

“At Day’s End”

That morning, I was aware of two things before I ever opened my eyes: the sorrowful cries of mourning doves overhead and the familiar ball of warmth pressed close to my right side.

The first light of dawn filtered down through the tree’s full leaves, casting a soft glow across my sleeping pad. My hand crept through the semi-darkness to find its resting place between my dog’s ears, just as it had every morning for the last eleven years. Cash lifted his bright eyes to mine, then rested his grey-flecked muzzle on my chest with a heavy sigh, as if to say *Up already, Dad?*

“Morning, buddy,” I murmured, reaching again to ruffle the hair behind Cash’s ears. Cash’s tail thumped softly against my side as he dutifully licked my palm and then surrendered to a jaw-achingly wide yawn.

I slid out from under the blankets, careful not to disturb Cash’s little nest beside me. Crisp mountain air filled my lungs as I stretched and surveyed the vast expanse of my property. After two days of walking, Cash and I had reached the center of my land. Far off, I could see some of my cattle grazing lazily in a meadow, their lowing mingling with the sounds of birdsong and rustling leaves. I was looking right through the gates of heaven.

Amidst the serenity of the morning, though, a sense of unease gnawed at my gut. Bright red sunrise flowed like a river over the shadow of the Rocky Mountains on the horizon. *Red sky in morning, shepherds warning...* A voice recalled in my head. There was surely a storm coming. I hoped Cash and I would make it home before the worst of the weather rolled in.

I did my best to brush aside my misgivings as I stoked the remains of last night’s campfire. Cash watched me intently from my sleeping pad, his eyes never leaving my face. He wore a knowing look, as if saying *Relax, Dad, nothing to worry about here*. By the time I had breakfast fixed, my unease had settled like the grease in the bottom of my frying pan.

Cash stretched, finally working his legs underneath himself. Age had slowed him significantly, but he always managed to get himself out and about in time for breakfast. He glued himself to my side. I tossed him his share of bacon, eggs, and toast before starting on my portion. He snapped his up in seconds, then rounded on me with hopeful eyes. I chuckled and relented, dropping him my piece of bacon.

After breakfast, I packed up camp in a matter of minutes. I had decided it was time to head back home to escape the impending weather. I had planned to clear several more miles of overgrown trail through my property in the coming days, but with storms incoming, I knew Cash and I would be better off with a roof overhead.

We set off towards the west, following the trail we had cleared the day before. Though we had not traveled it in many years, the path homeward was planted with memories. With every bend and rise, my mind wandered back to the countless hours we'd spent out here when Cash was a pup, just the two of us against the expanse of the ranch.

The sun was gaining altitude and Cash had a youthful bounce to his step that I had not seen in quite a while. His age had forced Cash to retire from herding, but the last few days of slow and steady walking had done him good. I beamed as I watched him dart and weave around trees with a serious expression, as though he were imagining the tall oaks to be cattle. He would slip over a hill or around a corner and then dart back to ensure that I was following closely behind. His eyes shone, saying *this is it, Dad! Just like old times.*

We walked until the sun was directly overhead. Cash showed no sign of slowing. He pushed forward around a bend in the path with his tail wagging high.

From around the bend, I heard a sharp, shrill cry. My blood went cold.

Cash had a wide vocabulary; over the years, I had come to understand most of his sounds. He had content chuffs. A stern, short bark that let me know it was supper time. He had a low growl reserved for unruly cattle. He made quick snorts when we wrestled and he took my forearm in his mouth to let me know he was only playing.

In all our years together, I had never heard Cash make a sound like that.

My mind felt as though it was floating above me as I sprinted around that bend in the path, but I had to stop short. I held my breath.

Cash's hind leg was twisted to an unnatural angle. He was shaking. His eyes met mine, so full of sorrow and pain. *I'm hurting bad*, his gaze said, *I'm so sorry, Dad*.

My hands trembled, too, as I knelt beside my faithful companion. "Oh, Cash... Cash, buddy..." I whispered as I felt his injury as gently as I could. As I ghosted my hand across his leg, his lips grew taught. I caught a glimpse of his sharp, white teeth. His expression instantly turned guilty. He licked my hand reassuringly, though he started to tremble again.

