

Sooner or Later

Part 4 of 4

by Lynne C. (www.geocities.com/fic_girl_2003/index.html)

Rating: PG-13

Disclaimer: It's all Joss' – I worship at the altar of his genius, and acknowledge that he owns all these folks and everything that they do and say.

Setting/Spoilers: post-*Not Fade Away* (AtS 5.22)

Summary: Spike doesn't figure Andrew can keep his secret, but can't seem to do anything about it.

Acknowledgements: Muchos Gracias to Scarlett for the beta! *You're the top, you're the Coliseum, you're the top, you're the Louvre Museum...*

The dialogue from *Afterlife* was taken from Buffyworld.com

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### ~ Pilgrimage ~

He had lost consciousness somewhere in that undefined period where night becomes morning, just before the faint green tinge that is the harbinger of dawn began to suffuse the sky. Lucky for Spike, he had chosen to pass out in the lee of a dumpster, in yet another narrow alleyway, so that he was well hidden from the light of the aforementioned dawn when it began to break in earnest across the now quiet City of Angels.

It was several hours before he became aware of his surroundings. The sun was still low, and the alley provided plenty of shadows. But the sounds and smells of day at last triggered the survival instinct to rouse the weary, wounded vampire.

The downpours of the night had passed, leaving the air fresh and unpolluted, and every surface clean and sparkling. As he stood clinging to the corner of the waste receptacle, evaluating his damage, Spike could see beyond the end of the alley to where the city glittered in the light of the new day. The refraction of light through the residual mist that hung in the air imbued it all with a dreamy quality that made him wonder if he'd come to in the same dimension in which he'd blacked out. He blinked several times, and the scene resolved itself to something a bit more focused and like the city to which he'd become accustomed. It seemed tangible enough...though with none of the smoking ruins or giant holes in the ground that he would have expected....

*'Nuff mooning 'bout it all still bein' there...best to get goin'.* Spike had had plans for this day for some time, and hadn't been about to let confrontation with all the hellhounds at the Senior Partners' disposal re-arrange his schedule. He hobbled through a series of connecting alleys to a nearby sewer entrance, and set out to keep his self-appointed commitment.

By the time he reached a quiet neighborhood in what had once-upon-seventy-years-ago been the outskirts of L.A, the pains of most of his body were settling down to a dull throb that, over the course of his many decades of physical punishment, he'd come to consider the white-noise of his existence. That background ache was punctuated frequently with the intense sensation of his broken ribs being bumped or jostled as he moved. Several times he'd been forced to stop and hold very still until the pain receded a bit and he could carry on. He was fervently grateful that his discomfort was not intensified by the need to breathe; never having had a broken rib when he was human, he wondered absently and in passing how the average person managed under such circumstances.

Spike ground his teeth against the protestations in his pummeled midsection as he stretched his arms overhead to push against the manhole cover that marked his destination. Luckily, this tunnel was a couple of branches off of the main line, so small enough that he didn't have to reach too far. With a groan, the cover was shunted to the

side, and Spike slowly pulled himself out of the hole over which a car from the Wolfram & Hart garages had been strategically parked.

He lay still for a few moments under the car, thanking whatever Fates governed such things that, thus far, all had gone his way. He hadn't had very long to scope out a stash for the car, and chanced upon a residential area old enough that the sewer entrances did not just march down the center of the street. Now, he hoped that that luck held, and that the protective properties of the car windows were more physical than magical, and would still be in operation if the Senior Partners weren't.

It was still quite early, and the sun was low in the sky, casting a comfortably long shadow on the passenger side of the Ford GT he'd chosen ~ *penis on wheels*, he'd thought to himself with a derisive smirk when he'd "borrowed" it just the day before. Forcibly not thinking about what a difference 24 hours can make, he crawled out from under the car, laying himself along the curb while he found the key and pressed the button to unlock the door. He fumbled for the handle, keeping as low as possible, and then, with much cursing at the pain involved, dragged himself into the car and slammed the door behind him.

