

Balancing Act
by [MJ Hajost](#)

Friday, November 7, 1975

"Go home," Roy suggested. "Cap can call up a replacement."

"What for?" Johnny seemed genuinely puzzled. He shifted in the passenger seat of the squad and pulled the edges of his open jacket closer together. *Man, why is it so cold in this squad?*

"What for? You're sick, that's what for."

Johnny made a scoffing sound.

"You can't keep working when you're sick, Junior."

"I'm *not* sick!" Johnny protested.

Roy stared at him in disbelief. "You're not--" He stopped speaking and shook his head in resignation. After a moment, he reached out and placed his hand on Johnny's forehead.

"Jeez, you're burning up." He glared reproachfully a second before returning his attention to the road. "You had that fever all day?"

"I don't have a fever," John declared, impatiently pushing Roy's hand away.

"Uh-huh." Roy turned onto Wayland Boulevard. "You have to go home, Johnny. You can't work with that fever."

"I'm all right," John repeated. "It's already after nine--I can handle it. Besides, maybe we'll get lucky and won't get called out tonight." He leaned his head against the rear window as he spoke and closed his eyes.

Glancing sideways at him, Roy reflected that he should have insisted that John see one of the doctors when they were at the hospital after this last run. The emergency room had been a madhouse, however, with the usual Friday night casualties making an early start on the evening: everyone had been tied up with two or three patients, and John had adamantly refused to take up the doctors' valuable time over something so simple as a sore throat.

The last run had turned from simple chest pains into a massive coronary. Roy had been on the biophone with the hospital when the patient had arrested so, by default, Johnny had been the one beginning the CPR. Having suspected that Johnny had been unwell as they had headed out for the call, Roy had found his suspicions growing as he had watched Johnny struggling to maintain the energy level necessary to perform the chest

compressions on their patient. Now, taking in John's pale face and sunken eyes, Roy knew that Johnny had already pushed himself beyond his limitations. Much as he hated the thought, he was going to have to get some support from above.

Back at the station, Captain Stanley had a little more time to spare than the doctors. "Roy?" he asked from the chair behind his desk, eyebrow cocked.

"101.2," replied DeSoto.

The Cap turned to Gage. "You go change and get out of here now," he told the dark-haired man. "We can stand the squad down until someone gets here."

"Cap--"

"Don't argue with me, John." He jerked his head toward the locker room. "Get going."

John opened his mouth, decided he didn't have the energy to argue, and simply nodded. "Right," he sighed.

"You okay to drive?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," John told him listlessly. "I'm not gonna pass out or anything."

"All right, then, get going," Stanley nodded.

Gage rose and slipped past Roy, pausing a moment to turn and open his mouth to speak again. Catching the captain's eye, he shut his mouth, shrugged, and made his way to the locker room.

"Thanks, Cap," Roy said. He looked after the departing figure. "I should have known he was sick--he hasn't argued with Chet all day." He followed Johnny into the locker room after a few minutes to find his partner sitting on the bench in front of his locker, slowly buttoning his shirt. Johnny looked up.

"Is it just me, or is it cold in here?"

"It's you," Roy told him. "Listen, are you sure you're okay to drive? You don't look so good."

Johnny nodded wearily and tossed his shoes into the locker. "I'm all right." He stopped, his hand on the door, staring at the extra uniform hanging in front of him. "But--thanks, Roy."

"Any time."

Johnny shut the door of his locker. "I'll see you tomorrow at your birthday party."

Roy grinned and shook his head. "Just make sure you're feeling better by then, so you don't pass this on to my kids."

Johnny nodded, too tired to joke, and departed. Now that he was going home, he suddenly felt all the aches and pains he'd been trying to ignore all afternoon and evening. Shivering, he made his way slowly across the parking lot to his Land Rover, slipping his arms into the sleeves of his jacket as he walked. He opened the door, pitched his duffel bag onto the passenger seat, and climbed in. Pulling the door shut behind him, he sat for two or three minutes with his head on the steering wheel, trying to muster the energy to insert the key and move the gear shift. Finally, heaving a weary sigh, he lifted his head and started the car.

The cool winter night chilled his already shivering body, so he drove with the windows shut and the heat blasting full force--and still felt unable to warm himself. Whatever this was, he hoped fervently it would be gone soon. In spite of what he'd told Roy, he was actually glad that Cap had insisted he leave immediately.

Traffic's pretty typical for a Friday night, he thought, as he approached an intersection: teenagers out for the early weekend spin in Dad's car, truck drivers making the last push for their next destination before the weekend officially got under way. Not heavy, just constant. As he drew nearer the crossroads, he noticed a distant sound, rapidly drawing closer. A siren. He slowed down, his eyes darting around as he sought the source. *Sounds like a rescue squad*, he thought, then spied it coming up on the left as it led the engine that followed, weaving cautiously through the traffic there, its speed only marginally reduced by other vehicles. John stopped to wait for it to pass.

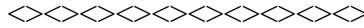
He never remembered doing so.

Neither was he ever able to remember the impact from the car behind him, whose driver neither heard the approaching siren nor noticed Johnny slowing and stopping. Rocketing forward in his seat, Johnny's forehead slammed into the edge of the rearview mirror. Even as he was reacting to that pain he was bouncing back into his seat and staring helplessly out the window to his left while his car slid into the intersection. As if in slow motion, he watched the squad looming, heard the frantic squeal of brakes, saw the larger truck try too late to swerve around him.

Then came the second impact.

Johnny's head connected sharply with the side panel as the door caved in and crushed against him. His Land Rover, propelled by the oversized rescue vehicle, skidded sideways. Tires squealing in protest against the unnatural movement, the car shuddered across the pavement until it was stopped by the semi-truck that had been waiting for the light on the far side of the intersection. The stop was so abrupt that the car nearly accordioned on itself.

Johnny's first reaction was to throw up. As the shock of impact began to wear off he tried to still the shaking that assaulted his body, waiting for the giddiness and nausea to subside a little, then managed to reach slowly up and switch off the ignition before an incredible dizziness forced his head back against the seat again. When asked later, he had no memory of turning off the car. And, for weeks, he was unable to remember the conversations he had with the police and fire department personnel during his evacuation from his vehicle and eventual airlift to Rampart. In fact, it surprised him later to be told how coherent he had actually been.



The paramedics driving the squad that hit him sat for only an instant in stunned silence before both men took a breath and, almost comically in tandem, looked at one another.

Ted "Dutch" Masters spoke first. "You okay, Gary?"

Gary Chambers nodded slowly. "Yeah, I think so." He didn't sound so sure.

"Yeah, me, too," Dutch murmured. He looked around. The front end of the squad had buckled in quite extensively, and when he tried to open his door, Dutch discovered that it was securely jammed shut. An experimental tug from Chambers showed the same thing on his side. They must have hit the Land Rover square despite the attempt to avoid it. With a shaky sigh, Chambers lifted the radio microphone.

"L.A., this is Squad 26. We've been involved in a multi-vehicle accident, with injuries, at the intersection of Cedar and Wells." His voice sounded remarkably calm. "Respond police and an ambulance to our location."

"Squad 26, 10-4."

Dutch turned at a tap on his window. Captain Pete Daniels stood outside, peering anxiously in. "You two okay?"

Dutch rolled the window down as far as it would go and nodded. "Yeah, but we're stuck in here, Pete. You wanna give us a hand and open these doors for us so we can take a look at the guy we hit?" As he spoke, he glanced at the vehicle sandwiched between the squad and the semi. In the darkness it looked as if the front end of the semi had been melted into a weird white shape. He prayed briefly that the occupants had been wearing seatbelts. Suddenly, he leaned forward and swore softly.

"Dutch?" Chambers was looking at him curiously.

"That's Johnny's truck!"

"Gage?" Chambers turned and stared through the cracked windshield, but from his angle he couldn't as easily see into the truck.

It was another long agonizing minute before Andy Starks was able to free Dutch's door. It was barely popped before Dutch was clambering across the crumpled hood of the Land Rover.

"Johnny?" he called out.

Shattered glass lay everywhere among the crushed remains of the truck, and he could see readily into the front seat through the portion of windshield that had been blown out. Johnny was firmly immobilized in the driver's seat, both the right and left sides of the car pushed in so far that the right side was almost touching him. Dutch shone his flashlight on the still figure, spotting the blood running down John's forehead but, much to his relief, the shallow rise and fall of the other man's chest. Even better, John's eyes were open, blinking slowly in the sudden light.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Dutch demanded a little breathlessly, not quite able to control the shaking that the sight of John's car had started.

"Going home," John muttered weakly.

"Isn't it a little early in the shift for that?"

"I wanted to...get a head...start..."

"Take it easy, John," Dutch advised, "we'll have you out of there in no time."

"Not...soon enough," was the barely audible rejoinder.

Dutch turned to Chambers, who had come up behind him.

"No one's hurt in that car," Chambers reported, pointing to the one that had hit John, "just a little shaken up. How's he doing?" he continued, motioning to the trapped paramedic.

"Aw, man," Gage was muttering, "aw, man..."

"I don't know. Okay, pal, you know what I need to hear," Dutch said, trying still to subdue the trembling. "Name, date, and circumstances."

"The name's...John...Gage," began the other, pausing to blink and catch his breath before going on. "It's Friday...and I...think I've been...turned into...sandwich filling."

"That's Gage, all right," murmured Chambers with a smile, turning away and setting up the biophone atop the squad's dented hood.

"Johnny, can you tell me where it hurts?" Dutch shot an expert eye over the wreck, seeing that everything seemed pretty stable for the time being, and at least the engine was off. But, they'd still have to work fast--even in the darkness, he thought it looked like

John was rapidly becoming shocky.

His answer was a half laugh cut short by a groan. "Every...where," said John. He took a shallow breath and began a clinical description. "I think I...have some...cracked ribs...collarbone, maybe..." There was something else....oh, yeah. "...ear hurts..." This last Dutch didn't catch.

Dutch busied himself pulling away a few pieces of glass and tossing them aside, and reached in to give John a cursory exam. "Are you having trouble breathing?" It looked from where he sat that Johnny's head had taken a good pounding.

"Having...trouble doing...*anything*," John gasped.

"Your back or neck hurt at all?"

John's head moved slightly, then stopped abruptly. "Oh, big mistake," he groaned, shutting his eyes. "No," he went on when the worst of the dizziness passed, "but my... legs're...pinned pretty...pretty good. Left knee...hurts...like hell...."

"Okay, listen, you just hang tight, okay?"

"I ain't...goin' any...where," John replied thickly.

Captain Daniels trotted up. "Dutch? How's it look?"

Dutch turned. "He's pinned in there pretty good, Pete. We're gonna have to cut him out."

"We got any fuel leaking here?"

"No, doesn't look like it."

"How ya doin', John?" Daniels called.

"I'm thinkin'...I shoulda...stayed at work."

"Hang in there," Daniels smiled. "We'll have you out in a jiffy." He leaned in close to Dutch. "How's he doing?" His voice was very low.

"Well, he's talking, but I don't know--he's having trouble breathing, he seems pretty shocky, and he's got that steering wheel jammed into his stomach and chest. It's pretty likely he's got some internal injuries. I think he might have hit his head on the door panel, too."

"Chopper?" Daniels asked.

Dutch nodded. "Might be a good idea."

"Right. I'll put in the call. You stay with him."

"Dutch, do you have any vitals?" Chambers called from where he had set up the biophone.

Dutch had made his way around the squad and was pulling out the C-collar and some 4x4's and gauze from the Trauma box. "Hang on a sec," Dutch yelled back as he climbed back onto the hood of the Rover. "Tell 'em he's conscious and coherent. Respirations are rapid and shallow." He reached a hand to Johnny's neck to try to see if he could determine the pulse rate. Startled by the warmth of Johnny's skin, he glanced sharply at the injured man. No wonder he was on his way home. "Pulse is 120. Patient is febrile and has vomited. BP is 80 by palpation. He's got a possible knee injury, possible broken ribs on the left side. He's bleeding from a cut on the left side of his head, possible concussion. It's okay, Johnny." John had suddenly jerked as a spasm of pain swept over him. Chambers relayed the information to Rampart.

"I'm feelin' a...little dizzy," Johnny complained.

"It's all right," Dutch assured him as he wrapped the gauze around Johnny's head to hold the bandages in place, his gaze darting frequently to Johnny's eyes, watching for the telltale glazing that would suggest a serious head injury. He relayed the additional information to Chambers.

"Is he gonna be all right? I never even saw you--" Dutch looked up to see a husky middle-aged man standing next to the wreck, frightened eyes staring helplessly into the car. Before he could answer, a police officer stepped to the man and gently led him away. Dutch turned back to Johnny.

"We'll have you out in no time," he told him.

"...'kay..." Johnny's reply was barely audible. Dutch watched with concern as Johnny's eyes closed again.

There was suddenly a lot of noise and voices, and Johnny's eyes snapped open. Dutch leaned in again. "Okay, John, you know the drill. Just let us do the work, and you try to relax."

"Knowin' the drill--" Gage gasped "--and being...the object of it...aren't the...same thing."

"Yeah, I know," Dutch agreed. He climbed off the hood of the Land Rover and out of the way.

