

The Roommate

Many years ago, when I was a senior in college, I had an unusual meeting with the dormitory manager. I think the only other time I'd even seen him had been the first day of my freshman year, when he spoke at a mandatory "Welcome to Devens Hall" meeting in the dorm courtyard. Since that day I'd minded my business and he minded his, and our orbits never intersected. One evening, however, as I was struggling with some differential equations, there was a knock at my door. I opened the door and a middle-aged man with gray hair and a three piece suit introduced himself as Robert Middleton, Dormitory Manager.

"I'm here to talk about your new roommate" he said after settling himself into my guest chair. "I think it's pretty clear by now that Mr. Thompson isn't going to return this semester, and we can't afford to let beds remain vacant. We have a waiting list, you know."

Larry Thompson had been my roommate the previous year and we had gotten along great. We'd signed up to room together again, but Larry never showed up at the beginning of the school year. I think his family may have suffered a financial setback. In any event, I'd had the room all to myself for several weeks now, and I enjoyed the solitude. I knew it wasn't going to last, though, so I just nodded in resigned acknowledgement of the dorm manager's statement.

"Most of the students on the waiting list are freshmen" Mr. Middleton continued, "but since you're a senior I thought you might prefer a roommate who was a little more mature. I came here to ask if you'd consider accepting a transfer from another residence hall."

I shuddered inwardly when I remembered the "potluck" roommate I'd been assigned my freshman year. Loud music, smuggled drugs, and alcohol. A constant stream of visitors. Never did anything to clean up. He flunked out at the end of the year, but I'd been forced to spend most of that year doing homework in the library, just to escape the chaos of my room. I did not want another freshman roommate. Still, I was suspicious about this transfer student. The Dorm Manager didn't need my permission to move him into my room. Why was he going out of his way? Coming to my room and asking me to "consider" it? Why not just move the guy?

"Did you have anyone in particular in mind?" I asked, trying to find a diplomatic way to get to the question that was gnawing at me.

"It's a Mr. Carl Jenkins" Mr. Middleton replied. "He's a history major. A junior. A quiet individual, much like yourself. Spends a lot of time doing research at the library. He's never been in any sort of trouble, but apparently he strikes some people as being a bit of an odd duck. He strikes his current roommate that way, anyway. He's been demanding a new roommate since the first week of the semester. He never gives a specific reason, just says Jenkins is driving him crazy. Normally I'd just let the floor counselor handle this sort of thing, but, since

you needed a roommate I thought I could solve two problems by assigning you someone who was quiet and studious.” He gave a little smile that was intended to be friendly, but somehow came off as being both ingratiating and threatening. I knew that if I said no my next roommate would not be quiet and studious. Still, I had a nagging feeling he knew more than he was telling.

“What does Jenkins say about this?” I asked.

“Oh, he’s quite willing to move. He’s never uttered a word of complaint about his current roommate, but he says if his roommate wants him to move he won’t object. He’s really quite accommodating.” He gave me another one of those strange smiles.

“He sounds OK to me” I said. I still wasn’t happy about the situation, and I felt like I wasn’t being told the whole story, but I couldn’t imagine how this Jenkins fellow could be worse than the roommate I’d get if I said no so I went along with the dorm manager.

I was still uneasy the next morning, when I saw a university truck pull up beside the dormitory. Two men in physical plant coveralls got out, along with a thin young man who looked like a student. They unloaded some boxes and carried them into the building.

“Hi. I’m Carl Jenkins” the young man said when I opened the door. “Sorry to intrude upon you like this” he said as we shook hands, “but I’m your new roommate.” He looked like an ordinary college student. A bit more elegantly dressed than most - wearing an oxford cloth shirt, slacks, and leather shoes - but this was in the days before blue jeans and T-shirts became the “uniform” of college students. His hair was unruly but not unkempt, and he wore a pair of relatively stylish eyeglasses. All in all, he looked like the quiet, studious type.

He had only a few boxes so the physical plant men were gone in no time. We talked and got to know each other as he unpacked the boxes and put his clothes in his half of the dresser and the closet. He had grown up in a small city in Indiana. Not a farm boy by any means, his father was an engineer and they lived in the suburbs. There was tragedy in his background – his father had been killed in a car crash when Carl was six, and his mother died of cancer shortly after he graduated from high school – but he seemed remarkably well-adjusted in spite of these events. His mother had invested his father’s insurance money and a small settlement she’d gotten from the car crash, so even though Carl was on his own he had enough money to see himself through college.

