

The Long Watch

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He took each step to the porch slowly, with calculated care, as if every painted, wooden plank represented all the days that Jack had been waiting for his absent family members to return home. When at last he reached the shade of the covered landing, he turned in a half-circle, tucked one hip underneath himself, and lay down. With his chin resting comfortably on his left paw, he gazed intently toward the street. His vision was not quite as sharp as it had once been, but his hearing and sense of smell were as keen as ever. As he did each day, he listened to the sound of vehicles passing along the street, and to the particular strides of anyone on the sidewalk. But no car stopped to let out a missing member of his family, and no pedestrian possessed the correct footfall, familiar scent or beloved voice that would tell him one of the boys had come home. And so, Jack's daily routine continued.

Three times a day he performed this ritual, and always at specific hours. The first of these had begun on a bitter cold morning late in December of 1941. A second was added to it in May of '43, followed by a third barely six weeks ago. Jack did not know what the word 'war' meant; he knew only that it evoked very strong emotions in the people around him. Their feelings ranged from excitement to displeasure and from assurance to fear. Only the passing of Grandma and the tragic, untimely death of Dad had elicited such intense feelings among the household. Even then, the family had drawn strength from one another and remained together. Now it was fragmented, and Jack's longing for the unity that had once been so much a part of his world was matched only by that of those who were left behind.

As the last of his daily rituals on the porch came to a close, Jack rose instinctively, waiting for Mom to open the screen door and let him in for the night.

"C'mon, Jack," she called and patted his head gently as he walked into the house.

He looked up at her with his canine smile and trotted alongside her into the kitchen. She placed the bowls for his food and water beside the pantry door, as she had every night for so long now. Between mouthfuls of food, his attention shifted from Mom, who stood at the stove serving dinner onto two plates, to the ever-energetic Louise -- most often referred to by her brothers as 'the Brat'. Dressed in jeans rolled to mid-calf and a long-tailed shirt that belonged to one of the boys, the blonde haired teenager danced as she hummed a catchy tune while setting the table.

Mom welcomed the return of her daughter's vivacious energy; indeed it was a refreshing relief in the midst of the distress and sadness that had enveloped them both when the youngest boy had left home. Only weeks away from his eighteenth birthday, his decision to follow in his brothers' footsteps had been totally unexpected. For that reason, it had hit Mom and Louise in a way that the absence of the other boys had not. But none of them were ever far from her thoughts. As Mom set the plates down on the table and watched Louise continue her animated song and dance, she could not help but wonder, despite every ounce of hope and faith within herself, if her sons were safe. When would they return? What scars would they carry? What nightmares would haunt the rest of their days? She cleared her throat a little and smiled widely at Louise.

“Isn’t that the new song by Bing Crosby?”

“Yes!” the 15-year-old cheerfully confirmed. “It’s called ‘Swingin’ on a Star’. Janie Kincaid said Bing sings it in that new picture show, ‘Going My Way’.”

Jack’s gaze shifted back from Mom, to Louise, and back to Mom; she was giving Louise that knowing look, the one that said, *‘I know what you’re up to’*.

Jack whimpered as, like a deer caught in the headlights, Louise’s blue eyes widened. Had she learned nothing from her brothers about ‘smoke screens’ and ‘red herrings’? Jack swallowed the last of his food with an audible gulp and trotted over to sit between Mom and ‘the Brat’. He listened intently to their exchange.

“Gee Mom---“, Louise started to complain.

But Mom, always one step ahead of everything, interrupted. “You promised Mrs. McDowell you would babysit Frankie on Saturday. Remember?”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten,” Louise quickly replied. “And besides, she said she’d only need me until noon.” There was a slight pause before she sheepishly added, “Janie said there’s a matinee at two o’clock...”

Jack shifted his weight onto one hip. He could feel Louise’s anticipation as Mom clearly deliberated a decision.

“Mom,” Louise pleaded, “It’s Bi-i-i-ng Crosby, mom! Please say ‘yes’.” The slight set of her mother’s jaw did not go unnoticed. “I have enough of my own money saved,” she offered, hoping that would make the outcome go in her favor.

Tail thump thumping against the hardwood floor, Jack whined and looked from Mom to Louise and back again as he too, waited expectantly for Mom to say *something!*

At last reason met with compassion behind the expression of chagrin in Mom’s gaze. “Alright. I suppose you can go. But if Mrs. McDowell changes her mind and needs you all day ---“

Jack’s barking contended with the loud whoop of excitement Louise let out as she hugged her mother. “Mom, you’re the best!”

“As I’ve so often been told.” Mom smiled warmly and laughed a little, returning Louise’s gesture of affection. “Now, let’s sit down to dinner before everything gets cold.”

