



Not In So Many Words

Rating: PG

Classification: Vignette

Spoilers: "To Russia With Love"/"Gypsy Eyes", "Goodbyes"

Author's Notes: Oh, wait, I don't have any notes this time. Go figure ...

Frank Burnett gazed out the kitchen window as he waited for his coffee to brew. It was unseasonably cool for a June morning in southern California, although the Midwestern part of him didn't mind a bit. Sometimes the total lack of winter out here still messed with his head, even after thirty years.

Before he could wander off in search of the Sunday newspaper, the phone rang, and he took it out onto the terrace so that he wouldn't wake up Trish. "Hello?"

"Hey, Frank," came the unmistakable voice of his stepson. "How are things in earthquake country?"

"Pretty calm at the moment. How's hurricane country?"

"Anything but calm. We've already flown one hop today, and we've got two more on the books." His voice belied his real feelings: he was more energized than annoyed by the schedule. It had been a month since Lieutenant Commander Harmon Rabb had chosen to end his tour of duty at JAG and return to flying, his first love. He'd been training at NAS Pensacola since then, finishing his qualifications to join an active fighter squadron. "This is basically the only free time I'll have all day."

"Hold on a minute. I'll go get your mother."

"No, don't wake her up. I kinda wanted to talk to you, anyway. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Frank was careful not to let the surprise show through in his voice. He and Harm had never been particularly close. As a child, Harm had resented him, for obvious reasons. The boy had lost his hero, and although Frank had no intention of trying to replace his father, there were many difficult times. As Harm grew up, time and understanding had eased the tension between them; he could even call them friends. And last year had been a turning point. When Harm had come to them, telling them of his plan to search for his missing father in Russia, Trish had been distraught. But Frank had quietly helped him, realizing that only the truth would allow both mother and son some peace at last. When Harm had returned to give them the awful news, there had been sorrow, but also a kind of acceptance. And, finally, Frank had felt another kind of acceptance from this proud, determined young man.

Still, the weekly phone calls were always for Trish, not him. "It *has* been a while," he admitted. "How are the young punks treating you down there?"

"Oh, I get my share of crap. They threatened to make my call sign 'Old Man of the Sea', but they couldn't figure out how to fit it on my helmet." He could almost hear the smile

on the other end. "But my boarding scores were top three, and I keep schooling them on the engagements, so they're learning to shut up."

"So you passed the quals?"

"No sweat. That's part of why I called. I got my new assignment." The career naval officer spoke calmly, but his stepfather could sense the undercurrent of excitement. "VF-218 Raptors, on board the USS *Patrick Henry*. We're deploying to the Med in three weeks."

"Harm, that's great," Frank said sincerely. "I know you've worked hard for this."

"Thanks, Frank. It feels good to be getting out there again. I'm going to try and get home for a couple of days before we sail, but I can't promise anything, so don't get Mom's hopes up." There was a brief pause. "She's not going to be too thrilled that I'm going to the Balkans right out of the gate."

The older man had to agree: he was a little uneasy about the idea himself. The one place where Americans were currently flying in combat ... But he didn't voice his fears. It wouldn't help matters, and Harm didn't need the added pressure. "Your mom understands the way it works," he told him. "Besides, she worries about you even in D.C. It's her job."

"Good point. I'm glad to be going, I think. At least I know I'll be doing something important." After a moment's hesitation, Harm sounded less certain. "Frank, does she really understand? Do *you* understand?"

"You mean, why you left JAG to fly?" Frank sighed. "We were surprised - I won't lie to you. But we know you, Harm. We were there when you got those wings, and we were there when they told you that you'd never fly again. For years after that, we still wondered if you'd ever really be happy doing something else. And you *were* happy - I know that. JAG gave you what you needed, and you did amazing things there. But how could anyone ever expect you to pass up the chance to get back everything you worked half your life to achieve?"

"I'm glad you believe that," he replied. "It's exactly what I believe. But ... it's not like I'm getting back the life I used to have. Unless the Personnel gods are smiling on me, this could stop my career dead in its tracks."

"Maybe," Frank allowed. "But has that ever been the most important thing? When you first dreamed about going into the Navy, did you see F-14s or admiral's stars?"

There was a hint of amusement in Harm's voice. "How do you always get right to the point so damn fast?"

"I'm in upper management - I have a bullshit detector. Listen, all you can do is take it one step at a time. Right now, concentrate on this cruise, and then you can think about the future."

"You're right, as usual. I wish everyone in Washington had been half as understanding."

"Didn't get a lot of support?" Frank asked sympathetically.

"Sure as hell didn't. Let's see, the admiral's pissed, Jordan's pissed, Bud's depressed,

and Mac ... I don't know where to start with Mac. I thought she'd be the one person to accept this - she's always understood everything else. But she took it harder than anyone. When I walked out of there, I felt like a traitor. And I felt like I'd been betrayed, too, like they didn't want me to make it. And that hurt. A lot."

"I'm sure that's not true. They still care about you, regardless of what your designator is. They were upset that you left simply because they don't want to lose a friend. Didn't you feel the same way when Mac left?"

"Yeah, something like that." He sighed. "I miss her, Frank. She's the best friend I've ever had, and I don't know if she knows that."

