

Jack's Honour

Old soldier Jack and his anti-war daughter Lucy had never been on the same side. But when her son joins up, the battle lines are redrawn Story by Pippa Kelly

Jack sits by the river in his garden. The shadows are lengthening and a silver disc of moon has appeared in the sky.

Trees stir and on the damp twilight air he scents the smoky-grey sharpness of a bonfire. He can't smell it without remembering. He's never spoken of it to anyone – not even Kate. In 56 years of marriage he couldn't find the words.

He remembers now. It was moonless. They'd stopped, 800 yards off shore. Raid over, the searchlights dim. All quiet. Waiting. A stray beam arched slowly across. "Keep off there, keep off." Jack whispered his prayer. But the light touched the water and caught them.

Jack shifts in his chair. His thin, 87-year-old buttocks hurt. This morning he went to church with his daughter Lucy and her son Tom. Only day of the year he goes. He doesn't believe in God. But he believes in honouring those who died. He wore his medals to the service, including the Africa Star for that suicidal mission.

Once the searchlight hit them, the guns opened. A shell exploded in the fo'c'sle. Jack stumbled up the ladder, lifted the hatch and, gagging on the acrid smoke, saw the indescribable, unforgettable horror of it.

A pile of pink, hairless, skinless meat. He had to get to the other side of the deck. He didn't know what to do. He did the only thing possible. He walked on top of his mates. His heavy boots slipping and crushing and smashing over roasted men.

This morning, a stranger came up to his wheelchair at the cenotaph on the village green. "Thank you," she said. Two words. Loaded and powerful as mortars. Lucy didn't seem to realise what the woman meant. But Jack did.

Lucy protested at Greenham Common and marched on Parliament when Blair took the country to war with Iraq. Good on her! Although Jack's never said it, he's proud of fierce little Lucy and her firebrand ways, despite disagreeing with some of her views.

In the distance, Jack sees a shape making its way down the garden path.

The ship's cook caught it in the next blast. One second the burly chap was



mid-sentence beside him, the next he was face down. When Jack turned him over, his warm, liver-red intestines slithered on to the deck.

Lucy's right. War is inhuman.

He realises that it's his grandson approaching. Jack's fond of Tom, who is 17 and destined for university. He's grown closer to him since his parents split up, and the two sit and talk.

After supper, the men disappear into Jack's study. When Lucy looks in, Tom is holding a small box. She knows what's inside. "Time we were off," she says sharply, but Tom has some news.

Lucy can't believe what she's hearing. She tries to change Tom's mind, but he's made his decision. Jack keeps quiet. He's too tired to argue, and understands too well a mother's fear. As Tom and Lucy leave, she turns on her father. "You and your war stories – look what you've done!"

Once Tom starts his training, Lucy returns to full-time teaching. She visits her father less often. She blames it on work, but Jack suspects she's never forgiven him for "turning" Tom. He says nothing. He'll soon be gone anyway; he can feel it in his bones.

Tom's leading his battalion in Basra when he hears the news. He brings

forward his leave to go to the funeral. Among the mourners are a handful of war veterans. They watch Tom, tall in his uniform, and know he's one of them.

Lucy stays strong all day. Then, when the prayers have been said and the hymns sung, she comes to sit beside the river in her father's garden. In her hand are Jack's medals. She's never looked at them properly before, never touched their ribbons or felt their weight. Grief, which she thought she'd exhausted, catches her unawares. More than anything else, she realises, these pieces of metal, these war honours, are him.

Replacing the medals as the light begins to fade, she spots, tucked under the velvet lining, a piece of paper. It's a letter.

She doesn't notice Tom approaching until his shadow falls across her. He sees what she's reading and sits down, waiting for her to finish.

Lucy looks up. "He never told me," she says, "that you argued that night."

He's surprised. "I thought you knew." "He was protecting you from my anger," says Lucy. "Giving you cover, just as you'd expect him to."

Tom sighs. "He tried so hard to talk me out of joining up. He'd experienced war and he hated it. And once I'd seen

what he'd seen, done what he'd done, I understood why. I wrote to him from Iraq to let him know he was right."

"Yet you still do it," says Lucy, her voice urgent with worry. "Still put yourself in danger every day. Why?"

Tom wants to explain, but he can't find the words, any more than Jack could. He shakes his head. "You, of all people, should know, Mum – you were his daughter, you're my mother."

A shaft of low, golden light touches the water and catches them in its beam. The sun's going down.

Lucy holds out her hand. "He'd want you to have these."

Tom's not sure. He knows what his mother thinks of war.

Lucy insists. She realises now, at the end of Jack's day, that nothing she can say or do will change her son. He's his own man – as strong-willed as her and as brave and determined as the father she's just buried. He's flesh of her flesh. A soldier. It's in his blood. He can't escape it, neither can she. All she can do, as she gives him Jack's medals, is whisper her prayer. ●

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