I had to leave for a class as he started to unpack his books, and when I came back to our room he was gone. The appearance of the room, however, immediately showed that his

interests were somewhat unusual. Instead of the posters of rock bands, Playboy bunnies, and similar items which adorned most dorm rooms, he had hung World War 1 recruiting posters. Hand decorated brass artillery shells – he called them “trench art” – were carefully placed on display, and a World War 1 helmet and gas mask served as bookends on his study desk. I scanned the titles of the books between them, and almost all of them were about World War 1. I knew he was a history major, but to me this seemed excessive. Almost an obsession. When I asked him about it later he just shrugged and said “it’s a hobby.” I was beginning to see why the dorm manager had described him as “a bit of an odd duck.”

In spite of his strange interests, Carl and I got along very well and developed a comfortable relationship over the next several weeks. Both of us were quiet, and on the evenings when neither one of us felt like talking, or when one of us was studying for a difficult exam, we could not say a word to each other the entire night and not have it seem awkward. On the occasions when we did feel like talking I found him to be intelligent, witty, and able to carry on a conversation about a wide variety of topics. Sometimes we went down to the cafeteria to dine together, and sometimes we ate separately, depending on our mood. Occasionally, on weekends, we’d go out for a pizza with a group of friends. I noticed, however, that we always went out with a group of my friends. He didn’t seem to have any friends of his own.

Shortly after Carl moved in, I discovered he had trouble sleeping. If I stayed up late studying and he went to bed before me, I would hear him toss and turn for hours before he fell asleep. Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night, vaguely aware that he had gotten out of bed and was getting dressed. I asked him about this once, and he said that when he couldn’t sleep a long walk around the campus calmed him down and helped him get sleepy. The worst nights were when he had nightmares. I would wake up to the sound of unintelligible shouting as he thrashed about in his bunk. I’d walk over to his bed and wake him as gently as I could. No matter how gentle I was, though, he always woke with a start. He’d stare at me with his eyes wide open, breathing heavily, and a look of terror on his face. Then he’d slowly relax as he came back to reality. He’d thank me for “rescuing” him from his dream, but he never told me what the nightmare was about.

Carl could also be moody. When he was in one of his black moods he sat around the room for days, skipping classes and either reading or staring out the window. He rarely spoke when he was in one of these moods, and if I spoke he either snapped at me or just gave me a cold stare. I thought these moods might be due to sleep deprivation, but I didn’t waste much time worrying about it. For me, the workaround was simple. I just left him alone. It was like having a single room again. In a few days, he would snap out of it and we would get along as if nothing had happened. I suspected his moodiness and his nightmares were why his former roommate had complained, and perhaps there were other roommates and complaints before that. The dorm manager probably wanted me to commit to being his roommate in advance, so it would

be harder for me to complain later on. He needn't have bothered. I felt bad that Carl had these problems, but they didn't affect my life.

When people change slowly, it's hard to notice the change until one day you suddenly realize something is dramatically different. We were well into the spring semester of my senior year before I noticed how much the lack of sleep was affecting Carl. He'd always been slender, but now he looked bony. His cheekbones stuck out sharply, with hollow eyes above them and hollow cheeks beneath them. His neck looked scrawny. His wrists were as skinny as a chair leg. His black moods came more frequently. Sometimes he snapped at me for no apparent reason. He always apologized afterward, but I realized it had been weeks since the last time we'd had dinner together. I resolved to go out of my way to be nice to Carl, to try to help him through what was obviously a difficult time.

A few nights later Carl had one of his nightmares before I'd gone to bed. I remember it was a Saturday night, because he'd made a joke about his "wild lifestyle, going to bed at nine on a Saturday night." It was obvious that he was exhausted, though, and this time he fell asleep quickly, while I caught up on homework. It couldn't have been much more than an hour later that he started shouting and thrashing about. After I woke him I said that I could use some night air myself and suggested we take a walk together.

