

Left Turn on Arrow Only
by MJ Hajost

For all the lefties out there....

"Gage, you're evil. And twisted. Can't forget twisted."

John Gage swiveled his head around to grin at his companion. "Oh, we're just gettin' started, Masters."

"You know, for an old man, you sure get around. How do you find stuff like this?"

Johnny returned his attention to the path in front of him, calling over his shoulder, "How'd you ever make it through the Academy?"

"Charm and good looks, same as you."

The wind swallowed Johnny's retort, and Dutch was too busy trying to keep up with his friend to worry about it. Instead, he began to plot his revenge.

A bike ride, Johnny had suggested earlier that afternoon.

"I found a trail that looks like it might be fun."

"Might be fun? Gage, you haven't ridden on this trail, and you think you're gonna drag me on it?"

"Aw, come on, Dutch. It's a great day for a ride."

"Your date fell through, didn't it?"

There had been a moment's silence, followed by an exasperated sigh. "Look, do ya wanna go riding or not?"

"Gage, I'm beat. We had eighteen runs yesterday. And a two-hour practice this morning."

"Practice? What for?"

Dutch had grinned at Gage's feigned confusion. "Firemen's Tourney? It's on Saturday, remember? 26s against 16s?"

"Oh, right. You're playing?"

"Gage, can't you remember where you left your brain?" Dutch had performed a mental shake of his head.

"Oh, yeah, now I remember...something about you pitching?"

"Smart ass."

There had been a laugh on the other end. "Relax, Masters. I'll have you back in plenty of time to make the game. I mean, it's not like it'll be a game even worth watching, seeing as how 51s isn't in it."

"This ain't warmin' my heart, Gage."

"Aw, come on, Dutch...." Johnny's faint whine had echoed down the line.

The pity gene had kicked in. "What the hell, why not?"

And, here they were. Except that Gage had failed to mention the fact that the trail rolled alongside some pretty steep cliff sides, and so far they had gone only up. Dutch began to tally up all the repairs his bike would be sure to need by the end of the trip, making a mental note to have the bill sent to Gage.

They rounded a bend and suddenly the path widened out onto a plateau that offered a stunning, and unexpected, view. Johnny braked, sliding from his seat and straddling his bike. Dutch drew up alongside and breathed out an appreciative sigh.

"Wow!"

Johnny grinned again. "Told you it'd be worth the ride," he reported smugly.

Dutch chuckled quietly. "You knew nothing of the sort," he retorted. "But, I'll agree, it was worth the ride." He climbed from his bike and set it down, walking out kinks and studying the impressive sight.

The land dropped away sharply from where they stood, falling steeply to the bottom of a narrow ravine, where a slender stream separated the sides of the valley. The opposite bank rose just as steeply, leveling off onto another plateau directly across from where Dutch stood, some thirty yards distant. Dark scrub dotted both hillsides, and just ahead, the canyon widened out to form a narrow, rocky beach. The ocean shimmered in the late afternoon, the peerless blue sky deepening in the gathering dusk.

There was a click and a soft whirr, repeated twice in quick succession. Dutch turned, and Johnny snapped another quick shot, then another as Dutch blinked at the unexpected flash.

Johnny let the camera drop, where it dangled from the strap around his neck, and appraised the view with satisfaction. "Pretty."

Dutch nodded and dropped to the ground, letting his feet swing easily over the edge of the cliff. After a few minutes, he dropped onto his back and, folding his arms across his chest, closed his eyes.

"Who's the old man?" Johnny teased, dropping beside his friend.

"Give it a rest, Gage. I threw for an hour this morning."

Johnny shook his head. "You guys at 26s are so competitive," he murmured resignedly. "You oughta take a lesson from us at 51s--we just play for the sheer fun of it."

Dutch snorted softly and opened his eyes to squint up. "How much you got riding on this one?"

Johnny grinned. "Ten, and you better not let me down."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Dutch's eyes closed again.

"Well, I figure my money's safe with you bein' the only lefty on either team. Even if you can't hit worth squat."

"Gage," drawled Dutch, his eyes still closed, "if you could hit half as good as me, we'd be beatin' 51s instead of 16s on Saturday."

Johnny just grinned. They both knew Dutch was right.

They remained companionably silent for a while longer, until Johnny thought that his friend had actually dozed off. He nudged him with one foot.

"Come on, Sleeping Beauty, we better start back."

