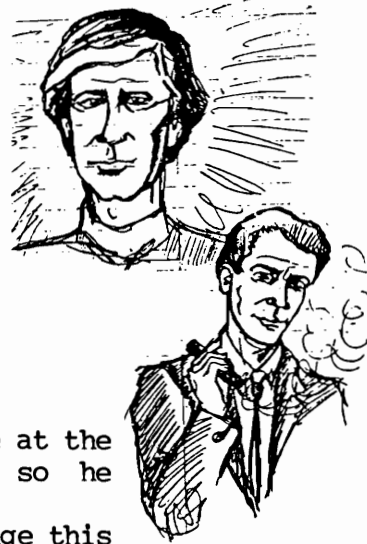


LEAPING ON A SHOESTRING

Diana Smith/Pat Dunn



"Eddie?"

Sam Beckett blinked and looked across the breakfast table at the attractive blonde woman. She had an anxious look on her face so he managed what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "Yes?"

"Are you sure you're all right? You're acting very strange this morning-- even for you." She peered at him over a pair of rather large reading glasses. "That cosh on the head must have done more damage than we thought."

"Cosh?"

She came around the table and touched his forehead, then checked his eyes. "You're not just trying to get out of my dinner party tonight, are you? I forgave you last time when that little girl laid you out in the cemetery, but you can only use that scam so many times, Eddie."

"Of course I'll be there," Sam said, finally realizing she had a British accent. He flashed a disarming smile. "I wouldn't want to miss one of your parties."

"Hmm." Sam could tell she wasn't convinced by the suspicious way she eyed him. "So are you going in this morning?"

"Well, uh, I suppose so." Sam wondered where he was supposed to be going-- work, no doubt, but where was that? He wished Al would show up soon.

"You'd better get going then," she advised. "It's nearly a quarter past eight. Are you taking the Tube or driving your car?"

Sam hesitated, while his faulty memory translated "Tube" as "subway". Since he didn't know where he was going, he said, "Driving, I guess."

"Don't forget to be here early to help me," she said, sitting down at the table and returning to her paper.

"Uh, okay." Sam stood up and patted his pockets until he found the car keys. He hesitated, wondering if he was expected to kiss--his wife?--good-- bye. She didn't seem particularly interested or concerned about it, merely turning another page of her paper and sipping her coffee. "See you later then," Sam finally ventured and she gave an absent waggle of her fingers so he headed for the screen door.

"What are you doing, Eddie?"

Sam paused, turned and said uncertainly, "I was just checking the weather?"

"Maybe I should drive you to the station--"

Station, Sam caught and decided he was a cop; undercover since he wasn't dressed in a uniform. What **was** he wearing? He frowned as he plucked at his shirt which looked suspiciously like a pajama top. The color went well-enough with his ruffled gray suit and open-necked tie.

"Eddie? Maybe we should stop by the doctor's," she said, clearly worried.

Sam looked up and shook his head. "I'm sure I'm okay, but maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea if you drove me to work," he said. Without Al, he had no idea where he was supposed to be going, who she was, or even his own last name.

"Let me get ready then," she said, heading down a hallway that led to the front of the house. Sam slowly followed and was surprised when she disappeared through a door and closed it behind her. This left him standing in a foyer that contained a small table by the front door, and a staircase. Above the table there was a mirror and Sam gravitated towards it. "I'm a Beatle with moustache," Sam said softly as he fingered his upper lip. Straight dark-brown hair in a style reminiscent of the 1960s curled at the back of his collar. Equally dark brown eyes stared back at Sam, and the bags under those eyes told of recent stress even though the man appeared to be no older than his late twenties.

"You're still quite good-looking enough, Eddie. Let's go."

Sam turned to see the woman juggling a briefcase, purse and umbrella, and he reached out to help.

His good intentions only succeeded in causing her to drop the umbrella. Sam ducked to pick it up, briefly blocking her way, and straightened up to find her eyeing him with exasperation.

"Just get the door, please, Eddie."

"Right, the-- door." Sam heaved a sigh and opened the front door, letting her precede him out onto the steps and down the walkway towards the small orange car parked at the curb.

Sam closed the door behind him and glanced at his surroundings. The house seemed to be part of a nice suburban neighborhood, filled with row houses and neatly tended gardens.

Enjoying the view, and supposing that his companion would drive, Sam stepped to the passenger side of the car. He blinked in surprise at the steering wheel he saw inside the window, then met the woman's quizzical expression.

"I thought you wanted me to drive, then?"

"This is England!"

"Eddie, I'm really not up to this," she sighed, pushing him aside and opening the car door. "Get in."

Sam went around to the other side and slid in as she started the car.

"Shall I pick you up for lunch?" she asked a few minutes later, halting the car and looking expectantly at Sam.

"Uh, yes, alright," he agreed, taking the hint and getting out of the car. As she drove off, he took a good look at the building. "Radio West?" Sam stood staring up at the sign, trying to assimilate the fact he probably wasn't a cop but rather worked at a radio station.

"Hi, Eddie," a young man said as he came out the glass doors. "How's the case coming?"

"Well, I, uh--"

"The old boy's on about expenses again," the man warned as he hurried past him. "Hope you haven't any smashed cars or hired planes to report."



"I don't think--"

"Oh, Sonia has quite a batch of mail for the 'Private Ear'," the young man called over his shoulder. "Must dash! This tip could be my big break!"

Sam stared after him, figuring he must have misunderstood-- maybe it was the heavy accent. Private Ear?

"Oh boy," Sam muttered, pushing through the door and into the lobby. Someone going up the circular staircase called a hello so Sam ventured after them, pretending he knew where he was going.

