Night Watch - A Marine's Duty

By Roy Popkin

"Your son is here," the nurse said to the old man. She had to repeat the words several times before the man's eyes opened. He was heavily sedated and only partially conscious after a massive heart attack he had suffered the night before. He could see the dim outline of a young man in a Marine Corps uniform, standing alongside his bed.

The old man reached out his hand. The Marine wrapped his toughened fingers around the old man's limp hand and squeezed gently. The nurse brought a chair, and the tired serviceman sat down at the bedside.

All through the night, the young Marine sat in the poorly lighted ward, holding the old man's hand and offering words of encouragement. The dying man said nothing, but kept a feeble grip on the young man's hand. Oblivious to the noise of the oxygen tank, the moans of the other patients, and the bustle of the night staff coming in and out of the ward, the Marine remained at the old man's side.

Every now and then, when she stopped by to check on her patients, the nurse heard the young Marine whisper a few comforting words to the old man. Several times in the course of that long night, she returned and suggested that the Marine leave to rest for a while. But every time, the young man refused.

Near dawn the old man died. The Marine placed the old man's lifeless hand on the bed and left to find the nurse. While the nurse took the old man away and attended to the necessary duties, the young man waited. When the nurse returned, she began to offer words of sympathy, but the Marine interrupted her.

"Who was that man?" he asked.

Startled, the nurse replied, "He was your father."

"No, he wasn't," the young man said. "I've never seen him before in my life."

"Then why didn't you say something when I took you to him?"

"I knew there had been a mistake by the people who sent me home on an emergency furlough. What happened was, there were two of us with the same name, from the same town and we had similar serial numbers. They sent me by mistake," the young man explained. "But I also knew he needed his son, and his son wasn't there. I could
tell he was too sick to know whether I was his son or not. When I realized how much he needed to have someone there, I just decided to stay."

By Roy Popkin
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