As he was now in full sun on the passenger side of the car, and not a pile of dust, he determined that in this, too, fortune was smiling on him. *No doubt, there'll bloody well be payback for it later...then again*, his cynicism was tempered a bit by the latent idealism of his inner William, *p'rhaps this one was paid in advance*.

He sat still for a moment, thinking about their little band, of which he was only lately, and still, only partially, a member. And yet, they were what he had...and now....

*Distraction...don't think, don't mourn, just do...just go.* He kicked the floorboards hard, letting the impact rattle through his body, drawing his thoughts back to the immediate situation, gritting his teeth as the intended wave of excrutia broke over him and began to recede. Then, he pulled himself across to the driver's seat, attempting to keep the gear shift from getting fresh. He settled himself behind the wheel, revved the engine, and peeled away from the curb.

He made one stop before pointing the vehicle towards the freeway. There was a particular butcher with whom he'd struck up an acquaintance, and he pulled up to the delivery entrance behind the shop, hoping that even though he'd not called ahead, there'd be an ample supply of fresh blood.

He had to wait for nearly a quarter of an hour after making his request, availing himself of the opportunity to change into fresh jeans and t-shirt, attempting the feat with as little actual movement as possible. Soon enough, his battle-stained clothes were lying haphazardly across the backseat, atop his trashed duster. Since it was no longer his *real* coat, he almost didn't care about the damage to it. Almost.

Then, his contact was handing him a bag with two plastic quart containers of "whatever he had lying around". Spike assumed this meant it was a non-gourmet blend of whatever had come in overnight ~ *prob'ly a bunch of chicken*. The idea was less than appetizing, but it was better than rodentia, to which he had been forced to resort a few times in his history. He thanked the proprietor and placed one of the quarts into a Styrofoam cooler in the back seat, then took a long drink from the other.

*Yep, cold cluck juice...brilliant.* He forced himself to consume half of it right away, knowing that blood of any description was going to be the key to knitting those ribs back together, along with closing the assorted lacerations and deep bruises he'd sustained. *Blood's blood...just not all equally tasty...* he gave a short laugh as he remembered a television commercial from years ago, asserting that "parts is parts." *'At was 'bout chicken, too...* he mused, and began to laugh out loud. It suddenly seemed outrageously funny...he sat and laughed and held his ribs, whose appreciation of this jag was somewhere in sub-Kelvin territory, but he laughed some more, the rational fragment of his brain beginning to wonder if he was too punchy to drive safely.

When the pain in his side and his heart began at last to spill out of his eyes and to slide down his cheeks, he pulled himself together, wiped off his face and placed his breakdown on hold. He put the car into gear and set off in earnest.

But, not quite....

Accustomed to navigating by his wit and native sense of direction, Spike found that the LA freeway system in the daytime was not conducive to such "seat of the pants" reckoning. He was forced to pull into the parking lot of a Burger Hutt to rummage in the glove box for a map. Finding one, he achieved his bearings, settled on a route and resumed driving. It took more than an hour and a half for him to clear the busiest traffic areas, despite the fact that he was *leaving* the city. He traveled east on the Santa Monica Freeway, to the 405 and finally Highway 5 northbound. Though he was still in Los Angeles County, once the true urban jungle was in the rearview mirror, he exited and began to travel via state and county roads, seeking to avoid the majority of other motorists in favor of appreciating a bit of natural solitude.

Spike's mood lightened a bit as he slipped away from the city, and opened the GT up on the increasingly rural roads. With the sun warming his hands, and the miles of road, bordered by blooming chaparral, disappearing under the humming tires, he found himself disinclined to fire up in his new Dropkick Murphys CD, preferring rather to let his imagination wander.

How lovely would it be to just be the average California bleach blond, tooling around without a care on a late spring day...perhaps on the way to a secluded beach – *wonder 'f there is such an animal any more in this state?* No matter; maybe, instead, he was off to meet his girl for a horseback ride in those hills in the distance, at the end of which would be a picnic lunch spread in the tall grass.... He tried to recall if Buffy had ever mentioned going riding, and decided that it must never have come up ~ he tended not to forget that sort of thing when it did.

