

The old man's tale

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Prologue

I am an old man and I know that the time to meet my ancestors will come soon. I can feel it in my bones and in my soul. I am tired and the times heap up where life is more of an effort than a benefit.

It's not that I don't enjoy the wonders of the world anymore. I do. Especially the time in the mornings when the sun slowly creeps over the horizon and the birds start singing their songs. The time in the evenings when everything is bathed in a golden red glow.

I am still thankful for every day I can spend with my family. To see the eyes of my grandson twinkling with joy about the toys I made for him make my heart beat faster with happiness every time.

But all these worldly joys cannot outweigh the wish to be joined with the greatest love of my life again, the woman I lost way too soon. I may have learned to cope with life after her death, but every time I see an echo of her presence in the blue eyes and the crooked smile of our daughter, I feel my heart breaking all over again.

It's evening, and while I sit in my favorite chair on the porch watching the stars in the nightly sky, I feel myself drifting to memories of the past. There comes a period in life when your time is filled with making new experiences, but there are also days when your body is weary and you feel that you've experienced it all. It's then, when you're old, that you start to live in the past and that your memories, the good and the bad, are coming back to haunt you.

I don't mean to complain, though. That's the course of life and although I've experienced a lot, good and bad likewise, it's memories of her that coming back to me frequently, memories that fill me with longing and happiness. Sometimes they are so real that I can almost feel her touch on my face and the hairs on my arms stand on edge. Oh what I would give just to feel her touch once again!

It's getting late, and although I'm not tired yet, I slowly make my way over to the kitchen to prepare myself a cup of herbal tea. Lately those chilly autumn nights are getting to me and even the thickest blanket won't keep me warm. While I wait for the water to boil, I watch out of the window and let my restless thoughts wander whatever road they choose. As it is, they're going back to the day my life finally changed for the better; although I couldn't see it back then. It was the day I met her.

That day we were enemies, unbelievable as it may sound today. She was the model Starfleet Captain and I was the Maquis rebel she was sent to capture. But life is never as easy as that, and destiny chose another path for us instead.

Yes, I believe in destiny. A force mankind will never be able to control. In my opinion it wasn't coincidence that we met each other, nor was it coincidence that I lost my heart to her. Deep inside my heart, I know that we were meant to love each other.

It may not have been love at first sight, but even then in the very first moments, when distrust and a world of different morals stood between us, there was a spark. A spark that would grow to a flame. A flame of passion, of hope, of love.

I know if we hadn't been separated by fate, we would still be together today. Right now; I can imagine us sitting out there on the bench, cuddled in the warmest blanket available. We would be holding hands and looking at the stars, telling us stories about the past. The very idea makes me smile.

The whistle of the kettle brings me back to reality. I turn off the stove and pour the hot liquid over the herbs, an wonderful aroma emerging into the air at once. I take the steaming mug and walk over to my sleeping room, where I place it on the nightstand. When she was still with me, this room was for guests only, but since her death I can't bring myself to spend even a single night in our former bedroom. It was our private sanctum, the place where we planned our future, the place where we made love. Without her, it lacked all of its warmth, and nowhere else did I feel her loss so deeply like I felt it there.

Coming back from the bathroom, I take a long look at the photograph set on the nightstand. It's my favorite picture of her. It was taken in her mother's kitchen the night before our wedding. She was sitting at the kitchen table, searching for the earrings she wanted to wear the next day. I sneaked in behind her and, startled, she had looked up at me. It was then that I asked her if she was happy. At that moment, she gave me the most heartwarming smile, her eyes shining brightly with happiness. Thanks to her mom, that smile is preserved for eternity.

Switching off the light and closing my eyes, I'm waiting for sleep to come. Sometimes, when I'm really exhausted, I'm asleep before my head even has the chance to hit the pillow, but most of the nights I'm lying awake for hours, the ghosts of the past the only ones to keep me company. As I stretch my arms to make myself more comfortable, my right hand grabs something hairy and for a moment I'm puzzled. Then I remember that it is one of my grandson's soft toys. He left it here yesterday, telling me it should keep me company whenever I feel alone.

Yesterday was the first time he asked me about his grandmother and, young as he is, he must have sensed my loneliness, for Timmy the rabbit is his favorite toy. I still see his eager face, hoping for me to shed some light on a person he never met for himself. For a moment I felt myself at a loss for words. How can somehow truly describe another person? How could I give him a true picture of his grandma and make him understand what a special woman she was?

In the end I told him that she was the most wonderful woman I ever met, and added some of her childhood stories that she or mother had told me. After all, Jeremy is only five years old and he wouldn't have been able to grasp the whole tale of a complicated love born in the Delta Quadrant. There had been too many problems that I wouldn't have been able to make him understand. Maybe when he is older, his mother will tell him the whole story as I told it to her when she was teenager. The story of the Angry Warrior whose heart was bound to a Woman Warrior.

I don't know how long I've been lying here awake, but finally I feel that I'm falling asleep. I start to dream at once. In this dream Kathryn is standing beside my bed. She is wearing a silk nightgown and her smooth hair is falling loosely down her back. At first she looks at me seriously but then she smiles and she stretches her hand out to me.

