

Death by Waiting

by The Blintz

It's the waiting that nearly kills you. The seemingly endless hours of doubt and uncertainty interspersed with tiny, almost insignificant moments of respite that only come if you're lucky. One minute, you're planning the details of your best friend's funeral, wondering how you're going to be able to be by his side every minute of every day until the end inevitably comes; the next minute, you're absolutely certain that nothing can be wrong with him because the God you know is faithful and loving, and He knows you can't live without the reassuring presence of your friend by your side.

And then he sneezes, or coughs, or breaks into a sweat, and all the doubts come rushing back, redoubled by the indisputable physical evidence you have just witnessed and refuse to believe. After all, it was just a cough, right? Just some dust or pollen in the air that irritated his throat like it's done a thousand times before, right? You've known him for seven, eight years now, and how many times have you heard him cough during that span? A thousand? Two thousand? Ten thousand? And, just about the time you've convinced yourself that he's really okay, he coughs again. Louder and more insistent this time until it literally takes his breath away and you're sure his face has gone a deeper shade of pale than it was just a minute ago. So you hold your breath because he can't breathe, and you wonder: If he stops breathing permanently, will I be able to hold my breath for all eternity?



Starsky tried to drag his eyes away from his suffering partner, tried to shrug it off as just another cold, but he was worried. Hutch had been feeling a little run-down, more tired than usual, which, in and of itself, was really nothing to worry about. After all, when you work twenty-five hours a day, eight days a week, it does tend to wear you down. But this was something different.

Several days earlier, Hutch had approached Starsky in the locker room and asked him to look at something. Normally, Starsky would have told Hutch he'd seen all of him he ever cared to see and that only electroshock therapy could permanently erase some of the more sordid images from his mind, but when he had turned to deliver his witty reply, something in the blond's eyes had stopped him cold. It wasn't fear so much as uncertainty he saw there, and he wondered how long Hutch had been keeping whatever it was to himself.

The something Hutch wanted Starsky to inspect was a lump just under his right arm. About the size of a large grape, it sat just under the skin, unremarkable except for the fact that it shouldn't have been there at all. Hutch claimed it wasn't causing him any pain, he didn't have any others like it as far as he knew, and it had been there for a little more than two weeks. Starsky immediately reprimanded him for not telling him about it sooner, and was even more upset when he learned that Hutch, predictably, had not seen a doctor about it. At Starsky's insistence, they had gone down to the clinic that very morning where the nurse had taken one look at the lump and

promptly picked up the phone, making an immediate appointment for him at a nearby doctor's office. The doctor had arranged for a biopsy, and, the next day, the lump was removed using a local anesthetic.

That was three days ago, and since then, the two detectives had gone back to their daily routine. Endless stakeouts, piles of paperwork, and hours of unwanted overtime made all the more stressful by the air of uncertainty that seemed to hang over them like a black cloud, waiting to devour any optimistic thought or hope they might briefly entertain. Hutch, in the meantime, seemed to be losing ground. Already worn down, he was positively tired now, taking longer than usual to get up and get ready in the mornings. His face had a haggard, pale appearance, accentuated by the seemingly permanent dark circles under his eyes, and his appetite was almost nonexistent. In fact, whenever the two partners stopped to grab a bite to eat, Hutch usually sent Starsky into the restaurant or sandwich shop alone, while he made himself as comfortable as possible in the front seat of the Torino and took a nap. Starsky always bought Hutch something, too—a tub of yogurt or a milkshake—and, with a little coaxing, he could usually persuade his stubborn friend to eat at least part of it, but even that did nothing to ease the nagging fear that constantly lurked in his mind. And every night, when their shift was over, Starsky found an excuse to go to Hutch's apartment with him, where he stayed until after he was sure Hutch ate a little something, took a shower, and was on his way to bed. Some nights they watched TV, but some nights Hutch was so exhausted, it was all he could do to keep his eyes open long enough to drink a little soup and stay upright in the shower.

Three days seems like such a short amount of time in the grand scheme of things, but when you're fighting uncertainty, fighting for your very existence, three days can stretch into a lifetime of waiting and wondering. You try to act normal, like nothing's changed, but you want to scream and rage against the unfairness of it all. You want to call the doctor and beg him to tell you the truth, because even bad news can be dealt with if you know it for certain. On the other hand, you don't want to know and would rather take your friend and run away to some place where they've never seen lumps or heard of cancer of any kind, but the only place you know of like that is Never-Never Land, and you know that only exists in the pages of a children's book. So, somehow, you find the strength to get up in the morning and go through the endless routine of existence, while at the same time, you wonder if you would ever have the amount of strength it would take to say goodbye.