Dutch opened his eyes, blinked, and sat up. "Just when I got comfortable, too," he groused affably, stretching one final time before he rose. Lifting his bike he took one last look at the view. "I hate to admit it, but you were right about this one, Johnny."

Johnny's bright smile lit his face. "I'm always right, Dutch," he assured him, then mounted his bike and set off. Dutch followed, shaking his head.

The ride down didn't seem nearly as steep as it had on the way up, but Dutch began to notice more ruts and sharp rocks than he had then. He kept his eyes glued to the ground in front of him, trying to avoid as many of the hazards as he could, but he was still feeling quite jounced when he heard Johnny call out.

"Oh, wow, check that out!"

Dutch lifted his head and followed Johnny's pointing finger. Big mistake.

The next thing he knew, he and his bike were cart-wheeling theatrically over the edge of the cliff.

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He wasn't sure, but he thought maybe someone was calling his name. It was hard to tell over the roaring in his ears. The voice was persistent, like a gnat circling in the summer heat. Had he had the energy, he would have swatted at it. Instead, he finally pulled open his eyes and tried to focus. Then, he realized he wasn't breathing and remembered to take a breath, too.

The panicky voice cut through the fog. "Dutch?"

Johnny, almost frantic with concern, hovered from a distance of some forty or more feet.

Not that Dutch recognized Johnny's face from that distance, not at first. He blinked several times, squinting and trying to make sense out of what his eyes were showing him. Finally, the sound of the voice got through. "John?"

He could almost sense the relief wafting down from above. "Don't move, Dutch, okay?"

Dutch blinked upwards into the early evening gloom. "Wasn't planning on it," he mumbled.

"Are you hurt?"

Dutch strained again through the gloom to see the figure above him. "Um...." He thought carefully. "Don't think so," he replied at last. He inhaled slowly. "Think I just had the wind knocked outa me."

"Well, don't move, okay?" Johnny's voice reflected a mixture of relief still tinged with the panic of a few minutes before. "I'm gonna see if I can find a way down."

Dutch ignored the admonishment, already pushing himself carefully into a sitting position. He looked around, then up toward Johnny. The world swam in and out of focus intermittently as he swiveled his eyes around. After a minute or so, he shut first one eye, then the other. Ah, that explained things. "Lost a contact," he called, narrowing his eyes and straining to focus on his friend. "You're a little fuzzy."

Johnny bit back the smart aleck reply that jumped into his mind, and tried to still his shaking hands. "You're sure you're not hurt?" he said instead.

Dutch began a slow assessment, starting with his head, which seemed to be a logical place to begin. He was reasonably sure he hadn't been knocked out in the fall, since his head didn't hurt at all, and the lack of dripping blood assured no major gashes. Aside from the missing contact lens, nothing seemed to be damaged there. Neck...nothing. Shoulders...same. Arms, elbows, hands...fingers.... He stopped and hissed in pain as he started to flex the fin-

gers of his left hand. Now, he examined them as closely as he could with his one corrected eye, and muttered curses to himself.

"Doesn't look like there's any way down from up here," Johnny called. There was no answer. "Dutch? You okay?"

"Takin' inventory," called the other, looking up from his study of his hand.

"All the parts still there?"

Dutch did not miss the worry underlying Johnny's jocular attempt at easing his own panic. "So far," he replied absently, fingering the swollen digits of his left hand. He put that problem temporarily aside and continued to flex bruised muscles.

"What's the damage?" Johnny's voice carried quietly from above.

"Well," Dutch's slow drawl echoed softly against the hills, "I'm a little wet...." From his waist to his feet, and most of his left side, though he didn't add those details when he spoke. "I think I'm gonna live, though." He lifted his head again and tried to find Johnny among the indistinct images floating above him.

"Well," Johnny muttered, "soon as we figure out a way to get you outa there, yeah. Any way you can climb up, you think?"

"Uh, Johnny....if I could see better, I maybe could do that. But, uh...." He swallowed and looked around, then sighed. "I've, uh, broken a couple of fingers."

There was a brief silence. "By a couple, you do mean two, don't you?"

"You're too quick for me, Gage."

Johnny ignored the barb. "On one hand or both?"

"Oh, one's enough."

There was another short silence. "On your left hand."

"Give the man his kewpie doll."

"How bad?"

Dutch flipped his hand over and studied it some more, as if that might help fix the problem. Nope, the first two fingers were well and truly broken. Where a minute ago he had been at least able to flex them slightly, they were now swollen, throbbing, and completely immovable. He could barely move the ring and pinky fingers.

