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Catch! By Mark Brandon Allen

He can only remember the time of year. Spring. No, there's more. More than just that. It's the fourteenth of May, a week after his tenth birthday. It has just stopped raining. He can smell the moist, sweet fragrance of the damp, new mown lawn. Birds should be noisily chattering after the brief spring rain, but he doesn't hear them. He's standing on the back porch of the old brick bungalow on the corner of Grove Street and Trask. There are crocus, daffodils and tulips blooming in his father's flower garden at the back of the yard. Myrtle pushes out from between the stones bordering the plot. And now more. A fresh warm breeze blows noisily through the branches of the neighborhoods only catalpa trees. Moved by the wind, left over droplets of rain water sprinkle down from heart shaped leaves. Chandler slaps his fist into the grip-tite pocket of his new Wilson snap action baseball mitt, a tenth birthday present. He moves toward the porch stairs. Near the curb, close to the street under the afternoon shade of the catalpas, his father is standing on the newly mown grass. Chandler's father motions to him. An old tattered Rawlings glove is on his father's left hand and in his right he is holding a worn, smudged, leather covered baseball. Chandler can see his father smiling at him. "Catch!" his father calls.

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Blinking lights and short high pitched sounds from the ships directive console rouse Chandler

with a start. He stretches awkwardly before taking a reading. Yes, the life signs are stable. All

the Fermi particle drives are functioning. The ship is on course. He checks the control console

again to make sure he had not misread any readings in his newly wakened state. Perspiration dots

his temples and dampens the armpits of his tunic. He shouldn't have dozed. Channeling the sling around Jupiter is only minutes away. He stretches again, looking around the control pit.

There is something odd about the way the panels of the pit construct met the deck plates. A slight

anomaly? Something askew in the placement of the controls on the console? He isn't sure.

Nothing that the boy would notice. The uniformed boy stood at the entrance to the pit. The boy?

"Hello son," Chandler said.

"You're not my father," the boy replied, "You're my grandfather. I'm your grandson Ted."

Chandler focused. Ted? The boy walked down the steps one by one into the interstellar's control pit. He slapped a ball into an old worn cowhide baseball mitt. Chandler could see that it was a Wilson grip-tite snap action, with a solid leather web between the thumb and forefinger, just like the one he had as a youth. The glove he has passed on to his son Brad.

"Here," the boy said. He tossed the ball to Chandler. "Catch!"

Chandler caught the ball barehanded, and was surprised by the sting. As he shook his hand he

noticed its frailty. Thin and gnarled the skin was loose on the bone. He blinked. His hand felt firm again. Chandler looked at the boy. He certainly looked like Brad, but he couldn't be sure.

"Are you O.K.?" the boy asked.

Shifting the scuffed-up ball to his left hand, Chandler lobbed it back at the boy.

"Sure," he said, "but I don't think that we should be playing catch here in the control pit, it's almost time for the jump."

“Oh,” answered the boy.

“Well, set the ball down...we’ll talk awhile,” Chandler said. “The monitors show the thrusters

are running steady ... and perigee is still a few minutes off... we’ve plenty of time.”

Chandler eased slowly back in his contoured channeling chair, reviewing the configuration of

the pit. Everything seemed to be in order. But he wasn’t really sure. He had an eerie feeling of

déjà vu. Chandler couldn’t quite remember having a grandson, but he liked the idea. All he could tell for sure was that the boy looked just like Brad had, at age ten.

“How did you get here,” Chandler inquired.

Placing the battered ball down on the edge of the control guidance console, near two blinking

pin lights of the forward portal screen, the boy took a seat in the auxiliary channeler’s chair.

Imitating a typical fielder’s gesture of almost seventy years ago, he rapped his closed fist into the worn glove.

“How did you get on board, Ted?” Chandler asked again. He still wasn’t convinced that this wasn’t Brad, but it couldn’t be, could it? His age? The boy had the same sandy hair and green eyes. He the same turned up corner to his mouth when he smiled. He had the same left handed

throwing motion. He was wearing Brad’s West Park baseball uniform. Chandler blinked hard and let his contacts readjust. And Brad? Chandler remembered. Brad was months away, channeling one of the fleet’s interstellar cruisers, the ‘Justine Venture’, inbound to Earth from the Antilles quadrant in Andromeda. It couldn’t be Brad.

