McKenna Stonebraker

English 205

Short Story

**Together Forever, Never Apart**

 I pace across the waiting room as patiently as possible in a situation such as this. This is difficult when every second passing seems to take longer than the last. It’s true what they say-time really does go more slowly when you’re watching the clock. But then, what other choice do I have? What I really need is my wife Catherine here with me, she’s the strong one. She’s been that way since I met her all those years ago in high school. I attribute this to the loss of her mother at an early age. Her father spent his time at the office or the local pub, so it was up to Catherine to raise herself and two younger sisters. She never seemed to view this as a burden, but you could see the hurt in her pale blue eyes whenever her mother was mentioned. This is why we decided to name our daughter Emily, in honor of her mother.

This is what we planned to name our daughter, anyway. The twenty minutes since the doctors rushed Catherine in to an emergency C-section seemed to me like an eternity. The nurses keep bringing me water as if this is going to ease my anxiety. Does water make a prisoner feel any more at home? This is what the waiting room is becoming to me, a prison. The plain white walls were anything but inviting and the chairs seemed to be made of stone. This was hardly the place for a man in a situation such as mine. I do not want to be mixed amongst these strangers fighting their own despair; I want to be with my wife.

“We need this baby,” is all I’m able to think at this moment. Lately our relationship had been rocky due to our difficulty conceiving all these years and it was essentially the only thing that saved us from getting a divorce a year ago. I knew that we hadn’t stopped loving each other, but the strain of not being able to have a baby became too much. Endless doctor appointments, fertility tests, and hormone injections puts an indescribable strain on a marriage. Yes, this was going to be our miracle baby.

 “Jeremy Burton,” the doctor beckons, pulling me out of my daze. I rise, though hesitant due to the look of forewarning on his face, and meet him. This was not going to be anything comforting I could tell. I noticed immediately his wrinkled brow and downward gaze and as he removed his surgical mask it exposed downturned lips that seemed to be tight. He did not want to speak to me, I concluded, but I needed him to.

 “I’m afraid we have some bad news,” the doctor continued. “There have been complications with the procedure I am afraid. I am sorry to inform you that, even through our best efforts, we were unable to save your baby. We did all we could but saving your baby would have been at the cost of your wife’s life. In circumstances such as these we do whatever we can do for the baby, but ultimately preserve the life of the mother. I am greatly sorry for your loss, sir. Your wife is still under anesthesia currently but you can see her shortly. If there is anything you need prior to this, do not hesitate to ask. Now, are there any questions you have for me currently?” My world began spinning. How could this happen? This didn’t seem real. We needed this baby to save us. It was all too much and all that kept running through my mind was the first time I ever met Catherine and the life we had built together since that moment.

 I was new to our town, having just moved to the Midwest from Houston, Texas the summer before starting high school. Due to all the commotion of the move, I hadn’t had a chance to make any friends in my neighborhood. I had always been shy, so chances are I wouldn’t have made many regardless. In my experience, not many kids wanted to be friends with the poor kid down the street with second hand clothes who barely talked to begin with. Knowing this, I was not incredibly optimistic about boarding the bus knowing no one. As I climbed on I wondered if anyone would even be open to sharing their seat with me willingly or if the bus driver would have to scold them in to making room as I had experienced so many times in the past. To my surprise however, there was only one seat available and it was next to the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, despite my lack of experience in the female realm. I made my way hastily over to her and she smiled at me as she scooted closer to the window to give me room. Why she was sitting alone still baffles me to this day. She was stunning.

 “Hi, I’m Catherine,” she said with a friendly tone. At hearing her voice I unfixed my gaze from the floor of the bus and glanced at her. Her blonde hair was pulled in to a neat pony tail, she wore a red sundress that clung at the waist and went out at the hips, her pedicured toes were in sandals, and she wore the world’s most magnificent smile.

 “Um…Jeremy,” I said. “Jeremy Burton.” I could not bring myself to fully look her in the eye as I said this. What was the point anyway? She’d never be interested in a guy like me.

 We rode along in silence after this exchange. I could see that she was waiting for me to say something else since she had initiated the first set of conversation, but hard as I tried words failed me. What was the point of trying to say something if she probably wouldn’t ever talk to me again anyway? Just as I finally worked up the courage to say something, the bus pulled to a stop. Everyone got up in such a hurry; I didn’t even have time to tell her good bye or pleasure to meet you.