The staircase led to another lobby, and a red-head sat at what he assumed was a reception desk. When she looked up and saw Sam, she flashed a welcoming smile.

"Morning, Eddie. Your popularity's growing," she said, handing him a huge bundle of letters. "Several calls, too, although not too many interesting ones," she added, handing him several cassette tapes. "Oh, and he wants to see you-- the usual expense account rage, I should imagine."

"Thanks, uh, Sonia," Sam said, glancing at her nameplate. Awkwardly juggling all she'd handed him, he looked around the lobby.

"Eddie, I want a word with you," a middle-aged, small man announced, coming up behind Sam.

Sonia gave him a sympathetic look as he turned to confront the other man. "Yes?"

The newcomer shoved a paper in Sam's face, and he peered at it over the pile of mail in his arms. The paper appeared to be a list of expenses for someone with the unlikely name of 'Eddie Shoestring'. "Er, is there a problem?"

"Is there a problem?!" the older man repeated, rolling his eyes. "We go through this every month, Eddie! You simply cannot continue to take advantage of Radio West in this fashion."

"No, of course not," Sam said, hoping to placate the man enough to be left alone.

"I don't care--" He broke off and peered at Sam. "What did you say?"

"Uh-- should I redo the expenses?"

Sam's comment stunned both of his coworkers, who exchanged glances and then stared worriedly at Sam.

"Perhaps we'd better have a chat in my office," the man informed him.

With a sigh, Sam trailed after him.

The office door was imprinted with the title "Director of Programmes"; the desk nameplate said "Donald Satchley", and the calendar indicated it was June 18, 1980. Sam digested these tidbits of information, then looked up as his--boss?--spoke.

"Now Eddie, what seems to be the trouble? Are you having problems with Mrs. Bayliss?"

Sam had to tread carefully through the minefield of ignorance on his part. "No-- no, I don't think so."

"Sit down, Eddie. You're not still dwelling on that affair with Tom, are you?"

Affair? Sam sat carefully on the gray sofa. "Well, I--"

"You **know** he was the one with the problem. He was jealous because you do an excellent job. You're providing a worthy service to our listeners. Oh, I know you think some of your cases are inconsequential, but they are important to your clients. We're getting excellent response," he concluded, nodding at the mail in Sam's lap.

"And the ratings haven't been bad either," Sam said, surprising himself with the knowledge he shouldn't have possessed. He blinked and added slowly, "But I don't deserve it--"

"Now that is absolute rubbish!" Donald Satchley proclaimed. "You're a **fine** private investigator, Eddie, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

Sam looked confused as the tenuous link to the real Eddie's mind faded. "I-- won't," he said carefully. "Was there anything else, Donald?"

The programme director shook his head, and Sam stood up, trying to hang onto all of his mail. "Take it easy for a bit, eh?"

"Sure," Sam assented as he left the office.

Donald stared after him worriedly. Shoestring's distraction and general moodiness had been markedly evident over the last few months. 'The Private Ear' might be looking for a kind ear himself into which he might pour out his troubles.

Sam wandered around, trying to look as if he **wasn't** looking for an office door with his name on it.

"Hey Eddie, I'm done in here if you want to listen to your tapes," a woman said, coming out of a studio.

"Thanks," Sam smiled, squeezing past her as she held the door open. His gentlemanly nature protested, but with his arms full he had little choice.

Sitting at the console, he finally unloaded his arms. Popping one of the tapes in, Sam began sorting through the huge pile of letters.

"'Mr. Shoestring'. 'The Private Ear' 'Private **Ear**'? I thought I was some sort of investigator," he muttered, reading one of the letters.

"It's a joke, Sam," a familiar voice said beside him.

He gave a start and glared at the holographic image of his best friend. "A **joke**, Al!?"

"Private Eye, Private Ear," Al Calavicci shrugged. "Eddie Shoestring's got this radio show-- he takes on cases people call in to him, solves the mystery and explains how he did it over the air. Radio West foots the bill."

Sam sighed. "Thanks, Al. Where have you been, anyway?"

The hologram looked apologetic. "Sorry, Sam. Ziggy had trouble finding you-- England's a long way from Alamagordo, you know."

"Yeah, I know." Sam absently stopped the cassette player and tapped his fingers on the console. "All right, what's the rest of it? Why am I here?"

Al rubbed the back of his neck. "We don't know-- Eddie's-- not

saying a lot, back at the Waiting Room. Beaks is working with him, but he's clammed up good. Just sits there, doodling."

"Doodling?"

"Yeah, you know-- drawing little pictures on a pad." He glanced at the handlink as it beeped. "Ziggy says Shoestring had a nervous breakdown a while back-- he's been out of the hospital about a year."

Sam frowned. "I've got to find out what case he's been working on, Al. Someone-- Mrs. Bayliss-- said I'd had a 'cosh' on the head. I guess that's why she didn't get too suspicious at anything I said. But I can't keep faking it like this morning. I need information!"

"Okay, okay," Al said, tapping the handlink. "That knock on the noggin must have done something, because Eddie has another breakdown and he never recovers from it."

"There must be something that causes it," Sam frowned. "You don't just wake up one morning and have a mental collapse."

"Well, it could be a case he's working on," Al said, rocking on his heels. "But he never wrote down any details and cracked up before the Private Ear could reveal the story to his listeners."

"Al."

"Yeah?"

"Are you saying we don't know what I'm supposed to fix?" Sam's voice was deceptively calm.

"Um, well, I guess so-- but it's just until Beaks gets Shoestring to open up!" Al said defensively, doing his best to avoid Sam's accusing glare.

"How long is **that** going to take?"

