

You Know Not The Day Nor the Hour

by Lynne C.

Rating: PG (ever-so light swearing)

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: Anytime post-“Potential” (7.12), intended to act as “stuff that happened but not while we were looking”. In other words, it tries not to contradict anything that's happened already or (trickier) might be about to happen!

Summary: Spike contemplates the unknown culmination of The First's anticipated apocalypse, and takes steps to prepare.

“What do you mean, he went out?” Buffy stared at Rona, uncomprehending.

“Just what I said – He. Went. Out. What, was I supposed to restrain him or something?” The potential slayer rolled her eyes and returned to rummaging through the Summers' refrigerator. “And are we out of Dr. Pepper again?”

“But where did he go?”

“Daamn, Buffy, I don't know. He's supposedly one of us, older than most of us put together, and stronger than me? Why would I ask where he was going? Last thing I want to do is piss him off! He's probably out of cigarettes again!” Her words were punctuated by the slamming of the refrigerator door. She stared somewhat sullenly at Buffy as she popped the top on the generic cola she'd finally fished out of the back of the fridge.

“Sorry, Rona...I'm just surprised is all. The last thing we need is him falling back into The First's hands...”

“Well, that's all I know. He left maybe a half hour ago.” The younger girl turned back towards the living room, pausing to add over her shoulder, “He did say he wouldn't be gone long – whatever that means.” And then Buffy was alone in the kitchen.

Her imagination immediately kicked into gear, presenting an array of dire fates which could befall the vampire. *What if The First's minions are lurking in the neighborhood? What if there's too many of them – his injuries still aren't all healed...What if--*

Buffy mentally shook herself to derail this somewhat panicky train of thought. *Okay, calm down. He is a big boy and can take care of himself...mostly.* She glanced at the clock on the microwave, and noted that it was still an hour or more until sunset. *Leave it to Spike to run errands in broad daylight! He's always been one weird vamp.* She realized that in all the years she'd known him, Spike had never seemed particularly inclined to be nocturnal. *Weird.* This time she actually did shake her head, and gave a tiny chuckle. *Okay, no worrying until... she looked at the clock again... 5:30? Sure, 5:30...two hours is plenty to run a mysterious errand before I begin to think about getting wiggy!*

Resolved to be calm and trust in the momentary beneficence of The Powers That Be, she turned to the sinkful of dishes, grabbed the sprayer, and began hosing off the evidence of her packed home. And she tried to pretend that she wasn't counting the minutes as they passed.

“Gee, Spike, are you sure you don’t want me to clear out of here?”

“Neh...Slayer seems to want to keep an eye on me – Kinda circling the wagons, I think.” Spike lolled sideways across the armchair in front of the now-dark television set. He gestured with his cigarette as he spoke, scattering ash on the floor. ““Sides, she’s got all these teenagers running around, and needs another minder for ‘em.”

“Well, you say the word, and I’ll be out of here, and you can have your crypt back to yourself,” replied the demon who sat cross-legged on the vault.

“Sure, Clem...maybe once this business with The First’s over with....” *Though, how that’s gonna happen is anyone’s guess....* The vampire took a thoughtful drag on his cigarette, forgetting momentarily that he wasn’t alone.

The silence had stretched to several minutes before Spike realized it, coming back to the present with a start. “But, thanks for the company, mate. All those giggling girls, and I include Harris and that pale kid with the rest of ‘em, can sure get on a fellow’s last nerve. Now, though, I’d best be going, seein’ as it’s dark enough to get around without the blanket” Spike unfolded himself from the chair, ground out his cigarette, and picked up the cardboard box and rolled up blanket that sat at his foot.

“Sure thing, Spike. Swing by whenever you want...it is your place, after all.” Clem slid off the sarcophagus and joined him at the entrance to the crypt. “And –“ The demon shifted uncomfortably for a moment, and scratched behind one of his ears, before continuing “I was real sorry to hear you’d been worked over so badly....take care, okay?”