Kathryn Janeway had been neither the most beautiful nor the most endearing person I had known throughout my life, yet she captured my interest like no one else had ever done. Even as I laid my eyes on her for the first time, I was mesmerized by her strength and her will. I was used to the fact that people were intimidated by me. She wasn't, and I knew she would never be. Although a rather petite woman on the outside, she made you forget that fact when you felt her aura of natural authority. You could talk with her, argue with her, but she never took any shit from anyone.

I still remember the first moments on Voyager, when I found myself beamed onto her bridge. We stood only inches apart, and because I was so much taller than her, her blue eyes seemed to burn holes into my chest. For a long time I hadn't met someone I saw as equal. With her I never even thought about treating her somehow else.

Her enemy that minute, I found myself in the role of her First Officer only days later. We were stranded in the Delta Quadrant. We both had a crew we had to take care of and my ship was gone. She made it clear that working together was our only chance to get home, and whether I liked it or not, I had to agree.

As it turned out it was the beginning of a wonderful friendship. Friendship that eventually turned into a deep love. It's interesting that even after all these years, I cannot name the moment when mutual respect and attraction turned into love, though I often think that maybe there never was such a special moment. I rather like to believe that the seed of love had been there all along and that it simply took its time to blossom.

All I know is that I cared for her deeply even before New Earth and I was hopelessly in love with her after. What can I say about those weeks on New Earth? Well, they were equally both bliss and torture.

The whole idea of suffering from a virus that would kill us as soon as we leave the planet was terrifying. I didn't want to abandon our crew and I didn't want to be left on this planet light years away from home forever, and neither did she.

Soon, though, I found peace in the simple life. Not to feel the weight of responsibility for the crew's wellbeing was liberating and I enjoyed the physical labor. I'd always found calmness in working with my hands. Above all else was the magnificent feeling of being in love. Here on the planet, I got to know another side of Kathryn. On New Earth she wasn't the Captain, but a woman of flesh and blood. She still had all the determination that made her a great leader, but at the same time she was so much more. She tried time and again to get a cure for the virus but, aside from these efforts, she was more relaxed, and sometimes I got a glimpse of the vulnerable part of her. One time, when a thunderstorm took us completely by surprise, she fled into my arms and I kept her safe while we waited for the storm to calm down. I cannot tell how often this memory comes back to me at nights.

We grew close those weeks, maybe not physically, but in our minds. If it had been up to me we could've been so much more, but she just couldn't give me what I longed for yet.

The night I told her the tale of the Angry Warrior, I opened my heart to her, let her see how much she meant to me. I let her know not only that I loved her but that I would stand forever by her side. God knows, that I meant every word I said. I could see how deeply my words touched her, and the moment we joined hands, we were so close like we wouldn't be for the next five years. But all of my love wasn't enough to let her forget the obstacles. Obstacles with the name 'protocol', 'Mark' and 'fear'.

'Protocol, Such a small word, but in the end it had more impact on Kathryn's and my life than I would have thought a word could have. Kathryn had lived by the rules for so many years that she couldn't just throw them off, and thought she refused to ever lose faith on New Earth, she thought she still had to abide by them. She had always believed that a cure for us would be found and that we would come back to Voyager. On Voyager we couldn't be lovers though. 'Protocol' strictly forbade fraternization, even decades away from home. And if that wasn't enough there was always her obligation towards her crew. In her view it was her fault that we were stranded in the Delta Quadrant and she felt that she had to sacrifice everything to get us home.

Then there was Mark, her fiancé on earth. Although she didn't know if she would ever see him again, even if she wasn't sure of her feelings anymore, it wasn't in her to break a promise once given.

Above everything else there was her fear, though. Fear of her feelings. Fear of losing control. The first time she ever admitted to having been afraid on New Earth was some weeks after our wedding. We

were talking about our time on the planet when she gave me a sad look. "Did I ever tell you what really made me resist you back then?" It was a rhetorical question, so I gave her time to tell me the story in her own way.

"It was fear, Chakotay. Fear of the feelings you created in me. I've had relationships before, with Justin and Mark, but never before was a single glance of a man enough to make my soul melt from desire and love likewise. When you told me that beautiful story and looked at me with unguarded love in your eyes, my skin burned with heat, but at the same moment I felt shivers running down my spine. That moment I wanted to make love with you and never let you go. But I couldn't handle these emotions then. I feared that once I gave in I would be consumed by my feelings and that there'd be nothing left of me. I was so accustomed to control everything and everyone that I didn't dare relax, even for a single moment."

"And how do you feel about giving up control today? At least once in a while." I couldn't resist asking her.

Then she laughed quietly.

"Today I know that giving up a bit of control doesn't make me weak, but even stronger. With you I know I am able to manage all obstacles life will throw at me. With you I feel a happiness and calmness I hadn't known before. It's wonderful to know that there is someone to catch me when I stumble. And Chakotay, I hope that you know that I'll always be there for you as well."

As it was, Kathryn had been right, and in the end we got back to Voyager. For a while our friendship was stronger than it had ever been, but with every passing month and every disagreement, we drifted further apart. It's the course of things that even the strongest love will suffer when it gets no encouragement, when no one is there to tend it.

