

The Featherduster

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Summary

The smallest job can mean the most.

Johnny McLovin sat at his station, slowly assimilating a cuba libre'. He'd been having two or three each night since Voyager got lost in the Delta Quadrant. It had been five years, but McLovin hadn't changed his routine in the entire time since that night Captain Janeway had announced they were 75 or more years from home. He tipped the glass back again. Then he heard a scraping from the door. Curious at the unexpected intrusion, he sat his glass down and shuffled over to open the egress into his little booth of a room.

Johnny was startled to see Captain Janeway herself standing in the door.

"Crewman McLovin! You have not done your job! Why not!" Janeway was not calm.

"I'm, I'm sorry, Captain! What, where have I been, um, what?" McLovin was confused.

"The ship just doesn't look right. You haven't been doing your job!" Janeway looked like she was going to chew Johnny a new asshole.

"Have you seen what the ship looks like?"

McLovin shuffled back to his chair at his station. He picked up his glass and looked at Janeway.

"You really mean that? I mean, you have ignored me for a number of years. Now you storm into my little place and demand I execute a job you have paid no attention to in -how many years?" Johnny smiled a melancholy smile at Janeway.

"Five years, Mr. McLovin, but I now have time to focus on you-and I discover you have not performed your necessary duties. You are in dereliction of duty."

"Captain Janeway, do you really think my duties are important to the survival of this ship? I mean, seriously, what I do(or did) isn't that big of a deal." Johnny smiled a smile that had kept ship inspectors out for five years-it didn't work on Janeway.

"Mr. McLovin, what you do pertains to the heart of the matter-you make Voyager look good. We've been trying to make friends wherever we go, and if you don't do your job we won't make the impression on alien cultures that we need to survive!" Janeway walked over and took the glass from Johnny's hand. "This won't help," she said, pouring it down the drain of the kitchenette sink. "Make Voyager look good, Mr. McLovin." Janeway tossed the glass into the sink and headed for the door.

"Do you really think this will help-what I do?"

Janeway paused in the doorway. "Mr. McLovin, what you do is important. There isn't anybody aboard Voyager that doesn't have an important job. It's all important-we don't have enough people on this ship-there is no Federation, no ideals, no way of life beyond what we build. We would like you with us. Or you can spend time in Puerto Rico at the distillery. It's your choice." The door closed behind her.

Johnny looked at the closed door. He wondered how many others he'd closed without realizing it. He looked away at the EPS suit locker. He glanced back at his desk, and the bottle of Puerto Rican rum that Janeway noticeably hadn't poured out. He opened the locker and began pulling the various items of his environment protection suit on. Then, after he had made himself ready to go on EVA, he got his tool. It was made of fibers, specially crafted fibers, they could withstand the cold of space, they were virtually indestructible. The rod was a metal composition that also resisted the vacuum of space, and Johnny knew that he was the most fragile piece of the equation. He grinned, and took his self through the airlock leading outside, using magnetic boots to maneuver onto the hull.

The stars were magnificent. Johnny stood and contemplated the infinite as they dopplered past, his tool forgotten on his shoulder. He hadn't been out here in forever and he'd forgotten the sheer wonder that open space could conjure in his heart. For a moment he was cold sober, stunned by what he was seeing. Then the alcoholic haze crept back over him and shrugged in his suit. He pulled his gaze down to the hull. It was a dull grey, not the pristine white that it had once been. Endless light years in the not-so-empty void of space had left a fine coating of stellar dust on Voyager. The shields kept out the micro-meteorites and other debris that could harm the ship as it traveled at warp but they allowed the harmless dust through. After five years the ship was...discolored. Johnny dropped his tool off of his shoulder and grasped the

handle firmly. Sighing, he began to sweep.

Hours passed, and when Johnny heard the beep of his oxygen alarm he slowly and painfully lofted his tool onto his shoulder. Before he made his way back through his office airlock he paused to look at what he'd accomplished. The upper part of the main disc shone bright in twinkling starlight as the ship eased out of warp. Johnny had a thick head and his arms and legs hurt but a small glimmer of pride warmed his heart. Janeway had been right—he'd let the crew down. He hadn't done his job and Voyager hadn't been the angel in the sky she should have been. Casting a final glance back at what he'd accomplished, he entered the airlock.

After dumping his EVA suit parts into the cleaning and storage chamber, he stripped off his sweat-soaked jumpsuit and chucked it at the recycler. The sonic shower was good and the single glass of rum he sipped after dinner was better. A sleeping man can not see his own expression—and so Johnny didn't see the smile he slept with.

The next morning Johnny grabbed a quick bite and suited up again. He planned to work on the lower half of the main disc today. He didn't even notice the alert on his com screen. He just headed out. He had the lower disc almost cleared before he realized he hadn't had a rum and orange juice for the first morning since Voyager was tossed into the Delta Quadrant. It made him look up at the new planet they were approaching and smile. He didn't even know why he was smiling. Then he nubbled the water drip in his helmet for a quick sip and went back to work. Clouds of dust fell away in Voyager's wake.

