself. Then he remembered her diabetes. *At least she's being careful about that.*

Jean led them to a table meant for six but crowded with eight, the others already pulling up empty chairs for the newcomers. Both Sam and Jean ate in relative silence, letting the others do the talking for them. Jean, because she had to and Sam because he had learned long ago that the best way to pick up vital information was to keep your ears open and mouth shut.

Chatter consisted mostly of who was doing what for the holidays and how everyone's Christmas shopping was progressing. The group was animated and friendly with tolerant teasing. Everyone seemed happy, including Jean.

Sam tried to watch her without her being aware but, because she couldn't contribute much to the conversation, he knew she caught him a number of times. But instead of being upset, she'd just nod once as if to say, "Don't worry. I'm okay." Still, he couldn't help but feel a pang of regret when he watched her drink her coffee, head tilted sideways so as not to choke. The part of Samuel Beckett that was a medical doctor worked on diagnosing her problem. *Paralysis of the vocal chords leaving them in an open position. That would account for the lack of air upon speaking and trouble eating. He knew further diagnosis would be impossible without a thorough examination.*

By the end of the break, Sam felt comfortable with the group and safe in the knowledge of most of their names--Anna was good natured, Sara was kind and intelligent, Barry was a tease, and Mark was quiet. As they started drifting back to the office, he caught sight of Al waving to him from the corner of the room. He left Jean to go back to the office in the caring hands of her other co-workers and approached Al. He lingered at the drinking fountain. "What do you have, Al?" he asked, his face lowered over the water.

"Is there somewhere we can talk, Sam?"

"The usual."

Al groaned. "Not the men's room again. I hope it's at least a different color than every other room in this place seems to be. What a putrid green."

Sam grinned at Al's discomfort, then walked back down the hall to the men's room. As the door closed behind them, Sam turned to his holographic friend. "Okay, Al, what has Ziggy come up with?"

"Not too much. We still don't know exactly what happened to her, but whatever it is, it happens sometime today."

"While she's at work?"

"I don't know that, either. All we've been able to find out is that after she leaves here today, she's never seen alive again. Her body is found two days from now by the man she's currently dating."

Sam's forehead wrinkled in thought. "There's nothing that points in his direction, is there?"

"No. He found her because they had a date and she didn't respond when he came to get her. He knew of her various medical problems and got in touch with her apartment manager to check on her. We did find out something about her past, though."

"Go on," Sam said, wandering over to the mirror. He realized that he had yet to see what he currently looked like.

Al talked while Sam examined the face in the mirror, not at all displeased by what he saw. "Jean's been married twice and for awhile was a full-time singer/musician. She had even been on the verge of recording an album when the cancer struck. For obvious reasons, it was never completed."

Sam watched Tim's blue eyes cloud in the mirror. "It must've been devastating for her," the well-dressed young man, approximately Sam's height although thinner and blond, stated.

"It was." Al took a puff on his ever-present cigar. "She even spent a few days in a mental hospital when it happened. It was during her time there that she found she could trust Tim."

"Then why am I here, Al, if she already trusts Tim?"

"Maybe because you know something that he doesn't. I don't know, and until we find out exactly what happens, your guess is as good as mine. The best you can do is to keep your eyes and ears open."

Sam ran his fingers through the blond hair and sighed. "Thanks, Al." He started to walk out the door then turned back to the hologram. "I forgot to ask, Al. Exactly what is my job at this place?"

Al punched a few buttons on the handlink. "You are the head statistical analyst and PC programmer in the Data Processing Department of a linen supply company. It should be a piece of cake for someone like you, Sam."

"Yeah," he muttered, walking back to the office. "A piece of cake."

Roger was already starting to move furniture when Sam got to his desk. One of the room dividers had been pushed aside, the table he had used earlier had been collapsed and moved to a corner and the various bric-a-brac on Tim's desk had been removed, although the plant that had been collecting the drips from the ceiling still remained.

Jean stood with her hands on her hips, waiting for her next set of instructions. She had evidently been asked to help move the smaller things while Roger had wrestled with the larger ones.

Roger noticed 'Tim's' arrival. "Good, you're back. I think it'll take both of us to move your desk so we can get a ladder under the spot that's leaking."

Sam eyed the solid steel desk, guessing at its weight. "Wouldn't it be easier just to stand on top of the desk?" he asked.

Jean nodded enthusiastically, but Roger seemed dubious. "Do you think it's safe?"

Sam almost laughed. "I'd trust the solidity of that desk over a step ladder any day."

"Will you be able to reach the ceiling?"

Sam looked at Roger, aghast. "Me? I don't know anything about fixing leaking ceilings." He felt confident that this was not part of his job description.

Anna picked that moment to come around the corner in order to use the Xerox machine. "Roger, why isn't Bob fixing that?"

"I called his office and no one answers the phone."

"Is he hiding out again? Give me a couple of minutes." She put down the papers she had intentions of copying. "I'll find him."

Roger just stood there shaking his head. "Leave it to Anna. I swear she knows more about this building than the contractors."

Sam grinned. His instinct had been proven right again. "I guess we can get back to work then?" he queried.

"Yeah, I guess so." Roger made his way to his cubicle and Jean drifted back to the computer station.

Sam watched her sigh as she sat down. Something was weighing very heavily on her and he intended to find out what it was. As he pulled up a chair next to her, he realized she was just staring at an empty screen.

"Jean?" he asked quietly.

The face that turned to him was a drastic change from the smiling, enthusiastic face of a few minutes ago. Her eyes looked haunted and a black streak was forming where a tear slid down her face. She tried wiping it away, but the effort only smeared her make-up more.

Sam did a quick visual inventory of the room and located his box of tissues. He retrieved them and was back in seconds. He handed one to her. "Are you okay? What happened?" Sam knew the difficulty answering his questions would be for her, but only she could give him the reason behind the tears.

"This morning," she gasped, "Stuart," deep breath, "forced himself," gasp, "on me."

"Who? Someone here at work?" Sam could feel his blood boil in anger.

She nodded. "Stuart. Accounting."

"When did this happen? How?"

Her sentences were punctuated every couple of words by deep breaths for air and occasions of tears and sniffles but, after a few minutes Sam had his answers. Jean had gotten to work early and gone directly into the cafeteria to make coffee, which was her custom. While in the kitchen, a guy who thought he was God's gift to women cornered and kissed her. When she tried to push him away, he grabbed her and kissed her harder, knowing that she couldn't scream for help. It was only the sound of approaching footsteps that distracted him and allowed her to get away. *So that was why she was so jumpy when we went on our morning break.* She had fled the cafeteria and hidden in the ladies' room until time to start work, trying to compose herself.

Sam took a tissue out of the box and dabbed at her wet face, trying to give her a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it. Stay here a minute, I'll be right back."

He walked up to the front of the office as fast as his long legs could carry him. He stopped at Sara's desk, giving her a brief outline of what had happened. The two of them returned to Jean's side, surrounding her like bookends. Sara sat on the chair Sam had vacated and Sam squatted down on Jean's other side. Jean tried to give them both a brave smile, her head shifting from side to side.

Sam touched her arm lightly to get her attention and he felt her slight recoil. "I'm going to report this incident. If you like, Sara will walk with you to the ladies' room." He winked encouragement. "Take as long as you like."

Jean pointed to the computer and the papers she was supposed to be working on. "What about..?" she rasped.

Sam shook his head, grasping her hand and giving it to Sara. "Don't worry about it. It can wait."

Jean nodded reluctantly and, after stopping at her desk for her purse, went with Sara to the ladies' room. Sam watched them go.

"That creep. How could he?"

Sam turned at the sound of Al's voice. "Then you heard?"

"The whole story. My god, hasn't that kid had enough problems lately? Did she have to go through sexual harassment, too?"

"This was more than harassment, Al. This was downright assault. I guess he figured anyone who's gone through two marriages is a little loose and sexually fair game."

"So what are you going to do, Sam?"

"I'll tell you what I'd like to do."

"You don't have to, I can see it in your eyes. But what are you really going to do?"

"Exactly what I told Jean and Sara that I would do--I'm going to report the incident."

"To whom?"

Sam grimaced. "Roger, first, I suppose. At least he'll know who I should talk to after that." He shook his head. "I don't know, Al. Something about this seems too easy."

"Well, I wouldn't exactly consider Jean on safe ground yet. As long as this Stuart character is walking the same halls she is, Jean's going to be a basket case. She'll be afraid to turn a corner for fear of bumping into him...especially if his butt gets hauled on the carpet but he doesn't get fired. She's really low on the self-confidence scale right now."

"Can you blame her?" The question really didn't require an answer.

"Sam, maybe I should go back to the Waiting Room and tell Tim what's been going on. He really does seem like a nice guy. Perhaps he can fill us in a little more."

"Good idea. In the meantime, I've got a report to make."

By the time Jean returned to her desk, Sara still in tow, Sam had talked to Roger and, together, had gone to see the Vice President of the Data Processing Department, Norman. The snag in everyone's dilemma stemmed from the fact that Stuart had worked himself up in position to be one step away from the Vice Presidency of the company. At that level, things got a bit tricky. No one was willing to go out on a limb in calling this man on the carpet, much less firing him, on the accusation of a minor employee.

But Sam had dealt with this situation before, and he wasn't about to let go until something was done. Any advice to Jean about quitting her job was immediately cast aside, though. Who was going to hire someone with as many medical problems as Jean? She couldn't even answer the phone without major effort. No, the answer had to come from the other end.

So Sam stuck to his guns and was adamant about making the situation known...even if he had to walk up and down the halls shouting about it to the general public. He argued that fact with Roger and Norman. Finally, they conceded. Norman would talk to Stuart about his actions.

That's why, when Jean sat back down in front of the computer, Sam couldn't figure out why he was still there. *Maybe another talk with Jean?* He pulled up a chair and explained the situation to her.

Her eyes widened with horror. "But what will I do if he tries anything again?" she asked, the words coming in pairs as air escaped from her lungs faster than she could inhale it. Al had been right, she was still an emotional basket case.

"If he even comes near you, you let me know. This will be his one and only warning. After all," Sam grinned, "Norman does outrank him."

"What if I have to go down to the Accounting Department for something?" she gasped, each word an effort.

"Don't, at least not until this blows over. Ask me or ask someone else, but don't go yourself...especially not by yourself. No one knows what Stuart's reaction to this is going to be. We don't want him to blow up and take it out on you. And stay out of the cafeteria first thing in the morning." Again, he smiled. "If you must have that cup of coffee, wait until someone else gets here and go with them, okay?"

She stared at him but didn't say a word or indicate that she would abide by his directions.

He prompted again. "Okay?"

This time a small smile found its way to her mouth and some of the tension left her eyes. She nodded, taking a deep breath. Sam was beginning to recognize that as her way of getting ready to speak. The words finally came. "Thank you."

Jean went back to work at the computer and Sam got up and walked back to his desk. Al was waiting for him. "Good job, Sam. Guess it's time you got

out of here."

Sam glanced back at the object of his leap. "Is she going to make it, Al?"

"Yeah. She manages to avoid Stuart for the next couple of weeks and even compares notes with other women in the office and finds out she wasn't the first Stuart came on to."

"What happens to him?"

"Well, he never gets fired, if that's what you mean, but he never forces himself on anyone again."

"Then why am I still here?"

Anna's jubilant voice interrupted any answer. "Lunchtime!" she called.

Al looked at Anna and then back at Sam. "To have lunch?"

Sam smiled. "Sure, why not?"

"Here," the hologram pointed. "This is Tim's lunch. Don't forget it."

Sam picked it up and waved to Jean. "Ready for lunch?"

She smiled, nodding.

"Me, too. It's been quite a morning. C'mon."

They walked together, back into the cafeteria. Again the group of eight crowded around the table meant for six. Again Sam sat next to Jean, keeping a protective eye on her as she began to eat. No one else seemed to notice the fact that she had to keep her head almost horizontal in order not to choke on her food.

Sam opened Tim's lunch. He found an apple, a buttered croissant, varieties of cheese slices wrapped in plastic wrap, and a bag of raw carrot sticks. *No wonder Tim is so thin. He doesn't eat anything.* Then, under the bag of raw carrots, he found another full of chocolate chip cookies. *On the other hand.*

The lunch conversation revolved around the upcoming Christmas party and who was attending. When asked if he was coming, Sam caught sight of Al nodding and gave a positive response.

Even Jean took time out from the effort of eating to mention that everyone would finally get to meet her new boyfriend there, and wasn't that a good enough reason to come? Her laughter pleased Sam. He grinned at her, offering her a carrot.

Jean took a bite of the raw carrot, then made the mistake of trying to talk and swallow at the same time, each an effort in itself. The carrot lodged itself in her windpipe, and she started coughing. Tears welled in her eyes as the coughing intensified. Sam was out of his seat and behind her, ready to do a Heimlich maneuver, but she waved him off. Taking a deep breath, she exhaled in a giant cough, finally clearing her windpipe of the obstacle. She swallowed, wiping the moisture from her eyes, then sat up and smiled.

"Are you okay?" Sam asked, concerned.

Again she nodded. "Fine." She took a sip of water, tilting her head.

Sam sat back down. "You've got to be more careful," he admonished gently. "I shouldn't've given you that carrot. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Al smiled from behind Jean's chair.

Sam's gaze traveled up to his friend. His forehead wrinkled in question.

"The coughing she did while choking on that carrot caused the scar tissue to break apart and release the nerve leading to her vocal chords," Al explained. "Within an hour she'll be talking like you and me, Sam. The confidence it gives her gets her through this tense period with Stuart." Al poked at the handlink, his eyes brightening. "She eventually marries her current new boyfriend and even goes back to her music. Hey, and get this, in a few years she writes a song called Changing Time." A piece of paper suddenly appeared in Al's hand. "Read the lyrics, Sam." He held the paper for Sam to see.