Al scratched his forehead with a familiar gesture of nervousness. "Sam, we don't know yet, but we're working on it! Look, just do the best you can, and I'll get back and check on Verbena's progress." He tapped a key on the handlink and brought up the doorway, then paused. "Oh-- one more thing. Mrs. Bayliss's first name is Erica, and she's your landlady-- among other things." He wagged an eyebrow significantly, then vanished.

"Al!" Receiving no answer, Sam heaved a heartfelt sigh and reluctantly turned back to reading Eddie's mail.

§§§§§

In the anteroom to the Waiting Room at Project Quantum Leap, Dr. Verbena Beaks studied the monitor, watching her latest patient. He had settled down a little after receiving the felt-tip pen and drawing pad he had asked for. Now he was seated cross-legged on the examination bed, drawing steadily.

Eddie Shoestring had had a rotten night, and was having a worse day. He'd come down to the breakfast table with a splitting headache, had barely managed to down his first cup of tea, and then had apparently blacked out.

He'd woken up here-- wherever **here** was-- wearing some sort of weird hospital-issue pajamas, and with absolutely no idea of what he'd done to be committed. He was afraid to ask, after last time.

There was also the little matter that he seemed to be wearing another man's face and body, but Eddie was ignoring that hallucination in the stubborn hope that it would eventually go away.

The door slid open, and Eddie glanced up as the pretty black woman entered again. She was certainly better-looking than any of his doctors at Fordingvale had ever been.

"Are you feeling better, Eddie?" she asked, using her professionally concerned voice.

He didn't reply right away but Verbena had a great store of patience. She watched as he made a few quick strokes on his notepad.

"I cracked up again, didn't I?" he asked conversationally. "Rather like last time, although I **do** remember smashing that blinking computer. I-- I didn't hurt anyone, did I?" The fearful uncertainty that crept into his voice touched Verbena.

"No, Eddie, you haven't hurt anyone," she reassured him. "And you haven't cracked up again."

"Then what am I doing, locked in a stark room and dressed in what I assume are the pajamas of this particular asylum?" Eddie capped his pen and put it in the breast pocket of the white lab coat he wore over a white jumpsuit. His hand was shaky as he rubbed at his forehead and his voice quivered. "Where the hell am I?"

"This is called the Waiting Room," Verbena said, knowing she had to choose her words very carefully. "I can't tell you exactly where or when you are, Eddie, but I **will** assure you that you won't be here long." She hesitated, then added, "Provided you help us by answering a few questions."

He tilted his head and watched her as she approached him. This was a new twist to the old interrogation routine, and he thought he'd been through most of those.

Verbena halted as Eddie swung his legs over the examination bed and hopped down. He stared at her warily, then glanced down at his reflection.

"Right then, Doctor," Eddie said. "I'll answer your questions if you'll tell me one thing."

"Yes?" Verbena said cautiously.

He pointed at the unfamiliar face staring up at him from the mirrored surface of the table. "Who the bloody **hell** is that, and why do I look like him?!"

Verbena had to admit it was a reasonable request. Eddie deserved a truthful answer-- but how much of the truth could he handle, in his edgy state?

The color drained from Eddie's face and he leaned back against the table. "It really **was** a UFO, wasn't it? One of your-- people-- has taken my place and even if I escaped, who would believe me? I'm just crazy Eddie, gone crackers again. No wonder everyone thinks poor Mrs. Byrne is loony."

"Eddie, please don't jump to conclusions," Verbena began. She took a step toward him, stopping when he tried to cringe further away. "Listen to me, please. This is **not** a UFO!"

He considered that warily. "Yeah, but if you **were** a body-snatcher, that's what you'd want me to think, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so," she said, smiling at him. "That does sound logical. And if you're capable of logical thinking, then you must know you haven't 'cracked up' again."

Eddie blinked and rubbed his forehead. This circular reasoning was making his headache worse.

"So if I'm **not** in the nuthatch, and this isn't a UFO, then where **am** I?"

She sighed. "It's difficult to explain."

"Try." He picked up the pad of paper, flipped to a clean sheet, and pulled the pen from his pocket. "You're an American, aren't you, Doctor?"

"New Orleans," she admitted. "And before you ask, we **are** in America. I can't tell you exactly where."

"How'd I get here?" He was drawing again, occasionally glancing at Verbena. "Last I heard, instantaneous matter transmission was only on Star Trek."

She blinked at that notion. "As far as I know, that's true. Are you a fan of Science Fiction, Eddie?"

"Not really." He shrugged and studied his drawing. "It's a bit more like Science Reality, though, isn't it?"

Before the psychiatrist could reply, the Waiting Room door opened and Al Calavicci strode forward. "Okay, Shoestring, I want some answers from you."

Eddie looked him up and down, then calmly returned to his drawing. "Yeah, I could use a few of those myself."

"Admiral, I don't think--" Verbena began.

"Listen, Ziggy's drawing blanks on this one. The only way we're going to get the information Sam needs is from **him**."

Eddie flipped to a new sheet of paper and started another drawing. "Who's Sam?"

Al took a breath. "He's my pal, and he's stuck with your job, at least for now. What case were you working on, Eddie?"

"Mrs. Byrne hired me to find the flying saucer," he said, his tone matter-of-fact. While they took that in, he inquired, "Does this bloke Sam look anything like that?" With the felt-tip pen he pointed at "his" reflection.

"Uh, well-- usually," Al admitted.

"But right now he looks like **me**?"

Al exchanged glances with Verbena. "Yeah, Eddie, I guess he does. **What** flying saucer?!"

"This one, maybe."

"**This** one?!"

"Eddie, I told you--"

Al and Verbena spoke in unison, and Eddie just smiled and added a curl of smoke to his portrait of Al. "She lives in a secluded area and has been seeing a strange airship landing in her woods. The police, of course, don't believe her."