Despite everything I was faithful to her for year after year, kept the promise given in a time now almost forgotten. In our seventh year, though, I became weak. Kathryn withdrew from me and the others more and more, and I couldn't find a way to pierce through her walls anymore. I was deeply saddened, but at the same time there was a nagging voice in me, asking me if I really should wait for time that may never come.

My question seemed to be answered when Seven started to seek my company. Seven of Nine, the beautiful Borg with the body of a model, the intellect of an Einstein but the maturity of a teenager. Seven who had decided for herself that she wanted to make first hand experiences in human relationships and who somehow thought that I'd be the right one to introduce her into the mystery called love.

I would lie if I'd say that I never really cared about her. I did. I was touched by her innocence and it was a wonderful feeling to look in the eyes of the woman and find unrestrained passion, maybe even a touch of love there. For a while we had a truly good time together and for the first time in years I felt alive again.

Maybe we might have stayed together if we hadn't found our way home, but somehow don't think so. After all, we were too different, and as much as she tried, Seven never could touch my heart like Kathryn could with only a simple smile. Seven may have made enormous progress in claiming back her humanity, but she still lacked personality.

That's the thing with physical beauty. It's only interesting when it's accompanied by a matching personality. At least, that's what I think.

I still remember the unofficial homecoming party held two months after Voyager's arrival on earth. I had come early and was talking to Tom and Tuvok when Seven entered the room in another one of her clingy dresses. In one moment, the level of noise dropped considerably as men fell silent, following Seven's every movement with their eyes. She often provoked this reaction in men, although back in those days, she wasn't aware of it.

I was still amused at the men's reaction when it was Kathryn's turn to make an entrance. She came alone, like she always did these days, head held high. This time she wore some pretty, rather short black dress. Although this outfit wasn't nearly as daring as Seven's had been, I could see the men's attention shifting from her to Kathryn.

You could say it was because she was the Captain and it was simply respect that provoked this reaction, but I could see in the men's eyes that they didn't see the Captain, but the woman. Not only did Kathryn have a slim, feminine figure, she had charisma that captivated people. It was in the way she moved, how her eyes seemed to look right into your soul. It was the way she smiled at people, the way her husky laugh sent shivers down the men's spine. In her way she was more woman than Seven could ever be.

That evening I went home early. I hadn't spoken a single word to Seven or Kathryn, and to be honest I wouldn't have known what to say to either of them, anyway. Back at home I took a bottle of Scotch and got drunk. I only wanted to forget all about my personal misery. For this night I did. I knew that I had to come to terms with my feelings, but my pride and my heart spoke two different languages.

The only thing I was completely sure about was that breaking up with Seven had been the right thing. Or rather, her breaking up with me. I don't know if my strong sense of honor would have allowed me to simply give up only because we didn't have to face countless years in the Delta Quadrant anymore. Thanks to the spirits, Seven didn't have such doubts. She came to me only two days after our homecoming, and as is her way, she told me in a few, plain words that it was over. She said that she had to get to know herself better before she would be able to commit herself to anyone, and she had the feeling that my heart had never truly belonged to her anyway.

She was right about everything she said, but at that moment I didn't appreciate her insights. I listened to her calmly, but once she was gone I slammed the door shut behind me and started to pace the house again and again. I was angry and felt used by her, and for days I was sulking. It seemed to me that every woman I had feelings for in the last ten years only had used me. Seska, Seven, and even Kathryn. I decided that whichever path my life would take now, it wouldn't include women.

I even believed that the nagging doubts that I had failed. Kathryn would disappear eventually, but they didn't. Hadn't I promised to stand by her side? Hadn't we made a silent agreement to explore our feelings for each other once we reached home? Shouldn't I, now that we had fulfilled our task, go to her and beg for her forgiveness? Didn't I still love her more than my life?

I don't know when I would've come to my senses, but thankfully Kathryn took the task into her own hands. She came to me the week after the party. I was occupied with packing my few belongings, I wanted to visit my sister on Dorvan, as the doorbell rang. I cannot tell you how surprised I was to find her standing in front of my door. We hadn't spoken in weeks, our friendship all but gone since she had learned about my relationship with Seven. She had never touched on the subject, but I had felt it in the way she treated me and within the weeks of the debriefings she became an expert on avoiding my presence as inconspicuous as possible.

My first thought when seeing her now, was that she had come for some official reason, maybe to convince me to work for Starfleet after all, but the look on her face told a different story. Her eyes were full of remorse and the sad smile she gave me made my heart ache and beat faster in my chest.

For a moment, I just stared at her, but then I made way to let her pass. No word had been spoken yet. She took some hesitant steps into my living room when she turned around to face me. In the meantime, I had closed the door and was now leaning with my back against it, not trusting my legs to support my weight. Somehow I felt that this was the moment where our future would be decided. The time for games was over. It was now or never.

"Chakotay, what can I do to make it right?" Her voice was hoarse and for the first time in years she didn't try to suppress her emotions. Her eyes were clearly showing the fear of rejection, but at the same time, I saw a faint glimpse of hope and even love in them.

"Just say that you love me." I spoke without thinking and took several steps into her direction. Could it be? Could it really be that there was a chance for us after all?

"I love you, Chakotay. I always have and always will."