As Sam Beckett read the words, his eyes widened. *How did she know?*

CHANGING TIME

Love comes in the morning.
Hope shines in the afternoon.
Dreams in the nighttime
Just fade away too soon.
New life in the springtime.
Summer brings the growing child.
Wisdom in the autumn,
In hopes of winter, mild.

CHORUS:

Life is but a circle,
A never ending string.
A path through time eternal.
A gentle song to sing.

Laughter at the sunrise.
Wistfulness when darkness falls.
Bird songs in the daytime.
Jazz when the trumpet calls.
Look into the mirror.
Tell me what strange sights you see.

Another changing pattern,
Another mystery.

Today blends with tomorrow.
Tomorrow becomes yesterday.
Past days are the future,
To live a different way.
To change again one moment,
One tiny piece of history.
To bend the road of what was
Towards what was meant to be.

When he had finished reading, Sam's eyes sought out Al and he licked his lips. His throat was suddenly dry. "Is this why I was here, Al?" "I don't know, Sam." Both men turned to watch as Jean laughed at a joke from across the table, her eyes sparkling. "Maybe it was just an added bonus."

"For who, Al? Her or me?"

"Maybe both of you, pal. Say good-by."

Sam Beckett took a final look at the woman with the penetrating eyes and, as the world once again began to disappear around him, Al could've sworn he heard Sam whisper something like 'for the want of a carrot'.

* * *

Author's note: The preceding story is essentially true. Some of the names have been changed to protect the innocent...or the guilty, as the case may be. The history of the character Jean is my own and the events in her life actually happened.

There are sometimes very special moments in a person's life, moments that change that person's life forever. Doctors had told me they thought I'd never speak normally again and there was nothing they could do about it. Choking on that carrot was a miracle moment in my life and I feel that somehow God or fate or time was watching out for me.

Tim was a real person, but who's to say that the spirit of Sam Beckett wasn't there that day, guiding him, when I was assaulted. There certainly is no denying the fact that had I not eaten that carrot, my life would've been entirely different than it turned out to be.

I've written this story to show what might've happened had that one seemingly insignificant act, the eating of a raw carrot stick, not occurred. As the song says, "To change again one moment..."

The song itself does exist and if anyone is interested in the music for it, they can contact me. Though I usually end up playing it on guitar, I prefer the full piano accompaniment. For obvious reasons, it's become one of my personal favorites and I never pass up a chance to perform it.

Finally, I'd like to say a sincere thank you to all the people in that office who went out of their way to help me through the toughest time in my life...especially Tim. Your caring concern and constant support will never be forgotten.



A Leap of Relative Importance

by

M.J. Frank & Crystal Nauyokas

As the disorientation of leaping faded, Samuel Beckett became aware of his surroundings. Figuring out what he was doing, at least physically, was easy as he found himself running. Not the type of run one would do if being chased but, rather, the stride of one trying to get into shape or stay in shape. Sam felt himself continuing the rhythm, not stopping nor breaking stride.

Leaping about in time had gotten him back into shape, so Sam didn't mind the jog, and he certainly didn't mind the surroundings--he was on a dirt path that ran through what was probably a park. Grass stretched out along both sides of the path, the landscape dotted with leafy trees and wooden benches. The sky was a light blue, punctuated with only a few white clouds. It was a gorgeous day to be outside, a day to make one glad to be alive.

He heard quick footsteps coming up behind him. A young man's voice, slightly breathless, called out. "Justin!" Sam turned his head, but didn't cease running, though he did slow his pace somewhat. A lone young runner raced up to his side. "That was sneaky! Can't a guy even stop to tie a shoelace without having his partner keep going?"

"Sorry."

"Like hell you are!" the other retorted good-naturedly. "You think that just because you're going to West Point you have to prove something?"

Sam let the information sink in for a moment before answering.

"Wouldn't you?"

They were approaching a small parking lot. His companion slowed to a walk, so Sam did the same. The younger man laughed slightly. "I guess I do, too."

The physicist didn't respond. Actually, he wasn't sure what the other meant by his statement, but had the feeling the person he'd replaced would, so he didn't want to just ask outright. They walked through the parking lot, though not towards any particular car--very modern, 1990's models, the time traveller noted--until Sam realized that they must have walked to the park from wherever they'd come. The tree-lined street and single-family houses with large yards reminded Sam of a small town. The air smelled fresh, as it does after a recent rainstorm.

As they strolled quietly, Sam took a moment to study his young companion. The other was Sam's height, his dark hair naturally curly, and he seemed to be in good shape, physically. He was probably in his late teens, to judge by his still youthful, but handsome, features. There was something familiar about the younger man, but the scientist couldn't put a finger on it. Did he know this kid in his past or maybe even his present?

"What's wrong, Justin?" The youth cocked his head at him, raised a quizzical eyebrow. The questioning expression almost floored Sam and he knew that he'd known him. From somewhere. Where was Al when he needed him?

"Uh, nothing," Sam replied hesitantly. "You need a shave."

"No kidding, and you don't?"

The leaper couldn't help but smile.

His new friend turned into a driveway that connected to a two-story red brick house. He opened a screen door on one side of the house and gestured that Sam should precede him. Nodding his thanks, Sam paused inside the door to look around. The kitchen was spacious, a circle of major appliances, cabinets and counter tops around a rectangular island. A pot rack hung above the island. Directly across from the screen door was a closed swinging door that most likely led to the rest of the house.

The teenager opened the refrigerator and pulled out a full bottle of orange juice, then snagged two tall glasses from a cabinet. He poured juice into both glasses. He held out one of the glasses. Before Sam could take it, he was startled by what sounded like a door slamming in the next room.

"Dammit, I thought he'd be gone by now," the other muttered, retracting the glass and setting it back on the counter.

"Austen!" came a loud male voice from the direction of the closed door. Sam saw the younger man stiffen at the harsh tone, but he didn't turn when the door swung open--a bit harder than was necessary--and a tall, distinguished looking man with wavy, jet-black hair stepped into the room. Sam assumed this was Austen's father, though there was very little in the way of resemblance between the two. He was dressed in a suit and tie. "Where the hell have you been?" the man demanded, anger written across his face.

Austen's brown eyes blazed as he capped the bottle of orange juice. "When the hell did you start to care?" he demanded without turning.

"What is that suppose to mean?"

The teenager whirled to face the other man. "You know damn well what it means! You never cared about me, or Mom either! You sure didn't seem too upset at her funeral!"

The older man's eyes flicked to Sam, then back. "Don't start this now, Austen."

"And don't bring the subject up later, either, huh?" Austen's reply came out through gritted teeth. "You needn't worry, I'll be out of here in two weeks! Then you can go to hell or do whatever you want!" He glanced at Sam. When he spoke, his voice was less harsh, but strained. "Uh, see you for lunch?"

"Yeah, sure. Where?"

"The usual?"

"Okay, yeah," Sam replied automatically, wondering where 'the usual' place was. Hopefully, Al would know when he got here.

"See you then."

The scientist wanted to stay and help Austen out with his father, but knew a dismissal when he heard one. He edged towards the door, pausing when he saw the Imaging Chamber door slide open. Al casually stepped through, handlink in hand, cigar in mouth. The hologram was dressed in white shirt, red pants and his stop sign jacket. He tapped a couple keys and the door closed behind him. He looked up, a confused expression crossing his face.

Was the tension so thick even Al could sense it? Sam wondered. "Okay, I'll see you around noon, then?" he remarked to the youth as he opened the door.

"Right," Austen agreed, turning to face the counter, his back to his father.

Sam left the house, walked onto the sidewalk, then hesitated, looking up and down the street. Which way did he--or rather, the person he'd leapt into--live? He jumped when Al suddenly popped in right next to him. Sighing in exasperation, he threw his friend a frustrated look. "Any closer and you'd be in my shorts!"

Al took a step back, pulling the cigar from his mouth. "You're not my type," he retorted calmly, used to Sam's snapping.

"Which way?" the scientist asked less harshly, easily ignoring his friend's comment.

"Oh, uh," he consulted the handlink, then pointed south with his cigar, "that way."

The traveller strode slowly down the street, his holographic friend by his side. "I'm here for that kid, right?"

A quick check with Ziggy via the handlink had the former astronaut nodding in agreement. "Yes. You're getting pretty good at this, Sam." He fiddled with the 'link some more.

"Al, do I know Austen?"

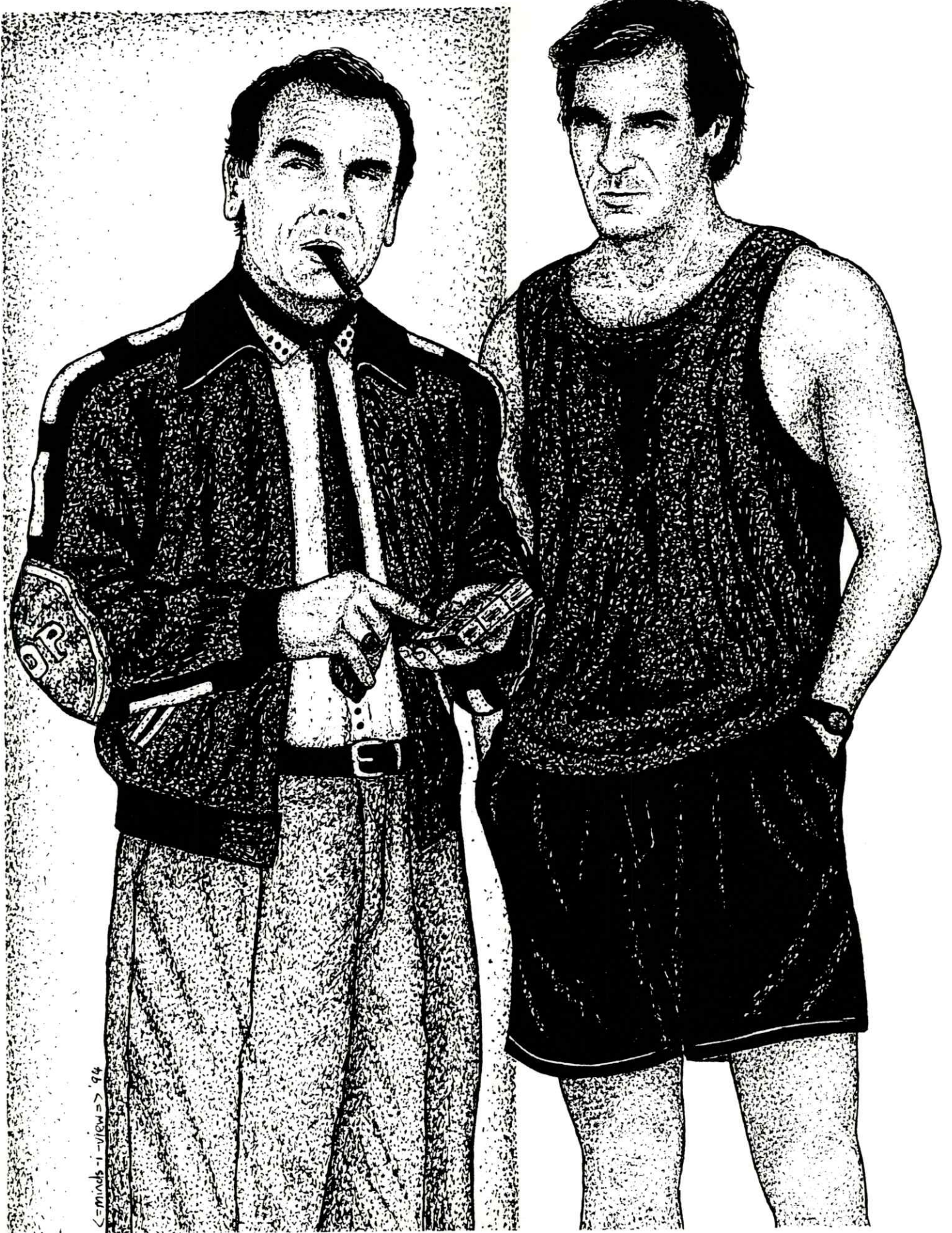
"You don't know him, Sam. At least, not that I'm aware of. Why?"

"I don't know. He just seems so familiar to me."

"Oh." The Observer shrugged, dismissing the statement. "Well, your name is Justin Hayward. The date is--"

"Justin Hayward?" the quantum physicist interrupted abruptly, his voice awed. "As in lead singer for the Moody Blues?"

"That's 'Blues,' Sam. The Moody Blues," Al corrected patiently. "And,



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no, you're not *that* Justin Hayward. As I was saying, the date is June 12, 1993. You just graduated from high school, in the top ten of your class. You were the star of both the basketball and track teams. In a few weeks, you'll be going to West Point. What a waste. All that talent, and the kid joins the Army! Geesh!"

Sam smiled despite himself. He glanced at Al, who was so busy pulling up information that he didn't see the bushes he was phasing through as he walked. Being a hologram could come in handy once in awhile. The ex-astronaut suddenly looked up, then scooted over to the sidewalk to pace his friend.

"What about Austen? Am I here to get him and his father together?"

"Who, that jerk he was arguing with or, rather, not talking to? That wasn't his father. That was his stepfather, Connelly Barnes."

"Okay, his stepfather. I'm here to rectify that?"

"The two never got along. I don't think that relationship can ever be made right." Al consulted the 'link. "The young man's name is Austen Michaels. He graduated with you, or rather, with Justin, a couple weeks ago. He was also top of his class, with all the usual sports under his belt as well, only *Austen* decided to go to the Naval Academy." He nodded his approval. "Smart kid. Anyway, Austen's mother--his natural mother--died in a car accident ten days ago."