"**You** do?"

Eddie looked calmly at Al. "I believe **she** believes it. Something is upsetting her and I'm determined to set her mind at ease."

"That's very commendable of you," Verbena said.

He gave her a quick look, then glanced down. "Except I'm not doing her any good-- at least, I haven't managed to so far. All I've found is a patch of ground in the forest where **something** has landed. Someone coshed me from behind. When I came to, I was lying across the front seat of my car."

"What's so odd about that?" Al asked.

Eddie met his concerned gaze. "I was 20 kilometres from where I'd parked it to begin with."

"Someone was trying to scare you off," Al suggested.

"Yeah." Eddie hesitated. "There's-- one other thing. When I drove home that night, something followed me."

"You were tailed by a car?"

"Not a car," Eddie said reluctantly. "Unless cars can fly above treetop level and have red and green lights."

Al's jaw dropped. "A UFO?!"

Eddie rubbed his forehead and mustered a smile. "I don't know. Look, could I have a cup of tea and a couple of aspirin, please"

"Huh? Sure, sure," Al muttered absently.

"Sit down, Eddie," Verbena urged. She checked his eyes, then said, "I'll be right back. Stay put, lie down if you'd like to. Don't worry, I won't forget your tea."

"Thanks," he called. He glanced at Al. "She doesn't believe me. Do you, Admiral?"

"Maybe," Al said, taking a meditative puff on his cigar. He pointed it at the neglected sketching pad. "Can you draw me a picture of it?"

"What good would that do? Are you going to go out and beat the bushes for it? Or are you afraid I saw it too clearly and will reveal more than you'd like?" He hopped up on the table, his legs tucked under him so that he resembled an elf perched on a mushroom.

Al removed his cigar and glared at Eddie, then sighed and began to pace. "His name's Sam Beckett." He waved the cigar in the direction of the reflection that had disturbed Eddie so much.

Eddie frowned. "Didn't he write plays or something?"

"Not **that** Beckett!" Al snapped.

"Ah. So what **does** he do? Your friend?"

Al thoughtfully puffed smoke, pacing while he considered. "He helps people," he said at last. "People like you, Eddie."

"So he's a psychologist as well as a body-snatcher," Eddie remarked. "Now we're getting somewhere!"

"No..." Al rubbed the back of his neck. "It's not like that. Listen,

you're here because Something, or Someone, has decided you need to be here, at least for a little while."

"And people used to call ~~me~~ crazy," Eddie quipped. "Why is the U.S. military concealing the presence of flying saucers? In England?"

Al looked blank for a second.

"She called you Admiral," the detective pointed out.

"You can call me Al." The Observer hesitated, then turned for the doorway. "I haven't got time to play games with you any more right now. We'll track down the UFO **without** the drawing!"

"You believe there **is** a UFO?"

Eddie's question made Al pause.

"After all I've seen and done, I believe it's possible that we're not alone," Al replied.

"Hmmm." Eddie made a few careful strokes on the notepad. "So your body-snatching friend is interested in UFOs?"

"Yeah, I think you could say-- Sam's **not** a body-snatcher! You make him sound like a ghoul in those creepy movies," Al protested with a shudder of distaste.

Eddie's lips quirked up at that. "If your friend finds Mrs. Byrne's flying saucer, what happens next? How do I go home?"

"We call it Leaping," Al said. "Don't worry, you'll go back where you belong just as soon as Sam's finished whatever he's supposed to do."

Eddie glanced at him, then held out the sketch pad. "There it is, for what it's worth. I don't know why, but I believe you, Al."

"Good." The Observer took the pad and studied the drawing. "Thanks. Take it easy for awhile. I'll be back."

"You could send someone along with that cup of tea-- and some biscuits," Eddie called as Al headed for the door.

"You got it," Al promised, pocketing the sketch pad and flashing Eddie a salute.

§§§§§

Sam shut off the tape player and ejected the cassette, then glanced at his watch. He frowned and gave it a tap, concluding that Eddie must have forgotten to wind it. No wonder Mrs. Bayliss was worried about him being on time for her party.

He set it by the wall clock, then stretched and rubbed his eyes. The sound of the Imaging Chamber's door caught his attention and he turned to see Al beside him. "Al, did you find out anything?"

The hologram waved a sketch pad, "It's all in here! UFOs, Sam!"

"Oh, Al--"

"Shoestring's working on a flying saucer case, trying to prove to a little old lady she's not losing it," Al went on. "Last night he got too close to something and they knocked him out..." He recounted Eddie's story of the lights which had apparently followed him home, finishing with, "There it is, Sam-- that's what he saw!"

Sam eyed his friend in bemusement, then glanced at the drawing Al extended for his inspection. "This is **it**?"

"That's it. What do you think, Sam?"

Sam said critically, "Well, there **is** a cigar-shaped object here-- and the guy holding it looks kinda weird, but..."

Al frowned and took a look at the pad. His frown deepened as he saw the caricature of himself. "Wrong page," he muttered, flipping it over.

Sam's eyes twinkled as he looked at the second drawing, but his amusement vanished. "Al, do you really believe that Shoestring saw this craft?"

"**Maybe**," Al said. "I think anything's possible." He raised an eyebrow and tilted his head. "And what makes you call it a 'craft'?"

Sam acknowledged that with a rueful grin. "Maybe because I think anything's possible, too."

"Yeah." Al grinned, then gave a hitch of his shoulders. "So what do we do now?"

Sam ran a hand through his hair and paced a little. "Okay, I guess tonight I'd better go back out to this place where he saw it."

"Do you think that's wise, Sam?"

"Well, I'm not going to find out the truth staying **here**..." Sam paused as Sonia poked her head into the listening room.