“Attention all units in the vicinity of Fourth and Main. A 2-11 in progress at Simon's Package Store at that location. Shots fired, proceed with caution. All units please respond.”

“That's us,” Starsky said, as he made a quick U-turn and headed for the package store. He looked toward his partner, his eyebrows knitted together in a worried frown. “Hutch?”

Receiving no response, Starsky raised his voice a little and shook Hutch's shoulder gently as he repeated his inquiry. “Hutch?”

“Huh?” Hutch replied, opening bleary eyes and looking around him in confusion. “Sorry, Starsk. I must have dozed off. What are we doing?”

“We're responding to a 2-11 at Simon's Package Store. At least I think we are. You sure you're up for this?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’ll be all right.”

“You sure?” Starsky asked, still not convinced.

“Yes, I’m sure, Mother. I was just taking a little nap, that’s all.”

“Then call it in, Son,” Starsky replied, grinning.

Hutch smiled in return and picked up the mic. “This is Zebra Three. We are responding.”

“Ten-four, Zebra Three. Proceed with caution.”

Starsky skillfully guided the Torino through the busy streets, and, in a matter of minutes, they were pulling to a stop outside the package store. They were just about to get out of the car, when a man wearing a ski mask ran out the front door of the store, tearing down the sidewalk without so much as a backward glance. It took only a split second for Starsky and Hutch to get out of the car and race after the suspect in hot pursuit.

Starsky ran for all he was worth, his blue Adidas quickly eating up the distance between him and the masked robber. He took a moment to look behind him and check on his partner, relieved to find that Hutch was just a few paces behind him, as intent on capturing the criminal as he was.

The chase finally led them into a blind alley, and, with a final burst of speed and a tackle that would have made a professional football player proud, Starsky subdued the suspect, knocking the wind out of him as he fell.

He flipped the suspect onto his stomach, quickly searching him for any weapons. Confiscating the man’s gun, he tucked it into the waistband of his jeans. “You have the right to remain silent,” Starsky began, cuffing the man’s hands securely behind him. “Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to...”

Starsky’s voice trailed off, as he suddenly realized that Hutch had not yet rounded the corner into the alley.

“On your feet, scumbag,” Starsky growled, dragging the suspect to his feet by his cuffed hands. Not even allowing the man time to gain his balance, Starsky propelled him out of the alleyway, anxiously looking around for his missing partner.

“Hey, watch it!” the prisoner exclaimed, tripping over his own feet while trying to keep up with Starsky’s urgent stride. “This is police brutality. I’m gonna get a lawyer and sue you and this crummy city, and—”

“Stuff it,” Starsky replied, “or I’ll be happy to show you some real brutality.”

The two men exited the alleyway just in time to meet two uniforms headed their way. Starsky shoved his prisoner into the hands of one of the officers, and, with a curt “Read him his rights,” headed to where a third officer knelt beside the still form of his partner.

“What happened?” Starsky asked, kneeling beside Hutch and rolling him gently onto his back.

“I don’t know,” the officer answered. “We apparently got here just a few minutes after you did. I saw you head around the corner after the suspect, and your partner here was right behind you. Next thing I know, he’s out cold on the ground, and you’re nowhere to be seen. I’ve been trying to wake him up, but I’m afraid I’m not having much luck.”

“Call an ambulance!” Starsky barked, gently tapping Hutch’s cheek. “Hutch? Can you hear me?”

There was no response. Raking a hand through his tangled curls, Starsky settled in beside his partner to wait for the all-too-familiar sound of the siren that would herald the approach of help and hope.

Funny how it doesn’t matter where you are or what you’re doing, those nagging doubts and fears are constantly there, weighing you down with a reminder of how fragile life really is and how precious every moment we’re given should be. You’d think you’d feel better being in a hospital, knowing that your friend is being taken care of by the best that medicine has to offer, but nothing about the waiting room is designed to make you feel any better. From the bus station décor to the worn carpet, lousy coffee, and outdated magazines, everything screams low budget, and you wonder if your friend is really getting the best care. After all, if this hospital were really a modern medical facility, why would it smell like the locker room in the precinct after a hot summer day?

“Detective Starsky?”