He pursued the fantasy for a bit, deciding what would be in the picnic basket, that there would be the sound of gently running water somewhere nearby...and, perhaps inspired by the previous day's triumph at the poetry slam, he contemplated what he'd read to her out of a book conveniently packed amongst the victuals.

It wasn't long before he was reciting aloud the remembered bits of his favorite poems of years long past:

*Unfathomable Sea! whose waves are years,  
Ocean of Time, whose waters of deep woe  
Are brackish with the salt of human tears!  
Thou shoreless flood, which in thy ebb and flow  
Claspest the limits of mortality!*

*When our two souls stand up erect and strong,  
Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,  
Until the lengthening wings break into fire  
At either curved point...*

*When I behold upon the night's starr'd face  
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,  
And think that I may never live to trace  
Their shadows with the magic hand of chance;  
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
That I shall never look upon thee more,  
Never have relish in the faery power  
Of unreflecting love;- then on the shore*

*Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.*

*Yet ere Love parted, he said to Death, 'This hour is thine:  
Thou art the shadow of life, and as the tree  
Stands in the sun and shadows all beneath,  
So in the light of great eternity  
Life eminent creates the shade of death.  
The shadow passeth when the tree shall fall,  
But I shall reign for ever over all.'*

*Is it that mens frayle eyes, which gaze too bold,  
She may entangle in that golden snare:  
And being caught may craftily enfold,  
Theyr weaker harts, which are not wel aware?*

*Thrice toss these oaken ashes in the air,  
Thrice sit thou mute in this enchanted chair,  
Then thrice three times tie up this true love's knot,  
And murmur soft "She will, or she will not."*

*And we will sit upon the rocks,  
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks,  
By shallow rivers, to whose falls  
Melodious birds sing madrigals.*

*And I will make thee beds of roses,  
And a thousand fragrant posies,  
A cap of flowers and a kirtle  
Embroider'd all with leaves of myrtle;*

Spike noted, as he forced down the last swallows from his first quart of blood, that the breath necessary for his recitation was drawn with somewhat less pain than first thing that morning. *Cheers for 'ccelerated healin'!* He reached around to find the second tub of blood behind the seat, the motion proving that it would still be some time before he was back to 100%.

His thoughts drifted back to the types of poems he'd mooned over as a young man, and was put in mind of some movie or other where it was asserted that the purpose of poetry was to woo women. *True 'nuff...bloody ponces, all of us....*  
*'Course, Lovelace wasn't t'all dainty about what he wanted:*

*Amarantha sweet and faire,  
Ah brade no more that shining haire !  
As my curious hand or eye,  
Hovering round thee let it flye.*

*.....  
See 'tis broke! Within this Grove  
The Bower, and the walkes of Love,  
Weary lye we downe and rest,  
And fanne each others panting breast.*

*Heere wee'l strippe and coole our fire  
In Creame below, in milke-baths higher :  
And when all Well's are drawne dry,  
I'll drink a tear out of thine eye.*

*Never 'preciated when I learned that one that 'e was just lookin' to get 'is ticket punched.... Then there's Coleridge...wonder 'f Xanadu was really just a Laudanum-stoned dream, 'r 'f he knew a bit about 'at what goes bump in th'night....*

*A damsel with a dulcimer  
In a vision once I saw:  
It was an Abyssinian maid,  
And on her dulcimer she played,  
Singing of Mount Abora...  
Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight 'twould win me...  
But oh! That deep romantic chasm which slanted  
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!  
A savage place! As holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!*

Close to two hours slipped away in this pursuit. Sometimes he'd fall silent as he ruminated on a particular piece, and the associations that it held for him. But eventually, the memory would play itself out, and another set of lines would make its way to his lips, and fill the air inside the car.

*He would answer to "Hi!" or to any loud cry,  
Such as "Fry me!" or "Fritter my wig!"  
To "What-you-may-call-um!" or "What-was-his-name!"  
But especially "Thing-um-a-jig!"*

*While, for those who preferred a more forcible word,  
He had different names from these:  
His intimate friends called him "Candle-ends,"  
And his enemies "Toasted-cheese."*

...

