

To Be or Not To Be

by Lynne C.

Rating: G

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-*Chosen* (7.22); AtS 5.0.

Summary: Spike's return from his fiery doom.

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*To be or not to be, that is the question
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing, end them*

All the girls had gone, escaping up through the Seal and into the school. It was just Buffy and Spike.

"Go on, then."

"No! No, you've done enough! You could still—" There had been desperation in Buffy's voice.

"No, you've beaten them back. It's for me to do the cleanup."

Behind her a vast section of the cavern ceiling had collapsed inward, tons of rock crashing into the abyss.

Faith was calling down frantically from the top of the stairs near the Seal. "Buffy, come on!" Taking one more look at Buffy, she'd leapt up into the school above.

"Gotta move, lamb. I think it's fair to say, school's out for the bloody summer."

"Spike!"

"I mean it! I gotta do this."

The light emanating from the amulet had flared even brighter and Buffy reached out to take Spike's hand in her own, entwining her fingers with his. A moment, and then both their hands burst into flame. She had ignored the fire and held his gaze with her own.

"I love you."

He had looked back at her, a flood of emotions pouring through him. Then, he'd smiled at her ironically. "No, you don't. But thanks for saying it."

They'd share one last look between them, two souls coming together as one at last, before the ground heaved beneath their feet and chunks of stone slammed down like bombs around them.

“Now go!”

Buffy had let go of Spike’s hand and run up through the Seal. He had trembled with the intensity of the energy pouring through him, staring into the maelstrom of destruction in front of him and grinning sardonically, the same old Spike to the last.

“I want to see how it ends.”

To die, to sleep no more

***And by a sleep to say we end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to
'Tis a consolation devoutly to be wish'd***

He could remember the exquisite pain as the cleansing fire had consumed him. He could not pinpoint when it had stopped, or how, or what, exactly, had followed it. Just a gradual insensate nothingness, as near as he could determine.

Now he seemed without form, but aware of all that had occurred. He floated: warm, safe and quiet. The word “fetal” occurred to him, and he decided it was apt to describe his sense of being enveloped in a cocoon of security and peace.

He had no concept of time or place; of how long he might have been in this state, or of whether there was anyone or anything else within the reach of his consciousness. And he discovered that this didn’t particularly bother him. For a time he was content to drift along in the pocket of well-being that surrounded him, and bask in the quiescence of the soul that had been so often in upheaval since its return to his corporeal self.

To die, to sleep

To sleep, perchance to dream, ay...there’s the rub

***For in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil must give us
pause***

She would float up, from the depths of her slumber, to that place that could not easily be classified as either waking or sleeping. Awareness of morning, of light infiltrating the curtains, and of breezes playing in the treetops was clearly bleeding through from the outside world. But he was there, and that must make them dreams.

Sometimes they walked hand-in-hand along a beach, the ocean curling around her bare toes, and his boots leaving deep impressions in the wet sand.

Sometimes they were dancing on a terra cotta patio, lit by colored glass lanterns. She twirled and spun an impossible number of times, always returning to his arms, never fearing for her balance, her dizziness due to his presence rather than her giddy rotations.

Once they watched the sunrise from a porch swing, swaying gently together in the dewy coolness of dawn.

Sometimes they spoke to one another: words she remembered from their long acquaintance, or that she now wished had been said but had not. Mostly she just observed them together, as though an outsider. Yet she was always privy to the sensations and emotions that each of them was experiencing, omniscient to these vignettes that never were and never would be.

Sometimes the scenes were mundane ~ cuddling on the sofa drinking hot chocolate; sometimes exotic ~ making love in a place that resembled a Turkish harem for all the pillows and tassels and gauzy hangings; sometimes tinged with the sadness of being on opposite banks of a river whose current made it impossible to cross, try

though they might; and sometimes they would laugh at nothing at all, holding one another and reveling in purest joy.

And then she would surface to full wakefulness, the intensity of her dream falling slowly away from her, until it became a barely remembered impression. But for an instant, she would expect him to be within her reach, and she would put her hand where she thought he would be, and meet empty air. It was not her nature to analyze these moments deeply. She knew their meaning. “A dream is a wish your heart makes,” went the song she’d sung in childhood. Spike.