"He was pretty close to her, wasn't he?"

"Austen was three when his mother married Barnes. Barnes was never around. He was always out of town on business, so Austen only had his mother to depend on. I get the impression Barnes didn't like having a kid around. Sam, he never even adopted Austen formally. That's enough to tell you he didn't care for him." Al stopped when the handlink beeped at him. Sam halted beside him. "Aw, dammit. Austen drops out of the Naval Academy before his first year is even over."

"Maybe he decided the Navy wasn't the place for him. Maybe he just couldn't take the stress and hard work."

"Possibly, but I think the kid had the potential to make it. According to what Ziggy says, anyway. No, I don't think it was because he couldn't keep up, he had good-enough grades when he dropped out. I think it was because he didn't have it here--" Al tapped his right temple. "Most of what you put up with at the Academy is psychological. I know. You need the support of others--your fellow plebes, the other mids, your parents."

"You made it through without your parents."

Al winced slightly. "Yeah, well, I was used to getting along without them," he replied nonchalantly. "I think Austen's mother picked the wrong time to die on him."

"Like she asked to die at all?" the younger man shot back, surprised his friend could phrase it that way.

"You know what I mean. Austen obviously needs some parental support and that nozzle of a stepfather certainly isn't going to give it to him."

"Support his mother would have given to him," Sam added. "I see what you mean. So I'm suppose to help him stay in the Academy? You want to tell me just how I'm going to accomplish that?"

"I don't know." When the scientist shot him an exasperated look, he added defensively, "I never said this leap would be easy."

Sam nodded apologetically. "What about Justin? Maybe instead of West Point, I get him to go to Annapolis..."

The hologram shook his head. "No, Justin ends up on an important project right after graduation. He'll probably make a career out of the Army." Al, frowning in concentration, jabbed at the keys with one finger. He paused, cocking his head, then barked in laughter. "You were right, Sam. Ziggy says the best way to keep Austen in the Naval Academy is to get him together with his father."

"His stepfather?" The leaper's brow furrowed in puzzlement. "But you said..."

"No, his *natural* father. Ziggy thinks that his father could give him the encouragement he needs to tough it out at the Academy. For once, Ziggy

may be right."

"Who's his natural father?"

"No data, at this time." Al tapped in the sequence that opened the door to his present. He looked up from the 'link. "Tell you what, I'll go back and give Ziggy a push in the right direction. Shouldn't be too hard, we'll just look up the birth certificate. Meanwhile, see what you can get out of Austen."

"Al!"

"What?"

"Where do I live?"

"Right there." The former astronaut pointed to a white house behind him. "Don't forget to shave." A push of a button and the door closed, cutting Sam off from his only link to home. Sam sighed, then walked towards the house.

* * *

Sam spent the morning familiarizing himself with his temporary home. As far as he could tell, Justin was an only child and both his parents were still alive and were very proud of him. He figured his next move would be to have lunch with Austen and work at solving the dilemma of finding his natural father. It was shortly before noon when he realized he'd forgotten to ask Al about the restaurant.

Mentally kicking himself, Sam stepped outside to walk back to Austen's house when he saw a dark blue convertible with the top down pull up to the curb. Austen was in the driver's seat. He waved cheerfully as he strolled towards the car.

"I thought I'd drive today," Austen remarked.

"No problem." He opened the door, then settled himself in the front seat. Seeing Austen frown, he grimaced to himself. He'd done something not in character for Justin. Affecting an attitude of nonchalance, he queried, "Problem?"

"Well, no, but you never open the door when I have the top down."

"I, uh, I've got a lot on my mind."

"Yeah, don't we all?" The comment was only a mere whisper, but Sam nonetheless heard it.

The scientist watched the scenery cruise by for a few minutes before turning his head to regard Austen's profile. Again the feeling of familiarity came over him. Who was this young man? *Damn this Swiss-cheese memory anyway!* "Did he come down hard on you?"

Austen stole a quick glance at him as he steered the convertible around a corner. "Who?"

"Your stepfather."

"You think I really care what that son of a bitch thinks?" came the savage response, then less brusque, "I'm out of there in two weeks. By the way, thanks for letting me store my stuff at your place while I'm at Annapolis. Maybe we could move it this weekend?"

"Sure. But your stepfather--"

"Drop it, okay, Justin? You know we never got along. The last thing I want to talk about is *him*."

"Alright, sorry if I upset you."

Pulling the car into a parking slot, the teenager flashed him a wide smile. "Forget it. Let's save the arguments for the Army/Navy games, alright?"

Sam found the younger man's grin infectious and returned it with one of his own. As he climbed out of the car, he noticed where they'd ended up. 'The usual place' was a small Italian restaurant. At least, that was the impression the traveller got by the name painted on the large picture window: Luigi's. He could handle Italian food. Despite his partial amnesia, he knew Al had dragged him to more than one Italian restaurant during the course of their friendship.

Inside, they only had to wait a moment until a blonde hostess greeted

them. "Hi, Austen, Justin."

"Lydia. You look fabulous."

Lydia's face lit up with a smile. Cocking her head, she picked up two menus and stated, "The usual place?"

"You got it, beautiful."

"Follow me, please."

"To the ends of the Earth," Austen replied teasingly. Sam shook his head in amazement, trailing the two. The hostess set down two menus at a window booth.

As she scooted past the teenager, Lydia murmured, "Flirt!"

Sam sat down, picked up a menu and glanced at it. He was unsure how to bring up the subject of Austen's natural father. Leaping through time had taught him a certain tactfulness, how to ease into a subject so it seemed a natural change in conversation, but this particular topic had Sam at a loss. Hopefully, he would find an opening somewhere in the conversation. Quickly deciding on a dish, he set down the menu, realizing that Austen hadn't even touched his. *The two must frequent this place quite a bit.* The younger man was staring out the window. "Figure out what you want already?"

"It'll be the usual." Austen looked at the other man long enough to answer him, then looked out the window again. Something was troubling him, Sam knew.

"Anything I can do?"

"No, I'm just thinking." He regarded Sam again. "I know, it's about time I used my brain for more than just taking up space."

Before Sam could retort, a brunette waitress stepped up to take their orders. As she walked away, Austen watched her go, then grinned at his friend. "Gotta get me some of that."

The older man chuckled. "Well, you have two weeks."

"Yeah, then it's Celibacy City."

"Did anybody ever tell you that you're hopeless?"

"Certainly, but I don't listen to idle gossip."

It only took a few minutes for their meals to arrive. Sam watched as the younger man prepared to tuck into his lunch. Austen hesitated, looking up at him. "Problem?"

"No," came the quick assurance. "I just don't remember anybody who seems to enjoy Italian food so much."

Austen smiled and shrugged. "Mom said I got that from my father."

Sam saw the opening he'd been searching for and decided to jump in feet first. Toying with his silverware, he asked, "What do you know about your father?"

The other paused, the fork half-way to his mouth. He slowly lowered it as he contemplated the query. "Not a whole hell of a lot, really. Mom didn't like him too much. Probably why she divorced him," he half-smiled. "She never wanted to talk about him when I asked, unless I did something that made her mad, then I heard how much I was like him."

The physicist couldn't help but smile. "Who was he?"

The younger man shrugged. "I don't know. Mom wouldn't tell me. Like I said, she never wanted to talk about him. All I do know is that he was in the Navy and that he was her first husband. She told me she found out she was pregnant with me during the divorce proceedings. I guess she never told him about me or else he didn't care."

"Don't you ever wonder about him?"

"Of course, I do! There's obviously some of him in me. It's almost as if I'm missing a piece of me, you know?" Austen shook his head. "You wouldn't understand."

"You would be surprised how much I understand. Not to know a piece of your past, not to know who you really are, that can be scary," Sam replied sincerely. "Is that why you joined the Navy? To find yourself?"

"Could be," the teenager answered noncommittally. "It's just something I always wanted to do."

Al chose that moment to make an appearance. A pained expression crossed his handsome features as he regarded Sam's plate. "Baked lasagna! Aw, Sam,

that looks yumola!" He glanced at Austen's meal. "Chicken cacciatore! Kid takes after my own heart." The brunette waitress strolled past. The hologram tore his eyes away from the food and watched her cross the room. "She looks pretty yumola, too!"

Sam rolled his eyes as he chewed on his lasagna. For a couple minutes, all was quiet as the two seated ate; Al spent the time accessing Ziggy through the handlink. He paused in his pacing to blow out a cloud of smoke, whacked the 'link, then pulled the cigar out of his mouth and commented, "As soon as you're able, Sam, we have to talk. Depending on what you found out from Austen, we may have a bit of a problem."

The scientist put aside his fork and began to take the napkin from his lap when Austen suddenly raised his napkin and wiped his mouth. "Excuse me, Justin, but Nature calls."

"And that pretty waitress?" Sam couldn't help but retort. There was something comfortable, almost familiar, about Austen that made it easy to banter with him.

"Could be. Jealous?" came the quick rebuff.

As Austen walked away, Sam swiveled to face his friend. "What have you got?"

Al took his ever-present cigar from his mouth again. "Nada."

"Nada?" Sam said loudly, attracting the unwanted attention of a man and woman walking past his table. He smiled weakly in apology, then quickly turned to face the empty seat across from him. "What do you mean, nada?" he whispered harshly.

"You know, zero, zilch, zippo."

"You checked Austen's birth certificate?"

Al phased through the table and positioned himself in a sitting pose across from Sam. "It was the first thing I had Ziggy do. There's no name listed for the father. My guess is that she didn't know who the father was."

"I think it was her first husband."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because Austen was telling me what little he knows about his father. He said she found out she was pregnant with him during the divorce proceedings from her first husband."

"Maybe she was bingo-bango-bongo-ing somebody on the sly during the proceedings," the hologram rationalized. Seeing the look his partner threw at him, he added without missing a beat, "Or, she really hated the guy enough not to tell him."

"Yeah, Austen hinted at that, too." Sam paused in thought. "Have Ziggy run a make on his mother, maybe you can come up with something from that."

"Already did. Her name was Brenda Michaels. Other than that, nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing," Al repeated as he tapped some keys on the 'link. "My bet is she changed her name, so I'm having Ziggy run a check. It may take awhile. Ziggy's being a pain. Again."

"Alright, thanks, Al."

"Wish it could be more, pal." Looking at his best friend's thoughtful expression, he commented, "You really like the kid, don't you?"

"Yes. He's so easy to get along with. I know him, Al. He's so familiar to me."

"Don't push it, Sam. It'll come to you. If you know this kid, though I don't know where you would have met him, you'll know when the time is right."

"You're right, Al. In any event, I've got to help him. So you give Ziggy a kick in the back end and find out what I need to know!"

The Observer stood up, his legs disappearing in the fake leather seat cover. Eyes twinkling with mischief, he asked, "Can I tell Gooshie you gave me permission to kick Ziggy?" He keyed in the doorway and disappeared in a whoosh of pneumatics.

The scientist smiled and shook his head in amazement. He was nibbling a particularly long strand of cheese when Austen returned. The two finished their meals in silence as Sam thought about his next move. Finishing off his drink, he regarded his handsome companion. "Austen, how about we move your

stuff today?"

"I thought you had other plans."

"Well, they've been changed. Seeing as your stepfather may very well throw you out before you head off to Annapolis, I think this would be a good time."

"Sure," he shrugged. "I still have to pack up some stuff."

"I can help, if you want."

"Okay, fine."

* * *

Later that afternoon found Sam and Austen packing up the last couple boxes. The older man noticed most of the stuff was his mother's personal things, items Austen told him his mother would want him to have, so he kept an eye open for any kind of clue to help in his search. As he placed a small box into a larger carton, Sam heard a sniffing noise come from Austen, whose back was to him. He stood and crossed the room, stopping beside the seated young man. Austen held a framed photograph in his hands, the color portrait depicting a lovely blonde woman and a slightly younger Austen.

The woman was Austen's mother, he figured; his suspicions were confirmed when he saw the tears slide down the teenager's face. Sam knelt, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Austen?" he queried gently.

Austen quickly set down the photograph and swiped away his tears. "I'm such a wimp, huh?" he laughed weakly.

"Not at all. What you are is a caring human being who misses somebody he loved very much."

"Well, I can't afford to grieve right now. I can't be vulnerable now, not this close to going to the Academy."

"Do you intend to hold in your feelings for the next four years? You have to let it go."

"Who are you? Sigmund Freud?" Austen glanced up at him; despite his suddenly jovial attitude, Sam could see the gratitude in his brown eyes, thanking him for understanding.

The time traveller smiled. "Not quite."

Austen picked up the picture and gazed at it. After a long, silent moment, he stood and strode towards the door. He set the picture on a dresser. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Whatever you're having is fine." Sam walked back to the box he'd been packing and sat on the floor. He glanced into the smaller carton he'd been transferring things from and noticed a manila envelope tucked to the side. He reached in and snagged the envelope. It wasn't sealed, so he lifted the flap and pulled out the contents. It was a photograph of a woman in a wedding dress standing next to a man in a Naval uniform. The woman was Austen's mother, but it was the man who caught Sam's attention. This explained why Austen seemed so familiar to him--he knew Brenda Michaels' first husband.

He was Al.

The timing couldn't have been more perfect if he'd planned it, Sam marvelled when the Imaging Chamber door hissed open. He casually set down the photograph as he watched his friend step out of the light and tap in the code to shut the door behind him.

"I found a picture of Brenda Michaels with her first husband," he commented nonchalantly.

"That's great, Sam! Ziggy's come up with zilch on this Brenda Michaels. Maybe if there's a name on the photo, we can track Austen's father down. If not, I'll have Ziggy scan the photograph and we can find out who this guy is."