She closed the distance between us. After all that time my dream of holding her, kissing her, finally came true. Her lips were soft, and for a moment I simply enjoyed the feeling of her lips on mine. The kiss deepened and I gently started to explore formerly forbidden territory. My last conscious thought was that I wanted to take it slow, but tenderness soon became passion that couldn't be denied any longer. That afternoon we made love for the first time. As I held her in my arms afterwards, I knew that I would never let her go.

The months that followed were the best of my life. I decided to take a position as teacher at Starfleet Headquarters, while Kathryn, now an Admiral, seemed to be quite content to be confined to her desk for most of her time.

There was hardly a night that we didn't spend together and I couldn't feel any closer to her. But after three months I wanted to make it official. I thought that we had wasted too much time already, and that it was time to create our own home.

I was still thinking about how I could make the perfect proposal when Kathryn took me by surprise. It was a Friday evening and we were just having dinner as she asked me to accompany her to Indiana the next day. I thought she wanted to visit her mother, and, as I liked and respected Gretchen Janeway very much, I agreed readily. I was right, and indeed we went to see her mother and, to my surprise, Kathryn's sister and her family were there as well.

We had lunch together and for some hours we chatted animatedly. When Kathryn asked me to take a walk through the surroundings with her in the afternoon, I agreed. Arm in arm we walked through the small neighborhood.

After some time, we passed an old farmhouse that was restored skillfully and she asked me if I could imagine living in such a house. Yes, I could, and that was what I told her. I had always liked the quietness of a living in the nature and that was just the kind of place I wanted to spend my life with Kathryn. My answer seemed to please her, because her eyes lit up and she said we should take a look at the inside.

"You're kidding. You cannot simply break into someone else's house."

"Oh, I'm sure the owner won't mind. I know her quite well." Her voice couldn't hide the laughter at my obviously shocked expression.

I simply shrugged in response and prepared myself to follow her inside. If Kathryn wanted to go inside and thought it was safe, who was I to convince her otherwise?

"Before we go and take a look, there's one thing I'd like to talk about with you." Her voice was hesitant and I was surprised to see uncertainty in her eyes.

"What's the matter? Having second thoughts about playing burglar at your neighbor's?" My feeble attempt at a joke only provoked a small smile from her. Such rapid mood swings weren't like her at all and I got worried. I pulled her into an embrace.

"What's the problem, Kathryn?"

She snuggled herself closer against me and mumbled something unintelligible into my chest. I asked her to repeat what she said but she remained silent.

"Come on. Spill it. It can't be that bad, can it?" I slowly withdrew from her and held her at arm's length. By now I was utterly confused.

Finally she looked up at me, and there it was again: the look of determination with which she faced every major hurdle in her life.

"I bought the house last week. I thought it would be the perfect place for us. And I...I intended to ask you to marry me." She stopped and looked at me obviously taken aback by her unique approach to such rather sensible matters.

The almost frightened look on her face proved too much. I couldn't help myself and started to laugh. She had taken me utterly by surprise and realization of what she had said only just started to dawn on me.

"You intended to ask me to marry you? Shall that mean you changed your mind in the meantime?" I was teasing her and a fine blush crept up her neck.

"No, I didn't change my mind. It's only a bit harder than I imagined." She gave me one of her crooked smiles and I couldn't help but smile back.

"Oh, I guess you deserve another try. What do you think?"

"I think that's quite fair of you."

I was still standing only two feet apart from her, my hands placed on her shoulders. She made a step into my direction and my arms slid down her arms and came to rest on her hips. Our faces were only inches apart now and I could feel her breath tickling my face and neck.

"Chakotay, I hope you know how much I love you. You have completed my life for so many years now, and I don't think I need to tell you how much these last months meant to me. I want to spend the rest of my life with you and I can think of nothing more wonderful than having you as my husband. Will you marry me?"

I simply nodded, not trusting my voice. Instead I kissed her with all the tenderness I felt for her this moment.

I remember the hours that followed like I would remember a dream, so unreal was the feeling that everything had finally fallen into place. We went into the house that Kathryn had bought for us, the house I still live in, and took a look around. It was still completely empty on the inside, but as Kathryn and I went from room to room my mind filled with ideas of how to make the most of the space. It seemed that we discussed everything that afternoon, even the color of the curtains.

Almost three hours passed before we went back to her mother's house. The whole family was waiting on the porch, and our faces must have given us away, as we were pulled into embraces and bear hugs the moment we set foot on the first step.

We got married only five weeks later.

As Tuvok pointed out, it was highly illogical to get married with such an imminent hurry after we waited for this moment for so many years but we were completely sure of what we're doing, so why should we wait any longer than necessary?

We had decided for a small wedding. Only our family and our dearest friends from Voyager were invited, and although the invitations got out on very short notice, they were all there. Kathryn's family, my sister with her eldest boy, Tom and B'Elanna, Tuvok and T'Pel, Harry, the Doc and, to our surprise, even Seven.

For some moments, seeing her again was awkward, but then I went over to her. To my surprise, we talked like old friends and I was happy and relieved to hear that she obviously had found peace in her

life. She was still working for Starfleet, helping to analyze the data Voyager had brought home and as Tom told me later she had been seen with the Doc quite often during the last weeks. So our separation hadn't only been right for me, but for her also.