"Eddie, Mrs. Bayliss's in the lobby waiting for you. Something about lunch--?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Uh-- right-- I'll be there in a second," Sam improvised. He waited until she had withdrawn, then turned to the hologram. "Al, I just remembered-- I'm supposed to be at a dinner party tonight..."

"Do you want to go to some old party or have the chance to save a little old lady's sanity?" Al demanded, folding his arms.

"You're right," Sam decided. "But first, I'm going to have some lunch." He started for the door. "Do me a favor, Al, and come along?"

"Why?"

"So Mrs. Bayliss won't think I'm a total geek."

Al's muttered comment was unintelligible, but Sam shot him a hard glare anyway, just for principle's sake.

Sam gathered up Shoestring's mail, shoving pieces into his jacket pockets as he left the listening room. He found Mrs. Bayliss waiting impatiently in the reception area, and the crossed arms and tapping foot spoke loud and clear.

"Eddie, where have you been? I don't have much time and I still need to stop by the market for tonight," she said, lowering her arms when he offered a crooked grin. "You haven't forgotten about the party, have you?"

"No, I haven't forgotten," Sam said, bending to retrieve a couple of letters that he'd dropped. "But something's come up-- a development in the case--"

"Case," Erica Bayliss snorted. "Eddie, you shouldn't encourage her like this. She needs help--"

"And I'm giving it to her," Sam cut in. "She thinks she's going crazy, and I want to prove to her that she isn't."

Erica glanced around the lobby, and took Sam by the arm. "Eddie, I know this case touches a little close to home, but--"

"I saw it," he said evenly, meeting her gaze.

"What?!"

"I saw the UFO last night," he repeated, heading for the staircase. He traded glances with Al, as the hologram moved aside in order to avoid being walked through. It didn't harm him, or the person doing it, but Al always claimed it bugged the hell out of him.

"The-- Eddie!" Erica followed him down to the main lobby and out to the curb. "Eddie, for heavens' sake, slow down!"

"I thought you were in a hurry," Sam said, halting by the car.

Erica glared at him. "Why didn't you mention this last night?"

"Wasn't thinking too clearly, I guess," Sam said, gambling that it was true. "But I remembered it this morning. There's **something** out there, and I've got to find out what it is."

"Oh Eddie, it's **not** a UFO," Erica said as he opened the car door on the passenger side.

"Maybe, maybe not," Sam said, getting in the car. When Erica got in the driver's seat, he continued. "But there is something, and it's terrifying Mrs. Byrne. And someone definitely hit me over the head and drove my car 20 kilometres from the site. Doesn't that sound even a little suspicious to you?"

"All right, I'll give you that," Erica said, switching on the ignition. "But it's not extraterrestrial in nature, Eddie. More like it's some land developer trying to scare her off the land, or something equally nasty but human."

"And someone needs to investigate, don't you agree?"

Erica sighed. "And that someone has to be Eddie Shoestring."

"So it would seem."

They drove in silence for a few minutes, and when Erica pulled the car up to the curb in front of a pub, she turned to face Sam. "But it's more than that, isn't it, Eddie? It's because everyone says Mrs. Byrne has gone off, needs to be locked away someplace quiet. Maybe she **does** need that kind of help. There's no shame in psychoanalysis."

"She's talking about Eddie's little trip to the funny farm," Al said from the backseat.

"Not if you need it," Sam agreed quietly. It had been suggested more than once that perhaps Dr. Beckett needed a "little rest", that his idea of Time Travel and Quantum Leaping was insane. There had been times when he'd begun to believe that perhaps they were right, that he **was** crazy. But Al had believed in him and the Project; Al who had insisted he was perfectly sane and that genius was often mistaken for insanity. Did Eddie Shoestring have anyone to believe in him? Erica Bayliss might be his landlady and lover, but did she **love** him? Did she stand behind him?

And what about the as-yet-unseen Mrs. Byrne? It sounded as if Eddie Shoestring was the only one in her corner.

Sam glanced over his shoulder at the hologram and smiled. No, Eddie wasn't the only one. She now had Sam Beckett and Al Calavicci.

"Eddie?"

"If she does need that kind of help, I'll see that she gets it," Sam said to Erica. "But first I need to prove to myself that she does."

She sighed, shook her head, and gave him a quick kiss. "All right, Eddie. I should have remembered how stubborn you can be when it comes to your little old ladies."

Sam blinked and looked quickly at Al for an explanation, but the hologram only shrugged.

"Get us a table, and order the drinks, why don't you? I'm going to the powder room." She gathered her purse and got out of the car, locking her door before turning to enter the pub.

Sam followed. "What do you want to drink?" he asked casually, hoping she wouldn't say, 'Oh, the usual'.

It was too much to hope for. "The usual," she said over her shoulder as she headed for the ladies' room.

Sam hung his head for a moment, then slowly walked toward the crowded bar while looking for an empty table.

"This is great, Sam! Times like this I wish I wasn't a hologram," Al moaned, bright eyes darting as he looked around the pub. "This is my kinda place!"

"Hey, Eddie-- the usual?" asked a very cheerful man behind the bar. A wide grin on his cherubic face, he was setting glasses full of dark liquid on the bar, the glasses disappearing as fast as he filled them.

"Uh, yeah," Sam said, relieved that the decision had been made for him. The bar man nodded and handed Sam two dark-colored bottles.

"What, no table yet?" Erica said, coming up behind him. "There's one."

Sam obediently followed her as she led the way to a table just being freed up by a trio of fresh-faced young women. They looked at Sam and giggled as they squeezed past, and Sam thought at least one of them rubbed against him more than was necessary to get past.

He looked up to meet Erica's eyes and was surprised by the look of resigned acceptance he saw there.

