

Pairing: Spike/Xander

Rating: PG-13

Disclaimer: I'm not Joss

Summary: Several years post-series, Xander thinks Spike needs to get his unlife together.

Notes: My first fic post from Europe. :-) Many thanks to my beta, [👤 **silk labyrinth**](#) . Comments deeply appreciated!

Epiphanies

by

Whichclothes

Spike was crying again.

During the night when he patrolled the streets he was all confidence and menace, swaggering around in his duster and winning fights, leering at girls and gulping gallons of whiskey. But during the day, back in his crappy little basement apartment, all of that disappeared. Mostly he slept or stared blankly at whatever happened to be on TV, but sometimes he just broke down and sobbed. Horrible, heart-shattering sobs that drove him to his knees and shook his entire body.

It was fucking annoying.

When Spike broke down like that, Xander told him to shut up, but Spike never paid any attention to him.

This morning, Spike had arrived home so close to sunrise that his hair and hands had been smoking slightly. He reeked of alcohol and cigarettes, and his face was battered from whatever fights he'd picked that night. He made his way to the little corner that passed for a kitchen and yanked a plastic tub of blood out of the fridge. He drank it right from the carton, cold and a little congealed, and when he was done he made a face like he might be considering puking. But the blood stayed in his stomach—or wherever it went once he drank it. Xander was a little vague on vampire biology.

Leaving the empty package on the counter, Spike brushed by Xander without saying anything. Then he kicked off his boots and peeled off his clothing. He hung the duster on the back of a chair but the rest he scowled at and kicked into the corner.

Spike was too thin. Not that he'd ever been a big guy, but now each rib was plainly visible and his hipbones jutted out over his concave belly. His skin wasn't so much milky white as a slightly ashy gray, like he was ill. Which was stupid, because vampires didn't get sick. Although he still slicked his hair back he hadn't bleached it in a while and the roots were showing. Xander wondered if Spike was aware of that. Grooming must be kind of a bitch without a reflection.

Spike padded into the little cubicle of a bathroom. He left the door open as he turned on the shower and then stood under the water, letting it sluice away blood and dirt and something greenish and sticky that Xander preferred not to identify. When the shower was over he dried off with his single, thin towel and walked back into the main room. Still nude, he

tossed the cushions off the couch and pulled out the lumpy mattress, then threw himself backwards onto it.

Xander thought that Spike was going to jerk off and he prepared to leave, because *eww*. Or maybe...not so much *eww*. But *that* was a dangerous train of thought and Xander derailed it immediately. Anyway, Spike didn't reach for his dick. He just lay there, staring up at the insect-spotted ceiling, until fat tears filled the corners of his eyes and dripped down, wetting his pillow. Within minutes he was curled in a fetal ball, wailing, the bones of his curved back standing up like the spines on a dinosaur.

“Knock it off!” Xander yelled. “Vampires aren't supposed to cry. They're supposed to terrorize and maybe scheme, and they can cackle madly or swoop around mysteriously and they can even brood. They don't fucking cry in their beds like girls jilted at the prom!”

But Spike just kept right on weeping and it was a wonder the neighbors didn't complain about so much noise this early in the morning, except the neighbors were probably mostly passed out from booze or drugs, or else they'd already left for the kind of jobs where they spent their days cleaning up after people who barely noticed they existed. “Shit,” Xander grumbled and left the apartment, wondering whether he had enough cash for coffee and toast at the greasy diner down the street.

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Maybe, Xander decided, Spike would listen to him better early in the evening, before he'd inflicted violence on the local demons and before he'd crawled into a bottle of Jack Daniels. Maybe a change of scenery wouldn't hurt either. So the next day, Xander waited for Spike to lace on his boots and shrug on his duster, and then Xander skulked behind the vampire for a few blocks, trying to keep Spike in sight without being noticed. They'd have a little chat. Xander would tell him to get his fucking act together, maybe see a vampire shrink or get a prescription for demon Prozac. Something.

There weren't many other people on the streets, and those that were kept their heads down, not acknowledging Xander as they passed. People were like that in this neighborhood. Defense mechanism, he supposed—you remained blind and deaf to everything that wasn't essential to you personally. Xander couldn't remember the last time he'd exchanged so much as a word with anyone.