At first, I was unsure how Kathryn would react to her presence. Although it had been her suggestion to invite Seven in the first place, I knew that mine and Seven's indiscretion had weighed heavily on her heart. My worries turned out to be though. The moment she came out the house and saw me talking to Seven, she came over and pulled her into a hug, much to Seven's surprise. She told me later that she just couldn't hold a grudge against Seven. The Borg woman may have disappointed her, but she was still young and had to find her place in life. With a twinkle in her eye she asked me if it hadn't taken herself some time to come to her senses after all.

Late that night, after we made love, we talked about the happenings of the day for hours, happiness still glowing strong in us. We agreed that our wedding had been wonderful and that the quiet, peaceful ceremony was exactly what we had dreamed of. Could life be any better?

Even now I still thrive on those memories and I can only think of one moment in my life that actually made me even happier.

It was four months after our wedding. Kathryn had been on an assignment in the demilitarized zone and rumors had it that there might be a war coming. I had tried not to let my worries show, but was relieved nonetheless when she told me that she'd be back on earth in a few days' time.

I knew that she was trained to face any kind of danger; in fact while on Voyager she had gone through more times of crisis than the average Starfleet Captain ever will, but I didn't even want to think of the possibility that I could lose her. It's entirely different knowing that your loved one is on a difficult space mission than it is to be at her side and at least to have the feeling you are there to protect her when necessary.

In addition to that, I noticed that she had been unusually pale during the last transmissions. One time I asked her about it, but she denied that anything was wrong.

"You know how it is. No sun in weeks ruins even the finest complexion," was her only comment.

I wanted to believe her but I felt that something was wrong. What could I do though? I had to accept that I had to wait for answers till she was back. How I hated that feeling of helplessness. On Voyager I had been the one who took care of her, the one who made sure that she relaxed at least once in a while. Who was there to take care of her now?

Two days later she was back on earth and, after some urgent conference with a few fellow Admirals, we finally returned to Indiana. She was obviously fatigued so I let her take a nap while I prepared dinner.

Although Kathryn never talked to me about it, I knew that she still was under quite a bit of pressure. There were more than just a few people at Starfleet who despised the thought that their 'golden girl' was married to a former criminal. The Maquis may have been pardoned, but our past was neither forgotten nor forgiven.

Later that evening, as we sat in our kitchen sipping tea and coffee, I took her hand into mine and caressed her palm with my finger.

"Kathryn, are you sure you're ok? You're ghastly pale and look like you haven't slept in weeks."

She gave me a tired smile and sighed quietly.

"I'm sure you won't believe me if I tell you that I'm ok, will you? But I am, at least as far as I can be under these circumstances."

"What circumstances?" I tried hard to let my voice sound reassuring, although I felt everything but calm at this moment.

Kathryn startled me by laughing out loud. "Chakotay, don't look like I'm going to stab you. I meant it seriously. I'm not ill."

Her voice softened and she squeezed my hand lightly.

"I'm two months pregnant."

How can I ever describe this moment? It was like time stood still for a second. My heart missed a beat, only to race even faster afterwards and I felt like I was frozen to the spot. Then the gate opened and my emotions were crashing down on me. Happiness and fear in equal measure.

I had always dreamed of being a father but Kathryn and I had accepted long ago that it was too late for us. After all, we were almost fifty years old. And now she told me that she was pregnant, told me that my greatest wish was about to come true.

I jumped off my chair, and pulled Kathryn into an embrace, mumbling that I loved her again and again.

I would never experience a moment of such pure happiness again.

The next months passed much too fast for my liking. While Kathryn was still working, I took time out from teaching to finish the last works in and at our house. I enjoyed the quiet work and I still remember the hours I spent carving the cradle, imaging our baby lying in it. This cradle still exists.

After our daughter grew out of it I kept it for sentimental reasons, and years later when she was pregnant with our grandson she asked me if she could have it. Of course she could, and I dare to hope that when Jeremy is old enough to have kids himself, he too will bed his baby in it. Tradition had always been important for my people and I liked the idea that a piece of my work could outlast myself and be a connection to the generations that will follow me.

While in her fifth month Kathryn quit working. Being pregnant simply didn't mesh with the tight schedule of an Admiral. During the first days of her leave she was restless, not being used to having so much free time on her hands and she was almost driving me crazy with her suggestions on how to improve my teaching. "You know, a bit more discipline surely wouldn't hurt them."

Whoever said that pregnant women are moody couldn't have been more right. After a week I had enough and I suggested she could try to help me painting the walls on the first floor. Now that I was working again I had to do any physical labor in the evenings and I thought she might like the idea. I swear, I've never seen a room painted that quickly and thoroughly again.

Being six months pregnant Kathryn got noticeably rounder. She had always been a rather slim woman, so until now you would have guessed that she may have gained some weight, but not that she was pregnant. I had always loved to touch her but suddenly it was even harder for me to keep my hands off her. I just couldn't resist the urge to lay my hands on her tummy, feeling our child kicking with strength. Even then I knew that this little boy or girl would inherit its mother's determination, or should I say stubbornness.