Sam picked up the 8 x 10 and held it so his friend could get a good look. Al held the handlink up as if to scan it, then paused as he looked at the picture with his own eyes. "Sam! That's my second wife! Hey, that's me!" The hand gripping the 'link dropped to his side as the realization sank in. He gazed at his friend's face in shock. "Are you saying..." He swallowed hard. "My God, you think Austen's my son!"

"It fits, Al. Austen said his father was in the Navy and loved Italian

food. The time frame is right. I think so, anyway. Austen would be the right age, and the reason he seems so familiar to me is because he has a lot of your traits--he 'talks' a lot with his hands, his facial expressions match yours, and the shameless Calavicci flirting! How could I have missed that?"

"A son." Al turned away, pacing slowly from the scientist. "I have a son," he spoke in an almost reverent tone. He paused to glance at his friend, a slight smile etching his features. "A son. Ain't that a kick in the butt?" The Observer gazed in the direction of the doorway as if lost in thought. The smile faded to a frown as he turned to regard Sam. "Why didn't she tell me she was pregnant?"

"You heard what Austen said and you should know from your own experiences with Brenda. She hated you, Al. I guess she figured this would be another way of taking everything from you."

"Yeah," Al agreed, bringing the handlink into play. "She even changed her last name so I couldn't find her. 'Michaels' was Brenda's mother's maiden name," he told his friend.

"That explains why Ziggy came up with zip." When Al just continued playing with the 'link's buttons and didn't respond, the scientist cocked his head and urged, "Al?"

"Why didn't she tell me, Sam?" The hologram looked askance at Sam as if he hadn't heard him speak a moment before; the physicist could only remember two times he'd seen more anguish on his friend's face. "I've got a son and she never told me!"

"I'm sorry she never told you, Al," Sam said sincerely, wishing he could ease the pain.

He couldn't say any more as Austen, clutching two tall glasses of orange juice, reentered the room. Al looked up and Sam saw him giving the younger man a closer scrutiny. Sam nodded mentally, finally noticing the vast similarities between father and son. There was a lot of Al in Austen, though the latter was taller, his features not as hardened by life.

"Find something?" the younger man queried, his voice a bit harsh, holding out one of the glasses.

Sam discreetly ignored Austen's slightly red eyes as he accepted the drink. "I found this picture. It's your mom with your natural father." He held out the photo.

Austen hesitated for a long moment before finally taking it from him. He studied the image for a long, silent moment, then looked up. Not sure what to say, he remarked hesitantly, "Kind of short, isn't he?"

"Great." Al groused. "Kid doesn't even know who I am and he's insulting me already."

Sam gazed at the picture of his best friend with his second wife; a small smile crossed his face. "Maybe, but he looks like a pretty decent guy."

"So, now what?" Austen asked. "We still don't know *who* he is. Where do we find him?" He tossed the 8 x 10 onto his bed. "What if this guy doesn't even want to know about me? What if he's just like my stepfather and tells me to get out of his life, too?"

"You'll never know unless you try, but you have to be the one who wants to do this."

Al walked over to stand next to his son. "Listen to him, kiddo. I'm not that bad a character, really. Of course, if you listened to everything your mother probably said about me, you'd think I was a real jerk."

"But all those things Mom said about him..." The young man looked up, oblivious to the admiral's comments. "Justin, I don't know."

"Remember, your mother said those things out of anger. Besides, aren't you even the least bit curious as to what he's doing? Bet he's still in the Navy."

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know. He looks like the Navy type."

"The 'Navy type'?" the hologram echoed.

Al's son lowered himself onto the bed and stared at the photo. A small smile etched his youthful features as he admitted, "I always did wonder about him. Who he was, what he was doing, if he even knew I existed or cared. I

always wanted to believe he was somebody special because Mom had married him, but then she married Connelly Barnes, too, so maybe he wasn't anything all that great after all. Maybe Mom just had bad taste in men." He picked up the picture. "He looks familiar."

"You look like he did at your age."

Austen gave Sam a strange look. "How would you know?"

"I mean that you probably look like he did at your age," the traveller corrected quickly. He gestured to the photograph the teenager held. "Look at the picture." He made a show of looking at the picture and then studying Austen. "It's there. Most kids do resemble their parents."

The young man seemed to accept Sam's hasty explanation; he stared at the photograph. "How come he seems so familiar?" He looked up, stared at the far wall for a long moment. He suddenly stood up, his face animated and Sam had to smile. He was so like Al! "Hey, wasn't he an astronaut or something? I seem to remember seeing something..."

Austen walked over to a three-drawer file cabinet. Dropping the photo on top of the cabinet, he jerked open the middle drawer and withdrew a folder. He flipped through it, totally unaware that Al had followed and now looked over his shoulder.

"Sam," the hologram marvelled, "he's got a whole bunch of stuff on the space programs, from the Apollo missions right up to the shuttle flights! I bet he wants to become an astronaut. Must be hereditary." There was an unmistakable hint of pride to his voice.

Austen snagged a newspaper clipping and pulled it out. "Here!" He picked up the 8 x 10 again and strode over to Sam's side, comparing the two pictures. "It's him! Look!"

Sam politely glanced over the pictures. The clipping, slightly yellowed and dog-eared, included a small picture of Al--years younger, of course--and two other astronauts along with the article. He nodded for Austen's sake. "Yep, that's him alright."

"Cala--Calavicci," Austen read, then gazed at the physicist. "My father was an astronaut. Do you believe this?" He returned his attention to the article. "He was a pilot, too. Guess that's pretty obvious if he was an astronaut."

"You want to be a pilot," Sam stated.

"Yeah, I do. Must be hereditary," he echoed Al's statement from a moment before. "God, it boggles the mind. I always envied those guys who got to go up into space and here I'm the son of one of them! Ain't that a kick?"

"In the butt." Sam smiled at his partner. "So now all we have to do is find out where he is." He hoped Al got the message, but the Observer was looking at his son.

"I hope you get the chance to find out what it's like, kiddo," Al was saying, despite the fact Austen couldn't hear him. "It's like nothing else you'll ever experience."

Austen stared at the scientist then. "What do you mean, 'find out where he is'?"

"So we can--you can meet him."

"Meet him? Are you crazy? Why would I do something like that?" He dropped the stuff onto the bed. "He's somebody, Justin! I'm just, well, I'm just nobody. Why would he want to meet me?"

"I think he'd like to know he has a son."

"Well, maybe, but we don't even know where to start looking for him."

"Give me some time, I'll find out." When the young man hesitated, Sam added, "Wouldn't you like to meet him?" The scientist stood and walked around the room, pausing to look into Austen's uncertain face. "Of course, you could spend the rest of your life under Connelly Barnes' roof."

It was the right button to push. "Dammit, no! Albert Calavicci can't be even half as bad as he is! I'll go, I'll go!"

The leaper smiled. "Okay. Listen, I'll find out where he is and give you a call, okay?"

"Alright, sure! What the hell."

"I'll let myself out. See you later."

"See ya."

As Sam left the room, he saw Austen sit down on the bed with the folder of clippings and begin going through it. He left the house and halted by the street as Al popped in. The admiral looked unsure of himself. "What's wrong, Al?"

"Sam," he began, gesturing with his cigar, "do you think this is such a good idea?"

"Don't you want to know your son, Al?"

"Sure, but, well, in 1993, we were so much into the Project and everything, I don't know if I'd have time for him."

"You'll have time, Al. I'll make sure of that."

"Yeah, you would, too," the older man agreed with a hint of a smile.

"It's the right thing to do, Al. Look, if you don't believe me, ask Ziggy."

"Huh? Oh, right, ask Ziggy." The hologram entered the request and read the answer. "He says there's a ninety-five percent probability that you're on the right track."

"I say there's a one hundred percent probability that you aren't very sure about this."

Al looked around, unable to meet his friend's gaze. "It's not every day you find out you have a son, Sam. What if I don't live up to his expectations? What if I blow this relationship like I blew it with five ex-wives? It's one thing if I ruin my own life, Sam, but I don't want to ruin his, too."

"You won't, Al. You'll be giving him support where he didn't have it before, you'll be there to help him through a very difficult time in his life. Not just Annapolis, but the death of his mother. He'll need you, Al. You'll be the father he's not getting in Barnes."

The hologram sighed, staring at his feet. "I wasn't there for him when he was growing up, Sam."

"You didn't know about him, Al," Sam reminded his friend gently. "But now you'll have the chance to be there for him. That's what we're here for, right? To put right what once went wrong? I think it's very wrong for a son not to know his real father and for a father not to know he's a father."

Al looked up then, a slight smile curling his lip. "Alright, pal, you've made your point. I can speak for myself, but I can't speak for my past self. Get Austen and me together. Give it your best shot and don't let the me of 1993 stop you."

* * *

"Stallions Gate? Where the hell is that?"

Sam pulled open the map he'd brought and spread it on the bed. "New Mexico." He pointed to a spot on the map. "Admiral Calavicci's working on a government project there."

"My father's an admiral? Great." Austen's last word was laced with as much sarcasm one could muster.

"But he's human, don't forget that. It'll take a day or so to get there, so you'd better pack a bag."

The younger man cocked his head at his friend. "How did you find out about this government project and that he's working on it?"

"I have friends in places you can't possibly imagine," Sam answered as he folded the map. *Certainly didn't have to lie on that one!*

"I had to ask," Austen cracked as he opened his closet. "I should leave a note for my stepfather..." He snorted in contempt. "Why bother? He'll probably never miss me." Al's son paused to look at Sam. "If you'd told me that two weeks before going to Annapolis I'd be running half-way across the country in search of the father I never knew, I'd've said you were crazy!"

"Live a little."

"Justin, you are one crazy bastard," Austen commented. "Must be why you joined the Army."

It took them little more than a day's driving to get them to New Mexico. Sam remembered very little about the area where the Project was situated, but Al popped in from time to time to keep them going in the right direction. Whether it was to keep him company or to watch the son he never knew he had, Sam was nonetheless grateful for his friend's help. Al explained about the decision to locate the Project a distance from any really big populated areas, but close enough to some kind of habitation so the Project members wouldn't feel totally closed off from the world. The hologram directed them to the town closest to Stallions Gate.

"As far as Ziggy can tell and I can remember, I was at this little Mexican place with Tina," Al remarked.

"How about we stop for a bite to eat?" Sam, who was driving, asked his companion.

"Sounds great. Last thing I want to do is meet my father on an empty stomach." Austen was gazing at the nondescript buildings as they cruised along. "Good thing you're here, Justin. I would have wimped out a long time ago."

"Just remember, high-ranking officers tend to bark a lot. Ignore it."

"Bark? I don't bark!" Al shot back, slightly offended. Hunching his shoulders demurely, he admitted, "I only growl."

Sam smiled slightly, then pulled the car into a parking place near the restaurant. Al tapped a button on the 'link and disappeared. A moment later, he reappeared next to a red sports car.

"Sam, I am here! This is my car!"

Waiting for Austen to round his side of the car and join him, he commented, "Hey, look at that beauty!"

Austen looked around. "I don't see any women."

Like father, like son. "No, that red convertible over there." Without waiting for an answer, he strolled over to stand next to Al and the car. The teenager followed, his eyes widening as he gazed at the vehicle.

"Wow! This is cool!" Austen enthused.

"Definitely my son," the hologram remarked, pride evident in his voice.

"May I help you?" came Al's voice behind them. All three turned to regard the man dressed in matching blue slacks and jacket, white shirt and bolo tie.

Sam resisted the urge to hug his friend, instead saying, "We were just admiring your car, Admiral Calavicci."

Al's brown eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Do I know you?"

"Not--exactly, Admiral," the physicist replied.

"How--exactly?"

"Don't let me push you around, Sam," the hologram warned. "If I remember right, Tina didn't show up for our dinner date and I was in a particularly bad mood."

"Well, uh, my name is Justin Hayward and this is Austen Michaels," Sam introduced.

The traveller had hoped Austen would take up the conversation from there, but the youth seemed suddenly gun-shy about the situation. Al continued to give them his 'Admiral stare', so he poked Austen in the back. It worked...sort-of. "I-I'm Brenda Michaels' son."

"No, no, Sam!" the holographic Al corrected quickly. "I wouldn't know her by that name! I knew her by the name Brenda Lodge!"

"Lodge!" Sam added quickly. "Brenda Lodge was his mother. I believe she was your second wife, Al--Admiral."

"Yes, she was. What of it?"

"Well, Austen wanted..."

"You're my father, Admiral," Austen blurted out. Seeing the shocked look on the older man's face, he added, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say it in quite that way."

"I'm your *father*?" Al shook his head. "I never had any kids. Just because Brenda Lodge was your mother, doesn't mean I'm your father."

"I was born in October of 1975. October 9th, to be exact. When was the date of your divorce? Do you remember?"

"Which one?" Al queried, then held up a hand before Austen could answer him. "April 12, 1975." At the youth's surprised look, he added, "Kid, you don't ever forget the day your marriage is truly over, especially when your ex-wife takes you for everything you've got."

"Yeah," the hologram muttered angrily, "and she took me for a lot more than I figured."

"She was pregnant with me during your divorce. She told me she hated you so much at the time that she never told you about the pregnancy. I didn't know who you were until my friend Justin found a wedding picture."

As Al and Austen talked, Sam slipped back to the car and retrieved a small folder of stuff. He returned in time to hear Austen's last sentence; he pulled out the 8 x 10 and handed it to Al. Al gazed at it for a moment, then looked back at his son.

"Yeah, that's Brenda and me. How is she doing?"

"She died two weeks ago," Austen mumbled.

"I'm sorry." Al's apprehensive tone softened.

"Austen will be going to the Naval Academy in two weeks," Sam said, hoping to crumble his partner's resistance further.

