

Old Friends

by TibbieB

*Time it was,
And what a time it was...
It was...
A time of innocence
A time of confidences...*

The elderly man sat on the park bench alone, his body a shell of what it once had been. Ravaged by time and too many injuries, he was sometimes amazed he got around at all, but reckoned he was just too stubborn to give in to the daily aches and pains he'd lived with the past forty-some years. The bench, once constructed of wood, had long ago been replaced by wrought iron and concrete—a victim of vandals, and, like himself, time. Still, it stirred a level of sentimentalism in him that few other places could. Here, he could sit quietly, blocking out the noise and crowds around him and remember days gone, images and recollections of his life...a life he generally believed had been well spent.

The morning sun danced upon his hair—once dark and curly—now shot through with silver and gray—some of the curl gone, but still thick and rich with waves. His face, though wrinkled and thinner, was still a handsome face. The years of hard work and too many brushes with death had not hardened it—rather, given it character. Only someone who knew him well could see the pain in the dark blue eyes, now dimmed with time and failing sight.

*Long ago
It must be,
I have a photograph,
Preserve your memories,
They're all that's left of you...*

Where had the years gone? And why was he drawn back to this place? Anytime the pain became too severe to ignore—or he needed to feel the comfort of his old friend—he thought about this park bench. They'd shared so many indelible moments here.

The old man looked around, a smile curling his lips as he stared up the jogging path. He could almost see the tall blonde running toward him, his hair glistening in the morning sun, his hands gently fisted. They'd spent a lot of hours here, and not just jogging. This is where Terry brought the kids from her school to play ball. God...he hadn't thought about that in a long time.

And this is where he'd come after she died. Terry—his beautiful lady. Hutch had found him here. He could almost feel the warm, strong hand on his shoulder, just as he had that morning. His partner had discreetly left him alone with Terry during those final hours, not wanting to intrude on their last precious moments together. But once she was gone, Starsky had burst through the doors of the hospital, running—running from the emptiness and hopelessness he felt when he saw the final spark of life flicker from her eyes.

He ran as fast as his long, muscular legs would carry him; ran toward the familiar park and jogging trails. He ran until he was near exhaustion, then collapsed here, on this very bench, the anger and guilt disabling him like a terrified animal, snared in a net. He felt like he'd suffocate from the overwhelming need to escape the moment. But he couldn't. Then he sensed he wasn't alone. Starsky swallowed the lump in his throat, remembering looking up to see the familiar eyes watching him compassionately. Hutch didn't say a word. Just sank to the bench next to him and wrapped a strong arm around his shoulders.

Starsky took a deep breath, blinking back the moisture from his eyes...remembering how it felt to let the anguish go. Remembering how Hutch seemed to want to absorb his pain. But then, that's how it was with them. They'd always been there for one another. The times too numerous to recite.

The years had rolled by, most good, some not so good. Then Starsky's whole world had changed in an instant. Or he should say THEIR whole world had changed. There, in the parking garage, in the blink of an eye, his life had almost ended in a pool of blood on the cold, hard concrete. Memories of those early days following the shooting were mercifully sketchy. His first conscious thought was of Hutch standing beside his bed, fussing with some pile of papers—acting like a crazy man—too exhausted, too relieved to make much sense.

Those long months of recovery were the most difficult of Starsky's life. But Hutch had been there—day and night—taking him home from the hospital, caring for him like some mother hen.

The old man ran his hand over the bench, his fingers bent with arthritis, his shoulder stiffened by the tightened scar tissue from the damage caused by the bullets. *This was our first outing afterward—to the park. We sat on this bench, Hutch pretending not to notice the sweat poppin' out on my brow—and me, tryin' not to let on my chest felt like it was gonna explode.*

Yes, he'd learned to hide it well. What choice did he have? If anyone had guessed—anyone except Hutch, that is, he'd have been off the force for good. Then, Gunther would've won. All the suffering, the fighting to come back, would have been for nothing. It would've meant the end of his partnership with Hutch—a partnership that had, until then, been undefeated. And Starsky couldn't let that happen. They were meant to be cops. It was kismet—and a guy shouldn't fight kismet.

People believed he'd recovered completely, *miraculously* recovered from injuries that should've devastated his body beyond repair. They couldn't see the scars beneath his clothes, or those in his heart, each time he faced the cruel reality of some physical or emotional limitation he'd not even imagined before the shooting.