After they pulled the squad away from the wreck--no easy feat with the front end damaged the way it was from the impact--the firefighters pulled out the K-12, the Jaws, and the chains and set to work trying to free the trapped paramedic. The whine of the

motor and the screech of bending metal set John's teeth on edge and added to the pounding already assaulting his head.

"Talk to me, Johnny. You okay?"

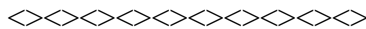
"I'm still here," he drawled faintly. "Cold...gettin' kinda groggy," he added.

From where he stood at the front end, Dutch could see that the work was slow going because of the powerful mangling the metal had undergone. He wished he could set up an IV and try to stabilize his friend, but there was no way he could reach Johnny's arms until they could cut away the crushed panels. All he could do was continue to worry.

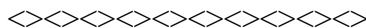
Finally, the car lurched again and Dutch jumped to the opening the firefighters had created. "You holdin' up okay?" he asked. Even as he spoke, he was swabbing Johnny's arm and inserting an IV needle and plugging in the ordered Ringer's solution. With growing alarm, he noticed that Johnny's eyes had taken on a glassy, unfocused appearance.

"...really groggy..." came the faint answer after a long pause.

"Okay, won't be long now," Dutch assured him, covering Johnny's face with a blanket to protect him from flying debris. "Gary!" he shouted to the other paramedic as the crew began to cut through the mangled door. "Get over here!" He waited until Chambers drew alongside. Leaning back, he said, "Tell Rampart he's getting shocky, pupils are reacting very sluggishly now. Also, tell them who the patient is." His voice was calm but Chambers could see the anxiety in his partner's face as he turned back toward the biophone. Dutch gripped Gage's shoulder as the motor started up and the powerful jaws worked at pulling the steering column away.



It was another fifteen minutes of earsplitting noise before the weight pressing against Johnny's chest and legs suddenly lifted. The pain flared for an instant. Then, the world spun wildly before fading out.



"Okay, let's get him outa here!" shouted Dutch.

"Wait!" yelled Andy Starks. "Cut the belt!"

Someone neatly slit the seatbelt Johnny still wore and the rescuers once more prepared to lift him free. Even as gently as they tried to shift him, the motion brought him abruptly back to awareness. Gage managed to limit his cursing to one or two mild profanities.

"Easy, easy--"

"Watch that leg!"

"Wait, wait, move that door--"

"Okay, easy now--"

Somehow several pairs of hands succeeded in manhandling him from the wreck and onto the backboard and, then, into the stokes. Chambers began re-assessing John's vital signs before they even had him settled. Dimly Johnny recognized the voices of the engine company around them, which faded quietly as he was carried away from the wreckage and toward the spot the police had cleared for the chopper.

"How long was he out?" Chambers asked.

"Three or four minutes."

"Dutch, he's shivering like the dickens," Starks reported.

"Yeah," Dutch said, "I noticed that. He's in shock, but I also think he's pretty sick. Get that blanket over him there."

"Ten-four, Rampart, second IV with normal saline. ETA five minutes." Chambers dropped the handset and spun back to help Dutch carry out the ordered treatment.

Johnny looked as if he'd gone out on them already, but his eyelids slid up just as they finished the second IV.

"Okay, let's load him up!" Chambers shouted.

"Dutch..." Johnny began.

"Just relax, Johnny," Dutch told him. "You're gonna be fine. This is the fastest way out of here."

In another minute John was secured in the chopper. Dutch jumped up with the equipment, Gary slammed the door, and they were off. John was almost immediately airsick.

"Johnny? Talk to me, buddy!" Dutch's voice was urgent as he frantically tipped his patient sideways. "Johnny?"

Johnny's eyes steadied for a minute on his friend's as he rolled him again onto his back, but then slowly shut. He came to abruptly again for a few seconds when they landed, before he was lifted from the chopper and hustled across the pavement to the Emergency Department.

"BP's 90 over 50," yelled Dutch as they swept into the treatment room. "Respiration is 30, pulse 130."

Two doctors and three nurses swarmed over the patient as Dutch settled the IV bags on the hook. He stepped quickly out of the way and let the others get to work cutting away Johnny's clothes, peering into his eyes, nose and ears, and sweeping expert fingers over his bruised chest and abdomen.

"We'll need a full skull series, chest and abdomen, and left leg, CBC with Diff, SMA-7, 12, and urinalysis," Kelly Brackett ordered. "And, Dix, let's order six units of the best for this customer. Who's available in the OR?"

"Stu Whitman is on call."

"All right, let him know we'll have a patient coming up."

Dixie nodded and went to make the phone call.

"Johnny? Johnny, can you hear me?" Brackett's rapid sternal rub elicited a low moan and an almost imperceptible fluttering of the eyelids.

"Temperature's 101.2," reported one of the nurses as she pulled the thermometer from Johnny's mouth.

Brackett turned to Dutch, still standing near the wall, watching the controlled chaos surrounding the examining table. "What did you say his temperature was earlier?"

"101," Dutch answered. "Evidently he'd been on his way home..." He suddenly realized that he needed to notify 51's. *Oh, man....* The knot in his stomach tightened.

"You say he was conscious at the site?"

Dutch nodded. "And coherent. He described most of his injuries, made a couple of jokes. He passed out once for a few minutes when we released him from the car. He came to again, then went out in the chopper on the way in after he threw up a second time. He also complained about dizziness."

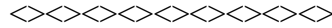
Brackett glanced back at Johnny. "I don't like the sound of that. His pupils are sluggish, and there's fluid in the left ear--there's the possibility that he has a skull fracture." He turned to the nurse. "Let's start with two units of blood when it arrives." He looked down at the patient. *Until we see if he's bleeding internally, I want to be extra careful.* Glancing up at Dutch's stricken face, he smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, Dutch. He's getting the best care there is."

"I know that," Dutch nodded slowly.

The door swung open and the orderlies wheeled in the x-ray machine. Dutch stepped out of the way and watched while they swiveled the device into place over Johnny. Dixie turned from the phone and gently steered Dutch into the hall.

"He'll be all right, Dutch." Dixie placed a hand on Dutch's arm.

He looked at her, then at the closing door, but he said nothing.



"LA County Fire Department, Station 51, Captain Stanley speaking."

"Captain Stanley, this is Dutch Masters. From Station 26?"

"Dutch, sure. Gage's friend. If you're looking for John, I'm sorry, he went home sick."

"Uh, no, Captain, I called to talk to you, actually." Dutch hesitated, then went on slowly. "Johnny was involved in an MVA on his way home." He listened to the silence. "You still there?"

"Yeah, I'm still here." In truth, Stanley had closed his eyes and dropped his head into his free hand. *Gage, what is it with you? I can't even send you home without your getting into trouble.* "What happened?" he sighed.

"Well...we hit him with our squad." Said that way, it was almost humorous.

"You what?!" Stanley sat up straighter in his chair.

Dutch managed to explain the circumstances of the crash to Stanley's satisfaction, although he was unable to give him any further information about Johnny's condition.

"I'm sorry, Captain."

"Nothing to be sorry for, Dutch." *Never is when it involves John Gage.*

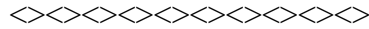
"I meant for having to bring you the news this way."

"Well, thanks for calling. Listen, the squad's out on a heart attack run. Chances are they'll be headed your way soon. You might want to look out for them, let Roy know what happened."

"I'll do that. Thanks."

Stanley set the phone down and dropped his head into both hands. After a moment, he slowly rose and made his way to the squad room where the rest of the shift were

watching an old movie.



"He *what*?!" Roy repeated. Already a full ten seconds had elapsed since Dutch had collared him in the hall and explained the situation.

"He's in four," replied Dutch, pointing, not bothering to repeat himself. "I think X-ray just left."

Roy followed Dutch's finger, staring stupidly at the closed door down the hall. For a few more seconds he stood motionless, then he finally put the handie-talkie on the desk and slowly shook his head. "Only Johnny could...." His eyes found Dutch. "How bad?"

"Bad," murmured Dutch. "Looks like he might have a skull fracture."

The portable radio crackled. "Squad 51, what's your status?"

Roy blinked at the unit a second before raising it to his lips. "Squad 51, available from Rampart Hospital."

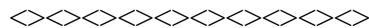
"Stand by for response."

Roy returned his gaze to Dutch. "Keep me posted, huh?"

Dutch nodded. "Sure."

"Bob," Roy called as Bellingham emerged from the doctor's lounge across the hall from the desk. "We've got a call coming in."

The radio came to life again as the dispatcher sent Roy and Bob on their way. Watching them as they disappeared down the hall, Dutch found himself almost envying the other paramedic. Roy, at least, would have something to occupy his mind while waiting for news of his injured partner. Letting out a frustrated breath, Dutch headed across the hall to look for his own partner.



Anne Hubbard handed Brackett the papers that the lab had just dropped off. "Blood work."

"Thanks, Anne," he replied, his eyes already scanning the report. "How're his vitals?" A nod of his head indicated Johnny, still lying insensate on the exam table.

"Vitals are unchanged," she reported. "He's still not responding to painful stimuli. Temp's up a tenth of a degree."

Brackett frowned. Dutch had reported, after his conversation with Hank Stanley, the fact that John had been on his way home, ill. *I'm sure the fever is from whatever sent him home in the first place, but it's just possible his injuries are contributing to it.*

"Any word on those x-rays?" he demanded.

At that moment, the door to the exam room opened and an orderly stepped in with a large manila envelope in his hand. "X-rays, Doc," he said, handing the package to Brackett.

Brackett muttered a thanks and quickly pulled the films from the pouch, sliding them into the viewer before the orderly had even stepped back out.

"I'll page Dr. Early," Anne said before Brackett could speak, already lifting the phone from the cradle and speaking into it. Hanging up the phone, she returned to cleaning Johnny's face, cutting away the rest of his clothes, and bandaging the gash Brackett had just finished suturing.

Joe Early strode into the exam room a few minutes later. "What do you have, Kel?" he asked, glancing at Johnny and then at Brackett.

Brackett, still frowning over the x-rays, shook his head. "It doesn't look good, Joe." He pointed to the clearly visible lines in two ribs and the slight separation of bone apparent in the left clavicle.

"That collarbone break looks nasty," agreed Early.

"Yeah, and looks like he might have some ligament damage to this knee." Again Brackett's finger lightly touched one of the films.

"Looks like our young friend is going to be wheelchair-bound for a while, huh?" smiled Early.

Brackett glanced sideways and shook his head. "Take a look at this." He jerked another film into the clip and pointed to a noticeable dark line.

Early gave a low whistle and looked back over his shoulder at the unconscious man lying on the table. His eyes found Brackett's. "Any signs of intracranial bleeding?"

Brackett shook his head. "None. But we'll need to keep an eye on it."

Early studied yet another film. "Fortunately, it doesn't look as if he has any abdominal bleeding--just some contusions."

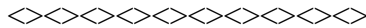
Brackett nodded. "Yeah, it's nice to have at least one thing going for us, huh?"

The door opened once more and two orderlies, trailing a gurney, lumbered into the room.

"Anne, is he ready to be moved?"

Anne nodded and began disconnecting the tubes from the treatment room equipment.

Johnny remained blissfully unaware.



Dutch looked up from his untouched coffee cup, his troubled expression turning hopeful as Dixie McCall stepped into the room. Gary Chambers started to rise, but she waved him back.

"No news, guys," she apologized. "Sorry. I just wanted to see how you two were doing."

Gary glanced at Dutch, hoping that Dixie's presence would open him up a little, get him talking about the accident. "I think we're both still kinda shook up, Dix," he said.

As if to prove his point, Dutch suddenly jerked and began trembling.

"Dutch?" Dixie placed her hand atop his.

Dutch's head jerked from side to side in agitation. Even as he lifted his eyes to meet Dixie's his vision was filled with the image of John's white Land Rover crushed between the squad and the semi-truck, and he felt once again the jarring impact. His breath began to come in short, quick gasps.

"Gary," said Dixie quietly, "get a chair or a gurney, and let's get him into a treatment room."

Gary was out of his chair in an instant, cursing himself for not realizing the extent to which Dutch had been upset by the crash.

"I'm all right," Dutch murmured ten minutes later as he lay on a table in one of the treatment rooms. He rested the back of a hand on his forehead and blinked at the bright overhead lamp. "I guess it just caught up with me all at once." He sighed and closed his eyes.

"No dizziness?" Joe Early persisted in his examination of the paramedic.

"No." He winced as Early pressed lightly against the middle of his chest.

"You've got some bruising here," Early noted. "Were you wearing a seatbelt?"

Dutch shook his head. "Not a shoulder belt," he admitted.

Early nodded. "You probably hit the steering column," he guessed. "Anything else hurt?"

"Just feeling a little weak in the knees is all," Dutch murmured. He was suddenly feeling very tired.

Early turned to Dixie. "Let's get a chest series, see if there are any fractures here." He continued to poke and prod Dutch a few more minutes, finally satisfying himself that there were no other injuries. "You know," he said, "I'm amazed that neither of you was hurt in the accident. From what you said, it sounds like it was pretty nasty."