Starsky tore himself away from his contemplation of a nondescript portion of the carpet at his feet to look up expectantly at the doctor standing in the waiting room doorway. “Right here,” he replied, bounding to his feet and covering the distance between them in a couple of strides. “How’s my partner?”

“He’s stabilized,” Dr. Snyder replied, sitting down in the nearest chair and motioning for Starsky to take the seat next to him. “Have a seat, Detective. I’d like to ask you a couple of questions about Detective Hutchinson.”

Starsky hesitated briefly, glancing through the open doorway that led into the corridor where Hutch lay hidden behind one of the closed doors. “When can I see him?”

“In just a moment. Please,” he added, once again motioning to the empty chair beside him.

Sighing resolutely, Starsky perched impatiently on the edge of the seat. “Shoot.”

“Have you noticed anything different about Detective Hutchinson lately? Any unusual fatigue, loss of appetite, fever, chills, sore throat?”

“You been following us around, Doc? He’s been just like that—not eating anything to speak of, nodding off to sleep almost every time he sits down. I don’t know about the fever, though. He usually doesn’t let me know when he’s really sick.”

“And when did all this start?” the doctor asked, glancing down at the sheaf of papers he held in his hands.

“Let me think,” Starsky replied, absently running a hand through his unruly curls. “It was just about the time he found that lump under his arm...a week or so, I guess. But he didn’t really seem that sick until just a few days ago, like he’s getting worse.”

“Lump?” The doctor shuffled through the papers in his lap, skimming each sheet quickly before moving on to the next. “What lump?”

“This little lump he found under his arm. Dr. Hamilton removed it in his office a few days ago, and we still haven’t heard the biopsy results.”

“Hmmm. Very interesting.” Dr. Snyder removed a pen from his coat pocket and jotted something on the back of one of the papers he held. “I’ll have to look into that. In the meantime, come with me and I’ll take you to your partner.”

The doctor rose quickly and started to walk out of the room, but Starsky grabbed him by the arm, effectively stopping his progress. “What about Hutch? Is he going to be okay?”

Dr. Snyder looked into Starsky’s eyes for several moments before answering. “I’ll know the answer to that as soon as I have the test results back. In the meantime, we’ll give him some fluids and keep an eye on him. Now, if you follow me, I’ll take you to him.”

You thought being at his bedside would help allay your fears, but you were wrong. The antiseptic atmosphere of the hospital with all its white-costumed employees and sterile equipment only makes it worse. At least on the outside there was some semblance of normalcy. There were bad guys to catch and paperwork to do and quiet evenings watching TV and drinking beer, and you could almost pretend your life wasn’t hanging in the balance. But here, there is no pretending. Every tiny part of the hospital just reminds you that there’s something terribly wrong, and every drip of the IV fluid into the chamber is a painful reminder that things may never be the same again.



Starsky stood from the uncomfortable chair and crossed to the windows that overlooked the hospital parking lot. The sun was just beginning its descent over the horizon, and it promised to be a brilliant sunset, alive with spectacular hues of pink and orange. In the lot below him, Starsky saw a new father carefully bundle his wife and baby into the front seat of a late-model sedan, nearly skipping in excitement as he hurried around to the driver’s door to take his family home. A small smile tugged at the corner of Starsky’s mouth as, for the briefest of moments, his worry for Hutch was almost overshadowed by the beautiful scene before him.

“You thinking about jumping?” came a tired voice from the bed.

Starsky twirled around quickly and was at Hutch’s side in an instant, the small grin from the moment before widening into a genuine smile. “Hey, sleepyhead. Is that any way to greet your long-suffering partner?”

Hutch smiled weakly in return. “I thought you were going home to get some sleep.”

“I was,” Starsky replied, settling himself comfortably on the corner of Hutch’s bed. “But Dr. Snyder called and said he was coming up here after his office closes to let us know the test results. So I thought I’d stick around.”

Hutch averted his gaze from his partner’s eyes and began idly picking at a stray thread on the hospital blanket that covered him. “Starsk....”

Starsky jumped up from the bed as if he’d been shot. “Don’t start, Hutch. I’m stayin’ ’til we find out what’s goin’ on, and you’re not in any condition to tell me otherwise; you got it?”

“Look, Starsky,” Hutch replied, straightening himself in the bed while still avoiding his partner’s eyes. “We both know this could be bad news—”

“Or it could be good news,” Starsky interrupted emphatically. He eased his weight back onto Hutch’s bed and gently reached out a hand, turning his partner’s face so he could no longer avoid Starsky’s eyes. “And whatever the news, we’ll get through it. Together.”

