

Home Through the Night
An alternative ending to "Sweet Revenge"
by Brit

The quiet of the hospital room was an unnerving contradiction to the organized chaos it had been only minutes before. Minutes before there had been a chance. Minutes before there had been hope.

Now, there was only the stark reality of life's brevity.

Hutch leaned heavily against the doorjamb of the ICU unit, acutely aware of his trembling, but knowing there wasn't anything he could do to stop it. The pounding of his heart, so loud in his ears, couldn't mask the fixed bellows of Starsky's vent, nor the irregular staccato of the heart monitor. Those beats measured were uneven and too far apart to sustain life much longer.

As gently as he could, the surgeon had explained the devastation done to Starsky's vital organs, and the final, fatal effects of the cardiac arrest: congestive heart failure, kidney failure, and diminishing brain wave activity. The only things keeping Starsky alive were the life support system, an assortment of potent medications, and the wisp of something within him that refused to give up. The doctor had told the grieving detective that Starsky's body and mind were shutting down, but for some reason—sheer stubbornness, he surmised—the critically wounded man refused to give in to death's pull. He then told Hutch he should say his good-byes and gave them their privacy.

As he stood in the doorway, Hutch shook his head in disbelief and amazement at his partner's lingering tenacity. After hearing the surgeon's description of the damage inflicted, it was a miracle that Starsky had held out for so long. But regardless of the brunet's stubborn will to live, the end results would be the same—it was simply a matter of time, and not much, at that. Hutch ran shaking fingers through his hair as he finally approached the too-still form on the bed.

"I never imagined I would be doing this. I never...I can't. I can't do this. Oh God, oh God! How...how do I tell you goodbye?"

Drawing a breath wet with unshed tears, Hutch searched his heart. If the roles were reversed—and how he wished to God that they were—what would he want to hear from Starsky? What words could possibly encompass the friendship of a lifetime?

"The doctor told me this is it, pal. That big old heart of yours just can't take any more, and you won't...you won't ever come out of the coma. Said that most patients would have...let go by now, but you haven't. For some reason, you just won't give up.

You're so still, buddy. I've never seen you so still. That respirator seems as loud in here as that tomato you call a car. And so cold...your hand...so cold.

Starsk, I never thought we'd be here like this. I always figured we'd go out together somehow, you know? Butch and Sundance style. And I never thought I'd be the one having to say goodbye.

And you're still fighting it. I'm not surprised. Not one bit. You always were bullheaded. Stubborn. But you don't have to fight it anymore, buddy. It's okay. You can let go now. It'll be okay. *I'll* be okay....

That's it, isn't it? You're sticking around because you're worried about me. About not being around to watch my back. *Awh, Starsky.* There's nobody else in the world who could do that better than you. Nobody in the world I want more to back me up. But the fight's over, pal. This was the last battle. And we won, Starsk. *We won.* We took down Gunther. Right about now the San Francisco P.D.'s bringing him in. Even after...even after you're gone, we still won, Starsk, because Gunther'll rot in jail, and you're...free. You're finally free.

You don't have to worry about me, okay? I won't stay on the streets anymore without you, I promise. Dobey'll come up with some cushy desk job somewhere and I can put my feet up, rest my back, and bring home a nice, fat paycheck. No more long nights on stakeouts. No more pounding the pavement. No more...no more...."

The heart monitor's cadence increased briefly, before settling back into its belabored pace. Hutch's face mirrored his flitting emotions: fear, hope, disappointment, and a sorrow that touched his very core.

"Starsk? *Awh, Starsk—I'll be okay.* You don't have to fight this anymore for me, buddy. I...I know who's waiting for you on the other side. Give Terry my love. And your dad'll be waiting for you, too. Tell him...tell him I said his son grew into an amazing man—somebody who made a difference in this stinking world."

Hutch's throat constricted with grief, choking off his words. There were so many memories bombarding him, so many things he wanted to tell Starsky, but he knew that time was rapidly growing short.

"You know I love you, Starsk. We didn't always say it, but we knew it, didn't we? Still, I'll tell you again anyway—I love you, buddy. You're the brother I always needed and the friend I never deserved. And my life...my life was so much richer because you were here. There won't be a day that goes by that I won't think of you and thank God that He loved me enough to give me you for a friend.

Somebody told me once that one day in heaven was like a thousand here on earth. So before you know it, I'll be right up there with you. I may be old and gray, but I'll be there soon, I promise."

Starsky's monitor was silent for several counts, and Hutch's eyes swung up to the screen of their own volition. Tears trailed down his unshaven cheeks when the machine finally registered another struggling beat. Gently Hutch brushed back the familiar tangle of curls from Starsky's face.

"Easy, buddy, easy—you don't have to fight it anymore. It's okay, I promise. Don't be afraid. You go on ahead—I'll be there soon."

Hutch leaned over the still, pale form on the hospital bed, his forehead touching his partner's—a silent communion and final goodbye. With the same gentleness he placed his hand over Starsky's struggling heart, and began to softly sing a melody that came unbidden from a distant memory:

*Sleep, my friend, and peace attend thee
All through the night
Guardian angels God will send thee
All through the night.
Soft the drowsy hours are creeping
Hill and vale in slumber sleeping
I, a soldier's vigil keeping,
All through the night.*

*Hark, a solemn bell is ringing,
Clear through the night;
You, my friend, are heav'nward winging,
Home through the night.
Earthly dust from off thee shaken,
By good angels art thou taken;
Soul immortal shalt thou waken,
Home through the night.*

As Hutch finished the lullaby, silence permeated the small room. With his hand resting gently on Starsky's still chest, he reached his other to engulf the side of his partner's face. The silence of the room was broken by the tone of the monitor, heralding a hero's homegoing.

Hutch dropped his head to his partner's chest and wept.

~Brit
9/02

**All Through the Night*

Written By: Sir Harold Boulton (1884) Copyright Unknown

I feel like I should explain a bit about this piece, as I never, ever intended to write a “death story.” I’m not sure I’m comfortable with it, even now. But we’ve all heard how writing can be cathartic—therapeutic—so there you have it.

In July 2002, I lost a dear, dear friend by the name of Joyce. Joyce had battled heart disease and diabetes for the last eight years, gradually losing her mobility and sight. She and I spent many Sunday afternoons chatting, singing, and sharing a Bible study together. Joyce enjoyed having me sing to her, and loved hymns and Christian music. During one of my last visits, I sang for her “It Is Well With My Soul.” We both agreed that we wanted that peace more than anything in our own lives.

Shortly after this last visit, Joyce’s health quickly deteriorated, and Hospice was finally called in. The next week was hellish, as she slipped into a coma. We were encouraged to talk to her, even though she was unresponsive. My heart broke to watch her husband Stu gently run his hand through her tangled curls and speak so tenderly to her. I later also spoke with her, telling her of the simple day-to-day events: work, home, my garden—which she took such delight in, though she never saw it with her physical eyes. I felt pressed to sing to her then, but lost my nerve with her husband and adult children nearby.

Two nights later, I stopped by the hospital after work. My heart was in my throat as I approached the room, as there were no family or friends there. I naturally feared the worst. But Joyce was still holding on, breathing with the help of a respirator. And we were alone.

Over the next two hours I sang for her every song I could think of, every hymn, every chorus of praise and worship to the God that drew Joyce nearer to Himself over the last few months. I sang....

Later that night we got the call—Joyce had gone home.

~Brit