Dutch shivered once, took a deep breath, and struggled visibly to regain control.

"Just try to relax, Dutch," suggested Joe, patting his shoulder.

"He gonna be all right, Doc?" Gary asked.

Joe glanced up. "I'd say so. There don't seem to be any serious injuries here. I think it's probably delayed shock," he said. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Gary nodded. "I wasn't driving, Doc."

Joe looked back at Dutch. "I can prescribe a mild sedative, if you like," he offered.

Dutch shook his head. "I'll be all right."

"Well, we'll see what the x-rays show, but I think I'll write you a no-work order for the rest of the shift, anyway."

Dutch nodded wearily, not really relieved. "Thanks, Doc."

Joe looked at Gary. "I'll call your captain for you, if you like."

Gary shook his head. "That's okay, Doc. I'll call him. I was wondering when we were gonna get picked up, anyhow."

Dutch spoke again. "Johnny...?"

"He's not doing so good," Joe told him, studying his fingers a minute. "He has a couple cracked ribs, broken collar bone," began Joe, glancing from one man to the other, "and it looks like he has a basilar skull fracture."

Dutch flinched.

"The good news is that it's a linear crack. The orthopedic surgeon is examining his

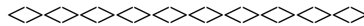
collarbone now, then we're going to move him to the ICU and keep a close eye on him. So far, there's no sign of building intracranial pressure, so that's good."

Dutch closed his eyes and said nothing. The door to the room opened and the x-ray tech rolled in. Joe explained what he wanted and told the firemen that he'd be back. Dixie followed him from the room.

"I'll be back, too," Gary informed his partner. "I'd better call Pete so he can get a replacement in, and see where my ride is."

"Sorry," Dutch muttered, opening his eyes and finding his partner.

"You'll only owe me if they stick me with Brice," Gary grinned. Dutch looked away. Gary's smile slowly faded. "He'll be okay, Dutch," he said softly. He waited a moment, but Dutch's eyes had closed again and he didn't respond. Gary slipped quietly from the room to call Pete Daniels.



Saturday, November 8, 1975

"You okay, Roy?"

When Roy didn't respond, Bob Bellingham calmly took the keys from the other paramedic and pushed him gently toward the passenger side of the squad. Roy broke out of his reverie and slowly continued in the direction in which Bellingham had shoved him, climbing into the unaccustomed seat in the truck and settling back distractedly.

"Look, Roy, I know I'm not your regular partner, but believe me, I've had my shots and I don't change shape in a full moon." Roy had been fine for the last two runs, but as the night wore on and Johnny's condition remained unchanged, DeSoto was becoming increasingly distracted.

Roy finally snickered and shook his head. "Sorry, Bob." *Great, Roy, three hours into a shift with a substitute and you're starting to behave like Johnny. One John Gage is more than the world is ready to handle as it is.*

"It's okay, I understand." Bellingham shrugged nonchalantly. At least he'd gotten DeSoto to say something, anyway. "I take it Dixie's report wasn't all that good?"

Roy made a face as he recalled Dixie's words. "Well, it's too soon for any word, I guess. He's in ICU, still unconscious. Fever's still a little higher than they'd like." He studied the road as Bob negotiated the quiet streets. "But, actually, I was thinking about Dutch just now."

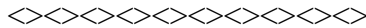
"Oh, yeah. Heard he almost passed out in the lounge." Bellingham shook his head.

"Wonder what came over him?"

"Delayed shock's not all that usual," Roy reminded him. "I guess the squad was totaled, too."

"That a fact?" Bob scratched his nose. "Must be on a hell of a guilt trip by now."

Roy looked away. He knew exactly how Dutch would be feeling.



"Just a few minutes, Dutch."

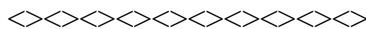
He nodded vaguely at the admonishment from the ICU nurse and entered Johnny's cubicle.

His first reaction was one of relief. The blood that had covered John's face had been washed away, the blood and vomit-stained clothing removed. Two IV's fed into either arm, supplying fluids and nourishment of sorts, and a nasal cannula ensured a steady provision of oxygen. John's left arm disappeared under a tight wrapping that secured it to his side. His left leg rested in a split cast, gauze tightly holding the edges together, an ice pack atop ostensibly there to reduce swelling.

John's head was turned slightly to the right, so Dutch had a clear view of the bruising that was developing along the cheekbone on that side. Johnny's long hair hid more damage, he was sure. A narrow bandage on his forehead concealed the gash that Dutch recalled from the accident scene, the source of some of the blood now so carefully erased.

Dutch stepped closer to the bed. His hand reached out tentatively, stopped, then fell to his side without ever touching his friend. "I'm sorry," he whispered after a moment.

After another moment, he turned around and left.



Dutch slowly climbed the stairs to his walk-up and let himself into his small apartment. Not bothering to turn on a light, he collapsed on the worn sofa, weary beyond the point of exhaustion. He leaned his head against the sofa back and stared at the ceiling.

Basilar skull fracture.

The words ran around in his head, circling repeatedly until Dutch felt almost dizzy.

It wasn't your fault, Dutch. There wasn't any way you could have avoided hitting him.

The words of his captain began to collide with the others, and Dutch felt an ache

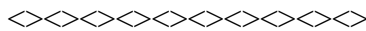
beginning in back of his eyes. He wished he hadn't let Early send him home.

Try to get some sleep.

At least the shaking had finally stopped. Early was right, of course. There was nothing he could do by hanging around the hospital. Johnny could regain consciousness tonight, or it could be next week. Or...

Dutch shut his eyes against any other possibilities. *Johnny's gonna be fine*, he insisted to himself. *He was awake and talking at the scene, remember? He's gonna be fine....*

Dutch also wished he'd accepted Early's offer of the sedative.



"Land Rover?" The grizzled mechanic scratched his head, then dropped his hand and pointed a bony finger toward the back of the lot. "She's around back. Not much left to her, though. She's gonna have to be totaled." He peered up at Roy, squinting in the bright November sunshine. "You from the insurance company?"

Roy shook his head. "I'm a friend of the owner," he explained impatiently, for the third time. He appreciated the wariness of the body shop's owner, but it had been an especially long shift. All he wanted was to empty the Rover of Johnny's belongings and go home.

"He's just here to remove the owner's property from the vehicle." Officer Dave Scott smiled benignly.

The mechanic blinked at the policeman. "Well," the workman finally agreed slowly, "I guess if you're here with him, it must be all right." He led the way around the building.

Roy glanced around as they reached the back lot. The repair shop was immaculate, and nothing lay out of place--no dropped tools, no empty barrels, no trash of any sort. Nothing except for what looked to be a large pile of scrap metal sitting in the far corner of the yard.

The old man was gesturing again. "Like I said, not much left of her." He shook his head sadly at the death of the car, then lifted his eyes to Roy. "Hope your friend is in better shape," he offered sympathetically.

Roy nodded dumbly as he realized that the hunk of scrap metal in the corner was all that was left of Johnny's car. *Jeez...* He swallowed. *How'd he make it out of that alive?*

A few shards of glass remained in the front, but most of the windshield was missing, as was the driver's side door. The steering column tilted up at an impossible angle, bent nearly back upon itself. The driver's seat had been pushed into the middle of the narrow car, leaving the two front seats looking as if they were one. He couldn't quite see it from

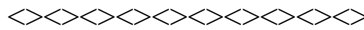
this distance, but it looked to Roy as if the two side panels were touching.

Roy glided across the asphalt as if in a dream, not even realizing that he was moving. He saw how the wheels on the near side of the truck sat at a cockeyed angle, wondering--*knowing*--that the same was true on the other side. The rear of the vehicle seemed to have fared no better than the side: the spare tire hung crookedly from its supporting bracket, and no small amount of force would open that back door. Yet, his brain recorded all of this in only some distant fashion. It quickly fashioned barricades against the rapidly developing rush of emotions, and allowed him to continue moving.

"You see 'em differently when you know the driver," commented Scott softly from behind Roy.

"Yeah." Roy nodded absently, still staring. Shaking himself after another moment, he finally leaned into the car to retrieve Johnny's belongings, trying very hard to ignore the bloodstains that spattered the interior surfaces.

*Dutch does **not** need to see this.*



Hank Stanley blew out a breath and reached back to scratch his head, leaving his hand on the back of his head a moment as he studied the insensate man on the bed.

An impressive array of tubes and wires connected Johnny to a variety of machinery, all of which seemed to be humming and hissing correctly.

At least he's not on a ventilator this time, Stanley thought. He shoved his hands into his pockets and looked around the room. For the moment, Gage had the room to himself, and Hank knew that if he were to look over his shoulder he would have a clear view of the nurses' station. If there were a plus to Gage's being here, this location would be it. Still, the paraphernalia in this room was enough to frighten a marine.

"Not a pretty sight, is it?"

Hank started at the voice and turned. Joe Early stood just behind him, smiling gently as he regarded the young man in the bed.

"Hey, Doc," murmured Hank, returning his gaze to Johnny. "How's he doing?"

"He's holding his own," replied Early, lifting the chart from the foot of the bed and studying it for a minute.

"Guess with head injuries, there's just no telling, huh?"

"Well, it's not an exact science, that's for sure." He replaced the chart. "He's young, he's

strong...he stands a better than even chance of making a full recovery."

Hank gestured to Johnny's left leg. "Is he going to need surgery on that?"

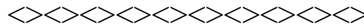
Joe nodded. "Yes, he will. The orthopedic surgeon was in earlier to look at the x-rays and see for himself how it looks. He'll let us know later today when he'll perform the surgery, but I'm guessing it'll be sometime Monday or Tuesday."

Hank's eyebrows went up slightly. "Even if he's still in a...coma?" *God, that's a hard word to say.*

"Well, the sooner the better. We can't wait too long, or it'll be virtually impossible to repair the ligaments and he'll lose the action of the joint."

Hank returned his gaze to the bed. "Tell me, Doc, what does your gut tell you about all this?" His hand waved vaguely at the occupant and his attachments.

Joe smiled. "My gut tells me that this is John Gage, and to make no predictions."



Roy hadn't planned to stay long that afternoon--he'd really just wanted to make a quick run out to drop off a few of Johnny's things and check on his partner. But he found himself settling into a chair he'd heisted from the nurses' station across the hall and talking to Johnny about the end of the shift, the latest antics of his kids, the dog's latest escapade. He slowed down as he related the details of his trip to the auto body shop.

"Sorry, Johnny," he said softly. "It looks like your truck is gonna be a total loss." His gaze traveled the length of the bed, taking in the tightly splinted left arm and shoulder, the bandaged knee, then returned to the bruised face. "Not that you'd be able to drive it for a while, anyhow..."

"Hi, Roy!" Judy Engle, the ICU nurse on duty this Saturday afternoon, sailed breezily into the room, a bright smile lighting her elfin features. "Oh, you don't have to get up," she admonished, gesturing for him to remain seated. "I'm just here for a quick check." Winking as she spoke, she shook down a thermometer and placed it in Johnny's mouth, picking up his wrist at the same time. "John," she addressed the patient, "you think maybe you can open your eyes for me this time?"

Roy watched Johnny's face with interest, half-expecting his friend to open his eyes and start telling some goofy story.

Johnny, of course, did nothing of the sort.

Judy lay his hand gently back against the sheets and picked up the BP cuff that dangled from the basket at the head of his bed. "That's okay, Johnny," she said as she fastened it

around his bicep, "maybe next time, huh?"

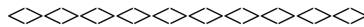
"You really believe he can hear you, don't you?"

Judy smiled at Roy's bemused expression, but said nothing until she had noted Johnny's blood pressure and removed the stethoscope from her ears. "Of course. Don't you?" She glanced at the blood pressure monitor that connected to the arterial line in Johnny's radial artery, and noted both readings on Johnny's chart.

Roy looked back at Johnny and laughed softly. "I must. I've spent the last twenty minutes sitting here talking to him." He looked back up at Judy, suddenly feeling much better.

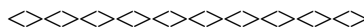
"See?" Judy's head bobbed knowingly. "You watch. Some day down the line, he's going to ask you about something you told him this afternoon. You'll scratch your head and wonder where the heck he got that notion, but if you ask him, he'll insist he heard you say it. It'll be in his memory, but he won't know why. I've seen it happen." She removed the thermometer and recorded the temperature on the chart. "100.6," she said, catching Roy's curious expression. "Down a little from last night." She replaced the chart. "See you later, Roy. Try not to stay much longer. He needs his rest." She sailed back out of the room.

Roy watched the empty doorway a beat, then turned his gaze to his unconscious partner. "You are one lucky man, Junior," he said. Smiling, he rose from the chair. "I'm gonna head out of here, let you get some rest. I'm on duty tomorrow, so I'm sure I'll be up here again." He patted Johnny's hand lightly. "Take it easy, Pally. You do whatever Judy tells you to, okay?" He waited a moment, but Johnny didn't stir. With a soft sigh, Roy turned away.



For a long time, Johnny floated in nothingness, sound, sight, sensation far distant memories. It was neither pleasant nor unpleasant. After a while, he thought he could distinguish sounds, first near, then far, then disappearing altogether, making him wonder whether they were real or part of this unreal dream. He thought about trying to investigate, decided the effort was too much, and let the darkness surround him once again.