"Young or old, it's always the same, isn't it? It's a bloody good thing I'm not the jealous type, Eddie," she said, taking one of the bottles from him and sitting down.

"I don't know what you mean," Sam said, taking a seat across from her.

"It's the killer Shoestring charm," Erica said, sipping from the beer bottle. "No woman is immune, no matter what her age. I'm certainly no exception."

"This might be a good time to mention that you're skipping out on the party," Al said helpfully.

"Erica, I--"

"Oh Eddie, no," she said, giving him a reproachful look.

Sam blinked and glanced at Al before saying, "No what?"

"You're trying to weasel out. I can always tell when you get that all too innocent look on your face. Eddie, you promised you'd be there. What's more important-- me or a little old lady? Oh, never mind, I know the answer. So go play in the woods," she said, plunking the bottle on the table and standing up.

"Whoever hit me last night wasn't playing," Sam said quietly. He looked up as she paused, and went on, "Suppose they go after Mrs. Byrne the same way? I've got a hard head, but she might not be so lucky. What if she's killed while I'm at your party, enjoying myself?"

Erica met his eyes, and managed a wry smile. "You never enjoy yourself at my parties, Eddie, as you frequently remind me."

"That's not--"

"It's all right." She touched his cheek. "I wish you'd stop blaming yourself for everything wrong with the world, however."

"Well, maybe I can make sure that nothing goes wrong this time," Sam said, the words as true for him as they might have been for Eddie Shoe-string.

Erica nodded, and bent to give him a brief kiss. "Be careful, please? I'm running low on iodine and bandages."

"Aw, women **love** playing nursemaids," Al commented, watching with interest.

"Then you don't mind?"

"I didn't say **that**," she retorted, straightening up and adjusting her hold on her pursestrap. "But I'll let you off the hook tonight **if** you help me with the shopping at the grocers first."

"All right," he said, smiling. He reached for his beer, only to see her turning away from the table. "Uh-- Erica? Where are you going?"

"To the grocers, of course! Really, Eddie, sometimes you are so-- Are you coming or not?!"

Sam sighed and rose to his feet. "Is a beer all I get for lunch?"

"I'll fix you a sandwich at home," she said, heading for the door. "And if you're a **very** good boy, I might even let you have dessert." The words were innocent enough, but there was no mistaking the suggestive tone or leer as she grabbed his loosened tie to pull him after her.

"Ohh-- boy," Sam sighed as he followed her.

§§§§§

"Take a left at the fork."

Sam glanced at the hologram, who was studying a notepad. "Are you sure, Al? This is looking pretty isolated," he said, peering over Al's arm at the map drawn by Eddie.

"Keep your eyes on the road, Sam-- and stay on the wrong side, will ya?" Al admonished, looking up. "Of course it's isolated. What kind of UFO lands in the middle of a city? They always land in a field or something. Don't you remember E.T. or Starman?"

"I'm lucky I can remember my own name," Sam grumbled. "Besides, this isn't the movies, this is reality, Al."

The Observer raised an eyebrow at that one, but didn't comment.

"What about Eddie? How's he doing? Does he still think he's been abducted by a UFO?"

"Naw, he's fine," Al said after a moment's hesitation. "Well, Beaks says he's got a mild concussion, but she's feeding him aspirin and

making him rest a lot. We're lucky the bump on his noggin didn't give him amnesia, or we'd really be in the dark about things."

"Guess so," Sam said. "I wonder why he doesn't keep files on his cases, though?"

"Eddie says he's got a photographic memory, so he never writes anything down."

"Terrific." Sam glanced at the hologram. "There's something you're not telling me, isn't there? Why is he cooperating with us?"

Al rubbed the back of his neck and peered through the windshield. "At the top of the hill there's a dirt road to your right and it leads to the clearing where Eddie saw it land."

"Al--"

"On the other side of the clearing is Mrs. Byrne's cottage. She owns all this land. One hundred-fifty acres of undeveloped countryside-- good reason to have a little old lady declared loony," Al said, ignoring Sam's attempts to interrupt. "Whoever gains her power of attorney could clean up good."

"Suppose they could," Sam said. He slowed the car as they crested the hill, and turned onto the dirt road that Al had described. "So you think someone's trying to gaslight Mrs. Byrne into selling out?"

"Could be," Al admitted. "Eddie thought so-- until he saw the bogey."

"Bogey," Sam muttered. Squinting at the dirt track Al had so generously called a "road". It was little more than two ruts running crookedly among the trees.

"That's Air Force lingo for an unidentified radar blip," Al said.

"I **know** that, Al," Sam snapped.

"Well, excuse me," the Observer retorted. "It's so hard to tell what you know nowadays, what with all those swiss-cheese holes in your memory... Don't pull out where they can see you," he warned as the car reached the clearing.

Sam rolled his eyes, but obeyed, stopping but not shutting off the engine immediately. "I assume you mean the ones who are setting this up to make Mrs. Byrne **think** she's seeing a UFO, not an extraterrestrial. Right?"

"They sure would be a lot easier to handle than a pack of little green guys," Al said. He scowled at the handlink as it beeped. "Though Ziggy's giving higher odds on the flying crockery theory."

"Well," Sam began, reaching for the ignition key, "I think--" He broke off, staring in astonishment as the car radio blared to life.

"Sam, are you crazy?! Shut that off!"

"I didn't turn it **on**!" Sam shouted above the static-marred music. He cut the engine but the radio continued to play, and the interior lights flashed on and off in time to it.

"Sam, get **out**!" Al called as the vehicle began to rock violently.

"Oh, boy," Sam muttered, opening his door and lunging out of the car.