*"His form is ungainly -- his intellect small -- "  
(So the Bellman would often remark)  
"But his courage is perfect! And that, after all,  
Is the thing that one needs with a Snark."*

*Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth  
A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.  
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,  
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.  
Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere...*

*I'll so offend to make offence a skill;  
Redeeming time when men think least I will*

*Whan that Aprill with his shoures sweet  
The drought of March hath percèd to the roote,  
And bathèd every vein in swich licour  
Of which virtue engendrèd is the flower,  
Whan Zephyrus eek with his sweete breeth  
Inspirèd hath in every holt and heeth  
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the Ram his halve cours y-run,  
And smale foweles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the nyght with open eye  
(so priketh them Nature in hir corages),  
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,*

It struck him somehow appropriate that it was in the midst of the introduction to the Canterbury Tales that he made the final turn towards...well, home. He was surprised to think of it that way, and then, not. And it was most certainly a pilgrimage that he was undertaking.

He was passing signs now – warnings



*No kiddin'....*



*Phht, where were all these warnings before, he wondered. Sunnydale's safer now'n it's ever been....*



A year. Even to one who'd seen as many as he had, this one had sped by, marked as it was with such loss, and, in small ways, in finding himself. Or, at least, beginning to.



One year ago, today, this chasm had been forged, and lives ended, changed and begun. One of the longest and quickest years of his existence.

**DEAD  
END**

He slowed the car as he covered the final few hundred yards to the edge of the Sunnydale pit. He stopped at the barricades that had been erected where the road ended, then backed the car up a bit and turned off the road to parallel the crater. For a distance to either side of the road, chain link fence had been installed, but it would have been nigh impossible to surround the entire hole. After a short while, the fencing ended, and the land sloped away into the dust and ashes of his old life.

Slowly, he guided the car along the rim of the precipice. It was all he could do in the broad daylight – skirt the edge of this immense grave. He'd known it would be nearly pointless to come in the daytime, but he'd felt compelled to be there as much of the day as he could ~ to mark the hour of their victory, and also to see what it had looked like to the busload of his comrades as they contemplated what they'd achieved.

When he had traveled far enough west that he could just appreciate the ocean in the distance, he turned around and went back the way he came, crossed the road, and began circling in the other direction. The minutes and hours ticked past as he eased the car slowly along the brink. The crunching of gravel under the tires was the soundtrack to this vigil.

At long last, he pulled the car up under a tree that had improbably managed to survive on the south-east edge of the crater, large portions of its root system exposed in the cave-in and subsequent rock-slides. Here he shut off the engine and leaned his forearms on the dash, propping his chin on the steering wheel. Time to reconnoiter and get his bearings.

Looking into the distance, he attempted to rebuild the significant landmarks of Sunnydale in the air over the void. Restfield Cemetery and the crypt he'd called "his" was well off to the west, in easy reach of Willy's bar. The Magic Box would have been close to the center. The Summers' house, the Bronze and the high school had been in the quadrant nearest where he was parked, so Spike presumed that this would also be the deepest part of the pit. He pondered briefly whether, under all the detritus of the conflagration, there was a hole that led straight to the bowels of hell... *'r all the way through, intersectin' th' bloody Deeper Well...damn Illyria!*

He closed his eyes and finally let the memories come...

Of last night's battle, and how necessary to it had been Illyria's strength and grief and rage. But at the price of Fred's seemingly unquenchable spirit...

Of Fred's compassion and goodness of heart.

Of Wesley, and Gunn...

Of so many deaths, that he couldn't prevent ~ Joyce and Tara and Buffy and however many of those young, newly-minted Slayers had fallen with him that day...

Of Dawn, standing on that platform, bleeding, and every decision he'd made that had ended in his own useless plummet to the ground at Doc's hands.

*... I did save you. Not when it counted, of course, but ... after that. Every night after that. I'd see it all again ... do something different. Faster or more clever, you know? Dozens of times, lots of different ways ... Every night I save you.*

What he'd never told her was that even after her return, he kept dreaming that he'd made it different. He'd begun to think he always would, though with decreasing frequency, much like soldiers who continue to have nightmares of battles long ago decided.