A half mile or so from the apartment, Spike ducked into a bar. That's what the sign said, just BAR, as if it hadn't even been worth the effort to give it a name. Xander waited several minutes, hovering around the grimy walls of the building across the street, and then he went in too.

Nobody looked up as he entered. The place wasn't exactly Cheers. A half dozen or so men and women were seated at tiny tables or at the bar itself, each of them hunched over a glass, each face a study in despair. Tony and Jessica used to look like that sometimes, he remembered. He'd catch a

glimpse of them at an unguarded moment when they weren't angry, and he'd see the withered corpse of their every hope hanging on them, bowing their backs, making their eyes and cheeks sag.

The bartender was leaning back against the inside of the bar with his arms folded across his beefy chest, his head tilted up to watch a basketball game on the grainy TV that hung overhead. He didn't look at Xander either. Xander peered into the darkness and spied Spike tucked into a booth at the far end of the room. A bottle and a glass were in front of him but he wasn't drinking, just staring into the amber liquid as if it were a crystal ball.

Xander walked across the room and planted himself next to Spike's table. "Hey, Spike," he said.

Spike startled spectacularly, his eyes and mouth flying open. "Harris!" he said, more with a squeak than a shout.

It was satisfying to get such a big response from a creature of the night. Xander grinned and slid into the seat opposite Spike. "Wanna share?" he asked pointing at the bottle.

"What—what are you doing here?"

"Just having a drink."

Spike gaped at him.

Xander sighed. "Look, we need to talk, okay? But we haven't

really been connecting very well back at your apartment, so—
”

“My flat?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, I’ve tried, but you haven’t.... Maybe my timing has sucked. And I get not being really up for the whole talking about feelings thing because, you know, we’re guys, even if one of us is a guy of the demon persuasion. But my experiences with Anya taught me one thing—well, she taught me a lot of things but most of them we will *not* be discussing—and that’s sometimes even a man has to talk about what’s going on inside his head.”

Spike was looking around wildly. “Anya? She’s here, too?”

Christ. Maybe Spike was having some sort of relapse to his immediate post-soul days, when he was crazier than Drusilla. Gently, Xander said, “Anya’s dead, Spike. She was killed in Sunnydale, what? Ten years ago. Just like you were, only she wasn’t so lucky with the resurrection part. We told you this when you caught up with us in Pittsburgh, remember?” And hadn’t that been a fun reunion, with Buffy finding out all at once that Spike wasn’t dust but Angel was. Deadboy having finally met the promise of his nickname during some big fight in LA.

Spike made a visible effort to calm himself. “Why are you here?”

“Told you. I just want to talk. Come on, it’ll only be

moderately painful, I promise. We can dull the agony with booze.”

“You want...you want to talk to *me*?”

Xander was trying to craft a relatively non-sarcastic response, but then the bartender appeared at their table. His arms were still crossed and he scowled down at Spike. “Look, man. You wanna pickle yourself quietly, be my guest. But I don’t do crazy. Got it?”

Spike glanced over at Xander and then nodded. “Right.” He grabbed the bottle by the neck and stood, then stomped towards the door.

Xander gave the bartender an apologetic shrug. “Sorry. He’s kinda—”

But the bartender simply turned his back and returned to his spot behind the bar.

Xander caught up with Spike halfway down the block. “Not a really friendly place, is it?”

Spike stopped in his tracks and took a quick look around, as if he didn’t even want to be spotted speaking with Xander. Which was pretty insulting, really. Okay, Xander might not be looking his best these days but that didn’t mean he was snub-worthy. Spike was undead, for Christ’s sake!

“You’re really stuck on having this chat, aren’t you?” Spike

asked.

“Well...yeah. I guess so.”

Spike closed his eyes for a moment as if he were in pain and then opened them. “Right. Back at my flat then.”

Xander wanted to point out that he'd tried that plenty of times before, but arguing would only make Spike more stubborn. Really, Xander just wanted to get this over with and go back to the way things were supposed to be, with him and Spike contemptuous of each other. And Spike not crying.