A moment of silence passed between the two partners until Hutch nodded imperceptibly in acquiescence. Starsky smiled broadly and patted his partner’s cheek. “Good boy. Now what say we find something to watch on this sorry excuse for a TV? Got any popcorn?”

Snatching the remote control from the bedside table, Starsky flopped into the chair he had occupied earlier and began to flip through the channels, the very picture of a man who hadn’t a care in the world.

Hutch grinned, shaking his head, and was just about to make a comment about Starsky’s appetite and the likelihood of finding something even remotely edible in a hospital, when a knock on the door interrupted him. “Come in,” Hutch said as Starsky turned down the volume on the TV set.

“Ah, Detective Hutchinson,” Dr. Snyder exclaimed as he entered the room. “How are we feeling today?”

“Better,” Hutch replied, anxiety edging his voice. “When can I go home?”

“Why don’t we talk first,” the doctor answered as he helped himself to a vacant chair at the bedside. “I’ve got your test results here.”

Hutch glanced at Starsky, who was immobile, his eyes fixed on Dr. Snyder. Taking a deep breath, he forced a smile. “Go ahead, Doc.”

At last the moment of truth has arrived, and you know all your questions are about to be answered. One part of you wants to grab the doctor by the lapels and demand that he just tell you. The other part of you wants to hide under the bed and beg him to keep his information to himself. The next few moments will dictate your future, completely and irrevocably. And, as much as you wish it had never come down to this, you wish even more fervently that you’ll be able to live with whatever the future holds.

"I'll not beat around the bush, Detective Hutchinson. I'm afraid you have infectious mononucleosis." Dr. Snyder looked at them expectantly, but neither man moved for several seconds.

Hutch risked another glance at Starsky, and, this time, was met by a pair of blue eyes that looked just as confused as his own. "How did I get that?" Hutch asked.

"Forget that, Hutch," Starsky interrupted impatiently. "What is that? And in English, please, Doc."

"Relax, Detective Starsky," Dr. Snyder replied, an amused smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Your partner here has mono. You do know what that is, don't you?"

Starsky stared at the doctor for several seconds until recognition registered in his eyes. "Mono?" he asked incredulously. "Hutch has mono? The kissing disease? What about that lump under his arm?"

"Just another one of many possible symptoms. It was a lymph node, enlarged because his body was trying to fight off the mono virus."

Dr. Snyder spent the next several minutes lecturing both men on the necessity of Hutch getting a lot of rest and plenty of fluids. He also told Hutch he would release him from the hospital with the understanding that he was to remain out of work for the next week and not go back before seeing him in his office. "If you don't promise me that, I'll just have to keep you here and make sure you don't overdo it."

"Yes, sir," Hutch replied meekly. While the prospect of lying around the house for the next week was not exactly appealing, the thought of spending one unnecessary minute in the hospital was even more distasteful.

"My nurse will be here in a little while with your discharge paperwork." Dr. Snyder's hand was on the door as he prepared to exit the room.

"Thank you, Doctor," Hutch said, as Dr. Snyder left the room.

"Yeah, thanks, Doc," Starsky chimed in, as he pushed the door closed. He turned around slowly, a smile threatening to overtake his face. "So, Hutch. Who you been kissin', huh? Anybody I know?"

Hutch put up a warning finger. "Don't start with me, Starsky."

"Anita from Booking? Or maybe Donna from Supply? Or, I know. It's that new girl Alisa from Dispatch, I'll bet."

"Starsky," Hutch said threateningly. "Not a word of this to anyone, you understand? Not a word!"

"Who, me?" Starsky asked, the picture of innocence. "Well, now Dobey's gonna have to know. I mean, he is our boss and all."

“Starsky....”

“And then there’s Mildred—she always misses you when you don’t answer the radio. Oh, and Minnie and Simmons and Babcock. They’re our friends and I’d hate to have to lie to them.”

Starsky slipped through the doorway just in time to elude the pillow Hutch had heaved at him from the bed. With a cheery, “I’m off to get the car. Be right back!” he strutted down the hallway, the smile on his face mirroring what was in his heart.

And all of a sudden, you’re twenty pounds lighter, the air is clear, the skies are blue, and you could swear that the birds are singing just for you. Your relief is so great that hysterical laughter bubbles up in your throat and you want to shout from the rooftops that all is well with the world again. And, as you take your first easy breath in what seems like years, you do it without guilt, knowing that your friend is able to breathe again, too.



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