Around this time, we started to spend a great deal of our evenings on the porch, sitting in our rocking chairs, talking with each other, talking with our child. These days life seemed simple and endless. Nothing could ever cloud our happiness, at least that was what we thought to be true.

It was one month later when we decided to visit my sister on Dorvan. She had invited us to celebrate her son's coming of age with him and the family and although I'd love to see my sister again I didn't want to leave Kathryn alone or burden her with travelling all the way to Dorvan. I tried hard to convince her that it could be too strenuous for her and the child but she wouldn't hear any of it.

'Yes, the last checkup had shown that the child laid back to front but hadn't the doctor assured us that it would most probably solve itself in time? Furthermore, wouldn't we be back early?' I let her soothe my worries away. The biggest mistake of my life.

We had stayed on Dorvan for ten days and it was planned that we would leave three days later. I was glad and thankful that Kathryn had persuaded me to go as my nephew's party had been a wonderful and grand affair. It warmed my heart to see how well my wife fit into the family and for a few precious moments I even dreamed of staying here, although I know that this was completely out of question. For so long my life had resembled a kaleidoscope, the pieces never quite fitting together but now I finally was whole again.

Some days earlier I had promised to fix some fences with my brother-in-law and my nephew and that particular morning we had gotten up early. On Dorvan you were good advised to use the colder hours in the mornings for any kind of physical activity. When the alarm bell rang Kathryn was already awake, thanks to the little night owl growing inside of her, but much to my reassurance she promised me to stay in bed and relax.

The work proved to be exhausting and I was glad when we were finished around midday. Being almost fifty and used to teaching nowadays it had been harder for me than I had expected. We were halfway home when I saw something lying beside the path, under one of the few trees growing here, and although we were still far from whatever it was it I got a bad feeling at once.

I dropped the tools I was carrying and ran towards the bundle on the ground, soon turning out to be Kathryn. I just couldn't believe what my eyes were telling me to be true and I was shouting her name all over. By the spirits, what had happened to her? She heard my calling and her head turned towards me but the relief I felt was only short-lived.

Dropping on my knees beside her. I saw that she was covered in sweat and panting for breath. My mouth went dry and I had trouble speaking.

"Kathryn, what has happened?"

She lifted her head a bit and tried to speak through clenched teeth. I could see that she was in severe pain and I was afraid. Afraid for her and the child.

"I...wanted.. to bring... some lemonade." Her finger pointed to a broken jug, lying beside her.
"Suddenly... pain... jug broke.... had to sit down...couldn't get up again. Pain is...ripping me...apart. Broke...my...ankle." Her hand gripped mine.

"Chakotay, the child...it is coming."

I had suspected it the moment I had seen her but actually hearing her say it made it real and the fear made my stomach tighten in a knot. Kathryn was in labor, six weeks early.

I know that I had to get her into the house soon, so I lifted her up, cradling her in my arms. I told my nephew, who had reached us in the meantime, to go and fetch the village's doctor and asked my brother-in-law to go after him and to see that hot water would be prepared. I followed the two of them as fast as I could.

"How long have you been lying here?"

"Don't...know....some hours."

It hurt to hear how weak she was and for a tiny moment despair seemed to overwhelm me.

"How long are the intervals between the contractions?" Despite all I hoped it might be a false alarm.

"Maybe...five...minutes."

I tried to walk faster.

How often had I asked myself what I could've done different that day?

How often did I curse myself that I let her persuade me to go to Dorvan?

Dorvan of all places. A barren planet, still suffering the consequences of war. People here were living a hard life, without the comfort of 24th century technology, trying hard to make a hostile environment habitable.

Under normal circumstances a simple birth shouldn't have proved a problem, even in Kathryn's age, even with the embryo laying back to front, even with her being weakened by lying outside in the heat for hours. But it weren't normal circumstances.

It soon turned out that the doctor wasn't even on the planet, being on a two week trip to some colony. So it was only us, the family, as well as an old woman from the neighborhood who had helped out as midwife a few times in the past. Still I hoped that we would be ok in the end. My sister had given birth to all of her kids here, hadn't she?

For the next hours we tried everything to soothe Kathryn, to make her as comfortable as possible. I held her hand and talked to her. I wiped the sweat from her face when another wave of contractions was due. I told her that everything would be ok. She was wonderful and bore the pain as if it was nothing. More than once she told **me** not to worry.

In the end nothing we did mattered though. Kathryn got weaker with the minute and after another eight hours she had hardly the strength to speak anymore. Around then my sister took me aside and said that she had to try to turn the baby around.

"That's our only chance, Chakotay. Look at Kathryn, she can't endure this any longer and we don't even know if the child is ok."

I nodded my consent. I knew she was right. It was that moment that I started praying to the spirits.

Shenaya went to work at once, very carefully and with skill. After some time she succeeded in turning the child. Kathryn endured this pain, like everything else today, patiently. After another half an hour of contractions our beautiful daughter was born.

That moment I really had thought we had made it and for some precious minutes, relief and happiness let me cry tears of joy. I kissed Kathryn softly on her sweaty cheek, and she smiled back at me, weakly but unmistakably happy.

I bowed down to her and whispered in her ear that I loved her, then I turned around, watching my sister take the opportunity to cut umbilical cord. Afterwards she took this wonderful, little girl and bathed her before she put her into a blanket.