"Congratulations." Al handed the picture back to Austen. "She never told you about me?"

"Very little. Usually I heard how I was like you when I got into trouble or flirted with the girls too much."

Al laughed. "Yeah, that sounds like Brenda. Listen, I'm sorry if I was kinda hard on you. What say we go inside, grab something to eat and you can tell me all about yourself. I don't know about you, but I'm starved."

"Okay, yeah," Austen agreed easily.

Sam looked at the hologram and smiled. The admiral didn't even bother consulting the handlink. "I think you've done it, Sam. I never would have known I even had a son if you hadn't been so damn-blasted stubborn about it. Owe you one, pal."

"Just returning one of many, my friend," Sam replied with a smile, just before the bright light of a leap engulfed him.

* * *

Al had seen the leap coming, so he wasn't surprised to find himself staring at the blank walls of the Imaging Chamber. He regarded the 'link silently for a moment before keying in the proper sequence so he could exit the room. Pausing in the threshold, he saw Gooshie scurry from one panel to the next before dashing off down the corridor.

Slowly, the realization of what had just occurred seeped into his mind and he had to lean against a control panel. Sam had introduced him to his son. *His son*. The words sounded almost... Quickly, he shifted to check a readout on the panel. He had to find out what had become of Austen.

"Welcome back, Ensign Calavicci," Ziggy's sultry tone said aloud. The words did not sink in until Al heard a familiar voice answer the computer's greeting.

"Hello, Ziggy. How's my girl?"

"Quite well, Ensign," Ziggy answered seductively.

Al's head snapped up. Standing in the doorway was Austen Michaels. A few years older than he had been just moments before when Al had seen him while in the Imaging Chamber, but the same person, nonetheless. The young man wore an ensign's uniform. What had Ziggy called him? Ensign Calavicci? Austen had taken his name? What had Sam done?

"What's wrong, Dad?" Austen studied his uniform. "Am I rumped or something?"

"Uh, no," the admiral replied, trying to act nonchalant. "You, uh, just startled me, that's all."

"Startled isn't the word I would use," Ziggy remarked.

"Shut up, you computer with delusions of God-hood."

"Dad!" Austen reprimanded lightly, walking over to the control panel. "That's no way to talk to my girl!"

"Thank you, Ensign," the computer purred as the young officer patted one of the glowing panels.

"I got a seven-day liberty," Austen continued. "I thought you'd like to do something, especially since Sam just leaped."

"Uh, sure, I guess. What would you like to do?"

"I don't know. Find some place we can pick up a couple of girls and let nature take its course."

"Like father, like son," Ziggy stated.

"How about it?" The ensign, easily ignoring the computer, asked his father.

"I don't see why not. You can tell me what you've been up to." Al picked up the handlink and tucked it into his jacket pocket as he headed towards the door. Austen paced him easily as they walked down the white corridor.

"Great! Let me get out of this uniform."

"I should change, too," Al said.

"Alright, see you shortly."

The admiral paused in front of his door, absently palming the admittance panel as he watched Austen continue down the hallway. *His son*, he thought with pride. The door slid open and Al stepped inside, crossing the living area to get to the computer terminal on the desk. He quickly tapped some keys, then stepped back as he stripped off his jacket. He fished in a pocket, pulled out the handlink and tossed it on the desk.

"Yes, Admiral Calavicci?" Ziggy queried aloud.

"Ziggy, when did Austen change his last name to Calavicci?"

"Just after completing his plebe year at the Naval Academy. You strutted around like a peacock in full plume for days. It was most irritating."

Leave it to Ziggy to be so damned--truthful, and in an embarrassing way, as well. Casually tossing his jacket onto a chair, Al proceeded to undress down to his skivvies. "I'm sorry if I've forgotten things concerning Austen, but--"

"It is perfectly understandable, Admiral. Since Dr. Beckett's latest leap involved getting you and your son together, I believe I can make the right assumption when I say that you don't remember knowing the ensign for the past six years?"

"You've got that right."

"Then, you wouldn't know that the ensign just completed his flight training a couple days ago."

"He's probably wondering why I didn't say anything," Al muttered to himself.

"Most likely."

Exasperated, the Observer cocked his head in irritation. "I wasn't talking to you."

"Might I inquire to whom you were speaking, if not to me?"

As he began to riffle through his technicolor wardrobe, Al answered, "Myself."

"Why do humans insist on speaking to themselves?"

The admiral pulled on a pair of white pants. "Cut to the chase, Ziggy!" he snapped. "What can you give me on Austen?"

"Would you like a brief run-down or would you prefer to ask questions?"

"Give me a brief run-down. Something to get me through dinner tonight, at least." Al tugged on a gold and black patterned shirt. "I'll catch up on the rest when we get back."

"You'll catch up on what when we get back?"

Al whirled. Austen stood by the front door. "I-uh-you certainly got changed pretty quickly." The older man indicated the blue jeans, T-shirt and black boots his son now wore.

"You learn to do things quickly in the Navy. Well, I don't have to tell you that. Besides, I prefer to get out of that uniform as quickly as

possible."

"I know the feeling," Al agreed, buttoning up his shirt.

"Dad, are you mad at me? You did tell me I could just come on in when you were expecting me. I mean, Tina's not here or anything."

"No, I'm not mad. I've just--had a lot on my mind."

Austen smiled slightly. "Yeah, you always are distracted when Sam's on a leap. How did this one go?"

"Good. Pretty good, I'd say."

"I should hope you'd think that," Ziggy commented.

"Why don't you shut down or something?" Al suggested to the hybrid computer, then said to Austen, "By the way, congratulations on getting through flight school."

Austen beamed proudly. "Thanks. I figured you'd forgotten about that. I'm going to be stationed in San Diego. Maybe we can see more of each other, depending on how Sam's leaps go."

"You bet." The admiral glanced around, his eyes finally settling on the 'link. He made a show of picking it up, examining it, then stuffing it in his pocket. He debated with himself for a few silent moments, then finally muttered, "Aw, hell, you've got a right to know."

"Dad?" Confusion underlied the single word.

Al looked into his son's brown eyes. Eyes that were so like his own, but hadn't seen half of what he had seen and Al hoped to God would never see. "How long have we known each other, Austen?"

The ensign shrugged. "Six years, give or take."

"We met not far from here. You were with your friend, Justin."

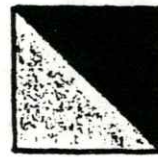
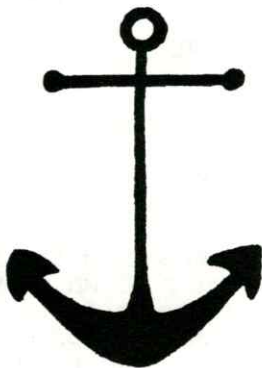
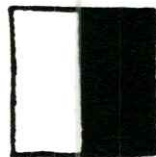
"Yeah, that's right."

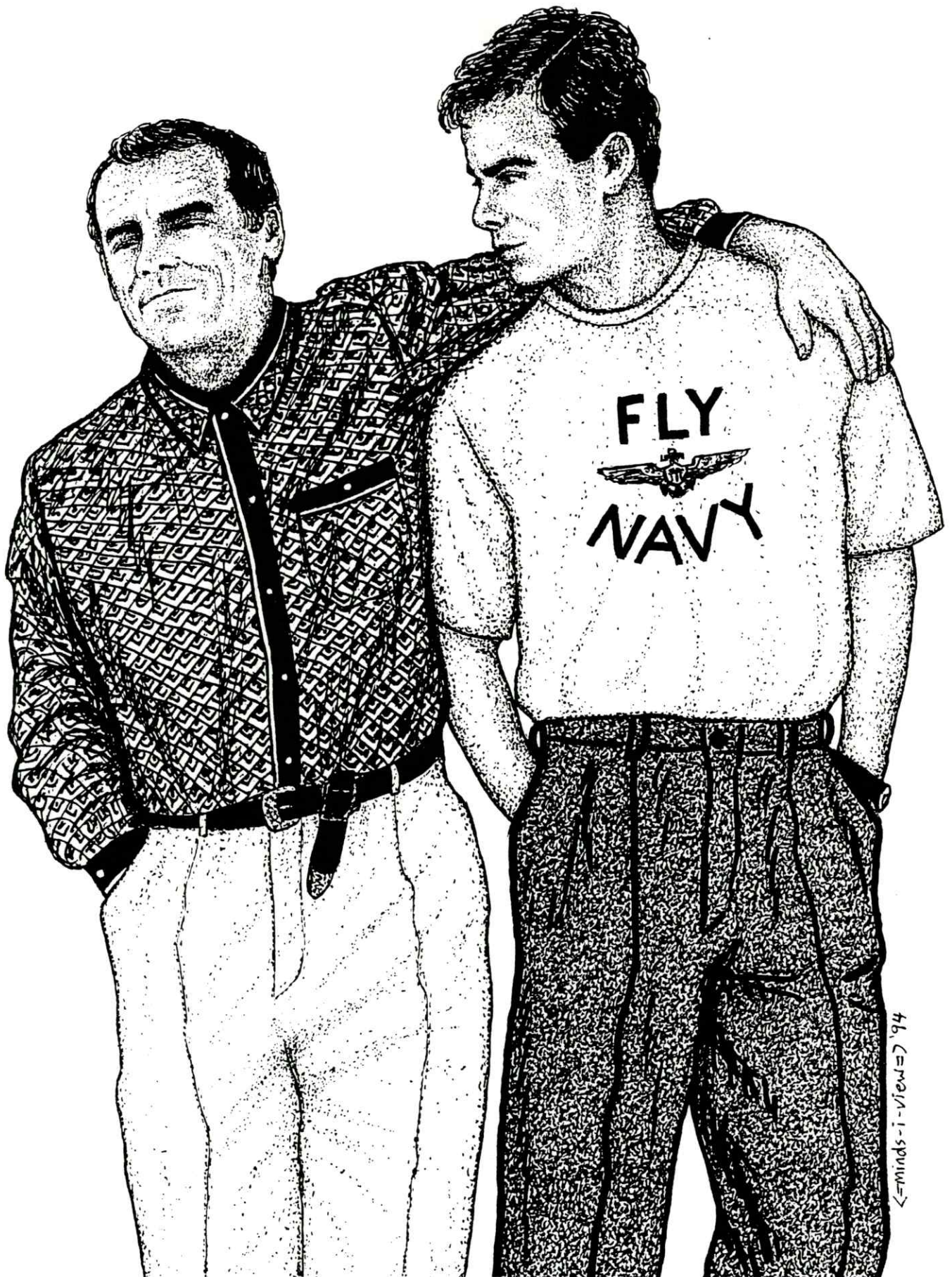
"Do you remember anything--different--about Justin around that time?"

"Come to think, Justin was acting differently for a day or so around that time. How did you know?"

Al didn't answer right away; instead, he walked over to his desk and shut down the terminal. He strode across the room to the door, waiting long enough to allow Austen to follow. He gestured and the ensign stepped outside; both paused as the door slid shut.

As father and son started down the long corridor, Al stated, "Let me tell you about Sam's latest leap..."





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MIRROR IMAGE

by

Gary E. Himes

* * * * *

Cokesburg, Pennsylvania

June 15, 1934

"He was a leaper!" Al shouted while the crowd of miners looked on in puzzled amusement. "That sonuvagun Stahpaw was a leaper!"

This was nuts. The whole last six hours reminded him of some weird surrealist play, a leap straight into the road company of Waiting For Godot. Sure, it was good to see his own face again in the mirror, but how the hell could he be his own adult self back on the exact day he was born? It flew in the face of all the rules he had believed governed quantum leaping. Damn it, where was Sam?

"Stahpaw was a Ukranian!" the words were low and gruff, and spoken with the trace of a noticeable accent. Al turned, not as surprised as he was the first time he had seen this miner with the face of an actor named John O'Malley but who said his name was Gooshie.

That was the screwiest thing about Cokesburg, Pennsylvania. Everybody here was somebody he knew. The waitress was Angelita Carmen Guadalupe Cecelia Jiminez, but here she said her name was, astonishingly, Verbena (which Al had pointed out wasn't even Spanish). One English-mangling miner with a happy laugh and who said his name was Ziggy had the face of his childhood friend Charlie "Black Magic" Walters. There were even two guys here, brothers, who were the spitting image of Frank and Jimmy LaMotta. It was enough to drive a man to drink, though he'd managed to restrict himself to a couple of beers.

And then there was Stahpaw. Somehow his swiss cheese memory had recognized him as Al's uncle, a man he hadn't seen since childhood. He remembered in his youth being frightened by his mother's twisted, bitter arthritis-ravaged brother. But he never remembered his uncle being able to vanish in a blaze of blue light.

But the strangest thing was the bartender, a friendly bear of a man with a penchant for cryptic statements who seemed to know things nobody living in the middle of the great depression should know, particularly about Al himself. The time traveller couldn't shake the feeling that the man seemed somehow familiar...

"I know Stahpah," the miner continued. "I come over on boat with him. He work Marianna mine. When Marianna mine blow up, Stahpah only miner come out alive. After that, people look at him funny. It was stone on his back--stoop him over."

"Look pal, it wasn't any damn stone that stooped him over!" Al exclaimed, becoming agitated. "He got arthritis from loading coal in flooded mines!"

"Gooshie" cocked his head in inquiry. "You stranger here. How you know Stahpah?"

"He was here not five minutes ago! He came up with the plan to get Frank and Jimmy...I mean, Tonchi and Pete out of the cave in!"

"Not Stahpah," Gooshie said firmly. "He die last year."

Al collapsed back onto a bar stool, oblivious to the celebrating men around him. Stahpah, dead? A cool sense of dread washed over him. If there was anything he feared worse than divorce lawyers, it was ghosts.