After the first few of these dreams, she had begun to write them down in a journal she kept in her bedside table. They faded so quickly and she wanted to hang on to as many details as she could. She filled many pages, but had never brought herself to read back through them. They were just too bittersweet. But maybe, one day, she’d know the time was right.

Spike. Always he had aroused in her a tumult of emotions. Possibly she had felt every single thing that there was to feel about another person. Disdain. Fear. Pity. Revulsion. Curiosity. Passion. Need. Friendship. Jealousy. Love. Gratitude. She knew he had to do what he did. Looking back, she knew that they had all walked the paths appointed to them, falling down and picking themselves up as necessary. All leading to the moment of transcendence and sacrifice at the Hellmouth. She knew what that acceptance of his fate had meant for his journey, and did not wish it undone. She was now proud of the part she played. Not of all the actions that she had chosen to take that had hurt him, but proud that she could be part of something so much bigger than herself. She had been integral to his redemption, and the fact that he had achieved it awed her. No, she accepted *why* he was gone.

But she missed all the moments that they would never have. Most of what she wished for in her sleep would never have happened anyway had he survived, but in his absence, they all became possibilities ~ possibilities unrealizable.

She wished she had taken more time to just talk to him. About day-to-day nothingness-es. How long had he lived under her roof? They knew one another’s habits and could finish each other’s sentences. But, there was still so much that she would never find out.

And she felt the loss keenly. One more hole in her heart that might heal, but whose scar she would carry for the rest of her days.

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As he drifted, he would sometimes construct fantasies of times he would have liked to have spent with her. Days in the sun, moments of simplicity and companionship and love. He didn’t miss her exactly. But he knew there were countless things he’d have liked to have shared with her. When he summoned her image forth, it became as tangible to him as if he was there, and it was happening to him. He still had no shape, but he could observe their interactions like a third party, experiencing every motion and sensation and feeling as though he inhabited both of their bodies at once.

Not a terrible way to spend an eternity, he observed.

***There’s the respect that makes calamity of so long life
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time***

During her waking hours she could forget, for whole minutes at a stretch, that the life she had known before that day was gone beyond recall. No friendly bedroom in which to seek refuge. No familiar streets to patrol – or just

stroll, depending. No mother's grave to visit. No landmarks, so intrinsically woven into the few joys and many tragedies of her young life. No touchstones or mementos at all from out of that gaping hole in the landscape.

She would forget, and think that she must remember to stop in at a store that no longer existed. Or that she could wear an article of clothing that lay under many metric tons of rock. Or make a mental note to tell Spike about something that had happened to her.

And then it would come rushing back. And she would still, while her insides absorbed the shock like a physical blow, and her face would freeze into a posture of defensive impassivity.

All gone. And she would have to remember to breathe. And she would slowly resume whatever task she had been undertaking, reminding herself to accept this new reality that was her existence.

Other times, she would purposely dredge up memories, taking them out like old letters, re-read so many times that the folds and edges had become tattered. Sometimes they were happy memories, but more often she would force herself to face her failures and transgressions. She would enumerate her shortcomings, and regret that time and circumstance had made them impossible to remedy. And remind herself that she could not, in his absence, sugar-coat all that had passed between them. It was penance, of a sort; a private rosary of disgrace whose beads she would force herself to count and meditate on. It was the only amends that she could make now that it was all over.

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There were times when images came to him as if unbidden. He did not entirely understand this, but also did not question it. He let the scenes unfold before him, curious as to the cause or meaning of their appearance. They were memories of events that he'd shared with her, many of them reflecting the darkest days that had passed between them.

The oppressor's wrong

His plots to kill her and her friends, thwarted in the end by the greater threat of Angelus.
Her fists pummeling him in the alley by the police station.

The proud man's contumely ***The pangs of despised love***

When he chained her to a wall, and offered to stake Drusilla at her word as proof of his devotion.
Her contempt for and mockery of his feelings for her, halting and imperfect as they were.

