

This short story touches from a reversed point of view on the same topic of *Two Summers* by anon-j-anon (at <http://anon-j-anon.livejournal.com/76350.html> and at <http://ksarchive.com>), which I recommend as a most intense piece on the development of grief -- an *Anabasis* where one doesn't even know if there is a sea ahead.

I wrote and finished this before I happened on *Ctrl-Alt-Delete* by screamlet, in «Universal Constant», no. 1, 186-221 (download link at <http://www.mediafire.com/?20lcoaw9iencb6s>), a powerful ni-var on the theme of how to survive when half your soul has died.

If you'll think this bit of mine was worth reading, and you haven't already done so, do read those two also. If not, do read them anyway, *they* are.

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One winter, three months

by mazaher

February 13th, 2011

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*Worlds on worlds are rolling ever
from creation to decay,
like the bubbles on a river
sparkling, bursting, borne away.*

(PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY, *Hellas*)

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point zero

Jim Kirk, Captain of the Enterprise, died on an away mission on Theta Carinae V, Stardate (...). Death was ascertained at 16:32 ship's time. He was shot by mistake with a laser gun by a Veen hunter, and bled to death in minutes. Dr. McCoy was present, but could not stop the haemorrhage from his carotid artery. Spock was on board, organizing the research team who would follow. Nobody had ever seen him so pale as he turned when the team beamed back aboard, Bones silently holding the limp body to his chest.

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month one

Now Spock seems to be having trouble staying awake.

He goes through his shifts with his usual efficient composure. Then he marches straight to his quarters, shuts the door behind himself, and falls asleep fully clothed.

When he manages to stay awake for a while, he sits at his desk and stares at the empty 3D chessboard. Then he falls asleep, brow reclined on his own arm.

He does not dream.

He has programmed two alarms 3'05" apart. Lately he has added a third.

Spock is not speaking to anyone outside ship's duty.

He doesn't allow anybody to touch him, not even Nyota.

His father had a long video conversation with him the day after the funeral, but what they said remains a secret. Sarek has not called since.

On shift, Spock has picked up a habit of staring. He stares at the armrests of the Captain's chair in which he sits, as though his hands laying there are somehow wrong. Chekov at the Science console feels his eyes on his neck, and shivers. Scotty caught him once, standing stock still in the corridor, staring at the buzzer on the door to Kirk's quarters.

"Why does he do that?" Sulu asks Nyota in a whisper.

"He searches for the smile that's disappeared."

All that the crew know of how he's taking the loss, is what can be seen from the outside. That is, almost nothing. He doesn't allow his grief to show and be shared. He keeps it all for himself. If he can't keep Jim, this is what he's going to keep instead.

They didn't even say goodbye, and Spock's first reaction is blaming himself. For not insisting on a second reading of the briefing papers, for not being there to foresee what was going to happen, for not being fast enough to beat death. For not being Vulcan enough, or human enough. For his amphibious nature that can't seem to hold on to anything.

He lost his childhood pet in the Shi'Kahr desert because he is less than a Vulcan, and didn't hear the le-matya coming.

He lost his mother during the attack to Vulcan because he is less than a human, and had let go of her hand.

Now he has lost his bondmate because he is less than a... what?

He racks his brain, finding nothing.

He should be dead. If not for the Enterprise, he would be dead. But this is Jim's ship, and he must keep it safe until they are back to Earth. He has this one more duty to perform for him. He finds that it helps him stay alive.

The night after Jim died, he found a few nail clippings on the bathroom floor. Three neat white crescents. He picked them up, put them inside a small trisilicate kawacha, sealed the lid shut. He hanged it on a silk thread. He wears it on his neck, next to his skin. He feels it softly tapping where Jim's heart used to beat against his chest, when he marches along the corridors on an evening round of the ship like Jim used to do before sleep.

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month two

Spock has taken to eat apples, drink beer. He sits with the command crew in the mess hall and listens to their conversation. He rarely speaks, but while in the past weeks he kept as much distance as possible, now he seems comforted by their nearness, as though he found in it an echo of the presence he misses. But if Jim's name turns up, he quietly excuses himself.