Sam the bartender set a mug of beer down in front of Al. "One on the house for the hero."

"I don't feel like much of a hero; never have," Al said woodenly as he sipped in beer, then looked down at it in surprise. "They didn't have non-alcoholic beer in '34."

"Oh, jou would not believe a few of the thins dat da boss has on tap

here," Verbena the waitress said in a thick Spanish accent as she cleaned off the bar.

"And that's another thing!" Al practically shouted. "That babe's an angel!"

The bartender smiled at his waitress. "Yes, Verbena is kind of special, isn't she!"

Al cast his eyes skyward in frustration. "No, I mean an angel angel! But here you're her boss and she's--" Suddenly the truth hit Al, who stopped dead in his tirade.

"Her boss," Al whispered.

"Sam" laughed. "Come on Al, you really don't think I'm God, do you?" He shook his head in amusement. "Ain't that a kick in the butt!"

"It's you, isn't it?" Al continued. "You're the one who's been using us both all along!"

"I never used anybody," the bartender said with a touch of defensiveness. "But your hostility is to be expected, considering what happened to your father."

Al, dumbstruck, couldn't think of a reply.

"God hears all prayers Al," the bartender continued. "But not everybody can have everything."

"Which is the whole point of quantum leaping, isn't it?" Al said with sudden passion. "Me and Sam-my Sam-have gotta leap down the yellow brick road so other folks can get their hearts, brains and courage?"

"Maybe," Bartender Sam said noncommittally.

"Yeah, well, I think that stinks!" Al's voice rose in anger. If this was who he thought it was, it was Someone he'd been nursing a grudge against his entire life, and supreme being or no supreme being, he wasn't going to let this opportunity to speak his mind go by. "My whole life is one long remake of 'Ten Little Indians'--my folks, Trudy, Chip, Beth..."

"And then there was Sam?" the bartender asked pointedly.

Al's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'm not leaping you around," he answered, a bit evasively.

"Oh yeah? Well then, who?"

Sam pointed to the mirror on the wall behind the bar. "Him."

Al looked into his own reflection and gulped. "Oh boy."

"It matters not how strait the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate and I am the captain of my soul". William Henley." Sam smiled enigmatically.

"That's nuts," Al replied hoarsely. "No way do I believe that!"

The bartender shrugged. "Why won't you accept what I tell you?"

"Because it's crazy!"

Sam laughed lightly. "Even the truth is sometimes crazy."

Al threw his hands up in disgust. "Cut the Philosophy 101 ca-ca!"

Just then a miner with the face of a lawyer named Larry Stanton walked up to the bar for a refill. Al glanced up and realized that his reflection was that of another lawyer he knew as Hugh Dobbs.

As the man moved on, Al exclaimed, "What the hell?!"

Sam continued cleaning glasses. "Don't look for explanations. Just accept that that's just the way it is."

Al was incredulous. "I got ghosts leaping around, angels waiting tables, the big guy pouring drinks, and a bar like something out of a Spider Robinson novel, and you tell me 'that's just the way it is'?"

"That's just the way it is' is sometimes the best explanation," he answered in a soothing tone. "Sometimes you just have to accept reality without explanations."

"So tell me wise guy, which reality do I accept?" Al indicated the mirror. "This one or that one?"

"Haven't you accepted both in the past?"

Al downed the rest of his drink in a single gulp. "Geez, what a day I'm having."

The bartender accepted the empty and refilled it. "Al, do you remember just before the first time you leaped?"

Al took the glass back. "Yeah, it was at Havenwell Sanitarium."

"What was going on then?"

Al winced at the memory. "Sam...Sam was getting electroshock therapy. I had to make him do it, it was the only way to kick his ego back in and straighten his head out."

The faux Sam leaned over the counter and fixed Al with a pointed look. "How did you feel at that moment?"

"How did I feel?" a bitterness returned to Al's voice. "Like crap, that's how I felt. I know I had to do it, but it doesn't changed the fact I nearly forced my best friend to get himself electrocuted, that I caused him ...a lot of pain he didn't deserve, and all I could do was stand there and watch."

The bartender nodded. "Exactly."

"'Exactly'? 'Exactly' what?" Al felt like pulling the bartender across the counter and boxing his ears until he got a straight answer, and he might have done it if not for the sneaking suspicion he might end up a pillar of salt if he tried. "Look pal, could you cut through the cryptic crap and give me one solid fact."

The man behind the bar nodded in obligation. "Think about what you were feeling then--guilt, and fear and anger. Emotions you'd been experiencing to varying degrees ever since your friend first leaped. Fear that you might never get him back. Guilt that all you could do was stand and wait while he took all the risks. Anger that you couldn't help him more."

The mixologist continued on. "At that moment, when Sam was in the darkest moment of his life, you made a wish; a wish that your friend would finally be relieved of his burdens, even if you had to shoulder them yourself. And you wished that so hard that even the heavens shook in reply."

Al remembered briefly a bolt of lightening and clap of thunder. "You mean that's it? I'm leaping so Sam doesn't have to?"

"You're leaping because you'd rather sacrifice yourself than have to watch helplessly while he suffers and struggles and maybe even dies. You're leaping because," he paused for emphasis, "...you're a good friend."

"So how do I get home?" Al said, his voice trailing off, his anger diffused.

The host shook his head. "You can go home anytime you want to. You just don't want to."

"Now what's that supposed to mean? Of course I want to go home!"

"But you want to protect Sam more," he pointed out. "You know the only way to do that is to keep him busy as a hologram helping you."

"Look, he's safe back at the project where I'd like to be with Tina and about three months bedrest! Why should I have to keep his busy to keep him safe?"

"Sam has helped a lot of people, more than even he knows. But for his whole adult life your friend has been haunted by the one life he wasn't able to save, the one life that meant the most to him." The bartender spoke with the quiet authority Al remembered from the priests he knew in childhood.

"His dad," Al spoke softly.

"His father," he confirmed. "It was no fault of Sam's, but John Beckett's death drove him with a guilt to redeem himself, to help others the way he wished he could've helped his father. And he did...Sam Beckett touched a lot of lives. The pity is he would've done it anyway, without the pain."

"Yeah, he's that type of guy," Al agreed.

"So you know--deep down you know--that if you were to go home and Sam no longer had to worry about watching over you, eventually he'd find an excuse to step back into the Accelerator and start leaping again. Because there's no better position he can put himself in where he can help people and know he's making a difference."

For along moment Al considered the words of a man who knew things about himself that even Al himself had never really allowed himself to know. It all fit together, like a crosstime jigsaw puzzle.

"So that's it?" Al said finally. "So long as Sam is gonna keep trying to play Mother Theresa, I've gotta keep doing the Lone Ranger routine?"

Forever?"

"Nobody lives forever," Sam pointed out.

"Until when, then?" Al demanded.

"Until," he said, his voice deep and holding a hint of a challenge, "you find a way to put right what once went wrong."

"You're the master of your own destiny, Al. Accept that and maybe you can do something about Sam's."

Al stared at his reflection in the mirror as the words sank in. In the back of his mind an idea, a wild and mad idea, began to form.

Suddenly another familiar figure appeared in the midst of a crowd full of familiar figures and motioned for Al to join him. Al let out a whoop of joy.

"Sam!"

"He's right there," said a passing miner who resembled a Naval commander named Dirk Riker. But Al was already hurrying to join his friend outside.

As Al rushed out the bar's door Sam Beckett emerged from its from window. "I was starting to think you'd never get here Sam!" Al said with audible relief.

"I don't even know where 'here' is!" Sam exclaimed, looking around.

"Well, the sign on the window says 'Sam's Bar', but if you ask me I don't think there is any 'here' here," the admiral replied.

"Al, this is incredible!" Sam said excitedly, missing his friend's remark. "You leaped without displacing someone else! Do you know what this means? I'm going to have to completely rewrite the string theory to account for this!"

"Before you start clearing a space on the mantle for another Nobel prize, maybe you oughta take a look where we're at." Al indicated the interior of the bar with a wave of his arm.

Instead of looking into the bar, Sam checked the handlink he was holding. "It's June 15th, 1934--happy birthday, by the way--and you're in a bar in Cokesburg, Pennsylvania. No word yet on what you're here to do; it was an amazing stroke of luck Ziggy found you at all without someone in the Waiting Room to backtrack."

"This is more than a bar, Sam," Al said.

"What is it then?" Sam asked, eyebrows rising.

"I'm starting to think it's a bad episode of the Twilight Zone," Al said with a touch of desperation. "Sam, the bartender her, I think he's...the Big Guy."

"'Big Guy'?" Sam asked, puzzled.

"The Head Honcho! The Big Cheese! The Top Dog!" Al said rapidly.

"Y'know, G-D!" Sam rewarded him with a look of incredulity.

Al went on. "I think he's the guy who's been leaping us around!"

Sam looked in through the window, but a haze of cigarette and cigar smoke obscured a clear view of anyone's face. "You're telling me it isn't time or fate or God that's been leaping us around...it's a bartender?"

"Don't you get it Sam?" Al answered sharply. "I think he is God! And let me tell you, he ain't exactly what I was expecting from what Sister Mary Margaret told me in the orphanage!"

Sam looked at his friend aghast. He asked himself if this could be another incident like the one where Al had psychosynergized with Lee Harvey Oswald, snapping out of it only in the nick of time when Sam had desperately reminded him of a romantic afternoon he'd been spending at that exact same moment with his first wife. How close a call that had been! Yet what a triumph they had achieved when Al dropped the rifle and the presidential motorcade drove safely away.

"Get a hold of yourself," Sam said with concern. "You're not making any sense."

"But he says he isn't leaping me around, he says I'm leaping me around," Al continued on. "And that's not all! The waitress here is that screwy angel, Angelita Jiminez, but now she says her name is Verbena!"

Sam gave him a blank look. "An angel?"

"Oh yeah, you wouldn't remember her," Al said dismissively. "But you'd

know some of the other people here; that actor John O'Malley, Charlie Walters, Larry Stanton, even Frank and Jimmy LaMotta! Only here, O'Malley says his name is Gooshie and Charlie says he's Ziggy and..." Al noticed Sam looking at him like he was a lunatic.

Sam punched the handlink forcefully. "Gooshie!"

"And me Uncle Stahpah was here!" Al went on. "But O'Malley says he's dead, and then he leaped, only nobody leaped back in after him."

"Gooshie!" Sam cried louder. "Hold on Al, I'll figure this out...I've just got to talk to Beeks--I mean Ziggy," Sam quickly corrected himself. The Imaging Chamber door slid open behind him.

"Sam, wait! That bartender told me things, things about you...about you and about your dad..." Al's voice trailed off as his eyes seemed to glaze over with deep thought.

"What?" Sam asked. Had Al finally gone over the edge.

"Never mind," Al answered, suddenly evasive. "You go on back and check with Ziggy to see what I'm here to do."

"I don't know..." Sam said, torn between the need to make sense of this bizarre leap and the fear of leaving Al alone in his befuddled state.

"Go on, I'll be okay," Al said, trying to sound reassuring. "Just get Ziggy to spill what we need to make copacetic this time out and things'll be fine. I promise."

"Well...all right," Sam began. "You know Al, before when we couldn't find you, I had a really wild idea I ran by Ziggy. I thought if we couldn't find you with a nanosearch, I could use the Accelerator to locate you."

"What!" Al exclaimed.

"Ziggy said there was an 89% chance that our neural link would've drawn me to you across time," the holograph of the scientist explained. "Of course, it turned out not to be necessary."

Al blinked; did he detect a trace of disappointment in Sam's voice?

"Just take it easy until I get back," Sam said as he backed into the Imaging Chamber door. "I'm going to get you out of this, Al; no matter what it takes, I swear I'm going to get you out of this."

Al watched his partner of so many years, the closest friend he'd ever known, the only real family he'd had for decades, disappear back into the blue glow of the Imaging Chamber door. Yet he felt like he was truly seeing the man for the first time. For moments after he stared at the space where Sam had vanished with a mixture of affection and sadness.

Al sat down on a bench facing the twilight of Cokeburg's empty streets. Behind him the screen door to the bar opened and Sam the bartender walked out to join him.

"Nice night," he said, joining Al on the bench.

"You were right," Al said flatly. "He's just looking for an excuse."

"Looks like you've got Mother Theresa there." Al said nothing to the anachronistic reference. "All things being equal, it's only a matter of time."

"And if all things weren't equal?" Al asked calmly.

"Where would you like to go, Al?" the man known as Sam asked gently. Al realized it was an offer.

For a moment dates and places swam before his mind's eye. A New Jersey mental institution in 1953. A combat mission gone horribly wrong over Vietnam in 1967. A woman crying and dancing alone in San Diego of 1969. All these possibilities and more presented themselves to him.

Al sighed and let his past rest. There was one, he knew, whose need was greater.

"Home." Al felt a trace of moisture around his eyes. "The only place I want to be is home. But I can't...not until I put something right. For Sam."

The bartender smiled wistfully. "He's a lucky man, to have a friend like you."

"Uh, well..." Al looked away, overcome with emotion. "Look, do me a favor."

"If I can; there are rules, you know--even for me," He answered.

"If you should see them," Al asked, rising stiffly to his feet, "tell my dad and Trudy that I love them."

And with a smile on his face that said the answer was yes, the bartender who said his name was Sam rose and laid a reassuring hand on Al's shoulder. "God bless, Al."
And then he leaped.

* * * * *

Elk Ridge, Indiana
April 3, 1974

The kitchen of the Beckett farm looked exactly the same as Al remembered it, save for a few dirty dishes piled in the sink. If he recalled correctly, Sam's mother had been gone for a few days visiting her sister and her husband apparently wasn't the meticulous housekeeper she was.