“Right. Well, you know, it take’s a bit of doin’ to do me in. Bloody ironic it was, that my blood let that Turukhan loose, and that’s what did such a number on me.” He snorted derisively and shook his head. “But, I figure maybe it’s all part of some cosmic scale-balancing – after all the havoc I wrecked in my day.”

“Yeah, well...anyway, I’m glad you made it out. Say, let the Slayer know that if there’s anything I can do to help, she can count on me to pitch in.”

“Will do.” Spike headed out into the lowering dusk, calling back to the demon in the doorway, “And thanks, mate!”

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5:25...*Still not quite panic time...* Buffy was aimlessly flipping through a month-old fashion magazine. She’d finished the mountain of dishes, then moved on to folding the mountain of laundry that had been pulled out of the dryer and heaped up on top of the appliance over the last several days. Willow, Dawn and Vi and Kennedy had, at various times passed through the kitchen, going various directions, generally with stops at the fridge or the pantry on the way. Buffy had kept sufficiently busy to minimize the need for conversation with them, focusing intently on not focusing on Spike’s absence.

5:26...*Still not quite – ooo, that’s a fun lip gloss...kinda sparkly. I wonder if the glittery stuff sticks to your teeth though...Hmmm, if it does, I wonder if it shines in the dark....*

At 5:27, the kitchen door opened and Spike strolled in.

“Where have you been?” The sparkly lip gloss now forgotten, Buffy stood, addressing Spike with more sharpness than she’d intended.

“Down, Buffy. Just ran by my crypt to pick up a few things, since it seems I’ll be needed here for a while yet.”

“Oh. Well...you could let someone know, how was I to —”

“I told that Rona chit I was goin’ out, and din’t ‘spect to be long. Not my fault if she didn’t let you know. What, the Slayerettes getting out of hand without something to keep ‘em lookin’ over their shoulders?”

“She told me that much, but...well...” Buffy was feeling a bit silly for her worry, and wished she’d not been caught waiting for him like he was an errant husband. “What if you’d been set on by a pack of ‘bringers? I wouldn’t have even known where to start looking...” she finished, a bit weakly, not meeting his eyes.

Spike set his carton and blanket down on the table, and hunkered down until he was looking Buffy in the eye. In times past, he might have tilted her chin up to achieve the effect, but he was still wary of touching her, lest she recoil from him again. He sighed at this realization. *Long way to go before even that scale balances, mate, never mind all the others....*

“Buffy, I’m fine. Just had some personal things I’d been wishin’ for, so I nipped over to get ‘em. I figured daylight was as safe a time as any. At the risk of bein’ trite, if we let ourselves be prisoners in this house, The First has already half-beaten us. But I appreciate the concern....”

Buffy crossed her arms, looked away, and smiled wryly. “Yeah, well...we just can’t have you getting broken all over again. Sorry I jumped on you.”

The vampire had straightened, and stepped back to lean against the counter. Now his lips twitched and an eyebrow lifted.

“Er, that I snapped at you – was...what I...meant.”

“Yeah, ‘s aright.” Spike didn’t pursue her slip of the tongue, knowing things still weren’t comfortable enough between them for innuendo to go over well. Besides...his desire for intimacy with her went so far beyond the physical, that it seemed almost to profane the depth of his emotions to treat what remained a very real physical desire in the flippant and throw-away manner he might once have done. He sighed again, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans, and regarding her intently.

“What?” She knew that head tilt...It pretty much always meant Deep Spike Thoughts, something she’d never really learned how to deal with. *Weird vamp. In every way. And how does that make you feel, Buffy? Shut up,* she warned her inner shrink. *You know we don’t like to get into that.*

“Nothin’ for you to worry yer pretty head about.” He smiled at her as he pushed off the counter and walked to the table to gather up his goods. “‘Cept sometimes you look so much like yer mum.” He paused before turning towards the basement steps, telling her, “and, I am sorry if I worried you. With everything going on, I s’pose I should have let you know.”

He then left a dumbfounded Buffy staring at his retreating back.

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It was a couple of hours later that soft footfalls on the basement steps broke his concentration. He looked up from his work to see Willow hesitating at the base of the steps.

“Hey-a, Red.”