Dawn had seemed so young still, that year, but never again thereafter. He smiled slightly to think of the crush that she'd had on him at the same time he had realized that he was woefully in love with her sister. *Talk 'bout yer Bizarre Love Triangle...* It had so deflated Xander that she wasn't puppy at his heels anymore. *One more strike against the undead for ol' Xander, that...*

He assumed that it was the influence of the soul that had turned his loathing of Xander into an alternating cycle of detached amusement, mild irritation and pity. *Kid'd had a rough road —, 'e was bound to have a bit o'resentment. S'pose 'twas best to channel it to helpin' Buffy...it wasn't 'is fight, an' 'e had nothin' superhuman t'help 'im out, but 'e never backed down...just advanced wi'is knees knockin'...* Spike decided that, though he'd bury himself in quicklime before admitting it, he admired Xander's pigheaded determination. He was not insensible of his own possession of that trait, in abundance.

He tried to recall if he and Xander had ever managed to bond over anything, if even for a moment. If there was an instance, maybe while they'd shared his parents' basement, he could not now dredge it up. On the other hand, there was Willow. She was as protective of Buffy's well-being as anyone, but she managed not to be so sanctimonious about it as the rest of them. And she made a terrific chocolate chip cookie. But, as with Lady Macbeth, for whom "all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand," Willow knew there were no true amends for what she had done. That, at the very least, was their bond.

Even before that, though, there was something special about Red. Maybe it had been the effect of the booze, but he remembered her being sympathetic when Dru left him and he undertook the first of his many returns to Sunnydale....He always seemed to be pulled back here, one way or another.

*Damnedest thing... 'm a soddin' boomerang... 'r a bad penny.* He'd noted that the "Welcome" sign at the main road had either been consumed by the crater, or stolen in the year since. Had it been in place, he might have been tempted to go back and drive over it, for old time's sake.

*Just keep comin' back...*

In another moment or two, these recollections and musings began to take their own directions, and as Spike slid into sleep, provided the fodder for his dreams. His Morphean exploits had progressed from playing guitar onstage at The Bronze, to reeling flowered leis in through Joyce's bedroom window on a fishing line, to repainting the interior of the elevator at Wolfram & Hart, to building a model of the house in which he'd grown up in the Sunnydale High School basement. He opened his eyes to realize that the sound of the hammer tapping the nails into the wood was, in fact, someone knocking on the car window right by his head.

Not just someone.

He stared at her, still disoriented from the dream, unable to shut his mouth, or check his chin to see that he hadn't drooled in his sleep.

She chuckled as she watched realization dawn on him, and then gestured to the passenger side of the car. Spike finally reacted by hitting the automatic lock to open the door for her, while wondering if it was possible to dream you were dreaming — maybe he'd only awakened from the inner dream, but not the meta-dream?

The fresh spring breeze that entered the cabin as Buffy slid into the passenger seat seemed to belie the idea that he was still asleep. It was too multi-layered and tangible, with the unmistakable scent of this woman overriding all else. He could have sworn his heart leapt into his throat. He seized upon the trivial observation of the sense memory his body displayed in such moments, as if his heart hadn't been inert for over a century.

“Aren’t you even going to say ‘hello’? I’d think I was the one with the right to be shocked.”

He recovered himself a bit then, dragging his eyes from the oh-so-welcome sight of her, dropping them to ruefully observe the gearshift, but starved of her for so long, they wandered back almost immediately.

“Yeh...guess I could at least do that.” His fingers twitched as he reigned in the desire to reach out and touch her. “Hello.”

“So, I don’t really have to wonder why you’re here...well,” she paused for emphasis, “why you’re here here, anyway.”

He nodded. “Had to see what it looked like. Maybe say good-bye.”

“Yep...makin’ with the closure.” The words were of the old, schoolgirlish phraseology, but the tone was new. *More mature, I s’pose.*

She was turned towards him in the passenger seat, one leg tucked up under her, and her head tilted sideways so that her temple lay on the headrest. And she just looked at him. He had expected a barrage of questions, perhaps even anger that he hadn’t come to her to at least let her know...now he wondered if the absence of these things meant that she didn’t care one way or another.

