

The Visitor

by Terry J. Erdmann

Synopsis

On a dark and stormy night in the early twenty-fifth century, an old man gazes around his home, taking in the artifacts of a lifetime. As he injects himself with a hypospray, he hears someone at the door and opens it to find a young woman drenched by the rainstorm. He invites her in to dry off and discovers that the woman, Melanie, is an aspiring writer who's come to find out why *her* favorite writer, Jake Sisko, stopped writing before he reached the age of forty.

An elderly Jake Sisko smiles and decides to share an untold story with the stranger. It begins long ago, he explains, back when he was eighteen. His father, Benjamin, had taken him on the *Defiant* to the Gamma Quadrant in order to watch the wormhole undergo a subspace inversion, a rare occurrence that happens only once every fifty years. During the voyage, the wormhole's fluctuating gravimetric field had destabilized the *Defiant's* warp core, and his father had repaired it. But just as the danger seemed to have passed, a bolt of energy shot out from the warp core, striking Ben Sisko full on and knocking Jake backward with the discharge. Jake had watched in horror as his father dematerialized, presumably lost forever.

Months later, as Jake struggled to move forward with his life, he awakened to see his father appear in his room. But within seconds, Sisko again dematerialized. The incident was dismissed as a nightmare until, after several more months had passed, Ben Sisko again rematerialized before his son. This time, Jake was able to summon help and get his father to the infirmary, where Deep Space Nine's senior officers determined that the captain's temporal signature had been altered by the warp-core accident, thrusting him into subspace. Unfortunately, before they could figure out a way to realign and restore his signature, Sisko dematerialized into subspace once more.

For several more months, Dax and O'Brien tried to find a way to locate Sisko, but eventually the unrest between the Klingons and the Federation forced Starfleet to evacuate the station. Jake was sent to Earth, where he became a published writer, fell in love, and got married. Then, when he was in his thirties, he received another brief visit from his father, this time at his home in New Orleans. But Jake's joy in seeing him was overwhelmed by his reawakened obsession to bring him back.

Working with Dax, Jake learned that the accident had created a subspace link between his father and himself, and that there was a pattern to the older Sisko's appearances. The next one, Dax calculated, was likely to occur when Jake was an old man. Hoping to find a way to help his father, Jake abandoned his writing to study subspace mechanics. His wife, Korena, could not compete with his obsession, and he ultimately lost her.

Fifty years after the original accident, Jake returned to the Gamma Quadrant in the *Defiant*, with Dax, Doctor Bashir, and his old friend Nog (serving as captain). As the wormhole again began to invert, Jake awaited his father's rematerialization, hoping this time to free him. Instead, he was pulled into the same region of subspace as his father.

The reunion was brief, but long enough to convince Ben that Jake's obsession had taken a terrible toll. He begged Jake to let go of his futile quest and rebuild his life. Then the two were separated once again, with Jake returning to the *Defiant*.

Jake finishes his account to Melanie and presents her with a copy of his latest book, a collection of short stories that he wrote to honor his father's request. Before she departs, he explains that he has learned at last how to save Ben. If he dies while his father is with him, the "cord" that has been dragging the elder Sisko through time will be cut, and Sisko will snap back to the moment of the original accident.

Later, when Sisko rematerializes at Jake's house, he is gratified to learn that Jake has gone back to writing. But he is stunned when he discovers that Jake has poisoned himself and why.

Jake's sacrifice is not in vain. As he dies, Sisko finds himself returning to the *Defiant*, where he successfully avoids the original accident. The father, who remembers everything that just transpired, and his son, who remembers nothing, receive a second chance to live out the rest of their days together.

Context

The Visitor was "that certain kind of *Star Trek* episode that appeals very strongly to certain people," as showrunner Ira Behr puts it. "It's a whole 'heart-on-the-sleeve,' sentimental, emotional, personal story."

"It was wonderfully written, wonderfully performed," observes producer Steve Oster. "But I think everyone was surprised at the audience reaction. No one expected it to have the emotional impact that it did."

That impact first became apparent to Behr when he saw fan-generated commentary on the episode. The episode was eventually nominated for a Hugo Award, the science-fiction literary community's version of the Oscar, for Best Dramatic Presentation. While the episode didn't win, it earned the distinction of being voted the best *Star Trek* episode ever by the readers of *TV Guide*. "The magazine called it the *Star Trek* shocker," recalls writer Rene Echevarria, "the fact that the least popular incarnation of *Star Trek* had produced the most popular episode."

What was it about the episode that hit home for so many viewers? "We always like to think *Star Trek* has this quality of universality, but this time we *really* had it," says Behr. "The idea of losing a parent. A love that spans a lifetime. A love stronger than death. Usually that's romantic love, but for this show, we chose the love between a father and son. And it worked like gangbusters. Everyone could relate to it."