 I shuffled in quickly with the rest of the students and tried to find my locker. The school had been kind enough to let me do a run through of the school prior to the year starting, but I was having trouble navigating the building still. Eventually I found it, and pulled out my geometry book. Despite how the morning had gone, I was optimistic about at least this first hour. Math had always been my strongest subject and I was looking forward to getting lost in a math problem to forget my morning endeavors. As luck would have it though, I walked in to the classroom and I spotted Catherine immediately; she was front and center. I’ll never be able to explain the favor I had with a higher power that day, but as luck would have it the only seat available happened to be right behind Catherine. This did not go unnoticed to her.

 “You seem to be following me quite a bit today, Jeremy” Catherine joked, turning around in her seat to meet me. I took notice again of her seemingly never-ending warm smile. It took me off guard then as much as it does today.

 “Haha, I guess so” I said, still not completely looking at her. I was amazed she remembered my name, let alone speak to me after the awkwardness I forced her to encounter on the way to school this morning. Needless to say, this amazement still exists today. I have never figured out what she saw in me. Luckily for me, the teacher came in before I could make a bigger fool of myself than I already had.

 “My name is Mr. Hendricks and I will be your geometry teacher for the year.” This man obviously meant to nonsense and I was glad for that. The less time I had to be distracted by the beautiful blonde in front of me, the better. This was easier said than done however, when all I wanted to do was play our first encounter over in my head and torture myself thinking of the possibility of our becoming friends.

 Turns out, she was not the best math student. She claims to this day that she made up being behind in geometry to get to me, but I know this can’t be true because girls like her didn’t do those sorts of things for boys like me. No, she was legitimately a poor math student. For me, this was a blessing. I began by helping her with problems casually as we rode the bus together to school. This quickly turned in to her suggesting we do the homework together after school. She requested we do the work at her house since she had to make dinner for her family. While learning about the death of her mother and the absence of her father made me sad, I was not complaining about the extra time I got to spend with Catherine.

 These study sessions quickly turned in to time for us to just spend together. Though I will never know why, she enjoyed my company. We became inseparable and amazingly enough stayed that way throughout the remainder of high school. We had a running joke of “together forever, never apart” that we would say to each other when times got rough, and I knew she was going to be the one to save this lost boy.

“Excuse me, sir?” I was suddenly jerked back in to reality and the doctor’s steady hands on my shoulder. I had forgotten for a second, I just had a bomb dropped on me. This was an impossible situation.

“No, no questions” I said abruptly. I’m sure it came off as cold, but to be far I believe anyone would be cold in my situation. The only question I could imagine asking would be is my marriage going to be okay, and there is no way the doctor could know that.

With that the doctor nodded a sympathetic nod and strode off through the double doors. I almost resented that nod. How could he possibly be sympathetic to my situation? It is not every day that someone has to face his wife and tell her that the child intended to save their relationship had not made it through the birthing process. With that, my mind slipped off to our wedding day.

Catherine’s grandparents had footed the bill for the entire wedding-rehearsal dinner, ceremony, reception, and honeymoon all paid for by them. While I did not want to accept this charity, my family certainly couldn’t afford such luxuries and Catherine deserved the wedding of her dreams. I knew that she had always dreamed of a large white wedding in an extravagant white dress with all of our friends and family in attendance. I was determined to give her just that, regardless of the fact that her father refused to come due to a business trip. Honestly, I hated the man from day one anyway.

I remembered being in the men’s dressing room in the church scared beyond belief. If it weren’t for my groomsmen I don’t know if I would have had the courage to go marry the woman of my dreams. Since I had no friends to speak of, the groomsmen were my father, her cousin, my cousin, and my uncle. It was not the most exciting of wedding parties, but I had not grown up with much so I was used to it. I felt bad, if anything, for the bridesmaids that were forced to deal with these men all evening.

I walked out behind my men and took my place at the altar. Music began to play and I knew any minute my beautiful bride-to-be would be walking down the aisle; I could hardly contain myself. As is tradition, I had not seen her dress yet and I could only imagine how it was going to look on her. Finally, I saw her step around the corner to reveal its glory to the room. In this moment, laying eyes on her at the end of the aisle, I knew I was undeserving. The dress was a typical princess-looking dress, made anything but typical by Catherine. It was tight corset on top, paired with a full bottom. She truly did look like royalty that night. All I could think was the princess was truly getting married to the frog, and I was lucky enough to be that frog.

She walked slowly to meet me, and I could not hold my emotions any longer. I wept, which would have been embarrassing had I had any male companions to tease me of such things. Regardless, I was unashamed. She could have chosen any man on the planet, any man to sit next to on the bus that day, but it was me.