“Hey-a, Spike. You didn’t come up for dinner, so I brought you some blood. Gotta keep your strength up, after all!”

Spike stood as she approached him, accepting the warm mug with a nod, and taking a sip or two.

“Thanks, Red. Din’t realize how late it was. I’d best get ready to patrol with the kiddies.”

“Whatcha workin’ on?” Willow curiously surveyed the paraphernalia he’d spread out on the small table in the basement corner.

“Let’s call it a little insurance policy.”

“Huh?”

Without replying, Spike set the mug down, and picked up a stick of sealing wax. He dug for a moment in his pocket, extracting his lighter. He lit the candle stub that sat next to the folded pages he’d evidently been laboring over. He deftly passed the wax stick through the flame several times, then smeared a softened glob of wax across the open edges of the paper. He then wrapped a narrow string in both directions around the squared paper, crossing them in the still-soft wax, and pressing them in with his thumb.

Willow watched with silent interest as he finished this task. Finally, he looked down at her, and clarified, “an insurance policy. Red, I don’t know exactly what’s coming. But if Buffy survives it, and I don’t – ” *and this time, if it’s a matter of one of us, by God, it will be me...* He took a breath before continuing, “please give her this.”

“But, Spike...”

“No ‘buts’, Red. With any luck, when this is all over, I’ll ask for it back, and that’ll be that. But if not...just make sure she gets it.”

Dampness glittered in Willow’s eyes as she took the letter and tucked it into a pocket. The gentleness in her gaze as she looked at him was humbling, and he looked at the table in embarrassment. “Spike...I – I’ll hold this for you, ‘til you ask for it back. But,” she faltered then, and reached up to cup his cheek for a moment. His astonishment at her caress was evident, and he opened his mouth to speak, but Willow continued, and her hand fell to his shoulder. “I want you to know I’m sorry that we only saw the bad in you for so long. I mean...” Her voice dropped to a whisper, “I understand now that none of us is all good or all bad.” She cleared her throat, and her voice strengthened again, “and I just wanted you to know that we all know now how hard you were trying, even when we didn’t give you any encouragement. And, I know that love can change someone for the better, and loss can change them for the worse....”

An answering dampness had risen in Spike’s eyes, and he didn’t entirely trust his voice. So he reached out and gave the witch a fierce, quick hug. She squeezed him back, chuckling through her emotion and discomfort. *Boy, is this weird,* she thought.

The vampire released her, cleared his throat and blinked quickly. “Well. Thanks for lettin’ me know. Not a word of this to anyone else though – I gotta keep those Slayerettes thinkin’ I’m all vicious and such.” They smiled at each other with understanding. Then, Spike’s tone softened again. “And I want you to know how sorry I was at losin’ Glinda. She was real good people. ‘N so are you – you din’t deserve to lose someone like that...Now you get outta here so I can finish my cuppa and get my Big Bad on for the freshmen up there.”

Willow sniffled and dragged the back of her hand across her eyes as she turned for the stairs.

Several minutes later, Spike joined the rest of the patrolling party in the kitchen.

“You were hidden down there for a while...what’s up?” Buffy’s tone was casual, but her sideways glance was rich with piqued feminine curiosity.

“What? A body’s got to immerse himself all day and all night in teenage girl-y hormones and nail polish? Just gettin’ a bit o’ me solitude.” The slayer raised a questioning eyebrow at him, but let the matter go.

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Willow had tucked the letter into the back of the drawer in which she kept her particular private momentos of Tara. She knew it would be safe there – that no prying eyes would stumble across it accidentally. She was terribly curious as to just what it might contain, though she was quite certain that she knew the tenor of it. She’d hesitated when she’d put it away, considering the handwriting on the outside. It simply read, “Buffy,” but the letters were swoop-y and in a hand that she would never have associated with rough-and-tumble Spike. *Just goes to show*, she’d thought, *how right the Victorian education system had been to teach penmanship.*

As much as she had wanted to know what Spike had written, she’d never have tried to find out. And, she realized, she had to hope that she never would know; that The First would be neutralized, and Spike would take his letter back, and that would be the end of it; that Buffy wouldn’t find herself in the position to grieve another loss. Whatever Buffy tried to pretend about her feelings for Spike, Willow knew they were much deeper and more complex than she’d ever admitted – to herself or anyone else. And if Spike were lost, Buffy would grieve – and would feel that she had to do so in secret.