Al snatched up the receiver from a wall-mounted phone and started to dial 911. "Damn, forgot its 1974," he mumbled. After a bit of trial and error he managed to get an operator.

"Listen, I need an ambulance...don't mind what my name is!...look, a guy's had a heart attack, or he's about to have a heart attack--no, this is not a crank call! It's..." Al realized he didn't know the address, "Look, the name of the man is John Beckett and...you know where he lives? Thank God for small town operators."

Al heard a jarring thump from upstairs. He dropped the phone without hanging up the receiver and rushed for what he knew would be the unconscious body of John Beckett.

He found him lying on his bedroom floor, a middle-aged man with a marked resemblance to his younger son but heftier and with a weather-beaten complexion. The scene was just as Sam had described it: John had collapsed while undressing for bed after a hard day's labor on the farm, alone and helpless while his family was away. In the original history he had died on this floor, undiscovered until the following afternoon. His wife had found his dead body at the foot of the bed they'd shared for thirty years.

Al was no doctor, but he had enough medical training to know what to do. Immediately he began CPR, alternating breaths into the farmer's mouth with a vigorous massage of his chest. For what felt like hours he worked until his arms ached with the effort. Finally he was rewarded with a hoarse cough from the man's bluish lips.

John Beckett's eyelids opened weakly. "Who...who are you?" he asked with effort.

Al helped him to the bed as he heard sirens from outside. The ambulance. It wouldn't be long.

"I'm a friend of your son's, of Sam's," Al answered, smiling and wiping his eyes.

"Sam?" he asked weakly.

At that moment Al happened to notice a picture of the young Sam Beckett sitting on the dresser across the room. For a second, Al imagined he saw it glow with the same blue light that Stahpah had vanished into. He had no time to consider the strange sight before the paramedics burst into the room.

* * * * *

JOHN BECKETT DID NOT DIE.

* * * * *

HE AND HIS WIFE THELMA CONTINUE TO LIFE ON THEIR FAMILY FARM IN ELK RIDGE, INDIANA WHERE THEY ARE OFTEN VISITED BY THEIR THREE CHILDREN AND FIVE GRANDCHILDREN. JOHN BECKETT WILL CELEBRATE HIS EIGHTY-SECOND BIRTHDAY IN JUNE.

* * * * *

ON JANUARY 1ST, 2000 A.D. ADMIRAL ALBERT FRANCIS CALAVICCI FINALLY RETURNED HOME. HE REMAINS THERE...WITH SAM BECKETT.

* * * * *

"To love is to place our happiness in the happiness of another."
--Gottfried Wilhelm Von Leibnitz



LETTERS OF COMMENT

LORRAINE ANDERSON: Hello to all of you!

I just wanted to congratulate you on "OH, BOY IV: Love and Glory." I found it to be quite wonderful and I'm recommending it to all of the QL fans I write to. The illustrations were great -- naturally -- but I thought the story was fantastic, and it held my interest right up to the end. Which is, of course, what everybody strives for!

Please be assured that I don't spread around my superlatives lightly. (Eek, she's spreading around superlatives!)

I only had a couple of minor quibbles. Number one was that I had a difficult time knowing when the various chapters take place (as in specific dates.) Granted, it wasn't important to the story, but knowing what year Al's marriages take place may have helped. I got confused on how long Al was separated from Ruthie, too. Perhaps some dates for the journal entries...? Number two...and maybe this is a personal opinion...is that I can't believe that Beth and Dirk could be so cold-hearted to Al. No, I don't believe she should have waited for him (especially since she was positive he was dead), and yes, I think she was meant to marry Dirk. However, I think the same dramatic effect could have been achieved if she and Dirk were a little...kinder to Al (but firm in their belief that Al should not to go searching for her), yet committed to one another. Instead, Dirk came off as a SOB, and Beth as...um...an ice princess, where I never saw either one that way at all. Even before that last episode.

Like I say...minor. Your way works, too...and a lot of what you wrote seems to run contrary to popular belief, from what I've heard. But who's to say your story is any less valid than, say, mine? We can't read the Bellasarius mind. "Far as that goes, I doubt that Bellusarius production had even thought things out this far.) Anyway, congrats on a great story!

CHERYL BELLUCCI: Tacky of me to do a LOC for OH BOY IV on a postcard - but it's all I have time for right now! I just wanted to let you know that I was very impressed by "Love & Glory" and thoroughly enjoyed reading it. Your Al is a bet more-well-randy than "my" Al-but then everyone has their own vision for the characters. I like how you managed to know both timelines through dreams-& I especially like the fact that Al ended up with Ruthie instead of Beth. Your story ending was what I had hoped for from the QL finale and didn't get. What a mess of an episode-threw a wrench in the works of everything! Unlike the episode-your story left me smiling...

Please tell Minds-i-view the art is beautifully - especially the "People" and "Time" covers and that marvelous Admiral C. portrait on page 301. Oh, the wedding portrait on page 153 is great too...very expressive!

I'm rather in awe of all the work and time and love that went into the writing of your story. You should be very proud of it. You really should send Dean Stockwell a copy...

Looking forward to your next story!

DANA BIUS: Hi! I just read Love and Glory, and I wanted to let you know what I thought, as well as ask a few questions.

First, let me say that I absolutely loved Love and Glory. One of my favorite aspects of Quantum Leap has always been the relationship between Sam and Al, so when I heard about Love and Glory, I knew I had to have it. I was not disappointed either. It was well-written and very true to the characters. I did want to make a few comments, though.

On a couple of occasions, Al makes reference to the fact that he doesn't drink anymore at all, one of these while he and Sam are still at Star Bright. However, during the pilot, we see Al drunk in one scene, and later, with a hangover. What are your thoughts on this? Did the three of you make a conscious decision not to deal with this, or did it just get automatically cut out because of being within the time the episodes covered?

I found it interesting that you used the hammering a vending machine scene described in "Play Ball," but chose not to make it the first time Sam and Al met, as Sam had said it was. I suppose we're supposed to assume this is Sam's swiss-cheese memory acting up again. Do you think the writer of the episode intended Sam to be in error, or did you use artistic license to allow for more story to tell?

My most serious question has to do with dates-specifically, when Al returned to America and when Sam's father died. In Love and Glory I noticed that when Sam met Al on Al's return to the states, he says that his dad died "last year." If we go by the pilot, we learn that Sam's father died in 1974, while "MIA" has Al state that he is repatriated in 1973. In "The Leap Home", Sam's father's death moves back to 1972, but Al's return is moved to 1975 ("I get repatriated in five years anyway.") did you choose from these dates to work with, or just leave it loose on purpose? My theory is that the 1974/1975 dates are accurate. Al's return date should have been changed by the events in the "The Leap Home", while Sam could have been wrong about his father's death. (Boy, that swiss cheese is convenient!) Of course, one would think his memory would have been more reliable by "The Leap Home" than it was in the pilot, but who knows? Also, by this theory, Al would have spent eight years as a POW, not six (1967-1975). Sheesh, these dates can give you a headache! Anyway, did the three of you come to a solution you could live with?

Well, I guess that's it. If this sounds picky, I'm just one of those perfectionists you mentioned in the editorial. I really did love the book and you all did a wonderful job with what you had to work with.

STACY DOYLE: I just finished reading OH BOY 4. I must admit it, I think it was the best zine I picked up at Media West. Yes, I picked up a bunch and, OH BOY 4 was the last one I read.

I almost didn't pick it up as I wasn't sure how much money I would have by the time I got home and it was almost \$30. I try to avoid purchasing novels as the writer tends to stray away from 'cannon' of the series or the characters don't ring true to the series.

I want to let you know that I loved the zine. I write a letter of comment to let you know because I want you to write more. When I ask someone to comment on something that I have given to them, I want criticism to improve my writing, not flowering words of how wonderful my story is because I can't improve if I don't know where I'm going wrong. So don't be upset that I'm criticizing your zine, I'm writing because I truly enjoyed it.

Every story interposes the writers ideas about how the characters should act. Some stories fill a hole, a gap, or a space in the series and after reading it, we feel closer to the character, or the story is off in left field and the characters don't seem like the series characters at all.

I wish to commend you in your portrayal of Sam and Al, and after reading your baby, I feel that it fleshes out the characters very well.

I love the fact that you pulled everything together and 'let us in on the inside joke.' There are only a couple of squiggly details for the series that I thought I'd point out. Al never told Sam about Trudy - in the show, when they have the 'heart to heart' talk, Sam apologized for not remembering and Al said, "I never told you about Trudy." I happen to live in the Bay Area (born in SF) and I have never see San Jose, California written with an accent over the e. A lot of California towns have Spanish names, but when the name is written, the accent marks are dropped. What's worse is, I'm sure you went to a lot of trouble to get those accent marks in the zine.

I was under the impression that Sam and Al met while working on Star Bright, not when Al just got back from 'Nam. I'm glad that you used Francis as Al's middle name as I've seen it used in a lot of other zines and I think it fits.

I'm thrilled that you have Al stationed at Moffett (and surprised that you know 101 is the Bayshore Freeway). It definitely shows me that you did your homework more than most. I never really thought of stationing Al there. I know that NASA has been at Moffett for years, and I never thought of it as a Navy base (and I live here!). I tended to envision Al in Alameda as it's

where they park the carriers and it's closer to the city.

I enjoyed you putting Ruth and Al back together but, I was under the impression that Ruth died, not divorced Al. I realize that Tina was only around during the leaps, but I was surprised that there wasn't a chapter or section with Tina.

Last, the way the story ends (with the beginning paragraph) it seem to indicate that Al lived the 'new timeline' but, Al indicates that he lived through "personal leaps" and he knew when they "jumped timelines" so the story holds itself as a paradox.

I almost forgot to let you know that I really enjoyed the art. The zine needed the art too and it is all very well done. My only complaint is that Beth and Ruth look too much alike. Flipping through the zine, the art is well placed and breaks up the zine. I like the use of art and text on the page which most editors don't do too often.

As I wrote this, I have re-read most of the zine already and I love the story. You may have just written the definitive back history of QL. I hope that you continue to put out stories and OH BOY! as I have truly enjoyed your zine. Keep on Leapin'

JACKLYN M. EGOLF: Love and Glory is great! I think it's probably the best QL story I've read, and I've read it several times. I'm a new Leaper, and most of the QL I've seen has been on the USA Network. So I'm using your story to help me fill in. I recently purchased the QL videos, and while watching "Catch a Falling Star" I was annoyed at Sam's comments about O'Malley being "a boozier" and "How do you get a guy like that to dry out in three days?" I told my TV "You did, you bozo!" Then I decided that the weekend in Las Vegas must have happened in a later episode, and that the writers weren't aware of it yet. It wasn't until later in the tape that I remembered that it hadn't happened in the show at all, but in your story...

TRACY E. FINIFTER: First of all, I want to tell you how much I loved OH BOY IV. You all did an incredible job tracing the histories of Sam and Al. I loved how you made use of every detail about their lives we've learned in the show and made them fit together. With all the inconsistencies we've been told over the years, that couldn't have been an easy task. And I especially loved the fact that it all took place in the altered timeline, showing how Sam's changes really affected their lives, yet didn't ignore what happened in the 'original' timeline.

Another great job was done with Al's marriages. Wives two through four fit perfectly in his history, and each one of them was believable. I must admit, though, I had a little trouble with Maxine. Marriage number five just didn't seem to fit in with the others. How you finally ended Al's relationship to Beth was one of the most realistic portrayals of them, but again I must admit I was disappointed with that compared to the rest of the story. Then again, I like Beth, can be too much of a romanticist and had hoped that somehow, Al's vision of her wouldn't be shattered. Maybe it's worth it to finally let Al be happy for the first time in his life, but I still can't help feeling that somehow that changes Al's character, so much of it being based on the events we learned in "M.I.A." But that all is just my opinion.

The best part of the book had to have been Al's marriage to Ruthie. everything about that whole period in his life was handled so well. It was very much how I had always envisioned that part of Al's life to be. It wasn't happy, but it was honest and very moving. I've always been an Al fan, and this book did him justice and then some. It is definitely an Al story, even if you did have a gratuitous Sam chapter thrown in there. Just an incredible job all around. You should all be proud of this creation.

ROBIN C. KWONG: I've read the first two issues of OH BOY and enjoyed it immensely, thanks to the diversity of stories, artwork and other pieces that appear in the zine, as well as the presence of some of my favorite writers and artists. I have not been lucky enough to get my hands on copies of #3 and #4

yet, but I hope to be able to soon.

SHARON MOLL: Thank you! I enjoyed this so very much, thanks for sharing your wonderful work of art with me! You and your co-writers are very talented- Only problem, it leaves you wanting more... I guess your objective was met.

PATRICIA POOLE: Back at MW*C 13, I promised you a LOC on OH BOY IV. I might have been the first to read your novel, but I'm just about dead last to send a LOC!

The fact I spent all of Friday night at Media West*Con 13 reading "OH BOY IV-Love and Glory" is a LOC in itself. Normally I have much better things to do at the con than read zines. But, after dipping into the first few pages I couldn't put it down.

The novel has several strengths. The "crystalline web" theory of the Quantum Leap universe is fascinating, and the concept is unfolded cleverly. The pacing draws the reader into the story but maintains suspense.

The dialogue crackles. Few authors write both main characters well. some pen witty wisecracks for Al while making Sam into a Boy Scout wimp; others capture Sam's character but write Al as a moronic clown. In "Love and Glory", both characters practically spring off the page.

Collaboration might have posed other difficulties for this writing team, but not with regard to characterization.