We happened to be taking the same class that semester, a course in 20'th Century European History. It was a core requirement for him. I had decided to take it as a non-technical elective because of the professor who taught the class, Dr. Kroft. Some people said he was an opinionated tyrant, but others called him an insightful nonconformist. Almost everyone agreed he gave brilliant lectures and encouraged students to challenge his opinions, as long as they could back up their arguments with facts. I asked Carl what he thought of Professor Kroft as we walked, hoping to take his mind off of whatever it was that gave him nightmares. Suddenly there was a loud screech behind us, followed by a brilliant white flash and a bang over our heads as a skyrocket exploded. I instinctively ducked at the noise, and was incensed to hear an outburst of laughter behind me. It was shortly after spring break, and some clowns who had gone to Florida over the break brought back a trunk full of fireworks. I launched a volley of profanity in their direction, which brought forth more laughter.

"F---ing Drunks!" I hissed as I turned back toward Carl. To my surprise, he was lying face down on the ground, trembling uncontrollably. I helped him up. He apologized for overreacting, but he was still trembling when we got back to the dorm. It took him a long time to fall asleep that night, and he had another nightmare around 3:00 a.m.

Professor Kroft's history class was eye opening, but challenging. Instead of providing a chronological overview of 20th Century European History, he followed what he called the "threads of history," showing how one event led directly to another or indirectly affected other threads. The result was that his lectures jumped back and forth in time, as he completed one thread and started another. Not surprisingly, considering the topic, a lot of threads started during or immediately before World War 1. Lecturing on the decline of authority and the growth of individualism, Professor Kroft described the Battle of the Somme.

"Kitchner's New Army was formed on the drill fields instead of being trained in the realities of modern war," the professor said. "Believing their superiors knew what they were doing, the soldiers attacked as they'd been taught. Lined up shoulder to shoulder they marched across no-man's-land, and into the range of German machine guns. The result was a ghastly slaughter. Almost 60,000 casualties in a single day. The German High Command described the British Army as 'lions led by donkeys.' Much of the prewar respect for authority died on the bloody fields of the Somme."

"I think that's a bit of an oversimplification, sir." I was surprised to realize it was Carl who was challenging the professor. Carl was willing to speak up when the professor asked a question, but he had never before offered an opinion. Professor Kroft asked him to elaborate.

"It's true the British initially attacked in close formation, although they were not marching," Carl explained. "They rushed forward at a brisk pace. Once the Germans who survived the bombardment came out of their dugouts, set up their machine guns, and opened fire, however, the British took cover. Especially once the German artillery opened fire. There were some experienced NCOs among the new recruits, and they led the men forward in short rushes, from one shell hole to the next, while maintaining cover fire. There were appalling casualties on the first day, but it was because the troops refused to quit. They pressed forward with the attack, until they got to the wire, which hadn't been cut by the bombardment the way they'd expected. It wasn't because they lined up and blindly marched forward while the Germans knocked them over like ninepins."

"I see," said Professor Kroft. "And what is the source of your extraordinary insight?"

Carl was suddenly drained of the confidence he'd shown a minute ago. He stood awkwardly beside his desk. "I, uh, I know I read it somewhere. Maybe Brown's book? Or Duffy's? Or wait, maybe it was in Middlebrook. I'll have to look it up."

Professor Kroft gave him a withering look. "When you find it, please be so good as to show it to me" he said with exaggerated politeness. "Until that time, I shall maintain my belief that the Battle of the Somme was one of the most pathetic wastes of human life in modern history."

“It wasn’t pathetic!” Carl’s fists were clenched and his face was flushed with anger. He wasn’t looking at the professor, though. He seemed to be staring at something off in the distance, beyond the blackboard at the end of the room. “It was magnificent! The way the lads pressed forward in spite of the German fire. We lost a lot of pals that day, we did, but we gave the Boche as good as we got! The battle wasn’t won in a day, but we kept on. We learned. And we broke the back of the German Army!”

The anger and pride slowly faded from Carl’s face and was replaced by confusion and embarrassment. He looked around the room, as though trying to get his bearings. Professor Kroft seemed remarkably kind and understanding in his reply.