Johnny had come in for lunch. There was just enough time to grab a sonic shower and a ham sandwich before he felt he had to get back to it. He already had his EVA suit on when he saw the com light flashing. Curious, he stepped over and tapped the ON button. The suit blocked his hearing but he could see Janeway's head and shoulders. Her mouth was moving. Johnny turned it off. He assumed she was haranguing him again. He grabbed his duty tool and headed back out.

Voyager was coasting in towards a blue-green planet and Johnny took a moment to look at it. His heart ached for Earth, for his friends in Yuma, for sunsets in the desert. He shrugged and began to walk to the bottom of the bridge. The phaser nodes needed polishing. Time passed, and Johnny worked the fine dust off. Puffs followed Voyager, like dandelions in the sunlight. Johnny grinned at the analogy. Work progressed. More time passed. Eventually, Johnny went back in. The com panel continued to flash. Johnny had forgotten to blank the message from Janeway. After he'd dumped his stuff, he made his way over to erase the message but his arms were so tired he missed the ERASE button and hit ON again.

"Mr. McLovin, while I offer no apology for my words yesterday, the progress report Commander Chakotay gave me on your efforts was encouraging. We are holding a Remembrance Day dinner tonight in Neelix's Kitchen and I'd like you to be there. In fact, I'd like to offer you a seat at the Captain's table. I await your RSVP."

Johnny stared at the communication screen, his mouth hanging open. Then he glanced at the date in the corner. It was Remembrance Day, the holiday Janeway had declared for people to reflect on their homes and family. Johnny couldn't really remember any of the previous ones—he'd spent them in a drunken stupor. He stood dumbly for a few moments and then rushed to the sonic shower. Shaving was an archaic process, but his father had taught him how to do it and he'd never gotten the depilatory habit. He tried not to carve chunks out of his cheeks as he hurried to make himself presentable. With a last glance at the mirror, he headed for the door. As he was about to step through he hesitated. Stepping back into the dark little closet that had been his home for so long, he opened his top dresser drawer. In the corner was a tiny box, the kind of box a ring or a pair of earrings would come in. He slipped it into the pocket of his utility suit, looked into the mirror again, sighed at the drab clothing that represented half of his wardrobe and headed for the main mess hall.

Neelix's Kitchen was boisterous when Johnny arrived. Making his way over to Captain Janeway's table, he tried to slide into his seat unnoticed. Janeway was having nothing of that.

"Mr. McLovin! How good of you to join us! Try the leecola root pate', Mr. Neelix really has outdone himself with that," she said, gesturing at a plate with a yellow-gray substance formed into a representation of the UFP banner. Johnny took a cracker and hesitantly spread a bit of the substance across it. As he began to bite into it he noticed Commander Chakotay, Lieutenant Paris and Chief Engineer Torres watching him closely. He felt self-conscious as he ate the treat. Then he realized why they were so interested in his reaction. Sputtering, he grabbed the glass of water in front of him and gulped frantically as the others laughed.

As everyone at the table chuckled, Janeway said, "I'm sorry, Mr. McLovin, but we all went through that. Apparently, Mr. Neelix has been experimenting with the jalapenos he's been growing in Hydroponics." Janeway looked to be full of mirth. "I drank a margarita and two glasses of milk before I felt better." She glanced across the crowded room at her cook cum ambassador. "Still, I felt everyone should at least try it so we don't have to lie too much to Neelix later when he asks how it was." Johnny realized she actually cared about what the cook thought. He set his glass of water down and spread pate' on another cracker. When he popped it into his mouth Janeway looked at him curiously.

"Doesn't that...well, hurt?" she asked.

Johnny grinned. "Captain, I'm from Yuma, Arizona. It's right next to the border of Mexico, in the USA. My dad used to grow jalapenos out back and eat them like, well, pickles, at the dinner table. I just haven't had anything like it in a while. You lose the trained reactions when you don't practice something on a regular basis." A look of understanding passed between them that the others at the table missed. "Although I have to admit, the leecola root gives them an interesting flavor." Everybody chuckled at that and Johnny smiled. Janeway answered with a twinkle in her eye.

"I'm glad we could give you a taste of home, even if it was filtered through Mr. Neelix's sometimes...unusual idea of Earth cuisine. That's what Remembrance Day is all about."

Johnny took the box out of his pocket. "I brought you a gift, Captain. A bit of my home." He held the box out.

Janeway took it and lifted the lid off. Everyone watched as she took out a small, glass-like black stone. "It's beautiful," she said. "What is it?"

Johnny realized that the warm feeling in his center bore a strange resemblance to the comfort that rum had been providing him since they'd

gotten to the Delta Quadrant. He hadn't had anything to drink but water.

"It's an Apache tear, a type of stone native to the part of Earth I grew up on. I'd like you to have it."

Janeway looked at Johnny with piercing eyes. "Mr. McLovin, I can't accept this."

Johnny smiled and scooped up another mouthful of Neelix's pate'. "Captain, I wish you would. I don't need any more tears. I don't think I feel like crying anymore."

Janeway smiled as the rest of the crewmembers at the table exchanged puzzled glances.

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