As soon as they entered the apartment, Spike walked to the kitchen and grabbed a glass. But when he started to approach the couch without getting another, Xander protested. “Hey! Sharing, remember?”

Spike looked slightly startled and then shrugged and took a second glass from the single cupboard. He carried everything over and sat at the end of the couch as far from Xander as he could get. Then he set the glasses down on his splintery coffee table and filled them both. For some reason, he seemed to be fascinated with watching Xander sip his, so much so that Xander set his own glass down and snapped his fingers to focus Spike's attention. “Okay. With the talking now.”

Spike eyed him skeptically and downed his entire glass of Jack in one swallow.

Xander fidgeted uncomfortably. He might have sought out this

conversation but he wasn't all that thrilled to be having it. "See, the thing is, well, I guess maybe things have been kinda rough for you lately. You're a little down on your luck. I get that. Been there myself, with the shitty apartment. Mine was even worse than this one, remember? What with the parental units upstairs and all. But then I got a girlfriend and it wasn't..." He rubbed at the back of his neck. "What I'm trying to say is maybe you need to find someone who can, uh.... Someone to hang with. Vamps do that, right? Hang? I mean not like a bat hangs 'cause I know that's just a myth, although Dracula...."

"Bloody *hell*, Harris. You're not making any more sense than you used to. Just spit it out, already. What do you want?"

Xander took a deep breath. "I want you to stop crying."

Spike blinked at him. Slowly, like an owl. "What?"

"Stop crying. It's...it's not right."

"You've been watching me cry?"

"Well, yeah. Don't have much choice, do I? There you are and here I am, and there's only this one room and it's been, like, at least once a week that you break down."

"You've been here. For weeks."

Shit. Spike's lunacy was worse than Xander had thought. "Of course I have. For...I don't know. Five or six months, right?"

And before that we were in Dubuque, and before that where was it? Lawrence, Kansas. And before that...well, I forget. Doesn't really matter."

"Why are you haunting me, Harris?"

"Haunting?" Xander said, offended. "Hey, you're the king of the stalkers. I'm just..." But then he stopped, because it suddenly occurred to him that he had no idea why he'd been with Spike. Bleachboy. Formerly-Fangless. Hyperactive, snarky, occasionally homicidal demon. Xander tried to recall how he'd hooked up with Spike and why, but the more he thought about it, the bigger the uneasy feeling in his stomach grew.

In a soft voice, Spike said, "You poor sod. You don't realize, do you?"

Xander jumped up and began to back towards the door. "Realize? Realize what? Don't know what you're talking about. And anyway we're supposed to be talking about *you*, sob sister."

Spike stood too and stepped slowly closer. "How'd it happen then? Demons?"

"What? I don't know what—" Xander's back was up against the wall by then and Spike was standing very close, his head tilted as he examined Xander curiously. "Personal space!" Xander squawked.

“Just had a call from the Watcher not so long ago, so I know the others are all right. Why aren’t you with them?”

“I...I...” Xander had no idea how the conversation had gone so wrong. This wasn’t supposed to be about him, goddammit! He wasn’t the one bawling his eyes out. Eye. No, eyes. He had two. But that didn’t make sense because— No. Not going there. He felt like he was going to barf.

Very slowly, Spike reached a hand up. Xander thought Spike was going to touch his chest—why, he had no idea—but Spike just remained like that, hand hovering, and then let his arm drop again. “Looks nasty,” he said. “Must have bloody hurt.”

Xander ducked away and scurried to the opposite side of the little apartment. He couldn’t understand what had gotten into Spike, who’d never really taken any interest in him before. Maybe Spike just didn’t want to talk about his own issues. That was it, Xander concluded. Spike was in denial.

“Look, Spike. I know this is hard. Hell, I spent years living with mostly a bunch of girls, and even Slayers are pretty big with the touchy-feely relationship stuff. Um, not much with the touching, actually, and the relationships were all of the sisterly types, but you know what I mean.” He gestured at the abandoned whiskey bottle. “Let’s have a few more shots. That’ll help.”