So, she’d put the letter away, and then lit a second candle on her side table. Ever since Tara’s death, she’d kept one burning as a memory to her. Something like a continual prayer – a prayer for exactly what, she couldn’t have said. Now she lit another one, as a prayer for all the rest of them; that they’d all somehow survive the struggle to come.

And then, she’d sighed sadly, and gone downstairs to whip up a batch of cookies for the hungry hunters when they returned.

You Know Not The Day Nor the Hour, Part 2

by Lynne C.

Rating: G

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Setting: Anytime post-“Potential” (7.12), intended to act as “stuff that happened but not while we were looking”. In other words, it tries not to contradict anything that's happened already or (trickier) might be about to happen!

Summary: Spike contemplates the unknown culmination of The First's anticipated apocalypse, and takes steps to prepare.

Spike shut the basement door behind him, holding the carton under one arm, pausing with his hand on the knob to smile at having taken her by surprise. Leaving Buffy Summers without the last word was always something of a feat, and now he gave himself a mental pat on the back at achieving it. *'Sides, she did look like Joyce there for a minute...* It wasn't until after her mother's death that he'd begun to notice a turn of the head or a mannerism in Buffy that would have made his heart skip a beat, had it beaten at all, at the resemblance. It was at once eerie and comforting to see her reflected in her daughter. *Guess that's part of the idea of passing on your genes...you're never really gone, then...Pity I'll nev—*..., he shook off the thought as pointless, and proceeded down into the basement.

He went to a small table in the corner that held an array of household tools, a hand mixer that evidently no longer functioned, and a lantern battery in a bad state of corrosion. Spike pushed this detritus of everyday household life to one side, set his cardboard box down, and began to pull out the contents. Several books he tossed in the direction of his cot, alongside a tatty-looking pair of combat boots; a few objects he put onto the table, before sliding the box halfway under the cot to deal with the rest later.

Sitting down, he drew a sheet of cream-colored writing paper in front of him, uncapped the fountain pen he'd nicked from the Magic Box two years before, and began to write.

He made several false starts, crumpling the efforts up and tossing them towards the carton, most of which landed inside. He'd sit for short periods, hunched over his work, or staring at the water heater whilst tapping the pen against his chin. Finally, he seemed to find his train of thought, and the steady scratching of the pen nib against the heavy paper filled the basement.

At last, he set the pen aside, and stretched, reaching back to rub his neck. *Long bloody time since I've written so much...funny how you never quite lose the knack...*

Once again comfortable, he organized the sheets that he'd filled, and leaned back in his chair to read them over.

Dear Buffy,

How to get this started? You should see the number of pages I've already tossed. It all sounds too cliché. 'If you're reading this, I must be gone...' all that rot.

It's tough, you know? We've said so much to each other over the years ~ can hardly be anything left, right? And still...here I am, trying to say good bye to you. Maybe I shouldn't even bother – things better left unsaid. But, in for a penny...

First with the mea culpa part of the missive. There's plenty I've done to you or involving you for which I'm sorry...and it seems a bit pointless to make a list. You know what they are, and I think by now you know how I feel about them. But on one point, I need to be specific: I was wrong to try to draw you into the darkness. I think part of me even knew it then. But you've always fought so hard against the dark in your nature, and since this thing that's always been between us was a part of that darkness ~ I wanted to push back; make you realize that it was never so black and white as you'd been taught. Of course, I went too far. And that was wrong. Long before that last night upstairs, I'd gone too far. That said, part of your power does spring from darkness, and you'll never be at peace until you accept that. Coming to terms with it doesn't mean becoming its agent. I tried to draw you to the dark and you resisted it because of who you are. The Slayer's power may have some mystical source in the forces of both good and evil, but Buffy Summers is a creature of the light. As hard as I tried, in the end, not only did you resist me, you pulled me towards that light. And though it's been a hell of a lot more painful than I could have imagined, I thank you for it.

