

We Visit Jack's Childhood Home



Wherein we visit Jack's childhood home in Ireland, discuss his father, converse about the meaning of longing, and I am accosted by a small dog, aptly named.

I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight. A cool breeze seemed to assure me that I wasn't dreaming. It also reminded me that I was wearing nothing but a hospital gown. I noticed the open wardrobe behind me and could just make out my darkened hospital room visible through the wardrobe, but had no time to dwell on this strange scene. I heard noises and looked in the direction of a garden. Two boys were eagerly digging a hole.

"Jack, can they see me?"

"No." He hesitated. "At least, I don't think they can see you. Why do you ask, Tom?"

"It's just that I'm not exactly dressed for the outdoors."

"Quite right." He paused and thought for a moment, raising his right hand to his chin.

"Take a coat."

"What?"

"A coat—from the wardrobe." He gestured with his hand.

I turned and looked at the fur coats hanging in the wardrobe. There

were many large ones, almost like kingly robes. Thinking I'd be better off with a fur coat over my gown, I reached for a large brown coat and slowly put it on. Its weight felt comfortable on me, but I don't think my appearance was much improved by it. Jack glanced at me, but said nothing about it.

In an effort to move the conversation away from the direction of my clothing, I asked, "What are those boys doing?" I could, in fact, see well enough what they were doing. Covered in dirt, they were digging a hole and laughing.

"They're digging, of course," said Jack, smiling.

"Why?"

"We're looking for a pot of gold."

He carefully stressed the word *we're*, indicating, I surmised, that he was one of the boys. This will be an interesting dream, I thought. After all, it's not every day that one gets to ask C. S. Lewis questions.

The breeze brought a slight chill to my face, though I was warmer now with the coat on. In a mirror in the wardrobe door I saw how ridiculous I looked, but had no time to contemplate my appearance further. The noises coming from the direction of the garden had again captured my attention.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"That larger boy on the right is my brother, Warren—" began Jack.

"And the other boy is supposed to be you?" I interrupted, my tone skeptical.

"Yes, that's right."

"So you're saying we've traveled back in time? That's impossible, you know." I spoke cautiously, being careful not to offend Jack. I still believed myself to be delirious, dreaming, or both, but there was no point in aggravating an illusory person.

“Not exactly, but it appears that way. It is more, I think, what you might call a reenactment rather than time travel.”

“I see,” I said, though I really didn’t. “And why do those boys—you and your brother—think there is a pot of gold buried in this garden?”

“Earlier that day we had gone for a walk with our nursemaid, and we saw a rainbow and imagined that it ended in our front yard. I convinced Warnie that it would be a good idea to pretend we were digging for a pot of gold. This is Ireland, after all—with leprechauns, from the Old Irish meaning ‘small body,’ a troublesome sprite.”

“I know what a leprechaun is, Jack.”

“Of course.”

The boys were digging hurriedly and, not surprising, the hole was getting bigger and bigger.

Suddenly a small dog bounded in our direction, barking rapidly.

“I thought you said we couldn’t be seen,” I said to Jack. The dog was now sniffing at my feet and growling.

“Well, I guess Nero can sense us,” Jack replied. “And maybe others.”

“Others? Nero?”

“The dog. We named him Nero. I forget why.”

“I can think of some reasons.” I smirked, as the dog continued to sniff and growl at my feet, occasionally nipping at me.

“Put your hand out—gently, like this,” said Jack, extending his hand carefully before the dog, who sniffed then licked it, all the while wagging its tail.

“You can touch him?” I asked, surprised. For some reason I didn’t expect to be able to interact with beings in this “reenactment,” as Jack called it.

“Apparently,” Jack replied. “Nero, run along now,” said Jack, as he knelt and affectionately patted the dog’s head. It appeared to smile, its tongue hanging out, and the animal tilted its head to one side. The small

but formidable beast—a Sheltie mix—looked up at Jack, wagged its tail, and ran off toward the boys.

Glad to be free of the canine menace, I turned my attention to the diggers—young Jack and Warren, according to Jack. It looked as though they had finished with their digging, producing a rather large hole in their front garden. A female voice from inside the home called to them, and they ran into the house through what I suspected was the main entrance.

“Let’s jump ahead a bit,” said Jack. “Nothing of much interest will happen for several hours.” I noticed some clouds in the sky moving rapidly, the sun changing position, Nero running in the yard—back and forth—at a rapid rate before he entered the house. Then everything slowed once again to a normal pace. It now appeared to be late in the afternoon, as it was getting dark.