She came over to me and handed the baby to me. For some moments I held my daughter in my arms, marveling at that beautiful creature, created by Kathryn's and my love. When she started to cry though, I turned around to hand her to Kathryn, sure that she was hungry and wanted her mommy.

Then I saw it. Saw, that after all this birth had proofed to be too much for her. Her will may have been strong but her body wasn't able to cope with the pain and the stress. Her breathing was quick and shallow and her whole appearance looked haggard all of sudden. It wasn't that what let my heart froze with fear though. It was Kathryn's eyes. They had lost all their brilliance. It was the look of a defeated person staring back at me.

"Kathryn?" I couldn't manage more than this small whisper.

"I want...to hold...her. Please!"

I laid the baby in her arms and she smiled down at her. Then she closed her eyes and was gone.

I broke down crying.

I called our daughter Hope. I thought the name fitted her like no other could. After all, she was the living proof that hope wasn't for nothing. That fairytales could come true. That it was possible that deep friendship and love could survive many years of obstacles and lead to a wonderful marriage. That people who had accepted that they were too old for kids could become parents.

We left Dorvan three days later. The 'Titan', Will Riker's ship, passed Dorvan on its way to Earth and they agreed readily to take us back to there. Gretchen wanted Kathryn to be buried at home and I agreed. I knew that was what Kathryn would have wanted herself, that she even had put that wish into her will. Back then I had laughed about her writing down her will, I was so sure that we still had decades ahead of us. Once again she proved herself to be wiser than me.

Thanks to the spirits, Shenaya accompanied me and took care of Hope. I cared about my daughter. The thought that she was the reason that my wife wasn't alive anymore never crossed my mind but I hadn't the strength to take care of her myself. Not at that moment. I functioned perfectly, made all the arrangements for our trip home, for the funeral, but on the inside I was numb. I didn't feel pain, I wasn't sad. I felt nothing at all. To mourn one needs strengths and I had none left.

My memories of our first weeks on earth remained hazy till today. When thinking back at those times it's not like seeing a sequence of events, but rather like looking at disconnected photographs.

Pictures of Gretchen, who had aged a good ten years since I was forced to tell her about her daughter's death.

Pictures of a sunlit day in May. Of people who had gathered around an old oak tree. Family, friends, a great deal of Starfleet's Admiralty. Of a priest who talked about the power love and the transitoriness of life. Of people who cried and a baby that screamed it's head off. My daughter, as it turned out.

Pictures of stormy day some weeks later. This time it was only Gretchen, Phoebe, and me. I was holding an urn in my hands, and when I opened the lid, ash was blown away by the wind. Just like Kathryn had wanted.

My sister left two weeks later. I knew that she couldn't stay forever. She was needed by her own family. Nonetheless, I felt helpless and lost. The moment she boarded the shuttle, I looked down at Hope who was lying asleep in my arms. She looked so unbelievably innocent and beautiful, but still I felt nothing.

Deep inside I feared that something of me had irretrievably died, that I would never be able to care about anyone again. The thought almost let me despair. How could I bring up Hope like this? My daughter needed all the love she could get, especially when she had to face life without the loving care of a mother. Although Gretchen and Phoebe were helping me, I couldn't rely on them forever.

It was when Hope was two months old that I decided the two of us needed some fresh air. It was a lovely summer day and after some consideration I took the cradle I had made for her and put it in a shady place on the porch. I had never put her to bed in it before and it had been standing in her room, which I kept closed. Until now, she was sleeping in a cot in that stood beside my bed in our guest room.

It was the moment that I saw her in her cradle for the first time that my emotions came back to me. Suddenly I remembered the time I spent working on it, how Kathryn sat in her rocking chair beside me and how we had dreamed of our future with the baby. This moment, I realized that I had shut all my memories away, that I had avoided thinking of Kathryn at all. But weren't those memories all that

was left now? My wife was dead and would never come back, but there was still our daughter, who needed her father.

It seemed that I cried for hours that afternoon, but they were tears of healing. I would never be the same again; I just couldn't, but I'd cope.

After all, you could say that I lived a good life.

I had friends that supported me. First and foremost there were Tom and B'elanna. Who would have thought I would call Tom Paris my best friend one day? I still cannot thank them enough for everything they've done for me and my daughter. Not only that they came to visit me more often than they actually could afford. No, they were like family for Hope. We spent almost every summer together and Miral and Hope remain best friends still today.

Beside the Paris family, there were Tuvok, Harry, Seven and the doctor. They were all more than willing to lend me an ear whenever I needed it and I hope I was an equally good friend to them.

Then there was my family: Shenaya, Gretchen, and Phoebe. Shenaya came to visit us at least once a year, Phoebe was with us several times a month, and I don't know what I'd done without Gretchen. Instead of concentrating on her own life, like she should have done in my opinion, she took care of Hope when I had to work. She said that Hope was her reason not to despair.