"Oh," he finally replied, "you don't need to worry about getting me back in time for the game on Saturday."

"Damn." This from above.

Dutch climbed unhurriedly to his feet and studied the cliff down which he had so ignominiously fallen. Whoa...not smart. With only the one contact in, he discovered it very difficult to judge the playing field, and trying to focus only made the world twirl uncomfortably. He dipped his head and lifted his right hand to his left eye. It was a little awkward, but he finally managed to pop out the contact. Having no other place for it, he stuck it in a pocket.

"What are you doing?" John's faintly incredulous voice floated down.

"Takin' out my contact," explained Dutch.

"What for?" The incredulity rose a notch.

"Cause I gotta figure out a way up, and I can't see worth shit with it in....."

"You're crazy! How're you gonna climb this with two broken fingers? It's straight up, and there's nothing between you and me except for sheer rock!"

"There's gotta be some handholds...."

"Yeah, sure--if you could see to find 'em, which you can't, and if you had some equipment, which you don't, and if you had two good hands...which you also don't. You're gonna get hurt!"

Dutch, however, was experimentally eyeing the cliff face, trying to decide which part of the wall looked most promising. After a couple of minutes, he finally concluded that it didn't matter. He couldn't see too well, but he sure as hell couldn't stay down here all night, either. The sooner he got to the top, the sooner he and Johnny would be on their way back to the car. Stepping forward, he began to feel his way along the cliff.

"Dutch...."

"You got any other ideas?" Dutch reached with his right hand for what looked like a slight protrusion a few inches above his head, and pulled himself up. Carefully placing his left hand to steady himself, he explored the rock again with his right.

"I can go for help." Johnny's protestation fell on seemingly deaf ears.

"You happen to see what happened to my bike?" Dutch asked conversationally. He hissed in pain as his left hand misjudged the distance to the rock face and came up solidly against it without warning. He shut his eyes and swore silently.

His only answer was a defeated sigh from above. "Just be careful," warned Johnny. Stretched flat on his stomach on the ridge above his friend, Johnny watched in fascination as Dutch attempted the virtually one-handed, and half-blind, climb.

When the pain had at last faded to a manageable throb again, Dutch continued his slow ascent. He reached more cautiously with his left hand, finally finding a purchase narrow enough for him to grasp with his two outer fingers and his thumb. There was no strength in the grip, but Dutch thought that he could manage if he took his time.

The bigger problem was his inability to focus on the rock in front of him. All depth perception was gone, and he found himself moving much more by feel than by any help from his vision. Now and then, he lifted his eyes and attempted to ease the eye strain a little by looking at Johnny. The motion of tilting his head, though, combined with the adjustment his eyes had to make each time he looked up and then back at the cliff face, began to make him dizzy.

Dutch jammed his right hand yet again as he sought a safe handhold on the rock, and let loose a volley of four-letter words that echoed against the canyon walls and startled some animal in the brush a short distance away.

"Hey, easy there," Johnny admonished. "Dutch, maybe you should just go back down," he added worriedly. Dutch had laboriously climbed perhaps ten or twelve feet, and as near as Johnny could determine, still had a good thirty feet more. And, his friend was clearly tiring.

"Damn it!" was Dutch's only reply. He gave no sign that he had heard Johnny, and more carefully found a grip, wide enough for only two fingers on the right. His hand and arm, even his legs, now trembled with the strain. Without looking to the left, he searched for a steadier handhold on that side. His broken fingers snagged on an unseen outcropping. Before he could stop himself, his hand snapped away from the wall, throwing him off-balance. He grabbed wildly with his right hand as those fingers slid from their purchase--too late. With a startled cry, he toppled backwards.

The fall wasn't far, but as he dropped, Dutch twisted, trying to land away from the wall. The result was that he landed with his right leg absorbing the impact of his weight. He heard as much as felt the soft popping as the right side of his knee gave way. Then, he was rolling over, winding up on his back, cradling his left hand in his right and trying to reach for his right knee at the same time, repeating the same four-letter word over and over.

"Dutch!" Johnny's cry finally broke through the haze surrounding the younger man.

"I'm all right!" he shouted up, his voice full of annoyance. "I just--" He broke off and heaved an infuriated sigh.

"You are not all right!" Frustration carried the words down the canyon wall. "Look, don't move, okay? I'm gonna go for help!"