Spike looked at him for a long moment. “Look, mate. Dunno why you’re here, of all places. Wasn’t as if we were besties back in Sunnyhell and I seem to recall a good bit of angry

glaring in Pittsburgh.”

“Well, yeah! I mean, you just showed up, all corporeal and everything, out of the blue. *Poof*. And you really shook Buffy up, which she so didn’t need then, when she was finally getting her shit straightened out with Brian, and—”

“Brian. That’s right. Another big bloke with stupid hair. She does have a type, doesn’t she?”

“Except you.”

Spike snarled. “Yeah, but I was never her one shining true love, was I? Was just a convenience, a way to scratch an itch.” He was bitter and angry, but Xander wasn’t stupid. Underneath all that he could see the true hurt that Spike felt.

“I don’t know about that,” Xander said. “She was pretty broken up after she thought you’d died. But she wasn’t...she was just a kid then. Didn’t know what she wanted, really.”

Spike’s jaw worked. “So how is old Bri then?”

Xander shifted his feet. “I don’t... I’m not sure. It’s been a while since I talked to...” But there was more of that uneasy, roiling feeling, as if he were teetering on the edge of a deep pit. Not a good feeling. Nope, not at all.

“What do you want from me, Harris?” Spike asked again.

“I told you! I want you to fucking stop crying all the time. It’s

getting on my nerves!”

“Then bloody *leave!*”

“I can’t!” Xander shouted back. “I live here!”

“You don’t live anywhere, you thick sod. You’re dead!”

There was a sudden rushing in Xander’s ears. “What?”

In a considerably calmer voice, one that sounded almost kind, Spike said, “You’re dead, mate. Deader than me. You’re a ghost.”

“I’m...I’m not!” The rushing was growing louder. Xander could hardly hear his own voice.

But he heard Spike just fine when Spike said, “Look at yourself, Harris. Look down at yourself.”

Xander didn’t want to. But his head bent of its own accord, and he did look down, and he saw his chest and belly and—No. That was just wrong. That was....

The rushing became a roar, like a speeding freight train was heading his way, and his stomach tightened so much it felt like there was vice-grip in his belly, and his vision went brilliant red.

And then he was gone.

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Spike limped slowly down the cracked pavement. When he came to the side door he'd been using, he took a quick look about to make sure nobody was watching, then ducked into the building. "Home sweet home," he announced loudly, startling a few pigeons that were roosting in the rafters. Much more quietly, he muttered, "Not a bloody home at all." It wasn't—it was, in fact, the former headquarters of Finkel Manufacturing which, as best as he could tell from the bits that still littered the place, had once produced plastic pencil boxes. Those boxes were now being made in China, which gave Spike a convenient place to sleep. Convenient and free.

Not very luxurious, though. The only water was cold and ran through rusty pipes, and there was no electricity at all. He'd brought in a few battery-powered lamps, which gave him enough light to read by, but he had to visit the butcher's every evening if he wanted to eat. No real furniture either, just an old mattress he'd scrounged and a few crates that served as stands for the lamps.

He'd nicked a bit of money from Wolfram & Hart back before the battle, and he'd tried to make it last as long as possible, but now he was down to a few bills. He'd have to find a position soon, he expected. Bouncer, perhaps. Enough to pay for booze and blood. But even the thought of having to go hat in hand to some demon barkeep, begging for a bit of dosh, exhausted him.

He collapsed onto his mattress without bothering to remove his boots or duster. He didn't cry. Hadn't cried for months, not since he'd had that visit from that ghost. Xander Harris! Poor sod, not even knowing he was dead. Perhaps Spike should have broken it to him a bit more gently, but he wasn't sure that there was a gentle way to tell a bloke that he'd entered the spectral realm.

Spike pulled a packet of cigarettes from his coat and shook one out. He lit it and lay back on his pillow, watching the smoke curl slowly upwards until it disappeared in the darkness above. His leg hurt—that Ygenrik he'd fought tonight had taken a chunk out of it. Ruined Spike's jeans as well, and they were his last pair. Bugger. He really was going to need to see about a job. Later.