Jack passed between their chairs and lay down; with all the boys gone, this became his new position under the old oak table. Above him, he heard Mom say grace. As usual, she added a little prayer for God to keep her absent children safe. The catch in her voice did not go unnoticed by the old dog, and as she half whispered, ‘Amen’, he settled his chin across the top of her feet.

The conversation during dinner ranged from Louise’s classes at school, to Mom’s job, to what news any of the neighbors had received from family members serving overseas.

Afterward, Jack stretched out in the middle of the kitchen floor, watching as the leftovers were put away, the dishes washed and dried.

As Mom placed the last plate in the china hutch, she said, "I think I'll ask Mrs. Kincaid if Janie can sleep over on Saturday night." Mom grinned wryly at the look of overjoyed shock on her daughter's face. "Would you like that?"

Louise turned toward her; she could hardly believe her ears. "Wow! Would I! You mean it, Mom? Really?"

"Well," Mom remarked, untying her apron and hanging it on the hook beside the stove, "with your Grandfather away visiting Aunt Rebecca, it would be nice to have another voice in the house. Besides," Mom added with a slight lift of one eyebrow, "with Janie sleeping over, you won't be talking on the telephone with her all night long."

'*Sleep over?*' The words caused a disgruntled groan to escape Jack as he rose to follow Mom and Louise into the living room. Janie Kincaid, as the boys had often said, had '*a voice so loud she wouldn't need a foghorn if she were lost in the middle of Lake Michigan*'. Jack grumbled again and looked at Mom forlornly as she glanced over her shoulder at him.

"Jack. Behave yourself."

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While the radio played, Mom sat in her wing back chair, hemming a new skirt she'd made. Louise had placed a big toss pillow on the floor in front of the radio cabinet. Jack lay beside her, his head nestled against hers. They listened to music for a while and Mom got to hear that new Bing Crosby song her daughter was so in love with. Later, while Louise sat on the staircase and chatted on the phone with Janie, the voices on the radio changed from those who sang or laughed to those who spoke in serious tones. Jack did not like these voices; they mentioned the word 'war' quite often and caused an undercurrent of worry to pass between Mom and Louise. He was glad when those voices stopped. In fact, he much preferred to hear Janie Kincaid's voice to theirs.

Finally, Mom turned the radio off and then held up five fingers to Louise, letting her know she had that many minutes left on the phone. She tidied up the room, and Jack stood on the stairs beside Louise, occasionally licking the side of her face. Between giggles, she playfully batted his muzzle away until Mom called out, "Say 'goodnight' to Janie, Louise".

"Aw, Mom ---"

"Louise..." Mom warned.

The phone conversation ended quickly and Mom, with Jack's help, shooed Louise off to bed. The dog remained in the girl's room until the rhythmic sound of her breathing told him she was asleep.

Downstairs in the kitchen, the night breeze filtered in through the screen door that led out to the back yard. The lulling sound of crickets and the soft light cast by the little lamp on the china hutch gave the room a tranquil atmosphere. Mom sat at the table, a steaming cup of coffee and a tablet of writing paper before her. Jack curled beside her chair and his gaze fixed upon her as she composed what she hoped were uplifting letters to her sons. He could feel that she struggled to keep her emotions at bay. But finally, when her breath caught on a barely contained sob and she had to dab at her eyes with a handkerchief, Jack sat up and nudged his nose gently beneath her free hand.

With tear-brightened eyes Mom reached down and caressed the silky hair that covered the dog's head and ears. "I know, Jack. You miss them too, don't you boy?" She sniffed a little, recovering her composure, fortifying her inner strength. "One day," she said with quiet confidence and unwavering resolve, "they'll come home."

When the letters were finished, Mom closed the back door and turned out the light. She placed the stamped and sealed envelopes on the phone table by the staircase and Jack followed her up to her room. He remained there until he knew she was asleep. After one last check on Louise, he headed to the attic stairs across the hall.

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The attic.

With Dad's parents living with them, the house wasn't big enough to accommodate the growing family. So, during the summer before Louise had been born, relatives on both sides of the family had helped Dad and Grandpa remodel the attic into a large area that all three of the boys could share.

Jack sat in front of the steep staircase, gazing up toward the room that, above all others, was his favorite. Mom kept it dusted and cleaned, but each boy's familiar scent was still noticeable to Jack. In the attic, it was almost as if the boys had never gone away. Gathering his strength, Jack finally rose and made his way methodically up the stairs, stopping briefly as one paw pressed against 'the Judas step', the creaky plank that, many times in the past, had betrayed boys and dog sneaking out in the middle of the night on some clandestine escapade. It wasn't long until the kids unanimously voted to make an addition to the 'Saunders house rules': in order to avoid compromising their adventures, one of the boys would pick Jack up and carry him past the traitorous stair. Jack now yearned for one of the boys to carry him the rest of the way up the long staircase, for each climb took him a little longer, and the effort registered deeply in his aged bones.