The law's delay ***The insolence of office***

Telling her that she didn't belong with the friends who loved her; that she was made for the darkness, just like him.
Telling him that he was useless to her, and that she needed the Big Bad back.

And the spurns that patient merit of th' unworthy takes

His willingness to accept whatever attention she would give him, no matter how base or perverse its source.

Her shame at their liaison, and her fear of her friends' condemnation, that had driven her to lash out at him with such unbridled physical and emotional violence.

When he, himself, might his quietus make with a bare bodkin?

Perhaps this was the best ending that either of them could have hoped for?

***Who would fardels bear
To grunt and sweat under a weary life***

But what was this ending? At some point he began to wonder in earnest about this passive limbo in which he existed. In the end, was this death? An aware oblivion? Bloody peculiar if all the philosophers and theologians through time had missed the mark by so much.

But that the dread of something after death, the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns

Yet, he'd heard firsthand one account of death.

He'd been sitting beside her when she told him, tonelessly, "I was happy."

Had he not been so utterly shocked, he'd have cursed himself for the worst kind of idiot. Despite his warning regarding the consequences of the kind of magic necessary to raise her, he'd never thought to question the Scoobies' conviction that they were rescuing her from some dreadful fate.

Her words had continued to wash over him, all in that same tight, resigned voice.

"Wherever I ... was ... I was happy. At peace.

"I knew that everyone I cared about was all right. I knew it. Time ... didn't mean anything ... nothing had form ... but I was still me, you know? And I was warm ... and I was loved ... and I was finished. Complete. I don't understand about theology or dimensions, or ... any of it, really ... but I think I was in Heaven."

Puzzles the will

And he realized that this was the source of his confusion. Clearly, he wasn't in some sort of hell – notable absence of torment being a clue. Yet he wasn't in the "complete" place either. He'd felt safe and at peace, but now he felt stirrings of other emotions. Maybe this was just a resting place... a way station of some sort. But then, what next?

The answer that came into his consciousness was to search out and understand his own feelings. His will struggled to conceive something more tangible, less "use the Force, Luke." But it was the only certainty that he could ascertain.

So, he let the events of his life swirl about him, not guiding their progression, but attempting to know them individually, and as they fit together, finding patterns and connections between moments far separated in time and geography.

Judging the full panorama of his actions, and of events to which he'd been a party, he began to feel sure that they had all walked the paths appointed to them, falling down and picking themselves up as necessary. All leading to

the moment of transcendence and sacrifice at the Hellmouth. He knew what that acceptance of his fate had meant for his journey, and did not wish it undone. He was now proud of how far he had come. Not that he'd had much of an opportunity to atone for the countless specific acts of evil that he had committed. But he could still be proud that, when it came down to it, he had given himself to save the world. She had been integral to his redemption but, in the end, he hadn't died for her, but for what she represented. He'd done it for the billions of Buffys the world over who would now have a chance at a normal life because he had walked the earth, and fallen in love, and wrestled with his nature, and risen above it to give himself over to the abyss.

And still, it felt like it wasn't enough.

*And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than to fly to others that we know not of*

He was sorry that the journey was over. His soul had been regained just a year before that final showdown, his sanity some months after, and his free will most recently of all. He'd barely had time to use them; to experience the world as a souled being again, with all of his past actions to animate the experience.

His spirit began to feel restless. He was satisfied with how he'd met the challenges that had come on that road to the cavern beneath Sunnydale High. But he began to question what else he might have done had he not been asked to make that sacrifice so soon.

*Thus, conscience does make cowards of us all
And, thus, the native hue or resolution is sicklied o'er with a pale cast of thought*

And then, he became very still again. An overwhelming impression came to him, that he asked himself these things for a reason. That it was within his power to decide whether his journey continued or not.

And enterprises of great pith and moment

She found that sleep was her solace, when this new life of hers proved too much. She scarcely knew how to operate without the weight of the world on her shoulders. She was learning. But the years of waiting for the other shoe to drop had left her suspicious of runs of either good fortune, or of simple "normalcy." She'd struggled for so long to be normal, only to learn that she didn't trust it when it was given to her.

The irony was not lost on her.