Not long after his ghostly visitation, Spike had rung Rupert. He hadn't actually mentioned seeing the boy, but he'd managed to get some information about his death. It was a demon, as Spike had thought. Demons plural, actually, a nest of Sphel'ngo that had jumped him when he was alone. He'd managed to kill a few of them, which was pretty good under the circumstances, but they'd cut him to shreds with their claws. He'd been disemboweled and they'd left him there to die slowly, some sort of message to Buffy. Buffy had found them and their ends had been brutal, but of course that didn't bring Xander back. If Rupert had any idea that Xander was a ghost or why he might have visited Spike, he didn't say so.

Spike ground out the cigarette on the concrete floor. Maybe it was time to move on again, he thought. He'd gone through

most of the nastier demons in this place already. He had everything west of the Mississippi to choose from. That was the agreement he'd made with the Slayer that time in Pittsburgh. She and her crew had the east. He could have pushed the matter, could even have joined them, but that would have felt...uncomfortable. The Scoobies had been hospitable enough once they'd got over the shock of his arrival, but they hadn't wanted him. He complicated things. Brought back old, bad memories.

"Fuck," he said out loud. Sometimes it seemed like bad memories were all he had.

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It was his stomach this time.

Well, his stomach and his ribs and his head and also, he thought, the fingers of both hands. But the stomach was the bit that really hurt as he tried to keep his insides where they belonged, holding them in with one arm. He'd made it back to the factory at least, so he was on his own pathetic mattress. But he was out of blood, and anyway it was almost dawn, and oh *fuck!* It bloody *hurt*.

"Should see the other guy," he said and laughed harshly, startling those sodding pigeons. But then the laugh turned into something else and he'd promised himself he wouldn't bloody cry anymore.

There were holes in the roof. Small ones that the birds used as

their private entrances. He'd placed the mattress well away from them, but if he wanted to he could walk—well, maybe just crawl—his way across the dirty floor until he was beneath one of those holes and he could wait for the sun to rise. He could. He probably should.

But he wouldn't. Wouldn't give the fucking world the satisfaction of it.

“Jesus, Spike.”

The voice was clear through the haze of pain and rage and anguish. Spike opened his eyes—hadn't even realized he'd closed them—and looked up at Xander Harris, who was standing over him looking much more real than he ought to.

After a moment, Xander knelt beside him. “You shouldn't let them go for the belly.” He looked down at himself, and those fatal horrible wounds wavered there for a second or two before disappearing, being replaced by an intact but also horrible purple shirt.

“Sod off,” Spike said. At least, that was what he meant to say. What actually came out of his mouth was a whimper: “Hurts.”

The ghost of Xander Harris reached over and, a bit tentatively, peeled away a lock of hair that was stuck to Spike's forehead with dried blood. He felt real, too. His fingers were warm. “I know,” he said.

“You're dead,” Spike whispered.

“We’ve established that. Besides, pot, kettle.”

“’M *undead*.”

“Well, of the two of us, I’m looking a whole lot more lively right now.”

Spike didn’t answer. It would have taken too much effort.

“Um, Spike? Do you actually need all the...the parts in your middle?”

“Dunno.”

Xander nodded and stood up. “I’ll be back,” he said, and vanished. Perhaps he was just a hallucination anyway. Spike let his eyes fall closed again.

He didn’t exactly sleep, couldn’t quite pass out. He drifted, more like, aware of the agony in his body and the cold that was seeping into his bones, but not knowing whether it was minutes passing or hours. And then that hand was back, calloused fingertips hot on his skin. He didn’t open his eyes, though, at least not until his nose caught the scent of blood—*human* blood—and then he looked.

Xander was sitting next to him on the mattress, a slightly smug look on his face, a plastic bag in his hand. “I don’t have any way to warm it up. Sorry. But I found straws!” Sure enough, a red and white striped straw was sticking out of the

top of the bag. “Can you sit up enough to drink?”

Spike tried, but as soon as he moved he almost lost his tenuous hold on his guts. His head fell back and he groaned.

“I guess that’s a no,” Xander said. “Hang on.” He repositioned himself so that he had a palm under Spike’s head and he applied just enough pressure to lift the head a little. With his other hand he held the blood bag to Spike’s face, maneuvering it so the straw was against his lips.