“Yes, Mr. Jenkins, there is something in what you say. The British soldiers did display remarkable bravery on the battlefield. And while they achieved very few of their objectives on the first day of the battle, they did continue to press the attack and over the next few months they achieved most of their original objectives. They also learned from their mistakes and developed new weapons and tactics such as the tank and the rolling barrage. I noticed that during your description of the battle you used the term ‘we’ repeatedly. Might I inquire as to who ‘we’ is?”

Carl seemed somewhat uncertain in his reply. “By ‘we’ I meant the Allies, of course. The US eventually entered the war on the Allied side, so I tend to think of the Allies as ‘we.’”

“I see,” said the professor. “And who were the ‘pals’ you referred to?”

Carl hesitated for a moment before answering. “I meant the ‘Pals Battalions.’ A lot of them fought at the Somme.”

“Of course,” said Professor Kroft. “For those of you who aren’t as familiar with the subject as Mr. Jenkins, early in the war the British encouraged recruits by promising them they could serve with their friends. Groups of students from a particular school, workers from a factory, or groups of young men from a village formed the so-called ‘Pals Battalions.’ It was good for recruiting and fostered esprit de corps, but when one of those battalions went into battle the results could be devastating to the school or village they came from.” He looked at his watch before continuing.

“I see we’re about out of time, but I want to leave you with some advice about studying history. To really understand history, you need to get inside the minds of the people you are studying. Try to understand what they were thinking, what they were feeling, and what motivated them. Don’t get emotionally involved, however. No matter how much you curse past villains or praise past heroes, they’re dead and gone. What happened, happened. You can’t change history, and you can’t undo the wrongs of the past. You can only learn from

history, accept the world as it is today, and move forward.” As if to add emphasis to his remarks, the bell rang. We all gathered our books and left the classroom.

Carl was visibly shaken as we walked back to our dorm, and he was still out of sorts that evening so I suggested we go out for a pizza – my treat. I hoped that a beer and some pizza might help him forget the classroom incident. It was just bad luck that we ran into Frank Blosser at the pizza joint.

Frank was more of an acquaintance than a friend. He’d been in a couple of my classes, including the history class that Carl and I were currently taking, but I didn’t know much about him. He struck me as being a glad-handing know-it-all who stopped just short of being a jerk, but I didn’t know him that well. For all I knew he might really have been a full-fledged jerk. He certainly acted like one that night. I was trying to take Carl’s mind off his classroom outburst, but that was the first thing Frank brought up as he invited himself into our booth.

“Hey! Carl! Paul! Good to see you!” He smiled broadly and waved as he walked up to our booth. “Way to stick it to Doc Kroft today, Carl! Scoot over, will you?” This last remark was directed at me. I scooted further into the booth, and Frank sat down beside me. “You were really going to town with the facts and figures about that battle. I don’t think the professor expected anybody to know more about it than he did. How’d you get to know so much?”

I could see Carl was embarrassed as he struggled for an answer. “Well, that period of history has always interested me somehow. I really don’t know why. Anyway, I’ve read a couple of books about that battle and I just didn’t see it the same way the professor did. I certainly didn’t mean to be disrespectful, though.”

“You weren’t being disrespectful!” Frank snorted. “The professor was talking through his hat and you called him out on it. Good job! He always says he wants us to think for ourselves and not be afraid to challenge him. Well, today he got a taste of it.”

Just then the waiter arrived with our pizza and a pitcher of beer. I hoped Frank would take the hint and leave us to our dinner.

“Ohhh! Peperoni!!” Frank exclaimed. “Speaking of a taste of it, mind if I nibble on a slice? Another glass please, waiter.” He helped himself to a slice of pizza and to one of the two plates the waiter had brought. I spread out a napkin to hold my piece of pizza. Later the waiter brought me a plate, along with a glass for Frank.

“So, Carl” Frank said when he took a break from his pizza. “Did you ever think that you might have been a World War One soldier in a previous life?”

“Oh come on, Frank!” I exclaimed. I was about to tell him how ridiculous I thought the whole notion of reincarnation was when Carl spoke up.