"Yeah, sure." Dutch closed his eyes and swallowed, willing his heart back into his chest.

"Dutch?" Near-panic again.

"I'm okay, John. Really." To prove his point, Dutch pushed himself into a sitting position, and tilted his head to look up. "Just twisted my knee, is all." He swallowed again and forced down the rising nausea.

"You sure?" Johnny asked after a moment's silence.

Dutch sensed the doubt. "I'm sure."

"I'll be back as soon as I can, all right?" Johnny peered anxiously down.

"I'll be here," Dutch replied dryly. He heard scuffling sounds from above, heard the spin of rubber against rock, and then nothing. "Be careful, yourself," he said softly, bitterly. Then, he cursed once more. It didn't make him feel any better.

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Dutch huddled with his back to the cliff wall, trying to shift his right leg into a comfortable position. He propped it carefully so that it was providing the least amount of discomfort and pulled his other knee to his chest. For about thirty seconds his shivering ceased; then, it returned with a vengeance. He wrapped his arms around his raised knee and dropped his head onto it.

As exhaustion takes over, the shivering gradually ceases, and the hypothermia victim begins to feel warm, sometimes hot, and tries to cool himself by removing clothing. Often, the shivering exhausts the victim and he loses consciousness. Treatment needs to be provided as quickly as possible once the victim reaches this stage.

"I'm too cold to sleep!" The sound of his voice startled him.

"Great, Masters, talkin' to yourself now." This, too, he said aloud. "And, I wish I had a jacket....not hot at all...." Exhaustion, however, was another matter altogether.

Dutch lifted his head and gazed into the band of darkness that was the top of the canyon. A sprinkling of stars etched the sky and, as he exhaled, Dutch's frosty breath smoked lazily in front of them like a thin cloud.

He wished he could pull his knee closer to his chest and try to warm himself more, but the joint stubbornly refused to allow movement in either direction. Stretched ligaments, he decided, unwilling to admit to the possibility of them being torn. His head ached now from the almost constant chattering of his teeth. His short-sleeved shirt and lightweight nylon pants afforded little protection against the chill of the night.

He wondered idly how much time had elapsed since Johnny had left. The luminescent hands of his watch were no more than a vague blur on his wrist, and he couldn't tell whether they had even moved, much less how much. He had no idea what had happened to the contact lens he'd had in his pocket, and considered that his losing it would be the least of his worries. He let his mind drift again.

A soft splash woke him from his doze with a jerk, and he bit back a curse as the movement jarred his knee. That, in turn, set the knives in his fingers slicing again. He sucked in air through his teeth, held it, then slowly exhaled. After another few minutes had passed, he carefully made his way to the small creek from which he'd received his earlier dousing. Reaching the bank, he slipped his injured left hand into the gently gurgling waters, keeping it there until he could stand it no longer. He couldn't decide which was worse--the pain from the fractures, or the mind-numbing cold of the water.

He wondered if he dared attempt to stand again, finally concluding that the dizziness that came from being unable to properly focus, the discomfort of his damaged knee, and the throbbing of his hand were decidedly in favor of remaining seated.

He edged away from the creek again, back toward the wall which at least sheltered him a little from the breeze that slid through the canyon. The heat of the day had long since evaporated from the rock face, but the security of the cliff reassured him, if only a little.

Dutch curled against it once more and closed his eyes. His teeth began to chatter, and he started shivering again. He wished Gage would return.

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A thin sliver of moon slid into the canyon. Dutch watched it idly and debated the wisdom of immersing his aching right knee in the creek. The joint felt

swollen to twice its size, and also like it was on fire. He couldn't decide if easing that discomfort would be worth the resulting worsening of the hypothermia. Then, he wondered if he could actually feel any colder and came to the conclusion that he actually felt quite warm. He slid to the creek, and eased his injured leg into the icy waters.

Cupping his right hand, he splashed water on his face several times, then drank a little water, dribbling more down his chin and onto his shirt than actually swallowing. His thirst was partially assuaged, though, enough that the heat gradually faded and he was once again shivering. He dropped his left hand into the water again to ease the throbbing of his broken fingers, left it there a few minutes, then reluctantly pulled himself back to the rock wall.

He examined his hand in the dim light. He knew that, in bright light, the fingers would sport various shades of purple, and he was glad he couldn't see the colors. It was bad enough that he could feel how swollen they had become. Gently fingering the distended digits with his other hand, he discovered the displaced joint on the injured index finger.