He rose to the surface a second time, more sounds disturbing his slumber, voices close by and speaking in hushed tones. He tried to open his eyes, to speak, to demand that they stop the world from gyrating and remove the elephant that was crushing his chest. His body refused to follow instructions, however, and he eventually gave up the effort and returned to the comfort of oblivion.



Sunday, November 9, 1975

The third try was the charm. Johnny finally managed to force open his eyes.

I'm in heaven, Johnny decided dreamily. I have to be.

The lovely apparition that had caused the thought finished marking the chart she held in her hand, and Johnny watched through half-opened eyes as she hung the clipboard back on the foot of his bed. Her eyes lifted for one final check of her patient.

"Where am I?" Johnny asked. Or, rather, tried to ask. He knew he had opened his mouth. The words had been clear in his mind. But somewhere between the first and the second they got lost, and all that emerged from his lips was a weak croak.

The vision didn't seem to notice anything amiss. "Good morning," she smiled, her teeth flashing whitely in a perfectly made-up face. Her voice sounded muffled, though Johnny's mind recorded this only distantly.

Morning? Okay, I'll go along with that. Whatever you say...

"Here." She held out a glass with a bent straw. Johnny sipped carefully, pleased that the water eased the dryness in his throat.

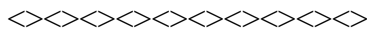
"Where am I?" he tried again. The words came out in a hoarse whisper, but at least they were audible this time.

The smile never faded. "Better?" she asked, ignoring his question.

Johnny nodded and once more asked where he was.

The woman simply maintained her smile and replied, "I'll page Dr. Early."

Johnny watched her disappear, wondering if he had actually spoken, or only imagined that he had. His eyes slid shut.



"Come on, John. Talk to me." Joe Early drew his gaze back to the petite nurse when the patient made no response. "Guess you're the only one he'll talk to," he quipped.

Judy blushed. "He seemed confused," she explained as Joe continued his examination. "He asked where he was."

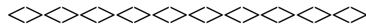
"I'd be surprised if he weren't confused," Joe assured her. He switched his penlight off and straightened, settling the miniature flashlight back into his pocket and turning to the nurse again. "What are his vitals like?"

Judy handed him the chart. "Holding steady," she replied. "Temp's still elevated."

Joe studied the numbers and nodded. "Everything else looks good, though. All right, have me paged if anything changes." He glanced at his watch and made a notation on the chart, handing it back to Judy. "Don't worry," he added, seeing the look on her face. "This is fairly typical of John Gage. Just when you think he's going to do one thing, he turns around and does the opposite." He grinned. "Life tends to get really interesting when he's around."

Judy smiled at Joe's retreating form. She reached down and resettled Johnny's hand against his side and smoothed the blanket tenderly. *He looks like a little boy*, she thought, brushing his hair back in a very motherly gesture, then laughed at herself.

Perhaps he looked like a little boy because I'm treating him like a little boy. She replaced the chart and continued her rounds.



His eyes were definitely open, but they remained unfocused, uncertain, reacting sluggishly to the surroundings.

Above him, Dixie McCall watched as Johnny gradually became aware of his surroundings. It was sheer luck that she was in the room--she had stopped in on a coffee break, and stayed when he began to stir restlessly, thinking to soothe him back into slumber. When his eyes opened and his mouth began to work noiselessly, she had sent for Joe Early and stood at Johnny's side, speaking to him quietly.

The door opened and Joe strode in. Dixie turned.

"He's coming around again," she told the doctor.

Joe leaned over the slowly rousing patient. "Take it easy, John. No, don't try to get up," he warned as Johnny suddenly made as if to sit up. "Just relax. That's it."

"...time is it?" Johnny whispered.

Joe glanced at Dixie and smiled back at John. "It's a little after one," he replied.

"Morning?"

"Afternoon."

"...mouth...feels like cotton..."

Dixie held out a glass and John sipped carefully from the straw. His face cleared of some

of its puzzlement, and it became apparent that he now noticed the tubes snaking around him and the various monitors blinking and beeping softly.

Johnny tried to lift his hand to his head.

"Careful," Dixie warned, catching his arm and holding it down. "You don't want to pull those IV's out."

"Where am I?" Johnny whispered.

"You're in the hospital," Joe told him.

"His temp is 101," Dixie reported, reading the flow sheet. "BP is 110 over 70, pulse is 60."

Johnny blinked. "Did I pass out?"

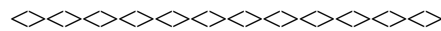
Joe frowned. "In a way," he replied. "How do you feel?"

Johnny closed his eyes and swallowed. "...bad headache..."

"Why don't you try to get some rest? You'll feel better next time you wake up."

"All right," Johnny agreed. He shifted slightly. "...think they'd at least give me some aspirin..." he sighed, and his eyes closed easily.

Dixie didn't know whether to laugh or cry.



"He lied."

Kelly Brackett looked up from the foot of the bed, startled. "Ah, I see our favorite patient is awake again. Who lied?" Smiling, he moved around to Johnny's side.

Johnny peered at him, trying to bring the doctor into focus. "Doc Early," he croaked after a minute, his dry throat making it hard to get the words out. "He said I'd feel better when I woke up, but I feel worse." His voice sounded hoarse, even to his own ears.

Brackett offered the water glass with its straw. "Better?"

"Why am I here?"

"Tell you what, how about if I ask you some questions, and you humor me and answer them, okay?"

"Sure." Johnny really didn't want to answer any questions. He wanted Brackett to make his head stop its pounding.

"What's your name?"

John stared at him a beat before he answered. "John Gage," he said, an odd look on his face matching the tone of his voice. *Doc, you're gettin' scary in your old age...*

Brackett smiled at his expression. "What day is it?"

John grimaced and waited for the headache to subside. It didn't, so he tried instead to ignore it. That didn't work, either. "...last I remember it was Friday," he replied at last, wondering again why the questions and deciding that he really didn't care. "Don't think it's Friday anymore...." His eyes began to close again and he had to force them open.

"Good guess," Brackett said. "One more: what IS the last thing you remember?"

Johnny thought a moment. It was hard to concentrate, and he finally gave it up. "Sorry..."

This answer elicited a frown from the doctor.

A light seemed to go on in Johnny's head. The light hurt. "Car accident?" he guessed.

"Bingo."

"My fault?"

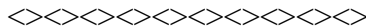
Brackett shook his head. "Someone else caused it."

Some of the amusement left Johnny's eyes. "Bad?"

"Well," Brackett told him, "it's Sunday."

Johnny looked faintly ill. "Sunday...?" *What happened to Saturday?*

"Welcome back, Johnny." Brackett's smile was a little worried.



"Okay, thanks, Dix." Roy hung up the phone and turned to the table where Captain Stanley was working on his month end report. "Johnny's awake," he told Hank, sitting back down to his coffee.

Stanley stopped writing and looked up. "That's great! How's he doing?"

Roy shrugged. "Well, Dixie says he's been coming around since this morning, but he's only becoming lucid now." He sipped his coffee. "She says he doesn't remember anything about the accident." He looked vaguely worried.

"That's not unusual, is it?" Hank frowned. *I'm not sure that forgetting such an experience isn't such a bad thing.*

"Well, I guess with that kind of fracture, it's not unusual for someone to have some memory loss. Dix says it's too soon to tell if it's going to be permanent or not. Anyway, she says he seems oriented about almost everything else."

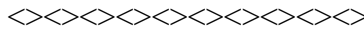
"Look, why don't you go on over and check on him? You and Bob can make yourselves available from there."

"Yeah, I think I'll do that, if you don't mind." He pushed back his chair and stood up.

"Tell him to get back on his feet soon."

The tones interrupted him. Roy listened for a second, then moved to the squad as Sam Lanier's voice announced a structure fire.

Johnny would have to wait.



"Come on, I'll walk you up." Dixie set down her pen and turned to Sharon. "I'll be up in ICU for a few minutes, if anyone needs me."

"I'll be in the doctor's lounge," said Bellingham. "Tell Gage I'll see him when he's more fit for company."

"Won't be long," Roy promised. He was anxious to talk to his partner. This was the first time all day they had managed to steal a few minutes so that he could even stop in. The runs had been nearly non-stop.

"I think he'll be asleep," she warned Roy, glancing at her watch, as she and the paramedic headed toward the elevator. "It sort of threw him to find out he's been here for two days." Besides, it was nearly eight o'clock at night. They couldn't expect him to be awake.

Johnny's eyes were closed when they stepped in, but he opened them at the sound of the door. He peered sleepily at the visitors.

"Hey, Junior," Roy grinned.

"Hey, Roy." He tried to smile in return, make his voice sound enthusiastic, but his head ached appallingly, his tightly wrapped left arm couldn't keep his collar bone from sending

regular reminders that it was nowhere near being healed, his cracked ribs made breathing difficult, and his left leg itched mightily under the wrapping that protected the ligaments that had been torn in the accident.

"How ya doin'?" Roy asked, moving alongside the bed, still smiling to see his partner awake at last.

Johnny grimaced. "I'd be doin' better if people'd stop waking me up every few minutes." He shot a sleepy gaze at Dixie.

Roy glanced at Dixie and winked. For as often as John Gage was a patient in these halls, he still had not learned to be a cooperative one. "Someday I'm gonna regret saying this, pal, but you look a whole lot better with your eyes open than you do with them shut."

Johnny made another face. "Thanks a lot."

"Your usual cheerful self, I see." Roy couldn't help but continue to grin stupidly.

Johnny started to shift, gasping sharply as the broken ends of his collarbone bumped against each other.

"You okay?" It was Roy's turn to shoot Dixie a look.

"I'm all right," Johnny whispered as Dixie adjusted his IV drip and rested her hand on his. "A little dizzy...."

"Maybe I should go," Roy suggested, "let you get some sleep."

"You just got here," Johnny protested.

"You should get some rest, Johnny," Dixie commanded.

"I can rest later," insisted Johnny.

Dixie winked at Roy, who grinned again, reassured. "All right, then, but only for a little while, okay?" She gave him a final pat on the hand. "I've gotta get back to work. I'll stop back in before I leave."

"So, looks like you'll be off your feet for a while," Roy commented when Dixie had gone. "Guess I'm gonna have to break in a replacement."

Johnny didn't seem to be paying attention. "Yeah," he answered vaguely. "Roy," he said, glancing up and then away, "they tell me I was pretty coherent at the scene." As tired as he was, he'd been waiting for Roy to show up so he could discuss this with him. He had to know.

Roy nodded. "Yeah, that's what Dutch told me."

Johnny looked at him bleakly. "I don't remember any of it," he murmured, almost fearfully.

"Johnny," Roy began, wishing he'd thought to confiscate the nurses station chair again, "that's not unusual, you know that."

Johnny's head bobbed fractionally. "I know that, I know that," he agreed. "It just feels...scary." He looked up. "You know?"

"Yeah," Roy replied, nodding slowly. "Yeah, I think I do."

"They didn't tell me much about what happened," Johnny went on, casting an almost hopeful look at his partner.

Roy sighed. *It figures.* "Johnny, it might be better to wait a day or so, until you're a little less groggy."

Johnny's head moved again. "I keep tryin' to remember...makes my head hurt. There's just nothin' there." He sighed.

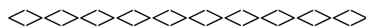
"Well, maybe right now your brain is shutting off the memory so that your body can heal without having to remember that initial shock, the worst of the pain." Sounded reasonable, anyhow.

Something flashed into Johnny's eyes. "It wasn't you...? I mean, you're okay, and everything?"

Roy shook his head. "No, it wasn't me, Johnny." He wanted to smile, but the truth was nearly as bad. "I'm fine."

Johnny waited.

Roy sighed. "Johnny...Dutch was driving the squad that hit you."



"How's he doing?" Bob Bellingham looked up lazily from his perusal of the comics that lay on the table before him.

Roy seated himself and swallowed a mouthful of coffee before he answered. "He's a little groggy," he began. "In a lot of pain, but he won't admit it."

Bob smiled. "Sounds typical."

"Yeah." Roy toyed with the handle of his mug. "He didn't know it was Dutch who hit him."

"Ouch. I thought you were gone a little longer than I expected."

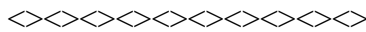
Roy nodded. "It took a little while to convince him that Dutch was all right," he sighed, "but he went to sleep still worried."

"Anybody call Dutch and tell him Johnny's awake?"

"Dixie's tried him a couple of times, but she hasn't been able to get through. She'll keep trying, I guess."

The handie-talkie beeped three times. "Squad 51, what's your status?"

Bob raised an eyebrow at Roy, who nodded. Bob lifted the portable and pressed the transmit button. "Squad 51, available."



Johnny reacted without thought, throwing himself flat on the roof's edge and flinging out his arm, grabbing desperately for the slipping man. "Grab my hand!" he yelled, tugging frantically at Dutch's lifeline. His fingers slipped once, twice, then managed a tenuous hold on the hook. But he knew it would be good for no more than another few seconds. "Dutch!" Johnny had no choice. He had to look down.