Spike sucked down the blood gratefully, for once not even caring that it was cold. It was fresh, anyhow, and human, and it would mend him. When the packet was empty Xander gave him another and then another. He offered a fourth but Spike shook his head. Xander carefully resettled Spike flat on the mattress.

“Where’d you get it?” Spike slurred. Between the injuries and the blood and the pure exhaustion, he was feeling nerveless, nearly paralyzed.

“Stole it,” Xander replied cheerfully. “So much easier to lead a life of crime as a ghost. Only I guess it’s more of an afterlife of crime, huh?” He stood and walked a few feet away. Spike didn’t bother to turn his head to see what he was up to, but a few seconds later Xander sat beside him again, this time with a plastic shopping bag in his hand. “Did you ever play that game, the one where you say which superpower you’d rather have? Now me, I was always all about the flying. I thought it would be cool. You know, go anywhere I wanted anytime.

Escape. Would be handy for getting away from bad guys, too. Plus I always thought the whole invisibility thing was kind of creepy. Like, mostly good for spying on girls' locker rooms or something. But as it turns out, I like invisibility. Useful, peepingtomness aside."

Spike let the babbling wash over him like waves. The odd thing was that the sound of it was comforting, something else to focus on aside from his own miseries. And it was familiar as well. He'd spent so many hours listening to the boy natter on.

But he wasn't a boy any longer, Spike remembered. He'd been a man and now he was a spirit. A spirit who was trying to pry Spike's arm away from his middle. "Don't!" Spike growled, albeit not very convincingly.

"You can't hold yourself together forever, Spike. It's okay. I stole supplies, too."

Spike focused on Xander's hands and saw that now the ghost had a roll of what looked like fishing line in one hand and a tube of glue in the other.

"What's it gonna be, Fangface? I figure the stitches'll hurt more now but hold better and be a cinch to pull out when you're all zipped up. The glue won't hurt but I'm not positive it'll hold, plus then once you're back together you're gonna have a hell of a lot of dried glue to peel off, and that smarts."

Spike blinked at him, trying to process the words.

“What’s it gonna be, Humpty Dumpty? Oh, and I take it surgical cleanliness isn’t much more of an issue for you than it is for me.”

Perhaps, Spike concluded, his brains had been more scrambled in the fight than he’d thought. Because why would the ghost of Xander Harris be at his side playing nurse? But Spike didn’t have the energy to resist the delusion. “Stitches,” he said.

Xander nodded approvingly. “Excellent choice, sir.”

After that he was silent, his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth as he sewed Spike back up. The needle did hurt, but there was already so much pain that it didn’t matter, and it was an enormous relief to be able to relax his arm. Relax everything, really, and just feel...cared after.

After he finished the sutures, Xander cut Spike’s clothing away and covered him with one of his dirty blankets. Then he disappeared for a moment, only to return with the plastic bowl Spike used for washing up and Spike’s lone towel. The water was icy, but still Spike was glad to feel the blood and grime dabbed gently from his skin. He hissed when Xander tried to clean his hair, though.

“Oops. Sorry. My old pal, head trauma. You shouldn’t copy me so faithfully, Spike.” Xander wiped more gently, then used his fingers to tease apart strands of hair that were gummed together. Despite everything, his touch was lovely. When was

the last time anyone had touched Spike except to hurt him?

Spike did moan a bit when Xander straightened out his fingers, but didn't complain because some pain now was bloody well better than having to rebreak them later to set them properly. And then Xander held him up for another bag of blood and tucked him back in and smiled.

“Harris? What.... Why...?” Spike's tongue felt thick and his brain felt thicker.

“Epiphany.”

“Wha'?”

“Tell you later. Now just sleep.”

Spike realized that for the first time in ages someone was going to watch over him while he slept. That was a wonderful feeling, even if the someone was dead Xander Harris. Spike closed his eyes and drifted off.

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“So I had an epiphany,” Xander announced. “Mrs. Weaver taught us that word in eighth grade. Bet she'd be happy I still remember it, even post-mortem. And now that I think of it, she gave me a C! C-minus, maybe. I ought to go look her up and-”

“Epiphany,” Spike interrupted.