He has been trying to avoid McCoy.

The doctor has common sense enough to let him be for a while, but when six weeks have passed, one night he waits for him after the laps Spock has picked up the habit of doing late at night, in the deserted swimming pool.

"Are you trying to remember, or to forget?" he asks, while Spock rubs his hair dry with a towel. Allowing him a chance to hide his face.

"I remember everything, and nothing matters," comes the muffled answer.

"You come here to swim, like he used to do. You walk the whole ship every night, like he did. You had pens and paper delivered to your quarters, the same sort he liked to use. You even drink beer. I can believe you remember everything. What I wonder is how your grieving's going."

Spock's face emerges from the towel.

"The classical five stages in the Kübler-Ross's model, Doctor? the alternate five stages? the seven stages? Which grieving protocol would you have me follow, Doctor?" he asks in a cold voice.

"There is no protocol I want you to follow, Spock. Grief goes its own way, like a forest fire. As models go, you know that Kübler-Ross wrote about people who learn they are going to die soon. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance: it all sounds a bit ...childish to me, all the more so when applied to grief for a loved one. I am rather partial to the three-stages description pattern: shock, suffering, recovery. These are not things one does, or does not, but facts that happen, on their own terms. There is little I can really do to help with the first two, apart from offering you drugs I know you're not going to take. I only want you to keep in mind

that I'm here, all the way. Going through my own grieving for my friend. And that I mean for a recovery to happen eventually, when we both will be ready. Let's take the time it needs. The time Jim deserves. But don't you die on me."

Spock stares at him for a moment, then nods once.

McCoy turns around and leaves.

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month three

Ten weeks, and Spock is not walking around anymore as though there is a knife stuck between his shoulder-blades.

He keeps to his new routines, studiously avoiding his habits from what the crew has come to call "the time before".

He has taken on new mannerisms: crossing his legs when sitting in the Captain's chair, a certain way of blinking, the ghost of a lopsided smile when Sulu and Chekov exchange a whispered joke.

As though the joke needs the Captain's smile, and if the Captain isn't here, then Spock will smile in his stead.

The first few times someone noticed, Spock froze. Now he just blinks and goes on with whatever he's doing.

He dreams more than usual, but all he remembers when he wakes is roaming strange cities, trying to get Jim to safety.

McCoy keeps an eye on him. Once or twice a week, he comes to Spock's quarters with a six-pack. They talk little, just drink their beers in companionable silence: McCoy four, Spock two. Tonight Spock says quietly: "We had discussed the possibility of one of us dying. He asked me to try and go on. 'Just try,' he said, 'try for me, at least for a while, ok?' I am surprisingly finding I can do it."

Ninety-nine days have elapsed since Kirk died, and McCoy finds a message in his in-ship voicemail. Spock asks him for half an hour of his time, after shift, at 21:25, in McCoy's quarters. McCoy texts him "Sure".

At 21:25 sharp, Spock is standing ramrod straight in front of the desk at which he's sitting, staring two inches above the line of McCoy's eyes.

"Doctor, I have resolved that I need your help. I remember Jim...". His voice cracks finely, and McCoy realizes this is the first time in three months Spock has pronounced the name. "I remember Jim telling me a story about a fictitious character, Baron Munchausen, who prevented himself from falling by holding to the tail of his own wig."

"I remember that too. Are you going to try it?"

"I am not planning on any such illogical attempt. I quote the tale as an analogue of the reason why I need your help. I have come to a conclusion, but I cannot be certain of its viability unless I gather independent confirmation".

"You want to bounce your idea off me? You're welcome. Sit down."

Spock sits.

"Bounce away."

"Doctor, in the last twelve weeks I have found myself torn between two paradoxical mental processes. My human half has been torturing itself in search of reasons to substantiate a sense of guilt. My Vulcan half has found none. The conclusion I have reached from this process cannot stand by itself without external validation of data. Therefore I ask you, the friend Jim held most dear from the longest time: have I been a good companion for him during the part of his lifetime we spent together?"

Spock's eyes, now fixed in his, are shining with something suspiciously resembling tears, but he doesn't look away.