The world spun wildly and Johnny felt his stomach heave. He shut his eyes and the sensation slowed. "Dutch!" He clenched his jaw in frustration. Don't let go, Gage, just don't let go!

He opened his eyes. The world did its merry-go-round act again, taking Dutch with it this time. "My hand!" John yelled. His vision began to blur, and his body felt as if it too, were floating recklessly high above the safe ground below. He stubbornly pushed against the encroaching darkness and pushed himself further out.

Dimly, he felt Dutch's fingers brush his. Instinctively his fingers curled and tightened against the touch, and Dutch was, for the moment, safe.

And then an extraordinary pain seemed to shatter his head, unexpected and fierce. He heard himself cry out, felt his fingers relax and the weight drop away.

"It's all right.... Johnny, it's all right, take it easy."

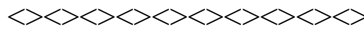
Calm hands steadied him, held him firm as the world bucked and heaved. His stomach lurched and he coughed and choked as the bile burned its way up his throat. The spinning grew wilder as his stomach contracted again and again, and he could barely hear

the attempts to calm and soothe him.

"Make it go away!" He could feel the tears stinging his eyes, and he felt like a child, but the pain was so fierce that he had at first thought the anesthesia had worn off in the middle of a surgical procedure and that the scalpel was somehow still in his ear. He tried to claw at the pain, but something had hold of his hand, preventing him from reaching up. *It hurt!*

Someone pressed a damp cloth on his forehead, gently wiped his mouth, passed cool fingers across his scalp and lightly touched his face. He heard indistinct shushing noises and the sounds of rapidly approaching footsteps. He was dimly aware of more than one person at his side, felt a gentle pressure on his arm as something cold coursed through his veins, disappearing somewhere near his elbow.

It was an eternity before the pain finally began to recede.



"Still dizzy?"

"A little." Johnny carefully avoided nodding his head, afraid to set the world in motion again.

Brackett straightened from his examination of John's ear. "Pain's still pretty bad, huh?"

"Yeah...." Johnny swallowed. "What's the story?"

Brackett folded his arms across his chest. "Well, I was hoping I'd find a ruptured ear drum, but I'm afraid that's not the case. It looks like the skull fracture has affected the middle ear bones."

"That explains why I'm not hearing so good on that side."

Brackett smiled briefly. "Well, yes, I imagine. Until the bones heal, Johnny--both in the ear and along the temporal bone, I'm afraid you're also going to be in for some severe bouts of vertigo as well as pain and loss of hearing."

Johnny swallowed again. "Is it gonna be permanent?"

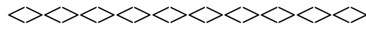
"It's too soon to say, Johnny. There's just no way to know right now." He studied the emotions flitting across the young paramedic's face. "Look, why don't you try to get some rest? I'll give you something a little stronger for the pain so you can sleep."

Johnny looked at him doubtfully.

"Johnny," Brackett said gently, "the more rest you get, the sooner you're going to heal. I

wish I could just make the pain disappear now, but all I can do is assure you that it will go away in time."

"Easy for you to say," muttered Johnny. But he closed his eyes obediently. The sooner he was better, the sooner he'd be able to escape.



Monday, November 10, 1975

"206 had a bad night, huh?" Judy frowned slightly at the notations on the chart at the nurses station, her glance flickering in the direction of the room in question.

"Yeah," sighed Alison Cohen as she plopped her thin rump in the lone chair still at the desk. "One nightmare after another." She kicked off her shoes and wiggled her toes luxuriously. "I thought nights were supposed to be quieter," she complained.

Judy smiled. "They usually are," she agreed, leaning against the counter. "How long's he been asleep this time?"

Alison cocked a curious eyebrow at the other nurse. "You have some sort of interest at stake here?"

Judy laughed. "You might say that. John Gage is one of the County paramedics. He's kinda special around here, if you know what I mean."

Alison straightened in the chair. "*That's* the infamous John Gage?" She swiveled toward Johnny's room, a thoughtful expression crossing her young face.

"Yes, but my advice is to not let him work his charm on you."

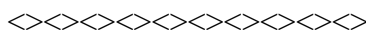
Alison snorted. "Not likely, not after having him throwing up on me half the night."

Judy laughed again. "Listen, you can head out if you want. Gail should be here any minute."

Alison nodded around the yawn that was forming. "kay," she mumbled, slipping back into her shoes and pushing herself to her feet. "Enjoy," she called over her shoulder as she shuffled off.

Judy grinned at the departing back. *What's not to enjoy?*

A low bell rang and, glancing down, she saw the light from 206 flashing in the console. She hurried down the hall to see what Johnny's problem was this time.



"I *can't*, Dix. What am I gonna say to him?"

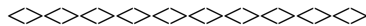
"Dutch Masters, I can't believe you don't want to go up and visit Johnny!" Dixie McCall squared her shoulders, crossed her arms, and glared at the paramedic.

Dutch shifted uncomfortably, the memory of Johnny's bruised and battered body still too fresh in his mind, the feeling of helplessness he'd felt the other night still assaulting him. "Dix, he just woke up--he isn't going to want visitors traipsing in and out of his room."

"Then, why are you here?" Dixie's demeanor softened. "Dutch," she said quietly, laying a hand across his, "this is John Gage we're talking about here. And, he didn't just wake up--he's been conscious since yesterday, and he's pretty lucid. He'd be furious if he knew you were here and didn't stop in. Look," she went on before Dutch could respond, "you can't keep blaming yourself. If anyone's to blame it's the guy who pushed him into the middle of that intersection. And if you want to go even further, blame it on whatever it was that sent him home in the first place."

Dutch relaxed slightly.

Dixie smiled. "There, you see? Come on. Let's go up and see your friend."



As they entered Johnny's room, they saw Judy, her arms encircling Johnny, laying him back against the pillow.

"Okay now?" she was saying.

Dixie opened her mouth to offer a wisecrack, but as Judy stepped away from Johnny Dixie caught sight of his ashen face. "Here, Judy, let me give you a hand."

"Sorry," Johnny whispered.

Dixie slid the emesis basin out of the way as Judy returned to Johnny's side with a damp cloth and placed it on his forehead. "It's okay," she assured him. "Don't worry about it." She glanced at Dixie. "He seems to be having trouble with the new pain meds. I've had Dr. Brackett notified."

"Lemme off this merry-go-round," muttered Johnny, opening his eyes. He saw Dutch, and his expression, impossibly, brightened. "Hi," he grinned weakly.

Dutch stepped closer. "Sorry, didn't mean to catch you at a bad time. I can come back when you've had a chance to ask her out...." *What a thing to say, Masters. Shut up and leave now.*

Johnny, however, seemed amused, and Judy had the grace to blush. She lifted the cloth from Johnny's head and stood back. "If you're okay, now...."

"We'll keep an eye on him, Judy," smiled Dixie.

"I'll be back with the new meds as soon as Dr. Brackett writes the orders," Judy replied, favoring Johnny with a last glance that he didn't appear to notice. She quickly made her retreat.

Dutch studied his friend a moment as Dixie fussed around the bed. Though Johnny's face was pale and his eyes pain-filled, he certainly seemed oriented. "So, I guess she said no, huh?"

"I only ask the ones I don't puke on," murmured Johnny sleepily.

"Just a couple of minutes, Dutch," said Dixie. She had glanced at Johnny's chart and noticed that his temperature was up again. *Better let Kel know as soon as possible.* She waited for Dutch's acknowledgment, then stepped from the room.

"...glad you're okay..."

Dutch blinked. "What?"

"Roy said you weren't hurt...." Johnny yawned. "...guess I didn't really believe him."

"Johnny...."

"Damn." Johnny's eyes squeezed shut a moment and his hands gripped the siderails of his bed.

"You all right?" Dutch reached for the call button, stopping as Johnny let out his breath.

"Just dizzy....sometimes it gets...really strong...." Johnny's eyes opened and he found his friend. "It'll go away...."

"Johnny, I'm sorry..."

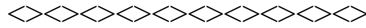
"Huh?" The other blinked lazily and his eyes lost a little of their focus.

He's falling asleep, thought Dutch. "It was my fault," he went on. "I'm sorry."

"...don't remember...." John's eyes closed.

"I'm sorry," Dutch repeated.

Johnny, however, was asleep.



"Mr. Gage, I'm Dan Lassky." The tall, balding man held out a hand, which Johnny took hesitantly. "I'm the orthopedic surgeon who'll be performing the procedure to repair your knee." Lassky oozed confidence.

Johnny failed to be reassured. Not only was the idea of his knee being sliced open an unpleasant thought, but the stream of doctors and nurses into and out of his room made him increasingly nervous. Anyone who mentioned performing another test or procedure ran the risk of being assaulted with some heavy-duty screaming.

Dr. Lassky didn't seem to notice anything untoward. He breezed briskly on. "As I'm sure you're aware, you suffered torn ligaments in your left knee in the crash. The sooner we go in and fix them, the better. Otherwise, you'll experience real trouble, perhaps even lose some function or mobility on that side." He waited to see if Johnny agreed. Johnny, however, remained bewildered. Lassky scanned the chart he had picked up. "Your neuro checks look good...no problems remaining oriented." He frowned and glanced up at the patient. "No memory of the accident?"

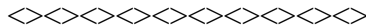
"No," Johnny mumbled, beginning to feel a slight sensation of panic.

Lassky's mouth twisted. "Well, that won't affect knee surgery now, will it?" he asked. Johnny had, by now, come to the conclusion that Lassky's questions were mostly rhetorical, so he didn't bother to attempt a reply. "So," Lassky sailed on, "I've scheduled your operation for first thing tomorrow morning, barring unforeseen complications. That all right with you?"

Somehow, I don't think I have much choice here. "Uh...that's fine, Doc," Johnny replied.

"Great!" Lassky seemed genuinely pleased. He replaced the chart and nodded enthusiastically. "Well, then, I'll see you in the morning."

He swirled out of the room, leaving Johnny to wonder if the apparition had been real or simply another weird dream.



"Man..." Johnny sighed dramatically.

Roy's mouth quirked into a smile as he regarded his friend. "Look at it this way, Johnny: you won't have to face the knife down the road. You'll get it over and done with while you're still miserable from everything else."

Johnny groaned louder. "You make it sound so appealing," he complained.

"Believe me, you'll feel much better when it's over," Roy insisted.

Well, it sure couldn't hurt much worse. Johnny sighed. He hadn't noticed the pain in his knee when he'd first come around yesterday, but today his entire leg seemed as if it were on fire. No matter which way he tried to lay, he could not bring relief to the swollen joint. He couldn't imagine that surgery would make it feel any better, though.

"I heard Cap and the guys were by earlier," Roy commented.

Johnny nodded slightly, his mouth twisting ruefully. "Yeah. Dutch was here this morning, too. I slept through most of their visits."

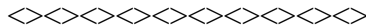
"Well, I'm sure they understood."

Johnny stared into space, not replying.

"Hey. Junior. You okay?" Roy waved his hand playfully in the other's face.

Johnny blinked. "You really think my leg'll feel better after the surgery?"

Roy just grinned and shook his head.



"Shit."

"Relax, Dutch, it's not that bad." Dixie McCall tried to smile reassuringly at the young paramedic, but she didn't seem to be having much success in calming him.

"I didn't know...." He looked at her searchingly. "This is gonna slow down his recovery, isn't it?"

Dixie shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. If I know Dan Lassky, he'll have Johnny on his feet just about as soon as he wakes up." She smiled and squeezed Dutch's hand. "He's in good hands."

Gary Chambers came out of the treatment room where he'd been delivering their latest patient. Spying his partner, he ambled to his side. "Hey, Dix, how's it going?"

"Hi, Gary," Dixie grinned. "Just updating your partner here on his friend."

"Yeah? How *is* Gage?"

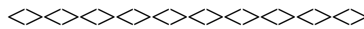
A garbled epithet from his partner startled him. Gary gave Dutch a sideways glance and saw Dutch's brow furrowed in an expression which Gary had learned meant danger. He sidestepped involuntarily.

"Let's go," growled Dutch, grabbing the Handie Talkie and spinning on his heel.

Gary threw Dixie a helpless, shoulder-shrugging apology and trotted after his partner. He arrived at the squad just in time to see Dutch almost dent the rear panel with his fist.

Well, I guess a few dents in the back end would make this squad a match for the one we totaled... Gary had the wisdom to keep the thought to himself. He didn't even bother to ask Dutch if he wanted to go back inside and have the hand x-rayed. *He'll let me know if anything's broken.*

But he made sure to stay on his own side of the squad as they returned to the station. Way on his own side.



Tuesday, November 11, 1975

Joe turned as his name was called. Dan Lassky strode rapidly toward him as elevator doors closed behind him.

"How'd it go?" Joe asked.

Lassky nodded. "Fine, just fine," he reported. "Everything looks good. He's in Recovery now--should be going back to his room pretty soon."

"No complications?"

"Well, we'll want to keep an eye on that fever," Lassky suggested. "But, all in all, he's doing fine."

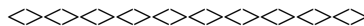
"When will you start him on therapy?"

"As soon as he's able," Lassky replied. "He'll need to work to regain function, and the longer he waits the harder that will be."