But everything in her body language told him otherwise. She just seemed to be....

“Waitin’ for me to explain, are you?”

“Mmm-hmmm.”

“Never known yeh to be so patient when you wanted to know somethin’.”

“Slamming doors and punching people is so last year.” She smiled at him...a small, wry smile, but one that reached her eyes. Those green eyes – they were... *Don’ go gettin’ distracted, or goin’ all sippy on ‘er...*

“Well, there I was in the Hellmouth, disintegratin’ an’ all...then, well...felt like I popped back up ‘lmost right away, but ‘t turned out t’was some weeks later. Shocked hell outta me! ‘N’ even better, shocked hell outta Pea--.” He broke off, not knowing exactly how to explain the convoluted business of this last year, especially as it involved the competition/friendship/rivalry between himself and Angel.

“Yeah, Angel, I know.”

*Right, then.* His eyes narrowed as he realized what had struck him wrong since he woke up. “You already know all this.”

“Yeah.”

“Bugger Andrew – I told ‘im, I’d find my own way in my own time –“

“It wasn’t Andrew. Well, not at first.” She drew in a breath to continue, but sat as if waiting for her mouth to form the right word to get her underway. When it didn’t choose to, the air she’d gathered dissipated, and she laughed the rest of it away softly, shaking her head. Whatever profound thing had been trying to be said was unreachable. Instead, she asked gently, much more gently than had ever been her wont, “Spike, do you really think I could be in the same room with either of you, never mind both of you, and not know it? The nightclub?”

My apartment? That's when I asked Andrew straight up, and he explained it all, at least, explained it as it made sense to him.... There were movie references. It was almost cute, really...."

"D'ya understand then, why I didn't know how, or if, or...how..."

"Spike, you leaving Rome was one of the most unselfish things you've done. Aside from the whole world savage, that is...." She smiled at him again and reached out to cup his cheek. "Besides, I kinda got a feeling a while back that, just like me, gone might not mean gone."

"You got a feelin'? Like your Spidey-sense? By the pricken' of your thumbs?" He was teasing her, feeling a bit euphoric from her touch, and the sheer unreality of her being here with him.

"Well, there were dreams...a whole bunch of them. I started paying attention, and...well, it just seemed like you weren't that far away. Turned out I was right."

She took her hand from his cheek, but before he could feel the loss too keenly, he found his own hand, which had been alternating between sitting in his lap and fidgeting with the gearshift, lying between the warmth of both of hers. She was speaking very earnestly now, leaning towards him in her urgency. He had to remind himself to focus on her words.

"– remember anything?"

"What? I mean, remember – what, exactly?"

"Just anything. Between that day and when you reappeared in LA? Thoughts...sensations...anything?"

"Nothin'. Like I said, it seemed like I was down there one second," he nodded his head in the direction of the pit, "an' I was standin' in Angel's office the next. 'Cept...eh, that's nothin'."

"What's nothing?"

"Nothin'. I mighta felt like I was fallin', 's all. Like I said, nothin'."

Buffy said nothing for a bit, just closed her eyes and smiled. Spike was used to Buffy being closed off, but easy-to-read in her very defensiveness. This was more enigmatic. She wasn't really trying to hide, so that what was going unsaid was much tougher to guess at.

"Luv, you wonderin' what part of the netherworld I was at? Which afterlife I scored? 'Cause I got nothin' –"

"No, it's not that...I just wondered how many of my guesses were right."

"And...?"

"Some. Maybe most. So, tell me."

"Beg pardon?"

"Tell me...it's been a year. I know a little. But I don't know it like you'd tell it. I –,” for a moment, the old, self-conscious version of herself returned, and her gaze slid away from him, and her cheeks flushed just a bit, before she cleared her throat and looked him in the eyes again. She gave his hand a squeeze, and continued, "I've missed you. Talking. Listening to you talk. So...tell me?"