“Right. Sorry.” Xander grinned, not looking sorry at all. Then he stretched out on the bed beside Spike—the nice, soft, *real* bed with a gadget that allowed you to adjust the firmness, and clean 400-thread-count sheets and half a dozen oversized pillows. Xander shoved a couple of those pillows behind his back and continued. “I had an epiphany. Actually, first I had a pretty major meltdown. Figuring out you’re dead will kinda do that to a guy. For a while I was sort of... I don’t know how to explain it. Scattered. Literally, like my molecules were spread out all over North America. It took me a while to collect them and...come back to myself. If that makes any sense at all.” He looked down at Spike.

Spike nodded, remembering the days after he’d been brought back from the almost finally dead himself, there in the poof’s office. He’d felt insubstantial, wispy. Not quite there. As if one sneeze might blow him to smithereens.

Xander looked thankful for the understanding. “Once I was back together I realized I was with you. Again. You’d picked up and moved shop—oh, and the factory? Not an improvement over that crappy apartment—but there I still was, stuck to you like gum on a shoe.”

Spike considered being offended that the wanker had been secretly haunting him again but decided he was too comfortable to care. The hotel room had a bathtub. A big one with plenty of hot water and almond-scented soap, and Xander had bathed him, gently scrubbing away the last of the filth without even blushing over the intimacy of it. Maybe ghosts couldn’t blush. And the room had not one towel, not two, but

four, four glorious rectangles of thick terry. Xander had dried him as well—Spike’s fingers weren’t working well yet—and when Spike was tucked into bed he’d brought him more blood, this time in a mug and warmed in the room’s microwave. But still with a straw.

“Why me, Xander?”

“Well, that’s what I wondered. I croaked in Louisville, and I cannot be grateful enough I’m not stuck haunting that place! But I wasn’t anywhere near you, wasn’t thinking about you when I was dying on that sidewalk—” He stopped and swallowed thickly.

Spike reached over and patted his hand. “Not a nice way to die.”

“No, it really, really wasn’t.” Xander shook his head as if to clear it. “So if I wasn’t tied to some particular place, then you’d think I’d end up with Willow and Buffy and the others, right?”

“And Brian,” Spike couldn’t help but add.

Xander grinned. “Actually, I think Bri’s kind of a dick, but he’s good to Buffy, so....”

Spike was almost successful in hiding his return smile. “And the epiphany?”

“Getting there. I watched you for a while and I thought about

why I was watching you and it wasn't quite clicking. Until one night you almost got dusted by that demon—the one with the horns and the feathers?”

“Chain'sel.”

“Yeah, okay. That one almost got you, Spike.”

“Loads of them almost get me.”

“Exactly! You're a strong guy and a really good fighter, but it's tough going up against bad guy after bad guy like you do, all by yourself. Even Buff needs some of us now and then. The other Slayers go out in twos and threes. But you have...just you.”

Spike turned his head away. “Right.” The word tasted bitter.

“Are you a Bruce Willis fan?”

That made Spike look at Xander again. “What?”

“Bruce Willis. You know, *Die Hard*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The Fifth Element*? That last one's totally underrated by the way.”

“Right. Bruce Willis. Does this have anything to do with that epiphany, mate?”

“He *is* the epiphany. I'm Bruce Willis.”

How was it that Spike always ended up with the barmy ones?

“You are Xander Harris. Or you were. Now you’re the spectral remains of that annoying git.”

Xander poked him in the bicep, surprisingly hard for an insubstantial being. “*The Sixth Sense*, Spike. Bruce Willis was a ghost who—”

“Who didn’t know it,” Spike finished for him, finally understanding where Xander was going with this.

Xander patted Spike’s shoulder approvingly. “Right! And do you remember *why* he was a ghost instead of moving on to the great never-never?”

“Film’s more interesting that way.”

Xander poked him again. “Because he had stuff to work out. He had to help that ‘I see dead people’ kid and he had to apologize to his wife for being a type-A asshole.”

“And your unfinished things, Xander?”

“I don’t have any unresolved personal issues.” He squirmed a little. “Well, not major ones, anyway. But maybe I still have work to do. A purpose.”