“You know, I’ve wondered about that myself sometimes. I mean, I always thought the whole idea of a ‘previous life’ was a bunch of hoey, but now I’m not so sure.” Carl sat for a moment in deep thought. “Sometimes I have dreams about people I’ve never seen before, and places I’ve never been, but the whole thing seems familiar. Like a memory, but not a memory of anything that ever happened to me. And today, in class. It’s like that wasn’t me talking. I mean, I’ve read books about the battle, but I never saw it from that perspective. I’ve always thought of it pretty much the way Professor Kroft described it – a horrendous waste of life. I certainly never thought of it as ‘magnificent.’”

We sat in stunned silence after Carl spoke. What are you supposed to say when a friend tells you he has memories of things that never happened? Naturally Frank was the one to break the silence.

“You know what you need?” Frank asked Carl. “Hypnotism.”

“Hypnotism?” Carl asked.

“Aw, for crying out loud, Frank!” I was getting upset. “Where do you get this stuff?”

“No, I’m serious” Carl said. “I’ve read about it. Hypnotists can help people remember things that happened in their childhood. When they were babies, even. Sometimes they can even remember things from a past life. One lady started speaking in French, but she’d never been to France or had a French lesson in her life!”

“Where’d you read that” I asked. “In a Frank Edwards book or a Weird Science comic?”

“It was a real book!” Frank said. “Or maybe a magazine. It might have been ‘Reader’s Digest.’ In any case it was real. I’m not making this up.”

“Do you think that would help?” Carl asked. He sounded serious. Almost pleading.

“What have you got to lose?” Frank answered. “If you don’t remember anything, you’re no worse off than you are today.”

“I’m willing to give it a whirl” Carl said. “It’s really been bothering me that I don’t know what’s happening to me. I don’t know why I can’t sleep, and why I have such terrible dreams when I do sleep. Maybe this will help.”

I managed to steer the conversation to another topic, and we finished our beer and pizza in a lighthearted mood. Carl even laughed and told a joke, which was very unusual for him. In spite of Frank's interference, or maybe because of it, his anguish over his classroom outburst seemed to be forgotten. We enjoyed the spring air and talked about inconsequential things as we walked back to the dorm. That night, Carl slept soundly all night long.

A few days later Frank called to say he'd found a hypnotist. He specialized in helping people quit smoking, lose weight, or cut back on their drinking. Sometimes he helped people remember where they put lost car keys or other items they'd misplaced. He'd never tried to help anyone remember a previous life, but he said he was willing to give it a try. The only hitch was, he'd have to have \$50 up front to pay for his "research" into how to take someone back to a previous life, and \$50 on the day of the session. There were no guarantees. If he hypnotized Carl but Carl couldn't remember a thing, or even if he failed to hypnotize Carl at all, he'd keep the money. It sounded fishy to me, but Carl had built up his hopes that this would help him settle down so I agreed to split the cost with Carl and Frank.

It didn't take long for the hypnotist to complete his research, and we soon found ourselves in his office. It wasn't as shabby as I'd expected, but it wasn't ostentatious either. Just a typical small business office in a nondescript strip mall. The kind of office you'd visit to see an insurance agent or an investment advisor. Carl was seated in a straight backed chair directly facing the hypnotist. Frank and I sat off to the side, on an imitation leather sofa. The hypnotist didn't swing his watch like a pendulum or use any stage artist tricks, he simply talked calmly and quietly to Carl. He talked Carl through the stages of falling asleep while repeatedly telling him to listen to his voice, and soon Carl was to all appearances fast asleep, but sitting bolt upright in the chair.

The hypnotist turned to us and said "I'm going to take him back to a happy memory from this life. Based on my research, memories of previous lives can be traumatic and I need a happy memory as a home base that he can return to." Then the hypnotist turned back to Carl.

"Carl, listen to me. I want you to remember a happy time from your childhood. Can you remember a happy time?"

Carl's face suddenly lit up in a big smile. "It's Christmas!" he exclaimed.

"Very good, Carl. What year is it?"

Carl's face furrowed as he thought. "This year?" he said.

“How old are you, Carl?”

“I’m five!” he beamed. “A whole handful.”

“Very good, Carl. Is there anyone with you?”

“My mommy and daddy” he answered. “And I got a new fire truck!”

“That’s wonderful, Carl. We’re going to leave this memory now, but we’ll come back to it. We’ll come back very soon. I want you to reach back even further into your memory. Way back. Can you remember World War One?”