"All right," Joe smiled. "Thanks, Dan."

"Any time, Joe, any time." Lassky saluted and breezed into the nearby lounge.

Joe shook his head at the surgeon's energy and went back to the chart on which he'd been writing.



Thursday, November 11, 1975

Whoa....that was weird. Never had that happen before....

"Something wrong?" The respiratory therapist frowned at the patient as the spirometer tumbled from his fingers, catching it before it fell to the floor.

Johnny lay panting, both from the exertion of using the device and the sudden waves of dizziness that accompanied it. The therapist repeated his question.

Johnny blinked hard several times, swallowing the nausea and trying to catch his breath.

The therapist didn't bother to wait for an answer. He pressed the call button to summon the nurse, and busied himself while waiting for the response by filling Johnny's water glass and offering it to the paramedic. Johnny waved it away impatiently.

"Dizzy..." he muttered as the door opened and Judy entered.

The nurse looked to the therapist for an explanation. "Mark?"

"I don't know. He was using the spirometer, and all of a sudden he turned white as a sheet and dropped it."

Judy was at Johnny's side by now, one hand on his forehead and the other automatically on his wrist. "Dizzy?" she asked.

"It's gettin' better..." Johnny swallowed again and closed his eyes.

Judy turned to Mark. "He's having trouble with vertigo," she explained. "The exercising probably brought it on. Don't let it worry you," she added, seeing the worried expression that crossed his face. "It comes and goes." *Mostly comes....* "Maybe you oughta end the session for today, though. I'll let Dr. Brackett know about it."

Mark nodded, not at all reluctantly. He gathered his things. "See you tomorrow, John."

Johnny nodded distractedly and Mark departed.

"Okay now?" Judy asked.

Johnny nodded slightly. "M gonna get some sleep now," he murmured.

"Okay, well, you just call if you need anything." She settled the blanket over him, gave him a last pat on the shoulder, and left quietly.

Johnny opened his eyes after she had left, but the room was still doing its rocking thing. It wasn't much better with them closed, but it was a little better. So, he closed them again. Sleep eluded him for only a short while, and the dreams came again.

"John, I need you on the ladder hose."

"Right, Cap." He looked up at the ladder, which seemed to disappear into the deep blue of the cloudless sky. The truck beneath his feet was stabilized, firmly anchored by the hydraulic plates, yet the extension ladder swayed lightly overhead.

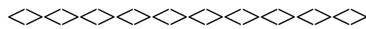
"Gage, sometime this month, huh?"

Johnny looked at the Captain, who was, idiotically, wearing neither his turnouts nor his helmet. As a matter of fact, he wasn't even wearing his uniform. Johnny opened his mouth to ask him why the Cap was wearing civvies, but the Cap was gesturing for him to climb the ladder. Nodding, Johnny turned to obey.

The next thing he knew, he was at the top of the ladder. He had no memory of climbing--one second he was at the bottom, the next at the top. He reached for the hose nozzle, pulled back on the lever. Water began to spray across the expanse of whatever was below; it suddenly occurred to him that he had no idea what he was supposed to be watering.

Again, he started to ask a question, but just as he did so the ladder began to spin. At first it was slow, then gradually the speed increased. The surrounding buildings lurched in and out of his field of vision as the ladder swung him around, faster and faster. Johnny open his mouth and screamed, but no sound emerged.

And, then, he was falling backwards, an endless descent toward certain death...and there was no one there to catch him....



"Is it always like that when he's waking up?" Hank Stanley watched with interest as the nurse he had summoned checked the various tubes emanating from Johnny before bending over the bed.

Judy glanced up at the tall, dark-haired captain and shrugged. "It is when he's had a nightmare." Returning her attention to the man in the bed, she spoke softly but insistently. "John? Johnny, open your eyes. You're having a bad dream." She waited, but Johnny continued to stir restlessly, moaning softly. She raised her voice.

Suddenly, with a sharp cry, Johnny's eyes flew open and his arms darted out as if reaching for a handhold. Judy tried to catch his arm, not quite getting to it before he ripped out the IV port.

Hank jumped forward to grab the flailing arms. "Easy, John, easy there..." He held Johnny firmly as Judy shut off the IV drip and grabbed for a gauze pad to staunch the blood oozing from Johnny's lower arm. "It's all right," he soothed, gradually relaxing his

grip as Johnny became aware of his surroundings.

"Cap...?" Johnny blinked slowly, taking in the room, his captain, and the nurse at his side.

"Yeah, Pal."

Johnny lifted his free hand and passed it across his face, whispering, "Oh, wow..."

"Musta been some dream," murmured Hank, releasing Johnny's other arm so Judy could re-insert the IV.

Johnny nodded vaguely and studied Hank. "You been here long?" he wondered.

"About half an hour," Hank replied.

"Was I awake when you got here?" Johnny flinched at the pinch of the needle but gave no other sign he was aware of what Judy was doing.

Hank shook his head and smiled. "No, but you still managed to provide some entertaining conversation. Funny, but I never heard you talk in your sleep before."

Faint alarm crossed Johnny's face, and Hank was hard-pressed to keep from laughing.

"Don't worry, pal, you didn't say anything I could possibly pass on. Didn't understand half of it."

Johnny wasn't necessarily reassured. He sipped from the glass of water Judy offered him, muttering a subdued thanks as she made sure he was all right before quietly departing.

"You okay now?" asked Hank.

Johnny nodded and settled back into the pillow. "Weird dream," he said. "One of those falling dreams...." He shuddered.

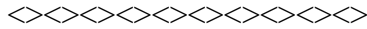
"Anything I can do?"

Johnny lifted his right hand and dropped it onto his forehead. "Yeah," he answered, a small smile flitting across his face, "don't send me up any ladders. Unless you're willing to catch me."

"I think I can manage that, Pal." He studied the young man closely. "How you doin', really?"

Johnny snorted. "I'd kill for a beer right now."

Hank dropped into the chair at John's bedside. *Atta boy, John, that's more like it.*



Monday, November 17, 1975

"So, when they gonna spring you?" Dutch lounged against the near wall as he regarded his friend.

"Better hope it's soon, Johnny. Dutch, here, is angling to fill your slot at 51's." Roy's eyes glinted with amusement.

"Yeah," agreed Dutch. "That Kelly makes a mean Irish stew."

"You mean he makes a mean Irish *man*," corrected Johnny, one eyebrow arching up.

"And since when did you decide you like 51's better than 26's?"

"Since I discovered the status that goes with riding shotgun for DeSoto," replied Dutch.

Johnny narrowed his eyes at his partner. "Huh. All this time I thought it was just me. Now I see that you won't let anybody *else* drive, either."

Roy shook his head. "Not since Craig Brice, no." He jerked his head in Dutch's direction. "Won't let him near the drug box, either, unless we're on a run. Can't take the chance of opening it and finding everything all organized."

The door opened and a young, white-uniformed man stepped in, pushing a wheelchair before him. "Hi, Mr. Gage," he chirped brightly.

Johnny groaned, eliciting a smile from the other man.

"Aw, now, Mr. Gage, is that any way to greet your physical therapist?"

"Go away, Kurt," ordered Johnny, his eyes daring the young man to argue.

Kurt just laughed. "You wish. Come on, this'll only hurt a little and then I'll go away."

"You want us to go?" Dutch glanced from Johnny to Kurt.

"We're the ones who'll be leaving," explained Kurt, parking the chair beside the bed and locking the wheels.

"Listen, Johnny, I'm gonna have to run, anyway," Roy announced. "I still have to run over to your place, pick up your mail."

"Oh, sure," complained Johnny, "use me as an excuse to leave."

"Anything you need me to bring back?" Roy went on, trying not to grin too widely.

"Nothin' they'll allow in here," muttered his partner.

"I'm gonna hit the road, too, Johnny," Dutch said.

"Where *you* going?"

"I don't know yet," replied Dutch, "but I figure anyplace besides this room when you're back from therapy has got to be good." He grinned and waved, and he and Roy departed.

"Yeah, that's right, leave me here to this guy's warped sense of humor!" Johnny called at the closing door. He dropped back onto his pillow and glared at Kurt.

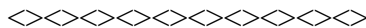
"You okay?" Kurt asked.

"Just cranky, I guess," Johnny grumbled irritably.

"Well," Kurt told him sympathetically as he helped him pivot into the wheelchair, "I'll try to make this as painless as possible."

Yeah, sure. Johnny sighed and said nothing as Kurt wheeled him from the room.

But there was no one who would ever convince him that these sessions were in any way *therapeutic*.



Johnny fell back against the pillow, feeling almost completely helpless. The voice at his side seemed to circle with the room, which currently was spinning at the speed of a 78 rpm record. Shutting his eyes, he had begun to discover, was only mildly helpful.

"Johnny?"

He ignored the voice and reached out blindly with one hand to tightly grip the siderail of the bed, thinking that somehow that might help him regain his equilibrium. At the same time, he tried to slow his rapid breathing and to quell the nausea that threatened. He was becoming quite...efficient...at that--each day, he was able to accomplish these things a minute or two quicker than the day before.

This last thought rose bitterly, helplessly. One more problem to work out.

"Johnny?"

"S'all right," he finally murmured, cranking open one eye and gazing at the doctor.

"S'gettin' better." He swallowed again.

Brackett's face wore its customary frown as he regarded the paramedic. "When is it at its worst?" he demanded.

Johnny sighed. Brackett wouldn't go away until he satisfied him. "After PT," he admitted, opening his other eye and slowly focusing on his surroundings again. The spin was down to a 33-1/3 now. Almost manageable.

"Is it exertion or being upright that bothers you more?" Brackett pressed.

Johnny's eyebrows drew together in concentration. "I don't know," he finally decided. "Both, I guess." He closed his eyes again. "Look, Doc, can we finish this another time?"

"No, Johnny, I want to try to handle this now."

"Handle what?" Johnny opened his eyes tiredly. "You've already told me there isn't anything you can do about it. Just leave me alone until the room stops revolving, and I'll feel much better, I promise."

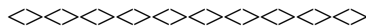
"Johnny, you passed out in the cafeteria this afternoon. A shattered glass and six stitches later, I think we need to establish some limitations." Brackett rocked lightly as he spoke. Johnny, watching him, found himself growing nauseous again and looked away.

"Okay, set the limitations. Whatever you want. Just, can you do it later? I'm really not feeling so good right now, Doc."

It was Brackett's turn to sigh. "John Gage, you are probably one of the most stubborn men I've ever met. All right, I'll come back in an hour, and we'll talk then."

"Thanks, Doc."

Brackett left. Johnny kept his eyes closed while the room slowly came to a halt, and went to sleep.



"You really think we need to go that route?" Joe Early raised his eyebrows.

"Well," Kel Brackett replied with a smile, "for a while, anyway. Just until he gets the idea that he needs to take things a little slower."

"You're talking about John Gage, Kel. He's never been one to travel in the slow lane."

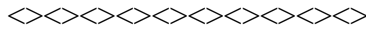
Brackett shrugged. "Maybe he just needs a suspension of his license, then."

"As if that would stop him."

Brackett laughed. "We'll just see to it that he has a personal escort for all of his activities."

"Just make sure she's young and pretty, and you'll have no worries."

Brackett shook his head in amusement. "This *is* John Gage we're talking about, Joe. Every time he turns around he worries me!"



Saturday, November 29, 1975

"Gentlemen, read 'em and weep!" Johnny flattened his cards on the tray table with a characteristically crooked smile. "Three of a kind."

Chet rolled his eyes and tossed his cards down with a groan.

"You mean I stayed in for *that*?" whined Stoker, falling back against his chair in disbelief.

Johnny merely chuckled and slid aside the cards to rake in his money. "Just goes to show who the master is," he crowed delightedly.

"Luck, Gage, sheer luck."

"Nothin' of the kind, Kelly," responded Johnny, shaking his head. "Why don't you just admit I'm a better poker player than you are?"

"Cause it ain't true," retorted Chet, leaning forward.

The opening of the door to Johnny's room stopped their argument. Kelly Brackett stopped in his tracks, taking in the scene. "Sorry, guys, am I interrupting something?"

"Not at all, Doc, not at all," Johnny assured him cheerfully.

"Just Gage's mouth running wild again," muttered Chet.

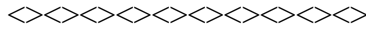
Brackett and Stoker both grinned. "You must have won, Johnny," the doctor guessed.

"Yup," Johnny agreed. "What's up?"

"Well, I just came in to ask how you feel about going home."

There was an instant of silence before the words sank in. "Doc," Johnny finally said,

"have I ever told you that you're my favorite doctor?"



Sunday, November 30, 1975

"Anything I can do for you before I leave?"

Johnny, padding happily--albeit slowly--around his living room, shook his head, unable to keep a goofy grin from lighting his features. "Nah, thanks anyway, Roy. You've already done more than you should have." He stopped in front of the window and inhaled the cool, winter air that wafted in through the open sash. A hint of salty breeze lifted his hair gently, and his grin widened as his eyes closed in near-ecstasy. "Man, you have no idea how good fresh air feels..." He breathed deeply and sighed contentedly.