I then noticed a figure approaching the front gate. As he got closer I got a better look at the man. He looked to be about Jack’s height, perhaps a little taller, but unlike Jack in his rumpled clothing, the man wore a clean, well-pressed suit, complete with tie and vest, and also sported a black bowler hat. His bushy dark mustache—which made it appear as though the man had no upper lip whatsoever—and unsmiling face did not invite friendliness. A man of business, I guessed.

He walked briskly, no doubt eager to get home after a work day. I noticed, however, that he was walking directly toward the large hole. Before I could shout to him to stop, he fell in. After some grunts and other indecipherable noises, he struggled to climb out, finally getting a good hold on one edge and lifting himself out of the hole. His fine suit was now crumpled and covered with fresh dirt, and his hat was nowhere to be seen. He did not look pleased as he marched determinedly to the front door.

“My father,” said Jack, smiling slightly but also looking somewhat wistful. “He was not pleased. I tried to explain that we were merely imag-

ining there was a pot of gold in our yard and, quite naturally, that we were looking for it, but he would have none of it. He thought we had deliberately set a trap for him.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Our nurse, Lizzie Endicott, later threatened to spank our ‘piggie-bottoms,’ though she never did. Ironic, really, considering that we had gotten the idea from dear Lizzie in the first place. She was the one, you see, who regaled us with all kinds of stories, including one about a leprechaun and a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.”

“I see. Your father—”

“Albert.”

“Albert was a man of business?”

“Oh my, yes. He was a solicitor—what you would call a lawyer. A fine lawyer, too. He had a great gift for rhetoric—a person of passion. He was a nineteenth-century man, of course, born in 1863, during your Civil War.”

“You got along well with him?” I sensed some difficulty in Jack’s tone when discussing his father.

He stared at me for a moment. “Well enough, I suppose, though our relationship was strained for many years. It improved later. He was a good man, as far as men can be called good. He loved books and rhetoric. He could talk politics with the best of them. And yet . . .” Jack paused, a quizzical expression on his face. “And yet, he could not pronounce the word *potato*.”

“Excuse me?”

“Potato. He couldn’t pronounce it. His particular Irish accent resulted in *potato* being pronounced something like ‘pudaita.’ Warnie and I used to call him ‘Pudaita-bird,’ though not to his face. It was my father who had this home built for us—Little Lea.” Jack gestured to the large home.

“In 1905, the year I would turn seven, we moved in.”

It was indeed a large home. I counted at least five chimneys from our position, though there may have been more. Its vibrant red bricks contrasted nicely with the white trim on the windows, the surrounding greenery—trees, shrubs, flowers—and with the clear but darkening blue sky. I had never been to Ireland and, in fact, did not believe I was there now. But what I saw was, nevertheless, beautiful. It was a quiet, peaceful location. I could not hear any cars or airplanes or other noise I was accustomed to hearing. It felt strange, yet calming.

“This home—Little Lea—means a lot to you?”

“Yes and no,” said Jack. “Like most children, Warnie and I became attached to our home. Because of all the rain and parental fears that we’d catch cold outdoors, we spent a lot of time inside—playing, creating, reading. My parents loved books and, as a result, our home was filled with them. We had no television, radio, or that monstrosity you people call the Internet. They were different and, I’d argue, in many ways, better times for children—at least when it came to our education.

“It was in this home that Warnie and I invented Animal-Land. I called it Boxen. We told stories of mostly political intrigue involving clothed, talking animals. We also spent hours drawing and reading. No book was off limits to us, though I dare say there were many we were too young to understand. I was nine or so when I first read Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. We had a wonderful space to ourselves in the attic—our ‘Little End Room,’ we called it. There is the window—” Jack pointed to the home, at a window on an upper level.

“Looking back I see that the struggle between my reason and imagination began very early on,” continued Jack. “In some ways imagination satisfied—but only in brief glimpses of joy—my desire and longing for something outer and other. In German this feeling of longing is some-

times called *Sehnsucht*, which is similar in some ways to what one might call nostalgia, but it is much more and much deeper. It is really a longing or desire for the transcendent—for God, for heaven, for the country we were really made for . . . our true home. But most people do not realize this.”

Jack stopped suddenly, breathing deeply. He began to walk slowly around the home, with me walking beside him, my pink slippers an eyesore on the rich green grass.

“And as a child you felt this—desire?”

“I did. I think many children do, though they grow up and often forget or associate their longings with nostalgia rather than stopping to think and analyze what it could really mean for them—indeed, what it could mean for the human race.”

“But I don’t understand how this longing makes the case for God or heaven. It seems a bit of a stretch.”

“To present a simple version of my argument, I would say that if human beings have longings that nothing in this world can satisfy, the logical conclusion is that we were made for another world—for somewhere else.”