Yet she began to remember what it had been like before she'd been Called: to assume that one birthday would follow another, and that the sunrise would always come. These old certitudes of youth she greeted warily, but tried them on for size and discovered that, with time, they might become her companions again.

Of course, the tangible requirements of rebuilding her day-to-day life were taxing. And when starting over became simply too much, she would seek out that dream world. There she could find simple and unadulterated pleasures unburdened by the worries and realities of the world.

She found that, after a time, her dreams of him changed ~ becoming less about the two of them. She began to see images of the life he might have pursued had he not paid such a dear price to secure her tomorrows. She was puzzled by this, as she had never become ready for him to not "be there" for her. But while she observed these scenes, she had an understanding that he had always been a separate entity from her. It seemed obvious, yet she had really only thought of him in terms of how he impinged upon her life and her choices. To think of him as an

individual was a revelation. And she felt ashamed all over again, regretting that she would never know him this way, beyond the random constructions her subconscious fed her in her sleep.

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It seemed that the stillness continued for a long time, to the degree that time had meaning. He returned to his initial activity of conjuring pictures that had never been. But this time, they were not exclusive to her. Certainly, she was sometimes part of them. Yet he recognized that the whole world potentially lay before him. That if he chose to return to it, he could truly test that free will of his by casting himself into the unknown, without her as a tether. And thereby come to know himself as a man.

In this regard, their currents turn awry

Yet she tempted him. As did this nothingness. He had asked, when in his ranting he'd revealed the soul to her, if he could rest. He'd been granted that rest. Along with love and forgiveness. Who was he to ask for more? To expect it? To upset a plan that he had evidently fulfilled properly already? Besides which, looking back, hadn't most of his schemes gotten bollocksed up one way or another? Granted, those schemes had generally been evil, so perhaps their failure could be chalked up to the intervention of The Powers or whatever puppet master it was who seemed to effect the outcome of things. But still, it would be quite a gamble that he would take, should he opt to reprise his earthly existence.

And so, faced with a choice, he waited.

But eventually, all those thoughts and impressions coalesced into a decision.

And lose the name of action

"Buffy! Buffy, wake up!"

Dawn's frightened voice reached out into the void and drew her back into the world. She came awake suddenly, sitting up and turning a face wet with tears and sweat to her sister.

"I'm okay! I'm awake!" Her heart hammered against her ribs, and though she looked in Dawn's direction, her eyes were wide and unfocused.

"Buffy, what was it? You were crying and holding onto the sheets like someone was trying to steal them."

"I'm not sure. I – I've been.... It was...Spike." She drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

"Reliving the Sunnydale sinkhole?" Dawn inquired gently, sitting on the bed next to her and handing her the box of tissues from the nightstand.

"No, it wasn't that...something else. I just don't know...." Buffy dabbed at her damp face, and then laid her cheek upon one of her knees. "It was like I was there with him. Not then, now," she clarified.

Clear as mud, apparently, from the look on her sister's face.

The dream had begun innocuously, like so many others, with a vague sense of drifting pleasantly through a warm impenetrable fog. But then it shifted.

First, she'd seen him, standing before her in the midst of that fog. It was the first time she'd dreamt him in anything other than a real world setting. But he'd solemnly taken both of her hands, and held them to his chest, an enigmatic little smile passing over his face. He hadn't spoken to her, but she'd felt their connection, as real as it had ever been. And she'd felt something else, under her fingers. Something warm and alive. The awesome realization hit her and he nodded. Then he'd lifted both of her hands to his lips and kissed them.

He'd released her then, in slow motion, backing away from her. She'd followed him, but he kept getting further away, two steps for each of hers.

Finally, he'd stopped, and lifted his arms out to his sides. When he tilted his head back, he'd looked just as he'd been in the cavern on that last day. But this time, there were no beams of light. And very slowly, he'd fallen backwards, as if over the edge of an unseen precipice. She could look down and see him falling away, so slowly that it seemed to take hours, until finally he disappeared. She had called after him all the while, begging him to come back.

She had tried to follow him over the edge, but could not. And so she'd prostrated herself and wrestled with the fog and wept.

She realized that Dawn was still waiting for some kind of explanation.