Roy, hands in his pockets, studied his partner from the doorway. It was so good to have him finally home from the hospital that he set aside the nagging suspicion that things weren't as all right as Johnny was making them out to be. Still, there was something about the way he stood...swaying almost negligibly on his crutches. "You sure you'll be all right?"

Johnny swiveled his head and favored his partner with an indulgent stare. "Yes, Dad, I'll be fine." He swung around carefully, his smile fixed in place as he fought another wave of giddiness, and avoided--just--gritting his teeth as he faced his partner. "Look, Roy, I'm just gonna get some rest, maybe watch a little t.v., take it easy." That wasn't at all far from the truth: he did intend, as soon as he could get rid of his obviously worried partner, to collapse on the sofa and not move until he was sure the room wasn't going to do so first. "Tell you the truth, I'm a little tired. Not used to being on my feet so much, I guess...." His grin faded slightly in apology.

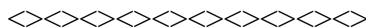
Roy nodded at last and slid his keys from his pocket. "Okay, if you're sure," he smiled, turning toward the door. "But, I'll be home, so you just call if you need anything."

"I will, I will," Johnny promised. He remained where he was, certain that seeing Roy out would be a big mistake.

Roy waved from the doorway and vanished, pulling the door gently closed behind him.

Johnny sighed, shutting his eyes in relief as he dropped wearily onto the nearest chair, letting the crutches slip from his grip.

The room was still spinning slowly when he dozed off.



Tuesday, December 7, 1975

Johnny placed the final piece of scotch tape with a self-satisfied smirk. He set aside the dispenser and lifted the package, studying the garish wrapping paper with a critical eye.

Well, it won't earn me a job in the gift-wrap department at Sears, but who cares? It's the thought that counts, right?

His expression became thoughtful. "Didn't mean to miss your birthday, Pally," he said softly.

After a moment, a slow smile crept back across his face. Roy would never expect him to show up at the station with a cake and a gift. Not a month late. Johnny was quite proud of himself for thinking of it. He'd even ordered the cake himself.

His eyes darted to the clock. *Better get a move on. Joanne'll be here in half an hour.* Since his weak knee still caused him trouble operating the clutch in the Rover, Joanne had offered to drive him to the station to deliver his surprise.

Setting down the package, he tidied the mess he'd made--which in his case, meant mostly shoving scissors and tape into the nearest handy drawer and tossing wadded paper remnants somewhere in the vicinity of the trash can.

Helping himself to a tall glass of milk, he limped into the bathroom and turned on the shower tap. *Gotta remember to ice that knee later.* Removing the knee brace, he tugged off his tee shirt and shorts, tossing them into the corner, and stepped under the steaming spray.

Johnny stood for a few minutes in the mist, letting the water penetrate still-tight muscles. When he was good and warm, he reached around the curtain and lifted the milk he'd set on the edge of the sink, downing the cool liquid in a couple of easy gulps. Thus refreshed, he turned back to the task of soaping and shampooing.

He had just finished rinsing his hair when without warning the hot water cut out, showering him with an unexpected icy spray. With a startled cry, Johnny leaped away from the water, trying to get out from under the abrupt change in temperature.

Even as he moved, he realized it was a mistake. He knew exactly what was going to happen, could already feel the surge of uncontrollable motion...and he was still powerless to stop it.

Thrown off-balance by the movement, Johnny tumbled helplessly against the shower wall. The room spun wildly for a minute, then rocked twice, bucked once, then continued to spin in a more leisurely fashion.

By then, though, Johnny had slid to the floor of the tub, banging his left knee against the side as he fell and crashing his right elbow against the soapholder at the same time. A

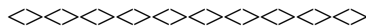
volley of curses flew from his mouth as he sat underneath the glacial flow, unable to move to shut off the water for several seconds. By the time he had regained the strength to reach forward, hot water returned to the stream. He waited under the water another few minutes, until the heat was once more restored to his shivering body and the nausea was under control.

Slowly, he reached out and shut off the tap. He sat without moving until the trembling stopped and he was sure he'd be able to stand without losing his breakfast. Pulling himself weakly to his feet, he grabbed the towel, wrapped it around himself, and climbed from the tub. He made his way shakily to his bedroom. Collapsing on the bed, he lay blinking and swallowing convulsively for several more minutes.

Oh, God....

The chill from lying damp and almost naked finally drove him upright, slowly and methodically, and back into the bathroom. He studied his reflection in the mirror.

"You are in big trouble," he whispered to himself.



He had just finished tugging on his boots when the doorbell rang. Johnny resisted the temptation to jump up, instead rising cautiously from his seat on the sofa to answer the door.

"Hi, Johnny! Joanne DeSoto smiled brightly at the young man. "Ready to go?"

"Hi, Jo." Johnny's tone was a bit more subdued, his smile a bit weaker than hers. "Come on in. I was just lacing my boots."

Joanne followed him into the living room, where he waited for her to sit before dropping himself carefully back onto the couch to finish tying his shoes.

Joanne watched his slow and deliberate motions. "You okay, Johnny?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," he replied, lifting his head and offering her a shadow of his grin. "Feeling a little rushed, that's all. I overslept." He tightened the last lace. "Sorry."

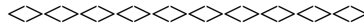
"That's all right," Joanne assured. *John Gage, you are the worst liar I've ever met.* "They'll probably be out on a run, anyway."

"Probably." Johnny's grin widened into a semblance of its normal self and he tightened the brace on his left knee. "Can you grab the present?" he asked, pointing to the package on the table and reaching for the crutches that lay next to the chair.

Joanne frowned. "Crutches?"

Johnny shrugged and averted his gaze. "Knee's acting up," he explained shortly. That, at least, was the truth--He swung slowly across the hall, still feeling slightly unbalanced but determined to have things appear normal.

Joanne shook her head at Johnny's retreating back, but wisely said nothing. No amount of prying would tear from Johnny this morning's secret. She sighed, grabbed the gift, and followed him out of his apartment.



Monday, January 7, 1976

Kelly Brackett looked up as his office door opened. With a smile, he tossed aside his pen and stood up.

"About time you got here," he admonished good-naturedly.

"Uh, sorry, Doc," grinned Johnny sheepishly. "It was such a great morning for a run...."

Brackett leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. "A run?" he questioned, one eyebrow lifting quizzically. "When did you start running again?"

"Over the holidays," Johnny explained. "I'm not up to full speed yet, but it's gettin' there." His face twisted into a pleased-with-himself smile.

"How far are you running?"

"Just a couple of miles. Gotta work my way back up."

"And, in the meantime, you're late your first day back on the job."

Johnny blushed. "Well, yeah...sorry."

Brackett laughed. "It's all right, Johnny. You know as well as I do that those trainees won't go anywhere." He stepped around the younger man and opened the door. "Shall we go meet the new class of paramedics?"

"You're the boss here." Johnny was smiling as he preceded Brackett into the hall.

Brackett watched him a moment before following. *I know this isn't what you want, John, but it'll help you keep your hand in until you can get back in the field.* He realized Johnny had spoken. "Hm?"

"How do they look?" They walked slowly together down the hall toward the elevator.

"Well, they're a little green, but I'm sure you'll whip 'em into shape."

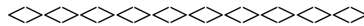
Johnny's smile faded a little. "Well," he said slowly, "it's not the same as working the squad...but I guess it's okay for now."

"That's the spirit."

The elevator doors opened. Johnny followed Brackett inside, determined to do the best in his temporary assignment. *At least I know people here. Maybe it won't be so bad.*

He looked up just as the elevator doors closed. A gurney swung around the far corner of the Emergency Department, a paramedic standing on the rail, arms pumping as he performed chest compressions on the patient below him.

Johnny swallowed hard and managed to suppress the sudden tightness in his chest. *This is only temporary, Gage. Temporary.*



Tuesday, April 10, 1976

"How's Gage doing?"

Dutch paused fractionally as he settled himself into the chair opposite Pete Daniels' desk. "He's doing okay," he replied cautiously to the seemingly innocuous question.

"Heard he's been studying for his re-certification," continued Daniels conversationally, watching Dutch closely.

"Yeah," nodded Dutch. "He's been working pretty hard."

"Is he gonna make it?"

Dutch stopped fidgeting. "Why wouldn't he?" he asked softly, eyes narrowing.

Daniels shrugged. "Rumor has it that he's still having trouble with dizzy spells."

Dutch nodded warily. "Yeah, that's right," he agreed, "but it's getting better." *Where's he going with this?*

"He has to pass a physical test, too, doesn't he?"

"You know he does." Dutch tilted his head. "What are you trying to say, Cap? You saying Gage isn't wanted back, that he won't be able to swing it?"

Daniels leaned forward, shaking his head. "Not at all, Dutch, not at all." He studied the

young paramedic carefully a moment. “Actually, it's *you* I'm a little worried about.”

“Me?” Dutch’s eyes widened indignantly, but suddenly he understood his captain’s concern. His shoulders slumped and he relaxed back into the chair.

“Look, Dutch, I know it’s been rough. I also know that you’ve blamed yourself for that accident ever since it happened. I’m pleased that you’ve been taking advantage of the Department’s counseling services.” He paused, but Dutch remained silent. “I just ...” He stopped, looked at his desk a moment, then back up. “If Gage gets washed out, I want to know that you’re not going to fall apart at the seams.”

Dutch seemed to find his shoes of extreme interest for a long minute. Then, his head bobbed. “I hear ya, Cap,” he said quietly.

“No, I’m not sure that you do, Dutch.” The paramedic’s head lifted, and Daniels could see the misery on his face. “I’m offering you the support of your shift mates. And my own. What happened was not your fault. I don’t know how many times that has to be said. Whatever happens now, I want you to feel free to include all of us in the fallout. Kapish?”

Dutch finally smiled faintly. “Gotcha, Cap.”

“So,” Daniels asked after a short pause, “when are you and your buddy getting together again? Just so I know to avoid the roads,” he added.

“Day after tomorrow,” Dutch told him, ignoring the barb. “We’re going climbing.”

Daniels frowned. “Are you sure that’s a wise thing to do?”

Dutch looked uncertain. “Well, Brackett said we could try it, as long as we’re careful....”

Pete shrugged. “Well, he’s the expert.”

“Johnny wants to try it....”

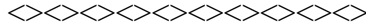
Pete smiled. “I’m not trying to tell you what to do, Dutch. Just being a little nosy, that’s all.” He eyed the paramedic. “You gonna be okay, now?”

Dutch nodded. “Yeah, Cap. Thanks. I appreciate the concern.”

“In that case,” Pete told him, jerking his head toward the door, “get back to the kitchen. You think this place is cleaned by elves?”

Dutch bounced up. “Yes, sir.”

Daniels watched him go, wondering if his paramedic really expected to cure Gage's problem in one fell swoop. He decided that, yes, Dutch was just idealistic enough to think he could. He sighed and made a mental note to be ready to pick up the pieces in three days. Just in case.



Wednesday, April 11, 1976

"Johnny, take a break!" Roy good-naturedly tugged the manual out of Gage's hands and tossed it aside. "Joanne says to stay for dinner."

"Hey!" Johnny protested, reaching for the book. Roy slid it further away. Johnny made a face, then his expression brightened. "Dinner?"

"Come on, you look like you need a beer."

Johnny followed him into the kitchen where Roy detoured to the refrigerator for two beers, then out onto the back deck. With surprise, Johnny realized that the day was fading quickly. He looked at his watch. "It's almost eight o'clock?"

"And I'm starved," Roy assured him.

Johnny rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. "Didn't realize it was that late." He yawned.

"You're gonna do fine, Junior."

"There's a few new procedures," Johnny reminded him.

"And lots of old procedures, too. You'll be fine."

Johnny started to argue again. Roy smoothly interrupted him. "Joanne and I are taking the kids to the beach tomorrow. You wanna tag along?"

Johnny shook his head. "Nah, but thanks anyway. Got other plans." He took a deep pull on the beer and rolled his head back and forth a few times, stretching his stiff neck.

"Not more studying?"

Johnny grinned at Roy's mildly horrified expression. "No, not more studying." He sipped at the beer again, letting it loosen the tension across his shoulders. "Going climbing with Dutch."

There was the faintest of hesitations. "Sounds like fun," Roy said carefully.

"Maybe." Johnny leaned back against the railing, quiet for a minute. "I'm a little nervous," he finally acknowledged.

Roy eyed him critically. "That's understandable," he replied neutrally.

Johnny's head moved fractionally. "I'm not sure I can do it, Roy."

"You still having trouble with the vertigo?" *Funny, he hasn't said anything.*

"A little, yeah."

That means it's a lot worse than he's letting on. "Maybe you should cancel."

Johnny gave a half laugh. "Don't think I haven't thought about it."

"Dutch'll understand."

"I'm not doin' it for him." Johnny's eyes narrowed as he regarded the other man. "I've gotta know."

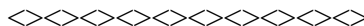
Roy nodded. Johnny's re-certification exam was in three weeks. After a moment, he smiled his brightest smile and clapped Johnny on the shoulder. "You'll do fine," he assured him.

The door opened before Johnny could reply, and Joanne poked her head out.

"You guys gonna come in and eat before the food gets cold, or what?"

"You don't have to ask me twice," Johnny grinned, pushing away from the railing and leading the way into the house.