“Irritating convalescent vampires?”

“Could be.” Xander was handsome when he smiled. Gorgeous, even. Spike had never noticed before. But then Xander’s face grew earnest. “Look, the gang, they don’t need

me. I wasn't exactly useless when I was with them, but let's face it, who needs a ghost when you've got Slayers and witches? You, on the other hand, could use someone to watch your back."

"Don't need a minder," Spike growled.

Xander lifted his eyebrows and gave Spike's still-battered body a significant look.

Spike shook his head. "You're a sodding *spirit*! How could you help me?"

"Oh, I don't know...maybe patching up your sorry ass when you get it kicked. Stealing nice hospital blood for you so you don't have to drink cow. Getting you a warm, comfy hotel room instead of an abandoned building."

All right. Maybe he had a point. But that brought up another question. "How *did* you get the room?"

Xander reached into his trousers pocket and pulled out a thick wad of cash, which he held up for Spike's inspection. "Good old American dollars. I have plenty, and there's more where that came from."

"Which was where? Afterlife ATM?"

Xander shrugged. "I stole it. Got it right out of the guy's pocket and he never even knew it. I told you, ghosts make really good thieves."

Now, Spike wasn't above a spot of larceny now and then, when necessity demanded it, but this was a White Hat boasting about it. "Do you have your soul?" he asked.

"My soul? I don't know, Spike. Maybe that's all I *do* have now. I feel like myself, though. Not evil. Maybe...moderately mischievous now and then. But, you know...itching powder in your underwear bad, not apocalypse."

"But the stealing..."

"The hospital can spare a few pints now and then for a good cause. You were wounded, right? And you needed it to heal. And the cash, I got that from a drug dealer, which doesn't cause my conscience any pangs at all."

Spike realized he'd been a bit tense, and now he relaxed fully. He looked at Xander, who was fidgeting slightly with the edge of the blanket. Nervously, as if he were afraid of Spike's response. Spike didn't need a minder. Except...sometimes it was nice to have someone watch your back. Maybe even someone to talk to now and then, to sit with and watch the telly. A partner. Suddenly, Spike found himself not minding that the someone would be Xander Harris.

"Can you fight?" he asked finally.

"Um, kind of. I'm not any stronger than I used to be, but I can sneak up on things pretty well. That's a good thing."

Spike nodded. “You manage solidity well.”

Xander smiled and put his hand on Spike’s arm. He didn’t move it. It was so warm that Spike shivered. “Thanks,” Xander said. “I’ve been practicing.”

They were both quiet for a while after that, and Xander kept his palm on Spike’s arm. The heater fan whirred on, and out in the hallway a man and a woman walked by, laughing softly.

Spike rolled his head on the pillow and gazed up at Xander. “When that tosser sorted his problems he moved on, to wherever the good little ghosties go.”

“Yep,” Xander replied slowly. “I thought of that, too. It was a really good epiphany. But I figure if my job’s supposed to be vampire sidekick, well, that could last a while.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

“Nope. Not quite ready to shuffle off this mortal coil. What *is* the mortal coil anyway? Does it include immortal vampires? And why is it coily?”

Spike rolled his head so that it bonked against Xander’s arm. It was all he could reach at the moment. “It’s Hamlet’s father who’s the ghost, not Hamlet.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Philistine. You’ll need to learn a few things if

you mean to work with me.”

“No fair,” Xander said through a grin. “Education shouldn’t have to continue into the afterlife.”

Spike may have scooted slightly closer to him. He was bloody warm for a dead bloke. Felt nice. And Xander may have scooted slightly closer to him as well.

“Xander?”

“Hmm?” He sounded sleepy. Did ghosts sleep?

“Those minor unresolved personal issues you mentioned....”

Ghosts *could* blush. Interesting.

“Maybe there could be some...resolving,” Xander said. “Later. When you’re in better resolution kind of condition. That is...if you wanted to sort of...um...help. Resolve.”

Spike could mend pretty quickly, given enough blood and a bit of care. And a good incentive. He smirked. “I reckon I could help you reach another epiphany or two.” Then he laughed. He hadn’t done that in ages, and it felt bloody brilliant.

The End