Once he reached the top of the stairs, Jack crossed the pine-paneled room and got up on the bed belonging to the youngest of the three boys.

Chris.

Studious and shy, Chris was less resourceful than his two brothers, and so Jack had been more outwardly protective of him. As a youngster, Chris' innate need to be helpful and

accepted had, on numerous occasions, been viewed as irritating interference by his older siblings -- especially when their plans were supposed to be kept secret from 'the grown ups,' namely, Mom and Dad. But as time passed, and Chris grew into his teens, Jack sensed a transformation in the boy. Inflexibility eased toward openness, and skepticism changed to adaptability. Combined with those traits, there grew a reluctant courage in Chris, one that, when ignited by his desire to help others, could not be suppressed.

Jack missed Chris' warm-heartedness. He longed for the way the boy would smother him with hugs, burying his freckled face in the rough of long white hair that encircled Jack's neck.

Chris was the last of the boys to leave home.

As the night stretched on, Jack eventually climbed off Chris' bed and scrambled on to Joey's.

Joey.

Four years older than Chris, Joey's boundless energy naturally drew Jack's attention. Always up for an adventure, Joey's imagination was often in league with that of his eldest brother's and the two of them would devise plans that would lead to rousing exploits. Ever the optimist, no problem was so great that Joey could not let it roll off his back without a second thought. His candor and calm temperament diffused many an argument and this made Joey liked even by the worst bullies on the schoolyard. On one occasion in particular, it had been all that held his eldest brother back from a serious, even life-threatening fight. Gregarious and bold, Joey was the dare devil among his brothers. His enthusiasm was so infectious that Jack never feared for the boy's safety.

Jack missed Joey's laughter and energy. He missed Joey throwing a stick or a ball and yelling, "Go fetch it, boy!" He missed the casual ruffle Joey would give him along his back -- especially in that one spot that Jack found so hard to scratch by himself.

Joey had been the second to leave home.

Well past midnight, Jack made his way to the one remaining bed in the room -- that belonging to the eldest boy.

Chip.

Mom's first-born did not possess Joey's unabashed charm, or Chris' emotional openness. Imaginative and sometimes mischievous, Chip was normally very private and even-tempered. However, as Jack had occasionally observed, Chip's anger would rise fiercely when he, or those he cared for, were threatened. At these times, Chip would find himself at odds with others --- even if he was ethically on the right side of a disagreement. By comparison to his siblings, he was extremely diligent, assertive and intuitive and long ago, Jack had quickly come to consider Chip as his natural leader; he had likewise connected instantly with Chip's loyalty and honesty, with his authoritative, yet fair manner and deep-rooted sense of responsibility. Jack had witnessed these traits come strongly into play after Dad's tragic death. Chip had barely been in his teens then; the carefree securities of boyhood fell suddenly away from him, like strings cut from a soaring kite as he purposefully assumed the complicated, oftentimes

unforgiving role of adulthood. Jack accepted that change and remained at Chip's side wherever he was allowed to accompany him.

Jack missed Chip's irrepressible confidence. He longed for his deliberate, yet gentle touch when he would scratch him behind his tufted ears. More and more, as the months had stretched into years, Jack hoped that it would not be much longer until he and Chip would once again sit quietly, side-by-side, on the porch steps in true companionship.

Chip had been the first to leave home.

A long time later, Jack raised his head from Chip's pillow. He climbed off the bed, stretched and yawned. Daybreak meant that Mom would soon be awake. As always, Jack would be there to greet her -- the pack member who now so selflessly cared for him in the absence of those they both missed so terribly. As was his habit before leaving the attic room, Jack gazed in turn at each of the beds; the memories of each boy were engrained in him as strongly as his unconditional love for them.

Outside, a bird twittered, hailing the grey dawn of the new day. Jack turned and descended the stairs.

Another long watch in the attic bedroom had come to a close.

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"Good morning, Jack."

As Mom climbed from her bed, Jack, with his tail wagging, headed into Louise's room. A muffled, "Okay, Jack. I'm awake," filtered into the hallway as he ambled back to Mom's room. He waited patiently for her to get dressed, then followed her, albeit a bit slowly, down to the living room, where she opened the front door to let him outside.

The brisk morning air caressed Jack's shaggy coat. His nose twitched as he breathed in all the scents in the surrounding area. He looked back at Mom, deep affection shining in his brown eyes, and then he was off to make his usual morning rounds. In an hour, he would return to the porch and listen to the cars and watch the passersby.

Perhaps today someone would come home.

The End