The boy fidgeted, tapping the scuffed up mitt on the emergency override arm of the auxiliary channeler’s chair.

“On the shuttle, just like I do every time grandpa.” He finally blurted out, “I’m just visiting.”

But that’s impossible Chandler reasoned, the ‘Drexler Prime’ is on an outward run nearing Ganymede to set up for the sling out from Jupiter. All the Fermi thrusters are engaged.

No known ship, much less a shuttle, could match this speed.

“I visit with you every weekend after my baseball game grandpa,” The boy reminded him.

That seemed right to Chandler, but it still troubled him. He checked the life sign readings on the console again. As he checked the trajectory variance on the forward portal screen, he picked up the ball . The texture of the cross stitching on the ball reminded him of a strangely, pleasant sensation that was almost lost to his memory. A familiar gnawing grew in his mind. Chandler felt the ripped seam on the well used hardball. It was just like the one he played catch with, with his father. Rolling the ball it in one hand he placed it in a spread fork finger grip, with finger pressure from his middle finger across the seam, as though getting ready to toss a slider.

“What do you like to talk about, Ted?” Chandler asked. He almost knew what the boy’s answer would be.

“Gee, grandpa, don’t cha remember?” the boy asked in return. “You always like to tell me about your father back in Illinois, ‘n going to Cubs games at Wrigley Field, even after they changed the name to Toyota Stadium .

“Yes, yes I do.”

Remembering, Chandler felt better. He relaxed into the old story that he always told the boy, one of his favorites. It was a very enjoyable story , playing catch with his father when he himself was just a boy of ten. Chandler flipped the ball to the boy as he began the story for the fourth time in as many sessions.

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“We’ve got that, Commander,” the naval hospital technician said. She continued to work the controls of the frontal gyirus scanner, as she carried on her conversation with Brad. “That was the fourth probe, but I think we can hold this catch long enough to make a visual capture.”

“Thanks, Ensign.” Brad said. “It’s the least we can do to help him rest in peaceful dreams.”

Brad looked down at his father in the cryonic chamber. Electrodes attached to the neurobiologic sensory receptors connected to the head and strategic motor nerve locations on the body of the comatose man. Chandler’s wrinkled skin was ashen; his body shrunken. Short grey hair still covered his head, except for the electrode placements. Assisted by a baryonic helium oxygen mixture, the old man’s breathing, was strong and regular. Subtle body motions indicated that a neurological stimulus was in process.

“Introducing a grandson to initiate these little talks was the only way to reach him, Sir. His prefrontal cortex seemed to be stuck on his last sling out nearing Ganymede before the meteor impact, and he knew that you were still on an inbound flight from Antilles quadrant.”

“Strange how the mind works,” Brad mused. He looked questioningly at the scan technician. The Ensign smiled at Brad as she continued to work the scanner. “This was the right thing to do, she said.”

“He always hoped to have a grandson.”

“Yes, Sir. All of your archived childhood digitals went into creating the mental invasion by the Ted construct, just to blot out the physical pain of the impact and replace it with a more pleasurable moment of his life.”

Brad tried to imagine what his father’s mind had seen, and if the old man believed what his mind saw.

“We’ll have the new catch looped in a few minutes as soon as we add all the new visual elements. Is there anything else that you can provide for this load clip from what you’ve seen on the catch, Sir...or know about? Any last details that he would enjoy?”

Brad thought for a moment. “Only two that I can think of,” he said

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The Ensign carefully inserted the newly mastered cognition loop. Then she pushed the play button on the console of the cryonic chambers stimulus feed to start the sensory presentation.

Spring. Chandler waves at his father. He walks down the wooden steps of the porch one by one into the backyard. It’s the fourteenth of May, a week after his tenth birthday. It has just stopped raining and he flicks away stray rain droplets that fall from the catalpa tree leaves. He can smell the moist, sweet fragrance of the damp, new mown lawn. Chandler slaps his fist into the grip-tite pocket of his new Wilson snap action baseball mitt. He’s proudly wearing a new pin stripe baseball uniform, with a Cubs logo across the chest, a tenth birthday present. Birds are chirping.

“Catch!” his father calls.

End.