"We're gonna get through this, boy" I whispered, barely audibly, "I ain't leaving. I'm right here. I promise."

My hands shook as I futilely attempted to splint his leg with what little I had; the injury was clearly beyond my ability to heal. Cash's breathing was shallow, his once-bright eyes dull with pain.

I felt a strong urge grip my soul: I had to get him home. I could call for a doctor, though they may laugh at a man like me in such a state over a dog. None of that mattered. Cash was my boy.

As gently as I could, I shifted Cash's weight into my arms, then above my head and onto my shoulders. I had to get him home. My heart squeezed as I recalled carrying him in this position as a young pup, spinning him around behind our house until I was breathless from laughter and Cash was licking my face and yipping with joy.

He was significantly heavier these days.

I turned back towards the sun, now past its peak. The weight of Cash was pressing down on me; he was a burden I could scarcely bear. Each step was agony. The rugged terrain had been difficult enough to traverse on the way in, without Cash's weight slung across my shoulders. More times than I could count, I felt the ground give way below me – I could not look

down for fear of jostling Cash's bad leg. My ankles throbbed from twisting sideways on roots I could not see. Though every step was painful, the thought of giving up was agonizing.

The sun sank lower in the sky, blinding me as I trudged on, driven by sheer willpower and love for my faithful companion. We just had to get back home.

The hours began to bleed together. The landscape, usually a source of solace, now seemed harsh and unforgiving. Sweat poured down my face, mixing with the dirt and grime left there by days on the trail. Cash whimpered softly, his eyes half-closed, his trust in me unbroken despite his pain.

Tears blurred my vision as I began to come to terms with the inevitable. Cash was shaking hard enough that he had nearly slipped from my grasp. Each of his jagged exhales ended in a soft whine. I felt a sorrow so deep it threatened to swallow me whole. He was suffering. There was no way around it.

I gently removed Cash from my shoulders and placed him on the soft earth. By the last light of the day, I searched through my pack for my pouch of bacon. I sat down next to Cash, stroking his ears. I fed him every last piece of bacon in the bag, and then we started on the bread. Cash licked and nuzzled my palm between bites of bacon and thin gasps of breath.

When the food was gone, I rose onto unsteady feet. I reached for my rifle, my hands shaking uncontrollably. It was cold between my hands. I had never imagined it would come to this, the weight of the decision was almost too much to bear. But I couldn't let Cash suffer. I owed him that much.

"I'm so sorry, Cash," I whispered, my voice breaking. "I love you, old friend."

With a heavy heart, I raised the rifle, my tears falling freely. Cash looked at me with a gentle understanding, his trust unwavering even in these final moments. *I love you, Dad*, those eyes seemed to say. I pulled the trigger and the sound echoed through the silent woods, a deafening roar that marked the end of an era.

As the smoke cleared, I cradled Cash's lifeless body. My shoulders shook as I sobbed. The pain was unbearable, the loss profound.

The moon had risen high in the sky by the time my tears subsided.

My mind had cleared, but my overwhelming desire to bring Cash home had not. I gently wrapped him in my jacket and lifted him once more, clutching him into my chest. The rest of the journey back was excruciating, each lonely step was a reminder of the void in my heart. But I carried on; Cash deserved to be at rest where he had called home for so many years.

When I finally reached the ranch, the sky was painted with the gentle hues of sunrise. I chose a quiet spot beneath the old oak tree where Cash had often lain on lazy afternoons, watching the world go by.

Rain began to fall softly as I dug his grave, each shovelful of earth was a testament to the love and loyalty that had defined our years together. As I laid Cash to rest, I whispered my final farewell to the closest thing I ever had to a son.

"Rest easy, buddy. You're home now."

I fashioned a simple marker from a weathered piece of wood and etched Cash's name into its surface with trembling hands. The sight of it brought a fresh wave of tears, but also a sense of peace. Cash was home, where he belonged, surrounded by the land he had loved and guarded all his life.

It was the land's turn to guard him now.