'When Edward died, I thought I had to die, too. The pain was simply too hard to endure. I would've given up if not for my daughters that still needed me. Kathryn, who thought that everything was her fault, and Phoebe who was still in the process of finding out who she was and what she wanted to do with her life. But now, Chakotay? Kathryn is dead and Phoebe lives a good life with her own family. This time I could have given into my grief without anyone being too hard effected. I'm an old woman after all, and no one would wonder if I'd die. But there's Hope and she needs someone to look after her. Let me be the one to do it. She reminds me that my life and Kathryn's weren't for nothing. I want to give her all the love I cannot give Kathryn anymore.'

Who was I to deny her this wish? I may have felt like an egotistic bastard for taking up so much of her time, but at the same time I was entirely grateful for her help.

As it turned out Gretchen lived for another seventeen years. They were happy years for her and Hope and Gretchen filled the place of a mother as well as she could. There are and will always be stages on the way from girlhood toward womanhood when the advice of another woman is irreplaceable, and Gretchen was there when my daughter had questions she didn't want to discuss with me.

I know that without Gretchen's influence my daughter wouldn't be the wonderful woman she is today. A perfect example of a Janeway woman, determined, stubborn, and passionate. She might look a lot like me: tall, tanned skin and dark haired, but where I'm rather quiet, she has the temper of her mother.

During these years that I watched my daughter growing up I was surrounded by love. I never really felt alone. But the gap in my heart left by Kathryn's death just wouldn't close itself. When Hope grew older, she began to conspire with B'Elanna. The two of them set up many a date for me. Although I met a few really nice and charming women, I couldn't bring myself to feel more than a superficial interest in them.

After an especially exhausting month, where they dragged me to five dates, I finally took them aside and told them to finally let me be. I didn't want to date one woman, let alone five in a row. I just had no interest in them.

Kathryn had been my soul mate. As nice as any woman might be, I'd always compare her to Kathryn and she was bound to lose. I'd rather live alone than with a woman that could only pierce the outer

walls of my heart and make me feel my loss even more. They seemed to understand and they never tried to set me up again.

Slowly the years passed by. Hope grew up and one day she left home to go to University. She wanted to become a scientist, and although I didn't tell her, I was relieved that she didn't want to join Starfleet. Life on a starship has never been an easy one and more than anything else I wished for her to live happily.

The first weeks after she had gone I felt more alone than I had in a very long time. It just isn't easy when children leave their nests, something only parents can truly understand.

For so many years you devoted a great deal of your time to them and tried to keep an eye on them so that they would stay out of harm's way. You gave them all of your love and stayed watchful even as they got older and told you to mind your own business. And then from one day to the other, they're gone to start a life full of new adventures and you are left with this hole in your heart and you have to learn to focus on something new. No easy task, to be sure. I, for one, learned to embrace the silence surrounding me and spent a great deal of my free time with meditating and carving.

Some years later, several months after Hope had finished her studies, she met Andrew, a history teacher and they fell in love. I was happy for the both of them and I liked Andrew from the beginning. He was a quiet and on the first glance rather unimpressive man, but when you got to talk to him you soon realized that he wasn't only intelligent but also had a caring soul. In any case he could stand Hope's temper, something only a few people could.

They married only some months after their first meeting and two years later Jeremy was born. He is a wonderful boy, much like his father and if there ever had been a happy family it must have been those three.

I'm glad to know that my daughter is in such good hands. It makes it easier for me to let go.

Epilogue

Kathryn is still waiting for me to take her hand but something inside of me is reluctant to do so. I'm having this dream for the fifth time this week now and my subconscious knows, that the moment I touch her hand, she'll evaporate and I will stay behind with a longing almost unbearable. I'd rather have her stand there like this forever and take the opportunity to look at her, although it isn't the real Kathryn and only a picture of her created by my mind.

I don't know how long I've looked at her, as I notice that her smile has vanished, replaced by a look of impatience. For a moment I wonder about it, but then I decide that it must be subconscious again, telling me that I should end this dream, that it isn't healthy to yearn for something you can never have.

I suppress a sigh and finally offer her my hand. Our fingers are almost touching each other but I don't quite close the distance between them. I know that it is childish attempt not to let go but I'm not ready to say goodbye yet.

I startle when she makes a step forward and her hand grabs mine. She doesn't disappear like I'd expected and her hand is warm around mine.

I look from our joined hands up to her and she smiles again.

'Come Chakotay, it's time for us to go'.

For a moment I doubt my sanity, still convinced that everything is only a dream, but when her finger starts to caress my hand I feel that this is real.

I nod and smile back at her before I get out of bed. Standing beside her I cannot resist the urge to take her into my arms and she feels wonderful and real. I'm sure I can even smell the scent of the favorite shampoo in her hair. I bow down and kiss her gently on the mouth, her lips warm and inviting.

After what seems like an eternity she slowly withdraws from me. She is still holding my hand and she gently pulls me into the direction of the door. I follow her willingly. Before I leave my sleeping room I turn around for a last time and I almost gasp as I see myself still lying in bed.

For a moment I feel a cold chill and I look from the bed back to Kathryn. She gives me an understanding look and now I fully comprehend that this is the moment I waited for so long.

I take my eyes away from my own features and look at my wife.

"I love you Kathryn."

"I love you, too, Chakotay."

We're leaving the room and I close the door behind. There's an eternity with the woman I love ahead of me and I don't want to wait a moment longer.

The End