Roy followed more slowly. *He's a lot more worried than he's letting on.* Roy sighed. *And there's not a damn thing I can do to help.*



Saturday, January 22, 1977

"*I can't!*" If there'd been a wall nearby, Johnny would have put his fist through it. Instead, he pounded it against the rock wall and split the knuckles of his middle and ring fingers.

"Johnny, take it easy--"

"Don't tell me to take it easy!" His body shaking, Johnny felt his knees begin to give way.

Dutch grabbed him and kept him from slipping. "You can do this, Gage!" His face pressed close to John's, he spoke through clenched teeth.

"Dutch, don't you think I *want* to do this? Don't you think I *want* to be up there, looking down..." His voice caught and he began to gasp for breath. He reached out blindly for something to grab onto as his eyes closed and his face paled. "*Dutch....*" The world spun violently and Johnny lost all sense of direction: for all he knew he was falling head first down the side of the cliff.

Dutch grabbed the outstretched arm just as Johnny's knees buckled, preventing him from dropping onto the ledge and falling. He lowered Johnny carefully, trying to hold him upright while Johnny tried to slow the hyperventilation. It was several silent minutes before Johnny was once again breathing more or less normally.

"Son of a bitch!" Johnny whispered at last.

"Johnny..."

John opened his eyes and blinked against the diffused sunlight, swallowing the nausea and studiously avoiding his friend's face.

"I'm sorry...I shouldn't have pushed you into this." Dutch looked very scared. Seeing the expression, Johnny wanted to somehow relieve Dutch's fear, but his own terror was only just beginning to dissipate.

"Damn straight," he muttered instead.

"Look--"

"I don't wanna look. The view makes me dizzy." Johnny glared at his friend. "Too many people think they know what's best for John Gage, and nobody thinks John Gage knows what's good for himself." He couldn't help it--his voice rose anxiously. He closed his eyes and swallowed another wave of dizziness. "You're gonna have to drive back," he went on more quietly. "You might even have to haul me back down the trail *on* your back. This isn't gonna go away for a while yet."

You're such an ass, Masters. "I was just trying to help," Dutch muttered.

"Go to hell." The words sprang unbidden to Johnny's lips.

"What do you want from me, John?" Dutch's voice was very quiet. Johnny blinked at Dutch's failure to use his nickname but Dutch wasn't looking up. "You tell me how you want to get back to work if only you can get past the vertigo, but when I try to help you do that, you push me away." He paused, his eyes lifting to stare at the view at Johnny's back, his own breath coming quickly now. "You want me to apologize for ramming you

with the squad?" he went on, his voice becoming louder and angrier. "You want me to change the route we took? You want me to fix it so that you never got sick and had to be sent home that night?" He dropped to Johnny's side. "*What is it you want from me, Gage? 'Cause if it's pity, you're gonna have to look somewhere else!*"

Johnny thrust himself upright, his face flushing. The sudden motion threw him off-balance, and again the world lurched and spun and, finally, disappeared altogether.

Dutch caught him before he fell over and pushed Johnny's head gently forward. *Geez, Gage, can't take you anywhere, can I?*

Johnny came to in less than a minute, quickly regaining his bearings.

"How often does that happen?" Dutch demanded, holding out a water bottle.

"Only when my friends piss me off," retorted Johnny, accepting the bottle and sipping slowly.

"Well, at least you still consider me your friend."

Johnny sat silently a long time with his head against the rock, blinking slowly. "I just want to be able to work," he finally said.

"Give it time, John," Dutch advised quietly. "They said it would take time."

"How much time?"

The question hung in the silence that followed.

After a while, Johnny looked at Dutch pensively. "Do you remember the first time we met?"

After a beat to adjust to the non sequitor, a weak grin spread across Dutch's face. "You were such an easy target..."

Johnny's answering smile was faint but genuine. "You wanted to know if I was a 'practicing paramedic'," he recalled ruefully. "I was dumb enough to say 'yes!'"

"You were so smug about it, I couldn't resist," Dutch smiled.

"Not good enough yet, huh?" they chimed in unison, recalling at the same moment Dutch's wisecrack answer. Johnny's soft laughter joined his friend's. "Yeah," he sighed. He looked sideways at his friend. "You don't ever think that it's gonna be taken away."

Dutch, sobering, watched Johnny's face as the other man's eyes traveled to the nearby scrub. He noticed how John avoided the view of the valley, and felt slightly sick.

"But, when it gets threatened...like this...you just can't help the fear..."

Dutch didn't know what to say, but it didn't really matter. Johnny went on, not waiting for a reply.

"I like what I do, Dutch...I'm not sure I'd know how else to make a living." He gave a quiet, half-laugh. "I used to think being a fireman was just an in-between job...something to do until I could decide what I wanted to be when I grew up." He shook his head.

"Once it gets in your blood you can't get rid of it," Dutch supplied.

Johnny's voice was distant. "But it's not the work, you know?"

"It's the men." Dutch knew instantly what Johnny meant.

"...hurts," Johnny muttered, shifting and stretching out his leg.

"Not being on the crew?"

"My knee. Hurts like hell. Never should've let them touch it with a knife."

Dutch understood. Fears had been expressed, apologies offered and accepted on both sides. The subject was now closed. He shrugged. "At least you have an excuse now for your lousy basketball playing."

"You're an ass, Masters."

"Ah, at last something we agree on." Dutch smiled feebly.

After a moment, Johnny shook his head and returned the smile. "Take me home, Theodore."

Dutch lifted an eyebrow. "Even my mother doesn't call me that."

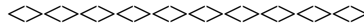
"I never did understand why she saddled you with that name and then never used it."

Dutch shrugged as he helped Johnny to his feet, steadying him as he swayed. "Yeah, well, don't remind her. She might remember and start."

"I've never met your mother."

"And you're never going to, either."

When they reached the truck, Dutch climbed into the driver's seat. Johnny slept most of the way back.



Wednesday, May 9, 1976

"Here, just put your head down."

Gentle hands eased him to the ground, pulling off his helmet and pressing his head between his knees. Panting and gasping, Johnny swatted away the help, steadying himself instead against the wall behind him, his elbows on upraised knees and his hands on the back of his head. Someone maintained reassuring pressure on his back, and Johnny shivered under the touch. After a few minutes, he realized that same someone was speaking quietly, continuously, at his side.

"...deep breath...that's it...nice and easy...you're gonna be fine..."

"I'm all right," he muttered, opening his eyes and lifting his head.

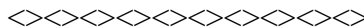
"Why don't you just sit here a few minutes longer," suggested the training captain squatting at his side, "and I'll arrange a ride for you."

Johnny nodded mutely. "Thanks, Cap," he said, swallowing.

"I'll be right back," the captain assured him as he rose.

Johnny tipped his head back against the tower wall, squinting for a minute into the sunshine. Tears blurred his vision and he closed his eyes, but he did nothing to try to stop their flow down the sides of his face.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit!



Friday, May 11, 1975

The bartender pointed toward a secluded corner in the dark and noisy bar. "They're over there," he shouted over the din. "Been here for quite a while. I'm afraid to let them out of here. They ain't in too good a shape."

Roy nodded. "I'll take care of them. Thanks for calling me, Jack." He pushed away from the bar and made his way to the sheltered area to which the bartender had directed him. There were no tables or chairs there, only a large jukebox and an ancient coat rack.

Huddled on the floor, a bottle of beer held loosely in both hands between his upraised knees, Johnny was unquestionably drunk. His head lolled against the wall behind him, and his eyes were unfocused in the vacant stare of the inebriated. A few feet away,

Dutch sat similarly, though his eyes were closed and he snored softly, occasionally muttering something unintelligible.

"Johnny?" Roy squatted beside his partner and removed the bottle from his hands. "Come on, it's time to go."

"Hey," protested Johnny, reaching for the beer.

Roy pulled the bottle back out of reach. "You've had enough," he said firmly.

"Not goin'!" Johnny shook his head slightly, stopping abruptly.

Roy, seeing the sudden stop, suspected the motion made him dizzy. *Not surprising, with all the beer Jack's been giving him.* He stood, set the bottle atop the jukebox, and reached down and grabbed Johnny firmly around the wrist. "Let's go. I'll take you home. You can pick up your car tomorrow."

Johnny yanked back against Roy's pressure, jerking his hand out of Roy's grip. "Go away...." he mumbled.

"Johnny--"

"Lea' me alone...." Johnny's head tipped sideways as he tried to turn away from Roy.

"What a sorry sight you are," Roy muttered, grasping Johnny's arm once more.

"I blew it," Johnny moaned as Roy pulled him this time to his feet, stumbling as Roy tried to get a shoulder under Johnny's arm. "I couldn't do it, Roy....I couldn't do it...."

"I know," Roy said softly, glancing back at Dutch, who hadn't moved. *He'll keep 'til I get Johnny in the car.*

"Washed right out." Johnny emphasized the words with a sweep of his hand.

"Uh-huh." Roy half-led, half-dragged Johnny out of the bar and over to Joanne's station wagon, propping him against the front fender while he opened the passenger side door. He caught Johnny as he began to slide to the ground, hauling him around the partially open door and folding him into the seat.

"Can't ever climb again...."

Roy looked up from buckling the seat belt. Johnny's eyes glistened in the dim light of the bar's parking lot. "You'll climb again, Johnny," he maintained.

Johnny shook his head. "Can't...." His eyes weren't focused on Roy, but some distant place in his mind.

Roy shook his head. "Stay here. I'll be right back." He lugged Dutch out to the car in a fireman's carry, since Dutch had already passed out, and dumped him into the back seat. Climbing into the driver's seat, he started the car and pulled out of the parking lot onto the street. The car was silent a few minutes except for Dutch's muted wheezing.

"Where we goin'?" said Johnny suddenly, blinking in the passing streelights.

"Your place," Roy told him. "You two can sleep it off there."

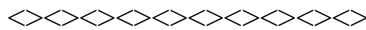
There was another moment's silence, and Roy thought Johnny had passed out, too.

"Roy?"

He glanced over. Johnny's face was green.

"...gonna be sick...."

Roy's reactions were far too slow.



An insistent bladder was what finally drove Johnny from the drunken stupor into which he'd fallen, and he rolled clumsily from the couch and onto the floor. He sat stupidly, wondering how he had ended up on the couch, and how long he had been there. His bladder protested some more, and he stumbled into the bathroom.

Shuffling back to the living room a few minutes later, Johnny collapsed onto the couch once again, groaning as his head and stomach let him know they weren't pleased with the abuse he'd heaped upon them. Memory returned slowly as he battled a rapidly developing and massive headache. *At least I'm not nauseous--* He winced as a dim memory surfaced, the memory of throwing up in someone's car. *Roy's....aw, man! He's gotta be pissed! He musta been the one who put me here.* The pounding in his head increased. A moan nearby caused him to turn his head just as he had decided that he needed to find some aspirin--desperately. Johnny peeled open his eyes and looked toward the sound.

Dutch lay on the floor, his head propped by a pillow and the rest of him covered with what Johnny recognized as the bedspread from his bed. Dutch was staring blearily at him.

"Do you feel as bad as I do?" Dutch croaked.

"Depends on whether or not you feel like the inside of a dumpster," Johnny muttered.

"Did you bring me here?" Dutch wondered, shifting underneath the bedspread but

making no move to rise.

"I think it was Roy."

"Oh."

"Dutch?"

"Mmhm...?" Dutch's eyes had closed again.

"You're not working today, are you?" Johnny closed his eyes, hoping that the room would stop its not-so-gentle rocking motion.

"Oh, God, I hope not... What day is it?"

"I think it's Friday." Johnny dropped an arm across his eyes to block out the growing strength of the rising sun.

"Not working...." Dutch groaned again. "...think I'm gonna be sick...."

"Not in here..." Johnny made no move to assist his friend.

"Never mind...s just my imagination, I think."

"Good."

"John?" asked Dutch after a short silence.

"Hm?" Johnny stirred drowsily.

"You gonna be okay?"

"I'll get over it, Dutch," Johnny replied tiredly. "I can try again in three months..." *Maybe*. "I can do the desk for a while longer." *Beats diggin' ditches*. He tried to ignore the ache developing in his heart.

There was another silence. Johnny drifted again in the haze.

"John?"

"Hm?" He thought Dutch's voice sounded much further away this time.

"Are *we* gonna be okay?"

"Yeah...we're gonna be fine, Dutch."

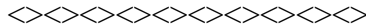
"Now that that's all settled," called a voice from the bedroom, "would you two go back to sleep? It's five o'clock in the morning--some of us need our beauty rest!"

Johnny blinked lazily and glanced at Dutch. Dutch returned a pained, amused gaze.

"Yes, Dad," they called back.

Roy smiled where he lay in Johnny's bed, and turned over .

Yeah. Those two will be just fine.



Author's note: It all started on a warm summer night when Linda begged for a "Johnny-owie" story (the puking is all for you, dear), and ended four months later in John's living room. Now I know why I had abandoned this story three months before that.... MUCH thanks to my beta readers, Theresa, Linda, and especially Pat, who once again fixed my boo-boos. Anything still bleeding is my own fault. ---November 4, 1999