Al stabbed a button on the handlink and vanished, reappearing out-

side, next to the physicist. "Weirdsville Central," he commented. "Sam, are you okay?"

Sam rolled over and sat up, carefully moving arms and legs until he was certain nothing was broken. Wincing, he rubbed his buttock where a large sharp stone poked him. "What the--?" He stared at the car which continued to rock back and forth until it flipped over, reminding Sam of a turtle on its back.

"Sam! Sam!"

"I'm okay," Sam assured the frantic hologram who was fairly dancing on the balls of his feet in agitation at his uselessness.

"How's Eddie gonna explain **that**?" Al whistled, pointing at the car with his cigar.

"I don't--" Sam's words were cut off in the rush and roar of wind. His hair and clothes whipping madly about as he stood up, Sam squinted against the flying dust and dirt, trying to locate Al.

"Sam!"

He turned to see Al staring up at the sky, pointing with Ziggy's handlink. Tilting his head back, Sam had to shade his eyes against the glare of bright lights hovering overhead.

"~~Sam~~--!"

This time Sam followed Al's pointing handlink and Sam saw a fragile-looking white-haired elderly woman entering the clearing. She seemed oblivious to the force of the wind and Sam wondered how she could even stay on her feet. Sam skirted the edge of the clearing as he made his way over to her, aware that the lights were drawing closer.

"Mr. Shoestring! It **is** real, isn't it?" the woman greeted when Sam was within earshot. "I've not lost my mind, have I? There really is a craft!"

Sam could hardly deny it, so he simply nodded and smiled as she grabbed his hands, laughing with joy at the evidence of her eyes.

"Mrs. Byrne!" Sam shouted above the wind. Cupping his hand around his mouth, he leaned towards her ear. "Mrs. Byrne, it's not safe here! We should go inside--"

"**What**?!" she called back. "And miss **this**?" She gestured to the sky and threw her head back, laughing like a girl.

Sam grinned and looked up.

"Besides," she shouted, pointing at the center of the clearing, "it's not **us** that they want!"

"Sam," said Al, "you're not gonna believe this..."

Peering through the dust and glare, Sam's jaw dropped as he made out an elongated, humanoid shape surrounded by a white glow. "My... God," he breathed, staring in awe at the ethereal creature who stood in the clearing with head tilted back and arms upraised.

Still holding one of the old lady's hands, Sam watched as a beam of light pierced the swirling dust and dirt to engulf the figure. The light began drawing back into the belly of the saucer-shaped ship, taking the creature with it. This accomplished, the ship soared into the sky, becoming just another star.

"Oh, Mr. Shoestring, wasn't it wonderful?"

Gaze still fastened on the distant point of light, Sam nodded.

"I'm so relieved," Mrs. Byrne continued, squeezing Sam's hand. "Now that I know I'm not senile I can keep my home. Thank you, dear Mr. Shoestring."

"Uh, you're welcome," Sam said, finally looking down at her. He glanced over her shoulder at Al, and raised an interrogative eyebrow. The hologram shrugged and began keying the handlink. Sam sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I'm glad it's over, Mrs. Bryne. I guess I'd better go now..." He paused, frowning at Al as the observer shook his head and gestured at the disabled automobile. "Er, do you have a telephone? I think I need to call a tow-truck."

"Of course, Mr. Shoestring. You come right in and I'll put the kettle on. I daresay we could both use a drop of tea after all of **that!**"

"Guess so," Sam agreed, smiling at the British notion that tea set all things right. He lagged behind as she led the way to her cottage, and whispered, "Al, why haven't I leaped yet?"

"Ziggy's best guess is that you'd better make sure she doesn't talk about tonight," Al answered, "or they **will** be hauling her off to the looney bin."

"But I saw..."

"Eddie didn't see what you saw tonight," Al interrupted. "And considering ol' Ed's recent mental history, he's not exactly a reliable witness anyway. He could end up in the same ward."

"So they need to agree that it's their little secret."

Al nodded, and checked the handlink. "Ziggy says you should get her to drop her the whole subject. Maybe get her to agree that Eddie found out it was military aircraft or something."

"Mr. Shoestring, do you take milk or lemon?"

Sam looked at the old lady standing in the doorway of her cottage. "Just sugar, please," he said, following her into the cozy kitchen. "Mrs. Byrne, I think we should discuss what happened tonight--"

"Yes, I have been thinking about that," she said, bustling about the kitchen. "I know that you tell these stories on the wireless, but I would like to ask that you keep this our little secret."

"You-- don't want me to reveal what we saw?"

"Mr. Shoestring dear," she said, patting his hand as it rested on the back of a kitchen chair, "I know it's a lot to ask, but if you tell your listeners about that craft, they'll either think we're both crazy, or they'll come camping on my land in the hopes of seeing another one. You can see my point, can't you?"