'You know not the day nor the hour.' That's from the Bible. Bloody funny, isn't it? Me, a demon, but I remember all those things from when I was alive. William was a pratt, but he was a decent bloke. A bit like Xander, now that I think of it, but worse. Maybe that's why the whelp's always irritated me. William just tried so damned hard to please, to be accepted ~ too hard, really...that was his trouble. So serious, so earnest. I wonder whether I'd ever have gotten a backbone if I'd lived? I sure spent all the years since then trying to be his opposite. But parts of him just stuck. A lot of the parts that drew me to you were his, and certainly if I ever managed to give you any comfort, or be of any use other than as muscle, that came from him. But you'd laugh yourself sick if you could see what he - I - was like back then. He's where the good stuff comes from, but he wasn't tough; not a survivor. He'd never have had anyone's back. To be of any real use to you, I had to be as I am. Go figure that one.

But, I was going somewhere. 'You know not the day nor the hour.' I don't know how this battle's going to end. I know that it may be my chance to do things right. To make up for failing on the tower that night. And, if that's how it ends, it's probably much better than I deserve.

'We're not all gonna make it. You know that.' That's what you said that night. I was so sure it would be me. And I was fine with that; ready for it, you know? There could have been no better way to end this sorry existence than to save both you girls - my girls - that's how I thought of you... still do, really. Then, that day in the alley, behind the Magic Box, after you came back ~ you told me what it had been like for you, when you were dead. I really was sorry you had to give that up. Not so sorry, of course, that I wasn't ecstatic to have you back, nevermind the circumstances. But it made me think about what a good place that must be, and how I'd never know what that was like. It wasn't supposed to matter to me, what came after this, but at that moment, it really did. I don't know where my soul was living before I got it back, and I don't know where it will go when this shell of mine is finally dust. But I can't think it will be anywhere like that. I'm not like you -- I've done too much.

*But if we **could** choose our own afterlife, I know what I'd choose. A place where I could be with you without crisis or struggle or fear ~ just somewhere I could love you without anyone's recrimination. You know, for all the shagging we did, and as mind-blowing as it was, I'd have given anything to make love with you, even just once. I knew you wouldn't have it; that wasn't what you needed from me, or could tolerate from me. Damned ironic! Your Agent Finn and I saw eye-to-eye exactly once, right after I narc'ed out his nasty little habit to you. You probably never knew that he came to my crypt to bluster about for me, and warn me off you. I told him then that sometimes I envied him so much...but then sometimes I thought I'd gotten the better deal; that he could be that close to you and not have you was worse than just plain not having you...we passed a bottle back and forth for a while that day. Of course, then, like a great git, he left when he knew he couldn't have it his way. For me, leaving for good was just never an option. Even when I'd put myself in the same bloody boat as him, just hoping that in time...eh, you know what I hoped. Some of it you were right about...what we were doing couldn't have grown into something better when it was coming out of so much anger and isolation. I get now that we both deserved better,*

not just in general, but from each other. Yeh, to rest in the light of your smile, and hold you peacefully in my arms, and just love you... that's what I'd choose. So, in the end, I guess you were right about that, too...after the consuming passion has taken everything I had, and made me do things I thought impossible, I want to just love you quietly like old married folks. Again, bloody ironic....

You know, I always admired you; I studied you when I first came into town, fascinated with the way you fought ~ your confidence, your spirit, the way you committed to whatever you did, no matter what. And I could also see your fear and your isolation and how heavily your calling weighed on you. When we made that first truce, you were so determined to do what you had to do, but I could almost taste your despair. 'Course, that didn't matter much to me, so long as I could blow town. But, from then on, the fix was in. Dru may have been one crazy bint, but she could see it long before I could, that we were connected. Dancing with you...well, it felt too good to want to end it. Little did I know where it would take us. Like how I've seen around most of those corners that you use to hide what you're thinking and feeling. You've fought me all the way on that, too...I always wondered how your friends could miss so much when they spent so much more time with you. But the times when you let the barriers down for me, and let me see you clearly...the enormity of that'd take my breath away, if I had any, even if it was only because my reaction didn't matter as much to you as theirs did. It meant that even if I didn't have your love, and probably never would, I had a part of your trust that no one else did. Not the part you held most important, of course. But, a fellow takes what he can! You've always hated it when I'd say I knew what was really going on in your head. Sometimes I was off, but more often, I had you figured out. I can almost hear your protests now, that I don't know you half so well as I think. But the way we can hold a conversation just looking at each other...you know I'm right.