Carl looked puzzled.

“The Great War” the hypnotist suggested. Carl nodded yes.

“What is your name?” the hypnotist asked.

“Jenkins” Carl answered.

“I mean during the Great War. What was your name during the war?”

“Jenkins” Carl replied, somewhat indignantly. “Private Arthur Jenkins.”

“Very good, Private Jenkins. What is your most vivid memory of the war?”

“I, I don’t want to remember that” Carl answered.

“It’s very important. I want you to tell me about that memory. Walk me through it.”

Carl sat stiffly upright in the chair and squared his shoulders. “It’s a warm summer morning. The rain has finally stopped. Our artillery is still pounding the German lines, as it has been for days. It’s almost time for the attack. I’m scared, but Bertie is reassuring me. He reminds me of what the lieutenant said. There won’t be anyone left alive in the German trenches, not after this pounding. Suddenly the artillery stops. My ears are still ringing, but I hear whistles, men cheering as they go over the top. Bertie and I scramble up the ladder and begin trotting across no-man’s-land. Bertie was right. There’s no shooting. The sun is shining and the grass is green. The lieutenant is kicking a football ahead of him. It’s all a glorious game. Bertie is a few paces ahead, to my right. I can see the German trenches about a hundred yards ahead of us. Then I hear machine gun fire, but I can’t tell where it’s coming from. Men are stumbling and falling down. Where is the shooting coming from? Shells are screeching over our heads. They’re headed straight for us! BERTIE!!! Oh God, Bertie!” Carl collapsed in the chair, cradling his face

in his hands. “Oh Bertie, Bertie” he was sobbing. “I’ve let down me pals. I’ve let down me pals.”

“Carl!” the hypnotist said. “We’re leaving this memory. Carl! Carl!”

Carl continued sobbing uncontrollably.

“Private Jenkins!” the hypnotist shouted. Carl lifted his head slightly to look at him.

“We’re leaving this memory, now! We’re going back to the Christmas memory. You’re five years old. Your mother and father are here.”

Carl’s sobbing slowly changed to the sniffing of a child. “Can I open another present?” he asked.

We left the hypnotist’s office, exhausted. He looked exhausted, too, and I suspect he never again tried to help anyone remember a traumatic experience. Carl was in the best shape of any of us. He didn’t remember a thing, and almost refused to believe he’d even been asleep. He was full of questions, of course, and we had to tell him what had happened. I’m sure our retelling was a little sketchy, as we were still recovering from the emotions. Frank and I kept interrupting each other to add some detail that the other had forgotten or to correct a minor sequence error, but I think we got the gist of it right. Carl just said “oh,” and sat in silence for a long time. Finally he added,

“That’s what my nightmares have been about.”

I wish I could say that experience brought some relief to Carl, but I’m not sure that it did. He still had a few nightmares before the semester ended. I graduated, and moved almost 2,000 miles away to begin an engineering career. Carl said he was going to move into an apartment and get a job while going to school part time, but he never gave me the address of his apartment. I never forgot Carl, but I seldom remembered him either. You know how it is. You move into a new phase of your life. A new town, a new career. Soon there was a new wife, followed by a family. Carl was one of the people I thought about whenever I looked back at my college days, but since I didn’t keep in touch with any of my other classmates I didn’t dust off those memories very often.

Over forty years after I graduated, when I was “semi-retired” and just doing a little consulting on the side, I got a surprise phone call from Frank. He was in town for a psychiatrist’s convention and he wanted to talk to me about Carl. He said Carl was one of the

reasons he went in to psychiatry. He didn't have a rental car, so I arranged to meet him at his hotel's bar the following evening.

After exchanging a few pleasantries and providing thumbnail sketches of what we'd been doing for the past forty years, Frank got down to business.

"Have you ever heard from your old roommate, Carl?" he asked.

"Not a word." I replied. "He moved into an apartment off-campus, but he never gave me the address so I couldn't even send him a Christmas card. I have no idea where he is now, or what he's doing."

"Damn!" Frank said as he contemplated his beer. "I've been trying to find him for a couple of years now, but it's like he disappeared from the face of the earth. He doesn't show up on whitepages.com, or any other Internet database I can find. He never joined the alumni association. The University has no current address for him. And I can't even find his name in any real estate transactions or other public record. He's one of the reasons I got into psychiatry, you know. I kept thinking about him, his nightmares, and his reaction in the hypnotist's office."