Also remarkable is the breadth of reference to Quantum Leap episodes incorporated into the story. There isn't a fan of the show who hasn't groaned aloud at some inconsistency in the universe, or pondered aloud upon seeing a first run episode-"And how is that supposed to fit in with what we already know?" Sandy Hall, Sharon Wisdom and Michelle Agnew show us, and very stylishly. There are still quibbles - no one will ever convince me that NASA would accept a recently returned POW into the program, much less send him up in teeny tiny capsule after he spent time in a tiger cage - but the authors do their best with the material they have to work with.

The novel's principal weakness is its length. If there is any fannish story that deserves 500 pages, I haven't read it yet. While this is a strong novel, there is an even better one lurking inside it. Like a sculpture, it needs more paring and polishing for its full potential to be achieved. Undoubtably, this is where one of the shortcomings of writing as a team rears its ugly head. Few authors thinks that their material should be cut, and when three writers become attached to their own sections of the story, problems are bound to crop up. "Love and Glory" needed an independent editor. Although all three collaborators have experience at editing, performing this painful task on one's own work is excruciating. If I had edited the novel, it would have come in under 350 pages. True, all three authors might never have spoken to me again, but by gosh, it would have been at least 150 pages lighter. Many of the cuts should occur in chapters 9-14, the middle of the book.

No LOC would be complete without making mention of the exquisite artwork of <=minds-eye-view=>. This portfolio of work is truly exceptional. However, I was rather surprised at the omission of Donna from any of the illos. A wedding portrait with Sam, as bookend to the one of Al and Ruthie, would have been a welcome addition.

Many zine readers are reluctant to part with more than \$20 for a one shot novel. This one is well worth the money.

I do prattle on, don't I? Jan Gosnell still has a copy of "Love and Glory" in the 'zine reading room, because Bill Hupe didn't pick it up last year. I'm sure that both the novel and the artwork are going to get nominations for Fan Q, so why don't you suggest to Bill that it stay in the 'zine room for another year? (The reason that I'm confident it will be nominated is that three other friends and I sent in nominations, and we can't all have botched the nominating process, can we? Well, maybe we can, but...)

REBECCA REEVES: I wanted to write before now but things have been extremely chaotic around here lately. I've finally had almost more that I can take and I've booked 2 weeks off work-my first vacation time this year-just to try to

catch up. It won't be a rest, but at least it'll be a change of pace and some of the backlog will get cleared up-I hope.

And, finally I can tell you how much I enjoyed LOVE & GLORY in its entirety. It was rough proofing it all - up to chapter 18 - and then having to wait for the rest. But it was a wait that paid off in the end. The zine is tremendous and if the story wasn't enough to carry it all, you had the FANTASTIC artwork of minds-i-view. She really surpassed herself this time...and so much of it! This zine doesn't have illos, it has a mini art gallery! The four of you can be very proud.

I suppose I shouldn't be FULL of praise, so I'll give you my one "complaint". It's so darn big - and heavy - that I couldn't carry it to work with me. About the only reading I get to do anymore is on the bus and taking the zine with me to and from the office, was more like the workout I do at the fitness studio. And I don't even think the free-weights I use are quite that heavy! Wow.

KIM ROUND: Congrats to you and Sandy on winning the Fan Q! Shari Ramseur e-mailed me this morning. I really like the Oh Boy series a lot. I'm hoping that our zine will be of a like quality. Unfortunately, I don't have a Nola Frame Gray to draw such wonderful cartoons! They're really great. I'm an Al fan (you'll be able to tell when you read my story) and I particularly enjoyed stories such as "Second Circle", "Reunion", "Detour Into Night", "A Little Help", "Watchman What of the Night?", "Leaping to Conclusions", and "Road Stop". There were many more stories that I thought were wonderful, but can't take the time to list them here. I've got my order in for OH BOY 4 and am impatiently awaiting it's arrival (I'm very jealous of the people who made it out to Media West and have their copies already!) *editor's note. Kim and friends edit a very good QL leap fanzine that I'd like to recommend called Leaping In With a Net. There are some wonderful stories, one of which is my favorite, Cave In. Care of Bill Hupe, \$18.90 post paid.*

TERI THOROWGOOD: I just had to write and tell you how much I enjoyed OH BOY III. I had dropped out of fandom over eight years ago (I was tired of Trek and the only other thing I was interested in, Remington Steele was going nowhere fandom-wise and series-wise. However, I started watching Quantum Leap and got hooked again. I watched it since the pilot, but didn't start buying fanzines until just recently. OH BOY III was the first zine I ordered...what luck!

It was gorgeous from cover to cover. Having co-produced two zines myself, Kobayshi Maru (Trek) and A Study in Steele (RS), I realize what a difficult job it is to put out a high quality product...you have succeeded by leaps and bounds (pardon the pun!)

The Waiting Room stories were delightful...I think it's great to find out what went on when the cameras weren't rolling. My favorite story of all had to be "A Brotherly Leap" Not only was it extremely witty, but I think you really nailed Al (Oh, if only it were possible!) He's not as easy to write as some people think, but you caught some very charming nuances of his character that other's have missed. "A Little Help" was wonderful, again helping us to see Sam and Al's relationship from a different angle. The art work was drop-dead gorgeous and suited each story perfectly.

I realize I'm gushing (no, not Gooshie) but it is so nice to see a zine that is so well done...I have ordered several QL zines lately and have been heartily disappointed in many of them. Yours is what I refer to as a "keeper." Thanks again for some wonderful hours of reading and keep up the great work!

TERI THOROWGOOD: I hate you. I hate you all. You three women have managed to spoil me completely for all other QL fanzines. I will have to give up ordering them, because nothing can possibly compare to "Love and Glory".

I just finished the zine and wanted to immediately express my undying gratitude to you for producing such a masterpiece. If you were men, I'd offer to bear your children. That not being the case, I will simply ask the goddess

of shopping to shine her light upon you and lead you in the path of designer discounts.

Seriously, what can I say? It was wonderful. It was fantastic. It was stunning. It was long! It came in the mail last Friday afternoon, just as my long-distance boyfriend arrived for a weekend visit. Jack is an Air Force pilot stationed in Newport News and we don't get to see each other very often. Because of the unfortunate timing of their duel arrival, I was forced to ignore the zine in favor of my continuing relationship with this man. He's tried to be patient with my obsession with QL, but he draws the line when I choose to read a story about Al over spending time with him. It particularly annoys him that the object of my fantasies is a Navy pilot, so I hid the zine on my desk and focused my attention on Jack.

Early Sunday afternoon, after packing Jack on his way back to base, I ripped into the zine. I couldn't put it down. I tried, but I couldn't. I finished it around 5:00 am., and now I groggily sit at my office computer typing you this LOC.

I thoroughly and totally enjoyed it, from cover to cover. I was even angry when it came to an end. I was also exhausted, but I still didn't want the fun to be over. I wanted it to go on and on. The story flowed so smoothly. I loved how you started each chapter in diary/journal form. It really drew me into the story and added a real authenticity to it. It was just so...AL. I am, as I said before, an Al fanatic, and I love the way you captured his multifaceted personality. It was fun to watch how he changed throughout the novel and it was especially nice to see the darker side of him that so many writers seem to steer away from.

I was instantly taken with your characterization of Ruthie (I knew he'd end up with her, I knew it!) and was so glad that Tina held such a small part in the novel. The one glimpse we got of Tina on screen, as a squeaky voiced, gum chewing bimbo, really turned me off. Although I was partial to Ruthie, you made all of Al's ex-wives likeable and I was sad when each marriage failed and he went on to the next. I thought I would never stop laughing as I read the scene where Maxine is trying out for the roller derby and I adored the sexy fight scenes between her and Al. It was all so imaginative and creatively fun. In fact the only change I would have made would have been to have more sex (in the zine, I mean)-- Come on Sharon, put the thumb screws to Sandy and let's see some more bingo-bango-bongoing. *Editor's note: Actually Sharon is the "Prudent Princess". I like bingo-bango-bongoing. Sandy*

Your portrayal of Sam was right on target also. Although I'm not a great "Sam" fan (I have always preferred rascals and rouges to boy scouts and choir boys) I love what you did with his relationship with Al. Most writers get so bogged down with this hurt/comfort "I'd do anything for my buddy" relationship, that you feel as if you are slogging through a swamp instead of reading a story. It was refreshing to see it portrayed as a "real life" friendship; they argued, fought, laughed and shared each other's lives in a very realistic way. The part where Sam goes to Las Vegas and helps Al sober-up was wonderful and I liked the fact that you continued throughout the novel to show Al's continuing battle with the bottle. As a substance abuse counselor, I thought you handled the stages of Al's recovery very realistically. It's never easy being in recovery, especially if you forgo AA. His denial of his problem with booze, compounded by the whole Beth storyline was so incredibly poignant it made my heart ache. But he found his happiness at the end and that's what's important.

The illustrations were beyond belief. They added so much to the zine and so accurately captured the mood of each character. I was completely amazed by some of the facial expressions and moods she caught with pen and ink. I was also amazed by the sheer number of full-page illos that graced the zine...do you have this woman chained in your cellar or what? Are you blackmailing her with proof that she didn't pay income tax on an illegal alien that cleaned her house?

In all seriousness, I really do want to congratulate everyone that worked on this issue of OH BOY. I realize the time, love, devotion and energy that goes into something like this and just wanted you to know that I

appreciate everyone's creativity and hard work.

Again, congratulations and I'll forgive you for spoiling me, but only if you keep it up!!

ANN WIGMORE: Please forgive the familiarity, as we've never met and you don't know me. Hello. I wanted to write to you as I bought a copy of your "Love and Glory" at the 1st British Quantum Leap convention, "Starbright 93" last weekend and I had to write to tell you how very much I have enjoyed reading it since I got home. In fact, I haven't been able to put it down.

I was expecting a good zine, because I've read previous copies of "Oh Boy" and knew what to expect - at least I thought I knew. That was before I read the story. After I read it, I was a little shell-shocked. Thank you so much for writing such a splendid story, I can't tell you how much I enjoyed it, how it made me laugh and cry at the same time. I just kept nodding my head "Yes", because what you wrote made sense. It most fit with the internal logic of the show, and where it didn't, it didn't matter because they never seem to pay much attention to the internal logic on the show anyway!

I loved what you did for both Sam and Al, I approved entirely, and you gave a part to Edward St. John, who is a great favorite of mine. Thank you. But what you mostly did which was right and proper as far as I'm concerned was to put Beth Calavicci Simon where she belonged all along, in the past. Yes, I'm a little partial to the Admiral and I loved the story you wove for him, it's all so right and springs quite naturally from little things I've noticed in the show.

Well, I didn't mean for this letter to get so long. I'd better leave you in peace now. Thank you again, so much, for this lovely story. It's one I will treasure.



Editor's note: Apologies to Jane Mailander. Due to lack of space and page numbering difficulties, her author's note was left off her story, *Circles*:

Author's Notes: The poem Katie reads is "This Stone," by Ursula K. LeGuin; it appears in her novel *Always Coming Home*. The songs quoted are, respectively, "Circles" by Harry Chapin and "Imagine" by John Lennon.

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The Waiting Room

by Nola Frame-Gray

Our story starts out when A1 is summoned to Project Quantum Leap's Waiting Room at a dead run ... as usual

Admiral Calavicci! What took you so long to get here?



Pant! Pant!
I really oughta quit smoking cigars! (Gasp!)



You don't look like Sam! Dr. Beeks, how come she don't look like Sam if she Traded places with him?

Because Nola Frame-Gray the Toonist, goofed!



I did not! It's too confusing trying to imagine what the "exchange leaper" would look like! Remember the time Sam switched places with Roseanne Barr -- while she was singing the National Anthem -- and giving birth to her first set of twins -- at the same time?

Lemme outta here! I demand to see the captain!

I'm an admiral. Will I do?

street clothing which instantly converts to admiral's uniform -- depending on writer's whim.



Waiting Room Technician in Yar-induced choke hold

Note: Cartoonist is wearing protective sunglasses to shade her eyes from the magnificent glare of Admiral Calavicci's dress whites

If you're an admiral then where's your tacky red start/leet uniform?



Mebbie Project QL ran out of beets which they need for the red dye!



Can we please get the story rolling?

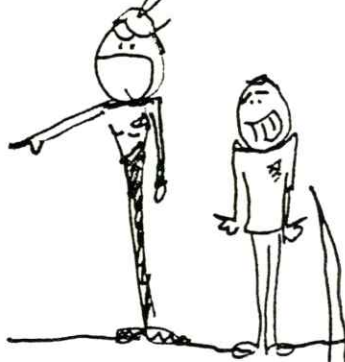
Excuse me, sir! Natasha Yar has disappeared from The Waiting Room

Again? Were using that dumb idea of 'runaway' again? That idea has been done to death!



Yeah. I know. This show hasn't been the same ever since writer/producer Deborah Pratt left to have her baby!

Your project is supposed to be super top secret, right? Then why do you have the outside of your building lit up like neon Leggo building blocks?



skee...! Crash!



To help guide our staff home after they've been hitting the brew at the local bar n grill?

Hours later... in the New Mexican desert outside of Project Quantum Leap...

Heck, no! I won't go!

But Tasha ya gotta go back to The Waiting Room so that --

Project Quantum Leap Building

Designed by: Industrial Light and Magic Building Corporation

Twinkle Twinkle

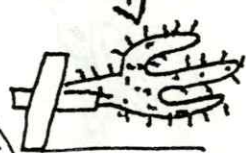
Are you kidding!? Have you seen the security around this place? (Look how easily I escaped!) You guys need me too much! Look at how amateurish this whole set-up is! For instance

Forget it, buster! I'm staying on! ... As Project Quantum Leap's new chief of Security!



Sam... where are you now that I need

Note: Not a dead Xmas tree



Donna will never speak to me again..

The End...?

Frame - Gray '92