I guess this is where I have to give you some advice. You need to learn to accept love, Buffy. Was it Angel who made you push it away? Or was it that useless excuse for an absent father of yours? Or are the expectations of others' love just too much to add to the burdens you already have to bear? Objectively, I know why you had to reject what I represented to you when we were 'together'. But it goes further than just me ~ I just had the privilege of being the glaring example. You've insulated yourself against it, from all quarters, and then don't know why all your feelings are deadened. That's why. Two-way street – give and receive. Both have to happen for the system to work.

Now, speaking of Angel, and of how I figured into your emotional life, here's an unpopular idea that I'm compelled to point out – exercising my right as the departed, don't you know. Part of why you couldn't accept that I loved you without a soul is because if I was capable of it, then Angel was, too. And you couldn't deal with why he didn't. Now, I'm sure you're working up a head of steam reading this, but be honest. Angel's the formative experience that defined the meaning of souled and un-souled for you. You figured it out the way you had to in order to keep going, but that doesn't mean that the way you wrote it is the way it is. Getting my soul back didn't make me love you any more than I already did. Couldn't have, actually. It was about trying to be less of a monster. Because you couldn't love me that way, and also because I thought I'd already become more of a man, and it turned out I hadn't. And that I wanted to. But I'm not going to let you off the hook for why your feelings for me, and mine for you, were such a struggle for you.

Enough about that ancient history.

Finally, you have to know that the thing that kept me going in that cave with the First and its minions doing their worst, was knowing that you believe in me. What I've done for you is so negligible next to what I've done to you, and yet you can offer me a gift as precious as your faith. It's...beyond what I can describe. Thank you.

This letter was difficult to begin, and now it's difficult to end. I guess in a way, if I keep writing, you'll have to keep reading, and that will put off the time when I'm really gone. I miss you. That sounds crazy, a particular specialty of mine of late, but being where you're not, how could I not

miss you? Just thinking about being away from here and you makes me feel empty. So, I won't think about it, and I'll try to pull together what last few things I want to say.

Know what an inspiration you've been to everyone around you.

Know that none of them ever expected you to be perfect.

Know that if people walk out of your life, it's because they're bleedin' idiots, not because there's anything wrong with you.

Let people take care of you sometimes.

Be honest about what you feel ~ honest with yourself and your friends. Sometimes they go in circles trying to figure you out!

Let those goldilocks of yours grow...you're always so beautiful, but never more so than with your hair shining down over your shoulders. It was like having a handful of sunlight...

Remember that Dawn still needs to be reminded that you notice her and that she's special. Kids are that way, needing reinforcement and all.

I can't help hoping you might remember the few good things between us more than the rest of it.

As ever ~

Spike

p.s. Keep any of my things, either in your house or at my crypt that you might want, or pitch them all if that appeals to you. And give the Little Bit a pick if she'd like anything for herself. There's a fussy fountain pen in a box under my cot that belongs to Giles...he'll be surprised to see it again.

He laid the pages down, feeling tired, but satisfied. He stretched backwards, tilting the chair back on two of its legs, resting his wrists on top of his head, and staring for long moments at the wall in front of him, looking through it to see Buffy ~ fighting in the graveyard, talking to her Mom in the kitchen, getting drunk while he played poker for kittens...asking him to tell her that he loved her. That last one was still particularly wrenching. That day, he'd really thought that she might be coming around – might be ready to feel something more for him. He'd really dared to hope. But, in the end, that day was the end of that part of their relationship. *Yeh, you just never can tell what's coming next. But odds are, for me, it's going to be all about her.* He made a noise between a snort and a laugh, and brought the chair back onto all of its legs with a sharp snap that echoed in the still basement.