"You could always call her up and tell her," Frank suggested dryly.

There was a short laugh on the other end. "Right. This is Mac we're talking about. We don't operate like that."

"That's your problem. Nobody's ever going to know what you're thinking if you don't tell them."

"I know. I'm working on that. But, like you said, one step at a time." There was another awkward silence. "On that subject ..."

Frank frowned, not comprehending. "On *what* subject?"

The voice that answered was different from the confident fighter jock he'd been only seconds ago. This voice was more unsure, but also more openly honest. "I never really thanked you for what you did to help me find my dad. I realized that a little while ago, and it was absolutely inexcusable of me not to say anything, after everything you did."

Surprised, the older man had to take a moment before responding. "It was only money, Harm. You don't have to -"

"It wasn't just the money, Frank. I mean, that's a big part of it, but not the biggest part. And it wasn't just what happened last year. I was thinking more about what happened about this time nineteen years ago."

This was an altogether new kind of surprise. They rarely spoke of that summer, when Harm had run away to join a group of former soldiers searching for American MIAs in Laos. It was still somewhat of a difficult subject. Frank recalled being amazed at the resourcefulness of his sixteen-year-old stepson, even as he and Trish had frantically searched for information on his whereabouts.

"I'll never be able to make up for the hell I put you and Mom through, will I?"

Since honesty seemed to be on tap, he abandoned tact. "Probably not," he said truthfully. "But you were young, and your intentions were noble. You just had blinders on to the rest of the world."

"I'll never forget the look on Mom's face when I came home. Seeing the pain I caused her ... I swore right then that I'd never do anything like that to her again."

Frank knew he'd never forget that night, either. Three weeks after he'd disappeared, Harm had shown up on their doorstep in tattered, dirty fatigues, dragging his backpack and pushing his longish hair out of his face. He'd said nothing of what he'd seen, but some of the innocence that had previously existed in his ice-blue eyes had been lost forever. "It wasn't just the fact that you were gone. It was where you'd been. That place took her husband from her, and the idea of losing her son to it as well ..."

"I know. I understand that now. All I can say is that it felt right at the time. But that's no excuse. I deserved everything she gave me, and more." Harm paused. "I know she wanted to rip up my application to the Academy after that."

After the initial shock of the statement wore off, Frank asked, "How exactly do you know that?"

"She told me a couple of years ago. She also told me that you stopped her from doing it. You told her I needed to choose my own path, even if it turned out to be the same one as my father's. You kept me pointed toward my goals, even when I thought about giving up and taking the path of least resistance. You always backed me up when I needed it, and I've been taking that for granted for a long time. So I guess I just wanted to tell you that I do remember, and I'm grateful."

The older man suddenly found himself speechless. "You're more than welcome," he said quietly. "Thank you for telling me. I imagine it wasn't easy."

"Well, a very wise person once told me that nobody's ever going to know what I'm thinking if I don't tell them."

He smiled at that, but before he could respond, a background voice filtered through the line. "Come on, Rabb, preflight in five minutes. Shake a leg, will ya?"

"That's 'shake a leg, *sir*,'" Harm corrected the other pilot good-naturedly, then turned back to the phone. "Listen, Frank, I have to run. Give Mom a kiss for me, all right? I'll talk to her tomorrow. I promise."

"You bet. Kick some ass up there, all right?"

"You got it. Bye, Frank."

Once he'd hung up, Frank just stared at the phone for a moment, wondering how they'd managed to come so far in such a short time. After a few minutes, Trish wandered out with their coffee mugs. "Who was calling so early?"

"Hmm? Oh, that was Harm. He said he passed his quals, and he'll talk to you tomorrow."

"You could have woken me, dear."

"Actually, he called for me. We had a very nice conversation. I'm proud of him, Trish. He's following his dreams, the way we taught him. I think this was the right decision for him."

"I know. I'm proud of him, too." Suddenly, she seemed to realize something, and her

eyes filled with tears.

"Honey, what's wrong?" Frank asked, concerned. "Are you worried about him being out on sea duty again? He'll be all right."

She shook her head, eyes shining. "Nothing's wrong. I just remembered what day it is."

"It's Sunday. Does that mean something?"

"Oh, Frank. Sometimes you're just as clueless as that son of mine." At his perplexed expression, she laid her hand on his arm. "It's Father's Day."

At first, he wrote it off to coincidence. But people did not excel in the courtroom or the Navy by being oblivious. It was usually safe to assume that Harmon Rabb knew exactly what he was doing. Surprised and touched, Frank could only shake his head. "I'll be damned," he said softly. "You always have been one step ahead of me, Harm."

Embracing his wife briefly, he walked down off the terrace toward the beach to be alone with his thoughts. Before long, a young boy skipped past, straying just to the edge of his parents' watchful gazes. As he kicked absently at a rock, a pair of jets streaked past, headed for Miramar. The rock was instantly forgotten as the boy stared up at the sky in unadulterated awe. "Wow," he breathed.

Frank smiled. "You like planes?" he asked. The boy nodded, beaming. "Those were F-14s. My son flies those."

"Really? Cool."

"Yeah," he echoed distantly, his mind elsewhere. "He *is* pretty cool."

*** THE END ***