"You have been impeccable to him. Jim felt very much loved. And I saw him happier than I had ever seen him."

Spock blinks and looks down.

"He told me once that he found we freely gave to each other those permissions neither of us had ever had, and that was something we could never have when alone," he says quietly.

"I count on you to keep all those permissions valid," McCoy answers. "And what's the conclusion you mentioned?"

"That I am not indulging in wishful thinking, believing that I have completed correctly a difficult task."

"You are not. And how does this make you feel?"

A pause.

"Not better. But stronger."

"You know that if you managed to make him happy, then you are also strong enough to endure your pain at his loss." It is not a question.

"Also that I owe it to him to endure it."

"Then only one thing is still missing. Try thinking like Jim would. What more would he ask of you?"

"...That I be strong enough to find joy again. At some point."

"Will you?"

3.6 seconds elapse while Spock considers.

"I do not know. It seems ...unlikely."

Bones sighs. "I know. It's the same for me. But who knows. When I was a kid, happiness was something I could count on, in a measure. Christmas, summer holidays, watching a new holovid. Then I grew up, and now happiness seems to always come as a surprise. If ever. But once you've had a taste of a miracle, you can't miss it if it comes your way again. You know what I mean, don't you?"

"I do, Doctor. I am not going to forget."

Bones fiddles with a stylus, his eyes on the shining titanium tip.

"You know what, Spock? There's something curious that's been happening to me. At times... when something good is going on, like the other day when Ensign G'trg's open-heart operation after her stroke went well, or when I see the sparkle in Chekov's eyes as he plots harmonics in supernova emissions, or whatever... or even when I take the first sip from a new bottle of bourbon... I catch myself smiling like Jim made me smile. Like we were sharing an inside joke, a good-natured one, and I feel happy. He used to do that. Make me feel happy. At the Academy, he would make my face hurt from smiling, at least twice a day. Not so much here. I've never been able to smile at danger, like he did. But I remember the feeling, and I still have it, at times. You know. Like he's still here, in my mind. Like he can hear me and see me." He looks up at Spock.

"I miss him. But I can't help being happy, sometimes. He taught me that back then, at a time when I had forgotten."

Spock stares at him in puzzlement.

"I do not understand. You used the expression 'I can't help', which implies regret for some mistake or damage willpower alone could not prevent. I miss the reason why you should feel guilty, experiencing happiness in consequence of your memories of the Captain."

Bones barks an embarrassed laugh.

"Well, yes, I get your point. I guess I'm just conflicted about the whole mourning process. I look at you, and I see serenity. There is work to be done, and you do it to perfection, whatever the situation, even as your heart is bleeding in pieces. One can't mark the passing of a loved one with a fault in one's duty. One marks it by being doubly faultless, whatever the cost. I thank you for doing just that, and reminding me how it's important. Because, yes, duty is stronger than pain. It is a question of necessity, of things that objectively need to be done in order to survive in this huge death trap that is deep space, because the laws of physics and biology are not suspended in case of grief. It is logical and you are right. But I can't always be so orderly about it. I'm broken and distracted and moody and drink myself asleep most evenings, and every damn morning I wonder if I can get my shit together and go through another day without making a mess at some point. And I do feel guilty, because I'd want to be better. I'd want to gather all the grief in one corner and happiness in another and memories maybe in the middle, but grief runs off in every which direction like a bunch of tribbles, and all the while memories fade, and happiness sometimes seems ...so unwelcome."

He falls silent for a moment, then speaks again, softly.

"I'd want to remind you that you also need to be faultless to yourself. You don't care enough, and Jim is not here anymore to keep an eye on you. I can't do what he did, if nothing else because you don't listen to anybody like you listened to him. I wish I had more to say to you, more that I could do."

He sighs. "But I'm not sure I can take you any further than this. A good reason is that I have not taken myself any further. Yet."

There seems to be no need for more words. The silence is filled with the hum of the engines. The Enterprise is sailing on.

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*Eternity points, in its amaranth bower
Where no clouds of fate o'er the sweet prospect lower,
Unspeakable pleasure, of goodness the dower,
When woe fades away like the mist of the heath.*

(PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY, *Bereavement*)

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