Refocusing his thoughts on the matter at hand, he aligned the sheets of paper and then folded them, ends up into the center, then the sides overlapping in the middle to form a square. Soft footfalls on the basement steps broke his concentration. He looked up from his work to see Willow hesitating at the base of the steps.

“Hey-a, Red.”

“Hey-a, Spike...”

You Know Not The Day Nor the Hour, Epilogue (Part 3)

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: Post-“Chosen”

They'd stood for a long time, staring at the hole in the ground that used to be their very own home-on-the-Hellmouth. They were all a bit giddy with shock and relief. All the other emotions would hit them later: the loss of many they knew, some they loved, and all they owned; the wonder that they had won and a whole world now lay ahead of them, waiting for what they would make of it.

Vi had an hysterical fit, which distracted from their wisecracks and the dark humor that kept them from having to try and assimilate it all. The wounded still needed tending, and the bus was turning into an oven, baking in the hot spring sun. The young slayers began to get restive, and finally Buffy, Willow, Xander and Giles, one-by-one, turned away from the crater, not really ready to bid farewell to everything left there, but realizing that they might never be really ready. So, they silently thought their thoughts and left bits of their hearts in the yawning hole that separated them from all that had come before, and was now catapulting them into an unknown future.

They drove for less than an hour, finding a motor lodge outside of San Luis Obispo that left much to be desired aesthetically, but which appeared to have few occupants. Giles had rented all of their dozen vacant rooms, thanking the almighty powers of the banking industry for seeing fit to provide him with a great deal of credit. The manager had raised an eyebrow as he looked out the window, and saw several bandaged girls milling outside the schoolbus. “Powder puff football...they take it very seriously,” had been Giles' explanation.

They'd settled into their rooms, and tried to relax – not easy after the experience they'd been through, with the residual adrenaline keeping them keyed up for hours. Finally, as evening fell, and the breezes turned to bring refreshing cool sea air inland, a degree of calm descended. And Willow knocked softly on the door of the room Buffy had chosen to share with Dawn.

Buffy opened the door, and bid her friend enter. The theme to “Three's Company” chirped quietly out of the television set, and the bright images from the screen flashed in the darkening room, illuminating Dawn's sleeping form on one of the narrow beds. The older girls sat down side by side on the other, regarding each other solemnly.

“So Buff, how ya holdin' up?”

“You know, about like most times we avert the end of the world ~ in need of some moisturizer and a pedicure.”

Though her words were vintage Buffy, Willow could see the exhaustion battling with deep sadness in her eyes.

“Um, Buffy, I...well, about Spike –”

“He was amazing, Willow...you should have seen him. He did it. He did it. In the end, it was him who saved us. And I can't believe he's gone. He was so alive, for a dead guy....”

Willow hesitated while Buffy stared at her own hands, folded in her lap. The reverie lasted only a minute or so before Buffy continued, “but what were you going to say?”

“Well...Spike gave me a letter some months ago...uh, in January, that he wanted me to give you if he didn't make it through all this...it's...kinda like – he knew. B-but, it was still in the house. I'm sorry, but it's gone. There were things he wanted you to know, to say good-bye, I guess...” she trailed off, not sure what else to say. She hadn't been aware of conceiving an affection for the wiry vampire, but she was conscious of a lump in her own throat that was not entirely out of sympathy for her friend's pain.

Buffy shook her head, and a small, sad smile played at the corners of her mouth. “It's okay, Will. The last few days...we quit hiding from each other, and said a lot of things that had been there between us for a long time. I – I don't really think there was anything in that letter that we hadn't, in the end, already covered, you know? He gave me so much strength, when I let him, right up to the end. I think a part of me loves him.” And then she closed her eyes, and leaned sideways to rest her head on Willow's shoulder. And Willow's arm came up to encircle her shoulders. And they sat that way for a long time.

And a long time later, Willow whispered, “He had really pretty handwriting. I wish you could have seen it.” And then they were quiet again.