In the beginning, he tried to keep it from Hutch, but that was about as likely as the sun not rising in the mornings. The slightest hesitation, a twinge of pain reflected in his eyes, an almost indiscernible slowing in his pace—all discreet clues that would have passed undetected by anyone else. But they were a dead give-away to Hutch. The blond stopped asking him, "Are you okay?" Starsky always shot back some smart-ass comment and a cocky grin, while silently cursing himself for letting the weakness momentarily break through his well-tended facade. Hutch stopped asking to spare his partner's pride.

The old man squeezed his eyes tightly shut, fighting back the agonizing memory of the day his physical limitations had finally placed his partner in a cross-fire. Hutch had counted on him to watch his back, and he'd let him down. Starsky had been downing pain pills all day, battling the ever-present, stabbing pain in his shoulder and chest. Despite the drugs, all he'd managed to do was reduce it to a dull throb.

As they chased an armed robbery suspect through the dark alley that night, the rain had pelted them from all sides, giving the whole area a surreal look of gray concrete and smoke, steam rising from the hot asphalt, the rain cooling it too quickly. Starsky had lost track of his partner, and by the time he realized Hutch had crossed the alley and was on the other side, the perp had doubled back and slipped up behind Hutch. A furtive movement in the shadows caught Starsky's attention, and he squinted to make out the figures lurking there. Finally, he saw the street light glint off Hutch's silver hair, and he began traversing his way toward his partner. Not as agile as he once was, he struggled to move quickly into place as Hutch's backup—but his chest burned from the effort of just sucking in enough breath to run. Seeing the gunman draw a bead on Hutch's back, Starsky raised his Smith & Wesson to intercede. Gulping for air, he strained to focus, the dregs of codeine blurring his vision, preventing him from getting a clear shot. All he could do was shout a desperate warning. "Huuuuutch!!!"

Starsky swallowed back the tears of humiliation and defeat—remembering how impotent he'd felt at that moment.

"I knew I'd find you here."

The old man lifted his head and looked up into the other set of blue eyes. Such a welcome sight.

"Oh, yeah? I guess you think you know just about everything, don't 'cha, Blondie?"

The teasing eyes locked for a moment.

*Old friends
Memory brushes the same years.
Silently sharing the same fear...*

“Maybe not. But I always knew a hell of a lot more than you, Starsk.” Hutch, not as tall and straight as he once had been, ambled toward the bench. The back injury he’d suffered all those years ago, when he was still a cop, seemed to slow his gait more with each passing year. “I thought we were going to meet for coffee this morning at Patty’s Diner. You forget again?”

Starsky chuckled. “You’ll do anything to get me to buy you breakfast. Even try to convince me I’m gettin’ senile.”

Hutch smiled, the wrinkles crinkling around his blue eyes, now clouded with the early stages of cataracts. “It’s your turn, remember?”

Starsky’s brow furrowed, as he concentrated to recall the last time they’d shared a morning meal; wondering, if indeed, it was his time to buy. “How’d you know I’d be here?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Where else would you be today?”

A ghost of a smile played upon Starsky’s lips. “I wasn’t sure you even remembered what today was.”

“Of course, I do.” Hutch slowly repositioned himself on the hard bench, trying to find a more comfortable spot. “But I don’t know why you always get so emotional about it.”

Starsky looked away, toward a group of small children playing on the nearby jungle gym. Embarrassed by the moisture forming in the corners of his eyes, he blurted out, “Rosie came to see me Wednesday.”

“Oh, yeah?” Hutch smiled, envisioning the beautiful, sophisticated, black woman. “You mean she wasn’t in court in the middle of the week?”

“No. She took a few days off after finishing up the Miller case. I think that one took a lot out of her,” Starsky answered, a tinge of concern in his voice.

“Being a prosecutor is tough work,” Hutch acknowledged. “Don’t you know the Captain would’ve been proud of her?”

“Yeah...” Starsky nodded, thinking about Dobey, dead now some twenty years. “I just wish he’d lived long enough to see how well she and Cal turned out.”

“Edith did a fine job,” Hutch agreed. “Frankly, I’m surprised his heart lasted as long as it did.” Both men fell silent for a moment, remembering their captain with fondness and respect—a man true to his convictions, and to those he cared about.

“Rosie’s boy just made detective and was assigned to Homicide,” Starsky added. “She’s not too happy about it.”

“Really?” Hutch looked surprised at the news. “Why not?”

“Says it’s too dangerous.”

Hutch shook his head. “And being a DA isn’t?”

Starsky smiled at the rhetorical question. “Well, that’s not the point. She thinks she’s indestructible. Her kid’s a different matter.”

They were quiet again for a moment, each lost in his own thoughts.

*Old friends,
Old friends
Sat on their park bench
Like bookends...*

“If I’d had kids, I’d have liked them to turn out like those two,” Starsky said thoughtfully.