“I still don’t see how that argues for God. And I don’t think it is a logical conclusion. Longings could mean a lot of things,” I said.

“Well, you get hungry now and then, I take it?”

“Yes. Everyone does—it’s part of our biological nature.”

“And when you get hungry you eat because there is food to be eaten?”

“Naturally.”

“Well then, if we have spiritual hunger that cannot be satisfied by anything in this world, I think a good case can be made that we were made for another world—a world that will satisfy our true longings and desires. We were made for God—for joy. Augustine and Pascal hinted at this argument. In fewer words than I used, they understood and communicated the nature of this longing.”

"I'd like to hear more about what they said."

"Perhaps later. I think they touch powerfully upon our predicament as human beings. We are trying to fill the void of our longings with everything except God. Even the longings of a child point to this grand fact. That is why when my brother Warnie one day showed me a toy garden that he had made, I was struck by this feeling of desire and joy. For me the toy garden, crude as it was, stirred within me this longing for more. It would be many years before I would figure that out."

Jack had given me much to think about, but I wasn't convinced. This longing could be any number of things. I didn't see that it had to be God. Just because someone longs for something better doesn't mean that God exists.

"I can see that you're not convinced," said Jack, probably reading the expression on my face. "No matter. We can discuss this again later. Perhaps once you've seen more of my life you'll understand my argument a bit better. It ties in as well to the reality of heaven and of our immortal nature."

Before I could reply, a woman's voice coming from inside the home distracted me.

"Albert, dear," the voice said, "I don't think it is reasonable to assume the boys deliberately set a trap for you." I heard a dog bark several times.

"Please put that beast outside!" said Albert. I looked to the front entrance as the door opened. Nero ran out, fortunately not in our direction, as a woman stepped briefly outside. The woman, whose hair was up, wore a long sleeved white blouse buttoned to the top, a large dark bow around her neck, and a long dark skirt. I saw her face, plain but kindly, as she watched the dog run off toward the garden, before she turned and went back into the home, closing the door behind her. She looked to be in her midforties, maybe younger.

"My mother—Flora," Jack said. "She was the reasonable one in the home. It couldn't be helped, what with her degrees in logic and mathematics. We had, on the whole, good parents, a wonderful place to live, delicious food to eat, and, despite the large hole in the ground—" Jack said, pointing, "a fantastic garden."

"It sounds like you had a pleasant childhood."

"We did, but like many things in this world, it was not to last. When I was nine years old, my mother became ill. Doctors and nurses came and went, sometimes in the middle of the night. One evening I remember having a toothache and going to see her late in the evening, but I could not get to her."

"What was wrong with her?"

"Cancer."

I swallowed hard, thinking of my own precarious condition. The doctors were optimistic, but I knew these things could change in an instant.

"An operation occurred, in our home," Jack continued, "in February 1908. She seemed better for a time, but by August that year—" He broke off and turned away.

"She did not recover, then?" I asked quietly.

"No. On August 23, my father's birthday, she died, and with her death my world showed its true colors—a feeble house of cards . . . with my mother's death it came crashing down. Oh how I prayed she would recover! When she died I even prayed for a miracle—that somehow, like Lazarus, she would rise from the dead and once again be my loving—and living—mother. Warnie and I, naturally, took the news very hard. My father, however, was emotionally devastated by the loss. I don't think he was prepared to deal with my mother's death. Within a few weeks he sent us to boarding school."

"Jack, I am truly sorry, but why exactly are you telling me all this?"

“Because, Tom, you need to know, that I too know grief and pain. I know what it is like to lose the ones I love.”

I frowned slightly. What was Jack getting at? What did he know about me?

Jack continued, “I know how cruel this world can seem at times. It is the evil in this world that drove me to atheism. How could God allow it?”

Now Jack was speaking my language. He was right. If a loving God exists, as Christianity claims, and if this loving God is all-powerful, then why is there so much evil in the world?

“It’s a classic argument against the existence of God, you know, and I think it’s a good one,” I remarked.

“Yes, it is a classic argument, as you put it. As old as humanity, I would wager. And yet, it is, in the end, really a hollow argument against God.”

“How so?”

“Come, let’s speak of it somewhere else. But first, I think we will skip my horrid boarding school years and jump ahead to a more pleasant and fruitful educational experience.”

I followed Jack as he began to walk beside his childhood home. As we turned a corner everything changed. Little Lea was gone. We were now in a train station—an enormous black steam engine, passenger cars in tow, loomed before us.

“Now this is the way to travel,” Jack said, grinning. We boarded the train, found a compartment all to ourselves and soon were on our way.