"I don't know exactly what I was dreaming. He was dead, but he was alive, and he was with me, and then he left. And it felt like he really did leave for good."

"Maybe it means you're finally accepting that he's dead, Buffy," she offered softly, stroking the side of her sister's face.

"Maybe," she agreed weakly. She didn't believe that was it at all, but explaining her gut instincts to others was usually more trouble than it was worth.

She sighed, and moved to throw off the covers. She had no more desire for sleep tonight.

"I'm going to fix myself some toast or something. You go back to bed, Dawn. I'm sorry I scared you."

Dawn's look of concern indicated she was not really placated. But she didn't argue as she returned to her own room.

When she was gone, Buffy opened the drawer in the nightstand, and withdrew her journal. She carried it out to the kitchen, where she opened a window and sat down at the dinette below it. Her skin prickled as the cool night air wafted over her damp skin, drying the remnants of her tears and struggle.

First she wrote her impressions of this most recent dream, her pen never stopping until she'd poured out her guesses and fears and hopes. Then, as the sky began to lighten, she turned back to the beginning of the book and immersed herself in each of the many dreams she had had of him.

Some hours later, she laid down the journal. She felt very calm, in studied contrast to her emotions upon waking. Yes, she now understood what she had felt when he'd held her hands earlier this evening, and what he had told her with his eyes and his beating heart. She could now see clearly what this active dream life of hers had really represented. And she believed that she now knew what came next.

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6,000 miles away and ten hours later, Angel unlocked the door to his offices at Wolfram & Hart. He knew it was probably a sham, this care he took regarding his privacy. Odds were good that the Senior Partners did not find deadbolts an impediment to their

gathering of information. Nonetheless, he found it a comforting ritual. He was enjoying the many new habits that he had acquired since moving into these comfortable offices, not the least of which was the sense of leisure -- time and money both seemed equally abundant here. Granted, the lawyers and operations teams were rather tedious, with their releases and indemnities and tracking devices. And there were the evil clients. But, still...

He hung up his coat, tossed his briefcase on the sofa, and flung himself into his leather chair, ready to enjoy the morning paper. It was laid aside, however, as he glanced at the mail, moving a few pieces randomly on his desk, uncertain how to prioritize it all. Much like the conference room full of client files that the team had been sorting through in recent days. How to get a handle on it all?

He took up a particularly bulky manila envelop without a return address, but set it down again as he fumbled with the telephone intercom.

"Um...can I get a cup of coffee or something?"

The speaker informed him, unhelpfully, "You have reached ritual sacrifice. For goats, press one or say 'goats.' "

And the mail was forgotten, at least, for the moment....

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Original Ending:

2,000 miles away, and two hours later, Angel unlocked the door to his offices at Wolfram & Hart. He knew it was probably a sham, this care he took regarding his privacy. Odds were good that the Senior Partners did not find deadbolts an impediment to their gathering of information. Nonetheless, he found it a comforting ritual.

He was enjoying the many new habits that he had acquired since moving into these comfortable offices, not the least of which was the sense of leisure – time and money both seemed equally abundant here. He hung up his coat, tossed his briefcase on the sofa, and flung himself into his leather chair, ready to enjoy the morning paper. But it was laid aside when he saw the blinking message light next to his private line. He hit the button, punched in his code, and heard Buffy's voice:

"Angel, it's me. I know this is going to sound bizarre, but then – I guess that means situation normal doesn't it? Angel, I -- I think that Spike might be alive. And if he is, he's probably going to need some help. You...you might want to see if your, um...resources can locate him." There was a pause then, as she clearly didn't know quite what else to say. "I guess that's it..." Another pause, then, "and, I'd like it if you'd keep me posted once in a while. Thanks. Bye."

Angel sighed and closed his eyes wearily, satisfaction with his creature comforts now dissolved and forgotten. Spike, eh? It seemed that even an heroic, sacrificial immolation could not deliver him from the troublesome vamp. "Damn!" A fist slammed onto the desk's smooth surface. But, since it was Buffy asking....

He opened his eyes, resigning himself to the inevitable, and reached for the telephone intercom.

"Wesley? I need to see you..."