Hell, no wonder it hurt so much. The thing was dislocated as well as broken.

Dutch settled the wounded hand back against his chest and leaned his head against the wall, and wondered how he was going to explain this to his teammates.

The shivering began anew, and it didn't matter how he would explain his dilemma to his teammates.

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"Dutch...."

He jolted to instant wakefulness at the touch on his upraised knee, bolting upright and reaching forward instinctively for whatever had just set the bees buzzing in the swollen joint. His head smacked an unmoving object that emitted a sharp cry.

"Ouch!"

Dutch blinked wildly, his outstretched arms waving blindly. He hissed as his left hand struck something. The something grabbed his wrist and held his arm steady.

"Dutch, hold still! It's me!" John Gage's voice was tinged with pain, annoyance, and weary anxiety.

Dutch blinked again and shook his head to clear the cobwebs. How long had he been asleep? "John?" His voice sounded hoarse.

"Yeah, it's me." His friend's voice was much calmer this time. "How you doin'?"

Dutch gazed around. "Took you long enough," he finally mumbled, reaching up and swiping his right hand through his hair. "What time is it?"

"A little after midnight," Johnny told him. "Here." Dutch felt something warm drop around his shoulders and tried to shove it off. "Take it easy," Johnny admonished as Dutch struggled feebly against the new sensation. "Dutch, it's just a jacket, take it easy."

"Oh, man," Dutch muttered, leaning sideways and resting his head against the cliff wall. His mouth was dry, and his head felt like it was filled with cotton. He fought to clear the cobwebs, discovered he was once again shivering violently.

"We're gonna have you outa here in a minute."

Things kind of floated in and out for Dutch after that. He later vaguely recalled an uncomfortable ride up the cliff in a stokes basket, lights flashing into and out of his eyes, the sting of a needle in his forearm, myriad voices and noises, a hazy trip down the trail strapped inside the stokes, and, lastly, the almost stifling warmth of the ambulance. He took Johnny's advice finally and relaxed, sinking into oblivion.

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He awoke to a dark room, momentarily disoriented by his surroundings. Shadows and faint swatches of light swam in and out of his vision, but as

near as he could figure he was alone. He shifted slightly and turned his head to the side, trying to slide back into sleep.

The shivering had finally stopped at last, and only the occasional tremor seized his muscles at odd intervals to remind him of his long night. According to the doctors in this hospital, he had been spared the agony of reconstructive surgery on his knee, the ligaments having been merely stretched, as he'd hoped, and not torn. Of course, his knee didn't hurt any less for all that. His left hand, too, now sported a cast from fingertip to elbow and, while it went a long way toward mitigating most of the pain, it would probably be another day or two before that ache dissipated. In short, Dutch was not a happy camper.

He became less so when the door opened and a shaft of bright light pierced the darkness.

"He's asleep," a quiet, female, voice was saying, "but you can leave those things if you want."

A male voice answered just as softly, "Thanks."

The light was momentarily blocked by a lanky, moving shadow, then narrowed and disappeared.

"If that's a cold adult beverage you're dropping off, you'll earn my undying gratitude for as long as you live," Dutch croaked.

A startled laugh accompanied the reply. "Thought you'd be asleep."

"Who can sleep with all the noise in this place?" groused Dutch, trying vainly to focus in the dark.

"I just wanted to drop off your glasses," apologized Johnny. "Didn't mean to wake you up."

"Glasses?" moaned Dutch. "Where'd you get my glasses?"

"Found 'em in my car." Johnny set the small case on the night table. "Don't ask me how they got there."

After a beat, Dutch held out his hand, and Johnny slid the glasses from the case and put them into his friend's palm. Dutch slipped them on, and suddenly felt one hundred percent better. He could see again.

Johnny grinned at Dutch's pleased sigh. "Nurse says they'll spring you this afternoon," he reported. "I'll give Gary a call and see if he can pick you up. I've gotta work."

"Thanks," Dutch murmured sleepily.

"You look like hell." Johnny removed Dutch's glasses and returned them to their case. "Get some sleep."

"You need it more than I do," Dutch retorted around a yawn. "I don't have to work today." Still, he settled himself as comfortably as he could and closed his eyes.

Johnny's expression sobered. "I'm really sorry, Dutch," he began.