"You know they've pretty much debunked the idea of hypnosis leading to memories of past lives." I said.

"Oh, I know" Frank said. "I'm in the business, remember? Some of those stories were outright frauds. Most were just cases of people remembering movies, or stories they'd heard as children, and mistaking it for past lives. And we helped that hypnotist lead Carl right to the type of story we wanted to hear. I don't think the hypnotist was a scam artist. I think he just didn't know what he was doing."

"I didn't realize we were leading Carl to what we wanted to hear" I said.

"Oh, big time." Frank answered. "'Do you have any memory of World War One?' People who are hypnotized want to please the hypnotist. They don't want to say 'no.' And yet, I don't think Carl was faking his emotions when he answered. Something was very deeply troubling that man. It wasn't until a couple years ago that I figured it out."

"What was it?" I asked.

"PTSD." Frank answered. "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder."

"You're crazy!" I said. "You were crazy forty years ago, and you're still crazy. Carl was never in a war."

“You don’t have to be in a war to suffer from PTSD” Frank said. Both his parents died when he was a kid, didn’t they? That’s pretty traumatic. You said yourself you didn’t know much about his childhood. Maybe something happened that you don’t know about. Something certainly triggered those nightmares. Even if it was just a movie he saw, to him it was traumatic. Think about it. The sleeplessness. The nightmares. The loss of weight. The sudden mood swings. Outbursts like the one in the classroom. The man was a walking poster boy for PTSD, only we didn’t know about that disorder back then.”

“Still seems like quite a stretch to me” I said.

“You think that’s a stretch?” Frank answered. “Get a load of this.” He opened a briefcase, took out a sheaf of papers, and handed them to me.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s from a privately printed memoir of a British World War One soldier. I found it on the Internet. Just read the highlighted part. He’s describing the first day of the Battle of the Somme.”

I read. “One of the saddest stories that day concerned two boys from a Pals Battalion that was attached to our unit shortly before the battle. Bertram Johnson and Arthur Jenkins. ‘Bertie and Jenkins’ we called them. Inseparable, those two were. I don’t think either of them was a day over 17, but back then the recruiters used to turn a blind eye to that sort of thing. When the big day came, Bertie and Jenkins went over the top side by side. Uncannily quiet, it was. I’m sure I could have heard the birds singing if my ears hadn’t been ringing from the week long bombardment that preceded the attack. Our lieutenant was leading us across no-man’s land, kicking a football. Then all hell broke loose. The Jerrys caught us in a cross fire from a machine gun up front and one on each flank. Their artillery began dropping shells into us. They were firing everything they had, big and little. Whiz bangs, coal boxes, and Jack Johnsons. One of them completely obliterated Bertie, and sent Jenkins running to the rear, covered in blood. We figured he was done for. Badly wounded he must be to be bleeding like that. Turned out there wasn’t a scratch on him. The blood was all from Bertie, along with little bits of Bertie. The Military Police found him cowering in the jump-off trench, sobbing like a child. When they discovered he wasn’t wounded they hauled him off and charged him with cowardice in the face of the enemy. Any front line soldier could have told them he wasn’t a coward. He’d just had more than he could bear on that particular day. But doctors didn’t know much about shell shock back then, and a court-martial miles behind the lines didn’t know anything about combat. We lost a lot of good lads who didn’t turn back that day, so there wasn’t much sympathy for anyone who ran back without a scratch on his body. We heard he wound up in front of a firing squad.”

“Enough to give anyone nightmares, isn’t it?” Frank asked. “Or to create a troubled soul that refuses to rest.”

“Still believe in the paranormal, Frank?” I asked.

“I’ve been a shrink for forty years” Frank replied. “Some cases don’t fit into the neat little boxes they teach in school. Who knows? Some cultures believe that troubled souls come back as ghosts, or are reborn in an attempt to resolve their troubles. I’ve had some troubled patients for whom that made as much sense as anything I could find in a textbook.”

“At least we know where he got the story he told in the hypnotist’s office” I said.

“If he ever read that,” Frank added.