So, he told her. Just about all of it. He left out the bit about the Shanshu prophecy, not certain that he believed it anyway, and uncertain how to convey the implications. He hesitated to confess to test-driving his corporeality with Harmony, but his awareness of her musing the sheets with the Immortal for weeks or months – *still?*, he paused to wonder – made him commit to full disclosure. Still, he hurried past the details, knowing that it was stupid to feel guilty for it, but helpless to escape the sense of having perpetrated an infidelity.

She asked him the occasional question as his narrative continued. At times, he'd fall silent and thoughtful, and she'd wait patiently for him to pick up the thread, or begin a new one.

As he neared the end, describing events of the previous few days, Buffy nodded knowingly, so that he raised an eyebrow at her. She correctly read the request to explain.

"Giles called this morning...er, last night...well, while I was waiting in the airport in Rome, and said it seemed that something major was going down in LA, but it was too early to determine what. There were words... metaphysical energy...disruptive vibratory events.... You know how excited he gets. I got the gist of it."

"So, d'they know you're here?"

"Maybe someone suspects. But I didn't mention it. Just said I wanted to be alone for a few days, and I was going to a spa. Which I will do before I go back, so it's almost not even a lie!"

He laughed then, and pulled her towards him and kissed her forehead.

"What was that for?"

"I've missed you...so much. You don't know how many times I started to come to you. I even tried to phone you once. It wasn't pretty."

"I can imagine. I don't see you as much of a phone guy."

"Not much."

"So, big battle against big evil. You're still here. How'd it go?"

He sighed. He'd been waiting for that one. "Angel? Dunno. We all got separated in the fighting, I passed out, and when I came around, it was like it'd never happened. Sorry, pet."

She shrugged, "S'okay. Not your job to keep tabs. Just to take care of you, and hope it all turns out okay. Guess you were surprised to come out of it, huh?"

"Eh, I'm like a cat wi' m'nine lives. Not too surprised to wake up dead or alive, anymore!"

It was her turn to arch her eyebrow at him. "Alive?"

"Phht. You know what I mean."

"So, you said you were supposed to spend the day like it'd be your last. What'd you do?"

"Eh, you wouldn't believe it, anyway. So, how's the Nibbler?"

"Good. She's had a tough adjustment, but she's getting there. But you're not going to change the subject. What did you do?"

This might be too much. Coming out to a club full of strangers was one thing. This was entirely different.

“Well...I’m only tellin’ you this ‘cause I love you an’ am helpless to deny you...anythin’....” She looked up at him expectantly, not blinking at his use of the ‘L’ word. “But none of the other Scoobies can know.” She nodded gravely at this stipulation.

“You ever heard of a poetry slam?”

Her lips twitched violently as he described his exploits, and a little bit of the story behind them, but she mastered what was clearly the urge to laugh her head off, instinctively realizing that while this seemed a bit silly and trivial to her, it was clearly a big deal to him. This sensation of empathy for Spike reminder her that she would once have jumped at the opportunity to mock a vulnerability in him, and she was deeply ashamed of that other Buffy, harsh and cruel, that lived inside her. She renewed her vow, yet again, to keep that malicious Buffy in check.

“You once said you’d always been bad. You were lying, weren’t you?”

“Like a rug.”

“Hmm.”

“What?”

“Just wondering what you were like.”

“Dreamy. Useless. Naïve. But it’s your turn. I wanna know ‘bout your life this year, and Dawn, and...the rest of them.”

She sketched out the generalities of life her life in Rome, admitting hesitantly to doing a rough imitation of Parris Hilton “without the skank factor”, out to the clubs every night, indulging in a bit of hedonism. Then, there were her trips to London to indoctrinate those new Slayers who had agreed to come and learn about their collective calling.

“Giles had to change that ‘one girl in all the world’ speech...he’s still working on how it should go now. But he seems to feel useful again, and it’s really good to see. For a long time, I didn’t really see how badly he wanted -- needed that. I suppose that’s why some of his decisions in that last year were so wrong...because he was trying too hard.”