Dutch waved lethargically with his free hand. "You didn't do anything wrong," he protested. "It's what I get for not looking where I was going." He opened his eyes and sought his fuzzy friend.

"Well...." Johnny shifted uneasily. "I still feel like it was my fault."

Dutch grinned. "Okay, it can be your fault," he agreed.

Johnny made a face. "Get some sleep," he repeated, swatting his friend playfully on the shoulder. "I'll call you later." He turned to leave.

"Hey, John."

Johnny turned back.

"Better get your ten back."

Johnny grinned, one hand on the door. "Not a chance, Masters. Your team's an even better bet without you in the game." He slipped out before Dutch could reply.

Dutch made a mental note to make Gage spend his winnings in a most profitable manner, and drifted to sleep amidst pleasant images of those cold adult beverages.

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Dutch, if he could, would have slouched lower on the bench, maybe even disappeared underneath it. The most he could do was reach up and tug his cap lower over his eyes, as if the bill, and his sunglasses, would prevent the crowd from seeing him.

Okay, he admitted, crowd was a relative term. Still, there were a good number of firefighters and their families behind the benches. And, one group was decidedly noisier than the other. Not his group, unfortunately.

Dutch heaved a sigh and carefully moved his right leg as he changed position yet again. At least this was the ninth inning. Finally. The torture would be over in minutes, and he could slink off the field. Again, he corrected himself. His awkward caning gate was anything but...slinky.

There was another crack of a bat, and Dutch watched as yet another run crossed the plate for 16s. He thumped his right fist lightly on his thigh and tried to melt further into the bench.

"Any further, and you're gonna hit the dirt," came an amused voice to his right.

Dutch didn't even bother to look up. "It's just a game," he tried.

"Uh-huh. I thought I was the one with the tenspot down."

"At least all you lost was ten bucks," Dutch sighed. "I've lost my reputation."

"Masters, if you had a reputation to begin with, it had nothing to do with softball."

This time Dutch did allow his gaze to slide sideways, but John Gage was grinning. Dutch shook his head and looked away again. "This is humiliating."

"You gotta admit," Johnny said, "the score's kinda symbolic."

Dutch's only response was to groan and drop his head nearly into his lap. "If this is your way of cheering me up, you need lessons."

"Unless," Johnny went on, as if Dutch hadn't spoken, "you guys let them score some more, or if you score some more...." His voice broke off as bat met ball once more. The crowd's cheer faded almost before it had begun, however, and nine weary firefighters trooped off the field and joined Dutch and Johnny on the bench.

They proved a quiet bunch. With the score an ironic 26-16 and their team on the losing end at the moment, there wasn't much enthusiasm for the comeback attempt before the final three outs. Dutch kept his head studiously bowed as three of his teammates took their turns at bat, all returning to the dugout almost as quickly as they had left. In short order, the game was history. Dutch still didn't move.

By the time the rest of the team had finished congratulating the winners, the ceremonial charity check had changed hands, and the crowd had begun to depart, Dutch's coworkers had regained some of their earlier good cheer. They crowded once more around the bench, slapping Dutch good-naturedly on the back and assuring him that they really didn't mind losing, that the game had all been in fun.

Dutch just sat and nodded, an occasional weak smile flitting across his face.

"You know, Dutch," suggested Johnny casually, winking at Gary Chambers as Dutch's partner tossed bats into an equipment bag, "maybe from now on you'll remember that it's left turn on the arrow only."

Dutch lifted his head, but his retort was interrupted as Johnny vaulted from the bench with an ear-splitting screech. Dutch stared at Johnny's soundlessly working mouth, then down at the water and ice from the team's water jug puddling in the dirt at Johnny's feet. Laughter echoed around him.

"Guess drinks are on Gage," he said dryly. He stood, grabbed his cane, and hitched a step to Johnny's side. Patting him on the shoulder, he grinned. "Nice, cold, adult beverages."

He started away, then stopped and turned back. "You know, Johnny," he mused, his mouth twitching, "being right ain't all it's cracked up to be." He spun away again and, humming tunelessly, made his awkward way to Johnny's Land Rover to await his ride to the post-game party. Even losers could be winners.

Author's note: Much thanks to Lisa for the advice and badgering. Pat, thanks for the broken finger suggestions. Susan, I'll think of you every time I lift one of those cold adult beverages, even when I'm not snorting them up my nose. And, to anyone I might have missed, thank you, too. More importantly, Dutch thanks you. He was really getting tired of being left in that canyon.