“What do you mean, ‘if’? Bertie, pals, the sunny morning – it’s a perfect match. Carl read this sometime when he was a kid, and it started a series of nightmares and an obsession with World War One. When the hypnotist asked him to remember the war, this was the most compelling thing he could think of.”

“But that assumes he actually found the book” Frank said. “I only found it because of the Internet. People are digitizing obscure public domain books now and posting them online. The original private printing of this book produced fewer than a hundred copies, and that was in 1923. I looked for it on the international inter-library loan site, and only four libraries reported having copies, and none of them were in the US. There was no Internet when Carl was having his nightmares, and no way to search foreign libraries. What are the odds one of the rare paper copies of this book made its way from England to a library that Carl visited?”

“But if Carl didn’t read this,” I said, “that means. . .” I didn’t finish the sentence.

Frank just raised one eyebrow in response. Then he added. “By the way. By searching the records of units that were attached to the author’s unit just before the battle, I was able to find Private Arthur Jenkins. He was from the 16th Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment. It was a Pals Battalion from Birmingham. His name was Arthur C. Jenkins.”

“And the ‘C’ stood for?” I asked.

Frank shrugged. “They didn’t say.”

I thought my evening with Frank would be the last news I would ever hear about Carl, but I was wrong. A little over a year later I got a call from a lawyer in my college home town. After verifying my identity he said

“Please accept my condolences if you haven’t already heard the news, but Mr. Carl Jenkins died recently. He left a note stating that he had no living relatives, and he named you as the heir to his estate. I should let you know up front that his estate consists of a few personal possessions which may be of sentimental value, but there is no monetary value to his estate.”

The lawyer didn’t know much about Carl. He hadn’t known him personally, but he gathered from the police and from the judge that asked him to take care of the estate pro bono that Carl had drifted from one job to another, earning enough to keep from being homeless but never enough to afford anything more than a run-down apartment or a decaying motel room. The money he inherited from his mother had probably run out while he was in college. That was why he told me he was going to get a job and attend school part time. I just wasn’t perceptive enough to realize that. He’d never been in any real trouble with the law, but the police knew his name because they’d been called several times by people in neighboring rooms who complained he was shouting in the middle of the night. He finally committed suicide with a gun, but the coroner who performed the mandatory autopsy said he had advanced liver cancer and probably would not have lived much longer. He also said it was probable that Carl knew there was something seriously wrong with his body, even though there was no record that he’d been to a doctor.

I asked the lawyer if he had any idea why Carl chose me to be his heir, and the lawyer said the note indicated I’d been kinder to Carl than anyone he’d met since his mother died. He added that the note would be part of the estate, which he would mail to me once I verified my address. A sudden curiosity prompted me to ask what kind of a gun Carl had used to kill himself.

“It was an antique rifle of some sort, from World War One I believe. The police said it was a very unusual choice. I take it Mr. Jenkins was some kind of a collector. The rifle is technically part of the estate, but I can’t mail that. The police have that in their evidence locker. You’ll have to come here in person to claim it,” he said.

I assured him I had no interest in the rifle and I verified my mailing address. A week later I received a couple of boxes in the mail. They contained the helmet and gas mask I remembered from our dorm room, along with several WW1 books that looked familiar. Unexpectedly, there was also a box containing Carl’s ashes. The plaque on the box matched the name I found on the handful of court papers which the lawyer had sent: “A. ‘Carl’ Jenkins.”

I was prepared for a battle at the airport, but the bored Customs agent seemed satisfied with the X-Ray of my suitcase and waved me through. I didn't need the reams of paperwork I'd brought from my lawyers. So now Frank and I found ourselves on a chilly spring night, standing in the middle of a freshly plowed field in France. Rain clouds were moving in, but the moon occasionally shone through the scattered clouds and cast a ghostly light over the scene. We said a few words that we hoped were appropriate before we scattered the ashes over the ground. Ground where, many decades previously, British soldiers had charged German machine guns. As we walked back to our rental car a gentle rain began to fall. I thought with some comfort that this was the kind of rain that would carry the ashes deep into the earth. I hoped that whoever's ashes they were – Carl's, Arthur's, or both – they would finally find the peace that had eluded them for so many years.