When Spike made no reply, she mistook his silence for irritation at the reminder of the Giles-Wood conspiracy, and attempted to make amends. “I mean, I don’t excuse what he did...tried to do --”

“Luv, I’ve not always been known for my own sound decisions. I never said I didn’t get where he...where both of ‘em were comin’ from. Just said I’d defend myself permanently if I ever had to again. I don’t ‘spect it’ll be an issue here on out, eh?”

“No, I think he gets it now, finally. I remember Willow being all ‘everything really **is** connected’ at him when we talked it all out after. He was pretty stunned when he realized you were the key to the whole thing. They all were, really.”

“So, Dawn’s good, Willow and that pushy bint are still a thing, whatabout Xander ‘n’ Anya – they seemed to be dancin’ about the idea of makin’ up fer good?”

“Oh....” Her voice was small and her eyes grew cloudy before she told him how Anya had died, too, and that Xander had been a much subdued version of himself most of the time since then. Spike stared straight ahead out the window, thinking how wrong it seemed that she’d not had the chance to really be happy. *Helluva bird....*

They talked about the day of the battle, and of incidentals of life since then, until the sun was slipping into the far horizon, and they exited the vehicle and walked slowly to the edge. They were quiet then, for some time, each reliving countless moments they had passed here, moments that seemed to linger in the air about them like specters.

At some point, Spike realized that Buffy’s hand was in his. *How’d that happen*, he wondered. *And, who initiated it?* But he decided it didn’t matter that much, and gave her fingers a squeeze. She returned the gesture, and he felt her mood shift and intensify.

She turned to him, mouth open to speak, but he silenced her with a finger to her lips, and a rumble barely more than a whisper, “Shhhh, Slayer...we should finish wi’them before we deal with us.”

She nodded and turned back to the gloom of the ruins. As they stood, struggling for how to honor their fallen, another set of words came to Spike out of the past that seemed apropos, so he offered them up into the still air :

***...we cannot hallow this ground...It is ... for us the living, to be  
dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these  
honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which  
they here gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here  
highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain...***

And they breathed the names of their lost comrades into the cooling dusk

~ / ~

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time  
~ Macbeth*

~~~~~  
Author’s Notes:

Poems, in order of appearance:

[Time](#) by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

[Sonnets from the Portuguese, XXII](#) by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861)

[When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be](#) by John Keats (1795-1821)

[Love and Death](#) by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

[Amoretti, Sonnet XXXVII](#) by Sir Edmund Spenser (1552-1599)

[Thrice Toss These Oaken Ashes](#) by Thomas Campion (1567-1620)

[The Passionate Shepherd to his Love](#) by Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)

[Song To Amarantha, That she would dishevel her haire](#) by Richard Lovelace (1518-1567)

[Kubla Khan](#) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

[The Hunting of the Snark](#) by Lewis Carroll (1832-1898)

[Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard](#) by Thomas Gray (1716-1771)

[Henry IV, Part I](#) by William Shakespeare (1564-1616)



[The Canterbury Tales, Prologue](#) by Geoffrey Chaucer (1340/45-1400)

To hear the prologue spoken as it's believed to have sounded in Middle English, go [here](#) and click on the little loudspeaker icon

In addition, the quoted passage from [Afterlife](#) was copied from Buffyworld.com

Finally, I depended for the layout of Old Sunnydale on a map to which I was directed, at www.slayer-tales.com. Had I been forced to just make up where everything was, I'm not sure I could have rested easy, knowing that the actual answers were just 144 short (but intensive) viewing hours away, and that I had failed to search them out. "Spike" at Slayer-Tales kept me from such a fate! Kudos to him and those who came before him in creating it, based on actual episodic research! This version also adds locations that he and his chums made up for gaming purposes, but that in no way detracts from the canon information contained therein! Thanks!

SIDEBAR:

Do I believe that Shakespeare is the author of Shakespeare's plays?

Short answer: Yep.

Longer answers:

[Author Unknown](#) by Donald Foster

[Words, words, words](#) ~ an essay regarding using phraseology from the plays

[Often, a cigar is just a cigar!](#)