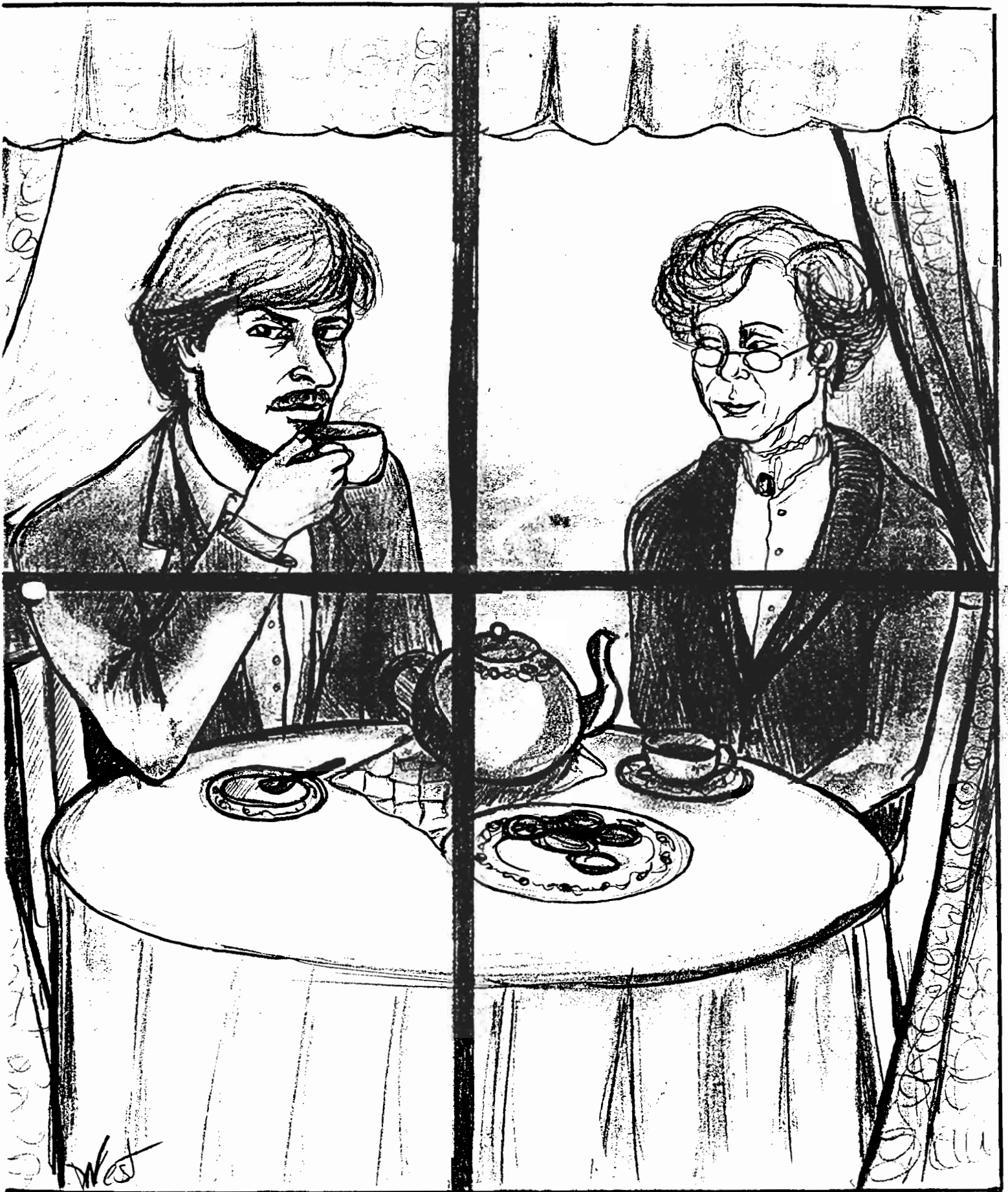
"Well, I--"

"After all, dear, you **did** do as I asked," she continued, pouring boiling water into a teapot sitting on the table. "You've eased my mind. I know I'm not losing it."

Sam glanced at Al in the corner, and the hologram shrugged. "Mrs. Byrne, you are quite a lady," Sam said, taking her hand and kissing it.

"Oh, Mr. Shoestring, you naughty boy!"

"Yeah, you naughty boy," Al echoed and Sam narrowed his eyes at him just as the electric tingle of Leaping stole over him.



"Mr. Shoestring?"

Eddie blinked and looked at the worried face of Mrs. Byrne. "Yes?"

"You look a bit green-- are you all right?"

"Perhaps not," he said, obeying her gesture at a chair and sitting down. A quick look down at his clothes told him that the 'pajamas' had been replaced by his own suit. He glanced at his reflection in the darkened kitchen window, and was reassured to see his own face staring back. "Ah, yes, thank you," he said as Mrs. Byrne placed a cup of tea before him.

"So we're quite agreed that you won't say anything about tonight on your wireless programme, Mr. Shoestring?" she inquired, sitting across from him.

"Eh?" he frowned. "Not if you don't want me to," he hazarded.

"Oh, good. It's not as if they meant us any harm, you know. They only wanted to retrieve their friend."

Eddie hadn't the slightest idea what she was talking about, so he kept quiet. His memory was fuzzy, but he thought he recalled talking to a woman named Verbena in a white room in-- the future? Impossible.

"--telephone."

"Excuse me?"

"I said there's the telephone," Mrs. Byrne repeated, a worried frown wrinkling her forehead.

Eddie blinked and looked at the phone. "Yes, it is."

"I thought you wanted to call for a tow."

"A tow?"

"For your car."

"My car?"

"Oh dear, Mr. Shoestring, you must have hit your head when the car overturned," Mrs. Byrne said, coming around the table to check his eyes.

"My car overturned?"

"I didn't see it happen, but it clearly is turned over. Some of the ruts in the road are rather deep... perhaps you hit one a bit fast?"

"Well, I--"

"If the spacecraft did it, I'm sure it was an accident. I really don't think they meant us any harm."

Eddie rubbed his forehead, then shook his head. "I suppose I should make that call now." He had no idea how he would explain this to Don, but he'd come up with something... he always did.

Before he could stand up, Mrs. Byrne kissed his cheek. "Thank you so much, Mr. Shoestring. It's such a relief knowing that I haven't lost my mind. You have no idea--"

Eddie patted her hand and managed the charming Shoestring smile. "I think I do, Mrs. Byrne. I think I do." He went to the window and stared up at the blinking stars, wondering if it had all been a hallucination brought on by concussion. For his own peace of mind, it was the best thing to believe.