“Yeah,” Hutch agreed, then fell silent again, remembering his own son who’d died in a military conflict in the Middle East back in 2004. He’d never gotten over it, and was convinced Dave’s death had led his mother to an early grave as well. Hutch cocked a brow at Starsky and asked a question that he’d left unspoken over the years.

“Starsk, how come you and Gina never had a kid? You would’ve been great parents.”

The old man shrugged his shoulders noncommittally, not answering at first. He coughed slightly then spoke just above a whisper. “Oh...we talked about it, but decided we’d married too late in life to start a family. Figured it just wasn’t meant to be.” The conversation lagged again, and the sounds of the city seem to grow louder in their silence.

*Old friends,
Winter companions,
The old men
Lost in their overcoats,
Waiting for the sunset.
The sounds of the city,
Sifting through the trees,
Settle like dust*

*On the shoulders
Of the old friends.*

“Hutch—” Starsky began, unable to hold back the troubling thoughts any longer.

“Yes?” Hutch gave him a sideways glance, recognizing that tone. Something was bothering his old partner, and there would be no peace in his heart until he got it off his chest.

“Hutch, do you...do you ever regret our lives? I mean, leaving the force and all?”

“Is that what’s bothering you? After all these years, you still think you were responsible for me leaving the police department?”

Starsky looked up, a challenge etched prominently in the line of his jaw. “Wasn’t I? I mean, that night in the alley—you could’a been killed.”

“But I wasn’t, Starsk. I heard your warning in time.”

“But—but I should’a been there to back you up. I just couldn’t run fast enough—be there when you needed me. It was a miracle you weren’t killed. That’s why you decided to quit, wasn’t it?”

Hutch reached out his hand, the once-strong fingers now drawn and knotted with arthritis, and placed it gently on his old partner’s shoulder in a familiar gesture. “Starsk, I quit because I realized we were BOTH lucky to have survived as long as we had. When I saw you lying there on the pavement, covered in blood, my mind was made up right then that no job—nothing on earth—mattered except seeing you alive and well again. I didn’t want us to go back to work after you got well, but you were so hell-bent and determined, I knew there was no stopping you. You seemed to have to prove it to me, to the world—hell—to yourself, that you could do it.”

Starsky studied his old friend’s face, seeking to learn the truth once and for all, hoping he could take the words at face value. “Me? I went back because I didn’t want our partnership to end. I was scared to death, Hutch. Every time I pulled my gun, I thought about how those bullets felt, ripping through me. I thought about how next time, it could be you, and how I couldn’t handle it if you were killed right before my eyes.”

Hutch smiled sadly. “So, you stayed on the job for me, and I stayed on the job for you?” He chuckled softly. “Sounds kind of ridiculous now, huh?”

Starsky smiled, too, his face transforming to a semblance of the younger man whose grin had always had the uncanny ability to lighten Hutch’s heart. “I thought you quit because you didn’t trust me to be your backup anymore. That you were afraid I was gonna get you killed,” he revealed.

“You mean you’ve been carrying that around the past forty years? When all along, I had just had all I could take and wanted out?”

“Yeah, I guess that about sums it up. I’ve felt guilty all this time, believin’ you left the life you loved because you didn’t trust me anymore. Crazy, huh?”

“Absolutely nuts,” Hutch answered, laughing as he patted the other old man’s knee. “We were both pretty stupid sometimes.”

“Guess we were, at that,” Starsky agreed. “Here it is, exactly forty years today that we left the force, and I’m still moonin’ over it. What’s worse is, we’re just now getting around to talkin’ it through.”

Both men chortled until mirthful tears began coursing down their cheeks. Starsky reached out and cupped the back of Hutch’s head, his gnarled fingers lightly brushing the meager remaining fringe of silver hair along the back of the old man’s neck. “Still want that breakfast?” he asked. “I guess maybe I’m about forty years late buying it for you.”

“That sounds pretty good to me. Anyplace but the Waffle House. My stomach can’t handle that greasy spoon.”

“All right, all right. I’ll let you pick,” Starsky answered. “But let’s just sit here a few minutes more and enjoy the cool mornin’, okay? The smog’ll be so thick soon, we’ll have to take cover.”

“Sure, buddy. I’ve got no place to rush off to,” came the quiet reply. “Planned to spend my whole day with you anyway.”

*Can you imagine us
Years from today,
Sharing a park bench quietly?
How terribly strange
To be seventy.
Old friends...*

Tibbie B

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Song lyrics from Simon & Garfunkle’s “Old Friends”