Her father handed her over to me and in the heat of the moment, I kissed her. She pulled back, looking at me with an astonished gaze. To this day she does not forgive me for ruining the “you may now kiss the bride moment,” but that is all minor details to me. I have yet to apologize for kissing her, and I never will, though I give her it was quite out of my character to do these things; it now occurred to me that this could be an issue in the decline of our marriage.

I hardly remember the ceremony. I was so caught up in the beauty of all, and the gravity of what was happening, and as if it happened in the blink of an eye the wedding was over. The only thing I can recall is Catherine looking at me when we went to light our candle and saying “together forever, never apart.” She always knew the right things to say at the right time and I knew in that instant we would have the most amazing lives together.

After the ceremony, we stayed at our reception long enough to cut the cake. Catherine was insistent that we stay longer, but I did not want to share this night with people we barely speak to. It was not even a groom’s typical reasoning for wanting to pull his wife away from the wedding. I honestly just couldn’t wait to spend the rest of my life with her. Also, though I do not tell her this, the thought of a tropical beach sounded much more exciting than our reception hall. Having no money growing up, I had never been able to visit exotic locations so I wanted to get to Barbados as soon as possible. Again, minor details.

 “It shouldn’t be too much longer before you can go see your wife” stated a nurse offering me a glass of water and an attempt at a sympathetic smile. I took the water and looked away, unable to say anything back. She walked away through the double doors. I began to hate those double doors and the despair they brought with them. I wish no one would ever have to come through those double doors. As I waited for my cue to see my wife, my mind took off once again to a distant memory of the day Catherine found out she was pregnant.

It was April, and I had just finished another mundane day at my middle management job. I had considered myself somewhat lucky this day because it was for once nice enough for me to drive with the windows down. I liked to do this whenever possible because there was something about the Midwestern air that put me at ease. It had always been much more preferable to me than the stuffy air in my Texas town. As I drove I began to wonder if Catherine would still be at home waiting for me when I arrived. We’d had so many fights the past few weeks, it wouldn’t have surprised me in the least if she would’ve packed up and taken off while I was at work one day. In fact, I half expected her to. This day though, she was outside as I pulled in to the drive. I braced myself; this was surely going to be the speech where she was going to tell me she was leaving me.

I climbed reluctantly out of my car, waiting to hear the bad news. When I met her though, her face did not look as if it she was about to leave. She looked astonished and lacking words. This left me baffled, if she didn’t know what to say we were going to be in a bind considering she had been carrying our conversations since the day I met. I stood quietly, waiting for her to deliver whatever news it was she had for me.

“It finally happened,” she said quietly still looking at me bewildered. I stood, trying to decipher what this could mean. What happened? She packed? Her father came back in to her life?

“Am I supposed to know what that means?” Even now, this seems cold to me. I did not intend for it to be that way, but the moment was so strange to me that I did not know what to say. Anything was a possibility, and I did not know what to mentally prepare myself for. I felt ambushed. I could only hope that this news was not bad.

“The baby,” she said. “We’re finally pregnant” And with those words, she let go of her composure and began to weep.

I grabbed her and spun her in the air. A baby! I could not believe what I was hearing. In a moment I was ever emotion a person could feel. I had wanted to long to be a father, to give someone all the things I could never have; looking back I think this is why I wanted to spoil Catherine so. Now our lives were finally coming in to place. I could only hope that this would be the saving grace for our marriage. No more baby stress, I had thought at the time. Of course, I did not know then just how wrong I could be.

“You may see your wife now,” said a voice over me. I looked up, startled. It was finally my time to walk again through the cursed double doors. I could only hope that this time would be more friendly. I did not know if Catherine would know yet what had happened. I did not know if she was going to leave me, or if this would bring us closer together. All I know is that I did not want to see the look of sadness in her beautiful blue eyes anymore.

I entered her room as a dog does after being scolded. My head was down and I could not handle the thought of her ending our marriage. After a day of reliving our love story, I knew now that we did not need a child to be happy. I only hoped that I could make her see these things. Perhaps I would just have to remind her of all the things I had relived today.

“Jeremy,” she said in a low but inviting voice. I approached her bed with caution. She adorned the same smile she had on the bus that day we met. Surely she remembered too and was not going to let it all go.

I took her hand and kissed it softly. She had always had the most perfect skin, the most perfect everything. I looked in her pale blue eyes with the courage I had lacked so many times before. I felt as I did that day coming home from the office, preparing myself for the worst.

“Together forever, never apart” she whispered to me with a smile before falling asleep still gripping my hand. I wept for the second time, unashamed of any questions to my manhood it might bring. This woman was going to stay by my side, continuing to be the princess to my frog.